

RESOLVING CONFLICT

Disagreement Isn't Conflict

Disagreement is a difference of opinion. I disagree with my brothers concerning our favorite college football team. I cheer for Penn State, another one of my brothers for Temple and a third for Pittsburgh. Our relationship has never been affected by which team wins or loses.

Conflict Hurts

Conflict occurs in part because no two of us see life exactly the same. These competing views of life (we have different information, values, desires, priorities, beliefs, etc) are like gunpowder. When our views clash with someone else's, and our pride (Proverbs 13:10) supplies the match, we call the resulting KA-POW "conflict." It separates us from others, and it hurts.

Forgiveness Heals

Forgiveness glues relationships back together. Conflict and separation are standard, even in committed relationships. Forgiveness is optional. It requires humility and no one can force us to do it. Jesus humbled himself to absorb our sins on the cross and didn't hold them against us. That's the pattern. We must humble ourselves to absorb the offenses of others without holding them against them. It's difficult, but we can do everything Jesus asks us to do through the strength he provides (Philippians 4:13). It's necessary because God's forgiving us is linked to our forgiving others (Mark 11:25).

Reconciliation requires forgiving the other person for his/her part in the conflict, asking for forgiveness for our part, and rebuilding the relationship. I have an old pair of walking shoes. The sole of the left foot has three times separated from the upper portion of the shoe near the toe. Three times I have glued it back together. Forgiveness is the glue we apply whenever there's separation of our relationship.

Conflict Is Inevitable

Conflict is a head-on collision between competing information, values, desires, priorities, beliefs, etc. These competing elements can exist without a collision. We each have the potential to disagree with anybody about just about anything. The issue isn't whether we disagree, but how we disagree. Conflict happens both between us and others and inside us (James 4:1-3). As believers, we'll never experience a conflict-free day. We can't even agree with ourselves! The Spirit and the sinful nature inside us battle for supremacy (Romans 7:14-25, Galatians 5:17). What matters is our *response* to the conflict. The right choice is to be led by the Spirit.

Since we have trouble getting along with ourselves even though we love ourselves, it shouldn't surprise us that we have trouble getting along with others whom we love less. Again, what matters is our response. The right choice is for the Spirit to lead us in interpersonal relationships. The most common wrong choice is to be led by pride and try to prove we're right. "Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice" (Proverbs 13:10). Pride pursues victory over or harm to an opponent, whereas Holy Spirit-led persons pursue peace, a fruit of the Spirit. That's why Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). When we're seeking to beat, embarrass, hurt or drive out of the church another believer with whom we disagree, we can be very sure we're not led by the Spirit.

The sinful nature pursues what's best for self, but those led by the Spirit seek what's best for God and others. That includes living in harmony (Romans 12:16) and peace (1 Thessalonians 5:13b) with other believers and with everyone as far as it depends on us (Romans 12:18). Conflict is inevitable; peace and harmony aren't. Harmony requires harmonizing and peace requires peacemaking. Both necessitate putting up with one another's quirks. "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13).

A common source of conflict in the church is pursuit of power to bolster a sense of importance. Our true value is what God paid to get us (Jesus). We've nothing to lose and nothing to prove. We've don't need a high position in the church to be important to Jesus. The disciples argued over which of them was the greatest (Luke 22:24). In Mark 9:35b, NIV, Jesus said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." If we're controlling the church, we're driving a stolen vehicle! The church belongs to Jesus (Matthew 16:18). Let him drive!

Conflict Is God's Shaping Tool

God uses conflict (competing desires) to shape nature, history and the church. Conflict in nature between individuals of the same species and between different species is common as dirt. We call it competition. Only plants and animals that can compete successfully pass their genes to the next generation. Even weather is the product of a kind of "conflict" between air masses. The behind the scenes conflict between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness drives history. When that conflict erupts into persecution, the church grows stronger. God also uses conflict within the church to shape believers into the image of his Son (Romans 8:29). It's one way he tests us. If everything in the church always went our way, and everyone always agreed with us, we'd have no motivation to change and wouldn't need God's power to do it.

Conflict is as much a part of life as breathing. Husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, friends and foes all experience conflict. The only residents on the globe who don't are the under the hill crowd! Treat conflict like an orange -- squeeze out all its potential benefits while avoiding the seeds of disunity and strife. God uses conflict to accomplish his will.

