

How To Work Through Conflicts

...and *win*

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Conflicts among people seem to be as certain as death and taxes. They can bring death to a relationship, and can be very taxing. All kidding aside, conflicts are no fun for most of us. The following is a brief treatment of a subject worthy of much thought and study. To those of us who want to, "pursue peace with all men" [Heb. 12:14] it is essential to have a Godly strategy for accomplishing that goal. (much of this material is borrowed from other sources, so if it occasionally sounds a bit familiar, we have probably read some of the same books!)

I. Definitions;

A. What is a "conflict"?

***Stage One:** Any point of difference between people which creates friction or tension, whether verbalized or not.

***Stage Two:** The inability to reconcile such tensions by practical &/or spiritual attempts, thus, continuing friction.

B. What is "winning"? Working through a conflict to reach a primary [*Christ-like*] objective.

Notice that this definition doesn't promise that there will be full reconciliation. That is our hope, but according to Rm. 12:18 it isn't guaranteed.

II. Chief cause of conflicts: Striving for personal desires

In Jas. 4:1 we are asked the question, "*what is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?*" Knowing the source is a tremendous help in finding a cure. James answers his own question with another question. "Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?" It is our pleasures, our desires, wanting things our way that is the source of our quarrels and conflicts. The next two verses go on to illustrate this progression, and to point out that the only way we will get satisfaction is by going to God with right [*unselfish*] motives and asking, rather than going to one another [with selfish expectations] and demanding.

III. Objectives in conflicts

A. Human objective: self protection

Whenever one of my presumed "rights" has been violated, or a goal of mine, conscious or unconscious, has been blocked, i react. The reaction may take many forms, but my main objective is to protect myself so as to prevent any further pain. This is very natural. In fact that is the problem with it.

B. Human strategy: self reliance

Whatever my reaction, i will tend to do whatever comes naturally to me. Most people have characteristic ways of reacting to conflicts, and seldom stray from their usual strategies. As you read the following examples, think about which one[s] are your "favorites".

*types of reactions:

<i>"I'll fix him!"</i>	<i>attack</i>
<i>"I'm out of here!"</i>	<i>retreat</i>
<i>"I give in."</i>	<i>surrender</i>
<i>"I'll meet him halfway."</i>	<i>compromise</i>

C. Godly objective: Reconciliation

In contrast with my rights or goals, I need to focus on the things God wants to either accomplish or avoid through this conflict. The following passages identify some of these:

I Cor. 10:31
Mt. 5:23, 24
Jas. 1:2-5
Rm. 12:18-21
Gal. 6:1

D. Godly strategy: loving confrontation

In eph. 4:15 we read that, "speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in all aspects into him, who is the head, even christ." love without truth is hypocrisy, and truth without love is brutality. We must have both! Notice on the line of progression below, how the above human reactions are at best an incomplete expression of this Godly strategy. They also reveal our personalities more than our convictions.

Truth		*		love
<i>attack</i> (extrovert)	<i>retreat</i> (introvert)	<i>surrender</i> (introvert)	<i>compromise</i> (extrovert)	

We must have both! We must listen and speak accurately. We must avoid all exaggerations. We must admit it when we are wrong *[even if the other person won't]* we must not rub it in when we are right.

These and many other suggestions are necessary if we are to be truthful before God and his word, and if we are to love the way his word describes it in I Cor. 13:4-8. *[Not a bad passage to review when dealing with conflicts!]*

The human strategies do produce an outward peace, but true peace can only be accomplished God's way.

IV. Principles for handling conflicts

There are several scriptural and practical ways to work through conflicts with greater promise of success.

A. Don't use the silent treatment

1. This is most often employed in order to maintain control: control of yourself [keeping silent], or control of the other person *[not letting them deal with the issue]*.

2. Why else is the "silent treatment" harmful?

3. When do you think it is right to be silent?

Jas. 1:19 tells us to, "...be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger"

Obviously that is good, but it is only the first step in a process for handling this kind of anger.

Below is a summary of some principles found in The Marriage Builder, by Lawrence J. Crabb, p. 76:

- Step 1: Be slow to anger. [Jas. 1:19]
- Step 2: Acknowledge your anger. Admit it to yourself; admit it to God. [Eph. 4:26]
- Step 3: Think through which goals of yours were blocked to create this conflict (...or a right that feels violated, or a perceived need that isn't being met). Since all behavior is goal oriented, ask yourself, "What am I trying to accomplish or avoid?" When a goal is blocked, we get angry. Therefore, they should be relabeled as desires, and not thought of as goals any longer.
- Step 4: Assume responsibility for proper goals. Two goals which are God-honoring, and can never be blocked are maturity & ministry. Ask yourself, "How can I grow through this conflict?" and "How can I minister [*meet the needs of*] the person with whom I am having this conflict?" [Phil. 2:3, 4]
- Step 5: Express negative feelings if doing so serves a good purpose. It is o.k. to express negative feelings, but we must do so with God's purposes in view. These must be included in the goals of maturity & ministry which were mentioned before. If my feelings can't be expressed in that way, then they don't need to be expressed.

B. Agree on an appropriate time and place to deal with the conflict

1. The key here is to settle on a time and place as free from distractions as possible. [*no phone, no friends, no kids, etc.*]
2. Another important factor is to deal with it as soon as possible. The longer we put this kind of thing off, the less likely we will be to resolve it properly.

C. Don't accumulate an arsenal of little grievances

1. What kind of irritations do you react to?

2. What is wrong with letting "little" hurts accumulate?

3. What specific principles can you glean from I Cor. 13:4-8 about this?

>> Beside the reasons given above, another good reason for regularly dealing with the little hurts, is that it keeps us in practice for the big conflicts when they come.

D. Attack the problem, not each other

1. No name calling

"I think you are wrong" vs. "I think you're an idiot!"

2. Be direct & specific

"I really felt put-down when you made that comment" vs. "Anyone like you just couldn't understand."

3. Take responsibility for your feelings

"When you don't introduce me to people we meet, I feel like you are ashamed of me" vs. "You made me look like a fool to your friends."

4. How else is this principle violated?

[examples.] Bringing up past failures.
Making unfavorable comparisons.

E. Stick to the subject and keep at it until you find a solution

1. Focus in on finding solutions, not placing blame.

2. Develop a plan for coming to a Godly understanding of how the conflict can be resolved.

3. Express to one another what you think the other sees as "the problem." we fail to hear one another accurately when we are distracted by our own defensiveness. When we are more concerned for what is right that who is right, we can move more humbly and objectively toward a resolution.

4. Exchange suggestions on how you can help alleviate any unnecessary discomfort for one another.
5. Some find it helpful to write letters to each other to express their feelings and ideas.

This is fine as long as the letters stimulate, rather than replace, conversation with one another.

F. An impasse?

If you reach an impasse and aren't moving toward the objectives described above [*thus a stage two conflict*], then it can be helpful to seek outside counsel.

G. A celebration

When you come to the place of full reconciliation, celebrate the victory with one another, and together give much praise to God for his grace and mercy.

H. A commitment

Commit yourselves to leave the conflict in the past, and to remember the principles and insights you learned so that you can aid your family and others as they desire to please God in their relationships.