

A naïve Christian married couple believed that because they loved each other and loved the Lord, they were going to live in peace and never have a disagreement. As you can imagine, they quickly discovered it just didn't work that way! The longer they were married, the more they bickered. The wife was really disturbed. She didn't believe in divorce, so finally one day she said to her husband, "Honey, let's just pray that the Lord will take one of us Home and then I'll go live with my mother!"

If you've never had a conflict with someone in the church or had your feelings hurt by another Christian, either you're a new believer or you've never gotten very close to another believer. If you get close to other Christians, you'll eventually have a conflict, probably sooner than later. I'm not trying to discourage you from getting involved. Instead we want to help you think realistically and to be prepared for the inevitable. We tend to be idealistic, that since we're all Christians, seeking to obey the Bible, filled with the Spirit, obeying the command to love one another, there won't be any conflicts among us. Such idealism just isn't realistic, whether in a church or in a Christian family. As one ditty says:

*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!*

We know that we're called to love one another. It doesn't sound very spiritual to admit that there are people we don't like. There are even Christians we don't like. Their personalities grate on us. The way they do things is counter to the way we do things, which of course is the right way.

It's vital then that we learn to deal with such situations for several reasons. First, the command to love one another is major! It's the second greatest commandment and is inextricably linked to the greatest commandment, to love God. 1 John 4:20 tells us that if we don't love our brother whom we have seen, we can't love God whom we have not seen. Christian unity is not minor. Jesus prayed just before His death that we'd have unity so the world would know the Father had sent Him (John 17:23).

The truth is that Christians disagree a lot, sometimes about the silliest things. Christians have been disagreeing with each other since the birth of the Church. When you read 1 Corinthians or Romans, you discover Christians were disagreeing over things like eating meat offered to idols, what holidays were important, to eat meat or be a vegetarian. Christians have disagreed on nearly every possible point on which you can disagree and still be a Christian. No matter what issue comes to mind, if you look around you'll find Christians somewhere who disagree about it. Sadly, some of those disagreements turn into knock down drag-out fights. That's not the way that it's supposed to be.

Wise are the words of Christian counselor, Dr. Larry Crabb ([picture](#)), "*The difference between spiritual and unspiritual community is not whether conflict exists, but is rather in our attitude toward it and our approach to handling it. When conflict is seen as an opportunity to draw more fully on spiritual resources, we have the makings of spiritual community.*" In other words, it's not that we have conflict; it's how we handle it that determines the level of our spiritual maturity. Relationships are strengthened through conflict if we handle them correctly. What makes or breaks relationships, what makes or breaks churches, is what we choose to do in conflict. We must learn how to walk in love while working through conflict. That way we can have unity even when there is diversity.

For the most part, even Christians living together in unity is unusual. Getting along on a regular basis, enjoying peace and harmony is wonderful, if not extraordinary. The occurrence was so odd the psalmist gets very excited, "*Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers (and sisters) dwell in unity!*" His point is that though a biological family or a spiritual family, rarely are we unified. While we share the same bonds of birth, blood, body, bionics, brain and behavior. We also share the same bonds of bias, beliefs, burdens, blots, blemishes, blame, bondage and battles. We share together the same time-space continuum that we call Earth, yet rarely are we unified. More than we want to admit it, we have conflicts. Disagreements are a reality for the church and Christian life.

Today what we want to work through **Conflict Resolution for Disciples**. We must learn how to disagree in a Christlike way. If you're taking notes...

**1. There are typical, yet unbiblical and unhealthy responses to conflict.** How do you deal with conflict? People handle it in various ways. Some seek to avoid it by either running away from it or by appeasing the other person. Some go to the opposite extreme and almost seem to welcome it, if not instigate it. There are those who won't back down from their core issues of belief, yet will seek to find common ground in which compromises can be made and issues resolved. Conflict takes place at work, in our neighborhoods, our families and politically. Our interest though is dealing with conflict among Christians and in the church.

Ken Sande (**pictures**) in his book, *The Peacemaker*, suggests that there are three basic ways that people respond to conflict.

**a. There are escape responses.** People tend to use these responses when they're more interested in avoiding a conflict than resolving it. This attitude is common within the Church. Many Christians believe that all conflict is wrong or dangerous. Thinking that Christians should always agree, or fearing that conflict will inevitably damage relationships, they will usually do one of three things to escape from conflict. Some will deny it to avoid a conflict. Others will run away from it. Some will even take their own lives to avoid conflict. Being dead is better to them than having unresolved issues.

