

Dealing With Enemies, Dealing With Conflict

Some of the findings from the psychological studies of pastors that have been conducted over the last 25 years is that

- (1) Pastors' psychological profiles are very similar to those found in other helping professions (e.g. being a nurse), deriving significant pleasure from the well-being and good relations they enjoy with the people they relate to in their job, while finding bad relations and conflict with others to be difficult to manage and personally hurtful, even devastating.
- (2) Pastors report that they have trouble managing conflict and often practice avoidance or deal with conflict in dysfunctional ways that create further problems
- (3) Pastors report that their work produces a high degree of stress and they regard their profession as being one of the most stressful professions one could pursue;
- (4) Pastors consistently report that the number-one source of job-related stress is that associated with or arising from conflict situations.
- (5) Most seminaries offer little instruction in how to manage and deal constructively with parish-based conflict
- (6) There is relatively little good literature on this topic from a traditional Christian theological perspective (as opposed to books that are written from an essentially secular systems perspective on psychological and sociological techniques for conflict management).

For lack of time, I want to make a few brief points about what feeds conflict:

- (1) people approaching a situation with different assumptions and expectations, with believing that the other person has the same assumption (which they don't) and then making (false) inferences about the motives or character of the other person
- (2) Mistrust or suspicion can lead people to express a greater degree of anger (and more sharply and destructively expressed) than the situation itself could ever warrant.
- (3) passive-aggressive approaches to the other person (not revealing or openly discussing the perceived offense)
- (4) constructive communication with the other person has been cut off and one speaks maliciously about the other person to third parties
- (5) constant reference is made to the past to show a trend in the other person's failings, leading up to this present situation;
- (6) demonizing the other person (they are a person of such-and-such type and that kind of person is bad and must be opposed)
- (7) the aim now becomes to hurt, put down or shame the other person (seeking to win the conflict at all costs and refusing to accept solutions to the conflict)

Some Perspectives On Conflict From Paul

- 1) Know how to delimit the issues that are worth fighting about and avoid taking a position on all other matters:
 - a) Rom. 14:1: "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters" (practices not central to the apostolic preaching about Jesus' death and resurrection, repentance, baptism and the coming of the Kingdom)

- 2) Paul explicitly defines this limit in terms of the preaching about Christ and the Cross, without spending too much time obsessing about a person's possible hidden motives or how one's own reputation might perhaps be impacted by their actions:
 - a) Phil. 1:15-18: "It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice."
 - b) 1 Cor. 1:10-13 (the preaching about Christ and the Cross to be a source of unity, in place of arguments about human persons and authority: "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?" Note also the way this is continued in v. 18, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" and v. 20b, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (i.e. human arguments about authority)
 - c) Gal. 1:6-8: (only when the teaching about Christ and the cross is fundamentally distorted and misunderstood does Paul step in with a word of rebuke)
- 3) Don't demonize "them" (the people you have decided are the opposition and lumped into some general category of people who are a problem and need to be opposed or aggressively managed or dealt with)
 - a) Who is "the enemy"? Note that the New Testament ordinarily reserves this term for the Devil (1 Pet. 5:8; Lk. 10:19; and probably 1 Tim. 5:14-15--note the enemy/Satan parallel) or death (1 Cor. 15:26). It is not the human being before you.
- 4) Emotional responses are not the most important thing and shouldn't lead us to hasty reaction or personal retaliation,
 - a) Rom.12:17-21 (cf. the intro. in vv. 14-16) sets out the general principle, carrying forward Jesus' teaching in the Beatitudes
 - b) 2 Cor. 7:8-9: Paul did not intend causing sorrow or pain, but he also sees an unexpected good thing coming out of that experience (repentance/change), so pain is not something to be avoided at all costs
 - c) When people have reacted hastily, the church should encourage and help in the process of reconciliation, precisely because people who have reacted hastily find it awkward to try to work this out by themselves (cf. Phil. 4:2-3 on Euodia and Sentyche)
- 5) In the end our well-being and the well-being of others depends upon God, not on human beings, their motives, their plans, their actions or their character.

God's plans, actions and character are what we must rely on and it is with this that we are commanded to be content (cf. Phil. 4:11-12; 1 Tim. 6:6-8; Heb. 13:5-6).

(An "enchanted worldview")

6) Introducing spiritual resources (e.g. praying, studying the Bible and asking questions) into a conflict can make a difference if one is careful not to use this to argue directly for a particular agenda.

7) Reconciliation and restoration must go beyond the behavior to deal with the issues of the heart and to provide real closure (see Tucker, *Primer for Pastors*, pp. 99-100)