

Preface

The aim of this booklet is to explore ourselves as individuals and our relationships with each other in the context of our Lord's teaching on love and our relationship with our heavenly Father. It is based on Romans chapters 12 to 14 and originally was given as a talk in April 2008 at a CSN Awareness Day.

Since then the contents have been updated and my thanks and appreciation are to my wife Sue for her skills as a lecturer in English and Communication studies; her practical understanding of relationships as a qualified counsellor working in a GPs practice and for her deep spiritual insight. Her work is evident in the many suggestions made and developments included in this final published booklet.

I have drawn on my experience and knowledge as a couple counsellor and qualifications in mediation and conflict resolution as well as 35 years as an Arranging Brother during which time I have experienced many of the ecclesial problems that human nature can bring.

This booklet may well give rise to more questions than answers. The apostle Paul's teaching is both challenging and encouraging and we offer this to you and pray that it will help in developing our fellowship that we might reflect in some small way the glory of the Father in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Andrew Collinge

Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. God’s relationship with us – “By the mercies of God”.	6
3. Our relationship with God – “Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice” ...	8
4. Our understanding of ourselves – “Think of yourselves with sober judgement”	10
5. Our relationship with each other – “Let love be genuine”	20
6. “Live in harmony with one another”.	23
7. Finding a Place of Agreement	24
8. Practical issues – “disputes over opinions”.	26
9. A Bible template for managing disagreement.	35
10. And when discord prevails?	36
11. Summary	37

1. Introduction

The apostle James in his letter writes:

From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?

James 4:1 KJV

The NIV has it as:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

Perhaps we might consider these words somewhat inappropriate for our relationships in Christ. And yet, as James explains, all disagreements and conflicts arise through our needs and desires. In asserting “I am right and you are wrong” we not only risk elevating Self above others but we risk elevating a disagreement to the level of harsh words, bitterness and hurt feelings. Whether we choose to do this through the spoken or written word or through our behaviour is immaterial, the effect is the same. This is human nature at work within each of us.

To consider this more fully, this booklet aims to explore ourselves as individuals and also our relationships with each other in the context of our Lord’s teaching on love and our relationship with God.

I begin with three questions.

First, why write a booklet of this nature? It’s not a subject I would readily choose. In fact, the more I research, pray and think about it the more reluctant I am to address a seemingly contentious subject.

However, whilst disputes in themselves might be contentious, understanding why disagreements and conflicts occur is relatively straightforward. It is because we are all different: diverse in our personalities, background, knowledge, culture, gender and in many other aspects of what makes us who we are.

And we each come to the Lord in our human nature with our own desires, expectations and needs.

Secondly, why this subject now?

Those of us who are actively involved in work with the Christadelphian Support Network (the CSN) are perhaps more aware of disagreement and conflict than many. Some years ago I took a call from a very elderly sister who was distressed that the ecclesia she loved was dividing; splitting over an issue that seemed quite irrelevant to her life and discipleship. She asked why this should happen. I had no answer.

The words “we multiply by division” kept coming to mind.

I frequently think about her.

Within the CSN, we have been involved in mediation between ecclesias and between brothers and sisters. Independent mediation is an option offered by the CSN. Mediation seeks to clarify the issues, find common ground and bring the parties together; to restart communication where this has broken down.

My work in couple counselling with Relate is similar: to encourage couples to understand themselves, each other and the dynamics of their relationship more fully; to find common ground for rebuilding; and through mutual respect and negotiation to find ways of helping them to meet their own and each other’s needs and expectations.

The third question is: what are your expectations in reading this booklet?

What sort of conflict do you have in mind: in personal relationships – marriage, family, children, or in the ecclesia or perhaps in the work environment?

We shall be no more than “scratching the surface” of a huge subject. We shall not necessarily be considering specific subjects of conflict but will refer to areas of disagreement in a general way.

I believe what I have to say will be relevant to all forms of conflict and will challenge all of us in our relationships with each other. It may discomfort us too because we shall be looking at ourselves to increase our awareness of the part we play in conflict. It’s also essential that we accept from the outset that the other person has a point of view which is important to them, even though we may strongly disagree and take an opposing view.

Otherwise we are in danger of dismissing and devaluing someone “for whom Christ died”.

We shall base our thoughts around a consideration of Paul’s letter to the Romans chapters 12 to 14.

He covers six main areas (I’m quoting from the RSV):

- God’s relationship with us – “*by the mercies of God*” (12:1)
- Our relationship with God – “*Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice*” (12:1)
- Our understanding of ourselves – “*Think of yourselves with sober judgement*” (12:3)
- Our relationship with each other – “*Let love be genuine*” (12:9)
- Living in harmony – “*Live peaceably with all men*” (12:18)
- Practical issues – “*but not for disputes over opinions*”. (14:1)

The apostle Paul has been described as the reactionary moderate.

On the one hand freedom in Christ is his inspiration. He is clear, decisive and emphatic that in Christ there is freedom from restrictions of the law. We see this in his confrontation with the apostle Peter at Antioch over his attitude to the circumcision party (Gal 2:12-13) and more so in his reaction to the influence of the Jewish Christians who were “*troubling*” and “*unsettling*” the brothers and sisters in Galatia and his desire that “*I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves!*” (Gal 5:10-12 RSV).

Yet in his conduct towards the individual, his response in love is to apply to himself something that restricts his freedom in Christ.

The right thing is to eat no meat or drink no wine [at all], or [do anything else] if it makes your brother stumble or hurts his conscience or offends or weakens him.

Rom 14:21 AMP

We will consider this apparent contradiction later in this booklet.

However, I want to start with the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is important:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

John 13:34-35 NIV

Jesus introduces to us the concept of servant love. The agápē love. Having washed the disciples' feet - and the feet of Judas who was to betray him, and Peter who was to deny him - he challenges us to reflect this in our lives as evidence of our discipleship and of our witness to the world.

I don't know about you but this makes me feel uncomfortable.

2. God's relationship with us – "By the mercies of God".

Let's remind ourselves of how privileged we are to be invited into a relationship with Almighty God. We'll start with Romans 12. In the previous chapter the apostle Paul contemplates the wonder of our God:

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
"Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counsellor?"
"Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay him?"
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory for ever! Amen.*

Rom 11:33-36 NIV

The Lord God, awesome in power and wisdom is the Mighty God of the universe who loves difference and diversity.

