

CONFLICT – TO CRINGE OR BE TRANSFORMED?

My son Lachlan has a great little game where a palm-sized ball asks questions, trying to guess an item you have chosen – a computerised version of “animal, vegetable or mineral?”. After about seven questions, the ball somewhat cheekily remarks “I know what you’re thinking!” - before it proceeds to ask further questions. So when I talk about the possibility of being transformed by conflict, I’m like the ball – I know what you’re thinking...

...because you are like me. Deep down, in the deep recesses of my gut, I find conflict one of the hardest things I ever have to deal with in life. I don’t like conflict. Like me, you were probably never taught how to respond biblically to conflict, even if you did grow up in a Christian home. Instead, your responses are probably largely instinctive, heavily influenced by the patterns of your family of origin, and may be somewhat hazy in terms of theology and biblical application.

Here are some statements about conflict you may associate with...

- more often than not, it seems to do more harm than good
- some people seem to thrive on conflict, but it’s hard to know how to respond to such people
- I know the Bible teaches some things that resonate with me about loving each other and turning the other cheek, but I really don’t have any overall biblical framework to understand conflict by
- I’m pretty good at identifying others’ faults but have a harder time with my own
- I wish I had some practical tools to help me
- in a school context, I can see that conflict is not a good thing, but it doesn’t seem to be an area that we touch on much or handle very well when it arises.

Now here are some other statements about conflict to cause you to ponder, and around which the rest of this article will be based...

- unresolved conflict in our lives and in our schools will inevitably cause considerable damage
- God is in the midst of our conflicts, and seeks to use them for our good
- God has given us all we need to learn how to respond biblically and redemptively to conflict
- there is great hope for us, even in our most troublesome conflicts, because God is the God both of hope and does not abandon us in this area
- a simple framework known as ‘the 4 G’s’ can provide you with a pathway forward for addressing conflict in your life
- how Christian schools respond to conflict is a major factor in determining the witness of the school for Christ both on the students of the school and on the broader school community itself (both Christian and not yet Christian)

The calling of Christian schools

One of the dominant themes of the 2008 Transforming Education conference in Hobart was the calling for Christian schools to be different; to be more than simply an image of secular schools being operated by Christian people. Writers such as Wolterstorff (2002), Edlin (2004) and Bishop (2004) have argued that the critical call of the Christian school is to expose and encourage children to embrace a thoroughly non-conformist Christian worldview that produces ‘dissenters and agents of change in the name of Christ.’ (Wolterstorff, 2002, 17).

If the Christian school is called to be different in imparting its educational, spiritual and relational framework to its community (which extends beyond the students to include *all* the staff, parents, Board and others who are associated with the School), then we must be aware that there is a powerful witness effect going on each day and on an ongoing basis. Students, parents and others alike are observing and judging the behavioural patterns of those representing the School (whether formally or informally), and assessing the Christian faith's authenticity on the basis partly of what they hear, but primarily on what they see and experience.

To use Paul's language as he writes to his dear Corinthians, who have struggled so hard in dealing with the challenge of authentic Christian living,

You yourselves are out letter, written on human hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Cor. 3:2-3)

So the issue becomes, when we face conflict in our schools, what letter are people reading? Is it a letter essentially the same as that written by the rest of the world's school communities, a letter in which themes of personal rights and vindication, minimisation of personal responsibility and resolution through power, compromise or avoidance are common? Or is it an altogether different letter? Is it one in which themes of justice, love, confession and forgiveness and redemption abide, and which is so dramatically different that it inspires people both to want deal with conflict themselves in a similar way and to consider the claims of Christ, the God/man who these Christians claim empowers them to act in this way?

The impact of conflict – negative and positive

We don't like to think about it, but it's extreme. Unresolved conflict operates like poison – sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, but always with devastating effect.

I have seen unresolved conflict in school communities (whether involving staff, Board, principal, parents, students or others) lead to breakdowns in people's health, loss of staff, loss of respect, loss of enrolments, consumption of inordinate human and financial resources, threats of legal action and, most tragically, loss of credibility of the witness of the school. At the same time, I have seen broken relationships miraculously restored through a Christian process in which both personal and substantive issues have been addressed seriously and in a godly manner. I have seen people once described as leopards actually change their spots through the power of God at work in their hearts and lives.

