

How to proceed

Conflict is everywhere, even in Sunday School lessons. We consider three biblical texts that help us deal with conflict from a Christian perspective. In Matthew 18, Jesus



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offers practical steps to dealing with conflict. James 5 points out the serious task of helping a “sinner” turn back from dangerous living. 1 John reminds us of our key ministry to pray for those falling into dangerous, even fatal, behavior.

All these texts call us to confrontation, which most of us find uncomfortable and even fearful. Note that none of these texts teach confrontation is easy or guarantees success. But resolution and restoration are at the core of faith in Christ, whose life and death offer us new life through God’s grace.

If you don’t want to hear the truth, restore a broken relationship or solve a problem, retreat into self-preservation, defensive silence or emotional detachment. The Matthew text is recorded between two key passages. The first is the story of the shepherd who leaves his flock safe in their pen while he goes in search of one lost lamb. The result is the rescue of the “lost” lamb and God’s rejoicing (Matthew 18:22). The second text has Jesus answering Simon Peter’s question about how many times we should forgive someone, with the staggering “forgive them as many as seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18:22, NRSV). These texts about extravagant grace set the example for our living and relationships as God’s people.

Jesus teaches three steps to possible reconciliation and resolution of conflict. First, go to the offending person alone to “correct” them. If they hear you and respond willingly to repair and restore the relationship, you have both won (Matthew 18:15). Second, if the offending person refuses to hear and work on reconciliation, go back with one or two witnesses to record the event (18:16). Third, if there is still no resolution, take the matter before the

church and treat the offending person as though they were a “Gentile or tax collector” (18:17).

These labels are very harsh. This process is carefully thought out and protects the one who is wronged as well as the church. Communication goes both ways. The last step shows a willfulness that cannot be resolved and a judgment that reflects the ultimate truth and standard of heaven. Jesus’ final words here remind us that such action by the church involves more than two people and demonstrate before the watching world that God’s people must embody integrity and morality.

The James passage also carries the tone of a serious attempt to rescue a person who has acted or spoken in a way that harms another and may also damage the witness of the church. There is no mistaking the one who “wanders from the truth” (James 5:19) and the person who “brings a sinner back from the wrong path” and helps them experience forgiveness (v. 20).

James understands human weakness and the power of a church member’s careless behavior to bring shame on a church. He also reminds us that our compassion and honest confrontation can help turn a life around and cause heaven to rejoice (v. 20). This text addresses the problems of false doctrine and serious immorality in a church. A church is sometimes forced to act in situations!

The 1 John text addresses a brother or sister “committing what is not a mortal sin” (5:16, NRSV). Instead of confrontation, John focuses on prayer: “Ask, and God will give life to such a one — to those whose sin is not mortal (does not result in death)” (v.16, NRSV). Much speculation has been offered on what constitutes “mortal” sin, but no definition is offered. There is no doubt that no matter the sin, we should seek to confront the individual, seek resolution and trust God with the outcome.

It is clear how we should deal with broken relationships and behavior that harms others and damages the

Formations

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Scripture: Matthew 18:15-19;
James 5:19-20; I John 5:16-17

reputation or harmony of a church. Notice that no guarantees are given. When we have been harmed by someone, it is not easy to act out of love, seeking forgiveness and resolution. Pride, fear, anger and shame are all feelings that rise like a wall and hamper healing.

I have been in a situation where I was slandered by an influential person in the church and community. A wise older deacon counseled me to “leave it alone and try your best to treat the offender well in public and people will see the truth.” My advisor was right. But it took me many months to forgive and be free from emotional pain.

Another situation I faced was never resolved. I tried my best to follow the biblical advice, praying, seeking the counsel of trusted friends and finally going to the person who continued to cause problems. I took an impartial witness and tried to find restoration. The meeting only produced more pain. I sought the help of a couple of respected church leaders, but they refused to listen and help. The result has been more damage. Prayer has been my source of strength and God has blessed me in surprising ways. Some things we simply have to trust to God as we seek his help and move on.

Years ago, I found myself in conflict with a church member who was very angry with me. We had no personal contact until we were put together at a church picnic. At the conclusion we sat down in the quiet of the park with a mutual friend and talked about our broken relationship. Healing resulted and we are friends to this day.

Whether it’s a broken relationship or broken lives, God’s grace is the solution. The Bible offers sound advice.

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