Consider for a moment the vast variety of plant and animal life; the heaven above us with its vast immeasurable numbers of galaxies and stars; the ocean depths teeming with life; and the basis of matter: atoms and molecules making up the structure of our world. Creation is magnificently diverse.

We, too, are all different - in culture, background, personality and feelings. And yet, as adopted sons and daughters of the living God we all become valued and precious to Him.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes of the bountiful generosity of God's grace which, in Christ, overflows towards us in forgiveness:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

Eph 1:7-8 NIV

And again

. . . God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved

Eph 2:4-8 RSV

How privileged we are to be recipients of God's abundant grace!

It is good to remember that this also brings responsibility for in Matthew 6 we read these words:

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Matt 6:14-15 NIV

Forgiveness is not a feeling but a choice we make. The pain of broken promises, betrayal, hurtful words or actions against us will not suddenly disappear. God does not ask us to forget but to forgive.

We may be truly repentant of *our* sins but do we limit God's grace and forgiveness towards *us* by our behaviour towards others? It's a sobering thought that our salvation can be affected by our relationships with each other!

3. Our relationship with God – “Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice”

And our response to God’s love for us? We come before Him in worship offering ourselves as “living sacrifices”.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship.

Romans 12:1 NIV

But what does it mean to offer ourselves? There are implications:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Rom 12:2 NIV

I believe the Apostle Paul is clearly showing in this verse that we are faced with a choice continually in our daily discipleship: to be moulded in the way of the world evidenced by selfishness, pride and arrogance, or changed by the renewing of our minds in Christ. “Conformed” means “moulded by external pressure”; stamped in to the shape of the ways of the world.

“Transformed” is the word from which we get “metamorphosis” and we are familiar with the way a chrysalis changes to a butterfly. It’s a change from within. It’s in the renewing of our mind. The same word “transformed” is found in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. NIV

However we understand the meaning of the work of the Spirit, Paul is talking about change towards the character of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke records the words of Jesus that:

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me".

Luke 9:23-25 NIV

Daily choices. Continuous choices to follow in the steps of our Lord, denying self. By doing so we are renewing our minds, moving closer, changing from within, and reflecting his character influenced by his teaching.

This following passage from the letter to the Philippians chapter 2 challenges us in our relationships to have the mind of Christ: the servant love.

*So if there is any encouragement in Christ,
any incentive of love,
any participation in the Spirit,
any affection and sympathy,
complete my joy by being of the same mind,
having the same love,
being in full accord and of one mind.
Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count
others better than yourselves.
Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the
interests of others.*

And continues:

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality
with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the
form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*

Phil 2:1-7 RSV

Here we have unity, harmony, humility and the love that serves others.

What splendour there is in these verses. Christ emptied himself of the natural inclinations and selfish pride of human nature to take on the humble role of the servant, according to God's will. Through this he achieved salvation for us all.

In the light of such humility and love where does that leave our disagreements and conflicts?

I don't know about you but this makes me feel very uncomfortable.

To summarise:

In our lives we are going to find ourselves in situations of discord. It's important that we are aware that we have a choice: to follow the way of the world or to follow the way of Christ, the way of the cross.

This is a much more difficult road to follow than the way of our natural inclinations. As one writer put it

“ . . . God may be teaching us to love by putting us in the midst of unlovely people. We may have to learn patience whilst experiencing irritations and learn peace in the midst of chaos. It is necessary for us to encounter situations where we can choose to do the right thing instead of following our natural inclinations.”
(Warren, UCB)

It is only in thorny situations that, as the Apostle Paul writes

“you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will”.

Rom 12:2 NIV

4. Our understanding of ourselves – “Think of yourselves with sober judgement”

Let's look at this phrase “sober judgement”. It appears in Romans 12:3 and is in the context of Paul's appeal to demonstrate our discipleship as a living sacrifice to God:

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. NIV

What does “sober judgement” mean?

To help us to understand this more fully we shall take a practical look at ourselves, our relationships and the way we communicate with each other.

Making an honest and objective assessment of oneself can be quite unsettling for we all see ourselves from the inside out which can be very

different from how we actually appear to others. Even our voice can be unrecognisable when we hear a recording.

For example, as part of my training in couple counselling, some sessions of role play were videoed. Have you ever seen yourself on a TV screen? Who is this person? Surely not me! I couldn't identify with him. His voice and appearance was not me. Yet it *was* me and what was most humbling was that this person was the one everyone saw and I had difficulty recognising him. It was an uncomfortable experience.

So from the starting point that we might not be what we think we are, let's briefly consider what we really are.

We are unique creations of the Lord God who delights in variety and difference. We have been moulded by our individual life experiences, culture and gender. Our relationship with our parents and their life style will have had a major influence on what and who we are now.

For example, we may be from a large family with many siblings or we may be an only child. Disagreements may have been dealt with by outbursts of anger which cleared the air and were forgotten; or we may have come from a family where anger was never shown but individuals withdrew into themselves and didn't talk. Two extremes and there may be no right or wrong here but there *is* difference and this will affect us in all our relationships.

This is particularly so in marriage. When we become more aware of what each is bringing to the marriage relationship from our individual background and personality, it helps us to understand the patterns of behaviour and the "emotional games we play". Powerful unconscious feelings can rise up when we are stressed. We know how we feel but may not be aware why.

