

The Cure for Conflict

by Ray C. Stedman

The most common charge leveled against the Christian church in our times is that it is irrelevant to people's real problems, and does not help people where they live. The church is accused of avoiding the blood and tears and guts of life. One of the most frequently heard charges is that the church is interested only in preserving the status quo. As someone has put it, "Come weal or come woe, our status is quo."

Let us be perfectly honest and admit that this is often too true today. There are churches that do not come to grips with life. Many churches of our day are interested only in singing hymns and performing religious ceremonies, or in spouting moral platitudes and reading Scripture, but not really engaging in the current burning issues of our society.

Where that is true, however, it is invariably due to a departure from the wisdom and authority of Scripture, either by setting aside the authority of Scripture, treating it as a collection of myths unworthy of modern man's intelligence, or, equally deadly, mechanically accepting the authority of Scripture without attempting to carry it out into life. In either case, perception of the Bible's relevance to life is lost, despite the fact no book is as relevant as the Bible. The Holy Scriptures take the radical secret of Christianity – that Jesus Christ is alive and can take up residence in a human being, and that he proposes to dress himself in the personality and individuality of that person and express his life through him – and apply it to the very struggles that we experience daily.

In Chapters 4 and 5 of Ephesians, we have seen that the Apostle Paul comes to grips with our constant urge to lie, to steal, to gossip, to be hateful and bitter with one another. He deals at length, frankly and forthrightly, with the problem of how to handle our powerful sex drives in a responsible and proper way. In every way, he brings Christian

truth right down into life, and shows us how to live in a sick society. This is what these New Testament books are all about.

In Ephesians 5, we come now to a passage where the apostle takes up the matter of Christian relationships with other human beings. Here we will face squarely the great, burning problems of our own day. In this section we will be dealing with such matters as climbing divorce rates, spreading juvenile delinquency, the squabbles between management and labor, civil rights struggles, and all the pressing issues of our day, for this passage brings us right to grips with these very conflicts.

What does Scripture have to say on these matters?

Well, the amazing thing is, and it is truly amazing, that what the inspired apostle has to say as to the solution of all conflicts between individuals can be put into one brief sentence. That is exactly what he does:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. {Eph 5:21 RSV}

Having said that, he has summarized everything he says in the next several verses, on through Chapter 6, Verse 9. He will simply apply this sentence again and again to various specific situations which a Christian faces in his relationship with other people. In saying, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ," the apostle is dealing with the basic remedy for all the conflicts in our day, or any day.

Perhaps you are ready to charge us with being superficial. Perhaps you say, "Oh, this is another of those easy answers you Christians are always coming up with, another platitude that is supposed to take care of everything." Well, you can look at

it like that if you wish; you can take it as an easy answer. Or you can give intelligent, thoughtful consideration to what Paul has to say, and see that it is indeed the answer to the problem.

It is noteworthy to contrast this simple statement with the approaches we use to solve the social issues of our day. When we are confronted by some moral problem, some grave social issue, what do we do? First, we must somehow gain the attention of the public to this problem. This may involve a riot or some other kind of violence in order to put it on the front pages and bring it to the attention of others. Then we must get an appropriation from some funding body, private or governmental. Then a committee must be appointed to go into the matter and to study it thoroughly. Then the committee must publish its report. After the report is out, and we have all studied it, then we proceed to organize pressure blocks and boycotts and pickets and other methods of bringing pressure on the right people to correct the abuses which exist.

I am not necessarily condemning these processes. I am simply listing them as the approach society inevitably takes to solve its problems. Inevitably such a solution creates as many, or more, problems than it actually solves. Thus, we get involved deeper and deeper in a descending spiral of difficulty which breaks out continually in riots and violence. This is the story of what is happening in our country today.

Contrast that with what Paul says here. He addresses himself to Christians, and he says to us, as individuals, "Start right where you are. Do not try to solve your problem on the community level first, or on the state level, or on any other level of society, but start as an individual; start right where you are." All the admonitions and exhortations of Scripture are addressed to us as individuals. The amazing thing, as you read through the New Testament, is to note the total absence of any appeal for corporate action in solving these basic problems of society. The solution is always addressed to individuals. Start where you are by doing one simple thing: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."

