

“Why Can’t We All Just Get Along:”

A New Norm for Managing Conflict in the Church.

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ABSTRACT

The Jesus Model of conflict management has important implications for the future of the church. If we can make this the standard operating practice in our congregations, then we can manage potentially destructive situations. This essay presents a definition of conflict: An expressed struggle between two interdependent parties over perceived scarce rewards, incompatible goals, or unfulfilled expectations. There are several important ideas about conflict: it is unavoidable, sometimes unresolvable, but manageable. There are three basic components of conflict: ego, stasis, and pseudo. Reproach and forgiveness are two essential elements of the four parts of the Jesus Model of conflict management.

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³⁶Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” ³⁷Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. ³⁹They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, ⁴⁰but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. (Acts 15:36-41)

A DEFINITION OF CONFLICT

Conflict can destroy your church. It is one of the single most common factors in people leaving a church and pastors leaving the ministry. As a university professor I recall a young man, who was called into youth ministry. He graduated from the university, married, and took a position as a youth pastor in a church. He arrived at the church in the middle of a fight between several factions and the pastor. He lost all faith in the church. He left his calling, he left the ministry, he left God. Now he is an atheist.

Today the church needs to face the problem of conflict directly and preemptively. A new generation of Christians will be the church in the new millennium and this generation can set a better standard for dealing with conflict. We are the church of today, and can set a new norm, a

new standard for dealing with conflict. We can approach it logically, systematically, and learn to manage conflict in a constructive, not destructive way.

To begin, we need a clear understanding what conflict is. A definition is a way to categorize something. In order for something to be considered a conflict, for the purposes of this essay, it should fit this definition. ***Conflict is an expressed struggle between two interdependent parties over perceived scarce rewards, incompatible goals, or unfulfilled expectations.*** Not everything that we don't like is a conflict. Not every disagreement is a conflict. Not everything that makes us unhappy is a conflict. There are other ways of dealing with those things. But the story in Acts fits this definition. The struggle was *expressed*. Barnabas said that he wanted to take John Mark with them on the second journey, and Paul said he did not want to take John Mark. Sometimes someone makes us mad, but if we say nothing then we are just mad, there is no conflict. If there is a problem, but it remains hidden, then there is no way to manage it or resolve it, and one person has unresolved issues to deal with.

We also see that Paul and Barnabas were *interdependent*. They were commissioned by the church at Antioch and set apart by the Lord for the work they were called to. They depended on each other to make the ministry work. In this case, they managed their conflict by simply no longer being interdependent. They "parted company" and formed two missionary teams instead of one.

For example: if a perfect stranger does something in traffic to make us angry, even if we express the struggle by honking our horn, we are not interdependent. They go their way and we go ours. In a residential university, roommate problems are very common. As long as they live in the same room they are interdependent, but once they separate and one moves to a new room, then there is no more conflict because they are no longer interdependent.

The next three elements in the definition are the three most basic *sources* of conflict and they are not mutually exclusive. Any or all of them may be present in a particular conflict. The term “perceived” is used here to indicate that these elements must be brought to our attention. Our perceptions play a role and may be accurate or inaccurate. If we are not perceiving something accurately, then changing our perceptions may resolve the conflict. In the case of Paul and Barnabas, Paul’s perceptions were correct. John Mark had not completed the first missionary journey with them. Paul expected him to follow through on his commitment, and he did not. This is also a case of incompatible goals. Barnabas was John Mark’s cousin, and was an encourager. His goal was to disciple John Mark, and give him another chance. Paul’s goal was to have a successful missionary journey, and he needed committed people to achieve that goal. Scarce rewards do not seem to play a role in this situation, but it’s possible that Paul also saw it as a great honor and responsibility to be a missionary.

Expectations play a part in most of our relationships. Husbands and wives expect each other to behave in a certain way. Parents expect children to behave. Employers often have written job descriptions. Expectations are often *unstated* or *implicit*; they go without saying. For example, a newly married man did not know his wife expected him to take out the trash, until they got into an argument over it. In her family, her father took out the trash. In his family it was the children who took it out. Once he knew what she expected, he was happy to do it.