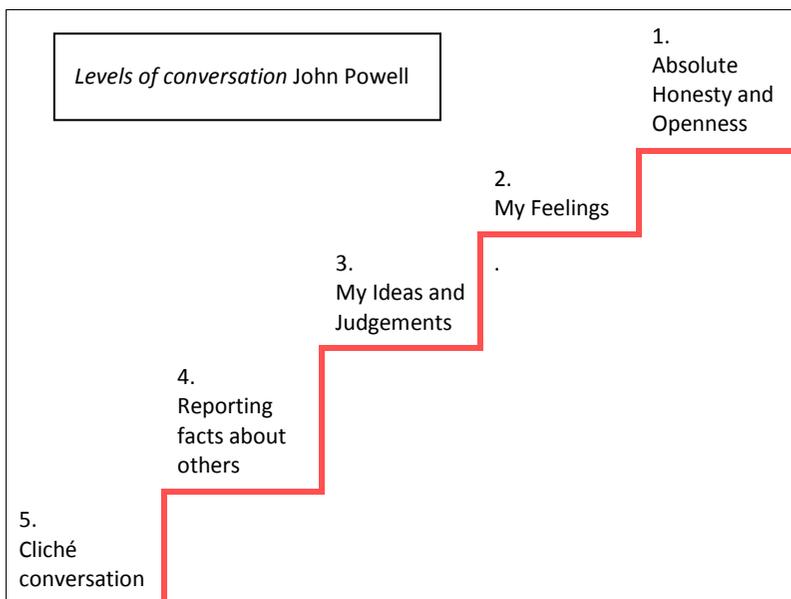
In addition to our past, there is the stress of the present which may also affect the way we interact with others: pressure at work; worries and anxieties; our health; a loss we are experiencing - perhaps through bereavement, or changing life stages such as the birth of the first child, the "empty nest" syndrome or retirement.

In the context of Romans 12:3 Paul is challenging each of us to be aware of how these issues affect our own behaviour in our relationships with others, because discipleship is all about relationships: with God as our Heavenly Father, with the Lord Jesus Christ and with each other. And the quality of our relationships is based on the way we communicate. For example, if we rarely pray what does that say about our relationship with God?

Communication involves all the ways we deal with each other. It's a huge topic and one which we can only begin to dip into here. I'm choosing to look at three areas: levels of conversation, the impact of how we communicate and the value of listening.

Levels of conversation

In his book "Why I am afraid to tell you who I am?" John Powell identifies five levels of conversation which are set out in the following diagram. They range from the conventional greetings of social politeness (level five) to the higher, more revealing level of openness (level one).



Here are some examples of the types of conversations at these levels:

Level 5 Hello, how are you? I'm fine thanks. How are you? Not too bad!

Level 4 I saw J at the meeting last night. That's nice. How is she? She's very well

Level 3 I thought T went on a bit today. He could have cut down on the last 10 minutes

Level 2 I'm anxious about the pressure I'm under at work. I'm worried that it will affect my health . . .

Level 1 I'd like to talk about . . . because it seems to be a problem between us that we need to resolve.

Conversing at levels 1 and 2 has the implied intimacy of the act of communion which signifies the sharing of a close relationship and unity one with another as in shared fellowship around the emblems of Christ's sacrifice. It also has a sense of looking deeply at ourselves:

I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit:

Ps 77:6 RSV

In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.

Ps 4:4 NIV

The Lord Jesus communed frequently with his Father, and in the gospels we are given a glimpse of the depth of that communion together with his deep love and concern for his disciples as he speaks to them of the future and prays for them. (John 13-17). Matthew reveals the strength of the Lord's feelings about what was to happen to him when he says to his disciples "my soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death" (Matthew 26:38 KJV).

Christ is Love expressed in all its self-sacrificing vulnerability and beauty.

Strong relationships will have a balance of all five levels of conversation in appropriate proportions. The lower levels, relevant to passing acquaintances or social convention, are an integral part of, but not in themselves adequate for, the closer relationships with spouse, family, friends or ecclesia. It is only through conversing at the higher levels that relationships can grow. Often this occurs through the process of working

through difficulties which necessitates a willingness to understand, adjust, respect and listen to those involved.

Unfortunately, when disagreements and disputes happen we tend to get stuck at level 3 which is all about *me*; *my* ideas; *my* judgements; and we become defensive if these are threatened.

Moving to the openness of levels 1 and 2 discards the protection of Self and becomes an altogether more exposed place. This is uncomfortable and is especially so in the heat of conflict.

At times like this we tend to entrench ourselves further into the obduracy of what *I* think. Unfortunately when this happens Self is preserved to the detriment of the Lord's command to "Love one another as I have loved you".

The Impact of how we communicate

When things are going well in relationships communication is effective. When things go wrong our communication is the means through which we display that all is not well. And it's not only through speech (or the lack of it) that we achieve this, for communication involves *all* the ways we deal with each other – writing, texting, speaking, tone of voice, body language, our motives and also the skills of listening.

The dynamics of communication are complex and it's not surprising that we often get it wrong, and will continue to so do until Christ returns. However, as followers of the Lord Jesus we can do our best to follow the way of love which he commanded and which the Apostle Paul so eloquently expounds to us in 1 Corinthians 13.

There are practical steps that we can take to work towards a greater awareness of ourselves and others as we communicate and my aim in this section is to briefly consider a few of these.

Firstly, let's look at normal, everyday conversations. What do we take most notice of?

Research shows that we take far more notice of the other person's voice (tone, intonation, volume etc) and body language (facial expression, posture, hand movements etc) than ever we do of what they say.

Whilst research figures differ on exact percentages they agree on the approximate ratio differences put forward by psychologist Professor Albert Mehrabian:

Words 7% Voice 38% Body language 55%

Surprising isn't it? The actual words used affect us far less than the voice or body language.

Of course there are times when words are of crucial importance and far outweigh any other considerations - the Word of God, for instance, or our confession of faith at baptism and there are many instances in our lives and in the Scriptures of the beneficial effects of encouraging or healing words. We only have to consider the compassionate words of the Lord Jesus as our example.

On the other hand human beings have a natural propensity to elevate Self in many different ways including our speech which has the power to harm or deeply hurt others and we are warned against this by James in his letter:

but no human being can tame the tongue - a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so.

James 3:8-10 RSV

However, in our day to day conversations it is also appropriate to consider the way we use our voice and body for it is these, and not just our words, that have an impact and are likely to reveal more candidly what's *going on inside us*. As one psychologist put it "People speak with their vocal organs but communicate with their whole body" (Abercrombie, 2006).

Here's a simple example. Have you ever been in the situation of talking to someone when they begin to look over your shoulder at something going on behind you? Or they look at their watch? What message do you pick up from them? How does it make you feel? How do you react?

The struggle we all have between flesh and spirit is often revealed, for good or ill, in the different ways we communicate with each other, for example the raised voice of anger; the 'cold shoulder' of dislike; the wagging finger of superiority; or alternatively, there is the smile of friendship; the touch of compassion; the calm voice of reason.

