

Conflict in the church

Jesus commanded, 'love each other as I have loved you'. Wouldn't it be nice if we all just get along all the time? In one sense there is no such thing as a perfect church where we all get along harmoniously without quarrelling or arguments. The reality is we live in a fallen world and conflict is very much a part of it, including within the church itself. Conflicts can be so brutal, so ugly, that some abandon the church and entertain doubts about the power of the gospel e.g. Russia-Ukraine war. A working understanding of causes and remedies for conflict is therefore vital for the Christian.

Why Do Conflicts Happen?

1. Hedonistic Desires

James 4:1-4. 1 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? 2 You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. 3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

James makes clear conflicts arise from a desire for personal gratification and selfish desires, vs 1. When such hedonistic desires are thwarted by God, it may even culminate to murder, vs 2. More likely Jesus had in mind more than just murder itself but rather a whole gamut of sins such as hatred, anger, bitterness and so on. The fact Jesus was writing this letter to a church should be a cautionary tale if we think it can't happen here.

2. Doctrinal Differences

Conflicts can also arise over doctrine.

1 Timothy 6:11-12. 11 But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Paul instructed Timothy to contend for the faith. This implies there will be conflict involved. The background is Paul left Timothy in charge of the church in Ephesus to deal with the problems which had arisen in the church. Paul wrote the letter to Timothy from Macedonia. The letter was basically to encourage Timothy to stand strong in view of the difficulties he would face in the church.

3. Personal Preferences

The general principle is anything not implicitly or expressly forbidden in the scriptures is permitted. See my teaching of the providence of God. Example church music. Colossians 3:16, Psalm 150.

Needful Conflict

Conflict is rarely pleasant but it is sometimes necessary.

1 Cor 11:18-19 18 In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. 19 No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.

In God's providence he sometimes allows conflict to demonstrate who is in the right and has His approval. When sin is confronted and conflict results, there is opportunity for repentance and reconciliation. When sin goes unchecked because of a desire to avoid conflict, sin and unbelief are allowed to endanger the church. The Apostle Paul instructed Titus to confront the false teachers in the churches in Crete:

Titus 1:10-13. 10 For there are many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision group. 11 They must be silenced, because they are disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain. 12 One of Crete's own prophets has said it: "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." [a] 13 This saying is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith.

When devious people in our midst are rebuked, conflict is sure to follow. But it is necessary to confront error so that the genuine Christian faith is preserved. In vs 19, "No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval." The word conflict is not found in this verse. Paul here is confronting those who are promoting heresies and causing division in the church- needful conflict is a necessary consequence of this. It is needed to preserve the purity of the church and to distinguish genuine from false believers. Every generation of Christians faces heretical challenges that must be confronted. In this passage the challenge was from the circumcision group – Jewish Christians who felt others had to be circumcised in order to be acceptable before God. Today for example we have the gender bender ideologies, the LGBTQIA+. Sad to say, there are those who insist we not just tolerate these ideas but actually celebrate them. No. Such heresies have to be refuted.

Contending for The Faith

Jesus was regularly in doctrinal disputes with the Pharisees and Sadducees. If we are to take up our cross and follow him, it stands to reason we too should be prepared for conflict in contending for the faith. We are to fight the good fight. The fact of the matter is you cannot proclaim the truth if the gospel and expect the lies of the evil one to remain dormant. Conflict always accompanies gospel preaching. It's a package deal. In every New Testament letter, the gospel is proclaimed, error is corrected and the enemies of the cross are called out. However not every doctrine carries equal weight. There are areas where there is genuine room for disagreement. For instance, the subject of children's baptism, or how we baptise. There are churches who will happily baptise infants subject to church policy, whereas others will not till the child is old enough to understand what they are doing. In this church we baptise by sprinkling with water. However, I see no warrant for this practice. Every example where people were baptised in scripture it was by immersion in water, including Jesus himself. On the other hand, there are core doctrines which, if denied, raise questions whether you are even a Christian e.g., the substitutionary atonement, the deity of Christ, the inerrancy and infallibility of the scriptures and so on. All these doctrines have been challenged and the church has had to confront those who deny these doctrines. This begs the question what is a core doctrine? Opinions vary but as far as this church is concerned, I would suggest you start with our creeds and confessions. I refer you to my message on this subject given November last year.

