

Don't confuse conflict resolution, reconciliation

This is the first of two articles written for President's Leadership News in the March 2010 issue of The Reporter, by Ted Kober, president of Ambassadors of Reconciliation. It is printed here with permission.

What is the difference between conflict resolution and reconciliation? Consider these situations:

Some people think that divorce resolves conflict. Yet the couple testifies that they have irreconcilable differences.

Two business partners sue one another, fighting over assets and liabilities as they separate. A judge's decision resolves the matter, but these two former friends part as adversaries.

A head elder and pastor continually disrupt meetings with their arguing. The head elder resigns his position, and his family transfers to another church. Both sides believe the problem is solved. But these Christian brothers never speak to one another again.

Conflict resolution focuses on resolving the *material* or *substantive* issues in a dispute, while *reconciliation* seeks to restore relationships by addressing the *personal* or *relational* issues.

If there are no relational issues to reconcile, conflict resolution may be adequate. Likewise, if the conflict centers solely on personal issues, reconciliation may be sufficient. However, the vast majority of disputes involves both kinds of issues. If parties attempt to deal with one and not the other, they will find the final solution incomplete and unsatisfactory.

In a legal dispute between a Christian ministry and a service contractor, the parties sought Christian conciliation to settle the matter rather than go to court. Both sides insisted that there were no personal issues to resolve. Their disagreement over \$85,000 of expenses focused on differing interpretations of their contract. Each stated that he had no personal grievance against the other.

As their reconciler, I was appointed to help them reach their own agreement through mediation, and, if unsuccessful, I would arbitrate (decide) the contract dispute. Craig represented the ministry's interests, and Ron presented his case as the service contractor. (Names have been changed to protect confidences.)

The mediation lasted 12 hours. We spent the first 11 hours on the personal issues that they said didn't exist, and then the money issue was easily resolved in one hour.

What were the illusive personal issues? When Craig's organization paid the final bill, Ron repeatedly demanded \$85,000 additional for expenses, but Craig refused. As tensions increased, Craig instructed his administrative assistant to take messages, which he didn't return. He told her Ron was a stubborn fool and Craig didn't want to waste any more time dealing with him.

As Ron realized that Craig was stonewalling, he became frustrated with Craig's assistant, calling Craig names. This angered Craig, who griped to co-workers about Ron's unchristian behavior. Craig advised them to also avoid talking to Ron. Meanwhile, Ron grumbled about Craig and the ministry to his other clients. He slandered Craig's character and questioned the integrity of the ministry.

From a business viewpoint, both men felt justified. After all, they reasoned, they were simply "telling the truth" and warning others about doing business with irresponsible people. But from a biblical perspective, both were guilty of sinning against the Eighth Commandment. Instead of putting the best construction on things, they demeaned one another in gossip. Moreover, their actions proved a poor witness to Christ. God declares such behavior sinful. Further, unconfessed sin harmed their relationship and undermined trust.

Privately, each was asked to compare Eph. 4:29-32 to his attitudes and words. Examining themselves against God's Word, they recognized their sins against God and one another. Meeting together, they confessed and

forgave as God had forgiven them. They reconciled their relationship by addressing the relational issues they claimed did not exist.

Following reconciliation, Craig and Ron reached agreement on the financial issue in 60 minutes. Trust was rebuilt through mutual confession and forgiveness, and they were able to negotiate a solution that had eluded them for months.

Without reconciliation, conflict resolution becomes more difficult. When we sin against one another, we tear down trust and erect walls that divide. Negotiating material issues requires more effort as we vie to protect our own interests. But those who live as forgiven children of God look not only to their own interests, but also to the interests of others (Phil. 2:3-4).

Many people, like Craig and Ron, contend that they have no personal issues to address—no sin to confess and no wrongs to forgive. They merely need to fix the problem. But such attitudes are naïve and contradict what the Scriptures teach. As saint and sinner, we struggle with sinful selfish desires.

Conflict reveals the Old Adam in us, as James teaches: “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:1-3).

If we convince ourselves that we have no personal sin issues to address, John writes that we deny the truth: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

Over time, resolving disagreements without reconciling erodes a relationship. We may solve problems, but trust in each other withers. Once friends, we identify the other as an opponent and eventually the enemy. Uncomplicated issues now become major battlegrounds. We elevate desires, even godly ones, into demands. If we don’t get what we want, we judge the other as wrong or evil. And then we punish by the way we treat one another.

Our greatest conflict in life is with God. Isaiah proclaims, “Your iniquities have separated you from your God so that he will not listen” (Is. 59:2). Paul notes in Rom. 5:10 that we are enemies of God.

What is the consequence of being an enemy of God? “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). So, from God, do you want conflict resolution or reconciliation?

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ! He chose not to allow us to suffer the just consequence of our sin, but while we were still sinners, God reconciled us to Himself through Christ. God did not wait for us to beg for mercy. Instead, He initiated reconciliation by sending His Son to restore our relationship to Him.

Reconciliation requires much more work than conflict resolution. But we are one people forgiven by God who believes in restoring relationships.

Reconciliation or conflict resolution? Both are usually necessary. May the Holy Spirit guide us as we wrestle to resolve difficult substantive issues so that we will be compelled by Christ’s love to focus on reconciliation.