**b. There are attack responses.** These responses are used by those more interested in winning than in preserving a relationship. It's seen in those who see conflict as an opportunity to assert their rights, control others or to take advantage of the situation. Attack responses are used not only by people who are strong and confident but also by those who feel weak or insecure. Whatever the motive, these responses are aimed at bringing as much pressure to bear on opponents as necessary to defeat the claim and eliminate the opposition. Some will even sue, using litigation as an aggressive action.

Some become aggressive. They attempt to overcome an opponent by using various forms of force or intimidation like verbal attacks (including gossip and slander), physical violence, or efforts to damage a person financially or even professionally. In extreme cases some are so desperate to win that they try to hurt or even kill those who oppose them. While most Christians won't kill someone, we must not forget we're guilty of murder in God's eyes if we harbor anger or contempt in our hearts toward others (Matt. 5:21-22).

**c. There are conciliation responses.** These responses are specifically commended by God and directed toward finding just and mutually agreeable solutions to conflict. Some will just overlook an offense. Most disputes are so insignificant they should be resolved by quietly overlooking an offense and forgiving the person who wronged you. "*A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense*" (Prov. 19:11). If the offense is too serious to overlook, it should be resolved through a kind confrontation. "*If your brother has something against you...go and be reconciled*" (Matt. 5:23-24). Others wisely negotiate. Substantive issues related to money, property, or other rights should be resolved through a bargaining process in which the parties seek to reach a settlement that satisfies the legitimate needs of each side.

When a dispute can't be resolved through one of the personal peacemaking responses, you should use an "assisted response." This requires involvement of others from either the church or community. There's mediation.

If two Christians can't reach an agreement in private, they should ask one or more others to meet with them to help them communicate more effectively and explore possible solutions.

In 1 Corinthians 6:1-8, Paul indicates that this is how Christians ought to resolve even legal conflicts with one another. "*If you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church*" (1 Cor. 6:4). Finally, if someone who professes to be a Christian refuses to be reconciled and obey Scripture, church leaders should be asked to intervene to promote repentance, justice, and forgiveness. "*If he refuses to listen [to others], tell it to the church*" (Matt. 18:17).

**2. Neither regeneration nor spiritual maturity erases differences or the potential for conflict.** In a battle during the French-English wars, an English frigate was anchored off of Quebec City waiting to reinforce the infantry when they arrived. To keep the sailors from getting bored an Admiral by the name of Phipps decided a little target practice would be good, so the cannons were aimed at one of the cathedrals. For the rest of the day the ship fired at the statues that on the roofline and along the walls of the church. Later, when the ship was ordered into battle it was discovered that, and here's the line, "*They had used up all their ammunition shooting at the Saints.*"

Christians are going to differ, disagree, even fight. To be obedient to Scripture, believers must work at resolving conflicts so that their church can focus on the work of the gospel. Let me suggest then that...

**a. Resolving conflicts is work.** It's not easy. It's easier to avoid. We have a tendency to shrink from confrontation. We feel anxious about how the other person will take it. We're not sure if it will escalate the conflict.

Because of these factors, the most common way people deal with conflict with another person at church is to just bail and find another church. That's an unbiblical and spiritually immature response. It's sad that it's so easy to just hop to another church, because too many of us, including pastors, take the easy way out and miss the growth and the testimony that can come through working things out in a biblical way. We must attempt to work through the problems before we consider separating.

**b. Resolving conflicts is first the responsibility of those involved in the conflict.** In Philippians 4:2-3 the Apostle Paul writes: "*I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and*

*the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.*" Paul repeats the same verb with each woman: **"I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche."**

Matthew 18:15 says, *"If your brother sins against you, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother."* In Matthew 5:23-24, the situation is reversed in that your brother has something against you. Yet, in both situations it's incumbent on you to take the initiative.

Many relational problems would be quickly resolved if we'd follow this simple guideline, to take the initiative in going to the other person to try to clear up the problem between us. One common sin is for the one who feels wronged to talk to others about the person who wronged him/her rather than going directly to the person. It's fine to go to a mature spiritual leader in order to gain their wisdom on how to approach the one who wronged you. It's a sin to talk to others! It's gossip or slander and compounds the problem. Before you go though...

