

How Did Jesus Handle Conflict?

Many years ago, I was working for a famous investment company with a team of talented and creative people who couldn't seem to get anything done. We had lots of good ideas and held meetings to decide what to do next. Unfortunately, we couldn't seem to make much progress in the decided direction, so we would have another meeting. The bosses couldn't believe that we were really so stuck, and they sent us to the corporate psychologist.

The psychologist gave us some tests and explained to us that the problem was in the way we approached our differences. He used the Thomas–Kilmann approach to find out that we were each advocating strongly for our own perspectives and giving up when our ideas weren't successful. Then we'd come back to the next meeting determined to get the team to do things our own way. We were stuck dancing around the same ideas and not finding any ways to make them work together. Learning the way things were working, we were able to make changes in our approaches to come together on the same page.

Later in life, when I became a pastor in a church, I discovered that just because we shared the same faith, that didn't mean we would always agree on what to do next or how to do it. I decided to go to the source, to Jesus, to find out how he handled his own differences with others around him when he was faced with a conflict. What I found out was that Jesus had been using the same approaches to working through conflicts that had worked so well in business.

What are our choices when faced with a conflict?

Daily life has plenty of chances to come into conflict with those around us. When we're faced with a conflict, what options do we have as we try to decide what to do next? Whenever any of us, including Jesus, face a potential conflict, we have a choice of the same five approaches. We get to choose whether we avoid it altogether or accommodate, compete, compromise, or collaborate with the opposition.

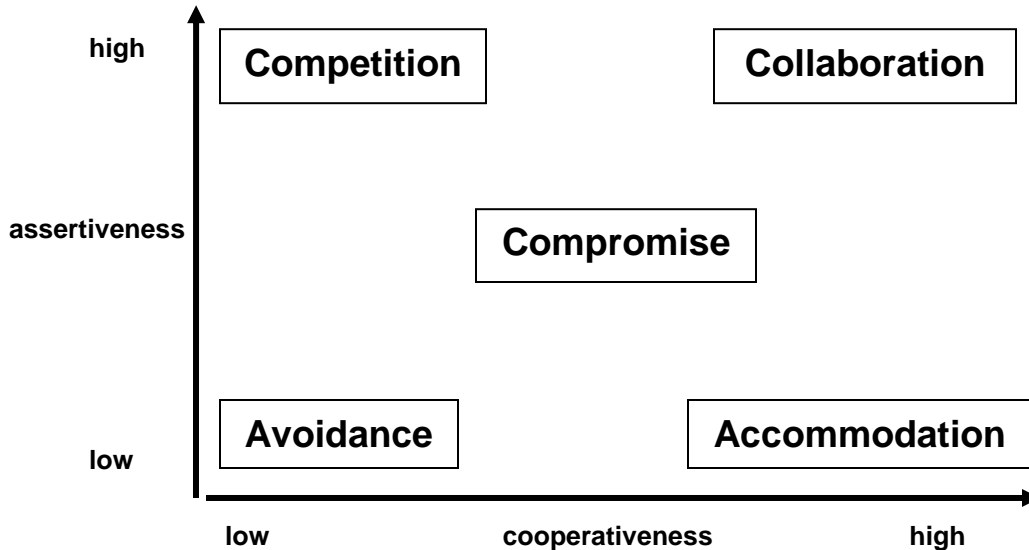
We can only control our own choice of approach, of the style we will use in working with those who differ from us in one or several ways.

- Avoidance means just walking away from the issue.
- Accommodation means going along with the others even when what they want is not what we want.
- Competition means arguing or even fighting to have things done our way.
- Compromise means give-and-take, finding a way to get some of what we want and letting the others have some of what they want.
- Collaboration means working together to find a solution that actually satisfies the needs of everyone, ourselves and the others.

Those are our choices, and the approach we choose will then determine our strategy and even the style of communication we use while addressing the issues.

Jesus got to choose what to do, just as we all get to choose. But how do we pick which approach to use on any particular day? One way to find a solution is to look at what Jesus actually did when he faced problems. So what did Jesus do? It turns out that Jesus used all of these approaches at different times depending on the situation.

