

Team Ministry - Lesson 6 Teams and Conflict

I. The Reality of Conflict in the Human Race: God's Loving Discipline

A. Since the Fall, in Genesis 3, conflict has been a part of the human condition

1. Adam and Eve demonstrate the roots of it in the break in their relationship with God and the subsequent blame shifting and refusal to accept personal responsibility for their sin [Gen 3:12, 13]
2. Cain demonstrates the destructive power of conflict when he kills his brother [Gen 4]
3. There is a spiritual conflict set in motion between the "seed of the serpent" and the "seed of the woman" that plays itself out in the tensions between the godly and the ungodly [Gen 3:15 cf 4:17ff, 4:25ff]

B. The striking reality about conflict however, is that God himself purposefully sets it into motion -- as a "necessary discipline ingredient" in a fallen world.

1. God's discipline of Adam and Eve is to turn them over to "conflict" in the marriage relationship (which is to say, all human relationships) [Gen 3:16]
2. God is the one who brings conflict in the relationship between the two seeds [Gen 3:15]
3. God is the one who, throughout history, unleashes conflict among the nations as part of his discipline [Jeremiah 46-51; Ezekiel 25-32; Zechariah 1:14,15, 18-21] including releasing the four horsemen who "conquer," "take peace from the earth," "create economic injustice," and "bring death" [Revelation 6]
4. God even -- deliberately -- permits internal conflict within the heart of the believer [Romans 7; Galatians 5:16-18; James 4:5]

All of this conflict, however, has God's loving purposes in it: it forces us to deal with the realities of sin that we would otherwise ignore. The capacity we all have to turn a blind eye to sin, oppression, lack of compassion and the evils of injustice is far, far deeper than we are able to admit [Isa 44:9ff, esp vv.19,20; Jeremiah 17:9; Rom 3:9-18]. The presence of conflict as a loving discipline from God leads us to cry out for grace and grow in our knowledge of the Lord [James 4:6, Romans 7:7-13; Hebrews 12:25-27]. Conflict seems to be like physical pain -- it hurts and no one enjoys it, but it works as a signal that there is something wrong that needs to be made right.

This means for the life of the believer and the church and the healing that needs to take place in us, even as we hold out the hope of healing to the nations around us, conflict is something we need to learn to accept as a natural reality in a still-fallen world, and in ourselves as a still-struggling people; but not conflict as a reality simply to be tolerated, but as a means of sanctification and growth. Every conflict is an opportunity for sin to be exposed, for grace to be applied, for wisdom to be gained and for the expression of genuine righteousness and justice to expand.

We do not need to fear, run from, or cover over conflict. The grace of God in Christ and his faithful commitment, through forgiveness, grace and the active presence of the Spirit to faithfully produce righteousness in us [Phil 1:3-6] is meant to give us patience, freedom and boldness to deal openly and honestly with conflict.

II. Destructive Conflict within the Church and Ministry Teams

A. The astonishing, destructive power of being “right” (or, Our Favorite Idol)

1. We are most dangerous when we see ourselves simply as “being right”

It is then that we are most easily judgmental; most easily blind to our own failings; most easily proud and not humble; less teachable

What motivates and feeds this attitude is the ongoing need for self-justification that our “flesh” yearns for, and can offer a deep, but momentary inner sense of confidence

What makes this so difficult at times to deal with in the church is that our sense of “being right” can easily get wrapped in a robe of “defending God’s righteousness,” when in fact, it is mostly about our own sense of being right. No matter how “right” we believe ourselves to be, the moment we start despising and condemning other believers, we have moved out of the wisdom of God into a man-centered, devilish inspired, destructive kind of “wisdom” [James 3:13-18, 4:11-12]

2. The opposite of an attitude of “I’m right” is one of understanding our “rightness,” that is, our “righteousness” comes only as a gift from God’s grace.

Paul makes this the major point of dealing with destructive conflict and division in Corinth [I Corinthians 1:10-31]

This perspective leads to humility and a boasting only in Christ that yields the kind of acceptance and love and patience that Paul had for the Corinthian church itself.

Paul never compromised what was right. He actually addressed the Corinthians on any number of issues, and came into “conflict” with their erroneous thinking. But it came in the form of constructive conflict because it came with the humility and love that flow from a knowledge that everything Paul knew and experienced that was “right” was a result of God’s free grace alone.

B. An example and analysis of destructive conflict

1. David Mains and the Circle Church – A Multi-Ethnic Congregation that ended in divisive splits (early 1970s)

Mains points out three critical failures that fed into the dissolution of the church:

- a. He never dealt with human depravity as something to be guarded against

Sets people up for “Christian idealism”- with high expectations, especially for others. Their “failures” then became an unbearable point of disappointment. This was not an issue for Christ, who knew the problem of sin and expected to deal with it in his disciples [Luke 22:31ff]

Does not mean the Christian is defined by sin -- but just that it is stronger in any of us than we thought. And we ought to be ready to apply the gospel

- b. He never dealt with issues of “authority,” “submission,” and the godly use of authority

The Team Leader needs to be willing to exercise authority so it can be given away. Part of exercising authority is to deal with conflicts. [Compare Christ Luke 22:24-30]

- c. He owned the ministry as a mistress – adultery/idolatry.

His personality merged with the ministry. It owned him. He became fixated. Small things going wrong began to bother him deeply.

Idols have power. You think it will do something for you. It does. It feeds your ego. But then, it leads into bondage. The banner of Christ over an idol makes it nearly impossible to see.

