

What's next when the formula in Matthew 18 doesn't work?

This article is from the "Edifying the Body" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's Web site, churchofgodbigandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of June 6-7, 2009. This article also appeared in the January-March 2009 issue of The Journal: News of the Churches of God.

By Dixon Cartwright

BIG SANDY, Texas—Anyone who has observed the Churches of God for very long notices that hundreds of groups exist where there used to be one Worldwide Church of God.

This in itself is not a problem. I see an advantage in the existence of multiple groups as opposed to only one. The appearance of unity in the old Radio/Worldwide Church of God was only an illusion anyway, when you take into account the way everything worked.

But you may be someone who is concerned, upset even, about the animosity between the groups that have split from the WCG and from each other.

The animosity also exists inside splits and inevitably leads to more splits and thus more animosity.

In a world that lacks peace, it would not be a bad idea for churches—the people who profess Christianity—to think about setting a better example as peacemakers.

Our dealings with each other, even our reliance on the principles of reconciliation outlined in Matthew 5 and 18, have not brought us peace within the Churches of God as a movement.

Difficulties with Matthew 18

This article attempts to analyze factors that have negatively contributed to the situation we have of Christians demonizing other Christians, even though the typical two sides of a church controversy have few real differences in their beliefs.

A part of the problem is, to put it bluntly, the formula for going to one's brother in Matthew 18.

The 18th chapter of Matthew, as we have implemented it, has fallen far short of contributing to peace in the churches and in fact is a part of the problem.

The problem with Matthew 18, beginning in verse 15, becomes apparent when we try to use it to settle disputes between two parties. Whether the point of dispute is governance or doctrine, everybody assumes one side must be right and one side wrong. That is the problem.

The verses beginning with Matthew 18:15 are written from the perspective of a person who believes he is the unjustly injured party. The offender is the other party, the one who has trespassed against the innocent one.

Immediately, then, the stage is set for one person being in the right (you) and one person sinning against you and God (the other guy).

The problem with the stage that is thus set is that the other party, in implementing the same formula from Matthew 18, looks at the guilt-innocence situation from the opposite point of view. In the other guy's mind, he is the offended party and you are the guilty one.

So what happens? Each side, in trying carefully to apply the words of Scripture, and indeed the recorded words of Jesus, demonizes the other.

Agents of whom?

Speaking of demonization, it is typical among conservative Christians, including the Churches of God, to feel almost compelled to think of the other side in a dispute about doctrine, and even governance, as agents of the devil.

Therefore, the impulses at play in trying to implement Matthew 18 to resolve major disagreements dictate that, if your brother will not take you seriously when you talk with him, you naturally conclude that your former friend is also your former brother.

You draw this conclusion because he even dares to disagree with your two friends who visit him in the second step of the Matthew 18 formula, and then refuses even to meet with the "church" (whatever exactly that means in verse 17) when you take the dispute before that body.

He has refused to accept responsibility for what you see as his sin. You are now obligated to treat him as a heathen and a publican. He is a bad guy.

At the same time, the opposite typically is happening with him. He is in the process of concluding that you are a willing, or at least unwilling, pawn of Satan because you will not accept and repent of the fault he finds in you.

This happens over and over. I conclude, therefore, that Matthew 18 as a remedy for governance and doctrinal disputes among the brethren is insufficient—although its principles can work in a simple dispute between two people who can readily agree about who is in the right and who is in the wrong.

Blow away the chaff

So what's the solution? Can there be a solution to this problem, if it really is a problem?

Maybe it's not actually a problem. Maybe justifying oneself and demonizing the other side in a dispute is a desirable outcome. If you're the godly person and the other guy is satanic, then what's wrong with separating from him and carrying on with the true thread of the faith?

In many people's minds this is indeed a desirable outcome. It's part of a winning process. Protect the wheat. Blow away the chaff.

But stepping back from our corner of Christendom for a minute—and realizing that there is many times not a dime's worth of difference between the disputants—might help you if you'd like to gain a longer view.

The longer, wider view realizes there is nothing wrong per se with splits and that there is no real need—except for the impulse to demonize other people to justify your own conclusions about religion—to live at war with people in other groups who used to be in your group.

Unpleasant gnawing

There is no use wasting time and effort to try to agree on a system of arbitration for church disputes, because one side or both can simply not agree to sit down with the other and certainly will be reluctant to agree to submitting to a binding decision of an outside judge.

Why would a group want to do that? Why would it want to take the chance that an arbiter would decide against its own best interests?

It wouldn't. So forget that.

Also forget trying to convince the people on the other side of the error of *their* ways.

Put yourself in their place. Do you want them to convince you of the error of your ways?

Of course not. So forget that.

What's left? Let's see. All that's left is to live and let live.

But aren't there problems with the laissez-faire approach?

Yes, there are. You're still left with the unpleasant gnawing conviction that the people on the other side are wrong, and not just wrong but religiously wrong, which means they're walking on the wrong side of God.

The other side is faced with the same unpleasant prospect: living and letting live not far from brethren or former brethren (you) who have given themselves over to doctrines of demons because, for example, you disagree with their form of government or calendar or when born-again happens or which biblical laws are applicable to Christians and which are not.

Be thankful

So what's this mean?

It means that, if you can take the longer view that—within your system of perception and within the other side's system of perception—you're both right, there can be more peace in the valley of the Churches of God.

So forget church mergers. Forget getting back together. That's hardly ever going to happen, and it doesn't need to happen.

There is no problem having hundreds of groups. The phenomenon of an abundance of fellowships can serve as a check and balance on each other.

A Church of God that you perceive as weird and coercive cannot be free to be nearly as weird and coercive in its *effects* as it could if it were the one true Church of God group.

So, in the sense I'm talking about here, be thankful for the splits.

God and your heart

Try this little thought experiment. Think of your set of beliefs and practices as correct in God's sight. But at the same time imagine the people in another group—perhaps the one you split to or from last year or 10 years ago—as living in a world different from yours but also holding to a set of beliefs and practices that are correct in God's sight.

Is this possible to do? Is this possible for God? Or is this cognitive dissonance in overdrive and I'm only deluding myself by even bringing it up?

An almost trite saying, but it's also surely the truth, is that God looks on the heart. Your heart is right with God. Be secure in that belief, because it's true.

But the hearts in the other groups, your former friends on the wrong side of this or that split, are also right with God.

Your hearts are right even if you find it difficult to accept that the two variations of the Church of God religion held dear by you and your former friends can both be right—as understood and as looked at by God—since God looks at the intent, the heart.

The intent, to draw close to God, of course is right, no matter which side of a dispute we're talking about.

The deep down intent of every spiritually minded human being is to grow closer to the source of everything, to God.

Shouldn't the dawning of the realization of that truth help you envision the other guys as people of worth, people of God, rather than witting or unwitting agents of Satan?

The splits per se are not a problem. A problem—in that it doesn't contribute toward a peaceful world—is the animosity. It doesn't have to exist. It also doesn't have to disappear overnight. But it can disappear one human being at a time.