



Gospel Relationships

Sample

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Unit 2. Conflict

Conflict is universal

Reflection

Have you experienced conflict? How did you respond to it? Is there a difference between how Christians respond and how non-Christians respond?

You do not have to research for long to discover that conflict is universal. We all read about it in the papers, see it on the TV, and experience it in our lives. It permeates the whole of our existence from family relationships to the workplace.

The Bible corroborates our experience. In Titus, Paul describes a standard life, living “in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.” (Titus 3:3). Conflict is clear in Paul’s catalogue of “the works of the flesh” in Galatians: “enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy” (Galatians 5:20-21). This is the world into which Jesus came and which God is reconciling to himself through Jesus. Therefore, this is the world in which God’s people are called to be faithful witnesses, testifying to that reconciliation.

In this unit we are going to lay the foundation for dealing with conflict. We are going to look at some approaches to this problem and its solution, and compare it to the Bible’s approach. This should then give us a framework for talking about how to deal with conflict in practice. Throughout this unit, when examining what people have to say about conflict, we have drawn material from examples dealing with conflict specifically in the workplace. However, the approach commended is common to other spheres of life.

The problem – according to the world

Since conflict is a glaring reality, it is not surprising that there are many and varied responses to it. However, before one can find a solution one must first define the problem. So in this first section we are going to look at the statement of the perceived problem, as this will shed light on the proposed solution.

No one seems to dispute the *fact* of conflict. The reason a number of people want to tackle it is because of the *result* of conflict. One survey into workplace conflict found that nearly one in three respondents had left employment due to conflict at work.⁷ Apparently “24-60% of management time and energy is spent dealing with anger. This leads to decreased

⁷ Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, *Leadership and the management of conflict at work*, (CIPD, 2008), 2

productivity, increased stress among employees, hampered performance, high turnover rate, absenteeism and at its worst, violence and death.”⁸

The resulting effects on business and productivity are clear. A further question arises, however, regarding the origin or causes of these conflicts. Again the secular world presents its case. What seems to be universally recognised is that conflict arises when there is an incompatibility of desires or expectations. There is some legitimacy to these desires and the resulting conflict, according to Dr Tony Fiore. It is legitimate to say, “Wait a minute. I’m not happy with this; I don’t like what’s going on.” This anger must simply be turned into positive action.⁹ What is illegitimate is for this discontent — this difference in expectations — to become destructive: “Sometimes, when we’re in a position where we recognise that we are upset about something, and we use that to our advantage, we can make that work for us, and in the long run, actually work for the company.”¹⁰

Reflection

In your experience, what are the effects of conflict in the workplace?

The problem — according to the Bible

According to the secular world, problems arise when different people’s interests are in conflict; when my desire or expectation about my job is different from yours. This can be fed by other unsettling movements in our culture. Interestingly, the Bible paints a similar picture of the reason for conflict. Indeed, it sees this as inevitable. Yet this does not lead to the conflict being seen as legitimate.

To examine this in more detail we will look at James 4, where we are given one of the clearest statements about conflict in the whole Bible:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. (James 4:1-3)

The analysis is similar to that of the world. The problem arises when my desire for something comes into contact with another person’s desire for something else. When the two are incompatible, there is conflict as we fight to achieve our desire. But is this a legitimate conflict that simply needs airing and compromise? Not according to James. In 3:14-16, James talks about a type of ‘wisdom’ that is based around selfish ambition and envy. This kind of wisdom results in the disorder that we see all around us. It is this

⁸ Fiore, T., *Resolving Workplace Conflict: 4 Ways to a Win-Win Solution*. Accessed at: <http://conflict911.com/guestconflict/win-winconflict.htm> on 6 February 2014

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

disorder which James goes on to address in more detail in chapter 4. The stunning thing is that this wisdom is not only earthly, not only unspiritual, but *of the devil himself*. What is demonstrated is the opposite of humility — and in this we take after the devil, the one who wanted to be God. This selfish ambition comes out in 4:2: our desires rule us, and when we do not get what we want, we pursue them in conflict. We are blindly self-sufficient: we refuse to ask God for what we desire (verse 2), and even when we do ask we are still pursuing those things in a self-centred way (verse 3).

