

Communication and Conflict

Part 2

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“Take a moment to think about the relationships in your life. Think about the relationships in your family while you were growing up. What were the unspoken rules your family followed? How did you handle conflict? What was the typical method of solving problems? Were there regular patterns of forgiveness? Did you see forgiveness sought and granted? What were the normal ways you communicated? Who typically had the floor? Did you grow up in a quiet or loud family? What was conversation like around the dinner table? Were there certain taboo subjects or was everything fair game? How was anger expressed? Was it handled in a positive way? In the busyness of family life, how much investment was made in keeping relationships healthy? Were people motivated positively or with threats and guilt? Was your family a place to relax or did you feel like you were walking on eggshells? To what degree was serving one another modelled and encouraged within the family? What kind of relationship did your family have with the surrounding community?” (Lane and Tripp p7)

Reflecting on these questions can help us to understand how many of our attitudes and values towards relationships and conflict have been assimilated from our family of origin. There are, of course, other influences such as our natural temperament and personality, the life experiences that, wanted or unwanted, have impressed themselves on our perspectives. Although as believers we have experienced the redeeming power of the gospel and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, often our natural responses to conflict still come from some of these deeply entrenched, early engrained values and attitudes.

We may have come from a church, Christian organisation or mission setting where unity was a strong value but emphasised as uniformity and loyalty with no place for questions or dissent. We may have experienced a situation where disagreement was expressed openly but with anger and defensive attitudes resulting in unresolved hurt and bitterness. Whatever our past experiences, it is easy to see why we view conflict as negative and especially as Christians as a sign of failure. After many years of service on the mission field Marjorie Foyle wrote in her book “Honourably Wounded”:-

“Most Christians naively expect to live together in constant harmony. We forget that even in the presence of the Lord, the disciples quarrelled about who got what in the coming Kingdom.”

Conflict is inevitable

“Conflict is inevitable. Two people in a close relationship are bound to have disagreements. Where more than two people are involved, there are even more possible combinations and permutations. It is important that we grapple with conflict. How it is expressed, and even more importantly resolved will depend to a large extent on the quality of communication. Communication and conflict resolution go together. What is important is not absence of conflict, but how we handle disagreements when they arise.” (Jones p67)

In fact not only is conflict inevitable but the absence of disagreement and conflict can be the sign of an unhealthy relationship. Ruth Graham Bell, the wife of the late Billy Graham, was quoted as saying that if there were no disagreements in a relationship then one of the members was unnecessary.

Gordon and Rosemary Jones in their work as mentors of teams would say that occasional disagreements or even sharp words can be part of good communication since they are honest expressions of what people really feel and think. They would go so far as to say that a marriage without confrontation is not a good marriage but may be a marriage in which apathy has set in. Nothing is gained by suppressing the disagreement, since it will be expressed through non-verbal means such as unease, disapproval or passive resistance.

The good news is that when conflict is accepted and confrontation is handled in a biblical way, rather than negative, the results can be positive both for our personal growth and for the deepening and enriching of the relationship.

“The highest joys of relationship grow in the soil of the deepest struggles. Struggles are not obstacles, but instruments in God’s hands. Every struggle is an opportunity to experience God’s grace yourself and to give it to the other person.” (Lane and Tripp p51)

Lane and Tripp would describe conflict, along with other forms of suffering, as something that God can use redemptively in our lives. That as we face conflict, by his grace it can be used to reveal our sin, to help us to grow in Christlikeness and deepen our love for God and for others, who bear his image.

“What happens in the messiness of relationships is that our hearts are revealed, our weaknesses are exposed, and we start coming to the end of ourselves. Only when this happens do we reach out for the help that God alone can provide. Weak and needy people finding their hope in Christ’s grace are what mark a mature relationship.”
(Lane and Tripp p12)

What causes conflict?

Wobbly foundations – “If our hearts foundation is solid, based on God’s truth, design and purpose for us, we will be able to build healthy, God honouring relationships even though we are flawed people living in a broken world.” (Lane and Tripp p56)

The two foundation stones they are referring to are *identity*, remembering who I am and *worship*, remembering who God is:-

Identity = how I define myself. If we seek to get our identity horizontally from how others think of us, from our status at work, comparison with other’s achievements, lifestyle or appearance rather than in our relationship with Christ and how God has made us, our relationships will become demanding, since we will be trying to extract from others what only Christ can give; he alone is the true source of our identity. “When I remember that Christ has given me everything I need to be the person he has designed me to be, I am free to serve and love you. When I know who I am, I am free to be humble, gentle, patient, forbearing and loving as we navigate the inevitable messiness of relationships.” (Lane and Tripp p60)

