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Questions of Faith

How are conflicts resolved in a church?

Most conflict can be resolved by using conflict management techniques. Most people give offense not personally but in reaction to something the other person did that triggered an emotional response within themselves. Getting people to see that it is the situation that is sparking the emotional response and not the other specific person usually defuses the anger and allows everyone to step back and reassess. Backing someone into a corner only brings hardened positions and personalizes the animosity. Good communication skills and mutual respect inoculates against most of these kinds of situations.

To learn to forgive requires a series of steps. But first let's start with 'the what' of forgiveness—meaning what viewpoint do you have when you begin the journey of healing?

The start—First, you surrender the right to get even. If you remove your intent for personal payback, for revenge, for one-upmanship, then you are on the journey of forgiveness. Second, you wish the person well. If you can truly pray that God would help and bless the person who wronged you or hurt you, you are on the journey of forgiveness. Those are two sacrifices—two ways of letting go. And those are two demonstrations of beginning to forgive as God in Christ forgave you. He surrendered the right to get even. He wishes you well.

The when—First, not too soon. You have to be careful about fast forgiveness. Think about it: A husband doesn't buy an anniversary card for his wife. His wife waits the whole day. Nothing. When it's too late, the husband begins pleading for mercy. He says, "I'm so sorry." The wife replies, "I forgive you" (spoken in a stern tone). What is she really saying? She's saying, "I am so much better than you, you forgetful and ungrateful scum. You will pay!"

If you pronounce forgiveness too soon, you may not have been able to see your hurt, to figure out who is at fault, to discover what pain is really in your life. You need to assess your pain. That's not something you will enjoy, but you cannot forgive to avoid pain. Forgiveness is to heal pain. Don't go too fast. If someone asks you, say, "I'm trying. Let's work on it."

Second, not too late. If you wait too long, the pain in your life will take over your being. You will no longer be yourself. Or, if you wait until the other guy comes crawling to you, if you say, "I will forgive when he begs for it!", then you give the freedom and happiness of your soul to the person who clobbered you. Don't wait too long. Go to the person and try. If that is not a possibility any more, go to God and let Him take it from you.

Third, you'll know it's time when you are weary with the pain. When you're so tired of carrying the hurt, you will be ready to hear Jesus say that there is only one way to get rid of it—forgiveness. Nothing else washes hurt away. The pain will make it very clear that it's time to enter the journey of resolving and addressing conflict. It may be with the person who hurt you—what a blessing if you could win that victory! But, as I mentioned, sometimes that is not possible. So you may enter the journey of resolving conflict by talking to a counselor, by diligent and ongoing prayer, by letting God take the lead to heal you.

The how—So what happens along this journey? How do you forgive? Let's look at five components of the journey.

First, if need be, begin by "pretending." Now, I'm not saying to be a hypocrite. Hypocrisy is pretending to do what you really don't want to do. I'm saying to pretend to do what you

want to do, what you are led by Christ to do. In other words, be obedient—even if you don't feel like it at first. If you practice something you get good at it.

Second, forgive patiently. It's a process. You go back and forth. Your feelings subside one day, and the next they're raging again. You are at peace for a few weeks, then you are in tears again. You're confident for a while, then you need reassurance. It's all behind you, but then you need to talk it over again. It's okay. Remember, forgiveness is a process, a journey. It can take a long time.

Third, forgive quietly at first. You don't have to run and tell the person right away that you forgive them. That person may not even be ready. I ran into someone a few weeks ago who had poured some hurt into my life. The conflict happened years ago—maybe ten years. We had settled it, each agreeing to go our separate ways. We parted agreeing that Christ's love would prevail. But to my surprise, when I ran across him not too long ago, he said for the very first time, "I really did things the wrong way back then. I'm sorry." And for the first time I was able to say, "You're forgiven." Starting out quietly, and being patient, led to good things.

Fourth, forgive intolerably. You forgive, but you say, "I'm not going to put up with what you do!" This goes back to the necessity of altering behavior in the seven A's of confession. What did Jesus say to the woman caught in adultery in John chapter eight? He said, "I forgive you. Now cut it out! Sin no more!" If you are a forgiver, you are not a doormat. Truth, acceptable behavior, and healthy boundaries must prevail. When you forgive an action, you are not giving approval to a person's conduct. If a person is rude, abusive, and hurtful in your life and unwilling to change, you may have to create some healthy space between you and that person. Jesus came as a gentle peacemaker on Palm Sunday—riding that donkey. But He also came as the Savior God who was going to crush sin and death once and for all. He was not going to put up with it. Forgive intolerably.

Fifth, forgive realistically. Don't expect the pain to go away immediately or forever. Time is often necessary to complete the process.

There is only one way you can do anything I have mentioned above. The only way to lose your energy to hate is to know that you have been truly loved. The only way to do what Jesus said in Matthew 18:15 and following—"Go and show your brother his fault, just between the two of you"—is to have a clear and firm grasp on what He said in Matthew 18:12 and following: "*What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.*"

The only way to do any forgiving or peacemaking, and to lose your energy to hate, is to know that the one lost sheep was you. And that the happiness of God the Father was because Jesus brought you back from a bitter life caught in the danger and thorns of hatred and hurt. And that God celebrates loving you. That God surrendered His right to get even with you by punishing Jesus on the cross instead. That God gave His all—His only Son sacrificed to torment and death—so that He could wish you well, so that He could make your life truly well, forgiven and washed clean. Only when you know you have been truly loved can you lose your energy to hate. You have been truly loved. That is why you can go to another person in your life, and to God Himself, and say, "Let's enter the journey of forgiveness."