

4 Steps to Resolving Conflict

When I served on the staff of Watermark Community Church in Dallas, there was a phrase that was repeated all the time. “Conflict: our constant opportunity.” It was repeated with such frequency for two reasons. First, because there really were constantly conflicts that were pointing to this reality. Second, because conflict resolution had become deeply entrenched in the culture of that community. In fact, it is one of the defining marks of that church.

You may be tempted to think, “Wow, what was wrong with that group of people that there were constantly conflicts that needed to be resolved?” But I would argue that if we are honest and on the lookout, we would see plenty of conflicts one (or zero) degrees of separation from each of us right now. I initially sat down to write this, but was stopped short because...wait for it...I needed to resolve a conflict with someone.

In this post I am not talking about conflict as a disagreement over some issue or idea. It is possible to have a disagreement without conflict if we are looking at conflict as the fracturing of relationship. Because we live in a fallen world where our relationship with God has been fractured by sin and causes us to be born with a nature bent on fracturing relationship with one another, conflict abounds. The irony of sin is that it promises satisfaction through idolatry which ultimately leads to conflict, but it is these relationships that sin fractures which have the greatest impact on our actual enjoyment (or lack of enjoyment) in life.

My guess is that you are not living under the guise of a conflict-less life and surprised that conflict would be constant. Rather, the more unusual concept would be conflict as an opportunity. Where there is conflict, there is an opportunity for it to be resolved. It is possible for it to be resolved because of the spiritual debt that was paid on our behalf by Jesus. He has afforded us the wealth to cover relational debts incurred when we wrong one another, hurt one another, or in some way fracture relationship with one another. Where there is sin, there is a debt. Where there is a debt, someone must pay. Jesus paid the debt we had with God, in effect funding our reconciliation with one another.

I mentioned that this is some of what made Watermark unique as a community, but this is actually what makes any gospel-saturated community unique. Because of the gospel, you can “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32)

It shouldn't be surprising for people who naturally create conflict that our natural means of handling it doesn't tend to repair relationship but only further fracture it. Here are some unhealthy ways that people tend to respond to conflict: withdrawing, escalating, negatively interpreting, or invalidating. We could devote an entire post to these patterns, but for now it will suffice to say that none of these represent a pathway to resolving conflict, a pathway critical to our discipleship with Jesus. When we fail to walk that path, there are consequences that are felt beyond the immediate parties involved. It impacts the entire church body.

Jesus talks about resolving conflict in this way in Matthew 5:23-24, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

This practice of resolving conflict matters to God. So much so that He tells us to not show up to worship Him when there is fractured relationship with one of our spiritual family members. Why? Ignoring conflict is in direct opposition to the gospel which serves as the lens through which we see the world. It is as if we try to peek around our contact lenses and accurately engage the world around us. Shoving a contact lens to the side of your eyeball isn't comfortable. Not surprisingly, it doesn't sit well with the Holy Spirit who dwells in you to attempt to circumvent our gospel identity when it comes to fractured relationships. We are instead called to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:3).

How can we do this? Here are some simple steps I was taught that will resolve conflict and restore fractured relationships:

Step 1: Acknowledge and ask forgiveness for your role in the problem.

How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye. (Luke 6:42)

It is the rarest of occasions when there is a conflict to which you have contributed nothing. This is not to say that you should take ownership for components of conflict that don't actually belong to you. That will not lead to the long term healing of a relationship. Instead, you should take the time to consider how you could have prevented the conflict or kept it from unfolding the way that it did. This step is challenging and might require some serious reflection (and serious repentance). But, one mark of a gospel leader is initiating reconciliation by owning whatever you contributed to a conflict.

Step 2: Keep it in perspective.

“Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense. (Proverbs 19:11)

If you can overlook an offense against you, you probably should. Giving a spouse, friend, or co-worker the benefit of the doubt is a glorious thing.

You might be someone prone to downplay something that is really bothering you because you are fearful of the process of reconciling. This isn't making peace, but rather faking peace. And

while you might be able to fool some people for a while, ultimately you are robbing the person who you are faking peace with of real relationship with you by not bringing to the surface the hurt or issue that is causing conflict.

On the other hand, you might be in a state of sensitivity (a place I often find myself) for any number of reasons that causes you to overstate the offense of another. If you know yourself to be someone prone to seeing mountains where there are mole hills, I would take an extra beat consider if this is a chance to give someone the benefit of the doubt.

Step 3: Talk to the person in private.

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (Matthew 18:15)

This is where things get real. But this is not where things get public. It is a lot easier to talk to anyone else in a conflict besides the person with whom you have it. That is not the call of the Scriptures on your life. Rather, we are to go to the person who has hurt us (and who may be oblivious to this reality), explain how you have been hurt and ask for forgiveness for the part you have played in the conflict. If they receive that and ask for forgiveness, then we have the beautiful opportunity to glorify Jesus and extend forgiveness.

This is absolutely unnatural to the world and honestly very uncomfortable most times. But restored relationship is on the other side of this conversation and it is worth it. I want to note that with domestic violence, ongoing abuse, or other extreme cases, forgiveness extended doesn't always equate to relationships being restored. For the vast majority of conflicts though, this is the end of the road.

Step 4: Bring others in.

But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Matthew 18:16-17)

Things get public in step 4. However, that publicity is always kept in the smallest concentric circle possible. If the person you are in conflict with won't hear you out when you come to them in private, bring along someone else. Practically speaking, this person should be as close to the conflict as possible but not someone who will escalate or aggressively accuse the other person. Their role is to support reconciliation.

If this fails, loop in leaders at the church. Our elder team is devoted to shepherding the flock among us and helping resolve conflict between members of the flock is a critical component of that shepherding.

If this fails, then there should be clarity that the conflict is no longer between two healthy members of God's church. Rather, the conflict is with someone who is functionally outside of God's covenant people and therefore to be treated with a different set of expectations. And, while still painful, you can know that you have been faithful to the process God has called you to in the midst of a world full of fractured relationships. A world that He will one day make new. A world that will one day not have conflict as our constant opportunity.