

BIBLICAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION (BCO Appendix I)

Preface

As we continue to seek to become a church holy before God, the manner in which we respond to sin and conflicts in the body, and gently shepherd those caught in sin, will reflect our commitment to the authority of God's Word and the spirit of love, which should define all of our actions and relationships. Biblical peacemaking is one of God's highest priorities (Matt. 5:23-24; Rom. 12:18; Gal. 6:1); therefore, it must be one of our highest priorities. The *Book of Church Order (BCO)* reflects our commitment to following God's procedure for reclaiming those going astray. It says, "Scriptural law is the basis of all discipline because it is the revelation of God's Holy will. Proper disciplinary principles are set forth in the Scriptures and must be followed" (BCO 27-5). It also says, "An injured party shall not become a prosecutor of personal offenses without having tried the means of reconciliation and of reclaiming the offender, required by Christ" (BCO 31-5). The purpose of this Appendix [of the BCO] is to provide guidance through the steps of biblical peacemaking required as pre-conditions to judicial process in cases of personal offense (BCO 31-5), and for use whenever possible in cases of general offense (BCO 31-7).

Each presbytery should endeavor to have several elders trained in the methods of "Christian conciliation" (including mediation and arbitration), and available to serve as Christian conciliators in cases that could and should be resolved privately before judicial process is initiated. We would do well to follow the wisdom of those who have considered the importance of this matter. For example, Elder Edmond Clowney states, "Discipline...is not first an exercise of negative judgment, a matter of church courts and censures. It begins with the care of friends with whom we strive to follow Christ" (Clowney, E.P., *The Church*, IVP, 1995).

The Biblical Steps of Discipline as they Relate to Biblical Peacemaking

BCO 27-5 outlines the proper principles for the exercise of church discipline. This BCO section emphasizes that the steps indicated, (a) through (d), must be followed in proper order. The steps are:

- a) Instruction in the Word;
- b) An individual's responsibility to admonish one another (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1);
- c) If the admonition is rejected, then the calling of one or more witnesses (Matt. 18:16);
- d) If rejection persists, then the church must act through her court unto admonition, suspension, excommunication and deposition.

This Appendix [of the BCO] addresses the first three steps, (a) through (c), by providing an expanded discussion of the implications raised by Scriptural direction for a complete process at each step. Step (d), formal church discipline, is addressed by Part II of the *Book of Church Order*, The Rules of Discipline.

1. **The first step - Instruction in the Word.**

Many Christians do not fully understand the emphasis God places on living at peace and in unity with others (Eph. 4:3). Preaching and teaching should regularly address this emphasis and the purposes for church discipline as set forth in BCO 27-3 and BCO 27-4. Attention should be drawn to the fact that the main procedural passage related to church discipline, Matthew 18:15-20, is set forth in the context of two powerful parables teaching the extent and depth of God's love in reclaiming those who have strayed (Matt. 18:10-14), and the vast measure of His forgiveness and the expansive forgiveness He expects from His children toward one another (Matt. 18:21-35). The extent of instruction on reconciliation provided to church members in "new member classes" and regular preaching from the pulpit will have a significant bearing on the extent to which a church member understands the benefits of church discipline and has consented to ecclesiastical jurisdiction (which is helpful for the church if it is to avoid legal liability for the proper exercise of church discipline).

Teaching God's Word concerning sin, and conflicts that result from it, and how Christians should respond biblically to conflict, will equip church members to become peacemakers themselves. Peacemaking has always been one of a Christian's most important ministries. As we are reminded in 2 Corinthians 5:18, God "reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." One of the most powerful ways that we can encourage reconciliation with God is to model reconciliation among people. When others see us resolve our differences in a loving and biblical manner, they are inclined to give more weight to what we say about the Lord (John 13:34-35; 17:20-23). On the other hand, when they see Christians embroiled in disputes, they tend to write God's people off as hypocrites and dismiss the claims of Christ (Rom. 2:21-24; 1 Cor. 6:1-8).

The Bible sets forth a process for resolving personal and substantive disputes in a constructive manner. This process is sometimes referred to as "Christian conciliation" and it may be used to resolve everything from minor personal differences to church divisions or lawsuits involving church members. As indicated in passages such as Proverbs 19:11, Matthew 5:23-25 and 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 6:1-8, and Galatians 6:1, conciliation involves three basic steps: (1) when Christians are involved in a conflict that is too serious to overlook, the first thing that they should do is **meet together privately and in person** to try to resolve their differences; (2) if this effort is unsuccessful, they should ask one or more other Christians to meet with them and help them to seek reconciliation and a voluntary settlement of their differences (a process sometimes referred to as **mediation**); and (3) if they cannot arrive at a voluntary settlement, they should ask one or more other Christians to hear both sides of the matter and render a biblically based decision that both sides are obligated to accept (a process sometimes referred to as **arbitration**).

