

Resolving Conflict Biblically / COB / 05.22.16

[Some of this is taken from previous training by Peacemaker Ministries]

Introduction

- † **[1: top line]** I think we can count on having conflict in our church. It is inevitable, because we are a bunch of sin-addled people trying to work together and be intimate with each other.
- Misunderstandings, disagreements, hurt feelings, all can contribute to little eruptions of conflict here. As we all mature in Christ, these problems should be less frequent and more easily resolved, but we should never be surprised by conflict. It is an aspect of the human condition.
 - A few times in the past three years, I have seen this come upon us like a disease, where conflicts break out all over the church, sometimes with hostility among many people in the congregation and sometimes all of it directed at me.
 - Either way, I think it would be valuable for us to talk about how to handle conflict. We all know how to handle it in bottom-line earthly ways, don't we? If you are new here, the bottom line is when we go after fleshly goals or when we go after good goals but in fleshly ways. But those goals and those ways are almost always sinful.
 - Yeah, we know how to handle conflict in a worldly-fleshly-bottom line way, don't we? We need to learn the top-line spiritual way to handle it. How would we handle conflict through faith and obedience, if we were obeying God's revelation, trusting him with the results?

Mindset

- † **[2: mindset]** I have biblical principles to share, but first let me say it is best if you remind yourself each morning what your standard is, whom you want to please, and whom you seek to glorify.
- If Christ and his scripture are your standard, then you will live by God's revelation and try to do the right thing in every situation, even conflict.
 - If you are living to please Christ instead of to protect your pride, then you will live by God's revelation and try to do the right thing in every situation, even conflict.
 - If you seek in that conflict to bring glory to Christ instead of yourself, then you will live by God's revelation and try to do the right thing in that conflict.
- † Though undesirable, conflict is an opportunity to glorify Christ, by resolving the conflict or – even if you cannot resolve it – you can bring Christ glory in how you handle yourself.
- That has to be your goal, to glorify Christ; not to win, not to feel better, not to prove how stupidly stubborn you are. No, your goal has to be to glorify Christ. In our marriage, LeeAnn and I never argue to win, we argue to find truth, and as soon as we realize we are on the wrong side of it, we know the right thing to do, to glorify Christ, is to admit we were wrong and move on.
 - So when possible, when someone hurts you, give yourself time to pray and think scripturally before you react. Then you can respond to the crisis on the top line, with God's empowerment, instead of on the bottom line in your flesh.
 - And keep in mind that most of what the world has taught you about conflict resolution is bottom line wrong! So you have to unlearn all that, as you learn the godly ways to respond. So now let's look at seven top line, biblical, principles of conflict resolution...

Principles

† **[3: love]** Principle 1: Continue to love.

- Part of God's instructions for Israel's new community were found in **Leviticus 19.17a NIV: Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart.**
- We find something similar for the church as the New Covenant community in **1 John 3.14 NET: We know that we have crossed over from death to life because we love our fellow Christians. The one who does not love remains in death.** In spiritual death, in worldliness.
- Whatever happens within the church, however antagonized you might feel, it would be rare to think of the other person as your enemy, right? And even about enemies, Jesus said in **Luke 6.27-28 NET, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."**
- If that is how we treat our enemies for the sake of the gospel, then how should we treat those we love who have antagonized us? Seek to model Christ, seek the top-line response. The first principle is "Continue to love."

† **[4: help]** Principle 2: Even when you are hurting, try to help, not hurt.

- **Philippians 2.3-4 NIV: Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.**
- So even when you are hurting, focus not on yourself or your rights, but rather on how you can help the other person, even if that person is the cause for your hurt.
- **Romans 12.17-18 NIV: Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.**
- Even with our enemies, we are not to seek revenge, instead praying for them, loving them, hoping they come to Christ, and trusting God to carry out justice in his own way and in his own time. How much more should this be true for fellow believers in the church!
- Someone in our community might hurt you, it's pretty much guaranteed if you are with us long enough. Someone might even intentionally be mean, but that does not require you to retaliate in kind. Seek to model Christ, seek the top-line response. The second principle is, "Even when you are hurting, try to help, not hurt."

† **[5: change]** Principle 3: Prayerfully consider whether you need to change.

