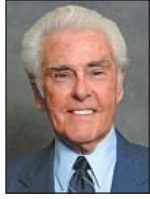


Work through conflict instead of fighting with others



John Howell

Conflict is prominent in the picture of some human relationships in the Bible. It may be conflict in families, conflict brought about by theological differences, conflict between political groups, or conflict in struggles for prominence among individuals.

It is often easy to misread someone's intentions or motives. We tend to see things from our own perspective and experience. When we fail to see the other's side, we are prone to criticize and judge, assuming that those persons or organizations are inherently wrong. When both sides in conflict talk about the issues, misconceptions can be avoided or corrected.

In our text, the Israelites misjudged a situation. Fortunately, they didn't immediately act on their assumptions. Instead, they sought answers and found a solution.

The setting for the conflict (vv. 1-9). Joshua brought together the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh to commend them for their fulfillment of the promises made to Moses to support their brothers in conquering Canaan. Joshua blessed them and sent them away to their tents. So they returned to their homes.

However, when they crossed the Jordan River, they decided to build a large altar which appeared to the other tribes in Canaan that the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh were rejecting worship of Jehovah and were setting up this altar to worship and sacrifice offerings to another deity. This became the source of conflict for the tribes in Canaan who worshipped at Shiloh.

Confronting the issue directly (vv. 11-12, 15-18). When the sons of Israel heard about this altar, the

immediate impetuous response was to organize for war against the three tribes. This plan was proposed before the other tribes had any official word from the three tribes about their project.

But a different plan was put into effect. Phinehas, the son of Eleazar the priest at Shiloh, chose 10 representative chiefs of the tribes at Shiloh to be an investigative group and to meet with the tribes building the altar. When the two groups met, Phinehas asked, "What is the unfaithful act which you have committed against the God of Israel, turning away from following the Lord this day, by building yourselves an altar, to rebel against the Lord this day?" (v. 16)

Listening to the other side (vv. 21-27). After the sons of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh heard what the Israelites understood about the purpose of the altar, they explained that it was not for sacrifice but was a witness to their own descendants that they were worshippers of Jehovah. "It will be a witness between us and you and between our generation after us, that we are to perform the services of the Lord before him" (v. 27).

Embrace a solution that honors God (vv. 30-34). Phinehas and his leaders were pleased with the explanation given to them so they returned to Canaan to report to the sons of Israel "and the word pleased the sons of Israel and the sons of Israel blessed God, and they did not speak of going up against them in war.... And the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad called the altar Witness; 'For,' they said, 'it is a witness between us that the Lord is God'" (v. 34).

After both sides understood what had caused the potential conflict, adequate conversation resolved it without warfare. There are other examples of such conflict resolution

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in the Bible but one that is most relevant to leadership in conflict is the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1-35.

Barnabas and Paul had been traveling in Gentile territory and had preached the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:47-48). At the close of their missionary journey, they reported to the Antioch church "all the things that God had done with them and how he had opened the door to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). In the midst of this rejoicing, some men from Jerusalem insisted that unless the Gentile men were circumcised according to the law of Moses, they could not be saved. This aroused a great discussion between these men and Paul and Barnabas.

The church leaders decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem with certain others for a conference on this matter since the very heart of the gospel was at issue. Barnabas and Paul were well received by the leaders and the church but the opposition was vocal. Then Simon Peter reminded them of how God had led him to witness to the Gentiles. James stood up and declared, "It is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles."

He told the congregation a letter would be sent to specify certain expected behaviors but not that they had to become Jews to be Christians (Acts 15:23-29). This pleased the apostles and the elders along with the whole church.

When the Antioch church had the letter read to them, they rejoiced and the conflict was resolved for the future of the gospel. Dedicated leadership led the way to resolution.

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