

# Dealing with Conflict While Shepherding the Flock

## *Introduction*

Ministry is often not as tidy as we would like it to be. It is redeemed sinners called to minister selflessly, and model Christ to other redeemed sinners, and to reach out to those who need the redemption that is only available in Christ Jesus. Because we live in a sinful world, and because Christians still struggle with sin, there are conflicts in churches and in the practical outworking of local church ministry. Unfortunately, when we think of ministry we tend to glamorize the glorious spiritual victories and the progress of the Word of God, assuming there will be no conflicts in the midst of ministering the Word to people. Ministry does have its great times of rejoicing and blessings, but it also has times of conflict. The true issue deals with how we handle conflict in ministry. The Lord is more concerned that we give him glory in the midst of conflict than that we avoid conflict or that we prevail in conflicts. The Lord even uses conflicts to shape us and our churches into what he would have us to become. Honestly, much of this cannot be learned in formal education. There are probably many pastors in this room who have encountered conflicts in ministry that you never foresaw coming. Even though we have not foreseen conflicts, and often know we are inadequate for the task, God's Word has the principles we need for dealing with conflict in ministry.

## *Sources of Conflict*

Biblically, there are two obvious sources of conflict: satanic attack and depravity. It is important to note, that if we were living in a sinless world without the presence of Satan or depravity we would not experience conflicts in life or ministry. However, we do live with the presence of evil and sin, so conflicts do exist quite frequently in ministry.

### Satanic Attack

There are several examples in Scripture of conflict in ministry coming from a satanic attack. For example, Ananias and Sapphira were emboldened by Satan to deceive the church and to lie to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5). Paul says that some widows in the church had become busy bodies eventually leading to their apostasy (1 Tim 5:9-16). External opposition to ministry by other religious people is sometimes satanically inspired (Rev 2:9).

### Sinful Hearts

Although it is impossible to discreetly distinguish between the work of Satan and the sinful conflict brought about by human depravity, there are examples in Scripture of conflict that came because of depravity. Demas loved the world and that caused him to abandon Paul during Paul's imprisonment (2 Tim 4:10). The conflict between Paul and Peter over the issue of keeping the law was evidently due to sinfulness on the part of Peter (Gal 2:11-14). Clearly, Diotrephes's own proud heart motivated him to oppose John and those who had gone out for the sake of Christ's name (3 Jn 5-10). Certainly, the Scripture contains additional examples,

however, this is sufficient to demonstrate that conflict in ministry often comes from our fallenness.

### Genuine Disagreement

Some conflicts do not seem obviously to arise from satanic attack or from human sinfulness. Sometimes the conflicts simply come from genuine, sincere disagreements between believers. These are not cases of clear biblical teaching or principle. An example of this in the Bible is Paul's disagreement with Barnabas about whether to take John Mark on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:36–41). There seems to be no biblical reason to take Mark or not to take him. It was a simple disagreement. Sometimes Christians have disagreements of this sort. These ought not to lead to sinful slanders, politicking or malice.

### *Kinds of Conflict and How to Respond to Them*

Christian ministers will encounter conflicts. These arise for the reasons we have considered above. Conflicts can be quite discouraging in ministry. Conflict is consistently one of the things pastors I have spoken with list as the reason they have considered leaving the ministry. Handling conflict biblically is essential to a healthy ministry. Considering some of the biblical examples of conflict will provide us with ways to address conflicts in our own ministries so that we can glorify God in the midst of conflict. I will illustrate some of these situations with my own experience. I do not desire to be the hero in these illustrations; I only hope that by sharing some of my own experience, I can be a help to others.

### Conflict Due to Criminal or Legal Disputes

First, the Bible makes clear that Christians should not resort to lawsuits to resolve conflicts between one another (1 Cor 6:1–8). However, this does not mean that Christians don't sometimes bring suits against one another. This prohibition against lawsuits does not apply to criminal matters. The Bible does not teach that it is wrong for a Christian press charges against someone for the other's criminal actions. Many states have mandatory reporting laws that require Christians to report serious crimes, like child abuse, to the authorities. Let us consider a passage of Scripture that describes Paul's interaction with the authorities on legal grounds. Acts 26 details Paul's defense before Festus, King Agrippa and Agrippa's wife Bernice. I want to note a few of Paul's actions that can serve as examples for us when interacting with legal authorities, or when we are involved in legal conflicts. First, Paul is truthful. Whether in Acts 26 or other passages where Paul interacts with the authorities he is truthful. Second, Paul takes the opportunity to be a gospel witness (Acts 26:27–39 cf. Phil 1:12–14). Third, Paul exercises his legal rights. He sees no reason to be a martyr voluntarily, or suffer for the sake of suffering (Acts 26:32 cf. Acts 22:25). Finally, the Scriptures also clearly teach that as Christians, if we do suffer it should be for the sake of the gospel, and not as evil-doers (1 Peter 4:15–16).