As churches we go to great extremes to avoid God's shaping tool. As quickly as conflict appears, we sweep it under the rug to make it disappear. We don't like it. We assume (erroneously) that if we love one another, we'll be able to get along without any ruffled feathers. We see love and conflict as opposites. We don't know how to handle conflict, so we deny its existence. We're silent when others offend us because we think we're keeping peace. The offense infuriates us and fractures our relationship, but we say nothing to the person who offended us. We hang on to these hurts and tell everyone but the offender about them, or we "grow a tumor" inside and let the hurts eat away at us. We can and must do a better job of calling conflict what it is and then resolving it. It's God's tool to mold our character (James 1:2-4). Avoiding conflict is like skipping school on days when tests are scheduled!

Conflict Can Make Your Church Better

God places us into the church to benefit from one another's perspective and gifts. We're better together because (instead of surrendering to laziness) we can encourage one another to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24). We're better together because we need one another's spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:21). We're better together because we benefit from the godliness of others. "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17, NIV). We're better together because we can help identify one another's warts. "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses" (Proverbs 27:6, NIV). We're better together because we can see most clearly in the mirror of one another how our ways and words offend others. Paul confronted Peter because he wasn't upfront about the truth of the gospel concerning eating with Gentiles (Galatians 2:11ff.). We're better together because we're wiser than we are on our own. "For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure" (Proverbs 11:14, NIV).

Dealing with fires and conflicts while they're small prevents them from becoming large and destructive. When we're offended, our tendency is to operate in the silence or violence mode. We start with silence. We follow the advice, "Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes -- 100 times! We take it and say nothing. We try to fit two quarts of offense into a pint container. It's running all over the place. Quietly, uncomplainingly (to the person offending us), we absorb multiple hurts until we become like Popeye ("that's all I can stand, I can't stand no more!"). Then we shift into the violence mode and give the best speech we'll ever regret. The person who was unknowingly offending us wonders where that came from. He

thinks to himself, “*I didn’t do anything!*” The offended and the offender switch places. Making peace has just become more difficult. It’s far wiser to address the offense the first or second time it occurs.

God uses conflict to change us and others to become more like Jesus for our good and his glory. Without conflict, we’d have little motivation to change and neither would our church. Conflict brings a sense of urgency. It reveals that something about the status quo isn’t good. A number of years ago I offended a visiting relative. I don’t need to go into the details about what caused the conflict. It’s enough to say that after some introspection I concluded I needed to put a greater priority on relating to people and a lesser emphasis on completing tasks. This conflict, though painful, helped me understand things about myself I needed to change.

Conflict can help us refocus on our mission and vision. Imagine this scenario. Those who’ve joined our church in the last five years think we should be doing more in our community. Those who’ve been members for many years don’t see the need to change anything. The conflict between the two groups becomes intense. Our administrative council schedules a leadership retreat to re-examine our mission and invites the membership to come and bring input. Speed Leas said, “Unless an organization encourages regular and thorough internal challenge to what it has been doing, it’s unlikely to keep up with the changing world.” (Speed Leas, “Tension Isn’t All Bad” in *Mastering Conflict and Controversy*, Edward G. Dobson, Speed B. Leas and Marshall Shelley, Multnomah, p. 31). Dealing with conflict helps our church meet the needs of a changing world.

Conflict helps us understand ourselves and others by informing us through our interaction what’s important to us and them. Where two or more are gathered in his name, there will be conflict in their midst! We only contest things that matter to us. You could try to argue with me who the best hockey team in history was. You couldn’t upset me, because I’m not interested in ice hockey at all! The most intense conflict occurs when cherished values collide head on. Nevertheless, to love one another, we need to know what hurts each other so we can avoid offending. God can use other people to reveal the offensive ways in us (Psalm 139:24). If we don’t challenge one another when we’re offended, we miss an opportunity to be used by God to shape our brother or sister in Christ.

Conflict reveals our character. When we’re being rebuked or when we’re rebuking, do we do it in a Christ-like way? Our lives our like a tube of toothpaste. When conflict squeezes us, what comes out is the real us. The way we handle conflict reveals how far down the road of Christian maturity we’ve progressed.

God Gives Conflict-Resolving Grace

Will all conflicts in the church be resolved? Unfortunately, they won't. If every conflict in the church were resolved, Christian marriages would never end in divorce, would they? I believe God provides sufficient grace to resolve conflict among Christians. "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other" (Galatians 5:13-15). Whether the conflict actually *is* resolved depends on the motivation of those entrenched in it and their willingness to embrace the grace and freedom they have to serve one another in love. Even if that grace is rejected, God still works all things together for the good of those involved and for his own glory (Romans 8:28). But the consequences of conflict remain.