Expectations can be a difficult issue in the church. It is very likely that every member of the church has a slightly different expectation of the pastor. One person wants a good preacher, another a good evangelist, another a good person for business. When the pastor fails to fulfill one of these expectations there can be conflict, and it can be unstated. It is often a good idea to sit down with the church board at the beginning of every church year and talk about what is

expected. This is true of most small groups in the church: youth council, choir, Sunday school board. Leaders and followers each have expectations which should be articulated to avoid future conflict.

In our example from Acts, Paul expected John Mark to fulfill his commitment as a missionary, and John Mark failed. Paul was not willing to give him another chance, but Barnabas was.

CONCEPTS ABOUT CONFLICT

Conflict is normal. We disagree with someone in our life almost every day. For example, I love my wife, and I love the restaurant “Chow King.” But sometimes she wants to go to somewhere else. I still love her. When my wife wants to go eat somewhere else, I say “yes mam” and the conflict is resolved. For some reason we seem to think that if we love Jesus and love each other we will never disagree. That is unrealistic. Its normal to disagree with people, even when we love them.

Conflict is unavoidable. This goes along with it being normal. At some point in our life, and in the church, we will be in conflict with others. But some people will avoid even the simple disagreement at any cost. I have seen some people badly hurt by conflict poorly managed. Their reaction is to avoid any hint of it. This isn't healthy and can lead to bad decision making. Sometimes in the church, we need to look at both the positive and negative implications of a choice. This does not need to rise to the level of a conflict. If we never admit there are two sides, we may encounter with the negative side unexpectedly and have even more problems.

Conflict cannot always be resolved. Sometimes conflict is about what is in the future, and has now answer in the present. This is what happened to Paul and Barnabas. Neither one knew exactly what John Mark would do on the second missionary journey. There was no possibility for compromise. Should they take him part of the way and see how he does? That was the problem the first time. Ironically, Paul was wrong in this case, and John Mark turned out to be a great missionary, eventually writing the Gospel of Mark.

Conflict can be managed. Managing conflict is not necessarily resolving it. But we could say that managing it positively is as good as resolving it. Paul and Barnabas could not resolve the conflict. There was no way to predict John Mark's behavior in the future. So they decided to no longer be interdependent and formed two teams instead of one. But they managed to avoid hurting any feelings. There was no anger or resentment.

Conflict can be constructive. When we look at some of the later letters of Paul from prison, we see that Barnabas and John Mark are mentioned positively. We have no record of Barnabas telling Paul "I told you so." If the source of the conflict is unstated expectations, just expressing the conflict can bring those expectations out where they can be managed. Even in the situation with Paul and Barnabas, we see they treated each other with respect, and the early church was strengthened because of two missionary teams instead of one.

Conflict is destructive when its personal. Not everything that makes us unhappy is a personal attack. I like "Chow King." If someone else does not like "Chow King" I do not take it personally, and assume that they don't like me. In the world today many believe that there is no absolute truth, that everything is relative. This means that each one of us has our own personal truth. So if we are talking to someone who believes that they have their own personal truth, and we disagree with them, then they take it very personally. We may not intend to be hurtful, but

they insist on being hurt. And there is nothing we can do about, but agree with them. Even Jesus did not agree with everyone, like the Pharisees, and teachers of the law.

Intensity and duration also play a part in destructive conflict. When the emotions evoked in a conflict are very intense, or last a long time, then the relationship can be harmed. This is why Paul said: “In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” Ephesians 4:26. The longer we hang on to a hurt, the more damage it does. Manage it quickly and efficiently.

COMPONENTS OF CONFLICT

In order to manage conflict effectively, we need to analyze it. We need to break down a situation into its components. Any specific example of a conflict may have any or all of these three components. But identifying the components we can deal more effectively with them.

Ego. *“Ego” is the Greek word for “I.”* This is the part of a conflict when we take something personally. This is when we feel attacked and defensive. Of course, we have to admit that people can be cruel and deliberately attack us with mean and hurtful words. If someone says to me “you have a big nose”, then my feelings will be hurt. I will be sad and angry. The emotional reaction is a result of the injury to my self-esteem. This is probably the most damaging element in conflict in a church. In the church we can take things too personally. It is possible for a conflict to be nothing but ego, which is why it is so important to analyze the situation

For example, I once sat on a church board that was considering buying a new sound system. The current one was ten years old, in need of repair, and the electronics were badly out of date. A man on the board was an electrician, and had built the system when the church moved into that building ten years ago. He stood up at the board meeting and said “This was my gift to

the church, if you don't want it, then you don't want me." It was a wonderful gift and served the church well for a decade. But he couldn't set his "ego" aside and put the needs of the church first. He took it very personally. And it wasn't meant personally.

