

South Bay Church Plant Sabbath School

8 – Dealing with Church Conflict

Introduction

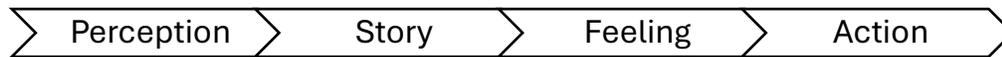
This week we look at how the early church handled conflict and some of the lessons we can learn. Conflict in a church plant is somewhat inevitable because of different personalities and expectations. There is a temptation in a church plant to go, “This church will be the ideal church!” But different ideals create tension, and we need a process to work through these expectations.

How comfortable do you feel dealing with conflict?

Acts 14:1-7 – Conflict in Iconium

What was the cause of division in the synagogue and how long did it go on?

Some Jews perceived that Paul was attacking their religion, so they created a story about Paul and Barnabas, and that story caused strong feelings of animosity, which eventually resulted in the crowd wanting to stone them. Notice how an event is interpreted by people in the situation:



How might this understanding help us to navigate strongly held disagreements?

Acts 14:8-20 – Conflict in Lystra

Even though Paul and Barnabas move to Lystra, who followed them there?

Just because you have moved on from a conflict doesn't mean it won't follow you. Angry people tend to become resentful and vengeful. In fact, it led them to attempt murder.

Acts 14:21-28 – Returning to the Place of Conflict

Notice that Paul and Barnabas went back to the same cities that they had to flee, and they strengthened and supported the new believers there. Why do you think they went back to cities where there had already been so much conflict?

Acts 15:1-5 – Conflict in Antioch and Jerusalem

What was the conflict over in Jerusalem?

It was the same group of upset men who had probably argued about the inclusion of the Gentiles in Acts 11:2. They were arguing that the Gentile believers keep the entire ceremonial law, including circumcision, which would have limited how many Gentiles would come into the church.

Acts 15:6

How did the church respond to the conflict?

Rather than avoiding the situation, or allowing different factions to break apart the church, the church took action and decided to “consider the matter” in a council. This was an appropriate move because it was a theological and practical discussion that involved the whole church.

What are your fears about having a group/committee deal with a conflict?

Acts 15:7-11

Why do you think it was important for them to be reminded by Peter of what God had done before?

Peter retells his personal experience without laying blame but by pointing to the providences of God. How would you solve the tension between who believe in a sacred tradition and those who believe God is leading in a different way today?

Acts 15:12-13

Why is listening so important to resolving conflict? **James 1:19-20**

One benefit of listening is that we get to hear a different story to the one that we have been telling ourselves. We need to be open to how God is leading in someone else's life.

Acts 15:14-18

What does James appeal to?

The words of Scripture clearly showed God's intentions to reach the Gentiles. James uses the words of Scripture to focus on God's leading rather than their personal opinions.

Acts 15:19-21

James at last comes to a judgment that seeks to make it as easy as possible for Gentiles to come to faith, while remaining true to biblical convictions. How can we balance our desire to reach as many people as possible with the need to not compromise our faith?

Acts 15:22-35

Rather than allowing this intense dispute to divide them, the early church found a creative solution and then had their leaders get behind it and explain it to others. They focused on strengthening each other, rather than harboring grievances or complaining about the decision that was made.

How do you handle things when you don't get your way? How might you support decisions that the church makes, even when you disagree with them?

Acts 15:36-41 Conflict Over John Mark

Why did Paul and Barnabas have such a disagreement over John Mark? How do you think this was related to their personalities?

Later, Paul came to view John Mark more favorably (Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24 Acts 12:12). It's not unusual for people to leave a church plant because of different personalities and ways of working. We need to see God's leading despite some of these disagreements.

Conclusion

These chapters teach us biblical principles for resolving conflict. We learn to listen to another person's story to understand how they see things. We tune in to the leading of the Spirit in ways that may be different from what we expect. We connect our experiences to the Word of God, and we make a decision that is best for the whole church. Then we support that decision or move on.

