

20 WAYS TO RESOLVE SERIOUS CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH

Ken Sande, November 11, 2021

PDF with Live URL Links at www.rw360.org/resolving-church-conflict

The COVID crisis, combined with heightened racial and political tension, has triggered unprecedented conflict throughout our nation, as well as in the local church.

Churches are literally dividing over masks, racial policies and political positions. As a result, pastors are spending untold hours every week talking with frustrated parishioners, deflecting personal attacks and trying desperately to rebuild unity within their leadership teams and congregations.

Other serious issues are occurring more frequently in Christian homes ... and often end up in pastors' studies.

Marital conflict is on the rise, in some cases triggering threats of divorce. Some parents are taking their frustrations out on their children, many of whom are unable to leave home to find respite at school. Financial pressures, workplace tensions, layoffs and struggles with alcohol and drugs are also increasing pastors' counseling workloads.

Having conciliated hundreds of church conflicts over the past three decades, I would like to describe 20 key peacemaking principles that have proven to be effective in healing church divisions, reuniting leadership teams, restoring marriages and settling multi-million dollar lawsuits.

Each principle is briefly summarized in this post, and then illustrated and explained in greater detail in a linked post that shows how the concept was applied in an actual conflict.

If you're a church leader, I encourage you to discuss the detailed explanation of each principle with your leadership team, either as part of your regular meetings or during a special weekend retreat. Then plan specific ways that you can model, teach and apply these concepts to the relational challenges your church and members are facing today.

If you're not a church leader, please pass this information on to your pastor. Before doing so, however, please read this post yourself. If you do, you'll see that these principles readily apply to the conflicts you face in your own marriage, with your children or in your workplace.

God's peacemaking principles are relevant to every relationship and conflict in life!

1. Remember the Golden Result

We all know the Golden Rule: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” But do you know the Golden Result? It’s a direct corollary to the Golden Rule: “Other people will usually treat you the way you treat them.” Not always, but usually. Because that’s how God wired us.

Blame others and they will usually blame you. Admit where you’ve been wrong, and you’ll be surprised how often others do the same. Listen patiently and openly to others, and hold off on making premature judgments, and others will be inclined to do the same with you, which will open the way for understanding and increase the likelihood of agreement.

So anytime you’re in a conflict, ask yourself, “How do I want to be treated?” Then engage others by treating them exactly the same way (Matt. 7:12). You’ll be amazed at how often this changes the course of your conflict.

For a real-life illustration of this principle in action, see [A Stolen Baby, \\$200,000,000 Lawsuit and an Astonishing Reconciliation](#).

2. Bring the Gospel into Every Conflict

When Christians are in conflict, our tendency is to resort to “the law.” We love to use God’s Word to show where we’re right and others are wrong. This approach only drives us further apart.

You can show your people a better way. Instead of bringing the law to others, bring them the gospel. Remind others of the forgiveness we all have in Christ. If we are trusting in him, our sins have been paid in full. We can put off the sinful patterns of the past and put on a new character and new habits, so that we act like Christ himself (Eph. 4:22-24; Rom. 8:29).

As you remind yourself and others of these promises, you can bring hope, reduce defensiveness, make it safe to confess sin and inspire Christ-like behavior. I’ve seen this principle work with deeply divided elder boards, multi-million dollar lawsuits ... and even with a teenage girl whose protective force-field would have put the Starship Enterprise to shame (see [Penetrating Barriers with the Gospel](#)).

3. Expose the Idols that Drive Conflict

James 4:1 provides a key insight on conflict: “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?”

In many church conflicts, these passions are not inherently sinful. They are often good things we want too much. This gives rise to a downward spiral, which I often refer to as the “progression of an idol:” a **good desire** turns into a **consuming demand** that leads us to **judge others** and eventually **punish them** if they don’t give us what we want.

For a detailed description of this destructive spiral and how you can keep it from crippling your church, see [Getting to the Heart of Conflict](#).

