

Blog Post – Did You Miss “Conflict”?  
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### **Did You Miss “Conflict”?**

During our recent Coach Equip Night on Tuesday September 3, we featured the topic: “Conflict.” We spent time covering eight principles for handling conflict—for ourselves, our groups, and assisting our leaders.

#### **Grace or Truth?**

If you are going to lean too far in one direction, which direction do you naturally lean: toward “grace” (neglecting to confront, tip-toeing around an issue), or “truth” (being harsh)?

#### **A Story**

Let me share with you a story:

Let’s say that you are sitting at Starbucks with one of your Leaders, and he tells you: “I’m really struggling with a gal in my Small Group named Jeannette. Some of the other women in the group told my wife how Jeannette will never correct her kids when they have playdates together. Apparently Jeannette lets them run around and do whatever they want.”

“Even though she’s never seen this happen personally, my wife has been really frustrated. Whenever Jeannette starts talking about parenting in Small Group, I can see my wife’s face get red, because she doesn’t trust her.”

“Now, I’m concerned too because I can tell there’s tension in the group; and honestly, I probably didn’t react well last week. I got a call from Jeannette’s husband Rob, letting me know they were going to miss Small Group because the kids had something going on. I hung up with him and told my wife, ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if Jeannette is just letting the kids go see a movie instead of her and Rob actually keeping their commitment to be here!’ So, I’m kind of miffed with Jeannette and Rob; but I don’t know if that’s something I need to address.”

What’s the problem here? There is a conflict! And you’ve gotten dragged into it!

Here’s a summary about situations like this from Tim Keller:

“When two people within the church are in conflict with each other, it can wreak a lot of havoc in the hearts and lives of the Christians around them who are not immediately involved in the dispute. The worst thing (but the common thing!) that happens is that rather than suspending judgment, praying, and encouraging the parties toward reconciliation, people take sides in the dispute in a very world-typical way. It is hard not to sympathize with the party you know best. It is also hard for that person not to “share” his or her hurt with you in a way that does not vilify the other party in the conflict.

*As a result, we can have second- and third-order unreconciled relationships. ... The problem is not that you have sinned or have been sinned against, but you have heard a bad report about another Christian and you let it come into your own heart and take root as distrust and hostility. What should we do?" (Tim Keller, "[Serving Each Other Through Forgiveness and Reconciliation](#)," p.9, italics mine)*

Have you guys ever seen or been a part of what Keller refers to here as "second- and third-order unreconciled relationships"? I know I have!

And since Coaches are leaders of leaders they have a responsibility to our direct relationships, and they also have a responsibility to "direct" relationships! Coaches need to help others reconcile through conflict!

#### **4 Possible Types of Conflict**

Before uncovering eight principles for dealing with conflict, let's first figure out what kind of "conflict" we're talking about. I think there are 4 possible definitions of "conflict":

1. We could mean **differing personalities**. This "conflict" happens when someone gets offended because another person is just different from them. "Why can't we just head home so I can recharge? My wife is such an extrovert! But I need to go to bed!"
2. We could mean **differing opinions**. This "conflict" happens when people just disagree. "Why don't you like to have us all pray together? Isn't that better than just men and women in their own cliques?"
3. We could mean **misunderstanding**. This "conflict" can happen when there is a "miscommunication" (when someone doesn't rightly understand what *was* communicated) or "missed communication" (when something *isn't* communicated that should have been).

Tonight we're not going to discuss any of these 3 types of Conflict: These are more in the realm of "differences" or "disagreements." Instead, we will use the fourth type:

4. What we do mean is **sin**.

*"When both parties *sin* against one another (in their communication and/or their actions) and are then in *opposition* to one another" (Stuart Scott, *Communication and Conflict Resolution*, p.13, italics mine)*

#### **8 Principles for Dealing with Conflict**

In order to figure out how we can step into conflict in a healthy way and move toward resolution, let's explore eight principles for dealing with conflict:

The first four are what have been called by many in the biblical counseling movement: the "4 Rules of Communication." I have found these incredibly grounding and helpful over the years. And they all come from [Ephesians 4](#).

## 1. Be Honest

“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another” ([Eph. 4: 25](#)).

We have to speak the truth to one another. If you lean too much toward “grace” then you need to be careful to actually step up and clearly share the truth with others.