The value of Listening

A most important ingredient of all our interactions is the ability to listen. James writes that we should be slow to speak. God has given us two ears and one mouth - a lesson for each of us.

Think of these words of Job:

"Listen carefully to my words; let this be the consolation you give me. Bear with me while I speak"

Job 21:2-3 NIV

The Message Bible puts it like this:

"Now listen to me carefully, please listen, at least do me the favour of listening. Put up with me while I have my say —"

Job 21:2-3 TMB

We are able to offer consolation by our listening: listening can be comforting and a mark of respect.

Here are some tips on how to improve our listening skills:

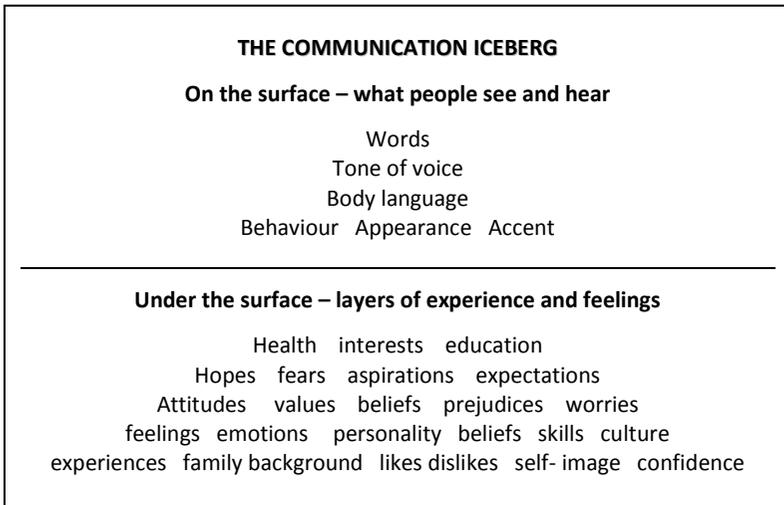
- Concentrate on the person speaking. Often, we are so eager to get our own point across that although we may hear what the other person says, we do not listen. There's a big difference.
- Concentrate on what they say
- and the way they are saying it.
- look at their body language. What signals are being given?
- Importance of silence. They may be thinking about what to say next.
- They may not want you to offer solutions but just want you to listen.
- Reflect back to them what you are hearing and use words of empathy such as "that must be difficult for you" or "I am sorry to hear that".

Sometimes we only want someone to listen to us to validate us as a person; to make us feel of worth; to acknowledge that we have an opinion even though our view may be different.

It's important to listen to the feelings behind the words. For example, a brother or sister might say "I don't believe in God anymore" to which we could respond with shock and a response such as "You mustn't say that". The words they are using could be masking deep pain at something that has happened in their life to shake their faith to the core. We cannot help them if we are unable to hear the pain beneath their words.

And when we are listening, be aware that what we interpret as being said may not be the same as the other is trying to communicate. Let me explain.

We hear and interpret all things around us, including what others say and do and what we say and do, through the layers of our experiences over the whole of our lives up to now; and our experiences will continue to mould who and what we are for the rest of our lives. All these layers of experience which activate feelings and responses are held inside us but will be shown through our communication. It's like an iceberg: what we say and do – the tip of the iceberg - are the things people can hear and see; the things hidden from view under the surface are a great deal more.



In our everyday interactions with others our communication will often depend more on what's inside *us* than on what *they* say or do; that is, how and why we react to them in certain ways can be based on how *we* are feeling – physically, emotionally and spiritually. It can also depend on the time and place; the reason for communication; what we hope to gain; what we think of the person with whom we are talking and so on.

We can have parallel experiences with others, similar attitudes, shared beliefs but every person will have their unique and individual perspective on life. Everything under the surface in this diagram will shape who we are and this will affect our communication. And so, in *any* group of people there will be as many different perspectives as there are individuals in the group. This could, potentially, lead to all sorts of disagreements.

How do you react to the following?

Imagine the elderly sister; the angry, disruptive brother; the rebel in scruffy clothing; the poor attender; the brother or sister we feel uncomfortable with or even dislike.

Our response towards them will be based on the things *under the surface*, sometimes light-heartedly known as our “stuff”. That is how we interpret what we see and hear. We prejudge unconsciously. Pre=judge=ism. Prejudice!

My response may be very different from yours but whatever it is it will affect what each of us says and how we behave.

The Apostle Paul was well aware of this in writing to the young churches. He sought to further their understanding of the gospel of Christ and the command to “love one another” through the concept of sacrificial love in their dealings with one another. He frequently appeals to them to be kind to one another, to put others before themselves, to agree for the sake of Christ. He asks them to put Self aside.

In exhorting us all towards “sober judgement” it is evident that Paul is challenging us to be aware of all of the things that lead to prejudice and disagreement: to be self aware and honest with ourselves (and God); to acknowledge what's going on for us; to try to see that others struggle with “stuff” under the surface just as we do and to try to see things from their

perspective rather than to impose our view on them. This is clearly shown to us in Philippians 4 which I shall consider in more detail later.

We are given a clear example in the opening verses of Matthew 7 about judgement. I believe our Lord Jesus had a very special sense of humour. Picture the man who approaches the one with a speck in his eye. He is coming to rescue him from his problem. In fact it is his intention to get rid of that speck. But he has a plank in his own eye! He is not able to see properly due to his affected eyesight. And he does not know it! He is not self aware.

And so when we are listening, be aware that what we interpret as being said may not be the same as the other is trying to communicate. Layers of our 'stuff', our emotional state, our experiences and upbringing will all play their part in how we respond to those around us. And it is our communication behaviour, in all its different forms, that will help or hinder *all* our relationships.

