

Conflict-Competent Pastors

Lori O'Dea

Dear Pastors, we live in exciting times! Jesus' return is closer than ever, which makes our work in His mission, that much more challenging. So, let's talk about another C-word. More common than cancer, but every bit as devastating, **conflict** continues to wreak destruction on churches and their leaders.

Disciples of Jesus regularly find themselves at war with Satan, the world, and the old nature. They are all difficult, but today, there is a cross-over among these enemy camps, an in-breeding that seems formidable. Conflicts come with complexities that can be traced to the Enemy's lies, but rarely present as bold-faced whoppers. They dress up in the prevailing culture and appeal to personal, as well as national pride. To risk confrontation, is to risk painting yourself with an identity long-ago canceled.

Some of you... likely most of you... already bear the scars of previous battles. Your hearts have been pierced with increasingly vitriolic accusations. (Raise your hand if you've been cussed out *in* your church office!) Your reputation has taken a few hits. You can count the empty chairs representing families who attacked and retreated, or simply retreated at the sound of others' attacks. You wonder, fleetingly, but with increasing frequency, if you should stay.

The answer is YES! You are needed now, more than ever!

Yes! You should stay in the faith.

Yes! You should stay in your calling.

Yes! You should stay in the Church.

Yes! You should stay the course of biblical discipleship, which requires the ability to manage conflict, to confront all manner of wrongs, to lead people toward Jesus, unity, faith, and forgiveness.

My prayer for you is that your hunger for the lost and your love for your flock will overcome the fear and cynicism that repeated conflicts have seeded in your hearts. The warnings Jesus gave about hatred, opposition, and persecution require us to confront the commonality of conflict. His words strip the powers of surprise or disillusionment from such encounters. Opting out of conflict is not possible. Increasing our competence is!

Common Conflict Causes

I know you are all more than familiar with the various subjects that appear to cause contemporary conflicts. We have heard – ad nauseum – about politics, vaccines, sexual issues, immorality, and financial challenges and corruption. Conflicts steeped in these topics have bred confusion and distraction from the Great Commission.

What is at the root of it? Of course, the things we mentioned earlier – Satan, sin, self, and worldly culture – play leading roles. But is there more? Yes! A massive hole in our discipleship! When we fail to teach the importance of managing conflict, believers resort to old nature habits and chaos ensues.

At the root of both increasing conflict and conflict incompetence is an outrageously underdeveloped security in Christ. When our identity in Christ is fully operational in the humility that safeguards one from pride, we are more willing and able to engage in conflict resolution. Self-protection no longer reigns. Obedience to Christ and concern for others outweigh our fears.

We also have a woefully undeveloped fear of God, which enables us to treat the Word of God too often as mere suggestion, rather than the absolute call to holiness and ways of God that it is. The fear of God empowers our willingness to engage in confrontation and reconciliation, rather than avoid or worse, treat relationships as disposable.

What's a Pastor to Do?

Raise the conflict competence of the Church by teaching conflict resolution principles. Don't wait! This is basic Christianity, right there with prayer, baptism, Bible study, and sharing the faith. Equipping the saints must include:

Davidic Psalms: Processing Conflict in Prayer

Often overlooked or delayed in the heat of conflict, prayer offers essential tools for processing emotions stirred by conflict. From lament to rage to sorrow to pleading, many psalms teach us how to pray honestly, so as to move through emotion to truth and empowerment.

Matthew 18: Conflict Resolution Basics

Every believer must be discipled in the steps of conflict resolution found in verses 15 (personal confrontation), 16 (witnessed confrontation), and 17 (leadership confrontation). If you do nothing else, at least give your people these handholds. Then hold them accountable to them! Do not let yourself be drawn into their conflicts prematurely, thus enabling their perpetual immaturity.

