

MISSIONARY CONFLICT: A CONTAGIOUS MALADY OF MISSIONARY SOULS

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There is so much conflict in missions, and it almost always causes pain. Let's think about it.

Conflict is not new. The ancient world was full of conflict. The Old Testament tells of many unreconciled relationships. There was injustice, corruption, massive oppression, and evil.

Then the New Testament was given and it told us of a reconciler. Jesus came to reconcile the world to God (Eph. 2) and He paid the highest price. His mission was inclusive—He loved the world (John 3:16) and He told us to love one another—55 times in the New Testament these 'one anothers' are mentioned. And the benefit was pervasive, throughout society, Gal. 3:28. Jesus' deep desire for His followers was that they experience and express unity. It didn't happen when He was on earth, but that was the mandate He left us (John 17). A mandate of reconciliation—II Cor. 5:18-21. He 'gave us the ministry of reconciliation', 'he entrusted to us the message of reconciliation.'

Men and women to God, and

Men and women to each other.

And He gave us the Holy Spirit as our helper, teacher, counselor and guide. John 16:8, 13, 14.

But look where we are today! We see conflict and division on every hand, in Christian and nonChristian settings, country wide; ethnic issues, political posturing and debates, hostility as a campaign tool. We live in an *Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words*, by Deborah Tannen. I sometimes wonder if we have forgotten the sweetness of peace, and crave the stimulation and energy of disagreement and turmoil. We have become accustomed to the pain of broken relationships, and the pain of being wounded by conflict, especially when others are paying that price.

Within organizations, even Christian ones, even those devoted to mission and evangelistic pursuits, there is conflict. Conflict toward and with leaders, and with one another. There is organizational competition with similar ministries, and competition for resources. Administrators are eaten alive by conflict—some refuse to serve in administrative or leadership roles ever again! There is comparison of one ministry with another. And it doesn't seem as if things are getting better in any way on any front.

This ought not to be. I assume you are here because you want to do something about it on a personal level at least, and perhaps within your organization or church, or family, or community.

We should begin with ourselves. What will we do about ourselves when confronted by our tendency to stereotype groups of people? "That's what the Brits/Germans/Aussies/Koreans are like! Or our quickness to take offense? "My family is like that—that's just the way we are!" We excuse, stereotype, explain, or judge. We seldom reconcile.

What will we do about our hearts when we tend to judge, assume, or maintain prejudices? Is our problem with justice and injustice an external one, or does it reside in our own hearts? What does it do to us?

I. How much damage does conflict do?

-- to ourselves—our spirits, morale, perspective, peace of mind, motivation, energy level.

Exercise: in triads, share as you are comfortable about situations where you have been wounded. (10 minutes). What happened? How did you cope? What did you learn? What was the impact of that conflict on you?

Then share situations where you've been the wounder (5 minutes). What did you do? Is this resolved? How did you resolve it?

Think about the damage done to others by conflict. Story.

II. How do we deal with our own conflicts, past and present whether we are the one wounded, or we were the wounder. What is our resolution style?

Story (a colleague didn't like me)

Biblical examples

What are the principles we must follow to resolve our own conflicts of the past?

Think about conflicts we're currently involved in, i.e., with family members – "My mother and I have not spoken for two years." Do we have a plan to help ourselves when we are hurt or offended? Or when we become aware that someone is at odds with us for some reason?

i.e., I am resolved to live without antagonisms. I want to be able to look someone in the eye and greet them warmly, genuinely.

i.e., I will assume good will. So he/she didn't speak to me—he probably was thinking...

i.e., I will live with an unoffendable heart.

i.e., even if unjustly treated, that cannot be an excuse for my corresponding ungodly behavior.

III. Some principles for dealing with conflicts in our group/organization/church/family: (Let's not forget that conflict **can** be beneficial.

Go back to your triad and think of situations where conflict has been beneficial.

Let's focus on our mission organization. You can substitute 'church' but most of my life has been in the mission world. It is fairly easy for me to walk away from church conflict (over hymnbooks, prayer from the pulpit, music, etc) because I'm leaving soon! But I do know a lot about conflict in missions! (There's a Chinese tongue-in-cheek proverb: The best way to handle conflict, out of 36 possibilities is to run away.")

Missionaries are strong people.

Strong people usually have strong opinions.

Missionaries are often workaholics. ("It is astonishing how much gets done when all we do is get things done. But oh, at what cost! To individuals and groups who continue tired and lonely!")

All the challenges facing Americans are amplified when living and working cross-culturally.

Increasingly missions is carried out by teams and teams are composed of workers from many sending countries—putting a Korean and an Australian on the same team is probably not wise.

Americans are often misunderstood—the friendliness of American women can be interpreted as sexual aggressiveness, leading to serious misunderstandings on both sides. Americans have been described as 'like puppies, clumsy, friendly, loud.' Or they may be thought of as outgoing, friendly, hardworking, generous, and wealthy, typically informal, always in a hurry, confident of having all the answers, great at problem-solving, not so great at quiet listening.

