

Living Together in Times of Conflict

What do we as followers of Jesus have to show those around us? How can we make the presence of Jesus real for others? We know who we've found and who we follow. Many around us haven't seen him, and many around us have heard of him but don't know him. How can we show them what he's like? How can we show them the difference that knowing him makes?

When we run into conflict in our life together, we're usually facing some pretty tough issues. We have the chance to live through the hard times in a way that demonstrates the difference that belonging to Jesus makes.

As we face a time of needing to understand each other and needing to address our different concerns, we can either show Christ-like behavior, or not. How we behave as we work together needs to grow out of the insight and wisdom we have from Jesus. He is our best guide and our role model.

How do we relate to those on the other side?

We've all heard what Jesus said about our priorities. When he was asked which was the greatest commandment, Jesus said,

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:37–40)

We who live together in the church are neighbors, part of one community of faith. But more than neighbors or even friends, we're relatives. We're brothers and sisters through Jesus. We're adopted children of God through him and truly part of one big family.

From time to time we disagree on things that are important to us. When we do, we become opponents and sometimes fall into thinking of each other as enemies. But Jesus went far beyond expecting us to love our neighbors. He commanded us to love our enemies as well. He said,

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. (Luke 6:27–28)

Sometimes we just pass over what he's saying here, because it's not a comfortable thought. Jesus is not talking about strangers, people we don't know. He's talking about people we know and see around us. He's talking about people who hate us, and none of us likes to think that we're hated. We're supposed to love those who mistreat us and actually do us harm. We're even supposed to love those who cause us serious pain and suffering.

Jesus had high expectations for us. He said,

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:35–36)

The people we really want to see punished are the very ones that Jesus expects us to be nice to. We're expected to be fair and kind to truly wicked and ungrateful people, just the way God is

fair and kind to all of us. This almost makes being fair and kind to our brothers and sisters in the church look easy.

How we treat each other in good times, and especially in bad times, shows how well we're following the commandment Jesus gave us to love. He said,

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. This is my command: Love each other. (John 15:12, 17)

Make no mistake, the nations and the neighbors are watching us. How we behave, especially in times when divisions in the church are so public, is something people around us notice. How well are we showing that we belong to Jesus at a time when we fight with each other?

We always have choices in the way we approach a conflict. We know from scripture that Jesus used different styles depending on the circumstances. There are times when we choose to avoid a conflict and times when we choose to go along with others even when we disagree. There are even times when we choose to be competitive and fight to get our own way.

But in our current communities, we're looking for a solution that will include us all. Collaboration means finding a solution for all together. It takes time, caring, and the willingness to listen to and understand each other, but it's the only way to blend all of our wisdom together into a plan that addresses all our concerns. Choosing well and prayerfully is a loving process.

Yes, but how do we do it? Jesus said,

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

Even, and especially when we're on opposite sides of an argument, we need to live by this Golden Rule. Yes, we've heard it before. But what does it mean that we actually do? If we're really willing to treat others the way we want to be treated, we have a few action items.

1 Be honest and tell the truth.

This may seem obvious, but actually it isn't always our natural tendency. You may not want to give opponents a fact, even a true fact, that might give them an advantage in your disagreements. You want the opponents to see the best of your position, so you might not want to let them see your weakness. You want opponents to think the best of those on your side, so you might want to spin the facts a little to show your allies in the best light. You might want to advertise the facts that support your position and overlook those that work against it.

Working together to resolve a conflict requires truthfulness and trust. There can be no cover up or pretense that everything's fine, because resentment and anger will fester underneath the covers. The key to openness is our loyalty to the integrity of the process we're engaged in.

Our disagreement needs to be one that defends the right of all sides to a fair hearing and due consideration. We all hope to succeed for our own position, of course, but none of us wants to succeed because of some unfair advantage or trick that would help our side win. Each of us hopes to succeed based on the real merits of our individual positions in a fair process.

In a conflict, it's critical that we act transparently. Whenever possible, we need to be ready to explain the reasons behind our positions, choices, and actions. Our issues are likely deeply emotional ones, and we need to be able to say what we mean to say, clearly and accurately, even in our most sensitive conversations.

