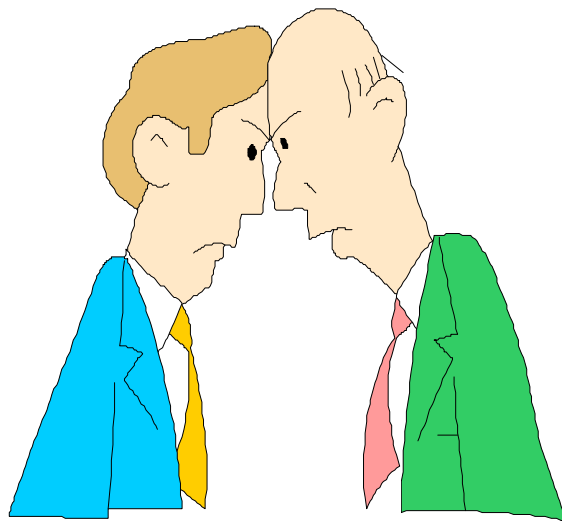


Preventing Unhealthy Church Conflict Resolution



Pastor's Guide

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Recognizing the Problem:

Many churches have been plagued with a history of fighting, sometimes leading to horrible church splits. Other churches report a continuous “backdoor” problem. Members leave with hurt feelings, frustration and disillusionment. Oftentimes, those leaving are good families who regretfully remove themselves from the ungodly atmosphere. They no longer are willing to tolerate the disturbing conflicts and have lost confidence in the church leadership.

The church is suppose to provide a safe and peaceful refuge for God’s people. Instead, church conflicts are creating a battleground for power struggles of various factions. Contentious church members are allowed to be divisive and hurtful. This victimizes the congregation, sabotages the pastor’s leadership and church progress.

Somehow, they are allowed to “act up” without restraining their hurtful behavior and attitudes. The resentment and frustration level can lead to “character assassinations”, conspiracies against those in leadership, slander campaigns, secret meetings, boycott of tithes, resignations of church positions, and forced termination of ministers. These extreme measures victimize the whole congregation.

Church members get overwhelmed with shame and frustration. They hesitate to invite visitors to church, for fear that they might experience ungodly behavior from the antagonists and ruin their spiritual witness.

When the destructive damage is done and the dust settles, the church’s reputation and God’s name is blasphemed. In addition, many church members are left wounded in their spirits. This epidemic problem is appalling and shameful.

The devil and his “forces of darkness” are relentless with their spiritual attacks on our churches. Unfortunately, they are using God’s people to hurt God’s work. The enemy’s plan remains the same through the ages, “divide and conquer” from within.

Understanding the Problem:

Baptist polity insures that every member has a right to voice their opinion and cast a vote. Usually, this privilege is afforded regardless of a member’s spiritual maturity, Christian testimony, or personal agendas.

A few contentious members can be empowered to hurt the fellowship, pastor’s leadership and church’s future. They may do their work in public meetings, monopolizing the discussions and speaking loudly or forcefully. This intimidates and discourages good people from participating in the discussions.

Most commonly, a contentious group works underground. They begin to poison or sway the minds of others to grow a faction that supports their views. They may work quietly and secretly, so that no specific individuals can be identified as the conspirators.

Complaints begin to surface through a voice that appears to have the best interest of the church in mind. Vague statements are made like, “There are many people who are very unhappy...” Or, “Many people are ready to leave the church unless...”

When conflict reaches unhealthy levels, usually there is a faction that is protesting the pastor’s or somebody in leadership. This is NOT necessarily a statement of blame. It is however a statement of responsibility.

Those in an overseeing role have a God-given managerial/spiritual role to maintain a biblical standard of congregational unity, love and godliness. Yet at times, it has been the pastor, who escalated the conflict with uncontrolled anger reactions or a dictatorial leadership style.

When the church conflict reaches a level that is damaging to the body, it is beyond personal and relational, and has become a **spiritual** problem. Spiritual problems must have a spiritual solution. The church leadership must react in this spiritual crisis by alarming God’s people to a spiritual alert.

This guide is provided to lead churches toward a spiritually redemptive process of resolution. The goal is to restore God’s standards for church life, for His honor and glory.

Spiritual Assessment of a Conflict-Torn Church

The Bible is the absolute guide for the purpose, mission and life of the church of Jesus Christ. When these factors of the church become hindered, sin has entered in and the church is in a spiritual crisis! It is urgent that the congregation and church leaders stop and evaluate what is happening to them.

