

I knew it was going to be a difficult conversation. I had been invited to mediate in a conflict between two men who were business partners. Both men were Christian, both saw themselves as victims, both painted the other party as malicious and deceitful. At the root of their disagreement was a dollar figure—each claimed they were entitled to a bigger piece of the pie. Sound familiar?

I was a young pastor at the time and naive enough to believe that things could be easily worked out. About 30 minutes into the conversation, my head was swimming—I had two angry men, each demanding “justice,” each unwilling to listen to what the other had to say. They didn’t want mediation, they wanted me to pronounce judgment—and it was clear that any such pronouncement would end with a “winner” and a “loser”.

On another occasion, I found myself at a congregant’s front door; a difficult conversation was waiting for me just inside. This couple had been serving in the church for a long time, they had been in long-standing conflict with a number other volunteers, and matters were going downhill fast. The husband pretended everything was just fine and the wife was bitter, angry, and jaded.

We sat down for one of the iciest cups of tea I have every had; the conversation I tried to lead fell far short of my desired outcome. I learned from that encounter that conflict cannot be resolved in the absence of willing partners—*where there is no will, there is way*. The husband didn’t say a word and the wife wouldn’t take responsibility for anything she had said or done. In fact, she repeatedly told me that she wasn’t going to do anything, because other people’s issues were much worse than hers—from her perspective, I was “wasting” my time on her, when other people had a greater need of correction.

I’ve sat in other meetings where the conflict has circled around me—and leader will tell you that you cannot lead anything, anyone, or anywhere and avoid conflict. People don’t always agree with the things I’ve said and done, or sometimes, people are unhappy with the things I haven’t said or done.

I am well-versed in experiencing conflict, and so are you. I would wager that in every relationship you have ever had, you have experienced some form of conflict. Disagreement, disappointment, or hurt—experienced in relationship—are all forms of conflict; we experience it every day. With this being the case, you would think we’d all be experts when it comes to dealing with conflict, but sadly, the reverse is true. In the face of conflict, most of us avoid or deny. We find ourselves caught of guard and unprepared when conflict comes our way; all-too-often we react badly and the conflict deepens.

Because we don’t live in Eden, because we aren’t perfect, because we don’t see everything eye to eye, conflict will be a “normal” part of life together. We may wish for it to be otherwise, but it’s critical to accept reality as it is. In fact, embracing feedback, listening to criticism, and dealing with conflict in a God-honouring-way is an important part of spiritual maturity. We’ve been talking all Fall about *Becoming Whole*, and I want to suggest that we will not grow in emotional or relational health by avoiding or denying conflict.

A little later, I’m going to offer some ways to tools for managing conflict, but first I want to engage you in a little game I like to call “*True or False*”. I’m going to make a couple of statements, and I want you to decide whether the statement is true or false.

Statement #1: True or False, in Christian community, where there is genuine love for God and one another, people do not experience conflict.

The answer is—**false**.

Love for God and others can certainly diminish conflict, but conflict will exist as long as we have imperfect people engaged in relationship—Paul and Barnabas are the perfect case in point.

In Acts 7-8, we read about Christians being arrested and killed for their faith in Jesus, all under the approving eye of one Saul of Tarsus. But everything changed when Jesus appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus—Saul did a 180 and began to follow Jesus passionately. Though Saul’s conversion was genuine, the wider Christian community was unconvinced.

Acts 9:26 and following says, “*When [Saul] came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.*”

Barnabas vouched for Saul when no one else would—he saw a genuine faith and wasn’t afraid of Saul’s track record of violence. Barnabas’ name means “*son of encouragement.*” We all need a Barnabas in our lives—someone who sees us at our worst and still

believes the best about us. This encounter between Barnabas and Saul cemented a deep ministry partnership.

Some time later, a church sprang up in Antioch—the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to assess the situation. The church was in need of teachers and so Barnabas sent for Saul—for the next year Barnabas and Saul lovingly taught and led this church.

Later, the church sent our dynamic duo out on mission—to preach the good news about Jesus in cities and towns where Jesus’ name had never been heard. Together they witnessed miracles. Together they suffered—they were beaten, stoned, and run out of town. Together they saw large numbers of people decide to follow Jesus.

And then they got in a fight, split up in anger, and went their separate ways. Acts 15:36-40 says, “*Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.’ Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left.*”

Paul and Barnabas loved God and one another, but conflict tore them apart. In Christian community, where there is genuine love for God and one another, people still experience conflict.

Statement #2: True or False, Jesus has called us be peacemakers, which means, we need to do our best to make sure everyone is happy. Once again, the answer is—**false**.

In Matthew 5:9, Jesus said, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons and daughters of God.*” But trying to keeping everyone happy? I have a hard time believing this is what Jesus had in mind—look no further than how Jesus lived, and it’s clear that He frequently disturbed the “peace”. In fact, on one occasion, Jesus said, “*I have not come to bring peace but a sword.*”¹ If we have to ignore difficult issues/problems in order to “keep the peace,” it’s more than likely that we are simply avoiding conflict. Let me offer a few examples.