One thing that often pervades conflict is judgementalism. As David Powlison puts it, “In an argument, you offend ME by crossing my will. I respond by confessing your offences to you. At the same time, I explain to you how all my failings are really your fault.”¹¹ We stand above the other person, shifting blame, accusing, and claiming innocence. This is precisely what Satan does. He is a liar and an *accuser* (John 8:44; Rev 12:10).¹² He stands in the place of God as judge, but illegitimately so. When we judge, we do the same. James 4:12 says this: “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you — who are you to judge your neighbour?” A disturbing picture starts to emerge. In acting as judge we seek to be God. However, in reality we succeed only in imitating the devil.¹³

It is interesting to note that James does not say that it is *evil* desires that lead to conflict. Rather, it is simply “desires”. What leads to fights and quarrels is simply not getting what we want. It is when our desires are not met that we launch our attack. The problem then is not the desire, *per se*, but the status it has now received as something that *must* be met. My desire for a good thing has moved from simply being a desire to being a “need”. Even if it is a genuine need, like food, water or even relationships, the key thing is it has now become a “demand”. Again, we are playing God as we make this demand on others to meet our desires.

Reflection

Think back to a conflict situation in which you have been involved. What desires had become needs?

The solution — according to the world

It becomes clear, then, that the diagnosis of the problem is not as similar as we might have first thought. Whereas the secular world sees the rule of our desires as legitimate, the Bible sees this rule as quite literally *diabolical*. Of course, with different diagnoses there will inevitably be different solutions offered.

¹¹ Powlison, D., ‘Getting to the Heart of Conflict: Anger, Part 3’, *The Journal of Biblical Counselling* (Fall 1997), 34

¹² Sande, K., ‘Judging Others: The Danger of Playing God’, *The Journal of Biblical Counselling* (Fall 2002)

¹³ Powlison, D., ‘Getting to the Heart of Conflict’, 37

Since the rule of these desires is taken for granted, but the clash of conflicting desires in different people results in disorder, the solution is to find a way in which these desires can live in harmony. Compromise is agreed upon and the business continues.

To achieve this goal certain action needs to be taken. If there is going to be compromise between these conflicting desires, there must be the feeling that the desires are valued enough to be accommodated. A career skills website talks about how it is important to gather information so that there is a level of partnership going on in the conflict resolution. "Here you are trying to get to the underlying interests, needs and concerns. Ask for the other person's viewpoint and confirm that you respect his or her opinion and need his or her co-operation to solve the problem."¹⁴ If we get even a sense that the other person will not accommodate our desires, then the conflict will re-emerge. Why? Because the defence and survival of our desires are paramount. It is interesting that this same website emphasises talking about the issues in "objective terms" and keeping "personality" out of the discussion, asking questions such as: "Is it effecting work performance? Damaging the delivery to the client? Disrupting team work? Hampering decision making?" It is important to show the other person that dealing with this conflict, even if there is compromise, is in fact in their own self-interest.

There is no reason in the secular mind to address the issue of the rule of our desires, as this is perfectly natural for someone not living under God's rule. A plaster is applied to the problem. As with all plasters, however, they eventually become wet and old, and begin to fall off. The problem has not been dealt with at a deeper level, and so it appears again. The result? Further compromise must be reached in order to institute another temporary semblance of peace.

Reflection

Think again about a conflict in which you have been involved in. What solution to the conflict, if any, was reached?

The solution — according to the Bible

As we all know, these skin-deep solutions cannot last. We may be able to convince someone for a while that it is in their self-interest to resolve this issue, but when something more appealing to their self-interest arises, the conflict will reignite. The reason for this is that the diagnosis is wrong, and so the solution is inevitably flawed.

The solution according to the Bible is first to recognise the problem. The problem is that we are putting ourselves in the place of God, judging others. We have to see that our desires are ruling instead of Christ. We have become enemies of God as we pursue this "friendship with the world" (James 4:4).

¹⁴ MindTools, *Conflict Resolution*. Accessed at http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_81.htm on 6 February 2014

Notice the perspective here. James does *not* address the problem of *the other person*, as we so often do in conflict. Instead, he addresses the problem in *us*. So the next step after recognising this problem is to do something about it. We need to submit to God (James 4:7) instead of submitting to the rule of our desires; we need to run from the devil (4:7) instead of imitating him. We need to come near to God, washing our hands of this action, purifying our hearts of this idol worship (4:8). Instead of haughtily judging others, we should humbly come before the Lord. Our action should reflect this new recognition of our position before God. We should no longer put others down — again, this is something so common in conflict as we use any means of attack at our disposal in order to pursue the victory for our desires.

Given that conflict is so prevalent we may be pessimistic about the possibility of actually doing this. However, the wonderful promise that James gives us is that “God gives grace to the humble”(4:6). He is the one who provides the means for a change of rule in our lives. He makes it possible for us to lay aside our desires and ‘needs’ for the sake of other people, just as Jesus did (see Philippians 2:5-11).

