

## II. Resolving Conflict

by

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Conflict among church members probably embarrasses church leaders more than any other aspect of body life. Many Christians carry an unrecognized burden of frustration, pain, and discouragement — the fallout of one fight too many among believers. While the price of mishandled conflict is substantial, many leaders seem to want to look the other way and ignore the problem until it reaches crisis proportions in their own back yards.

Involvement in conflict is unpleasant for most people. Specific strategies for managing conflict must therefore be developed and employed so that the general health of the church does not suffer further deterioration.

Our objective here is to present a number of concepts and tools which can be used to bring out the best in people — especially when the people are embroiled in conflict. The focus is on situations wherein the participants are morally responsible, rational, and willing to compromise, if necessary, to see the conflict resolved. Procedures for situations in which the preceding cannot be assumed are handled in Haugk's (1988) excellent treatment of that special case.

### Knowing Where We Are

A place to begin in improving our conflict management skills is to do an objective analysis of our preferred style in conflict situations. It is important for us to learn how we lead before we spend much energy learning new ways of handling conflict.

Numerous inventories are available to assist the church leader with this self-assessment. Speed Leas (1984) has developed an easily understood self-scoring instrument which assesses a person's preference for the following conflict strategies: supporting, negotiating, collaborating, avoiding/accommodating, compelling, and persuading. Teleometrics International has developed the *Conflict Management Survey* (1986) to assess the relative importance attached to persons and to tasks when resolving conflict. Styles include synergistic, compromise, yield-lose, win-lose, and lose-leave.

These and other available inventories assume that a leader is likely to use several or perhaps all of the styles. It is also assumed that each person has a preferred mode of dealing with conflict. Knowing one's style can help eliminate blindspots and help ensure more intentional and appropriate matching of style to the demands of the context.

Some of us might think that a cursory and subjective personal conflict assessment is sufficient. Louis McBurney, a Christian psychiatrist and counselor for church leaders, observes that "many people in the ministry find it very

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difficult to admit they have any weaknesses or needs. One of the most difficult tasks I face is helping them admit this.” (McBurney, 1980, 92).

The risks of not exploring our style for counterproductive features can be significant. Speed Leas, an authority on conflict in the church, has said, “A leader who is uncomfortable with dissension, who is unable to encourage others to express their differences, who negatively judges those who do surface their differences, is going to cause even more organizational difficulty” (1982, 63). Church leaders can take constructive steps toward greater harmony in the church by spending time in the process of assessing their own preferred mode(s) of handling conflict.

### Individual Strategies for Bringing out the Best in People

Church leaders can take some steps on the individual level of their own lives to enhance the constructiveness of the way conflict situations are managed within the church. Our discussion of ways for bringing out the best in people begins with six general principles and concludes with three specific tools which have proven their worth. The ideas are not comprehensive and are not meant to minimize the difficult challenge of bringing more constructive and loving methods into the life of the church. We must avoid three tempting pitfalls: assuming that there is a quick way, that there is an easy way, or that there is a foolproof way to resolve conflict.

#### General Principles

The first principle is to believe that, by God’s grace, we can be persons that bring out the best in others. No doubt many leaders have never seriously considered this as a goal. The Scriptures affirm that “His divine power has granted us everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3) and that “our adequacy is from God” (2 Cor. 3:5). Surely these promises include our ability to minimize the devastating effects of some conflict.

The second principle is to work on bringing out the best in ourselves. Loving ones neighbor as oneself does require attention to personal needs. Pastors/leaders must attend to such things as exercise, rest, recreation, time alone, and proper diet. Skills must be developed in keeping short accounts, being able to say “No” when necessary, minimizing overload. We are to give careful thought and apply wisdom to how we “walk” (Eph. 5:15).

Third, leaders should work on being alert to the circumstances that bring out the worst in them. With some effort (perhaps through journaling) we can become aware of particular times of vulnerability when destructive reactions are more likely. Times of the day, week, month or year may be considered. Other triggers might include getting little sleep for two consecutive nights, not being appreciated, being criticized publicly, committee meetings which routinely go beyond announced time limits, being asked to do something without adequate preparation time, or having ones mate compared to the previous pastor’s spouse. Being aware of these sensitive times can make it easier for us “to lay aside the old self” (Eph. 4:22).

