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Learning from Our Conflicts

Gerald R. Williams

Some months ago, when I was invited to speak today, I asked what I should talk about. After a long pause the voice said, “Well, people usually talk about things they’re good at.” So my topic today is conflict.

I used to think other people had conflicts but that I was immune. Then I came upon two incidents in the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith that completely changed my understanding of conflicts and forced me to admit I probably have as many as anybody else.

What is a conflict? For our purposes today, a conflict is any situation in which both sides feel the other is in the wrong.

I’ll begin with seven propositions about conflicts.

1. It is strange, but unless we had a conflict in the last few hours, most of us don’t remember our conflicts. This may be good, because it saves us pain, but it creates a problem. If we don’t remember our conflicts, we can’t learn anything from them.

2. We probably experience conflicts differently—depending on our personalities, our prior experiences (such as the way conflicts were handled in the home where we grew up), and perhaps other factors such as gender and culture.

3. In Mormon culture most people are conflict avoiders. However, some of us are neutral about conflict, and some of us actually enjoy a good conflict.

4. If we are in relationships with others, there will be conflicts. They may be small or they may be large, but there will surely be conflicts. Can you think of any conflicts in your life right now? Perhaps a few hints will help. If you do think of a conflict or two, I hope you will jot them down.

a. Conflicts with family, such as father, mother, siblings, spouse, children, or in-laws.

b. Conflicts with people you see often who are *not* family: neighbors, landlords, merchants, even people at church. President Brigham Young summed it up in rhyme:

To live with Saints in Heaven is bliss and glory
To live with Saints on Earth is another story.¹

5. It takes two sides to create a conflict. More important, there is almost always fault on *both* sides. As someone said, “It’s a mighty thin pancake that only has one side.”

6. During a conflict we are usually blind to our own fault and we blame the other side.

7. A final proposition introduces my theme. When we remember our conflicts and reflect on them, they are like mirrors that can teach us things about ourselves that are otherwise difficult to discover. If we permit them, our conflicts will show us where we are weak, defensive, prideful, or otherwise in need of repair.

First Example

I’ll illustrate the value of conflicts with three examples. Two are from the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith. These both involve Oliver Cowdery, who, at the time, was Joseph’s most trusted associate. These conflicts occurred very close to each other in the summer of 1830, just after the Church was organized. Joseph was 24 years old, and Oliver was 23.

Joseph was busy copying and arranging revelations for publication. Oliver was staying with the Whitmer family in Fayette, 80 miles to the north. Out of the blue, Joseph received a letter from Oliver.

Joseph recorded:

[Oliver] wrote to inform me that he had discovered an error in one of the commandments—Book of Doctrine and Covenants: “And truly manifest by their works that they have received of the Spirit of Christ unto a remission of their sins” [D&C 20:37].

The above quotation, [Oliver] said, was erroneous, and added: “I command you in the name of God to erase those words, that no priestcraft be amongst us!”

The Prophet continued:

I immediately wrote to him in reply, in which I asked him by what authority he took upon him to command me to alter or erase, to add to or diminish from, a revelation or commandment from Almighty God.²

Doctrinally, Oliver was wrong and Joseph was right. But knowing that doesn’t solve the problem. These two trusted friends were now in a conflict—both felt the other was in the wrong. The doctrinal issue could be solved, but what about the bad feelings that had arisen between them?

Realizing his letter had not really answered the doctrinal question and had made the interpersonal problem worse, Joseph traveled 80 miles to the Whitmer home to meet with Oliver and the Whitmers.

Joseph reported:

I found the [Whitmer] family in general of [Oliver's] opinion concerning the words above quoted, and it was not without both labor and perseverance that I could prevail with any of them to reason calmly on the subject. . . . Finally, with [Christian Whitmer's] assistance, I succeeded in bringing, not only the Whitmer family, but also Oliver Cowdery to acknowledge that they had been in error, and that the sentence in dispute was in accordance with the rest of the commandment.

