

2 Cor 7:2-16 Reconciliation Through Correct Response

Or Reconciliation, Repentance, and Refreshment

In the old days, before telephones, email, and instant messaging, communication over distance was a slow process. Before the invention of the postal system, if you wanted to send a letter to someone, you'd have to send someone with the letter. And once you sent the letter, it may be a long time before you got a response. Waiting for a response could be a very tense and uncertain time.

Paul had sent a rather stern and severe letter to the church at Corinth, and he was concerned about how they would respond to it. Titus had delivered this letter and then reported back to Paul about how the people had responded. Titus was happy to report that the people had responded well both to him and to the letter. So in this section, Paul expresses his gratitude that everything had been resolved and that they were now back on good terms with one another.

This passage deals with repairing a troubled relationship between a church and its spiritual leaders. From time to time, conflict arises within a church, and the best way to resolve that conflict is to deal with it biblically and honestly. That's what Paul is doing here; he's trying to restore relationships.

What are some steps a church can take to rebuild a broken relationship with its spiritual leaders? What steps can we take toward reconciliation? I think we find two main steps here:

- I. Try to maintain a friendly relationship with your spiritual leaders .2-4
 - A. .2a The original language here says "open (χωρέω) to us." What does that mean?
 1. The word itself means "to make room for, to leave a space." The sense of the word as used here means "to be friendly toward someone; to open one's heart." It's an appeal for a friendly, open relationship. "Let's be friends again."
 2. Read 6:11-13. Having an open, friendly relationship is the opposite of being "restricted." He's urging his readers to open their hearts to him, to make room in their hearts for him. He wants to enjoy good fellowship and friendship with these people again, and he's inviting them to be reconciled with him.

- B. What this implies that there had been some kind of conflict between Paul and the people of Corinth. They were closed in some sense to him; their hearts were closed off, perhaps hard-hearted or skeptical. Remember that some false teachers had turned many of the people at Corinth against Paul. So he's reaching out to these people and seeking to repair this relationship.

App: Often, when conflicts arise, the solution is for one side of the conflict to appeal to the other side to pursue reconciliation. Sometimes the best thing you can do is to say something like "Let's be friends. Let's try to restore our friendship." Someone has to start this process by reaching out to the other side.

App: Conflict between a church and its spiritual leaders is fairly common. I have not sensed too much conflict between me and the members of this church, but it does happen. The average tenure of a pastor in a Baptist church is about 8 years. The average for Protestant churches in general is about 4 years. I'm coming up on 20 years here, and I'm thankful that these years have been, for the most part, free of major conflict.

Many pastors have not had that kind of experience. It's sad but often true that conflict arises between a church and its leaders.

- C. .2 Paul gives several reasons that the church at Corinth should be friendly to him. Each of these statements is likely a response to the criticisms, slanders, and accusations against him. He's asserting that such accusations are false.

1. We have wronged (ἠδικήσαμεν) no one—i.e. not done anything unlawful or unrighteous. I.e., he's been blameless in his behavior toward them.
2. We have corrupted (ἐφθείραμεν) no one—i.e. corruption of morals or doctrine. They had not led anyone astray; they had not been a bad influence; there have been no moral failures on the part of their spiritual leaders.
3. We have cheated (ἐπλεονεκτήσαμεν) no one—i.e. to take advantage of, to defraud. He denies that he had acted fraudulently or with greed; he denies mishandling funds or misleading anyone.

Illus.: I read in the news just the other day about church leaders accused of defrauding or cheating the people of the church:

Armed with reams of financial records and genuine Hillsong Church board documents ..., Andrew Wilkie, an independent member of the Australian Parliament, accused Hillsong Church founder Brian Houston and other leaders, including the newly appointed Global Senior Pastor Phil Dooley, of money laundering, tax evasion and shopping sprees that would "embarrass a Kardashian."

He then pointed to a document showing that in 2021, as the world grappled with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, four members of the Houston family jetted off with friends to Cancun, Mexico, for a luxury retreat lasting three days and billed the church \$150,000 for it.¹

Every pastor ought to be able to make these same affirmations—he's done nothing unrighteous, corrupt, or fraudulent. These are basic standards of morality that a church has the right to expect from its pastor.

