

An Assessment of the 4-Step New Testament Conflict Management Principles

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Abstract

Managing crisis among people that share the same religion and also share the same community of faith may seem easy in principle, but in actual fact, the day to day experiences prove otherwise. There had been reported cases of churches fragmenting into smaller cluster groups as a result of misunderstanding over issues such as finances, doctrine, leadership roles, etc. This kind of crisis happens in spite of the fact that they have many common denominators such as faith in the same saviour, the scripture being the main source of their theology, faith and practice; the denomination's constitution that contains guiding principles and several other things that bind them together and unite them in common faith. This study agrees with the words of Christ that "offence will come." Luke 17: 1. However, taking care of the "offence" is the main responsibility of believers. Jesus said, "blessed are the peace makers, for they shall be called the children of God." This descriptive study evaluates the 4-Step principle of conflict management by Jesus Christ in Matthew 18:15 (Figure 1). Here Christ recommended to believers that they needed to take three cogent steps before they declare a case as an irreconcilable difference. This study compares the biblical principle of conflict resolution with the contemporary theories with the aim of seeing how relevant such principle is in the day to day interpersonal conflicts among Christians. The conclusions from this study shows that this biblical principle of conflict resolution as propounded by Christ if applied in sequential order would help solve most of the interpersonal crisis that crop up from time to time among Christians.

Keywords: conflict, conflict management, conflict resolution, Christians, interpersonal conflict

Introduction

Managing interpersonal crisis could be very cumbersome and complicated. For instance conflicts arising from misunderstanding during conversation may be difficult to resolve. Sometimes, what was said by party A may not be exactly be what party B heard. The interpretation given to what was heard by party B may not be what was intended or meant by party A. This is just a simple case of simple misunderstanding that stems from interpersonal communication. Traditionally, the case of misunderstanding that could arise when messages are

communicated from one person to the other is often demonstrated to audience by carrying out a simple experiment. Five or six people would be selected from a group. One of them would be given an instruction or told something, the stress and intonations would be clearly noted by the person that gave the instruction or pass the message. The hearer would be required to communicate the same message to the next person and then the next, in quick succession until the message is relayed to the last person. In the end, the last person would be required to publicly verbalise the instruction or message he heard. In most cases, the quality of the message reduces as it travels from one person to the other. This means that the longer the line of communication, the lesser would be the quality of the message compared to what the primary recipient heard. Jesus was explicit when he instructed his audience, “Take heed of what you hear!” Luke 8: 18. James cautioned believers “be quick to hear but slow to speak.” James 1: 9

Several reasons may bring conflicts between individuals which may either be caused by either one or both parties. However, no matter the cause of the misunderstanding, the New Testament has one standout instruction to everyone who seeks to please God. The instruction is to take a step to make peace and resolve whatever conflicts there may be with the other party. Matthew 5: 23. Jesus categorically said that peacemakers would be called sons of God (Matthew 5:9) and they are often the first party to make peace with others. In the verse cited above, Jesus prioritised being at peace with one’s neighbour over and above presenting a great offering at the temple. In the book of Genesis, Cain was first of all rejected before God turned a blind eye on his offering. Genesis 4: 5. After he killed his brother Abel, the ground which drained the blood of his brother kept asking for vengeance. Gen. 4: 10.

Despite the expectations of God as articulated by Christ in the book of Matthew 5: 23, there are several conflicts that cannot be easily resolved between two conflicting parties within the church. In such cases, no one of them may want to shift ground for the next person or make compromises that could help resolve such crisis. No one wanted to be in the wrong. This may create some complications. Such a difficult case was the conflict between Paul and Barnabas regarding taking John Mark along for their second missionary journey (Acts 15: 16 – 40). In such difficult cases, Jesus recommended an intermediary or a mediator in case interpersonal resolution had hit the bricks. Mediation through an intermediary, who is believed to be a neutral, non-interested and objective party C, is expected to listen to parties A and B and decide accordingly, within that context, who was right and who was wrong, or simply clear the misunderstanding, or suggest a shift of ground, etc, depending on the mediation mechanism he intends to apply in this kind of situation. This may fail as well. This

second step is not foolproof. But it is a step forward and that could help give peace a chance.