Paul and Barnabas couldn't agree whether to take John Mark on their second missionary journey (Acts 15:36ff). They parted ways, but God used them both to further his kingdom's work. Only God knows what would've happened on the second missionary journey if Paul and Barnabas hadn't separated. Conflicts aren't always resolved because Christians don't always act like Christians, and some who profess to be Christians aren't. We can't ensure others will act like Christians. We can only make sure we do.

Conflict Comes in Different Packages

Speed Leas identified five levels of conflict in congregations (*Moving Your Church Through Conflict*, Washington D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1985). I've used his concept of five levels, but modified the content of each.

Paper Sword Conflict

As long as issues remain problem-centered, huge relational explosions won't happen. I don't consider this a real conflict, based on the definition I shared in the second paragraph. Paper sword conflict is when two or more people are figuratively sitting side by side and facing a common problem together. It could be as mundane as dividing an apple equally between two persons. The solution can be as simple as, "I'll cut the apple in half, and you get first choice." Let's suppose Bill and Harry from the worship committee meet to develop ways to improve the flow in the worship service by trimming away time when nothing significant is happening. They brainstorm a list of suggestions. They agree together on the best five on the list and implement them. They face a problem. They solve it together. Their relationship isn't negatively affected at all.

Gunpowder Conflict

Level two is disagreement-centered. Bill and Harry don't see the world or the church exactly alike. That's the gunpowder, the potential for an explosion to separate them. Let's assume Bill and Harry meet to decide how to cut the dead time from the worship service. Bill thinks they should sing the Doxology after the offering; Harry thinks they shouldn't. They follow a conflict resolution process we'll discuss later. They agree to sing the Doxology every other Sunday and to evaluate after six months. Both are satisfied and continue to work together to trim unproductive time from the service.

Gun-KA-POW-der Conflict

Level three is victory-centered. This is a fleshly approach to a spiritual problem. Bill and Harry meet to decide how to cut unprofitable time from the worship service. During the first meeting Bill says, "Harry, No one but you would think of a foolish idea like eliminating the Doxology after the offering!" That's his pride gushing out. It's also the match that explodes the gunpowder of their differences (KA-POW). He strikes another match saying, "As long as I'm on the worship committee we'll sing the Doxology after we take the offering. That's the way we've always done it, and that's the way we're going to keep doing it! I've been around this church longer than you have, and I know better than you do what we need!" KA-POW!

Harry is offended. He tells himself that Bill is selfish and wants to have total control of the church. Harry feels unimportant, embarrassed, unappreciated, inadequate and angry. He decides to fight Bill. He thinks to himself, *"Foolish, is it? I bet Bill sings the Doxology out of habit without even putting his brain in gear. It's an empty waste of thirty seconds of worship time."* That thought is just the beginning of the downward spiral of his negative thinking about Bill. He calls people on the worship committee to rally support for his position. Over time the issue becomes more how people feel about singing the Doxology than whether it's the best use of worship hour time. Can this conflict be resolved? Perhaps, but it won't be if Bill and Harry hold to their positions like a couple of pit bulls. This issue might require denominational intervention.

Gun-KA-POW--KA-POW--KA-POW-der Conflict

Level four is hurt-centered, like the linebacker whose goal is to knock the opposing quarterback out of the game. Hurting and humiliating the other side is just as important as winning -- KA-POW, KA-POW, KA-POW. This too is a fleshly approach to a spiritual problem. You can't resolve it by conflict-resolution techniques. When level four conflict exists, the parties don't talk to each other, and they show open disrespect. When they do communicate with each other, they shout. Resolving this issue will take denominational intervention.

Nuclear Conflict

Level five is destruction-centered. *Nuke 'em!* Kenneth C. Haugk calls such persons antagonists (*Antagonists in the Church*). Haugk describes key characteristics of an antagonist. Their antagonistic behavior is recurring inside and outside the church. They say unspecified others feel the same way they do. They criticize previous leaders to present ones. They befriend the pastor as soon as he moves in and praise him/her excessively. After they disagree with something the pastor or leaders do, they try to catch them in an error. They seem extremely likable. They do a lot of church-hopping. They frequently lie. They give money conspicuously. They don't seek or want forgiveness.

