

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Caribbean Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_caribbean-journal-theology_01.php

Relationship and Conflict

By
James Loewen

James Loewen (M.A.) is a lecturer in Conflict Resolution, as well as Philosophy at the Jamaica Theological Seminary. He has earned degrees from Trinity Western University (B.A.) and the University of Calgary (M.A.).

In my present situation as a teacher of conflict management I am acutely aware of the numerous conflicts that exist around me. What has begun to strike me is the incredibly important role relationship plays in the development and resolution of conflict. It is my hope that this article will assist you in understanding the role and importance of relationship in conflict situations. I also hope that you will be as impressed as I have been with the tremendous responsibility we have as Christians to maintain good relationship with other believers.

It is not unusual to get “mixed up” in conflict (Augsberger 1981; Rush 1983); either in the sense that we get involved, or in the sense that we are not really certain of all that is going on around us. To those who study conflict there are clear differentiations between elements of conflict, like relationship, issue, and process. These differentiations are anything but clear to the average individual involved in conflict, especially if those conflicts exist in the church. Nonetheless, they do exist, and not only in the minds of conflict experts. Scripture has evidence of these three vital elements of conflict and the clarification of how they interrelate. One example of this is Jesus, sin, His crucifixion, and what it accomplished. The diagram below was suggested to me by Dr. Dave Carlson.

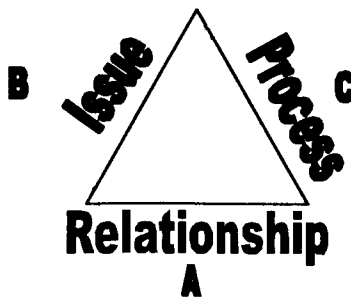


Fig.1

Simply put, Jesus came to earth because of His relationship (A) to His creation. He came because of sin and our inability to live without committing acts of sin (B). In sin there is broken relationship. In order to renew and maintain the relationship, Jesus had to engage in a series of events (C) that led to the expiation of our sin. The resolution of the issue of sin leads to the possible renewal of the relationship. Thus we see the three aspects of conflict: Jesus seeking to renew relationship, an issue (sin) which blocked that relationship, and a process, Jesus' existence on earth and eventual sacrificial death, which resolved the issue and made reconciliation possible.

The relationship and its importance to the parties involved are a central part of how, when, and why an issue will be dealt with. If you have a strong relationship with someone, you will seek to resolve even small issues. If you have a weak relationship, only the big or unavoidable issues will be dealt with. The issue is that which stands in the way of the continuation of the relationship, either breaking it or damaging it in some way. The way in which the issue is dealt with is known as the process, and this can affect the relationship positively or negatively and may also result in the introduction of new issues. It is clear that while relationship, issue, and process are different aspects of conflict, they are strongly interrelated, which is why it may be difficult to distinguish between them if you do not know that you ought to. The image of the triangle suggests that in any conflict one of the three sides will play a foundational role (in the image given relationship exists as the foundation of the triangle). It will become clear as this article continues that relationship is the foundation of a healthy conflict triangle.

The focus of this paper, as the title suggests, is on the role of relationship in conflict. Of necessity the other two aspects will be addressed, but only insofar as they speak to relationship. I intend to include both theological and conflict theory discussion while addressing this topic. To begin with, I will look at the general way in which relationship is viewed within the New Testament and what is expected in the normal run of church life. I will then seek to show how relationship can be affected by conflict. This will be followed with a look at how and when one can maintain relationship in conflict. There will, at the end, be some conclusion as to what I think is vital in the understanding of good relationship in and out of conflict. Let it be known that problems in

relationship are common and do not represent a sign of spiritual immaturity (Augsberger 1981; Rush 1983). It should also be known that even so, broken relationships are abhorrent to the Lord (Augsberger 1981; Rush 1983; Prov. 6:16-19, NIV). How we respond to relationship problems is an excellent measure of our spiritual maturity (Augsberger 1981; Rush 1983).

