

Navigating Life's Conflicts

1. Understanding Conflict – Its Source and Nature

Conflict is something we have all experienced at all levels of our lives. While none of us remember it, we all first experienced conflict as toddlers when one of our parents had the temerity to expect us to do something we did not want to do. From there it extended to the playpen where we discovered that our siblings did not always agree with us, and then on the schoolyard, the footy field, the workplace, and our marriage and family life, etc., where competition and conflict often came to be seemingly synonymous.

Conflict researchers, Bartos & Wehr, comment: "The ways of dealing with human conflict around the world are legion. They are passed down from parent to child, from generation to generation. They are transmitted from one life experience to the next. Handling conflict is simply one of the life skills we learn and practice. Some do it better than others."

Question: Is conflict inevitable?

Definition: Conflict – *noun* – to strike together;

Latin: *con* - together, and *fligere* - to strike

: a struggle for power, property, territory, etc.

: strong disagreement between people or groups, that can result in angry argument

: a difference that prevents agreement: between ideas, values, feelings, or opinions

: a clash between contradictory impulses within an individual – inner conflict

It has been variously described as:

Clashes of interests, values, beliefs, actions, or directions – residing in human differences

Jesus said:

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. (Jn 16:33)

Exploring the Origins of Conflict in the Garden of Eden

Taking the various pictures provided for us in Genesis 1 and 2, we see God as the original provider creating a nurturing environment requiring the work of creation-care to maintain sustainable life and growth.

Chapter 1 – ²⁷ *So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

²⁸ *God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."*

Chapter 2 – ¹⁵ *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*

¹⁶ *And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will surely die."*

There is a clear implication within the creation narratives that part of the privilege of bearing God's image meant that there was a reciprocal responsibility for Adam and Eve to learn some specific things about their relationship with their Creator into which they had been brought. These included understanding and applying the responsibilities he was giving them, such as creation-care through applying the principles of agricultural and animal husbandry, and those of practical family relationships.

Question: How does a sovereign, unlimited God, create a learning opportunity for his newly created embodied image-bearing and therefore limited creatures, who have no context or experience of anything other than loving and idyllic provision?

Answer: He must instigate a situation from which they can begin to learn what it means for them as 'created' beings; meaning, limited and dependent; to live in a covenant relationship of love and grace with their uncreated, sovereign, and unlimited Creator.

So, he provides them with a limitation – a wise and loving restriction on their freedom – designed to help them learn the reality of their dependency and resultant consequential responsibility, which will require them to learn trust and loving restraint on their part.

There was not a sniff of conflict on the radar screen in this idyllic environment with God's image-bearers since this was all in the context of a loving relationship, but as yet, untested.

But.....When another 'perspective' – a different point of view – was presented to them, which they, as yet, had no context to accurately assess, it caused a potential conflict to arise which would require them to make a decision in relation to what God had communicated to them regarding eating or not eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.
(Gen 3:1-7, 10-24)

So, this 'limitation' that God had placed on them was, in fact, a learning opportunity for them. But this was always going to be a point of potential conflict, since, although they were sinless, they were not God, and therefore, not capable of maintaining their sinless state in their own powers – Why? Because trust can only be learned within a genuinely relational environment!!!

It is the Freedom to Choose that Creates the Learning Opportunity

The capacity for limited freedom is only a blessing in the context of a loving relationship of trust with our creator God. However, it is this privilege of choice that creates not only the potential to learn, but also the possibility of conflict. Sadly, human history is now littered with the wreckage caused by that deceptive consumerist philosophy – If I want it, I should have it now, *regardless of the consequences.*

Question:

On what we have just looked at, what was the basic mistake that Adam and Eve made? We know, of course, that they made the momentous mistake of simply believing the serpent's lie, and in doing so, found themselves to have disobeyed God (Gen 3:7-19).

However, I suggest that was their second mistake, not their first mistake. Their primary mistake was not first going back to the Source; the relationship they already had with their loving Creator; to get his thoughts on this 'new' perspective that had been presented to them.

The Christian understanding of freedom of choice must include the possibility of responding either positively or negatively. Tragically, they missed the primary lesson they were meant to learn, namely, confident, grace-filled trust in God's provision. (Rom 12:3; Heb 4:14-16)

⁵ Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶ in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. ⁷ Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. ⁸ This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones. (Prov 3:5-8)

³ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. (Rom 12:3)

It was through Adam and Eve's misguided disobedience that they learned the other lesson of consequential responsibility; that of being removed from the favoured status of access to the immediate presence of God. However, their decision was foreknown by God, as revealed in the fact that Jesus is "the Lamb slain from the creation of the world" (Rev 13:8; 1Pet 1:17-20).

'Sin' – *missing the mark* of God's perfect righteousness – is the result of a *self-centred* response to conflict. This is precisely how sin commenced in the heart of Satan, the father of lies, who then infected humanity resulting in the shattering of the direct relationship between God and humanity, and the perversion of the human heart (Is 14:12-15; Ezek 28:11-17).

Put simply, sin is a self-centred response to an inner dialogue that subverts the God-given privilege of choice, inciting an indulgent 'I want', and pushing it towards a rebellious 'I will.'

However, the other very important lesson to take from this scenario is that conflict itself is not sinful – conflict simply creates a learning opportunity. It is the trusting or non-trusting, obedient or disobedient response, which determines whether it becomes sinful or not.

⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

(1Jn 1:8-9)