

WHEN
CHRISTIANS
CLASH



When Christians Clash
(A Guide to Manage Conflict in the Church)
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Conflict hurts. It divides people, destroys careers, and damages the ministry and reputation of the church. Most people are not equipped to manage conflict well. Often pastors and church leaders don't know what to do when a dispute breaks out in their congregation. So, they hold multiple meetings and take a variety of actions that only tend to escalate the conflict and make the situation worse. It doesn't have to be that way. While there is no conflict management strategy that will guarantee a peaceful resolution, there are ways of understanding and managing conflict that will lead to a more positive, less destructive outcome. I have developed an A-C-T-I-O-N plan to help you walk through conflict in an orderly and intentional way. The sessions that follow will help individuals and leadership teams to gain a better sense of what's going on around them and what to do about it.

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Years ago, well before the days of home computers, my elementary school-aged daughter had an electric typewriter. Eventually the ribbon wore out, and she asked me to replace it. I purchased a new ribbon and put it in the typewriter. I wanted to test it to see whether I had installed it properly, so I typed a sentence that I remembered from my own junior high typing class: "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog." After typing the sentence, I told my daughter that the ribbon was installed, and she could use her typewriter again. I left the paper in the typewriter and walked away, with the satisfaction of having completed another household project. I heard a brief period of typing from my daughter's room, followed by silence. Later that day I walked past the typewriter and saw that my test page was still in it. My original sentence was there, and my daughter had added to what I had typed. The paper in the typewriter now read:

The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.

The dog barked and was very angry with the fox.

The fox said he was sorry and would never do that again.

The dog forgave him, and they lived happily ever after.

I gave some thought to what she had added. Lucky fox! Lucky dog! Apology and forgiveness are key ingredients for a happily-ever-after friendship. Life is full of jumping foxes and barking dogs. Their human equivalents are found in homes, schools, churches, and the workplace. I've written this guide to help people live happily ever after, or at least with a greater measure of peace. And peace is much needed.

Some people are **peace breakers**. Some are **peace fakers**. And some are **peace makers**. It's been that way throughout human history. Conflict has been part of life since life began. And conflict has been part of church life since the church began. So, Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9). And the Apostle Paul wrote, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace" (Colossians 3:15). As followers of Christ, we are called to peace. The church needs you to be a peacemaker, to strive to resolve conflicts in ways that honor God and promote peace.

The church also needs you to be a person of wisdom and courage. Proverbs 29:8 says, "Mockers stir up a city, but the wise turn away anger." Proverbs 29:11 says, "Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end." In times of conflict foolish people do foolish things. Wisdom is often in short supply. The wise need to take their place and stand up. That takes courage. In Joshua 1 the Lord told Joshua to be "strong and courageous" (Joshua 1:6,7,9). He told him three times. Then the officers of the people said, "Be strong and courageous" (Joshua 1:18). Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 16:13, "Be courageous; be strong." Wisdom without courage is like a flashlight without a battery.

In the pages that follow I offer a strategy that I believe will help you and those around you work through conflict in positive ways that lead to a greater measure of peace. This can be used either as an individual resource to sharpen your conflict management skills or as a guide for a leadership team managing a dispute.

Before getting into strategies to manage conflict, here are some basic truths about conflict.

The Truth about Conflict

Conflict is inevitable. I've been a pastor for over forty years. I am the husband of an attractive, intelligent wife; the father of two wonderful children; and a former athlete. I coached little league baseball and helped coach soccer. I was a Boy Scout. I spent twenty-five years in school. I worked for six years in a cancer research laboratory. I have served five churches. I have lived in congenial neighborhoods in pleasant communities. I have many friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. In all of those areas of life I've tried to be a "nice guy." But I have nonetheless experienced conflict in each of those spheres of life. Think about the areas of your life. Haven't you experienced conflict in a variety of relationships and situations? Even when you tried to be "nice," didn't you experience at least some clashes? Look at today's news. You'll find examples of conflict everywhere you look. Conflict is an inevitable part of life.

The Bible is a book of conflict. It begins with conflict. In Genesis 4, Cain killed Abel. And conflict follows in book after book. The Bible also ends with conflict. The book of Revelation prophesies the Battle of Armageddon, the final struggle of human history. The Bible describes conflict between kings and armies, between husbands and wives, between rich and poor, between parents and children, between siblings, between enemies, between friends, and even between church leaders. Conflict was common not only among people who were evil, but also among the righteous. Moses experienced conflict. David experienced conflict. So did Daniel, Peter, John, James, Paul, and even Jesus. Conflict is inevitable. It's going to happen in your life and in your church.

Conflict can be destructive. You already know that to be true. You've seen it in your life. You've seen it in the world. You've seen it in Scripture. Cain did kill Abel. And conflict today causes pain and division. Unresolved conflict damages churches, marriages, families, careers, and friendships.

Several years ago, I was in a barbershop waiting for a haircut. As I waited, I paged through an outdoors magazine and saw a picture that startled me. It was from the Michigan DNR. The picture featured two muskies. A muskie is a large, aggressive fish. These two fish became too aggressive. They were bonded in a death lock. One muskie had bitten the other. His jaw got stuck over his rival's head. The two became locked in a fatal bite that destroyed them both. The picture showed the two muskies, now dead, still locked in the fatal bite, the mouth of one clamped over the head of the other.

A few years later I read a newspaper article about other animals fighting to a mutual death. There's a small town in Minnesota called Hermantown. It's right outside of Duluth, MN, where I grew up. One day a hiker near that town found two whitetail deer in the woods. Both were bucks, with antlers. And they, too, were bonded in a death lock. They fought by crashing into each other, using their antlers as weapons. The antlers got stuck together. Both deer lost. When the hiker found them, they were near death because of their injuries and the prolonged ill effects of the antler death lock. He called the authorities, whose only option was to put them both out of their misery.

There's a lot of conflict in the animal kingdom. Their conflict doesn't always end well. There is also a lot of conflict in the kingdoms of humans, including the church. And that conflict doesn't always end well either. Scripture gives us a warning.

Galatians 5:15, "If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other." Conflict can be destructive.

Conflict can also be constructive. Conflict can cause people to grow, both personally and spiritually. It can solve problems and lead to positive change. Good can come from conflict. If you view discord only as a destructive event, when engaged in a conflict you will likely conduct yourself in destructive ways. If, on the other hand, you view conflict as a potentially constructive opportunity, you will likely conduct yourself in ways that are conducive to resolving problems and restoring relationships. Managed conflict can be constructive!

Conflict energizes people. It will motivate some to take action and will keep others awake at night. It can become a driving force within a church, the thing that everyone talks about. Think about the last time you were involved in a dispute. Didn't the conflict stimulate you? How did you use the added energy? Did it rob you of sleep? Give you a headache or a stomachache? Or did it motivate you to investigate creative options to solve the problem?

When there's a disagreement, people are animated. That energy can be channeled in constructive or destructive ways, ways that will serve either to resolve the conflict or to escalate it. When you feel that surge of conflict-related energy, take steps to manage it rather than allowing it to manage you.

Conflict brings out the best and worst in people. When engaged in a controversy, some people rise to new heights. Others sink to unprecedented depths. In 1 Samuel 22, King Saul was pursuing David. A priest named Ahimelech had unwittingly helped David in his flight, not realizing that he was running from the king. That angered King Saul, who ordered the deaths of Ahimelech, his family, and all the priests at Nob. Conflict brought out the worst in Saul. The king's officials, however, were unwilling to raise a hand against the priests of the Lord. The tension brought out the best in them. At this junction, King Saul ordered his henchman, Doeg, to do the killing. That day Doeg killed 85 priests of the Lord, along with all the men, women, and children of Nob. Conflict brought out the worst in Doeg.

When you're entangled in a conflict, the situation will draw out either the best or the worst in you. The choice is yours.

Conflict can be managed effectively. When something is inevitable, energizing, and can be either destructive or constructive, it must be well managed. Conflict is like a fire. It has great potential to destroy. But if managed well it has the capabilities of warming, energizing, and clearing away dead, dried brush, and making new life possible. Managed conflict can resolve problems and restore relationships. In the church, managed conflict can clarify vision and settle differences.

Conflict management starts in the heart. Jesus said, "Out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Matthew 15:19). Thoughts, words, actions, and attitudes flow from the heart. If your heart is inclined toward peace, you have a chance to achieve it. If your heart is inclined toward revenge, infliction of pain, getting even, or abuse of power, peace will be out of reach.

The conflict management strategy I offer does not come with a guarantee of peace, because conflict management starts in the heart not with a strategy. But if your heart is inclined toward peace, the application of these principles will help you manage conflict more effectively, leading to a greater measure of peace.

An A-C-T-I-O-N Plan to Manage Conflict

I've taken some basic conflict management strategies and put them in an easy to remember form. As I said, I can't promise that if you use this strategy all your conflicts will end happily ever after. That would be a fairy tale. But I can assure you that if you use this strategy your conflicts will go better than if you didn't.

The strategy is summarized by the acronym: A-C-T-I-O-N.

A: Assess the conflict.

C: Choose your conflict behavior.

T: Target your interests.

I: Identify the stakeholders.

O: Open communication.

N: Negotiate a resolution.

In each session I present a few pages of explanation followed by questions for you to consider. The questions can be addressed individually or in a group. If you are part of a leadership team striving to effectively manage a conflict, the A-C-T-I-O-N steps will help you better understand the dynamics of the conflict, hopefully leading to resolution. As you go through each session, take an honest and insightful look at what's going on in your setting and keep an open mind on how you might be able to bring resolution to the tension. I also include some guidelines regarding when to call in outside help. If you are unable to resolve the dispute, get help!

Session 1: Assess the Conflict

When you're in a conflict, before you react step back and assess what's going on. In the Old Testament, Nehemiah was the leader of his people. There was a conflict. Here's what he did first. "When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind..." (Nehemiah 5:6-7). He was angry, but before he acted or spoke, he pondered. He assessed the conflict. When you're in a conflict, especially when you're angry, step back and assess what's going on. Here's how to assess a conflict.

Take the Temperature.

Your body always has a temperature. A temperature of 98.6° is ideal. If your temperature is 101°, you have a fever. If it hits 105°, you're seriously ill. If it drops to 95°, you're hypothermic. Your temperature is a sign of health. Have you ever been to the doctor's office without the nurse taking your temperature?

