

lesson seven

NOVEMBER 10–16

When Conflicts **Arise**

“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27, 28, NKJV).



When you oppose someone, it can feel like you are in a tug-of-war. God calls us to lay aside our differences and to stop fighting each other so that we can be one in Him.

Eph. 4:3;
1 Pet. 3:8

Introduction

Dissonance or Harmony?— Strength in Unity

The church congregation was jam-packed into a beautiful church. We all sat shoulder to shoulder as the song service started. A group of singers were soon joined by the organ, keyboard, guitar, drums, and a bass guitar. With each added instrument, the volume began to intensify beyond what I was used to hearing. My friend motioned toward his ears that it was getting uncomfortably loud and that he wanted to enjoy the music from outside. I decided to accompany him, and as we headed toward the exit, I noticed some of the congregation were raising their hands in the air and joining in the singing. People were celebrating God heartily as they joined in praise.

We are to be one in Christ and to work out our differences in a loving and compassionate way.

Outside the doors of the sanctuary, a family was gathered, the mother's hands trembling as she wrapped them around the ears of her husband and son. As we made our way farther outside, we were met by another group of young people who were openly displaying disgust and disappointment about the music.

In contrast, I remember seeing a mother and her son sitting in the pews across from me who caught my attention. They displayed no outward resentment and withheld judgment. There was a presence of peace about them. The worship leader had invited the congregation to stand to their feet. Her son stood out of respect. The mother calmly remained seated on the pew, with her head bowed, eyes closed in silent prayer. Having met her earlier, I had learned that this was not her type of music.

As a church musician, I have learned to be tolerant and nonjudgmental of other people's choice of church music. First Peter 3:8 is a beautiful reminder that we are to be loving and like-minded. "Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous" (NKJV). Ephesians 4:3 invites us to strive for peace, "endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

As we strive to live in harmony, our music, though diverse, should ultimately bring glory to God, as pointed out by some of my favorite quotes from one of the greatest classical music composers, J. S. Bach: "The aim and final end of all music should be none other than the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul." "Music is an agreeable harmony for the honor of God and the permissible delights of the soul."

We are to be one in Christ and to work out our differences in a loving and compassionate way. If we separate ourselves from the church or individuals in the church, we become separated from Christ.

Alva Waworoendeng, Loma Linda, California, USA

Logos

Resolving Conflict and Finding Its Roots

James 4:1;
Luke 22:24–26;
Acts 6:1–4; 15:1–39

Conflict and Resolution

My wife dreads conflict. She will leave a room where voices are rising in pitch. Her sleep may be disturbed even hours after an unpleasant confrontation.

And I? Disagreements don't repel me. I enjoy trying to resolve conflict.

How about you? How do you seek for unity? By confrontation? By avoidance? We probably concur with David that unity is "good" and "pleasant" (Ps. 133:1). But what is the proper way for Christians to achieve unity? How should we resolve conflict? These are two questions we will study this week.

We don't all need to see things the same to help get the church's work done.

How one resolves conflict depends very much on how the conflict arose. And while there may be hundreds of situations that lead to conflict, we will find principles in four New Testament examples that can help us widely in resolving conflicts today.

Humility as a Means of Resolution (Luke 22:24–26)

In the first example, Christ's chosen men were bickering over who "would be the greatest." Jesus commented on their argument that a desire for supremacy was to be expected from worldly people. But, He said, it should not be that way among you (Luke 22:26).

"And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest. And he said unto them, The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve" (Luke 22:24–26).

What we learn here about unity is that it begins with an attitude of service. Self-exaltation pervades society and may even creep into the church. It might even have infected the chosen twelve. But Jesus says, "Each of you, be like the younger person." Being humble will solve many tense situations.

Choosing Leaders Wisely as a Means of Resolution (Acts 6:1–4)

But humility won't solve all of them. In the second story, the use of church money was at the basis of the conflict. Feelings that the business of the church was not being handled fairly, and even feelings that the Jews were favoring their own widows, gave rise to bitterness.

"And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because

their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations" (Acts 6:1).

