

One of the most famous feuds, known throughout the world, is the feud between the Hatfields and McCoys. – A dispute between two wealthy land-owning families, over one insignificant hog, escalated to a 13 year battle of kidnap, murder, abandonment, arson and brutality. More than a dozen family members were murdered, along with dozens of bounty hunters who tried to pull them in. And of course, the feud between the Hatfields and McCoys has become legendary.

But an even greater division which certainly has existed, throughout the world, is a division within the very institution, which at its inception, was ordained to be one of unity and truth and love..... And sometimes in the church we can see anything but unity, truth and love.

One of my greatest sadnesses, is that this church, (along with just about every other church, by the way), began because Christians disagreed on the direction that God was leading the church.

And I would dare to say that most people, who once **used** to worship regularly a Sunday morning, but now never even set foot in a church, are people who have been hurt (by Christians) and have withdrawn from fellowship of their church, because of this hurt.... God forgive **us**, for any part that we have played in that.... God forgive us.

Christian unity is **very** important. I know it's important, because Jesus prayed for it. In John 17, Jesus prayed for His disciples, and all those who would follow – that's us – and He prayed that we would be ONE. Just as the Father and the Son are one – united in truth.

So, if Jesus prayed for that..., “why is the church in the state that it’s in?” Why **is** the church broken and fractured? Why in this little town of St George, are there **9** church meetings happening this morning?... Why?

Well we could spend weeks studying all the great schisms in history, we could spend another few months looking at a local level, but I think we would find that it all boils down to one small word that explains it all – “Sin”

So, here’s a question for you, “Can a church sin?”.... Well, of course it can.... A church is made up of people – humans. And if there’s one thing that we can learn as we read the Bible, it’s that God’s people have a nasty habit of turning their backs on Him. **We** have a nasty habit of falling short of all of what God requires. It’s just as well our Lord is a gracious and forgiving God.

But what should we do about it, when sin enters a church?

A commonly held view, both in the church and outside the church, is that Christians should **naturally** get on with each other. Now that’s a lovely notion isn’t it? Doesn’t it make you feel all goose-bumpy? But I’m pretty sure we all have our feet on the ground firmly enough to be able to say, “Well that’s **not** the way it is.” You and I can see division and sin in the church, can’t we? And the bible is a book full of practical application. And in fact, most of the New Testament, rather than telling us how to be saved, is actually saying “Now that you are saved, this is how you should live.”

And the Bible teaches us so much about that, because living the Christian life, does **not** come naturally. Christian unity is **not** a natural trait for us humans. Christian unity, is a working of the Spirit. It goes against the human, fleshly nature. It's **not** natural – it's a learned and practiced behaviour. And it's something that **we** need to work hard at, with (of course) the help and grace of God....

Our Bible reading this morning, guides us in how we should deal with sin and division, when it arises in the church. And I suspect that it probably takes most of us to a place, that we really don't want to be. ..

It takes us to confrontation, repentance, and forgiveness. And unless we go through all three of these, the issue will never be properly resolved, and the sin in the church will fester, and strain relationships, and cause division, dissension, and back biting.

So, the first step is confrontation.... ¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you..... Some of us are really good at confrontation "I'll tear strips off you brother...."

One lady one day said to her pastor "And so I gave that so-and-so a piece of my mind", to which he replied "Are you sure you could afford such a generous offering?"

I'm pretty sure that this sort of confrontation is **not** what Jesus has in mind. **Ephesians 4:**² Be completely

humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

But confrontation **is required**. *Somebody once said, "How much easier it is to be critical than to correct."*ⁱ - that's true, isn't it???

How will I ever know to stop doing what I've been doing, and to ask for forgiveness if you don't tell me that what I'm doing is hurting you?

And there are so many 'nice' people in the church, who try to keep harmony by **not** saying anything. They avoid confrontation at **all** costs. And while this may be a 'nice' notion, it's not scriptural... and it's certainly not effective. *Think for a moment – if you ignore a bur or a splinter in your hand, it'll begin to fester, and your skin will become either calloused or infected.* And if we leave sin and division undealt with in a church, we the people become either hard and calloused, or we become bitter with infection.

