

Bringing Harmony From Discord

By

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A Church, like a piano, needs tuning from time to time.

The natural state of a piano is discord. Leave it alone and it will naturally get out of tune.

The natural state of a group of people is discord. Put people together and you will have some discord. Simply make no effort to build relationships.

It happens even in churches. Discord is hard to define but everyone knows it when it is there. Discord is not disagreement. Discord is being out of harmony – out of tune. All you need to do to produce discord in a church is fail to work at building and maintaining healthy relationships.

Simply do nothing.

A piano needs to be tuned if it is to have a pleasing sound.

When there is discord in a church you need to have some tools to help restore harmony. You need the right tools and you need to know how to use them. Bringing harmony out of discord requires hard spiritual work.

In this brief treatment of the subject we will look at some of the positive things you can do that will help bring harmony out of discord. I use tuning a piano as a parable, but the Bible is our guide to belief and practice. The Word of God will guide us as we think about discord.

A piano may be only slightly out of tune. Only those with trained ears can hear it at first.

All of us are different. God made us that way. People have different opinions, education, customs, and cultural backgrounds. We have different values, principles, feelings, internal conflicts, and perceptions. You can hear these differences. They can be a beautiful thing – unless they begin to clash.

Differences are the spice of life. We need to celebrate our differences. God has given each person a unique set of gifts. We need each other. God intended it to be that way.

When needs and desires clash there is discord. Recognize discord as early as possible. Resolve discord before it becomes a serious problem. Jesus told us to go to the person who has given offense (Matt. 18:15). Settle the matter quickly between the two of you.

A piano can be out of tune so bad you do not even notice the music.

The early church experienced discord. In Acts 6:1-7 we see the first note of discord in the church in Jerusalem. They did it right. They came together. When there is discord we usually want to stay apart. Problems cannot be solved unless we talk to one another.

Discord does not have to result in broken relationships and destroyed churches. God is able to bring good out of the most difficult situations.

Under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the early church was strengthened and the gospel advanced. Harmony came from Discord.

A piano can be out of tune so bad the sound cannot even be recognized as music.

Relationships in churches can get so bad people cannot recognize the church as being anything positive, let alone redemptive. God did not intend it to be this way. The church is to be the Body of Christ. When discord is not dealt with in a positive way, Satan destroys lives, relationships and churches.

When a piano is out of tune, only a tuner can restore harmony.

Only God can bring harmony out of discord. God is in the redemption business. He brought order out of chaos, Daniel out of the lion's den and salvation out of the cross. He can take impossible situations and bring good out of them – if we will ask Him.

Strings on a piano are not all alike. Every string needs to be in its proper place.

People in a church are not all alike. God has made all of us to His specifications. He has the proper place for every person who is born into His Kingdom. The church can only be in tune when every person is doing what God called them to do.

For a piano to be in tune every note needs to be in proper tune. All 88 notes on a full-size keyboard are tuned to a different pitch. Each note is tuned separately.

For harmony to exist in the church, every Christian needs to be what God wants him to be. Music would be pretty dull if every note had the same sound. God made all of us different for His Glory. Discord does not come because we are different. Discord comes when we are not what God wants us to be.

The first step to take when there is any discord in the church is to take a personal spiritual inventory. “Am I what God wants me to be?” “Are there any unconfessed sins in my life?” “Are there any attitudes that are out of control?” Most of us would rather confess the sins of other people than to deal with our sins.

Watch out for spiritual pride. Just because I am in tune with God, I should not let pride fool me into believing that I am in any way superior to other people. Recognizing my own need for forgiveness is the beginning point. I am able to forgive if I know I have

been forgiven -- and will be in need of forgiveness again (Eph. 4:32).

God made us humble, and by our nature we became proud of our humility. Pride always promotes discord. Harmony cannot be restored if we hold onto spiritual pride.

A tuning fork, or a special electronic tuner, is used to tune a piano.

Christians need an objective standard to produce harmony. That standard is the love of God. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another (John 13:35). We need to learn to vibrate in tune with the love of God.

When a piano is out of tune you cannot ignore it, hoping it will get better.

The only way to bring harmony out of discord is to deal with it. Ignoring a hurt is like trying to sink an iceberg. It is going to pop up somewhere.

You cannot tune a piano by cutting the strings, by trying to punish the string or by complaining to the other strings.

