

RESOLVING CONFLICT

HOW TO MAKE, DISTURB, AND KEEP PEACE

LOU PRIOLO

RESOLVING CONFLICT

HOW TO MAKE, DISTURB, AND KEEP PEACE

LOU PRIOLO



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2016 by Lou Priolo

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked (NKJV) are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Priolo, Lou, author.

Title: Resolving conflict : how to make, disturb, and keep peace / Lou Priolo.

Description: Phillipsburg : P&R Publishing, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016016392 | ISBN 9781596389090 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781596389106 (epub) | ISBN 9781596389113 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Conflict management--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4597.53.C58 P75 2016 | DDC 248.4--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016016392>

To Fern Gregory

Thanks oodles for teaching me how to make
my ideas fit for human consumption!

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	9
Preface	11
Introduction	13
 Part One: Prerequisites for Conflict Resolution	
1. Prerequisite One: Humility	19
2. Prerequisite Two: Gentleness	35
3. Prerequisite Three: Patience	61
4. Prerequisite Four: Loving Forbearance	87
 Part Two: Biblical Principles of Conflict Resolution	
5. Three Types of Conflict	115
6. Love Communicates	143
7. Responding to Reproof	169
8. Getting to the Heart of Conflict	189
9. Unbiblical Responses to Conflict: Internal	209
10. Unbiblical Responses to Conflict: External	227
11. Conflict-Resolving Questions	245

12. You Put the Words Right into My Mouth	259
13. Have We Gone Too Far?	269
14. The Hidden Prerequisite	283
Appendix A: How to Use a Conflict Journal	291
Appendix B: Conflicts with Unbelievers	303
Appendix C: Biblical Alternatives to Commonly Used Terms for Sin	311

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

SEVERAL INDIVIDUALS have helped me with this project in various ways over the five years it has taken me to write this book. Andy and Beth Beano, David and Leesa Street, and Johnny and Dianne Phillips have each provided me with a “writer’s getaway” that has enabled me to focus my attention on this project without the distractions that typically occur when I write at home. Mrs. Fern Gregory has been my crackerjack proofreader for years and has done another masterful job at clarifying my message, largely by correcting my atrocious spelling and grammar and checking that my Scripture references are accurate. My wife, Kim, encourages me to write and helps with entering Fern’s corrections (and makes a few of her own emendations to the manuscript).

I also want to acknowledge two of my mentors who have taught me much and, though they are cited in this volume at various places, have influenced much more of this book than even I can fully recognize. They are Wayne Mack (who has taught me more about how to make biblical counseling practical and effective than anyone else has) and Jay Adams (who has invested himself in my life in a variety of ways). The Institute in Basic Life Principles years ago gave me the tools to develop the working definitions that I have included in part one of this book.

I thank Christ Jesus, my Lord, who has strengthened me and entrusted to me the ministry of helping His people through writing.

PREFACE

THOSE WHO HAVE READ some of my other books will notice some familiar material in this volume. Because most of the previous books also have to do, in one way or another, with improving our relationships with others (spouses, former spouses, children, manipulators, and so on), some overlap of material was necessary. I trust that revisiting those concepts will serve as a helpful review to you if you have read my other works.

It is my prayer that *Resolving Conflict* will be used by Christians in a broad variety of contexts. As a marriage counselor, I hope that the book will be a blessing to many couples who want to learn how to resolve conflicts quickly, effectively, and with a minimum amount of sin. As a family counselor, I believe that the concepts in this volume, if practiced regularly, will help many parents and children learn to do likewise. As a pastor/elder, I know that church members who understand and practice the biblical principles and directives contained in the following pages will be able to prevent and resolve church-splitting schisms that dishonor God, wreck friendships, and sometimes spiritually cripple those who have been involved in them. (I recently taught this book as a Sunday school class in my local church. The response was overwhelmingly positive.)

As a counselor to missionaries, I know that Christian workers who are willing to conduct their relationships according to the Bible will be more effective in ministry and will prevent many of the interpersonal relationship problems (or so-called “personality conflicts”) that account for the majority of missionaries returning from the field years before

P R E F A C E

they imagined. (The same is true of conflicts between staff members of local churches.) As a college and seminary professor, I have written this book in the hope that it will be used as a textbook for biblical conflict-resolution courses. As a father, I imagine that such a course could be used even in Christian high schools (and home education programs).

What is different about this book?