How did the church come back into unity? They did it by carefully choosing men who had a reputation among all parties for being fair and spiritual. And these men were put in charge of handling the money, while the elders of the church left the business behind to devote their attention to sharing the Word of God.

So, practically, choosing your church board well, placing persons widely appreciated for piety and fairness, is an important strategy in preserving our unity. But even choosing the best leaders won't always prevent conflict.

Church Authority and Parting as Means of Resolution (Acts 15:1–39)

In the third incident, angry feelings arose over differing doctrinal positions about the true gospel. As you can imagine, this is generally a touchy point with anyone who believes that the gospel is a life-and-death issue.

In our story, the church was threatened with schism over questions about whether the Gentile Christians were obliged to practice many of the Hebrew rituals. Some said yes. Paul and others said no.

"And certain men . . . taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. . . . Therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them" (Acts 15:1, 2).

This problem was resolved authoritatively by the church leaders meeting together. (See Acts 15:2–35.) They sent letters to announce their somewhat unpopular conclusion.

While we can learn from this story to depend on the world church to settle its own doctrinal questions, we should not conclude that such decisions will put an end to conflict in the church.

In fact, even in Acts 15 itself, we find the fourth conflict of our study rising among faithful men, Paul and Barnabas. And what drove them apart was a value judgment about the usefulness of a young Christian who earlier had made some mistakes (Acts 15:39).

Here we see that parting ways, agreeing to disagree, was the way consecrated men made peace when they could not agree regarding John Mark. We don't all need to see things the same to help get the church's work done. While the world church could resolve doctrinal and policy issues for the church, it could do nothing to make its faithful ministers see eye to eye in lesser things.

REACT

Conflicts arise over money, desires for promotion, differences of opinion, or even differences in faith. In all these cases the Bible provides a model for coming back together.

1. But what about the origins of conflict in your life or church? What if they don't well parallel any of these stories? (For a general source of conflict, see James 4:1.)

2. If conflict comes from our desires and passions, can there be any resolution without victory over the same? Should intemperate people be expected to be sources of local conflict?

Testimony

How to Make Music in Heaven

Acts 10:1–23,
28, 29, 34, 35

The story of Peter and Cornelius describes an event that is nothing short of miraculous! Peter is hesitant to share the gospel because of Cornelius's Roman standing, and we see heavenly agents step into the story. Angels intervened and ministered, while God worked on the heart of Peter! In fact, Ellen G. White counsels us to give "special attention" to this passage. She further advises, "Heaven is much nearer to the Christian who is engaged in the work of soulsaving than many suppose. We should learn through them also the lesson of God's regard for every human being, and that each should treat his fellow man as one of the Lord's instrumentalities for the accomplishment of His work in the earth."¹

"They bring a sacred atmosphere of joy and peace."

This work of soul winning is precious; it not only brings the atmosphere of heaven closer to us but can even create music in heaven. "As you open your door to Christ's needy and suffering ones, you are welcoming unseen angels. . . . They bring a sacred atmosphere of joy and peace. They come with praises upon their lips, and answering strain is heard in heaven. Every deed of mercy makes music there. The Father from His throne numbers the unselfish workers among His most precious treasures."² That is a promise we can all see fulfilled in our lifetimes, a promise that we can be a source of joy and song in heaven.

Unfortunately, many times our internal struggles and our lack of unity create a rift between what we know should be done and what we want to do. But exclusivity does not bring the atmosphere of heaven. Anger, resentment, selfishness, and prejudice will not cause the angels to sing. Humble willingness and action to serve others, regardless of their demographics, is what will bring the greatest joy to the heart of God. As we reflect on what Christ has done for us, the more willing we will be to share that experience with others. "The same interest and tenderness and long-suffering that He has manifested toward us, we are to manifest toward others. 'As I have loved you,' He says, 'that ye also love one another.' John 13:34. If Christ dwells in us, we shall reveal His unselfish love toward all with whom we have to do. As we see men and women in need of sympathy and help, we shall not ask, 'Are they worthy?' but 'How can I benefit them?'"³

1. Ellen G. White Comments, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 2nd ed., vol. 6, p. 1059.

2. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 639.

3. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 162.

Acts 6:1–7

Evidence

Serving the Word of God

God's evident guidance in the early Christian church did not guarantee it freedom from conflict and division. In fact, it was in the very days that “the number of the disciples was multiplying” (Acts 6:1, NKJV)—during a period of great growth and development—that a subtle but dangerous controversy emerged.

The conflict divided the new believers along cultural lines.

The conflict divided the new believers along cultural lines. Even among circumcised Jews, there were major differences regarding language, education, customs, and cultural background. For example, the Hebrews were accustomed to carefully guarding Moses' statutes and judgments, while the foreign, Hellenized Jews were known for “imitating the manners, customs, and worship of the Greeks and speaking the Greek tongue” even though they, too, were descendants of Abraham.

The acceptance of the gospel softened major prejudices between the two groups; however, old contentions resurged when talk began to circulate about the unequal treatment of Hellenist widows.

In addressing the complaint, the church leadership faced two main dangers: (1) ignoring the issues and allowing the cultural tensions to build, thus weakening unity or (2) shifting the attention and mission of the church toward meeting the material needs of its members rather than the spiritual.

The response of the Twelve Apostles described in verses 2–4 illustrates how God imparts wisdom to solve conflicts among believers. The Twelve emphasized that spreading the Word of God was their priority and that “serving tables” was not to distract them from the mission. The Greek word for tables, *trapeza*, is used to describe surfaces used for either serving food or counting and distributing money. Therefore, by stating that it was not “right” to “leave the Word of God, and serve tables,” the church leaders were reaffirming that their attention was not to be diverted from preaching the message of eternal life to serving the temporal, earthly needs of the congregation.

When we face divisive conflicts as a church today, we can be sure that God will provide us with solutions that will ultimately honor and glorify His name.

REACT

1. What is today's version of “serving tables,” and how can it distract from our primary mission?
2. What is the key to maintaining unity in our church when we come from such varied socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds?

How-to *Walking in Love*

Ps. 119:1–4;
John 17:20–23;
Rom. 14:12–21;
1 Pet. 4:8;
2 Tim. 2:15, 22–26

During His time of sorrow and agony in Gethsemane, Jesus prayed a beautiful, selfless prayer for us. He specifically prayed for future believers to have unity—not only to experience relational, unselfish love among one another but also to be a powerful witness to the rest of the world. Given Jesus' attention to this aspect of the Christian church and community, it is critical that we do all we can to support this unity within the church family.

We should always have the love of God in our hearts.

There are many sources of conflict in our church today, which certainly are not easy to navigate, but we should think about the following guidelines found in the Bible:

Above all demonstrate Jesus' unselfish, compassionate love toward others (1 Pet. 4:8). When in doubt, we should always have the love of God in our hearts as the motivation for our actions. This should not be about winning a debate or making the other side look intolerant. Each of us is accountable before God, and we want to see the church members who are on the opposing side in heaven too.

Don't be a stumbling block for your neighbor (Rom. 14:12–21). You may honestly think there's nothing wrong with a particular issue, and it may be unclear from a biblical perspective; however, don't cause conflict if you can avoid it. Paul's example in Romans 14 describes a difference of opinion on diet, and Paul says that if that by eating a particular food you will create a stumbling block for your neighbor, just don't eat that food in front of him or her. It's better to pursue the things that promote peace and will edify others.

Prioritize your relationship with God through prayer and Bible study so that you can discern truth and correct someone who is truly misguided (Ps. 119:1–4; 2 Tim. 2:15, 22–26). Even Paul had to call out Peter when Peter was discriminating against Gentiles for no good reason (Gal. 2:11–14). Jesus Himself used a whip to clear out of the temple the people who were taking advantage of the poor and using God's place of worship as a marketplace (Matt. 21:12, 13). In other words, if there's something morally wrong happening in the church, we should stand for what is right and follow the appropriate channels to resolve the issue.

