

Years ago, Leslie Flynn (**picture**) penned a book called, *Great Church Fights* (**picture**). In it he chronicled the way people in different churches would go after each other – all in the name of Jesus. He shares that one day a young father heard a commotion out in his backyard. He looked outside and saw his daughter and several playmates in a heated quarrel. When he intervened, his daughter called back, “Dad, we’re just playing church!”

If you’ve been around churches long, you know that’s a scene not too far from the truth. Church conflicts happen for the strangest and silliest stuff.

In the 1890s there was a small Baptist church in Mayfield County, Kentucky. The church had just two deacons. These guys were constantly bickering with each other. One Sunday, one of them put a small wooden peg in the back wall so the pastor could hang up his hat. But when the other deacon discovered the peg, he was outraged. “How dare someone put a peg in the wall without first consulting me!” The people in the church took sides and the church eventually split. A hundred years later, residents of Mayfield County still refer to the two churches as *Peg Baptist* and *Anti-Peg Baptist*.

God loves multiplication; Satan loves division. Satan’s first conspiracy was to divide Adam and Eve from God and from each other. It’s been his strategy ever since. Mankind’s history is one of division. Satan loves it when you fight with your spouse. He loves it when your children fight. He loves the division in our country and in our world. He loves division in the Church.

The great Reformer, John Calvin (**picture**) saw that the Devil’s chief device was disunity and division. He urged unity and fellowship, “*Among Christians there ought to be so great a dislike of schism, as that they may always avoid it so fast as lies in their power.*”

From Genesis 1 and Creation, through Noah and Abraham, Moses and the prophets, God is continuously blessing His people and telling them to “*be fruitful and multiply.*” **God loves multiplication.**

The history of the early church is multiplication. Any reader of the book of Acts will note the attention given to numbers. Those who were saved in the early days of the Church were “*added to the church*” (Acts 2:47). More believers were “*added to the Lord*” as evangelism continued in Jerusalem (Acts 5:14). Church math begins with addition, yet grew into multiplication. Acts 6:7 says, “*And the Word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied...*” Multiplication is His plan for His Church.

Jesus teaches us that healthy Christianity is lived by, “*Abide in Me*” (John 15:1–8). When believers live lives submitted to the Lord Jesus, they reproduce themselves. We’re to be fruit for Him. Part of that fruit-bearing is spiritual reproduction. Christians producing new Christians through Spirit-empowered evangelism. It’s divine multiplication.

Because Satan loves division, every church will struggle with conflict and division at some level. Our tendency is to think idealistically that since we’re all Christians, living by the Bible, filled with the Spirit, obeying the command to love one another, that there won’t be any conflicts among us.

Such idealism is unrealistic, whether in a church or in a Christian family. As some wise wag wrote: *To dwell above with the saints we love, O that will be glory; But to dwell below with the saints we know, that’s a different story!*

This church at Philippi was made up of people from diverse backgrounds. There was the mature, probably widowed, businesswoman, Lydia, with a Jewish background. There was a career military man, the jailer, with a pagan background. There was the slave girl with an occult background. A church should be composed of varied backgrounds and cultures. Yet, it also sets the stage for conflict. Two women in the Philippian church, of whom we know nothing except what’s written in our text were having a tiff.

In our passage Paul gives us a pattern for biblical problem-solving, teaching us how to get along with each other with the outcome of unity, addition, and multiplication. It’s imperative that Christians work at resolving conflicts. We’re to be known by our love for each other (John 13:35). How can a church focus on reaching a lost world if it has internal conflict? What do we have to offer an angry world if we refuse to work out our own conflicts?

Today we’re going to cover **Four Truths: 1. It takes courage to biblically problem-solve. 2. Conflict is not unusual within the church. 3. It takes commitment to Christ to intervene and be a peacemaker. 4. Resolving conflicts is critical if the church is going to be able to focus on the mission of reaching our world.** This is so vital that I want to outline so key values for us before we jump into the passage.

Passages like this one are why we’re committed to systematic Bible teaching at Grace. This is not a passage I want to preach. If we weren’t working through Philippians, it’d be easy to skip. Systematic Bible teaching forces us to work through uncomfortable passages that are part of Scripture.

One of the greatest heartbreaks of ministry is when someone leaves the church. Ask any pastor and they’ll share that this is the dark side of ministry. You love people. You pray for them. You’re there at critical junctures of their lives. You

go into the ministry because you love Jesus and love people. If divisions are not resolved, someone will typically leave the church.