Ken Sande has written a wonderful book on conflict resolution entitled *The Peacemaker*.¹ If you have not yet read it, you should. It is a classic! Ken unfolds the entire Matthew 18:15–20 process better than I could ever dream of doing. There is no way I can improve upon what Ken has written. What I have tried to do in this volume is to zoom in and take a very practical look at the first step of the process—resolving conflicts “between he and thee alone.” Solomon said,

Do not go out hastily to argue your case;
Otherwise, what will you do in the end,
When your neighbor humiliates you?
Argue your case with your neighbor,
And do not reveal the secret of another,
Or he who hears it will reproach you,
And the evil report about you will not pass away. (Prov. 25:8–10)

This is a much more informal, more “down and dirty,” less forensic approach to solving conflicts than *The Peacemaker* is. It deals in great detail with approaching conflict with the proper motives and attitudes. Other fine biblically based books address this topic in one way or another. My book is written through the eyes and experience of a biblical counselor. As such, it offers useful material not found anywhere else, although I make no claim that it is infallible.

1. Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

INTRODUCTION

WHAT COMES TO MIND when you hear the word *conflict*? Do you see conflict as something that is always wrong, or perhaps as something to be avoided at all cost? Or do you see conflict as something that can be good—and even *necessary*—something that God Himself requires you to participate in and even to initiate¹ at times? Do you see conflict as something that, if avoided (or eschewed), may displease God?

I recently had an opportunity to minister in Sao Paulo, Brazil. During my presentation, I used the word *conflict* to express the idea of two people being able to passionately disagree with each other without either one of them necessarily resorting to sin. My translator faithfully translated the word *conflict* into Portuguese. At the break, an English-speaking Brazilian brother came up to me and said that he had “a doubt” (“a question,” as it turns out) about how a conflict could occur without sin. After I explained what I meant, he went on to explain that in the Portuguese language (or at least in Brazilian Portuguese), the word *conflict* necessarily connotes the employment of sinful forms of communication (sort of like our word *quarrel*). The Portuguese word for “argument,” however, does not necessarily involve sin. From a biblical perspective, to have a conflict with someone (or even to start one) is not *necessarily* a sin.

Where, may I ask, does the Bible say that conflicts, arguments, debates, disputes, and disagreements are necessarily wrong and are, therefore, always to be avoided? Sure, generally speaking, Christians are

1. I'm currently reviewing an interesting book about “being a gentleman” in which the author suggests that a gentleman should never start an argument. Although I certainly appreciate that sentiment, I do not fully agree, because sometimes Christians must initiate conflict.

exhorted to be cool-spirited, calm, cheek-turning, quarrel abandoning peacemakers who make every effort to make and keep peace (in fact, that phrase is central enough that it once formed the working title of this book!). And, of course, on the other side of the same coin, we are exhorted to avoid being contentious, to keep away from strife, to not quarrel or fight or battle, and to avoid a dozen other things that are usually thought of as conflict.

Yet *conflict* is a general term under which many biblical forms of good and proper communication may rightly be placed. For example, the process of restoring a sinning brother in Matthew 18:15–18 is essentially a command to initiate a course of action that (even as the text suggests) might result in conflict. Scripture speaks of additional conflicts (or confrontations) that Christians sometimes must initiate. Christians must at times “convict” (Jude 15), “rebuke” (2 Tim. 4:2), “admonish” (Rom. 15:14), “resist” (or “oppose,” Gal. 2:11) and “solemnly charge” (2 Tim. 2:14) people. There are even times when they may have to “contend earnestly” with people for the sake of the faith (Jude 3). These words all imply some form of confrontation if not conflict. So to throw out all conflict as wrong is to, as the saying goes, “throw out the baby with the bathwater.” Indeed, sometimes, in order to obey God, followers of Jesus Christ are called upon to disturb the peace. Disrupting the status quo is something that Jesus and His followers were accustomed to doing. Those who proclaim the gospel (who put on the shoes of “the preparation of the gospel of peace,” Eph. 6:15) publicly and privately ought to expect that, despite every attempt to make and keep it, the peace is often disturbed—sometimes even to their own physical detriment. The truth is divisive!

When I use the word *conflict* throughout this volume, I do not necessarily mean something that is wrong or unhealthy. Indeed, as we shall see, sometimes conflicts are biblically necessary and therefore good. There is a difference between having a conflict and having a fight, between arguing and quarreling, between having a contestation and being contentious. One is not necessarily sinful; the other is.

This should become more apparent as the book develops, but I trust for now that this will help you to properly interpret the term *conflict* as it occurs quite frequently in this book.

