

Forgiveness or Reconciliation? (Graziano Crepaldi)

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:17-19)

In last years we have been confronted with many challenging conflicts and we have worked hard to bring reconciliation and healing between many bitter, hostile, and hurting people. Most of them told us that they have no problems and they had forgiven everybody. One question still remain: if everybody has forgiven the others, then why do we have so much division and broken relationships in our families and teams? We have realized that simply ask for forgiveness wasn't bringing the kind of restoration that Jesus Christ came to give to a broken world and so sadly we have noticed that many people don't really want restored relationships. We have decided to use the principles Jesus taught in **Matthew 18:15-20** as a basis and we have checked the Scriptures for biblical insights into confession, repentance, forgiveness, restitution and real reconciliation. Since the beginning of our walk with God we are used to these words, but are we really sure to know the true meaning of forgiveness and reconciliation? Paul was warning his disciple Timothy (**1 Tim. 3:2-5**) on the danger of people with wrong motives that focus on external form of godliness, but that lack spiritual depth and have little or not practice with the power of transformation of the message of the Kingdom of God.

The followers of Christ want to have a heart of forgiveness, such as Christ displayed in his ministry (**Luke 23:24**) and God has toward us sinners (**Col. 3:13**). We have realized that the believers often extends forgiveness for their own health, so that their sins can be forgiven and because they are afraid of further consequences. We are all aware how destructive an unrepentant bitter heart can be for an individual, a family and for the body of Christ. A person that is able to forgive and patiently and eagerly waits to restore relationships, as we read in **Matthew 18:21-35** knows very well that a sin against God is far greater than another human's sin against them. We know that the word forgiveness is for God a very important and expensive word. God doesn't forgive where there is no repentance, but God does show grace and mercy as He invites sinners to Him through godly repentance. In **Luke 23:34** Jesus said: **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"**.

Step 1

The steps that we should take when we commit a sin are clearly explained in **James 5:16** **"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed"** and even more directly in **Matthew 5:23-26** is written that **"...if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift"**. The offense is anything that comes between two professing believers and Jesus is asking us to be reconcile! Reconciliation means to change someone's mind, and make something right between people. Therefore reconciliation is something deeper than asking forgiveness, but it is the re-establishing of a relationship where sin has wrecked it. Reconciliation is the fruit of confession, repentance, and forgiveness (**2 Corinthians 7:8-13**). God wants much more than forgiveness! He desires to give us total restoration. It is interesting that in the dictionary the word restoration means to complete thoroughly, repair, mend, make perfect with patience and perseverance. Is this what you need?

Or when you see another sin **"...someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins"** (**James 5:19-20**) and again in **Matthew 18:15**: **"Moreover, if your brother should commit an act of sin, be going, show him his sin with a view of convicting him of it and bringing about a confession between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have won your brother over"**. Or in **Luke 17:3** is written: **"Be taking heed to yourselves. If your brother commits an act of sin, reprove him at once. And if he repents, forgive him"**.

Active reconciliation

We have a responsibility of love to act and not stay passive! God commands it! In these verses we see clearly that these matters must be addressed quickly and directly. To God, reconciling a relationship is more important than the next worship experience or an evangelistic activity. Is this our attitude? Are you willing to meet and open your heart with those who have caused you pain or the ones you have offended? Some years ago we were trying to be reconciled with some friends and we were so eager to see them in order to talk and pray together, but we have been surprised at their response. They told us that they didn't feel that the meeting with us was the way of God for reconciliation, because they had no faults and they felt that we were not ready to change. A known leader that they deeply respected told them that they should have rather focus on fighting the spirit of Antichrist and not have any meeting for reconciliation. The conflict was not solved, in few weeks the lies spread and the gossip of people made the situation worse than it ever was. Can you not see how much religiosity made us move away from the model the Bible gave us for reconciliation? It would have been much easier to do it Jesus's way, but our past experiences, low self esteem, pride and specially our fears stopped us to follow the example of Christ.

True repentance in Christ

How do you know when there's true repentance? Understanding God's reconciliation requires an understanding of God's view of sin, sorrow,

contrition, confession, repentance, justice and restoration. Sin does not begin with outward acts of disobedience. By the spiritual regeneration of God's Holy Spirit, the regenerated person possesses a need to be in unity with God and fellow believers. Only God fills that inner longing. Man's sinful habits turns to self, searching for love and acceptance. Self devotes control and power to protect its needs not being met. The self strenuously rejects attempts to correct the sinner's favorite sins. The self, then rationalizes biblical and secular values, beliefs and behavior, while denying unity with God, His truth and His people. Unity is not gained nor does corruption disappear by merely saying the words, "I've sinned, please forgive me." God calls the believer, continuing in sin, to get right with Him and man through godly sorrow. This conviction is leading us to confession and repentance (**2 Corinthians 7:9-11**) and will move us to reconciliation that is a biblical concept that addresses fallen man being completely restored to God, through Christ... **"Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace"** (Ephesians 2:15).

