

Resolving Conflict Well Seminar

Introduction: (Stuart)

Our seminar tonight is focussing on the resolution of conflict within the Christian Community. We may experience conflict in our marriages and families, in our places of work, with the school bully and with all sorts of people who are not part of our Christian Community. In a fallen world, this should not surprise us either. Each of these contexts for resolving conflict bring with them distinctive complexities or problems. The range of possible situations of conflict for us means that we cannot adequately address them all in this single seminar. So, for the sake of clarity, this seminar is particularly addressing the Christian Community—the church—as the context within which we will be aiming to resolve conflict well. Many of the principles that we discuss here will be useful and applicable in other spheres of resolving conflict—but not all.

To frame our discussion tonight we would do well to recall Jaime's recent sermon on this topic. This sermon helpfully gave us a Theological Framework for understanding Conflict.

Some key points to recall:

- We live in a fallen world.
- As Christians, although reconciled to God in Christ, we still sin; thus marring our relationships with God and with one another.
- Therefore, we should not be surprised that we experience conflict within the Christian community.
- Resolving Conflict is a Top Priority for us (Matt 5:23-24)

Matt. 5:23 “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

- We ought to take the initiative in resolving conflict

Rom. 5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us...¹⁰ For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

God has taken the initiative in resolving our conflict with him. He is the offended party, but he has taken the initiative. We sometimes prefer to avoid resolving conflict—it's painful. If we are the injured party, we wait for them to take the initiative. But that is not God's way. Leaving conflict unresolved leads to a stalemate and to festering wounds left unattended. Following God's model, we ought to take the initiative in resolving conflict, whether we are the offended party or not.

- The goal of conflict resolution is Reconciliation, not the mere 'end of hostilities' (Rom 5:10). Peace, real peace, means mending broken relationships. For example, the Father to the Prodigal Son in Luke 15.

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This seminar is meant to give us some practical help in following through in Conflict Resolution. Conflict can either be constructive or destructive—the choice is ours. We need not be afraid of conflict, but rather we can see it as an opportunity for transformation and growth in Christ-likeness. Ultimately, we want to be a Community that can embrace conflict as a positive thing; as an occasion for progress in the faith.

Your 'Style' of Conflict (Sally)

Prior to the Seminar participants were asked to fill in the Adult Personal Conflict Style Indicator Questionnaire. The purpose of this device was to help you reflect on your usual manner of responding to conflict. The result of the indicator locates you on a grid, measuring your tendency to commonly value 'the issue' or 'relationship' in any given situation. See the PowerPoint presentation notes for detail.

Rules and Skills for Peace-Making (Stuart)

Eventually, a commitment to resolving conflict in order to bring about reconciliation is going to lead you to sitting down face to face and talking. It is a difficult conversation; but it is a necessary one. To do it well, you need a plan: where is this conversation going, how are we going to get there, and what are the rules along the way.

Before the conversation

- Set up the meeting at a time and place where you'll be able to give your full attention to the matter at hand. The place should be appropriate to the nature of your relationship with the person: do not invade personal space, look for neutral territory that is 'semi-public' if you would not normally see each other in your homes. The ideal place is one where others can see you but not readily overhear your conversation—it puts a stop to yelling and inappropriate outbursts.
- Make sure the person knows that you have something important and specific that you want to talk about: no ambushes!
- In the first instance, if the matter involves just two people, go alone. (Matthew 18:15-17). Keep it between the two of you. Avoid triangulation.
- Be prepared to leave your immediate emotions aside. Our emotions are rightly involved in such personal matters but ensure that you are not being driven by emotion—that you are in control of your emotions. You want to be driven by your conviction that you need to resolve the matter, not your feeling of hurt. If you can't yet control your emotion in regard to the matter, maybe wait a little longer.
- Pray for yourself and the other person. Recognise that both you and the person that you are meeting with stand together before God, open before him, as you engage in this process.

The Goal (where is this conversation going to go?)

Before actually meeting, it is good to have a clear objective for the conversation you are about to have. The ultimate goal is reconciliation.

Reconciliation involves:

- mutual understanding,
- acceptance of responsibility for wrong-doing,
- apology for specific fault,
- restitution (making it right, making it up; where possible), and;

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- repentance, mutually agreed and understood (the way that we will relate in the future so that the same problem does not happen again).

Ideally, you want **an acknowledgment that Reconciliation has taken place**. This may not be immediately possible but you are beginning the process. Toward the end of your time together you might ask, "Can we say that we are at peace yet? Or do we have more work to do?"

Even if reconciliation is not immediately possible or achieved, one goal of your time together is personal transformation. This is an opportunity to learn more about yourself and to change and grow in response to that knowledge.

The Process (how are we going to get there?)

The preparation is complete, now it is time to sit face-to-face and talk.

1. Explain the reason you wanted to talk: you have perceived a problem that you want to resolve so that relationship is strengthened. Since you are not sure how long this conversation might need, agree on a finish time (say 1 hour).
2. Define the issue clearly; describing the actual facts of events.
3. Confirm that the facts are true. Recognise that in any situation you only have a part of the truth.
4. Share how you felt/respond to these events. Explain what issues are at stake for you. Ensure that you have a 'shared understanding' of these factors.
5. Each party identifies where they are responsible for the breakdown in relationship.
6. Apology for specific fault: no weasel words.
 - "I'm sorry if you felt that way....." [it's still your fault, not mine]
 - "I'm sorry, but...." [I might look to be at fault, but really there was a valid reason. So, actually, I'm not to blame...]
 - "I didn't mean to hurt you...." [but you did!]
 - Name it for what it was. Do not minimise the hurt. ["I'm sorry about that little bombing of Hiroshima, but maybe all just need to move on."]
7. Is there anything that can be done to make this up? Restitution might mean replacing a broken object, payment of lost income, making an apology in front of other parties in whose eyes your reputation was lowered; etc. This principle of restitution is embedded in the OT (Ex 22 etc).
8. Repentance: how are we going to act towards each other and in relation to this situation in the future so that our relationship is not hurt again? Form a clearly defined plan, with clear boundaries and actions: mutual understanding assured.
9. Confidentiality: aim at a 'needs to know' audience only—that is, only those involved (eg witnesses) who need to know that it's been resolved. The best situation is where it stays only between the two of you.

