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Church Conflict/Church Growth

Thomas Hammond and Steve Wilkes

In the Book of Acts, we read about the infant church experiencing tremendous evangelistic growth. When the Holy Spirit came, Peter preached, and about three thousand souls were saved and baptized in one day! The church continued to grow *spiritually*, through discipleship, as they “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42); *numerically*, as “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47); and in *fellowship*, “continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house” (Acts 2:47).

After the miracle of the lame man’s healing outside of the temple (Acts 3), Peter preached again, and about five thousand men were saved. While this caused great joy in the church, not everyone in Jerusalem was excited. The Sanhedrin began to pressure some of the leaders of the church by threatening them. The efforts of those who tried to stop the spreading of the gospel actually caused it to spread more quickly. Everything the enemy attempted--threats, beatings, arrests, even murder--failed miserably.

In Acts 6, however, things took a turn. The Bible says, “there arose a complaint.” These are the words every pastor dreads to hear. Up until this time the church had experienced persecution, attacks from outside the Body of Christ, but now it was experiencing problems from within. Persecution had caused the Body of Christ to grow, but the new problems had a much different effect. The conflict caused the church to stop growing for the first time since her inception.

Christians have been told to expect persecution. In John 15:20, Jesus said, “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you,” but should Christians also expect problems within the Body? Yes!

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Conflict is present in every aspect of society. We witness it during political debates, company board meetings, family reunions, and little league baseball games. At the present time, the Democratic party in the United States is experiencing conflict as Hillary Clinton and Barak Obama contest for the nomination. Wherever you find people, you will certainly find conflict. It can be traced back to the simplest of beginnings and does not have a particular field, court, or arena. Conflict can take place anywhere--even in church. In the Philippian church--possibly Paul's strongest and most spiritual one--in Philippians 4:1, the apostle pled with two sisters in the church to stop fighting. Euodia and Syntyche may have been the culprits, but left unchecked, their bad relationship could have destroyed the harmony in the entire church.

Sadly, conflict is a common occurrence in congregations of every denomination across America. It happens to traditional, blended, and contemporary churches for a variety of reasons, with the capacity to reach extreme levels of intensity. Its impact on a congregation can be devastating. Relationships are damaged, friendships strained, and many decide to stop attending. The church's ministry and evangelism efforts are usually brought to a standstill, leaving a divided fellowship that has taken its eyes off the harvest and has become distracted from fulfilling the Great Commission.

Everybody Is Doing It

In a recent national survey of over 14,000 congregations, 75 percent reported some level of conflict in the past five years (based on the Faith Communities Today 2000: <http://fact.hartsem.edu>). While the conflict experienced in each of these churches might have varied greatly, it was still significant enough for church leaders to remember it, even after five years.

Conflict in a congregation can easily be compared to cancer in the human body. Interestingly enough, like the ever-present potential of conflict in the body of Christ, every human body contains radical cancer cells. These cancer cells flow through the body with the potential of developing into a deadly disease.

Conflict can start at any moment in any church. I (Steve) am a seminary professor. At my last full-time pastorate I never dreamed we would have conflict like we did. A new believer became a church leader much too quickly. He decided that he would challenge the leadership of his pastor--and that would be against me! We had a classic power struggle with two clear sides. The issue came to a head in a Baptist business meeting that

lasted about three hours. Nobody won; the house was divided; and the church suffered for two years. We continued to reach people, but our growth was destroyed. Church conflict had killed our church growth.

A disagreement over the color of carpet, program schedule, or a committee's role can result in a dispute that reaches biblical proportions. A 2004 *Christianity Today* survey of pastors revealed the top six sources of conflict.

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|---------------------------|-----|
| Control Issues..... | 85% |
| Vision/Direction..... | 64% |
| Leadership Changes..... | 43% |
| Pastor's Style..... | 39% |
| Financial..... | 33% |
| Theological/Doctrine..... | 23% |

Handle With Care

There are many different styles of handling conflict. Billy Martin, former New York Yankee manager, is reported to have said, "You'll have fifteen guys who will run through a wall for you, five who hate you, and five who are undecided. The trick is keeping the five who hate you away from the five who are undecided."

While this strategy might work in managing a baseball team, it does not guarantee success for church leaders who are dealing with strife. From *Christianity Today's* survey, we discover that pastors responded to conflict differently. Over 50% said they responded with anger and defensiveness, while 33% claimed to have been shocked.

If three out of four churches have experienced conflict in the past few years, it would be prudent for every pastor to expect conflict and be prepared to respond in a Christ-like manner. Being unprepared or responding inappropriately can impede a pastor's ability to lead his church effectively or have even worse side effects. Jim Van Yperen, author of *Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict*, says that church conflict is normal. The problem, he says, is the way leadership responds to conflict.

In 1999, 72,000 pastors and clergy were terminated in U.S. churches. A 1984 study in the SBC revealed that 1,056 pastors were fired annually. Four years later, the same study was done, and 1,392 pastors were terminated annually. By 1999, forced terminations among Southern Baptist pastors and other full-time staff appear to have leveled off. The most recent shocking finding of this study is that only 55 percent of pastors who experienced forced termination returned to church-related work, while 45 percent did not (Forced Terminations, 2000).