In looking at relationship in conflict I think it will be helpful to note the fact that the interaction among the three aspects of conflict can be complex. It becomes clear, however, that issues and processes find their origin in relationship. We can sometimes point to behaviors in our relationships which become issues, and we can sometimes point to how we do things over time (process) as issues. Our relationship to each other to a certain extent dictates what we do about the issues. So, it is important to be clear on what exactly we are talking about when we say relationship. The *Oxford Universal Dictionary* defines relationship as being in a state of relating to others. I will look at relationship as the act of being with others. This being with others is not necessarily just in the physical presence, but in a sense of belonging or having obligation to someone other than ourselves. The term that is used in the following discussion is the biblical term "one another". In the following discussion I will endeavor to point out the relational aspect in the texts being used.

You will note that there are two parts of the discussion. These parts are our attitude towards others and our behavior with others (Stutzman et al. 1998). Behavior in this paper will be taken to mean any form of action or lack of action which is external in nature and conveys or acts out an inner attitude. For example, placing handicapped parking in the church parking lot conveys the message that the church has concern for the accessibility of the church to the handicapped. Of course, such behavior does say something of the attitude of the church, but it is not necessarily clear what that attitude is. Attitude will be understood to be that inner position which is private to us and which may or may not find its way into action. Scripture addresses both with regard to our relationship with others in the church and with others outside of the church.

The Scriptures and conflict theory have a great deal to say about our attitudes and behavior in relationship. One way of looking at the relational aspect of a Christian's life is to look at those texts that talk of "one another" (Getz 1976). These texts referred to by Getz are attitudinal and

behavior based. In a search to discover important aspects of our relationships in the Church, I will note the presence of each of these aspects in his twelve groupings of “one another”s and note what speaks directly to relationship. To further illuminate other aspects of relationship I will make note of Rush’s discussion of met need as a central aspect to relationship building (Rush 1983). This will assist in our understanding of relationship in the church, as well as in conflict. Each of the twelve “one another” texts will be connected to each of the needs which Rush highlights.

Rush uses five of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and argues that spiritual need is foundational to all other needs. The abbreviated list of Maslow’s needs, according to Rush, in order of most important to least, includes the basic physiological needs, need for safety, need for love (i.e. social relationship), esteem (self-respect), self-actualization. Rush adds on an underlying spiritual need that is connected to and supersedes the other five¹. This last need will be assumed as being a part of each of the twelve “one another”s and Maslow’s five needs will be noted with regard to each.

Being *members of one another* is the first “one another” principle mentioned by Getz (1 Corinthians 12:25). The image used in this scripture is one of a body². As it is without question that we depend on the unique functioning of each part of our body, so also it should be without question that we depend upon the unique functioning of each individual in the church. There is to be an attitude of acknowledgment that we are all necessary for the functioning of the church body. What implications does this have for our behavior? Well, it means that no one person is more important than another, only that each person is different from all others. It also means that we are all to work as one.

¹It is not necessarily easy to understand how this need operated within this construct as the hierarchy is intended to show a progressive system by which if one need is consistently met we can then move on to the next. How we fit spiritual need into this hierarchy is unclear.

²Which, interestingly enough, is also an image used by Plato in his *Republic* to symbolize the unity and mutuality of his ideal community.

I was watching the Discovery Channel the other day and a show about conjoined twins was on. I was fascinated to see and listen to one set of these twins as they explained that they were two persons, just “stuck” together. These two persons, “stuck” together, had had to learn how to co-exist. This was because one had control over one arm and leg, and the other over the other set. This meant that walking required each to know intimately the timing and placement, as well as the direction, of their walking. Truly, these two are of one body. So it is to be in the church, we are many people, just stuck together. Thus, our attitude is one of equality, unity, and need (Rush 1983). Our behavior towards one another must bring out this awareness that we are all in this together, and that we cannot separate anymore than can those conjoined twins.