One of the greatest anxieties of ministry is when people leave a church. It's rare for someone to leave a church quietly. Sometimes they're mad. Sometimes they feel they must justify or rationalize their actions.

Every business knows that happy customers on average tell about 4 to 6 people. Dissatisfied ones will tell 10 to 20. Our human nature tends to believe bad news. The pastor's responsibility is to protect the flock. It's difficult for pastors to not worry about those uninvolved with a conflict being dragged in by someone upset who is leaving the church.

Many individuals enter our doors on Sunday bringing heavy burdens. They don't need more. Our church must be their safe place. It's why at Grace, our leadership is committed to protecting this church family from needless burdens. And it's evil to share something that could be a barrier to a lost person coming to Christ. There are folk who may never again darken the door of a church because they experienced the dark side of a church conflict.

It is rare for someone to leave a church over a biblical issue. In American Churchianity, we're consumers. We don't see the church as a family, but a place to do our religious shopping. If you have a bad experience with your kid, you don't sell him on eBay. But when we have a problem at church, we're often out the door.

Even the best churches have people leave. Any famous preacher, any who you think are phenomenal like an Alistair Begg, or John MacArthur, or Rick Warren, have people leave their church. It's happening all around us. Satan is splitting churches today over politics or the Pandemic or social justice.

There are times to leave a church. At Grace, we hold without apology to, *Sola Scriptura*. That simply means the Bible is the sole infallible source of authority for faith and practice. If a church veers from that and won't return to the authority of Scripture, you should find a church that will.

Then, we're to reach the lost. Our church is to partner with us as we work at being "backyard missionaries." If you're attending a church where you're embarrassed to bring lost friends or family, find a church where you can.

One more would be if your own spiritual growth is stunted. If you can go to another church and grow more spiritually and get more on fire for God there, please go with our blessing! Okay, let's dig into the text.

1. It takes courage to help problem-solve, *"Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved."* When Bible was originally written, there were no chapter or verse divisions. Chapter divisions were developed around 1227 A.D. with verse numbering in 1555 A.D. I'm drawing attention to that because we're not sure if verse 1 is connected to the thought at the end of chapter 3 or the beginning of chapter 4. It seems to fit better here because of the courage to help problem-solve.

During his years as premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev (**picture**) denounced the atrocities of Stalin. Once, as he censured Stalin in a public meeting, Khrushchev was interrupted by a shout from a heckler in the audience. "You were one of Stalin's colleagues. Why didn't you stop him?" "Who said that?" roared Khrushchev. An agonizing silence followed as nobody in the room dared move a muscle. Then Khrushchev replied quietly, "Now you know why."

It's not easy to solve conflict. It's easier to avoid it. We're anxious about how someone will respond and unsure if it will escalate things if we seek to deal with it. Because of this, most choose flight. They bail out to look for another church. But in New Testament times they didn't have that option, since there was only one church per city.

It'd be better if we couldn't just hop to another church. If we take the easy way out, we miss out on spiritual growth that comes through working things out in a biblical manner. We need to recognize that it's work and commit ourselves to seeking to resolve conflicts before we consider separating.

At least ten times in his letters, Paul urges his readers to *"stand firm."* Why the repeated emphasis? Paul knew Satan loves division and to discourage us. He knew we'd be tempted to bail when the bullets of conflict begin whizzing by. So he repeats it again and again: *Stand firm!*

When it comes to conflict with another believer, we're to commit to biblically problem-solve. Matthew 18 commands us that when we're offended to go to that believer one on one and share that we're offended. That's what it means to *"stand firm"* in this context.

What do we usually do? We talk to 3 or 4 of our friends, looking for allies.

Years ago I heard that someone was offended by one of our leaders. They told several others how upset they were. One of the folk they talked to contacted me, so I contacted the offended person and urged them to biblically handle it by going to this leader. Do you think they ever did? No and sadly, they're no longer with us.

If you don't learn to stand firm, you'll run from place to place. Neither you or that other believer have an opportunity to grow spiritually because it's all shoved under the rug. Sometimes God's will is for us to grit our teeth and do what's right. God blesses us as we stand firm, and do what we know is the biblical thing to do, and do it even though we'd prefer to run.

