

RESPONDING TO CONFLICT GOD'S WAY

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1 – THE NATURE OF CONFLICT

God's word to us

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Foundation and Call

Our sin causes conflict with God and damages our relationship with him. God responds by giving his Son Jesus in our place, and then:

- forgiving us for Jesus' sake – and never taking that forgiveness back
- restoring our relationship with him
- working to right wrongs and renew our life together.

Now God calls us to forgive as we have been forgiven – to be reconciled to those who hurt us and whom we hurt.

So we ask: How do we go about being reconciled to those who sin against us (on the horizontal plane) as we have been reconciled by God (in the vertical direction)?

The Nature and Causes of Conflict

Conflict begins when a person is hurt by another.

Conflict can be caused by:

- misunderstandings
- differences in values, goals or expectations
- competition over limited resources
- sinful desires and attitudes which lead to sinful words and actions.

The bible is the story of broken relationships caused by sin, God's response to restore these relationships, and his call for us to join him in that mission.

The Escalation of Conflict

Conflict escalates when:

- hurt is stored up
- hurt is paid back
- wrong-doing is not confessed
- wrong-doing is continued.

Conflict can go underground in cycles of abuse when wrong-doing is denied or covered up.

Conflict causes damage – which is usually what we try to fix up. But unless relationships are restored, this is no more than 'damage control'.

2 – WAYS OF RESPONDING TO CONFLICT

God's word to us

In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. (Ephesians 4: 26-27)

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation... (2 Corinthians 5:18)

Unhealthy responses to conflict

Escape responses:

- Escape by denial
- Escape by flight; includes storming out of room or meeting (noting that time-out may be needed to calm down)
- Escape by self-destruction

Attack responses:

- Attack by assault; includes verbal, physical, financial and other intimidation and abuse; also gossip (talking behind a person's back).
- Attack by litigation
- Attack by murder

God's way to respond to conflict

Foundations:

- Listen to God in the scriptures (*eg Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-20*)

- Trust in the gospel of God's forgiveness of oneself and of others
- Trust in God's power to enable us to forgive and reconcile too
- Believe that God does his greatest work this way – it's his mission!

For minor offences:

- Overlook, ie forgive without taking the matter to the other person

For significant offences:

- Examine own actions and see the sin in them
- Confess these to God and receive his forgiveness for them
- Confess these to the other person and ask for forgiveness
- Share hurt with the other person, and share forgiveness too
- Work out together how to restore any damage from the conflict

If this personal peace-making is not successful:

- Seek a mediator to assist
- If mediation does not bring reconciliation, seek adjudication (an impartial judgement by a 3rd party)
- Be accountable to church leaders for any refusal to be reconciled

3 – THE SEVEN A'S OF CONFESSION

God's word to us

First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:5)

If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

The Seven A's of Confession

1. Address everyone involved
 - and no-one else (Matthew 18:15)
 - include people who witnessed the conflict

2. Avoid if, but and maybe language
 - confess unconditionally
3. Admit specifically
 - internal sin as well as visible things
4. Acknowledge the hurt
 - recognises the impact on the other party and sadness at this
5. Accept the consequences
 - take responsibility for own actions
 - follows from a healed relationship
 - contrasts with human conflict resolution which puts material issues above personal relationships
6. Alter your behaviour
 - authenticates the confession
 - gives hope for the future
7. Ask for forgiveness
 - the same way we ask God for forgiveness: as a beggar
 - invites the other party into God's way of responding to conflict

Things to note

Confessing God's way contrasts with saying *Sorry* and *I apologise*.

- These are ambiguous (eg may disguise blame for taking offense).
- They don't express the fulness of confession nor carry its power.

Learn by doing, and surround with prayer.

- Preparation helps, including writing out a confession

4 – FORGIVING OTHERS OURSELVES

God's word to us

Bear with each other, and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Colossians 3:13)

Why forgiveness?

- It's God's own answer to conflict

- It frees us from sin's guilt, shame and power
- It's the gospel itself, the power of God for salvation
- It's unconditional and comes first, enabling repentance and change in response
- God calls us to forgive as we have been forgiven
- A world without forgiveness is horrible

The Four Promises of Forgiveness

1. I will not dwell on this incident
 - I will let it go in my heart and mind
2. I will not bring up this incident and use it against you
 - no *You always...* or *You never...*
3. I will not talk to others about this incident
 - but will speak well of you
4. I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship
 - a commitment to restore the relationship

Forgiving those who've hurt us

- Forgive *before* we go and talk with them
- Forgive, even if they don't *receive* it, don't want to restore the relationship
 - pray that they will
- Un-returned forgiveness is part of the cross we bear
 - voice the pain to God

5 – HELPING OTHERS RESPOND GOD'S WAY

God's word to us

Brothers and sisters, if anyone is caught up in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore them gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. (Galatians 6:1)

Helping others respond to conflict God's way

- This is for helping a person caught up in conflict with someone *else*
 - Includes when people *share gossip* or *complain* about others
1. Avoid entering the conflict yourself
 - eg taking sides, agreeing, or fuelling the complaint

- eg listening to gossip with interest, or repeating it to others
2. Listen carefully; ask questions to clarify the problem
 - Discern the response being made: Escape? Attack?
 - Separate the material issues from the relationship damage.
 3. Guide the person to understand their response, its cause and effects
 4. Guide the person to respond God's way, ie to...
 - Listen to God in the scriptures and discern their own sin
 - Confess their sin and receive God's forgiveness for it; declare that forgiveness yourself
 - Overlook the offence if it is minor
 - Trust in the power of God's forgiveness when it is shared
 - Seek one-on-one conversation with the other party to the conflict, in order to ...
 - confess their own sin and ask for forgiveness, guided by the Seven A's of Confession
 - share their hurt, and share forgiveness too, making the Four Promises of Forgiveness
 - work out together how to restore any damage and resolve the conflict.

Special cases

- If this personal peace-making fails, Christian *mediation* should be sought, and after that *adjudication* with accountability to church authorities for refusing to be reconciled.
- Power imbalances – use third-party support or mediation
- Legal requirements (eg child abuse, which must be reported).

Pray for healthy reconciliation so that God is glorified!

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