

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Conflict

No one has to convince missionaries that conflict exists in missions. It has been a part of missions since the very beginning in the early chapters of the book of Acts. Not only has there been conflict, but the basic issues are still the same in that there are cultural conflicts which bring disagreement between missionaries and headquarters as well as conflicts between individual missionaries on the field. Why do we have conflict? What should we do about it? What steps can we take to resolve it? What do we do if you feel like we are attacked? What if it cannot be resolved? Let's consider some of these questions.

Why do we have conflict?

Conflict is normal whenever people who hold different opinions are in a close relationship. Conflict occurs whenever people who care have different opinions on important issues. The more the people care and the more important the issue, the more intense the conflict. Conflicts are simply a fact of life, and they are destructive only if not handled correctly.

Let's take as an example the conflict that arose in Acts 15. Paul and Barnabas returned from their first term of service to the local church that had commissioned them in Antioch. They held a mission conference and told about all that God had done through them. Everything went well for a long time until men from the culture in which headquarters was located visited the church in Antioch.

These men began teaching that unless the men who had responded to the message preached by Paul and Barnabas were circumcised, they were not saved. The issue was whether or not this "custom taught by Moses" was a cultural issue or a salvation issue. Thus we have a situation in which missionaries who cared deeply (Paul and Barnabas) disagreed with others on an important question (Salvation). This brought the missionaries into "sharp dispute and debate with them" (v.2).

What should we do about conflict?

The conflict needs to be resolved as quickly as possible. In Matthew 5, Jesus noted that if you are offering your gift to God at the altar and suddenly remember that there is an unresolved conflict with another believer, you should leave your gift there, go settle the conflict, then return to offer your gift to God. We are to settle matters quickly, but we should carefully pick the time and place to be reconciled. Sometimes the conflict is still at a high emotional pitch, and it would be best to wait a while before approaching the other person. If other people are around, it is best not to involve them in the dispute. The important thing, though, is to resolve the conflict soon because the feelings aroused by unresolved conflict soon become established and are more difficult to change.

What steps do we take to resolve it?

Jesus gave a three-step procedure to use in resolving conflict in Matthew 18. In American culture as in much of Western culture where we tend to think linearly, it is usually most appropriate to take these three steps in sequence. *However, if the conflict is*

with someone of a different culture, be sure to consult with someone raised in that culture before trying to resolve the conflict. These steps in this order may not be culturally appropriate in that situation, and the conflict may only be worsened if you do all of them in this order. The steps Jesus gave are:

- Approach the person alone. Often the two of you can resolve the conflict by yourselves and your friendship will be stronger than ever before. Of course, you must choose the time, situation, and manner of approach carefully.
- Find a mediator. If a direct approach does not work, or if it is not appropriate in the culture, you should choose a mediator. Again, choose a mediator carefully, one that you believe both parties will see as unbiased and in which both will have confidence.
- Take it to the church. If neither you nor the mediator can bring about resolution, the issue should be brought before the larger body. After the church comes to a decision, both of you are to accept the decision. The church is instructed to treat either party who does not abide by the decision as being outside the church.

Let us return to the conflict in Acts 15. Paul and Barnabas were in "sharp dispute and debate" with the visiting teachers, but were unable to settle the conflict alone. They apparently called in mediators there in Antioch, but they were also unable to settle the conflict. So, Paul, Barnabas, and some other believers were sent to headquarters in Jerusalem to settle the conflict.

How do we go about resolving it?

Assuming that the issue is an important one and that you have carefully

chosen the time and situation, here are some guidelines found in Acts 15 that will help you resolve the conflict, whether it is two of you alone or it is a whole body of believers.

- Give both sides a chance to present. Paul and Barnabas presented their position, then the Pharisees presented theirs.
- Give time for adequate discussion. This was a crucial issue (salvation) so there was "much discussion."
- Be quiet. Note that "the whole assembly became silent" as they listened to the discussion. Too often in such situations there is an undercurrent of whispering in the crowd.
- Listen. "They listened." There is a big difference between being quiet and really listening. Put yourself in the other's place and really try to hear and understand what the other side is saying. Too often we "turn them off," let our minds wander, think about what we are going to say in reply, or just doze off in a long discussion.
- Allow others to finish. "When they finished, James spoke up." Do not interrupt until others have finished.
- Keep to the issue. The issue here was whether or not circumcision was necessary for salvation. Imagine all the other issues that could have been proposed from the books of the law! Also discuss the issue, not personalities.
- Express feelings appropriately. There is no report of verbal attacks or counterattacks during the discussion.
- Apply scripture. There may be differing interpretations, but certainly at least look at what the Bible has to say. James quoted from Amos 9.
- Propose a solution. James said, "It is my judgement, therefore, that..."

