

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary

Conflict Management in the Church

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Introduction

Church leadership is a tremendous responsibility. In 1 Peter 1:5, Jesus instructs the elders (leaders) of the church, “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight *thereof*, not by constraint, but willingly.”¹ According to Blackaby, “Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus in their book, *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*, report that they discovered over 850 different definitions of leadership.”² Yet, every type of leadership must prudently prepare for the inevitable result of any gathering of people, known as the unwelcomed guest of “conflict.” Though today’s society and culture has trained a response of instant negativity, conflict is neutral in characterization and can be either positive or negative. For the Christian leader, there is a lot at stake. Susek reminds the Christian leader, more importantly than winning or losing a conflict, is the way a conflict is handled because ultimately this is what will determine the type of person we are perceived to be.³ Halverstadt adds that Christian leaders, when leading a conflict, must be careful to emphasize an environment of Christlike reconciliation.⁴ Conflict can be delineated in a number of ways because of its broadened tentacles.

A simple format used for this paper will examine some basic characterizations of conflict, such as: types, roles, sources/causes, and assessments. Additionally, some management characterizations found in the paper will include: advocacy, settlement, and circumvention. Conflict for the church leader is a reality and preparedness and guidance of the Holy Spirit are crucial elements for cultivating a successfully harmonic atmosphere within the church of God!

¹ All Scripture is from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.

² Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*, (1989): 4, quoted in Henry and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on God’s Agenda* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2001), 16.

³ Ron Susek. *Firestorm: Preventing and Overcoming Church Conflicts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 135.

⁴ Hugh F. Halverstadt. *Managing Church Conflict* (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1991), 89.

Conflict Characteristics

The word conflict is quite interesting. With regards to the New Testament usage, the word “conflict” is formed from the Greek word *agon*. According to *Strong’s Concordance* the word *agon* occurs six times in the King James Version of the New Testament and is translated: *conflict* twice (Phil. 1:30; Col. 2:1), *fight* twice (1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7), *contention* once (1 Thess. 2:2), and *race* once (Heb. 12:1).⁵ Earle describes the Greek word *agon*, found in 1 Thessalonians 2:2 (contention), as follows: “originally an athletic term, referring to the “contest” or “struggle” of the Olympic Games.”⁶ With a more secularized idea in mind, Willimon describes the word “conflict” as originating “from the Latin *fligere*,” meaning “to strike together.”⁷ The “conflict” is meaningful, although, the characterizing words of types, roles, sources/causes, and assessments, give flesh to the bare bone meaning.

Defining Types in Conflicts

One of the most important factors when an understanding of a conflict is sought is to define the type of conflict being dealt with. There are three basic types of conflicts that every church leader should be familiar with: impersonal, intrapersonal, and interpersonal.⁸ Impersonal conflict means it involves individuals that are not specifically related. Intrapersonal are inner conflicts occurring within the individual. Interpersonal is characterized by conflicts between individuals and relationships. Interpersonal conflicts are the primary conflicts the Christian manager needs

⁵ James Strong. *Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*. “Conflict” G73. Taken from Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance by James Strong, S.T.D., LL.D., 1890. e-Sword, Version 10.0.5.

⁶ Ralph Earle. *Word Meanings in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson, 1998), 365.

⁷ William Willimon. “Crisis and Conflict.” In *Leadership Handbook of Management and Administration*, edited by James Berkley, 215-234 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 215.

⁸ John Wallace. *Control in Conflict* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1982), 31.

to prepare for, though the other conflicts are quite possible as well. Augsburger delineates the three basic types of interpersonal relationships as being: complementary, symmetrical, and parallel.⁹ The complementary relationship is where different individuals connect and compliment their differences. The symmetrical relationship is more adapting and provides harmony between each individual within the relationship. The parallel relationship is more individualistic and makes room for a more balanced freedom of acceptable individuality. The identification of relationships is helpful because it can assist the conflict manager to identify the conflict with a broader understanding.