Missionaries are 'my tribe' but I know we have many weaknesses. And many conflicts. And our 'best' strategy is usually avoidance. However, we can seek understanding; we can be careful of our words; we can build unity. We can be salt and light in this situation. When we hear gossip, we can challenge it in a grace-filled way. We can determine not to be so sensitive, or take offense easily. In every conflict I am either an observer or a

participant. As an observer, I may be neutral or take sides. As a participant, I may be the cause of the conflict, or recipient of it. My goal should be resolution, whether I am observer or participant.

“Do not be sensitive. Perhaps you are by nature, but you can get over it with the exercise of common sense and the help of God. Let things hurt until the tender spot gets callous. Believe that people do not intend to be unkind; some are too busy to think of the feelings of their fellow-workers, and others have not the nice discernment that ought to guide even the busy brain and tongue. Sensitiveness is only another kind of self-consciousness, and as such we should seek deliverance from its irritating power.” (Isabella Thoburn, quoted in *Introducing World Missions*, page 236.)

We can be an agent of healing in any group, any setting. Refusing to take sides, yet displaying care and concern calls for discernment but is essential. Watch the second thing we say. The first thing when someone tells us of a ‘grave injustice or slight’ they have received is probably, “I’m sorry.” But usually the second thing we say is, “You should hear what she did to me!” That second response is key—we could say, How are you coping with that? How is God helping you handle that? It sounds like she had a hard day, etc. This takes practice and thought!!

Principles:

i.e., I would rather be talked to than talked about.

i.e., I/we will not ‘fry’ people!

i.e., I am committed to reconciliation (not just peace or superficial harmony)

i.e., I will aim to promote unity

How will you and I be careful of our words, and promote similar cautions in others? (Expand)

IV. How can we be agents of healing in our circle of influence and relationship—II Cor. 5:18, 19. Acts 4:13
“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.” “Being with Jesus” has to be our first commitment! Living without conflict is too hard to do on our own! Situations sneak up on us and take us by surprise and words pop out of our mouths. Yet we are commanded to “Let your speech **always** be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Col. 4:5). We must move from this ‘war of words’ to redemptive communication among ourselves!

Do we want to be known as a people who have been with Jesus in spite of our commonness? As Acts 4:13 says?

What would that look like? (I think of things like accountability, hospitality, addressing conflict early, sharing frequently with one another about Jesus, being vulnerable, stop pretending to be more than we are, forgiveness, reconciliation, openness, genuine and inclusive friendship, freedom from gossip, Clarifying misunderstandings quickly. Building one another up, encouraging one another.) Etc.

Discuss in small groups:

Solicit

In order to live like this, we must realize that we are very ethnocentric and egocentric. We are prejudiced without even knowing that we are. Not only must we engage in self examination, we must solicit feedback. We must make it safe for others to tell us how we come across to them. What are we missing? Are we part of the problem, or are we part of the solution? Am I living according to the Scriptures or not? How can I know? Who will tell me? Ps. 139 begins with a fact (God has examined me and knows me through and through) and ends with an invitation (examine me and show me to myself; lead me in eternal ways). God knows us but that doesn’t mean we know ourselves—we need Him to show us to ourselves—and we need others too, to tell us when we offend. My personal commitment is to be healthy enough to hear hard things about myself, and sturdy enough to do something about that.

V. How do we help from a distance? I.e., we are on the mission committee and hear from our workers in that country that there is serious discord between them and their leader, or their colleagues? What will we do?

Remember: we are hearing only one side.

Remember: what we hear is often colored (exaggerated) by emotion and pain

Remember: we do not have authority to deal with field matters, but we do have responsibility for the well-being of your member. Consider carefully how to engage in helpful ways.

Role Play

Conclusion:

Write 2 or 3 principles you intend to follow with regard to estranged relationships on any level, and share one or two of these principles with your triad. Pray for one another.

My principles:

1. I will live without antagonism toward anyone.
2. To the best of my ability, with God's help, I will be free from grudges, memories of old hurts, grievances with anyone.
3. I will be an agent of healing in any relational situation. "Do you trust Bob?"
4. I will promote unity.
5. I will choose not to take offense (live with an unoffendable heart).
6. I will solicit feedback on my behavior from trusted friends.
7. I will be cautious about my words, aim to build people up, not tear them down. Redemptive Communication.
8. I will be careful about my efforts at humor.
9. Where there is obvious injustice, I will speak clearly and kindly with the intent of promoting justice.
10. I will aim to listen well, and grow in my listening skills, and hearing heart.
11. I will update my memories about people. They may have grown beyond that long-ago offense, and be different. By God's grace, I am different too.

Suggested Reading:

Ehman, Karen. 2015. *Keep It Shut: What to say, how to say it, and when to say nothing at all!* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Klug, Lyn, Ed. 2003. *A Forgiving Heart: Prayers for blessing and reconciliation.* Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Books.

Strauch, Alexander. 2011. *If you Bite & Devour One Another: Biblical principles for handling conflict.* Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers.

Tannen, Deborah. 1998. *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's war of words.* New York: Ballantine Books.