Worship = what we live for, what controls our heart. In Matthew 6:19-24 Jesus reminds us that where our treasure is will be that which we worship and that which controls our hearts and ultimately our behaviour. When we worship God for who he is, we will love others as those made in the image of God, created by him and valuable to him. If we fail to honour God as the Sovereign designer we will attempt to change others to how we want them to be, not as God has made them. Also worshipping God as saviour helps us to remember that we are sinners in relationship with other sinners and so we are all in the process of being redeemed and changed by him. “When I forget this, I become self-righteous, impatient, critical and judgmental. I give in to the temptation to play God and try to change you in ways only God can.” (Lane and Tripp p64)

Dangerous expectations – We have a tendency to make our relationships either more or less than they were intended to be. If you imagine a continuum with *isolation* “I want to be safe” at one end and *Immersion* “I need you in order to live” at the other end, we may not relate at the extremes of one or the other, but in all our relationships we tend to move in the direction of one or the other. As Lane and Tripp would describe it, we live with a tension between self-protective isolation and the dream of meaningful relationships. How we move in our relationships can result in one of three relational profiles:-

1. The frustrated relationship: one person moves towards isolation and the other moves toward immersion. One dreams of being safe; the other dreams of being close and intimate. Both have their expectations frustrated since the isolationist feels smothered and the immersionist feels rejected.
2. The enmeshed relationship: here both people move toward immersion. Both parties are relationally dependant on the other. Because their expectations of each other are so high, they tend to live in isolation from other people. They also live at a highly sensitive, easily hurt level, which means that their expectations of the other person are never fulfilled.
3. The isolated relationship: both persons move toward isolation; both make relational decisions based on maintaining safety. Conversations are limited, safe and impersonal, staying away from self-disclosure. Although they both want safety (which they see as isolation and independence) their desire for it separates them, making the relationship empty and disappointing.

When things go wrong in a relationship this is often where the problems start – not with the relationship but with the expectations we bring to it.

Difference that divides – “Something in us longs to perceive the world as divided in two: us and them, black and white, east and west, right and wrong. It’s simple. It’s as if there are only two views, and the one that we ourselves hold just happens to be the correct one. It’s an illusion, of course. There are as many different views as there are people. Binary thinking inspires conflict and division, which in turn are exacerbated when we stop listening to each other.” (Miller p85)

Marjorie Foyle suggests two ways that differences can be a source of conflict:-

“Usually in our heart we think that our ways are both right and better than others. Our childhood conditioning, our social and educational background and the strength of our culture contribute to this attitude.”

This is especially the case when there are obvious differences of culture, race, religion, socio-economic status or education. But differences can be more subtle and nuanced:-

“Differences upset our framework. The mind likes to organise things into wholes. When someone comes along with a new idea it makes us feel threatened because it means that we have to adjust our framework. If we are already feeling tired or stressed the threat is worse, since we are already only able to manage life by keeping everything controlled and organised in our own minds. So we fear anything that can upset the balance we have created. This means that we become rigid and critical of others, which in turn leads to anger, jealousy and frustration.”

Maybe this is one way that we can become more irritable, critical, rigid and prone to conflict as we get older, since our framework has become entrenched over a long period of time and any kind of change and difference is more difficult to accommodate?

We can even struggle with differences within the body of Christ failing to see how God can use these for his purposes:-

“Notice all the differences that exist among us. We have different gifts, serve in different capacities in the body of Christ, and are at various levels of maturity. All of these differences are there at God’s sovereign apportionment (Ephesian 4:7-16). That is God chooses to surround us with people who are different from us because he knows his will promote his purpose. Yet how often do we see diversity as a hindrance to good relationships and God’s purposes.” (Lane and Tripp p48)

In our personal relationships such as marriage or close working relationships, differences of personality type may take some understanding and acceptance in order to avoid conflict. Nicky and Sila Lee describe five categories of differences in personality that we may encounter:-

1. Extrovert or introvert – Extroverts tend to gain energy from their interaction with other people. Talking is important since it is the way that they organise their thoughts. Although not averse to solitude they need to be stimulated by the outside world to recharge their batteries. By contrast, introverts gain energy from quiet reflection. Their inner world of thoughts and ideas is their natural focus. Too much social interaction is draining and takes time to recover from.
2. Logical or intuitive - those with a preference for logic use their five senses to garner information. They want facts. They learn from past experience. They like clear practical information and love detail to solve problems and to analyse. Those who are intuitive prefer ideas. They are more innovative than practical, more ‘big picture’ than detail, more likely to focus on the future than the past.