Defining Roles in Conflict

Each conflict, dependent on its nature, can have a wide array of role players. Some of these role players include principals, bystanders, third-parties, or mediators. Halverstadt, in *Managing Church Conflict*, makes a couple of interesting observations regarding role players. One point Halverstadt makes is that on most occasions the principals, though they may appear to be acting with their own motives in mind, are actually representing the social/political interests of a larger group within the organizational structure.¹⁰ When the bystander role is considered, frequently a misapplication of a disinterested party is pictured. In conflicts this is not the case. A bystander is someone that does have interests and investments that are certain to be affected by the final outcome of the conflict. Halverstadt gives a good analogy of bystanders as being individuals co-occupying a fishing boat where a conflict is taking place between the principals. The bystanders primary focus is not on the resolution itself, but the process involved, so that the boat they are

⁹ David Augsburger. *When Caring is not Enough* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1983), 174.

¹⁰ Hugh F. Halverstadt. *Managing Church Conflict*, 45.

co-occupying does not sink.¹¹ It is actually the “third-party” of a conflict that has the most neutrality and is relative “only to the dynamics” of the resolution.¹² The role of the mediator, or arbitrator, is normally a neutral and unbiased third party, brought in to help the conflicting parties reach a comparably acceptable resolution. Many times the Christian leader will act as a mediator while the arbitrator is a disinterested third party from outside the organization.

Locating the Sources and Causes of Conflict

The causes of conflict are many. Wallace lists some of the more common causes of church conflicts as confusion, ignorance, distortion, moods, roles, presumptions, pressures, goals, failure, concealment, and control of power.¹³ Other causes, identified by Leas and Kittlaus, include “Conflict over the facts of a situation, conflict over methods or means, conflict over ends or goals, and conflict over values.”¹⁴ The point made here is the impossibility of categorizing every cause or source due to the diversity of mitigating factors. Halverstadt sees conflicts as “power struggles” over differentiating items such as “beliefs, interests, desires, or values” and “abilities.”¹⁵ So groups of people can, and will, bring conflicts generated from a wide array of factoring agents.

When considering conflicts one of the underlying factors to note is relationships. Provided in the Xeroxed copied notes of Liberty University’s class notes for DSMN 605, *Christian Leadership*, is an equation that takes the number of people in a group and multiplies it by the

¹¹ Ibid., 47.

¹² Ibid., 49.

¹³ John Wallace. *Control in Conflict*, 31-48.

¹⁴ William Willimon. “Crisis and Conflict.” In *Leadership Handbook of Management and Administration*, 216.

¹⁵ Hugh F. Halverstadt. *Managing Church Conflict*, 4.

same number, minus one; thus, the product is the amount of possible relationships that exist within that group.¹⁶ For example, in a church with 100 members, the equation would look like this: $100 \times 99 = 9,990$; thus, this group has the potentiality of 9,900 different relationships within the group. When the numbers are compiled and the diversity of cultures, social/economic backgrounds are considered, it is easy to see why conflicts are frequent.

Assessment of the Conflict

With types, roles, and sources of a conflict identified the Christian leader must initiate a thorough assessment before beginning the appropriate management technique. As a Christian leader expectations for conflict are quite probable. Assessment is something that should be processed with a great deal of caution because an incorrect assessment can lead to unwarranted and detrimental outcomes. Accurate information is a mandate for a fair and effective assessment to be formulated. An assessment of the current climactic conditions is imperative. The involved parties level of involvement should be an important determinate of any assessment. With the preliminary steps of identifying types, defining roles, locating sources, and assessing the conflict the church leader is ready to begin the fragile process of conflict management.

Conflict Management

Leas equates a leader who has difficulty dealing with conflictive disagreements as more of a detriment to an organization than a help.¹⁷ A study of biblical leaders will reveal that every great leader such as Moses, Nehemiah, David, Paul and even Christ, had to deal with conflict. While

¹⁶ Conflict Management: Introduction; Unpublished Class Notes for Christian Leadership DSMN 605, Module 5 (Liberty University, Summer 2012), 30.