4. Guard Against Amygdala Hijacking in Yourself and Others

The Apostle Peter's denial of Christ is a classic example of a neurological/emotional failure that today is commonly referred to as "amygdala hijacking." As Peter demonstrates all too painfully in Luke 22:54-62, this process typically involves sudden, intense emotions that trigger an impulsive reaction that is deeply regretted.

Most of us have experienced these types of impulsive reactions in our marriages, as well as with our children, coworkers or fellow church members.

The good news is that the Bible describes four simple steps you can follow to avoid this destructive dynamic and to take control of even the most intense emotions. This process is summarized in the simple acrostic: **READ** (**R**ecognize and name your emotions; **E**valuate their source; **A**nticipate the consequences of following them; and **D**irect the power of your emotions on a constructive course).

For a detailed explanation of both the neurology and theology behind amygdala hijacking, and for two videos illustrating how the READ concept can be applied in daily life, see [Four Ways to Defeat Amygdala Hijacking](#).

5. Weave Relational Wisdom into Your Church

When we get into a conflict, most of us have a tendency to go "two-dimensional." We focus obsessively on our own righteousness and the other persons' wrongs. Back and forth, back and forth, and the conflict gets worse.

Relational wisdom, which is gospel-driven form of [emotional intelligence](#), helps people to always view their relationships "three-dimensionally" by seeking to be *God-aware*, *self-aware* and *other-aware* in every relational interaction, just as Jesus taught when he commanded us to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:37-40).

One of the easiest ways to help your people develop this type of relational wisdom is to teach them to practice four simple acrostics until these key relational skills become automatic habits. To learn more about relational wisdom and the **SOG**, **GPS**, **READ** and **SERVE** acrostics, see [Discover RW](#) and [Five Ways to Weave RW into Your Life](#).

6. Communicate So Clearly that You Cannot Be Misunderstood

Many conflicts in the church are triggered or inflamed by poor communication, often by leaders themselves. We know what we intend to communicate, but we don't take the time to carefully evaluate and adjust our words so that they cannot be misconstrued.

As one of my mentors once taught me, “For a leader, it’s not good enough to communicate so you *can be understood*. You must communicate so clearly that you *cannot be misunderstood*.”

No one will get this perfect all the time, but spending a little extra time on an email, a sermon or position paper or remarks you plan to make in a conversation or at a congregational meeting can save you many hours of unnecessary conflict.

For an example of what happened when I failed to live up to this standard, see [Clarity and Charity](#).

7. Work Patiently with People As They Process Their Emotions and Experiences

People are always interpreting our words and actions through their own life experiences and emotions. As a result, a seemingly innocent statement in a sermon or conversation can trigger an intense emotional reaction in others. Our natural tendency in such situations is to defend ourselves and point out how unwarranted their responses are. That typically drives you further apart.

It takes time and patience, but it’s possible to turn these types of interactions into opportunities for life-changing ministry if you’ll take the time to gently and patiently help people process their emotions and life experiences. This is exactly what happened when I deeply offended a woman through one of my blog posts (see [Seven Ways to Redeem an Offense](#)).

8. Don’t Be Misled by the Three Faces of Fear

When people react to you with control, anger or withdrawal, it’s natural to become defensive and judgmental. But has that response ever helped, whether in your family or in your church? Probably not.

You can break this cycle by realizing that control, anger and withdrawal are often triggered by fear. It’s how people instinctively react to protect themselves from being disappointed or hurt.

Once you understand this underlying dynamic, you can resist the temptation to become defensive and instead seek to discern and address the fear that is triggering other’s behavior. When you do so, you can prevent conflict, minister to others and move your relationships to a whole new level.

[The Three Faces of Fear](#) explains how this principle was applied to a city-wide racial conflict that was turned into a major motion picture.

