

Responding to Conflict with the Mind of Christ

A 2-Page Handout for Church Group Classes (by Ted Lewis, copyright 2005)

1. Conflict in the Bible. Conflict is not identical with evil or sin, yet it is part of our world marked by divisions and separations. In group settings, conflict involves tension-building dynamics that escalate between persons. While social conflict is inevitable as part of the human experience, *how* people *respond to conflict* can more freely affect good or bad outcomes.

- A. Old Testament Example: **The Threatening Altar** (Joshua 22) based on misunderstanding
- B. New Testament Example: **The Jerusalem Council** (Acts 15) based on clash of traditions

In both, Fight-or-Flight response modes were overcome by healthy ‘Third-Way’ communication processes which led to resolutions that were mutually chosen and satisfactory for all involved. (Win-Win rather than Win-Lose.) Good communication is indispensable for preserving unity.

2. Mulling Things Over. In the aftermath of conflict, we all have default levels of mulling over things that make us angry, worried, irritated, etc. We can’t seem to turn off this leaky faucet. Without being mindful of such thoughts, these habitual ways of thinking will inevitably spill over into our communications. The ‘fool’ in Proverbs is archetypal of such mindlessness, refusing to acknowledge that there is any problem or personal responsibility (Proverbs 14:8,9)

Jesus said, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12).

To “be overcome by evil” is to allow mulling to have full sway in our thinking. In order to “overcome evil with good,” we must shift from mulling to mindfulness, first through prayer, then through empathy for the other, and finally through wishing for and seeking the good of the other.

3. Conflict and the Ministry of Jesus. When one studies the many social encounters of Jesus’ ministry, it is clear that Jesus saw conflict as a great opportunity for learning about God’s unique ways and modeling God’s unique love. Conflict is either an **Obstacle** or **Opportunity**.

Group A: Luke 18:15-17 Jesus, the Disciples, the Little Children, and Parents (enact)

Group B: John 8:1-11 Jesus, the Pharisees, and the Woman caught in adultery (enact)

With a transformational understanding of conflict, one can see how Jesus redirects the focus when he addresses conventional conflicts between two sides. It is not about one side being right or asserting power, but about people on both sides coming to a deeper recognition of God’s truth. When other people are no longer viewed as “the problem”, the practical problems that exist can be shared by all people who are involved, and the common ground can foster resolution.

Mid-point in this study: **What is one conflict you have had that has been difficult?** (in pairs)

4. Cruciformity and Conflict Trans-Formation. Cruciformity simply means that our choices and actions conform to the pattern of the willing death of Jesus. While Epistle-language about being “in Christ” affirms the truth of our new status before God, the language of “putting on Christ” speaks about our capacity to intentionally “follow in his steps,” “walk as he walked,” “love as he loved,” etc. Without this, there is no trans-formation into Christ-likeness.

The Christ-Virtues: Compassion Kindness Humility Meekness
Patience Forbearance Forgiveness Love

These “One Another-ing” Christ-Virtues listed in Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 all share an aspect of cruciformity in that our ego must die a bit for new life to rise up for the other person. They are sacrificial. Without them it is very difficult to maintain unity in the Body of Christ. Such unity is never automatic but must be maintained with hard work. Unity *is* the Body at work.

5. Kenotic Communication and the Mind of Christ. The Christ-hymn of Philippians 2 is perhaps the most important text showing the pattern of cruciformity (Phil. 2:5-11). Jesus is said to have ‘emptied himself’ for the sake of serving others. The term ‘kenotic’ comes from the Greek word for ‘emptying’, revealing how humility is really a relational virtue.

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves....Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though being in the form of God, did not grasp... but emptied himself...taking on the form of a servant” (2:6f)

When applied to our communication habits, such humility compels us to yield our speech and listening energy *toward* the other person, rather than drawing the communication energy back to ourselves. Such mindful word-care is Other-Centered, Servant-Oriented, and Agape-Driven.

6. Practical Communication Skills. The cruciform pattern of emptying ourselves is akin to laying down our lives for the sake of making new life happen for others. As we become mindful of our Self-Centered default patterns of communication (which yield no life), we can begin to be mindful of Other-Centered ways of speaking and listening (which yield life).

Disciplines of Listening: By listening to others well, we show genuine interest in them, we value what we hear over what we want to say next, and we enter the other person’s conversational space respectfully without trying to *control* or *consume* that space.

Disciplines of Restraint: The wisdom of Proverbs is full of admonitions to “hold the tongue.” In the face of heated conflict, when we are apt to be *possessive* or *protective*, restraining our words allows us to be *non-consumptive* or *non-retaliatory* in our communication.

Disciplines of Response: There are numerous responses that serve the other more than ourselves. Two are the **Power of Acknowledgement** (echoing, validating, empathizing) and the **Power of the Question** (which keeps the ‘center of gravity’ with the other person).

These applications of “the mind of Christ” will orient us, in situations of conflict, to build BRIDGES rather than WALLS. But as with any new discipline, mindfulness is essential.