The approaches reflect two distinctive factors—how assertive we are (how important it is to us to have our own way) and how cooperative we are (how much we want to get along with others around us).



If we don't much care about getting along with others, then low assertiveness leads to avoidance while high assertiveness leads to competition. On the other hand, if we value cooperation, then low assertiveness leads to accommodation, while high assertiveness brings us to work for collaboration. Compromise is an option that can deal with an issue more quickly but will not ultimately resolve it to everyone's satisfaction.

The basis for our choice

When we disagree with other followers of Jesus, other brothers and sisters in Christ, we have some constraints on our behavior choices. We all know that we can choose our friends but we can't choose our relatives. Just because we're all followers of Jesus together, we don't always share the same information or experiences, and as a result we can have very different perspectives on a situation. I believe that conflict in church communities is God's way of teaching us to work with and love people we don't like very much at the moment.

Jesus points out that we're supposed to treat even those who we think of as strangers, as opponents, or even as enemies with love. He says,

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:46-48)

Knowing that Jesus used all of the possible approaches at different times, how do you decide which approach you should use in a particular situation? It turns out that each of the approaches has times when it's more appropriate than the others.

Did Jesus ever avoid a conflict?

You might think that Jesus never avoided a potential conflict, but look what he did when the right thing was happening at the wrong time.

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is come to save the world.” When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself (John 6:14-15)

Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands. He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there. (John 10:39-40)

In these situations, Jesus saved expressing his differences with those around him for another, more appropriate time.

For example, we might want to choose avoidance:

- when an issue is trivial or more important issues are pressing
- when we see no chance of satisfying our concerns
- when potential disruption outweighs the benefits of resolution
- to let people cool down and regain perspective
- when gathering information is more important than the need for immediate action

Jesus had no problem avoiding trouble when it was the right thing to do.

He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” (Mark 6:10-11)

Simply walking away from a conflict without engaging in it can sometimes be the most helpful and appropriate action.

Did Jesus ever accommodate just to get along with others?

Do you remember when Jesus recommended going out of the way to accommodate a person we’ve had trouble with?

But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:22-24)

There are times when another issue, like worship, overrides whatever issue that’s separating us from others.

How do you feel about accommodation? It doesn’t mean that you’re a wimp if you choose to go along for a good reason. If everyone wants to go out for Chinese food, you can choose to let your taste for pizza wait until another day. We might choose to accommodate:

- when we find we’re wrong—to let a better position to be heard and show our reasonableness

- when issues are more important to others than to ourselves—to satisfy others and maintain cooperation
- to build social credits for other issues
- to minimize loss when we realize that we're outmatched or losing
- when harmony and stability are especially important

These are times when the issues that are separating us are simply not as important or significant as the things we're doing, or trying to do, together.

When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who has invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you." (Luke 14:8-11)

Humility is completely appropriate when the occasion is to honor others, and accommodating their needs and preferences shows our respect and willingness to adapt to the situation.

Did Jesus ever compete to get his own way?

And then there's competition. We usually think of Jesus as loving and caring for those he encountered. Did Jesus ever compete?

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple (Mark 11:15-16)

There's no question about how Jesus felt about the financial transactions that were going on in the temple. He'd visited the temple many times over the years and not said anything about how he felt. This time, however, he clearly thought that it was the time to make a point: this kind of behavior is not appropriate in the house of God.

There are times when, no matter how much we would rather not speak up, it's necessary and vital to make our perspective known and hopefully accepted. Situations when competition is the appropriate choice include:

- when quick, decisive action is vital
- on important issues where unpopular actions are needed, for instance cost-cutting, enforcing unpopular rules, or discipline
- on issues vital to the welfare of the participants when we know we're right
- against people who take advantage of non-competitive behavior

Jesus knew how to pick the right time, but when an issue was critically important he didn't hesitate to address it. He entered into the discussion fully aware of the opposition he would face.