You have a friend, but the only time they call is when they need something from you. Every conversation you have revolves around them—you’re struggling because the relationship is so one-sided. The relationship is slowly dying, but you keep your observations to yourself—you don’t want to make waves, and besides, you don’t want to add to their pain. Over time, resentment begins to grow, and you find opportunities to avoid this friendship.

You’re out for coffee with a group of co-workers and the conversation shifts to your boss—everyone begins to launch verbal grenades against her. You don’t agree with the complaints, but you don’t say anything—you want to “keep the peace.”

You’re a high school student and you’re trying to live up to your parents expectations. They expect you to make the honour roll, to be the star of your sports team, to help out around the house—you feel like you are drowning under the weight of expectations and commitments. But you don’t say a word, in fact, you try to avoid them as much as possible—*if I’m not home, I don’t have to deal with*

them. You’re not sure how they would react if you told them how you were feeling—*I’ll keep my head down and just keep going...only one more year until I graduate and then I’m gone.*

Your husband promises the world but rarely delivers. Your frustration level is high but instead of talking with him, you give him the “silent” treatment—*if he doesn’t know what wrong, I’m not going to tell him. Besides, bringing this up will just make things worse between us—I’ll stay quiet and keep the peace.*

We cannot make something “right” by ignoring what is “wrong.” Peter Scazzero, in his book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, looks at the issue of managing conflict, and describes the various stages between emotional infancy and emotional adulthood.

Emotional Infants

- have difficulty entering the world of others
- need instant gratification
- use others as objects to meet their needs

Emotional Children

- are content as long as they get what they want
- interpret disagreement as personal offences
- have difficulty calmly discussing their needs and wants in a mature, loving way

Emotional Adolescents

- are threatened and alarmed by criticism (tend to be defensive)

¹ Matthew 10:34.

- deal with conflict poorly, often blaming, appeasing, going to a third party, pouting, or ignoring the issue entirely
- have difficulty listening to another person's pain, disappointments, or needs
- are critical and judgmental

Emotional Adults

- are able to discuss their needs/wants/preferences in a mature, loving way
- recognize, manage, and take responsibility for their own thoughts and feelings
- respect others without having to change them
- give people room to make mistakes and not be perfect
- have the capacity to resolve conflict maturely, and negotiate solutions that consider the perspective of others²

In which category where would you place yourself?

Many years ago, I took a class at Trinity Western in conflict resolution; my professor's working background was in hostage negotiation. He said to us many times, "*conflict is inevitable, but combat is optional.*" The question is, how do we honour God, self, and others in the middle of conflict? In the time remaining, I'd like to look a few Scriptures, offer a few principles for managing the conflict in our lives.

1. First, become a good listener. James 1:19-20 says, "*Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry because human anger does not produce the [right living] that God*

desires." How often are we quick to listen and slow to speak? When we seek to understand someone with just as much diligence as we seek to be understood, misunderstanding can be dealt with before it becomes conflict. My spiritual director is fond of saying, "*listening is indistinguishable from love.*"

2. Second, talk openly about your assumptions, expectations, and "triggers."

Conflict is filled with such emotional tension because conflict has to do with an unshared assumption, a person's expectations going unmet, or a personal value being threatened. The difficulty is that our expectations are typically unconscious, unspoken, un-agreed upon, and sometimes, unrealistic.

Proverbs 20:5 says, "*The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out.*" In the face of conflict, we are wise to ask:

- what assumption is being challenged?
- what value is being threatened?
- what expectation isn't being met (or communicated)?
- or, what trigger is being pressed?

In nearly every conflict, three things are at play: an event, an interpretation of the event, and a feeling. We need to keep in mind that "objectivity" and "neutrality" are impossible. A part of the maturing process is recognizing that there are multiple interpretations—every observer brings their own set of assumptions, expectations, values, and blindness to the event. God is the only One who sees the

² Adapted from: Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 178-179.

truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. A part of the maturing process is our growing willingness to hear what other people see, think, and feel.

When we let our assumptions about another person go unchecked, we run the risk of believing a lie about them. Let me give you an example. When you are talking with a person and they go “silent,” what should we assume? Are they listening intently to what you are saying? Are they tuning you out? Are they a slow processor, and need time to consider what you’ve said? Or, are they hurt by something you’ve said, and they are withdrawing, trying to punish you with silence? Which assumption is right?

Well...we can ask, and hope that they are self-aware enough to give you an answer that brings clarity. The only other option is create your own version of reality and judge them accordingly. We might want to ask something like, *“I’ve noticed that you haven’t said anything for awhile and I’m wondering if I’ve said something that has hurt you? Or, would you like more time to process what I’ve shared?”*

Another way we hold people hostage is through unspoken expectations—this is a tangled web in many marriages. We cannot expect people to “just know” unless we “just tell them,” and once we’ve told them, the negotiation begins—are my expectations shared? Realistic?

If I expect you to always agree with me, no questions asked—we are going to regularly experience conflict. If I expect you to be “safe,” to never say or do anything that might hurt me—we are going to regularly experience conflict. Often times, our expectations are tied to deep, emotional triggers.

