Jesus prayed that all His followers might be one (John 17:20, 21). Paul urged Christians to “be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10). “Enmities,” “strife,” “anger, disputes, dissensions,” and “factions” are included among the works of the flesh which will keep the Christian from inheriting the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19–21). In spite of these prayers and admonitions, strife is a problem in today’s congregations.

In fact, strife is the ingredient that ties many other problems together. For instance, differences between preachers and elders, disagreements about facilities or mission work, and doctrinal conflicts are likely to result in strife. Whatever else the church leader is prepared to do, he must be prepared to help the church overcome the problem of strife if he wants to lead successfully. In order to do so, he should know the answer to three questions.

**WHAT IS STRIFE?**

When we speak of “strife” we do not mean differences of opinion, nor do we mean “conflict.” Why? Because there will always be differences of opinion and, in that sense, conflict in the church. It is not the fact that people differ that causes problems. Paul and Barnabas differed sharply on one occasion, but their conflict did not harm the church. It is not differences between people that cause problems, but what people do about their differences.

One English dictionary defines “strife” as “quarreling; fighting” or “a quarrel; fight.” Another says that it means “bitter, sometimes violent conflict or dissension” or “an act of contention: fight, struggle” and gives “discord” as a synonym and “peace, accord” as antonyms. The Greek word in Galatians 5:20 which is translated “strife” in the RSV, NRSV, and NASB (and translated “variance” in the KJV) is sometimes translated “strife” and sometimes “quarreling,” “quarrels,” “rivalry,” or “dissension.” According to Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, it means “strife, contention” and “is the expression of enmity.”

By “strife,” therefore, we mean continued fighting or quarreling characterized by enmity and resulting in a state of division or dissension among members of the church.

**WHY LEARN TO DEAL WITH STRIFE?**

Why is it important for church leaders to solve the problem of strife?

Leaders must learn to overcome strife in the church, first, because division, or strife, is a sin. In addition to Galatians 5:19–21, which teaches that strife is among the “deeds of the flesh,” Romans 1:29–31 lists strife in a catalog of sins, placed between “murder” and “deceit.” Among

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1The World Book Encyclopedia Dictionary, s.v. “strife.”
2Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, s.v. “strife.”
3Passages where this word is found include Romans 1:29; 13:13; 1 Corinthians 1:11; 3:3; 2 Corinthians 12:20; Philippians 1:15; 1 Timothy 6:4; and Titus 3:9.
the six things the Lord hates is “a man who sows discord among brothers” (Proverbs 6:19; RSV).

Second, unless the strife is resolved, the church is not likely to grow. (1) Church members are likely to be so involved in inner struggles that they will have no time or energy left for preaching to outsiders. (2) People who might otherwise be won to Christ will be turned away by a fussing, fighting membership. That includes our own children, many of whom have turned away from the church because all they ever witnessed in the church were fights and splits. (3) Often, as a result of strife, the church splits, or some members leave, or members remain but are unhappy. Any one of these consequences sets the church back at the time and—even worse—is likely to make growth impossible in the near future.

Third, congregations need to work hard to overcome strife because it is the most prevalent problem in the church. (1) Strife arose among the apostles (Matthew 20:20–28). (2) Strife existed in the early church as it is described in Acts. According to Acts 6:1, “a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews.” (See also Acts 15.) (3) The church at Corinth was torn by strife (1 Corinthians 1:11). (4) Strife occurred even in the beloved church at Philippi; two women had to be urged to get along (Philippians 4:2). (5) Strife was likely even more widespread, since passages in other epistles (e.g., Romans 14:19) deal directly or indirectly with the problem. (6) It is rare to find a church today which has not been hurt by strife.

**HOW CAN STRIFE BE OVERCOME?**

Two steps are important in reducing strife: prevention and cure.

**The Prevention of Strife**

The best cure is prevention. Anything that tends to produce greater unity will reduce strife. Church leaders can help in the following six ways.

*By preaching and teaching.* Ideally, the church should have preaching and teaching on the subject even before any problem arises. Church members need to understand that Christ wants His people to be one (John 17:20, 21) and to be “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). They need to know that God hates the sin of causing division (Proverbs 6:19) and that Christ wants us to be known by our love (John 13:34, 35). They need to learn that, according to Proverbs, the wise man avoids strife:

- Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions (10:12).
- A perverse man spreads strife, and a slanderer separates intimate friends (16:28).
- The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so abandon the quarrel before it breaks out (17:14).
- A fool’s lips bring strife, . . . (18:6).
- Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man, but any fool will quarrel (20:3).
- An arrogant man stirs up strife, . . . (28:25).
- An angry man stirs up strife, and a hot-tempered man abounds in transgression (29:22).
- For the churning of milk produces butter, and pressing the nose brings forth blood, so the churning of anger produces strife (30:33).

They also need to be warned against becoming “gossips and busybodies” (1 Timothy 5:13; see also Romans 1:29 and 2 Corinthians 12:20). Of course, all preaching must be *of truth* and *in love* (Ephesians 4:15).