They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved

at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. (Mark 3:2-6)

It turns out that healing on the Sabbath was under discussion among the Pharisees and other authorities at the time. Jesus jumped right into the conversation and, when the issue was later decided by the authorities, turned out to be on the winning side.

Did Jesus ever recommend a compromise?

How about compromise? Once Jesus was asked,

"Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:17-21)

In this case the questioners were probably hoping that Jesus would side against paying taxes to the emperor, siding with the rebels against Roman rule. Instead he advocated a compromise that would allow people to live in peace under control of the foreign power.

A compromise can be most appropriate when external constraints are not under our control. When we can't fix the entire situation, we can at least improve some part of it:

- when goals are important but not worth the effort or interruption of other things
- when opponents with equal power are committed to mutually exclusive goals
- to achieve a temporary settlement to a complex issue
- to arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure
- as a backup when collaboration or competition hasn't been successful

With compromise, no one is completely satisfied by the result, but hopefully both parties are a little happier and able to move on.

John the Baptist also recommended compromise when dealing with the hard reality of the impact of Roman rule.

Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." (Luke 3:12-14)

The compromise calls for complying with the government at the time, but not using the situation to take additional advantage of others.

Did Jesus ever collaborate?

How about collaboration? Remember when Jesus talks about working together?

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us." (Mark 9:38-40)

Of all the options, collaboration leads to resolutions that are most stable and long lasting. It provides a path forward so that the previously opposed parties come together and work together as a team.

We should consider using collaboration when we want to:

- find a solution when both concerns of both sides are too important to be compromised
- learn more about the situation and parties involved
- merge insights from people with different perspectives
- gain commitment by incorporating concerns into a common consensus
- work through feelings which have interfered with a relationship

Collaboration does usually take more time and effort than the other approaches. It involves all sides learning the perspectives of the others in order to build a solution that incorporates the best advantages of each of the others. It involves understanding the values of the other parties, so that the final solution incorporates the benefits each is looking for.

Collaboration also requires the humility to accept that others have value to contribute to the ultimate solution. John the Baptist is a wonderful role model for a participant in a cooperating effort without insisting on being the one in control.

They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” John answered, “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.’ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled.” (John 3:26-29)

When it is possible, collaboration provides the best hope for a lasting solution to the current conflict, as well as a foundation for addressing complex issues in the future.

How did these strategies work in the early church?

Paul’s active missionary ministry led him to many cities in the Roman territories, and in many places he encountered resistance and conflict. How did he use the alternatives Jesus used as he chose his response?

In Ephesus, the success of Paul’s ministry was costing the cult of Artemis, and the craftsmen who made souvenirs for tourists, their popularity and prosperity. The crowd that gathered to protest were very angry and vocal. Considering the options, what do you think Paul should do?

These folks were way too emotional to be able to work together, so collaboration was off the table. They sounded so upset that they wouldn’t be able to negotiate either, so a compromise probably wouldn’t work. There were too many of them to argue with, so trying to compete would probably lose. There was no way that Paul would be able to go along and agree to support Artemis, so accommodation wasn’t possible for him.

It was a no win situation, which only left Paul the choice for avoidance. Paul decided to stay away from the crowd, and he made the right choice for the situation. He left the problem to be handled by the local authorities, by those who had the authority and were capable of dealing with it.

On the other hand, in Athens Paul found some of his opponents more open-minded. His teaching in the synagogue and marketplace led to a meeting where Paul was asked “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean. (Acts 17:19)”

After Paul had spoken, “some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject.’ (Acts 17:32)” Paul left the meeting, but continued to talk with those who were interested, ultimately leading them to become followers of Jesus. Paul’s patience and persistence led to an active collaboration with the followers he found in Athens.

As we face our conflicts, choosing our approach carefully as Jesus and Paul did provides us good guidance for how we can handle our own conflicts most effectively.

References

Thomas, K. W., and Kilmann, R. H. *The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*. Mountain View, CA: CPP, Inc., 1974. See <https://kilmanniagnostics.com/overview-thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument-tki/>.