



SERVANTS IN CONFLICT: *STICK IT OUT OR SPLIT?*

By Al Ells, M.C.

The New Testament is full of great partnerships: Paul and Barnabas, Priscilla and Aquila, and of course the 12 apostles. Ministry leaders of today still follow suit. Establishing and operating a church or ministry is more than a one-man job; it requires a team.

Sometimes a husband and wife work toward a common vision. Other times, a preacher or teacher and a worship leader combine their gifts to plant a congregation. So many incredible ministries have started with just a few dedicated believers.

But what should a ministry team do when conflicts arise and cannot be resolved? Should the team seek counseling and conflict mediation, or should the warring parties dissolve the partnership? In Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas sharply disagreed over whether to take Mark with them on their second missionary journey, and so decided to go their separate ways, Barnabas continuing on with Mark, and Paul partnering with Silas.

Ideally, most people want to mend conflicts and be strengthened by the process. Many conflicts can be resolved with prayer, communication and mediation. However, there are times when it is more beneficial to dissolve the partnership. When conflict intensifies and separation becomes plausible, consider the following guidelines during your decision-making:

NINE GUIDELINES TO FOLLOW DURING A CONFLICT:

Do not immediately take sides.

Though you may have inside information on the dispute, it is impossible to know all the facts. When you prejudge a situation, you limit your effectiveness as a leader (Proverbs 18:13, 17). Rather than jump to conclusions, insist on a complete assessment of the problem that evaluates each party's role in the conflict as well as organizational factors that may be influencing the negative interaction.

Alert an authority.

Too many ministry teams keep interpersonal conflict to themselves. This is a major mistake. A relationship in conflict gets either better or worse. If your conflict has remained unresolved for weeks, you need help. Start the process by informing a superior that you need intermediary assistance. Postponing help only complicates the conflict, hardens hearts and makes resolution more difficult.

Sharing (conflict) is not caring. (Proverbs 6:19)

When you are in conflict with a ministry partner, no one else should know the details except for those in authority over you and possibly your spouse. Sharing specifics with church or staff members causes side-taking and dissension. If you need advice, seek counsel from a trusted individual who is well outside the situation to help resolve the conflict rather than someone who will take sides.

Cooperation is key.

All parties involved must cooperate in the assessment to really get to the root cause. Sometimes personality issues, past offenses or character weaknesses are to blame for conflict. However, conflict can stem from larger, organizational problems like unclear authority, role differentiation, job expectations, vision and management style. For example, a recent conflict between two leaders of a ministry determined that their roles of authority had never truly been defined. Though their leadership styles did differ, deeper issues were exacerbating the situation.

Conflicts of vision require separation. (Amos 3:3)

When members of a ministry disagree on its vision, one member must yield their side. The one who yields must either fully adopt the agreed-upon vision or leave that ministry. A ministry can possess only one vision. A Phoenix-area pastor once said that vision either unites or divides. Opposing visions and visionaries usually produce major division, not diversity, in the church.

Conflicts over authority require submission or separation. (Hebrews 13:17)

When leaders conflict over authority, the organization rarely produces good fruit. If clarifying the authority structure does not resolve the issue, one of the team members must leave. This person is usually the non-submissive member. To remain, he or she must feel called by God to submit to the other partner's authority and stop the contention.

First comes marriage, then comes ministry.

Married ministry partners must not bring their unresolved conflicts into the church leadership dynamic. Their marital difficulties will produce an unhealthy leadership team and create a negative ripple effect throughout the congregation. Many marriage partners are great at living together but not working together. For others, the opposite is true. The couple that successfully lives and works together is rare. If you and your spouse minister together, establish your relational priorities and get feedback from others regarding how your marriage influences the ministry. When push comes to shove, the well being of the marriage must take priority.

Seek outside help.

When team leaders are in a stalemate, a respected outsider can bring fresh input, objective evaluation and assistance in mediation. Many churches benefit greatly from establishing ongoing relationships with other ministry leaders and church consultants. As needs, conflicts or problems arise, these individuals can help resolve issues and support the ministry. When you choose and develop such relationships, look for individuals with gifts of wisdom and counsel, who understand conflict resolution, church governance and ministry needs.

*For information on connecting with other ministry leaders,
contact Leaders That Last at 480-325-9350 or info@leadersthatlast.org.*