Just like a body, a conflict has a temperature. It can be smoldering and ready to burst into flames or cool, with a chilling effect. Years ago, the Department of Homeland Security developed a threat advisory system based on colors, from green (low threat) to red (severe threat). The colors determined the level of threat. I have developed a color scheme to identify the temperature of conflicts. The temperature levels go from blue to orange to red to purple. Conflicts usually escalate in this order.

The Blue Conflict (Cooling): In a blue conflict, there's a cooling in the relationship. At first the cooling may be difficult to detect. Interactions may not be quite as warm as they once were. Then there's a gradual withdrawal from the relationship. People aren't talking to or spending time with each other the way they once did. Communication remains civil but is for the most part superficial and brief, with neither party really opening up. Nobody goes on the attack, but everybody goes into withdrawal. There's a drifting apart.

The Orange Conflict (Simmering, Smoldering): When water simmers it stays just below the boiling point. When a fire smolders, it gives off a lot of smoke and is continuously on the verge of breaking into flame. In an orange conflict, relationships are tense, but interactions stay just below the boiling point. There may be some smoke, but no fire. There are noticeable slights, strained communication, and nonverbal expressions of frustration, disappointment, or anger. People become petty and easily offended. Discussions turn into arguments. It becomes difficult for the parties involved to work together. Relationships become unpleasant, and there's a feeling that an outburst of anger could happen at any time.

The Red Conflict (Boiling, Explosive): In a red conflict tempers flare. There's a lot of anger and a lot of blame. The atmosphere gets red-hot. People function as declared adversaries. Arguments never seem to get resolved. There may be an ongoing cycle of attack and counterattack. Revenge also comes into play. Talking becomes yelling. Words become harsh, accusative, and abusive. Sometimes the situation escalates into physical violence. People seek out allies to join their side and support their cause.

The Purple Conflict (Frigid): In a purple conflict, people are ice-cold toward each other. They are angry and avoid one another. Relationships are frozen. There is little or no communication between the parties to the conflict. Sometimes there is communication through an intermediary and at other times no communication at all. When a husband and wife live in the same house but are so mutually angry that they sleep in separate rooms, eat separate meals, and refuse to address one another, they are involved in a frigid conflict.

When there's a conflict between a parent and a child that leads to such estrangement that there is no communication or relationship between them, the conflict has also reached this level. As painful as red clashes are, purple conflicts are worse. They can occur even in church, where they usually result in cutting off communication between the parties involved, attendance at different worship services, or even a transfer by one or the other party to a different church. Leslie Flynn, in his book *When the Saints Come Storming In*, writes about an unusual response to a purple conflict: "In a Canadian church that had no middle aisle, but rather a divider down the center of the pews, two families at loggerheads managed always to sit on one side and one on the other."¹

Frigid conflicts are difficult to resolve. They require a lot of thawing out. How hot (or cold) is your conflict? Take its temperature before moving on.

Measure the Breadth: The next question to ask is How broad is your conflict? Is it widespread? Or confined? I live in Southern California, where we occasionally experience brush fires. If those fires are confined to a given area, they don't pose much of a problem. They just burn up the available fuel and burn out. If, however, the fire is pushed by the strong and dry Santa Ana winds off the desert, even the smallest flare-up can become a major threat. Wildfires destroy property and threaten lives. They're difficult to control. At times a wildfire becomes so unmanageable that the strategy of the firefighters is focused more on protecting buildings than on containing the fire itself. A small, contained blaze—no problem. But a wind-driven, spreading conflagration over tinder-dry terrain—big problem!

The same is true of conflicts. If they can be contained, they can be somewhat easily resolved, or at least the damage minimized. However, once they start to proliferate, they can take on a life of their own and do major damage to people and organizations. When you assess a dispute, take note of how well contained it is. Also note the atmosphere within which the dispute has been kindled. Are there people or forces fanning the flames? If the wind is blowing hot and dry, a two-person conflict can easily engulf an entire family or church.

Note the Age: A new conflict is easier to manage than an old one. The longer a dispute has been around, the more it has taken on a history. Bitterness sets in. Feuding and revenge take place. If left unresolved, blue conflicts can become orange, and orange become red. Ephesians 4:26 says, "In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry."

Identify the Source: One of the key questions to ask of any conflict is what caused it. This isn't always an easy question to answer. But identifying the source is an important step. If you have a leaky roof, you can use a pail to catch the water, but if you don't fix the roof it's going to leak again the next time it rains.

Assess the Power Structure: Power is always an issue in conflict. As you assess the level of strife, consider the power structures involved. Power can come from a variety of sources. Those who officially hold positions of authority have organizational power. Those who have a measure of charisma have persuasive power. Some have a strong following and enjoy the power of popularity. Those who are strong-willed, stubborn, and/or intimidating may exert a great deal of personal power. Those who possess wealth, skills, or information vital to the success of an organization wield a high measure of resource power. Even victims or perceived victims can bring to bear a measure of what I call sympathetic power. I have been in church meetings where the most powerful person in the room has been the one in tears. Sometimes the one supposedly at the top is not the one brokering the power. There is also power in numbers. When you're a party to a controversy, assess the influence of those involved. When there's a power inequity, someone may need to be empowered or protected. When power is being

abused, someone may need to be confronted. When you're the one in a position of power, you have both the responsibility and the opportunity to settle the quarrel. When you're in a significantly weaker position, there may be little or nothing you can do to make things better. Ultimately, however, everyone has the power to appeal to the One who holds the highest power. This is called the power of prayer.

Know Yourself: Assessing the conflict includes assessing yourself. In one way or another you are involved. Whether you are an active participant in the conflict, or a leader called upon to manage it, or one affected by it, you are part of it. Ask yourself some questions. How do you feel about conflict in general? How do you tend to manage conflict? How was it managed in your family of origin? What is your current stress level? What is going on in your life that could affect how you respond to the conflict? Assess yourself as you assess the conflict.

A-C-T-I-O-N Steps to Assess the Conflict

Assessing the conflict starts with assessing yourself. Before meeting as a leadership team, think through the personal assessment questions and identify your core values and attitudes regarding conflict. Then individually or as a leadership group, work through the conflict assessment. At this point the goal is not to resolve or manage the conflict, but to understand what's behind it. You may think you have a full understanding of what's going on, but it's always more complicated than one person's initial assessment.

Personal Assessment: Core Values and Attitudes about Conflict

1. How was conflict handled in your family of origin? How does that early experience contribute to your view of conflict?
2. Do you view conflict as destructive? Constructive? Or both?
3. Identify a time in your life when a conflict led to a destructive end. What happened? How did this experience impact your feelings about conflict?
4. Identify a time in your life when a conflict led to a constructive end. What happened? How did this experience impact your feelings about conflict?
5. Does conflict bring out the best in you? Or the worst? Think through recent examples.
6. Does conflict energize you? In what ways? Is conflict affecting your sleep? Your health? Your attitude?
7. Do you feel as though you're walking on eggshells around certain people? Who? Why?
8. Is denial of the conflict causing problems in your life?
9. Do you complain to others about people with whom you feel tension or conflict, without expressing this directly to the antagonist?

Conflict Assessment

1. What's the temperature of the conflict? (Blue, Orange, Red, Purple)

2. What's the breadth of the conflict? How likely is it to spread? Who is likely to spread it? How fast is it likely to spread?
3. How old is the conflict? Is it a continuation of past tensions? Or is it a recent dispute?
4. What is the source of the conflict? Was there a primary ignition point? Was inappropriate behavior involved? What caused it to escalate?
5. Who has power, and what kind of power?
 - Organizational power (official leadership)?
 - Persuasive power (charisma, popularity, or intimidation)?
 - Resource power (wealth, skills, or information)?
 - Sympathetic power (victimization or discrimination)?
 - Numerical power (numbers matter)?
6. Is there a power inequity that makes some people vulnerable? What can be done to protect them during the conflict management process?
7. How do your individual personal values and attitudes toward conflict affect how you manage it as a group?

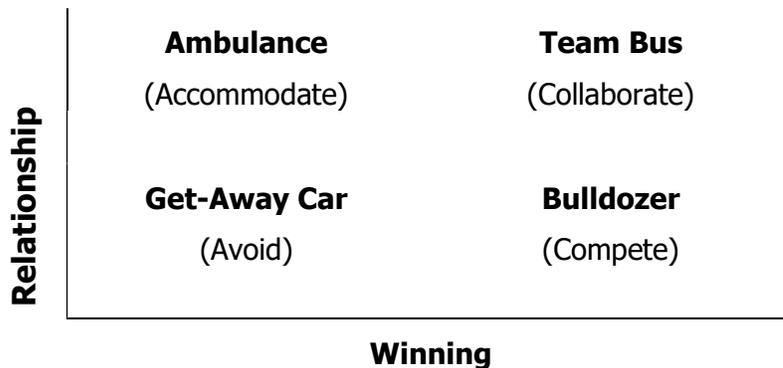
Working through these questions will help you identify not only your personal values and attitudes toward conflict, but also elements of the current dispute you are striving to manage. Once you have completed the assessment, move on to consider how you will respond to the conflict.

Session 2: Choose Your Conflict Behavior

When you're involved in a conflict, choose your behavior—don't let your behavior choose you. Dissension causes stress, stress drives us toward self-preservation, and self-preservation elicits an instinctive fight-or-flight response. People who react to conflict on a merely instinctive level will likely either fight or run. Flight and fight are reasonable options in some situations. Sometimes running away is the best option. And sometimes taking a stand and fighting is the best option. Sometimes an instinctive response is best. However, you will manage conflict much more effectively if you intentionally choose behaviors rather than reacting instinctively. One way or another, the conflict behavior you choose will contribute toward faking peace, breaking peace, or making peace. The choice is yours. Choose the response that will lead to peace.

In most conflicts there are both problems to solve and relationships to preserve or restore. There is usually competition between those two priorities. This contest between fixing the problem and preserving or restoring relationships leads to four basic conflict styles, which I describe as types of vehicles. When you've got a job to do that requires a vehicle, a certain type will suit the task better than another. Likewise, when you're in a controversy, one conflict style will suit the situation better than any of the others. The four conflict styles are illustrated and explained in the diagram that follows. This illustration is based upon a model developed by Robert Blake and Jane Mouton and known as the "Managerial Grid."²

Conflict Styles



The Bulldozer

When you're in a conflict, one choice is for you to fight to win. This involves competing against your adversary and doing everything you can to defeat him and gain the upper hand. The battle cry for this popular conflict style is "My Way!" The primary goal of many people involved in a clash is to win at all costs. If such combatants were vehicles, they would be Bulldozers, aggressively moving toward their objective and in the process mowing down anything that stands in their way. Nothing stops them. They strive for win-lose outcomes. Their strength is that they get the job done, while their weakness is that they can irreparably damage people and relationships along the way.