Again, look back at our example of Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas could have taken Paul's comment personally. After all, it was Barnabas who went to Tarsus and brought Paul to Antioch and encouraged him to be missionary. The whole thing was Barnabas' idea. And John Mark was Barnabas' *cousin!* This was his *family!* Barnabas could have said "Who does that Paul think he is!" or "He should not talk to me like that!" But he didn't. He didn't get mad or emotional, or take it personally.

But sometimes people are very passionate and emotions can get out of control. That is when it's good to take a break. One way to manage the emotion in a conflict is to stop talking, be quiet, and take some time to cool off.

Stasis. "*Stasis*" is a Greek word that means "stopping point." Progress towards a decision or a goal stops when there is conflict. In a conflict this is the core issue: the substance of the conflict. It is the pivot point that the argument revolves around. If we can find it, and resolve it or manage it, then we can be constructive. It's very easy to be distracted by emotion and ego and miss the real issue. Paul and Barnabas had a real issue: John Mark and his ability to serve on the second missionary journey. Paul focused on John Mark's behavior on the first trip, and Barnabas looked at him and evaluated his quality as a person. This was the stasis point of the argument. Progress towards the second missionary journey stopped until this issue was managed.

Psuedo. "*Psuedo*" is the Greek word for "false." This is the part of a conflict that is a misunderstanding and it is very common. In the example of Paul and Barnabas, there really was

no “pseudo” component to their conflict. They spoke and understood very clearly. I once missed a board meeting and asked a friend to tell me what I missed. She was upset because they were going to stop having Sunday School. I was a bit confused by this, since I was Sunday School Superintendent (SDMI) and had not heard about this. When I called the board secretary for clarification, she said they talked about it cancelling once it for a summer holiday only. It was a simple misunderstanding.

THE JESUS METHOD OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

So now we know what makes a disagreement a conflict by definition, and we know some ideas about it, and we know the three components of a conflict. Now we can look for a way to manage it. We need to look no further than Matthew chapter 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. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

(Matthew 18:15-17)

Conflict is a normal and natural part of the church. In the Gospels, we saw the apostles arguing over who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. In Acts we saw Paul and Barnabas in conflict. In Galatians Paul recounts a confrontation with Peter in Antioch. Jesus himself gives us some advice on how to handle conflict. He deals with two issues, reproach and

forgiveness. Reproach is a term from interpersonal communication. When someone in a relationship does something wrong, the other person brings it to their attention. This is the called a “reproach.”

His method has 4 Parts:

- 1) **Reproach privately** (one on one) *“just between the two of you.”*
- 2) **Reproach selectively** (with someone else) *“take one or two others along.”*
- 3) **Reproach collectively** (with a group in authority) *“tell it to the church.”*
- 4) **(For)give them over to God** (binding it to him) *“treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector,”* and *“whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.”*

Let’s look at each one of these individually:

1) **Reproach privately.** The first part in handling conflict is to go to the person we are in conflict with and express the struggle, which we call a reproach. This is a kind of confrontation and is probably the hardest thing to do. But let’s break down the first part of that verse “If your brother *sins* against you....” The Greek word that we translate as “*sin*” [*hamartia*] appears in Greek medical literature as a wound, injury, or harm. So that first line in Mathew could read: “If your brother *harms* you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.” The hardest thing to do is to go back to someone that hurt our feelings and say “Hey man, you hurt my feelings.” This is risky, because they could just hurt our feelings again. But reproaching gives them a chance to apologize. In Biblical terms, to apologize is to repent. The appropriate response to a hurt is an apology, as the proper response to a sin is to repent.