It is safe to say, then, that in the church our commitment to relationship is not only supposed to be high, it is supposed to apply to all within the church. We are to consider ourselves to be in relationship with everyone. Any obligation which is found in relationship applies to everyone. A common response to conflict within any church body is to split. This is in clear violation of what God calls us to be in this “one another” experience. With regard to our discussion of needs, this first section highlights the fact that we ought to be concerned with the needs of the body of believers. We cannot operate on a self-oriented method. We must be aware of, and sensitive to, the needs of the church body as if it were our body (because it is). Thus, this “one another” principle addresses all six needs. It also supports the idea, in using the image of the body, that as a human body ages and matures its needs change, evolve, and shift. So also does the body of the Church. This leads to the understanding that we must be aware of the changing needs of the Church (Rush 1983).

Devoted to one another is the second “one another” principle Getz introduces to us. He mentions in particular Romans 12:10 which speaks of being devoted to “one another” in brotherly love. This verse points to another image of the church, the family image. “The Christian shows the same love to his fellow-Christian as he does within his own family; it is a caring concern”(Black 1981, 154). As I am devoted to my wife and children, so am I to be devoted to my brothers and sisters in Christ. Just as one cannot pick one’s body type, one cannot pick one’s family. Our relationship with each other, then, needs to contain some of the attitudes and behaviour which are indicative of devotion within the family. Now,

there are numerous ways of doing family out there. There is no one way which can be considered exclusively biblical³, but there are some features of devotion in family that transcend cultural and familial differences. One of these is a deliberate commitment before God to each other which is exceptionally difficult to break down. It takes years of dysfunction and hurt to break a family. So it should be that conflict in our church does not easily break our family ties with one another. Our churches should be able to withstand extreme strain without its relationships being weakened. This "one another" principle deals with two of the more basic needs, for safety and for love (social relationship). Safety is found in belonging to a group as this provides more strength and security. Obviously, the need for social relationship is provided for in a family as we are surrounded by people deliberately committed to us.

The third "one another" principle also comes from Romans 12:10 (NIV), *honor one another*. Getz interprets this to mean that we look out for each other in the sense that we help them look good. In other words, "... that love which eagerly seeks out and rejoices in and honors the good qualities in other believers." (Morris 1997, 445). In a sense, this is a service minded activity, done in relationship, with the needs and the good of the other placed firmly in our minds (Rush 1983). It is a way of living which does not shame, belittle, or deliberately subordinate anyone we are in relationship with. Many Christians in conflict seek to undermine and tear down those who disagree with them. If we were to focus on honoring one another in conflict, the damage to relationships would significantly reduced. This "one another" principle deals primarily with the needs for self-actualization and for self-respect. As others seek to lift us up we find ourselves feeling fulfilled and our self-image improves.

Be of the same mind with one another, fourth in the list is found in Romans 15:5 (NIV). There are a number of ways one can interpret this, but I prefer to see it as not dictating that we all think alike, or that we agree on all things. It seems to me that we can be of like mind in the desire to glorify God and to maintain the unity which we are called to in Christ Jesus. Unity in the spirit/mind is towards a goal (Black 1981), not on any

³Any model will do really, provided that it allows for and encourages the attitudes and behaviors mentioned in this article.

particular aspect of our current reality. Unity, not uniformity, is the focus here (Morris 1997). Any theology that demands uniformity will of necessity lead to division and schism, and, of course, broken relationship. Any like-mindedness must not be in violation of any of the other ways of being in relationship. Clearly there are aspects of church life that will require uniformity, aside from the theological foundations of Christianity, and these ought to be understood as identifiers of a particular sub-grouping of the church, not as identifiers of the church as a whole. These unique aspects would be how that church has decided to pursue our like-minded goal of glorifying God.

