

THE LONDON ST. MARY OF DEBRE TSION ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH - V - SOME MEMBERS LATEST CONFLICT: GOOD OR EVIL?

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The Holy Bible asks us all by saying, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will also destroy that person. For God's temple is Holy, and you are that temple". The Internet is an interesting combination between a method for publication and a method for simply speaking. There are a few mind-boggling cases here related to the above matter too? Ethioview.com editor/s, if my impression is correct, may have posted some made up nonsense about the London St. Mary of Debre TSION Ethiopian Orthodox Church not only to defame the church's reputation out of spite but also to give a bad name to the Ethiopian Community in UK to suit their devious purposes: or to appease others. Otherwise, why bother at all to get the Police and the Charity Commission involved in that kind of internal dispute that could have been solved by **"Forming A Conflict Resolution or Peacemaker Committee"**. More or less, it was not a wise thing for Ethioview to get engaged in a trial by media and defamation campaigns if as they had claimed that this matter was in the process to be dealt by outside bodies. It's also possible that they have legitimate reasons and problems with the church elders and members but the accuser/s did not seem to have realized that such a problem existed before they/he have been expelled.

So, why chose to accuse the wrongdoers if any, after one has been expelled from the church for unaccepted and wrong conducts? And why was that such allegations are always posted only on Ethioview.com not on any other Ethiopian websites too? **For the church and the accused members, being hounded by Ethioview.com editor/s in an attempt to conduct trial by media is one of the most dangerous and unpleasant experiences that is short of physical assaults.** Secondly, publishing slanderous statements concerning the said Ethiopian Orthodox Church's chosen elders and elected members for yet an unproven allegation; may have a very legitimate case of defamation of character no matter how much the defamation of characters is notoriously difficult to prove in the Court of Law for those in the public eyes, all because the actual real effects can be quite evident and badly damaging. Yes, even truthful but malicious statements like these can still be considered defamation of characters under some circumstances. Ethioview.com's **"repeated, remorseless and speculative reporting"** of the London St. Mary of Debre TSION Ethiopian Orthodox Church conflict will **"irreparably damage the reputation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church"** and would not be too easy to unravel.

While all media reporting has a part to play in all fields, the reputation of the church, its elders and the congressional members who helped the church to be fully owned continues to hinge on the outcome of the London Police investigation and the Charity Commission as indicated by Ethioview.com. Therefore, the very crucial questions to ask at this stage relate to the broader implications of an intensified accusation made against the church and its practices on issues of fraudulent activities and other matters as claimed by Ethioview.com. During this planned **"Trial By Media"**, due process and the attendant legal requirement to provide evidence of guilt gives way to moral speculation about the actions and motives of key protagonists. This is creating a volatile climate in which one section of the media take the lead in defining who is guilty & who is innocent in the court of public opinion. Hence what are also at stake more than the reputation of the church and those few individuals are Ethiopia's good name and the Orthodox religion's reputation. **One may ask these days, what is the church, what is it doing for the sinners and whose church is it anyway and why? The answer from 1 Corinthians is clear. The church is God's church. The church is the creation and "property" of the triune God too.**

Acknowledging this, means that when we're in the midst of such church conflicts, we must seek God's will for God's church above all other selfish personal things. I myself don't at all claim to have been one of those regular churchgoers since the so-called Patriarch Aba Diabilos divided and poisoned our Orthodox churches there in Ethiopia and all over the world. I hate division. Never the less, I sincerely and wholeheartedly wish conflicts among Christians were a relatively insignificant problem till I myself witnessed many bad things in the past. I wish we who believe in Jesus Christ could experience the unity he commended to us in John 17:20-24. I wish there wasn't animosity within churches and its denominations. But all of this is, I admit, has been my wishful thinking. The fact of the matter is that Christians often have a hard time getting along with each other as the Devil was and still is actively at work to set us against each other. This has been true from the earliest days of the church. The Apostle Paul, who planted the church, wrote in 1 Corinthians to the believers principally because of internal conflict in the church. By the time Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, the real tension was largely between Paul and his church.