There are many ways to be a Bulldozer. I have seen people use their physical stature to intimidate others. I knew one man who was taller than most other people. He would frequently stand closer than normal while engaged in conversation with others. The result was that he

literally and physically looked down on them. People found this intimidating, especially in times of dissension. Others use their wealth or intelligence or propensity to grandstand or a volatile personality to bulldoze their way to winning. Still others resort to tears and a victimization mentality. While tears are usually a sign of weakness and meekness, they can also be effective tools for bulldozing our way to the top. In some situations, the Bulldozer is the best choice of conflict styles. Biblical examples include David taking on Goliath and Jesus turning over the tables of the money changers in the temple.

There will be times when solving a problem has a higher priority than preserving relationships with conflict opponents. However, conflict participants need to choose those times carefully. They also need to select their words and actions carefully. It's easy for Bulldozer-type people to feel self-justified and become overly aggressive in conflict situations, following a philosophy that "might makes right" or the "ends justify the means." But the reality often is that "might makes wrong." As a rule, "unjust means lead to an unjust end." If the Bulldozer is your dominant conflict style, be careful. Learn to back off and consider other options first. If you seldom or never choose this style, learn to use it where appropriate. There are times when standing up for what's right is more important than keeping others happy. When such a time comes, choose to stand, but stand in the way Jesus would stand.

The Team Bus

Frequently in a conflict the best course of action is to work together to resolve differences. The battle cry of this conflict style is "Our Way!" Rather than competing to win, this style focuses on all parties working together to resolve differences so that everybody can win. The vehicle that best describes this style is the Team Bus. Those on the Team Bus have a place to go and plan to go there together. And they intend to win together. Tommy Lasorda, the former Los Angeles Dodger Manager, put it this way. "You've got to play for the name on the front of your uniform, not the name on the back." The Team Bus approach maximizes the potential both for resolving the problem and for restoring relationships. While the Bulldozer runs over others, the Team Bus runs along with them. Team Bus people strive for mutually agreeable, win-win outcomes. Their strength is their ability to negotiate a solution that is acceptable to all parties, but their weakness is that they're not sure what to do when negotiations break down. And negotiations do break down. Not all people will play according to fair-play ground rules, and it isn't always possible to find solutions that will keep everybody happy. A win-win outcome is a highly desirable goal, but it isn't always possible.

The Ambulance

Sometimes in a disagreement the best option is to choose to lose so that another can win. This conflict style is highly accommodative. The "battle" cry of those who choose to accommodate is "Your Way!" and the vehicle that best describes them is the Ambulance. Their highest priorities are relationships and the well-being of others. Winning the conflict comes in second. Rather than running over people or even running along with others, the Ambulance runs to people to help them. The strength of the Ambulance approach is the care of people. Jesus instructed His followers to "love one another" (John 13:34) and demonstrated this style when He healed people and forgave their sins. In fact, Jesus went so far as to direct His followers to "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44). Jesus knew who needed confrontation and who needed kindness. Matthew 12:20 quotes the prophet Isaiah with reference to Jesus: "A bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." A bruised reed is fragile and needs to be handled gently to prevent breakage. Some people are like bruised reeds. They need to have a soft touch, even in a conflict situation.

One weakness of this approach is its tendency to allow some people to remain dependent and others co-dependent. Another weakness is its high cost to those who employ it consistently. Such people may eventually feel like doormats. The Ambulance approach leads to lose-win outcomes, in which one of the participants decides, "I will lose. You can win. I just want to care for you." In some circumstances there can be a high price to accommodating others. Just before World War II the British prime minister Neville Chamberlain developed a policy of appeasement toward Nazi Germany, believing that giving in to some of Hitler's demands might prevent war. It didn't. The price of appeasement was high.

Accommodation is the conflict style to choose when a conflict opponent is vulnerable, powerless, and desperately in need of a win. If, however, this becomes your dominant style, you will pay a high personal price in conflict situations.

The Getaway Car

Conflict usually hurts! So, to avoid the pain some people simply avoid controversy. The battle cry of those who sidestep conflict is "The Highway!" and the vehicle that best describes them is the Getaway Car. When dissension comes, they go. They "hit the highway," running from their adversaries. This style usually results in lose-lose conflict outcomes. The Getaway Car simply wants out of the conflict, leaving no possibility of mutual resolution. Avoidance takes a higher priority than winning the dispute or preserving or fostering the relationship. Conflict evaders often withdraw both physically and emotionally, doing whatever it takes to dodge the discomfort. Sometimes those who choose the Getaway Car approach think they're just being nice. They tend to have a core belief that says, "Nice people don't get into conflicts." Others use the Getaway Car in a more hostile manner. They really don't care about their opponents or about the conflict at hand. It's like the teen at variance with his or her parents who responds to parental concerns with an unperturbed "Whatever?" The implication is, of course, "I won't fight, but I won't let you win either. I don't care about you or your concerns." No matter what the motivation for choosing this course of action, those who regularly opt for avoidance are choosing to lose both the conflicts and the relationships.

As with the other conflict styles, however, there are occasions in which the Getaway Car is the best approach. In the television cartoons, that's the technique to which Roadrunner resorts when confronted by Wylie Coyote. He just finds a way to vacate the vicinity.

On some occasions Jesus chose to be a Getaway Car. In Luke 4:28–30, for example, a hometown mob turned against Jesus, wanting to kill Him by throwing Him over a cliff. Verse 30 states that "He walked right through the crowd and went on His way." Similarly in John 8:59, as the people were preparing to stone Him, "Jesus hid himself, slipping away." And John 10:30 records, "Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp."

There are certainly times when it's prudent to avoid conflict. For example, it's a good idea to avoid getting embroiled in an argument if a Bulldozer-type person confronts you and you're in danger of being run over, with little or nothing to gain by holding your ground. That's what Jesus did when confronted by the hometown mob. Another time to avoid conflict is when the issue is simply not worth a quarrel. "Choose your battles," as the popular saying puts it. You can't fight over every little thing. Sometimes it's best to shrug off the issue and let it go. Choose to avoid conflict when you have nothing to gain by the fight and nothing to lose by the flight.

A Summary of Conflict Styles

The Bulldozer

- Competes against others
- Wants it “my way”
- Runs over others
- Win-lose outcome

The Team Bus

- Works with others
- Tries to achieve “our way!”
- Runs along with others
- Win-win outcome

The Ambulance

- Accommodates the needs of others
- Seeks a “Your way!” outcome
- Runs to others (to help them)
- Lose-win outcome

The Getaway Car

- Avoids others
- Hits “the Highway!”
- Runs from others
- Lose-lose outcome

Choosing Conflict Styles

Jesus used all four conflict styles. Sometimes He confronted others. He often worked with His disciples as a team. On the cross He chose to lose so we would gain eternal life. And at times He walked away from conflict. All the conflict styles are useful tools. Using the right tool for the right situation is key to your success. When the task calls for a hammer, don't use a screwdriver. As a golfer, I carry several clubs—tools—in my golf bag. Some of them work for me better than others. I'm not an exceptionally good golfer, but one time I did get a hole-in-one using my six-iron. I've loved my six-iron ever since. If, however, I used my six-iron all the time I'd be an even worse golfer than I am now. I wouldn't hit the ball far enough off the tee. A driver would be better for this task but using it near the green I would tend to hit the ball too far. A pitching wedge would be a better choice—a more accurate tool—at that stage. A putter, on the other hand, would be the most effective tool on the green. Good golfers not only know how to use all the clubs in their bag but also when to use each one.

Similarly, the challenge in any conflict is to choose the best style (tool) for the situation at hand. While there are no guaranteed formulas for choosing a conflict style, these simple guidelines will help:

Choose to be a **Bulldozer** when standing up for what is right is more important than keeping other people happy. Some causes are worth fighting for.

Choose the **Team Bus** approach when goodwill prevails and all participants in the dispute are willing to enter into a good-faith effort to resolve their differences.

Choose to be an **Ambulance** when dealing with bruised reeds, as well as in situations in which you can opt to lose the conflict without paying a high personal or organizational price.

Choose to be a **Getaway Car** when you have nothing to gain by the fight and nothing to lose by the flight.

Be flexible. Follow Jesus' example by employing different styles in different conflict settings. Most importantly, choose! Your conflict style must be a deliberate response rather than an instinctive reaction. Too often conflict behavior comes from impulse rather than thoughtful decision. Don't allow your preferred or natural style to become your only style. In every conflict, **choose your conflict style!**

A-C-T-I-O-N Steps to Choose Your Conflict Response

Before you choose how you will respond to your conflict, think through your options. That will help you identify which of the conflict styles is your best response to your current situation.

1. Among the conflict participants, who is behaving as a Bulldozer? How is that behavior affecting the conflict?
2. Among the conflict participants, who is behaving as a Team Bus? How is that behavior affecting the conflict?
3. Among the conflict participants, who is behaving as an Ambulance? How is that behavior affecting the conflict?
4. Among the conflict participants, who is behaving as a Get-Away Car? How is that behavior affecting the conflict?
5. If you were to choose to be a Bulldozer in the conflict, what action steps would you take? How do you think that would affect the outcome of the dispute?
6. If you were to choose to be a Team Bus in the conflict, what action steps would you take? How do you think that would affect the outcome of the dispute?
7. If you were to choose to be an Ambulance in the conflict, what action steps would you take? How do you think that would affect the outcome of the dispute?
8. If you were to choose to be a Get-Away Car in the conflict, what action steps would you take? How do you think that would affect the outcome of the dispute?

Session 3: Target Your Interests

Conflict is a competition between people who have differing wants, needs, values, or goals. If the conflict is to be resolved, it is necessary for each participant to identify his or her desired or feared outcome from the dispute. The desired or feared outcomes are called "interests."

What Is an Interest?

An interest is a stake one has in the outcome of the conflict. Your interest has a positive side, something that you desire, such as a pay raise, a position of greater power, or your preference on anything from the color of the carpet to the style of music in worship. Your interest also has a negative side, an outcome you want to avoid, such as a pay cut, being fired, being demoted, losing power, or losing to your opponent's preference on anything from the color of carpet to the style of music. Interests are the desired outcomes you strive to obtain and the negative outcomes you strive to avoid.