This approach is, of course, what Jesus himself talked about in Matthew 7:5: “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.” If we do not first deal with our own sin, no matter how much or how little we have contributed to the conflict, then we show we have not recognised the problem. We are still living in the delusion that we are God and can judge others. Once we have removed our own plank, however, we can indeed see better to help the other person. This is not because we are now perfect, but because we are now in a position of humility, recognising our own sin and need of forgiveness.

In order to deal with conflict, we first of all need to do some soul-searching. We need to ask ourselves: “Why are *we* involved in this particular conflict? What desire is driving us to this place? What ‘need’ are we grasping hold of?” When we have answered these questions we will have removed one side of the problem. What is important to note, however, is that there is no biblical promise that this will result in the other person doing the same. We might deal with our ruling desire, but the other person may not, whether or not they are a Christian or non-Christian. As a result, the conflict may continue to some degree. Peter does have some important things to say to us if we find ourselves in such a position (1 Peter 2:13-4:6). However, we are not going to spend time looking at this particular area in this module. Instead, we are going to look at the opportunity conflict presents for displaying and talking about the gospel.

Conflict resolution as a gospel opportunity

If the above analysis is correct, then what conflict shows in action is our basic sinfulness. That is, our desires ruling instead of God. We see the consequences of Genesis 3 as we seek to assert our dominance over someone else. This problem was addressed by Jesus when he died and rose again. He removed the barrier to relationships and so now calls all people to turn from their lives of conflict and self-rule, and to come under his kingship among his people. The Bible is clear that coming under Jesus’ rule means becoming like him. We are to be a people who are humble, not proud, who recognise our own sin rather than emphasising others’ and diminishing our own. We are to be people who put aside our desires and even our needs for the sake of others. After all, in one sense Jesus ‘needed’ relationship with his Father: when that was removed he experienced death. Yet he was

willing to give up his 'need' for the sake of others. Not only are we called to do this as Christians, but it is in fact what we call others to in evangelism.

It is quite clear, then, that conflict presents a great opportunity for telling this story and calling people to repentance. We do not need to argue from newspapers, art, past or possible future experiences to illustrate our sin and our desire for self-rule. We can point people to an example in the present, with all of its destructive effects. We can show people that the reason they are in this conflict is that they are living for themselves: their desires are ruling and they will go to any lengths to assert their dominance, even over others.

Once we have established this, we can demonstrate the inadequacies of other approaches to resolving this conflict, showing how they simply reinforce the legitimacy of the dominance of our desires: they call only for compromise. It is quite clear from most people's experiences that this simply fails to deal with the conflict in the long run. Having done this, we can then show a better way. We can call people to lay aside their claims of being god. After all, Jesus laid aside his rights, even though he *was* God. We can show them how he did that so we can be forgiven for our false claims. What is more, God now enables us to forgive and even choose to be wronged.

Let me give an example. A few years ago I was in a band set up by an older man who was a regular at an open mic night we used to go to. There were six of us in the band to start with. None of the others were Christians. By Christmas we were down to just two of the original members including me. What had happened? There were clearly fights for dominance going on. People thought, "It's my band and I'm god!" The result was conflict. I would get regular phone calls from Harry, the organiser of the band. He would complain to me about what the others were doing, about their lack of commitment. One time I suggested to him that he might forgive one of the other people involved in this conflict. His response was, "What? After all he's done to me?" I tried to point out that that was the point of forgiveness.

In another conversation we got talking about the conflicts again. He has a strange view of me — that I am some kind of saint who is never phased by anything. He said something to this effect and I responded by saying, "I do get annoyed at people sometimes!" He asked what I do when someone lets me down. I explained that if they were a Christian then we would have a common commitment to wanting to be like Jesus. So we would talk about why they let me down and how that was living for self (or something to that effect). He then asked what I would do with a non-Christian. I thought about it for a moment and then said that I would actually do something very similar. I said that, whether we believe in God or not, we all recognise that we want things to be our own way: we want to be god. We hate it — or at least we hate the results — but we all do it. The same challenge therefore applies to the non-Christian as to the Christian at this point: "Come under the one who truly *is* King!"

This was a situation in which I was mediating. If I were involved in the conflict itself, the first step would be for me to model this gospel attitude to the other person. I should ask for forgiveness from them and from God, and accept whatever the consequences were — for example, being viewed as entirely in the wrong, or facing the sack if this happens in the workplace. If the relationship is such that conversation can continue — and this approach can make that possible when it previously was impossible — then I could begin to talk with the other person about Jesus' better way.

Reflection

What situations of conflict are there currently in your church? Among your unbelieving friends? At work? How could you apply some of the principles you have learned through this unit in those situations?