3. Task-orientated or people-orientated – Those who are task-orientated are clear about their goals. They are motivated by efficiency, justice and truth and in business by productivity and profit. They move quickly and in an orderly way to the destination. For the people-orientated types, the heart rules the head and relationships rule over goals. They tend to empathise easily with the feelings of others and their choices are made on how they will affect others.
4. Structured or flexible – Those who are structured prefer plans to be drawn up in advance. They decide on a course of action then follow it through. They are good at setting priorities and well organised. Those who prefer to remain flexible like to keep their options open for as long as possible in case they receive further information, a better offer or a cheaper deal. They tend to go with the flow and like freedom and spontaneity.
5. Initiator or supporter – This reflects whether we prefer to lead or to follow. Initiators enjoy coming up with new ideas, make decisions easily and are not afraid of change. They like to take charge and make good leaders. Supporters like others to take the initiative and may defer all responsibility for joint decisions. They listen carefully but are slow to share their opinions and prefer to avoid conflict. They will adapt to maintain harmony.

Selfish sins – Since sin affects every area of our lives, relationships are no exception. Lane and Tripp reflect on six ways that the selfishness of sin causes problems in our relationships:-

1. Self-centredness – “since relationships are about being other-centred, the self-centredness of sin will inevitably subvert God’s design. And since both people will be struggling with the same thing it is easy to see the conflicts that can and will result.” Self-centred people seek attention and approval and become anxious and needy when it is denied.
2. Self-rule – This is where we see others as our subjects and seek to be in control. This will result in us being coercive and manipulative to get our way and angry if we don’t.
3. Self-sufficiency – This sinful attitude is manifested in thinking that we don’t need God or other people. Relationships are meant to be built upon godly, mutual dependence. To be self-sufficient will mean that others feel unappreciated and our relationships will be cold and distant.
4. Self-righteousness – When the holiness of God is not our personal standard of what is good, right and true, we will set *ourselves* up as our own standard. We will seek to be right in the eyes of others and if we are challenged, condemned or dismissed will react with defensiveness and aggression. There will be no sense of personal need and no ability to give grace to others.
5. Self-satisfaction – If our objective is self-satisfaction and we no longer look to God we will seek it from some other source. If we find satisfaction in material things we will under value our relationships, but, if we seek our satisfaction in people, we will use relationships for our own happiness. This will result in treating people like objects, controlling, demanding and dissatisfied if they don’t meet our needs.
6. Self-taught – This is when we become our own source of truth. Relationships become a platform for our own opinions. We assume the role of mentor in our relationships

and give the impression that we have little to learn from others. People feel patronised and dominated.

“When love for God is replaced by love for self, we see people either as obstacles that hinder our goals or vehicles that promote them. Sinful self-interest turns the two great commands upside down: rather than loving God and using his gifts to serve others, we love the gifts and use people to get them.” (Lane and Tripp p35)

The battle within – we have already seen that one of the primary reasons we engage in conflict and quarrels with others is the spiritual battle that is going on within us; the battle for the control of our hearts – what we worship and what controls us.

Lane and Tripp describe it like this – “Our typical response to conflict is to point the finger at our opponent. We feel justified because the person often has done something annoying, frustrating, or even downright sinful! But James does not let us off the hook that easily. He makes it clear that even if someone has sinned against us, the reason we fight is because there is something wrong going on inside us! He says,”

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but you don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasure.” (James 4:1-3)

Another important element of the spiritual battle that we are in is that we have an enemy who delights to help us to be divided by conflicts and paralysed in our service for Christ by the hurt, resentment and bitterness that can build up between believers.

“Satan is a liar and a trickster. He seeks to divide and destroy. He is the enemy of all that is good and right. He seeks to sow the weeds of doubt and despair, and rebellion. He hates living faith. He fights new life. He seeks to turn us from God and against one another. We must be wise to his tricks and do anything we can to keep him from having his way with us. We must forbid him any room to work.” (Tripp P130-131)

The personal sin of anger against others may start in our heart but, undealt with, the enemy of our souls will use it to bring about a greater evil of causing division among Christians. This is why the apostle Paul says “Do not give the Devil a foothold.” (Ephesians 4:27)

Hurt and our responses

How do we respond when we feel our rights have been violated, when you or your loved one has been deeply hurt, or when your ideas and opinions have been rejected? Do you rant, rave and scream with uncontrolled anger, the proverbial ‘Rhino’ response or do you withdraw, refuse to communicate, and roll up in a ball like the ‘hedgehog’ with its spiky exterior? The chances are that you have stopped listening. We want the other person to know just what they have done to us, but are not really interested in listening to their point of view. We usually adopt one of four main responses, which we could describe as our default strategy in conflict:-

1. Attack – either we become defensive and dig our heels in, seeking to coerce the other person or we outwardly comply, while seething with anger inside. This is the unwillingness to give ground and the drive to win at all costs.
2. Surrender – we withdraw, cease to contribute, just go along with the person, but there is a loss of dynamic partnership and closeness in the relationship. Another form of surrender can be yielding i.e. just giving in to keep the peace. The danger with this response, especially if one person in a relationship is constantly yielding, is that their needs are never met, the other person always appears to win and a spirit of resentment builds up, which will eventually erupt with devastating results.
3. Bargain – we give ground in order to gain ground, a kind of conditional truce. This is a form of compromise which may be appropriate in trivial issues, but when there is real hurt or misunderstanding, because we don't deal with the real issue, it will surface again in the future.
4. Negotiate – communicate openly and honestly, intentionally moving towards each other, both asking how can we change to find a solution to the issue? This is essential in marriage, family or close working relationships. It is the desire to seek resolution of the problem, which we will examine later.

