

## Why Is There So Much Conflict?

Sometimes it seems that God must love conflict. Why else would God have created a world with so much of it? As followers of Jesus we're often surrounded by conflicts, sometimes mired in conflicts, and often deeply embarrassed by the conflicts we're stuck in. Our situation is not new.

Most of our conflicts seem to have one of three different roots. We fight over sin—our desire for stuff and our desire for control of others. We fight over relationships and loyalties—over who we like and who we don't like. We fight over principles—over what is true and false about ourselves, about the way the world works, and about God. Once a conflict begins, we keep it alive and help it grow with all the things we feel we “need” to do and say to help our side win.

### Is there a benefit that comes from conflict?

As we look around, we can see plenty of examples of success and failure. Some shops are full of customers, while others close quietly. Some businesses come out with one helpful product after another, while others disappear. Some politicians move from small successes to big successes, while others go back to their day jobs.

We can see some of the factors that mark the differences between success and failure. Those who succeed often have some things in common: the skills to do the work that's needed, the energy to what needs to be done, the ability to think clearly and make plans, the motivation to keep going when things look bad, and the independence that can still ask for advice sometimes. With the exception of basic skills, all of those other factors are developed and encouraged by times of conflict.

Experience with conflict sharpens our ability to think clearly, to make plans, and to carry them out. In conflict we get lots of practice—trying to understand the difference between our side and the other side, trying to figure what to do to advance our own position, and making plans to get victory for our side.

Conflict is energizing, giving us some visible goals to measure our own performance and giving us an immediate charge when we can see progress. Conflict keeps motivation going, giving us something to push off against, when we might otherwise just stop and take a nap. Conflict uses and exercises independence, giving us practice in standing up for what we believe in, and building our self-confidence in the process.

Those who succeed and practice their skills in conflict have an advantage when it comes to efforts in other areas of their lives. Conflict is a training ground for helpful skills. Athletics and debating clubs in schools are intended to encourage this kind of learning. Student athletes get to define their strategies to win and anticipate their need to defend against the other team's moves. Debaters develop the skills to formulate, present, and defend their positions.

In both cases, energy and motivation come from the need to support their own side as strongly as possible in the face of opposition. Those who learn how to focus and bring energy to bear on their goals will have an advantage as they go on to other activities.

In spite of these apparent benefits, the many costs of conflict are high.

## Causes for conflict from the Old Testament

Sin entered this world, as we hear in the story of the Garden of Eden, when the free will and potential for sinfulness built into human beings led to disobedience and separation from God. In each generation since, we're born in self-centered self-absorption, and we spend years moving step by step to recognize, acknowledge, and interact with those around us. Specific sins grow out of our sinfulness, and our independent lives are often made up of one sin after another.

The potential for sinfulness means that we have the ability to understand and distinguish between good and evil. The reality of our nature and our practice of sin means that we can choose evil with our own free will. Of course, we don't think of ourselves as choosing evil; we have lots of excuses, rationalizations, and convenient memory lapses to protect our self-image.

The reality of the situation is that, no matter how hard we try, we are simply unable to choose good consistently. We sin directly, by taking more than our share, by hurting those we don't like, or by not listening to those who ask for help. We sin indirectly, by choosing leaders who will do our thinking for us or who deliver the results of sin to our doorstep without our having to think for ourselves.

Without even noticing it, perhaps because we don't want to pay attention, we slide into complicity in acts of pride, domination, and violence. When we stick together in groups, we're even more effective at nastiness than any one of us would be alone.

The scripture of the Old Testament puts two limits on the impact on our potential for sin. The first limitation was applied immediately, right after our initial disobedience. Our sinfulness is limited in time, limited to the space of a single lifetime.

*The LORD God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. (Gen 3:22-23)*

This natural limitation at least gives us the hope of a fresh start with each new generation.

The second limitation put on our ability to sin is one that limits our ability to sin in unison. The story of the Tower of Babel is the story of the unlimited potential of cooperation.

*the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth (Gen 11:5-8)*

Barriers were set up among us with the differences in our languages, customs, and cultures. This is the heritage into which we were born and in which we live.

Our sin and our competition for the fruits of sin are the underlying cause of much of our conflict. The limits of our human nature—our fragile bodies and our limited lifetime—most of the time keep our sin from getting too far out of control. As a secondary protection to limit the effects of our sin, we have misunderstandings, which are still effective even when we're able to cross the boundaries of language. The potential for conflict based on our differences and for the exacerbation of sin-based conflict through miscommunication continues to be with us.

## **Conflict among the first disciples**

There has been conflict among followers of Jesus from the very beginning of his ministry. Even the disciples who knew Jesus didn't always get along with each other. Luke tells us that even at the last supper, just before Jesus was arrested, they were arguing.

