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Reconciling Battling Members

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> Conflict resolution is more than a bleak necessity.
> —*Edward Dobson*

One young man in our church, a fairly new believer employed by another member in our church, resigned his job with the understanding that the company owed him a sizable sum of money.

Months passed, and the owner, a long-standing member of our church, refused to pay. Finally, rather than sue, John lodged a complaint with the Restoration and Healing Committee of our church. After six months of mediation, both parties agreed to a settlement of 20 percent of the original sum.

Again, months passed, and we were told that the owner of the company would not pay up. So the church board got involved again. The committee voted to discipline the company owner, barring him from ministry in the church and placing his membership on hold.

Saturday, at 10:00 p.m., he called me at home and demanded to see me immediately.

Like it or not, pastors at times are firefighters. And it doesn't take a ten-alarm fire to scorch a pastor—a flickering match can inflict third-degree burns, and a smoldering mattress can kill through smoke inhalation.

Whether members feud over something as minor as Mary forgetting to invite Betty to her tea or something as major as thousands of dollars, the pastor risks hurting feelings, feeding opposing agendas, making enemies, and creating factions.

So why hazard it? Why not just let people handle their own problems?

Deciding factor

I'm not always a firefighter. In our church, the Committee for Restoration and Healing was established to handle cases including threatened divorce, business disputes, interpersonal strife. I'm not on that committee. They resolve most situations without my input (twelve to fifteen cases at any given time).

But not all. Though I had scrupulously avoided being sucked into the dispute described above, when the owner of the business phoned me on that Saturday night, I had to act.

When we met, he maintained, "I really don't owe him the money."

After some discussion, I replied, "You agreed to this settlement. You signed off on it, and you haven't met your commitment."

The following week he cut a check. Both men and their wives, formerly close friends, met with me. They apologized to each other, asked forgiveness, hugged, and prayed.

A pastor can sometimes be the deciding factor in such a resolution. Though he may not say or do anything differently than others, simply by his weight of position and spiritual authority, he breaks the deadlock. That can mean better spiritual health for the individuals involved and greater unity for the church. Such reconciliation doesn't happen automatically. I've learned a few things over the years, though, that make it more of a possibility.

Avoidable mistakes

I have found three mistakes that can turn peacemaking perilous:

To mediate alone. One member of our church filed for divorce against her husband, which automatically involved her with the Committee for Restoration and Healing. They met with her and her husband, and they concluded that the couple had no biblical basis for divorce.

They informed her of their decision, offered support and counseling services, and in accordance with church policy, said, "For the next twelve months, you will be an inactive member of the church. During that time you need to work toward a biblical resolution of this conflict. After twelve months, if you have not resolved it, the church will be forced to drop you from membership."

She aborted the process, withdrawing her membership. However, a year later she remarried and returned to the church. At that time we did something that in retrospect I think was unwise. The elders wrote her a letter: "You are not welcome here until you face up to the situation which was unresolved when you withdrew your membership." We didn't want her to divorce her new husband but simply to acknowledge, "Yes, I have strayed from God's will, and I'm sorry."

A week later we decided it had been a stupid move—that we were not prepared to try to stop people from attending. So the chairman of the board and I met with the couple. She defended her actions as biblical. We disagreed with her and said they could attend the church if she and her new husband wished, but we also told her we would not accept them into membership without an acknowledgment of wrongdoing.

She replied, "We still plan to come."

They attended for a while. Eventually they stopped, and the last I heard, she had retained an attorney and was considering suing us for discrimination against divorced people.

When predicaments like this arise, I'm always relieved I haven't tackled the dispute alone. Nothing can be more dangerous for a pastor. Group intervention is advisable for three reasons:

1. There's wisdom in a multitude of counselors. In this case, we determined our every step based on the wisdom of the group. One man would bring up a point, another a counterpoint, then a consensus would emerge. The group's collective wisdom surpassed anything I would have decided on my own.

2. There's protection in numbers. When situations get ugly, a pastor needs the legal protection of the board and the corporate status of the church.

3. Numbers dilute the possibility of the dispute narrowing into a personal conflict—me versus another person. The decisions made are decisions of the church, not mine. Sometimes the final agreement will be unfavorable to one or both parties, so one or both will be dissatisfied or bitter. The pastor who tackles it alone is in a no-win situation.

To take sides. One pastor I know made this mistake in marriage counseling. The husband and wife both were drinkers, but the woman was an alcoholic. In one session, after the husband had complained about how her drinking was weakening his commitment to the marriage and how their teenage kids detested their mother, the pastor took the side of the husband.

"If you don't get a hold of yourself," he said to her, "you may lose your family. You've got to take responsibility for your actions."

That may have been true, but the moment the words left his mouth, he realized he had blundered. The husband, who was no saint, felt justified, and the wife felt attacked from all sides. She never returned to counseling with that pastor.

Each side in a controversy desperately wants the pastor to be the judge (and to rule in their favor, of course). To such couples, I have learned to say, with Jesus, "Who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" I assured them, "I am here to help *you* resolve this issue."

