

Conflict Resolution

All you have to do is see two toddlers wrestling over the same toy to realize that conflict is a part of life. Conflict comes up for many reasons; sometimes because of sin (like selfishness, or envy) and sometimes for good reasons (like when there is more than one good way to solve something, but people have strong feelings about which way is best). However, all conflict becomes destructive when we don't handle it right.

Fortunately, the Bible offers God's insight into how Christians should resolve conflict with each other. First, there is the critical matter of our hearts. No matter what process we follow for conflict resolution, our attitude matters a great deal to God. The #1 enemy of effective conflict resolution is anger. The Bible says we should be "slow to anger" (James 1:19) and "in your anger do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26, quoting Psalm 4:4). One of the most common ways we sin in anger is by using words as weapons to hurt the other person; James 3:8 vividly reminds us that our tongue can be "a restless evil, full of deadly poison". Anger and the hurtful words that usually go with it never help in resolving conflict. Even when we have to speak some "hard truth" to someone, we are to do so in love (Ephesians 4:15).

The Bible also teaches us principles for how to resolve conflict – the steps to follow, so to speak. First, understand that leaving conflict unresolved is not biblical. Ephesians 4:26 says, "do not let the sun go down on your anger". In Matthew 5:23-25 Jesus teaches us that reconciliation with a fellow Christian takes priority over religious duty, and that we should try to quickly resolve disputes before they end up in court. We should always feel a sense of urgency about resolving conflict with a brother or sister in Christ.

Jesus told us what to do in situations where we feel we have been wronged by another Christian but they are either unaware they've hurt us or they aren't acknowledging it. In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus emphasizes that we are to resolve conflict with the gentlest means possible – as long as the issue is put to rest. There are three escalating steps;

1. Pray, and then talk to the person privately about the issue. Be clear about what you feel he or she has done wrong and offer suggestions for how it can be made right. It is amazing, often we will talk to everybody else about what so-and-so has done but we never actually talk to so-and-so!
2. If your fellow believer refuses to discuss it with you so you can both be at peace, Jesus says it is time to get one or two other Christians to go with you and try again. Note that in doing so, the first thing you will have to do is discuss the situation with these friends and take their counsel (prayer should also continue to be part of the process). Maybe they will help you see you have a part in the conflict that you were ignoring (remember Jesus also said, "How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye, when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?'" Matthew 7:4). But if they agree with you on the matter, then they will go with you in attempting to reason with the person again, always with the objective of bringing the two of you to peace. Again, it is possible this may require multiple meetings if you are making progress but not getting it completely cleared up in one sitting.
3. It is possible the other person may still refuse to listen, preferring to ignore the issue and leave it unresolved. Assuming this is a serious matter and God is leading you with the conviction to see it through, you now have permission to take it to "the church". This does not mean that you get a few minutes on the stage on Sunday morning to make your case or that you can send out an e-mail blast to the entire congregation! Taking it to the church means getting pastors and elders involved as people charged with the responsibility for the spiritual care of the congregation.

At Crossroads, this third step means contacting one of our pastors who will then guide you in determining who else should be involved as well as when and how the matter should be pursued. Much prayer will be required.

If you are experiencing unresolved conflict in a relationship and just aren't sure what to do next, please contact the church at 630-585-7777, or crossroads@crossroadsconnect.net.