At this point, it should not be the priority to decide who is right or wrong, but honestly determine whether the process of resolution is righteous and honoring God.

Who is the head of the church? Who does the church belong to?

(1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15-16; Col. 1:18)

Jesus Christ alone!!

What are His credentials?

- ◆ *Sovereign (Eph. 1:20-22)*
- ◆ *Lord and Savior (Col. 1:13-14)*
- ◆ *Creator and Sustainer (Col. 1:15-17)*
- ◆ *King of Kings and Lord of Lords (1 Tim. 6:15-16)*

What is the evidence and goals of His headship?

- ◆ *Unity (Eph. 4:12)*
- ◆ *Love (Eph. 4:16)*

- ◆ *Imitate Christ (Eph. 4:20-5:1)*
- ◆ *Reconciliation (Col. 1:20)*
- ◆ *Peace (Col. 1:20; 3:15; 1 Cor. 14:33)*
- ◆ *Holy and blameless (Col. 1:22b)*
- ◆ *Spiritual growth (Col. 1:28b)*
- ◆ *Stability of faith (Col. 2:5)*
- ◆ *Walk in Christ (Col. 2:6)*
- ◆ *Edifying body life (Col. 3:1-17)*

What are the attitudes and conduct that defy Christ's headship and sabotage His goals for the church?

(Check those that apply to your church.)

Attitudes

- __ *unforgiveness*
- __ *harshness*
- __ *anger*
- __ *resentment*
- __ *bitterness*
- __ *arrogance*
- __ *impatience*

__ *intolerance*

- __ *repulsion*
- __ *mean-spirited*

Behaviors

- __ *slander*
- __ *misuse of position*
- __ *gossip*

__ *defensiveness*

- __ *irreconcilable*
- __ *threats*
- __ *self-centeredness*
- __ *contentiousness*
- __ *grumbling*
- __ *irresponsibility*
- __ *snubbing*

__ *deceitfulness*

- __ *maliciousness*
- __ *factions*
- __ *withdrawal*
- __ *non-cooperative*
- __ *name-calling*
- __ *conspiracies*

What harm is brought by a conflicted church?

- ❖ *Blasphemes the name of Christ*
- ❖ *Dishonors God*
- ❖ *Wounds church members*
- ❖ *Invalidates the church's witness*
- ❖ *Turns people away from God and the church*
- ❖ *Destroys the joy of church life*
- ❖ *Damages relationships*
- ❖ *Confuses new Christians*
- ❖ *Spreads guilt, shame, discouragement and despair*
- ❖ *Discourages children from future church loyalty*
- ❖ *Sinful and hurtful behavior is tolerated*
- ❖ *Defies the headship of the Christ*
- ❖ *Gives victory to the devil*

What is the only hope for spiritual restoration?

- ❖ *Humility, Confession, and repentance (2 Chron. 7:14)(Individually and corporately*- Solemn Assembly)*
- ❖ *Church discipline of the unrepentant (Mt. 18:15-17)*

Solemn Assembly - Biblical Process for Spiritual Church Renewal

When conflicts arise in the body of Christ, fellowship is fragmented and results in disunity. The problems are spiritual and require spiritual solutions.

There must be a spiritual crisis alert to the congregation when there are individual and corporate sins identified, reports of damaged relationships, offended or hurt members, unresolved anger, disgruntledness, lack of church participation, dissatisfaction with leadership, cliques and other negative factors.

A churchwide solemn assembly should be called immediately.

Step 1: Review the Biblical Standards for the Church

Corporate: 2 Chron. 7:14; Mt. 18:15-17; Mt. 5:23-24; Eph. 4:26-32; Col. 3:12-17; Jn. 17:20-26, 34-35; Acts 4:32

Individual: Lk. 6:46, 9:23; 1Cor. 10:31; Mt. 22:36-40, 5:3-16; 1 Cor. 13:4-8a

Step 2: Take Personal and Corporate Spiritual Inventory

Pray the prayer of Psalm 139:23-24

List the individual and corporate sins

Step 3: Make Public Confession of Identified Sins

Gain cleansing and healing – James 5:16; 1Jn. 1:9; Psalm 51:1-13

Step 4: Take Steps of Repentance and Restoration of Relationships

Communicate and reconcile with each other – Mt. 5:23-24; 2 Chron. 7:14

Step 5: Make a Written Covenant As a Church

Decide on the agreements for righteous and healthy conduct, attitudes and relationships for the fellowship – Neh. 9:38

Sample Church Covenant

We the members of _____ Baptist Church, are committed to Jesus Christ, having experienced His acceptance and forgiveness, and having been redeemed through His blood. We all covenant together as members of this body that with God's help we will...