Ron Kraybill makes an interesting point that groups can be bound by conflict or divided by conflict (Stutzman et al. 1995). This points out that groups can be unified during conflict. Thus, our unity need not be in our ideas, but in our desire to work through a decision making process together. In a unified, like-minded church an individual will no doubt have a greater sense of social relationship (love) thereby meeting that need. Having room and respect for uniqueness alongside shared values, will foster increased self esteem and self actualization as well.

Romans 15 (NIV) is again Getz's source of a "one another", the fifth, seen in verse 7, *accept one another*. The action here is clear, we are to accept each other as we are accepted by Jesus, unconditionally (Black 1981). The grace of Jesus covers us and there is nothing we can do to gain His acceptance, so our acceptance is not based upon a list of rules and regulations. Therefore a brother cannot say to another that "I accept you only if you _____" (fill in the blank). Many are the rules that we have for each other, but our performance is not to be a determiner of our acceptance. This means that those in our church who are weak in their faith, who fail regularly, who do not fit the mold that we would like them to, are to be accepted as valuable, worthy members of the body.

We are to be in relationship in a way that evidences acceptance of all the members of the Church family. As Morris states, "*Accept one another* is surely addressed to the whole community." (Morris 1997, 503)(his emphasis). James is clear when he states that we are to be without partiality (James 2:1 NIV) in who we choose to be in relationship with. Partiality is known as having a preference for someone based on external and internal factors which we judge to be better than others. Thus we cannot reject a brother or sister in Christ lightly, nor can we give

preference for those we are more comfortable with.' This clearly has implications for Christians in conflict. I cannot reject those who disagree with me, nor is the discomfort I feel to be a barrier to my relationship with them. This "one another" clearly addresses the meeting of the need for love (social relationship). It also has concern for self-esteem, in that it is difficult to accept ourselves if others do not accept us as well. Furthermore, there is room for greater self-actualization in an environment, which allows for failure.

Admonish one another, the sixth in the list, is found in Colossians 3:16 (NIV). It states that admonition plays a role in our relationship with our fellow believers. This is an action, which has for its attitude service, humility and honesty. The action requires that we talk to other believers when we see them failing in their walk. It assumes that we are engaged in an honest process of self-evaluation so that we are people who are worthy to be admonishing others. Our lives must be in better standing than that of the life of the person we are admonishing. There is a specific process involved in this admonition which Getz believes is steeped in love. There must be a willingness to engage in persistent, personal admonition with pure motive that is both proactive and corrective. We should be aware that we must make a clear differentiation between our will and the will of God in the matter of admonition so that we are not confusing the two (Getz 1976).

The main relational point here is that we have a responsibility to a person who is damaging their relationship with other believers or God. We are expected to call attention to it and seek to encourage and support change with the goal of renewed relationship. Our relationships will not tolerate wrong behavior and scripture provides the issues to be concerned about and the process by which we deal with them. This means that avoiding or suppressing the problem is not an option. Avoidance or suppression are common responses to conflict in our churches today. This cannot be tolerated or encouraged

This "one another" principle is capable of meeting four of the needs. Our safety is increased if inappropriate behaviors are monitored and corrected. Our social relationships are stabilized due to the proactive and corrective measures. These measures also convey a sense of love and relationship, a sense that we matter, which speaks to both social relationship and self esteem. Furthermore, we are not only expected to

improve ourselves, we are held accountable to further growth and self-actualization.

The seventh "one another" principle is *greet one another* (Roman 16:16 NIV). Getz believes this ought to be done in a culturally appropriate and sincere way. The intention is to show affection for one another, to acknowledge the relationship between one another. I think that it is also a requirement that we continue to be in communication with each other. We are not to give the "silent treatment" during conflict. We are to continue to engage each other, which, of course, begins with a greeting. This last may be a bit of stretch, but it is consistent with the theme found so far within the "one another" statements. We are to acknowledge outwardly the fact that we are indeed in relationship with other believers. This meets the love (social relationship) aspect of our needs. It affirms our belonging and acceptance within a specific group.

