

# CONFLICT

## | A CONSTANT OPPORTUNITY

**\*\*\*This is an abbreviated version of Conflict: A Constant Opportunity Field Guide, which is produced by Todd Wagner and Watermark Community Church**

Fully devoted followers of Christ should be committed to resolving conflict in a way that glorifies the Lord, edifies the body of Christ, and reflects the principles laid out in Scripture. Since all relationships – including those among believers – will be faced with disagreements at different times, as followers of Christ, commit to the following biblical principles as a guide for resolving these issues. We trust that the following information will serve as a continual resource for you as you strive to serve others, grow personally, and glorify the Lord in the context of conflict.

### **Scriptures to remember:**

- Proverbs 6:16-19
- Proverbs 17:14
- Proverbs 20:3
- Matthew 5:23-24
- 1 Peter 5:5-7
- Ephesians 4:1-3
- Proverbs 18:19

### **Our Commitment to Biblical Conflict Resolution:**

As people reconciled to God by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we believe we are called to respond to conflict in a way that is remarkably different from the way the world deals with conflict. We also believe conflict provides opportunities to glorify God, serve other people, and become more like Jesus. Therefore, in response to God's love and in reliance on His grace, we commit ourselves to respond to conflict according to the following principles:

**GLORIFY GOD** – Instead of focusing on our own

desires or dwelling on what others may do, we will seek to please and honor God – by depending on His wisdom, power and love; by faithfully obeying His commands; and by seeking to maintain a loving, merciful and forgiving attitude.

**GET THE LOG OUT OF YOUR OWN EYE** – Instead of attacking others or dwelling on their wrongs, we will take personal responsibility for our own contribution to conflicts – confessing our sins, asking God to help us change any attitudes and habits that lead to conflict and seeking to repair any harm we have caused.

**GO AND SHOW YOUR BROTHER HIS FAULT** – Instead of pretending that conflict doesn't exist or talking about others behind their backs, we will choose to overlook minor offenses, or we will talk directly and graciously with those whose offenses seem too serious to overlook. When a conflict with another Christian cannot be resolved in private, we will ask others in the body of Christ to help us settle the matter in a biblical manner.

**GO AND BE RECONCILED** – Instead of accepting premature compromise or allowing relationships to wither, we will actively pursue genuine peace and reconciliation – forgiving others as God, through Christ, has forgiven us, and seeking just and mutually beneficial solutions to our differences.

By God's grace, we will apply these principles as a matter of stewardship, realizing that conflict is an opportunity, not an accident. We will remember that success, in God's eyes, is not a matter of specific results but of faithful, dependent obedience. And we will pray that our service as peacemakers brings praise to our Lord and leads other to know His infinite love.

## #1 AT THE TRAILHEAD: LEARNING THE LANDSCAPE

### **See Conflict as an Opportunity**

Conflict is not necessarily bad or destructive. Even when conflict is caused by sin and causes a great deal of stress, God can use it for good (Rom. 8:28). As the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1, conflict actually provides three significant opportunities. By God's grace, you can use conflict to:

- Glorify God by trusting, obeying, and imitating Him
- Serve other people by helping to bear their burdens or by confronting them in love
- Become more like Jesus

These concepts are totally overlooked in most conflicts because people naturally focus on escaping from the situation or overcoming their opponent. Therefore, it is wise to periodically step back from a conflict and ask yourself whether you are doing all that you can to take advantage of these special opportunities.

### **Glorify God**

When the Apostle Paul urged the Corinthians to live "to the glory of God," he was not talking about one hour on Sunday morning. He wanted them to show God honor and bring Him praise in day-to-day life, especially by the way that they resolved personal conflicts. As mentioned above, you can glorify God in the midst of conflict by trusting Him, obeying Him and imitating Him. One of the best ways to keep these concerns uppermost in your mind is to regularly ask yourself the focusing question: "How can I please and honor the Lord in this situation?"

## PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

### **Get the Log Out of Your Own Eye**

The most challenging part of peace-making is set forth in Matthew 7:5, where Jesus admonishes us to "...first take the log out of our own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

There are generally two kinds of logs you need to

look for when seeing your part in the conflict. First, you need to consider your own attitudes and biases. Critical, negative, or overly sensitive attitudes easily lead to unnecessary conflict.

The other log you must deal with is actual sinful words and actions. Because we are often blind to our own failures, we must have honest friends who will help us take an objective look at ourselves and face up to our contribution to a conflict.

