

Ten Lessons Learned Through Facing Conflict in Christian Ministry

1. Accept the fact that conflict among God's people is both normal and potentially helpful for the strengthening of relationships – we are a family and all families are made up of imperfect human beings who will experience tensions among one another – all ministries of value for God will experience opposition, e.g. opposition to truth.
 - Lesson: Be ready and prepared to experience conflict rather than fearing it or avoiding it at any cost. How we respond to conflict is the most important factor, not having conflict.
2. Conflict situations sometimes reveal as much about ourselves and areas in our lives where we need to grow as they do about the needs of “problem people,” eg personal testimony of my own struggles with acceptance/rejection; also our constant need to grow in humility and to put off pride. God's work in us – what we have to learn personally through conflict situations – will be directed to areas in our lives where we have definite need
 - Lesson: Be open to let God speak to you through the conflict and do His refining work in you.
3. God wants to listen to the concerns or complaints expressed through those who oppose us in our ministry. It is harmful to our ministry and leadership to adopt the attitude of being “right” and rejecting as “wrong” any criticism of those who appear to act as enemies.
 - Lesson: Be humble in your attitude towards those who criticise you. Discern between what is just “poison” and what you need to pay attention to.
4. Guard against blaming yourself for conflict or allowing other people to place the blame for conflict on you. Take responsibility for your part in any conflict. Don't hide it. Admit it to yourself and to others. But in every conflict situation, there are always two sides. Sinful man is always trying to pass the blame for their problems and conflicts on to others. Refuse to accept their accusations and condemnations.
 - Lesson: Don't give a foothold in your mind to Satan, the accuser of the brethren.
5. Don't sacrifice your personal convictions for the sake of avoiding conflict. As a leader of God's people, your personal integrity is of utmost significance. See Psalm 24:3-4. If we run from conflict over major issues and convictions for the sake of peace or for reasons of our own security, then we lack one of the essential qualities of godly leadership = integrity.
 - Lesson: Work hard to prove yourself to be a godly leader/person of integrity.
6. God does not often solve conflicts instantly, or remove the source of the problem out of our lives. Praying is an important part of our facing and coping with conflict situations and “problem people.” However, do not imagine that in response to our prayer, God will answer with instant and perfect

harmony. We must be prepared to lead and labour in the face of some opposition, refusing to allow the enemy to side-track us from doing God's kingdom work. In some situations, God will even use conflict for the expansion of His work/church. See Acts 15:36-41.

- Lesson: Be patient and prayerful, trusting God to work out His sovereign purposes through conflicts.

7. It is an unrealistic expectation that all Christians can work harmoniously together. Some conflicts arise because of carnality among some believers (eg problems in Corinth – see 1 Cor.3:1-4; James 4:1-2. Other conflicts arise because of significant differences in goals and foundational convictions – cf. Phil.1:27-2:2. Still other convictions arise because of personality differences producing tensions and frequent clashes – see Phil.4:2. In certain circumstances, it is God's will for us to move on to another ministry rather than force people against their will to accept us as their leader. (HBC experience in 1982-83.)

- Lesson: Find where you can serve the Lord with those who share your fundamental beliefs even though you will never experience 100% agreement with everyone. However, loyalty and unity of the Spirit with your team / those you lead is a must. (cf. Eph.4:1-3)

8. Sometimes you may feel strongly that it is impossible for you to work within a particular ministry situation because of tensions caused by some major difference of conviction. However, don't react quickly. The issues may not be nearly as serious or principle as you had concluded. If over time the conflict is proven to be rooted in a serious and major issue, then seek to separate the problem issue from the person/persons involved. Respond to the core problem rather than reacting to the person(s).

- Lesson: Work hard to find the root of any conflict, then take appropriate biblical action. Examples: if the root issue is some sin (eg gossip, slander, spreading rumours etc.), then the offender must be confronted and led to repentance and confession. See Titus 3:1-2, 9-11.

9. No leader by himself/herself is ever able to see a conflict situation with 20/20 vision. We all need people of maturity and wisdom around us to help us see more clearly any hidden factor(s) that may have caused the conflict. It is common that anyone including Christian leaders become too subjectively involved in a conflict. As a result, they tend to think very negatively about the "problem" and so be tempted to give an over-reactive and unwise response. Don't depend only on your own opinions and conclusions concerning a conflict / problem. Find and consult with a mature, wise man/woman of God outside the conflict and ask them if they would be willing to sit with you and give you some discernment concerning the issues related to the conflict. Don't find

“yes” people or “nice” people who will not speak the hard word to you if necessary. Be open to listen seriously to their guidance.

- Lesson: Ask God to bless you with a close and trustworthy confidant – someone who will be speak the truth in love and whose wisdom will throw fresh and helpful light on the conflict for the purpose of bringing about a resolution.

10. Though conflict is a normal part of a healthy, growing church or Christian ministry, we must also hold understand that the heart of Jesus is for true unity in the Spirit – John 17:21; Eph.4:1-3; 1 Cor.12; Philippians 2:27-2:2; 4:2 et al. Therefore, God calls us to desire UNITY and to work hard towards reaching this goal in our relationships with one another and with other believers. It is therefore the leader’s responsibility to make sure that all obstacles towards true spiritual unity are removed and true unity is promoted and pursued.

- Lesson: Conflict is a reality, but peace and unity is our goal. Therefore, a leader must have no part in deliberately stirring up conflict among God’s people, but must give himself/herself to leading God’s people to experience and enjoy a true sense of oneness and harmony together.

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