And so confrontation is the (very necessary) first step... ¹⁵

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. Of course, if he doesn't listen, the confrontation may need to escalate - ⁶
... take one or two others along, and then tell it to the church;

But of course the aim here is not to condemn, nor is it to publicise their sin – the aim is to win the other over – the

aim is to lead the person to repentance, so that the relationship can be restored....

And so the second step is repentance. Confrontation leads to repentance.

When I've done something wrong, and somebody brings it to my attention, sometimes I could ignore them – that's a hardness of heart... But when several people take me to task over the same issue, that's a bit harder to ignore. But I still have a choice – what am I going to do with that? If I know that I have wronged somebody, am I going to repent and ask for forgiveness, or am I going to stand on me digs and say, "Well that's their problem." ...

I know what the natural, fleshly option is. But the Spirit calls us to something quite profoundly different... Because the purpose of confrontation is to bring repentance. There's a good example of this – when Paul wrote the second of his letters to the Corinthian church: He said: **2 Corinthians 7:** ⁸ Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it--I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while-- ⁹ yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance.

Do you see what was going on here? His first letter was a letter of confrontation... It clearly outlined what was going wrong in that church, but this confrontation lead to repentance, and repentance leads to forgiveness. And it's only when true forgiveness happens in a church that a division can be healed.

And repentance is so important, that if anyone refuses to repent, they have no right to be numbered among the believers... That is a very harsh statement, but Jesus said it... If someone refuses to repent, Jesus said: **17 treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.** That means “Still love the person, but unrepentant sin has no place in the church.”..... And I’ll tell you why:

A **unified** church, is a powerful church. But a church, which tolerates sin, and does not address that sin, and does not repent of that sin, can never be a unified church – It can never be unified with Christ, and unified with one another... A church which refuses to repent of its sin, can never be witness to the reconciling and saving work of Christ.

We can never be truly unified with Christ, if we refuse to repent of our sin... And that’s one of the primary reasons, that **this** little church here began...

A unified church – even if it’s a very small church – a church who are unified with each other, and with Christ, are a powerful church... Now you might think that sounds a bit backwards – we tend to think of mega-churches as being powerful churches, but it is small, unified churches, who throughout history, have made the difference in the world. Because a unified church is a powerful church.

V¹⁸ "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. **19** "Again, I tell you

that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

You know, I've copped a bit of flack from other churches – "The last thing St George needs is another church" they say... But I'll tell you what St George needs – St George needs a church that is unified... It doesn't matter how little or insignificant it may seem...

A church unified, in agreement, in truth, in repentance, in faith, in love, is a powerful church... Can we be that church????

When a church is in agreement with each other, and the will of God, in the mission that God is calling them to, and that church relies on God to do it, it will be done... Believe it!

Christian unity is **so** important. Jesus prays for it. He prays for you and me. And the Bible shows us how we are to work towards it – confrontation, repentance and forgiveness....

- Some of us hope for repentance without confrontation – That will rarely happen.
- Some try forgiveness without repentance – it'll rarely be genuine or helpful.
- Some hope for a healing of relationships as if it just takes time – there isn't enough time.
- Some are willing to do the confronting, but unwilling to do the forgiving – confrontation has no place in the

church, unless it will be closely followed by a forgiving and loving heart.

And you might find yourself asking yourself the question, “How many times do we need to forgive?” And of course the answer is “As often as it takes – over and over again.” (and that’s going to be the topic next time I preach)

A unified church doesn’t just happen. The short term pain of confrontation, properly followed by repentance and forgiveness – a lot of forgiveness – is all that can keep us together – it is the only thing that can keep us strong for God.

My prayer, for this little church, is that we would be united in Christ – united in truth, united in faith, united in hope, united in love... My prayer, is that when one of us sins against the other (and it will happen), that we would stick by God’s process – confrontation, repentance, forgiveness...

I also pray for the wider Christian church in St George... I pray for a time when the whole Christian church is united in Christ – united in truth, united in faith, united in hope, united in love...

Not a unity that covers up sin... Not a unity that ignores a festering thorn... Not a unity that is like fresh paint on a rotting wall... But a unity of agreement, united in Christ – united in truth, united in faith, united in hope, united in love...

Because a church united in this way, is a powerful church...

Questions

Sentence: Christian Unity.
Scripture: Matthew 18:15-22 Date: 24/11/2013 Name: Michael Brumpton
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ⁱ Adapted from readers digest quotable quotes p.93