Nobody Wins

The emotional trauma of a pastor or staff member being fired has many lasting effects on a church member, the church body, the future ministry of the person terminated, and the Body of Christ. A minister friend of mine (Steve) was pastor of a thriving church in Arkansas. The church used "ministry-evangelism" to help people and to win them to Christ. The church doubled. They started a daughter church nearby. Then, lay people rose up against the pastor, and he resigned. For a while, he helped the new church, but today he is not in full-time ministry. This is a great brother who was wounded by conflict--after church growth--and today he is working in the secular world. I'm afraid his story is common. A church grows, conflict occurs, and preachers and lay people are hurt deeply. I can sometimes spot the "walking wounded" when they visit our seminary after graduating several years earlier. They, too, are victims. Some members leave their churches disillusioned, while others lose trust in church leadership and become less faithful in their attendance and service. These casualties may find it difficult to become personally involved in another church for fear of another disaster.

Ministers are leaving the ministry and their pulpits in record numbers. It is estimated that 1,500 pastors (all denominations) leave their positions each month. Their families are confused about what just happened and concerned about their uncertain future.

Churches struggle within their fellowship to regain a sense of stability and harmony. Leadership must cope with a damaged reputation, possibly in the church, but certainly in the community. There is also the unavoidable reality that they are not fulfilling their purpose for existing.

How Does Conflict Affect Evangelism?

Several years ago, I (Thomas) began serving as interim pastor with a church that recently had forced their pastor to resign. During the first meeting with church leaders, I asked to see their numbers for the past several years. Needless to say, they were not good. Money...down, attendance...down, baptisms...you guessed it, down as well. One significant fact about this church is that they were located in the second-fastest-growing county in America. In the middle of a population explosion, they were in a terrible freefall.

As I looked closer at the numbers, I noticed the chart did not go straight down. In fact, there were several high peaks over the years. After questioning one of the lay leaders about the reasons

for the decline after the growth, he pointed to each and embarrassingly admitted that the growth stopped because of "fights." He was even able to recall what the different "fights" were about. While these "fights" left emotional scars across the congregation, they also served as a deterrent.

Have you ever wondered why the Holy Spirit wanted this story in Acts 6 to be told? It does not present a very flattering image of the church. The "complaint" showed that favoritism, or possibly even racism, existed in this young congregation. I would have been tempted to focus only on the amazing, supernatural works of God through mere men rather than focusing on spiritual men appearing ordinary.

But the truth is that we are all sinners and possess the constant potential of doing something or someone wrong. Soviet dissident and Pulitzer Prize winner, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, wrote, "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them--but the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." Paul said, "There is none righteous" (Rom. 3:10).

This story is to show the ever present possibility of conflict, how it impacts the church's outreach, and how to deal with it properly. It has been stated in this article on numerous occasions that conflict is going to happen, so at this time let's deal with how conflict impacts the church's outreach.

To say it plainly, conflict stops evangelism. Any momentum a church might be experiencing through outreach almost always comes to a screeching halt at the slightest hint of a brouhaha. In Acts 6:1, we find the early church still exploding with growth. Thousands were saved, "*the number of disciples was multiplying,*" and things were going well. However, the next words are what all church leaders dread. The scripture says, "*there arose a complaint.*" How do we know that the church stopped evangelizing during this conflict? We know because of one word in verse seven. This word is not eloquent but very enlightening. It reveals the beginning of something. It is the word... "*Then.*" The conflict was resolved and "then" something happened. What was it? Verse seven says, "Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem."

So between verse one, "*the number of disciples was multiplying,*" and verse seven, "*the number of the disciples multiplied greatly,*" a conflict "arose." It was dealt with appropriately, and the church continued to fulfill the Great Commission.

C. Peter Wagner identified a classic growth problem. He called it the "Pioneer vs. Homesteader Conflict." The pioneers are

the people in the church who have been there for many years. The homesteaders are the newcomers who have joined the church within the last few years. When the homesteaders begin to grow because the church is growing, the pioneers often feel threatened. They know that soon they will be outnumbered and lose control. Thus, some of the pioneers cause trouble in the church, causing the growth to slow down or stop. Here again conflict has caused growth to cease.

Why do conflicts stop evangelism?

There are many reasons why the disease of conflict prevents a church from growing. A conflict diverts the focus of church members from the fields of harvest to discovering who is on whose side. The energy that is needed for ministry, missions, and witnessing is siphoned from the body and spent on forming battle lines. Communication is broken down, and critical decisions are made in secret, causing mistrust and alienation. The unity of the fellowship is broken into factions of "us" and "them" and prevents anyone from inviting a lost person to a ministry event or Bible study. Morale plummets with staff members and lay leaders as evangelistic events are canceled or poorly attended. The hope of impacting the community with the gospel in the future fades as word of the fight begins to seep into the community. It is hard to save a drowning man if everyone holding a life preserver is arguing so loudly they cannot hear his cry.

Conflict Management or Resolution?