I or the committee can't resolve other people's conflicts. We can't agree for them. We can't forgive for them. If there is going to be true reconciliation and peace, the combatants must achieve it.

To rush into intervention. Although doing nothing can allow small fires to enlarge, a pastor rushing to resolve a conflict can cause equal or greater problems.

1. For small problems or petty conflicts, a pastor's intrusion can be threatening and heavy-handed. Knowing that the pastor will call every time they have a tiff may scare some people out of the church. Nobody wants a busybody for a pastor.

2. The pastor's involvement in a dispute can inflate a conflict between individuals into a church-wide problem. As leader of the church, anything I do or say has the potential to become a church issue, and thus a

potentially divisive or polarizing issue. Others can perceive me as throwing my weight around or abusing power, giving ammunition to those who are already opponents of my leadership.

One pastor I know tried prematurely to resolve a conflict between four leaders in the women's group. The problem had smoldered as a personality conflict but ignited when they disagreed over program plans for their monthly meetings. When the pastor tried to settle the feud by publicly backing the decision of the leader, he suddenly found himself the enemy of the other three women. Soon their husbands also opposed him, and within months nearly every committed leader in his small church had left.

3. In a small church especially, if a pastor involves himself frequently in conflict resolution, he will find himself mediating more and more disputes. Even squabbling children instinctively know how to get clout on their side, running to their parents with tears in their eyes. The more pastors settle fights, the more they fan the flames of sibling rivalry, and the more they will be called on to referee.

4. Maturity involves learning to settle disputes we have with others. I'm not helping my people to grow in Christ if I jump in and try to help them solve each of their problems. They've got to learn to work these things out for themselves. I want to be there when things threaten to get out of hand; that, after all, is one of the purposes of the church—to be there in crises. But it's also a purpose of the church to help people to mature in faith. And that means, most of the time, letting people settle their conflicts themselves.

Intervention

Most disputes are complex, with combatants stubbornly crouching in their bunkers, so I have to coax people to the peace table in stages.

Determine whether intervention is necessary. Naturally, this is a judgment call. But, in general, if the dispute has been ongoing and is beginning to affect the church body, then it's time to try to intervene.

An argument between the Sunday school superintendent and a Sunday school teacher about the lack of crayons in the supply room is one thing. When the Sunday school teacher and the superintendent start telling other teachers about the stubbornness of the other, creating suspicion and anger in a whole department, then it's probably time to step in.

This applies whether or not the parties involved come to me or our committee. Just because someone approaches us with a conflict doesn't mean it's worth the committee's time. And just because people don't come to the committee doesn't mean we won't step in. It depends on how destructive the conflict could become.

This rule also applies to cases that don't directly involve other members. For instance, divorce proceedings may appear to be a private affair. But if the man or wife is involved in leadership, then the church's integrity is at stake. If the couple can't resolve their differences, then whether or not they approach the church, we will attempt to intervene.

See whether the parties are willing to end the fight. Just because we think intervention is necessary doesn't mean we will proceed with it. Our experience has shown that unless the parties involved are willing to end their fighting, there's no point in going through a resolution process. The antagonists need to admit that their dispute displeases God and that they need to do something about it. If they can't see that, there's no point in seeking resolution. Church discipline becomes the only option.

Negotiate a process agreeable to both parties. Although we offer some guidelines for a resolution process, the parties have to negotiate the process themselves. If we simply impose a process on them, they are much less likely to agree with the outcome.

The parties have to agree on what they are going to decide, what steps they'll take in deciding it, and who will help them decide. If either party is uncomfortable with one or more members of the restoration committee, we'll let them bring in a person they do trust. In other words, we're pretty flexible at this point, as long as the parties aren't stalling and are putting together a process they can both agree to.

In the case of the two men involved in the business dispute explained in the introduction, they agreed at this point that they would submit to the process of negotiation as well as abide by the recommendations that were made.

Require a commitment to submit to the process whatever the results. If the parties have agreed on the process, we assume they will submit to the results. But in any case, we want them to say so—it's another step of commitment to resolving the dispute. Saying this up front also reminds people that they better have been serious in negotiating the process—they are literally going to have to live with it.

In addition, we caution them, "You probably will not agree with everything decided, but since mature, biblically minded, and objective people will be mediating, the settlement will be as fair as possible. The only way to achieve reconciliation is through give-and-take on both sides. You can reconcile without agreeing on all the details."

It was only because we took this step that we were able to get the employer to pay his former employee. He reneged until I forcefully reminded him of his promise earlier in the negotiations.

Execute the mediation process. Sometimes this can take six months to a year. Along the way, each party may put roadblocks in the way. The process may require meeting with the aggrieved parties separately as well as together.

For example, recently an employer who is a member of our church dismissed one of his secretaries who is also a member of our church. She filed an age-discrimination suit against him with the local employment commission. She also notified the church of her actions.

