

The Price of Making Peace and the Perils of Not Pursuing It

Bill, Mary, Jim and Kathy were sponsored to go overseas as ambassadors for the Prince of Peace by their home fellowships. They arrived in their newly adopted country full of faith, hope, joy, and trust in each other as they would share the love and truth of Jesus with unreached people as a team.

Less than a year later, they were empty of faith, hope, joy, and trust in each other. Jim and Kathy wanted to resign from the team. They had come to dislike, criticize, and resist Bill's leadership style. Bill was ready to dismiss Jim and Kathy from the team and was so discouraged about his own competency he was considering resigning as team leader altogether. Mary and Kathy's relationship had stored up so much mutual pain from a cycle of criticism and withdrawal that they each said independently that they did not feel safe to be in the same room with the other. Mary displayed symptoms of clinical depression.

Bill asked for outside help. A team of three mediators were called in to manage the reconciliation. The two couples in conflict suspended their ministry for a week in order to address their relationship problems.

Though he submitted to the peacemaking process, Jim confessed to the mediators, "I don't understand why we have to spend all this time and energy dealing with this conflict with Bill and Mary. I just want to get out and declare the love of Jesus to the unreached." Mary and Kathy also submitted to the process, but each made the condition that she would not be forced to meet in the same room with the other woman until she felt safe to do so.

An intense week of breakfast-to-bedtime counseling and prayer ensued. Praise be to God, for Jim, Kathy, Mary and Bill each sought Him, listened to His voice, and obeyed His word. They yanked the logs out of their own eyes, they admitted the truth about themselves, and they humbled themselves before God and each other. True to His promise, God gave each of them the grace they needed (James 4:6).

On the last day, the mediators and all four of the parties met together for the first time. Jim volunteered to start. With tears, he confessed his rebellious, judgmental spirit toward Bill. Bill confessed his pride in not shepherding Jim and Kathy as he should have, and for believing he had the competence to lead the team without training in peacemaking.

Kathy sobbed as she confessed how she had known that her critical words had hurt Mary but had willfully continued to say them. A tearful Mary confessed withholding her love and forgiveness of Kathy and consciously withdrawing from her. These two women, who just the day before did not feel safe to be in the same room with each other stood up and sobbed their eyes out in a lengthy embrace of mutual repentance and forgiveness.

A fairy tale ending to a feel-good movie? No. We call it a holy transaction. It was holy because four people resisted the devil and defied the world's values by honestly humbling themselves before each other. It was a transaction because they canceled the debt of offense through mutual confession and forgiveness. It was not a fairy tale. It was as real and as intense an experience as life in spiritual community can be.

The price of this holy transaction, the cancelling of so much debt, wasn't cheap. Of course, the down payment for all this peace and joy was paid on the cross by Jesus, the Prince of Peace. For the persons involved, there were both practical and personal costs.

Let's look at the total bill for this holy transaction on the practical level. It cost no small amount of money in airfares to bring the mediators and the parties together in the same location. Then figure in the value of a week's labor for the three mediators. Don't forget the loss of productive ministry caused by this mediation. Each of the seven individuals involved (the three mediators and the four parties) could have invested their week in declaring the love of Jesus to the unreached, thus spreading the Kingdom of God forward instead of retreating inward to bring peace on the team. You'll remember that Jim the evangelist initially questioned paying this price.

What was the personal price for Bill, Mary, Kathy and Jim? The cost was heavy, but simple. They put to death their own pride and relinquished their claims of relational debt against each other.

However you count the practical and personal costs, everyone directly and indirectly involved in this conflict and its resolution now believe the price was worth it. Why? Because they know that the cost to the kingdom of their not reconciling would have been much greater.

Let's say these four had refused to pursue peace and had held on to the same frame of mind toward each other that they had before the mediation.

Jim and Kathy would most likely have left the team and location by resigning before Bill could complete the due process of dismissing them. They would have maintained their judgmental and resistant attitudes toward Bill and Mary, and would have taken this spirit to their new ministry context. (Would you want to be their next leader?)

Bill would likely have resigned his leadership of the team and sunk into further discouragement. Mary likely would have spiraled further into depression. They would probably have left the field for an extended, indefinite time. This would also have left the rest of the team without a leader, greatly diminishing their progress and potential fruitfulness and causing overseers much time, money and effort to provide new leadership for the team.

Jim and Kathy's taking their same attitudes to a different team in a new location and Bill and Mary's undetermined stay away from the field are high costs to pay for not making peace. Let's not forget the loss in that neither couple would be around to share the love of Jesus with those dear unreached people they came to live among.

