

United Church of God Big Sandy, Inc.

P.O. Box 690
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PROCEDURE FOR CHURCH INVOLVEMENT IN DISPUTE RESOLUTION

Derived from recommendations from the
Biblical Discipline and Appeal Process Committee

Prologue

In a perfect world, nobody would hurt or offend anybody else. There would be no disagreements or conflicts leading to hurt feelings or worse. But we do not live in a perfect world. And Christians, like all other human beings, are imperfect. Christians can and do have disagreements (Acts 15:39). Christians can and do hurt one another. Sometimes they even anathematize or slander one another.

Jesus knew we would have conflicts and disagreements even as brethren, so He gave us some principles or guidelines to follow. These guidelines only work with willing, converted and mature minds. Immature minds follow a dependency paradigm and seek others—usually authority figures—to intercede and resolve their problems. The mature person realizes he has a responsibility to take care of his own conflicts, without the need for mediators or intercessors (Luke 12:13-14; Proverbs 26:17).

Paul explained that if Christians are to judge even angels in the future, all of us should be capable of resolving our own issues now (1 Corinthians 6:1-8). The biblical approach to conflict resolution for the Christian is derived primarily from Matthew 18:15-17.

The underlying subtext of Matthew 18 is basic respect—and love—for each individual as a child of God. A Christian's thoughts and words should reflect that attitude (Matthew 12:34-37; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; Philippians 4:8). A Christian should respect even strangers, following the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12).

The other subtext of Matthew 18 is the sense of family and of community. The Christian *wants* to get along with his brethren. He *wants* breaches to be healed. A Christian can get angry with a brother, but without sinning (Ephesians 4:26; Matthew 5:22-26, 44-48).

A third subtext is that Christianity demands courage, which is why, perhaps, all too few Christians truly follow the guidelines Jesus gave us in Matthew 18. Following these principles demands overcoming timidity and cowardice (2 Timothy 1:7), for it is not easy to go to one's brother. It is far easier to gossip about him, or to make accusations behind his back. When a Christian does this, he is often succumbing to the temptations proffered by the archaccuser (Revelation 12:9-10). Moreover, the tongue, as emphasized in James 3, is powerful and should be used to build up—not to tear down—our community. The Christian's focus should be: What can I *give* to strengthen our community? How can I *build* healthy relationships?

Matthew 18:15-35 describes three steps:

1. Matthew 18:15 directs the Christian to begin the process of conflict resolution by privately going to the person who can most easily *do* something about the problem—the person who, at least in the offended person’s perception, created the problem to begin with.

In reviewing the various subtexts or themes of this passage (basic respect and love, sense of family and community, courage), the Christian realizes that the approach he must take is all-important. For example, he will not publicize the offense but keep it secret (Proverbs 25:9). He will not go in wagging an accusatory finger, or demanding an apology, or announcing an ultimatum. Instead he will approach the situation with an attitude of humility (Galatians 6:1-3) because he realizes that it is often hard even for servants of God to see themselves as offenders (2 Samuel 12:1-7). The Christian must exhibit a genuine willingness to forgive (Luke 17:3-4).

It is also important to understand that it is entirely possible for the offended party to have misunderstood his brother’s intent or to be missing some essential facts. (Author Stephen Covey in *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* describes a principle that is very applicable in this context: Seek first to understand, then to be understood.) A Christian cannot assume he understands every relevant detail of a given situation. Many offenses boil down to some sort of misunderstanding. Once the issue is brought out and explained, it is much easier to resolve.

The Christian must also go to his brother in a constructive frame of mind. He must truly be seeking to repair the rift and build up the relationship between them, as much as humanly possible. He should be willing to give the other party the benefit of the doubt. He should assume that the other party did not mean to offend or hurt him. After all, that is how most people would like to be treated. We would like others to assume that we meant well, even if we had said or done something that caused offense.

If Christians consistently and carefully apply this first step, using the approach delineated above, the vast majority of interpersonal conflicts would be resolved, resulting in a strengthened church.

It is important to note that the response of the brother or sister who has offended is also important. If a Christian’s brother comes to him, the offending party should also be willing to seek first to understand, then to be understood. If a Christian has done wrong, he should have the courage to apologize without trying to make excuses. If he finds himself getting defensive, he could ask the brother who has come to him for time—perhaps a day or so—to think and to pray about the situation, with the hope of becoming less defensive and more conciliatory.

One more example of the kind of attitude the Christian needs to have in going to a brother or sister who has offended him or has sinned and hurt him is found in the example of Joseph, the human father of Jesus. Joseph had the *right* to *publicly* humiliate Mary, but being a just man, he kept things private (Matthew 1:18-19). In fact, if we look at passages such as Deuteronomy 22:13-24, Mary apparently could have been sentenced to death by stoning. Joseph, however, being the kind of man who could be a model for God’s own Son, showed great mercy, as God does toward all Christians every day (Lamentations 3:22-23).