The reason you might “expect” others to immediately agree with you—no questions asked—is because you’re tied to an unhealthy past relationship with a parent or boss. Perhaps you never measured up in their eyes, they never trusted you, and the questions they asked made you feel incompetent. The reason you demand cooperation from others is because facing questions triggers a deep sense of insecurity.

Or, perhaps you expect others to never say or do anything to hurt you, because you have been deeply wounded by a past friend or spouse. The moment you hear something hurtful you find yourself triggered emotionally—you label people “unsafe,” and find ways to sideline them in your life.

Until we are aware of the assumptions, expectations and values—within and without—conflict will remain unresolved.

3. Keep Short Accounts. Ephesians 4:26-27 says, *“In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.”* Now clearly, not every conflict can be resolved before sundown—some are too large, too complex, and require multiple steps. And, we need to keep in mind that this is not the only Scripture that speaks about managing conflict—there is a time to wait, to let things settle, before seeking resolution.

Sometimes the best way to avoid speaking or acting in anger, it to call a time-out, process what’s happening within us, before re-engaging in the conversation. We cannot take back a word spoken in anger.

But there is a principle here that can be honoured: never leave until tomorrow, what is wiser to deal with today. If we are just wallowing in our anger—as opposed to processing our anger before God—unwittingly, we are opening ourselves to the influence of the evil one. Jesus once compared the devil to a thief who comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. Unprocessed anger steals our peace, kills our joy, and ultimately destroys our ability to relate to others in healthy ways.

When we deny that there is conflict, or pretend that it's not a big deal, we leave room for anger to grow. More often than not, a whole bunch of little things, left unaddressed become a BIG thing that is much harder to deal with. Keep short accounts.

4. Manage Your Expectations. We need to clarify what we can and cannot control when conflict arises. Try as we might, we cannot control others' thoughts, emotions, words, and willingness, anymore than we can we control the outcome. We may do everything “right” and still have things remain unresolved. All that we can control is our response before God and others. Romans 12:18 says, *“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”*

Paul and Barnabas later resolved their conflict; after a time apart they ministered together in Corinth. Further, Paul also changed his mind about Mark—he came to depend on him in his later ministry years. I always enjoy a happy ending, but not every conflict has a happy ending—Paul could attest to this in other relationships.

Not every conflict can be resolved; *where there is no will, there is no way forward.* We may eliminate pretending, denying, and avoiding as

dead-end strategies, but without willing participants, conflict will remain.

Unless we are willing to give up our need to be heard in order to hear the other, unless we are willing to give up our need to be “right” in order to see the bigger picture, unless we are willing to let go of our hurt in order to forgive, unless we are willing to give up our need to “win” in order to allow for a “win win” solution, unless we are willing to take responsibility for our part in the conflict, nothing will ever be resolved.

I believe with all of my heart that with Jesus' presence and power, every conflict has the **potential** for resolution. But I've also come to understand that Jesus does not force reconciliation and restoration upon us—we need to choose it for ourselves. The sad reality is that in every dispute, one side might want restoration—one party may be willing—but without willingness on both sides, resolution is impossible

One of the ongoing pains, this side of heaven, is unresolved relational conflict—many of us mourn what is, and, what could be. This becomes a place of prayer for us, where we commit to God situations and relationships that we cannot fix, heal, or control. And finally,

5. Speak The Truth In Love. In Ephesians 4:3 the apostle Paul tells us to *“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”* In the verses that follow, Paul employs the word “one” seven times. At least in part, living a life worthy of the calling we have received from Jesus means experiencing oneness in the church, and in our relationships. The more we give ourselves to

humility, gentleness, patient-willing-to-wait-for-one-another-love, the better chance we have of experiencing this oneness.

But Paul offers us one more necessary ingredient in vs. 15. He writes, *“speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”* **Speaking the truth in love is necessary.**

A growing Christian community is the place where we tell the truth about God (worship), tell the truth about our selves (confession), and tell the truth about one another (correction).

Sometimes the truth hurts. When people speak the truth to us, it might expose things we didn't know about ourselves—things we didn't want to know—or, things we thought we had hidden. This kind of truth can hurt, but it also heals—“truth,” Jesus said, “can set us free.”³ Truth is at its best, when it's spoken in love—this kind of truth both pierces and embraces.

One author writes, “Truth is not used to harm, nor is love allowed to distort...Both love and truth are needed for health...in a fallen world, confrontation is necessary to love.”⁴

As I said earlier, we don't live in Eden, we aren't perfect, and we don't see everything eye to eye—conflict is a “normal” part of our life together. And so, dealing with conflict in a God-honouring-way is an important part of spiritual maturity.

³ John 8:32.

⁴ Klyne Snodgrass, *NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*, 226.

We have a lot to learn when it comes to understanding ourselves and one another. But with the Lord's help, we can grow into maturity, we can manage conflict in God-honouring ways, and we can experience the oneness the Spirit brings. Even so Lord Jesus, help us.

Pray