The NT provides rather strict and high standards for pastors and deacons. As long as those serving in these offices have not disqualified themselves through sinful conduct, the people of the church should remain "open" –friendly, welcoming—to the spiritual leadership of these men.

D. .3-4 Paul professes his great affection for the people. Paul lists some encouraging things about the people of this church.

1. He's not condemning them.
2. They were in his heart. He was willing to die for them, but at least he wants to live in peace with them.
3. .4a He was holding back nothing in his speech—he spoke the truth boldly. Cf. vs. 14—"we spoke all things to you in truth."

App: A church should appreciate bold speech from its spiritual leaders. Many pastors today tiptoe around controversial issues in an effort not to offend anyone. I'd rather listen to someone who knows what he believes and speaks his mind boldly rather than one who tries to tickle people's ears and be as inoffensive as possible.

¹ <https://www.christianpost.com/news/hillsong-leaders-accused-of-money-laundering-tax-evasion.html>

But, of course, with bold speech comes the potential of offense and misunderstanding. People sometimes don't like it when you tell the truth. But boldness in speech is a virtue for a pastor; we should appreciate those who speak the truth boldly.

4. .4b He was proud of them—"great is my boasting on your behalf."
5. .4end He was filled with comfort and joy in spite of the tribulations he had experienced.

So he's trying to reassure them of his good will toward them. He's trying to repair the relationship and to restore good fellowship with these people.

App: Reconciliation can happen when people decide that they want to be friends again. Sometimes all that is required is that one side in the conflict reaches out with the offer of restored fellowship. If you have a fractured relationship, maybe that's what you need to do—reach out and try to be friends.

Trans: A church should strive to retain friendly, open relations with its spiritual leaders. If the leaders remain spiritually qualified to do the job, then the people in the church should be open hearted toward them.

II. Respond properly to your spiritual leaders. .5-16

The emphasis in this passage is on how the people at Corinth *responded* to Paul's instruction to them. They responded properly, and that's what solved the problem. Our response is often the key to reconciling relationships. Conflicts begin and persist because people don't respond to one another properly.

.5 After Paul left Corinth, he traveled to Macedonia—north about 200 miles. He experienced trouble, conflicts, and fears as he was waiting for their response to his letter.

App: Vs. 5 shows that Christian ministry is not always peaceful and pleasant. When you are in conflict with those you are trying to serve, you naturally feel unrest, trouble, and fear.

In fact, in vs. 6, the word "downcast" (*ταπεινός*) could be translated as "depressed." The word has the sense of being discouraged, lacking in hope, being downhearted, even depressed.

Do you think pastors ever get a bit depressed over how their people respond to them? Yes, they do. Some of the greatest pastors of history struggled with depression, including CH Spurgeon. Paul himself admits to being discouraged and disappointed about his relationship with the people.

Thankfully, God comforts those who are downcast (vs. 6). The joy of the Lord is our strength, even when experiencing adversities.

.6b Paul's fear and distress lifted when Titus showed up in Macedonia and told him that all had gone well when he visited the church in Corinth. This was a consolation/comfort to Paul.

Let's look at these responses.

A. Respond to your spiritual leaders *sincerely*.

The severe letter that Paul wrote must have elicited a rather emotional response.

1. .7b Titus told Paul about the peoples' "earnest desire, mourning, zeal." These words indicate that the people were sorry about their previous behavior and that they were still loyal to Paul.

2. .11 Their sorrow over how they had treated Paul resulted in diligence, clearing, indignation, fear, vehement desire, zeal, and vindication. I.e., they responded very seriously to the letter.

The church had been sorry about how some of the people had treated Paul so badly. They were still loyal to him. They had even defended him against the attacks of the false teachers.

3. .13 Paul found that response very encouraging.

a) He was comforted after all his unrest and trouble on account of this problem.

b) He rejoiced in how the people there had treated Titus.

App: The best way to cheer up and encourage a pastor is to respond positively to biblical teaching. Listen to the bold teaching of the truth and apply it in your life. I always appreciate it when people tell me that my messages have been helpful to them. Everybody appreciates a kind, encouraging word, including pastors.

