

Guidelines for resolving conflict

No matter who started it, **I** have the responsibility to take the initiative to seek reconciliation, either by offering forgiveness, or apologising and asking for forgiveness. This remains true, no matter how embarrassing or awkward it may seem. Here are some Biblical principles:

Philippians 4:6,7 Matthew 6:6	Pray before taking any action at all.
1 Peter 5:6,7 Romans 8:28	Bring your negative feelings to God first. Thank him that the good that he desires will come from the situation.
Acts 24:16 Proverbs 28:13	Pursue a clear conscience and expect God to show his mercy and blessing.
Matthew 5:23,24	Only confess to the one(s) you have upset or offended.
Matthew 5:24 Philippians 2:2-4	Make loving reconciliation your goal, not proving you were right all along.
Titus 3:2 Matthew 7:3-5	Before going, identify & confess your own wrong attitudes, and ask God to give you his attitude & perspective.
Philippians 2:3 James 2:3,4	Go with a humble spirit, not an air of moral superiority.
Philippians 2:4 Mark 10:42-44	Try to see the matter from the other's perspective, to understand and serve their interest as much as possible.
2 Corinthians 6:3 1 Cor 8:9	Do not refuse to admit that part of the blame might be yours. Acknowledge your own failures in the matter.
Eph. 4:29-32 Proverbs 14:29	Describe your negative feelings honestly and kindly, without a bitter, or accusing spirit, but also without lying to the one who offended you about how you really feel.
Romans 12:17-21	Incorporate an act of kindness to highlight your genuine desire for reconciliation.
James 5:16	Pray with the other party before ending the conversation.
Matthew 18:16 1 Timothy 2:5	Consider the role that a neutral third-party might play as mediator if the initial caring confrontation was fruitless.

Stepping stones to conflict resolution

In her book, *Conflict: Friend or Foe?* Joyce Huggett lists irreplaceable stepping stones to conflict resolution. The following questions have been adapted from that list. If God is putting someone on your heart, take time to think through your answers before going to them.

1. What am I expecting from this relationship?
2. Are my expectations realistic? Are they mutual (shared by the other party)?
3. What do I appreciate about the person with whom I am in conflict?
4. What is it about me that does not want to support him/her?
5. What is it about me that needs to change? (Matthew 7:3-5)
6. Are we for each other or against each other?
7. Do we want this relationship to glorify God?
8. Is there something in me that is disrupting the unity of God's people?

What will convince the world that our love and unity come from God?

6

Aim of study: to show that the way Christians handle differences and resolve conflicts powerfully affects their witness to the world

Review: Did anything come up from your homework?

Launching question: Can you think of a recent example in our church or in your experience, where a disagreement was properly handled and resolved?

The need to forgive someone arises as a result of being hurt or offended by him/her, often through a disagreement or conflict. The main study passage looks at a conflict between two leaders in the first century church in Antioch about handling a church member who had let them down significantly. Such a sharp disagreement could have happened in our church.

Download & print the extra sheet 'Guidelines for resolving conflict' for each person before this session.

Acts 15:35-41

1. What caused the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas and why? (v 36, 37)

Paul was goal-orientated, with a hard-driving personality. His mind was on getting the message of Jesus out. He thought that Mark had let them down before and probably will again, which will drain the team. Barnabas saw the potential in Mark. He wanted to take him under his wing.

- With whom would you have sided?

2. What was the final outcome of the disagreement?

- What do you think of the way Paul and Barnabas handled the situation?

3. How did Paul and John Mark feel about one another later on? (Colossians 4:10 & 2 Timothy 4:11)

- What does this show about how they originally handled the matter?

4. What positive results came out of this conflict?

Two missionary journeys resulted instead of one. John Mark benefited from Barnabas' encouragement.

Ask someone to read this paragraph:

Unresolved conflicts can cause people to become bitter. When Biblical guidelines for dealing with sharp disagreements are ignored, Christians begin avoiding those they feel have wounded them. Hurt feelings can be the real reason someone leaves the church. What is needed is *caring confrontation*. It takes courage to care enough about the other person to speak with them kindly concerning the matter. In Ephesians 4:15, Paul describes this Christian approach to confrontation as 'speaking the truth in love'. For it to be a genuine attempt to resolve the disagreement, forgiveness must be included.