Confrontation in conflict

Recognise and take responsibility for the conflict – “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.” (Matthew 18:15)

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled with your brother; then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23-24)

These verses seem to suggest that whether we have sinned or are sinned against; whether we are the one who is hurt or who has done the hurting, we are responsible and must initiate seeking to resolve the issue.

Find the best time – Once the issue has been recognised, we need to pray about the best time to discuss it. Both parties need to be prepared, and at their best to cope emotionally. Tiredness, stress and broaching sensitive issues late at night or when time is limited will not help us either to communicate or to listen well.

Listening is vital – Our instinct is to make sure the other person has heard our point of view, although we may not feel so inclined to listen intently or to try to understand their perspective. Listening well and genuinely seeking to understand the issue from the other person's point of view may go a long way to resolving the problem and demonstrates respect for how they feel.

“Perhaps there is no situation in which listening well is more challenging than in the midst of conflict. Empathetic listening may not be sufficient to resolve the conflict, but at least it is a good start. The goal is first to understand a differing perspective. Good listening does not imply agreement.” (Miller p84)

Be prepared to express your views – Being willing to take the risk of speaking openly and honestly can create a climate of respect and trust, as long as it is done in the right way. Emotions have a way of blocking our reason, better judgment and good communication. As soon as emotions take over our ears fail to listen to what others are saying, especially if we feel that they are making a false or serious accusation against us. Our speech can be affected, the voice changes under stress, it moves up in pitch and becomes strident and the tone becomes defensive. These emotions have a negative effect on communication, and if they are not brought under control they will be detrimental to the outcome.

In conflict situations some people become loud and argumentative, while others become quiet and withdrawn. Extroverts may need to learn to control the expression of their feelings, whereas introverts may need to be more willing to be open and to voice them. Just being quiet to keep the peace does not build relationships or resolve conflicts. We need to “Speak the truth in love.” Ephesians 4:15

Avoid accusations and blaming – attributing blame will tend to produce a natural response of defensiveness. This may be expressed in aggression such as striking back, going on the offensive by pointing out the other person’s failings and deficiencies. Alternatively, the person may withdraw by moving away, not seeking to clarify or explain. They may bury the hurt and internalise the emotions resulting in a passive aggressive stance. This is not unusual in children or teenagers who feel dominated by an over-bearing parent.

The problem with accusations and blaming is that they do not address the issue but simply attack the person. It is good to avoid the “you always” and the “you never” accusations, which as well as being untrue (none of us is that consistent) label and denigrate the other person. The use of “you” with “never” or “always” is guaranteed to inflame and heighten conflict, and will hinder real communication and resolution.

Instead express your own feelings using “I” or “me”, which is no longer an accusation but a genuine expression of how you feel or think about the issue. Expressing feelings this way maintains a relationship of love, trust and gentleness.

E.g. I feel upset when..... I feel hurt by..... I feel lonely because.....

“One fundamental practice in communicating is the ‘I message’, which can be particularly helpful in expressing feelings. It involves taking responsibility for your own reactions rather than blaming others. When we feel angry or hurt, for example, the immediate temptation is to begin with the word ‘you’.” (Miller p45)

N.B. Sometimes we can thinly disguise a “you” accusation within an “I” statement e.g. I feel *that you* are insensitive. Miller gives a good guideline for this. He says that if you can logically put the word ‘that’ after the word ‘feel’, then it’s not a feeling but an opinion!

It is best to avoid dragging up past incidents or hurts, which may make us feel more justified, but only add fuel to the fire and distract from the present issue. Also we should avoid using the situation to make cruel or personal judgments about the person; sounds obvious but is not beyond any of us if we feel on the defensive.

Establishing common ground – Confrontation usually occurs when someone has sinned, hurt or offended someone else. The context is one of a broken relationship in which one or perhaps both people are nursing their wounds and feeling angry or negative towards the other. But the challenge is to find common ground, to approach the issue as a joint problem that both have to work through. When the conflict is between two believers it is helpful to remember that the common ground that we share is at the foot of the cross where Christ died for us both. We need to establish mutual trust and respect, confirming that we are on the same side, not fighting each other and making our bottom line maintaining our relationship with the Lord.