¹⁷ Speed B. Leas. *Leadership and Conflict*. Edited by Lyle E. Schaller (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 63.

examining the subject of conflict management within the church, three predominating approaches will be considered: conflict advocacy, conflict settlement, and conflict circumvention. Little, in *Resolving Conflict*, provides some “general principles” to guide the Christian leader through the fields of conflict. Little suggests in believing that by God’s grace the manager is able to bring out the best in himself and in others.¹⁸ Little advises the manager to consider that for most people the pastor is the “answer person” and the “one who gives” rather than needing help.¹⁹ Little also reminds the manager of the irreplaceable necessity for serious and beseeching prayer to God throughout the process.²⁰

Conflict Advocacy

Conflict advocacy is one management technique that is customarily overlooked. To most, the promotion of conflict is unthinkable; yet, conflict can provide several positive aspects. Sometimes a nonresistant environment can be a breeding ground for apathy and indifference. The conflict is actually necessary to cause movement towards new and fresh ideas. Another reason for conflict advocacy is that it can cause a closed community to become more acceptable to productive outside influences. In the Xeroxed copied notes of Liberty University’s class notes for DSMN 605, *Christian Leadership* it indicates that advocacy conflict acts as a signal of “healthy organizational life” showing the concern of a people willing to invest “themselves into its life.”²¹ The class notes also suggest other positive results of advocacy such as promoting growth, challenging the entrenched “status quo” methods of operation, and “establishing a

¹⁸ Douglass M. Little. “*Resolving Conflict*,” *Ashland Theological Journal*,” AJT 21:0 (NA 1989): 31.

¹⁹ Douglass M. Little. “*Resolving Conflict*,” 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

²¹ Conflict Management: Introduction; Unpublished Class Notes for Christian Leadership DSMN 605, Module 5 (Liberty University, Summer 2012), 30.

church's identity.²² So the positive aspects of conflict are many though, as with any aspect of Christian leadership, the guidance of the Holy Spirit is indispensable. Habecker adds, "Only as the art of confrontation is carried out under the divine leadership of the Holy Spirit will the kind of personal and organizational results desired by leaders be accomplished."²³ This would be true in the case of conflict advocacy, settlement and circumvention.

Conflict Settlement

Settlement in a conflict can be achieved through many mediums. Gangel suggested settlement styles to include "confrontation, compromise, working through, teaching, withdrawing, taking, giving, and agreeing."²⁴ Gangel scores four of the leadership models as follows: "withdrawing (1-1 level), taking (10-1 level), giving (1-10 level), agreeing (10-10 level)."²⁵ This graph gives two numerical figures: one for "focus upon own goals and one for "willingness to fulfill the needs of others."²⁶ It is the agreeing (10-10 level) which is known as the win/win situation. This is the goal (win/win) that every Christian leader should strive to ascertain; yet, the outcome is often dictated by the circumstances surrounding each conflict.

There are a couple of Christian principles that the manager must strive to stress throughout the process. The biblical formula found in Matthew 18:15-20 which promotes a sequential threefold approach should be considered: (1) approach the individual alone, (2) approach the individual in the company of a few reputable witnesses, (3) and take the matter before the

²² Ibid., 31-34.

²³ Eugene B. Habecker. *The Other Side of Leadership*. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987), 102.

²⁴ Kenneth O. Gangel. *Team Leadership in Christian Ministry* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1997), 192-197.

²⁵ Kenneth O. Gangel. *Team Leadership in Christian Ministry*, 192-197

²⁶ Ibid., 195-198.

church. If the individual is unchanging the church will exercise discipline. Keeping in mind, the goal of successful conflict management situation is to “help others reach their potential, including full-fledged stature in Christ”; therefore, all negative attitudes that would embarrass or downgrade the parties must be avoided.²⁷

Role of the Manager

It is important the manager realizes that the power of authority for conflict resolution does not reside within the manager. Halverstadt describes this power of authority as not consisting “of expending one's own resources but in activating communal resources.”²⁸ The manager must be purposely diligent to establish a climate that genuinely nurtures dual commitment with a true desire to reach a mutually accepted resolution. Another responsibility of the manager is to endeavor to provide a reasonable amount of flexibility throughout the resolution process. Augsburger has written a great deal on the subject of fair fighting during conflicts and in *When Caring is not Enough*, Augsburger notes certain things a manager of conflict can do to make the conflict fair, secure, and productive. Augsburger gives these ideas: utilizing an agreed upon appointment time and place, maintaining focus on the issue at hand, and prohibiting the usage of all “unfair, unlimited, and unconditional demands.”²⁹

Communicating and Working Through the Conflict

Communicating during a conflict is essential, though, it can be perceived differently by each principal. Communication has six parts: “a source, an encoder, a message, a channel, a decoder,

²⁷ Eugene B. Habecker. *The Other Side of Leadership*, 102.