- Conflict often erupts when one of us tries to hold another one of us accountable. Sometimes the problem is we don't think we should be held accountable. But scripture says we should not overlook offenses against God or behavior that hurts other people or relationships.
- Consider the full principle in **Leviticus 19.17 NIV: Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt.**
- In our New Covenant church community, we find something similar: **Colossians 3.16 ESV: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.** We all are to hold each other accountable, to encourage each other to do what will lead us

closer to God [top line things] and to exhort each other to avoid what will take us away [bottom line things].

- This especially is the task of the pastor-elders. **1 Thessalonians 5.12-13 NET: Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who labor among you and preside over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them most highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.**
 - Nobody likes to get admonished. Sometimes we are prideful, sometimes we are embarrassed about our sin, sometimes the other person was less than delicate. On the one hand, I could say, “LeeAnn, you know I care about you a great deal; I have been praying and I have a concern I want to share with you. All I ask is that you hear me out and then pray about it yourself, ok?” On the other hand, I could say, “LeeAnn, you gross sinner, you fake hypocritical believer, how can you be so fleshly as to do this? You’re gonna burn sister!” Which will yield better results?
 - **[6: caution]** Accountability and admonishment have always caused conflicts, so much even early on that Paul had to address accusations of wrong doing by an elder. I don’t know if the elder was being admonished or if someone was angry that the elder admonished him, but Paul wrote, **1 Timothy 5.19-20 NIV: Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. But those elders who are sinning you are to reprove before everyone, so that the others may take warning.**
 - It is a delicate balance as to when and how forcefully we should admonish each other. Jesus said in **Luke 6.41-42 NIV, “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? How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.”** That should guide us to look at how we need to change, even as we admonish someone else to change.
 - It also should temper our enthusiasm for excess admonishment! We should never judge others in the sense that we think we are better than them. That causes a lot of problems. Rather, our goal for any accountability or admonishment should be to help our loved one get healthy and right with God. That should affect how we express ourselves.
- † **[7: confess]** When we are admonished, we are admonishing, or we find ourselves in conflict with someone for another reason, we should ask whether any of the fault lies with us. In conflict, you should ask whether God is showing you something about yourself that needs to change.
- Are you the aggressor who should change so you don’t hurt people? Are you the victim who should change so you are not hurt when others are being themselves? Are you the sinner who should respond to admonishment with repentance and gratitude instead of anger and pride?
 - If you feel conviction, don’t get even more angry! True conviction about the need to change comes from God, so repent and confess with God. **Proverbs 28.13 NIV: Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.**
 - Then seek forgiveness from, and offer restitution to, anyone you hurt. This was the example given to Israel in **Numbers 5.5-7 NIV: The LORD said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites: ‘Any man or woman who wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the LORD is guilty and must confess the sin they have committed. They must make full restitution for the wrong they have done, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the person they have wronged.’”**

- Seek to model Christ, seek the top-line response. The third principle is, “Prayerfully consider whether you need to change.”

† **[8: forgive]** Principle 4: If possible, let it go; in any case, forgive.

- One reason we forgive is because we have been forgiven. God forgave us even though we were his enemies, walking completely by the flesh, in the world, guided by evil; he forgave us even though we were not at first repentant or sorry for our way of life.
- **Colossians 3.13 NIV: Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.**
- In fact, we cannot be in right relationship with God unless we forgive others as God has forgiven us. Jesus said in **Matthew 6.14-15 NIV: For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.**
- **[9: forgive lots]** It is astounding at first to consider the depth of the forgiveness demanded of us. Jesus said in **Luke 17.3-4 NIV: “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.”** That would be genuine repentance, not just saying the words.
- **Matthew 18.21-22 NIV: Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”** In other words, just keep forgiving!
- Why? Think of how many times you sinned against God and he still accepted you as his child, forgiving all those sins and adopting you into his family. Think of how many times you still struggle with the same sin, doing it over and over, repentantly confessing but still struggling again. As you have been forgiven, you should forgive others.
- In the Bible, forgiveness is an active and deliberate decision, not a passive feeling. So you can forgive someone even though you identify their behavior as sin and you are angry about it. It is a choice, a decision you need to make.
- Once you have forgiven someone for something, do not dwell on it further, do not bring it back up to use against them later, do not talk with others about it, and do not let it harm your relationship any longer.
- Of course, some serious offenses, such as adultery or abuse, might require a time for rebuilding trust even after you forgive. Also, situations where the offending party is not repentant or has shown to have an ongoing struggle might require you to protect yourself from being further vulnerable, even though you forgive.
- Seek to model Christ, seek the top-line response. The fourth principle is, “If possible, let it go; in any case, forgive.”