*By modeling unity.* The church leaders must exemplify unity. If the elders and preacher(s) and deacons cannot “dwell together in unity” (Psalm 133:1), how can they expect the rest of the congregation to do so?

*By bringing people together.* Church leaders must strive to produce a church which is a loving fellowship in which exists a “family feeling” and “brother” or “sister” describe the way we feel about one another. How can this happen?

To begin, they can provide opportunities for Christians to be together other than during the regular worship services: Bible classes, work days, special projects, etc., should be seen as opportunities for Christians to get to know one another better and to love one another more. Especially important are opportunities for the church to eat together. If “not even to eat” with the saints is important to “disfellowshiping” (1 Corinthians 5:11), then eating with the saints is equally important to “fellowshiping”!
By creating a warm and loving atmosphere in the church. To develop such an atmosphere, church leaders can make worship services uplifting. When the worship service is dull and the singing is unenthusiastic and the preaching is wholly negative, people are likely to leave the service dispirited and disheartened—no closer either to God or to one another than they were before the service. On the other hand, warm-hearted worship services with enthusiastic singing and uplifting preaching tend to bring people together. Furthermore, leaders can get to know people by name, make a point of using people’s names, and help the members get to know one another by name. Those who are sick, bereaved, or hurting should be mentioned and prayed for by name. Also, church leaders can work to produce a climate of gratitude and appreciation by expressing their appreciation, as often as possible, in as many ways as possible, to as many church members as possible.

By allowing diversity in matters of opinion. Church leaders need to aim at producing a fellowship which allows room for differences in opinion. To seek to enforce strict uniformity on all questions is more likely to lead to strife than to peace.

By exercising an “open” style of leadership. Church leaders need to be open about their plans and concerns, to communicate frequently and fully with the membership on matters which come to their attention, to ask for advice and help from all, and to welcome it when they receive it. They should see that decisions are made by consensus, rather than by majority vote, and only after they have consulted with others. Church leaders also need to avoid the tyranny of the minority—letting one man or a small group of men, in effect, “run the church” by objecting to any suggestion made by others. To keep this from happening, something like the following can be said openly: “We respect every member of the church. We genuinely want to hear your opinion. If, after we have listened to you, some other course of action appears better and is accepted by most of the members (or the men), we may not accept your advice. If that happens, we hope that you will not take it personally, but will continue to work with us, help us, and pray with us that the greatest good will be done. We need you.”

The Cure for Strife

Most likely, no matter how much we preach against it or work to avoid it, strife will arise in the local congregation. What can be done then?

The problem must be recognized and resolved. In Acts 6, the church leaders did not wait to see how the conflict turned out or assume that since the instigators of the problem were troublemakers, there was no point in listening to their complaint. They did not simply preach against murmuring or carry out their own solution without consulting the whole church. They dealt with the problem. Even so, disagreements ought to be dealt with today. Just as Paul urged Euodia and Syntyche to agree (Philippians 4:2), church leaders should try to effect agreement between brethren who disagree. How?

First, church leaders can attempt, in private, to get those who disagree to agree, or at least to “agree to disagree.” They can play the part of peacemakers by bringing the concerned parties together in a private meeting to try to help resolve the issue which has divided them. If the disputants agree on the question, the problem is solved. If they both agree that the issue is not a matter of faith, then they may be willing to “agree to disagree.” If even one believes that the difference involves a matter of faith, the problem has not been solved. Even if both sides are willing to accept the idea that the issue is not a matter of faith, they still may believe it to be so important that they cannot agree. Questions concerning whether to hire or fire a preacher or whether or not to use the building for some nonreligious purpose may seem so important that the two sides find themselves unable to agree.

Second, if agreement cannot be reached by those most directly involved in the conflict, church leaders can provide the opportunity for an open discussion to resolve the issue. In fact, if a matter has caused much controversy, more than one meeting may need to be held. The meeting (or meetings) must proceed according to certain guidelines; the following might be included:

(1) Seek God’s direction. Prayer should be part of the process. If we are to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17; see also Luke 18:1; 4For suggestions, see the lesson “Confronting Doctrinal Issues,” especially the discussion of Romans 14 found on page 25.)
Romans 12:12; Colossians 4:2), then surely we ought to pray when we come together to resolve the issues that divide us. We should expect our prayers for peace and unity to be answered (Matthew 7:7, 8; 1 John 5:14, 15).

(2) **Concentrate on issues, not personalities.** Emphasis must be on the question to be resolved, not on personalities. The best way of dealing with controversy is to deal with it as a challenge or problem facing the church. Leaders should make the discussion impersonal, in a sense, rather than to deal with the problem as a “me” versus “you” matter—a personal dispute. The question should be phrased “Here is the situation facing the church. Here are the issues. Now what are the possible solutions, and what is the best solution?”

(3) **Conquer animosity.** Personal animosity that colors the issues may have to be dealt with before the issues themselves can be resolved. For instance, if a church leader who is involved feels animosity towards his “opponent,” he should admit that feeling to himself and then do whatever is necessary to overcome it so that he can look at the issues in an unbiased way. Perhaps he could also remember that the best way of overcoming animosity toward another is to make a friend of him.