PART ONE

PREREQUISITES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

WOULD IT SURPRISE YOU to learn that there is a passage of Scripture that, when violated, produces virtually every kind of interpersonal conflict? When couples whom I counsel have serious difficulties resolving their differences, before I even start exploring their backgrounds I know that at least one of them is out of sync with this passage of Scripture. But the amazing thing about it is that there is absolutely nothing anywhere near the text about marriage. Can you guess what that passage is?

It's Ephesians 4:1–3. Four character traits listed in this passage are essential to conflict resolution. See if you can pick them out.

Therefore, I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance [forbearance] for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The very last line of this passage is sort of a summary statement of the entire sentence. It is an imperative—a command that we are to obey. The Holy Spirit, through the pen of the apostle Paul, is giving us a very important directive: “*make every effort*,” He says, “to keep the unity of

the Spirit through the bond of peace” (v. 3 NIV).¹ What precedes this summary statement are the four prerequisites: humility, gentleness, patience, and loving forbearance.

You may have noticed that this book is divided into two sections: “Prerequisites for Conflict Resolution” and “Biblical Principles of Conflict Resolution.” In this section, we will take an in-depth look at the four prerequisites in verse two of Ephesians 4. In the next, we will unpack some of the most important components of resolving conflicts biblically.

But before we go any further, please allow me to give you a word of warning. There may be a moment or two as you read the prerequisite materials in this section of the book when its contents will seem to have little to do with conflict resolution. (Some of the working definitions of these prerequisite character traits will go way beyond the scope of resolving conflicts or even communication.) You might even be tempted to read ahead in order to get to the nuts and bolts of what you purchased this book for—to learn the mechanics of biblical conflict resolution. Let me assure you that plenty of very helpful, practical material of that nature follows in the second half (and in the appendices) of this book. But learning all of those wonderful, biblically based principles of conflict resolution will do you little good if you don’t meet the prerequisites. (In fact, my prayer for you is that the first part of this book will have a greater impact on you than the latter half.) Believing that you can skip prerequisites is as shortsighted as a building contractor believing he can erect a skyscraper without first driving the pilings upon which its foundation will be laid deep into the bedrock. Such a building may stand for a moment, but it simply will not endure the test of time—it will not be able to stand up to the tempestuous forces of nature and will soon crumble.

Let me explain why the prerequisites are essential. Communication proceeds from the heart. The Bible speaks often of the connection

1. Paul reminds the Ephesians in chapter 2 (vv. 11–17) that Christ’s death on the cross established “peace” both between God and man and between Jew and Gentile (believer and believer). The unity of (or the unity that comes from) the Spirit is the result of both groups having been brought together in Christ.

between the heart and the mouth (and lips and tongue—see Job 33:3; Pss. 12:2; 17:10; 19:14; Prov. 15:2, 28; 16:23; 26:23–24). Matthew 15:8 looks at the hypocrisy shown when the heart and the lips say different things. Many verses in Scripture compare the way that the thoughts of the heart proceed through the mouth in terms of flowing water. Proverbs 15:2 says, “The *tongue* of the wise makes knowledge acceptable, but the *mouth* of fools *spouts* folly.” Or see Proverbs 15:28: “The *heart* of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the *mouth* of the wicked pours out evil things.” Proverbs 10:11 tells us, “The mouth of the righteous is a *fountain* of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.”

Imagine a fountain or a waterfall. Whatever is at the source will come out. If the basin is salt water, don’t expect fresh to come from the fountain. If the water at the top has arsenic in it, what comes down the waterfall won’t be good to drink. Likewise, Luke tells us, what is in the heart will be expressed in the words: “The good man brings out of the good treasure of his heart forth what is good; and the evil man brings out of the evil treasure forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart” (Luke 6:45).

You simply can’t expect to speak that which is good (or to resolve conflicts well) when evil attitudes are ruling your heart. Jesus asked the question, “How can you, being evil, speak what is good?” (Matt. 12:34). The only way we can have our hearts truly cleansed is through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

So please work hard to meet the preconditions of effective conflict resolution discussed in chapters one through four. Just as you will have to work hard to practice the skills you will learn in part two of this manual, so you will need to practice developing these prerequisites—even *after* you have finished reading the book. It is as Paul told Timothy: “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Tim. 4:7–8).

But really now, who can say, “I have met the prerequisites”? Which of us have become so totally proficient in each of these virtues that we can now claim to have arrived?

