

TOGETHER, WE CAN . . . RESOLVE CONFLICT
2002 Arkansas Christian Convention
Gene McCoy

PERTINENT SCRIPTURES (not exhaustive) all from New American Standard Updated version

Matt 7:12

In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Matt 5:25

Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.

2 Peter 1:3-9

. . . His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins.

Gal 6:1, 2 Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

John 13:35 By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

Col 3:15-16

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

1 Thess 5:12-15

But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.

James 5:16

Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

Definition -- "a difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone's goals or desires."

A Bride Like No Other . . .

"The wedding guests have gathered in great anticipation; the ceremony to be performed today has long been awaited . . . The bridegroom and his attendants gather in front of the chancel . . . The sound of the organ rises, a joyous announcement that the bride is coming. Everyone stands and strains to get a proper glimpse of the beauty. Then a horrible gasp explodes from the congregation. This is a bride like no other.

In she stumbles. Something terrible has happened! One leg is twisted. She limps pronouncedly. The wedding garment is tattered and muddy; great rents in her dress leave her scarcely modest. Black bruises can be seen welting her bare arms; the bride's nose is bloody. An eye is swollen, yellow and purple in its discoloration. Patches of hair look as if they had actually been pulled from her scalp.

Fumbling over the keys, the organist begins again after his shocked pause. The attendants cast their eyes down. The congregation mourns silently. Surely the Bridegroom deserved better than this. That handsome Prince who has kept himself faithful to his love should find consummation with the most beautiful of women – not this. His bride, the church, has been fighting again."

– Karen Mains, The Key to a Loving Heart, Elgin, IL: David Cook, 1979

CONFLICT IS INEVITABLE BUT MANAGEABLE

John Ortberg tells a story about a pastor who needed to confront an individual who was causing conflict in the church. But the reluctant pastor confided to his wife that he was afraid to speak to the troublemaker because "every time I think about this person, I get sweaty palms and every time I have to confront someone, my mouth goes dry." His wife's pithy response: "Why don't you lick your palms?"

-- Greg Morris, <http://leadershipdynamics.org/2001/6-18-01.htm>

"Unresolved conflict can destroy unity and effectiveness and ultimately the impact of your organization or ministry." We must learn to "cope with conflict, tone down the rhetoric, search for compromise and open the way for creative solutions."

-- Greg Morris, <http://leadershipdynamics.org/1998/10-26-98.htm>

■ Five Principles Governing Conflict Management

1. Conflict is not always bad.
Simple diversity does not necessarily equal conflict.
2. Learn to handle potentially divisive issues before they become problems.
“It’s much easier to handle conflict when it’s a skirmish, not an all out fight with battle lines drawn.” -- Greg Morris
3. Don’t spiritualize the conflict.
“When conflict is spiritualized, the result is polarization with spiritual winners and spiritual losers.” -- Greg Morris
4. Speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15)
“Truth without grace is brutality. Grace without truth is hypocrisy. But grace with truth is Christ-like.” -- unknown
5. Extend and receive forgiveness.
“Conflict always takes an emotional toll.” -- Greg Morris
Therefore, heed to instruction of Peter (1 Pet. 4:8), who wrote, “. . . have fervent love for one another, for ‘love will cover a multitude of sins.’”

- “Conflict is never comfortable, but God is more concerned with our character than our comfort!”
-- Greg Morris, <http://leadershipdynamics.org/2001/6-18-01.htm>
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CAUSES OF CONFLICT

- Selfishness – *My* desires. *My* wrong motives. Serving *my* personal pleasures.
What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious 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 with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. James 4:1-3 NASU
- Labeling (judging) people or groups of people
- Speculating on others’ motives
- Accepting or acting on accusations of others without personally talking to the accused and giving them an opportunity to describe their side of the story before we ourselves accuse them of being guilty.
- Failing to love one another as Christ loves us

LISTEN

- Express your desire to hear the other person.
- Let that person explain without interruption.
- Restate what you think you heard, seeking clarification.

