

CHAPTER ONE



SOLUTION

DEALING WITH NEEDS AND WANTS

Experience is the best teacher—especially other people’s experiences!

The good news? The two of us have already made every mistake in the book. Take our word for it: The best thing you can do is discard any misconceptions you may have about relational conflicts, arguments, and disagreements.

I (Rich) can still remember the morning when Dave, a close friend, took me to breakfast and proceeded to confront me about the way I treated people. I sat there and listened to him because I knew Dave loved me. He had earned the right to confront me. I am in ministry today, in part, due to his confrontation. I thank the Lord I have been married for several decades. Yet, without Dave’s love for me and his courage to say something, I doubt my wife LouAnna and I would have made it.

Dave risked our relationship. I am a strong-willed individual. Ask my friends; they will tell you that when operating outside of the Spirit’s control, I have an opinion on everything. I will reduce everything to an opportunity to win. My attitude forced everyone around me to “walk

on eggshells.” One of my coworkers said that having a relationship with me was like “kissing a sparkplug.”

Yet Dave loved me enough to wade in and confront me. I left that confrontation so angry I had to collect myself before I could drive out of the restaurant parking lot. I vowed to never speak to him again. Yet, over the next several days, God used the event to bring me to my knees. I couldn’t get past Dave’s words because I knew how much he loved me and how hard that conversation was for him.

EXPLODE THE MYTHS OF RELATIONAL CONFLICT

Most of us have probably felt this sting from what Scripture calls the “faithful wound of a friend” (Proverbs 27:6). But as we have discovered in our years of counseling, most of us find it easier to lick our wounds rather than learn from them. Redeeming relationships requires us to stop licking and start learning. Exploding the myths about relational conflict is the best place to begin.

Myth #1: My relationships will succeed without confrontation

One of the hidden scars of unresolved conflict is disunity. It’s true that, for a short time, avoiding conflict can make us feel like we’re flying down the superhighway of life, the wind in our hair and our low-profile Michelins barely touching the pavement. Then a huge pothole appears (“out of nowhere” we swear). Suddenly we’re faced with the insurmountable truth—there can be no lasting success in a relationship based on pretense: No matter how much we want to believe the myth, conflict will not take care of itself. That’s where the rubber really meets the road.

Jesus knew this. Buried in the passionate prose of John 17, where Jesus Christ prayed that Christians would be “one,” lays a deep concern: He asks his father, God, to “protect us from the evil one” (Satan). This protection promotes the

kind of affectionate unity that draws people toward God (John 17:20–23). What is one of the tactics of the evil one? He convinces us that we can succeed without facing and fixing relational conflict.

Earlier, Jesus had given careful instructions about this: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23–24). He knew we’d be able to convince ourselves that we can succeed without redeeming our relationships. But, as General Douglas MacArthur so aptly put it in the midst of his greatest relational conflict, “nothing could be further from the truth.”

Myth #2: Disagreement is sin

I (Rich) had been the dean of students in a Christian liberal arts college in the Northwest for several years when I encountered Eric. In a casual conversation in my office, Eric, a freshman, expressed some strong disagreements about some of the college’s policies. My response surprised him.

“I don’t like some of them either. Let’s compare notes and see if our lists are the same.”

I knew Eric’s family background. He came from a home where to ask “why?” was tantamount to rebellion. I always sensed that Eric wanted to be obedient, but he also wanted to know the basis of the rules in his house. Like many of us in our overly analytical teen years, he saw a disparity between what was taught in the Bible and what was practiced in the home.

Since his father would explode at him during their disagreements, Eric learned to disagree in the same fashion. Neither Eric nor his father had a clue that the sin in disagreement is often in *how* we disagree. When we shout, change the subject, dredge up the past, stomp off,

manipulate with tears, hit, retreat to silence, blame, use sarcasm, humiliate, or threaten to leave the person, we are sinning. Learning how to disagree is far more important than trying to avoid all disagreement. Allowing people to disagree with us gives them the freedom to bring the conflict out into the open. It allows the participants to seek resolution and growth.

God's Word models this for us. The Bible contains an entire genre of Psalms called "Lament Psalms." These Psalms include sentences such as "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (10:1) and "Hear me, O God, as I voice my complaint" (64:1). Was it wrong or sinful for the Psalm writers to express their personal conflicts with God? It sure doesn't look like it!

What God seems to be reminding us is the fact that such feelings are real and need to be communicated. Notice how these same Psalms resolve: "You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry" (10:17); and "Let the righteous rejoice in the Lord and take refuge in him" (64:10). C. S. Lewis said that, in these psalms, a person sees in print a feeling we all know too well: "Resentment, expressing itself with perfect freedom, without disguise, without self-consciousness, without shame—as few but children would express it today."¹ The point? If a personal conflict with God is not sin, then conflicts with his creatures aren't sinful, either. It is what we do with the conflict that makes the difference!