None of us is able to do that. But we can all commit ourselves to learning how to walk in these qualities so that day by day we become increasingly more prepared to resolve conflicts God's way—and thereby to glorify Him.

1

PREREQUISITE ONE: HUMILITY

THE FIRST PREREQUISITE for being a biblical peacemaker is humility.

I . . . implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, *with all humility*. (Eph. 4:1–2)

What is it that most often prevents conflicts from being resolved? What is the opposite of humility? Pride is the *one sin, above all others*, that hinders our ability to resolve conflicts with others. “Pride only breeds quarrels” (Prov. 13:10 NIV). It comes in many show-stopping forms. See if you can recognize any of them in your life.

- Unwillingness to admit when I am wrong
- Resorting to defensiveness, blame shifting, justification, or anger when I’m lawfully reproved by another
- Becoming impatient or upset when contradicted in speech—especially when publicly contradicted
- Oversensitivity to correction
- Being unwilling when wronged to forgive an offender who has not demonstrated extreme submission or repentance
- Difficulty in being pleased by others

Conflicts often occur when one person sins against another.¹ Such conflicts cannot be resolved effectively without confession² (and repentance) on the part of the sinning party. And that takes humility. But pride often gets in the way.

WHAT IS PRIDE?

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome is a disease that renders the body's immune system *unable to resist* invasion by several microorganisms that cause serious infections. According to my encyclopedia,

The AIDS virus causes so much damage to the immune system that the body becomes susceptible to a variety of opportunistic infections— infections that are less harmful to people with normal immune systems but take advantage of the breakdown in an AIDS sufferer's immune system to produce devastating and eventually lethal diseases.³

The sin of pride is the AIDS of the soul. Almost like a cataract, the HIV/AIDS virus blinds the eyes of its victim's immune system, preventing it from seeing those bodily enemies that threaten his life.

Pride blinds us not only to itself, but to every other sin tucked away in the recesses of our hearts and lives. It causes us to hate correction and reproof. It hides our sin from us, it justifies our sin, it excuses our sin, and it keeps us from repenting of our sin. It deceives us into thinking that we are spiritually well when, in fact, we have a deadly cancer and are in desperate need of the Great Physician's balm.⁴ (Of course, when

1. As we will explore later in this book, sin is not the only cause of conflict. Sometimes conflicts can occur when (non-sinful) differences in people's views, personas, values, lifestyles, or approaches to problems cause them to disagree.

2. The first person to whom we must always confess our sins is God, who promises that "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9; cf. Pss. 32:5; 51). This is necessary if we want to be in proper relationship with God and man (see Acts 24:16). We need God's grace—that is, His supernatural enabling power and desire (see Phil. 2:13)—to properly repent of those sins that mess up all of our interactions.

3. *Encarta* (Redmond, WA: Microsoft Press, 1993), CD-ROM, s. v. "Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome."

4. When people die as a result of contracting AIDS, they do not die of AIDS. They die from other diseases commonly referred to as AIDS-related complications, such as pneumonia or tuberculosis.

it comes time for us to confess our sin, we expect those whom we have offended to overlook our “little mistakes.”)

Look at what Richard Baxter, the prolific Puritan writer, had to say about the pathology of this horrible plague of the soul:

Pride is a deep rooted and a self-preserving sin; and therefore is harder to be killed and rooted up than other sins. It hinders the discovery of itself. . . . It will not allow the sinner to see his pride when he is reproofed; neither will it allow him to confess it if he see it; nor . . . to loathe himself and forsake it. . . . Even when he recognizes all of the evidences of pride in others, he will not see it in himself. When he feels himself despising reproof, and knows that this is a sign of pride in others, yet he will not know it in himself. If you would go about to cure him of this or any other fault, you shall feel that you are handling a wasp or an adder; yet when he is spitting the venom of pride against the reprover, he does not perceive that he is proud; this venom is a part of his nature and therefore is not felt as harmful or poisonous.⁵

The proud person doesn't understand the dynamics of Proverbs 15:33 and 18:12 that “before honor is humility.”

Notice the terms that Solomon uses to describe the persons whose pride will not allow them to accept reproof or instruction.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
Fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov. 1:7)

Do not reprove a *scoffer*, or he will hate you,
Reprove a wise man, and he will love you. (Prov. 9:8; cf. Prov. 15:2)

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,
But he who hates reproof is *stupid*. (Prov. 12:1)

5. Richard Baxter, *Baxter's Practical Works*, vol. 1, *A Christian Directory* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990), 207.