The third recommendation from Christ is that the larger group of believers or body of Christ should be involved in resolving the conflict. This party D is expected to be a bunch of matured Christians, especially elders and leaders, who through years of experience know what appropriate principle of mediation and arbitration could be applied in a particular situation based on the case and personality traits involved in the crisis. Despite, the physical, mental and spiritual forces brought to bear in this kind of many-to-a-pair as against one-to-a-pair approach, there may not be a resolution in sight. One of the two parties may be adamant and insists on total breakdown of relationship, despite the duo being believers and members of the body of Christ. Jesus strictly recommended that no further step should be taken in managing the crisis any further and the party who is adamant and hard hearted should be treated like an unbeliever. The New Testament vehemently discouraged believers from pursuing civil or criminal cases in the court of law against a fellow believer. The church is thought of as the highest organ in resolving interpersonal and ecclesiastical crises, no matter their magnitude, as long as both parties are believers.

This descriptive study will critically examine the four step crisis management procedures in the New Testament with the aim of seeing their applicability in the contemporary times especially in the age when there are multiplicity of interpersonal crisis among members of the body of Christ which had often raised the issue of the strength of Christian love among brethren who supposed to share the same Christian fraternity.

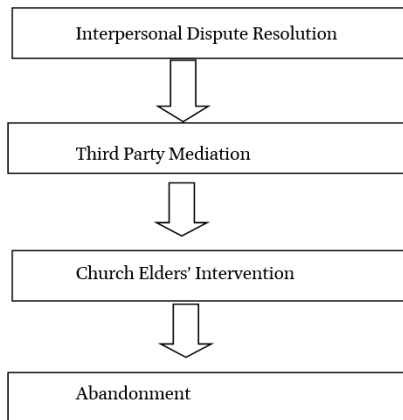


Fig. 1: Christ's 4-step linear conflict management model

Conceptual Review

It is difficult to give a single, all-encompassing, one-fits-all definition of conflict. However, attempt would be made to interact with some scholarly definitions of conflict with the aim of coming up with a working definition for this study. C.G Smith sees conflicts “as a situation in which the conditions, practices, or goals for the different participants are inherently incompatible.”¹The definition above is in line with L. Coser’s position that conflict involves struggles and behavioural differences.² However, M. Deutsch introduced the concept of incompatibility in his definition;³ while J.A Wall sees parties involved in a conflict attempting to frustrate each other.⁴ While articulating his position further, Wall identified three factors underlying conflicts, which are: “interdependences, differences in goals and differences in perceptions.”⁵ However, the definition of conflict by A.P Schmid, who quoted Lund in *Thesaurus and Glossary of Early Warning and Conflict Prevention Terms*, is very appropriate in defining the New Testament concept of conflict that is under review in this study. It states, “Conflict is present when two or more parties perceive that their interests are incompatible, express hostile attitudes, or pursue their interests through actions that damage the other parties. These parties may be individuals, small or large groups, and countries.”⁶This study sees conflict as a position that arises when two or more individuals are working at cross purposes.

According to J.P Lederach, conflict resolution works towards or focuses on “achieving an agreement and solution to the presenting problem creating the crisis” by using tools, such as the presence of a third party, to end the conflict.⁷A critical assessment of conflict resolution shows that it is often short-term focused, centered on the current situation and often than not, focused on solving issues in a relationship where conflict appears at that point in time.⁸ Conflict resolution involves resolving a conflict by taking away the toxic leftovers or damaging consequences of previous crisis. The primary aim of conflict resolution is to eliminate, if possible, every negative addendums that became the pendant on the smooth chain of the relationship. Though, not a straightforward action, conflict resolution could be a series of steps aims at making future relationship less complicated. One could submit that conflict resolution has more of future implications than the present gratification.

S. Alper, D. Tjosvold and K. S Law in their work titled “conflict management, efficiency, and performance in organizational teams see conflict management as deft process of mitigating the negative effect of conflict.⁹This could imply reducing the effect of tensions and crises that may be caused by conflicts. K.W Thomas-Kilmann identifies competing, compromising, collaborating, avoiding and accommodating as five styles of conflict management.¹⁰Expatiating on the concept of conflict management further, D. Bloomfield and B. Reilly opined that it is “the positive and constructive handling of difference and divergence.”¹¹They further said that rather than focusing on resolving differences between people, conflict management takes a more practical and more pragmatic approach to conflict by constructing agreements and practices that allow people to effectively cooperate despite their differences.¹²They concluded by stating that conflict management does not waste time attempting to unearth the root cause of the conflict or what brought it about, rather it attempts to mitigate a conflict’s negative effects it could have on both parties.¹³ As long as the conflict does not affect the people or hinder the organisational objectives, one could classify that as a nontoxic conflict. In such cases, two people that barely get by could be made to work together on a church project if they are the most suitable and if, by setting aside individual differences, their partnership could yield necessary result.

