

Resolving Conflict: Two Principles

How well do you handle conflict? Are you an avoider? A collaborator? A peacemaker at all costs? Or, the proverbial “bull in a china shop”? Christians have a special responsibility to resolve conflicts. God has reconciled us to himself; He expects us to be reconciled to each other. God desires true unity and peace among His people. Often conflicts are not handled properly among believers because they simply don’t understand the biblical instructions for resolving them.

The New Testament provides two primary directives for resolving conflict: *Confronting in Love* and *Covering in Love*.

1. Confront in love: This follows the pattern of Ephesians 4:15– “Speak the truth in love.” When sinned against, we are required to speak to our offender with honesty and humility—to confront him in a loving manner. This is described in Matthew 5:23,24 and 18:15-17. In these texts, Jesus anticipates conflicts among His followers and provides steps for resolution. This reminds us not to be alarmed by conflicts as if they are strange.

The key principle behind both passages is clear. Whether you have been offended, or you’ve offended another, the Lord puts responsibility for reconciliation on you. There is no room for the attitude that says: “That’s his problem!” or “Let her come to me!” The plan established in these passages is from the Lord himself. To ignore it, is to disobey the head of the church and to invite his displeasure and discipline into our Churches (See: Revelation 2 & 3). Note the sense of urgency and immediacy in Matthew 5:23-24 (cf. Ephesians 4:27).

Key question: In light of the above principle, should *all* matters be issues of confrontation? The second principle indicates that this is not the case.

2. Cover in love: “Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins (i.e. offenses)” (I Peter 4:8). The plan of action found in Matthew 5:23-24 and 18:15-17 must be kept in balance with the principle of covering in love.

If every offense became a matter for confrontation, we would be involved in endless conflict. Through deep and mature love, many minor offenses can be covered. In the Church, we must learn to cover many minor grievances for the unity and testimony of the fellowship (John 13:34-35; 17:20-23; Philippians 2:14-15). This principle aligns with the requirement in Ephesians 4:2- “show forbearance to one another in love.” (see: Eph. 4:32)

According to I Corinthians 13:5, “Love does not take into account a wrong suffered.” The continual emphasis on strong enduring love between believers highlights the importance of this principle (see: Phil. 1:9; Col. 3:14; I Thess. 3:12; Eph. 5:2; Gal. 5:13; Rom. 12:10). By keeping short accounts with God (see: Prov. 28:13; I Jn. 1:9), we will be better prepared to display a generous spirit to our fellow believers.

A remaining question: How do we know which of the two principles above should be applied?

“People often ask: ‘Wouldn’t it be better just to let a matter die and not raise the question afresh, thereby starting more trouble?’ The issue resolves itself to this: whether or not the

offended person really finds it possible to let the problem die. Plainly every rub and offense cannot be raised and settled. We must learn, in love, to forgive and pass by many slights, annoyances, and offenses. Christ is not speaking of these in Mt. 5 & 18. Rather, he speaks of those offenses that brethren find it difficult to 'cover.' If a matter is likely to rattle around inside or carry over till the next day, it should be handled. To put it another way, if an offense drives a wedge between Christian brothers, the wedge must be removed by reconciliation. To say it a third way: anything that causes an unreconciled condition to exist between brethren must be dealt with." (*The Christian Counselors Manual*, Jay Adams p. 52).

This is where Matthew 5 and 18 apply. On the one hand, if we feel the need to talk to others about an offense instead of our offender, this may indicate a need for loving confrontation. On the other hand, if we are involved in constant confrontation, we need to become more mature in our love. Where love is weak, suspicion, misunderstanding, and conflict increase. Where love is strong, many minor offenses are covered (I Pet. 1:22).

"If you decide to overlook an offense, you should not simply file it away in your memory for later use against the other person. Instead, you need to forgive the offense in a biblical way: making a commitment not to dwell on it or to use it against the other person in the future. If you cannot overlook the offense this way, or if overlooking it would not be biblically appropriate, talk to the other person about it in a loving and constructive manner." (*The Peacemaker*, Ken Sande, p. 64)

In applying these principles, remember that a person with a negative and critical spirit (a faultfinder, cf. Jude 16) is a person who is destructive to the unity of the Church. When such a person refuses to change, the necessary step is: "Remove the scoffer and contention will cease" (Proverbs 22:10).