Managing conflict is only a part of a leader's responsibility. This job is not complete until there is resolution! This is exactly what "the twelve" did. They did not ignore the complaint, hoping it would go away, or label the widows as troublemakers. They asked the church in Jerusalem to choose men to deal with this task. What task was that? Was it just to oversee this distribution of food as many believe? No! The task was to deal with the conflict at hand--the conflict between the Jewish and Greek widows. Talk about an explosive issue! This has to be at the top of the list of problems which could keep the church from growing and making progress in other areas.

Mind you, this is the only place in Acts where we see a possible democratic vote. It may have been a vote or it may have been nomination and consensus by the church. I tend to think the latter is more likely. Either way, the church chose seven leaders, and I believe they were the first deacons. This process of choosing indicates the type of church government the early church had. It certainly was not strict democracy. It may have

involved some democratic votes.

Today's over-emphasis on voting and insistence on business meetings in many churches creates an atmosphere of potential conflict. This conflict can damage or kill church growth. The leaders of the church in Acts worked together to carefully develop a plan and communicate it to the entire church. After sharing it with the church, "the saying pleased the whole multitude."

Those who were chosen--the Seven--were good men, full of the Holy Spirit, and men with a good reputation. Much conflict in churches occurs because pastors and congregations fail to observe these biblical mandates. A man who is not obviously full of the Spirit should never be selected to be a deacon. And the first task of a deacon should be to watch for and quietly handle any conflict.

Then they worked the plan. The laity was empowered to do what they were saved and gifted to do, and the Apostles did not "leave the word of God." After the conflict was resolved, the Word of God spread, people were saved, and something else amazing happened. The Scripture says, "a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." Wow! Priests became followers of Christ!

Much conflict occurs because people have a cultural understanding or a misunderstanding of the authority of their pastor. The clearest verse in the Bible regarding this issue is Hebrews 13:17. Here people are told to obey and to submit to their spiritual leaders. Granted, many disobey this verse out of ignorance, while many others do it out of stubbornness.

The most radical example I know of refusing to follow a pastor occurred in a church in Arkansas where about a dozen plotted against their pastor. One evening after a service, this group waited until everyone else had left the church building. Then, someone locked the church doors, and the group of a dozen or so beat their pastor right in front of the pulpit. Elderly women stomped on him with their high heeled shoes. The pastor was taken to the hospital. A good friend of mine came to the church as pastor about three years later, and all but two or three of the mob had died! Imagine what this has done to this church's outreach. This happened decades ago, but I (Steve) think unbelievers in the community probably still balk at receiving Christ, and they still mention the incident when the pastor was abused.

When the people of God work out their differences in a Christ-like manner, it provides a powerful testimony for others to see. Then the Spirit of God is not hindered but freely moves into the hearts of the lost as the Word of God, and even the hardest of hearts are within reach.

When some of the people of God refuse to forgive and resolve their differences, the church must help them. This is what church discipline is all about--helping God's children come to a resolution when there are problems unsolved. Matthew, chapter 18, is well known as the standard chapter on church discipline. It is well known but practiced very little. Often, the actual growth and progress of an entire church hinges on two of God's saints resolving their problem.

Of course there are other important issues concerning conflict management, but these are crucial issues. Utilized, they will open doors for the church to grow past conflict and reach more for the Kingdom.

A Strong Immune System

So how can a church avoid conflict or prevent a conflict from totally devastating their fellowship? Well, let's return to the cancer illustration used earlier in the article. While every human body has cancer cells and the potential of developing the illness, most do not. Why? God gave the human body something wonderful called the Immune System. The immune system prevents cancer cells from lodging in a part of the body, multiplying, and forming a tumor.

Having a strong immune system is essential in the fight against cancer. We can all strengthen our immune system by eating a balanced, nutritional diet, reducing stress and relaxing more, minimizing bad behavior, avoiding pollutants, and participating in a consistent exercise regimen.

The body of Christ has an immune system as well. Its presence is evident in the first church in Acts. Though they experienced all types of conflict, they were continually used by God to accomplish amazing results. The God-given immune system can be strengthened by each member enjoying a daily, healthy diet of the spiritual nutrients of the Word of God. They must spend sufficient time in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to reveal any sin that needs to be confessed, and praying for God's will to be accomplished in their life and church. It is important for each member of the body to avoid all selfish attitudes and bad behavior. Focusing their attention and energy on the needs of others allows them to serve as a source of encouragement. Finally, every member needs to exercise his faith and gifts. This keeps everyone's faith healthy and strong.

Conclusion

Conflict is a part of every body of believers. When it surfaces, conflict can prevent any church from fulfilling the Great

Commission and reaching her full potential. Recently a pastor friend of mine (Steve) experienced conflict in his church. The church had experienced years of good growth. They built a nice, new building, and conflict came walking down the aisle. Instead of ignoring it, the pastor called a "townhall" type meeting, and he addressed the issues head-on. He told me recently that things were better.

Conflict doesn't have to destroy our dreams and churches. There are ways to deal with it, and we have tried to discuss some. Either we face it and deal with it, or conflict will destroy our churches' growth. We must not let this happen, as it certainly is not something that God desires.

Writer

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