PREREQUISITES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

He is on the path of life who heeds instruction,
But he who forsakes reproof *goes astray*. (Prov. 10:17)

Humility, on the other hand, causes people to realize that because of the effects of sin on the human mind, we don't know everything. Each of us is quite capable of misperceiving, misjudging, misunderstanding, and miscommunicating. More than this, God didn't give any of us the entire loaf of bread (all wisdom). The humble person recognizes and appreciates the fact that God has blessed *others* with gifts, abilities, and information from which we may learn. A humble person realizes that he is a great sinner capable not only of doing wrong, but also of being blinded to the sin about which he is being confronted. The humble person can be grateful for the gift of counsel—for both the correction and the corrector.

If you're not quite sure of the connection between pride and lack of forgiveness, let's look at two brief conversations, first between two proud people and then between two humble people:

Jim: You are so messed up. Who do you think you are talking to me that way? I'm not a child! I deserve to be treated with respect.

Bob: So you don't think the way you're acting right now is childish? Look, I'm having a bad day. You're just going to have to get over it (and while you're at it, you need to get over yourself) and forgive me.

Jim: I'm not quite ready to extend my forgiveness to the likes of you. You haven't offended just any ol' person, you've offended *me!* And I don't go around granting people my forgiveness simply on the basis of their word without them somehow otherwise *propitiating* my anger.

Whoops, rerun. Let's try that again.

Jim: Hey Bob, you know I have a lot of respect for you and the way you conduct yourself in general. But the way you spoke to me yesterday left

me a bit puzzled and frankly disturbed. I might be wrong, but what I heard you say was _____. It seemed you were angry at me or something. It came across as rather condescending and even a bit vindictive. But it was bugging me, and so I thought I should check and see if I heard it right.

Bob: Thank you for caring enough to say something. You know, I haven't quite got that off my conscience. God didn't let me sleep well last night, and I'd already decided to talk to you in order to try to make it right. I'm sorry. I probably did have a condescending attitude toward you. I wasn't actually angry at you. Two hours before we spoke one of my subordinates at work embarrassed me very badly in front of my boss, who proceeded to falsely accuse me in front of lots of people. At any rate, will you forgive me for having such a proud and dismissive attitude and for setting a bad example for you and for any others who might have been watching? Is there anything else I need to ask your forgiveness for?

Jim: I forgive you, brother. Thank you for hearing me and, more importantly, for listening to what the Lord was convicting you of.

A humble believer recognizes the enormity of his own debt of sin that Christ has forgiven and considers any offenses that he must forgive as minutia in comparison (see Matt. 18:21–35). He willingly grants forgiveness to those who sincerely ask for it. In the absence of hard evidence to the contrary, he takes the repentant brother at his word.

Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, *saying*, "I repent," forgive him. (Luke 17:3–4)

Humble people have realistic expectations of themselves and are willing to give others grace. Because they understand the importance of respect and honor, they grant them to others. If someone's action

can be taken two different ways, they choose to see it through the eyes of love and grace. Baxter again says it well.

As godly, humble men rightly amplify their sins in light of the greatness and excellency of God whom they offend; so the proud man foolishly amplifies every little wrong that is done to him, and every word that is said against him, and every supposed omission or neglect of him, because of the high estimation he has of himself.⁶

In what ways may our desire to be too highly esteemed by others affect our ability to resolve conflicts successfully? Here are just a few possibilities. (As you view this list, remember that we may still manifest pride in conflict even if the person with whom we are speaking is not one by whom we want to be esteemed. Of course, we might think ourselves better than that person and therefore consider his opinion irrelevant, which is still pride.)

- ❑ It may tempt us to respond defensively (to shift the blame to someone or something else, to justify our sin, or to become angry) when reprovved.
- ❑ It may tempt us to exaggerate (lie about) our virtues and minimize our flaws.
- ❑ It may produce in us a censorious, critical, condemning, accusing, judgmental attitude toward others (especially toward those in positions of authority). Others—especially those who know us best—may be repulsed by our pride and consequently try to humble us by putting us in our place.
- ❑ It may tempt us to include in our discussion superfluous tidbits of information about our own accomplishments that have little or nothing to do with the issue at hand. In addition to distracting from the resolution (wasting time), our pride may again tempt others to a sinful response.
- ❑ It may tempt us to outwardly agree with others even though we don't inwardly agree.

