

Eight Paths to a Peaceful Church

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There are many challenging and difficult passages in the Bible, but perhaps one of the most challenging of all is 1 Corinthians 1:10. What makes it so challenging is that it involves more than just us. As any Christian can attest, it's hard enough for us to keep our minds and bodies subject to the will of Christ, and that's just when we aren't dealing with anyone else besides ourselves. The words of Paul here, though, urge a course of action on an entire congregation, and trying to get a whole church to treat one another lovingly is often about as easy as trying to herd cats.

Sadly, the consequences of this are all too evident. God has always intended His church to be one, but the religious world around us is filled with thousands of competing churches, separated by doctrinal division and just plain old hatred. This same wretched pattern is repeated even within the churches of Christ. Since the Restoration, we've been through brotherhood splits, church splits, and factional disputes of every kind. In fact, I doubt that there is anywhere on this planet a church that obeys this passage fully, if only because of two grumpy old pew-warmers who can't get along.

When the Scriptural principle here is so important, and when our problems in living up to it are so evident, they should call us to a new commitment to understanding the Lord's will on this subject and putting it into practice. For some of us, this is no particular challenge. Those brethren can take a page from the book of Will Rogers and honestly say that they've never met a Christian we didn't like. For most of us, though, it's quite a bit harder than that. We start off truly desiring to serve God, but then somebody steps on our toes, or says something we don't like, and before we know it, we've left the path of love behind for a trek through the desert of hatred. We need to do better than that. We need to understand and obey God's word. Let's take the opportunity this morning, then, to find eight paths to a peaceful church.

Things to Avoid.

We're going to begin our study of these eight principles by looking at four things we need to avoid if we also wish to avoid problems. The first of these is **DON'T SHOW PARTIALITY**. Consider Paul's thoughts about this topic in 1 Timothy 5:21. In context, Paul is speaking to Timothy in his role as a church leader, and this is certainly good advice for church leaders today. A preacher who refuses to preach on Matthew 19 lest he make an unscripturally remarried member uncomfortable, or an eldership that treats Christians differently in the same situation, will do incalculable damage to a church. However, the application doesn't end there. Any Christian can harm the entire congregation through partiality.

Now, this doesn't mean that we can't have people in the church who are our particular friends. That's harmless. However, beyond that point, problems abound. Christians who refuse to admit other brethren to their little clique, or who divide the church up into "us" and "them", or who turn a blind eye to the misdeeds of their own family members are creating an opening for Satan. Just like walking on rotten ice creates fault lines in the ice, that kind of behavior creates fault lines in the congregation. All it takes is one moderate problem that brethren are normally able to work out, and the church will shatter. The only way we can maintain unity is by adopting an impartial attitude toward one another.

It's equally important, though, that we **DON'T SPEAK HASTILY**. Hezekiah condemns this behavior in Proverbs 29:20. In context, this condemnation is surprisingly strong. After all, throughout the entire book of Proverbs, its authors have been comparing the wise and the foolish, describing all the blessings that happen to the wise, and all the horrible things that happen to the foolish. Yet here, Hezekiah places the hasty in speech on a lower plane than the fool.

This should tell us just how dangerous hasty speech is, and yet all of us have spoken hastily. Oftentimes, the memory of what we've said lasts hundreds of times longer than the amount of time we spent thinking about. Hasty speech can wreck friendships and split churches. Sometimes the damage done by a few thoughtless words will never be undone this side of eternity. We need to learn, then, to check our words before we say them and before we regret them.

Of course, that's not the only difficulty that can arise in our speech. We also avoid massive problems if we **DON'T BACKBITE**. Paul warns us against this in 2 Corinthians 12:20. Sadly, this command is more honored in the brotherhood by its breach than by its observance. Somebody offends us, or hurts our feelings, or does something that we don't like, and rather than going to them about it, we complain about them to our spouse and our friends, or we take the problem straight to the elders, or we start polling the congregation, looking for sympathy. Brethren, that kind of gossipy, malicious behavior may make us feel better, but it doesn't solve the problem, and it leads to worse problems later.

Sometimes, though, brethren get so concerned about gossip and backbiting that they won't say anything about another Christian at all. That's taking this principle a little bit too far. There's nothing in the Bible that keeps us from innocent, well meant conversation about a brother or sister, or even from seeking help in unraveling some disagreement that's grown up. However, all such conversations must be carried out in a spirit of love, with only the good of the brother under discussion in our minds. Anything less than that is whispering and backbiting, and it is sinful and destructive.

