

It's going to happen sooner or later — probably sooner than later!

It's inevitable when people get together — husbands and wives, bosses and employees, business associates, friends who have known each other for years, people who have just met.

Someone is going to be offended — get his feelings hurt because of what someone else does or says, misunderstand a message, misinterpret a situation.

And, sad to say, offenses can destroy loving relationships and create long-lasting enmity and hard feelings. Even seemingly insignificant misunderstandings can, unless handled properly, fester into deep wounds that permanently divide people.

Offenses that go unresolved between two Christians can adversely affect the spiritual development of both. Notice the importance that God places on resolving interpersonal difficulties: "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:23-24).

Your relationship with God depends on your obedience to this command. You can actually cut yourself off from God because of your failure to show love for another person in

the manner God prescribes (I John 4:20-21).

When you are offended, or when you offend someone else, how do you handle the problem? Do you confront it or avoid it? If you deal with the situation, how do you do so? Do you really know how to handle offenses?

What to do when offended

A major key to handling problems between people is found in Matthew 18:15: "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his

fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother."

While this command of God — and it *is* a command — applies specifically to members of God's Church, the principle is clear: God wants people to do something about offenses, not ignore them. He doesn't want real or imagined barriers between people.

How do you "go to your brother"? Make sure your attitude is right beforehand. Draw close to God in prayer about the situation. Evaluate the hurt you feel. Has the person really wronged you or are you overreacting? Don't let your pride get in the way.

When you approach the person, show respect for the hurt he himself feels. Be careful about accusing him of being too sensi-

tive. To you it may seem that he is making an issue out of nothing, but what may be relatively unimportant to one person can be a major consideration to another.

You must understand that admitting error will probably be difficult for the other person. Isn't it for you? The other person may offer many justifications for his actions, but give him a chance to tell his side (Prov. 18:13). You might discover that you have been wrong in feeling offended!

Be sure to choose your words carefully (Prov. 25:11-12). Don't let the hurt you have suffered ruin your communication. Restrain your emotions, consider the other person's point of view and objectively present the

Can You Go to Your Brother?

Your relationship with another person can be ruined by an offense. Here is God's way of dealing with offenses.

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Photo by Hal Finch

problem. It is hard for the mind to stop justifying itself and acknowledge wrongdoing. Approaching another person with a proud, demanding and harsh attitude can keep him from seeing himself. He will become defensive and start accusing you rather than examining himself.

Be patient and gentle. "By long forbearance a ruler is persuaded, and a gentle tongue breaks a bone" (verse 15). As Proverbs 15:1 says, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." It is critical that the situation be handled with tact, sincerity and concern for the other person.

Here's another important principle to remember: Keep the dispute between the two of you at this point. Instead of going to the person himself, it is easy to discuss his real or imagined fault with others. What good does this do? None! It ruins his reputation and doesn't make you look so good either.

Not only will you still have a problem with the person, but you'll infect others with your negative feelings and information. And if the person finds out that you have discussed the problem with others, he may become even more bitter toward you. "Debate your case with your neighbor himself, and do not disclose the secret to another" (Prov. 25:9).

God wants you to keep the problem between the two of you in the hope that it can be resolved without adversely affecting others. So restrain yourself from telling others unless, in an extreme case, you would want to counsel with a minister to determine a way to approach the offending person.

Be willing to apologize

Don't desire revenge or blow out of proportion your role as the wounded party. Be willing to admit your own faults. God says: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be of a humble spirit

with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud" (Prov. 16:18-19).

Our humility is tested when we need to admit that we are wrong, but admitting our own error is a major part of solving interpersonal problems.

Healing a relationship that has been ruptured by offense is not easy. "A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a castle" (Prov. 18:19).

Have the mind of God when you go to your brother: "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering" (Col. 3:12). These ingredients will enable you to do a much more effective job of talking to your offended acquaintance. If you are wrong, these qualities will enable you to apologize. The apology is vital to restoring the relationship.

And when you have resolved a problem with someone, completely forgive and forget it. Don't harbor resentment about it or bring it up later. Avoid developing bitterness over the situation (Heb. 12:15). God forgives us, after all, according to how we forgive others (Matt. 6:12).

Praying together — even fasting in some cases — may be necessary to restore the breach in your relationship.

What if it doesn't work?

What should you do if your efforts fail? You go to your brother as God instructs, but the problem isn't resolved or the person reacts in a hostile manner. Should you quit trying to solve the problem?

What does God say? "But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established'" (Matt. 18:16).

Now is the time to include others. Choose these individuals carefully. They need the same right attitude as you have. All of

you need to pray and perhaps fast about the situation to receive God's guidance and strength. Go to the person with the same humility, love and truthfulness. Try to reason with him about the problem.

If your efforts fail, then, in the case of a dispute within God's Church, you will need to involve God's ministry: "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector" (Matt. 18:17).

The ministry will carefully work with the offending person in hopes of correcting his fault. However, if the fruit of repentance is not borne, stronger action must be taken (Rom. 16:17).

Try not to offend

As Christians we should at all costs avoid being offensive (I Cor. 10:32-33). Still, as we noted earlier, it's not always possible to avoid offenses (Matt. 18:7). In some instances, offending people in the process of obeying God is unavoidable (Matt. 15:12-14). Being human, we will offend people. Others will offend us (Jas. 3:2).

So who's perfect? No one, yet! But perfection is the objective of those now learning to live the Christian way, in the process of qualifying to become part of God's Family (Matt. 5:48).

In the process, be careful how you conduct yourself. Be considerate of all with whom you come in contact and try to avoid giving a bad representation of God's way of life (I Thess. 5:22). Try to avoid giving someone even the impression that you are sinning. All of us have God-given emotions, but not all of us control them in the same way.

Going to your brother is a biblical, God-ordained requirement to insure that right character and relationships will be built. If we practice this principle, we will enjoy much more peace, unity and harmony in all of our relationships. □