Here are a couple tools that have helped me to be honest with others:

- **Don’t use 100% words.** 100% words are “always” and “never.” Instead a wife saying, “You *always* yell at the kids,” she should say “There have been four or five times this week you’ve raised your voice with Caden after he didn’t pick up his toys.” People rarely do things “always” or “never.” You can think of it this way: “100% words” are *always* a bad idea because they are *never* true!
- When confronting someone: **point to a real-life situation.** Instead of saying “You are being a terrible husband,” say “At Small Group this week, I noticed that you interrupted Sarah a number of times during discussion, and that you loudly disagreed with her on your way out.” When we point to real-life situations, that person can see a flesh-and-blood example they likely can’t deny. It helps both of you think situationally (and about resolving a presenting issue), instead of thinking in unresolvable generalities.

## 2. Keep Current

“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil” ([Eph. 4:26-27](#)).

I know of couples who have committed not to go to bed angry with each other, which is great. I also think that there is a principle here—of resolving sin conflict as quickly as possible. Sometimes this can’t be done before sunset with somebody—but we should be asking the question, “Am I trying to address this and get reconciled as quickly as wisdom and circumstances allow?” If we don’t, the devil creates a foothold for bitterness.

## 3. Attack the Problem, Not the Person

“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” ([Eph. 4:29](#)).

Maybe you know the debate term for “attacking the person”: *ad hominem*, meaning “against the person.” If attacking the person (instead of their argument) is unproductive in debate, it’s all the more inappropriate in Christian living!

## 4. Act, Don’t React

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” ([Eph. 4:31-32](#)).

In the heat of battle, it is natural to react: to lash back in anger. Instead, we should act like Jesus (show kindness and forgiveness).

### **5. Keep the Circle Small**

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you...” ([Matt. 18:15-20](#)).

The church discipline passage in Matthew 18 is also a reconciliation and communication passage. It shows how we can protect the person we have an issue with—by keeping the circle of those involved as small as possible.

Not keeping the circle small easily leads to gossip (i.e.: telling others negative things about a person with whom they are neither involved in the problem nor the solution)!

### **6. Hear Both Sides**

“The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him” ([Prov. 18:17](#)).

In the last month, I have had a couple of situations where I was surprised how different the stories were that I received about a person’s situation. They told me one thing, and other trustworthy individuals told me something very different. This wise proverb is just as true today as it has ever been. Both sides deserve being heard.

### **7. Ask: “What Do I Want?”**

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ...” ([James 4:1-10](#)).

The reason we have sinful conflicts with each other is because we want something. We do what we do because we want what we want! And we’re willing to cross the line of sin to get it. I think the big takeaway for me from these verses is in [verses 6-10](#): “humble!,” “submit!,” “humble!” That’s the spirit we must have to resolve conflict.

In conflict it can be helpful to allow each person to think through and talk through what it is they are wanting. Recently, I was hanging picture frames in our guest room with my wife, and we got into a hard conversation because we were wanting different things: I thought “It’s better to have something up than for it to be perfect,” and she was thinking “It’s better to have it be perfect (right) than to just put something up.” We were wanting different things.

### **8. The Goal is Peace ...“so Far as It Depends on You”**

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” ([Rom. 12:18](#)).

I'm grateful this verse has a realism to it: it says "so far as it depends on you" because not everyone wants peace! Not everyone is willing to forgive or reconcile. But our obligation is to be ready to forgive and reconcile.

### **What's My Motivation?**

It's this: to be like God.

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, *as God in Christ forgave you*" ([Eph. 4:32](#), italics mine).

When we reconcile we get to be like God! Jesus says it this way: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" ([Matt. 5:9](#)). Hopefully these promises will be enough wind in our sails to propel us into dealing with conflict.

### **The Mechanics**

Whether needing to deal with personal conflict or coaching someone else on how to enter in, what are the mechanics of conflict resolution? These are the basics of what must happen:

- **Addressing the issue** ([Luke 17:3](#): "If your brother sins, rebuke him")
- **Confessing the sin** ([Luke 17:3b](#): "and if he repents")
- **Forgiving the sin** ([Luke 17:3c](#): "forgive him")
- **Gaining peace with each other** ([Matt. 18:15b](#): "if he listens to you, you have gained your brother")
- **Or moving further toward discipline** ([Matt. 18:17](#): "if he refuses to listen...")

### **Further Resources:**

[Serving Each Other Through Forgiveness and Reconciliation](#) by Tim Keller (article)

[Communication and Conflict Resolution: A Biblical Perspective](#) by Stuart Scott (booklet)