The power of an idol is broken as we look to Christ -- he is the Head over every part of the body and over everything for the body [Eph 1: 22:, 23]. In a good sense, we need to know Christ doesn’t need us. His pleasure is to use us, but we are not indispensable [cf Moses- Ex 4]. We can shed tears over our idolatry, but it won’t disappear until we take

this good look at Christ, and submit to Him as Head. This is the pace where idols fade. Sometimes this is needed every day, sometimes, every hour. One of the sure signs of idolatry in our area of ministry is a lack of patience for others combined with an over-exaggeration of small things. At that point we may think we have a small problem, but it is really huge and can destroy us, and others, if we don't bring it to Christ.

2. The process of destructive conflict

a. Failure to flee idolatry -- I John 5:21

What feeds into this failure?

-- shifting the focus of faith and reliance from Christ alone to the gifts/plans/expectations of self and others, and the result: power goes out of the life

-- along with this is a shift from grace to works -- creating our own reality of how to motivate and accomplish the tasks

-- accompanied by an absence of prayer, or if there is prayer, it is dry, perfunctory; not a broken heart over ourselves and others and the power and promise of God to meet us

Unless we wrestle here, we will become destructive people in conflict.

b. Differences become critical

Secret doubts about others rise to the surface in a prominent way [contrast 2 Cor 5:16-21]. We begin to identify people by their sins instead of by the promise of Christ in them. We begin to notice the differences between us more and more.

Feelings of superiority and being "right" begin to impress themselves on our consciousness. If we see ourselves clearly as fellow sinners always in need of grace, we will repent and exercise humility. If we see ourselves as clearly right, we tend to judge, kill and destroy.

c. Fear turns to condemnation

"I am superior/right" always has an underside of fear. That fear begins to drive us—it becomes fear not only of others, but also of ourselves. I John 4:16 says that perfect love drives out fear. The opposite is true as well, that fear can drive out a mature love.

Unless we are dealing with these things, attitudes harden and differences become unbridgeable. This begins to express itself in gossip and judgmentalism. Feelings are growing cold in “love,” but hot in “judgment.” We begin fixating on other person’s weaknesses. Every action now acts as a catalyst for further hardening of the attitudes. Bitterness sets in. There is no forgiveness and in the end, we demonize the other person [Compare James 3:13ff]

d. Public exposure and clash

The issues break out in the open. Something similar to the “O.K. Corral” occurs. People fire volatile rounds of accusation at one another. Peacemakers sometimes come along and try to hold the bodies up and keep things going, but there is no attempt at Matthew 18. The woundings increase, the gossip increases and the self-righteousness hardens.

e. Excommunication of each other

The team breaks up. A sense of hopelessness about the gospel and the power of God and the kingdom sets in. Often followed by a spiritual despair. In the end, the conclusion is that the Gospel doesn’t work.

II. God’s Cure: Build on the Gospel at every point

The “way out” is surprisingly simple, and can be pursued at any point in the chain of events. At the core we must return to I John 4:12 – knowing and relying on the love God has for us.

A. Re-focus our faith on the Gospel

We are all deserving of wrath. And unless we are touched by the blood and the water, which alone makes us sons of God, we are all sunk.

We need the ministry of the Spirit to work God’s love in us -- forever! And we need to complete the circuit of God’s love -- Eph 4:30-32 – especially where others “shake” our idols. Especially with the “unexpected” team member -- the one who rubs us the wrong way. We can begin so responding to their “flesh” that we lose the love of God for them and his commitment to make righteousness flourish.

We must see others under this same Gospel as well. We may have to fight for this perspective daily, but it is worth the battle [II Corinthians 5:16-19]

B. Cry out for grace

Individually and collectively recognizing we can't do this kind of loving on our own. So we cry out for God to meet us freely by his grace. Let the conflicts drive us to the promises of God, freely given [James 1:2-5]

C. Identify and reject the idols

First, don't deny they exist. Idolatry is deep in the "flesh" of every one of us. That is why the first two of the Ten Commandments deal with idolatry. It is as common a human condition as issues of work/rest, family, sex, lying, coveting, etc.

Second, don't deny their power. All "addictions" have power that is spiritual in nature. They feed our "flesh." The child of God has the freedom to acknowledge this and reject them.

D. Focus on foundational unity -- Philippians 2:1ff

Focus on what we have in common. This is God's call. If we let ourselves drift and focus on the differences, it will never lead to reconciliation. The need for this focus is especially true as we discuss our differences.

E. Repent frequently

Apologize, confess sins, listen, affirm. These are crucial to keeping the unity of the body [James 3:17-18]

F. Out of our own conviction of sin and brokenness, don't be afraid to talk to others about their idols [cf Paul, I Corinthians]

G. Engage in constructive conflict

The Glory of God, for all, as the chief concern

Not the glory of self. Glory: about the revelation of God's goodness through his grace in everyone's life and for the situation as a whole

H. Mount a love-offensive

How do I/we make the love of God known? Can we win the person without "winning the point"? Invitational versus argumentative

Enter into the conflict with a predisposition towards forgiveness and the hope of the Gospel for the other person, yourself and the situation [1 Cor 1:4-9]

I. Deal openly with differences without judging attitudes

James 4:11,12

J. Inquire about the issue, don't focus on the personality

Personality is often a code word for predetermined view of a person; can't/won't change. Begin reacting to that personality before we even know the real issue.

K. Listen to concerns, instead of moving to accusation

Perceptions may not be rooted in truth and may not actually reflect reality; but they are perceived as reality and affect the feelings and the process of reasoning. Listen, without accusing.

L. Reject gossip and go directly to the other person as a "brother" you are covenantally bound to [Matthew 18:15ff]