2 Respect others and their good intentions.

If we're going to treat others the way we want to be treated, we have to believe in their best intentions. After all, we expect others to believe in our good intentions. When we're engaged in conflict, it's much easier to slide into fighting if we think of the other side as "the bad guys." By looking at their faults and not their virtues, their weaknesses and not their strengths, it's easier to see them as "deserving" to fail.

This also leads to a cycle of having low expectations of their behavior, interpreting their actions in the worst possible light, finding lots of confirmation of their evil intent, and concluding that the opposition does not deserve either respect or fair dealing. This polarization is natural, human, and disastrous.

The basis of trust is an underlying conviction of the good intent of those on the opposite side. Trust means that each side expects the other side to play fair, and not to expect the other side will resort to sneakiness, trickery, or manipulation.

When some part of the process works to the disadvantage of one side, it's very hard not to see it as a result of the conspiracy of the other side. Even one incident that is felt unfair or underhanded can undermine trust and lead to the negative cycle of lowered expectations of the opposition.

When we believe strongly in the rightness of our own position, receiving dirty tricks tends to make us feel justified to respond in kind. This can lead into a downward spiral with both sides falling into the use of strategies they would ordinarily avoid.

3 Listen to others in order to understand.

To resolve the differences that lead to conflict, we need to know what all of those involved think and feel. We need to do all that we can to understand the situation clearly, from our own side and from the perspective of those on the other side. This involves really listening to what the others say about what they believe.

In my experience of conflict in the church, it's usually true that we're operating out of a critical set of shared values. We're each doing what we believe to be right, we're all doing our best to follow the direction of Jesus, and we all believe that it's critical to work together in the church community in spite of our different positions.

We need to learn the perspectives of those involved on all sides in order to learn about those factors which need to be addressed and integrated into a coherent resolution. This learning takes a lot of listening, and much of this is listening to things we disagree with. This listening is critically important if we're going to find a solution that addresses the others' needs as well as our own.

4 In humility, accept our uncertainties.

It's also important for each of us to know the boundaries of where our own position has a strong foundation and where we move out of solid ground into mud or even quicksand. Some aspects of an issue can be clear beyond a shadow of doubt, while others may be much less clear.

No matter where we stand on a particular issue, there will be unfinished areas around the edges. These are aspects of the issue which still need to be considered and potential implications which still need to be discovered. Discovering them in conversation can be both disconcerting and humbling. Being conscious of where we are certain and where we are not matters.

Going forward to argue a position when we're not certain risks all we might gain when arguing out of certain knowledge. If we are found to be wrong in some areas, the validity of our entire position is called into question. Knowing what ground we safely stand on, while being aware of the edges of that ground, should create a realistic security and avoid the risky behavior of false optimism.

It's humbling to become aware of the limitations of one's own arguments and convictions, but it's far less embarrassing than needing to backtrack from half-baked positions in the middle of a conflict. All participants in a conflict are responsible for the errors that result from their own uncertainty or incomplete understanding. Each must be able to live with the uncertainty of knowing that there are things not fully understood, while still advocating strongly for those things that are well known.

5 Respond rather than react to others.

When we're in sensitive territory, we need to think carefully about the timing of what we do. We need to be able to wait for the productive, and not alienating, moment to take action. We need to think through, very intentionally, the way we mean to act. We need to choose what we say and when we say it, responding intentionally to others, rather than reacting emotionally in ways that can be damaging.

Paul gives very good advice to the people of Ephesus:

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.
(Ephesians 4:29)

Simply put, if what we're going to say will make things worse, don't say it. If what we're going to say won't help, don't say it either. It is not loving to dump our emotions—our frustration, our impatience, or our anxiety—on someone else. If there's a message we believe the other needs to hear, the loving way to deliver it is to find a time when the other is able to hear.

6 Work together.

Regardless of the state of our disagreements, we all do need to continue working together in the community of faith. While we're working on our plans for the future, we still need to keep on doing with the ministries of the church. We need to keep our differences from getting in the way of our cooperation in the work of Jesus. This means that we mustn't let our differences in one area get in the way of our relationships in others.

We shouldn't let our differences keep us from joining in friendly conversation or sitting together in gatherings. We need to keep working together, both on our common future and on the other activities we share.