Galatians 6: The Practice of Spiritual Admonition

"Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently" (Gal. 6:1, NIV). What Paul packs into that one sentence is the stuff of multiple preaching series. There is an expectation that believers will confront one another regarding sin. Yes, it should be done in the context of relationship, the leading of the Spirit, and with complete gentleness, but it should be done.

Ephesians 4: Speaking the Truth in Love

Again, note the expectation of active confrontation (v. 15). (Confrontation, like conflict, is neutral. It can be positive or negative, depending on how it is handled. And we are taught to handle it in love.) Do you understand how many wounds could be healed if we dealt with our offenses, talked *to* others, instead of *about* them, and taught the way of God more adequately (Acts 18:26)?! We cannot continue to give openings to the devil (Eph. 4:27) by living as the walking wounded, instead of repairing relationships.

Nehemiah 5: Leading through Organizational Conflict

The book of Nehemiah provides one of the most complete leadership primers in the entire Bible. Significantly, one chapter is devoted to the handling of a conflict that had the potential to end any attempt to restore God's people to Israel. Outside attacks tend to unite people against a

threat, whereas attacks from within risk tearing the organization apart. Nehemiah recognizes the inherent danger of the latter and offers a blueprint for response.

Matthew 18: Forgiveness

The importance of forgiveness cannot be overstated. It may be the single greatest need among the people you pastor. Unforgiveness kills everything it touches. God requires us to forgive – not calling a wrong right but trusting the only just Judge to hold the offender accountable.

Matthew 26: Reconciliation

The goals of conflict resolution include growing understanding, problem solving, and restored, stronger relationships. Surprisingly, Jesus' interactions with Judas at the Last Supper provide a wonderfully detailed template for reconciliation.

Consequences of Failing to Build Conflict-Competence

Pastors, if you fail to rise to the challenges of current conflicts, the Church faces dire consequences.

First, failure to make disciples willing to engage in conflict resolution, will necessarily weaken the Church. Producing increasingly more conflict-avoidant people does not diminish conflict, it reduces their options when facing it. They will resort more often to the leadership of their emotions and imitation of the world, rather than the Spirit.

Second, if we don't make healthy disciples, evangelism will cease. Evangelism, by definition, is a form of conflict. When we share the gospel with a lost person, we are confronting them with truth that opposes their current state, apart from Christ's lordship. Believers paralyzed by fear of conflict, dare not share the gospel.

Third, surrendering our willingness to function in the authority of Christ in opposition to a corrupt culture means believers will lose influence. Christianity, historically, has influenced every sector of society – from politics to healthcare to education, fair business practices, and the creative arts. But if we retreat from culture, we lose the ability to change it. And if we fear conflict, we tame the authority of Christ and become imitators of culture, rather than those who shape it. Conflict competence gives us our eschatological bearings, which means we have the stability to engage instead of withdrawing to a "take me now, Jesus" mentality.

Finally, and perhaps the scariest consequence of failing to form Christians who are willing to resolve conflict, is the loss of discernment. When avoiding conflict becomes a higher value than upholding truth, we simply lose the ability to know and understand the truth. And we will spoil our own doctrine with increasing compromise, failure to teach, and little accountability to live what we say we believe.

Conclusion

I know that last part reads like a doomsday letter. It's not at all. It's an honest cry for you, God's shepherds, to stand in the shoes of the prophet, looking ahead, and seeing where current

conditions will lead. Then, still standing in the prophet's place, proclaim the biblical principles that will create conflict-competent disciples of Jesus Christ.

Fair warning, brothers and sisters... conflict competence will not eliminate conflict and it will not guarantee successful resolution. There will still be casualties – but hopefully less innocents caught in the crossfire, and hopefully not you or your ministry.

Guard your hearts in these last days! Do the daily work of forgiveness that cleanses and heals heart wounds. Love people – zealously, actively, hopefully. Believe the best can happen. Be filled with the Spirit, without whom this kind of love and faith are impossible. And keep an unwavering commitment to the Word of God.