The Apostle Paul was not pleased with what was happening in his church. Here's what he wrote to all the Corinthians: **"When you have something against another Christian, why do you file a lawsuit and ask a secular court to decide the matter, instead of taking it to other Christians to decide who is right? Don't you know that someday we Christians are going to judge the world?"** He went on to say, since you are going to judge the world, can't you decide these little things among yourselves? Don't you realize that we Christians will judge Angels too? So, you should be able to resolve ordinary disagreements on earth. If you have legal disputes about matters, why do you go to outside judges who are not respected by the church? I am saying this to shame you. Isn't there anyone in the church who is wise enough to decide these negative arguments? But one Christian sues another in front of unbelievers. To have such lawsuits at all is a real defeat for you all. Why not just accept the injustice and leave it at that? Why not let yourselves be even cheated? But instead, you yourselves are the ones who do wrong and cheat even your own Christian brothers and sisters said Paul. 1 Cor 6:1-8.

What is wrong with Christians suing other Christians in court or elsewhere? First, there should be sufficient wisdom in the said Church to solve such conflicts. Notice that Paul assumes that disputes among Christians are the business of the church. If a Christian brother has a conflict with another brother, that's not a private matter. It's something that impacts the church and is part of the church's rightful concern. Moreover too, for Christians to sue each other in secular courts really and truly looks terrible to observing children and unbelievers around us. It certainly doesn't commend the Gospel of Jesus Christ if Christians sue each other. For that matter, the desire to win and get even doesn't reflect the Holy Cross of Jesus Christ. Moreover too, when the behaviour of church officials is illegal, then justice requires legal action in criminal court not in a Charity Commission. But some use of this route to solve personal conflicts is nothing we should be proud of or seek to perpetuate. Whatever else, such route should be the last resort among Christians. So, where should we start if we are seeking God's guidance for conflicts?

First, in times of conflict our natural human emotions often try to dictate our behaviour. We feel angry and want to lash out. We feel fear and want to defend or attack. We feel wronged and want to get revenges too? Yet, if we allow our emotions to guide our behaviour, inevitably we'll simply make matters much worse. Secondly, in times of conflict, we must stand solidly upon God's Scripture all because God's ways of dealing with conflicts are generally very different from the world's ways. And these days there are no good mediators. When we are in the midst of church battle too, we are tempted to adopt ways of this cruel world. Chief among these ways is the desire to win. We can also be tempted to use human schemes to defeat our opponents. We spin like we are in the middle of a dirty political campaign. We rally the troops. We let out the dogs. We defend ourselves. We also play the victim cards. We undermine our opponents. We conveniently ignore facts that don't support our side. We hold grudges, so on, and so forth.

Third, in times of conflict among Christians, we need the Bible as the source both of practical guidance to learn how to act and of theological insight to learn how to think about God and the church. The biblical combination of ethics and theology helps to shape our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Many of such conflicts are a matter of perception to escalate because someone has not thought it thoroughly and carefully. The advice to count to 10 before responding to someone in anger is good, but we should go a step further and ask if the situation is worth engaging in a conflict at all? Is there a conflict because you didn't get your way or is it a conflict all because others hurt you? Only by asking the question can you get the answer. Rarely does a major conflict have a solution acceptable to all. However, if an effort is made to hear all sides of any kind of conflicts, a course of action can at least be explained based on all the information presented. If in a committee meeting someone tries to revive the issue, useful answers can be provided based on the group's discussion, thus reducing those bad conflicts over some issues.

But unfortunately, some priests in our religion and most church elders resist discussing church conflicts. Their resistance often stems from the belief that all conflicts are so negative and to be avoided, if not ignored, at all costs. It seems that was why this current matter sadly got out of hand. The correct response depends on the definition given to the word conflict, which may be defined to also include any matter that terminates, limits or prohibits Christians from acting or interacting with one another in a spiritually compelling way and therefore, affects their ability to serve God according to the Scripture. Someone said that conflict is neither good nor evil but only inevitable. Jesus made it clear that we would always experience conflicts of all kinds even as Christians Luke 17:1. But the Scripture lays out the proper way to handle conflict, and the Holy Spirit empowers us to deal with conflicts competently. Yet, the church often remains unwilling to learn how to manage its conflicts in a way that will be beneficial to the kingdom of God. Conflict should be viewed as an opportunity to help people grow in faith. Rather than dwelling on the negative aspects of conflict in the church's divisiveness, power plays and also control issues, the church should begin to recognize conflicts as the opportunity to create action to avoid these kinds of allegations & counter allegations against each other in future too.