Divide into two groups, each taking a case study. Each group should read the Bible passage, read the case study and then discuss questions. After 10 minutes, get the two groups to summarise their discussion in the whole group. Matthew 18 is given as a guideline for discipline among believers. Dealing with a brother who sins is developed in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-16 & James 5:19-20. Matthew 18:15 (if your brother offends you) is the corollary of Matthew 5:23,24 (sensing you have offended your brother). *Dealing with a sin requiring church discipline is outside the scope of this study.*

Case study 1: Matthew 5:23,24

Mary was sitting down to write out her monthly cheque to the church, but a scene kept popping into her mind. She had been leaving the service last Sunday and was waiting at the door. Sue was coming up from the side aisle and, when she saw Mary, immediately turned and headed in the other direction. "Was it my imagination?" Mary wondered. But no, she had seen the look on Sue's face; a look of suppressed irritation. 'This is silly – I'm sure it was nothing to do with me,' Mary told herself. But the uneasy feeling wouldn't go away. Sue and Mary had been co-leaders of the Social Committee last year, and they hadn't always got on with each other. With summer now well underway, the committee was no longer meeting, nor had they been in contact with each other. It was true that Mary's ideas were implemented far more often than Sue's. 'But my ideas were better,' she thought. 'Surely she can't be annoyed over that?' Just then the telephone rang. It was Mary's close friend, Janice. Mary felt a need to unburden herself about the problem. Janice was a good listener, even if she did pass on what she heard sometimes. Now seemed a good time to talk about it...

Case study 2: Matthew 18:15-17

Robert spent much of his free time visiting new students in his hall of residence. He seemed to have a talent for making people feel welcome and wanted, and many of those he met started coming to the university Christian group. One of these was John, who had only been a Christian for about a term. Robert had been glad he'd had a part in seeing John get involved. But now Robert has been told by another Christian student that John has openly made fun of Robert behind his back, saying things like, "He's such an odd chap, I'm glad we didn't let that put us off coming to this group." Robert's feelings are hurt, but he thinks it best to forgive and forget. He's an easygoing person, who tries to avoid confrontation. Still, he has heard from a few others that John has made cutting remarks about them, as well.

[These questions are printed under each case study on members' notes. Here they apply to both case studies]

- What should be done in this situation?
- Who has caused the problem?
- Who should take the initiative to resolve the conflict?
- To whom does the initiator go?
- Should anyone else be involved and at what point?
- What can go wrong if problems between these people are not handled promptly and properly?

5. How can I know if my hurt feelings represent a problem that needs caring confrontation?

Eg. If a person in the church is under great stress, he/she might wound others unintentionally. This needs loving acceptance rather than caring confrontation.

If I find myself consistently avoiding another church member, I need to ask myself if caring confrontation is needed. It's my responsibility to go to him/her. If I am dwelling on the incident, or developing resentment towards that person even after confessing my wrong attitude to God, it is probably God's way of showing me I have not yet been obedient to follow the guidelines in his word.

Ephesians 4:22-27, 30-32 Ask someone to read the passage. If there's time, discuss these two issues.

6. What are some ways our witness will be hindered if we refuse to speak the truth in love and resolve conflicts? (v27 & 30)

We will give the devil a foothold and grieve the Holy Spirit. This will inevitably have a dampening effect on our witness to outsiders.

Summary

Get group to state some of the principles/guidelines for resolving conflict covered so far. Ask if anyone can think of any other Biblical guidelines. Then look at the sheet 'Biblical Guidelines for resolving conflict', and if time, get different group members to look up the verses stating the principle. Read out the questions that follow 'stepping stones for conflict resolution' adapted from Joyce Huggett's book 'Conflict, friend or foe?'

Apply - give a few moments to think through these questions.

"But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7)

- Am I *walking in the light* in my relationships?
- Is there someone I am avoiding or someone I sense is avoiding me?
- Do I need to go to him/her and 'speak the truth in love', either telling them that they have hurt me or confessing where I have hurt them?
- When and what do I need to do to put things right?
- What is my first step?
- Is there something in my life that's hindering my fellowship with God?

Pray - for anything that has come up as a result of this study. For God to search our hearts to keep us walking close to him. Each pray for one of your Five in Focus names. Pray for our personal and corporate witness to Jesus.

Before next time...

Review the principles in this study, including the 'Guidelines for resolving conflict' page. Think of one good thing God has done in your life (big, small or ordinary) to share next time. Continue praying for your Five in Focus

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Apply

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