6. Baxter, *Baxter's Practical Works*, 203.

- ❑ It may also tempt us to say “yes” when we should say “no.”
- ❑ It may tempt us to show partiality in a conflict—to favor one person’s opinion (the one whose esteem we are longing for) over another’s.
- ❑ It may tempt us to be indecisive. We may be so concerned about how a decision will be seen by the one whose esteem we are seeking that we spend inordinate amounts of time trying to look at the decision from every vantage point.
- ❑ It may make us prone to command rather than to obey, prone to teach rather than to be taught, prone to speak rather than to listen.
- ❑ It may tempt us to become impatient or upset when we are contradicted—especially when others are witnessing the conflict.
- ❑ It may render us inordinately curious about things that we do not have a biblical need to know, thus causing us to be reproved for being meddlesome.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PRIDE AND HUMILITY?

Next I’d like to give you four working definitions of the sin of pride⁷ and four definitions of its antithesis, humility.

To really get the most out of the definitions in this chapter (and the following three chapters) I’d like to suggest that you internalize (memorize) them so that you may suck as much of the flavor out of them as you can. And let me remind you again that the character traits we will be looking at will go outside the bounds of conflict resolution. These are matters of the heart—of sin and righteousness—and as such should not be viewed primarily as a means to some temporal end. Even our desire to be conflict resolvers (peacemakers) should have a higher motive than merely getting along with others.

7. These definitions were originally published in my book *Pleasing People: How Not to Be an “Approval Junkie”* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 109–13.

1. Pride is the delusion that our achievements are primarily the results of our own doing.

A delusion is an erroneous belief or opinion. The dictionary defines it as a false belief that is strongly held in spite of invalidating evidence, *especially as a symptom of mental illness*. (By this definition, our mental hospitals are filled with people who are crazy . . . *about themselves!*)

Whatever we have has been given to us by God and should be used as a means of bringing honor to Him. “For who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). God has given us the blessings and achievements in our lives. Those blessings are bestowed on us to promote the glory and reputation of the One who is truly responsible for them and for the good of others. Yet pride tempts us to take credit and to focus on ourselves.

To use any of our gifts to promote ourselves is to use them for purposes other than those for which they were given. Not that it is wrong to take pleasure in these things, or even to enjoy a certain sense of satisfaction as they are used for God’s purposes. But to consume them in the pursuit one’s lusts is to pervert the ends to which they were given and to rob the Giver of the glory that is due Him.

On the other hand, humility is the realization that God (and, to a certain extent through His grace, others) is responsible for our achievements. “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father” (James 1:17).

“What does this have to do with conflict resolution?” you may be wondering.

Let me ask you a few questions about the last conflict you had. For whom (for whose glory) were you fighting? To what extent were you *consciously trying* to use your communication skills, your logic, the Scriptures, and so on for the purpose of showing love to your neighbor (or enemy) and bringing glory to God? Would a bit more humility (regarding what God has given you) have done anything to improve your ability to solve that dispute?

Sometimes when we are in a conflict, we can lose sight of the fact

that defending our reputation is not the most important thing. Glorifying God, telling the truth, edifying others, and finding a biblical resolution to the matter as quickly as possible with a minimum amount of sin should all trump our desire to defend our reputation—or to bolster it by showing off our verbal prowess (see 2 Cor. 12:19).

An ungrateful attitude—especially toward a person in position of authority—can be especially provocative in a conflict.

2. Pride is esteeming ourselves above and beyond the condition and proportion that God has appointed for us.

By “condition” I mean our state of being, from the state of our health to our IQ, our social standing, or anything that might cause others to esteem us more highly. In other words, our condition would be the situation or circumstances (and the honor associated with them) into which the Lord has chosen to place us. By “proportion” I mean the relative magnitude, quantity, or degree of those conditions (or circumstances) that God has chosen for us.

Humility allows us to be content with our status in life, whether we have authority, honor, influence, and wealth, or whether we have a position that is lowly by human standards. Humble people are thankful for what they have been given and for God’s wise distribution of blessings to all people for His purposes, and they understand that all the parts of the body work together anyway, whether our own part is that of an eye or of a thumb. Perhaps the saddest thing about being proud is that we will never be satisfied, no matter how much approval we are able to generate. What Solomon says about material wealth—“He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income” (Eccl. 5:10)—is applicable to any idolatrous desire. Temporal things do not satisfy; they only tempt us to further discontentment.

Over-esteeming ourselves in the midst of a conflict will usually produce a condescending “know-it-all” attitude that disposes others to resist agreeing with our point of view—not because we are necessarily wrong but because we appear wise in our own eyes (and therefore in need of a little embarrassing opposition).