UNDERSTAND

- By talking directly and in person, wherever possible. Avoid written communication (e.g., e-mail)
- Empathize

IDENTIFY

- The problem (source, cause, etc.)
 - Is the conflict due to a misunderstanding or oversight?
 - Is the conflict due to a miscommunication?
 - Is the conflict due to a deliberate act?
 - ❖ Speed Leas identified the following problems in one congregation:
 - ◆ The congregation left decision making up to a few individuals but when those people took the initiative they got “hung out to dry” and were criticized for any action.
 - ◆ High-profile leaders would stop participating in the church if an action was not to their liking.
 - ◆ Lack of focus or vision, causing disputes to “take on larger meaning than would have been the case if there were something more important than those tensions which moved the organization forward.
- Your role
 - Some conflicts may be resolved only as “disinterested parties” remove themselves from the situation. If you don’t belong in the conflict, have the gumption to stay out of it!
 - Measure personal responsibility objectively, giving the benefit of doubt and assuming as much obligation as is warranted and healthy to resolve the dispute.
 - Get good data and do good analysis -- Speed Leas (see Leadership interview)

REPENT

Confess

A's of Confession – by Ted Kober, [Conflict an Opportunity? I Hate Conflict](#) and Ken Sande

Address everyone involved

Avoid “if”, “but”, and “maybe” (don’t make excuses)

Admit your sin (attitude and action). Acknowledge sin’s role in the conflict.

“When we are in conflict, our tendency is to focus on the other person and the wrong things he has said or done. . . Jesus asks us to approach conflict from a radically different perspective. . . In Matthew 7:3-5, Jesus tells us first to examine our own wrong actions and words, taking full responsibility for them through repentance and confession, and then to talk to the other person about his harmful actions and words.”

Gary D. Friesen, “Conflict Provides Opportunities!”, October 2000 issue of *Alliance Life*, a publication of the Christian & Missionary Alliance church

Apologize.

Accept the consequences

Ask for forgiveness

Alter your choices in the future

Apology – It is amazing how far a sincere apology goes in resolving conflict. In many cases, it is to the advantage of all to humbly apologize, even if you consider yourself innocent of wrongdoing.

RESOLVE

The Peacemaker’s Pledge

A Commitment to Biblical Conflict Resolution

[The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict](#)

By Ken Sande, founder and president of Peacemaker Ministries, 1997

As people reconciled to God by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we believe that we are called to respond to conflict in a way that is remarkably different from the way the world deals with conflict.

We also believe that conflict provides opportunities to glorify God, serve other people, and grow to be like Christ. Therefore, in response to God’s love and in reliance on His grace, we commit ourselves to respond to conflict according to the following principles:

Glorify God How can I please and honor God in this situation, and how can I give witness to what He has done for me through Christ?

- Acknowledge God’s role in our conflicts. Our conflicts involve more than just the two human parties. God paid dearly to involve Himself in our lives.
- Three opportunities conflict provides: 1) Glorify God, 2) serve others, and 3) grow to be more like Christ

Get the log out of your eye How have I contributed to this conflict and what do I need to do to resolve it?

- Matthew 7:5 “First take the plank out of your own eye, then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”
- Acknowledge responsibility
- Two kinds of logs to look for
 1. A critical, negative, or overly sensitive attitude (Meditate on Phil. 4:2-9)
 2. Actual sinful words and actions

Go and show your brother his fault Instead of talking to others about my opponent, how can I lovingly and gently help my brother understand how he has contributed to the conflict?

- 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.”
- Overlook minor offenses (see Prov. 19:11), which can be identified if you can answer “no” to all of the following questions:
 1. Is the offense seriously dishonoring God?
 2. Has it permanently damaged a relationship?
 3. Is it seriously hurting other people?
 4. Is it seriously hurting the offender himself?
- *Loving confrontation; restoring gently* (Gal. 6:1) -- list by Ken Sande
 1. Pray for humility and wisdom.
 2. Plan your words carefully, considering how you would want to be confronted.

3. Anticipate likely reactions and plan appropriate responses.
4. Choose the right time and place (talk in person whenever possible).
5. Assume the best about the other person until facts prove otherwise (Prov. 11:27).
6. Listen carefully (Prov. 18:13).
7. Speak only to build up the other person (Eph. 4:29).
8. Ask for feedback.
9. Recognize the other person's limits (You can speak the truth in love, but only God can change the other person's heart. See Rom. 12:18; 2 Tim. 2:24-26).