An extremely important "one another" verse, found in Galatians 5:13 (NIV) is the eighth one. It states that we are to *serve one another in love*. When we have an attitude of service in our relationships, we are necessarily concerned with needs of others and how we can meet them (Burton 1971). Of course, how we meet those needs, and even which needs we meet, are dependent on our understanding of what it means to be a servant.

The main focus in this verse is love, which involves specific attitudes and actions as found in I Corinthians 13 (NIV). Obviously a specific type of service is intended when one looks at that chapter. There are numerous features of love listed in the chapter. I will highlight a few quickly for purposes of illustration. Love is not self-seeking. This means that if we serve in love, our service is not self-seeking. We are to serve selflessly. Love is also truthful, which entails our service is in the service of truth. We seek to meet true needs in a manner that is free of deceit, whether in motive, intention, or method.

Clearly this type of service is highly demanding and the kind of activity which will build relationship rather than hurt it. It is also the kind of behavior and attitude that can only be lived out if we are in relationship with those we are serving. While we are in conflict with others we are not to forget this "one another". It is of vital importance to seek to meet the needs of those we are in conflict with. One of the most difficult elements of conflict is to maintain an interest in meeting the needs of the other

party. Difficult or otherwise, we are to engage in this important act of service. This "one another" principle has as its target the meeting of all needs. It will search out and seek to fulfill the need in people it is in relationship with. An individual or group seeking to serve one another would meet all six needs mentioned by Rush.

Getz points to another verse in Galatians, this time found in Gal 6:2 (NIV). This verse shows that we are to *bear one another's burdens*. Getz takes this ninth "one another" to mean that we are to help restore fallen brothers and sisters, to help bear one another's sin burdens. He feels this is to be done in a way that is humble, prayerful, and gentle. This verse could also be talking about more physical and emotional burdens as well (Burton 1971). Too often people we are in relationship with will go without support in important areas of their lives. As we walk together in relationship, let us consider it part our obligation to share in one another's work with a view to support and be a presence in their lives. When we fail to carry out this behavior we create an environment that is conducive to conflict. It is an activity which seeks to ease the others life, not make it more difficult. In conflict we need to seek to aid the other in dealing with it. This "one another" meets basic physiological needs as well as the need of love. It can also assist in the meeting of our need for self-actualization as it assists us in bearing the burden of our weakness.

Bearing with one another is the tenth requirement and is viewed with some distaste. Ephesians 4:2 (NIV) states that we are to do this, among other things, such that we overlook idiosyncrasies and minor issues which are of no central value to our walk with Jesus. We are to forbear differences with love so as to maintain relationship with those we find in the family of God. We all know people who are weird, or strange in some way, and we have a great deal of difficulty understanding their perspective. This last is fine unless this difficulty lends itself towards reduction or elimination of relationship. There are some things that we must just tolerate. The toleration should be done in relationship though, not from a distance. It seems that some things are worth getting in conflict over, and some are not. Getz thinks that this "one another" not only refers to idiosyncratic behavior, but also to behavior which requires forgiveness and effort on our part, that we are to make the effort required to maintain the relationship. This means that in conflict we are to stick it out with a selfless love that is known as agape love (MacAurthur 1986). We cannot

give up on those we are in conflict with simply because they annoy or sin against us. This "one another" can meet the need for social relationship (love) as well as for self-esteem. We can see this in the reality that if others accept you, perhaps you can then accept yourself.