\* **Identify the true problem or source of the conflict.** We don't know what the root problem was between Euodia and Syntyche. Most problems between Christians can be grouped under several heads: A personal wrong (someone did something to offend you); a personality clash (the person rubs you the wrong way); a methodology difference (you don't agree with how they're doing something); a doctrinal difference which is very rare; or (most commonly) some combination of all of them.

Some Christians label problems as a doctrinal difference because it sounds more spiritual: "I'm defending THE TRUTH!" Often the doctrinal difference is only a mask for a personal problem or sin (which doesn't make me look so good!). It's possible to hold correct doctrine in an insensitive, proud manner that results in relational conflict. You can be right doctrinally yet sinning in the way you use your "correct" view to think you're better than your brother or sister. Or use it to put him down for being wrong rather than gently correct him, help him grow and build him up.

Quite often some degree of self-love is at the root of a problem with someone else. Not a lack of self-love, but rather we love ourselves more than we love our neighbor. We need to humble ourselves and be open to what God wants to teach us through the conflict. We may need to judge ourselves and grow in humility or sensitivity to others. Quite often, there's a breakdown in communication (in what's said or left unsaid, or how it's said; and in what was heard or not heard), so we need to grow there.

\* **Remind yourself of the goal.** *"Agree in the Lord"* is the same phrase Paul used in Philippians 2:2, *"by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."* This doesn't mean we're all to think the same way about every issue or set aside essential truth for the sake of unity. It means we must have our minds geared toward Christian love, seeking the highest good for each other. Our goal is not to win or put the other person in their place. It's to honor Christ by growing in maturity and helping our brother or sister grow in maturity through the resolution of the conflict in line with biblical truth. So we need to ask prayerfully: *What does God want to teach me in this situation? What does He want to teach the other person? What does He want to accomplish in the larger picture of His Church in this community?* The honor of Christ and the testimony of the gospel should be at the forefront as we seek to resolve any conflict.

\* **Go to the other person in a spirit of gentleness and humility, seeking to restore the relationship.** If the other person has sinned, you don't go to blast him or give her a piece of your mind. You check yourself, making sure that you're spiritual, that you're in submission to the Spirit, that your motive is to restore the person, not blow them away. You recognize that you, too, are a sinner. Deal with any anger you feel. Spend time in prayer, waiting on God for the right attitude, timing, and place. Think through the proper wording that will be winsome and not communicate arrogance or self-righteousness. Your manner and attitude must be gentle. Don't go with an accusational spirit. When you go, it's good to ask questions first, to make sure you understand the situation. The first thing in any conflict is for those involved to come together in a spirit of love, submission to God, and seek to work it out. If that fails then...

\* **Resolving conflicts sometimes requires the help of an outside party.** Paul calls on his *"true companion"* (*"loyal yokefellow,"* NIV) to help these two women reunite. *"Yokefellow"* points to someone who brings two people together. This brother should be true to his name and help these women. It's often helpful for an outside party to help resolve a conflict. We learn several things about such a mediator...

1) **The outside party should be a mature, committed Christian.** *"True companion,"* shows Paul considered whoever this was as a mature Christian.

2) **The outside party should be objective.** Paul's objectivity is hinted at in his double use of the verb, *"I entreat...I ask."* He doesn't take sides or imply one is right and the other wrong. Proverbs 18:17 states, *"The first to plead his case seems just, until another comes and examines him."*

Speaking from experience, it gets sticky when both sides are saying contradictory things and neither will admit to lying. When that happens, about all you can do is put the past out of the way and deal with the sinful attitudes and words that you perceive in the present.

3) ***The outside party should be open, direct, and truthful.*** Can you imagine how these two women felt when this letter was read at church? Here they are, known in church history for one thing, the quarrel they had! Paul doesn't beat around the bush. He named names. In several places he corrects people by name. Sometimes we're so careful tiptoeing trying not to offend anyone, we end up being vague and confusing. Paul was direct, specific, and truthful.

4) ***The outside party should be affirming and positive where possible.*** Paul didn't berate these women. He affirms them by mentioning how they'd shared in the cause of the gospel. He acknowledges the names of all these dear people are known to God, written in the Book of life, that book in heaven that contains the names of all born-again Christians. Affirming differing gifts is vital to conflict resolution, especially in the work of the gospel. In any conflict resolution, we need to keep in mind that our overall goal isn't to have peace. Peace is nice. But there's a greater goal...

