

Handling Conflict

Conflict is inevitable. Most of us shy well clear of it, while a few others thrive on it. However, conflict is not necessarily bad or harmful. For example, Paul and Barnabas fell out with each other, with each going their separate ways (Acts 15:36ff). Good came out of it, as not only did Paul and Silas evangelise in one direction, but Barnabus who took Mark headed in another covering more territory.

Some conflict can be creative. It forces us to look at new ideas and ways of doing things. On the other hand, history is rife with many examples, where unresolved conflict dishonoured the Lord's name. Never forget that the New Testament Church was imperfect.

Reasons for conflict

There are many reasons why conflict occurs. Here are some of them.

- *Communication problems.* Language is a complex tool to use. We think we know what we are saying, but the recipient may pick up something different.
- *Carnal attitudes.* These can include things like jealousies and power struggles. The heart deceives and even the best people can have problems with impure motives.
- *Ignorance.* We can get people's motives wrong and even pick up incorrect pieces of information if we are not careful.
- *Temperaments.* These vary from person to person thus altering the way we look at things. Some people even in worship have strong ideas as to what is the correct style to use, while often it is only an expression of one's temperament. Whatever forms of worship people prefer even within one congregation will vary and allowance needs to be made for that.
- *Doctrine.* It is to the churches great shame that it has severely persecuted and excommunicated people, because of minor doctrinal differences. The Truth is not so much in what we believe but in Whom we believe. Churches have more in common than most of us realise.
- *Christian experience.* Many confine God to a box of their spiritual experience, thus leading to spiritual pride. He is much bigger and wider than any experience we can have of Him.
- *Change.* Resistance to change creates conflict. The freshness of renewal we desperately endeavour to preserve may also lead to a deterioration of spiritual life. This is where we need wisdom.

- *Spiritual warfare.* We are in a life and death battle. Satan and his forces are out for the destruction of the church. Never let us underestimate his ways, especially in his methods of bringing division into the church.

Win/Win

Most times a win/win dynamic is important in reaching decisions and in interacting with people. Where relationships are secure and attitudes humble it is possible to speak directly into a person's life. However, that often is not the case, so if you go ahead and bring correction it may mean people will in time become alienated from you, bruised and may even turn on you.

The answer in resolving much conflict is to try and develop a win/win relationship where there are no losers, only winners. This approach means that the decision reached is of mutual benefit.

Sometimes a pastor must appear to become the loser while others win, because there are character deficiencies in their lives. In some situations, pastors have to absorb hurts and the bitterness of people and not react with self-justification but love and care. This may be what Jesus means when He talks about 'denying self'. When that happens, stand against self-pity and resentment.

Try to avoid win/lose situations where someone is going to feel hard done by, because they did not get their way. This method of tackling problems will become easier with practise, but it does take humility on the part of the pastor or counsellor especially if you feel you have been badly treated. It is worth it to maintain harmonious relationship within a church. Some cultures always make decisions based on consensus. That is often a good idea. It means then that many are responsible for decisions made.

Resolving conflict

Praise the Lord that in seemingly hopeless situations there is resurrection life. Many a church having experienced division has known restoration and even churches that have gone their separate ways have multiplied into two or three others. Sometimes it is better to separate than to have to compromise. However, that is not the norm as in the Lord's prayer in John 17 Jesus, often prays that they may be 'one'.

- *Pray for wisdom.* James makes it clear in chapter 1 that we will receive wisdom if we ask in faith and doubt not! We need wisdom to know how to pray and how to deal with complex issues that face us. Some issues can be ignored while others must be tackled as soon as possible. Do not leave the big ones too long as they only grow and become potentially dangerous.
- *Pray for the people and against demonic powers at work.*
Do not attack the people but attack the demonic forces that cause division.

- *Criticism can produce personal growth* if we have an attitude that we want to learn. Let us be open to what people have to say. If we respect the one giving the advice and their attitude is healthy, it is easier to learn.
- *Get the facts straight.* It is too easy to jump to conclusions without all the facts being weighed up objectively.

One time when I was severely criticised, the matter was finally resolved when I carefully shared with a couple why I had to take the action I did. They appreciated the insights given. Most people do want to be reasonable. However, when people insist that half the church agree with them, recognise that this is highly unlikely to be the case, especially, if this is the first time you have heard of the issue. It can be useful to ask them how many people they are referring to. Get their names because normally it is only just a few!

- *Bring what is in the dark, into the light.* Unfortunately, there are always people who will not go to the pastor with their concerns but will go to their favourite confidant. When shared in this way the confidant should be prepared to bring the problem and names of the people involved out into the open. This will allow the problem to be dealt with. Not only is this approach Scriptural, but it will clear the air and stop behind the scenes back-biting.
- *List the different possible solutions.* For example, if you desire to change the Sunday morning service time, find out what the people think. When all the views about the service time are collated, summarise the different viewpoints, giving your preferences and the reasons why you have done so. Do not spring major decisions on the people without time for discussion.
- *The right person should confront the conflict.* For example, if a person is disciplined for wrong behaviour of minor importance, the pastor could be the last person who should do it. For some people he is in the place of God, and so the confrontation could lead to hurt and disillusionment, unless of course the problem is of major significance. If another church leader deals with the situation, it can take the heat out of it.
- *Do not hold people back* from leaving the church if that is their desire. They will more than likely eventually leave the church in time and often with the wrong attitude. This will not help the church or the people leaving. People who do leave while still living nearby are a difficulty for pastors. It can create a sense of failure and a lot of self-doubt.
- *Communication* is useful in minimising conflict, particularly in large churches, where it becomes more difficult. If someone is about to leave the church because of significant unresolved conflict, then in most cases wish them God's blessing and sometimes pray for them from upfront in a service.

- *Foster healthy relationships.* With healthy relationships it is easier to talk about personal and meaningful issues otherwise one tends to get on the defensive, that is why pastors should spend some of their time cultivating good relationships with their leaders. If you have enemies, try and keep them close to you. That way they will cause less trouble.
- *If we are in the wrong, confess it.* On one occasion I was confronting a couple about an issue, but my attitude was wrong. When I later asked them for their forgiveness for my wrong behaviour, they forgave me and became involved in the fellowship again.
- *Do not become the middle person.* Do not become the middle person whereby you end up relaying messages backwards and forwards between people, as this will breed misunderstanding where you please neither party. Instead encourage the two parties to meet, to talk through the issue.
- *Modelling a solution is helpful in resolving conflict.* For example, if someone in leadership always turns up late for a meeting, make sure that you are there on time. On the other hand, if you want staff or leadership to learn how to cope with conflict, let them observe how you cope. People learn best through observation rather than simply receiving knowledge through a lecture.
- *On some issues, do not compromise.* Do not be a peacekeeper at any price but rather be a peace maker. You may lose a few people, but the rest will more than likely stand behind you.

When we hear of conflicts in different churches, we need to generally keep them to ourselves. It is unhelpful for these rumours to be spread by pastors. Rather than trying to score points off other pastors, we need to support them in prayer and give them whatever encouragement they need. Insecure and competitive pastors are more likely to propagate unfortunate news of this type. We need to follow Jesus' example and esteem others better than ourselves (Phil 2:4-11).

Are you approachable?

Remember, that any church moving with God will experience conflict, as it has by its very action declared spiritual warfare against the forces of darkness and it is certain that demonic forces will not passively stand by. However, take encouragement - victory is ours through Jesus Christ.

'But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!'
(1 Corinthians 15:57).