The fourth principle is probably more difficult to implement because of role expectations (our own or others') that the pastor is the answer person — one who gives rather than needs help. Nevertheless, pastors who want to see greater fruit in bringing out the best in others would benefit by bonding with others in the body of Christ (Gal. 6:2). Sometimes this will need to involve colleagues or mature Christians from another church or fellowship. Time spent working on this principle will help undercut the crippling notion that pastors/leaders should be lone rangers or self-sufficient.

Many passages of Scripture (e.g., Prov. 12:18, 25; Eph. 4:29; Phil. 4:8) point to the fifth principle: we should base our efforts to help people on their strengths. This does not mean that we are blind to their weaknesses. It merely points to the place of emphasis. Punishing (zapping) people for their errant behavior is not very effective in helping them learn new behaviors. Punishment (if sufficiently intense) does not eliminate unwanted behavior; it merely suppresses it. Unfortunately, our formal and informal training in critical thinking has made us masters at finding fault but novices in finding the praiseworthy. Motivation for constructive change is marshalled when we affirm and help another to recognize personal strengths.

Finally, those of us who want to bring out the best in others must be serious in beseeching God through prayer. In the actual order of things, prayer should be our first resource. Two prominent passages on prayer are given to us in the context of coping with conflict. The well-known assurance that "where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20) is part of the solution for those times when "your brother sins against you" (Matt. 18:15). Paul's exhortation to "be anxious for nothing" explicitly ties prayer to handling the stress caused by conflict between Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-7). For the sake of any combatants or participants, prayer must be a part of our efforts.

### *Specific Techniques*

*Communicate to build bridges.* It is crucial that those seeking to bring about a peaceful resolution of differences speak for themselves. "I" language is very important. For example, one might say, "As I see it . . ." or "What I wish would happen is . . ." When using "you" language, stick to descriptions of behavior. Avoid statements which interpret motives or intentions (e.g., "You say that, but *you* really just want to get even."). Also to be avoided are statements which judge, categorize, or absolutize in a negative manner (e.g., "You are just like your father, slower than molasses.').

Another way to build bridges is by making an effort to accurately reflect the feelings and experiences being expressed by the other person. There is a saying which goes, "I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what I said is not exactly what I meant." This reminds us that communication must be two-way — each person taking responsibility for the quality of the interaction.

When we fail to check out our understanding (e.g., "It sounds like you are really angry that no one called you ahead of time about the board meeting.''),

ambiguity abounds on two fronts. *We* are not sure we can really understand others' experiences, and *they* are not sure we can really appreciate where they are coming from. It might seem wooden and artificial to use reflection of feelings, but with practice and sincere delivery it can help defuse volatile situations — especially when the method is not overused. We encourage the best in others when we periodically acknowledge in an explicit way what we hear them saying.

We also help to bring out the best in others when we avoid labels and put-downs (e.g., “you jerk”). Labeling mistakenly equates the whole of a person with a few limited behaviors. Even in jest, this can be a perilous practice. Most people who are hypercritical of others are in fact very hard on themselves.

Points are earned when we are willing to admit our mistakes. By our being open and vulnerable in this way, others are less likely to be forced into a defensive or critical posture. Finally, those who want to keep conflict from bringing out the worst need to be careful to avoid gossip about the offending parties. Strife ceases when there is no gossip (Prov. 16:20).

*Keep short accounts.* All too often interpersonal problems grow worse because we wait until the exploding point before dealing with offenses. No case is being made here for being overly sensitive to every slight. If, however, something bothers us enough that our attention keeps returning to that slight, it is time for the accounts to be settled. Direct discussion is called for (Matt. 18:15, Gal. 6:1).

One system for keeping short accounts is the DESC script. When we recognize that another's behavior has been offensive, we may schedule a time when we can talk to the person in private. First, we should *describe* in objective and nonjudgemental terms the behavior that bothers us (e.g., “Last Sunday you talked to Amy during the hymns and the prayers.”). Then we can *express* our feelings associated with their behavior (e.g., “I was so distracted that I worked up a good case of anger before Pastor Jim ever started to preach.”). Next, we *specify* what we would like the person to do differently in the future (e.g., “I wish you would wait until the service is over to catch up on news.”). Finally, we note the consequences, if any, which we want to mention) e.g., “This bothers me so much that I may have to get up and move to a different section of the church if it continues.”).

*Be Responsible for personal feelings.* Emotional reactions, with their automatic and overlearned qualities, can be very misleading. Typically, we blame external events exclusively for the totality of emotional upset. For instance, a driver pulls out and drives 54 mph in the passing lane where the speed limit is 65 mph and road conditions are excellent. If we are traveling to an important meeting but are now slowed by this person, what is our reaction? Many might say something like, “Oh, he *really* makes me mad!” Slow driver (A) causes me to be angry (C). Activating event (A) causes emotional consequence (C). It all happens so quickly and seems so clear. What could be missing?