A Theology for Conflict Resolution (adapted from *The Peacemaker* by Ken Sande)

(See <https://rw360.org/the-four-gs/>)

Conflict is not necessarily bad or destructive. Even when conflict is caused by sin and causes a great deal of stress, God can use it for good (see [Rom. 8:28-29](#)). As the Apostle Paul wrote in [1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1](#), conflict actually provides three significant opportunities. By God's grace, you can use conflict to:

- Glorify God (by trusting, obeying, and imitating him)
- Serve other people (by helping to bear their burdens or by confronting them in love)
- Grow to be like Christ (by confessing sin and turning from attitudes that promote conflict).

These concepts are totally overlooked in most conflicts because people naturally focus on escaping from the situation or overcoming their opponent. Therefore, it is wise to periodically step back from a conflict and ask yourself whether you are doing all that you can to take advantage of these special opportunities.

1st G: Glorify God

When the Apostle Paul urged the Corinthians to live “to the glory of God,” he was not talking about one hour during a worship service. He wanted them to show God honor and bring him praise in day-to-day life, especially by the way that they resolved personal conflicts (see [1 Cor. 10:31](#)).

“How can I please and honor the Lord in this situation?”

As mentioned above, you can glorify God in the midst of conflict by trusting him, obeying him, and imitating him (see [Prov. 3:4-6](#); [John 14:15](#); [Eph. 5:1](#)). One of the best ways to keep these concerns uppermost in your mind is to regularly ask yourself this focusing question: “How can I please and honor the Lord in this situation?”

2nd G: Get the Log Out of Your Own Eye

One of the most challenging principles of peacemaking is set forth in [Matthew 7:5](#), where Jesus says, “You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.”

There are generally two kinds of “logs” you need to look for when dealing with conflict. First, you need to ask whether you have had a critical, negative, or overly sensitive attitude that has led to unnecessary conflict. One of the best ways to do this is to spend some time meditating on [Philippians 4:2-9](#), which describes the kind of attitude Christians should have even when they are involved in a conflict.

The second kind of log you must deal with is actual sinful words and actions. Because you are often blind to your own sins, you may need an honest friend or adviser who will help you to take an objective look at yourself and face up to your contribution to a conflict.

When you identify ways that you have wronged another person, it is important to admit your wrongs honestly and thoroughly. One way to do this is to use the [Seven A's of Confession](#).

“Conflict is often fueled by good desires that you have elevated to sinful demands”

The most important aspect of getting the log out of your own eye is to go beyond the confession of wrong behavior and face up to the root cause of that behavior. The Bible teaches that conflict comes from the desires that battle in your heart ([James 4:1-3](#); [Matt. 15:18-19](#)). Some of these desires are obviously sinful, such as wanting to conceal the truth, bend others to your will, or have revenge. In many situations, however, conflict is fueled by good desires that you have elevated to sinful demands, such as a craving to be understood, loved, respected, or vindicated.

Any time you become excessively preoccupied with something, even a good thing, and seek to find happiness, security or fulfillment in it rather than in God, you are guilty of idolatry. Idolatry inevitably leads to conflict with God (“You shall have no other gods before me”). It also causes conflict with other people. As James writes, when we want something but don’t get it, we kill and covet, quarrel and fight ([James 4:1-4](#)).

There are three basic steps you can take to overcome the idolatry that fuels conflict. First, you should ask God to help you see where you have been guilty of wrong worship, that is, where you are focusing your love, attention, and energy on something other than God. Second, you should specifically identify and renounce each of the desires contributing to the conflict. Third, you should deliberately pursue right worship, that is, to fix your heart and mind on God and to seek joy, fulfillment, and satisfaction in him alone.

As God guides and empowers these efforts, you can find freedom from the idols that fuel conflict and be motivated to make choices that will please and honor Christ. This change in heart will usually speed a resolution to a present problem, and at the same time improve your ability to avoid similar conflicts in the future.

3rd G: Gently Restore

Another key principle of peacemaking involves an effort to help others understand how they have contributed to a conflict. When Christians think about talking to someone else about a conflict, one of the first verses that comes to mind is [Matthew 18:15](#): “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.” If this verse is read in isolation, it seems to teach that we must always use direct confrontation to force others to admit they have sinned. If the verse is read in context, however, we see that Jesus had something much more flexible and beneficial in mind than simply standing toe to toe with others and describing their sins.