9. Practice the Three P’s of Satisfaction

Whenever you are helping others work through a conflict, you are far more likely to see a positive outcome if you work diligently to provide them with “the Three P’s of Satisfaction,” which are:

- **Process satisfaction**, which requires a fair, orderly, and even-handed process where everyone feels that they’ve had a reasonable opportunity to present their side of the matter,
- **Personal satisfaction**, which requires treating everyone with respect, courtesy and equality, just as we would want to be treated ourselves, and
- **Product satisfaction**, which requires a final solution that is as reasonable, just and equitable as is humanly possible.

Here’s the key: although most people involved in a decision-making or conflict-resolving process will focus their energy on achieving a particular outcome (product satisfaction), in the long run they will also place a great deal of value on how they were treated during the process. This means that even if a final decision is not entirely to their liking, they will often accept the result with equanimity if the decision-makers provided them with a high level of both process and personal satisfaction.

I cannot emphasize this point too much: Give people process satisfaction (the opportunity to fully and candidly share their views), as well as personal satisfaction (treating them with sincere courtesy and respect), and you’ll be surprised how content they’ll be even if they disagree with your substantive decision.

To see how this process satisfied an attorney who lost a \$2,000,000 contingency fee, and to learn how you can put it into practice in your church, see [The Three P’s of Satisfaction](#).

10. Constantly Build Passport

Every time you engage the people in your church, whether in your study or from the pulpit, you are either building or destroying “passport.” A passport is an authorization to go someplace you have no inherent right to be. In relational terms, it is the permission that people give to you to enter into their lives, to learn their secrets, to know their struggles and to offer advice and correction.

If you want your people to allow you into their lives—to have real relationship with them and to trust you to provide needed shepherding—you must earn a relational passport from every person you engage.

The best way to do so is to relate to others in such a way that they would automatically answer “yes” to three key questions:

- Can I trust you?
- Do you really care about me?

- Can you actually help me?

Each of these questions encompasses a variety of sub-questions that are always rolling around in people's minds when they are thinking of opening up to you. To learn how to engage people in such a way that they will open their hearts and lives to you, even when facing major challenges, see [Building Passport](#).

11. Teach Your People to Practice Charitable Judgments

Many of the conflicts that arise in a church begin or grow worse because people assume the worst about others' actions or motives. The best way for you to prevent this tendency is to proactively teach your congregation to practice "charitable judgments" in every area of life.

Making a charitable judgment means that out of love for God, you strive to believe the best about others until you have facts to prove otherwise. In other words, if you can reasonably interpret facts in two possible ways, God calls you to embrace the positive interpretation over the negative, or at least to postpone making any judgment at all until you can acquire conclusive facts.

To see dozens of Scriptures that support this concept and several practical ways that you can teach this conflict-reducing habit to your congregation, see [Charitable Judgments: An Antidote to Judging Others](#).

12. When You Need to Negotiate, PAUSE

Many conflicts in the church involve the negotiation of substantive issues, such as hiring new staff, revising ministry priorities, setting the budget, adopting new Sunday school curricula ... or deciding whether to wear masks.

The Bible provides excellent guidance on how Christians can successfully negotiate the most challenging issues in life. This biblical wisdom may be summarized in an acrostic called the PAUSE principle of negotiating, which stands for:

- **P**repare (pray, get the facts, seek godly counsel, develop options)
- **A**ffirm relationships (show genuine concern and respect for others)
- **U**nderstand interests (identify others' concerns, desires, needs, limitations or fears)
- **S**earch for creative solutions (prayerful brainstorming)
- **E**valuate options objectively and reasonably (evaluate, don't argue)

In Philippians 2:3-4, the Apostle Paul highlighted one of the key elements of biblical negotiating when he wrote, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (see also [Matt. 22:39](#); [1Cor. 13:5](#); [Matt. 7:12](#)).

To see how the PAUSE principle was used in one of the most challenging negotiation situations many of us will face in life, see [Asking Parents to Give Up Their Keys](#).