I've heard it said "I can't change -that's just how I am". I disagree. As disciples of Christ it is our responsibility to be aware of ourselves and to aim for change, to be transformed,

This translation is from the Amplified Bible

..... having the same love, being in full accord and of one harmonious mind and intention. Do nothing from factional motives [through contentiousness, strife, selfishness, or for unworthy ends] or prompted by conceit and empty arrogance. Instead, in the true spirit of humility (lowliness of mind) let each regard the others as better than and superior to himself [thinking more highly of one another than you do of yourselves]. Let each of you esteem and look upon and be concerned for not [merely] his own interests, but also each for the interests of others. Let this same attitude and purpose and [humble] mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus: [Let Him be your example in humility:]

Phil 2:2-5 AMP

5. Our relationship with each other – “Let love be genuine”

Consider for a moment the background to the early church and the letters. There was diversity of culture - Romans, Jews and Greeks, but all were members of the body of Christ. Paul reminds us that we are all different with different skills, problems and trials.

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

Rom 12:4-6 NIV

And then says:

Let love be genuine

Rom 12:9 RSV

This is translated “without hypocrisy” in KJV, “sincere” in NIV.

That is - we don't love our brothers and sisters, marriage partner, and family just when we feel it. We *show* that love through our everyday actions, even when we don't *feel* it. This is our call to discipleship and it's a difficult road to follow. I sometimes wonder if this is what Jesus meant by the words

“For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

Matt 7:14 RSV

This is the *agápē* love: the servant love. This is the love that loves the unlovable: the mind over heart love. This is the patient love. This is the love that always sees the highest motives in the behaviour of the other, even when continually disappointed and the evidence shows the worst. This is the long suffering love, first introduced by the Lord Jesus Christ as the love we should show to our enemies and which he gives us as the new commandment. Paul increases our understanding particularly in his letter to the Corinthian believers.

This translation is from the Amplified Bible:

4 Love endures long and is patient and kind; love never is envious nor boils over with jealousy, is not boastful or vainglorious, does not display itself haughtily.

5 It is not conceited (arrogant and inflated with pride); it is not rude (unmannerly) and does not act unbecomingly. Love (God's love in us) does not insist on its own rights or its own way, for it is not self-seeking; it is not touchy or fretful or resentful; it takes no account of the evil done to it [it pays no attention to a suffered wrong].

6 It does not rejoice at injustice and unrighteousness, but rejoices when right and truth prevail.

7 Love bears up under anything and everything that comes, is ever ready to believe the best of every person, its hopes are fadeless under all circumstances, and it endures everything [without weakening].

1 Cor 13:4-8 AMP

Notice the last verse of this chapter:

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

All versions convey the same principle. How do we understand this? Isn't Paul saying that this love that we show to each other is more important than our faith and our hope?

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, **I gain nothing.***

1 Cor 13:1 NIV

It puts all things in perspective. All the spiritual gifts, our knowledge, our faith and our selfless dedication to God are empty and we gain nothing if we are without love.

I leave you to ponder on this.

There may be times when to show this love to someone, when to seek someone's highest good will involve hard choices. Discipline is rarely welcomed but there are times when action has to be taken to bring about repentance.

Paul is uncompromising in his condemnation of the ways of the flesh.

But rather I wrote to you not to associate with any one who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber - not even to eat with such a one.

1 Cor 5:11 RSV

He is equally so in his censure of controversies.

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

Titus 3:9-11 NIV

It is easy to think of the divisive person as someone other than ourselves – and that may be so. But it could also be any one of us in our stubbornness of thinking “I am right. You are wrong”, especially when an opinion becomes an issue and others become involved. The consequences can be discord in the ecclesia and distress to brothers and sisters. This is not Christ-like. Self has pre-eminence in such an attitude and Love is lost in the process. Paul is firm in his instructions of how to deal with such a person.

This is a most difficult area and I'm still trying to understand it. Paul gives clear instructions as to the action to be taken when a brother or sister is living in a way which is unacceptable.

Sadly, there is a view that we can drift into a “golf club” mentality of rejecting a member because their behaviour or appearance is against the rules or there is poor attendance with “failure to pay the subscription”.

An ecclesia is not a golf club. We are motivated by the *agápē* love which may require discipline to be applied towards those who miss the expected standard, but it is vital that those standards are Christ's and not those of our own making.

Discipline requires compassion in deed and in seeking repentance and reinstatement to fellowship for without love our actions are simply noise without substance. Our responsibility in loving our brother/sister is always to seek their highest good.

6. "Live in harmony with one another".

Coming back to Romans 12, Paul emphasises the aim of peace and harmony in the ecclesia:

Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.

Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.

Rom 12:18 NKJV

Paul develops the idea of "living peaceably with all men" later in his letter:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Rom 15:5-6 RSV

For harmony there is a need for agreement. Agreement has a common focus.

"Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow." (Tozer, 1982)

The “tuning fork” for our harmony is the Lord Jesus Christ. To attempt to find our own harmony by tuning ourselves to each other can only result in a disturbing cacophony of sound.

7. Finding a Place of Agreement

The first step towards resolution of a disagreement is to move towards a place of agreement, to seek a common focus. This is not necessarily an easy step to take.

I am reminded of the response of God’s people (Numbers 14) to both the positive and negative messages of the spies, which was to be filled with fear, to retreat and to desire a return to the place from whence they had come. They did not want to face the walled cities and giants. They wanted to run away: a typical human trait.

In our discipleship, in moving towards our place of agreement we may face our “giants”: for example, difficult people, a troubled teenager, an elderly brother or sister. The Lord God encouraged Joshua to be strong and of good courage and that He would never leave him or forsake him.

We may feel like running away but we can face our “giants” in His strength. Consider the following:

- Focus on our Lord Jesus Christ. Through his word there can be true agreement and harmony.
- Trust God and pray for discretion and wisdom.
- It is important to acknowledge that finding a place of agreement is neither compromise nor a sign of weakness but evidence of meekness. (Gk. Lt. “controlled strength, patience”).
- In seeking a place of agreement people feel valued when their opinion is heard and respected even if not agreed with.
- Sometimes negotiating is the only way forward in disagreements. Good relationships, whether in marriage, the family or the ecclesia, are maintained and strengthened by negotiation and acceptance. But to find a place of agreement is not free from risk and may not be easy.

- Sometimes we need an independent person to clarify the issues and the values placed on them and to identify whether the issues have become confused over “personalities”. Mediation to bring about a place of agreement can be a positive way forward. (See Appendix)
- We can choose to abide by our opinion believing it is the only way forward or we can choose to be forbearing of those who don’t think like us, dress like us or worship like us. But we do have that choice.
- We can choose to let go. Accept that we are all different. Growth in relationships is based on accepting difference. As Paul tells us concerning the one we disagree with, “*It is before his own master that he stands or falls*”. (Romans 14:4)
- Disagreement can be ugly and is often a place of pride.
- We may disagree but we don’t have to be disagreeable!
- There are times when we may have to agree to disagree.
- And there are times when we may have to accept, graciously, that we cannot have our way.