- B. .15 respond to your spiritual leaders *obediently*—Titus saw that the people had obeyed Paul’s instructions in the letter he had sent.

App: When a qualified, trustworthy pastor tells you what to do based on God’s word, or gives his advice regarding what he thinks you should do, it’s usually wise to follow that advice. Pastors “watch for your souls” (Heb 13:17), and they have your best interests in mind. While there may be exceptions to the rule, normally speaking, you should obey the instructions of your pastor. He is a legitimate authority.

- C. .15end Respond to your spiritual leaders *respectfully*—They had received Titus “with fear and trembling.” They had a high degree of respect for Paul’s representative.

App: It was not that long ago that pastors had a very highly respected position in society. The pastor was often held in high esteem; people treated pastors with honor.

All that has changed over the last 50 years or so as the failures and faults of so many pastors have become evident and widely publicized.

Still, as long as a pastor remains qualified and as long as he is fulfilling his role biblically, he is worthy of respect. It’s not so much the person as it is the office of the pastor. One faithfully fulfilling that role is worthy of respect.

- D. Respond to your spiritual leaders *repentantly* .8-12

1. .8 “my letter” – We do not have a copy of this letter; it’s not 1 Corinthians. It was specifically between Paul and the people of the church at Corinth, so it did not have a wider application.
2. .8b Paul had regretted sending the letter, but it had a good effect. It made the people sorry, but it also produced godly repentance—“you were made sorry in a godly manner” (vs. 9c). They did not merely regret their behavior; they repented of their sinful attitudes and behaviors toward Paul. The letter caused pain, but it also caused repentance, so that was good.

App: Stern, harsh, severe words are sometimes appropriate. Strict rebuke may be the solution to the problem. If you receive rebuke and censure from your pastor, the right response is repentance. He’s pointing out a problem that you need to deal with seriously.

E. Vs. 10 is an important statement on repentance. Conviction (“godly sorrow”) leads to repentance. What is repentance?

1. The word literally means “a change of mind.”
 - a) Repentance is changing your thinking about yourself, your sin, and God. You don’t try to hide or to excuse your sin; you admit it and turn away from it.
 - b) These people were saved—they had repented of their sins and put their faith in Christ.
 - c) They had also repented of their wrongful attitude and behavior against Paul.

2. Godly sorrow is the work of the HSp in our hearts. When the Spirit of God points out our sin, our response should be humble confession of that sin.

3. If we feel sorry about our sins, that’s a good thing; it’s an evidence of genuine salvation. If you’ve committed a sin, you should feel guilty about it. If you can sin without feeling guilty, that’s a bad sign.

Some people are insensitive to godly sorrow; their conscience is seared (1 Tim 4:2). Some people have a calloused conscience; it’s not sensitive enough. If your conscience is sensitive, that’s a good thing.

4. .10b This kind of repentance is “not to be regretted.” We never regret genuine repentance. True repentance always has positive benefits. It can be very difficult to do, but it’s always in our best interests.

5. .10end There is a worldly sort of regret that only “produces death.” It’s not genuine repentance, so it does nothing to clear the sin. Regret does not remove the problems caused by sin. Worldly regret often leads to bitterness and resentment.

Cf. Judas regretted his betrayal of Jesus, but he did not repent of his sin. Many wicked people regret what they have done, but that does not mean that they repent of their sins.

Regret often does not change behavior; regret does not seek forgiveness from God and from others.

6. Paul is talking to Christians here. That means that Christians need to repent. Repentance should be a normal part of our lives. The Christian life is a life of repentance. Godly sorrow—conviction of sin, a guilty conscience—should lead us to repentance.

2 Corinthians 12:21 [Paul was concerned that some had] *not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced.*

Part of the process of repentance is conviction of sin. The HSp brings about conviction of sin—a feeling of guilt and spiritual unease. When we recognize that we have broken God’s law or failed to obey God’s commands, repentance is the appropriate response.

Part of the pastor’s job is to point out sin, to rebuke people because of their sin, and to call people to repentance. That’s not a very pleasant part of the job, but it is necessary at times.

Titus 2:15 *Speak these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no one despise you.*

Sadly, people often “despise” the pastor for his efforts to encourage repentance. People don’t want anyone to confront them over their sin. People get angry when spiritual leaders tell them that they need to repent and change their ways.