Perhaps one of the greatest lessons that parents, children, friends, pastors, teachers, and employers must learn is this: Allowing individuals to express their feelings about conflict (in an appropriate manner) can help them move toward resolution. Personal conflicts shouldn't be labeled "sin."

Myth #3: I can still grow without resolving conflict

It turned out that young Eric was angry about one specific area of standards at the college. The college required all

freshmen students to live in the college residence halls. In addition, each student who didn't choose a specific roommate was assigned one. If a roommate conflict arose (and they often did), we would not consider changing roommates until the two had gone through a series of controlled confrontations and exercises together.

"I'm old enough to vote—I shouldn't have to be told where to live," Eric retorted. "Besides, my roommate is a jerk."

"What does he think of you?" I asked.

"I don't know ... he probably thinks I'm the jerk."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "I know this is a tough experience, but will you sit down and talk? I don't know if I can satisfy your concerns, but I can help you understand how this standard can benefit you in your education."

During the next hour I shared with him the results of national studies that demonstrated that in nearly every area—emotionally, socially, academically, and spiritually—the on-campus freshman excels over the off-campus freshman.

Eric was a typical private college student. He had never shared a room. Sharing space for the first time was one of the most difficult things he had done. He finally confessed that most of the time he liked his roommate, but that the night before they had "blown-up" at each other.

"Are you willing to talk to him about these things?" I asked.

"I think that if I really told him what I feel, he'd be hurt." His shoulders relaxed and a previously hidden compassion crept into his words.

I've heard this excuse many times when dealing with fractured relationships, but withholding the truth can also mean refusing to love. John Powell affirms this notion:

Most of us feel that others will not tolerate such emotional honesty in communication. We would rather defend our

dishonesty on the grounds that it might hurt others; and, having rationalized our phoniness into nobility, we settle for superficial relationships.²

Had Eric taken this immaturity with his roommate into his marriage, he would have left for the reason many couples do—unresolved conflict. It's difficult to experience the blessings that personal growth brings to our relationships if we don't resolve our conflicts.

Myth #4: Real love doesn't confront; it forgives

The greatest love we show doesn't end at forgiveness. It ends at the truth. We want it to be delivered with kindness, gentleness, and concern, but we want it said. When we refuse to confront because we think we should be more forgiving, we are saying that we do not really love the other person.

Our culture doesn't help much. We have been brought up with the idea that true love only forgives. Like the characters in Henrik Ibsen's play, *The Wild Duck*, we are consumed with the idea that telling the truth will always lead to more pain. We feel we are cursed ("thirteenth at the table") if we dare try to help someone walk into and through a time of conflict. But, unlike the ending of Ibsen's play, Scripture reminds us that conflict doesn't have to consume and condemn.

The Apostle Paul explained to the first-century church in Galatia that, along with forgiving people, we are to help those who are struggling—even if it initially creates more conflict (Galatians 6:1). We are to confront them in love, just as we would hope to be confronted. This is the context for the next, and much loved, verse: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (6:2). Initially confrontation creates some conflict, but when the confrontation contains commitment, it also creates a new sense and degree of caring.

I (Marty) often face this uncomfortable task in my office at the college. One day I'm confronting the manipulation that seems to haunt "late" assignments, the next it's a lack of friendliness between roommates. Although the confrontations rarely start well, they rarely end poorly. Those awkward times not only help the students, they also bring a new dimension to my relationships—to my ideas about "caring" and the "law of Christ." It's one thing to forgive and quite another to share the world of caring that lies just beyond forgiveness.

Both of us have worked with hundreds of Erics over the years. Most of these roommates have, by the end of the year, become inseparable. In fact, in Eric's case, a decade later he and his roommate are still best friends. Real love doesn't just forgive; it confronts.

Myth #5: Agreement is the glue of unity

This myth is often translated, "If I disagree with her, she will leave me." LouAnna and I (Rich) have been married for more than forty years now. We are a great team. We are united over the main issues. There are still many things, however, about which we disagree. We decided long ago that we are not going to let our disagreements divide us. We resolve those that are important. We "live and let live" those that are not important.

In my present ministry, I have had the pleasure of working with an individual who played for the NFL. When discussing this fact, he commented that every football team is made up of players who have their own ideas about how the team should function. Their differences add strength to the team. The quarterback sees the game from his perspective. The lineman sees the game from his perspective. They don't always agree on what's important or what the next play should be. But when the play is called, they each do their part to make the team a success.

Unity is not dependent upon agreement.