However, there are times when it is necessary to ‘withstand’ [definition: to be strong enough to stand up to somebody or remain unchanged by pressure]. Paul writes:

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. . . . he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when [the Jews] arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of [them]. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy . . . even Barnabas was led astray.

Gal 2:11-14 NIV

This behaviour was unacceptable to Paul, not because of any differences of opinion, but because “. . . *they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel*”. (Gal 2:14). There is a place for anger but it is imperative that it is expressed in the right way and that opposition is conducted in the spirit of love.

When angry, do not sin; do not ever let your wrath (your exasperation, your fury or indignation) last until the sun goes down.
Eph 4:26 AMP

Direct any anger towards the problem, not the person, for you are speaking to one for whom Christ died, and “*speak the truth in love*” (Eph 4:15).

Say what needs to be said in kindness:

and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.
Eph 4:32 RSV

The heated words of inflamed tempers or the cold anger of avoidance are damaging to the individuals concerned and to the ecclesia; issues become lost beneath the conflict of resentment and hurt feelings and in this behaviour itself we dishonour the gospel of Christ. At times like this we do well to remind ourselves that “*it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved*” (Acts 15:11).

Scripture shows us that Paul and Peter, both strong-minded individuals, faced one another and resolved the issue between them. Peter, having been admonished by Paul, bears no bitterness towards him. Having learnt from Paul’s words, Peter eloquently expresses his greater understanding of the grace of Christ when speaking to the believers at the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15:7-11), and later speaks with affection of “*our beloved brother Paul*” (2 Pet 3:15-16). What a blessing we would be to one another if we could follow their example.

8. Practical issues – “disputes over opinions”.

Let’s move on now to take a closer look at some practical issues. This is based on Chapter 14, which starts:

As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions.

Rom 14:1 RSV

Whenever I come to this chapter, often to validate my position in a disagreement, the great question that needs to be asked first is “Who is weak in faith? The other person - or me?”

In the context of chapters 12 and 13, I wonder if the “weak” one is the one who is still moulded to the way of the world rather than beginning the transformation to be like Christ?

I wonder if the “weak” one is the one who has failed to consider himself/herself with sober judgement and is less than self aware?

I wonder if the “weak” one is the one who is failing to show the *agápē* servant love?

It puts into context the subject of the dispute.

The next question that comes to mind is this - is the subject, the “opinion”, important?

In the context of this chapter and many of his letters, Paul’s disagreements are with the Jews and Jewish customs. In all cases he is making a stand on freedom in Christ against rules and regulations that others impose on themselves and seek to impose on others.

But, how do we decide if our disagreement or dispute is valid?

The Lord has given us clear guidance on this:

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Matt 18:15-17 NIV

So, first we communicate with our brother/sister. We listen to them. We aim for the higher levels of conversation (page 12). Our motive is the servant love showing patience and understanding.

The same applies if we are the one who has caused offence. We listen to our brother/sister. We aim for the higher levels of conversation. Our motive too, is the servant love showing patience and understanding.

We *each* have a responsibility to find a place of agreement.

If that fails then the issue will have to be sufficiently important to involve two or three others. The context suggests they will be witnesses to the offence but the wider principle can also apply. If that procedure is adopted and fails to bring about repentance then the elders of the ecclesia will become involved. By this stage the issue should be of sufficient importance to affect the ecclesia or the individual's salvation.

I think it's worth mentioning what should not happen: the letter of complaint to the AB's; grumbling to others about how upset we are by what so and so has done; ignoring the brother/sister with whom we are upset.

It's easier to give in to our natural inclinations than it is to follow the way Christ commanded which is to go and see our brother or sister alone. This is hard to do, especially when feelings are hurt. May the Lord give us strength to meet this challenge.

I believe, and I know from experience, that this does work and we can make a friend out of a difficult situation.

And what a powerful witness this can be of love – not just in the ecclesia but also to the world.

Now I want to draw your attention to another verse which widens our obligation in love to each other.

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Matt 5:23-25 NIV

If we are aware someone has a grievance against us, our Lord requires us to go and see them first before we can complete our worship. It's getting harder, don't you think?

Someone asked "Which is the more serious: the one who gives offence or the one who takes offence?"

The one who gives offence may not be aware they have done this. The recipient has a choice whether or not they take offence. So what do you think?

We are continually faced with choices in our discipleship: to be moulded in the fashion of the world or to be transformed on the inside by the renewing of our mind.

Let's go back to Romans 14.

As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions. One believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats; for God has welcomed him.

Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand.

Rom 14:1-4 RSV

Interesting: the emphasis on welcoming the brother or sister.

In "the disputes over opinions" their point of view is between them and their Lord where he/she stands or falls. How encouraging are the words: "*And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand*".

While we blunder about with these planks in our eyes, our Lord is in control.

I want to come back to these "opinions".

These are our personal views which may be different from those held by others. Today and throughout our history, our brotherhood has been, and is, beset with these "opinions". Our marriage relationships and family connections are littered with these "opinions". Between individuals there is the breakdown of trust, criticism, clash of "personalities", anger and loss.

There are, and have been, "opinions" both important and less important on so many subjects:

- the nature of Christ and the atonement

- praying to Jesus
- what is meant by inspiration of the scriptures.
- fellowship in divorce and remarriage situations.
- the work of sisters in the ecclesia
- head coverings to be worn or not worn
- the clothes we wear
- forms of worship and hymns and songs of praise
- Bible versions to be used.

Now I do not propose to comment on these “opinions”. That is not the purpose of this booklet. Instead I want us to consider how we relate to each other when there are differences of opinion.

Many of the issues in the history of our community have been considered major – sufficient to insist on separation and division. Often personalities have been involved. Some have suggested that many individuals follow the personality rather than understand the principles involved.

Paul makes the important point in v5 *“Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. . .”*.

We have individual personal responsibility to fully understand a dispute if we are to be involved.