2. Conflict and division are not unusual within the church, “*I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.*” What kind of Christians do you think have fights and disagreements? Bad ones or good ones? Good Christians have conflicts, too. Two great leaders in the early church, Paul and Barnabas, had a big conflict and division (Acts 15). And these two ladies are church leaders. They’re godly. Paul loved them. The church loved them but they’d had a falling out. They weren’t just troublemakers. They loved Jesus and Paul. Godly Christians will sometimes have a falling out.

The word “*entreat*” means to urge or beg or plead. Paul comes to them with his heart in his hands, pleading with them to resolve this rift. *Why?* Because rifts rarely heal themselves.

Ever had a big fight with your spouse? Does ignoring it resolve it? No, you have to do surgery or like a cancer, it spreads. The same is true of unresolved church conflicts. They’re like a cancer and hurt the church and its mission.

The names of these two leading women who couldn’t get along with is very insightful. “*Euodia*” means “sweet smell.” “*Syntyche*” means “friendly.” Their fight had caused them to be *Odious* and *Stinky*. We don’t know much about them or what the dispute was over. Evidently, they were well-known leaders in the church. Yet, for some reason, “Sweet smell” and “Friendly” weren’t very sweet or very friendly to each other.

When the church at Philippi received this letter, all of the church gathered to listen to it read before the congregation. I wonder how these two women felt when they heard their names read in public. 2,000 years later they stand for women who can’t stand each other. It’s instructive that Paul doesn’t give us many details. We can’t tell from his words the background of the problem and nothing he says lets us know who was right and who was wrong.

Instead of taking sides, he simply urges these two Christians to settle their differences. That’s a useful principle to remember because in most disputes it usually doesn’t matter who started it or what it’s about. Once animosity builds up, there is generally plenty of blame on every hand.

We do know that these women are genuine believers (*their names are written in the Book of Life*, v. 3). They’re evidently personal friends of Paul’s who’d worked with him in founding this church. The word “*labored*” means to engage in competition. It indicates that they were strong, hard-working, and probably a tad opinionated. They had their own view of how things should be done. It’s easy to see how a rift might develop. But instead of focusing on the cause, Paul urges them to “*agree*,” which literally means to come to one mind. It doesn’t mean seeing eye to eye on every detail; instead, it indicates a personal choice to focus on the things that unite them in Christ.

Most church arguments are over opinions, not convictions. When I was first in the ministry, the Church in America was having “Worship Wars.” It was over new versus old music; hymnals over slides on a screen; piano and organ versus drums and guitars. It sometimes got bloody and I think Satan laughed with delight. But none of it was biblical which is why it’s died.

Ed Dobson (**picture**), one time pastor of Calvary Church in Grand Rapids told his church something in a sermon that has stuck with me for decades: “*The average Christian gets all upset about what they shouldn’t get upset about and doesn’t get upset about what they should get upset about.*” It’s arrogance when we let our opinions or preferences become wedges of division. I have to think that Jesus weeps at our pettiness.

In his book, *What They Never Told Us About How to Get Along With One Another*, Judson Edwards (**picture**) lists six rules for healthy relationships:

Agree more...Argue less.
Listen more...Talk less.
Produce more...Advertise less.
Confess more...Accuse less.
Laugh more...Fret less.
Give more...Receive less.

Every believer needs to take those to heart. So, consider the state of your relationships. It’s a new month. Start August by making a sincere effort to settle your disagreements. If you can’t settle them completely, at least make an effort in that direction.

Notice the key. They are to agree with each other “*in the Lord.*” In other words, we don’t need to agree with each other on each and every particular thing, but we must agree with each other in the Lord. We must stand united in Christ and work together as partners in the gospel. As the old saying goes: “*In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Charity.*”

Euodia and Syntyche are bickering over non-essentials, so Paul intervenes.

One of the most overlooked verses in the Church is from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God*” (Matthew 5:9). **3. It takes commitment to Christ to intervene and be a**

peacemaker, “Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.”

Paul calls on his “true comrade” to help these two women. We’re not sure who he was. Some think the man’s name was *Syzygus*, the Greek word for “comrade.” In the midst of all these other names, it makes sense. It would also be a play on words.

The KJV translates it “true yokefellow.” That points to someone who brings people together. He was to be true to his name and help these women. Whoever he was, we learn that it’s helpful for an outside party to assist in resolving conflict. Sometimes we need a godly mediator to bring us together. We can learn several things about such a mediator.