What is not initially apparent takes shape when we ask, “I am acting as

if I believed what to be true about A?” Soon interpretations and beliefs about A are identified. “He shouldn’t do that. How totally rotten to be delayed. I will probably be late. They will think I’m incompetent. I can’t stand this treatment. People like this turkey deserve to be shot.”

Anger builds as we keep running these thoughts over and over in our minds. Soon the key role of our cognitive processes (thoughts and beliefs) in emotional reactions becomes clearer. Actually the concept is not at all new — as we see in Proverbs 23:7: “For as he thinks within himself, so he is” Philipians 4:8, 9 instructs us what to think about to have peace of mind. We are challenged to be transformed (e.g., have our feelings and behavioral reactions changed) by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2). What we focus our mind on is very important (Col. 3:2).

The point is that what we think about a given event contributes significantly to the feelings we have about the event. The activating event (A) occurs first. Then, imperceptibly the beliefs (B) about A + B = C. We may not be able to control the A’s of life, but with concerted effort and instruction we can learn to challenge the B’s so that we substitute beliefs that are verifiable (“Where’s the evidence they will think I am incompetent?”) and not distorted or exaggerated (“Where is the proof that this is totally rotten and that I can’t stand it at all?”).

Unfortunately, our minds fool us by working so quickly. We contend that A caused C and almost totally ignore the role of our own self-talk (B) about A which we alone control.

We become responsible for our own feelings when we cease blaming others and assume responsibility for at least sustaining our emotional upset through our choice of self-talk (B). This does not ignore that we can be the victims of painful and even cruel actions (A), nor does it mean that we passively accept these unjust circumstances. But it is not other persons who run projection rooms is in our mind. We must be responsible for what we control.

One way to grasp this point is to remember this saying: “No situation is so bad that we can’t make it worse with our crooked thinking.” As we take responsibility for our own feelings (especially anger) and build bridges with good communication while using DESC scripts to keep short accounts, we go a long way toward bringing out the best in others — and in ourselves.

### Group Procedures for Bringing out the Best in People

Bringing out the best in people can also be approached on the group level. Every church organizes itself through various planning and decision-making groups. Each of these subgroups can be trained to use more effective ways of managing and resolving conflict. Numerous models have been suggested to deal with the various levels and types of conflict (e.g., Haugk 1988; Huttenlocker 1988; Leas 1982, 1989; McSwain and Treadwell 1981; Wakefield 1987).

The approach selected for review here has been developed by Malony (1988a, 1988b, 14-21). It not only addresses individual and group dimensions of con-

flict but also sensitively involves both the spiritual and psychological dynamics necessary for constructive results. Malony's model can effectively address those situations of ongoing conflict in which one or more of the participants have stopped being concerned with maintaining relationships or with accomplishing goals and tasks and are intensely focused on restoring threatened self-esteem.

It should be noted that Malony goes beyond mere methodology to advocate an organizational lifestyle for the church. All the models, methods, and techniques of conflict management must be employed as part of a process which preeminently values persons over programs and objectives. The church must consistently, persistently set its course toward helping its members become all they can become in Christ. Toward this end, it is necessary for church leaders to esteem differences and encourage their expression.

Once it becomes evident that conflict has surfaced in a group, the leader can suggest that special procedures be put into effect. At this point, Malony's 8-step model can be employed. (It is adapted and presented in abbreviated form here. The interested reader will profit by reviewing the complete documents available through H. Newton Malony at Fuller Theological Seminary.)

*Assume the best.* When the leader recognizes that conflict is erupting and individuals are struggling to restore threatened self-esteem, the leader can call the group's attention to the special situation and the need for special procedures. If this model has been taught beforehand, the leader can mention the "new tradition" that is being used at "First Church." The leader overtly and specifically reviews the basic assumption of good will: "Let's take a minute to remember that each of us is specially gifted by God and is a unique and precious creation. We are each doing our best to find and do the will of God in this situation. Let's remember that as Christians we are committed to living together and loving one another in spite of any difference we may have."

*Classify the difference(s).* It will help the group to regain some objectivity if it can spend a few moments talking about what type of conflict seems to be occurring. It really does not matter what classification system is used or whether all participants can agree on what type the present conflict is. Some unproductive emotional energy is drained away as the group refocuses its attention on the issues at hand and, for the moment, away from hurts and personalities.