Antagonists account for only a small percentage of conflict. They aren't open to change. There's no trace of Christianity in their approach. That was the nature of Jesus' conflict with the Jewish religious leaders of his day. Their answer to the conflict between his teachings and theirs, his way of life and theirs, and his following and theirs was to kill him. When one party seeks to "nuke" another, denominational intervention is the only option.

Practical Ways to Resolve Conflict

My goal is to suggest two practical strategies for harmonizing and peacemaking. The first applies to resolving conflict and the second to dealing with those who disappoint by not doing what they promised. First, however, we need to change the way we think about persons with whom we're in conflict. How we think about a situation or person affects how we feel about it or him. How we feel about it or her affects what we do. To resolve conflicts, we need to think more rationally about those who've hurt us.

Our Story Is Wrong!

No one enjoys being wrong! My first title for this section was, "Your Story Is Wrong!" After some reflection, I realized that title excused the possibility that *my* story could be wrong, so I changed it to "Our Story Is Wrong!" Mine too! How so?

When others offend and hurt us, we tell ourselves a story to explain their motivation. Even though we *can't* know their intentions, we think we do. We base our judgment on how their words or deeds impacted us. The more they hurt us, the harsher we judge. We quickly jump to the conclusion that selfishness motivated their behavior. *They intentionally hurt me because they're a bad person!* Case closed. We don't consider any other possibilities, such as how people or things influenced their behavior, or that the offense might have been totally unintentional. Such judgments on our part are *wrong*, because they're contrary to Jesus' will and because they're just plain inaccurate. There's nothing in life for which we're more

unequipped than judging intentions exactly right. We're more likely to win the lottery without buying a ticket! If you want to be consistently wrong, keep on judging people's intentions!

Furthermore, we become guilty of the very selfishness we attribute to the offender. Our concern is our own hurt. That's selfishness. We don't consider how reacting to this hurt is going to affect others. Our unwillingness to let go of the offense is a direct violation of Jesus' command to forgive. When we get tied up in our own little package of hurt, we're only thinking about ourselves.

Apart from forgiveness, our irrational conclusion shapes our relationship with the offending persons thereafter. *They're bad people because they hurt me.* We magnify their negative traits all out of proportion and minimize or totally ignore their positive traits because they don't fit our conclusion about them.

My goal is for us to eliminate from our thinking this way of judging because it defies God's word and reason, and it consistently causes us great pain. "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way" (Romans 14:13, NIV). "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13, NIV).

Judging why others behave as they do is contrary to reason. Do you know what I'm going to write next? Of course you don't, any more than I know what you're thinking right now. Stick with me. This is the heart of the truth I'm trying to communicate. *We don't know how others think or feel unless they tell us. They don't know how we think or feel unless we tell them.* Listening to one another's stories is *the* key element in resolving conflict. Telling ourselves the wrong story is how conflict starts. It doesn't start with how others hurt us but with our irrational reaction to that hurt. Getting our story right is critical.

How to Resolve Conflicts

Based on *Difficult Conversations* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen, the following is a process that can be used by churches who are dealing with conflict.

1. The parties in conflict should pray daily for at least two weeks before the resolution meeting.
 - a. For those who've offended them.
 - b. For wisdom to see the two-by-four in their own eyes (Matthew 7:1-5).
 - c. For God to reveal their contribution to the conflict (Proverbs 13:10).
 - d. For God to forgive them (1 John 1:9).
2. Get a Grip on What Really Happened

- a. We'll meet to talk about the conflict:
 - i. Place _____
 - ii. Date _____
 - iii. Time _____
- b. Our goal is to learn, share and fix the problem, not the blame.
- c. If there are multiple issues, we'll deal with only one at a time.
- d. While party one is sharing his/her viewpoint on issue one without attacking (following the outline of the five categories in the following table), party two will listen and take notes to understand how the issue looks and feels to party one. No "correcting" is allowed.
- e. After party one's story, party two will summarize it verbally.
- f. Parties one and two switch roles.
- g. Repeat process as needed to address other issues.