While there is no one correct answer to this situation, a less well-reasoned response may seek to avoid the conflict simply by presenting both options to the church board and holding a vote to determine who wins and who also loses. Most church elders and especially priests know that it would result in one or more members leaving the church with a negative attitude if not dealt properly in unbiased manners. Viewing conflicts, as a negative that ought to be ignored can be detrimental not only to the church elders and priests, who wants a growing and thriving church, but also to churchgoers, who eagerly follow the elders and priests example in intelligently and diplomatically handling all conflicts. All kinds of conflicts need not be ignored at all, for God has equipped priests and some preachers to manage conflicts to disciple and heal church members in working out all the scriptural mandates of repentance, reconciliation and conflict resolutions.

Moreover, in today's rights-oriented society, a simple conflict at the moment could become a major lawsuit at a later time. One of the blessings of a minor conflict is that it can prepare the parties to handle a major conflict with understanding in the future so that it does not destroy relationships. The ministry of reconciliation is at the heart of the Gospel messages in the Bible. Conflict has no simple answers, no formulas for easy use too. However, if we have a desire to be proactive rather than reactive to conflict situation and competently meet it rather than ignore it, we can certainly minimize difficulties and legal ramifications that might flow from disputes. So, is conflict good or evil? It is neither. Moreover too, that is not the real issue here in this case. The real issue is how will we choose to resolve conflicts in our way or in God's way? Or, would it still be better if Ethioview.com and the Church continue to be at loggerheads to virtually gain nothing, but only bad names? Is it really and truly worth it too, to poison the badly troubled Ethiopian Communities' reputation to become a laughing stock for EPRDF: Ethiopian enemies?

The church should not rely on outsiders or the court system for conflict resolution in this kind of ever-increasing litigious society. This kind of tragic conflict is a drain on the church's resources and, more importantly too, a stumbling block for those who attend the church to seek to know Christ as their life-changing force. Does the God of our salvation not have power to help believers resolve conflicts? Why do we trust Him to save our eternal souls and yet believe that He is disinterested or incapable of providing an answer for the resolution of conflicts but believe Charity Commission does? Consider this simple answer: We do not want Almighty God to help us resolve our conflicts. In other words, we want Him as our saviour and creature God of some things but not our conflicts. Could it be that we, as a churchgoers, elders and priests, have abandoned the principles God has provided for us in the everyday area that we call conflicts? Conflicts in our churches are a reality. But I say, a church without conflict is probably a church that is dead. Although we tend to be shaken by conflicts, in itself conflict is not the real issue. Rather, the issue is whether and how the church responds to conflicts in a way that honours God. How do we address the issue of conflict and discipline in the church? One option is the formation of a **"Conflict Resolution Committee"** with matured and respected individuals to help church members resolve their disputes in compliance with the standard of Scripture rather than simply the law of man. This peacemaker committee ideally would have the same status as the most important committees of the church and be under the direct supervision of the Senior Priest. A committee of this nature could take many forms, but some commonalities of such a committee should be considered for constructively commit to resolving conflicts & nothing else.

Before forming a conflict resolution/peacemaker committee, church leaders must desire to build a church that is willing to resolve conflicts between the church leaders and members, married couple and relatives alike, in a purely biblically faithful ways. Conflict must be viewed as an opportunity for church members' growth and the discipleship. Unless the church leadership commits to the process, forming a committee will be just another program. Since many conflicts result from some kind of misunderstanding and miscommunication, it is imperative that the committee's mission be clearly communicated to the congregation as well as to those who serve on the said committee. The written mission should be stated in positive terms with the goal's being not only to foster reconciliation and restoration to those individuals in conflict or the church's tenets of faith but also to resolve issues. It is very easy to project an authoritarian image of the committee to the congregation that would defeat its successes. One of the main keys to an effective **Peacemaking Committee** is a very good peacemaker with pleasant personality. Identify those in the church who have distinguished themselves as peacemakers in any previous conflict situations. They should not be known contention makers or those who are quick to judge others but, rather, those who exhibit the fruit of the Spirit wise, patient and caring kinds. Committee members should (1), be able to keep matters in confidence, not given to discussing what they hear with others in the church, and (2), be able to judge any matter of all conflicts or sins rather than judging the person. These can be seen as very useful mediators.

