

***HELP!***

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**I'M IN A CONFLICT**

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*Ernie Baker*

*Consulting Editor: Dr. Paul Tautges*

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## INTRODUCTION

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Sleepless nights, loss of appetite, broken relationships, and emotions going crazy with anger, bitterness, and anxiety all describe times of conflict. Add to this nasty e-mails, accusations flying, and people getting “defriended” on social networking sites. These reactions cause many to ask questions like, “How can Christians treat each other this way?” “How did my marriage get to this point?” “Why does God allow such conflict in His church?” “If this is what the church is like I don’t want to have anything to do with it!”

Right from the very beginning the history of the planet has included conflict. Unfortunately, churches and Christians are not immune. In fact, the statistics on the Evangelical Church in the United States are appalling. One study has shown that of all evangelical churches polled, 34% percent forced their previous pastor to resign, and 23% of all current pastors in the U.S. have been

fired or forced to resign. One of the most troubling statistics of all is that the average pastoral career lasts only fourteen years.<sup>1</sup> Though these statistics are incredibly sad they do not include all of the marriages feeling tension, families fighting over inheritance, or nations at war.

How are we supposed to respond to others when we are in conflict? What kind of guidance can the Bible give us? Does gospel-grounded truth address tension in our relationships? What practical steps should we take if we're experiencing relationship difficulty? These are some of the questions this mini-book will answer.

## No Stranger to Conflict

Conflict is much more than an academic subject for me. As a pastor, I am not a stranger to conflict. In fact, the tensest moments in my life have been spent in congregational or church board meetings!

Many years ago, a group of people within my church began to express their concerns about my leadership. They wrote letters of complaint and “voted with their pocketbooks” as they withheld their giving. Many accusations were made, among which was that I was not a loving pastor. I was also told by the music committee that they should have more money in the budget. But the missions committee believed *they* were the most important because “really spiritual” churches spend more on missions. Those leading the youth ministry didn’t agree; they thought they should get more because they were preparing the next generation for the Lord.

## Seeking Help from a Mediator

As things intensified, the congregation became deeply divided and it became painfully obvious that we needed the help of an outside mediator. So we called a ministry that supposedly specialized in these types of situations.<sup>2</sup> From the beginning of this organization's involvement I realized biblical principles were being violated. For example, the "mediator" never asked me my side of the story even though Proverbs 18:17 makes it clear there is "always two sides to every story."

*"The first to plead his case seems just,  
until another comes and examines him."*

The mediator also told me that his methodology was to just let people "ventilate." In other words, they just needed to get it out so that they would feel better. I can tell you there was a lot of sinful "ventilating" that violated what Scripture says about controlling the tongue. He wanted me to not attend a congregational meeting so that people could freely stand and share concerns about me, which was a direct violation of Matthew 18:15, "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother."

This experience was a shock to me as a pastor. I had grown up in a pastor's home and knew, at least in theory, the potential of church conflict since I had seen my father go through much of it. I had led myself to believe, however, that if I did all my duties as a pastor and preached solid biblical messages that everyone would love me. I found out the painful way that this is not true.

The reality set in when I started to receive anonymous letters. After a while I began to check first to see if the letter was signed. If it was not I would throw it away because I believed anonymity violated the biblical principle to go to your brother personally if you have a concern.

I know from this experience, and others like it, that it is easy for cynicism and thoughts of failure to rise. Maybe you've had these or other similar things go through your mind. "I'm a failure as a wife." Or, "They fired me, I must be a failure." Cynicism can eat away at your soul and you can grow hard, not wanting to be hurt again. It is easy then to put up barriers of self-protection and not let others get close. Pastors then drop out of ministry and others drop out of their marriages.

If these or similar experiences and emotions have been yours then I am writing to you. It is my hope that you will be encouraged as you see



what the Lord may be doing and as you realize how relevant Scripture is for dealing with tensions in relationships. In fact, the topic of broken relationships comes up near the beginning of the Scriptures and reveals to us how desperately we need the Lord to intervene and provide answers. Let's start at the beginning and see where tension in relationships originated.