Just before this passage, we find Jesus’ wonderful metaphor of a loving shepherd who goes to look for a wandering sheep and then rejoices when it is found ([Matt. 18:12](#)–14). Thus, [Matthew 18:15](#) is introduced with a theme of restoration, not condemnation. Jesus repeats this theme just after telling us to “go and show him his fault” by adding, “If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.” And then he hits the restoration theme a third time in verses 21–35, where he uses the parable of the unmerciful servant to remind us to be as merciful and forgiving to others as God is to us ([Matt. 18:21](#)–35).

Jesus is clearly calling for something much more loving and redemptive than simply confronting others with a list of their wrongs. Similarly, [Galatians 6:1](#) gives us solid counsel on our what our attitude and purpose ought to be when we go to our brother. “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.” Our attitude should be one of gentleness rather than anger, and our purpose should be to restore rather than condemn.

Yet even before you go to talk with someone, remember that it is appropriate to overlook minor offenses (see [Prov. 19:11](#)). As a general rule, an offense should be overlooked if you can answer “no” to all of the following questions:

- Is the offense seriously dishonoring God?
- Has it permanently damaged a relationship?
- Is it seriously hurting other people? and
- Is it seriously hurting the offender himself?

If you answer “yes” to any of these questions, an offense is too serious to overlook, in which case God commands you to go and talk with the offender privately and lovingly about the situation. As you do so, remember to:

- Pray for humility and wisdom
- Plan your words carefully (think of how you would want to be confronted)
- Anticipate likely reactions and plan appropriate responses (rehearsals can be very helpful)
- Choose the right time and place (talk in person whenever possible)
- Assume the best about the other person until you have facts to prove otherwise ([Prov. 11:27](#))
- Listen carefully ([Prov. 18:13](#))
- Speak only to build others up ([Eph. 4:29](#))
- Ask for feedback from the other person
- Recognize your limits (only God can change people; see [Rom. 12:18](#); [2 Tim. 2:24-26](#))

If an initial conversation does not resolve a conflict, do not give up. Review what was said and done, and look for ways to make a better approach during a follow up conversation. It may also be wise to ask a spiritually mature friend for advice on how to approach the other person more effectively. Then try again with even stronger prayer support.

If repeated, careful attempts at a private discussion are not fruitful, and if the matter is still too serious to overlook, you should ask one or two other people to meet with you and your opponent and help you to resolve your differences through mediation, arbitration, or accountability (see [Matt. 18:16-20](#); [1 Cor. 6:1-8](#); for more guidance on getting such help, click [Get Help With Conflict](#).)

4th G: Go and be Reconciled

One of the most unique features of biblical peacemaking is the pursuit of genuine forgiveness and reconciliation. Even though Christians have experienced the greatest forgiveness in the world, we often fail to show that forgiveness to others. To cover up our disobedience we often use the shallow statement, “I forgive her—I just don’t want to have anything to do with her again.” Just think, however, how you would feel if God said to you, “I forgive you; I just don’t want to have anything to do with you again”?

Praise God that he never says this! Instead, he forgives you totally and opens the way for genuine reconciliation. He calls you to forgive others in exactly the same way: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” ([Col. 3:12-14](#); see also [1 Cor. 13:5](#); [Psalm 103:12](#); [Isa. 43:25](#)). One way to imitate God’s forgiveness is to make the [Four Promises of Forgiveness](#) when you forgive someone.

Remember that forgiveness is a spiritual process that you cannot fully accomplish on your own. Therefore, as you seek to forgive others, continually ask God for grace to enable you to imitate his wonderful forgiveness toward you.

Other Considerations

Be Prepared for Unreasonable People

Whenever you are responding to conflict, you need to realize that other people may harden their hearts and refuse to be reconciled to you. There are two ways you can prepare for this possibility.

First, remember that God does not measure success in terms of results but in terms of faithful obedience. He knows that you cannot force other people to act in a certain way. Therefore he will not hold you responsible for their actions or for the ultimate outcome of a conflict.

All God expects of you is to obey his revealed will as faithfully as possible (see [Rom. 12:18](#)). If you do that, no matter how the conflict turns out, you can walk away with a clear conscience before God, knowing that his appraisal is, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Second, resolve that you will not give up on finding a biblical solution. If a dispute is not easily resolved, you may be tempted to say, "Well, I tried all the biblical principles I know, and they just didn't work. It looks like I'll have to handle this another way (meaning, 'the world's way')."