Joseph then reflected on what he learned from this experience. His conclusions are the centerpiece of my message today:

And thus was this error rooted out, which having its rise in presumption and rash judgment, was . . . particularly calculated (when once fairly understood) to teach each and all of us the necessity of humility and meekness before the Lord, that He might teach us of His ways.³

Judging from his emphasis on humility and meekness, Joseph was commenting not only on Oliver's doctrinal error but also on the interpersonal conflict between them and, I think, on the nature of conflicts in general. With prophetic insight he taught two important lessons. His first point was that conflicts arise "in presumption and rash judgment." *Presumptuous* means overconfident or even offensive. *Rash* means hasty or impetuous. With these definitions in mind, let us look again at Oliver's message to Joseph. He said: "I command you in the name of God to erase those words, that no priestcraft be amongst us!"⁴

Do you see any ways in which Oliver's statement might be considered rash or presumptuous? Certainly commanding another person risks being offensive, especially if it is your ecclesiastical leader. Commanding "in the name of God" would raise offensiveness a degree or two. Accusing your leader of priestcraft would undoubtedly qualify.

I move to the next statement with trepidation, but Joseph invited us to consider the effect of his reply as well. Joseph "immediately wrote to [Oliver]," asking: "By what authority he took upon him to command me to alter or erase, to add to or diminish from, a revelation or commandment from Almighty God?"

Are there ways in which Joseph's words might have lacked "humility and meekness"? At a minimum he might have responded with a comment and a question such as, "Oliver, I love you and I value your opinion. Would you help me understand your objection to this passage?"

Joseph's second point added power to the first. He concluded that "[conflicts are] particularly calculated (when once fairly understood) to teach each and all of us."

Three ideas stand out in this statement. First, conflicts are particularly calculated to teach us something. Second, we can't learn from them until they are fairly understood, until we can see both sides—meaning we need to cool off before we can learn from them. Third, in a marvelous illustration of his own humility, Joseph included himself as one who learned something important from this conflict.

If our conflicts are particularly calculated to teach us something, what are we supposed to learn? Joseph's answer goes deep: Conflicts are particularly calculated to teach us "the necessity of humility and meekness before the Lord, that He might teach us of His ways."

Why did Joseph say humility "before the Lord"? Why didn't he say "before the person on the other side"? To learn from our conflicts we must be willing to see our own faults, and we need the Lord's help to do that. Only then can He begin to "teach us of *His* ways" (emphasis added).

We come to the ultimate question: What *are* the Lord's ways for dealing with conflict? They are illustrated in a second conflict between Joseph and Oliver.

Second Example

Just a month after the first conflict, to escape persecution, Joseph and Emma moved 80 miles north to the Whitmer home in Fayette—the home Joseph had so recently visited to resolve the first conflict. Arriving at the Whitmer home, Joseph was grieved to learn that Hiram Page, one of the eight witnesses to the Book of Mormon, had been receiving revelations through a "seer stone" that purported to give instructions on how the Church should operate. Newel Knight was with Joseph, and he described the seriousness of the problem:

[Hiram Page] had managed to get up some dissension of feeling among the brethren by giving revelations concerning the government of the Church . . . , which he claimed to have received through the medium of a stone he possessed. . . . Even Oliver Cowdery and the Whitmer family had given heed to them.⁵

What could have been more painful and frustrating to Joseph than this? If Joseph had followed his earlier pattern, he would have demanded of Hiram Page by what authority he presumed to receive revelations for the Church, and he would have demanded of Oliver what on earth he was thinking to believe in such things. But Joseph was more aware that a hasty and intemperate response would not solve the problem. Joseph knew what *not* to do, but he wasn't sure what he *ought* to do.

Newel Knight wrote:

Joseph was perplexed and scarcely knew how to meet this new exigency. That night I occupied the same room that he did and the greater part of the night was spent in prayer and supplication.⁶

Rather than react defensively, Joseph patiently sought counsel from the Lord. He was soon granted an answer in the form of a revelation, which is now section 28 of the Doctrine and Covenants.

Doctrine and Covenants, Section 28

Section 28 is well known for answering the question of who *can*—and who *cannot*—receive revelation for the Church. It is also a model of the Lord’s willingness to see wrongdoers in the larger context of their lives and to show divine confidence in them while reproofing or correcting them.

