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**WHEN TWO ELEPHANTS FIGHT:**  
A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON  
HANDLING INTERPERSONAL PROBLEMS  
BETWEEN BAPTIST PASTORS

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## ABSTRACT

Ministers of the Gospel have been called by God to lead as ambassadors for Christ in the task of reconciling man to God, man to himself and man to one another. These relationships which were marred by sin but redeemed through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary, can be restored by faith in Him, working out in loving, humble service to God and mankind.

Consequently, when Ministers offend one another in the course of carrying out their divine tasks, it is of crucial importance that they seek to be reconciled as soon as possible so that their fellowship and ministry be not hindered. To the extent that Ministers are growing and maturing in this relationship with God and one another, they will also be more effective as facilitators in modeling same to the laity whom they lead as well as humanity as a whole.

In chapter one, an overview of the study is given, followed in chapter two by the theological framework that should undergird the creative handling of interpersonal relationships. Emphasis is placed on the fact that Ministers must respond appropriately to God's demonstration of reconciliation as exemplified by Jesus Christ as well as the Apostle Paul, if they have to create the needed impact in their ministry to the world. All over the world it is evident that whenever the handling of conflicts focuses more on personalities, than on issues, and the use of mundane methods empowered by mere human emotions, rather than scriptural guidelines empowered by the Holy Spirit, the misunderstandings tend to be destructive.

In chapter three therefore, an attempt is made to proffer solutions to handling interpersonal problems in such a way that they have a likelihood of turning out to be more creative than destructive. Chapter four then concludes with a challenge for Ministers to be more interdependent in the task of building up one another towards spiritual maturity, which is a prerequisite to deepening interpersonal relationships. Some recommendations

for further reflection and possible solutions are also suggested which if taken seriously, may redeem the hitherto distorted image of the Pastoral ministry in the recent past.

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## A. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the ministry of reconciliation is indeed very vital if human beings have to live in right relationship with God and one another. The Ministers of the gospel have the challenge of modeling before their members and the whole world that people can live amicably with one another in spite of imminent misunderstandings and conflicts that are bound to come.

For Ministers to take their leadership roles in terms of demonstrating in word and life what it means to be reconciled to God, to oneself and to one another, there needs to be mutual openness and confrontation in love. Focus has to be on the building up of the Kingdom of God through the deepening of relationships and the proclamation of the transforming message of the cross of Jesus Christ that demolishes hitherto dividing walls of enmity between formerly estranged people. By faith in Jesus Christ working through love, Pastors that are maturing daily in their relationship with God and with one another are able to lead their Churches to be God's reconciling, redemptive community in the world.

In the course of interacting with each other, when Ministers inevitably offend themselves, there is a need to quickly and honestly express one's

feelings to each other in humility and love, rather than bitterness or rudeness. There needs to be such mutual trust and respect of one another, that one will be quick to forgive each other as well as confess their faults to one another without any coercion. Issues ought to be dealt with promptly according to scriptural guidelines so that they don't get out of hand, through the nursing of grudges, building up of malice and factions, as well as the biting and devouring of one another through blackmail, gossip and destructive criticism.

In order to further strengthen the unity of the Ministers, they have to learn to work as a team, making use of the ingredients discussed earlier in enhancing their relationships while avoiding those hindrances or causes of frequent interpersonal problems among them. Following the procedures that have been proposed from the theological framework established will hopefully make for a stronger ministerial corps, a more mature Church, and hopefully a more united and effective ministry in the world.

## **B. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Whether Ministers like it or not, it is evident that generally speaking higher moral and ethical standards are expected from them than from the rest of the laity (cf, I Timothy 3:1-7; James 3:1). Nolan B. Harmon therefore may be right when he asserts that:

The minister is supposed to be an arbiter in the field of morals and ethics; since he or she is personally regarded as a judge and

diviner in such matters, then it is the obligation of the Pastor to engage in proper conduct<sup>157</sup>

Even though the minister is supposed to serve as referee in matters pertaining to morals and ethics, it is unfortunately not always the case due to frequent ministerial failures. Such failures may come as a result of spiritual immaturity, ignorance, negligence, laziness, lack of tact, pride or really an attack from the devil. Consequently there is a need for Pastors to watch each other and correct ministerial lapses humbly and in love as discipline is administered redemptively always and keeping in focus the goal of restoration of the repentant colleague (cf. Galatians 6:1-2), edifying the Church and bringing glory to God.

Such mutual, loving oversight over one another could take place in various forms and at various levels as the case may be (cf. Matthew 18:15, II Timothy 2:2). It could take the form of every minister having a "Paul",<sup>158</sup> and a

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<sup>157</sup>Nolan B. Harmon, Ministerial Ethics and Etiquette (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1967), pp. 12-13.

<sup>158</sup>Having a "Paul" means establishing a relationship with a dependable elder in the faith and ministry, whose life and service best exemplifies Christ. He or she could be a mature model which one respects, appreciates and would love to pattern his or her life after. Such a person would also be available for one to run to any time for advice whenever one faces difficulties in life and ministry. For example, Barnabas could be said to have served as Paul's "Paul", (cf. Acts 9:27 ff).

'Timothy.'<sup>159</sup> Intimate relationships that are built following this model will check excesses in the use of power or the concepts of little 'popes' who can do and undo, as well as over-zealous immature Ministers who may want to lord it over others. This will also ensure that work is carried out effectively since one is aware that he is not only accountable ultimately to God, but also to a colleague in ministry. Responsibility will also be instilled because one will be constantly aware of his "Timothy" watching him to emulate what he is doing. More caution will be engendered in ministerial dealings since one could be checked upon and called to order at anytime or call another person to order too.

For this model to function however, there must be mutual trust, and loving acceptance of one another as persons created in the image of God as well as co-labourers in ministry. Responsible freedom and transparency will make for authentic living and consequently more credible and effective ministry. As members of the Pastoral corps become more self-disciplined and diligent in the execution of their God-given responsibilities there will

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<sup>159</sup>A 'Timothy' here is used with reference to the discipleship model in which an older, experienced minister chooses a younger minister who is available and teachable to provide guidance to in ministry. This is indeed a kind of discipleship mentoring or a master-apprentice model of on-the-job training or supervision. Every minister needs to have others whom he is training or exercising oversight on, or ones who are accountable to him. In any case they must be open to correcting and receiving correction from each other.