Avoid incorrect assumptions and judgement of motives and intentions – When confronted with behaviour that we do not understand, we tend to assign a negative characteristic to the person before we have found out the facts. So we confront from a closed mind and a biased attitude with accusatory words. We don't suspend judgment or live with uncertainty, especially if the trust bond is weak, but move straight to attributing negative motives or intentions. Most Christian conflicts don't start from malicious intent but malice and ill will enter after there has been a series of miscommunications and misunderstandings.

Good attitudes to assume:-

- Gather data to make sure that you see the issue accurately.
- Try to think the best about the person from the beginning.
- Assume there is a good and reasonable explanation for anything you do not yet know.
- Wait patiently and non-judgmentally until you have access to the person, who can provide the facts from their perspective.
- Refuse to engage in negative speculation.
- Ask questions that seek clarification and understanding and foster open communication.
- Focus on the issue, speak to the issue and strive for understanding.
- Leave the judgement to God, he alone knows the thoughts and intents of the heart.
1 Peter 2:23, Matthew 7:1-2

Pursue understanding before agreement – This is important in order to work out a long term resolution. Too often parties seek agreement before they fully comprehend the issue. This is especially true when one person feels uncomfortable and wants to avoid confrontation. If there is agreement without understanding then the issue will surface again, because it was not properly dealt with the first time. We may have to repeat how we feel and think several times and in different ways, to allow the person the time to grasp the content of what we are saying. There are times when agreement cannot be reached, but even then it is important to pursue understanding, to the point that each one grasps the perspective of the other on the issue. Understanding is a prerequisite, but not a guarantee, of agreement or resolution. The benefit of understanding, even without agreement, is that it allows the two parties to respect each other, because facts, motives and intentions have been brought out into the open.

Be prepared to be proved wrong – There are few things harder than to admit that we are wrong; this often comes down to pride. We desperately want to justify ourselves; to show

that we are right and to be vindicated. Winning an argument can be counter-productive, especially when in the process we hurt the other person and destroy the relationship. Remember “The purpose of confrontation is not to get someone to do what you want or to live in a way that pleases you.” (Tripp p138). When we decide that we no longer have to win or to force our views and opinions on others, but rather try to see the other person’s point of view, then they will no longer feel defensive. “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Romans 12:18

Accept responsibility for your actions – “Making excuses for your behaviour and blaming others for theirs is not a recipe for solving disputes. Own up for your part in causing the problem.” (Jones and Jones p77) Where we have brought personal sin into the situation we need to own it, but not where we haven’t. We should not assume personal guilt or responsibility in order to excuse wrong treatment at the hands of others or to make it easier to forgive their actions. (We will look at this later when considering forgiveness.)

Pursue a win-win resolution – When the Holy Spirit indwells both parties, we must believe that a win-win solution exists, if we are willing to put in the time and energy to find it. This does not mean that agreement will always be reached, but that both parties will be able to preserve what is important to them and yet maintain a relationship if mutual trust and respect. Honouring God requires an uncompromising commitment to pursue win-win solutions so that relationships are protected, while significant values are not given up. Explore possible solutions that have benefits for both parties and that both can accept. When this has been agreed, commit to making the solution work

Make unity a priority, for God’ glory – Maintaining unity in the body of Christ is a high value in the scriptures Ephesians 4:1-6, 15-16. Disunity may be seen as a negative reflection on the character and power of God, whereas unity among God’s people, especially when it is forged in the fire of conflict, confirms to a watching world that God is alive, that he loves us and that he has given his Son that we might have life John 13:34-35. God chooses to reveal his glory through the solidarity of his people John 17:22-23. But remember that unity is not the same as uniformity.

“Our love will not be perfect, but it must be substantial enough for the world to be able to observe or it does not fit into the structure of the verses in John 13 and 17. And if the world does not observe this among true Christians, the world has a right to make two awful judgments which these verses indicate: that we are not Christians and that Christ was not sent by the Father,” (Francis Schaeffer)

Change as a process – Sometimes in confronting an issue with someone we can unrealistically expect immediate change. But for all of us change tends to be a process that takes time. “Many times in confrontation we fail to give the Spirit room to work. Nothing in scripture tells us to expect a person to undergo a complete reversal of heart and behaviour after one meeting. In fact the bible depicts change more as a process than an event.” (Tripp p138)

We need to be compassionate, patient and accepting of the human frailties of others, as we would want them to be of us. Miller (p96) speaks of the paradox in how change comes about:-

“Something in most human beings wants to judge, correct, criticise, and punish shortcomings, as though we believe that people will change if only they can be made to feel bad enough about themselves. Yet precisely the opposite seems so to be true. Feeling unacceptable invokes a kind of paralysis that makes it very difficult to change. Ironically it is when we experience acceptance as we are, a momentary realisation of unmerited respect and grace, that change becomes possible.”