Interests Vs. Positions

There is a difference between interests and positions. According to Roger Fisher and William Ury, "Your position is something you have decided upon. Your interests are what caused you to decide."³ An interest, then, is a stake someone has in a conflict. A position is a stand or a side one takes in a controversy. While the two may sound similar, there are significant differences between them. A position answers the question "What stand are you taking?" while an interest answers the question "What do you really want?" An interest identifies one's basic desired outcomes. Creative options can be considered, as long as the basic desired outcomes are met. Positions are shortcut solutions, which often include demands beyond the basic interests. Positions tend to be rigid and resistant to creative options. Identifying interests helps resolve conflicts, while holding positions delays and distorts the resolution process.

As an example, let's say you're going out to dinner with your spouse. You really don't want fast food. You've had it for lunch the past two days and are tired of it. You would also like a quieter setting than a fast-food restaurant provides. So, you suggest to your spouse, "Let's go to Lobster Larry's."

Your spouse, however, doesn't like Lobster Larry's. The air conditioning there, in your spouse's opinion, is always too cold, as is the seafood. So, your spouse replies, "I really don't like Lobster Larry's. Let's just go to Hamburger Quick Stop." Hamburger Quick Stop is a local burger-and-fries diner.

You have a conflict. Both you and your spouse have stated your positions: "Let's go to Lobster Larry's" and "Let's go to Hamburger Quick Stop." Neither of you, however, has stated your interest. Your interest is "I don't want fast food today." Your spouse's interest is "I don't want to go to Lobster Larry's today (or any other day)."

If you stick to your positions, you won't reach a mutually agreeable resolution to the dissension. Either you will be disappointed with fast food, or your spouse will suffer through a cold evening at Lobster Larry's. If, however, you focus on your real interests, you can identify additional options. Maybe the Spaghetti Sensation restaurant would satisfy both the desired atmosphere and the desired menu. It doesn't serve fast food, and some say both the food and the atmosphere are hot.

In any conflict it's important to identify the true interests of each party. That may mean peeling away positions until the interests are revealed. It's like peeling an orange to get at the fruit or

cracking a shell to get at the nut. Positions are like peels and shells. There's something better behind them. Identify interests! Avoid positions!

Material Interests Vs. Personal Interests

Ken Sande writes, "Conflicts generally involve two kinds of issues: material and personal."⁴ Every conflict has two components: a problem and people. Those components lead to the material interests and the personal interests. Material interests are the substantive and more obvious issues in the dispute, things like money, power, positions, and getting your way in the decision. Personal interests are relational issues involved in a disagreement, values like being treated fairly, being treated with respect, and being given the opportunity to voice your concerns. A wise conflict resolution strategy will deal with both material and personal interests, both resolving the problem and restoring (or preventing the rupture of) relationships. To resolve problems without considering the relationships of the people involved will eventually lead to future conflicts, which are likely to become more intense as personal interests continue to go unresolved. That's how dissent escalates from a blue conflict to an orange to a red and finally to a purple. Churches generally place a high value on relationships. While relationship building is a positive core value, however, this reality also means that most church conflicts have a strong personal-interest component. If you strive to resolve the variance in terms of material interests without addressing the personal interests, the conflict won't go away. There may be a truce between the participants, but the temporary lull will end over something else.

People want (and need) to be treated with respect. If they aren't treated that way, differences over minor material interests can become runaway conflicts over personal interests. Feuds are runaway conflicts. Often the initial material cause is lost and forgotten because of the overpowering energy of the personal attacks.

Personal interests carry great weight. It's possible to "win" the conflict and still feel like a "loser" because of the way you've been treated. It's also possible to "lose" the conflict and still feel like a "winner" because of the way you've been treated.

As you strive to resolve the substantive interests of a conflict (money, power, etc.), don't forget to address the personal interests. Everybody wants and needs to be treated with respect. If they are treated that way the conflict can have a happy ending. As a wise friend once told me, "Sometimes you've got to say 'no' and make it feel like a 'yes.'" In this statement the "no" represents the material interests and the "yes" the personal interests.

Inappropriate Interests

Not all interests are noble and just. Sometimes conflict participants have inappropriate interests. Revenge is one of them. There's a part of us that loves retribution. Getting even satisfies our innate sense of justice. In the movies we want to cheer when the wronged person stands up, fights back, and exacts vengeance on the one who has caused them injury. And when you've been wronged it's natural to want payback. But if you seek revenge, there may well be a revenge for the revenge. The tensions just get worse. God has a better idea. Romans 12:19 counsels us, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." Leave vengeance to the Lord. The desire for revenge is an inappropriate interest.

Other inappropriate interests include inflicting pain, taking unfair advantage, exploiting the vulnerable, or oppressing others. But these and all other inappropriate interests must be set aside during the conflict resolution process. Don't take the low road.

Avoid Entrenchment

As a conflict develops, it's easy to become entrenched in a position. Entrenchment comes from making positional statements that are difficult to take back. The entrenchment works against a resolution. It may even work against your own best interests. It's easy to become fixed in a position. If you dig the trench deeply enough, nothing can make you come out or give in. You end up taking a last stand for something that is simply not all that important. While it's necessary to fight for your real interests, avoid becoming entrenched in positions.

Your "Bull's-Eye" Interest

Conflict interests are like a target. There are outer-ring interests that are of lesser value to you, middle-ring interests that are of more value to you, and a "bull's-eye" interest that is of the greatest value to you. Your bull's eye is your answer to the question "What do I want most?" In an argument, it's important that you target your interests, identifying which ones are outer-ring, mid-ring, and bull's-eye. In the negotiation process you may choose to sacrifice an outer-ring interest in order to hit the bull's eye. Never, however, sacrifice your bull's-eye interest for an outer-ring interest.

When you're embroiled in a conflict, identify your interests by asking yourself two questions: What do I want? And What do I want most? Sometimes you have to let go of something you want in order to gain what you want the most.

A-C-T-I-O-N Steps to Target Your Interests

1. In the current conflict, what various sides or "positions" are people taking?
2. Have you joined one of those sides?
3. Have you become entrenched in a position?
4. Are any of your interests or positions inappropriate?
5. What are your material interests? What do you want to gain?
6. What are your personal interests? How do you want to be treated?
7. What do you stand to lose if the conflict is not well managed?
8. What outcome do you want to achieve? What do you want most? What is your "bulls-eye" interest?
9. In addition to your "bulls-eye," what are some of the "outer ring" (lesser) interests you have?

Session 4: Identify the Stakeholders

Conflict is like a pebble in a pond. It has a ripple effect that can touch a lot of people. It's important to identify who gets affected by the ripples. What roles does each play? And what interests do they have? Those who have interests in the outcome are "stakeholders" in the conflict. Paul wrote, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4). We all have interests, especially when we're engaged in a conflict. Disputes affect a variety of people in a variety of ways. If those who are affected are left out of the resolution process, they will feel that their personal interests have been violated. When you're involved in a conflict, ask yourself, "Who else is affected by the outcome of this conflict? Who are the other stakeholders?" You're always free to stretch your arms and swing them from side to side, with one exception: Your freedom to swing your arms ends where someone else's nose begins. It's vital in a controversy to identify the stakeholders. I identify the stakeholders using the following terms and descriptions.

Primaries

In a conflict a "primary" is one who is directly involved in the conflict as an initiator or as one of the initial opposing parties in the dispute. Primaries are the ones who started or were initially involved in the fight, the ones most likely to be mentioned with reference to the conflict. They are likely the most active and visible in the quarrel. And they're directly affected by the outcome of the dispute. In Exodus 2:11–13 we read about a conflict. An Egyptian guard was beating a Hebrew slave. The guard and the slave were primaries in the conflict.

Secondaries

Secondaries are those who side with one or another of the primaries. If Joe and Pete are good friends and Bill gets into a conflict with Joe, Bill will likely find himself fighting not only with Joe but also with Pete. In that case, Pete would be a secondary. If Joe has fifty loyal friends, Bill is in big trouble. Sometimes secondaries join a conflict because they identify with the cause. Others join in based on their relationship with one or more of the primaries, either defending a friend or attacking a common foe. Several years ago, in a tension-filled situation, a church leader came to me privately to express concern about the way someone else had spoken to me. The leader stated, "I can't tolerate the way he spoke to you. It was rude and disrespectful. He shouldn't talk to our pastor that way." That church leader was a secondary, entering the conflict in defense of a primary, who in this case was me.

In the Exodus 2 conflict, Moses witnessed an Egyptian guard beating a Hebrew slave. He rescued the slave by killing the guard, thereby entering the conflict as a secondary. He had not been part of the original dispute and may not even have known what had caused the guard to attack the slave. He just jumped in, taking the side of the slave and killing the guard. In 2 Samuel 13, Amnon raped his half-sister, Tamar. Tamar's brother Absalom despised Amnon for what he had done, and after two years of hatred he entered the conflict as a secondary. In an act of vengeance, Absalom killed Amnon. Absalom entered the conflict as a secondary and escalated the hostility.

Secondaries often enter a struggle with great passion because they're fighting for both a cause and a loyalty. The more secondaries there are, the more difficult it will be to resolve the issue. Churches value friendship and loyalty. That's why it's so common in churches for conflicts to quickly escalate in terms of the involvement of many secondaries. Secondaries are great to have on your side, but they complicate conflict situations. Secondaries feel strongly that their cause is just. And if they're defending a person they care about, feelings of loyalty fuel their

sense of justice. If they're joining with a primary in attacking a common enemy, their sense of justice is fueled by their alliance. They reason, "If both of us feel the same way about him or her, how can we possibly be wrong?" Secondaries can enter the conflict with a great deal of passion, often blurring the lines between secondaries and primaries. Secondaries can keep a conflict going, sometimes even after the primaries have dropped out. It's often difficult to identify the interests of secondaries because their participation is frequently based upon a relationship with a primary rather than on a material issue.

In a conflict it's tempting for a primary to assemble a team of secondaries to join in the fight against the opponent(s). It's very easy for well-meaning but otherwise uninvolved people to get caught up in a dispute based on loyalty. In most cases this serves to escalate the conflict, making it more difficult to resolve. Secondaries sometimes find themselves acting in unrighteous ways based on what they perceive to be righteous loyalties. Think carefully before becoming a secondary. You might just be adding fuel to the fire, not to mention that you might get burned or burn someone else. If you're a secondary in a conflict, be careful not to allow your sense of loyalty to distort your sense of right and wrong.

Affected Bystanders

There's an African proverb that says, "When elephants fight, the grass suffers." The grass isn't directly involved in the fighting, but it sure is affected by it. Sometimes this type of impact is referred to as collateral damage. In conflict situations there can be a lot of collateral damage.