\* ***Resolving conflicts is necessary so that the church can focus on the work of the gospel.*** When Paul says that 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 start fighting each other, the other team will make easy work of them.

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

We must remember that the Enemy is out there, the prince of darkness, who wants nothing more than to divide God's people so lost people don't hear the good news that Christ the Savior has come. *Quarreling church members are not witnessing church members.* You can't be at odds with other Christians and be promoting Christ.

\* ***Unresolved conflict often leads to bitterness.*** Our greatest danger is that not only will we disagree, but we'll cross the line into bitterness. You know have a problem if you start thinking about revenge against those who've hurt you. Perhaps you want to get even so you begin to spread rumors or twist facts to make someone else look bad. You have a problem when you begin to attack the person, not the problem. Attacking the problem means studying the issue, sorting out the good and bad points, thinking through other ways of looking at things. Attacking the person means losing your temper, questioning motives, and using intimidation to get your way.

If you must disagree—and sometimes we do, then let's disagree agreeably, with respect and not with rancor or bitterness. Let's determine to handle conflict as disciples of Jesus Christ.

**Conclusion:** As we tie this up, please remember – conflict always provides an opportunity to glorify God. Conflict gives you an opportunity to show God that you love, respect and trust Him. It allows you to show others that God is loving, wise, powerful and faithful. When you face a clash with another Christian, try to disengage your emotions and objectively think through the answers to these **four questions**:

1) ***What is the real nature of the difficulty?*** We need to be careful, because we have a built in tendency to push personality differences into the realm of doctrine or sin. It sounds far more spiritual to say that the other person is doctrinally off base or that he sinned, than to admit his personality grates on mine. Sometimes an objective third party helps work through these matters.

2) ***Is there an important biblical principle at stake?*** Sometimes, because of personality differences, one person elevates one biblical principle, while the other elevates a different one. In such cases, if the principle is basic to one's approach to ministry, it may be better to agree to work separately.

Some of you may be thinking, "What if you can't separate from the person that you clash with because you're married to him (or her)?" That leads to the third question you need to ask...

3) ***What godly character qualities is the Lord trying to develop in me through this clash?*** Sometimes God in His grace throws us together with people who grate against us to sandpaper off our rough edges. Let's face it. I don't really need patience or kindness when the other person sees everything my way! I don't need to learn to deny myself when the other person thinks I'm a wonderful person. But when there's a clash, God often confronts me with my selfishness and stubbornness. If I submit to Him, He'll use it to develop Christlike qualities in me.

4) ***Would the cause of Christ be furthered or hindered by my continuing to work closely with this person?*** In the case of two Christians who are married to one another, it won't further the cause of Christ to divorce over incompatible personalities. They need to learn to appreciate one another's strengths, to affirm each other in love, and to agree to disagree over certain matters. Divorce harms the work of Christ.

In the case of Christian workers, if they can learn to affirm one another's strengths, the beauty of the Body of Christ can be demonstrated through their working relationship. God gives us differing gifts. The hand has no right to reject the foot because it's not a hand (1 Cor. 12:12-30).

When we face personality differences in the church, we need to be diligent to guard the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We must seek to work out our differences if possible in a spirit of love and kindness.

In his book, *Prophecy in the Ring*, Dr. Robert Lightner tells of a custom Japanese parents use when their children are fighting. They bring each child into the room and put a pillow on the table. The child is angry and upset. The child puts

his hands on the pillow and says, *“I am right and my friend is wrong.”* The child then moves to the other side of the pillow, puts his hands on it and says, *“My friend is right and I am wrong.”* The child then places his hands on the third side of the pillow, saying, *“Both of us are right and both of us are wrong.”* As he places his hands on the final side, very thoughtfully he says, *“I am partly right and my friend is partly right.”*

When you and I get to Heaven and look back on many of the issues that have divided us, we’ll say the same thing. We were partly right and our friends were partly right. Between now and then, there are going to be plenty of disagreements in the church. That’s the price we pay for being sinners who needed dying for. Yet, we have the wonderful opportunity to deal with our disagreements graciously because we know Jesus Christ. He makes the difference in how we handle conflict. It’s essential that we handle **Conflict Resolution in a way that demonstrates that we are truly Christ’s Disciples.**