In the book of Esther, Haman esteemed himself *above* and *beyond* the condition and proportion that God had appointed for him. He is a prime example of the fool who Paul spoke of in Galatians 6:3: “For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” His pride deceived him into thinking that he was the man most worthy of honor in the king’s court, though God thought otherwise. God chose to exalt a young orphaned Jewish girl named Esther and her wise uncle Mordecai, and to let Haman’s pride be the snare that entrapped him.

On the other hand, *humility is esteeming ourselves soberly according to the condition and proportion God has appointed for us*. Do you have a sober assessment of yourself? “For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith” (Rom. 12:3).

To have a sober understanding of the wisdom, gifts, and abilities that God has given you is not necessarily pride. To have no understanding of one’s “giftedness” is to have no cause to glorify God for His goodness to you in that area. In fact, to be ignorant of such things is to not become good stewards of them. What’s more, it is not necessarily proud to derive a certain measure of delight and pleasure in such God-given things as wisdom, gifts, and abilities. “With the fruit of a man’s mouth his stomach will be satisfied; he will be satisfied with the product of his lips” (Prov. 18:20).

So then, *humility is aware of its own blessings, but it is also very mindful that God has blessed others as well*. “Do nothing from selfishness or *empty conceit*, but with humility of mind let each of you *regard one another as more important than yourselves*” (Phil. 2:3). Regarding others as more important than ourselves helps to minimize and resolve conflicts. (It disposes people to want to affirm and agree with us where they can, rather than to resist us.) To regard others is to regard their opinions. It is not that we are always going to agree with them or even believe that they are right, but that we are going to treat them as though (all things being equal) their opinions are just as valuable to the conversation as our own (or even more so).

3. *Pride is the desire to be esteemed by others above and beyond the condition and proportion that God has appointed for us.*

It's bad enough to esteem ourselves above and beyond the condition and proportion appointed to us by God. It's *worse* to want others to do so.

Do you remember the account of that married couple in the book of Acts who were snuffed out by God within hours of each other because of something they said? A cursory reading of the text might lead you to believe that Ananias and Sapphira were judged just for their deception. But if you really look, you will see that it was their *pride* that motivated them to lie!

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a *portion* of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back *some* of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And *after it was sold*, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God." And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. (Acts 5:1-5)

How and why did Ananias and Sapphira lie? They lied by leading the church to believe that they gave the *entire portion* of the proceeds from the sale of their property to the Lord. They were free to give only a portion of the sale to the church. It was *under their control*. They lied because they wanted the church to esteem them above and beyond the proportion of what they had given. Another man in the New Testament had an inordinate desire for others to esteem him above and beyond what he had been given. He had a rather serious conflict-resolution issue. The Bible says of him that he "loved to be first" among his peers. His name was Diotrefes.

I wrote something to the church; but Diotrefes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. For this reason, if I come,

PREREQUISITES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts *them* out of the church. (3 John 9–10)

Haman, Ananias, and Diotrephes all tried to exalt themselves and were rebuked for their pride. A scary principle that runs through the Bible about humility says that *either we humble ourselves or God will humble us!* King Nebuchadnezzar and Pharaoh both learned that the hard way. (Pharaoh never learned it at all.)

On the other hand, *humility is the desire for others not to esteem us above and beyond the condition and proportion that God has appointed for us.*

For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me. (2 Cor. 12:6 NKJV)

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, *did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped*, but emptied Himself, *taking the form of a bond-servant*, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name. (Phil. 2:5–9)

In what ways can humility help us to love others even as we face conflict with them?

- It will enable us to listen when reproved.
- It will help us to resist the temptation to exaggerate (lie about) our virtues and minimize our flaws.
- It will produce in us a gentle, compassionate, respectful, and teachable attitude toward others (especially toward those in positions of authority).

- It will enable us to focus on the other person and on the problem at hand more than on how we are coming across in the conversation.
- It will help us to listen to what others are saying and to look for ways to agree with and encourage them.
- It will enable us to show impartiality in a conflict—to avoid favoring one person’s opinion (the one whose esteem we are longing for) over another’s.
- It may help us to be objective by obliging us to look at the decision from every vantage point without trying to see which angle will serve our own desires best.
- It should make us prone to listen and more willing to understand our opponent’s perspective.
- It will encourage us to be patient even when we are contradicted or shown to be wrong—even if others are witnessing the conflict.
- It will prevent us from being inordinately curious about things which we do not have a biblical need to know and thus will keep us from being reproved for being meddlesome.