The Lord spoke in the first person directly to Oliver: “Behold, I say unto thee, Oliver, that it shall be given unto thee that thou shalt be heard by the church in all things whatsoever thou shalt teach them . . .” The Lord’s first words were an affirmation of Oliver’s good standing in the Lord’s eyes. Then He added this stipulation: “. . . by the Comforter, concerning the revelations and commandments which I have given.”⁷

After clarifying that only the prophet can receive revelation for the Church, the Lord reaffirmed His divine confidence in Oliver: “And if thou art led at any time by the Comforter to *speak* . . . by the way of commandment unto the church, thou mayest do it.”⁸ And then, again, He outlined the limits on Oliver’s authority: “But thou shalt not *write* by way of commandment, but by wisdom; And thou shalt not command him who is at thy head, and at the head of the church.”⁹

The Lord then turned to the source of the problem: Hiram Page. I am struck that He spoke with the same concern for Hiram’s feelings as He had shown for Oliver’s. This exemplifies the Lord’s way, and it makes it much easier for Hiram to accept correction: “Take thy brother, Hiram Page, between him and thee alone, and tell him that those things which he hath written from that stone are not of me.”¹⁰

Instructed and corrected in this loving and reaffirming way, both Oliver Cowdery and Hiram Page recognized their error and continued in full fellowship in the Church for a long while.

Third Example

These two events in the life of the Prophet Joseph prepare us for one other scriptural example—the painful misunderstanding between Moroni and Pahoran in Alma 59 through 62. I wonder if this is where the Prophet Joseph gained his own understanding that conflicts are meaningful and we must learn from them.

Moroni is one of the great military leaders in all of scripture. At the early age of 25 he was made captain over all the Nephite armies. As you will recall, when the prophet Mormon abridged the records of Moroni's military leadership, he called him "a man of a perfect understanding"¹¹ and honored him with this remarkable endorsement:

If all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men.

Behold, he was a man like unto Ammon . . . , and even the other sons of Mosiah, yea, and also Alma and his sons, for they were all men of God.¹²

It has always astonished me that this same Mormon included, as part of his abridged record, a vivid account of Moroni's conflict with Pahoran, the chief judge and governor of the Nephites.

As we learn in Alma 59, Moroni's army was caught in a dangerous situation. Lamanite armies were rapidly gaining ground against them. As chief military leader, Moroni wrote Pahoran for reinforcements. Receiving none, the scripture reports, "Moroni was angry with the government, because of their indifference concerning the freedom of their country."¹³

When no help came from the government, Moroni wrote Pahoran again. He began with the facts: the suffering of his men, the slaughter of thousands of the Nephite people, and other atrocities of war. But Moroni didn't realize that Pahoran had been driven from his throne by the kingmen and forced to take refuge in Gideon, and Moroni wrongly accused Pahoran of being a traitor to his own country. Moroni concluded with these challenging words: "Behold, the Lord saith unto me: If those whom ye have appointed your governors do not repent of their sins and iniquities, ye shall go up to battle against them."¹⁴

We are treading sacred ground here. Is there any question whether the Lord had inspired Moroni to know there were problems at the government level that called for military help? Not at all. However, in his abridgment, Mormon made it clear that Moroni mistakenly assumed Pahoran was part of the problem and threatened to remove him as head of the government.

I have puzzled many years why Mormon would include a detailed account of this uncharacteristic error by the great Captain Moroni. I expect it was for at least two reasons.

One would be to show us that none of us, not even the great Captain Moroni, is immune from presumption and rash judgment. What a comfort it is to me, and I hope to you, that we are in the best of company when we make errors of this kind. This is not to excuse them but to give us permission to admit our mistakes and to learn from them.

The second reason is to show us one of the best examples in all of scripture of how to respond to an unjust accusation. We know very little about Pahoran except that he was an upright ruler committed to standing

“fast in that liberty in . . . which God . . . made us free.”¹⁵ In chapter 61, Mormon, as editor, gave us Pahoran’s entire response to Captain Moroni. I will quote only two of the 20 verses included in his answer:

I, Pahoran, who am the chief governor of this land, do send these words.
 . . . Behold, I say unto you, Moroni, that I do not joy in your great afflictions,
 yea, it grieves my soul. . . .