We met with her and requested she remove her claim from the public forum and let the church mediate her situation. She agreed to do that, and her employer agreed to our mediation. It took several individual meetings before the parties were brought together and the problem solved. The mediation also included an expert on employee relations and the law.

Bring closure to the reconciliation. Beyond dousing the flames, we seek to restore the relationship. After the settlement, we encourage the former foes to join in Communion with the mediation committee. This may involve seeking forgiveness from each other. In some cases, it takes several hours to confess and resolve many hurts. When one conflict between two businessmen was resolved, they met together, asked forgiveness, cried, and hugged.

Doctor's role

An acquaintance of mine told me something a doctor told him: "Doctors don't heal the body; the body heals itself. Sometimes a disease or infection becomes more than the body can handle on its own. With the medication and procedures we use, we are trying to give the body a chance to heal itself."

In conflict mediation, I see my role in similar terms. I can't coerce people to reconcile. But just as a doctor can resort to ice packs for a sprained ankle and antibiotics for an infection, so I can bring factors to bear in a dispute that will encourage the disputing parties to seek their own healing. These are:

Scripture. Sometimes a pastor feels he or she exerts no more authority than the referee of a World Wrestling Federation match. However, while the WWF doesn't exactly stand behind its referees, God wholly backs up his Word.

Scripture is the strongest factor influencing people to begin and continue the painful process of reconciliation. God-fearing people, convinced that conflict and bitterness displease God, will swallow their pride and make peace with enemies. It doesn't take more than a few gentle reminders, especially from Ephesians, to encourage people to reconcile.

My use of Scripture, of course, depends on the clarity of the Scripture. When the verse under question is clear (for example, that stealing is wrong), I state my position unequivocally. When a verse is subject to two or more interpretations (on the divorce issue for example), I explain my interpretation and clearly label it as such. I don't try to strong-arm them into buying my interpretation, but rather insist that they decide what they think is right. I leave the issue between them and God, because that's where the issue ultimately rests (it's *their* conflict). I never get embroiled in an argument over correct interpretation.

Motivation. By approaching the parties in conflict and saying, "Let's try to work this out," I serve as an instigator of, and impetus to, reconciliation. Just as a preacher brings people, especially people who otherwise avoid that decision, to the point of faith with an "altar call," so I beckon adversaries with a "peacemaking call."

Productive communication. Until they start talking, rivals cannot reconcile. But when opponents try to communicate on their own, they often lock horns and do more goring than good. They accuse, threaten, and yell.

In the presence of a pastor, they are much less likely to behave in the same way. A church committee can perform this same service, but there's also something about the office of pastor that puts people on their best behavior. In some pastoral situations, that reality makes me squirm—I usually don't like people to put on a

false front when I'm around. But when I stand between two angry people, I'm thankful for the forbearance that my office encourages.

Accountability. On occasion, I've had to warn warring members that they were jeopardizing their opportunities and privileges in the church by their ongoing strife. If they don't settle, I tell them, they'll forfeit leadership roles, ministry functions (such as choir), and ultimately church membership.

I'm not waving a stick at that time; I'm simply informing them of the implications of their stubbornness. No one should minister whose spiritual life is crippled by a refusal to restore relationships. No one should continue as a member who blatantly ignores Scripture and church leaders. And although committee members can bring others to accountability in this way, sometimes it takes a word from the pastor to drive the point home.

Staff infection

Conflict between staff has many of the same dynamics as does conflict between members. I see only a couple of things that need to be kept in mind. In particular, most staff conflict is due to one of two causes:

1. Lack of communication. Staff members assume what other staff members may or may not be doing.

2. Getting cornered. Staff members take a position and then can't gracefully back down.

One Sunday night the bathrooms were backed up by paper towels in the commode. The custodians blamed the young people, though they didn't have witnesses. They came to the youth pastor and said, "You've got to control those kids."

"Did you see any young people even go in there?" he asked.

"No, we didn't see them."

Well, that led our business administrator to rekey every door in the building. He restricted certain areas of the building to pastors' access only, and to prevent kids from entering after their activities, he denied the youth pastor a key to the front door of the building. The result was mistrust and palpable animosity.

Finally, I convened our management team of seven people and our ministry leaders and said, "This key stuff is a pain in the neck. Let's talk it out."

In that setting everyone involved was more flexible, and we resolved the problem quickly.

I have found that most staff conflict can be solved by getting people to sit down and talk by themselves. If they have tried and cannot settle the dispute on their own, I offer to sit down with them and mediate the problem.

In contrast to mediating with others in the church, I am much more willing to mediate alone between staff members. For one thing, I see that as part of my responsibility as head-of-staff. For another, there are unique staff dynamics that should remain confidential.

I didn't enter the ministry to settle scuffles. I get frustrated when I have to take time away from preaching, evangelism, and discipleship in order to hose down fires. But ministry boils down to relationships, to individuals working together in harmony. Positive, peaceful relationships are the building blocks of a strong church. As a result, conflict resolution is more than a bleak necessity: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."

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