I found that a while back I was serving on a committee with a person I was opposing in a judicial matter. There were times when I tried to join a conversation, but didn't feel that I was welcome in it. Once I noticed in a meeting that folks who tended to agree with me were all isolated on one side of the table, while the opposition surrounded us on the other three sides. Over time, I learned to mix up our seating positions so that I could sit next to different members of the committee.

In discussion, it became very important to me to support ideas I agreed with from each of the others, and especially from my usual opponents. The good news was that my opponent had

lots of good ideas, and it was easy to find areas in which we agreed. I found that this opponent also agreed with my thoughts from time to time. This taught me that real, engaged cooperation is possible in many areas even when there is significant conflict on other important issues.

7 Provide and accept support with all.

What I find important is a concern for all others, including those on the other side. We can empathize with the pain or stress in a colleague's life, even when that pain or stress is caused by being on the opposite side of a particular conflict. Sincere prayer for the other's concerns, encouragement on the road, appreciation for accomplishments, and even interest in life's ups and downs are all appropriate across lines of disagreement.

It should be no surprise to see opponents sharing stories of children or grandchildren or even questions and advice about professional situations in informal settings. Providing and accepting support, moral and material, should not be affected by position in conflict or limited to neutral or trivial areas of life. Opponents should be working to heal even those wounds in each other that are caused by the differences between them.

8 Have compassion and welcome shared feelings.

It is hard to be a "loser" at any stage of a conflict. But it is more difficult to be an apparent "winner" in the midst of people whose hopes have suffered defeat by our own efforts. We can't help but feel grief for a success which results in loss for so many others. We can't help recognizing that we, on both sides of the conflict, are sharing one experience: we are joined in a shared struggle over something we care a lot about. We are all experiencing some satisfaction, but also pain and loss, with each turn of events.

In a very real way, we have more in common with our opponents than we do with those who don't care about the issues. The issues matter to us on both sides. We all care about doing what is right and standing up for our convictions. We are all willing to spend time, money, thought, and feelings to honor our commitments to God and others.

In a very real way, the grief over our conflict is a shared grief. We grieve for the hurt that underlies the conflict. We grieve for the pain we cause each other as we engage in it. We grieve for the waste of time and resources that could have been used in other ministries of the church.

And we grieve for the costs of the division to the church itself, for the estrangement of participants and observers who are separated from their brother and sisters in the community. The one hope for redemption in this grief is that we find empathy, compassion and love for those on both sides with whom we share it.

9 Stay aware of living the example of love.

For me, part of this responsibility includes not just advocating for the positions I believe to be right, but also talking about the way I think we're expected to behave in conflict. As Jesus said,

In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

As the first letter of Peter points out, we must always be prepared and willing to explain what we are doing and why we are doing it to all who might ask.

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, (1 Peter 3:15)

Keeping in mind that we're consciously working on being loving in our disagreements actually helps us to remember to do it.

In the end, we'll all be judged on how well we live up to the expectations and commandments Jesus has given us. John Newton, former slaver and author of the hymn "Amazing Grace," knew that good folks can have people in their lives who are hard to love at the moment. He said,

In a little while you will meet in heaven; this brother will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts; and though you might find it necessary to oppose his views, view him personally as a kindred soul, with whom you are to be happy in Christ FOREVER.
(John Newton)

Newton realized, as we all should, that the relationships we have now with other people of faith are not temporary. As we live in and nurture our relationships, we always need to keep the long term in mind.

Loving our enemies or our opponents is never easy. Fortunately, as Mother Teresa once pointed out, we're not expected to be successful, but only to be faithful. We have to try to behave lovingly to our enemies and opponents, even and especially when we're in the heat of a conflict with them.

In that struggle, aided by the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit, we have the chance to be a witness to the one we follow, and in the process to change ourselves from the inside out.

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34–35)

We have the chance to show those around us—whether they are neighbors who think the church is petty and broken, folks in the church who disagree with us, the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and invested so much to make this church possible, those we know and have cared about for years, and all the others—that we belong to Jesus. I think that a church that can talk about its differences lovingly is just as amazing and just as visible to those around us.

The path is narrow, and the way forward takes patience, and understanding, prayer, and—yes—courage. By the grace of God, may we come through our conflicts more caring, more understanding of each other, and better able to live out the example of Jesus. May God help us all, as we struggle to love when it is most difficult, to grow to be more like the Lord we serve.