2. Matthew 18:16 discusses taking witnesses to help resolve the problem if the first step was not successful in doing so. Clearly, considering the subtexts already adduced, the Christian who sincerely wants to gain his brother will want witnesses who are seeking a “win-win” resolution for everyone, not people who are biased and may have their own grudge against a brother. The attitude of these witnesses, too, should reflect basic respect and love, a strong sense of family and community, as well as courage and mercy. They are there not to buttress either side’s arguments, but to contribute to a resolution of the problem. Obviously, they can ask clarifying questions, but they are not part of the dispute or offense.

If a large percentage of problems between brethren could be resolved with the first step of Matthew 18, then surely most of the remaining problems should be resolved by the second step. So perhaps a minuscule number of issues would ever need to be taken to the third step.

3. Matthew 18:17. How is the term “church” to be understood and applied in this context? The church as a spiritual organism? As a church organization? As a local congregation? If it is the latter, do we mean everyone in the congregation, including young children? If we mean the church as a spiritual organism, how do we take a matter before the entire church?

The view adopted by the board of trustees is that Matthew 18:17 is a reference to those who are in a position of responsibility for the congregation that the Christian disputants in question attend. (In another New Testament book, addressing each of the seven churches is synonymous with addressing the “angel” of each church—cf. Revelation 3:13-14. There is an implied identification of the congregation with the leadership of that congregation.) In the case of the Church of God Big Sandy, the individuals responsible for the congregation as its appointed representatives are the members of the board of trustees.

Christians should always entertain the hope that, at some future point, an offending brother may come to see his offense, repent and seek to be reconciled to the one he has offended. In that light, how beneficial will it have been to have trumpeted the person’s offense(s) to the entire church? Moreover, if a Christian’s attitude toward even a “heathen” or a “publican” should be one of outgoing concern and forgiveness, not hatred or revenge, how much more should he be willing to forgive his brother? (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60; Romans 5:8, 10; Matthew 5:44).

Jesus clearly points out in Matthew 18:21-35 that if a Christian is unwilling to forgive others, then he cannot be forgiven.

The policy submitted and recommended by the Biblical Discipline and Appeals Process Committee is based on the assumption that Christian brethren will make a prayerful, sincere, and wholehearted effort to resolve their differences, or to amend their behavior if they are made aware of its inappropriateness. The essential principles Christians should follow, more fully described above, can be summarized as:

- They will genuinely seek to be reconciled to the offending brother (Matthew 18:15);
- They are willing and eager to forgive (Matthew 18:21-35);

- They will seek resolution at the earliest possible opportunity (Ephesians 4:26);
- They will seek restoration in a spirit of humility (Galatians 6:1-3).

Policy

In the judgment of the board of trustees, it is not the pastor's responsibility to mediate disputes between Christians (Luke 12:13-14). If his intervention is requested, he should remind disputants of the principles described above, and he should periodically teach principles of conflict resolution from the pulpit. But Christians who have not resolved a dispute even after following the first two steps delineated in Matthew 18:15-17 should follow up on step three with the church board, not with the pastor. This policy is intended to provide an orderly process for doing that.

At the request of the disputants, the board of trustees will name an ad hoc committee to work with the parties involved in an attempt to achieve a resolution. The committee shall be made up of three to five members of the congregation, one of whom must be a current board member. The committee members will be selected from a list of 10-15 members of the congregation whom the board considers to be qualified to assist in resolving conflicts and redressing grievances. In order to avoid even the appearance of impropriety, a board member or committee member should recuse himself if the dispute involves his employer, his employee, a member of his family or any other person with whom he has a relationship that would give rise to a real or perceived conflict of interest.

The first responsibility of the committee will be to ascertain that the request is valid, i.e., that the first two steps of Matthew 18:15-17 have been correctly and completely followed. If, in the judgment of the committee, those steps have not been carried out correctly or completely, then the committee will recommend to the disputants to first fulfill those steps. The committee may assist the disputants by reviewing with them the principles underlying Matthew 18:15-17 as outlined in the prologue above and by making practical suggestions on how to fulfill their Christian responsibilities in this regard.

If, in the judgment of the committee, the first two steps have been correctly and completely carried out, but without success, then the parties to the dispute will have the opportunity to present their case to the committee in writing and then orally within 30 days of a valid request. The deadlines for submission of written documentation and the dates for oral presentations will be established by the committee in as reasonable a manner as possible, but not later than 30 days after the initial valid request. Disputants may ask witnesses to submit written testimony or testify orally before the committee. With the consent of both disputants, one or more meetings between the committee and the disputants may be private.

The grievance committee's decision may be appealed to the full board of trustees within 30 days of the announcement of the decision. The procedure to be followed by the board shall be the same as the procedure followed by the grievance committee, within the same time frame and under the same conditions.

The committee and the board will make every reasonable effort to assist the disputants in achieving a satisfactory resolution to their conflict. However, the board and committee fully realize that they have no authority to impose an unwanted resolution, nor is it their desire or intention to do so. Whether or not a successful resolution is achieved, the disputants will be expected to conduct themselves in the congregation in a manner befitting Christians. Refusal to do so may leave the pastor or board no choice but to ask them to refrain from attending church services or other church activities. Should such an unfortunate situation arise, disputants shall be advised that they will be welcome to return to church activities when they are willing to conduct themselves in an orderly manner.

Adopted March 5, 2001

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Don Walls". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Don Walls, Secretary