The most important aspect of getting the log out of your own eye is to go beyond the confession of wrong behavior and face up to the root cause of that behavior. The Bible teaches that conflict comes from the "desires at war within you" (James 4:1-3). Some of these desires are obviously sinful, such as wanting to conceal truth, bend others to your will, or have revenge. In many situations, however, conflict is fueled by good desires that you have elevated to a sinful place, such as an unhealthy craving to be understood, loved, respected or vindicated (1 Peter 2:23).

Any time you become excessively preoccupied with something, even a good thing, and seek to find happiness, security, or fulfillment in it rather than in God, you are guilty of idolatry. Idolatry inevitably leads to conflict with God. It also causes conflict with other people. As James writes, when we want something but don't get it, we kill and covet, quarrel and fight (James 4:1-4).

Having done the hard work of discovering your part in the conflict, it is time to take action. Below is a clear, seven-step process to help you first examine yourself and them forward as a peacemaker:

- Ask the Lord and other for help with self-awareness (1 John 1:8)
- Ask God to show you where you have been guilty of "wrong worship," which is to say where you have been focusing your attention and love on something other than the Lord and His desires.
- Specifically identify and renounce the desire contributing to the conflict

- Deliberately pursue right worship. Fix your heart and mind on God and seek joy in Him alone.
- Give others permission to speak into your life, and regularly ask them to help you see any “logs” both in attitude and action.
- Address everyone involved as soon as possible (Matthew 5:23-24; Prov. 6:1-5)
- Avoid if, but and maybe. (Don’t make excuses; be specific when possible with both attitudes and actions) (Luke 15:17-24)
- Apologize. Express sorrow for the way you affected someone. (Luke 15:21)
- Ask for forgiveness. (Proverbs 28:13)
- Accept the consequences. (Luke 19:1-9)
- Alter your behavior. (Eph. 4:22-32; John 8:11)

As God guides and empowers these efforts, you can find freedom from the idols that fuel conflict and be motivated to make choices that will please and honor Christ. This change in heart will usually speed a resolution to a present problem, and at the same time improve your ability to avoid similar conflicts in the future.

## #2 – BEGINNING THE JOURNEY: HITTING THE TRAIL TO LOVE YOUR FRIEND

### *Go and Show Your Brothers His Fault*

#### **DON'T SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF**

Overlook Minor Offenses

Another key principle of peacemaking involves an effort to help others understand how they have contributed to a conflict. Before you rush off to confront someone, however, remember that it is appropriate to overlook minor offenses. As a general rule, an offense should be overlooked if you can answer “no” to all the following questions:

- Is the offense dishonoring to God?
- Has it damaged a relationship?
- Is it hurting other people?
- Is it hurting the offender himself?

#### **DON'T SPREAD THE BIG STUFF**

Talk in Private

If you answer “yes” to any of these questions, an offense is too serious to overlook, in which case God commands you to go and talk with the offender privately and lovingly about the situation (Matt. 18:15). As you do so, remember to:

- Pray for humility and wisdom (1 Peter 5:5)
- Plan your words carefully – think of how you would want to be confronted (Proverbs 15:1-2; 16:23)
- Anticipate likely reactions and plan appropriate responses – rehearsals can be very helpful (Proverbs 20:18)
- Choose the right time and place – talk in person whenever possible (Proverbs 16:21; 27:12)
- Assume the best about the other person until you have facts to prove otherwise (Prov. 18:17)
- Listen carefully (Proverbs 18:13)
- Speak only to build others up (Ephesians 4:29)
- Ask for feedback from the other person (Proverbs 18:2)
- Trust God (Psalm 37:3)

#### **DON'T STOP IF YOU'VE BEEN STIFFED**

Take Others Along (Matthew 18:17)

If an initial confrontation does not resolve conflict, do not give up. Review what was said and done, and look for ways to approach the other person more effectively. Then try again with even stronger prayer support.

If you have done all you can to share your concern and the matter is still unchanged in that it is “too serious to overlook,” you should ask one or two other people to meet with you and the person you have approached to help resolve your differences. (Matthew 18:16-20).

#### **DON'T STOP IF IT GETS STICKY**

As unfortunate as it is, there are times when the only solution left is to expand the circle of accountability and wisdom to include an even wider community within the body of Christ. It is imperative that the process is not stopped short of any Scriptural admonition to diligently preserve the unity that the

Lord intends. Where conflict persists, it is the job of the wider community of faith to speak boldly into the matter and where necessary separate itself from hard hearts that refuse to deal with matters “too serious to overlook,” (Matthew 18:17a; 1 Cor. 5:1-2) even when that includes necessary separation until such a time as when the sin issues creating the conflict are acknowledged and dealt with.