Finally, we must learn that the righteous **DON'T KEEP TRACK OF WRONGS**. This is the idea in 1 Corinthians 13:5. Here's what Paul is talking about: For whatever reason, we have several accountants in the congregation, and the basic function of an accountant is to keep track of where the money goes. Accountants keep records so that if their organization is audited months or years later, they can explain what cash went where.

Some people keep relationship accounts just like accountants keep financial accounts. They might not be great at remembering kindnesses, but boy! they sure do remember wrongs. Every time somebody does something they don't like, they jot it down on the mental balance sheet. They might not say a word to the person who has offended them, but that black mark against him is there for good. As months and years pass, the number of wrongs taken into account climbs and climbs, until finally some event provokes a catastrophic unleashing of pent-up anger. Let me be honest with you, brethren. There are people in my life, though nobody here, who really make me struggle not to keep track of wrongs. I understand how seductive it can be. Underneath the seductiveness, though, keeping those accounts is a sin. If we have that balance sheet in our minds, we need to tear it up and repent. Otherwise, we endanger our souls and the church.

Things to Seek.

However, just as there are negative behaviors that we should avoid in our relationships with our brethren, there are also positive behaviors, attitudes and actions that we should seek out. The first of these is that we must learn to **WALK IN LOVE**. Paul so instructs us in Ephesians 5:2. Friends, this needs to be the overall description of the way that we interact with one another. Notice that this isn't just a warm fuzzy feeling. It's a walk. In other words, love is something that we do. It's something that we practice, so that everything we do to and for one another can be summarized by saying that we walk in love. At the heart of every serious problem between brethren, there is at least one Christian who is failing to walk in love as Christ did. It may be lack of love for other Christians that is at the source of the problem; it may be lack of love for God. Regardless, though, lovelessness is always going to be at the bottom of things.

So, then, how do we walk in love? Walking in love begins with an attitude, an attitude that says that other Christians are more important than we are. If we truly believe that, we will always seek their good rather than our own, and we will be slow to take offense, because insulting us can't touch what really matters to us. This focus on our brethren will lead us to action, to pursuing the good of our brethren whenever possible. We will reach out in love to everyone, not just to our special clique. There are a hundred things this leads to, but ultimately, they lead back to walking in love.

As part of walking in love, we need to remember to **LISTEN**. James exhorts us to pay attention in James 1:19. This is a highly underrated skill. Admittedly, I haven't been on the earth as long as a lot of you, but it's been my experience that arguments tend to be about half actual disagreement and about half not listening. Some brother starts to say something, and we assume the worst about where he's headed, and we start getting mad and inventing all these counter-arguments in our head before he even finishes speaking. Then, if we really get into it with him, the confrontation escalates so quickly that nobody stops to check whether there's any substantial difference at all. We end up talking past one another rather than talking to one another, and it's all because we don't listen. Brethren, we have two ears and one mouth, and most of us would be better off if we listened twice as much as we talk. Let's remember this the next time somebody seems to be headed down a path we don't like. Let's pay attention to him instead of paying attention to us.

Third, when there is a problem, let's be sure to **GO TO OUR BROTHER** about it. Our Lord commands us to do this in Matthew 18:15. I can't help but wonder how much better off the church would be if Christians actually did this. No more whisper campaigns, no more rumors about who said what, just private, frank discussion when the need arises. I know, I know. This is hard to do. Nobody likes calling up the Christian who's made us mad and saying, "Um, brother. . . we need to talk." We feel weird when we think about it. Let me remind you, friends, that this is not optional. If someone has sinned, we need to go to them. If he hasn't sinned, we have no right to feel offended. There is no allowable in-between state where we get to hold on to the offense but don't try to make it right with the brother on the other side. That's called "sin", and it will send us to hell just as surely as adultery or murder. The rule is simple. We need to follow it.

Finally, as we learn to keep peace in the church, we need to learn to **FORGIVE**. Once again, this is an area where Jesus leaves us no room for doubt about His expectations. Look at His words in Matthew 18:34-35. This comes at the tail end of the parable of the unforgiving servant. His king had forgiven him a massive debt, but he was unwilling to forgive his fellow servant a small debt. The king found out about it, and that was the end of the unforgiving servant.

Folks, that's the way it is with us. For every one of us who is a Christian, God has forgiven us the crushing debt we've accumulated with our sin. He wasn't grudging about it; He didn't refuse to forgive the really bad sins. He cheerfully forgave it all. When we are the recipients of such massive grace, it's incredibly dangerous for us to dare to be unforgiving. What's more, the forgiveness we offer can't be some meaningless mouthing of the words, "I forgive you", while we still carry around anger and hatred in our hearts. That's not the kind of forgiveness this passage is about. Instead, we have to mean the forgiveness we bestow. Only then can we truly hope to be forgiven.