

## **Dealing With Conflict Between Christians**

Imagine a world without conflict. It's been the dream of mankind since the fall, and yet it eludes us. Mankind, at heart, is conflict waiting to happen. The very first brothers, Cain and Abel were really a prototype of how men would treat one other from then on. Man is a killer, he is supremely selfish, and without Christ, he will spend his life in endless conflict with family, colleagues, acquaintances and his neighbours as he battles for his selfish rights. James 4:1 "From whence *come* wars and fightings among you? *come they* not hence, *even* of your lusts that war in your members?"

It is only the Holy Spirit that can give a man any possibility of being genuinely, consistently unselfish. That is why true peace, whether interpersonally or on a global scale, is utterly impossible without the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conflict is going to be part of our lives on this side of heaven. Paul recognized that being in the world, perfect peace with unbelievers would not always be possible. That is why he said in Romans 12:18 "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men". Paul knew that perfect, conflict-free relationships with unbelievers was not going to be a realistic goal. However, God has a different standard for His children. Being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, God has every right to expect harmonious relationships between Christians. Since we have the Holy Spirit within us, being unselfishly good to each other is quite possible.

The New Testament leans extremely heavily on the expectation that Christians love and honour one another. Jesus taught that the new commandment was to love one another as He had loved us. His final prayer in John 17 was a plea for oneness amongst the saints. This is not a false peace that embraces error for the sake of a superficial feeling of goodwill toward each other; this is true unity based on truth. He likened it to the natural unity in the Trinity which they have always had, and He prayed that true believers would be one, in a very spiritual and godly sense.

Going into the book of Acts we have the wonderful church at Jerusalem continuing daily in 'one accord'. The Greek word carries the idea of different notes that come together to make one harmonious sound. Into the epistles, and the commands on how to treat one another are numerous, no less than 27 'one another' statements.

God expects His children to be able to resolve conflict amongst themselves. He does not say conflict will never happen, but He certainly gives multitudes of commands which, if followed, would certainly decrease the likelihood of conflict occurring. Paul warned of what unsolved conflict will do to a church in Galatians 5:13-14 "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, *even* in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. <sup>15</sup>But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another." Paul told the Corinthians that it was inexcusable that Corinthian believers were taking each other to the civil courts when they would one day be judging angels themselves. They were expected to solve their conflicts within the church. How do we deal with conflict amongst Christians?

We have a fascinating incident that occurs in the OT that beautifully illustrates how conflict can be resolved. It's a useful illustration of the NT principles because 1) Just as in many conflicts today, no one was actually wrong. There was a lot of misunderstanding, but ultimately there wasn't a clearly right or wrong party. 2) The conflict was resolved. The incident occurred in Joshua 22. The scene was Israel beginning to settle the land of Canaan. What happened is that tribes the tribe of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh liked the land east of the Jordan. They wanted to settle it, while the other tribes were going to cross over the Jordan. This is no problem, the tribes are just instructed to make sure they don't drift away from Israel as a whole. Well, once on that side, the three tribes build an altar on the river Jordan. They do this for precisely the reason the other tribes told them to, to not forget their links to Israel. They want their children to know that they are Israelites, and brothers and sisters with the ones on the other side of the river. Unfortunately, the other tribes immediately get the wrong idea. They think those two-and-a-half tribes are trying to start their own religion and make a substitute tabernacle. They get their men together for war. A civil war is about to break out, and it's all, in fact, over a misunderstanding. How did they solve it?

### **I. The Law of Motive**

Fortunately, in this case, both sides had the right motive, God's glory. The three tribes built their altar to glorify God. The other 9 tribes took up arms to purge out sin from Israel's camp. The fact that they had both been acting for God's glory ultimately enabled a solution. But what if one party had been selfish? War would have been inevitable. The only possible motive for solving conflicts is a desire for God's glory. Think about it: if you are selfish, and I am selfish, the best we can ever do is come to some kind of truce to allow your and my selfishness to co-exist. But if we share a desire for God's glory, it follows that we will be at least able to throw aside accusations of selfishness in the other party. Remember the disciples who began squabbling over who would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Or remember how when James and John's mother asked Jesus if they could sit on His left and right hand side in the kingdom? There was conflict amongst the believers then, because their ultimate motive was selfish. If in a conflict situation, someone is clearly being selfish, then that must be exposed. But in complex conflicts, our only hope of resolving it is if we both agree that we want God's glory. We may even agree to disagree, but if we have God's glory as our motive, we will at least do so in a Christlike manner, no childish avoiding each other and refusing to greet and so on. Paul went to great lengths to explain to a church racked by divisions, the Corinthians, that they were one body with different parts. Hands cannot despise feet, or it is a sick body. Unless we understand that we are the body of Christ, and to despise and fight each other in a local church is to effectively hate Christ, we are misguided. John taught us this, didn't he? "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" I John 4:20

