

Healthy Attitude Toward Conflict • Acts 6:1-7

Conflict is everywhere. Nations threaten war. Neighbors go to court over property lines. Families fight over inheritances. Churches are divided over cantankerous personalities.

I have always hated conflict. Maybe it has to do with being the youngest of four children. I appreciate the words of Rodney King who said, “Why can’t we all just get along?” In my childhood I somehow adopted the notion that all conflict is bad. It was not a healthy attitude toward conflict. I needed to grow, to change my mind. I needed to see conflict differently.

A few years ago our family was visiting the New York City area. As I drove our minivan down a suburban street in northern New Jersey we came to a “Road Closed” sign. While trying to figure out what to do I stopped at the intersection long enough to trigger the anger of a road construction worker. He went into a rage because I came too far toward his “Road Closed” sign. He yelled; he swore; he pointed at the sign—first with his hand and then repeatedly with his foot. Obviously we were in serious conflict and we had never met.

I drove up beside him, put down the car window and said, “Hi, I’m from Minnesota and I don’t know any other way to get where we need to go except down this road. Can you help me?” He said, “I’ve been trying to figure that out myself. I’m not sure if it’s better to go right or left or go back the way you came. Why don’t I stop the traffic while you back up and decide which way to try.” He was so nice—warm and gracious. Conflict resolved. I wish it were always that easy.

The Bible tells the early stories of the Christian church. Among them is the report of a conflict that threatened to divide Christians from the very start. Let’s look at Acts 6:1-7:

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were

being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

In those days in Jerusalem, in the beginning of Christianity, most Christians were poor and

looked to the church for money and food. It was also a time of multiple ethnicities within the Christian community including Hebrew-heritage Christians and Greek-heritage Christians. The Greek-heritage Christians, who

were in the minority, thought their widows were being cheated and not getting their fair share in the food distribution.

The apostles could handle this themselves but they recognized that if they became involved in this conflict it would distract them from the more important responsibilities of teaching the Bible and praying. That would weaken the church.

The conflict was significant enough to possibly split the church. So the apostles told the Greek-heritage Christians to choose whoever

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they wanted to distribute the food. They chose seven godly trusted men who all had Greek names. Not one Hebrew-heritage Christian in the bunch. The apostles, who were all Hebrew-heritage Christians, approved and blessed the seven and thereby ended the conflict. The church remained united and significantly flourished.

Wouldn't you think that these early Christians would have avoided all conflict in the first place? The truth is that conflict is inevitable, conflict can produce great good and how we handle conflict is important.

Let's look at some pillars of a healthy attitude toward conflict. First on the list is that conflict is inevitable. It is part of our individuality and our idiosyncrasies. Wherever there are different people there will always be conflict as a means of dealing with the differences we have.

Some of us don't even need anyone else. We can get into conflict all by ourselves. Our generation has added a new use of the word when we speak of "being conflicted" in our own hearts and heads. We sometimes don't even get along with ourselves.

The story goes that a man was finally rescued from a desert island where he had been stranded for more than twenty years. He gave his rescuers a tour of the island including the house he had built for himself. He showed them the church building he had constructed as a place for personal worship of God. When one of the rescuers asked about the other building a hundred yards away the once stranded man said, "Oh, that's where I used to go to church."

Conflict is everywhere. God and Satan have been in conflict for many thousands of years as they have fought for human souls. The best of businesses have conflict between labor and management, between employees and customers. Even the best marriages have disagreements and fights. We live in a democracy, but the whole nature of democracy is that decisions come out of disagreement and conflict.

None of this is to say that conflict is good. Much conflict is terribly sinful. But not all conflict is either sinful or bad.

People with healthy attitudes toward conflict

acknowledge and accept that conflict is a part of life. We have always had conflict and we always will have conflict. There is no place we can go to escape it.

In the early 1980s a Canadian man became so distraught over conflict in the world that he decided to leave his native North America. He studied the world to find a place where peace always prevailed and conflict was absent. Then he moved to some of the most remote islands in the world, the Falklands. Within a year, Argentina invaded and claimed the islands they call the Malvinas and triggered a war with Great Britain that cost many lives and still leaves 30,000 active land mines unexploded. There is no place without conflict.

A healthy attitude towards conflict recognizes that it is part of our world and part of our lives. But just because conflict is inevitable doesn't mean that it cannot produce good. To the contrary, conflict can produce good. Many conflict theorists will say that all good flows out of conflict. Where there is no conflict there is no good change. Scientific discovery comes out of conflict. Political victory results from conflict. Adolescence with all of its conflicted struggles leads to adult independence. Nations are born. Ideas emerge. Progress is always rooted in conflict.

One analyst claims, "Without conflict there would be no New Testament." That is true. Christianity was born out of conflict with both Greek culture and Hebrew religion. There was even a conflict of opinion between God-the-Son and God-the-Father the night before Jesus was crucified. Three times Jesus prayed for the cup to pass from him and three times his Father refused and Jesus said, "*Not my will but your will be done.*" That famous conflict led Jesus to the cross where he died and paid for human sin, giving us eternal life.