Mediation – Sometimes things get stuck; perhaps one party refuses to admit that there is a problem or the issues are so complex and longstanding that it seems impossible to even hear each other let alone find common ground or a solution. At this point a mediator or third party can be most helpful. A mediator needs to have the skills and maturity to handle this kind of situation. It needs to be a person that both parties trust and have confidence in. The mediator creates a safe place for both parties to express their perspectives and to share their hurt and to be heard. They will aim to help each side to gain understanding, to focus on the issue and to find common ground from which to move forward.

We have said that conflict is inevitable, that it can be positive and helpful to growth both in our relationships and personally, when handled properly and resolved well. But the greatest challenge and most formidable barrier in our relationships is reaching the place of forgiveness for those who have hurt us. To offer forgiveness or to withhold forgiveness will exert immense power in our lives either for good or ill.

The Power of Forgiveness

When we hurt others or are hurt by them, the trust and openness on which the relationship is built is damaged. If the hurt is unresolved and the relationship is not restored, walls of division will grow up between us. We are faced with the choice of letting the hurt fester like an open wound, poisoning the relationship or to choose to deal with it.

The problem with hurt is that it invokes in us such powerful emotions and reactions. When we are hurt we instinctively feel angry. Although anger is a natural response, it matters what we do with it. We may display the anger outwardly in aggression and let the person know exactly what they have done or we may quietly withdraw allowing the anger to stew in feelings of resentment and bitterness. Withdrawal may also be the result of fear. We don't want to be hurt again so we withdraw to protect ourselves. Closeness is risky, so we stop being open and close down communication.

Unresolved, this anger will move on to a desire to retaliate, to get our own back, a desire to make them pay for what they have done to us. Sometimes these feelings can be most strong when the hurt has been done to someone we love.

Another, less obvious reaction, can be guilt as a result of denying or not taking the responsibility for our part in hurting someone else. If pride, or perhaps fear of the consequences causes someone to refuse to acknowledge the wrong and hurt caused, outwardly the trust and openness of the relationship will be destroyed but the unconfessed sin will produce guilt (1 John 1:8), which in turn will destroy our relationship with the Lord.

Seeking and granting forgiveness is the turning point in restoring our relationships with others and with the Lord.

Paul Tripp describes forgiveness as a rebuilding process with two aspects:-

“First, there must be *Judicial* forgiveness. This is our willingness to let go of another’s offense before God. It is in actuality, surrendering any right or desire for vengeance. Paul says, “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:19). When God says “Leave room for my wrath,” he is essentially saying, “Stay out of my way let me do my job.” Forgiveness starts vertically. It is handing the offense over to the Lord and resting in his justice.

The second aspect of forgiveness is *relational* forgiveness. This is the willingness to forgive anyone who comes seeking it. “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32). In my counselling experience I have seen that there is no greater impediment to change than the unwillingness to seek and grant forgiveness. The lack of forgiveness causes us to fight God rather than to submit to him and causes us to stand against rather than with one another.” (Tripp p127-128)

For us, as Christians, forgiveness is mandatory, it is at the heart of the very gospel that we depend on and seek to share with others and yet we find it so difficult. “The bible is a book about a God who forgives; it calls those who have been forgiven to be forgiving people. Yet so little of the forgiveness that has been received translates into forgiveness being offered.” (Lane and Tripp p94) Why do we find forgiveness so difficult:-

- Because we are required to forgive daily, seventy times seven as Jesus told Peter. C. S. Lewis summed it up this way “To forgive the incessant provocations of daily life – to keep on forgiving the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son – how can we do it? Only I think by remembering where we stand, by meaning our words when we say in our prayers each night, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse is to refuse God’s mercy for ourselves. There is no hint of exceptions and God means what he says.”
- Because forgiveness feels unfair and unjust. We want the person who has hurt us to earn their forgiveness. It is costly to forgive. We have to sacrifice our pride, our self-pity and lay down our right to justice and our desire for revenge. “Forgiveness goes beyond human fairness; It is pardoning those things that can’t be readily be pardoned at all.” C.S. Lewis. Forgiveness does not mean that we condone the person’s behaviour or excuse it. We acknowledge both the offence and the hurt it caused.
- Because forgiveness requires cancelling the debt and absorbing the cost of the hurt ourselves. This has nothing to do with feelings but is a choice of the will, based on truth and out of obedience to God we cancel the debt owed to us. We relinquish the need for the person to pay; we refuse to bring it up again or to slander the person to a third party. This is hard and impossible outside of the grace of God. If we choose to forgive as an act of the will, in time the feelings will eventually follow.

- Because forgiveness is not a once for all event but a continual process. Even when we have genuinely forgiven someone, we will be tempted to revisit the hurt whenever we see the person or hear about them. We will need to keep on renewing that commitment to forgive many times.
- Because forgiving is not forgetting. It is unrealistic to assume that we will not remember the hurt or the person who caused it, but like forgiveness it will require choosing not to linger on the memories. In time, and by God's grace, it may become possible to replace the memories that come by praying for the person.