In applying this, Paul will discuss the relationship of husbands to wives, which brings in the whole realm of marriage and divorce and the problems that arise there. Then he will take up the matter of children and parents, which brings in the whole issue of juvenile delinquency – its causes and

what can be done about it. Then he will take up the issue of management and labor, masters and servants, employers and employees. In each case, the remedy is always the same: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."

I suggest that there is nothing more important than for us to see, carefully and exactly, what he means by this, and why he says it: For, if we have any desire at all to be part of a solution of the issues surrounding us today, we must do so out of an intelligent understanding of what God has revealed about the heart of the problem. If we are to have any answer to give those who urge us to get involved in this or that kind of activity, we must understand the great, basic, underlying, fundamental realities of the problem. It is to these realities that Scripture always brings us.

If we are going to understand the world in which we live and the reasons for violent conditions break out in recurrent cycles in human history, we must go back to the basic cause of all human strife.

I suppose there is not one of us here, old or young, who has not at some time asked himself the question, "How can I get the greatest satisfaction out of life? How can I get the maximum expression of my potentialities? How can I escape boredom and monotony in my life? How, in other words, can I fulfill myself?"

Now it is not wrong to ask these questions, because it is obvious that God has put these urges within us. It is God who makes us desire to express ourselves and to fulfill ourselves. It is he who creates these inward urges in every human heart to experience life, to be happy, and to gain satisfaction out of life. It is not wrong to ask the questions, but it is absolutely essential that we understand it is gravely wrong to ask them in this way.

When we ask the questions this way – "How can I get satisfaction out of life? How can I fulfill myself?" – we are asking as though we were the only person in the world, as though we were all alone in the world and were responsible only for our own self-development. Others, of course, are responsible for their own self-development, and we are all trying to get the same thing. They are going about it their way and I have to choose my own way. This basic drive in every human heart, this universal approach to every problem, can be expressed in the question heard frequently: "What will I get out of this? What's in it for me?" This

you hear on every side. Look beneath the surface of the violence, the difficulties, the wranglings involved in Capital-Labor squabbles, or in the civil rights struggle today, and you see that this idea underlies each situation. Each group is saying, "What can we get out of this? What's in it for us?" This is basic.

Under this approach, the inevitable always occurs. Sooner or later, in my attempts to develop myself and to gain satisfaction, I find myself on a collision course with someone else who is attempting the same thing with the same motives. And I find that my efforts to satisfy myself are continually sabotaged by his efforts to satisfy himself. I feel that he is standing in my way and he feels that I am standing in his. This person may be the boss, it may be the husband or wife, it may be the children, it may be the man who works next to me at my desk, it may be the income-tax collector, it may be anyone! We constantly find ourselves cutting across the courses of others. These are the normal relationships of life. I insist on my rights and he insists on his rights, and so we become rivals, enemies, obstacles to each other. We discover that we cannot even successfully arbitrate or arrange a compromise, except for relatively short periods of time, because the same old suspicions remain within us and soon the same old charges are hurled all over again.

That, I submit to you, is the pathetic pattern of life visible all around us, on every side, both individually and corporately.

But the Apostle Paul takes up this matter and changes the whole pattern for Christians by introducing two radical and powerful factors which drastically alter the whole situation. First, he reminds us of the presence of a third party in every relationship we experience: "Subject yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ," {cf, Eph 5:21}. Second, he reveals to us the true way of finding fulfillment. He does all this in one brief statement. Let us take these one by one.

First, the Christian must never forget that, in every relationship of life, another person is present: It is not merely a problem of 'what I want' versus 'what you want.' There are not only the two of us present – the husband and wife, the parent and child, the boss and employee. In every relationship, the apostle reminds us, a third person is present – the Lord Jesus Christ. To a worlding, who does

not recognize the universal presence of Christ, the primary concern is 'what I want versus what you

want,' but, to a Christian, this must always and inevitably be secondary. Here, then, we come to the solution. The great issue for the Christian must never be 'what I want versus what he wants,' but "What does Christ want me to do? What does he want out of this situation?" The great question must ever be, "What does Jesus Christ, living in me, expect of this relationship?"