There are many benefits to resolving disputes through Christian conciliation. It prevents a public quarrel that would dishonor the Lord Jesus Christ and diminish the credibility and witness of His church. Conciliation also allows Christians to demonstrate their faith in Christ and their confidence in His teachings (John 13:34; 14:15; 17:20-23). In addition, conciliation encourages forgiveness and promotes reconciliation, which can help to preserve valuable relationships and strengthen the church (Eph. 4:29-32; Col. 3:12-17). Conciliation also helps people to identify and deal with the root causes of conflict, which may include such things as pride, selfishness, fear, vengeance, greed, bitterness, or unforgiveness (see Matt. 7:3-5). This allows people to make changes in their lives so that they will enjoy more peaceful relationships in the future (Eph. 4:1-3, 22-24).

Christian conciliation is especially beneficial for people who sincerely want to do what is right and are open to learning where they have been wrong (Prov. 15:31-32). Conciliators can help them to identify improper attitudes or unwise practices, to understand more fully the effects of their decision and actions, and to make improvements in their lives that will help them to honor and serve the Lord more effectively in the future (1 Peter 2:12).

Teaching and Ruling elders are encouraged to learn all they can about Christian conciliation and develop local ministries that will equip members under their care to respond to conflicts in a manner that reflects the power of Christ working in their lives. The more church members understand these concepts and benefits, the more likely they will be to apply biblical principles when conflicts occur.

2. The second step - An individual's responsibility to admonish another (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1). Scripture warns against making a premature judgment about a matter (Matt. 7:1-5). By first going personally and in private to those who have offended, we provide the opportunity for clarification of misunderstandings and avoid premature judgment. This step includes the three responses of personal peacemaking as follows:

Overlook an offense: An individual may overlook an offense of another if it is minor in nature and it has not significantly dishonored God, damaged a personal relationship, or hurt other people

(including the offender). “A man’s wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense” (Prov. 19:11).

Discussion: When personal wrongs are too serious to overlook, the parties are required to seek to resolve them privately through loving confrontation and confession. “If your brother has something against you...go and be reconciled” (Matt. 5:23-24). “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you” (Matt. 18:15).

Negotiation: When a substantive issue related to money, property, or other material issues or rights divides Christians, a process of biblical negotiation should be followed that will meet the interests of all those involved. “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4).

Privately responding to conflict early, before it escalates, through the means of these three forms of personal peacemaking will often result in reconciliation and no need for further peacemaking attention. Successful personal peacemaking is usually based on at least one parties’ willingness to accept responsibility for how they have contributed to the conflict and by being willing to humble themselves for the greater goal of God’s glory through “making every effort” (Eph. 4:3) to keep the unity of the spirit.

3. The third step - If private admonition is rejected, then calling of one or more witnesses (Matt. 18:16; 1 Cor. 6:1-9). Involving others is a serious escalation of a conflict and should be considered only after the elements of step two have been fully exhausted. Step three includes the three assisted peacemaking responses as follows:

Mediation: If a dispute cannot be resolved through personal peacemaking, the parties should ask one or more other Christians to meet with them to help the parties communicate more effectively and explore possible solutions. The mediators may give advice but have no power to impose solutions. They may later act as witnesses in formal church disciplinary proceedings, should mediation fail due to hardness of heart or the unrepentant sin of one or both parties. “If he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” (Matt. 18:16).

Arbitration: When two parties to a conflict cannot come to a voluntary agreement on a substantive issue, one or more arbitrators may be appointed to listen to the arguments and evidence of each side and render a binding decision. “If you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church” (1 Cor. 6:1-8).

Church Discipline: Formal church discipline, pursuant to the procedures of *BCO* Part II, is reserved for those cases where the person who professes to be a Christian refuses to be reconciled, repent of personal sin, and do what is right. Church leaders bearing ecclesiastical jurisdiction over such persons should formally intervene to promote justice, repentance, and forgiveness. “If he refuses to listen, tell it to the church” (Matt. 18:17-20).