- Settle on essentials. They all agreed on several items and wrote a letter.
- Accept the decision. When the delegation delivered the letter back to the church at Antioch, “The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.”
- Reaffirm your friendship. “After spending some time there” for fellowship, they were sent off “with the blessing of peace.”

What if we feel like we are being attacked?

Sometimes you are not the one trying to resolve the conflict and the other side approaches you in an inappropriate way. A good example of this is found in Joshua 22. The Israelites had just finished years of fighting for the Promised Land. Every one of God’s good promises had been fulfilled and they were ready for a time of peace and rest.

As the tribes living on the east side of the Jordan River were going home, they built a large altar on the property belonging to the tribes on the west side. This angered the tribes on the west side and they “gathered at Shiloh to go to war with them.” Fortunately, rather than just attacking, they sent a delegation to talk first; unfortunately the delegation was not skilled in conflict resolution. It was an important faith issue, but Phineas and his group assumed things about the thoughts and motives of those who had built the altar and were predicting what would happen—things that should not be done in conflict resolution.

The delegation started with “How could you.....How could you...” Read verses 16-21, noting how many times “you” and “yourself” are used. Put yourself in the place of those hearing the accusations and see how they must have felt.

Fortunately, someone on the east side of the river knew about defusing a conflict situation. First he tried to defuse the situation by affirming that they were both completely dedicated to serving the same God, and he did it using “we” “us” or “our” messages rather than “you” messages. These first person pronouns appear 20 times in verses 22-29, an average of more than two per verse. Following the guidelines we found in Acts 15 and refusing to read minds, judge motives, or predict what will happen, and by using “I” messages (One on one, or “we” messages in a group setting), one can defuse and resolve conflicts as shown in Joshua 22.

What if the conflict is not resolved?

Sometimes conflicts cannot be resolved, and the options then are either “agree to disagree,” or part company. Just after the good conflict resolution in Acts 15, we find an irreconcilable conflict between Paul and Barnabas. In planning to go back for another term of missionary service, Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them. Paul did not, and they had “a sharp disagreement.” Apparently Paul was task-oriented and did not want to take a chance on someone quitting, but Barnabas was people-oriented and did not want hurt feelings.

We are not told how they tried to resolve the conflict, but they were not able to do so, and “they parted company.” Of course, God works in all things to accomplish his purposes. He sent Barnabas and Mark to Cyprus, while Paul and Silas went to Syria. Note that later Paul changed his mind about Mark and asked to have him visit (2 Timothy 4:11). God uses our conflicts to advance his work.

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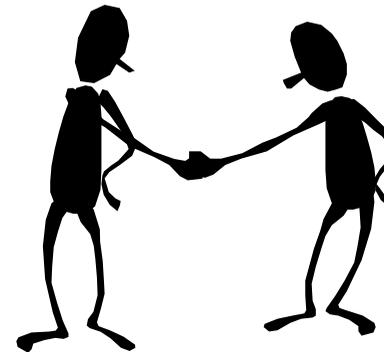
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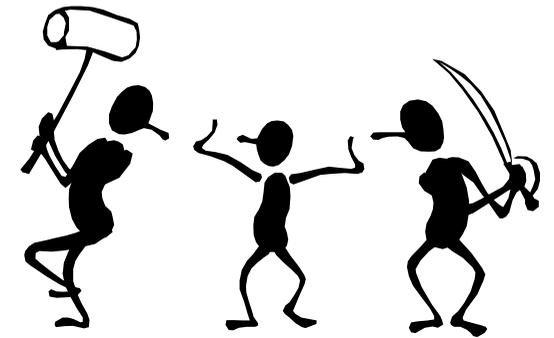
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