Notice how Christ is seen in each relationship. Paul has brought this to our attention in Verse 21: Subject yourselves "to one another out of reverence for Christ." Then he brings up the matter of wives and husbands. "Wives," he says, "be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord," {Eph 5:22 RSV}. Then, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church ..." {Eph 5:25 RSV}. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord," {Eph 6:1 RSV}. "Parents, do not provoke your children ... but follow the instruction of the Lord," {cf, Eph 6:4}. "Slaves, be obedient to your earthly masters ... as to Christ," {Eph 6:5 RSV}. "Masters, do the same to them, remembering you have a Master in heaven," {cf, Eph 6:9}.

So, in each of these relationships, the apostle is careful to remind us that we do not face them alone. We must never think of them that way. It is not, "This person and I, opposed to one another," but "Christ is also here, and what does he want?" That is the first consideration.

If we do not recognize his presence, then, of course, we cannot submit ourselves to one another. We know how this goes. We are all so familiar with it. If we do not recognize this third party who is present in every situation, then, of course, we see only the two of us. And our pride immediately gets in the way, and grips us, and holds us, and we refuse to yield, to back down. "Let him back down first!" "Let her apologize first!" Our pride grips us so that we cannot give in. And our mind rationalizes the whole thing, and says, "After all, it's because I'm right that I'm insisting on it. Therefore, she (or he) should give in first." We soon invent all kinds of reasons and excuses for why it is perfectly right and proper for us to act the way we are acting, and why we cannot, under any circumstance, yield to the other.

But when we see Christ, when we see that we are not alone in this matter, then the great question which throbs through the whole relationship is not,

“What am I going to get out of this?” but “What does Jesus Christ want? What is he after in this? As his representative, as the one in whom he lives, the one redeemed by his grace, what responsibility have I to him in this situation?”

Here is where the difference comes. We know that our first responsibility must be to obey him. After all, we have crowned him as our God and our King. And here is where the test comes: To whom shall we yield ourselves to obey? Whatever it is, that is our god. If we insist on satisfying the urges within ourselves for self-justification or vindication, then that is our god. If we are willing to obey Christ, we prove he is our God. Therefore, our first responsibility must be to obey him, our Lord, our God. We cannot live with his displeasure, if we are really Christians. “The love of Christ constrains me” {cf, 2 Cor 5:14}, Paul says.

That brings us to the second matter. When I am at odds with another person, no matter where it is or who it is, to see that Christ is there too is immediately to make me aware of what he has shown me, what he has taught me. I remember that I cannot attain my greatest possible development when I consciously try to do so. That is a fundamental law of life. That is why it is so wrong to ask, “How can I get what I want in order to find fulfillment for myself?” It is only when I forget myself and devote myself to another’s fulfillment that I will find my own heart running over with grace and glory and satisfaction.

This is one of the fundamental mysteries of life, and it is confirmed to us every day. The man who tries desperately to satisfy himself, the man who gets up in the morning and says, “Today I’m going to make a great deal of money, and I shall have everything that I want,” the man who gives himself to that is the man who ends up empty-hearted, hollow inside. As someone has eloquently expressed it, he suffers from “destination sickness,” the awful sickness of having arrived where you want to go, but having nothing when you get there. Our Lord put it this way: “If any man would save his life he will lose it, but if he lose his life for my sake he will save it,” {cf, Matt 16:25, Luke 9:24}. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you,” {Matt 6:33 KJV}.

It becomes, then, a question of priority. What is the right way to find fulfillment? If we are Christians, we must face honestly, thoughtfully,

and absolutely seriously this pronouncement of our Lord that life is so constructed that if we try to find it we will never do so. You cannot have your rights by insisting upon them. You can have them only when you seek to give another person his rights. The person who loves and does not think of himself finds himself. The one who is constantly seeking is always cheated.