Go and be reconciled How can I demonstrate forgiveness and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict?

- Matthew 5:24 "First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."
- "Go" = Active, not passive; proactive, not reactive
- Our tendency is to avoid the one with whom we have had conflict.
- Essential because more people are affected than the two parties in conflict. There are many observers, including innocent children, non-Christians, and those who follow our example.
- Not a superficial truce, but genuine reconciliation by making four specific promises:
 1. I will not think about (dwell on or brood over) this incident.
 2. I will not bring up this incident and use it against you.
 3. I will not talk to others about this incident.
 4. I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.

Negotiation

- Substantive issues may still need to be negotiated. Do not aggressively pursue selfish advantage in a competitive manner, but look for solutions that are mutually beneficial. (See Phil. 2:3-4; Matt. 22:39; 1 Cor. 13:5; Matt. 7:12)
- PAUSE method
 - ◆ **P**repare (pray, get the facts, seek godly counsel, develop options)
 - ◆ **A**ffirm relationships (show genuine concern and respect for others)
 - ◆ **U**nderstand interests (identify others' concerns, desires, needs, limitations, or fears)
 - ◆ **S**earch for creative solutions (prayerful brainstorming)
 - ◆ **E**valuate options objectively and reasonably (evaluate, don't argue)

Get help from above

- Forgiveness is a spiritual process with which we need divine help

Get help from the church

- Secure the counsel of a trusted mature Christian who may help you apply these principles.
- If the conflict continues, ask one or two mutually respected friends to mediate or arbitrate (see Matt. 18:16-17; 1 Cor. 6:1-8).

What to do if the other party will not reconcile.

- You cannot be responsible for another person's response or actions. You are responsible to be faithful to the Lord's will (Rom. 12:18)
- Don't give up on finding a Biblical solution. Continue to pray, read the Word, and seek the counsel of mature Christians.
- Five principles for overcoming evil, as described in Romans 12:14-21
 1. Control your tongue ("Bless those who curse you;" see also Eph. 4:29)
 2. Seek godly advisors (Identify with others and do not become isolated.)
 3. Keep doing what is right (see 1 Pet. 2:12, 15; 3:15b-16)
 4. Recognize your limits (Instead of retaliating, stay within proper biblical channels.)
 5. Use the ultimate weapon: deliberate, focused love (see also John 3:16; Luke 6:27-31)

Questions to evaluate success / failure

- Were we able to identify the issues on which we needed to make decisions?
- Did we make that decision?
- Did I reduce tension?
- Did I help people develop skills to manage conflict in the future?
- Did every group with a legitimate right to be heard receive a hearing?

Levels of Conflict by Speed Leas (Moving Your Church Through Conflict, Alban Institute, 1984)

- **Level One:** There's a problem to solve in the organization, and people may disagree about how to solve it. But they believe they can work it out, and they are committed to try. They are talking directly to each other, not withholding information. As a result, most people don't call this conflict. They say, "We've got problems to solve, but we can do it."
- **Level Two:** The focus shifts from solving the problem to caring for myself. People feel, *We've got a problem to fix, but I don't want to be associated with it. I'm going to be cautious, armor myself, plan before I talk to the pastor. I'll talk with other people, but not share fully all I know about the situation.* People are nervous, which you can tell because they generalize everything: "We're not communicating. There seems to be low trust around here. There are some difficulties with the choir" But they don't describe the problem specifically. The role of the pastor, then, is to get people talking.
- **Level Three:** Again the objective has changed. It's no longer, "Fix the problem", or "Protect myself;" it's "Win." People feel, *You must accept my solution. It's win or lose. I'm not contributing to the difficulty; I'm the good person who has the only possible answer.* The language in such cases is not only vague, it also overstates, distorts, and dichotomizes the conflict. For example, "Pastor, the whole church is out to get you. We are split down the middle. A few bad apples should not be in the church at all. They're never going to change." People are not yet in factions, but they clump together, and we give them labels: "The pastor's buddies," "the old pillars of the church." The pastor's role is to create a safe environment for people to air concerns and start solving them, which means thinking a lot about who should be in what conversations and how we can affirm people and hear their concern.
- **Level Four:** People are no longer satisfied with getting their way. Now they have to get rid of the opposition. The goal is a "divorce" – getting people to quit coming to church, firing the pastor, or disbanding a committee or ministry. People are now in factions, usually meeting in homes. There is a clear leader, sometimes two, who gives marching orders to each faction. At this level, it's wise to get outside help: denominational officials, a consultant, a skilled pastor or lay leaders from another congregation.
- **Level Five:** People won't settle for getting people to leave; now they want to remove them from the face of the earth, as we see in Palestine or Northern Ireland. In a church, the people are not satisfied with a resignation; they want to have the pastor defrocked. And if they can't have that, they'll call congregations where the pastor is candidating and warn them. People at this level become fanatics, They won't stop fighting because they feel it's immoral to stop. They believe they are called by God to destroy the evil. The only thing you can do at this level is remove the opposing parties from each other. A pastor may need to ask for protection and support from the denomination.

