

Resolving Family Conflicts Biblically/Forgiveness¹

In the late spring of her sixth-grade year, it was as if [our daughter] Wendy came out of her bedroom one day and said, “I’m going to ruin your lives for the next four years.” Overnight she became strong-willed and argumentative.

Of course, she was worried about her appearance, going into junior high, and hormonal changes that she (and I) didn’t understand. She was moody; she didn’t want to eat dinner with us; she spent hours in her bedroom alone. That summer on vacation, she wanted to do her thing first and then go back to the hotel; she didn’t want to let [others] do what they wanted to do. ...

Every statement was an absolute: “I’m never going to school again.” “I’m not going to talk to that person ever again.” ... That [attitude] set up many head-to-head battles. For example, I’d ask, “Where do you want to go for supper?”

“I don’t care.”

“Fine. I’ll decide.”

In the car, she’d ask, “Where are we going?”

“McDonald’s.”

“I refuse to eat there. I want to go to Burger King.”

“I asked you, and you said you didn’t care, so I made the decision. The next time I ask, please tell me and we’ll go to Burger King, but tonight we’re going to McDonald’s.”

“Then I’m not eating!”²

I’m sure that kind of thing never happens in your family, but it does happen in many families. The writer of that testimony is a pastor, and the conflict he experienced in his family caused him a great deal of pain and distress.

In the process of dealing with his own family conflict, he discovered that other people in the church, even those families that seemed to be doing very well, experienced similar kinds of conflict within their own homes.

¹ Bruce K. Meyer’s article, “Swimming Upstream in a Downstream Culture: Remaining Moral in the Midst of Immorality” was helpful in producing this message.

² Marshall Shelley, *The Healthy Hectic Home: Raising a Family in the Midst of Ministry*, vol. 16, The Leadership Library (Carol Stream, IL; Dallas, TX: Christianity Today; Word Pub., 1988), 166–167. Edited.

I recognize that family conflict is quite common, even within faithful Christian families. It shouldn't be, but it is. In most families, conflict flares up from time to time. In some families, conflict is almost non-stop. We may not see it when families are at church, but conflict may be nearly constant at home.

Every family member would benefit from reducing conflict. Christian homes should be peaceful and harmonious. At least, members of the family should not be at each other's throats all the time. Conflict should be rare and minor in Christian homes.

Today I'd like to talk about the causes of family conflict and then suggest several steps we can take to reduce or eliminate family conflict.

I. Causes of family conflict

Ultimately, all conflict is the result of sin. All of us are sinners, and conflict comes naturally to us because of the fallen human condition.

A. The sinful human heart causes conflict.

Jer 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked;...

Mt 15:19 For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.

Jas 1:14 But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.

Jas 4:1 Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?

1. The heart of every conflict is the sinful human heart. Because we are sinners, we respond sinfully to circumstances and to people, resulting in conflict. The flesh still conflicts with the Spirit (Gal 5:17), and that leads to conflict with others.
2. For saved people, the power of sin has been broken and we are new creations in Christ. We are not enslaved to sin, but we are still prone to sin. We may still respond sinfully to various circumstances and get into conflict.

Perhaps it's a long-standing character flaw that drives conflict. Maybe it's a bad habit or an unbiblical way of thinking. The primary source is internal, it's ourselves and our sinful way of thinking that leads to conflict.

It's easy to blame others, but if we are involved in conflict, we should consider whether our own sinful behavior and attitudes may be part of the problem. It all starts in the sinful human heart.

B. A sinful rejection of biblical roles causes conflict.

When people refuse to fulfill their God-given roles in the family, conflict will result. If family members reject God's order for the home, conflict will result. Peace and harmony result when people know their roles and fulfill them.

Quote: Overturning the biblical lines of authority in a family doesn't eliminate conflicts; it multiplies them.³

C. Sinful responses to the circumstances of life cause conflict.

1. Sometimes life experiences influence us to respond sinfully. Perhaps previous abuse and pain continue to influence our responses. It's a well-known fact that those who suffer abuse often abuse others. It could be that someone is repeating the same kind of experience he/she suffered as a child.

2. Things like fear, pain, loneliness, shame, anger, and stress can influence us to respond to events and people sinfully.

We all know what it's like to respond rudely or harshly when we are under stress or when we are exhausted. It's hard to be cheerful and pleasant when you are worried, exhausted, fearful, or angry.

