

God's Way of Handling Conflict in the Church, part 3  
Ephesians 4:29-32

- I. There's a lot of talk these days about being an Acts 2 church.
  - a. It's talk I support and encourage.
    - i. Talk about growing churches by reaching new people with the message of Christ.
    - ii. Talk about making disciples so that we grow to become more like Christ.
  - b. I think having more Acts 2 churches is a good thing.
    - i. But it's not an end in itself.
    - ii. I think the next step is maybe even more important – developing Ephesians 4 churches.
  - c. Acts 2 is about the beginning and birth of churches.
    - i. Ephesians 4 is about unity and maturity.
    - ii. Ephesians 4 is about difficult lessons that stretch us and pull us, sometimes in painful and unsettling directions, but ultimately result in spurts of growth.
  - d. That's why Ephesians 4 has been an important destination these past 3 Sundays.
    - i. This Scripture is pulling and pushing to act in a fashion that indicates more maturity and stability.
    - ii. It's forcing us to think about relationships, unity, church health, and where we need to improve.
  - e. So, let's wrap things up today by reminding ourselves of what we've talked about previously.
    - i. Be completely humble and gentle.
    - ii. Be patient.
    - iii. Speak the truth in love.
    - iv. Put off your old self.
    - v. Be made new in the attitude of your mind.
    - vi. Put on righteousness and holiness.
    - vii. Put off falsehood.
    - viii. Forgo unwholesome talk.
- II. Let's begin with this: build each other up.
  - a. This centers us on something other than ourselves.
    - i. In many conflicts, we get defensive because we feel threatened.
      1. In response we back off and close down – we become the center of our attention and our energy.
      2. I think that's a pretty natural response – self-preservation.
    - ii. But rather than focus on our own needs, God wants us to focus on the needs of others.
      1. God says it's worth the struggle to turn our attention and energy on the other person rather than us.
      2. God wants us to see beyond the conflict (beyond the angry words, the petty snipes, the hurtful actions), and look harder at the person.
    - iii. Anger is always the second emotion (and anger is always at the center of conflict).
      1. You are angry because ...
      2. You are angry because you don't think you're being heard.
      3. You are angry because you are hurt and feeling threatened.
      4. You are angry because you're feeling weak and frightened.

- b. It's enough for me to focus on one person's needs; I don't have the energy or the ability to focus on the needs of two people.
    - i. Exactly. So God says, "You let me worry about your needs and then you're freed up to worry about that other person's needs."
      - 1. It takes a lot of spiritual maturity and a lot of faith to do that.
      - 2. But when we do – God moves, conflict lessens and good things happen.
    - ii. It focuses on building up rather than tearing down.
      - 1. It focuses on God winning rather than who's losing.
      - 2. It focuses on their needs rather than ours.
  - c. Verse 29 says, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."
    - i. Unwholesome talk in this context is not "cursing" or "cussing."
    - ii. It is any talk that doesn't build up.
- III. Next, Paul tells us to get rid of anger.
- a. Not just anger, but bitterness, rage, brawling, slander, malice.
    - i. Finally, an easy one. This one's easy right?
      - 1. Not so fast.
      - 2. Brawling, slander, malice – those might be rarer than the others but there's still plenty of anger and bitterness to go around.
    - ii. But rage, brawling, slander and malice are still too much a part of conflict – and especially conflict in churches.
      - 1. brawling – fighting in church?
      - 2. slander – the opposite of building someone up.
      - 3. malice – wishing someone harm.
  - b. Notice Paul's strong language in verse 31.
    - i. "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice."
    - ii. He doesn't say, "Control it. Watch out for it. Keep it in check."
    - iii. He says, "Get rid of it."
      - 1. We make excuses for our anger.
        - a. We're only human.
        - b. I was provoked.
      - 2. God says, "enough excuses."
        - a. – Get rid of it.
        - b. There is no place for it in the church.
  - c. You get rid of these things by replacing them with their opposites.
    - i. Which of these is the one you struggle with the most?
      - 1. Please; be honest. You're still human and these things are a part of being human.
      - 2. Don't tell me; tell God about it right now.
    - ii. Take a minute and think about it – what are the opposites of fighting, slander, anger, malice and rage?
      - 1. This is how you find victory.
      - 2. You replace one with the other.
        - a. You replace rage ... with forgiveness.
        - b. You replace malice ... with compassion.
        - c. You replace slander ... with encouragement.
- IV. Perhaps that's why Paul now says, "Be compassionate to one another."

- a. It's in verse 32: "Be kind and compassionate to one another,"
  - i. This really isn't rocket science.
    - 1. Is it kind to talk behind someone's back?
    - 2. Is it compassionate to ignore someone's pain even in the middle of conflict?
  - ii. Showing true compassion is about restoration, wholeness, and peace.
    - 1. Restoring hope in the middle of conflict.
    - 2. Seeking wholeness [of people and of the body] in the midst of angry words and harsh judgments.
    - 3. Peace that passes understanding at times of upheaval and threat.
- b. This illustrates for me what I call the principle of replacement.
  - i. When you turn away from one thing – there should be something else that you are turning toward.
  - ii. When you put off one thing – there should be something else that you put on.
  - iii. For example,
    - 1. When Paul says, put off unwholesome talk he asks us to put on speech that builds one another up.
    - 2. When Paul says, get rid of your anger he asks us to put on compassion.
  - iv. It's never a good idea to put something off without replacing it with something better.
    - 1. If you don't you leave a void in your life that has to be filled (Nature hates a vacuum).
    - 2. The easiest way to fill that void is to let the old habits, the old thoughts and the old way of doing things creep back in.
    - 3. That's we experience so much frustration with our spiritual growth.
      - a. We put off things. We push things away.
      - b. But we don't put things on, we don't pull things close.
      - c. We don't fill the void and in the process the old habits slip back into place.
- c. So as we put off anger and malice and slander – replace those evil, negative things with something better – compassion.
  - i. In the middle of conflict this has tremendous implications.
  - ii. Can you imagine how quickly an argument will dissolve if the person doesn't have to win you over to their side?
  - iii. If you truly have compassion on them, then they will begin to feel and believe that you already are on their side!

V. Finally, Paul says forgive each other.

- a. Here is the greatest motivation to ending conflict.
  - i. What have you done today to offend Christ? Do you believe he will forgive you?
  - ii. Can you give that same forgiveness to those you are fighting with right now?
- b. What greater act of compassion can there be than to say, "I forgive you?"
  - i. And if we can say, I forgive you, then start to act like they are forgiven == everything changes.
    - 1. It changes them.
    - 2. It changes us.
  - ii. It's like defusing a bomb or letting the pressure out of a pressure cooker.

- c. Paul calls this to mind in verse 32 – “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as in Christ God forgave you.”
- VI. Paul spends this whole chapter fleshing out concrete ways that we can handle conflict in the church.
- a. He deals with attitudes, he deals with behaviors, he deals with motivations.
  - b. And he ties it all up neatly (not in chapter 4, but in chapter 5) with these words.
  - c. “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”
    - i. Follow God’s example – what example does He mean?
      - 1. The example of the way he dealt with us.
      - 2. God says, do the same thing to the people you have a conflict with.
    - ii. What is that exactly?
      - 1. Give yourself to them.
      - 2. Offer yourself to them.
      - 3. Sacrifice for them.
      - 4. In short, love them.