1. Walk together in brotherly love.
2. Show loving care toward each other and encourage, counsel and admonish each other.
3. Assemble ourselves regularly and faithfully for worship and fellowship.
4. Pray earnestly for others as well as ourselves.
5. Endeavor to guide and nurture those under our care in the love and admonition of the Lord
6. Seek by Christlike and personal witness, to win others to Christ and to encourage their growth toward Christian maturity.
7. Share in each other's joys and endeavor to share each other's burdens and sorrows.
8. Oppose all conduct that might compromise our Christian faith and uphold high standards of Christian morality.
9. Verify the reality of our conversion by living godly, fruitful lives.
10. Maintain a faithful ministry of worship, witness, education, fellowship and service.
11. Be faithful stewards of our resources and abilities by sharing the gospel with people of all nations.
12. Seek earnestly, as a result of this covenant relationship, to live in the glory of God who brought us out of darkness and into His marvelous light.

Additional agreements:

Procedures for Church Discipline

“And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. However, if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that ‘By the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.’ And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church,; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, *let him be to you as a Gentile or tax-gatherer.*”

God’s corrective process begins with a private one on one appeal for repentance. Then it is strengthened with a private small group appeal. Finally, it is strengthened with a public large group appeal. If he still refuses to repent, excommunication must follow.

1. *“Tell it to the church”*

After the unrepentant church member has been lovingly approached for confession and repentance, individually and with a witness or two, then the matter must be brought to the appropriate leadership group.

The leadership group with this responsibility may vary in different churches. The church bylaws should specify who should have this responsibility.

A public announcement would be made about the situation, review the process that was followed for restoration and the Biblical reasoning for recommending the action to disfellowship the unrepentant church member.

In a special called business session, the congregation would vote their will. The necessary majority vote should be noted from the Church Constitution and Bylaws. If there isn’t any specific reference, then a simple majority vote (51%) would be sufficient for the action. Hopefully, after much prayer, there would be a unanimous vote, indicating the congregation’s commitment to protect the body, church witness and obey the scriptures.

Carl Laney relates a story about the tragic results of a church that neglects its duty for church discipline. A single woman in the church became pregnant. Some heard that she was going to have an abortion. Several women confronted her and an offer was even made by one member to adopt the baby. But the woman wouldn’t change her mind.

Some went to the pastor and suggested church discipline. He was concerned that the issue would divide the church. Instead, he advocated “loving her back into the fellowship.” She had the abortion and never admitted any wrongdoing. Many have left the church. “The problem is that the ones leaving are those who are sensitive to sin and desire a holy fellowship! The leaven of impurity is permeating this congregation.”¹

2. *“let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer”*

They were considered outsiders and unbelievers. Jesus advocated treating them as outsiders since they did not heed the authority of Christ and the church. The Apostle Paul instructed the church to “avoid” and “remove” the unrepentant sinner. (I Cor. 5:11,13; II Thess. 3:6,14)

Restoration was the goal at every stage. After a member is disfellowshipped, the church should still follow-up and reach out with loving appeals. (II Cor. 2:6-9) How did Jesus treat the Gentiles and tax-gatherers? He reached out to them with love, leading them to get right with God. (Mt. 9:9-13)

How does your church presently reach out to outsiders? The disfellowshipped member should continue to be the recipient of the church’s love and appeal to get right with God.

If there is repentance, then the church should forgive and restore to fellowship and membership. (LK.17:4) The whole process of church discipline is to be overshadowed with a redemptive spirit.

