

## Church Conflict and Forgiveness

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Conflict is an inevitable part of church life. As long as people care about one another and are committed to various beliefs and issues, conflict will emerge. Such conflict in itself is not sinful; the mismanagement of conflict is what causes hurt among people. These hurts, if unresolved, will produce broken relationships and divisions within the church fellowship. Such brokenness requires forgiveness if the fellowship is to heal.

### Definitions

Conflict is a neutral word. It is neither sinful nor good, but it becomes one or the other by the way people interpret and manage it.

Church conflict occurs when two groups or two people or two ideas want to occupy the same space at the same time, but there is room for only one. Suppose you are in a room with only one door. The door is only wide enough for one person to go through. Suppose you are going out the door and another person is coming in, and you both converge in the doorway. Two of you would be occupying the same space at the same time, but there is room for only one.

This example is an illustrative definition of conflict. It is a normal happening. At this point no one has hurt the other. The real issue is how the conflict is to be managed. If healthy, redemptive management is used, conflict is resolved and forgiveness is not needed. If, however, conflict is destructively mismanaged, sinful behaviors will be expressed and will require forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not simply letting bygones be bygones. It is not an emotional feeling; rather, it is an act of the will. The Bible commands us to forgive one another (Eph. 4:32). These commands appeal to the mind, not to the emotions.

In that forgiveness is an act of the will, it involves a desire. A person must desire for a broken relationship to be repaired and healed. Followed by desire is an act of the will that says, "I choose to give up my right to hit you back." In its fullest sense, forgiveness is a person's act of the will motivated by a spiritual desire to release the other person of the responsibility for the hurt he or she received and from that point on never to hold it against the offender(s) again. Some emotions may linger for a while, but the responsibility for the hurt is not held against the offender(s).

## Categories

Mismanaged church conflict requires forgiveness in the following categories: individual, group, and institutional.

**Individual** - When individuals hurt and sin against each other, forgiveness is needed.

A suburban church was embroiled in conflict. Accusations were made about the pastor's authoritarian leadership decisions, the secretary's lack of confidentiality, and the deacons' running the church. Within the deacon body were three lifelong friends who found themselves divided over these issues. One supported the pastor; one supported the secretary; and the other sided with the minority opinion of the deacons. They quit speaking to one another, called one another liars, and threatened to resign as deacons. The hurts were deep.

The church asked me to help resolve the conflict. Each member of the church was given an opportunity to share his or her point of view and hurts. This in itself started the healing process. Issues were defined, and specific recommendations for healing were given. All recommendations were explained and clearly understood.

A special meeting of the congregation was held where testimonies and sentence prayers were spoken. The congregation then unanimously adopted and immediately started implementing the recommendations. At the close of the meeting, evidence of forgiveness manifested itself. Individuals went to one another and asked for forgiveness. People on each side of the issue embraced, and a spirit of fellowship began to return. As I was leaving the meeting, one of the three lifelong friends came to me and thanked me for helping. He said, "You know about me and my friends. Just a moment ago all three of us forgave the others and we shook hands. We are friends again."

**Group** - Forgiveness is needed among organizational groups that fight over power and control.

A large church invited me to assist them in solving their leadership conflict. The deacons were in competition with the church leadership team. The staff was divided over which group had authority to do what. The pastor was caught in the middle, and he had withdrawn from his leadership role with each group. He began making autocratic decisions that increased the intensity of the conflict.

One of the first steps in forgiveness is allowing people to be heard. In this process each group shared their point of view and feelings. The congregation was given the same opportunity. From listening to and evaluating the facts, the problems were clearly defined. Recommendations were presented, and the church accepted them.

During the church meeting, the pastor asked the deacon body, church leadership team, and staff to forgive him. He further announced that he had reconciled with the deacon chairman and that they were making plans to have a deacon retreat to mend their differences. I saw members of each group converge on each other and ask to be forgiven. They were talking about how to work together in the future. The whole congregation was alive with a new spirit of fellowship.

**Institutional** - Forgiveness is also needed at the institutional level. This has to do with the way the church is organized to function. Institutional authority structures such as constitution and bylaws, policies, job descriptions, and budgets can be a perpetual breeding ground for conflict. If these structures are not followed or revised to meet the relevant vision of the church, they will keep the church in constant turmoil.

One church with institutional conflict called and invited me to help. The people were polarized into staff, generational, and decision-making factions. Individuals were publicly vocal about the factions. Others were withholding their giving, and a few were moving their memberships. Some were boycotting the worship services to force the resignation of the pastor.

As an outside person, I listened to all the concerns. I read and evaluated all of their documents and how they were organized to function. The constitution was well written, but it had a corporate institutional feel to it. The deacons were given great administrative powers. The church leadership team was composed of all the deacons, church organizational leaders, and committee chairpersons. They made many decisions apart from the congregation. The congregation only had quarterly business sessions. The decisions made apart from the congregation caused them to feel powerless. The pastor, by constitutional directive, was the chairperson of this large council. Since the pastor was the chairperson and congregational business sessions were quarterly, he had to make many decisions behind the scenes. Some viewed him as a “dictator,” and thought the deacons were “running the church.” As long as the church was organized in this manner and as long as the membership wanted more input in the decision-making, conflict would emerge regardless of who the pastor or deacons were.

Recommendations were made and accepted by all, save one. A process for implementing the recommendations was immediately set in place. Procedures for reviewing and revising all the institutional documents that were breeding the conflict were established. The church began to feel hope and a renewed commitment to work through their problems. Giving increased, attendance picked up, people stopped boycotting the worship services, and an atmosphere of corporate unity returned to the church. This is institutional forgiveness.

## Restructuring

Forgiveness removes relational barriers so that reconciliation can take place. Individuals, groups, and institutional structures are now friendly again. In such an atmosphere of unity, people are speaking to one another, agreeing to disagree, and focusing on the future.

Restructuring affects the way people will relate in the future. Some will resign from a position but will do so in good faith. Others will accept positions they have earlier refused. Silent and shy people will become more active because of the renewed respect of one another's points of view.

I know of a church with small membership that radically restructured. At the conclusion of the church's accepting my recommendations, 35 percent of the members chose to move their membership to another church. Both groups embraced and asked the other to remember them in prayer. Comments such as "I am sorry," "I didn't mean to hurt you," and "Please forgive me" were heard. All the groups who differed remained friends, but they restructured the way they would relate in the future. Forgiveness made this positive restructuring possible.

Restructuring also means changing documents and policies to assure a positive future for the church.

A small-town church did just that. Its constitution stated that the personnel committee was to be composed of active deacons. This meant that the pastor could not feel as free as he often needed to be in discussing church and personnel issues with the deacons. The personnel committee was responsible for recommending salaries and potential dismissal of a pastor, which created unhealthy tension between the pastor and deacons.

The pastor detached himself from the deacons meetings, which added to problems between the pastor and deacons— so much so that the deacons asked him to resign. After working with the church, the deacons withdrew their request for his resignation.

As a result of reconciling their differences, the church restructured the constitution and pulled the personnel committee out of the deacon body and made it more representative of the membership. The pastor returned to the deacon body. He later asked the deacons to work with him and give him time to relocate. They restructured their relationship, and within six months the pastor relocated. The deacon body, the personnel committee, and the pastor were relating differently as a result of restructuring.

Forgiveness doesn't mean just letting bygones be bygones. It creates a new relational environment in which people can agree to disagree and make healthy decisions. Forgiveness also creates a way for people to work through problems rather than acting too hastily and making unwise and hurtful decisions.

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