

## For love's sake: The work of reconciliation

Years ago, there was a season when I was involved in leadership while the church I was attending was undergoing major struggles. These struggles, not surprisingly, had to do primarily with people. While there was a larger conflict going on with the pastors and elders, I discovered smaller divisions between families and individuals. These smaller, seemingly insignificant divisions, had been ongoing for some time – even before any troublesome pastor came on the scene. So when a larger crisis was looming, it's no wonder that these smaller problems surfaced – adding more tension to an already difficult situation.

I was talking to a friend about some of the events that were going on. She was a long-standing member of the community; active and respected. It became apparent that there were issues between her and another prominent woman of the church. When I suggested that she could talk to the other woman about their relationship, she immediately recoiled and said, “Oh no, I can't do that.” Now, I wasn't entirely a disillusioned Christian at that time because I was still in the midst of that crisis. I was younger and definitely idealistic. I remember feeling sad and disappointed when I heard her say that. How can the larger conflict in the church be resolved if the conflict between two individuals, within the same church, is not? After all, as Christians, shouldn't we of all people, get along somehow?

The reality is, is that we don't – Christian or not. Life is full of human conflict, big ones and small ones. Even Jesus's first disciples needed refereeing at times and the gospel writers were not hesitant to record those incidents. So what is conflict?

[Doing something different: Turn to your neighbour and discuss.]

Dictionary.Com:

- a fight, battle, or struggle, especially a prolonged struggle; strife.
- controversy; quarrel: conflicts between parties.
- discord of action, feeling, or effect; antagonism or opposition, as of interests or principles
- a striking together; collision.
- incompatibility or interference<sup>1</sup>

I think it's fair to say that we're all familiar with conflicts whether it's in the church, in our families, in our work places, our schools, government... basically whenever we have to deal with people. While there are varying degrees to a conflict from a difference of opinion, protests, and all the way to open war, I want to focus on the interpersonal conflicts that have resulted in brokenness. I want to look at the times when person A is not talking to person B, or person C no longer wants a friendship with person D. Because I know that these conflicts have occurred, and are occurring, in our own community- and it would be foolish of us to think that more conflicts won't arise. Christian ministry is FULL of conflicts.

I want to pause here and say that I know that this may not be the wisest of topics to address for my first sermon as pastor because I could be stepping on sensitive toes. And it's a huge topic to cover in 20 min. But I couldn't escape it when reading Paul's letter to Philemon. Moreover, I'm preaching to myself just as much, if not more, as I'm preaching to you.

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary.com, "Conflict," *The American Heritage® Stedman's Medical Dictionary* (Houghton Mifflin Company, n.d.), <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/conflict>.

So we have an idea of what conflicts are, and perhaps you've experienced some or all of these types of conflicts. But it's important to remember that all conflicts are not necessarily bad. Some could be good. The difference lies primarily in how we handle conflict and in the outcome.

A good conflict is when parties involved work through it by going through a process we call "conflict resolution." Both sides are heard, there is an exchange of opinions, and sometimes third party mediation. Conflicts can have a great potential for deepening relationships, generating trust, and encouraging growth and maturity. With these kind of results I would consider them good conflicts. But then, some conflicts can result in a great deal of pain.

Bad conflicts are ones that have caused broken relationships and rifts. The work of conflict resolution becomes more difficult. There can be a range of outcomes; sometimes people can agree to disagree and part ways, or people are able to fully reconcile, which I believe is the best outcome. Reconciliation is the restoration of a relationship previously broken.

Reconciliation happens when person A accepts person B for their differences, and person C receives person D. When the outcome is reconciliation, then I would call it a bad conflict turned good.

But how does reconciliation come about?

For starters: you have to *want* reconciliation.

**Every person involved has to want reconciliation.**

Paul's letter to Philemon is a plea for reconciliation, not with himself, but with Onesimus. Onesimus is presumed to be Philemon's runaway slave.<sup>2</sup> We don't know what happened between Philemon and Onesimus, nor the depth of the conflict. It's implied that Onesimus may have wronged Philemon or stolen from him. What we do know is that Onesimus was at one time with Philemon, but then left and went to Paul. But while with Paul, Onesimus becomes a believer and ministers to Paul. Now Paul wants to send Onesimus back to Philemon and pleads for his reception. Paul has the authority to order Philemon to accept Onesimus back, but instead, he wants Philemon to accept him willingly and voluntarily (v 14).

Yet Paul isn't naive about people's hearts. He knows he needs to do a bit of convincing. I'm assuming that Onesimus is willing to return to Philemon, but Philemon may still be angry. He may be wanting to punish Onesimus, as he would have had the right to do.

[Turn to your neighbour and talk about what keeps us from wanting reconciliation]

So why reconciliation? Why should we want it? Why should it be our aim?