The outside party should be a mature, committed Christian. “True comrade” shows that Paul considered whoever this was a mature Christian who was committed to the work of the gospel.

The outside party should be objective. The outside party needs to hear both sides before he/she makes any judgments. We’re quick to jump to conclusions. Only a foolish person hears one side of a disagreement. There are always two sides. Proverbs 18:17, “The first to plead his case seems just, until another comes and examines him.”

If there’s clearly a sin, it’s easy to bring resolution, assuming that the erring party is repentant. Speaking from experience, it gets sticky when both sides say contradictory things and neither will admit to being dishonest. When that happens, about all you can do is push the past out of the way and deal with wrong attitudes and words that you perceive in the present. But you need to be as objective toward both sides as you can be.

The outside party should be open, direct, and truthful. Paul didn’t beat around the bush. He called them out for this by name. Sometimes we’re so careful not to offend anyone that we end up being vague and confusing.

The outside party should be affirming and positive where possible. Paul didn’t scold or berate them. He affirms them, mentioning how they’d shared in his struggle for the gospel, along with Clement and others unnamed.

He affirms these women, referring to them as fellow workers with himself. Each Christian is gifted by God and vital to the cause of Christ. We should lift up the giftedness and ministry of each and not make anyone feel belittled, even if they’re part of a conflict. We should express gratitude for their ministry. Recognizing and affirming differing gifts helps heal conflicts.

I have two older brothers, Mike and Mark. Mike was five years older than Mark. Their sibling fights were vicious, but when they were in the same school and some bullies were picking on Mark, the younger of the two, Mike came to his rescue like the Marines had landed. *Why?* They were brothers.

As believers, we have a stronger bond than a biological family. We’re brothers and sisters in Christ and must defend each other. How can we justify letting even a professing Christian trash talk a brother or sister in Christ?

Remember Jesus’ words? “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). Maybe that’s why a lost world doesn’t want what we have. Because of our lack of love they don’t even know that we’re Christ-followers. Please don’t be a passive listener to gossip. Be a problem-solver.

In any conflict resolution we must keep in mind that our overall goal isn’t to have peace. Peace is nice and we all feel better when everyone is getting along. But there’s a greater purpose.

4. Resolving conflicts is critical if the church is going to be able to focus on the mission of reaching our world.

When Paul says these women have shared his struggle in the gospel, the word he uses means to be on the same team in an athletic contest. Team members must work together. If they fight each other, the other team will make easy work of them and win.

Lord Nelson (**picture**) once came on deck and found two of his officers quarreling. He whirled them about, pointed to the enemy ships on the horizon and exclaimed, “Gentlemen, there are your enemies!”

Our enemy is out there. The devil loves to divide God’s people so that the lost won’t hear the good news that Christ the Savior has come. Quarreling church members aren’t witnessing church members. We must remember that we’re on the same team with everyone who shares the gospel. Their names are with ours in the Book of Life and we’ll spend eternity together. Our Enemy is Satan, not each other. We must focus on the work of the gospel.

Conclusion: God loves multiplication; Satan loves division. God has been working in our church. We’ve seen more come to Christ and become Christ-followers than I believe at any other time in our church’s history.

The need is great. I believe that God is using this pandemic to make people aware of the fragility of life. We have a great opportunity but we must be committed to Christ and united as a church.

The 1904 revival in Wales was the beginning of an evangelical awakening that would circle the world. In less than 10 months, approximately 100,000 people joined those little chapels in Wales that were filled to overflowing capacity. Could it happen again? Could it happen in our area? I believe so.

One of the starting points of that great revival occurred during a prayer meeting when a young, college student, Evan Roberts (**picture**) prayed, "Bend me!" Later Evan would write, "*I fell on my knees with my arms over the seat in front of me, and the tears flowed freely. I cried, ' Bend me! Bend me! Bend me!'*"

God is looking for broken Christians and broken churches. That's who He uses. Broken churches need broken, humble hearts. God wants to do something great! Will we humble ourselves? Will we let Him?

We are going to spend eternity in heaven with one another. If we refuse to seek to problem-solve now, I wonder if Jesus is going to pull some of us aside to resolve things there. God honors brokenness and humility! He wants to do great things through us and our church! The cause is too great to be divided over minor issues. We must be united by His grace for His glory!