3. However, life experience is no excuse for sinful behavior. We can't excuse our present sinful behavior by our past experiences. "I've had terrible, tragic experiences in the past, so I have a right to be grumpy and disagreeable." Or "I've had a bad day." Perhaps the past *explains* the present, but it's no *excuse* for causing conflict.

D. Sinful influences cause conflict.

³ John MacArthur, *Successful Christian Parenting : Raising Your Child with Care, Compassion, and Common Sense* (Bedford, Tex.: Word Pub., 1998), 187.

1. Most people have at least some ungodly influences in their lives. E.g., TV, books, magazines, Internet, music, relatives, friends, co-workers, teachers, culture, celebrities, etc. Most people get at least some of their ideas from what they hear, see, and experience. We absorb ideas—good ones and bad ones—from many different sources.
2. These outside influences can be the source of conflict. People get ungodly, unbiblical ideas into their heads and act on them. They see others in the culture doing things and then follow their bad example. Following bad ideas often leads to bad behavior, and that often leads to conflict. Teenagers are especially sensitive to outside influences. The blind often follow the blind.

That's one good reason that parents need to limit the exposure children are getting from ungodly outside influences like TV, movies, the Internet, music, and friends.
3. These outside influences can be the source of temptation. If we are giving in to temptation, it could cause conflict in the home. E.g., alcohol, drugs, pornography, gambling. When members of the family are involved in these sins, conflict is almost inevitable.
4. So it could be that the ideas you picked up from one or more of these sources is playing a role in the conflict. Giving in to temptation may fuel conflict.

Trans.: Conflict can come from a number of sources. The root cause is our own sinful hearts. And if we allow other negative influences, conflict is all the more likely in our homes.

So we should take a moment to consider if there is a particular source of conflict within our homes. What or who is driving it? Where does it usually come from? Is one person mostly responsible, or is it an outside influence that is causing the problem? Is it a temptation that someone is indulging in? In order to solve the problem, we have to find the source(s).

II. Solutions to family conflict

How do we reduce or eliminate conflict in the home?

- A. Confess the sin; admit the problem.

Proverbs 28:13 *He who covers his sins will not prosper, But whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.*

1 John 1:9 *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

1. If the conflict is caused by sinful behavior, then the guilty party must admit his/her sin. One must honestly admit personal guilt for causing the problem.

In the story I read earlier, the daughter, Wendy, was the major source of family conflict. Wendy needed to admit her sin and repent of it.

The problem is that sinful people often don't want to admit that they are the cause of the conflict. They make excuses and shift the blame to others. But conflict will never stop if the guilty person does not take responsibility for it.

Sometimes, those in the household may need to confront the source of the problem. Perhaps the father is an alcoholic. Perhaps the mother is abusive. Perhaps one of the parents is provoking the children to wrath. Perhaps one of the kids has a rotten attitude or is breaking the rules. The other members of the household may need to confront the person and insist that he/she quit the sinful activity.

2. Strong confrontation is necessary and it works in some cases. However, the guilty person may not want to admit his sin or change his ways.
3. People often don't want to be accountable for their weaknesses and failures. They tend to blame others, to pass the buck, to explain away their shortcomings. People may not want to quit their sinful behavior even if it does cause conflict.

So it may be difficult to get the cause of the conflict to admit that he/she is the cause.

4. Instead of excusing ourselves, we must confess our sins.
 - a) The word “confess” means “to say the same thing.” When we confess our sins, we are agreeing with God about our sin, we are admitting that the sin is destructive and offensive.
 - b) The Bible repeatedly commands us to admit our sins, to confess them and repent of them.
 - (1) We should confess them to God and seek forgiveness regularly.
 - (2) We may need to confess them to others and seek forgiveness from those we’ve hurt.
 - (3) And repentance demands changed behavior. If the behavior does not change, then repentance has probably not happened.
5. Personal responsibility is a major emphasis of the Bible. Christians don’t blame others for their own failures and weaknesses. If you are the cause of the conflict, then you must admit that and take responsibility for it.
6. In a family situation, the conflict may be caused by one or more people. It may be that sinful behavior by one person is followed by a sinful response from somebody else. There is usually more than one person to blame when conflict is common at home.

The solution to conflict begins when people admit their sins.