## The Origin of Conflict

To understand how drastic the situation has become let's contrast it with what life may have been like in the pre-conflict, sin-free world. Genesis 1:26-28 tell us that as humans we were created with the high privilege of portraying the image of God. According to these verses this image is uniquely reflected in a man and woman coming together as husband and wife. Just as God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in harmony with one another the first husband and wife were to reflect this by being in harmony with one another. There was no tension, only harmony. There was no turmoil, only peace. Sound amazing? Can you even imagine any relationship being like that?

This sense of what it may be like before the events of Genesis 3 is reinforced further by

chapter two telling us that this new husband and wife were “one flesh” and “naked and... not ashamed” (2:24-25). In other words, there was nothing between them, not even clothes. Wow! Things were about to change radically.

Broken relationships are right at the heart of what happened next, described in Genesis 3. Because of their mistrust of God, Adam and Eve had a new, and I'm sure very uncomfortable, experience of tension in their relationship. But an infinitely more devastating result of their lack of following the Lord was the break in their relationship with Him!

First, notice some of the heart-wrenching impact on relationships. After sin entered Adam and Eve's world...

1. They covered themselves and hid from God (3:7). There were now barriers in relationships.
2. They blamed others for their problems (3:12).
3. Tension entered into the husband's and wife's particular roles (3:16-17).
4. And, to top it off, just a few verses later, a brother murdered his brother (4:8).

Painful as these things are, however, the most

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heartbreaking aspect is the loss of relationship with their Creator. They distrusted Him, misquoted Him, hid from Him, lied to Him, and consequently were removed from the garden of Eden (3:24). There were now not only barriers between the man and his wife but the man and his Creator. It is imperative for us to realize that the tensions we experience daily are rooted here, in the first human rebellion.

As I've thought about this passage of Scripture through the years I have been amazed at the Lord's mercy toward Adam and Eve. In the immediate aftermath of their rebellion He promised them that someone would come and defeat the serpent (3:15). Scripture then unfolds this amazing story of the coming Savior and His finished work on the cross and all its implications, both for life now and an eternity of perfect relationships with God and others.

## Scripture, Not Naïve about Conflict

But does the story of Christ's death, burial and resurrection really apply to my conflict? Apparently the Apostle Paul thought so since he addressed tension in relationships quite often in his writings, as we see from the following examples. He always

writes against the backdrop of what our Lord did through his death and resurrection, and who we are relation to him. Often his commands relate to how the gospel (good news) impacts relationships. Quite regularly, relationship tension is at least implied in the context.

*1 CORINTHIANS*

The Corinthian church had a notorious reputation for conflict (and a lot of other problems as well)! Because of this, the book of 1 Corinthians was written and the Corinthian Christians reputation will continue until the end of time. In seminary, I was encouraged to make 1 Corinthians the first book I preached through when going to a new church since it addresses so many contemporary issues in the local church. That way, no one could accuse me of knowing, and preaching about, what was actually going on!

In the first chapter, Paul gently confronts the Corinthians:

*For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you" (verse 11).*

Later, in 6:1, he addresses the specific question

of lawsuits:

*Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before saints?*

Brothers and sisters in Christ were taking one another to court! In other words, Paul was thinking, “How dare the just go to the unjust for justice!”

*PHILIPPIANS*

In Philippians, Paul writes,

*I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord” (4:2).*

These two women needed help getting along and I assume their sour relationship was impacting the church. This may be why he wrote earlier in this letter,

*Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are*

*standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (1:27).*

We often focus on the wonderful theology concerning our Lord's sacrificial death (2:6-11) but forget that the context is yet another admonition to unity (2:1-5). In fact, I have come to the conclusion that verse 4 is one of the most important conflict resolution verses in the Bible. Based upon the example of our Lord, the apostle writes,

*Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also to the interests of others.*

A few verses later he admonishes the believers,

*Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, (2:14-15).*

He wouldn't have had to remind them not to

grumble if it wasn't already happening. What motivates him is the same thing that seems to almost always motivate him—the reputation of Jesus Christ.

It is easy to see that Scripture is not naïve about conflict and gives wise direction on how to handle the inevitable tension accompanying relationships. The Bible makes clear (and it's a good reality check to understand) there never was a pristine time in the church where believers did not have to work through difficult issues.

Out of all the passages where Paul addresses relationships Ephesians 4:1-3 deserves special attention. Let's look at that next.