

Understanding Conflict – Exploring its Purposes

We have already explored the origins and nature of conflict, which brings us to the real issue and purposes of conflict. Another reality that gives us some clear insight is the fact that only God is inherently eternal, infinite, all-knowing, and righteous, which deeply impacts on us.

¹⁵ ...God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶ who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.

(1Tim 6:15-

16)

¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Heb

4:13)

Therefore, since we his creatures are not infinite and all-knowing within ourselves, we are always in the position of needing wisdom and knowledge from him in order to learn how to trust in his faithfulness. And it is this fundamental distinction between God, our all-knowing and infinite Creator, and us, his finite creatures who need to learn wisdom and knowledge from him, which is precisely where the potential for conflict resides. God's answer is in Christ!

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² My purpose is that you may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that you may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that you may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:2-3).

However, contrary to what many Christians seem to believe, conflict is not sinful in and of itself. Conflict may make us feel uncomfortable, feel confused, and sometimes feel helpless, but its purpose is to provoke some kind of learning opportunity. These learning opportunities are meant to lead to growth in understanding and the development of greater wisdom that can open up more productive ways of handling life's problems. Of course, conflict not handled well can lead to relational breakdowns, mental fatigue, anxiety, and even physical sicknesses. It's what we do with that opportunity that determines whether it becomes sinful or not!!!

And this is precisely what happened to Adam and Eve! Conflict that is not handled wisely can result in situations that become quite toxic and place us in circumstances that are unhelpful and can become harmful to ourselves and others, becoming the playgrounds of sin.

The actual reason for this need for conflict to promote necessary learning opportunities for us lies directly in our 'embodied' reality. Putting it simply, the way God has created the human brain to function requires repeated experiences, which can be positive or negative,

to build a storehouse of memories that can be drawn on from which we can begin to develop an understanding of the world around us.

God's Creative Masterpiece – the Human Brain

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John Medina, a developmental molecular biologist and Professor of Bioengineering at the University of Washington, describes the human brain as: "Easily the most sophisticated information-transfer system on earth. Your brain sends jolts of electricity crackling through hundreds of miles of wires composed of brain cells so small that thousands of them could fit into the full-stop at the end of this sentence."

Our brain is a physical object housed within our skull, yet it has the capacity to generate the metaphysical realms of mind, thought, memory, and emotion, which still baffles neuroscientists as to how it is able to do that.

As one educator comments, "...children are born with brains but not fully developed minds. It is through interaction and the use of language and gesture that the mind is formed and only then can 'the self' begin to emerge."

This time consuming process required for mind-development to emerge from within the physical brain, has been the subject of much research, which shows that the mind-brain relationship can be understood only as an embodied mind/brain and one that is environmentally and socially situated. The mind does not descend from above but emerges naturally as the result of biological development. And the Christian can say, by divine design.

However, it is also now known that this drawn out process is actually driven by our experiences occurring in the outside physical world, which also produce metaphysical responses internally. In fact, the architecture of our brain is being formed over time by these very experiences.

This is the reason behind why we humans require so much more time to develop to full maturity. For example, a foal will be walking with some stability only hours after being born, whereas a human will take 10 to 18 months to walk, and another year or two to speak coherently. We now know scientifically that the human brain is not fully developed until the mid to late 20's. It is all to do with brain development and the emergence of the individual's sense of self. As one researcher has astutely recognised:

"The areas of the brain associated with foresight and planning are not fully developed in teenagers, a finding that will come as little surprise to most parents."

So, this lengthy amount of time required for full brain development to occur within human beings is because of our embodied constitution and the extraordinary degree of control that must be mastered in order to function at the level required for normal human life.

Four Reasons Why People Disagree –

Since we all agree that conflict is a given, what are some of the fundamental reasons why we humans often disagree about many things. Edward de Bono makes four suggestions –

- **Because we see things differently** - there are a multitude of contributing factors, such as brain wiring, family of origin, current family environment, current mood, life experiences, and the context we find ourselves in at any point in time.
- **Because we want different things** - we see things from a different perspective, and often involving principles, values, and beliefs.
- **Because our thinking style encourage us to** - our thinking is *word-language* based, and our words communicate particular meanings with attached emotional values. Conflict can easily arise when someone thinks they are hearing one thing, not realising that is not what the other party was intending.
As the marriage counselling saying goes –
*I know you believe you understand what you think I said,
but I'm not sure you realise that what you heard is not what I meant.*
- **Because we are supposed to** - the inevitability of conflict creates opportunity to discover better alternatives that remaining in a static deadlock of no growth would not.

In summary:

Different people see things differently because of different perspectives. Whatever their motivating factors might be, they bring texture and depth of feeling to their definition of life. So, observing how other people express themselves allows us to expand our own thinking; we may not agree with them, but we gain a broader perspective from which to develop our own understanding.

It's important to realise it is only as we engage with the differences in others that we receive an insight into our own strengths and weaknesses. Conflict creates learning opportunities for growth and development within ourselves and others when handled appropriately.

Finish with naval manoeuvres story – a true story!!!

Two battleships assigned to a training squadron had been at sea on manoeuvres in heavy weather for several days. I was serving on the lead battleship and was on watch on the bridge as night fell. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the Captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities.

Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing of the bridge reported, "Light bearing on the starboard bow." "Is it steady or moving astern?", the captain called out.

Lookout replied, "Steady, Captain," which meant we were on a dangerous collision course with that ship.

The Captain then called to the signalman, "Signal that ship: We are on a collision course, advise you change course 20 degrees."

Back came a signal, "Advisable for you to change course 20 degrees."

The Captain said, "Send, I'm a Captain, change course 20 degrees."

"I'm a seaman second class," came the reply. "You had better change course 20 degrees"

By that time the captain was furious. He spat out, "Send, I'm a battleship. Change course 20 degrees." Back came the flashing light, "I'm a lighthouse."

We changed course.

Seek first to understand; then to be understood!!!