Conflicts affect people who have no active voice in the conflict process. When marital tension gets out of hand, children become innocent victims of collateral damage. The husband and wife have no intention of hurting their kids, but nonetheless the kids are damaged. They are affected bystanders.

That happens in churches, too. A church dispute may result in the departure of a pastor. The pastor's family is affected by the controversy. There will also be those in the congregation who will be negatively affected by the pastor's leaving, even though they have had no role in the conflict process. Whether they've had the opportunity and have chosen not to be involved in the conflict or have had no opportunity for input into the process, they are still stakeholders who have been affected by the outcome of the clash. In many denominations the district or national office is affected by church conflict. The situation may cost them staff time as denominational leaders attempt to manage the strife. The discord may hurt the reputation of the denomination. It may also affect the loyalty of the church or pastor to the denomination.

When a church conflict results in the departure of a pastor, there are usually many people, sometimes even the majority of a congregation, who feel they have been left out of the process. Other people make decisions that impact their lives, and they haven't even been consulted. That leaves them feeling frustrated, angry, and disrespected.

Leaders

Leaders are also stakeholders in a conflict. While they may identify with one primary or another, they have a greater stake in the conflict—the well-being of the organization. It's the leaders' responsibility to see to it that the argument is resolved according to the ground rules of fair play. It's also the leaders' responsibility to protect the vulnerable. Paul commended Timothy as one who took a genuine interest in the welfare of others (Philippians 2:20). That was one of the qualities that made Timothy an effective leader.

When leaders fail to lead, tensions get out of hand. And there are several ways for leaders to fail. Leaders fail when they allow themselves to become active secondaries. Sooner or later leaders may need to make a judgment in a controversy, but if that judgment is made prematurely, the leaders have failed to lead. They have simply joined the fray. Leaders also fail when they don't set ground rules. In managing conflict somebody needs to establish the process by which the difference will be resolved and decide which behaviors are acceptable and which are unacceptable. Ground rules must both be established and enforced. If one of the ground rules is that leaders will not attend secret meetings with either side, and one or more leaders do attend such secret meetings, they have failed in their responsibilities.

Sometimes leaders are forced to make difficult decisions and to confront wrongdoing. I was part of a church in which a conflict was getting out of hand. After numerous attempts at resolution, one couple refused to reconcile. The church board discussed the matter and agreed that it was time for a confrontation. One board member stated, "Someone needs to talk with them. It won't be the pastor. It will be me. And after I talk with them, they won't be back." Then he made a kind, but firm, confrontation. Not unexpectedly, the couple did leave.

Spectators

A spectator is one who observes a conflict but has no stake in its outcome. The spectator is like the sports fan who watches a football game, favoring neither team over the other. The process is interesting, but the outcome doesn't really matter to the spectator. However, spectators should beware! As disputes intensify in scope and scale, they can easily begin to touch individuals or issues near and dear to the spectator. At the beginning of World War 2 the United States perceived itself as a bystander as Germany in Europe and Japan in the Pacific engaged in conflict with other nations. Then on December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was bombed. The United States quickly moved from spectator to participant.

In a church conflict those outside the church are watching. Word gets around. People want to see how we handle disputes. Do we act like the rest of the world? Or is there something different about us? Jesus prayed for His disciples, "That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me, and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." When we are united and resolve conflicts Christianly, we influence the world toward belief in Jesus. When conflict brings out the worst in us, the church loses a lot of credibility. When Christians fight, the world is watching.

Understanding Your Role

Who are you in a particular controversy? Are you a primary, a secondary, a leader, an affected one, or a spectator? Once you understand your role in the conflict, you can more easily choose your behavior and identify your interests. At that point you can also identify the other stakeholders and their interests. Understanding the role of others in the conflict will help you to better understand their behaviors and interests, making it possible to work toward common-ground solutions.

A-C-T-I-O-N Steps to Identify Stakeholders

1. Who are the primaries in the conflict? What are their interests? What are their behaviors? What power do they possess?

2. Who are the secondaries in the conflict? What are their relationships with the primaries? What are their relationships with others in the church? What is the likelihood of other secondaries joining the fray? How are secondaries affecting the conflict?
3. Who are the affected bystanders in the conflict? What are their interests? How is the conflict currently affecting them? How will the potential outcomes of the conflict affect them?
4. How is the conflict affecting the church's witness in the community?
5. Who are the leaders responsible to manage the conflict?
6. What ground rules need to be established?
7. Who needs to be confronted?
8. Who needs to be protected?
9. Are any of the leaders also primaries or passionate secondaries in the conflict? If so, how will their participation affect the management and outcome of the conflict? Should any of them step aside and recuse themselves from the conflict management process?

Session 5: Open Communication

Open communication is a vital component of conflict management. When communication breaks down, so does the possibility of resolving the conflict.

The Bible is filled with guidelines on communication. A short but awesome phrase in Ephesians 4:15 summarizes how we are to address one another. "Speaking the truth in love." Don't forget the truth. Don't forget the love. Truth without love is too hot to handle. Love without truth is sentimental drivel. Speaking the truth in love is key to effective communication. Proverbs 15:1 points out that "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." The tone of your voice and the choice of your words will serve to either settle or escalate the conflict. Good communication includes wise speaking.

Good communication also involves active listening. In the words of James, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry" (James 1:19). In this verse listening, speaking, and anger are linked together. Listening before speaking is an effective way to decelerate anger.

Communication also includes drawing out the thoughts and feelings of others. "The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out" (Proverbs 20:5). The drawing out of thoughts and feelings takes place through active listening and active questioning. This process results in increased awareness and clarification of interests, usually for both parties.

Communication creates a bridge over which concerns, ideas, feelings, and solutions pass from one person to another. Creative options develop when people start dialoguing with each other in a language both parties can understand and appreciate. If you want to resolve a conflict, you need to communicate in a way that everyone can accept, understand, and appreciate.

Two Doors

There are two figurative doors through which your words must pass. One is the door of your mouth. Psalm 141:3 requests, "Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips." Psalm 39:1 pledges, "I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence." James 3 warns that the tongue is a small thing that is capable of inflicting severe damage. So be cautious about what is going to emerge before you open the door of your mouth.

The other door is that of your heart. As Proverbs 4:23 expresses, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." And Jesus pointed out that "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34).

Your words find their origin in your heart and then flow through your mouth. From that perspective, there are two doors through which your words must pass. If your heart is right and pure, you can probably leave the door of your mouth thrown wide open. But if your heart is not right and pure, you had better choose carefully when to open the door of your mouth.

Communication Is Everyone's Responsibility

In a conflict, communication is everybody's responsibility. It's the responsibility of the offender. Jesus instructs, "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" (Matthew 5:23-24). Offering a gift at the altar was an act of worship. According to Jesus, God is not only concerned about the act

of worship but also about the reconciliation of brothers and sisters. In this case it is the offender ("If...your brother has something against you") who has the responsibility to initiate communication.

Communication is also the responsibility of the offended party. Jesus also said, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over" (Matthew 18:15). In this verse it is clearly the offended one who has the responsibility to commence communication with the offender. "Go and show him his fault." Jesus didn't say "Keep it to yourself and let your heart become bitter." And Jesus didn't say "Go and tell someone else." I've sometimes heard people claim that the one who has offended them is "unapproachable," insinuating thereby that it would be impossible or dangerous to initiate direct communication about the offensive behavior. There are certainly occasions where there is such an extreme imbalance in power that the weaker party could be in significant danger by approaching the offender. However, the "unapproachable" excuse is used far too often, usually in conjunction with complaining to a willing listener who sides with the offended one. The willing listener may become secondary and feed the feelings of hurt and injustice, actually intensifying the conflict. Jesus said, "Go and show him his fault." The offended one has a responsibility to open up communication.

In both Matthew 5:24 and Matthew 18:15, Jesus instructed His followers to "go" to the one you have offended or to the one who has offended you. The manner in which you "go" is vital to the resolution of the conflict. If you go with revenge on your mind, you have no reason to expect to settle the argument. If you go to apologize, but in your apology spend a lot of time justifying ourselves and our behavior, you can't expect the apology to lead to reconciliation. Sometimes public figures (and also not-so-public figures) will offer some variation on the following blanket apology: "If I have offended anyone, I am truly sorry." Nobody, and I mean nobody, who has been offended will ever take that statement as a sincere and meaningful apology. In fact, it usually serves to escalate the level of tension and makes matters worse. If you approach the other person just to just get yourself off the hook, you won't. However, if you go with the purpose of reconciliation and engage in honest, open conversation, you have a chance at achieving peace.

The Bible also suggests a third-party responsibility in communication. In Philippians 4:2-3 Paul wrote, "I plead with Euodia, and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women." There apparently had been an unresolved dispute between Euodia and Syntyche. Paul opened up communication about it, asking his "loyal yokefellow" to mediate. In this case both Paul and the loyal yokefellow had a stake in the outcome of the conflict, which adversely affected the reputation and ministry of the church. As a leader, Paul stepped in and opened that bridge of communication, asking his ministry partner to step in as an intermediary to help the women come to agreement. Sometimes it's the responsibility of a third party to open the lines of communication. Do not, however, view this as an excuse to enter uninvited into other people's business. Busybodies escalate conflict and, in the process, make a lot of enemies. If, however, you find yourself in the role of leader or affected bystander, assisting the dissenting parties to resolve their dispute through open communication can be to everybody's benefit.

Communication is a shared responsibility. It belongs to the offender, the offended one, and sometimes even to a third party. Communication is a bridge to reconciliation.

Key Questions to Ask

Successfully managing a conflict includes asking the right questions. Jesus regularly practiced asking straightforward questions to identify the interests of others.

Jesus asked two disciples, "What do you want?" (John 1:38).

Jesus asked a blind beggar, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Luke 18:41).

Jesus asked an invalid at the pool of Bethesda, "Do you want to get well?" (John 5:6).

Jesus asked the mother of James and John, "What is it you want?" (Matthew 20:21).

To identify the interests of others, follow Jesus' examples. Ask questions. Here are some open-ended questions to ask.

What happened?

In what way have I offended you?

Why did you do that?

What do you want to achieve through this conflict?

What do you fear losing?

Who else has a stake in this conflict?

What interests do we share in common?

What do you see as options to resolve this conflict?

The "Key" Question

One of the goals of communication is to identify the interests of all stakeholders. Once those interests are understood, conflict participants can begin to work on creative options to resolve the problems. The key question in the communication process is "What do you want?"