Resolving Christian Conflicts- General Principles

1. Peace With Others.

Matthew 5:23-24. 23 'Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.'

It is incumbent on every believer, wherever possible, to be at peace with everyone. Notice that verse 23 says if your brother or sister has something against you..... not if you have something against your brother. I believe God put this there to emphasize that resolving conflict is critical to the peace of the church. It helps maintain righteous living among believers.

2. Overlooking insults

Proverbs 19:11. A person's wisdom yields patience; it is to one's glory to overlook an offense.

1 Peter 4:8. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

3. Deal With Your Own Sin First

Get the log out of your own eye, Matthew 7:1-5. Jesus commanded us to deal with the sin in our own lives before trying to fix the same problem in others. There is a natural tendency to view the sins of others in black and white, whereas our sins we see in shades of grey.

4. Reconciliation is the Goal

The goal of confronting another believer is not to emphasize your own hurt feelings or to get our story out there or get the person thrown out of church and so on. The aim is to give the other person an opportunity to repent so that the relationship is restored. In this way peace and righteousness is restored to the church.

Resolving Conflict- Confronting in Love

Once you have decided that a meeting is necessary and your heart is right with God, follow the steps Jesus outlined in Matthew 18:15-17:

15 "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. 16 But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' [c] 17 If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

1) Confront One-on-One

The one who has been offended should go privately to the one causing the offence. There are occasions where this may not be appropriate. For instance, where the victim is a child. In which case, move to step number 2.

2) Bring Another with You

What if he will not listen? Jesus anticipated this in vs 16 where he said to take another with you. Another in this context would usually mean an older mature Christian(s) who can intercede and pass judgment.

3) Tell it to The Church

If that still does not work then tell it to the church, vs 17. By this he means the elders of the church who are called to spiritually shepherd the flock. The elders are to formally consider the charges against the errant member and apply scripture in judgment. In practical terms, in this church, it would mean making a formal report to the church management. The ultimate goal is to get the errant member to repent and welcome him back to the fold. If it fails

4) Treat Him Like an Unbeliever

If in the end the member will not repent, it is the duty of the elders to declare this as evidence of unbelief. The only remedy then is to treat the person as a tax collector vs 17. This is also known as excommunication. If the individual is truly a believer, God will use the time out of the church to prod him back in. Otherwise, good riddance. He will stay in excommunication permanently since he never belonged to the body of Christ in the first place.

This is the template Jesus has given us for settling personal disputes in the local assembly.

Public Conflicts

Occasionally it is necessary to confront a brother publicly, bypassing the steps in Matthew 18. This happens when they commit a really egregious public sin. This was the case in Galatians 2 when Peter started acting as a hypocrite. Paul confronted him publicly when he witnessed a public sin. By withdrawing from the Gentiles when other Jews arrived, Peter acted in a way to discredit the gospel. This is an often-neglected aspect of church life today. There are many preachers out there who really should be shackled or at the least called out because they are doing so much damage. A public sin that threatens the existence of the local assembly has to be confronted publicly for the health and well-being of the church. These instances are generally rare and refer to exceptional cases- where the existence of the church is threatened. Not every sin and error need to be confronted publicly.

Scripture expressly forbids lawsuits against other believers for civil cases, 1 Cor 6. This prohibition does not apply to criminal cases. For instance, if a child was being abused in the church, we have to report it to the police. It's the law of the land.

Summary

Conflict is an unpleasant reality from which we cannot escape. In so far as it lies within our power we are to live at peace with all men- but never at the expense of the truth. If a meeting is necessary to resolve outstanding issues then Jesus gave us a template in Matthew 18:15-17

- Confront the brother one-on-one to try and win him over
- If that fails take along one or two witnesses
- If that still does not work then report the matter formally to the church
- The elders of the church should consider the matter and render judgment according to the scriptures. The recommended censure is excommunication.
- In rare instances, when the existence of the church is threatened, it may be appropriate to rebuke a believer publicly for the well-being of the church.
- Civil lawsuits among believers are strictly forbidden.
- As always, the Bible is the only binding authority on the doctrine of the church. All doctrinal disputes have to be settled on the basis of what the scripture says alone (Sola Scriptura).

References

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- Resolving Doctrinal Conflict. Fred Greco. Tabletalk Magazine March 2022 Pg 11-13
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