What Happened?	Impact of the Conflict	Intentions	Contributions to the Conflict	Feelings
My version	On me	Mine	Mine	I'm feeling: (circle yours and underline his/hers) Anger – Frustrated, exasperated, enraged, indignant Hurt – Let down, betrayed, disappointed, needy Shame – Embarrassed, guilty, regretful, humiliated, self-hating Fear – Anxious, terrified, worried, obsessed, suspicious Self-doubt – Inadequate, unworthy, inept, unmotivated Sadness – Bereft, wistful, joyless, depressed Jealousy – Envious, selfish, covetous, anguished, yearning Gratitude – Appreciative, thankful, relieved, admiring Loneliness – Desolate, abandoned, empty, longing
His/Her Version?	On Him/Her?	His/Hers?	His/Hers?	

3. Forgive

- a. Jesus humbled himself on the cross to accept our sins.
- b. We must humble ourselves and not hold the offenses of others against them (Proverbs 13:10).
- c. We can do it through the strength Jesus provides (Philippians 4:13).
- d. God's forgiving us is linked to our forgiving others (Mark 11:25).

- e. Both parties should confess their part in the conflict to the other (pride, etc.) and ask for forgiveness.
4. Solve the Problem behind the Conflict
 - a. Both parties should define the three things they want most related to the area of conflict – i.e. what their interests are.
 - b. Multiply options that *fairly* meet both side’s most important concerns and interests.
 - c. Together select the best option that’s fair to both sides or a mediator will make that choice.
 - d. After the solution has been implemented for a while, meet again to evaluate how well it’s working.

How to Deal with Those Who Disappoint You by Not Doing What They Promise

These suggestions are based on: *Crucial Confrontations* by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler.

1. Before the confrontation, define what the problem is in one sentence as follows:
 - a. The first confrontation should use a content focus - “You said you’d do (whatever), but didn’t.”
 - b. During the second confrontation about the same issue, use a pattern focus – “Repeated disappointments are causing me to begin to lose trust in you, and I don’t want that to happen.”
 - c. During the third confrontation use a relationship focus – “I’ve almost lost my trust in you to do what you promise because of this recurring problem.”
2. During the confrontation describe in a respectful, non-attacking tone the difference between what you expected and what actually happened, giving the offender the benefit of the doubt, helping to maintain safety by being clear about what you are and aren’t saying and caring about her goals. You can talk about almost anything with people who feel safe.
3. For example:

Beverly, You promised you’d have the newsletter typed by noon yesterday, but it still isn’t completed and you never let me know you wouldn’t be able to meet the deadline. Now we won’t be able to send it until next week. I’m not angry at you, and your job certainly isn’t in jeopardy, but I’m disappointed. I’m sure there’s a good reason you didn’t finish it, but meeting the deadline is very important to me. Let’s talk about what happened.

I'd like to explore the extent the problem is your not really wanting to do the newsletter and to what extent you just couldn't get it done as promised. I want you to enjoy working here, to be motivated and able to carry out all your assignments in a timely manner. Let's try to sort a few things out so we can prevent this kind of thing from happening again.

Let me ask:

- i. How would you rate how much you like typing the newsletter (Scale of 1-10)? [This is exploring personal motivation.]
 - ii. How confident do you feel about you ability to produce a quality newsletter (Scale of 1-10)? [This is exploring personal ability.]
 - iii. How did I or others decrease your desire to complete it by noon yesterday? [This is exploring the influence of people on motivation.]
 - iv. How did I or others decrease your ability to complete it by noon yesterday? [This is exploring the influence of people on ability.]
 - v. How does the way we run the church office decrease your motivation to complete it as promised? [This is exploring the influence of things on motivation.]
 - vi. How does the way we run the church office decrease your ability to produce the newsletter as promised? [This is exploring the influence of things on ability.]
4. If Beverly isn't motivated, explore natural consequences of her behavior until you find one that motivates her. For example, "Beverly, do you have any idea how many lives you are touching by putting the newsletter together and how eagerly our parishioners look forward to receiving it on the 17th? We regularly get calls from them testifying how the newsletter has encouraged them and made their day."
 5. If natural consequences aren't motivating and Beverly continues not keeping her promises without alerting you, use discipline, telling what will happen the next time she doesn't do what you expect. "If this happens again, it will affect your performance evaluation and your raise."
 6. If a person isn't able to do what's expected, it's the supervisor's job to remove personal, relational or institutional barriers interfering with her ability to do it.
 7. Agree together on a plan to do what you expect by a given date and how and when follow-up will occur. For example:

Next month's newsletter should be completed by noon on the 15th. If you can't project finishing it by the deadline, let me know by noon on the 14th and I will help you rearrange the timetable on your other tasks to make sure the newsletter is completed on time. Agreed?

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