Resources

Kober, Ted, Conflict an Opportunity? I Hate Conflict

Mains, Karen, The Key to a Loving Heart, David Cook, Elgin, IL

Sande, Ken, The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict, 2nd ed., Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Books, 1997.

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www.leadershipdynamics.org

<http://home.att.net/~speedleas/Intervw.htm> for an interview in Leadership Magazine

<http://home.att.net/~speedleas/> for his e-mail address, bibliography, vita, and links

Keeping the Peace

This article was originally printed in [Christianity Online](#) (Spring 2000, Volume 1, No. 4) and is reprinted by permission. *Since it's so difficult to read between the lines, it's critical to be crystal clear in your e-communications.*

by Carolyn McCulley

"Can you tell me the thinking behind this?"

The sentence resonated ominously across cyberspace. To the recipient, it dripped of condescending sarcasm. To the sender--me--it was a simple request for information. But there I was, not long into a new job, staring red-faced at the computer screen, fighting hot tears of embarrassment.

I had received an e-mail from an esteemed colleague who was displeased with my previous e-mail correspondence, and was questioning my "tone."

Tone?! With no vocal cues or body language to set the "tone," I wondered how I'd managed to communicate one. Should I have added a smiling emoticon, or would that have looked too much like a smirk?

My mind raced back to other similar situations where e-mail had thrown a wrench into even simple communication. For a fleeting moment, I was tempted to announce a full-scale retreat from the online world. Instead, I wiped my tears and pursued no-tech, face-to-face biblical reconciliation.

Unfortunately, my experience with misconstrued e-mail is not unique.

Ken Sande, founder of Peacemaker Ministries and author of *The Peacemaker*, says e-mail has added an extra wrinkle in business and personal communications.

As a former attorney and now a professional Christian mediator and lecturer, Sande increasingly has had to guide ministry and church staffs, as well as other groups, through friction that originated in e-mail or other online communications.

"People are much more careful in how they write a letter on paper than they are in how they communicate through e-mail," he says. "The further you get away from a face-to-face communication, the more you lose your message-sending capabilities. It's not good enough to communicate so that you can be understood, you must communicate so clearly that you cannot be misunderstood. There's a huge difference."

So how do we avoid problems? Here are ten practical tips for being a peacemaker online:

1. Start with an affirmative greeting. Sande points to Paul's Epistles as a prime example of this practice. "These letters begin with statements like, 'My brothers, I always rejoice when I think of you.' When Paul has to do some stern correction, he spends virtually the first chapter just encouraging them, affirming his love, and the goodness of God toward these people. Those are tremendous illustrations of how to communicate--online or in real life."

2. Look carefully at the first few sentences of your letter. They generally set the tone for how the rest of the letter will be received. "A little bit of a personal touch up front can cast other words in a very positive light," Sande says.

3. Quote sections of letters you've received. That helps keep the thread of the conversation, and shows your recipient that you're really "listening."

4. Re-read your words. Can they be understood in any other way than what you intend? Is it obvious to the recipient that you have a spirit of inquiry, and not of assumption?

5. Don't rely on gimmicky "emoticons." Though emoticons [like the overused :)] can help establish your tone, don't rely on them to soften phrases that could be misinterpreted. Rewrite your sentence, instead, with the goal of precise communication.