Many times, people don't know what they want. At other times their wants are unfair, unreasonable, or beyond your ability to satisfy. But asking that key question can help them identify their bull's-eye interests and shift their energy from attacking people to solving problems.

Communication Mistakes to Avoid

While communication can resolve friction and bring people together in a meeting of the minds, if handled poorly it can also escalate the conflict. The wrong words spoken at the wrong time in the wrong way to the wrong person just add fuel to the fire. There are many communication mistakes to avoid. The following are some common mistakes to avoid:

Gossiping

The Bible is abundantly clear about the destructive nature of gossip. Proverbs 26:20 states that "Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down." Gossip keeps a conflict stirred up. Proverbs 16:28 elaborates: "A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends." One of the surest ways of turning a friend into an enemy is to gossip about him or her. Gossiping never makes things better.

Breaking a Confidence

Breaking a confidence exacerbates conflict. It's betrayal. It's wrong. If you must talk confidentially with someone else, choose someone you can trust and tell him or her up front that what you are about to share is confidential. Ask for verbal agreement that they will treat it that way. If you are on the receiving end of confidential information, keep it classified. If for whatever reason you can't be trusted or can't (for instance legally) maintain silence, say so. In the words of Proverbs 11:13, "A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret."

Deception

Lies, exaggerations, and other forms of deception fan the flames of conflict. They keep things stirred up. Jesus called the devil "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). In fact, Jesus referred to deception as the devil's "native language." On the other hand, our Lord identified Himself as "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Throughout the New Testament Jesus is consistently referred to in terms of the truth. In a conflict situation, whose example are you going to follow? As Jesus also pointed out, "The truth will set you free" (John 8:32). The one who deceives is never free. He has to remember what lie he told to whom in order to keep his story straight. One lie invariably leads to another. And with each untruth the deceiver digs himself into a deeper hole. He also has to worry about what will happen when his deception is uncovered. Sooner or later dishonesty will be exposed—at a very high price.

Unguarded Words

Proverbs 13:3 tells us that "He who guards his lips guards his soul, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin." During argument emotions run high. And when emotions are at fever pitch, words flow freely. In the heat of a quarrel, you might say something that you'll not only regret later on but that you don't really mean. Your rash words may reflect your unguarded emotions at that moment, but not your true thoughts and feelings at a less impassioned time. Whenever you preface a statement with "I really shouldn't say this, but ...," it's best to stop right there before you say something you'll regret later. It would be much better to check yourself, changing this to, "I really shouldn't say this ... so I won't." Remember that there are two doors through which your words must pass before they can be spoken, the door of your heart and the door of your mouth. In the midst of an emotional clash, think carefully before leaving both doors open. Guard your words!

Means of Communication

There are several ways to express your communication. You can speak face-to-face, speak over the phone, zoom, send a letter, send a text, send an email, or post something on social media. Conflict participants too often gravitate toward text, email, or social media when communicating too or about their adversaries. Those who receive such communication usually view the words with a negative bias. They read into it all kinds of intended or unintended adversarial motivation. Effective communication includes non-verbal interaction. Those methods eliminate non-verbal impact. They also remove the ability to clarify statements or provide responses in the moment. To manage a conflict, communicate face-to-face, on zoom, or by phone whenever possible.

When adversaries are engaged in a heated conversation, one of the parties may ask to record the conversation. Never agree to that. When people record such a conversation, they do it to use, misuse, and abuse your spoken words. They will take your comments out of context. They are looking for ammunition to be used against you, not resolution with you.

Before You Confront

Confrontation is sometimes necessary, however before you confront, consider the following.

Be sure you have an accurate understanding of the facts and perceptions.

Be sure you understand your role in the conflict.

Be sure the issue is important enough to merit confrontation.

Be sure the time and place are "safe" for all parties.

Be sure to identify what you want to achieve from the conflict and the confrontation.

Be sure of what you can afford to lose if the confrontation results in escalation of the controversy.

Be sure of the words you want to say.

A-C-T-I-O-N Steps to Open Communication

1. What are people saying about the conflict?
2. In what ways are they expressing their opinions (face-to-face, phone, email, texts, social media, etc.)?
3. In what ways are the conversations escalating the conflict?
4. Who are the perceived offenders in the conflict?
5. Who are the perceived offended in the conflict?
6. Are the perceived offenders and perceived offended communicating with each other?
7. Who does not have a voice in the conflict, but should?
8. How is conflict being communicated (face-to-face, zoom, phone, text, email, social media, etc.)?
9. How would you rate yourself as a listener?
10. What should you not say in the conflict?

Session 6: Negotiate a Resolution

When you understand your true interests and the interests of other stakeholders, it's time to direct the energy of the conflict toward negotiating a resolution. Negotiation is a process aimed at reaching a resolution to a dispute. It can take a variety of pathways.

Pathways to Resolution

Ken Sande lists several ways in which disputes can be resolved.⁵ They can be settled through unilateral solution, negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and litigation. Each of these methods is explained below in an order that reflects an increasing complexity of the resolution process, an increasing cost, an increasing involvement of others, and a decreasing sense of goodwill among the conflict participants.

Unilateral Solution

Many conflicts can be resolved by one party making a unilateral decision to end it. The offending party can resolve a dispute by admitting wrongdoing and apologizing. As Jesus said, "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" (Matthew 5:23–24). In this teaching it is the offending party who goes to the other to resolve a conflict. "I was wrong. I'm sorry"—Those words can have a powerful impact and can often bring about a unilateral conflict resolution.

If the offended party is the one who decides to end the conflict, this choice will usually involve just "letting it go." In Matthew 18:15 Jesus said, "If your brother (or sister) sins against you..." "If" is a very big word that deserves thoughtful consideration. The "if question" considers whether or not another has sinned against you. Too many disputes intensify over matters that are small and unintended. These can be overlooked by those who perceive them as a slight. Proverbs 19:11 points out that "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense." In the give-and-take of living, most of us routinely overlook offenses. If you were to engage in conflict over every perceived offense, you would be too busy fighting to accomplish anything else. Overlooking an offense is one way of keeping the peace. However, I offer two warnings when you are considering this pathway to resolution:

Warning #1: Don't pretend to overlook an offense if by so doing you are burying bitterness in your heart.

Warning #2: Don't overlook an offense if this means allowing destructive behavior to continue. Ongoing injurious behavior could end up hurting both the offended one and the offending one.

While it is to "one's glory to overlook an offense," the situation does depend on the nature and severity of the offense.

If the conflict is over something material, one party can unilaterally end it by simply giving in and letting the other person win. This unilateral strategy is called "choosing to lose." If you place a high value on the relationship and a low value on the material thing being contested, "choosing to lose" is a reasonable option. If, however, you habitually choose to lose, or if you choose to lose when you can't afford to lose, a unilateral solution is far too costly. This recourse can make you feel like a doormat.

Apologizing, letting it go, and choosing to lose can be wise and effective ways of unilaterally resolving some conflicts. If the value of the relationship is high and the material and personal stakes are low, it's a good choice. If such is not the case, consider another pathway to resolution.

Negotiation

In the unilateral approach to conflict resolution, either party A or party B can decide to end the conflict. Negotiation, which involves both party A and party B, is person-to-person conflict resolution. In Matthew 5:25 Jesus said, "Settle matters quickly with your adversary" and in Matthew 18:15, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." Jesus affirmed the value of person-to-person conflict resolution.

Negotiation allows parties A and B to meet face-to-face, identify individual and common interests, develop creative options, and reach a mutually agreeable resolution. Negotiation is an effective tool both for resolving problems and for restoring or preserving relationships. It should be used often.

Mediation

In mediation a third party gets involved as a conflict consultant. Parties A and B remain the primary conflict participants, with party C acting as a mediator to advise, assist, and encourage them to resolve their differences. Jesus endorsed the mediation process. In Matthew 18:15 He instructed an offended person to go to the offender for a one-on-one, face-to-face meeting (negotiation). In the next verse, however, Jesus went on, "But if he will not listen, take one or two others along." If one-on-one negotiation fails to settle a dispute, the next step is mediation. There are several advantages to involving a mediator:

- A mediator can add an unbiased perspective.
- A mediator can help develop fair-play ground rules.
- A mediator can help to identify real interests.
- A mediator can point out common-ground interests.
- A mediator can bring creative energy to the resolution process.
- A mediator can help protect the well-being of both parties.
- A mediator can help stimulate feelings of good will.
- A mediator allows the participants to have a final say in the resolution.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). A mediator is a peacemaker. When negotiations break down, mediation is the next step to make peace. It is important, however, that the disputing parties agree on the mediation process and the mediator.

Arbitration

In arbitration, as in mediation, party C enters the conflict between parties A and B. However, in arbitration, party C is given the power to decide on a solution to the dispute. Usually in the mediation-arbitration process the conflicting parties (A and B) mutually agree to allow the arbitrator, party C, to listen to each side state their case, and then make a decision. At other

times a court, a previously existing contract, or an ecclesiastical authority endows the arbitrator with the power to make a binding decision.

In Acts 15 there was dispute in the church over the inclusion of Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas were on one side, believing that Gentiles should be included in the church. Others were of the opinion that, in order to become a Christian, a Gentile needed to first be circumcised, according to Jewish custom and law. Each side stated its case (producing witnesses and presenting opinion statements), and then James acted as arbitrator. In Acts 15:19 James began his statement with "It is my judgment..." He listened to the arguments and then decided the matter.

In disputes between believers, Jesus instructed (in Matthew 18) His disciples first to try a negotiated settlement (v. 15), followed by a mediated settlement (v. 16) and finally by an arbitrated settlement, with the church acting as the arbitrator. "If he (the offending party) refuses to listen to them (the mediators), tell it to the church." In this teaching our Lord made clear that the church has the authority to expect its members to agree with its judgment if they want to remain members.

Arbitration has the same advantages as mediation, with one exception: In arbitration the power to decide upon a resolution is taken out of the hands of the opposing parties and given to the arbitrator. In mediation that power is left in the hands of the parties who are at odds. Arbitration offers the advantage of ensuring that a resolution will be reached, as well as the potential disadvantage (to the disputing parties) of taking the decision making out of their hands. One or the other or both conflicting parties may be forced to accept a resolution they find undesirable.

Litigation

The next step in the resolution process is litigation. Litigation involves a plaintiff, a defendant, lawyers, witnesses, a judge, and a jury. Litigation is expensive—costly not only monetarily but also in terms of time, energy, reputation, and relationships. Like arbitration, it also puts the decision-making power in the hands of others. In Matthew 5:25 Jesus advised against litigation: "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison."