*A dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. (Luke 22:24)*

After all those years of traveling and listening to Jesus, they still hadn't gotten the point. This kind of dominance wasn't something worth fighting about. You can almost hear Jesus sigh as he explains to them, one more time, that those who want to be great will have to be servants. They will have to follow the example that he has given them.

Simon and Andrew and James and John were not instantly transformed when they answered that call from Jesus to leave their fishing boats on the beach. They made a commitment and put their feet on the first steps of a long path, but they were still themselves. They were still uneducated fishermen, and still people with the normal human range of faults and virtues.

Sin was still a very real factor in their lives. James and John were still the sons of an ambitious mother, one who could get them to compete for their future positions. Peter was still overly enthusiastic; wanting to do the right thing, even when he thought it meant building houses for Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop. Guessing wrong about what to do next, often with the best of intentions, was still a possibility even when following Jesus.

One of the truly great things about the stories in the bible is that the writers of scripture don't clean them up. We do hear about the disciples' finest moments—the moments when they take Jesus at his word and follow him. We also hear about their low points.

The accounts record the times when their faith falters, the conversations when they show they've missed the point again, and the time when they leave Jesus to face his trials alone. Their strengths and their weaknesses, including their contentiousness, are written down for those of us who come later. Even with Jesus there as their teacher and their example, their conflicts were very painful and very real.

## **Conflict in the early church**

The people of the early church, having seen the resurrection of Jesus and been filled with the Holy Spirit, didn't avoid disputes and conflict either. In his letter, James says,

*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. (James 4:1-2)*

Sin was still active and causing conflicts in their lives. Even those who had seen the power of God at work among them could get off track and find themselves in the middle of arguments.

Paul's experience in the new churches he founded wasn't all that different. He says to the people of Corinth,

*when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. (2 Corinthians 7:5)*

You can see that conflicts and disputes have been part of the reality of life, even for the closest followers of Jesus, from the very beginning. You can hear the frustration in his voice as Paul writes his first letter to Corinth. He says,

*I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." (1 Corinthians 1:10-12)*

Can you picture what Paul must be feeling? He left the community with the gospel message, thinking that they heard it well and would live its direction to love each other faithfully. But what happens? No sooner is Paul out of town than things start to come apart.

It's become so bad that the rumor mill has started: people are gossiping about it. The factions have formed. Each faction has chosen its favorite teacher, and followers of the different teachers are ready to fight about why their teacher is the best. Paul has the additional embarrassment of hearing that he's the leader of one of the factions. Aargh! What can he say?

*Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:13)*

Paul never meant to give anyone grounds to identify with himself, personally. In all he's tried to do, he's tried to give all the glory and all the credit to Jesus. The people don't belong to him, or to Peter, or to any other apostle. The people belong to Jesus alone. Why can't they simply love each other and be children of God together? They can't seem to help falling into conflict over who they want to follow.

The leaders of the early church found themselves disagreeing with each other on matters of principle as well. As leaders in the early church, James and Peter and Paul held very different convictions about whether a person needed to become a Jew first, before they were able to become a believer.

*The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." (Acts 11:1-3)*

Then

*Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. (Acts 15:1-2)*

Criticism and debate were no strangers to the apostles, especially when people care deeply about the issues.

### **Conflict in today's church**

The many conflicts in the church today are often covered even in our local newspapers. We fight about issues with sin at the bottom—power, territory, assets, control. We fight about when to hold the potluck dinner and who gets to choose the color when we repaint the basement.

We fight about issues of relationship—who we like, who we'll follow, and whose behavior we'll defend against all comers.

We fight about matters of principle, feeling quite proud of our rightness, as we argue about homosexuality, abortion, sexual abuse, war and peacemaking, how and where to do mission work, political advocacy, needs of immigrants, support for the disabled and disadvantaged, and hundreds of other issues. Making a complete list of current conflicts in the church is left as an exercise for the reader.

Of course, once we choose sides and become involved in a conflict, we live down to the lowest possible standards of human behavior. We assume our opponents are evil or just plain stupid, and we act accordingly.

Sinful behaviors that we wouldn't consider using during ordinary times, become justifiable due to the importance and rightness of our cause. In our enthusiasm, we end up acting foolishly ourselves and bringing ridicule on our church. The situation isn't pretty.

### **There must be a reason for so much conflict**

Why is there so much conflict in the church? Why is there so much conflict in everything that we do as human beings? It's easy to say that our conflict is a result of our sin. It's also easy to see that differences over relationships and principles can lead us into sinful behaviors.

I don't think that God would have built a world that allowed so much place for conflict, if God didn't mean for us to learn something from it. I believe that, silly and petty and foolish as many of our conflicts are, the simple presence of conflict in our lives has to be an important gift from God.

Church conflict has a purpose: to help us learn to love our enemies in a place where we can practice forgiveness, love, and prayer with our opponents. Other followers of Jesus are family, and we can choose our friends but we can't choose our relatives. Conflict in the church is God's way of teaching us to love people we don't like very much at the moment.