Application of the Principles

Judicial cases that come to the attention of church courts frequently begin as personal disputes between two or more individuals. Typically, when one side feels they are not getting what they want, they bring charges of sin against the other side. In this manner, sessions and presbyteries are drawn into conflicts that would better be resolved at a personal level through Christian conciliation. Of course, when conflicted parties refuse to be reconciled, the accountability afforded by formal church discipline should be used to further the goals of purity in the church, the rebuke of offenses, the removal of scandal, and the spiritual good of offenders (1 Cor. 5:5). Every effort should be made, however, to resolve the conflict through repentance, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation before formal charges are entertained by a church court. The intent of the relevant *BCO* provisions is to

encourage Christian unity before the formal provisions of church discipline are brought to bear on a situation. Of course, not every situation will lend itself to Christian conciliation. However, every effort should be made to utilize private confrontation, mediation, and arbitration in order to reserve the use of formal church discipline, and the time of church courts, for those matters related to the purity of the church and the keeping and reclaiming of disobedient sinners (*BCO* 27-3). Many of these ends will be realized through the processes of Christian conciliation and, therefore, should be viewed as prerequisite procedures to the formal disciplinary process.

Failure to Follow the Steps

Churches unwilling or unable to instruct their members completely in the full breadth of the steps of conciliation and discipline encourage resorting to unbiblical, worldly responses to conflict. The escape responses of denial, flight, and even suicide can be expected if church members are not positively directed to the biblical processes of Christian conciliation. Others, when not given the hope of having matters responded to within the body of Christ, will resort to civil litigation, verbal and physical attack, and possibly even murder to remove an opponent where there is no avenue for a just resolution.

Moving a case too quickly to formal church discipline can build barriers that could otherwise be dealt with in mediation or arbitration. Every church and presbytery is encouraged to equip elders and mature members with the skills of Christian conciliation, and to exhaust conciliation processes and remedies before moving to formal church discipline.

Use of Conciliation Clauses in Membership Documents

One significant way church members can be educated and prepared for biblical conflict resolution is through the use of a conciliation clause in the membership covenant or other agreement signed by new members when they join the church. The recommended language for this clause is set forth below. It should be noted that signing this clause cannot be made a condition for membership, but may be encouraged as a voluntary biblical commitment. It should be clearly offered as an optional statement for the resolution of any disputes that may arise.

Christian Conciliation

Members are encouraged but not required to make this additional commitment.

If I ever have a dispute with the church that cannot be resolved through its own internal procedures, I agree to resolve the dispute according to biblical principles (such as those set forth in Matthew 5:23-25 and 18:15-20, and 1 Corinthians 6:1-8) by submitting the matter to mediation and, if necessary, arbitration, according to the Bylaws of this church and the *Rules of Procedure* of the Institute for Christian Conciliation. I understand that arbitration is a legally binding process, and that judgment upon an arbitration award may be entered in any court otherwise having jurisdiction.

Dated this ____ day of _____, 20____

Name (Printed) Signature

Name (Printed) Signature

Parent's or Guardian's Name Parent's or Guardian's Signature
(for minors)

THIS AGREEMENT IS SUBJECT TO ARBITRATION PURSUANT TO THE
[STATE] ARBITRATION ACT, TITLE ##, CHAPTER #, [STATE] CODE
ANNOTATED.

Amend Church Bylaws to Allow Continuing Church Jurisdiction

The following clause is recommended for inclusion in local church bylaws to allow the continuing ecclesiastical jurisdiction over a member who may otherwise simply flee from the church to avoid biblical discipline:

Members may be removed from membership at their own request following the steps of appropriate pastoral care as set forth in *BCO* 38-4. If a member requests to withdraw because of specific problems or disappointments with the church, the Session shall attempt to resolve those matters so that the member may remain in the church and enjoy greater fruitfulness and personal spiritual growth. If the Session is unable to resolve those matters, it shall offer to assist the member in locating a church of like faith and practice that can respond more effectively to his gifts and needs. If it appears to the Session that a member has requested removal merely to avoid church discipline, that request shall not be given effect until the disciplinary process has been properly concluded.

Use of this clause will also help the church avoid serious legal liability for following through with all of the steps of church discipline. Members should be informed of its provisions and carefully taught the Scriptural basis for continuing shepherding and pastoral care especially when caught in sin (see also *BCO* 38-3 and 38-4).

Conclusion

The courts of the church are encouraged to employ the means of Christian conciliation whenever possible. That is, churches and presbyteries are encouraged to defer judicial action until all other remedies have been exhausted. Peace, unity, and the mission of the Church can be furthered through careful and complete attention to every step of the process as set forth in *BCO* 27-5 as understood through the expanded guidance concerning Christian conciliation as set forth above.