For the committee's work to be successful, the congregation must be able to understand the nature of conflicts and the discipleship function of the church. Many in the church these days may view the church as a Social Club or Society; however, the leadership of the congregation has an obligation to the membership to create a very caring church that is responsive to the discipleship of the individual members and just churchgoers. Sometimes too, conflicts are not resolved because the parties are unwilling to look for help outside their own immediate circle all because of their personal pride and fear of spread of malicious gossips and innuendos alike. They fear appearing less spiritual if others know they are embroiled in a conflict. This attitude should be really dismissed if we recognize the value of conflicts to be resolved. Contacting an outside source for Conflict Resolutions help also provides a church with a resource to help reconcile relationships & resolve conflicts that may not be resolvable using internal procedures.

Now, you all realized that the kind of process I have been describing and explaining above isn't an easy one at all. But believe me, I know this. I have been involved in some of the messiest and most confusing efforts to bring reconciliation between people. Often, what makes them so messy and confusing is the failure or their unwillingness of involved parties to do what Jesus Christ told us to do in such circumstances? We all know how to resolve many conflicts but the problem is that we usually are more interested in showing ourselves to others to be right rather than fixing the conflict. We just want to fully justify our thoughts. Rather than making a show, causing a stir, lashing out, and or complaining about what has happened to us, let us simply and quietly try to act properly and resolve our conflicts in Godly and civilized manners, even if it means we may be treated unfairly by others be it our accusers or the accused. Ethioview's publication would be seen as unnecessary leaks of the church's internal matters in public in illegal manners and treason by the accuser to resort to these kinds of accusation that was not done when the accuser/s were/was with the church as trusted and valued Christian members.

Ethioview.com editors' statement **"We are open to post any article and replies should it come from the Parish Council or anyone else as long as it has a supporting document"** did not at all sound practical and genuine to me as well. Why on earth any publisher like me needs any supporting document as required by the editors' to only raise my concerns, views and give constructive critiques as an independent person against the accusers or the accused when I am not involved in this dispute and also that I am not a member of the church. Ethioview editors' seemed to be saying to us, **"Do not comment on our allegations but just read them and believe us without any reasonable doubts"**. Denying that everyone must be able to speak out their observation without strings attached that do not wrongly favour all parties concerned in this matter. No wonder that no one yet published rebuttals on Ethioview.com too?

What also really puzzled me was that although Ethioview claimed the complaints were lodged and signed by 60 Concerned Members of the Church, but no single name was mentioned in there hence it looked and sounded to me as a few people' suspicious claims that was as noisy as a brass band. In addition to all that, there have been contradictions in the allegation and some irrelevant political accusations were inserted in the complaints to spice up the allegation to make it believable and acceptable as a true reflection of what went wrong in the church. Notes taken and resolutions passed at various committee meetings were foolishly listed as evidential documents as well. And why talk about unproven rape and human right abuses too?

Furthermore, The Ethioview statement had about five flashing headlines to attract readers just like some shops and night clubs do to pull customers into their premises but when one opens them all one by one, they were one and only one statement that clearly showed desperation to the maximum and too much anger and hate to the accused than exposing the wrongdoers to help the church concerned that the person/s cried for with their crocodile tears to fool the public. It did not add up at all to merit any kind of respect let alone acceptance as a truthful statement of genuine complaints by a true Christian/s readers were made to believe. More or less, God will bring his justice later and knows of our righteous actions if the accuser/s and the accused failed to wholeheartedly repent and revoke this nonsense accusation and immediately resolve these Holy Church matters in an amicable ways and moreover too, in true Christian manners. Hence now, I appeal to the accuser and the accused, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind in the name of Almighty God and for the same purpose too as good Christians you all claimed to be. Good must win over evil. May all be, as God will too? Amen!

Genuine and constructive comments from readers are very much appreciated at:

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