(4) **Require fairness.** Everyone is entitled to an opportunity to speak. Of course, only one person can speak at a time. No one should be allowed to dominate the discussion; every speaker should be allowed the same amount of time.

(5) **Manifest a Christlike spirit.** Each person should be encouraged to behave in a Christian manner. No shouting, no personal accusations, and no intimidation can be allowed.

(6) **Provide openness.** Within the boundaries given, anyone should be allowed to say whatever is on his mind, without fear of being ridiculed or rejected as a person (although his ideas may not be accepted). In many cases, just letting the “opposition” have its say will satisfy the people who hold an opinion contrary to that of most people in the congregation.

(7) **Consider feelings and facts.** All those involved in the discussion need to appreciate the importance of feelings and emotions. It is easy to dismiss some opinions because they are based on feelings rather than facts. However, feelings are facts. The way people feel about things is a fact that must be considered. All the “facts” or “logic” may point one direction, but if the majority of the members have “feelings” that point another way, their “feelings” might weigh as heavily as the “facts.”

(8) **Have a time limit.** A time limit can be set on the discussion, and/or someone can be appointed to be in charge of the meeting. This leader must assume a neutral role; his task is to assure that all sides are fairly heard and that the discussion moves toward a constructive conclusion. Such a person should be given the authority to end the meeting when it becomes apparent that all has been said and that nothing more can be achieved.

(9) **Exhibit a willingness to compromise.** Participants in the discussion need to understand that it is not always wrong to compromise. Sometimes, to achieve a consensus on a controversial question having to do with methods (not with the “faith once for all delivered” to the church), church leaders may be required to compromise, or to alter a proposed program in some way.

(10) **Reach a decision by consensus.** Decisions should be made by consensus, not by majority vote.

James Means, in *Leadership in Christian Ministry*, provided an alternative model for a meeting (or meetings) to settle church problems, using Acts 15 as an example for decision-making for Christian leaders today. He said concerning what was done on that occasion,
cal understanding. While Scripture does not give a mandate for all controversial decisions, there usually are applicable principles.\(^5\)

Third, sometimes the overall unity of the church may best be served by brethren going their separate ways to work faithfully for the Lord. The experience of Paul and Barnabas, as recorded in Acts 15:36–41, suggests this idea. Paul proposed that he and Barnabas return to visit the churches established on the first missionary journey. Barnabas agreed, but he wanted to take John Mark (his cousin, Colossians 4:10) with them. However, John Mark had turned back on the first journey (Acts 13:13) and Paul, blaming him for his defection, was not willing to take him along. Consequently, there arose, not just a contention, but a “sharp disagreement” between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:39). Consequently, each went his own way: “... they separated from one another” (Acts 15:39). Barnabas and John Mark went by ship to work on the island of Cyprus, which had been visited on the first journey (Acts 13:4–12) and which was Barnabas’ home (Acts 4:36, 37). Paul took Silas and went overland to the cities, where churches had been established in Asia Minor, passing through Cilicia (his home, Acts 22:3) on the way (Acts 15:40, 41).

We can learn from Paul and Barnabas that good and faithful brethren can disagree on matters of expediency without either one sinning. Christians can agree to disagree on these matters, but disagreements can sometimes be sharp. They can, in fact, make it impossible for brethren to work together. When that happens, the best solution may be for those brethren to work separately. Through their separating from one another, the church as a whole may experience greater peace. In God’s providence, the good done in the long run may be increased. In the case in Acts 15, the result was that four people, rather than two or three, went to the mission field, and they went to two fields rather than just one. Possibly, twice as much good was done! However, if everything is “to work together for good” (Romans 8:28), the people involved need to have good attitudes. There is no indication that Paul thought any less of Barnabas as a result of this experience, and he held no grudges against John Mark. In fact, late in his life he spoke with respect and affection of the one whom he had one time refused to take with him (Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11).

CONCLUSION

The goal of the church leader with regard to strife is to love peace, live peacefully with all men as much as possible (Romans 12:18), and make peace.

Abraham provided an example of a peace-loving man. He and his nephew Lot both had been blessed with great flocks and herds (Genesis 13:2, 5). After they had lived and journeyed together for a while, the time came when “the land could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together, and there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s cattle and the herdsmen of Lot’s cattle” (Genesis 13:6, 7a; RSV). What could be done? Abraham might have insisted on staying in that area, requiring Lot to leave. Instead, he gave Lot his choice of the land:

And Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren. Is not the whole land before thee? separate thyself, I pray thee from me: if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left (Genesis 13:8, 9; KJV).

We know “the rest of the story.” Lot “pitched his tent toward Sodom” (Genesis 13:12; KJV), ultimately with disastrous results for himself and his family. In contrast, Abram received new promises from the God who had called him from his homeland (Genesis 13:14–17).

What price are we willing to pay for peace? “Peace at any price”—even at the cost of doctrinal purity—is too much. Nevertheless, we should be willing to pay the price Abraham paid to bring about peace in the family. We need to learn to say, “Let there be no strife between us. You can take your choice, you can have your way, so that we can be at peace. After all, we are brethren.”

“There is no disappointment to one whose will is lost in God’s will.”

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