This kind of reproach means that the person causing the hurt has a chance to apologize (repent) for the hurt (sin). They have a chance to say "I am sorry for hurting you", and work on healing the hurt and the relationship. Most of the time people do tend to repent. But if they don’t

apologize, reproaching could be painful, and Jesus knows that. Reproaching makes us vulnerable to be hurt again, but after all, wasn't Jesus opening himself up to the painful wound that our sins inflicted on him when he died on the cross? He was vulnerable. The Cross was his reproach to the sins of mankind.

This first part of the Jesus method for managing conflict shows that it is also very important to keep the conflict contained. So much conflict gets out of hand because too many other people get involved. The boss hurts our feelings so we go tell all our co-workers. Our co-worker hurts our feelings and we tell everyone else, maybe even the boss. We have a fight with our spouse and call our family for comfort. But do we ever call our family when our spouse apologizes or we work things out? Usually we do not. The important point here is keeping focused on the "stasis" of the conflict, keeping it contained, and not getting emotionally swept up in it. This is what Jesus is suggesting. If people repent/apologize, then the appropriate response is forgiveness and the situation is managed.

2) Reproach selectively. But he realized that there will be a time when "your brother" does not listen, and does not repent or apologize. This situation is where Old Testament law applies and in the second part of the Jesus Model we take someone with us to as a witness the fact that we have reproached people and they refuse to apologize. They may take this opportunity to repent and the conflict can be resolved, but sometimes they don't.

3) Reproach collectively. If they still don't apologize, then it is time to take them to someone or some group with authority. For Christians this would be the body of believers, or elders, that Jesus calls "the Church." This could also mean the human resource office of a business, the police, or some other kind of authority. Many cultures use groups or other

individuals as mediators between people in conflict. These authorities could work like that. Then, the people who caused the harm have one last chance to repent. But sometimes they don't.

4) (For)give them over to God. If they don't repent after three attempts, then Jesus says we should "Treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector." This phrase doesn't mean much to us today, but to his disciples, it meant to pray for them as a lost or unsaved person. At this point we have run out of options. We have done all that we can do to manage the conflict. When we forgive them over to God, we make them his responsibility. It is up to God to reproach them and bring them to repentance. They are no longer our problem. It frees us from the pain that the hurt they caused. This does not leave the hurt untreated, because God will heal our wounds. God takes our pain very seriously, and does not leave our wounds untreated.

Jesus did this on the cross when he said "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" Luke 23:33. The people of Jerusalem hurt him, they crucified him. Jesus could have forgiven the people of Jerusalem; he forgave many people of their sins while he was on earth. He could have said "I forgive you, Jerusalem, because you don't understand that you are killing the Son of God." But he was not in a position to reproach them, so he turned them over to God. Jesus bound the city of Jerusalem to God: "whatever you bind on earth..." If we read on in Acts, we see that God clearly answered Jesus's prayer when he sent the Holy Spirit who came upon the Apostles on the day of Pentecost. Once on that day, and in two other sermons, we hear Peter preaching to the city of Jerusalem, and each sermon carried the same message: "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.... Repent and be baptized." Acts 2:36&38.

The message of repentance brings us to the issue of forgiveness. Peter wisely connects reproach to forgiveness. In Matthew 18:21 we read his response to the Jesus Method: "Then

Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Forgiveness follows repentance which follows a reproach. In fact, without repentance there can be no forgiveness. God, Himself does not forgive people who do not repent. He only forgives those who repent: “*If* we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.” I John 19. That’s a big “*if.*” Since God himself does not forgive people who do not repent, how can we? Obviously we can’t. Jesus does not ask us to when we follow his method of conflict management. If they don’t repent, we can’t forgive them, we give them over to God.

If we look at the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:20-35, we see that the two servants both apologized and asked for mercy. They repented. The first servant owed his master a great debt, he asked for mercy, and the master forgave the debt. But that very same servant, who was forgiven, was not, in turn, forgiving. When his fellow servant asked for mercy, the first man refused to be forgiving.

In the parable of the unmerciful servant, it is easy to look at that last verse, Matthew 18:35, and think we have to forgive people who do not repent: “This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.” This verse is at the end of the chapter and must be interpreted in the context of the whole chapter. All Jesus is saying is that forgiveness must be real and sincere. At any of the first three parts in his model, if our brother repents, we must sincerely forgive him. There is no option for us to forgive but not forget. If we look at the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew, we see that the two servants both apologized and asked for mercy. They repented. But one servant, who was forgiven, was not, in turn, forgiving.