What is true in history and in the Bible is often true in our own lives. Many of us can look back at the turning points in our lives and see how conflict produced great results. It was when fired from a job that we embarked on a new career that would not otherwise have been dared.

It was a broken engagement that resulted in a new relationship and a far better marriage. It was a disappointment at a church that caused you to study the Bible for yourself and your life was forever transformed.

God is the master at using conflict for good. That's what happened in the New Testament when early Christian missionaries named Paul, Mark and Barnabas couldn't get along with each other. Their disagreements were so great that they had to go in different directions, but God used that for good and gave them more effective ministries apart than they would have had together.

I have seen God take awful, sinful, unnecessary conflict and turn it into good. Watergate felon Chuck Colson's prison experience birthed Prison Fellowship and the transformation of thousands of inmates in America and around the world. That is not to say that his crimes were right, but God used that bad for good. It takes a great deal of faith, especially when we are in the midst of conflict, to believe that God can turn conflict into good.

What we are trying to do here is build a healthy attitude toward conflict. If we start with an attitude that says that conflict is inevitable and then move on to an attitude that conflict can produce great good, we are ready to see that how we handle conflict is important.

Maybe we should start with the other guy. Some people are dysfunctional. Some people are irrational. Some people are sinful. Some people are controllers. Some people resist all change. Some people stand for principle. Some people are absolutely right and everyone else is completely wrong. All of this is to say that we need to evaluate the reason someone else is generating conflict.

In the story in Acts 6 it was a combination of an unfair distribution of food to needy widows and ethnic distrust. As Christians we are to love others even if they are our enemies. Love in conflict doesn't mean giving in or giving up and it certainly does not mean that we should accom-

modate people's inappropriate behavior or dysfunction. We should pray, think and work for ways to help shape the other person for good.

It is difficult to love and help those who attack us and are dysfunctional. But it is the Christian thing to do. Our good response to conflict can shape another person's life for good. Many people are dysfunctional, unhealthy and unhappy because no one earlier in their lives loved them enough to deal with their unacceptable behavior. How you handle their conflict can bring great good.

When we deal with ourselves there are good ways and bad ways to deal with conflict just as there are fair ways to fight and unfair ways to fight. Let's look at some simple rules. Rule #1 is

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to promote peace. There's a great line in the New Testament in Romans 12:18 that says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." That

means that it does not depend on what the other person says or does, it depends on me. As Christians, each of us is to be a peacemaker rather than a troublemaker.

Rule #2 is to think before you speak, write or act. Think through your words and behavior. What will be the consequences? Will they help or hurt? My rule is to never send anything in writing that I would not want read in public. My goal is to try to honor Jesus with anything I communicate.

Avoid assuming other people's motives. Avoid words like "always" and "never". Avoid exaggeration. Avoid carelessness with facts. Avoid anonymous accusations or information. Don't say things like, "There are a lot of people who agree with me and are on my side" when, in fact, that is not factually true. And avoid rumors.

A third rule is to follow the principle of Matthew 18:15 which says, "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." The principle here

is to deal with conflict on the lowest personal level and don't escalate. The goal is to resolve the conflict rather than escalate it. Be a reconciler not an escalator. And always seek the good of the other person. Jesus says that if this person listens to you, you have won your brother over. The goal is not to win the battle; the goal is to win the peace, to win a brother over and to resolve the conflict.

Finally, and most of all, trust God in all of this. If we really trust God, we are convinced that he can and will resolve the conflict for the greatest good. Our role is not to fix everything but to be faithful to God in everything.

When it comes to a healthy attitude toward conflict, I've got to tell you about a man who wins the gold medal in this category. His name is Gamaliel. He was a Pharisee in first century Jerusalem, and Pharisees were usually pretty uptight.

A huge conflict was brewing in Jerusalem between the followers of Jesus and the religious establishment. Change was in the air and the religious establishment doesn't usually like change. They were jealous and protective of the status quo. The conflict was escalating rapidly. The Pharisees insisted upon the arrest and imprisonment of Peter and other Christian leaders. Then they convened a business meeting of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the religious governing body of Judaism in Jerusalem. They actually presented a motion on the floor to murder Peter and his colleagues. That is what they were debating and someone was ready to call for the vote. Then Gamaliel, who was greatly respected and had a healthy attitude toward God and conflict, stood up to speak. Here's the record from Acts 5:33-40:

. . . they were furious and wanted to put (Peter and the other apostles) to death. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed them: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time

ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

His speech persuaded them.

Good for Gamaliel! When it came to conflict, he was a veteran. He knew it was inevitable. And, he knew it could produce great good. He deescalated the conflict. But, most of all, he trusted God to bring ultimate good.

Have a healthy attitude when it comes to conflict. Be like Gamaliel. Trust God.

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
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