

Handling Conflict

Conflict is inevitable. Most people avoid it, while others are energised by it. Yet conflict is not always harmful. For example, Paul and Barnabas parted ways (Acts 15:36ff), and good resulted: Paul and Silas evangelised in one direction, while Barnabas and Mark went in another, extending their reach.

Some conflict can be constructive, prompting us to consider new ideas and different ways of doing things. Yet history also offers many examples of unresolved conflict dishonouring the Lord's name. We should remember that the New Testament church was not perfect.

Reasons for conflict

Conflict arises for many reasons. Some of the most common are outlined below.

1. *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.
2. *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.
3. *Ignorance.* If we are not careful, we can misunderstand people's motives and accept inaccurate information.
4. *Doctrine.* It is to the church's 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.
5. *Christian experience.* Many confine God to the box of their own spiritual experience, leading to spiritual pride. He is much bigger and wider than any experience we can have of Him. People differ in temperament, and this shapes how they view things. Even in worship, some feel strongly about the 'right' style, when their preference may simply reflect personality. Since preferences vary within any congregation, allowance should be made for that.
6. *Change.* Resistance to change creates conflict. The freshness of renewal may also lead to a deterioration of spiritual life. This is where we need wisdom to navigate change.
7. *Spiritual warfare.* We are in a life-and-death battle. Satan and his forces are out for the destruction of the church. We must never underestimate his ways, especially his methods of bringing division into the church.

Win/Win

A win/win approach is often important when making decisions and dealing with people. When relationships are secure and attitudes are humble, it is possible to speak directly into someone's life. However, that is often not the case, and bringing correction too quickly can leave people feeling hurt, alienated, and even hostile.

One way to resolve much conflict is to build win/win relationships, where no one loses and both sides benefit. In this approach, the decision reached serves everyone involved.

Sometimes a pastor must appear to become the loser while others win, because there are character deficiencies in their lives. In some situations, pastors must 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 God that even in seemingly hopeless situations, resurrection life can bring renewal. Many churches that have experienced division have later been restored, and some that separated have multiplied into two or three others. At times, separation may be better than compromise. Even so, this is not the ideal, for in John 17 Jesus prays that His people may be one.

1. *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.
2. *Pray for the people and against demonic powers at work.*
Do not attack the people but attack the demonic forces that cause division.
3. *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.
4. *Get the facts straight.* It is too easy to jump to conclusions without all the facts being weighed up objectively.

When I was once strongly criticised, the issue was resolved after I carefully explained to a couple why I had taken that course of action. They appreciated the explanation. Most people want to be reasonable. However, if someone claims that half the church agrees with them, that is usually unlikely, especially if this is the first time you have heard of the matter. It can help to ask how many people they mean and to request names, because it is often only a few.

5. *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.
6. *List the different possible solutions in resolving conflict.* 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.
7. *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.
8. *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.
9. *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.
10. *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.
11. *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.
12. *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.

13. *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.
14. *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 about conflict in other churches, we should usually keep it confidential. It is unhelpful for pastors to spread such rumours. Instead of criticising other pastors, we should support them in prayer and offer encouragement where needed. Insecure and competitive pastors are more likely to pass on this kind of negative news. We should follow Jesus' example and value others above ourselves Philippians 2:4–11:

*'... not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.
In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death —
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.'*

Are you approachable?

Remember that any church moving with God will face conflict, because by doing so it declares spiritual warfare against the forces of darkness. Those forces will not remain passive. Yet take heart—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.