Malony recommends four categories of classification: issues, convictions, ways, and means. *Issues* have to do with what the church considers its "domain of responsibility" (1988b, 16). Examples might include day care, the homeless, missions, or education. Conflicts of *conviction* concern beliefs around which consensus is assumed to be needed. Examples here could include the inerrancy of Scripture or the nature of spiritual gifts. *Ways* conflicts revolve around which programs or methods will be used to implement issues and convictions. *Means* conflicts focus on how the programs will be supported with finances, facilities, and other resources.

*Clarify the viewpoints.* Healthy resolution of conflict requires that differences be aired. Some leaders are afraid of this step, fearing that it may get out of

hand. In actuality, the conflict is less likely to escalate as people get a chance to share feelings and perspectives and have them recognized. In this step every person involved is encouraged to identify and express personal views. Church leaders can play a key role by encouraging and modeling such behavior.

*Prompt deeper reflection.* To this point the whole group has been involved as a unit. Now it is time to ask the participants to do some individual work. The goal here is to expand awareness and deepen understanding. The leader in charge directs each person to reflect privately on the following questions:

“What is God teaching me about myself or Himself?”

“What is God asking or leading me to do in this situation?”

“In what ways are my self-esteem needs and feelings toward others influencing my approach in this conflict?”

The group may need to be reminded that no one is being asked to change any opinions. The objective is increased understanding.

*Promote thorough understanding.* Maloney prescribes a very intentional process to assure understanding among the parties involved. One person volunteers to begin by stating their viewpoint. Then someone with a differing (or opposite) viewpoint states their understanding of what has just been said. “Now, let’s see. You seem to be saying that the copy machine we have is good enough for our bulletins and newsletters. You’re worried about going over budget if we buy a new one. On top of that you’re a little annoyed because you see me as repeatedly not taking the budget seriously. You vote to repair the old machine. How am I reading you?”

The second person keeps working at it until the first party can say, “Yes, that’s what I mean.” Then the process is repeated until every one who has a viewpoint says, “I believe you understand what I’m saying.” As in the preceding stage, no one is asked or otherwise pressured to change an opinion.

*Encourage sincere forgiveness.* Again, time for inner reflection is provided. Without being coerced to change any viewpoint, each person is asked to privately seek forgiveness from God for such things as uncharitable assumptions about other (e.g., believing the worst); over-involvement to the neglect of others, the church and the work of Christ (e.g., the negative impact on the youth and children of the church); and attacks through gossip, bad reports or direct and poor-spirited verbal criticism. After seeking forgiveness for their own misconduct, participants can, through private subvocal prayer, grant forgiveness to the others for the specific offenses they committed. These procedures should help the participants to become aware of such un-Christlike behaviors.

*Establish a goal.* Sharing, understanding and discussion must eventually move toward a “consensus” or toward a “distinction” goal. Some projects lend themselves more easily to distinction goals. For instance, the church could emply both Evangelism Explosion and a program of friendship evangelism. Both are possible, and the participants could agree to mutually support one another in their separate programs. Most churches couldnot afford two copier

machines, so presumable in that instance some sort of consensus goal will need to be selected.

*Recall ultimate priorities.* Now that a decision has been made, it is time to bring the process of conflict resolution full circle. The process began by focusing on commonly shared faith and discipleship. The process concludes with a reemphasis of the larger issues of the faith. Believers need to continue to affirm the importance of worshipping God, glorifying Christ through loving obedience, winning the lost, building up the body of Christ, and serving as we are gifted.

### Conclusion

Conflict is one of the most draining factors in church life, neutralizing much-needed potential. In the face of conflict some leaders seem to vacillate between a smothering denial and an authoritarian dominance. They seem uncertain about what to do but are too busy to work on improving their style of leadership and conflict management. However, Matthew 5:9 does not say that the peace *lovers* are blessed. Those who would be blessed (and a blessing) must roll up their sleeves and studiously work at being peace *makers*.

Conflict is not entirely destructive and often contains the seeds of great opportunity. Every believer has been given a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17-21). The estranged lives we meet at every turn provide excellent opportunities to fulfill our commitment to the Lord and His church. Every church leader has a wealth of training opportunities for learning how to bring out the best in people. After a solid self-assessment, the leader can set about to systematically develop individual and group approaches for minimizing the destructive impact of conflict.

What decision will we make: business as usual or seize the opportunity? "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds . . . encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Heb. 10:24, 25).