Our motivation to forgive:-

- Because we have been forgiven by God. When we come to God genuinely confessing our failures, he forgives us as a gift, even though he knows that we will sin again and again. He is our model and our motivation to forgive others, as we have been forgiven in Christ. Colossians 3:13 says "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." God no longer holds our sin against us, in fact "He has removed my transgressions as far as the East is from the West." Psalm 103
- Because we do not want to be judged. Luke 6:37 "Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven." See also Matthew 7:1-2 and Matthew 6:12.
- Because we do not wish to grieve the Holy Spirit and to hinder God's blessing on our lives and our work for Him. (Ephesians 4:30-32)
- Because we want to walk in the light maintaining intimacy with Christ and fellowship with other believers. (1 John 1:7)
- Because forgiveness sets us free. When we forgive others we are the ones who ultimately benefit most. Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch prisoner of war in Ravensbruck concentration camp, where she watched her sister Betsie die at the hands of the guards. In her book "He sets the captive free" she recalls the moment when she met one of the guards, who had become a Christian after the war and who had come to her to ask forgiveness. "At that moment I was able to forgive, my hatred disappeared. What a liberation! Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of resentment and the handcuffs of hatred. It is a power that breaks the chains of bitterness and the shackles of selfishness. What a liberation it is when you can forgive."
- Because it allows us to be healed and to move forward. In time the memories have less power over us. But time alone will not heal the wounds, only forgiveness heals wounds. Holding on to an offense will make us bitter and unloving, locked in the past, and damaging all our relationships in the future. Forgiving them, not only cancels their debt, but releases us to a better future. "If you cannot free people from their wrongs and see them for the needy people that they are, you enslave yourself to your own painful past, and by fastening yourself to the past you let your hate become your future. You can reverse your future only by releasing other people from their pasts." (Lewis B. Smedes, 1984)

In his book *Total Forgiveness*, R.T. Kendal helpfully records what forgiveness *is* and what *it is not*:-

Total forgiveness is not:-

- Approval of what someone has done. In John 8:11 Jesus did not approve of the actions of the woman caught in adultery, but he still forgave her. Forgiveness is not approval of evil.
- Excusing what they did. We do not cover up what they did. We do not explain away their behaviour because of circumstances or other reasons.
- Justifying what they have done. We do not try to make out that what they did was right, just or reasonable. We are required to forgive, not to make what was wrong appear to be right.
- Pardoning what they did. A pardon is a legal transaction, which releases the offender from the consequences of an action i.e. from the penalty. But forgiveness does not mean that a person no longer needs to face the penalty for a crime. The person needs to pay their debt to society, and if possible be rehabilitated.
- Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Reconciliation takes two people, but the person you need to forgive may refuse to see you, may deny the offense or may even be dead. Forgiving someone does not mean that you want to be the person's best friend or to go on holiday with them. Reconciliation is a restoration of the relationship (2 Corinthians 5:19-20). It involves two parties. But an injured person can forgive the person who hurt them without reconciliation. They can let go of bitterness, the desire to punish and to have revenge.
- Denying what they did. It is not repressing what they did or refusing to face the reality of the situation. This is a way of trying to avoid the pain and looking for an easy way out. But if pushed down, it will still affect the person in the form of physical or psychological illness. This sometimes occurs when the person blames themselves. But the offence must be acknowledged and then forgiven.
- Blindness to what happened. This can be misunderstood as forgiveness, especially by those of a scrupulous conscience, who feel that they should not even name an offence, so they pretend that it never happened. This is often true when the offence was committed by an authority figure or admired person.
- Forgetting. We have already said that it is unrealistic to expect that forgiveness will cause us to forget the wounds and the hurt someone has caused us. It is an act of great grace to fully remember what someone has done and then to choose to totally forgive them. God does not forget our sins, he chooses not to remember and not to hold them against us.

“When we forgive someone we do not forget the hurtful act, as if forgetting came along with the forgiveness package.....If you forget, you will not forgive at all.....Forgetting may be a dangerous way to escape the inner surgery of the heart we call forgiving.”
Lewes B. Smedes 1984

- Refusing to take the wrong seriously. It may be possible to try to lessen the seriousness of the offence and of how much we were hurt in an attempt to make forgiving easier. God did not treat our sin as insignificant, it was serious enough for him to send his Son to die to pay the price for our sin.
- Pretending that we are not hurt. When we are betrayed, unjustly criticised, molested or injured in some way, we do not need to pretend that we are not hurt. In 2 Samuel Chapter 12, God makes David fully aware, by means of Nathan the prophet, just how much David has sinned against Him and others.