6. Honor the biblical standards about gossip, especially because e-mail can be forwarded without your consultation. A good barometer of when you're gossiping is whether you'd be embarrassed to have the object of your letter receive it accidentally. The same applies to forwarding e-mail you have received.

7. Keep it as brief as possible. If you're having problems with someone, don't dump an entire "case history" of your concerns in your first letter. A brief summary of the problem and an invitation to converse further will give the recipient time to respond, and give you the ability to choose your words in light of that response. Sande suggests using words like, "Could we talk about this?" and "I heard you did this, and it doesn't seem to be consistent with what I've heard from you before. I'd sure like to hear your side of the story."

8. Don't assume people know your mind. If you're sending potentially negative correspondence, "Don't assume the recipient knows you still think they're a good or competent person," says Sande. "Be explicit about it. Say, 'Even though I'm disappointed in this particular thing, I know this is not your normal style.' Give them the benefit of the doubt and clearly communicate your attitude toward them."

9. Don't send difficult letters right away. Save them as a draft and read them again the next day with fresh eyes.

10. Use questions wisely--not to make accusations. "Saying, 'Didn't I tell you to keep your bike out of the driveway?' is not a question, it's an accusation," Sande says. "I regularly get copies of people's letters in conflicts, and I'm almost embarrassed at the way some Christian people use questions in, frankly, a way attorneys do--it's cross-examination."

Carolyn McCulley is a freelance writer who lives in Germantown, Maryland. She writes for both the Christian media, including CHRISTIANITY TODAY and Christian Single, and the mainstream media, including The Washington Post.

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In a Leadership Magazine interview with Speed Leas, noted authority on church conflict, he gave the management-school definition of conflict as "a disagreement about values, goals, methods, or the facts of a given situation."

My experience confirms the assessment of Mr. Leas, that most church conflict does not emanate from this kind of disagreement. Generally speaking, we are agreed on the values and purpose of the church. Conflict in churches usually stems from disagreements on how to do things. Leas says that to most people in churches, conflict really means, "I feel bad," or, to be precise, "Somebody is causing me to feel bad." I have said that most conflict arises from people's *perceptions*. Perceptions are, by nature, very subjective, have no firm foundation in fact, are rarely documented. I have tried to acknowledge and understand the perceptions of antagonists, affirm them, and articulate their observations back to them as long as I thought their goals were noble.

I have seen this as it is applied to *circumstances* and to *change*. For example, I have worked with small congregations that are struggling to grow. Finances are very limited, resources are few, facilities are less than adequate, and mere survival was the constant concern. In the established congregation, change seems to be a primary focal point of conflict.

Despite the differences between the new and established congregations, I have identified two or three categories in which conflict is manifested.

PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY -- Preacher's interpersonal competence accounted for 46% of the cases of conflict...Of those, 23% was due was due to the preacher being withdrawn, apathetic, not providing leadership, and 23% was due to the preacher being contentious and authoritarian...

PHILOSOPHY OF LEADERSHIP -- "Often the pastor's leadership becomes the central issue no matter what people are really fighting over. The pastor will be blamed for taking one side, for not taking a side, or for the fact that others are having conflict." (Leas) [My experience at West Plains]

PHILOSOPHY OF GROWTH -- People feel bad that the church isn't growing, so points of conflict arise relating to varying opinions as to the reason(s). Since it is the preacher in most congregations that is doing almost all the evangelizing, he is the one who feels the brunt of this conflict. The very people who are unwilling to do the work criticize the one who is doing it.

The assumption is that conflict is inescapable. While that may be true, I think there are some things we can do to prevent it, or diminish it.

CREATE AN OPEN AND IRENIC ATMOSPHERE

Confess weakness and fault (imperfection)

Apologize freely & publicly

Welcome challenging opinions

ACCEPT DIFFERING IDEAS

Try the other person's way; don't insist on doing it your way. Respect those who differ.

Leas says God might speak through an antagonist: "Maybe I need to hear something so I can improve. Or, perhaps that board member is crying for help. There may be an opportunity to minister to him, and he's testing to see if I care for him even when he is nasty."

BACK OFF

Know when and how to push, but also know when to back away.

CONFRONT IN LOVE

Firmness is OK

ENLIST THE SUPPORT OF LEADERS

If you are out on a limb alone, be careful.