A Christian should never close the Bible. When you try to resolve a conflict but do not see the results you desire, you should seek God even more earnestly through prayer, the study of his Word, and the counsel of his church. As you do so, it is essential to keep your focus on Christ and all that he has already done for you (see [Col. 3:1-4](#)). It is also helpful to follow five principles for overcoming evil, which are described in [Romans 12:14-21](#):

- Control your tongue ("Bless those who curse you;" see also [Eph. 4:29](#))
- Seek godly advisors (identify with others and do not become isolated)
- Keep doing what is right (see [1 Pet. 2:12, 15; 3:15b-16](#))
- Recognize your limits (instead of retaliating, stay within proper biblical channels)
- Use the ultimate weapon: deliberate, focused love (see also [John 3:16; Luke 6:27-31](#))

At the very least, these steps will protect you from being consumed by the acid of your own bitterness and resentment if others continue to oppose you. And in some cases, God may eventually use such actions to bring another person to repentance (see [1 Sam. 24:1-22](#)).

Even if other people persist in doing wrong, you can continue to trust that God is in control and will deal with them in his time (see Psalms 10 and 37). This kind of patience in the face of suffering is commended by God (see [1 Pet. 2:19](#)) and ultimately results in our good and his glory.

Get Help from Above

None of us can make complete and lasting peace with others in our own strength. We must have help from God. But before we can receive that help, we need to be at peace with God himself.

Peace with God does not come automatically, because all of us have sinned and alienated ourselves from him (see [Isa. 59:1](#) "2). Instead of living the perfect lives needed to enjoy fellowship with him, each of us has a record stained with sin (see [Matt. 5:48; Rom. 3:23](#)). As a result, we deserve to be eternally separated from God ([Rom. 6:23a](#)). That is the bad news.

The good news is that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” ([John 3:16](#)). Believing in Jesus means more than being baptized, going to church, or trying to be a good person. None of these activities can erase the sins you have already committed and will continue to commit throughout your life. Believing in Jesus means, first of all, admitting that you are a sinner and acknowledging that there is no way you can earn God’s approval by your own works ([Rom. 3:20](#); [Eph. 2:8](#)–“9”).

Second, it means believing that Jesus paid the full penalty for your sins when he died on the cross ([Isa. 53:1](#)–“12”; [1 Peter 2:24](#)–“25”). In other words, believing in Jesus means trusting that he exchanged records with you at Calvary—that is, he took your sinful record on himself and paid for it in full, giving you his perfect record.

When you believe in Jesus and receive his perfect record of righteousness, you can really have true peace with God. As you receive this peace, God will give you an increasing ability to make peace with others by following the peacemaking principles he gives us in Scripture, many of which are described above (see [Phil. 4:7](#); [Matt. 5:9](#)).

If you have never confessed your sin to God and believed in Jesus Christ as your Savior, Lord, and King, you can do so right now by sincerely praying this prayer:

Lord Jesus,

I know that I am a sinner, and I realize that my good deeds could never make up for my wrongs. I need your forgiveness. I believe that you died for my sins, and I want to turn away from them. I trust you now to be my Savior, and I will follow you as my Lord and King, in the fellowship of your church.

If you have prayed this prayer, it is essential that you find fellowship with other Christians in a church where the Bible is faithfully taught and applied. This fellowship will help you to learn more about God, grow in your faith, and obey what he commands, even when you are involved in a difficult conflict.

Get Help from the Church

As God helps you to practice his peacemaking principles, you will be able to resolve most of the normal conflicts of daily life on your own. Sometimes, however, you will encounter situations that you do not know how to handle. In such situations, it is appropriate to turn to a spiritually mature person within the church who can give you advice on how you might be able to apply these principles more effectively.

In most cases, such “coaching” will enable you to go back to the other person in the conflict and work out your differences in private. If the person from whom you seek advice does not have much experience in conflict resolution, it may be helpful to give him or her a copy of [Leading Christians through Conflict](#), which provides practical, nuts-and-bolts guidance on how to help other people resolve conflict.

When individual advice does not enable you to resolve a dispute, you should ask one or two mutually respected friends to meet with you and your opponent to help you settle your difference through mediation or arbitration (see [Matt. 18:16-17](#); [1 Cor. 6:1-8](#)). For more information on how to get guidance and assistance in resolving a dispute, click [Get Help With Conflict](#).
