

8. What if things go wrong?

All of us seek good supportive relationships that are beneficial for both the Pastor and church, but:

- What should happen if serious doctrinal error or personal sin is apparent?
- What if relationships threaten to breakdown?

Christians do disagree and reconciliation, although desirable, is not always possible. Two brothers Cain and Abel had their problems. In the New Testament there was such a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas that it led to separation.

Acts 15:36-40

Larry Crabb wrote *"The difference between spiritual and unspiritual community is not whether conflict exists, but is rather in our attitude toward it and our approach to handling it. When conflict is seen as an opportunity to draw more fully on spiritual resources, we have the makings of spiritual community."*

How we handle conflict is an indicator of spiritual maturity.

The pastor-church relationship is a sensitive and vitally important one. Churches can produce difficulties for pastors but it is not unknown for pastors to jeopardize the trust placed in them by the church. Everything possible should be done to avoid a breakdown in the pastor-church relationship, acknowledging that intense pain, controversy and at times division may be among the consequences. Local witness is also damaged.

Potentially conflicting factors can be a work but it is better to develop a full understanding before considering any specific action. The Bible is the starting point but agreements made at the time of appointment are important. Insufficient attention to detail and possible eventualities not being considered create future problems. Promises publicly made at Induction services should also be carefully reviewed.

8. What if things go wrong?

The pastor, by virtue of their call and invitation to serve in a church, is due respect and esteem by virtue of their office. They possess a spiritual authority and members should demonstrate by their conduct that they desire their pastors to serve with joy and not a burden, "they keep watch over you as men who must give account." Hebrews 13:17

Pastors, like everyone else, are imperfect people. They are subject to the same temptations, sins and frailties as everyone else. It is easy to find fault and "roast pastor" is not an unknown Sunday lunch delicacy.

Although there is no clearly defined procedure to deal with the breakdown of relationship between Pastor and church members, there are some guiding principles. These include:

1. Reconciliation not justification

At the beginning of Matthew 18, Jesus sets the stage for His teaching on resolving conflict by saying we are to become as little children. Humility is essential in conflict situations. It is the opposite of seeking to exalt yourself or win an argument. If only one person wins, everybody loses. Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep in verses v 12-14 where the goal is restoration. He goes on to provide guidance on what to do when Christians fall out or sin is persistent and unconfessed -verses 15-17.

Three actions are required:

a. Meet face to face

The individuals involved should meet and specific grievances clearly expressed. Letters, emails or telephone messages are not what the Lord had in mind. The purpose is not to attack or defend but express problems the other person may be unaware of. You are not to act as a prosecuting barrister presenting evidence and assuming guilt. The responsibility is to help someone to be granted understanding.

8. What if things go wrong?

Jesus points to the importance of listening not necessarily finding agreement. Where this takes place forgiveness is a gift that should be offered. Matthew 5:23 encourages prompt action and a responsibility even if you know that someone has a problem with you. Delay permits anger and bitterness to grow often with devastating consequences.

But what if someone does not want to consider the matter or doesn't want to make the relationship right? Then go to the next step.

b. Meet with others present

Respected witnesses are present in order to seek reconciliation. They are there to mediate, clarify the issues and keep emotions in check. This is often the time to invite someone from outside of the church to be present.

Should this not bring resolution the third step is most serious.

c. Meet with the church

The passage does not say seek to gather support or drop loaded comments during a service but tell it "to the church." By this stage the tensions are likely to have impacted the work and witness of the church. They may be able to mediate or recommend an appropriate course of action.

2. Accusations against Elders

1 Timothy 5:17-21

Paul is concerned that Timothy knows how to behave and conduct himself as a leader in the church. He must seek to "direct the affairs of the church well." If he does so, he will be worthy of double honour. Both character and competence are important.

Pastors are extremely susceptible to false accusations by virtue of the nature of their work.

8. What if things go wrong?

They must take care to avoid unnecessary risks that could place themselves in danger of unfounded rumours. Paul's directions concern allegations that are made against church leaders are:

Unsubstantiated allegations are unacceptable

Any accusations against a Pastor should not be based on rumours emanating from an individual. (Verse 19) At least two or three reliable witnesses are required. Spiritual leaders should not become suspect because of gossip or innuendo. Unsubstantiated rumours should not be repeated and treated with caution, unless questions of legality are involved. In such circumstances contact with the relevant authorities is essential.

Impartial investigation is necessary - verse 21

No prejudice or pre-judging should be evident. Following careful investigation of any allegations made by two or more witnesses, if the matter is sufficiently serious and evidence available, the church should be informed by their leaders. That is their duty and their responsibility before God for the welfare of the congregation. Those involved in the church should seek to discern the relevant issues involved and permit all involved the opportunity to speak. Where sin is involved, a public rebuke (1 Timothy 5:20) followed by the opportunity for repentance and forgiveness, may be appropriate. Should the problem be regarded as sufficiently serious that a pastor has disqualified himself from public ministry in the church, removal from office may be required. There should be an agreed procedure for this. Due regard for the content of any letter of agreement or contract of employment will be necessary. This is why determination clauses should be included in these documents. Where there is a lack of clarity or agreement appropriate legal advice should also be sought. Progress is often made where both parties agree to hold what are called "without prejudice meetings." 1 Corinthians 6:1-7 urges Christians to settle matters between themselves as part of our witness to an unbelieving world.

8. What if things go wrong?

Any investigation or action should be made in the light of "everything taking place in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels." - verse 21

Summary

Conflict will come, even in the church. They are never easy to deal with and we should pray that the Lord would preserve his church from dealing with unresolved issues in inappropriate and destructive ways. God is honoured when agreement is reached.

The church belongs to Jesus Christ and we have been told in Scripture that one day the church will be free from spot and wrinkle. That will be a great day! But that day is not yet. We still have spots and we still have wrinkles. Should the need arise we must follow the guidance of Scripture at each step, seeking the honour of the Lord's name.

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