

STUDY SIX: MANAGING CONFLICT AND OPPOSITION

© Rosemary Bardsley 2009, 2014

A. DEFINING 'CONFLICT' AND 'OPPOSITION'

Conflict and opposition [negativity] are part of human life on earth in this era between Genesis 3 and Revelation 21. The entry and presence of sin was accompanied by the entry and presence of conflict and negativity. That is the way it is. The entry of sin erected a barrier and a separation in the four fundamental relationships of our lives, which results in the presence of conflict and/or opposition and negativity in these four relationships:

There is conflict within our own being as we struggle against our own sinfulness [Romans 7:7-25] and there is negativity about ourselves as we despair about our failures or about our perceptions of ourselves

There is conflict, opposition and negativity in our relationships with each other as we hurt, despise, deride and accuse each other in our fear-filled efforts to preserve, defend and justify ourselves, and as we, in our self-love and self-absorption fail to love and consider the well-being of the other.

There is conflict between us and God as we rebel against his command and his Lordship.

And there is conflict between us and nature as it threatens us with death and we threaten it with extinction.

This study is primarily about coping in the second area noted above. People usually respond to conflict in one of two ways: *passively, we try to escape from it* – by denying that it exists or that we personally should try to fix it, by running away [e.g. leaving a church, divorce], or by suicide [or escape into addictions]; or *actively, we try to fight* the people we perceive to be the cause of the conflict - we become verbally or physically aggressive or abusive [the extreme of this is murder], we utilize emotional, social or financial blackmail, or we fight with litigation.

Complete Section #1 in the Study Six Worksheet now.

The word of God and the example of Christ challenge us to work proactively towards reconciliation, peace and hope in situations of conflict and negativity. God does not want us to stay in the mindset of the sin-stricken world. He wants us, he commands us, to leave behind its empty, dark, destructive mindset and, embracing the mind of Christ, to implement reconciliation and peace. He, in Christ, has redeemed us from the kingdom of darkness and made us stand in the kingdom of his Son, who is the Light of the world. He has liberated us from the need to defend, preserve and justify ourselves, and set us free to be both for him and for the other.

B. BIBLICAL COMMANDS ABOUT COPING WITH CONFLICT AND OPPOSITION

What does God tell us to do? How does he expect those who are his children to respond to opposition and conflict?

Complete Section #2 in the Study Six Worksheet now.

From the references listed in the Worksheet we can identify a number of principles, some of which we have already studied in earlier sessions:

- The principle of making peace
- The principle of reconciliation
- The principle of non-retaliation
- The principle of returning good for evil – [overcoming evil with good]
- The principle of loving the enemy
- The principle of forgiveness
- The principle of giving a kind answer
- The principle of building others up with our words, rather than destroying them
- The principle of living at peace with all men.

C. THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

Complete Section #3 in the Study Six Worksheet now

From the Bible references given about the example of Jesus we can identify the following principles:

The priority of God's truth: When God's truth is at stake don't run away from the conflict, verbally fight for the truth.

The priority of the gospel: Avoid conflict, even run away from it, when to stay in the conflict would short circuit the gospel.

The principle of humility: Personal pride or maintaining our 'rights' should never dictate our behaviour in situations of conflict, opposition and negativity.

The principle of holiness: Our goal should be to survive the pressure of conflict, opposition and negativity without sinning.

The principle of endurance: Our goal should be to survive the pressure of conflict, opposition and negativity without giving up our faith and commitment.

The principle of non-retaliation.

D. COPING PERSONALLY

It is easy to crack under the pressure of conflict and negativity. Most of what has been said above relates to how we cope with the people who are creating conflict. A further question is 'How can I cope personally, within myself, with the personal impact that conflict and negativity has on me – within my own heart/soul/mind?' Here are some foundational concepts:

As a child of God you are exposed to the same opposition that God himself has experienced since the rebellion of Satan. You are automatically the target of Satan's hatred and opposition, and this usually comes via human and natural means. At the bottom line the attack is not directed at you but against God, through you his child. Because you are God's treasured child you are part of the cosmic warfare between himself and Satan. God has provided his armour to enable you to stand and survive these attacks [Ephesians 6:10-18]

The opposition you face as a Christian is the same as the opposition that he experienced from sinners. Sinners love darkness rather than light – and you are light because of your relationship with the Light of the world. What men, mostly religious men, did to him, the flack they gave him, the rejection, the criticism – they will do to you. It is nothing to do with you personally; it is to do with him. He warned us that this would happen [Matthew 24:12-25].

Our suffering in conflict and negativity is part of the in-between age. We are already saved, yet we look forward in confident hope to the day when all tears and pain will be banished forever. We should not expect freedom from conflict and negativity in this life or in this world. Just as Jesus endured the cross because of the joy set before him, even so we his followers endure *because of the joy that is set before us*. [Hebrews 12:1-3; 2 Cor 4:17; 2 Tim 2:10; 1 Peter 5:10.]

Our goal should not be the absence of conflict and negativity but that in situations of negativity and conflict our response will honour our Lord. Job expressed this in a rather extreme way:

'Oh, that I might have my request, that God would grant what I hope for,
that God would be willing to crush me,
to let loose his hand and cut me off!
Then I would still have this consolation –
my joy in unrelenting pain –
that I had not denied the words of the Holy One.' [Job 6:8-10]

The conflict and the negativity were immense, and Job knew how fragile he was. So committed was he to uphold God's honour, God's truth, that he begged the Lord to take his life, rather than let him break down, give in, give up, and dishonour God. Irrespective of how painful the situation is, yet there is this goal: to glorify God in and through it.

Just as the righteousness of Christ covers you and protects you from the wrath and judgment of God, allow it to also protect you from the criticism of others. As far as God is concerned your life is hidden with Christ [Colossians 3:3]. His just condemnation of you has already been taken and borne by Christ. When others criticize, objectively recognize it as either just or unjust, then rest in the confidence that irrespective of its justice or injustice, there is now no condemnation for you because you are in Christ Jesus [Romans 8:1]. Even just accusations cannot cut you off from the love of God for you. Because you are in Christ, you are free: free for ever from God's condemnation, free from the need to justify yourself, and therefore free to say, Yes, I was wrong. I should not have done that. I'm sorry. Please forgive me.

When we suffer conflict and negativity because of our Christian faith we share at one level in the sufferings of Christ [2 Corinthians 1:5; Philippians 3:10; Colossians 1:24; 1 Peter 4:13]. We begin to understand what it cost him just to live among us – the rejection, the hatred of the truth, the criticism, the unrealistic and unreasonable expectations, the hardness of hearts, the sheer grief of being surrounded by sin and suffering in the world he had created for glory.

None of this makes conflict and negativity go away. But it does help us to personally cope with it when it is directed towards us.

Complete Section #4 in the Study Six Worksheet now.