

An Island ECC positional paper on:

Biblical Conflict Resolution

Introduction

Island ECC is committed to resolving conflict in a way that glorifies God, 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, Island ECC is committed to following biblical principles as a guide for resolving issues. We trust that the following information will serve as a continual resource as we all purpose to serve others, grow personally and glorify the Lord in the context of conflict.

The Peacemaker's Pledge

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 honour 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 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.
- *Confront the problem.* 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.
- *Be reconciled.* Instead of accepting premature compromise or allowing relationships to wither, we will actively pursue genuine peace and reconciliation – forgiving others as God, for Christ's sake, 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, realising 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 God and leads others to know his infinite love.

These principles are so simple that they can be used to resolve the most basic conflicts of daily life. But they are so powerful that they have been used to mediate and arbitrate bitter divorce and child custody actions, embezzlement situations, church divisions, multi-million dollar business disputes, malpractice lawsuits, and terrible sexual abuse cases. These principles are briefly discussed below.

Glorify God

View 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 (see Romans 8:28-29). 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
- Grow to be like Christ – by confessing sin and turning from attitudes that promote conflict.

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.

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 honour and bring him praise in everyday life, especially by the way they resolved personal conflicts (1 Cor 10:31).

You can glorify God in the midst of conflict by trusting him, obeying him and imitating him (see Proverbs 3:4-6; John 14:15; Ephesians 5:1). One of the best ways to keep these concerns uppermost in your mind is to regularly ask yourself this focusing question, “How can I please and honour the Lord in this situation?”

Get the Log Out of Your Own Eye

One of the most challenging principles of peacemaking is set forth in Matthew 7:5, where Jesus says, *“You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.”* There are generally two kinds of “logs” you need to look for when dealing with conflict.

First, you need to ask whether you have had a critical, negative or overly sensitive attitude that has led to unnecessary conflict. One of the best ways to do this is to spend some time meditating on Philippians 4:2-9, which describes the kind of attitude Christians should have even when they are involved in a conflict.

The second kind of log you must deal with is actual sinful words and actions. Because you are often blind to your own sins, you may need an honest friend or advisor who will help you to take an objective look at yourself and face up to your contribution to a conflict.

When you identify ways that you have wronged another person, it is important to admit your wrongs honestly and thoroughly. One way to do this is to use the “Seven A's of Confession”:

- Address everyone involved (Prov 28:13; 1 John 1:8-9)
- Avoid using “if”, “but” and “maybe” – don't make excuses (Luke 15:11-24)
- Admit specifically – both attitudes and actions
- Apologise – express sorrow for the way you affected someone
- Accept the consequences (Luke 19:1-9)
- Alter your behaviour – commit to changing harmful habits (Eph 4:22-32)

- Ask for forgiveness.

The most important aspect of getting the log out of your own eye is to go beyond the confession of wrong behaviour and face up to the root cause of that behaviour. The Bible teaches that conflict comes from the desires that battle in your heart (James 4:1-3; Matt 15:18-19). Some of these desires are obviously sinful, such as wanting to conceal the truth, bend others to your will, or have revenge. In many situations, however, conflict is fuelled by good desires that you have elevated to sinful demands, such as a craving to be understood, loved, respected or vindicated.

Any time you become excessively preoccupied with something, even a good thing, and seek to find happiness, security or fulfilment in it rather than in God, you are guilty of idolatry. Idolatry inevitably leads to conflict with God (*"You shall have no other gods before me."*) 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).

There are three basic steps you can take to overcome the idolatry that fuels conflict.

1. Ask God to help you see where you have been guilty of wrong worship, that is, where you are focusing your love, attention and energy on something other than God.
2. Specifically identify and renounce each of the desires contributing to the conflict.
3. Deliberately pursue right worship, that is, to fix your heart and mind on God and to seek joy, fulfilment and satisfaction in him alone.

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 honour 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.

Confront the Problem

Once you have identified God's concerns and taken responsibility for your contributions to a conflict, it may be necessary to talk to others about their shortcomings. Many people do not like to confront others. However, confronting the problem is necessary so that it does not linger. Also while talking about the problem is uncomfortable, it is often a most caring act.

1. Overlook minor offences

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 (Prov 19:11). As a general rule, an offense should be overlooked if you can answer "no" to all of the following questions:

- Is the offense seriously dishonouring God?
- Has it permanently damaged a relationship?
- Is it seriously hurting other people?
- Is it seriously hurting the offender himself?

2. Talk in private

If you answer "yes" to any of the above 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 (Prov 15:1-2; 16:23)
- Anticipate likely reactions and plan appropriate responses – rehearsals can be very helpful (Prov 20:18)
- Choose the right time and place – talk in person whenever possible (Prov 16:21; 27:12)
- Assume the best about the other person until you have facts to prove otherwise (Prov 18:17)
- Listen carefully (Prov 18:13)
- Speak only to build others up (Eph 4:29)
- Ask for feedback from the other person (Prov 18:2)
- Trust God (Psalm 37:3).

Be Reconciled

Reconciliation is the final step in resolving a conflict. To be reconciled means to replace hostility and separation with peace and friendship. Normally, two things must happen for complete reconciliation to occur. First, the personal offenses that separated the opponents must be laid to rest through confession and forgiveness. Second, the material issues of the conflict must be resolved by negotiating a mutually satisfactory agreement.

Remember to:

- Confirm repentance
- Renounce sinful attitudes and expectations
- Assess your contributions to the problem
- Recognise that God is working for good
- Remember God's forgiveness
- Draw on God's strength.

[For further reading please refer to "The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict" by Ken Sande (Baker Books, 2nd ed. 1997).]