

Portrait of a Peacemaker



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They'd breached the contract – big time! No doubt about it. And the Contractor was angry!

Just six weeks before they'd unanimously agreed to all the terms set out by the Contractor.(1) Then their leader mysteriously disappeared. They disregarded their bargain, flagrantly breached the first three requirements – the essentials of their relationship and responsibilities to the Contractor.(2)

The Contractor, who now seemed so distant, knew exactly what they'd done. Was He angry! – angry enough to disassociate with them, wipe them out, and begin all over. Since the contract was dead, He had no further responsibility to them. However, rather than acting precipitously, he turned to a third party, His close confidante Moses, who knew the people well.(3)

Moses' response is a classic pattern for those who would be peacemakers, reconciling those caught in conflict

Get All the Facts

First, Moses got the facts from the perspective of the person who was wronged, the LORD: the people had turned their backs on their promise, made and worshiped a molten calf and credited *it* (rather than the LORD) with getting them out of the horrendous mess they'd been in. When Moses was offered the choice of becoming the progenitor of a new class of beneficiaries, he maintained objectivity and refused the bait. He blunted the LORD's anger by recalling *His* relationship with the wrongdoers, *His* reputation, and His long-standing covenant.(4)

Then he investigated the other side: he went to the people accused of wrongdoing(5) Long before he reached them, he had a premonition that there was good foundation for the story he'd heard. When he saw for himself that everything he'd been told was true, he responded just as the LORD had – with intense, burning anger. As the wrongdoers had shattered their verbal agreement, so he shattered the contract written in stone. It was indeed worthless, dead.

Peacemakers need to retain objectivity, as Moses did. Having heard one side of the story, he refused to be "bought" or risk an ego trip; he reminded the wronged party of His own long-standing plan and commitments, and he did not become emotionally involved and react until he had all the facts.

Confront the Wrongdoer

The story could have ended here. Status quo. No contract. No mutual commitments. Alienation. But Moses doesn't drop the matter; he confronts the wrongdoers (6). First, he graphically displays the seriousness of the offense by pulverizing the object of the offense and making the people identify with their sin by drinking water mixed with the idol's ashes.

Second, he confronts and holds his brother Aaron, the next-in-command, responsible: "What did this people do to *you* that *you* have brought such a great sin upon *them*?" Aaron's response is defensive and pathetically weak; he infers helplessness by accurately quoting the people, innocence by passing the buck, and passivity by disclaiming personal responsibility with a "white" lie

Third, Moses takes radical action to bring continuing sin to a roaring halt. Although he had destroyed the offending golden calf, at least some of the people persisted in uncontrollable orgiastic rituals associated with idolatry.(7) Radical action was called for – even to the point of destroying those who persisted in sin. Confronting wrongdoers is tough! There's a no-guarantee risk attached! Our egos get in the way; we're afraid of the other's reaction. We jump to wrong conclusions because we lack the facts or have become subjective. We avoid responsibility because we think the one confronted will be defensive (like Aaron) or won't change (like the people). We bumble and blow it. We misunderstand Scripture's admonition to avoid becoming critical. We misjudge. We gloss over the seriousness of the wrong, forgetting that all wrong doing is sin against the Holy One. We "stuff it" – thinking the problem will disappear if we ignore it long enough.

Sadly, none of these defenses works!

When I've effectively confronted another I've worked from objective facts, obtained counsel from a confidante-prayer partner, eagerly wanted the best for the person confronted, and acted carefully after much prayer. I'm more willing to take the risk of confrontation when I see sin as an affront to the LORD; the more I am in touch with the holiness and love of God, the more concerned I am when others bring dishonor and derision to Him.

Intervention

Moses takes another radical step – he returns to the one who was wronged to try to make peace (8) He now fully comprehends and acknowledges the greatness of the sin, the enormity of the breach. He might have gone back and said, “You’re right, LORD! The people *are* obstinate. You have every reason to destroy them. I accept your offer to become the father of a new, great nation.”

Not Moses! Instead, he puts his own neck on the line. Yes, he acknowledges the greatness of their sin. But then he asks the LORD to forgive them – and if He won’t, to wipe *him* out, blot *his* name out. He puts himself in the wrongdoers’ sandals by offering his own life for theirs.

Peacemakers need to be ready to pay a cost. It may be measured in time, or in emotional or spiritual energy. It may involve financial sacrifice. The most effective peacemakers are ready to stand in the shoes of the wrongdoers, ready to pay their just debts in order to gain the forgiveness of the one who was wronged.

Consequences

The record doesn’t explicitly tell us that Moses succeeded in his mission of gaining forgiveness. However, he was at least partially successful at this point, for he’s instructed to lead the people forward. The LORD will not wipe them out.

Nevertheless, there were consequences.(9) The LORD confirms that He will hold those who sin personally accountable. He inflicted a form of immediate, unidentified punishment on the wrongdoers. Most awesome was the consequence that matched the sin: the LORD would substitute an angel protector for His personal presence among the people who had wanted a “god who would go before them”. What a great loss!

Up to this point, there is no indication that the people were genuinely sorry for their rebellion and obstinacy. Knowledge of the sad consequences brought them to their knees. *Now* they mourned. *Now* they stripped off their ornaments, imposing on themselves a visible reminder of their regrettable deed.