Do you dare to try this? Do you dare to try this radical, revolutionary principle right where you live?

The problem has not been that we have not known it, but that we do not act on it. We acknowledge that it is true. We nod our heads when we hear these words of Christ’s. But when it comes to a specific situation where someone is cutting across our pathway and we find ourselves in the direct, head-on collision of insisting on our rights while they insist on their rights, we revert so many times to the old basis by which the world lives: “Well, at any cost I’m going to have my rights. I demand my rights!” As a result we only increase the enmity, and ultimately it breaks out in violence or bitterness. But here is the solution. Do you dare to try it? Do you dare to apply this the next time you clash with another?

A friend was telling me recently of a Christian couple who had moved into a new home. They had not been in their house more than a day when the man chanced to meet their next door neighbor out in the yard. The first thing the neighbor did was to bawl him out for some minor inconvenience which had resulted from their moving in, and then he threatened him with a lawsuit if he did a certain thing. The man went back into his home, heavy-hearted, to tell his wife about it, realizing that when he bought his dream house he had bought with it a very cantankerous neighbor.

Now he planned to live there the rest of his life. What was he going to do?

He confessed he felt a very natural reaction to allow a wall of exclusion, of silence, to be built, to have nothing to do with the neighbor. That is the easiest way to handle a person like this. You don’t want to antagonize him or fight with him, so just cut him off, don’t talk to him, don’t have anything to do with him. The wife was concerned about this, too, and they were praying about what to do.

A day or so later she was baking a pie, and it suddenly occurred to her to make a pie for her neighbors and take it over to them. So she baked a

beautiful pie, and, at lunch time, she took it over to the neighbor's house, and fearfully rang the doorbell. When the woman came to the door, her face set in hard, unyielding lines, the Christian woman greeted her, and said, "You know, I was baking a pie today, and I thought of you folks. I thought you might like to have a pie, so I brought this over." The neighbor took it, thanked her, and went back inside.

About an hour later the phone rang and there was the neighbor lady calling up to thank her for the pie. She said, "That happened to be my husband's favorite pie. He loves lemon meringue pie!" And on the spur of the moment the Christian lady said, "Well, that's wonderful! Why don't you come over to dinner tomorrow night?" There was an almost audible gasp on the other end of the line, and then the neighbor lady said, "Well, I'll ask my husband." In a little while, she called back and said, "Yes, we'd love to come over." The last my friend heard the four of them were going out for a ride together, and the neighbor couple had already made some inquiries as to where the others went to church, suggesting that they might go with them.

This is exactly what Paul means: "Subject yourselves to one another, out of reverence for Christ." The world is waiting to see a demonstration of this. They do not understand this kind of action, and they cannot grasp its importance until they see it in action among Christians.

I do not think there is any doubt whatsoever that if Christians in this country had been living like this in relationship to those with whom they live and work, the civil rights riots we are facing in our land today would never have occurred. And if Christians now, in this country, begin individually

to live on this level, the riots will be greatly diminished – if not ultimately eliminated.

Here is what strikes at the heart of these problems. The solutions we usually attempt are superficial. They do not get at the heart of them. But, when we act on these basic, underlying, fundamental laws of life, fulfilling the mystery of our being in the paradox of action which loses our life in order to gain it back, we discover that we have found the answer to conflict.

The apostle will go on, and we shall go with him, to apply this principle to husbands and wives, to children and parents, and to employers and employees. As we trace these out, we will see him putting his finger squarely upon the great, burning issues which are creating so much havoc and strife today. We can solve them only as we take these words seriously and begin to live on this level.

May God help us, through Christ.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you once again for a word which searches us, which probes us, which cuts deep and lays bare and hides nothing. We know that in this sweet surgery of the Holy Spirit there is healing, forgiveness, cleansing, and restoration. We thank you for the love that will not let us go, but insists on examining our lives unto the most uttermost corner, into the darkest closet, bringing out all that is hidden therein. Teach us to walk in the light as Christ is in the light, and thus to experience the glory of fellowship with our living Lord. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.