

Grounding texts

Romans 12 *“Do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought...we form one body...be devoted to one another in love...”* (See also 1 Corinthians 12-13)

John 13:34-5 *“As I have loved you so you must love one another, by this the world will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”*

What is conflict? How do you react to conflict?

Differences

A natural result of God creating us unique, this diversity is healthy, giving us different understandings of things, different ways of interpreting circumstances, and different ways of seeing the world.

Disagreements

Our differences often lead us to clash. This is healthy and helpful and should be welcomed, not avoided.

Disagreements actually help broaden our perspective, identify other solutions, discover potential weaknesses; they test our assumptions, help us to see all the angles in a discussion and ultimately build ownership of outcomes – meaning we make better decisions as a group.

Disagreements are unhelpful when they develop into conflicts; if these are not dealt with openly they can eat away at the group.

Conflict

A Conflict is more than just an extreme difference of opinion; it is when our disagreement or problem is taken personally. This happens if someone begins to feel they need to be right, aren't listened to, or that in rejecting their perspective they are being rejected too. At this point the problem or disagreement becomes a threat to their self-esteem, and they go into conflict – ceasing to act reasonably, reacting impulsively, defensively or even drastically. This can mean shouting, accusing, getting upset, or going quiet, sulking or running away. Therefore we need to be careful to help each other realise that we are not attacking each other's self-esteem. Conflict will destroy trust, cause hurt and a loss of confidence; it stifles creativity, and results in a decreased commitment.

We are all still sinful people, and as a result of that conflict is inevitable, however learning to deal with conflict in a Christ-like manner will teach us how to love others more effectively.

What are some of the things you have seen that give rise to destructive conflict?

What are some of the underlying factors that caused the issue to turn into conflict?

How was it handled? Was the problem addressed and resolved or not?

We all react differently in these situations, the more we understand each other, the better we can spot the warning signs and respond in love.

Coping Mechanisms

Forcing – using whatever is at your disposal to make the other party accept your favoured position

Withdrawal – retreating from any argument that comes about

Smoothing – playing down the differences, emphasising the positives, or avoiding issues that give rise to disagreement or conflict

Compromising – looking for a position where both parties give and get a little. Both lose some and gain some.

Confrontation/Problem Solving – directing energy toward defeating the problem not the person, encouraging an open exchange of information where the parties try to reach a mutually beneficial solution.

Which of these best describes how you react in a conflict situation?

What do you see as the positives and negatives of each?



Outcomes

Forcing and Withdrawal are both win-lose, and ultimately as one party 'loses' tend to damage relationships. Smoothing and Compromise are both lose-lose. Smoothing doesn't resolve the issues - it can be fine for group members but not leaders. Compromise means both have to give something up, but at times can be helpful.

The best approach is the win-win strategy of Confrontation/Problem Solving. This means the problem is brought out into the open, dealt with honestly, and recognised as a problem that can be resolved. This requires understanding each other's position more fully and focusing on the goals they have in common, reaching an agreement on how they can best work through the problem to accomplish those shared goals. This approach is much more Christ-like, and people tend to grow in confidence and trust in each other. Sometimes this means shedding light on buried disagreements or sensitive issues for the purpose of resolution (not point-scoring). Simply voicing that this is a difficult conversation can actually drain the tension out of the situation.

What do you need to be aware of in yourself when you are involved in conflict?

What do you need to remember as you respond to others?

Prevention

The best time to deal with conflict is before it happens. This requires time and effort at the beginning of your year to:

- Clarify the vision and the values that will guide you as a group this year
- Agree in advance, review and be crystal clear on your strategy (how you are going to do what you're doing)
- Explain what good communication looks like and will require of everyone in the group
- Agree together the principles that will govern how you interact and make decisions
- Agree together in advance how you will deal with any conflict that arises

Agreeing these things together as a group gives shared ownership, helps build trust and gives clear direction.

Peacemaking

Jesus calls us to be peacemakers (peace in biblical language is not just the absence of conflict - or the appearance of absence of conflict, but God's comprehensive 'shalom'). We must consider how the gospel transforms our understanding of and approach to conflict. Ignoring or covering over issues is often not actually the loving (for the person's ultimate good) response. Peacemaking responses include:

Overlooking - some disputes are insignificant and can be overlooked. See Proverbs 19.11

Reconciliation - if the offence is too serious to overlook, we need to resolve through confession, loving correction and forgiveness. See Matthew 5.23-24

Negotiation - If we resolve relational issues we may still need to work through material issues related to decisions, money etc. This requires co-operation with an agreed settlement that is fair to all involved. See Philippians 2.4

Mediation - if two parties cannot reach agreement in private, ask one or more objective outsiders to help advise, ask questions and guide the conversation. See Matthew 18.16

Arbitration - when a voluntary agreement cannot be reached over a material issue, one or more arbitrators may be appointed to listen and render a binding decision to settle the issue - 1 Corinthians 6.1-8.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments we see examples of productive conflict - Paul and Peter, Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). As you think about conflict meditate on passages such as: 1 Corinthians 13, Philippians 2, Matthew 5-7, James 1.19-26, 3.13-18.

The most effective leaders are those who aren't threatened by others gifts and perspectives, but who are secure in who they are in Christ, allowing others to flourish, demonstrating the radical life of the kingdom to a broken and unbelieving world.