### **GO AND BE RECONCILED**

One of the unique features of biblical peacemaking is the pursuit of genuine forgiveness and reconciliation. Even though followers of Christ have experienced the greatest forgiveness in the world, we often fail to show that forgiveness to others. To cover up our disobedience we often use the shallow statement, “I forgive her – I just don’t want to have anything to do with her again.” Just think, however, how you would feel if God said to you, “I forgive you; I just don’t want anything to do with you again.”

Praise God that He never says this! Instead, He forgives you totally and opens the way for genuine reconciliation. He calls you to forgive other in exactly the same way: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Col. 3:12-14). One way to imitate God’s forgiveness is to purpose to live with these actions and attitudes when you forgive someone:

- I will not dwell on the incident.
- I will not revisit this incident or use it against you.
- I will not talk to others about this incident.
- I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.

Remember that forgiveness is a spiritual process that you cannot fully accomplish on your own. Therefore, as you seek to forgive others, continually ask God for grace to enable you to imitate His wonderful forgiveness toward you.

## **#3 - ENDURING DIFFICULTIES ON THE JOURNEY: WHAT TO DO WHEN THE TRAIL GETS ROUGH**

### **BE PREPARED FOR UNREASONABLE PEOPLE**

Whenever you are responding to conflict, you need to realize that other people may harden their hearts and refuse to be reconciled to you. There are two ways you can prepare for this possibility.

First, remember that God does not measure success in terms of results but in terms of obedience. He knows that you cannot force other people to act in a certain way. Therefore, He will not hold you responsible for their actions or for the ultimate outcome of a conflict.

All God expects of you is to obey His revealed will as faithfully as possible (Rom. 12:18). If you do that, no matter how the conflict turns out, you can walk away with a clear conscience before God, knowing that His appraisal is, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Second, resolve that you will not give up on finding a biblical solution. If a dispute is not easily resolved, you may be tempted to say, “Well, I tried all the biblical principles I know, and they just didn’t work. It looks like I’ll have to handle this another way” – meaning, the world’s way.

A follower of Christ should never close the Bible. When you try to resolve a conflict but do not see the results you desire, you should seek God even more earnestly through prayer, the study of His Word and the counsel of His Church. As you do so, it is essential to keep your focus on Christ and all that He has already done for you (Col. 3:1-4). It is also helpful to follow five principles for overcoming evil, which are described in Romans 12:14-21:

- Control your tongue
- Seek godly advisers (do not become isolated)
- Keep doing what is right
- Recognize your limits (instead of retaliating, stay within proper biblical channels)
- Use the ultimate weapon: deliberate, focused love

At the very least, these steps will protect you from being consumed by the acid of your own bitterness and resentment if others continue to oppose you. And in some cases, God may eventually use such actions to bring another person to repentance (1 Samuel 24:1-22).

Even if other people persist in doing wrong, you can continue to trust that God is in control and will deal with them in His time. This kind of patience in the face of suffering is commended by God and ultimately results in our good and His glory.

### **GET HELP FROM ABOVE**

None of us can make complete and lasting peace with others in our strength. We must have help from God. But before we can receive that help, we need to be at peace with God Himself.

Peace with God doesn't come automatically, because all of us have sinned and alienated ourselves from Him. Instead of living the perfect lives needed to enjoy fellowship with Him, each of us has a record stained with sin. As a result, we deserve to be eternally separated from God. That's the bad news.

The good news is that "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Believing in Jesus mean more than being baptized, going to church, or trying to be a good person. None of these activities can erase the sins you have already committed and will continue to commit throughout your life. Believing in Jesus means, first of all, admitting that you are a sinner and acknowledging that there is no way you can earn God's approval by your own works.

Second, it means believing that Jesus paid the full penalty for your sin when he died on the cross. In other words, believing in Jesus means trusting that He exchanged records with you - that is, He took your sinful record on Himself and paid for it in full, giving you His perfect record.

When you believe in Jesus and receive His perfect record of righteousness, you can really have true peace with God. As you receive this peace, God will give you an increasing ability to make peace with others by following the peacemaking principles He gives us in Scripture, many of which are described above.

### **GET HELP FROM THE CHURCH**

As God help you to practice His peacemaking principles, you will be able to resolve most of the normal conflicts of daily life on your own. Sometimes, however, you will encounter situations that you do not know how to handle. In such situations, it is wise and appropriate to turn to others in your community or to spiritually mature persons around you who can give you advice on how you might be able to apply these principles more effectively.

When individual advice does not enable you to resolve a dispute, you should ask one or two mutually respected friends to meet with you and the other person to help you settle your difference through mediation or arbitration.