13. Diffuse Explosive Meetings with a Six Part Format

Have you ever been in a church meeting that was about to explode? You could feel the tension building with each person's comments and knew it was just a matter of time before the dynamite went off. Once the explosion occurs, it's often impossible to pick up the pieces.

Such explosions are not inevitable. In fact, you can turn these types of volatile meetings into a time of humble self-examination and constructive problem solving by summarizing the issue to be discussed and then indicating that everyone who speaks will be expected to follow a six part format:

- Briefly stated, how do you feel because of this problem?
- What have you done that might have contributed to this problem?
- What do you think would please God as we work through this situation?
- What steps have you already taken to make things better?
- What are you now willing to do to help resolve this problem?
- What do you suggest others do to help resolve this problem?

This format can help people to become more God-aware, self-aware and other-aware by remembering God's involvement in the situation, empathizing with one another, recalling their shared frailty, getting the logs out of their own eyes, showing respect and accepting responsibility, and being solution-focused rather than attack-oriented (see [Defusing Explosive Meetings](#) for further discussion of this simple and yet powerful strategy).

14. Teach People to Focus on the Good Before Itemizing the Bad

When any of us get into a conflict, our tendency is to see our opponents in an increasingly negative light, highlighting their faults and recounting their wrongs. This is a perfect strategy for destroying relationships and dividing churches.

Since God commands us to seek unity and reconciliation in the body of Christ, he graciously provides wisdom principles that enable us to overcome our tendency to focus on others' flaws. One of these principles is set forth in Philippians 4:8-9:

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

I've seen God use this passage to change the course of bitter divorces, lawsuits and church divisions. To see how he made a baby moose the key element in such a reversal, see [Reconciled by a Baby Moose.](#)"

15. Be Approachable

Conflicts in churches often begin with misunderstandings and minor differences in opinion. Unfortunately, many Christians are afraid to approach their church leaders with their concerns, which sometimes allows those concerns to fester and grow until they finally explode into an intense conflict.

One of the most effective ways to encourage church members to share their concerns before they become major problems is for church leaders to strive earnestly to make themselves "approachable." This requires the development of a variety of relational skills, including humility, empathy, reading subtle emotional cues and attentive listening.

To see how the presence of these skills greatly enhanced the ministry of one pastor and how the absence of these same skills killed the ministry of another pastor, see [Approachability: The Passport to Real Ministry and Leadership.](#)

16. Unleash the Power of Confession

At the beginning of this post, I described the power of the "Golden Result," the fact that other people will usually treat you the same way you are treating them. This principle is especially true when you're in conflict. If you blame others for a problem, they will typically blame you right back. But if you instead confess your contribution to a problem, it's amazing how often others will follow your lead and begin to acknowledge how they have contributed to the situation as well.

One of the most vivid examples I've ever seen of this dynamic took place at a congregational meeting where a pastor had planned a scathing rebuke of his fellow elders. He was just minutes away from delivering an attack that he knew would probably split the church. But one of the elders got up first and confessed his sins to the whole church. To see how the pastor altered course became an inspiring example to his entire church, see [A Wave of Confessions Saves a Church.](#)

17. Follow the Example of Lincoln and Reagan

I love to read biographies of individuals who model character qualities and relational skills that I want to develop in my own life. Two of my favorite role models are Abraham Lincoln, who led our country through the Civil War, the bloodiest period in our nation's history, and Ronald Reagan, who led us out of the Cold War, which threatened to annihilate human civilization.

One of the many characteristics that these two men shared was their exceptional ability to understand and manage not only their own emotions and interests but also the emotions and interests of the people they led and the opponents they wished to turn into friends.

Lincoln's relational skills are superbly illustrated in *Team of Rivals*, which describes how Lincoln turned former political rivals into his closest friends and allies. Reagan's remarkable skills are highlighted in *Reagan's Secret War*, which describes how he saved the world from nuclear disaster by winning over obstructionist leaders in the U.S. Congress and hostile leaders in the Soviet Kremlin.