Another more difficult "one another" principle, the eleventh, is pointed out by Getz, *submit to one another* (Ephesians 5:21 NIV). This is to be understood in the sense that we are all to submit to each other. No one person or group is to be subordinated, no one group is given to domination⁴. Getz thinks that this "one another" is concerned that we show a humble acceptance of admonition and advice. It contains an attitude of obedience that we are all to have. This attitude is foundational to how we relate to each other and of our openness to continual growth in community. In a sense, it is a constant preparedness to be held accountable by others for our place and action in relationship with other believers. At no time is submission harder than when we are in conflict. None-the-less, mutual submission in conflict will help avoid the power games and pride that so often destroy relationships and churches. This "one another" looks to be a bit tougher than the others to link to a need. I think that it would most accurately be fit with the need for self-actualization, as odd as that might appear. It is only through consistent self evaluation and submitting ourselves to evaluation by others that we can achieve that which is greater than what we have already achieved (Stutzman et al. 1998).

The twelfth and final "one another" principle noted by Getz is found in I Thessalonians 5:11 (NIV), It says that we are to *encourage one another*. This is to be done using the Word of God and the Truth of God.

... the mutual responsibility of members of the community to aid one another in inculcating and carrying out the ethical demands of

⁴It is understood in this that there are lines of authority within the church and that these authorities are to be respected and obeyed. It is also understood that we are all under a higher authority to whom we are subject and anyone, regardless of their position, needs help in maintaining a proper submission to God. So it is necessary that those in submission to authority take hold of the authority given by God in Scripture, to hold those in authority accountable for their leadership.

the faith and in communicating the theological' concepts supporting those demands (Wanamaker 1990, 190).

The Scriptures are to be our constant companions, which are used in encouraging each other on to the lives we are called to, part of which includes how we are to be with one another. Our relationships are to be founded in the Scripture and constantly put in it's light with a view to encourage each other. There is a sense of urgency about this exhortation in light of the unknown arrival time of the second-coming of Christ (Wanamaker 1990). In conflict our ultimate goal is to spur one another on to greater growth in Christ. In that way conflict will not lead to broken relationship. It will lead to a greater relationship with each other and with God. This last "one another" assists us in dealing with two needs, the need for self-esteem and the need for self-actualization. As we are encouraged our self-esteem will of necessity increase and will make room for self-actualization as we are spurred on to greater works.

The previous twelve "one another" principles have areas of overlap and some similar themes. The main connector is their concern for how we exist in relationship with each other and they all have a concern about that aspect of our existence. "One another" principles one, two, four, five, ten, and eleven all focus on our unity and what that unity is to look like. "One another" principles six, eight, nine, ten and eleven focus on corrective measures in ensuring continued "one another"ness. "One another"s one, two, three, five, seven, and ten show that we need to accept each other as valuable in the sight of God and each other. All but the first "one another" principle contain specific behaviors within their titles which are to be engaged in. They all contain attitudes which undergird those behaviors.

It is clear that the Bible has much to say on how we ought to be in relationship together. It is extremely obvious that there is very little room for broken relationships in the family of God. I have only covered a portion of the verses and themes which talk about how we can relate to each other in the church. However, it can be seen in the portion covered that there are both attitudinal and behavioral expectations on us. It is also noted that meeting these expectations will result in meeting the needs of individuals within our church body/family. What is painfully true is that we consistently fail to meet those expectations. All too often our attitudes and our behaviors run counter to those which are spoken about in the "one

another” principles. This results in unmet needs, which result in weakened and broken relationships (Rush 1983).

“ONE ANOTHER”	NEEDS MET	FOCUS
1. Members of one another	Physical, safety, love, esteem, self-actualization, spiritual	Unity, Acceptance
2. Devoted to one another	Safety, love	Unity, Acceptance
3. Honor one another	Esteem, self-actualization	Acceptance
4. Be of the same mind with one another	Love, esteem, self-actualization	Unity
5. Accept one another	Love, esteem, self-actualization	Unity, Acceptance
6. Admonish one another	Love, safety, esteem, self-actualization	Corrective
7. Greet one another	Love	Acceptance
8. Serve one another in love	Physical, safety, love, esteem, self-actualization, spiritual	Corrective
9. Bear one another’s burdens	Physical, love, self-actualization	Corrective
10. Bearing with one another	Love, esteem	Unity, Corrective, Acceptance
11. Submit to one another	Self-actualization	Unity, Corrective
12. Encourage one another	Esteem, self-actualization	Unity, Corrective

