

Peacemaker

By Pastor Alan Utting



'First keep the peace within yourself, then you can also bring peace to others.'

Thomas a Kempis

Various cultures handle conflict in different ways. For example, there are Power, Shame and Guilt-based cultures and the way they seek to resolve conflict is based on their core values. For example, Power-based culture (North Korea) is resolved by those in power, e.g. government officials who decided how to handle the case and any punishment dispensed. Whereas in a Shame-based culture (Japan) conflict resolution is usually handled within the family, tribe, village who seek a peaceful solution that avoids public shame. Their goal is to restore harmony and honour. In a Guilt-based culture (USA) individuals are expected to acknowledge their wrongdoing when they violate moral or legal standards. The goal in this culture is to relieve guilt by making amends, seeking forgiveness, or accepting punishment. People are taught to feel guilty when they've done wrong, even if no one else knows.

The emphasis of this article is primarily on a Guilt-based culture, though it touches on aspects of other cultures.

Even godly individuals, such as the apostle Paul and Barnabas, experienced sharp disagreements, like the one over whether John Mark should join them on their next missionary journey. Unable to come to an agreement, they parted ways. 'They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus' (Acts 15:39). Thankfully, over time, Paul came to appreciate John Mark and later invited him to be part of his ministry. 'Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry' (2 Timothy 4:11).

'... as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone' (Romans 12:18).

Useful hints on peacemaking

1. Be aware that Satan's primary way of destroying God's work is in disunity amongst His people. 'Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Ephesians 3:3) and 'Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold' (Ephesians 3:26, 27). 'Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour' (1 Peter 5:8).
2. Pray earnestly and stand firm on the promises of Scripture for relief in times of spiritual opposition. In one of the churches I pastored, a small group of leaders resisted my ministry because of my openness to the work of the Holy Spirit. Outwardly we maintained a cordial relationship, but underneath, there was tension. I held on to God's promise in Isaiah 49:17 and prayed that, if they could not embrace the Spirit's work, the Lord would remove them in His timing. After a period of five years, each of them left for legitimate reasons within the space of just a month or two. During that time, God also did a deeper work in me, drawing me closer to Him and strengthening me from within. This quiet resolution allowed the church to move forward in unity, free from division.

3. You never resolve conflict through attacking! It is essential to have an openness to understand a different point of view even if we disagree with it. Treat people with respect.
4. Jesus teaches us to first get the log out of our eye before we judge others. 'Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?' (Luke 6:41).
5. There are often two sides to every story, so take care to gather the full facts before drawing conclusions. I learned this the hard way during my very first weekend in a new church pastorate. Everything had gone smoothly until after the evening service, when it was arranged for me and another leader to visit a young woman who was rumoured to have had an affair with our voluntary youth leader. She was attractive, articulate, and persuasive. I listened carefully to her account and, by the time I returned home, I told my wife Pam with full conviction that the young woman was completely innocent. But not long after, a phone call came in that confirmed the opposite. It was a sobering reminder of not rushing to judgment without all the facts.
6. Portray an attitude of a 'relaxed disposition' and 'openness' when dealing with people caught up in conflict even if that takes an effort. Look for a win/win solution where both people experiencing conflict feel honoured. It may take time, but it is worth exploring options for that to happen.
7. Do not shy away from confrontation when it is necessary, even if it feels difficult. A restless night beforehand is not uncommon when facing a challenging situation, but it can keep us humble and dependent upon God.
8. Be quick to listen and slow to speak (James 1:19). Choose your battles wisely. Sadly, some people lack discernment in this area and create issues over things that don't really matter. Stay focused and keep the main thing the main thing!
9. Avoid triangulation. Triangulation occurs when three parties become involved in a conflict, each emotionally invested in the issue. A wise peacemaker works to find a way forward, ideally removing the emotional tension from the situation.
10. Don't let pride stop you from seeking outside help. I've done it more than once myself. There's no shame in asking for support. Just make sure you involve the right person. To off load stress get a mentor or preferably a supervisor to talk to regularly. Attend seminars on conflict management.
11. Apologise sincerely when you've wronged someone. At times, you may still need to apologise even if you believe you're in the right. It helps to defuse tension and shows care and humility, much like looking out for the 'weaker brother' or 'sister'.

Resources

Dr David Cormack, *Peacing Together*
Peacemaker Ministries, *Guiding People Through Conflict*