The proper response to rebuke is humble repentance. Cf. David when Nathan rebuked him.

God is merciful and gracious; he forgives iniquity, transgressions, and sins when we repent. 1 John 1:9

And what are the fruits of repentance? A change of mind and behavior.

Mt 3:8 *Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance*

Ac 26:20 *... they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.*

Cf. the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:18)—he didn’t stay in the pigpen; he turned around.

Repentance leads to changed behavior. It does not necessarily mean that you will never commit that sin again, but it does mean that you are trying to change; you are seeking to overcome that sin and not engage in it any more.

A lack of humble repentance may cause conflict in our relationships to persist. People are often stubborn in their sin and refuse to acknowledge their failures. That's how relationship fracture; that's how they remain unreconciled.

Repentance is necessary for salvation, and it's also required for living the Christian life. It should be a regular experience because we sin regularly. The fact that these Corinthian people had repented was a very good sign that they were genuinely saved. Repentance is often the key to reconciled relationships.

Perhaps you need to repent and to seek reconciliation.

F. Some results of genuine repentance

1. .11end It restores the relationship.

- a) Paul assures them that they are “clear in this matter.” So this difficult conflict is all water under the bridge, as far as Paul is concerned. No need to discuss it anymore. You've dealt with it properly and it's no longer an issue.

App: Isn't it nice when you resolve a conflict, restore a relationship, and no longer even think about the former problem. That former conflict just fades away; it's almost like it never happened.

- b) .12 Paul assures them that his intent in writing the letter in the first place was to demonstrate his care for the people. He intended the stern rebuke to have a positive effect. He wrote the letter because he cared for them.

(1) “him who had done wrong” – probably referring to someone in the church who had publicly opposed Paul, perhaps someone who had insulted him or said something inappropriate.

(2) “him who had suffered wrong” – he's probably referring to himself; he had suffered because of the bad behavior of the one (or the group) who had treated him poorly.

- (3) Paul was willing to put the trouble behind him; it's all water under the bridge; he's ready to forgive and forget.

App: When we have to confront someone over sin, and when that person admits his sin and repents, then we can restore the relationship. In fact, we *must* restore the relationship. We have to be charitable toward those who offend us and be willing to be reconciled to the one who was at fault.

Luke 17:3–4 *If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. 4 And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him.'*

When a person repents, we must forgive; put it behind us and don't be resentful or bitter. We must forgive freely and seek true restoration.

2. .16 It yields confidence going forward.

Paul expresses his confidence in the people "in everything." So it would seem that Paul is happy with how the people had responded to his letter. They had received this severe letter, responded to it appropriately, and treated Titus reverently and obediently. Paul seems to be very relieved about that. Their response was very encouraging.

App: When we respond to rebuke with repentance and changed behavior, the outcome/result is usually positive.

When the people of the church respond appropriately to spiritual instruction, and particularly when godly sorrow leads to repentance, it cause spiritual leaders to rejoice. When people respond this way, it gives us confidence that the people are genuinely saved and are following the Lord.

When there is tension/conflict between the church and its spiritual leaders, we need to consider a couple of things:

Have the spiritual leaders been guilty of some kind of disqualifying behavior (vs. 2)? If the pastor has violated these standards, then the problem lies with him, and he needs to repent. But if not, then the source of the problem must be elsewhere.

Has the church responded correctly to the instruction of the spiritual leaders? It could be that the church needed a rebuke, and the proper response is humble repentance.

If the rebuke is legitimate, then the thing to do is to repent—admit your sins, confess them to God and to the offended person, turn away from them, and change your behavior. That's the solution; that's the proper response; that's how reconciliation happens.

After the repentance has happened, rejoice in God's forgiveness and put the whole thing behind you. Forget about it. Try to regain and maintain friendly, open relationships. We must put these offenses and conflicts behind us and leave them in the past. We must freely forgive others when they repent.

Perhaps some of us need to repent. Perhaps you are the source of the conflict. Or perhaps we need to make that appeal for the restoration of an open, friendly relationship. Perhaps we need to put a conflict behind us and move forward with confidence.