Step 2

What is happening when somebody is not willing to meet or repent? When a believer knows of a Christian's errors, sins, even if it's a personal offense, it's the responsibility of the one who knows and has been unsuccessful in accomplishing repentance and reconciliation (Step 1 of Matthew 18), to take two or three witnesses and confront the person a second time. In **Matthew 18:16** we read: **"But if he does not hear you, take with you one or two besides, in order that upon the basis of the mouth of two witnesses or three, every word may be established"**. The concept of a witness (someone who record, observe what is spoken and testified to what was done) is combined with the responsibility of every believer to confront, reprove, rebuke, restore the parties as is necessary according to Luke 17, 1 Timothy 5, and Galatians 6. Christ promises us that where there are issues that require the completion of Matthew 18, and a least two are there for Him and His purposes, that He will be there to help with the process and the decisions. In effect, helping those involved find His answers in a process designed to restore Christian community. All issues can be resolved by using the Scriptures. Those seeking help with reconciliation are to submit to any Biblical resolution exercising Hebrews 13.

Step 3

When repentance and reconciliation are not achieved at Steps 1 and 2 of Matthew 18, it is the responsibility of the individual and the witnesses to tell it to the church. In **Matthew 18:17** we read: **"And if he is unwilling to hear them, tell the assembly. And if he also is unwilling to hear the assembly, let him be to you as the pagan Gentile and the tax collector"**. The early followers of Christ took literally this command to "tell it to the church." When members of the congregation had complaints against one another, they would stand up in church and explain their issues. The whole congregation would listen and try to arbitrate. The meeting could not proceed until both parties were reconciled, or the guilty party, if unrepentant, had been expelled from the assembly. Jesus prayed (**John 17:23**) for unity among his disciples and for our community. The unity in Christ is broken by sin. Reconciliation of fallen believers is everyone responsibility and yet restoring a sinner to Christ and his spiritual family is a very important ministry of the Church.

Confronting a leader

Can you restore fallen leaders? Do some sins disqualify leaders forever? In (**1 Timothy 5:17-22**) is written that when we should **"...not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses"**. The Bible does not regard a leader's sin different from other believers. **1 Timothy 5:19-20** requires two or more witnesses accusing a leader/elder at a tribunal. In **Matthew 18:16**, Christ quotes **Deuteronomy 19:15** requiring two or more witness in case of a crime or an offense. Leaders are human and sin and are subject to the same spiritual requirements in reconciliation as all professing believers with one additional requirement...they are also to be rebuked publicly so that other believers may be fearful of sinning. There are some example of leaders confronted in the Bible. Peter committed the sin of practice heresy when he taught the believers to follow Jewish laws (**Galatians 2**) but he responded correctly to Paul public rebuke and quickly repented from his error. Hymenaeus and Alexander are two examples of teachers who left the faith (**1 Timothy 1:3-20, 2 Timothy 2:14-19**). Their continued teaching of heresy put them out of the Church and they were turned over to Satan for correction. Scripture indicates if a leader is stubbornly disobedient, and/or greatly resists or refuses reconciliation (**Matthew 18:15-20**), they therefore no longer qualify as a leader, and should be removed from the Church. Therefore, a leader is removed from his/her office because no longer meet the qualifications of a leader (**1 Timothy 3, Titus 1**). The removed leader must again meet the qualifications of a leader, by demonstrating over time, godly fruit and a mature faith, who is no longer under reproach before consideration for leadership.

The point of the three steps is that when discord arises we must do everything we possibly can to be at peace with one another. When a fellow church member sins against us, rather than retaliating, we are to offer them these three opportunities for repentance and reconciliation. Christ has shown his love for us by reconciling us to God. And it's precisely in mutual forgiveness that we begin to show Christ's love to one another and to the world. We would like to encourage you to pray for the people with whom you have had some conflicts and disagreements in the past and see ways you could put into practice what Jesus has taught us in his life about conflict resolution. Let all believers be committed to Biblical love through the ministry of reconciliation.