When someone has wronged you, you will be tempted to handle the hurt in a destructive way.

Cutting all ties with the person does not solve the problem. Jesus said considering a person worthless is the same as murder (Matt. 5:22).

You cannot correct a wrong by trying to punish the other person involved. We are to turn the other cheek, walk the second mile and not try to hurt back (Matt. 5:44). Revenge is always wrong (Rom. 12:19).

You may be tempted to withhold something from the person who has hurt you —friendship, civil language or even love. That person becomes your hostage. You want them to apologize or beg forgiveness. You are trying to play God.

You cannot mend a wounded relationship by complaining to other church members or family members about the person who has offended you. Don't use a third person hoping they will get the message to the other person involved. This triangle makes the hurt worse and more complex.

To tune a piano, the tuning hammer must be applied to the tuning pins. There is no other way to get it back in tune.

Jesus gave very clear instructions. “Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him...” (Luke 17:3 KJV). If you have been wronged you must go to the person who has hurt you. Ego tells us the one who has caused the hurt should come to us and apologize. Jesus told us to go to the person who has hurt us. This does not seem fair until you realize how many times the person who has given offense is not even aware of the hurt he has caused.

On the other hand, Jesus said the person who has given offense should go to the person offended. “Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there

rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift” (Matt. 5:23-24 KJV).

No matter which side you are on, the offended or the offender, you are never off the hook. You have the responsibility to go to the other person. Ideally, the two of you would meet along the way.

Every wrong does not require this kind of action. Love covers a great many wrongs. Some things just don't make that much difference. If a wrong keeps coming to mind, you have some hard spiritual work you need to do (I Peter 4:8).

You cannot tune a piano with a sledge hammer.

Jesus said, “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother” (Matt. 18:15 KJV).

The only way to bring harmony out of discord is to talk with the other person(s) involved. There is no other way.

Before you go, check your attitude. The only reason you should go to the other person is to restore the relationship. If you intend to punish them, seek revenge, or make them pay for their wrong, don't go. You will only make matters worse. Don't try to force an apology or to make them beg for forgiveness. You must go in the spirit of love.

Do not go while you have “hot” anger. Work through the worst part of your anger before you go. Don’t let anger take charge of the conversation.

Go to the other person quickly. Do not sack your hurts and dump them on the person all at once. Deal with one thing at a time.

Go to the other person privately. You may need to make an appointment. Do not talk where you can be overheard.

Everything you do needs to let the other person know you are interested in them and that you believe in the relationship. Your only motive must be to restore the relationship.

The word “if” in Matthew 18:15 is very important. Explain the reason for the visit. You can say something like, “Our friendship is important to me. What was said the other day (give the time, place and details – be specific) bothered me. I need to talk with you about it.” Clarify the facts. Never assume that the other person views the situation the way you do. Identify the time and place of the incident. Tell how it made you feel, but do not counter attack!

Give the person a chance to respond. Listen closely. If the person repents, you must be ready to forgive. It may all be a misunderstanding.

If needed, ask for their forgiveness. They may have reacted to something you said or did. You may need to ask for their forgiveness before you can deal with their part in the matter.

Never rebuke a person on hearsay. Tell them what you have heard and listen to their answer. Never assume what you have heard is totally accurate.

If the relationship is restored, close by affirming the person's worth. Assure that person you look forward to working and worshipping together in the future. Let them know all is forgiven.

Forgiveness is a decision and a promise. You promise you will not bring this matter up to them, to other people or to yourself again. Pray together. Thank God for the other person and the relationship.

Forgiveness is not an end in itself. Forgiveness is like clearing away the rubble after a building has been destroyed so something new can be built.

When you try to tune a piano and there is a problem, you may need to call an experienced technician for help and advice.

What do you do if you try to make peace with a person and they will not listen to you? Jesus said, "But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established" (Matt. 18:16). If the person will not listen to you, go back again. Take one or two "witnesses" with you.

A witness is a Godly person who can listen to both sides – and is not just someone who agrees with you. A witness is there to establish the facts and to witness the actions and reactions of every person involved. They may need to confront you about your contributions to the situation.

Your purpose must be reconciliation. You are not there to punish them, to get even, to get them to beg for forgiveness, or to verbally beat up on them.

You will continually be tempted to turn the conflict into a “win-lose” situation. When you start trying to “win” you have stepped outside Matthew 18. Keep a close spiritual eye on your own attitude.