In a conflict between Christians, one of the stakeholders is the church. In the public spectacle of litigation between believers, the reputation of the church may be in danger. For this reason, 1 Corinthians 6 also warns against lawsuits between believers. Verses 4 and 5 suggest finding an arbitrator from within the church instead of going to court. "Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?" Verse 7 suggests taking a unilateral approach instead of litigation, stating that's it's better to be wronged than to damage the church through a conflict. "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?"

As has been pointed out, litigation is expensive. It costs a lot of money; eats up a good deal of time and energy, taking the litigants away from other commitments in their lives; damages the reputations of individuals and sometimes even of the church; and destroys relationships. Therefore, Scripture warns against litigation between Christians. Is there ever, however, a time when litigation is appropriate, even between Christians? The answer is yes. In Matthew 18

Jesus' prescription for the resolution of conflicts between believers goes on to a fourth step. Step 1, as we have seen, is negotiation (v. 15), step 2 is mediation (v. 16), and step 3 is arbitration (v. 17). But further along in verse 17 Jesus draws his final conclusion: "If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as a pagan or a tax collector." This statement opens the door for step 4, litigation—but only after steps one through three have failed to settle the dispute.

We live in a highly litigious society and, even as Christians, can be quick to take one another to court. That tendency is increasing, even among pastors and churches. If and only if all else fails, litigation remains the final, unfortunate option.

Each step along this continuum incurs increased expense and risk. As Jesus directed in Matthew 5:25, we do well to resolve our conflicts early. The longer they last, the more they will cost!

The Resolution Toolbox

Auto mechanics, construction workers, and plumbers know that the right tool used in the right way can fix even the worst of problems. That's true in conflict resolution as well. Here are some "tools" to help you develop creative options for conflict resolution:

"Expanding the Pie"

"Expanding the pie" is the process of adding something of value to the object of the conflict. Here's an example. Suppose a mother has three children. Each child wants an ice cream bar, but there are only two ice cream bars in the freezer. The mother could attempt to divide the two bars three ways so that each child receives a fair share, but ice cream bars are on sticks and difficult to divide. The mother could have the children draw straws, with two long straws and one short one. The two children drawing long straws would each get an ice cream bar. The one drawing the short straw would go without. While this could be considered fair, it wouldn't be kind. One child would be hurt. A third option to resolve the conflict would be to "expand the pie" by adding something else of value to the objects under dispute. In this case, a candy bar could be used to "expand the pie." The mother could say, "I have only two ice cream bars, but I also have this candy bar with rich milk chocolate, chewy caramel, crunchy peanuts, and a creamy nougat center. Would someone like the candy bar instead?" Chances are one of the three will want the candy bar instead of an ice cream bar, but even if the ice cream bars remain the preferred snack of all three children, the candy bar could serve as an acceptable consolation for the one who draws the short straw. This would be much less painful than going without.

What the mother has done in "expanding the pie" is to add something else of value to the object of the conflict. In many conflicts there will be a winner and a loser. Not every conflict will end with a mutually satisfying solution, nor can everything be compromised or divided equally. However, adding an additional "win" for the one who loses the primary conflict can go a long way toward keeping the peace.

"Making a Peace Offering"

In Genesis 27–32 Jacob fled from his family after his brother Esau threatened to kill him. He went to live with his Uncle Laban, where he stayed for twenty years. After tensions began to escalate with Laban, he decided to return home; however, he was understandably concerned about his brother, with whom he had often engaged in conflict. So, on his way home, after wrestling with God, Jacob sent an impressive peace offering ahead of him as a gift for his brother Esau, "two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and

twenty rams, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys" (Genesis 32:14, 15). With the livestock went an implicit, clear statement to his brother: "I want peace." Esau also wanted peace. At first Esau turned down the animals, but then he accepted them for what they were, a gift proffered as the token of a desire to end the hostility.

Sometimes a conflict participant can take a step toward reconciliation by making a peace offering. A peace offering can be any signal of conciliation your opponent will recognize as a goodwill gesture offered in the hope of initiating peace. Sometimes a peace offering can be the turning point that leads to reconciliation.

"Offering a Concession"

"Offering a concession" is an action taken by one party in a dispute who voluntarily lets go of one or more demands as an expression of goodwill. Through offering a concession, one party can initiate an expression of goodwill that becomes contagious, making compromise both possible and satisfying. When that happens, the other party may respond by offering a reciprocal concession. The result is that the conflicting parties have each taken a step closer to a mutually agreeable resolution.

"Brainstorming Solutions"

A brainstorming session is one in which ideas are offered without critical comment for or against. They are listed on a board, flip chart, or screen that is visible to all participants. The purpose of brainstorming is to list all possible solutions to the problem. In conflict resolution the suggested solutions will range from those that benefit one party to those that benefit the other, but each idea is to be listed without critical comment (at least during the brainstorming phase).

"Creating a Menu of Options"

Once suggestions are listed, they can be combined, deleted, or expanded until a menu of more viable options is created. The menu may include a variety of options, including those derived by "expanding the pie" and "offering concessions." The menu may lead to a mutually agreeable solution, but if not, it will at least provide a source of ideas for those with the power to decide the outcome of the conflict.

"Saving Face"

Disputes involve both material and personal interests, and both must be considered in the resolution process. However, sometimes in the heat of the moment things get said or done that cause one or more parties to suffer embarrassment or even humiliation. Such loss of face must be addressed in the resolution process. People have a right to be treated with dignity and respect, even if they will end up losing one or more of their interests as a result of the conflict. The protection of their dignity is called "saving face." Sometimes in the course of a conflict one or more participants may develop a desire to give up their interests and end the conflict—if they can find a way to do so that allows them to save face. Providing a way for others to maintain their dignity is a significant instrument in the resolution toolbox.

"Saving face" doesn't come naturally. In the heat of an argument instinct often tells us to "go for the throat," "win at all costs," and "take no prisoners." This is called "rubbing salt in the wound." The opposite response is to provide saving of face. Saving face is allowing the loser to maintain a sense of integrity in spite of the loss. Gracious words or a small goodwill concession can go a long way toward helping another save face. It can also shorten the duration of a conflict and its aftermath. Some people will fight longer and harder than they otherwise would

to try to save face. Offering a face-saving resolution may be just enough to persuade them to end the quarrel. As a conflict heads toward resolution, help everybody involved to save face. When you save someone else's face, your own looks better, too.

"Forgiving"

In a conflict people get hurt. If conflicts are to be resolved and relationships restored, forgiveness must be extended. Jesus taught His disciples to pray "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). Paul wrote, "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13). And as Jesus died on the cross, He prayed, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34). A few years later, Stephen became the first martyr in the church. As he was being stoned to death he followed Jesus' example, crying, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60).

Forgiveness is a gift you give to the one who hurts you. Forgiving another is also a gift you give yourself. As you go through life, you're inevitably going to get hurt. It's like hiking on a rainy day. You're going to get mud on your boots. You can carry that mud on your boots for the rest of your life (or at least as long as you own the boots), making the boots unsightly, adding to their weight, and leaving a trail of mud wherever you walk. Or you can clean off the mud. Some people collect hurts in the same way that boots collect mud. The hurts become an added burden as they trudge their way through life. They become bitter and unhappy. Forgiveness cleans off the mud.

Lewis Smedes⁶ identifies four stages in forgiveness: (1) We hurt. (2) We hate. (3) We heal ourselves. And (4) we come together. Each stage is important. The hurt acknowledges the depth of the pain. The hate acknowledges the anger and sense of injustice. The healing of ourselves is the process that cleans the mud of the boots. It's the freedom we give ourselves to stop lugging around the offense. It's "letting it go" and "forgiving as the Lord forgave you." The final stage, coming together, restores the relationship that has been damaged by the offense. Under some circumstances, stage 4 is impossible to achieve. Reconciliation doesn't depend only on you. It depends on the other party, too. But whether or not stage 4 is achieved, be sure to go through stage 3. If you don't heal yourself and let go of the hurt, you'll go through life carrying a bitterness that weighs you down.

"Burying the Hatchet"

The phrase "burying the hatchet" simply means stopping the fight and making peace.

Bougainville, an island in the South Pacific, was the site of civil war for ten years. Separatist rebels fought against control of the New Guinea government. In those ten years of fighting, 40,000 of the 200,000 islanders were driven from their homes, with 20,000 killed (10% of the population). When the war ended in 1998, the process was handled in a traditional manner. Leaders of the two sides got together, signed a cease-fire, and then laid down their spears and broke their arrows in two. Sam Kauona, the rebel commander, addressed the crowd, stating, "The war is over. Now it's up to us to protect the peace." At that point they all sang and danced at a ceremony. Sam understood that the goal of war should be peace. As such, there comes a time to break the arrow, dance, sing, and live in peace.⁷

Sometimes you've got to bury the hatchet or, as in the case of Bougainville, break your arrows in two. At some point you need to acknowledge that the conflict is over and that it's time to live in and for peace.

A-C-T-I-O-N Steps to Negotiate a Resolution

1. What would it look like for the offended party to choose a unilateral solution (to just let it go)?
2. What would it look like for the offending party to choose a unilateral solution (to admit wrongdoing and apologize)?
3. Is the relationship between the disputing parties positive enough for them to negotiate? What would you expect to happen if they had a face-to-face meeting?
4. Are the parties open to mediation? If so, who would mediate? Are the church leaders viewed by both parties as unbiased mediators? If not, who could mediate the dispute?
5. Has the conflict reached the point where church leaders need to arbitrate the matter and dictate a resolution? What steps should be taken before such an action is implemented? What would be the anticipated consequences of such an action?
6. If the resolution of the conflict is at an impasse, what tools in the resolution toolbox could be implemented?

Expanding the Pie

Making a Peace Offering

Offering a Concession

Brainstorming Solutions

Creating a Menu of Options

Saving Face

Forgiving

Burying the Hatchet

Session 7: Dealing with Difficult People

When treated reasonably, most people will respond reasonably. But some people are unreasonable no matter how fairly they are treated. Some people are difficult to deal with. They're always ready for a fight and resistant to all proposed solutions. They're agitators, troublemakers, antagonists—the ones who rock the boat and claim there's a storm at sea. Making peace with them is like petting a porcupine. Difficult people break the peace and keep it broken.