When this occurs, this is seen as so unusual, so profound and so truly counter-cultural as to have ripple effects that ring out widely through the School and its broader community. The ripple is a wave of amazement and hope and joy and encouragement that proclaims the power of the gospel, and lends enormous credence to the claims that Christian communities can be places of true 'shalom' peace.

A Christian worldview of conflict

Our human tendency when in conflict is to focus on the wrongful actions of the 'other' who is causing our pain. Our focus is the horizontal, earthly dimension. Yet if our God is truly a sovereign God over all parts of our lives, then this includes the area of conflict as well. In his landmark work *The peacemaker* (2002), Ken Sande presents a holistic biblical framework for responding to conflict. He argues that in order to respond appropriately to conflict, we need to realise that conflict does not take God by surprise, nor is it always an inherently negative or destructive thing. Rather, conflict represents a *stewardship opportunity* for God to work in our lives and in the lives of others.

Arguing from 1 Corinthians 10, in which Paul exhorts the conflict-riven Corinthian community to understand that in *whatever* they do, they are to glorify God, Sande contends that the starting point for all our thinking about conflict is not ourselves or the 'other', but rather God himself; we need to embrace a vertical perspective and seek to see things as God would have us do. We then begin to see conflict not as an unwelcome accident in which God abandons us to suffer on our own, but rather as an opportunity to glorify God, serve others and grow to be like Christ. (2002, 29-37).

A biblically based framework for responding to conflict

Adopting this way of thinking, what falls out is a simple approach based in Scripture that begins with God, proceeds with 'my' contribution to a conflict, continues with how I can lovingly but directly address 'your' contribution, then ends with a deliberate focus on being reconciled. The movement is thus God ⇒ me ⇒ you ⇒ us.

Sande has summarised the key principles in a 4 point approach to conflict called the '4 G's', offering a foundational practical application question that underlies each principle (2002, p.38):¹

Glorify God: (1 Cor. 10:31)
How can I please and honour God in this situation?

Get the log out of my own eye (Matt. 7:5)
How can I show Jesus' work in me by taking responsibility for my contribution to this conflict?

Gently restore (Gal. 6:1)
How can I lovingly serve others by helping them take responsibility for their contribution to this conflict?

Go and be reconciled (Matt. 5:24)
How can I demonstrate the forgiveness of God and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict?

And each of these four 'G's' is guided and empowered by the gospel of Christ, through which the seemingly impossible, both for us and for the 'other' becomes possible. Healing can come from brokenness, hard hearts can become softer, repentance, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation can occur.

Such an approach is inherently different to other approaches seen in our world, because it does not begin with vindication of my rights, nor is it predicated on minimising my contribution to a conflict. Rather, it is an approach that mirrors the whole focus of Jesus' teaching when it comes to conflict, which is on relational restoration. The seminal gospel teaching on this subject is found in Matthew 18. In this chapter, as the last teaching to his disciples before he leaves for Jerusalem to face his death, Jesus teaches his disciples about the principles to use in approaching conflicts which he knows will confront the church. Whilst the central direct teaching falls within verses 15-20, the teaching is 'bookended' first by a story of restoring the lost sheep to the community (Matt. 18: 10-14) and then by a further story of the need to forgive even when others sin against us (Matt. 18: 21-35).

In Matthew 18:15 contains the simple yet profound principle of going directly to our brother or sister in Christ when they sin against us. Therefore, without gossiping to others, we seek to address the matter one on one, with the aim that if they listen, 'you have won them over'. In other words, the relationship is restored.²

¹ Sande's work is replete with extensive biblical referencing – I have simply listed some key verses here.

² Matthew 18:16 envisages a Christian mediation process, and Matthew 18:17-20 proceeds to explain the church's role in helping parties address issues and be reconciled if these earlier processes have not succeeded.

This is profoundly counter-cultural and is normally observed in the breach. Our common tendency when we are hurt by someone is either to talk to others first, often in ways that are simply harmful gossip that is not aimed at finding biblical and godly responses to the conflict at hand, but is more about garnering sympathy or a support base from which to mount a counter attack. Or, alternatively, we say nothing, but punish them in other ways such as withdrawal of relationship or subtle (and less subtle) undermining of them personally or professionally (Backus, 1985, 117-19).