If forgiveness is requested and given the relationship is restored. It is time for rejoicing.

If reconciliation does not happen at this point, and you are to restore the relationship, you must take the next step.

Jesus said, “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglects to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican” (Matt. 18:17).

Most churches today do not exercise formal church discipline but that does not mean this step can be ignored. This is not a matter of church business. It is a matter of church fellowship.

Take the matter to a small group of Godly people in the church who can work with you. You are not there to gossip or to see how many people you can get to be on your side. Reconciliation is still your aim. Ask the group to pray with you and to meet with you and the other person involved in conflict. If the person will not listen, treat him as a heathen or publican.

How did Jesus treat the heathens and publicans? He did not treat them as enemies. He tried to win them. He ate with them. He talked with them. He tried to love them into the Kingdom. That is the way we are to treat those who have broken fellowship with us. Pray for them. Love them. Find ways to be kind to them.

Once you have taken the matter to the church and the relationship has not been restored, turn the matter over to God and get out of His Way. There is too much that needs to be done in the Kingdom to continue to focus on something only God can change.

When a piano has been tuned you do not say, “Isn’t the piano in tune?” You say, “Isn’t the music beautiful.”

Jesus said, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35).

None of us are perfect. All of us need forgiveness. We need to be forgiven by God and by other people. Forgiveness is the oil that keeps the machinery of fellowship working. Without forgiveness, friction heats up the fellowship and brings everything to a screeching halt. Forgiveness is love in action.

Forgiveness requires **grace** and **work**. It is both **internal** and **external**. Forgiveness has four parts: **internal grace; internal work; external grace; and external work**.

Internal grace is making the decision to forgive. In the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15), the loving father made the decision to forgive before his prodigal

son returned. The older brother did not. We do not know if the older son ever made that decision. Sometimes, before we can make the decision to forgive another person, we need to pray, “God help me be willing, to be willing, to forgive.”

The **internal work** of forgiveness is the hard work of dealing with our feelings. Of the five stages all of us go through when we face anything we cannot change – shock, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – anger and depression are the two most difficult feelings for most Christians to face. If anger and depression are dealt with in destructive ways, the situation gets worse. If they are dealt with under the Lordship of Christ, anger and depression can become the stepping stones of spiritual growth.

In most cases we work through anger and depression and then make the decision to forgive. It is possible to make the decision to forgive while we are still angry, but the decision does not end the matter. We must still work through our anger and depression. The decision to be willing to forgive is one very important step along the way to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Reconciliation is the **external grace** in the process of forgiveness. Reconciliation takes place when one person, or everyone, says, “I’m sorry,” and the other person says, “I forgive you.” Reconciliation requires God’s grace.

Reconciliation is not the end of the matter. It is a beginning. The reconciliation part of forgiveness is like clearing away the rubble after a building has been destroyed so something new can be built. Forgiveness provides the foundation so a restored relationship can be

built. Rebuilding the relationship is the **external work** of forgiveness.

We will not forgive another person if we forget our own sinful nature. We cannot forgive unless we remember we have been in need of forgiveness. We forgive because we know we have been forgiven (Eph. 4:43).

Love is the beautiful music produced after forgiveness has taken away the discord. Love means caring about the hurts, joys, feelings, and interest of each other in the name of Jesus.

When a piano is in tune, the skill of the musician can be appreciated and the beauty of the music can bless those who hear.

Every Christian needs to develop “fellowship skills” that can help a church grow in harmony. Here are some of the skills we need to learn and practice:

“Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 19:19). We need to care about the needs and interest of our fellow church members as much as we care about our own needs and interests.

Building a strong fellowship requires that everyone be willing to understand things from the other person’s perspective. That does not mean I must agree with the other person. I do need to understand why he feels or thinks the way he does. I can’t be satisfied until I can, to the other person’s satisfaction, explain his position in the matter.

Good fellowship skills mean I must treat other people the way I want to be treated (Matt. 7:12). I must always treat the other person with respect even when we disagree.

When Saul tried to pin David to the wall with a spear, David refused to return the spear (I Sam. 19:10). We must refuse to throw verbal (or physical) spears at each other. Never attack the other person even when they throw the first spear. “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone” (Rom. 12:17, NASB). I can stand my ground on an issue but I must never try to harm another person physically, emotionally or spiritually. I can deal with an issue but I must never treat a brother or sister in Christ as an enemy. I can be kind even when we do not agree.