According to Rush, "Problems in relationships occur as a result of individuals being so committed to their own views, opinions, ideas, and feelings that they abuse or neglect those of others." (Rush 1983, 14). This violates the selflessness, servant-hood, and submission that I talked about earlier. Rush is concerned that we are more interested in "me" than in "one another". A common way of putting this is that we lack empathy. Dr. Dave Carlson says that "Empathy is being with the person in his way not our way, in his pain not our pain, from his view not our view. Empathy does not mean we surrender our view, opinions, decisions, power or authority. It means we use the other person's point of view to help us form some common ground and create a cooperative atmosphere for problem solving"(interview). This inability to be with "one other" leads to conflict, and it can be seen that at times relationship problems find their source in conflict.

No one is exempt from problems, or conflict for that matter, in their relationships. It bears repetition that it is not necessarily an indication of spiritual maturity. When we fail to meet other peoples needs, thereby causing some level of hurt, it is not necessarily because we wanted to hurt them. It may be because they failed to communicate their need (Rush 1983), or we failed to recognize such a communication. It may be because we cannot meet their need, due to lack of resource or ability. It may be that the need should not be met at that time, if at all. It may be that there are conflicting needs.

Regardless of how we are hurt, how we respond when we recognize our own hurt, or hurt in others, is an indicator of our maturity in Christ. The "one another" principles assume that there will be problems, and so provide corrective attitudes and behaviors to deal with them, as seen in numbers four, five, six, ten, and eleven. It is the task of the mature Christian to adopt those attitudes and become skilled in the behaviors. Of the two tasks, though, attitude is the most difficult one (Stutzman et al. 1998). These tasks are to be carried out with the knowledge that our maintaining relationship to other believers is of extreme importance to our Christian walk.

Conflict does not always result in, or come from, hurt. Conflicts can remain in the realm of ideas, issues, and process, with relationship being maintained and properly dealt with along the way. This is known as constructive conflict (Hocker et al. 1995). Unfortunately, all too often

conflicts move from constructive conflict and lead to hurt and destructive conflict. This adds a whole new dimension to a conflict and complicates things immensely. It is therefore necessary to understand the role of hurt in relationship and how that hurt can be dealt with. Numerous authors have written about the two tools given to us to resolve hurt in relationship. These two tools are forgiveness and reconciliation. Some people blend the two⁵, but it is easier to understand each if they are separated.

As mentioned earlier, one common problem in maintaining relationship during conflict is the reality that we can, and do (Augsberger 1981), get hurt in those relationships. This hurt often becomes an issue within the relationship and, depending on the nature of the hurt, we must deal with it before it destroys the relationship. Unfortunately, we will usually assign blame solely on one or two individuals, rarely acknowledging our role in the hurt (Augsberger 1981). Responsibility for any wrong ought to be allocated to all involved⁶. This may sound strange or difficult, so let me explain. Any relationship requires at least two people. When person "P" hurts person "U", this could not happen unless "U" can be hurt in that manner. It must be acknowledged, that "U" participates in the hurt, if only passively. Further, "U" has probably engaged in behavior that has allowed, or encouraged, "P" to behave the way she did. An example, a wife who refuses sexual activity with her husband can claim some (though not the lions share) of the responsibility of her husbands sexual infidelity. I want to be clear that we are not minimizing the hurtfulness of the infidelity, nor are we trying to find excuses for the husband. The person performing the act is always responsible for it. We are merely noting that there were factors on both sides of the relationship that contributed to the act and to the hurt. This avoids an us/them mentality and focuses on mutuality and proper apportioning of responsibility. An us/them mentality is always bad for the relationship between us and them. When we acknowledge our role in the hurt, however limited it may be, we set the stage for forgiveness (Augsberger 1981).