Our experience shows that there are other possibilities if the two couples don't reconcile. One is that they could both stay right where they are. Jim and Kathy could work independently. Or, they could find some church or organization that would be happy to sponsor them without much accountability and without asking for character references from Bill. (Sadly, this happens more often than you would expect.) Bill and Mary could also stay, and with great courage and with trust in their overseers and counselors, persevere in leading their team while Bill gets upgrading in the skills of leading and Mary receives counsel and prayer for her depression. So, without reconciling with each other, the two couples could remain living in their same locale, continuing to declare the love of Jesus to the unreached in the same neighborhood where they both live.

But this would be a tragedy.

"Wait a minute," some may say. "Even if they haven't done peacemaking with each other, you still have four evangelists bringing the good news of Jesus to the unreached who have never heard it before. How can that be a tragedy?"

Here's how. Remember that unreconciled Bill, Mary, Jim and Kathy still live in the same unreached neighborhood. They still have some unreached friends in common. For example, Kathy and Mary have a common friend named Rose who they both have been trying to share Jesus with. Rose has taught both Kathy and Mary how to cook local food and she has helped them both with language learning.

Let's say Rose comes over to Kathy's house for coffee. Naturally, Rose asks Kathy how Mary is doing. To Rose's surprise, Kathy replies, "Umm. Rose, let's just say that Mary and I have grown apart and aren't seeing each other anymore." The tragedy comes when Kathy gives her testimony to Rose about how following Jesus is so life-changing but without herself seeing that she has not obeyed His essential commands to make peace before she worships and prays (Matt. 5:23-24, Matt: 6:15, Mark 11:25). Rose will quickly see the inconsistency in Kathy's testimony.

Sadly, that's not all.

Rose's husband Abraham is friends with both Bill and Jim. Now picture Rose at dinner with Abraham after she has come back from afternoon coffee at Kathy's. Rose tells Abraham that Kathy and Mary aren't seeing each other anymore. What does Abraham think now about the love of Jesus Bill and Jim have been declaring to him?

Maybe Abraham is a realist. He might give the four ambassadors for the Prince of Peace the benefit of the doubt. He might respond, "Rose, it's normal for people to not get along, whatever their religion. As individuals, these four are good people. They can do their personal religious duty without being at peace with each other. Think of us and our extended families. We're the same. The important thing is that as individuals they read their holy book and say their prayers, just like we read our holy book and say our prayers."

Or, Abraham might be a cynic. "Yeah, Rose, they try to tell us that the way of Jesus is more loving and forgiving than ours, but this shows they are just hypocrites."

In either case, without these two couples reconciling, Abraham and Rose certainly would not, and could not, know that they are truly Jesus' disciples from the love they have for one another (John 13:35).

There you have it. If these two couples had not pursued peace, their ministry careers would have likely been stunted or aborted, and the testimony they have given to common unreached friends would have been deeply compromised. Not to mention the pain, concern, and discouragement they would have caused to their other teammates and their ministry partners in their home countries.

But, praise be to God. Because these four reconciled, they can now with integrity and clear consciences share the love of Jesus with unreached persons like Rose and Abraham who will now see that these four are truly Jesus' disciples because of the love they have for one another.

Does this mean the four must become best friends, they will never have conflict again, or they will never consider being called to a different team or location? Of course not. But, when they do have conflict, and if they do feel led to change teams or ministry locations, they are equipped and experienced to process these decisions with mutual honor, respect and love. They will be able to bless each other so that their testimony to unbelievers will remain intact, and their new co-workers can receive them without doubts.

There is one more frightful peril to not pursuing peace. We become stumbling blocks to younger believers. And you know what Jesus said about millstones, necks, and being thrown into the sea in regard to those who become stumbling blocks to little ones (Matt. 18:6-7).

A young cross-cultural worker was deeply distressed because two mature senior couples on the team would not pursue peace for a number of years. Finally, these older couples did reconcile. The younger one rejoiced in tears and confessed this: "I had lost my faith in a God who could not reconcile these two couples." Causing a young ambassador for the Prince of Peace to stumble, to lose faith in God, is a tragic price to pay for not pursuing peace.

May we all, wherever our spiritual community is, be quick to pay the price of making peace and to avoid the perils of not pursuing it.

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These stories are real but the names, places and groups have been changed, interchanged and blurred to protect their identities overseas. This report was prepared by a veteran overseas worker who has taught in many countries with different cultures, practices and religions. However, the principles shared here "work" because they come from scripture and encompass every tribe, race, nationality and tongue.

Comments, questions and requests can be directed to me at gary@sweetenlife.com and I will pass them on to my anonymous friends who work tirelessly to bring peace to all men and women.