REACT

1. Of all the things He could have prayed for, why did Jesus specifically pray for unity within the family of believers?
2. Did love for the other party factor in your actions and responses during the last conflict you had with someone?

Cintia Nojima, Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Acts 11:4–24

Opinion

Who Am I That I Should Stand in God's Way?

It's almost inevitable in every relationship that at some point conflict will arise. However, how we respond to and address these conflicts determines the future trajectory of the relationship. As Christians, when faced with conflicts, be they in our personal or spiritual lives, the example the early Christians modeled is one that we should emulate.

I remember having this experience as a younger boy. At one point my home church wanted to do an evangelistic outreach. We had two venue suggestions: to use the church premises, the best cost-saving option for us, or to pay more and use one of the public facilities in the city that was centrally located and would attract a broader audience.

We very quickly replace the Holy Spirit's guidance and directions in our churches and lives.

The church called a business meeting to deliberate on this issue. A majority of the members felt we should use our own facilities to save money while a minority thought that we should go with the second option. But the minority also felt that if it was the will of God that we have this series at the public facility, He would provide the financial resources we needed.

As the deliberation intensified, one of the members stood up and suggested that we pray. To make a long story short, we were given the facility, and to the surprise of many, the city council gave it to us at no charge for the duration of the series. The campaign was successful, and souls were won for Christ. When I look back at this incident, I am reminded of how we are sometimes still ignorant of the power of the Holy Spirit in touching the hearts of individuals.

Too often when conflicts arise within our circles, we accept the opinions of the most educated, vocal, or eloquent of the congregation. We very quickly replace the Holy Spirit's guidance and directions in our churches and lives with that of the men and women whom we class as "very qualified" on the subject matter. This often creates tensions, factions, and divisions in our churches. Sometimes we join the majority while failing to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In this biblical example, Peter, when confronted with his decision to reach out to the Gentiles, responded, "Who was I to stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17, NLT)—a beautiful reminder that oftentimes God leads us into the unexpected.

REACT

1. Why is an active prayer life important in our walk with Jesus?
2. What approach should you use when navigating conflicts in your group?
3. How do you know what God's will and direction is on a subject matter when you are faced with a conclusion that is different from your own?

Lucien Nana-Yobo, Houston, Texas, USA

Exploration

When Conflicts Arise

Gal. 3:27, 28

CONCLUDE

Because divine discernment was needed to successfully address the church's strivings, God-fearing men were selected who would, with much prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, engage in open discussion about unity. Without the Spirit of God, the trusted leaders would not have been able to realize the need for unprejudiced Christian fellowship and its importance in maintaining Christlike unity in the church.

Only in constant connection with Christ will we be able to intentionally regard others more highly than we would ourselves. Self-denial and constant surrender to God are the antidotes to the earthbound virus of internal strife and dissension. The kingdom of heaven is ours, not because of what we have done but because He has ransomed us.

CONSIDER

- Praying for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in your life so that your godly character may be a catalyst for barrier-breaking worship, fellowship, and discipleship.
- Reading the book of Acts with your family and friends and writing specific ways your community of faith can exemplify the good works of loving fellowship and wise conflict management of the apostolic church.
- Attending an ethnically diverse church to learn of varied ways of worship and community engagement and to recognize similarities of Christian beliefs, practices, and experiences.
- Watching a nature documentary about ants and learning how the secret to their strength lies in their unity of purpose and activity.
- Engaging in a team-building game during a vespers service and drawing spiritual lessons from the activity that demonstrate this week's lesson study.
- Composing music with friends about one of this week's lesson themes: unity in truth.

CONNECT

Acts 2:37–47; 1 Corinthians 12:4–31; Colossians 3:9–17.

Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 19, "Jew and Gentile"; *Christian Experience and Teachings of Ellen G. White*, chapter 33, "Organization and Development"; *Counsels for the Church*, chapter 50, "Christians in All the World Become One in Christ."

G. Douglass Lewis, *Resolving Church Conflicts: A Case Study Approach for Local Congregations*, chapters 1 and 2.

Lucile and Wadensson Saint Martin, Loma Linda, California, USA