Our motive must be the love of Christ, which will cause a natural love for His members. Rom 12:10 "*Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another;*"

The second solution for conflict is

## **II. The Law of Thinking No Evil**

The other 10 tribes heard about an altar being built. What did they do? They assumed the worst. They believed it was idolatry. That was their mistake. Yes, there was something that needed investigation, but they were impulsive, and assumed the worst about their brethren. It nearly caused a war. How much conflict is caused by what we assume to be in the hearts of others? Sometimes things as simple as a look, a tone of voice, a missed greeting, gets us thinking in overdrive. We must confess that our interpretation of others actions is not perfect, and it is pride which assumes it is. I know someone who passes sentence on others and calls it 'godly wisdom'. But that is wrong. You must ask, not assume. I Corinthians 13 describes one of the characteristics of love as 'love thinketh no evil' and love 'believes all things'. That means that if I love you, I will assume the best about you, not the worst. I hold you innocent until proven guilty, not the other way around. Proverbs 18:13 describes the fool. Being sceptical and cynical of other believers is not treating them the way you would want to be treated. Obviously, when proven guilty, then they are guilty in your mind. But not before that. I am always fascinated by how Jesus treated Judas. Jesus knew that he would betray Him; He wasn't even in our situation where we don't know what's in another's heart. Yet Jesus still offered him a hand of reconciliation at the Last Supper by offering him the best part of the meal. Amazing! He didn't get the others to gang up on him, though He knew his heart. Jas 4:11 "Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of *his* brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge"

It's easy to assume. But not assuming is exactly what will lead you to ask. That leads us to the next step which is

## **III. The Law of Initiative & Communication**

The nine tribes did something right. V13-14. They sent Phinehas and 10 princes to go and confront them. They asked before attacking. They took the initiative, and went and confronted them and communicated. These tribes made the mistake of assuming, but they at least did what was right in asking. Proverbs 18:13. Too often, we assume, pass sentence on another, and then think it's OK to leave it there. That's twisted and wicked. How much conflict drags on because people are too cowardly to confront. How wretched to have Christians who can spend years avoiding each other, ignoring each other, and yet there has never been a meeting, with communication. Matthew 18 is where Jesus says, if your brother sins against you, go and confront him. Some make so many excuses for not confronting, 'They must approach me!' But interestingly enough, Jesus put the onus on you to take the initiative and communicate, no matter where you stand in the conflict. If you are the offender, Matthew 5:23 "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; <sup>24</sup>Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." If you are the offended one, Matthew 18 tells you to go and confront. There is no escape! And, if we were obedient, we'd end up meeting halfway. See, the real key here is humility, isn't it? Humility is the oil that lubricates human relationships. a desire to serve each other. That's why Paul said in Ephesians 4:2-3, "With all lowliness and meekness,

with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; <sup>3</sup>Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Notice the unity does not have to be created, or built, it has to be maintained. Forbearing means to endure one another, to bear with them. Humility, patience and power under control are the keys here. Martin Luther noticed that when two mountain goats traveling in opposite directions met on a narrow mountain pass, one would actually lie down and the other would walk over him. The two could then move on. If they’d been humans, they’d both stand there waiting for the other to lie down. Humility is the goat that lies down. That takes a Spirit-filled attitude. I have had to chase some people down for one-on-one meetings, and it feels terrible. You keep saying, Why don’t they do it?” But that will get us nowhere. Someone has to move. Let it be you. Also, in the actual communication, kindness is called for. Paul told his readers that if they were to confront someone overtaken in sin, they should still do it in a spirit of meekness. Gal 6:1. Some equate tenderness, friendliness and patience with needless emotional trimmings, but the tone is vitally important. You want to win a person, not an argument. The 10 tribes really pushed the limit because they had assumed the worst, and then arrived and started throwing accusations around. They accused them of being like Achan who brought sin into the camp, they assumed, and then attacked verbally. One of the characteristics of love is that it does not behave itself ‘unseemly’ It is not rude or discourteous. It carries the spirit and attitude of Christ in the confrontation. “Finally, *be ye* all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, *be pitiful, be courteous*: <sup>9</sup>Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing” I Pet 3:8-9.