²⁸ Hugh F. Halverstadt. *Managing Church Conflict*, 92.

²⁹ David Augsburger. *When Caring is not Enough*, 24-25.

and a receiver.”³⁰ Accounting for the multifaceted characteristics of communication difficulty is understandable. Adding to this are the sometimes purposeful roadblocks of generalizing, summarization, confusion and misrepresentations. When taking into account the complexity of communication the issue of an acceptable resolution is more probable. Leas, in *Leadership and Conflict*, lists some useful items during the de-escalation phase of the conflict. These items include boundary establishment, increased structure to the procedure, heeding to similar resolutions, responding to threats with reaffirmations of position, and involvement of an authority as a third party.³¹ Leas idealizes the forward movement of conflict resolution through the stages of searching for answers, verbalization of differences, and stimulation of an environment where joint resolutions can be effectuated.³²

Fair fighting is a necessary part of conflict resolution. The Christian leader should already be familiar and endorsing towards these types of fighting techniques. Augsburgur attributes “unpracticed fight patterns,” as “one way,” “win-lose,” and “all-or-nothing strategies” which can cause destructive disorder in any relationship.³³ Other potential results a conflict manager must prepare for are expectant fears such as job instability, criticisms, impositions, and rejection.³⁴ These fears often lead to self-destructive psychological behaviors that are fueled by guilt, stress, depression, and apathy. It is critical the conflict manager allows each individual to develop a personal identification of the conflict at hand. Keeping in mind, there are personalities that are

³⁰ John Stott. *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 80.

³¹ Speed B. Leas. *Leadership and Conflict*, 100.

³² *Ibid.*, 65.

³³ David Augsburgur. *When Caring is not Enough*, 17.

³⁴ Speed B. Leas. *Leadership and Conflict*, 60.

prone to willfully allow others to define things for them; the manager must prevent this from being the case. Additionally, the manager should consciously emphasize that acceptable differences can be a healthy result if used in a positive way. Another characteristic found in fair fighting is the essentiality of listening (and addressing) one principal's evaluation before allowing the second principal to begin presenting their assessment of the conflict. Certainly, this matter of working through a conflict is complex and factors such as time, clarity, patience, and spiritual principles are momentous. Susek, in *Firestorm*, advises of some actions Christian leaders can take during a conflict. These actions are to “*Step out*: set a spiritual example; *step in*: mediate the conflict; *step over*: rise above the conflict; *step up*: confront the conflict; *step back*: let the conflict burn itself out; *step down*: resign from the conflict.”³⁵

If a conflict manager has unsuccessfully exhausted the methods of “confronting” and “working through,” “mediation with a third party” should be considered. In this case, the church leader would be wise to consider such an immense resource because if the conflict remains unresolved, the potentiality of it causing damage and disintegration is considerable.

Many believe arbitration and mediation are the same; yet, there is a striking difference between the two. Though, both act as “go betweens,” the mediator acts as a third party seeking reconciliation with no final imposition power. Contrastingly, the arbitrator, also a third party seeking reconciliation does possess the added authority to impose a final decision on the matter. As can be imagined arbitration could possibly render an unfavorable decision and though the matter may appear to be resolved on the surface, it is not acceptable to all parties. This is why mediation is a better option for the Christian leader facing conflict within the church. Zimmer, in Berkley's *Crisis and Conflict* gives some sensible steps a mediator can take. Some of these steps would include: “Develop ground rules, facilitate storytelling, build an agenda, create alternatives,

³⁵ Ron Susek. *Firestorm: Preventing and Overcoming Church Conflicts*, 136.

restructure the conflict, understand the interests involved, and separate the past from future.”³⁶ It must be remembered that a mediator should be a third party person that has no vested interest in the conflict. It is this characteristic of detachment that allows the mediator to work through the conflict objectively. When a church related conflict surfaces and resolution is sought it is the Christian leader that is generally sought. Habecker, in reference to Augsburg’s book *Caring Enough to Confront*, gives four options to the Christian leader: “ignore the problem, winner-take-all, give in to the concern, and I’ll-go-halfway-if-you’ll-go-halfway.”³⁷ Of these four options, it is the last option that is most desirable in the church community setting.