⁵Such as Augsberger.

⁶ There are exceptions where the victim has no responsibility at all, but these are exceptions, not the rule.

Another important feature of maintaining relationship while the hurt is being dealt with is acknowledging that, as Augsberger says, “Wrongdoing is not a valid reason for my not seeing you as a person of worth.”(Augsberger 1981, 16). All too often people who do wrong are labeled; what they have done becomes who they are (Yantzi 1998). This is often the case with people who offend sexually. They become “sexual offenders” instead of people who, while most of their actions are beneficial to society, have caused severe hurt in the area of sexuality. The “one another” principles make it clear that even though the relationship is painful, we are to admonish, teach, tolerate, bear with and so on with those in our midst who fail to measure up to God’s standard. As beings created in the image of God, we are to understand that each person is valuable, regardless of their actions. So, responding to people who hurt us in a way that devalues them as persons violates the principles of relationship.

Occasionally, though, Christians will place far too much emphasis on maintaining relationship. It is, they think, to be maintained at any and all cost. This too violates the principles of relationship. There are clear examples of times when the norm of remaining in relationship must be broken. When the person in question refuses to take instruction from one another, or refuses to act in humility when being admonished, then this person is, in effect, telling us that he does not wish to be in relationship with us. We are not to force ourselves to be in relationship with such a person (Stutzman et al. 1998). Forgiveness and reconciliation cannot occur unless all parties to the hurt acknowledge their role in the hurt, repent of that role and seek to change so as to avoid creating that hurt again (Stutzman et al. 1998). This is a fairly standard understanding of the process of reconciliation. We cannot be reconciled to those who will not reconcile with us. Forgiveness always precedes reconciliation, but does not necessarily lead to reconciliation (Stutzman et al. 1998). Essentially, the goal of these two tools is to renew the relationship, just as Jesus renewed His relationship to us.

From the story found in Matthew 18:23-25 and 35 (NIV), it is explicit that should someone come to us seeking forgiveness, we are expected to give it. We are never to be the reason for broken relationship. So important is this in the story, that our previous forgiveness can be withdrawn should we fail to provide the requisite forgiveness to others seeking it. This shows that we must be willing to reconcile with others, should they also be

willing to reconcile with us. We are also, as shown in the “one another” passages, to make certain that we do the work necessary to facilitate reconciliation. This is not a passive event. Just as Jesus came to us to reconcile with those who broke relationship with him, we are to seek out those who have broken relationship with us.

In conclusion, then, regardless of the circumstance or the level of hurt, we are to seek to maintain relationship with those who do the same. All who are in the church are to desire relationship with all others within the church. There are clear guidelines of what that relationship is to look like, and there are clear processes by which we are to seek renewal when it is damaged. There is no excuse for our being responsible for a broken relationship. In or out of conflict, our relationships are to be typified by love of one another.



REFERENCE LIST

- Augsberger, David. 1981. *Caring enough to forgive/caring enough not to forgive*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press.
- Black, Matthew. 1981. *The New Century Bible commentary: Romans*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Burton, E. 1971. *A critical and exegetical commentary on The Epistle to the Galatians*. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark.
- Getz, Gene. 1976. *Building one another up*. Wheaton, Illinois: S.P. Publishers.
- Hocker, Joyce and W. W. Wilmot. 1995. *Interpersonal conflict*. 4th ed. Iowa: Brown and Benchmark Publishers.
- MacArthur, John. 1986. *The MacArthur New Testament commentary: Ephesians*. Chicago: Moody Press.
- Morris, Leon. 1997. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Rush, Myron D. 1983. *Richer relationships*. Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press.
- Stutzman, Jim and C. Shrock-Shenk, eds. 1998. *Mediation and facilitation manual*. 3rd ed. Akron, PA: Mennonite Conciliation Service.
- Wanamaker, Charles A. 1990. *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Yantzi, Mark. 1998. *Sexual offending and restoration*. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press.