I think it might be helpful to consider three issues of conflict which illustrate the complexity of human thoughts, feelings and behaviour. There are no simple answers. I leave you to ponder upon them. The first is about problems in a marriage and is an amalgamation of a number of cases I have been working with as a Relate Couple counsellor. The other two cover disputes in the ecclesia which I think are unlikely to be current today.

Example 1

They have been married fourteen years and have two children. He is very occupied with church/social work and a busy job. She has a part time job at the local school. They tell me it is as if they are living parallel lives. She feels she is never heard. When they do talk it seems to her that he does not understand what she is saying. He says he does listen and will always help her to understand her problems and how she can sort out her life. He

is puzzled why she gets so annoyed with him. They talk less and less because it seems always to end in conflict. There is no more sex because she resents him so much. Often he is angry.

I am curious why he feels he needs to rescue her from her problems. I wonder if she has difficulty in clearly expressing her needs. Communication problems are so often at the root of marriage conflict. They are stuck in a pattern of behaviour which can lead to disaster.

Her needs may be complex but, foremost, she needs to feel she is valued as a person in her own right, not just as a wife or mother or perhaps a daughter of demanding parents. He needs to feel valued and loved. Both need to feel safe to be vulnerable in their relationship.

I ask how they can show love to each other.

Some couples spend a lifetime enduring each other, unable to share their needs and expectations in their God given relationship.

There is the story of a couple who had been married for fifty years. They were asked what the secret of their marriage was. The wife explained that if her husband's ways annoyed her she would sit down and make a little doll. Afterwards her husband asked her about this and she brought out a box from under the bed. This contained two dolls and a bank book with her savings. £10,000. "Only two dolls" he said with quiet satisfaction. "Where did all the savings come from?" "From selling the dolls" she explained.

(UCB Word for Today)

This illustrates in a humorous way, how some couples find great difficulty in opening up to one another about their needs in their relationship.

There is a handout available called "Just Listen" (see Appendix) which addresses the need to be heard and valued and not necessarily "sorted out". Couples often need help to express their needs to each other. In doing this they can feel very vulnerable and sometimes their relationship does not feel safe enough. Skilled counselling can provide a safe place where husbands and wives can begin to explore their relationship with openness and honesty. I continue to be delighted at the positive changes many couples can make to their marriage.

The majority of calls to the CSN Help line are about marriage and family problems. Sadly, when couples come to us it is often at a late stage. Why is it that we are so reluctant to ask for help? Why are we so reluctant to attend support days within our community to enrich our marriage? All marriage relationships deserve time spent on learning about communication whether through couple counselling or support days.

The CSN *Marriage Matters* Course has been prepared as a training course for marriage: six sections to work through with an older experienced couple. It includes sections on communication and managing conflict as well as understanding each other's family background. It is a valuable resource for all couples to work through together, regardless of the length of their married life.

Example 2

Next, I am going to be someone who brings forward an "opinion" in the ecclesia. I have deliberately chosen a topic that, as far as I'm aware, is not an issue in any ecclesia today. You can judge who you think is the "weak" brother but I ask you to be aware of that plank. We may smile at this example but the feelings beneath the words are keenly felt.

"I believe that all things should be done decently and in order. It used to be a tradition in this ecclesia that brethren on the platform would always wear waistcoats. This is no longer the case. Both my grandfather and father always wore waistcoats. I have a wardrobe full of waistcoats and I don't feel properly dressed without one. I bring this subject up at most business meetings. Many brothers and sisters groan and laugh behind their hands when I do this but it is important to me. I live alone and rarely hear from anyone from my ecclesia during the week. When I do this at least I get some attention. My wife died three years ago".

So how do we love this brother?

Example 3

A sister is insisting that as an ecclesia we fail to keep a direct command of the Lord Jesus. Jesus says we should wash one another's feet. She is prepared to provide the facilities each Sunday morning so that we can do this. She argues that it would improve our fellowship and care for each

other. The majority of the ecclesia is vocal in expressing the view that this is inappropriate. Touching each other's feet invades their body space and in any case there is no way that they would want to wash the feet of certain brothers and sisters.

The ABs are uncomfortable about making a recommendation to the ecclesia as it is a clear instruction of scripture which surely has to be obeyed. On the other hand it could be said that it only applied to the custom and practice of the early church especially as they must have had dirty feet which required washing.

How do we show love to this sister?

Earlier I referred to Paul as the reactionary moderate. Freedom in Christ is his inspiration. His standing up against the apostle Peter at Antioch and his criticism of those who wanted to bring in legalism from the law are there on record for us.

Yet in his conduct towards the individual, his response in love is to apply to himself something that restricts his freedom in Christ.

The right thing is to eat no meat or drink no wine [at all], or [do anything else] if it makes your brother stumble or hurts his conscience or offends or weakens him.

Rom 14:21 AMP

What do we make of this?

I believe this verse demonstrates Paul's own self awareness, attitude, conscience and the effect of his personal relationship with Christ and how this motivates his relationships with his brothers and sisters.

With the individual he will deny himself anything rather than cause his brother to stumble.

In a perfect ecclesia with everyone motivated to be Christ-like, all perfectly self aware and loving in this way, there will be perfect growth in love. Unfortunately, this is the ideal that none of us can achieve this side of the Kingdom.

But if there is one brother or sister who insists on a particular form of behaviour or practice then, following this principle, should all surrender

rather than cause this brother or sister to stumble? But does this mean that he/she is effectively coercing the ecclesia into getting his/her own way? Is this acceptable?

My view is that there is a difference between how we act towards each other as individuals and how the ecclesia, as the body of Christ, manages these difficult issues. The ecclesia will be looking at the collective good and this may require difficult decisions to be made. The behaviour of the disruptive brother/sister may need to be addressed - always seeking their highest good in the perspective of the agāpē love.

There are no easy answers and I leave you to consider these things.