† **[10: restore]** Principle 5: Seek to restore relationships.

- **Galatians 6.1-2 NIV: Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.**

- Our goal is to restore the other person in right relationship with God and with fellow believers, including ourselves. So be gentle, not harsh. Carrying each other's burdens in part means to help each other overcome problems, including sin problems and relationship problems.
- Even if you think you are not at fault in a conflict, consider seeking peace and preserving unity by offering an apology. **Ephesians 4.1-3 NET: I, therefore, the prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live worthily of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**
- Many times, both parties will think they are in the right. If one will step forward for Christ, with humility and gentleness, saying "I am sorry for my part in this conflict," that can go a long way toward facilitating peace and restoring unity. Seek to model Christ, seek the top-line response. The fifth principle is, "Seek to restore relationships."

† **[11: edify]** Principle 6: Speak in an edifying way.

- **Romans 14.19 NET: So then, let us pursue what makes for peace and for building up one another.**
- **Ephesians 4.29 NIV: Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.**
- Is that clear? In your conflict, there should be no name calling, derogatory adjectives, angry accusations, violent outbursts, cussing, or harsh criticism coming out of your mouth. And watch your body language: try not to be intimidating or overly dramatic, rolling your eyes, and so on.
- You have to express your perspective in a way that is edifying, a way that will build the other person up in Christ, to be a better person, yes, but also to be an encouraged person. When conflict resolution is done well, both parties come away encouraged and built up in Christ.
- Pastor Chuck Swindoll says, "One of the marks of [spiritual] maturity is the ability to disagree without becoming disagreeable" [*Grace Awakening*, 159]. Seek to model Christ, seek the top-line response. The sixth principle is, "Speak in an edifying way."

† **[12: reconcile]** Principle 7: Work hard to work things out.

- How important is it that we try to reconcile after a conflict? Jesus told his fellow Jews they should seek to reconcile before coming to worship, that they should delay their sacrifice in order to attend to reconciliation. He said this in **Matthew 5.23-24 NIV: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift."**
- **[13: resolve]** We find some principles of resolving disputes in another teaching of Jesus. **Matthew 18.15 NET: If your brother sins, go and show him his fault when the two of you are alone. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother.**
- Go alone. Let me offer you some help: talk gently, lovingly. **Proverbs 16.24 NIV: Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.**
- Say something like "When you do that... I feel this..." "LeeAnn, when you say in front of our friends that I am 'little miss chatterbox,' I feel embarrassed." This is not an accusation, it is an

expression of how you feel and think, it gives them an opportunity to restore your relationship and even change their behavior [though it might prove to be you who needs to change!].

- A lot of conflict around here involves misunderstandings. Allow for that before you get angry. Seek to clarify things. When you are talking together, ask questions and then repeat what they said in your own words, to ensure that you got it correctly and assure them that you are listening and understanding. LeeAnn might say to me, “So what I hear you saying is that you don’t want me to tease you in front of other people.” Then I can clarify, “I didn’t mind when you said you would get a vacation while I was in Bolivia, I just didn’t like being called ‘little miss chatterbox’; maybe ‘your extra-manly chatterbox’ would be ok.”
- Do listen carefully. **Proverbs 18.13 NIV: To answer before listening-- that is folly and shame.**
- Reflect on their perspective; try to understand it. Seek truth, not victory. If you have a share in the blame, own up to it; if you need to be part of the change, then do what you have to do, even if the other person does not.

† **[14: bless]** Sometimes the other person will be difficult. When I was in Israel I was annoyed by talkative people not respectfully listening to our local professor tour guide. One day on the bus, one of these people talked through something the professor was saying, and then asked me what he had said. I looked in his face as I replied “I don’t know, I couldn’t hear him.” This other fellow took offense at this, felt I was being critical and had embarrassed him in front of the others. At the next rest stop, he put his hands on me in a threatening gesture. I was, in my flesh, very tempted to show him I remembered enough martial arts to make him sorry. But God helped me with restraint. I prayed a lot that night. I felt I was in the right, and I thought he was making things a lot worse than they had to be, but I was not sure what to do. The next morning at breakfast, God had done his work, and this fellow apologized for his part in all this, and I said I was sorry I had embarrassed him.