Conflict Prevention

The third type of conflict management, conflict prevention, is rarely credited to its fullest effectiveness. Prevention, as a “common” idiom describes as, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, can avert later conflict. Furthermore, though prevention may not always prevent a “total” conflict, it can diminish the severity of the conflict tremendously. Another “common” saying, states: “everything rises and falls on leadership.” Leadership plays an enormous role in the area of conflict prevention. Leas, in *Leadership & Conflict*, delineates the differences between transactional and transformational leaderships. Leas describes transactional leadership as a leadership that meets the needs of individuals by giving them the necessary goods with no “joint effort” between the two parties.³⁸ Transformational leadership works on the concept of building, not controlling, the members within an organization. Leas sees transformational

³⁶ Chip Zimmer. “Crisis and Conflict.” In *Leadership Handbook of Management and Administration*, edited by James Berkley, 225-226. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 225-226.

³⁷ Eugene B. Habecker. *The Other Side of Leadership*, 92.

³⁸ Speed B. Leas. *Leadership and Conflict*, 28.

leadership as a builder of morality within that develops “a transforming effect” on all parties concerned.³⁹ Another preventative measure necessary for groups and organizations is sound decision making. A prudent leader will ensure a final decision, whether related to conflict or not, is owned by the group consensus as being satisfactory. In doing this, the leader will have the assuredness of an extended group willingness to stand by the decision with reduced potential for future conflict. Drushal adds, “A period of time in which to “try out” the planned change should be agreed upon.”⁴⁰ The overall stability of an organization essentially decreases the possibility for future conflict. Stable organizations have less conflict while unstable organizations experience more conflict.

Conclusion

Susek, in *Firestorm*, likens conflict to a firestorm and progresses through the different phases of a firestorm.⁴¹ Susek begins with the words, “The firestorm has passed” and commences to describe the results of such a storm as “a bareness of the soul,” and standing trees that are “disrobed.”⁴² How devastating conflict can be if the church leader has no skills for fighting such a raging storm. The congregation, once in harmonic worship and love for the Lord, can end up as “green foliage” that is turned into “a mountain of ash.”⁴³ Conflict unabated can leave the church as a “landscape . . . draped in death,” and presents “a grave challenge.”⁴⁴ Yet, Susek ends

³⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁰ Mary Ellen Drushal. “*Managing Change*,” *Ashland Theological Journal*. AJT 21:0 (NA 1989): 39-46. (41).

⁴¹ Ron Susek. *Firestorm: Preventing and Overcoming Church Conflicts*, 175.

⁴² Ibid., 175.

⁴³ Ibid., 175.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 175.

his summation on a high note, “It will demand true mastery of spiritual leadership to bring the life out of the ashes.”⁴⁵ The church leader does not have to enter this dangerous firestorm of conflict ill-equipped. Combating a firestorm (conflict) requires identification of the firestorm in the following areas of type, role players, source/cause, and a final assessment. The fire is raging! Wait, is it a controlled fire burn (conflict advocacy)? A controlled burn will bring positive results so management will be different. No, it is a fire (conflict) that calls for confrontation (conflict settlement). The leader will need the right equipment for the fire: established fire zones (boundaries), needed protections (structure), case studies of similar fires (similar resolutions), plan of attack (responding appropriately), and back-up (third party mediation). The fire (conflict) is under control and appears to be out!

Conflict circumvention is the next step in the Church leader’s path. What could have prevented such a fury? Were the people properly trained (transformational leadership)? Is this a piece of land others are willing to fight for (ownership of decision)? Is this organization correctly designed (stability) to minimize the potentiality for such a disaster? The firestorm has passed! The question is, will the conflict be an opportunity for growing or will it have devastating effect? This paper has tried to prepare the church manager for such a firestorm because it is an inevitable event in every church leader’s life!

⁴⁵ Ibid., 175.

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