Romans 12:18, as we have seen, counsels us as follows: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." The implication of the "if" clause is that peace isn't always possible. There are people who will choose not to live at peace with you. To place the expectation upon yourself that you will live at peace with all people all the time is unrealistic. The verse includes the qualification "as far as it depends on you," and the next verse begins with "Do not take revenge." So, each of us must be willing and ready to make peace, while at the same time recognizing that there will be those with whom this will not be possible. Following are some suggestions for dealing with difficult people:

1. Be cautious about judging others as "difficult people."

Few people enjoy being opposed. Most of us like to think we're right, at least in terms of the issues that matter most to us. We tend to perceive opposition as a threat, and it's easy for us to judge all opponents as "difficult people," assuming that we're justified in thinking of them as those in Romans 12:18 with whom peace is impossible. We too easily label them, at least in our minds, as agitators, troublemakers, or antagonists. The fact is, though, sometimes we're wrong. I've been wrong. At times I have judged others as difficult people, resistant to making peace. I then acted in such negative ways that it became impossible for peace to exist. In those cases, peace was out of reach not because of them, but because of me. In judging others as difficult people, I have sometimes been the difficult person, on the wrong side of Romans 12:18.

Titus 3:10 says, "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them." That verse highlights the importance of unity in the church and the destructiveness of divisiveness. When someone is truly divisive, they need to be dealt with. However, far too often a simple disagreement is judged as divisive. It's easy for persons in positions of power to misuse this verse as a weapon to bully those who disagree with them.

While there are people who are truly difficult to deal with, be cautious about putting anyone in that category. If you're wrong in your assessment, you just may end up being there yourself.

2. Communicate clearly.

It's always a good idea to communicate clearly, but when dealing with difficult people take extra measures to do so. Ask straightforward questions, such as: "Why did you want to meet with me? What is it you want?" Then when it's your turn to speak, be extra careful about what you say. If people are truly "difficult," your words may be put on trial by them (and by everyone else they speak to about the situation). When the police arrest a suspect they read the individual the Miranda rights, including the statement, "Anything you say may be used against you." This statement also applies when dealing with difficult people. What you say may be used against you. So, choose your words carefully, and communicate clearly.

3. Don't put yourself in a vulnerable position.

Norm Shawchuck has a word to describe people whose dominant conflict style is aggressive-competing. He calls them "sharks."⁸ Difficult people can act like sharks. Imagine a swimming

beach near shark-infested waters. If there have been recent shark sightings, the beach patrol might post a sign warning of the dangers of sharks and advising swimmers how to safeguard themselves. The sign might offer the following suggestions:

Don't swim alone.

Don't swim with an open wound.

Don't swim in the dark.

Don't swim beyond the marker buoys.

Don't provoke a shark.

Leave the water when a shark is spotted.

Stay away from a feeding frenzy.

That's great advice for swimming at the beach near shark-infested waters. It's also great advice for dealing with difficult people. Don't put yourself in a vulnerable position.

4. Don't be overly accessible.

Difficult people thrive on power. Your accessibility can give them an increased sense of power. If your door is known to be open to anyone at any time, sooner or later you'll encounter someone who will walk through your door all the time. Some of these individuals will be difficult people. Difficult people take pleasure in controlling your time, as well as the agenda. Don't let them. Kenneth Haugk, in his book *Antagonists in the Church*,⁹ suggests the following in regard to dealing with antagonists:

If possible, avoid meeting with the antagonist at all.

Meet in a place of your choosing.

Avoid meeting in your home. (You're expected to be a "host.")

Avoid meeting in their home. (It's their turf. It gives them confidence.)

Don't meet over lunch. (This creates unwanted intimacy.)

Meet at a time of your choosing.

Don't be forced into an open-ended meeting. If you're concerned about a meeting going too long, schedule it just before a hard break in your schedule, such as another commitment.

Don't be overly accessible to troublemakers. It will just encourage them to make more trouble.

5. Develop and enforce ground rules.

Ground rules allow conflict to be resolved in an atmosphere of fair play. They minimize the use of "dirty tricks." When in a conflict, it's always a good idea to establish a set of ground rules, but this is especially necessary when dealing with difficult people. Establish ground rules, communicate them, and enforce them. They will protect you, as well as your church. They will also protect the troublemaker from doing or saying things that he/she might eventually come to regret. If you're in the role of leader, ground rules are extremely important for protecting the interests of everyone. Ground rules should include such stipulations as:

Everyone will speak for self, not for others (no second-hand statements).

Everyone will have an opportunity to state his/her concerns.

There will be no interrupting.

Everyone will listen actively and strive to understand the others.

There will be no labeling, name-calling, or personal attacks.

We will focus on the facts.

We will not judge motives.

We will be civil.

We will not rush to judgment.

We will honor confidential and privileged information.

Everyone will be accountable to that which they have agreed to.

Enforcing these and additional ground rules will help create a fair-play atmosphere in which disputes can be managed effectively.

6. Accept the fact that some people are just difficult.

Dealing with difficult people is unpleasant. There's a strong temptation to try to change them. But that's not your job; it's the Lord's. Your job is to control your own behavior and to deal wisely and fairly with those around you. If through your integrity God softens the hearts and changes the behavior of fractious people, that's great. But while God is doing His work in their lives, you just may have to accept difficult people for who they are. Sometimes it's wisest to back off and say to yourself, "That's just a porcupine showing his quills. Porcupines do that, and I'm too smart to get stuck." Don't fight with a porcupine. Don't pet one either.

A-C-T-I-O-N Steps to Deal with Difficult People

1. Is the condition of your heart consistent with Romans 12:18?
2. Have you in any way been acting as a difficult person in this dispute?
3. Are others acting as difficult people in this conflict? What are they doing to break the peace?
4. How and to whom will you communicate as you strive to manage the conflict?
5. Who is vulnerable and needs to be protected? How will you protect them?
6. What ground rules do you need to establish? How will those ground rules be enforced?

Putting It All Together

I hope that the A-C-T-I-O-N strategies provided a framework for you to better understand your conflict and how you might respond to it. I hope as you read through the material and worked through the A-C-T-I-O-N steps you experienced some "ah-ha" moments that helped you see things more clearly. Now it's time for you to develop an action plan to manage the dispute. Here are some things to consider.

1. What did you learn during the assessment step? Is the conflict hot and likely to spread to a dangerous degree? Are people using their various types of power in destructive ways? If so, it's time for leadership to prayerfully develop a plan.
2. As you looked at the conflict behaviors, who were the bulldozers, the team buses, the ambulances, and the get-away cars? What are your behaviors in the conflict? What are your options to deal with the bulldozers? How do you leverage the team bus-type people? As you develop a plan to manage the conflict, keep in mind the conflict behaviors of various people. Some may need to be confronted. Some may need to be protected.
3. What are your bulls-eye interests? What are the bulls-eye interests of the organization? As you develop your plan, keep focus on the outcome that you and the organization want most.
4. Who are the other stakeholders and what are their interests? Are there many secondaries involved? Remember, secondaries often engage in a conflict out of loyalty to others. Loyalty is a very powerful driving force. In your plan, deal with the primaries, but don't ignore the secondaries. And be sure to know who you are in the conflict. If you are a leader, you have an awesome responsibility. Take it seriously.
5. How are people communicating? Is it open? Is it destructive? Are things being said verbally or in written form that enflame the situation? Who needs to be confronted? Who needs to be comforted? In your plan, find ways to speak the truth in love. Don't leave out the truth. Don't leave out the love.
6. What steps can you take toward a negotiated resolution? Look over the resolution toolbox and determine which of the strategies might help disputing parties take a step toward each other.
7. Are there difficult people to be dealt with? First, be careful in judging them as difficult. You might judge wrongly. Second, be careful in your response to them. If you overreact with an overly harsh response, you may turn villains into victims. That rallies the secondaries to the defense of their friends, adding a new dimension to the dispute. Third, identify ways to protect yourself and others from the effects of difficult people.

Conflict is complicated. So is a conflict management. As you wrestle with the above questions, hopefully your best next steps to manage the conflict will become clear. If not, you might need a conflict consultant.

Do You Need a Conflict Consultant?

Sometimes individuals or leaders from within the church may not be equipped to resolve the conflict. They may lack the training and skills or are biased for or against one of the parties or may not be held in high esteem by all of the conflict participants or may not be willing to invest the time and energy needed to resolve the conflict. It isn't always easy to find in-house, well-trained, unbiased, respected leaders who are willing to invest the time and energy necessary to settle the matter. Despite the best of intentions, church leaders may find the controversy gaining speed and feel powerless to stop or steer it. Churches too often wait until discord resembles a runaway train before calling in a conflict consultant. It would be much more productive to do so earlier, even before a full-blown clash begins. Training in conflict management is of great benefit to any church at any time. Even during times of peace and harmony, small tensions will inevitably arise. A little conflict management training can go a long way toward settling a disagreement before it has had an opportunity to intensify.

Once tensions escalate into a conflict that cannot effectively be managed by those in-house, a conflict consultant becomes not only a good idea but a necessity. If your church is involved in a dispute and you are wondering whether or not it's time to call in a consultant, here are some questions to ask yourself:

1. Has communication broken down?
2. Has goodwill been lost?
3. Do either or both parties feel threatened or powerless?
4. Is the leadership unsure of or divided about what to do?
5. Is the conflict causing fatigue among leadership figures?
6. Have previous efforts at conflict resolution failed?
7. Is the conflict escalating?
8. Are people choosing sides?
9. Are people leaving the church?
10. Is the conflict hindering the goals of the church?

If the answer is yes to even a few of these questions, it's time to contact a conflict consultant. The price will be far less than that of a runaway conflict.

Endnotes

¹ *When the Saints Come Storming In*, Leslie B. Flynn, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1988, p. 75.

² *The New Managerial Grid, the Key to Leadership Excellence*, Robert Blake and Jane Mouton, Houston, Gulf Publishing Company, 1964.

³ *Getting To Yes*, Roger Fisher and William Ury, Penguin Books, New York, 1991, p. 40.

⁴ *The Peacemaker*, Ken Sande, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1991, p. 62.

⁵ *The Peacemaker*, Ken Sande, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1991, pp. 211–216 and *Conciliator Training Program Manual*, Ken Sande, Institute for Christian Conciliation, Billings, MT, 1993, pp. 4-1 to 7-6.

⁶ *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*, Lewis Smedes, Pocket Books, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1984, pp. 17-58.

⁷ *America Online News*, Associated Press, April 30, 1998.

⁸ *How To Manage Conflict In The Church*, Norman Shawchuck, Spiritual Growth Resources, Indianapolis, 1983, p. 27.

⁹ *Antagonists in the Church*, Kenneth Haugk, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1988, pp. 128–133.

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