- In those situations, keep praying for yourself and them, stay calm, be patient, be reasonable. Remember principles one through six. **Romans 12.14 NIV: Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Romans 12.21 NIV: Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**
- Seek to model Christ, seek the top-line response. The seventh principle is “Work hard to work things out.”

† **[15: community]** Sometimes there seems no way to reconcile. **Matthew 18.16 NET: But if he does not listen, take one or two others with you, so that at the testimony of two or three witnesses every matter may be established.**

- If you cannot resolve the conflict or the other person does not see his sin, then you bring one or two trusted mature Christians with you to talk about it together. This might be the elders of the church, though not necessarily. Fellow small group members or mutual friends in the church might be more effective and less intimidating.
- It is important when involving others not to gossip. Even when asking for prayer support, you should not share all the gory details, especially since you would be offering only your perspective. Just say, “Please pray for LeeAnn and me, as we work through an issue together.”
- You can seek godly counsel, but talk only to someone who is part of the problem or part of the solution. Talking to someone who cannot help resolve the problem is gossip. When you involve others clearly distinguish between facts, your emotions, and your perceptions.

- **Matthew 18.17: If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. If he refuses to listen to the church, treat him like a Gentile** [which would be a non-believer in this context] **or a tax collector** [meaning a gross sinner who takes advantage of people].
- This relates to church discipline, another topic entirely. But I will say that even in church discipline, we seek to help the other person. The goals of such discipline are to not only preserve honor for God, protect the purity of the church, and guard others from being tempted, deceived, divided, or otherwise harmed, but also to restore the fallen believer to health, a walk with God, fellowship in the church, and usefulness for the mission.

What we do not consider top line responses

- † **[16: escape]** Before we close, I want to mention some responses which would not be top-line. First, we have forms of peace faking or escape responses: avoiding the conflict rather than resolving it.
- This includes denying that the problem exists, refusing to do what you should to resolve it in a timely manner.
 - Another example is avoiding the person so the problem does not get resolved. This is never the answer in church matters. It can be necessary in life or death situations. **1 Samuel 19.9-10 NIV: While David was playing the lyre, Saul tried to pin him to the wall with his spear, but David eluded him as Saul drove the spear into the wall. That night David made good his escape.**
 - An extreme response would be suicide, which represents a loss of hope due to ongoing conflict. But who is our source of hope? Christ. And what is the content of our hope? That in Christ all things will be made right, with us restored to God for an eternity of peace and joy on a renewed earth without sin or conflict. Don't give up on Christ, don't commit suicide!
 - **[17: attack]** There also are forms of peace breaking or attack responses: bringing pressure on your antagonist to gain victory by force.
 - One is unnecessary litigation. The Bible says we should try to resolve things in the church. Paul accusingly asked in **1 Corinthians 6.1 NIV: If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Lord's people?** Seriously, who are you going to trust to judge, fellow believers who at least might be guided by the Holy Spirit or the pagan legal system?
 - Even worse is to use force or intimidation to compel the other person to do as you want.
 - An extreme example of that would be violence or even just thoughts of it. Jesus said in **Matthew 5.21-22 NET, "You have heard that it was said to an older generation, 'Do not murder,' and 'whoever murders will be subjected to judgment.' But I say to you that anyone who is angry with a brother will be subjected to judgment. And whoever insults a brother will be brought before the council, and whoever says 'Fool' [to a brother] will be sent to fiery hell.** He sets a high standard, doesn't he?

Conclusion

- † **[18: title]** Using these principles, Mark and I will develop a church conflict covenant, to which we will ask you all to agree. If we handle conflict like Christians and resolve it biblically, then we can turn what our spiritual adversaries thought to be trouble into something that glorifies God even more.

- Remember, **Ephesians 6.12 NIV: For our struggle is not against flesh and blood** [that is, each other], **but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.**
- Sometimes conflict erupts because we are deceived by our spiritual enemies. This is a real issue in churches today! Think about it, how would demons go about attacking a church like ours? They can mess with our technology [which it seems like they have been doing lately], but the real damage they can do is relational. Jesus wants us to have peace and unity, they do not; let's not let them succeed.
- Let's pray now and then go forth in pursuit of the gospel mission with stronger bonds of relationship, because when differences or conflicts do arise, we will know how to handle them.