As I read these books, I was amazed to discover that many of the skills these two men practiced are directly relevant to the battles that pastors often fight within their own congregations. To read a summary of these key leadership skills, see [Reagan, Lincoln, RW and You](#) and [Lincoln's Relational Wisdom](#).

18. Deploy God's Full Array of Peacemaking Processes

The Bible provides a variety of ways for Christians to resolve conflict, including overlooking minor offenses (Prov. 19:11), talking privately with the other person (Matt. 18:15), seeking advice from wise counselors (Prov. 20:18), pursuing mediation (Matt. 18:16) and submitting to binding arbitration (1 Cor. 6:1-6).

Although some conflicts are so complex that professionally-trained conciliators may be needed (such help is available through our [Christian Conciliation Service®](#)), the vast majority of conflicts involving Christians can be fully resolved by spiritually mature leaders in the local church, just as God instructs in 1 Corinthians 6:4-5.

For detailed guidance on how you can apply each of these biblical processes to resolve the conflicts that arise in your church family, even if they involve financial or legal issues, download our free 72-page ebooklet, [Leading Christians through Conflict](#).

19. Practice Redemptive, Gospel-Centered Church Discipline

Although most conflicts involving Christians can be resolved through the peacemaking processes described above, Jesus knew that believers will occasionally refuse to receive guidance and correction from church leaders. This is why the Matthew 18:15-20 process includes instructions on how to carry out formal discipline with believers who refuse to listen to the church.

Many churches shy away from this responsibility because they think it is unloving or legalistic, because they fear a retaliatory lawsuit or because they've never seen an example of successful church discipline. Other churches willingly pursue discipline but forget that Jesus calls us to approach such ministry as a gospel-centered "rescue mission" rather than a time to impose guilt and condemnation (see Matt. 18:12-14).

Neither of these approaches to discipline reflect the glory of the gospel, nor are they necessary.

As a church elder and professional conciliator, I have been involved in dozens of church discipline cases that were carried out in biblically faithful, gospel-centered and marvelously redemptive ways. These cases involved issues such as a fraudulent business deal, an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, marital abandonment and an illicit affair between two church members.

To learn how cases like these resulted in repentance, reconciliation and joyful celebration by entire congregations, see [Four Amazing Church Discipline Cases](#).

20. An Ounce of Prevention Is Worth Many of Hours of Conflict Resolution

There is one thing that is even better than successfully *resolving* a conflict: *preventing* a conflict in the first place.

Many church leaders spend hundreds of hours every year putting out the fires of conflict. Pastors can dramatically reduce this type of draining ministry by investing just a few hours in training designed to improve their own relational wisdom and peacemaking skills.

Pastors can see an even greater reduction in their conflict resolution workload by encouraging their entire leadership team to pursue training as well. If leaders go one step further and bring this training to their entire congregation, most of the sparks of conflict can be extinguished before they ever have a chance to start a relational fire.

To learn how you can study, practice and share relational wisdom throughout your church, as well as in any ministry or business in which you are involved, see [15 Training Options and Opportunities](#).

Put God's Peacemaking Principles into Practice!

If you're a church leader, I again encourage you to set aside time to discuss these principles in depth with your leadership team, either as part of your regular meetings or during a special weekend retreat. Then plan specific ways that you can model, teach and apply these concepts to the relational challenges your church and members are facing today.

A small proactive investment of time today could save you hundreds of hours of resolving conflict in the months and years ahead. As James 3:18 promises, "**Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.**"

~ Ken Sande

Reflection Questions

- Describe one or more situations in your church or ministry in which some of these principles might have resulted in a better outcome?

- Which of these principles might be especially helpful in addressing conflict that your church or ministry is currently facing?
- How many hours have your church or ministry leaders spent this year dealing with conflict?
- How might your church or ministry benefit if your leadership team discuss a few of these principles at each of your regular leadership meetings, or discuss the entire list during a leadership retreat?

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