What is Forgiveness:-

- Being aware of what someone has done and still forgiving them. Not denying, excusing, explaining away or minimising the hurt, and yet still forgiving them and not seeking revenge. This takes God's help.
- It is a choice to keep no record of wrong. (1 Corinthians 13:5) When we keep records it is in order to use them against the person, to remind them of what they have done and to punish them. When we choose to forgive, we choose to tear up the record.
- Refusing to punish. This is the essence of forgiveness. Our natural desire is for revenge, to see the person punished. But this opposes the love of Christ and the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Vindication is God's prerogative and his alone; we need to leave the righting of wrongs to Him.
- Not repeating what they did. We may need to talk with someone about our own hurt to get help. But we should not tell others with the intention of damaging the offender's reputation and to make others think less of them as a kind of punishment. Would we want others to know of the sins God has forgiven us?
- Being merciful. Matthew 5:7 says "Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy." Mercy is not treating someone as they deserve i.e. forgiving them rather than punishing them. When we show mercy we receive mercy.
- Being gracious. This is a rare quality that cuts right across a legalistic spirit. It is almost impossible to be gracious if we are self-righteous and desire the 'truth' to be known even if it damages another.
- Forgiveness is an inner condition, it must take place in the heart. If we have not truly forgiven those who have hurt us from our heart, then in time it will surface again. Also the fact that forgiveness takes place in our heart means that the other person does not need to acknowledge the offence, be repentant, to apologise or to desire reconciliation for us to cancel the debt and be released from the bitterness and resentment. Jesus modelled this kind of forgiveness when he forgave the Roman soldiers who drove the nails into his hands and feet and gambled over his clothes. They were evidently neither aware, nor sorry nor repentant for what they had done. (Luke 23:34.) This is why we are able to forgive someone who has died or who we can never see again, because our ability to forgive is in our heart and not dependant on them.
- The absence of bitterness. Bitterness is an excessive desire for vengeance that comes from deep resentment held in our heart. It heads the list of sins that grieve the Spirit

of God in Ephesians 4:30-31. In Hebrews 12:15 it causes us to miss out on the grace of God. If we choose to hold on to a bitter, unforgiving spirit it can show itself in physical and psychological problems as well as spiritual. We know when we have dealt with bitterness, when we no longer seek to get even, to hurt their reputation but actually wish and seek their best interests.

- Forgiveness is forgiving God. Bitterness is a sign that we are angry with God, because he has allowed bad things to happen. If he is all powerful and all knowing why didn't he prevent it? Why did he allow us or our loved one to suffer? We blame God for our hurt. We don't know all the answers, but we need to trust God and take him at his word, that he is just and merciful. He is God and he knows what he is doing, and why. We must forgive God and set him free to be God before we can move on.
- Forgiveness is forgiving ourselves. To totally forgive we must forgive others, forgive God and forgive ourselves. If we are unable to forgive ourselves there will be no lasting joy. Holding a grudge against ourselves is like holding a grudge against someone else. It undermines the forgiveness of Christ, if we are unwilling to forgive that for which Christ died and has already forgiven.

We have totally forgiven someone when:-

We have discharged the debt – the person owes us nothing.

We have no need to repeat the offence to others or to them.

We no longer seek revenge or punishment.

We no longer keep a record of wrong.

We genuinely desire the person's welfare and success.

We can pray for God's blessing on them.

“He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him;

As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.”

Psalm 103:10-14

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Questions for Reflection:-

What have been the formative influences on the way that you react to and handle conflict in relationships?

What have become your default strategies?

When have you experienced conflict as the catalyst for positive outcomes and personal growth?

As you examine the causes of conflict, which areas are the most frequent triggers of conflict for you?

Do different reasons for conflict arise in different relationships e.g. with spouse, work colleagues, children or church situations? Why do you think that is?

Have the issues that cause irritation, annoyance, conflict or hurt changed as you have got older?

Many of you will have completed some kind of personality profile e.g. Myers-Briggs etc. do you identify the ones that best describe you in the five personality areas that Nick and Sila Lee suggest? Ask your spouse if they agree!

Do any of these personality differences create the possibility of conflict between you? (For personal reflection, not for discussion, unless you want to.)

What is your natural response to being hurt by someone?

Did you discover anything that could help you in the section on confrontation in conflict?

Do you find it difficult to forgive someone who has hurt you or a loved one?

What is the most compelling motive for you to forgive?

What are the dangers of withholding forgiveness?

Is there anything in R.T. Kendall's description of what forgiveness 'is' or 'is not' that you struggle with or anything that has helped to clarify the issues for you?

Has the Lord brought to mind a particular source of conflict or hurt that you need to deal with?

Is there someone that you need to forgive? Speak to the Lord about this and if appropriate the person(s) concerned.

This may have raised deep wounds and memories from the past; if this is the case, spend some time reflecting on God's love, mercy and forgiveness and ask him for the grace to extend that forgiveness to others.