Comparatively, while conflict management attempts to reduce the toxic part of the relationship, conflict resolution attempts to remove every form of toxicity, like a kind of amnesia that detoxify the past and wipes it out completely from the memory. Another concept which is very relevant in the assessment of the 4 step process on conflict management recommended by Jesus is conflict transformation. Conflict transformation could imply the change of relationships and social interactions in a way to proffer solution to the problems which led to the conflict in the first place.¹⁴According to Diamond’s approach, conflict transformation “seek(s) to change the conditions that give rise to the underlying root causes of the conflict.”¹⁵ According to Lederach, conflict transformation attempts “to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships”¹⁶It could therefore be inferred that conflict transformation is an attempt to bring positivity out of negativity. It is an attempt to bring good out of evil. The conflict between Paul and Barnabas cited above gave rise to two different evangelist bands that was instrumental to the growth and development of the church in Asia Minor and Europe. Paul gave a hint of how crisis situation could lead to a positive end when he frankly told the church in Philippi that;

Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some from goodwill: the one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel. What then? Notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretense, or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice. Philippians 1: 15 - 19

Biblical Position on Conflict Resolution, Conflict Management, Conflict Transformation

The bible is very explicit in the best way to maintain interpersonal relationship. “Follow peace with all men.” Heb. 12:14. Also the bible encourages us that if it lies within our own capacity, we should be at peace with all men. Romans 12: 8. The bible says in 1 Cor. 6: 1 – 8, that Christians should never take each other to the law court. As Christians the Holy Scriptures encourages believers to pursue peace with all men and also to do everything within their capacity to make sure that warring parties are reconciled at all cost. Though there are several methods articulated in the bible for conflict resolution, management and transformation, however, the Jesus’ 4 point theory seems to be the most logical and easy to adopt of them all.

Several theories have been propounded as ways of managing conflicts. A few of them would be highlighted below and compared to the 4 step theory of Christ. The first theory is Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument (TKI).¹⁷ This model contains five steps, which are: collaborating, competing, avoiding, accommodating and compromising. According to Barbara Benoliel, each of these steps have their own advantages and disadvantages.¹⁸ However, a critical look into the theory will show a kind of similarities between it and that of the Christ, especially the areas of compromising, accommodating and avoiding. Jesus even asked the believers to pray that God should not lead them into temptation. Matthew 6: 6 - 9. He further counselled them to always resolve issues with their accusers before going to the law court. Luke 12: 57 – 58, Matthew 5: 25 – 26. Morton Detsch’s cooperative model is also a good model that has resemblance with that of Christ.¹⁹ This model emphasizes competition and cooperation. Also, Roger Fisher and William Ury’s Principled Negotiation which encouraged people to separate issues from personality.²⁰ God, loves sinners, but hates sin. The example of how God treated the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3, 4) and the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 16) show that the love of God is deep, in spite of human frailties. He does not hate human beings but hates their sins (John 3: 16)

Conclusion

No matter how smooth human interactions could be, as long as they are humans, they will still have small issues that could bring conflicts between them. Being believers, it is very important that conflicts should be resolved in the spirit of reconciliation, and brotherliness. Though there are well established theories on conflict resolution and management, however, the 4 point agenda or steps for conflict management has been proven to be very effective. Therefore this study concludes that believers need to follow the example of Christ, who while dying on the cross, he asked God to forgive his enemies. This is what people that profess Christ should do.

This 4-step conflict management steps recommended by Christ needs to me followed sequentially. However, some people in managing conflict jump one or two of these steps or did not follow them as stipulated. The result could be very devastating. What Jesus recommended is a like a physician's description, it must be followed religiously. An issue that could be resolved between two parties does not need the intervention of the third party. An issue that could be resolved by the elders of the church should not be abandoned as an impossible case.

Recommendations

The following recommendations would help contemporary leaders of the church in handling internal crisis using the 4-step principles of Christ.

1. Pastors should be formally trained on how to manage conflicts among their church members.
2. Conflict resolution and management and Peace studies should be introduced to the curriculum of Bible schools and Seminaries.
3. Pastors in who major in theology and church growth should take more electives in counselling psychology department; and pastoral counselling syllabus should be expanded and made compulsory for all levels at theological colleges at diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
4. Churches should have robust and engaging social media handles which should be handled by a matured church leader. Some of the crises among youths start from their engagements in social media. Such issues would be nipped in the bud before they degenerate into full blown crisis.
5. Lastly, there should be statutory roles for church pastors. In many Baptist churches some of the wives of pastors are accused of redundancy, while in some, they are accused of being too overbearing and "nosy." This had been one of the main causes of crises in many churches. Pastors' wives

should know what is required of them according to the constitution of the church and how they would be able to deliver such responsibilities.²¹

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