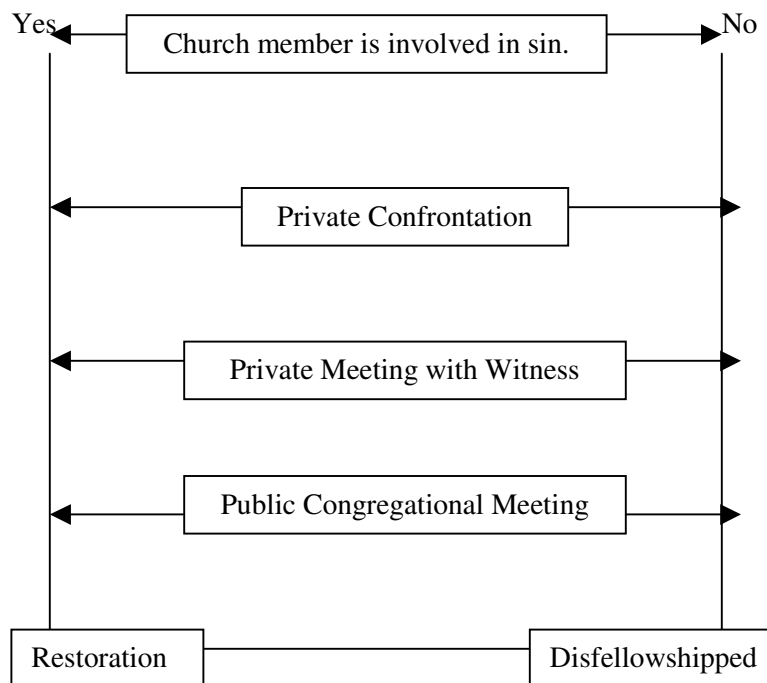
Jay Adams offers solid guidance on this point. “The process of restoration is set forth in II Corinthians 2. Among other things, three factors stand out:

1. The repentant offender must be forgiven
2. He must be assisted
3. He must be reinstated in love.²

This same Paul could be so tough on sin, “Remove the wicked man from among yourselves” (I Cor. 5:13), but tenderly with grace. “Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, lest somehow such a one be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (II Corinthians 2:6-8).

Biblical Church Discipline Process

Repentance?



- At any level, if “yes”, then restoration is the next level of action.
 - If “no”, action proceeds to the next level of discipline.
- Restoration is still the goal, even when disfellowshipped.

¹ Guide to Church Discipline, J. Carl Laney, page 59

² Handbook of Church Discipline, Jay E. Adams, page 91

Intervention Strategy

1. Fortify your prayer life. This is a time for an unusual prayer commitment.
2. Engage in spiritual warfare. (Refer to pages 13-14)
3. Seek prayer support, accountability and mentorship from a trusted fellow pastor and director of missions.
4. Establish a practical strategy to resolve the conflict. Realize that time is of essence.
5. Involve the appropriate leadership group in the church.
6. Request consultation from the director of missions to provide guidance for the leadership group.
7. If specialized help is needed, call the Office of Church & Pastoral Care, CSBC.

Perhaps you are reading this material and find yourself in the middle of serious church conflict. Church conflict is spiritual conflict and must be approached from that standpoint. Spiritual conflicts require spiritual interventions. Nothing short of the intervention of the Prince of Peace and the God of reconciliation will bring healing.

A church conflict has battlefronts on three levels. First and foremost is the **spiritual** conflict. When the damage is assessed within the church fellowship, the ugly destructive effects of sin are readily apparent. The eradication of sin is a spiritual process.

The second level of conflict is **personal**. Church conflict can be traced to hurtful interactions of people who are plagued with conflict within themselves. They are struggling with a range of negative emotions that cause them to say and do harmful things.

The third level is **relational** conflict. Relational conflict is resolved through following the procedures and principles of Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-16; 22:36-40.

Lastly, there is an invisible dimension behind harmful church/relational conflict. Ephesians 6:11-18 identifies it as spiritual warfare in “heavenly places”. It is absolutely imperative for the pastor to arm himself with weapons that are “divinely powerful”. (2 Corinthians 10:3-4)

If your church is not presently experiencing serious church conflict – praise the Lord! You have the luxury to take preventative measures to guard the fellowship from destructive conflict in the future. Conflict at some level is inevitable. When it comes, it should be very clear to the church, how to resolve conflict biblically and healthily.

Prevention Strategy

1. Establish an ad hoc committee to recommend a clear process for resolving conflicts and grievances to be added to the church bylaws.
2. Invite the director of missions to consult with this committee.
3. Establish guidelines for severance benefits, in case any future conflict is pastor-centered and it is decided that the pastor will resign. This will spare the church from fighting over this issue.
4. The procedures for conflict resolution must identify who will be the leadership group that is responsible to handle the grievances. Ideally, they should be different groups depending on whether the issues are focused on the membership or pastor/staff.
5. Conflicts involving paid staff members should be handled by the Personnel Committee or similar group. When conflicts pertain to lay members, an ad hoc group (3-5 members) should be created, including respected godly members. (peacemakers)
6. Establish a church covenant or update your current one, to gain a corporate commitment to a God-honoring spirit of reconciliation, unity and love. (Neh. 9:38)

What can a pastor do to prevent destructive conflict within the church?