If I try to “win at all cost” I will destroy the relationship. The church will be hurt. Everyone must look after the needs of everyone else. Questions like, “What do you think we should do?” are powerful fellowship builders.

Anger must never be allowed to take charge of a conversation.

Speak for yourself. Tell how you feel about events or issues. Don’t start a sentence with the accusatory “you.” Blaming and shaming are never appropriate.

“Blaming” says, “You caused the problem.” “Shaming” says, “You are the problem.” We need to deal with issues, not personalities.

Being “co-laborers” in Christ means we must learn to deal with difficult issues in a loving way. “Co-laboring” says, “I care about our relationship in Christ and I care about the issue we are dealing with.”

Learn to say, “I want to hear your view and I want to clearly express mine.” Christian love compels us to say, “I will respect your viewpoint and I want respect for mine.” When there is a misunderstanding or disagreement we need to say, “I promise to stay until we’ve reached an understanding, and I want you to stay also. I will not trick, pressure, manipulate or distort our differences, and I want your honest view of our differences.”

Good fellowship skills can help build harmony in the Body of Christ.

When you try to tune a piano and a part is broken or damaged, you may need to call the factory for assistance.

What can you do if your church is involved in conflict and there does not seem to be a solution? An outside mediator may be helpful. An outside mediator needs to be a neutral person (as far as the conflict is concerned) who can provide a process and a strategy for helping the parties identify and clarify the issues, and help them move toward resolution.

In Acts 15 we read about a church in conflict. Paul and Barnabas, along with some others, were appointed to go to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about the conflict. This “Jerusalem council” shows how a church in conflict can be helped by seeking outside advice.

Because every Baptist church is autonomous, there is no higher authority for decision making than the local Church. No one from the outside can help a church in conflict unless they are invited. A solution cannot be imposed on a Baptist Church.

How do you know when it is time to call in a mediator? Here are a few things that may indicate it is time to ask for some help.

When a conflict is drawn out and complex. As conflicts deepen issues become less specific and communication less direct.

When time is short and the conflict is urgent. When early warning signs are not recognized, a crisis can develop.

When the parties in the conflict are deadlocked in their differences and their own efforts have been fruitless.

When there are long drawn out meetings (business or otherwise) where people are being attacked or damaged (physically, emotionally or spiritually) and it feels like things are out of control.

When communication needs to be reinstated among the parties. In conflict situations, communication usually becomes less direct and less accurate.

When the conflict causes giving to decrease and attendance to drop off significantly. These are

signs that the fellowship has been disrupted in a significant way.

When no one in the church can function in a neutral capacity. Church leaders may not be able to serve as mediators if they are perceived to be part of the conflict.

When trust level among participants is very low.

These are some of the indicators that suggest a mediator may be helpful.

A mediator should be someone who understands the mission and function of the church, has knowledge and experience in conflict resolution, and who can bring a strategy for resolving the conflict. A mediator brings a process and not a solution. The mediator needs to be credible to all sides and should not take sides or be an advocate for a particular solution.

Bringing harmony out of discord is hard spiritual work but it is worth the effort. God will help in this important task -- if He is asked.

About the Author

Dr. Ed Handkins grew up near, and in, Crab Orchard, Illinois. He received a B.A. in mathematics from the Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois, a Master of Divinity and a Doctor of Ministry degree from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

Dr. Handkins served for twenty-five years as pastor of five churches in Illinois and one church in Kentucky, including churches in Cairo, the Chicago area and the Peoria area in Illinois. In 1986 he was appointed as a missionary for the Home Mission Board (Became the North American Mission Board – NAMB -- about 1996) of the Southern Baptist Convention. He served as Director of Missions for the Quad-Cities Area Baptist Association and the Sinnissippi Baptist Association in Northwest Illinois for ten years. For eight years he served as the Director of Anglo New Work for the Illinois Baptist State Association.

Dr. Handkins has published three daily devotion guides. His material called OVERCOMING LIFE'S HURTS was published by the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. He has written for several publications including CHURCH ADMINISTRATION, PROCLAIM, ENCOUNTER, OPEN WINDOWS, HOME LIFE, and THE DEACON.

He and his wife, Donna, live in Apex, North Carolina. He retired from NAMB and the Illinois Baptist State Association in 2005 and is currently serving churches - leading revivals and conferences.