I have been involved in civil cases related to our church as well as mandatory reporting situations. They are never something we desire. I will say that they have been

some of the most difficult trials I have personally faced in ministry. Being a gospel witness in these situations is the area I wish I would have done better. It is easy to get caught up in legal protection and forget that God has given us exposure to people we may otherwise never encounter in our daily lives.

### Conflict with Fellow Pastors over Doctrine

There are sometimes conflicts between fellow ministers because of false teaching. It is our responsibility to proclaim the truth and warn against error. Paul was an example of this. He warned against the false teachers (Gal 1:6–9). He also called out Peter for giving support to a teaching that endangered the gospel message (Gal 2:11–14). However, on other occasions we see Christians gently teaching one another when there is a misunderstanding about biblical truth (Acts 18:24–26). We need wisdom to know how to deal with these situations. For example calling out false teachers like Benny Hinn does not require the private meeting of Apollos in Acts 18. Benny Hinn has publically taught false doctrine for decades. We should warn people against such false teachings as the prosperity gospel. When dealing with a true brother who is teaching something false it is sometimes wise to deal with them in public as Paul did with Peter. Peter's sin was public and endangered the public representation of the gospel. Paul needed to deal with it in public so that the body of believers would clearly understand the truth. In our day, if a man puts something in print, it is often appropriate (though not demanded) to answer that man in print. This kind of public response can help protect those who have been misled by what was written. Third, most situations of doctrinal disagreement between believing brothers are best dealt with in private conversations. The demagoguery of some pastors calling out men they disagree with on minor points does not help anyone. I have been publicly named in sermons by men who had private correspondence with me. That is not the biblical pattern, as I understand it. I also know of at least one situation in which I wrongly mentioned a brother in a sermon (it made for a great illustration after all), but it was not the correct way to handle the situation.

### Conflict with Fellow Pastors over Non-Doctrinal Issues

Many conflicts that arise between pastors are issues of conflict because of personality differences or sin. As pastors we are not immune from pettiness, jealousies, and passing unfair judgments. How should we handle such disagreements? The Bible gives us principles for dealing with conflicts with other believers (Matt 5:23–24). We need to be sure that we do not let conflicts with our brothers linger or fester. When they are left unresolved they often become bitter conflicts that impact more than those involved (He 12:15). This is especially true if the conflict is with pastors within the same church. Our personal considerations need to be set aside for the spiritual health of people. Also take note of the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas. They disagreed over a judgment issue regarding John Mark. This even caused them to go separate ways (probably for the good of the spread of the gospel). However, there is no indication that they went around maligning one another. We can choose separate ways for differences of opinion without labeling another brother as an apostate, false teacher, or a dangerous leader (Acts 15:36–41).

## Conflict with Deacons or Church Members

Clearly the Bible teaches that the pastors of the church are to direct the church and exercise the teaching authority of the church (1 Tim 5:17). Biblical church governance and the roles of pastors, deacons, and congregation are not widely understood in our churches. Many churches simply operate on a corporate model; some operate with a lay tribal leader directing things. These kinds of structures can lead to conflict between the pastor and the congregation. These conflicts need to be handled with care. We must remember that we will answer for the souls of our people. It is not primarily about winning a political fight; it is about the health of souls (Heb 13:17). I have had several of these kinds of conflict in ministry. Sometimes they are over doctrinal disputes. We need to kindly teach the truth. There is no need to back down from the truth, but we must speak it in love (Eph 4:15). Some of these conflicts are due to difference of opinion that get blown out of proportion. We must not ignore small disagreements and relational struggles. They can become big. By not following the Bible's teaching about anger and reconciliation we allow sin to grow (Matt 5:23-24; Eph 4:26). One of the hardest areas for us as pastors to deal with is conflict due to our own sin. These cases call on us to humble ourselves and be models of repentance for our people (1 Pet 3:8). Pastors who refuse to admit they have sinned teach their people that it is best to cover sin than to repent.

### *The Right Heart in the Midst of Conflict*

Each one of us is going to face conflict in ministry. Ultimately, what is most important is not whether we prevail in the conflict; what is most important is how we respond to the conflict. Our response impacts our souls and the souls of those to whom we minister. We must always respond with humility (Jas 4:6). We must also remember that we need to be gracious in our speech in the midst of the hardest conflicts (Col 4:6). Finally, consider the example of Christ; he faced many unjust and unfair conflicts. We are called to follow his example (1 Peter 2:23). We should not think it strange that conflicts come our way if we follow our Lord (Matt 10:24-25). We should not come to false conclusions that God is punishing us, or that a fellow minister who has fewer conflicts has more of God's blessing. We should focus on the response of our own hearts, and our impact on others.

### *Conclusion*

We are going to face conflict in ministry. The conflicts we face are often attacks of Satan, or the outworking of sinfulness. However, regardless of the conflicts, we are called to be like Christ in the midst of them. We must remember that in the midst of conflicts, even through them, God is working his plan for the sanctification of our souls and those of our people.

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