

## **PROTECTING YOUR CHURCH**

- **Ephesians 4:3 (KJV)** Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
- **Ephesians 4:3 (LB)** Try always to be led along together by the Holy Spirit and so be at peace with one another.
- Other translations: “make every effort, being diligent, striving, take every care, do your best” ... to keep UNITY!
- If you are a Christian, it is your responsibility to protect the unity of your church. Unity in the church is so important that the New Testament gives more attention to it than to either Heaven or Hell. Unity is the very soul of fellowship. Destroy it and you rip the heart out of Christ’s body. It is the very essence of how God intends us to experience life together as His people.
- Just like every parent, our heavenly Father enjoys watching His children get along with each other. In fact, in his final moments before he was arrested and taken to Calvary, Jesus prayed passionately for our unity in John 17. It was our unity that was uppermost in his mind during those agonizing hours.
- Nothing on earth is more valuable to God than his church. He paid the highest price for it, and he wants it protected! If you are part of his family, that is your responsibility! Today, we want to talk about some practical ways in which you can fulfill that responsibility:

### **1. FOCUS ON WHAT WE HAVE IN COMMON, NOT OUR DIFFERENCES.**

- **Romans 14:19 (NIV)** Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.
- **Romans 14:19 (MSG)** So let’s agree to use all our energy in getting along with each other. Help others with encouraging words;
- As Christians, we share one Lord, one body, one purpose, one Father, one Spirit, one hope, one faith, one baptism, and one love. We share the same salvation, the same life, and the same future – and these are factors far more important than any little differences that might try to divide us.
- It was God Himself who chose to give us different personalities, backgrounds and preferences, so we should value and enjoy those differences, not merely tolerate them.
- GOD WANTS UNITY, NOT UNIFORMITY!

- Conflict is almost always a sign that the focus has shifted to less important issues, things the Bible calls “disputable matters.”
- **Romans 14:1 (NIV)** Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.
- **Romans 14:1 (MSG)** Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don’t see things the way you do. And don’t jump all over them every time they do or say something you don’t agree with—even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.
- When we focus on personalities, preferences, interpretations, styles, or methods, division always happens. But if we concentrate on loving each other and fulfilling God’s purposes, harmony is the result.
- **1 Corinthians 1:10 (NLT)** Now, dear brothers and sisters, I appeal to you by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ to stop arguing among yourselves. Let there be real harmony so there won’t be divisions in the church. I plead with you to be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.

### **2. BE REALISTIC IN YOUR EXPECTATIONS.**

- It is easy to become discouraged by the gap that exists between the IDEAL and the REAL in the church. Yet we must passionately love the church in spite of its imperfections.
  - Longing for the ideal while criticizing the real is evidence of IMMATURITY.
  - Settling for the real without striving for the ideal is evidence of COMPLACENCY.
  - Living with this tension is evidence of MATURITY.
- Other believers will disappoint you and let you down, but they are your family and you can’t just walk out on them. Stay and work it out!
- **Ephesians 4:2 (NLT)** Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love.
- Divorcing your mate at the first sign of disappointment or disillusionment is a mark of immaturity. So is divorcing your church! God has things he wants to teach you, even through difficulties with others, and besides – there is no perfect church to escape to!
- Groucho Marx was famous for saying he wouldn’t want to belong to any club that would let him in. If a church has to be perfect to satisfy you, that same perfection will exclude you from membership!

### 3. CHOOSE TO ENCOURAGE RATHER THAN CRITICIZE.

- It is always easier to stand on the sidelines and take shots at those who are serving than it is to get involved and make a contribution. But God warns us over and over in His Word not to criticize, compare or judge each other.
- **Romans 14:10 (PHI)** Why, then, criticize your brother's actions, why try to make him look small? We shall all be judged one day, not by each other's standards or even our own, but by the standard of Christ.
- Whenever I judge another believer, four things instantly happen:
  - I lose fellowship with God
  - I expose my own pride and insecurity
  - I set myself up to be judged by God
  - I harm the fellowship of the church
- A critical spirit is a costly vice! The Bible calls Satan "the accuser of our brethren" (Revelation 12:10). It's his job to blame, complain and criticize the members of God's family ... and any time we do the same, we're being duped into doing Satan's work for him!
- Remember that other Christians, no matter how much you disagree with them, are not the real enemy!

### 4. REFUSE TO LISTEN TO GOSSIP.

- Gossip is passing on information when you are neither part of the problem nor part of the solution.
- Most people intuitively know that gossiping is wrong, but they don't grasp the fact that listening to it is wrong as well! Remember that people who gossip TO you will gossip ABOUT you as well. Besides, if you listen to gossip, God says that you are a troublemaker.
- **Proverbs 17:4 (CEV)** Trouble makers listen to trouble makers, and liars listen to liars.
- **Jude 1:19 (MSG)** These are the ones who split churches, thinking only of themselves. There's nothing to them, no sign of the Spirit!
- **Galatians 5:15 (NCV)** If you go on hurting each other and tearing each other apart, be careful, or you will completely destroy each other.
- **Proverbs 26:20 (LB)** Fire goes out for lack of fuel, and tensions disappear when gossip stops.

### 5. PRACTICE GOD'S METHOD FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION.

- Jesus gave the church a simple three-step process for conflict resolution. But during conflict, it is tempting to complain to a third party rather than courageously speak the truth in love to the person you are upset with. This always makes matters worse!
- **Matthew 18:15-17a (MSG)** If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend. If he won't listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If he still won't listen, tell the church.

### 6. SUPPORT YOUR PASTORS AND LEADERS.

- One of the sad things you learn in ministry is that people who have been around the church the longest can often be the most immature. Pastors often have the unpleasant task of serving as mediator between hurt or immature members, and they're also given the task of trying to make everyone happy, which even Jesus couldn't do!
- **Hebrews 13:17 (MSG)** Be responsive to your pastoral leaders. Listen to their counsel. They are alert to the condition of your lives and work under the strict supervision of God. Contribute to the joy of their leadership, not its drudgery. Why would you want to make things harder for them?
- **1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 (MSG)** And now, friends, we ask you to honor those leaders who work so hard for you, who have been given the responsibility of urging and guiding you along in your obedience. Overwhelm them with appreciation and love! Get along among yourselves, each of you doing your part.
- It is not always easy to protect the unity of the church. Sometimes you will have to do what's best for the Body, not yourself, showing preference to others. That's one reason God puts us in a church family – to learn unselfishness. As members of a church, we learn to say "we" instead of "I" and "our" instead of "mine." God blesses churches that are unified like that!
- **1 Corinthians 10:24 (NLT)** Don't think only of your own good. Think of other Christians and what is best for them.
- When God has a bunch of baby believers He wants to deliver, He looks for the warmest incubator he can find. There are many people in our community looking for love and a place to belong. When they find a church where people genuinely love and care for each other, you would have to lock the doors to keep them away. What are you doing personally to make your church family more warm and loving?