

THE BEACON – Electronic Edition – 3/5/24

Cliquishness

A common criticism leveled against congregations by visitors, new members, or even those who have become dissatisfied with their identification with a particular local church is the charge that it practices "cliquishness." A *clique* is "a small, exclusive group of friends or associates" (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*).

The reason the charge of "cliquishness" is leveled at churches has to do with its treatment of all others. Those outside of a clique can feel as if they are excluded or unwelcomed into a group that isolates itself. When there are various cliques, competition may develop between people who don't get along with each other in order to secure the loyalty of others to their clique before another group "gets them." This kind of social tug-of-war happens regularly among school children, but sadly, far too many congregations of God's people have fallen victim to the same pettiness that is seen on an elementary school playground.

Scripture doesn't use any equivalent of the word *clique*, but it addresses the problem of cliquishness. In rebuking the Corinthians for their divisiveness as one group among them would say "I am of Paul," while another said, "I am of Apollos" (1 Cor. 1:12), Paul asked "Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor. 1:13). The relationship of those in Christ is to be a unique bond. In the Lord's church, age, race, social class, nationality, or any of the other things that normally divide people should disappear. In Christ, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). The Holy Spirit commands Christians not to show "partiality" (NKJV), "personal favoritism" (NASB), or "respect of persons" (Jas. 2:1, KJV), even offering an example of how this could be done toward one who visits an assembly (Jas. 2:2-3). To act with favoritism is to act as "judges with evil thoughts" (Jas. 2:4) and to "commit sin" (Jas. 2:9). Instead, in the church, "there should be no schism in the body," instead "the members should have the same care for one another" (1 Cor. 12:25). How can Christians avoid the perception of cliquishness?

All of us are naturally drawn to those with whom it is easy for us to talk or to those who share our interests and personalities. In the church, however, our bond must transcend these mere material concerns. There will be plenty of time to get together with friends and talk to those to whom we feel close, but as you visit with your friends or family, ask yourself---"have I spoken to anyone today with whom I have not spoken in a while?" Look around and see who is standing alone. Are there those who don't seem to fit in? Have you spoken to a visitor or a new member recently? What about that older person? What about the young? Break those generational barriers and go talk to them! Are there those who don't have someone talking to them? Don't just take the easy course and talk to the same people you always talk to---reach out and let someone you haven't spoken to as often know you are interested in him.

Great caution should be exercised so as to not to be perceived as being exclusive. Obviously, very few members have homes large enough to host all members of a congregation at the same time. But parties, social functions, or even Bible studies that involve some members while excluding others are naturally prone to make some people feel isolated and unwelcomed. Be careful!

When people feel isolated, it may be because others have been cliquish, OR it may be because they have been unwilling to be friendly to others. Solomon admonished, "A man who has friends must himself be friendly" (Prov. 18:24, NKJV). If we act unwilling to talk to others, if we leave the building as soon as the closing prayer is over, if we show no interest in the lives of others, we might well isolate ourselves. Be friendly!

As brothers and sisters in Christ, we must be "kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love" (Rom. 12:10). If there are ways we have failed to do this in the past, let's commit ourselves to demonstrate this loving spirit from this day forward.

- by Kyle Pope
(edited for length)

Forgiveness (3rd in a series)

We have been instructed to forgive others "just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32). Last week we observed that God is not only willing to forgive us, but He is also 'aggressive' in His desire to forgive. By that we mean that He 'goes the extra mile' to make it possible for us to be restored to a right standing with Him – and we should also be willing and anxious to forgive those who sin against us,.

With these points in mind, we must emphasize that God's forgiveness is conditional. That is to say, He requires us to do certain things in order to be forgiven. For the alien sinner, those conditions are clearly stated in what we often refer to as 'the plan of salvation'. One must hear (Romans 10:17), believe (Hebrews 11:6), repent (Luke 13:3), confess Christ (Romans 10:10), and be baptized (Acts 2:38) in order to be saved. Omit any of these requirements/conditions, and salvation cannot be obtained. For one who has already become a Christian but sins again, the terms of pardon involve repentance, confession, and prayer (Acts 8:22). Would we argue that – since God has imposed these conditions – He is not a loving and forgiving God? Of course not! As already observed, He is willing and ready to forgive, but His conditions must be met.

What about us? What should we do when someone sins against us? The answer is obvious – forgive them "just as" God does. That means that it is proper to expect them to meet the appropriate conditions of forgiveness. Jesus taught that our forgiveness is to be conditional: "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him" (Luke 17:3).

Some are uncomfortable with the idea that our forgiveness should be withheld until the sinning brother repents. They suggest that the loving thing is to forgive unilaterally and unconditionally. But, think! In doing so we would not be taking important steps to bring our brother back from sin. We would not be motivating him to be right with God. We would be potentially facilitating his continuation in a sin that can cause his soul to be lost.

(continued next week)

- by Greg Gwin