Here is a summary of Paul's argument in chapter 14. I have rearranged the order to increase the impact and the challenge of what he writes:

If, by imposing our views on the other:

We put a stumbling block/hindrance/cause weakness (v13)

Someone is distressed or injured by what we do (v15)

Then

we no longer walk in love (v15)

And cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died

What is good is spoken of as evil (v16)

We are not pursuing what makes for peace and mutual up-building (v19)

We destroy the work of God (v20)

Paul's summary

None of us lives for himself. We live to the Lord (v7)

The faith we have we keep between ourselves and God (v22)

We are not to judge (v4) "it is before his own master that he/she stands or falls. And he will be upheld for the Master is able to make him stand".

9. A Bible template for managing disagreement.

In his epistle to the Philippians chapter 4, the apostle Paul gives us clear advice on how to manage our disagreements. Let's have a look at this and see what conclusions we can take.

V2. I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.

Accept and confront that there is a problem and seek to find common ground – a place of agreement. Remember as disciples of our Lord we are on the same side

V3 Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

For those not directly involved: don't take sides. Be even-handed. Support them both. Seek to understand the other's point of view. Listen. Search for common ground.

V4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

A rejoicing heart is a more gentle and forgiving heart. Not just in this situation but as a way of life. Our joy stems from our acknowledgement and gratitude for the overwhelming mercy of God's grace towards us.

V5 Let your gentleness be evident to all.

The idea here is of Christ-like meekness – a spiritual strength which can harness our natural inclinations. Keep our focus on the Lord Jesus Christ not on our own opinions or feelings and try to get the issues in perspective. It can be helpful to take some time away from the disagreement.

V5 The Lord is near

Life is too short to harbour resentment. Search your own heart. Ask "why am I reacting this way?" Think about what is going on behind the words. Accept there is always a choice of how we respond. If the Lord were to return today where would that leave our dispute? What really matters?

V6 Do not be anxious about anything

Don't dwell on what has happened. It prolongs and inflates negativity, resentment, self pity and feelings of superiority.

V6 but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

At every step bring all that happens and all our thoughts and feelings to God. Be honest with Him. Be willing to forgive even if you can't feel it yet. Acknowledging to God where you're at is an important step. Following this, one of the most healing steps we can take, and one of the most difficult of all, is to pray for and with the one with whom we are in dispute.

V7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Our thoughts, our feelings, all the anxieties and worries of our hearts are guarded in the peace of God. He is in control.

V8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things.

Focus on the good things! Focus on the Lord Jesus. *"Let love be your aim"* (1Cor 14:1).

10. And when discord prevails?

But what happens when there is a serious disagreement in the ecclesia over the principles of our faith or the moral teaching of our Lord Jesus? We have followed the principles of Matthew 18 (Page 27), the issues have been clarified and the possibility of "personalities" minimised but the ecclesia is critically divided?

There are times when, as an ecclesia, a stand needs to be made on important issues. Agreement should not be at any cost.

An anticipated "division" of this gravity is beyond the scope of this booklet. However, spiritual wisdom and guidance is available. We are

blessed with, and I recommend to you, a small booklet entitled *“A guide to the Formation and Conduct of Christadelphian Ecclesias”* (See appendix). Here can be found sections considering *“the Dissatisfied Minority”*, *“Absence and Separate Meetings Unlawful”*, *“A Time to Separate and How to go about it”* and *“Ecclesias in Relationship to One Another”*.

What a tragedy to find ourselves in “division” of the Body of our Lord when disagreements escalate to such a place of discord that our differences become greater than those things we have in common. What a failure of our fellowship. I wonder if Christ weeps for us seeing his Body broken over matters that cannot be settled in love.

In all things our discipleship aim is to *“walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”* (Eph 5: 2 NIV.)

What a challenge this is to each of us!

11. Summary

We started with our relationship with God, a God of difference and diversity and, as our form of worship, we offer ourselves as living sacrifices.

We can choose between being moulded to the way the world deals with people, or the way of the cross where we can begin to change from the inside by the renewing of our mind. This involves considering ourselves with sober judgement; to be more self-aware and aware of the way our personality, background and present circumstances affect how we see and understand our brothers and sisters.

We looked briefly at the importance of listening and at the levels of the way we communicate and at the challenge of the servant love that is expected of us in all our relationships.

This is where we started

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

John 13:34-35 NIV

Jesus introduces to us the concept of servant love, having washed the disciples' feet and the feet of Judas who was to betray him and of Peter who was to deny him. He encourages us to see this as evidence of our discipleship and of our witness to the world. We can choose to love.

Our God is mighty and awesome in power. He is also a God of difference and diversity, who challenges us to offer ourselves to Him; to search our own hearts through sober judgement; to apply the teaching of our Lord in showing love to the unlovable and to be one in Christ.

Our natural inclinations lead to discord. True agreement and harmony can only come from a common focus on our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us go forward, resolved to bring the way of Christ into our marriage, our relationships with family and friends and our brothers and sisters, in his strength.

I want to finish with these wonderful words of the apostle from Philippians: 2:1-11 RSV

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.

Appendix

Seminars on this subject can be arranged by contacting admin@chsn.org.uk.

Mediation. Information about the Christadelphian Support Network and its services, including mediation, are available from our web site www.chsn.org.uk.

Handout “Just Listen” available to download from CSN web site page: “Resources/Relationships”.

Marriage Matters Course. See CSN web site www.chsn.org.uk under “Resources”.

Quotations

AMP: Amplified Bible.

KJV: King James (Authorised) Version.

NIV: (from The Holy Bible: New International Version. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, by International Bible Society).

RSV: Revised Standard Version.

The Message Bible: (from THE MESSAGE: The Bible in Contemporary Language © 2002 by Eugene H. Peterson. All rights reserved.)

References

Abercrombie N, 2006, “The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology”.

Houston B, 2008, Themes from Places of Agreement. Penguin.

Mehrabian A, (1981), “Silent messages: Implicit communication of emotions and attitudes”, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth (currently distributed by Albert Mehrabian, am@kaaj.com).

Powell John, 1995, “Why am I afraid to tell you who I am?” Alban Books, Edinburgh.

Roberts R, 1883, “A guide to the Formation and Conduct of Christadelphian Ecclesias”, The Christadelphian Magazine and Publishing Association Ltd, Birmingham UK.

Tozer A W, 1982, “The Pursuit of God”, Christian Publications Inc, Philadelphia USA.

Warren UCB: Word for Today, UCB Free copies available from PO Box 255, Stoke on Trent, ST4 8YY, UK .