And now, in your epistle you have censured me, but it mattereth not;
 I am not angry, but *do rejoice in the greatness of your heart*.¹⁶

How did Pahoran do it? How could he respond in such humility and meekness before the Lord? He probably sat right down and wrote an angry reply, venting his injured feelings against Moroni. If so, when he was finished, he did what we all must do—he tore it up and threw it away. Then he must have spent long hours in supplication to the Lord to find the strength to overlook the unjust accusations and to reply with such compassion and love.

In Proverbs we read that “grievous words stir up anger” and “a soft answer turneth away wrath.”¹⁷ Pahoran’s soft answer is a beautiful example of what the Prophet Joseph said about “the necessity of humility and meekness before the Lord, that He might teach us of *His* ways.”¹⁸

Even in this misjudgment Moroni is also our model. When he learned of his error, he was not prideful. He immediately marched to the aid of Pahoran, and with their combined forces they overthrew the king-men and the Lamanites, and peace was restored in the land.

As you reflect on these examples, do they call to mind any other gospel principles? I’m thinking in particular of that favorite scripture, Ether 12:27:

And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.

President Kimball taught this gospel principle in terms of mirrors. He said, “Our vision is completely obscured when we have no mirror to [show us] our own faults and [we] look only for the foibles of others.”¹⁹

Edward Edinger, a wise psychologist, wrote this about mirrors:

[A mirror] shows us what we otherwise cannot see for ourselves because we are too close to it. Without a mirror, for instance, we would never even know what our face looks like; since we are inside looking out, there can be no self-knowledge, even the elementary self-knowledge of what we look like, unless there is some device that can turn the light back on us.²⁰

Final Observations

I conclude with a few final observations about conflicts. Again, more could be said, but you will understand.

1. Conflicts are easy to get into but difficult to get out of. If we have the courage to face them early, they are easier to resolve and to learn from.

2. Conflicts can be dangerous, because they easily fly out of control. They need good containers—such as good friendships and solid marriages—to hold them in. Early detection helps.

3. There are plenty of conflicts. They are also cyclical. If we don't learn from one, that's okay; wait a while, and, sure enough, the conflict will come around again and again until it either destroys a relationship or we learn from it. (If we learn from it, we move on to the next level of conflict, higher up on the plane of progression.)

4. Things often get worse before they get better. But it is generally better to face the problem now than to wait for the next time around.

5. It's cruel that it should be this way, but the thing we're supposed to learn about ourselves is usually obvious to the person we're in conflict with.

6. Even when we are right, we may be wrong. Even when we are right—or *especially* when we are right—if we are presumptuous and rash, we will give offense and become a stumbling block to others.

7. We learn by experience; but experience is not a very good teacher *unless* we remember our conflicts. It is a mark of greatness to remember and to learn from our conflicts.

Conclusion

We should think of our conflicts as mirrors that reflect back upon us things about ourselves we would rather not know. As we learn in Ether 12:27, it is a gift from heaven to be shown our weakness. If we will reflect upon *our* weakness, as the Prophet Joseph did upon his, the Lord will make us strong where we are weak.

I pray we may learn from our conflicts, that the Lord may teach us of *His* ways. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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Notes

1. Barbara Neff Autograph Book, LDS Church Historical Department, Salt Lake City; quoted in Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Jeni Broberg Holzapfel, *Women of Nauvoo* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 68.
2. HC 1:105.
3. HC 1:105.
4. HC 1:105.
5. Newel Knight's Journal, in *Scraps of Biography* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883), 64; also in *They Knew the Prophet*, comp. Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), 13.
6. In *Scraps of Biography*, 65; also *They Knew*, 13.
7. D&C 28:1.
8. D&C 28:4; emphasis added.
9. D&C 28:5–6; emphasis added.
10. D&C 28:11.
11. Alma 48:11.
12. Alma 48:17–18.
13. Alma 59:13.
14. Alma 60:33.
15. Alma 61:9.
16. Alma 61:2, 9; emphasis added.
17. Proverbs 15:1.
18. HC 1:105; emphasis added.
19. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 269.
20. Edward F. Edinger, *The Eternal Drama: The Inner Meaning of Greek Mythology* (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), 85.