

Resolving Conflict

By Keoke King

Try this: Flip through one of the Gospels and mark the margin everywhere Jesus has an interpersonal conflict. He seems to have had a running argument with the Pharisees and he even found himself differing with members of his own family. Conflict with other people is a natural part of life even for Christlike people. It just happens. This is part of reality we must learn to deal with. But, as you've undoubtedly noticed there are a number of different ways to deal with conflict. Common conflict strategies range from cowering and running away like a beaten dog to raging and using the shock and violence of our anger to push others around. In my own family, conflict is avoided until the issues has slipped by. Other times we would throw up all kinds of dust, confusing the issue with extra issues and information.

Few people relish the thought of a good fight. And we regularly go to great lengths to avoid dealing with potentially painful and difficult issues. It's not strange on campus today for people to trade in a lover or opt for a new roommate rather than address the person directly. Jesus, with his wisdom on human relationships, teaches us to be intentional in dealing with conflict. As usual, he goes beyond the simple action to teach us about the best attitude to have. From his perspective, it's a matter of our hearts.

I'd like to offer two angles. First, I'll draw on Jesus' teaching for some insight on attitude and then I'm going to go into some really practical tips that have helped me. These principals have worked for me. Last December Chris and I marked our seventh full year living together in something less than marital bliss. We've crossed many difficult hurdles and working through conflict has been a key skill for us. I hope this helps you as much.

Many times, people's behavior in the face of conflict is an effort to gain dominance and exercise their power over another person. There's probably an endless variety and combination of ways to manipulate people so that we get our ways. It's important that we carefully consider our own conflict resolution habits and our heart's attitudes so that we're not inadvertently honing our manipulation skills. Our future spouses and children will thank us. This is truly a crucial life skill.

One of the first steps we need to take is in beginning to understand our feelings and our motivations. Many times when I've faced conflict, I've just left the situation feeling 'weird'. I wasn't sure exactly what was going on for me or why I felt upset or bummed out. You've probably seen the "How I feel Today" poster (google for it). I used to carry one in my planner. There are probably 50 different faces on there expressing a whole range of emotions from sad and melancholy to incensed and violated. Becoming able to understand and name my emotion, developing my emotional vocabulary, helped me to understand why I was feeling the way I was. That gave me a starting point for a back track into how exactly I got that way.

I grew up with a lot of talk about strong, hard-boiled men like John Wayne. Naming and explaining my feelings was not something I learned a lot about. The reality was that it left me pretty pissed off all the time. So, if this seems silly to go into the process of feeling, just be thankful that it's not work for you.

Once we get that far, and that's no easy step. We've got a couple decisions to make. "Am I going to get into this?" "And, if I am, what kind of attitude will I take with me?" Now, these decisions are probably automatic. But, with Jesus help, through His Spirit, we can begin to take back control and live the best way.

As Jesus' friend Matthew recorded it, Jesus recommended aggressively pursuing conflict resolution whether we 'started it' or not.

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

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you." Mt. 18:15

When you think about all the times we're instructed to become like God, it really makes sense that he'd want us to be



at peace and unified like he is within himself. In a perfect world, we'd be at peace with other people all the time.

Jesus didn't leave us alone to figure out this crucial life skill. Christ's life and some other New Testament writings shed some light on the best ways to face conflict. Jesus, taught in Matt.6 that we should have other people's best interests in mind. The attitude of Will help us to overcome the urge to vindicate ourselves or hurt others with our anger. Well, I hope you're motivated to go talk to this person. Here are a few tips that will help the conversation to go well once you're there.

- Use personal statements (I. my. our.) rather than blaming or attacking (you. your.).
- Describe feelings rather than acting them out or attempting to disguise them.
- Express hurt instead of hostility. Hurt is a legitimate response to disappointment and offense, and it should never be denied or kept hidden inside. But hurt becomes a problem when people let it build up inside and turn into anger.
- Finally, make direct statements. Don't be afraid to own your feelings; let the other person know specifically what it is they have done to hurt you. Avoid making grand accusations like, "You're always so insensitive to my needs." Instead say, "I was hurt because you didn't call and let me know you were going to be late." It's much easier to deal with honest and concrete disappointments than vague generalities.
- Rather than stating your inferences or assumptions about others' motives as if they were true, state our concern as a guess and ask for confirmation or denial.
- As much as possible, stay with descriptions of behavior rather than guesses at what the behavior means. Stay away from labeling or name calling. It's not wise to even insinuate about their character or who they are at the core, stick with addressing specific behaviors
- Acknowledge your share in creating the conflict.

A formula that's helped me.

This has helped me to map out what I want to say to a person ahead of time. It operates in five different arenas. First, it gives their specific action, just the raw data of what happened. Secondly, it let's them know, in as specific of terms as you can muster, how you felt when that incident happened. Thirdly, it let's them in on the thought process that was going on for you that led you from their action to your feeling. Fourthly, it gives your hope for how the same situation will be approached in the future.

" {Insert person's name}, when you {indicate specific action}, I feel {insert feeling}. You see, when you do that it indicates to me that {insert your thought process here}. What I would prefer is that you {insert the preferable alternative}."

This little formula may help you get started. Once you've used it a few times, please move onto applying your own flair. Sticking with this too long will have you sounding like an emotional freshman. But, it's a good place to start.

These suggestions and this little pattern for expressing yourself will be really helpful. But, ultimately Jesus has an even better hope for us.

Moving Beyond Living in Relational Turmoil

"When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly." 1Pet. 2:23.

When Jesus faced hurtful accusations, He did not curse, defend, or blame. Although He had every right, He didn't point an incriminating finger at His accusers nor strike back at them with a list of their own sins and failings. Instead, He put the situation into God's hands. Admittedly, there's a paradox here. He instructs his followers to resolve their conflict, yet he seemed to live above the need in His own life. I think it is a heart issue.

Ultimately, as we become like Christ, we'll develop a thicker skin. We'll be more in tuned to serving other people and focusing on the spiritual realities all around us rather than feeling like we need to be consciously defending ourselves against every insult and injury. There is a level of spiritual maturity that I've heard about, I'm not there yet either,



where we can give people space to err and not get hurt by it. It's not that we're ignoring our feelings, it's that we're operating from a framework that doesn't allow for getting easily angered. And, with the offenses we experience, we're willing to rely on God, who judges justly, rather than bring our own punishment on them.

Relationships are right at the center of God's heart. He longs for better relationship with us and for us in our experiences with other people. There's a lot of room for all of us to grow in our

Conflict Analysis Questions

Here are some conflict analysis questions from another resource that can be helpful:

1. Briefly summarize your dispute as you perceive it, placing events in chronological order as much as possible. In particular, describe what you have done to resolve the dispute.
2. What have you done that probably made this dispute worse?
3. What have your primary goals been as you've tried to resolve this dispute?
4. Which response to conflict have you been using to resolve this dispute? How has your response encouraged or inhibited progress toward a meaningful solution?
5. How can you glorify God – that is, please and honor Him through this conflict?
6. How can you serve others through this conflict?
7. What have you been relying on for guidance in this situation: your feelings and personal opinions about what is right or the careful study and application of what is taught in the Bible? What will you rely on in the future?
8. What are you struggling with most at this time (e.g., your opponent's attacks, controlling your tongue, lack of support from others)?
9. How could you use the resources God has provided (the Bible, Holy Spirit, and other Christians) to deal with these struggles?
10. If God were to evaluate this conflict after It is over, how would you like him to complete these sentences:
"I am pleased that you did not"
"I am pleased that you"