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Skills to be implemented

- Active listening (body language is more than 50% of the meaning; tone of voice is another 20% of the meaning)
- Clarify before response: Reflect back what you have heard before going forward in the conversation—build 'shared understanding'.
- Ask questions first. Beware of preconceived ideas.
- Attack the issue, not the person. Deflect emotive statements.
- Help each other to be true (not two faced, not gossiping). For example, when A talks to B about a problem with C, but does not address the issue with C; a helpful thing for B to say might be, "What happens when you talk to C about this?" This encourages direct conversations and resolution, not triangulation.

The Rules (for resolving well)

- Stick to the point: no incidental swipes and collateral damage. No history lessons. That's why the matter must be clearly defined up front.
- Use 'I' statements: not assertions about the other person, no blame game, no absolute overstatements (you never....., you always.....)
- Value the experience of the other person. There is no need to be threatened by their views or experience of things.
- When you observe a friend or a church member in conflict, remember that it is theirs to handle, not yours. Pray for them but don't talk to them about it,... yet.

Application: Scenarios

Following this presentation, participants were asked to form small discussion groups to consider the following scenarios.

(1) During the monthly Parish Council meeting, a discussion about new ministry directions gets a little heated. Joanna and Simon, who find themselves on different sides of the debate, exchange a couple of un-kind remarks about each other's refusal to listen to the arguments. It's clear from their body language that they are both quite annoyed at each other. After some time, it's clear that the issue can not be resolved at this meeting. Further discussion is held over until the following meeting. The meeting then ends in prayer.

Imagine you were at the meeting, and observed this exchange. What are you thinking? Will you do or say anything? Should Joanna and/or Simon do or say anything?

(2) The music team at church is meeting to discuss the introduction of some new songs into their repertoire. Peter has brought some suggestions of songs which could be introduced, but Sonia and Gareth, really don't like the music. Gareth, however, has brought a couple of suggestions of his own, and is keen that these songs be introduced because the words are so good. Julie and Roger don't really like any of the suggested songs. It seems like there's a stalemate.

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What are the key issues in this conflict? How does the music team resolve the issues in a way that will preserve their relationships, and develop the music ministry as a whole?

(3) Belinda and Bruce had been going to their local church for some years, and were active members of a home group as well. They had 3 young boys; a 6 year old and twins of 4 years old.

During morning tea after church, the boys were very energetic, and often played chasings in and out of the morning tea crowd. Jeremy and Joan were in charge of the morning teas, and had been getting increasingly concerned about hot tea spilling as a result of the boys' playing. They had spoken gently to the boys on one or two occasions, and the boys had calmed down, only to take up their games again later.

Belinda and Bruce were always very involved in packing up music after the church service, and so were often not around at the beginning of tea. And when they were, it was well known that Bruce in particular was excellent with new-comers and had a real ministry welcoming them at tea and involving them in conversation.

Jeremy and Joan began to make a few passing critical comments about the boys and sometimes about their parents to those they were serving tea to. Over the months it began to be a source of real concern and of irritation to Joan and Jeremy. Joan in particular found her eyes flicking towards Bruce and Belinda during the service, and feeling anger and frustration.

One day, there was an accident where one of the boys knocked an elderly woman's arm, and the tea spilled over her hand, burning her. Joan and Jeremy both yelled sharply at the boys, and then spoke very abruptly to Belinda, saying,

"Why don't you do something about those boys! You never control those boys at morning tea!" [continued over the page]

Belinda felt they had over-reacted and blamed the boys for something that could happen at any time. She was angry and hurt, and felt unappreciated for all she and Bruce did for the church. She grabbed the kids and her husband and left, hiding her tears as she went.

- List all the issues emerging here for Jeremy and Joan and then for Belinda and Bruce.
- What could Jeremy and Joan have done;
 - at the outset when they first saw a potentially dangerous situation?
 - after their reaction?
- What could Belinda have done;
 - when the incident occurred
 - after the incident?
- What could the hearers of Jeremy and Joan's comments over tea have done or said?

(4) Bob and Fred are members of the same Home Group. At their weekly meeting their Home Group leader asks for suggestions for a social activity, which the group will organise in order to invite along some non-Christian friends.

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Bob: I think we should have a 4 wheel driving day in the Wattogan State Forest.

Fred: That's a ridiculous idea. None of my friends would want to come to that. And besides, 4WDs are bad for the environment. I think we should go bowling.

Bob: Why should we always do what you want to do. Just this once, let's do something I suggest.

Home Group Leader: Ummm, OK, perhaps we could do both

Fred: No. Who wants to do all that driving through the bush stuff??? Lets go bowling.

Phil: Well I'm busy that weekend so I can't come. Sorry.

Fred: But we haven't even set a date yet.

Phil: Ummm, well, I'm busy.

Bob: Nice work, Freddy. Now Phil doesn't want to come. You've done it again.

Fred: But you love bowling Phil, don't you? Yes! So we're agreed-- Bowling it is.

Home Group Leader: Could we drive 4WDs to a bowling place?

Fred: You've never even been bowling, have you?

Bob: I'm not interested.

After a long silence....

Fred: There you go then-- bowling it is.

How are each of the people participating in this conflict? How might the Home Group Leader have helped Bob and Fred?