Ephesians 4:11-13 teaches that the pastor is to equip the members to maintain unity in the church. The Christian education ministry of the church should be intentional in providing training on the Christian's responsibility to resolve conflict biblically. (Eph. 4:11-13)

Discipleship training is the best form of prevention. This basic discipleship training should include the following:

- How to maintain God-honoring relationships
- How to resolve conflict biblically
- How to control anger and frustrations
- How to gain inner healing for deep hurts
- How to fulfill the great commandment
- How to truly forgive someone who hurts others
- How to maintain Jesus as Lord daily
- How to engage in spiritual warfare

Pastors Honoring God in the Midst of Church Conflict

Most of the church conflicts are centered on the pastor. Individuals or factions attempt to "rattle his cage." The pastor's reactions to the subversive plots or personal attacks is the key to the outcome.

The pastor's reaction is dependant on his own self-management. The goal is to keep the "high road." This is quite a challenge when inwardly there are raging emotions of anger, resentment, and fear.

At this point, the pastor must take steps to stay healthy, spiritually and emotionally. On the following page, you'll find a scriptural path to allow the Holy Spirit to fortify your spirit.

It is possible through the power of God, to honor and glorify Christ in the resolution of church conflict. As you open the Word of God, allow Him to give you His perspective and His wisdom to proceed forward.

Pastors in Conflict

Biblical Guide for Staying Healthy in the Battle

Remembering the Call

- 1 Timothy 3:1-7
- Titus 1:5-9
- Hebrews 13:17
- John 21:15-17
- 1 Peter 5:1-4
- Ephesians 4:11-12
- 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12
- Luke 9:23; 6:27-36

God's Purposes in Allowing Conflict

- Matthew 5:3-12
- Romans 5:3-5
- Romans 8:28-29
- 2 Corinthians 4:7-11
- 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Godly Responses to Church Antagonists

- Ephesians 6:10-18

- Ephesians 4:26-32
- Colossians 3:1-17
- 1 Corinthians 13:4-8
- Matthew 18:15-17
- Matthew 18:21-3

Hope and Comfort for Persecuted Pastors

- Ephesians 1:18-23
- Psalm 18:1-3
- Psalm 109

Spiritual Preparation for Honoring God in the Battle

- Psalm 139:23-24
- Psalm 51:10-17
- Psalm 46:10
- Proverbs 3:5-8
- Matthew

26:36-39

Spiritual Preparation and Protection

To be used during times of intense spiritual attack and conflict with evil. This is a time for a spiritual alert.

The first course of action is very clear in the Bible. Read the following Scriptures: Psalm 37:39-40; 46:1; 55:17; James 4:7-10; 1Peter 5:6-8

• **Go to God in prayer. Submit yourself to Him. Submit your anxieties, fears, anger, and all concerns. Truly give them into His hands.**

The second step is to gain assurance and inner security that God is in control. Read 1Timothy 6:15-16; Col. 1:15-18; 2:14; 1 Peter 3:22

• **Reaffirm the eternal truth that God is Sovereign. Visualize Him sitting on His throne. Get your primary focus off of the people and put all concentration on God.**

The third step is for the believer to take your position to Christ. Read Ephesians 2:6; Romans 16:20; 1 John 4:4

• **Recognize that you also have spiritual authority through your position in Christ. Visualize yourself standing next to God's throne.**

The fourth step is to “put on the full armor of God.” This is time for warfare. It cannot be “business as usual.” There must be an extraordinary concentration on right doctrine, faith development, and spiritual disciplines. Don't let busyness, work, or futile activities crowd out your time for the Word and prayer. Spiritual protection is insured by being in His Word and covering through prayer.

God's will for those afflicted is for them to become men and women of God's Word, prayer, righteousness, peace, truth, salvation and faith. (All elements of the armor of God) It is a great goal in the midst of human and spiritual struggles.

Read Ephesians 6:11-18; Romans 8:28-31

• **Put on the full armor of God. Pray for yourself constantly to stand firmly, and pray boldly for the fleeing of the evil spirits.**

The Apostle Paul talked about his “thorns in the flesh” as influenced by Satan. Believers today also deal with “thorns of the flesh.” They are intended by God for believers to experience more of God! But it is easy to get trapped into worldly thinking and responses. The consequence is evident by anger, resentment, self-pity, depression, fear and vengeful thoughts.

Pastors – You are the key. Your spiritual leadership through the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit will make the difference. You can bring the church through a spiritual crisis to spiritual renewal! (Gen. 50:19-20; Rom. 8:28-29)