4. Pride is the desire to exalt ourselves above and beyond the condition and proportion that God has appointed for us.

This is the pinnacle of pride: to exalt *ourselves* to a higher position than we know we deserve.⁸ It’s bad enough to esteem oneself above and beyond the condition and proportion appointed by God. It’s *worse* to want others to do so. It’s *worse yet* to *exalt oneself* above that position. It’s what the Devil did that got him thrown out of heaven. It’s what Eve and Adam did to get them thrown out of the garden. As we’ve seen, it’s what Ananias and Sapphira did to get thrown out of the church!

On the other hand, *humility is contentment with the condition and proportion God that has appointed for us.*

Are you content with your condition in life? Are you content with your house, your social status, your clothing, your looks, your earning

8. Of course, a truly humble individual knows that the thing he deserves most is to spend eternity in hell. The point here is not that we should think of ourselves as “deserving” but rather that we should not exalt ourselves (boast) beyond what God has seen fit to give us.

PREREQUISITES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

power, your other stuff? Richard Baxter said, “Humility is a willingness and desire that others should not think of us, or speak of us, or use [i.e., treat] us as greater or wiser or better than we are: that they should give us no more honor, praise or love than is our due.”⁹

O LORD, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty;
Nor do I involve myself in great matters,
Or in things too difficult for me. (Ps. 131:1)

Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Heb. 13:5 NKJV)

The apostle Paul learned how to regulate his level of desire to the condition and proportion into which God chose to place him from day to day.

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. (Phil. 4:11–12 NIV)

The same is often true of us. Be it our health, finances, jobs, friendships, or reputations, we can find ourselves to have paucity or plenty. But contentment is the “secret” in any and every situation.

If we were content with food and clothing, we would save ourselves from many unnecessary conflicts.

What is the source of *quarrels and conflicts* among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you *fight and quarrel*. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask

9. Baxter, *Baxter's Practical Works*, 193.

and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us”? But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” (James 4:1–6)

We will unpack this passage in chapter 2, but for now suffice it to say that the opposite of contentment is covetousness (idolatry), and James makes a definite correlation between sinful conflicts and our covetous desires.

Of the four godly attitudes we will look at in this section, humility has the broadest scope. It is something we must all strive to develop (to clothe ourselves with—see 1 Peter 5:5) every day of our lives on this earth. The more you understand and can recognize the many facets of pride in your heart and life, the easier it will be for you to repent of them by God’s grace. As with the Spirit’s help you learn to clothe yourself with humility day by day, you will find that your ability to resolve conflicts will dramatically improve.

“Everything Lou writes is helpful, practical, and biblical because of his wisdom gained through years of counseling experience and his love for God’s Word.”

—JIM NEWHEISER

Executive Director, Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship

Many Christians see *conflict* as a dirty word—something to be avoided at all costs. After all, aren’t Christians to be peacemakers who strive to maintain unity?

But, as Lou Priolo reminds us, many other things that the Bible exhorts us to do—such as convicting, rebuking, and admonishing other Christians—make conflict a necessary part of the Christian life.

Lou takes us through the biblical principles of conflict resolution, beginning before conflict even starts. He shows us the prerequisites we must have in place as we go into conflict, what is at the heart of our conflict, what makes it biblical or unbiblical, and how we should respond to it. He also shares practical steps and advice, giving us specific talking points to resolve conflict and journaling exercises that help us to grow when it happens.

Learn how to “make every effort” to maintain unity—even when that effort must start with conflict!

“Conflicts are like forest fires. If you can put them out while they’re still small, you can save an enormous amount of time and effort. That’s why this book is so valuable: it provides simple, biblically sound, and incredibly effective insights for resolving conflict in its earliest stages, when it still involves only two people. If you learn and practice these principles, you will spend more time enjoying the people around you—rather than fighting prolonged relational fires.”

—KEN SANDE, President, Relational Wisdom 360; Author, *The Peacemaker*

Lou Priolo is the founder and president of Competent to Counsel International and is an instructor with Birmingham Theological Seminary. He has been a full-time biblical counselor since 1985 and is a fellow of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors. Lou lives in Birmingham, Alabama, with his wife, Kim, and his daughters, Sophia and Gabriella.

COVER DESIGN: CHRISTOPHER TOBIAS
www.tobiasdesign.com

Photo © Adobe Stock

www.prpbooks.com

PRP
P U B L I S H I N G

COUNSELING

ISBN: 978-1-59638-909-0

EAN