Yet if we begin, not with a mindset that is determined to 'win' or 'be justified', but rather a soft heart willing to explore what God may be seeking to achieve in and through me and the situation, the landscape begins to change. We start to be able to see the other person with more compassion, as we seek to understand the influences that may have contributed to their negative behaviour (a pregnant daughter without a husband? a health crisis in the family? an upbringing in which violence ruled? a mother dying of cancer?).

We may also see our own sinfulness more clearly – have we valued too preciously a good thing (such as praise or recognition from our boss, or the desire for excellence) to the point where it has become something of an obsession, or a substitute idol for our love of God? Is this an opportunity for me to say (or even learn *how* to say) sorry and ask for forgiveness in clean and unqualified language – something I have always found hard.³ Is God seeking to use this conflict to work on a part of my character that deep inside I know I need to address? Or is God seeking to use me in gentleness and kindness to another to lovingly confront them with their harmful conduct with grace and humility? Can I do this in a way in which they do not feel judged but rather truly loved, sensing that my heart is not to 'nail them to the wall' but to be reconciled, and perhaps to help them address an area of their life that has hurt them and their other relationships even more than I myself have been hurt?

Jesus calls us to love one another even as he has loved us (John 15: 9-17). In this passage, Jesus explains that this exhortation is a command that is inextricably linked to our confession of him as Lord ('You are my friends if you do what I command'). Yet it is for our own benefit as well ('If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that *your* joy may be complete'). God promises to bless us if we obey him, even in relation to the thorny area of conflict!

Loving confrontation does not involve becoming a Christian doormat. Yet it *does* involve love. Speaking the truth in love does not involve what I call 'Pollyanna peacemaking'; blithely minimising the harm caused by others and taking the blame for their conduct ourselves. It *does*, however, require love. Sometimes it may be more loving for a person who has caused harm to face the consequences of their wrong (eg. this might sometimes be the case for damage caused by student vandalism, or loss caused by embezzlement), but this will be accompanied by the hand of forgiveness and a context of restoration to community.

Well, what do I do with all this?

To cringe is natural. To be transformed is Godly.

At a personal level, I would encourage you next time you are involved in a conflict to reflect seriously on how your responses stack up against the challenge to a truly God-oriented and God-honouring mindset that I have presented in this article. How is your heart? Are you seeking to win (fight), to withdraw (flight) or to please and honour God? Are you willing to seek to allow God to

³ I encourage you to visit the PeaceWise website www.peacewise.org.au or the Peacemaker Ministries website www.peacemaker.net for more practical help in the 'how to's' of things such as saying sorry and approaching difficult conversations with others with whom we are in conflict.

work in your life to change you, and perhaps to change the other person involved as well, through applying a process such as “the 4 G’s”? Do you realise that his Holy Spirit is waiting to help you in this, is already taking your unspoken prayers up to the heavenly father, and longs to empower you with his strength and wisdom and hope and encouragement as you entrust this matter into the hands of your loving heavenly father?

At a school level, you can influence your community in many ways. To begin, *each and every* personal conflict that you approach truly seeking to please and honour God contributes to the school community becoming more like a shalom peace community rather than one which struggles to distinguish itself from worldly cultures. You can recognise the critical importance of how conflict is addressed in the school community, and seek to develop values and practices that reflect truly biblical principles in practice. You can support key people gaining training in this area to be better equipped to help others. You can share these principles and model them in your own life. And in so doing, you will contribute to the school’s witness in ways that will surprise and delight you.

Go for it.

And God will be with you as you do.

References:

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Wolterstorff, N	2002	<i>Educating for life</i> , Baker. Grand Rapids



If you would like to learn more about how to respond biblically to conflict in your life or the lives of others, we encourage you not to miss the wide range of training offered by PeaceWise, a national cross-denominational ministry organisation dedicated to ‘Promoting peace and reconciliation in relationships through biblical principles and the power of Christ.’ The 2008 training is in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth on various dates from May to August. For full details and to book online, see www.peacewise.org.au