Well, it's interesting to note that Paul does not begin with his request, but with a prayer. A very intentional, carefully worded, prayer. Reports of Philemon's ministry had reached Paul, and they have been favourable. Paul emphasizes Philemon's love and how this love has encouraged Paul and “refreshed the hearts of the saints.” Philemon's love has had a wider impact by being an encouragement to Paul and those with him. In other words, Philemon's love is being witnessed and celebrated.

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<sup>2</sup> C. F. D Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Cambridge Greek Testament commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 19.

Therefore (v 8), Paul appeals on the basis of love. Philemon has great love for all the saints, could he not extend his love to Onesimus? Paul gives several reasons why.

For starters, Onesimus is no longer a slave but a brother in Christ. It's clear that Paul considers Onesimus as his spiritual son, much like he considers Philemon is his spiritual son (owning his very life to him v19). Onesimus has become *family*. Though greco-roman society would deem that a run-away slave is still a slave, Paul's letter implies that those social bonds are changed in Christ. Under the love of Christ, a slave is transformed into a beloved brother.<sup>3</sup> Paul goes further in Onesimus' transformation:

Onesimus is no longer a slave, but a partner in the faith. Paul does a play on words with “Onesimus,” which means “profitable or useful.”<sup>4</sup> Formally Onesimus was *useless* to Philemon, but now has become *useful* to both Paul and Philemon (v 11). How is he useful? Onesimus ministered to Paul during his imprisonment – in fact, Paul writes that Onesimus was doing what Philemon himself should have been doing. Furthermore, by using the same root word, Paul links partnership in v. 6 (also translated as sharing, or fellowship) to partner in v. 17.<sup>5</sup> Paul asks Philemon to consider Onesimus as a partner in the faith, by welcoming him as he would welcome Paul. If he does so, Paul would “benefit” or “profit” (again, another play on words) from the Lord, and his heart would be refreshed (v20). Paul is trying to persuade Philemon to see that Onesimus is now a partner in faith and fellow minister, just like Paul is.

<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament commentary : Philippians, Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 27.

<sup>4</sup> “Dictionary and Word Search for Onēsimos (Strong’s 3682),” *Blue Letter Bible*, n.d., <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G3682&t=NASB>.

<sup>5</sup> Robert W. Wall, “Philemon 1 Commentary,” *BibleGateway*, n.d., <http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Phlm/Pauls-Prayer>.

OK, even if we *want* reconciliation, it still requires work. If the conflict is big enough, it becomes *costly*. It takes effort, humility, vulnerability, and commitment. And it may take revisiting of past hurts and pains. It requires forgiveness. Paul acknowledges this by offering to pay Onesimus' debt. This is a profound gesture of grace, and imitation of Jesus Christ. For is that not what Christ has done for all of us? He has paid our debt to God, and our debts to each other. He took on the sins of all (Rom 5:6-11).<sup>6</sup> And even as Paul offers to pay Onesimus' debt, he not-so-subtly reminds Philemon of his debt to Paul. It's a reminder to us, of our owing our lives to Christ. It is fitting then, that as we pray the Lord's prayer together, that we would ask that our trespasses be forgiven, just as we forgive those who trespass against us. To forgive someone else's sin against you, is to no longer count it. Reconciliation cannot happen without forgiveness. But we have to be careful here because we often don't realize that the cost of pain cannot be paid off. So there is a tension, between forgiving a sin and recognizing that a wrong was done and taking responsibility for it.

So why reconcile?

1. It is an act of love:

- when we work towards reconciliation, we are doing ministry because it is an act of love towards a sister or brother in Christ
- By reconciling, we're acknowledging that we are part of the same family and partake in the same faith. We receive one another as sister or brother in Christ.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## 2. It brings joy and refreshment to all

- Paul addresses to Apphia and Archippus (possibly Philemon's wife and son), and to the house church; Philemon belongs to a community
- conflicts are rarely an isolated situation. It affects the people surrounding those directly involved. If you are in conflict with a brother or sister in the church, you can be assured that it's affecting the entire church, whether subtly or overtly.
- therefore, reconciliation brings refreshment to the entire church, and *all* God's people benefit.

## 3. It affects our witness and our understanding of Christ

- unresolved conflicts hurts the church because its members are not working together
- if we can't work together, we fail to live in God's kingdom, and bear witness to that kingdom
- I believe that when we fail to partner together, then we limit our understanding of the goodness we share in Christ because we limit our participation with each other

To talk about reconciliation is all well and good, but I'm well aware that real life is complicated and reconciliation is not simple or easy. Each conflict has to be treated individually: in its own context and its own timing. Sometimes people are not ready to resolve conflicts. Sometimes, it may not be possible. I would still strive for reconciliation because for the sake of love it is worth striving for – but only if every person involved is able and willing.

And I have hope, that in the long view of life, all things will be reconciled in Christ in the end because it is God who ultimately pays, who takes the blame even though He is innocent. In another letter to the Christians in Colosse, Paul writes,

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col 1:19-20)

For love's sake, God reconciled us to Him.

#### REFLECTION:

- Who do you need to receive back?
- Who do you need to return to?
- Who do you need to plea on behalf of?