Does this mean that the LORD had *not* forgiven them? Not necessarily. Forgiveness and consequences are not mutually exclusive. Both bear a cost, whether emotional, spiritual or economic. Stripping their ornaments

was an act of humility, the people gave up something they valued. When they did, the LORD gave up His "right" to eradicate the contract-breakers and also gave His promise of protection.

Peacemakers should hold wrongdoers accountable for the consequences of their action. Consequences humbly remind us that we are prone to sin; therefore, they are healthy deterrents to further sin. In time, scar tissue may replace the painful, raw wounds; these scars can perpetually remind us of the grace that heals.

Restoration

The first hint of a restored relationship comes as Moses presses God for greater intimacy (10). He, too, lives with the consequences of his people's sin. Since the LORD had removed His presence from the migrant camp that was defiled by sin, Moses was also excluded from the LORD unless he left home. So he pitched a tent "a good distance away", and there the LORD spoke with him "face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend." (11) Others could only watch from a distance.

It's not surprising that Moses then dares to ask the LORD boldly for better information. He affirms God's orders. He's uncomfortable with the information vacuum. He claims God's promise of a special relationship. And he asks to know the LORD even more intimately. The LORD responds by reversing His decision to withhold His presence and promises not just His presence, but ultimate rest.

Moses then seizes on the LORD's promised presence to press his plea for absolute assurance. He cannot bear the thought of going one step further without God's presence because it is *that* which distinguishes him and the people as "Thy people". Nothing less than the LORD's honor is at stake. And because Moses has found favor with the LORD, the LORD discloses His goodness, grace and compassion.

Peacemakers concerned for the LORD's honor will be very reluctant to go forward without seeking the LORD's ways, finding His favor, and receiving the promise of His presence on the journey and His rest at the end.

The second hint that the LORD restored the relationship comes when he gives a new contract to Moses (12). A new beginning calls for a new agreement, with covenants almost identical to the ones that had been shattered.

How different was Moses' second homecoming! The first time he reflected the LORD's anger because the people had broken their agreement. Now he reflects the LORD's glory so brilliantly that the people were afraid to come near him.

The third evidence of a restored relationship is implicit, not explicit. Moses proceeds to carry out the instructions – to the letter! – for a sanctuary and the ordination of priests. And who should be the first priest to be ordained but Aaron, (13) the very person who'd crafted the offensive image and proclaimed the orgiastic feast...and then weaseled to shirk his responsibility. That's grace!

Finally, the sanctuary was designed to be the place where the LORD would dwell in the midst of His people.(14) When it was completed and erected in the camp, the "glory of the LORD" filled it – just as originally intended. His presence, evident in the cloud and fire, remained with them (15)

How different from today's secular dispute resolution that aims to "right wrongs", end wrongdoing, make the wrong one "whole" by payment of damages or some penalty – and succeeds in driving people apart. In contrast, those who would follow Moses' pattern of peacemaking will be satisfied with nothing less than bringing those in conflict into fully restored relationships.

It's costly. There's no guarantee of success. Unlike the dispute Moses "mediated", where there was no wrongdoing on the part of one "party", generally in the disputes we have opportunity to intervene in, there will be some wrongdoing on the part of all of the parties. And at the bottom of any wrongdoing is sin against the LORD who is *always* the innocent party.

Will we be satisfied with merely "righting wrongs", or will we like Moses persist until relationships are fully restored? Only then will the person sinned against be "made whole "

For Further Thought

1. What do you do when you are wronged? If the LORD informed Moses of the wrong, tacitly inviting him to intervene, why don't we follow His example and seek competent help when we're wronged? Why do you think we often prefer to resolve disputes alone, or alternatively act as if ignoring them will cause the issue to go away?
2. Moses had just spent six weeks of uninterrupted time with the LORD; how did this equip him to be a peacemaker?
3. Recall a time when you confronted a wrongdoer. What helped you? What hindered you? What was the result?
4. If we do ask another to help, why should we seek reconciliation and restoration rather than being content with merely settling the issue?
5. How is Moses a picture of our mediator, Jesus Christ?
6. Are you in conflict with anyone? What stage is it in? What should you do to move forward toward resolution and reconciliation?
7. Are you in a position of leadership, with people under you who are in conflict? What might/should you do to intervene?

Endnotes

- (1) Exodus 24:3,7
- (2) Exodus 32:1-7; see also 20:1-7
- (3) Exodus 32:7-10
- (4) Exodus 32:11-14
- (5) Exodus 32:15-19
- (6) Exodus 32:20-29
- (7) Davidson, Stibbs and Kevan, editors, *New Bible Commentary*, page 130, InterVarsity Press, 1954
- (8) Exodus 32:30-32
- (9) Exodus 32:33-33:6
- (10) Exodus 33:12-23
- (11) Exodus 34:10-28
- (12) Exodus 35:1-40:33; c f. Exodus 25:1-31:18 for the blueprint
- (13) Exodus 40:12-16
- (14) Exodus 25:8
- (15) Exodus 40:34-38; c f Exodus 25:8 for original intent



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