Finally, the way to deal with conflict is

#### **IV. The Law of Non-Defensiveness**

The war could have begun if this hadn’t happened. Here are these 10 tribes accusing the other 2 and a half of rebellion, of backsliding, of turning away from God. Meantime, these tribes did it *for* God! I can just picture the blood pressure rising. How quickly this could have become, “We did this for God, and you *dare* accuse us of being against God?!” War would have begun. But listen to their response in verse 22. They do not defend themselves or their reputation. They leave that to God. What do they do? They simply speak the truth. They explain the truth about what they did and why. Well, once the others hear it, they also do the correct thing, they believe them and the conflict is resolved. Proverbs 15:1 was followed here. See, pride makes us defensive. We want to ask, who are to question me? What business is it of yours? That can ruin everything. It becomes a counter-attack, and it discourages the one who had enough courage and love to confront you in the first place. It’s worse when you have done something in your integrity and are accused of being selfish and ungodly. You feel threatened & insulted. You want to rise up and defend your name. But that is what these tribes avoided. They left the defending of their motives to God. See- if you’ve done something for God, you don’t have to prove it to men. If you truly did it for Him, and it was biblical, He’ll prove it ultimately. All you need to do is give the truth and communicate openly. Love does not shrivel up when questioned; humility causes it to give a plain, honest answer. Speak the truth. Col 3:9 “Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds;” If you have done wrong, then as James says Confess *your* faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. (5:16). Sometimes we need reminding

that as God's slaves, even our reputation is His. David learnt the hard way, didn't he? A king accusing him of being a rebel, when he actually protected the king's reputation. But ultimately, though he was slandered, God vindicated David, and showed Saul up for what he was.

Once these tribes avoided defensiveness and simply told the truth, the other tribes were satisfied. You know why? Because again, their love for God and each other caused them to believe their explanation. They did not doubt them, or call them dishonest. Love 'believes all things'. And so the conflict while not a perfect model of how it should work was resolved.

So here is how it works together. An issue comes up whatever it is. I make sure that my heart is free from selfishness and my desire is for the glory of God and the edification of my brother and sister in Christ. I do not assume the worst about them. I need information, and so I take the initiative and communicate. Even if they have clearly sinned against me, I communicate in a godly and Christlike way. The person who is the offender, should also take the initiative, but my action is not dependent on that. They must also seek to be calm and non-defensive, and simply speak the truth in love. From there, we can sort it out, whether it means repentance on either side or both sides, or whether it was just a misunderstanding. Love means there will be a believing of the other, and forgiveness where necessary.

Ephesians 4:32 "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

What if all my efforts at reconciliation are rejected? If there is more to be done in the future, God will let you know. In the meantime, you must respond correctly. Listen to Paul "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but *rather* give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance *is* mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. <sup>20</sup>Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. <sup>21</sup>Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." In other words, don't let that person's evil contaminate you or swallow you up. You just keep holding you head up high in the sense of being noble and Christlike, and remain humble and meek, a sheep with no reputation to defend, just part of the body of Christ.

Also, those who consistently violate the law of love to fellow believers cannot be left to do that. All sin is to be disciplined, and evildoers ought to be threatened with consequences for unrepentant behaviour. The reason conflicts drag on for so long is often the parties involved, no matter who they are, are never held accountable with consequences for continued disobedience to Christ. We often kind of hope God will step in with a lightning bolt. Most often, He won't. He has given us more than enough instruction in the Word for dealing with conflict.

As conflicts arise in our Christian homes, churches and organizations, let us apply these Biblical laws so that the world may see that we are His disciples.