Sometimes we are so afraid of being hurt again that we hide behind forgiveness. Aggressive and unethical communicators will use our fear of confrontation against us; to bully and manipulate us. The hurt they caused us is a sin, not just to us, but also before God, and God will only forgive that hurt if they repent. (I John 1:9) If we say “I will not say anything to them, I will just forgive them”, they will still be held accountable for their sin before God. It is part of our responsibility to give them a chance to apologize to us, and then also repent before God. So our obligation is not to forgive everyone no matter what, but to call people to repent; even if doing so hurts our feelings again and again. Because we know at the end of the process, God is waiting to take over the conflict when we have done our best to resolve the conflict and heal our wound/sin [*hamartia*].

For example: I know of a man who had a neighbor that was stealing natural gas from his gas well. The man was a Christian and decided not to say anything to his neighbor, the thief, and to forgive him, but let him continue to steal the natural gas. This is a kind of “cheap grace.” It costs the thief nothing, he doesn’t have any idea that he has been forgiven, because there has been no reproach. It was really the well owner who wanted to avoid the conflict. He might have had to call the police, press charges in court, or hire a lawyer. All of this would have been stressful, time consuming, and expensive. He was hiding behind forgiveness. In fact, the landowner was being selfish, by doing what was best for him, not what would be best for the thief. The thief needs to be given a chance to repent. God will hold the thief accountable for stealing. But what will happen to the landowner?

As Christians we have a moral obligation to reproach, which is to give people a chance to repent before God. In Ezekiel, God shows that we will be held accountable for letting someone die in their sin, when we could have warned them.

When I say to the wicked, ‘You wicked person, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved. Ezekiel 33:8-9.

The Jesus method is a way of applying this principle. By reproaching the person we “speak out to dissuade them from their ways” and give them a chance to repent. This is not cheap grace, this grace that costs us something. We risk being hurt all over again every time we go back and reproach. But it is Christ-like grace. The grace Jesus gave us on the cross, cost him everything.

SUMMARY

In this essay we defined conflict as an *expressed* struggle between two *interdependent* parties over perceived scarce rewards, incompatible goals, or unfulfilled expectations. Once we know that we are in a conflict, we can identify the causes, and look for its effects, and then manage it constructively.

We also covered several important ideas about conflict. Conflict is normal. Conflict is unavoidable. Conflict cannot always be resolved. Conflict can be managed. Conflict can be constructive. Conflict is destructive when its personal.

We looked at the three elements of conflict. “Ego” is the Greek word for “I.” This is the part of a conflict when we take something personally. “Stasis” is a Greek word that means stopping point. In a conflict this is the core issue: the substance of the conflict. “Psuedo” is the Greek word for “false.” This is the part of a conflict that is a misunderstanding and it is very common.

And Jesus himself gave us a practical, wise, and constructive way to manage conflict that gives us the change to heal from the hurt, and to give grace and forgiveness to the person who caused the hurt.

- 1) Reproach privately (one on one) “just between the two of you.”
- 2) Reproach selectively (with someone else) “take one or two others along.”
- 3) Reproach collectively (with a group in authority) “tell it to the church.”
- 4) (For)give them over to God (binding it to him) “treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector,” and “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.

CONCLUSION

The Jesus Model of conflict management has important implications for the future of the church. If we can make this the norm, the standard operating practice in our congregations, then we can avoid destructive situations like the one that drove my student from the church and from God. This is something the pastor and church board should agree to and go over at the beginning of every church year. This could even be the subject of a sermon sometimes, so the congregation learns how to handle the conflict in a constructive way. As this becomes normal for the church, it is very likely that someone who violates the norm will be sanctioned by the group. Imagine a gossip being scolded by a church member for talking about a conflict to a third party and not taking it to the person directly. It would be positively shocking, I tell you, shocking.

I have heard many sermons on how Christians must be forgiving. That is true, but it runs the risk of becoming cheap grace, when we forgive people who have not apologized or repented for their sin. We must also be repentant. We must be willing to apologize when we hurt others, even if it is unintentional. Conflict in the church is unavoidable, but it can be managed constructively, just as Paul and Barnabas demonstrated.