- B. Commit to adopting the biblical roles for husbands, wives, and children.
 1. If everyone in the home is a Christian, and if all members of the family commit to fulfilling their God-given roles, then a great potential for conflict is removed.
 2. Of course, no member of the family will fulfill his/her roles perfectly, so there is always potential for conflict even when everyone has the best intentions.
 3. But if everyone knows his/her role and is intentionally trying to fulfill those roles, it certainly reduces the potential for conflict.
 4. What roles am I talking about? Just to review these roles briefly:

- a) The husband/father is the head of the household. He is obligated to lead, provide, protect, and love.
- b) The wife/mother is to respect her husband and care for the home and children.
- c) Children must obey and honor their parents and work hard at learning.
- d) If members of the family are failing to fulfill these basic obligations, conflict will result. So the family must adopt and apply these roles. Doing so will reduce family conflict.

C. Commit to change.

The biblical word for positive change is sanctification. Christians are supposed to grow in holiness and Christ-likeness. A decrease in family conflict requires an increase in sanctification, especially for those who are the most responsible for causing the conflict.

In Eph 4:22-24, Paul describes the process of sanctification in terms of taking off and putting on.

Eph 4:22-24 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

Families must put off behaviors that cause conflict and put on behaviors that produce unity, harmony, and peace.

1. Stop those behaviors that lead to conflict.
Stop provoking your children to wrath. Stop getting drunk. Stop the constant criticism and complaint. Stop the bad attitudes, the lying, and the stealing. Stop the ungodly behavior. Stop being the source of the conflict.
2. Start following biblical standards of behavior. Put on the new man.
 - a) Family conflict often involves sinful *words* or language. If we want to prevent conflict, everyone has to control his/her words.

- (1) No foul language, no vulgarity, no name-calling, no insults, no biting sarcasm, no ridicule, no nagging, no lying. “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.”
- (2) Try to edify, to uplift, to be kind and gracious with your words. Be positive and optimistic. Praise others when they move in the right direction.

Proverbs 12:18 *There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, But the tongue of the wise promotes health.*

Proverbs 15:1 *A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

- b) Family conflict often occurs when members of the family *behave* in sinful ways. The family must commit itself to changing its behavior.
 - (1) It could be destructive behaviors like physical abuse or alcoholism or drug abuse. Obviously, these kinds of behaviors have no place in a Christian home. If they are present, those guilty must stop immediately.
 - (2) It could be more mundane behavior like stealing and lying. It could even be fairly minor things like tattling or complaining or delayed or incomplete obedience.
 - (3) If we are talking about a Christian family, the members of that family know that their behavior is not what it ought to be. They should see the need to change, and they should commit themselves to necessary change.

Christian families must commit themselves to Christian behavior in the home. We don’t expect perfection, but we do expect Christians to follow basic biblical behavior standards. And we expect parents to enforce those standards. Set the rules and then enforce them with appropriate consequences.

3. Start walking in the spirit and not in the flesh.

- a) The ultimate cause of conflict is spiritual (sin), and the ultimate solution to conflict in the home is also spiritual. We must submit ourselves to God and to his Word. We don't make these changes in our own strength; we trust God to bring about these changes as we submit to his Word.
- b) Walking in the *flesh* means that you are controlled by your sinful attitudes and desires. Even if you are saved, you can still follow your flesh instead of the Spirit. And it's easy for the old flesh to get into conflict.
- c) Walking in the *Spirit* means you are willingly submitted to the Holy Spirit, and that basically means being obedient to the Word of God. To be filled with the Spirit basically means being controlled by the Word of God.
- d) Rom 6:13 "yield yourselves to God." If we get self out of the way and intentionally yield ourselves to God, conflict will be reduced if not eliminated.

- 4. Start having a forgiving, gracious, peaceful attitude toward family members.

Mt 22:39 *Love thy neighbor as thyself.* That's not a suggestion; it's a command. Your family members are your closest neighbors, and God commands you to love them.

Romans 12:18 *If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.* Don't be the source of the conflict; be the peacemaker.

Col 3:13 *bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also [must do].*

Eph 4:2 *with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love,*

It would certainly help everyone involved if people would extend grace and forgiveness. That's a good way to defuse family conflicts and encourage peace and harmony in the home.

- 5. Start defusing conflict before it begins.

For families where conflict is common, it should be obvious when a conflict is about to flare up. What do we do about it?

- a) Speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). You can't solve the problem by ignoring it or pretending it does not exist. Define the source of the conflict.

But remember Mt 7:5—take the log out of your own eye before dealing with the speck in someone else's eye. Don't be hypocritical by blaming someone else for the same thing you are guilty of.

- b) Have a family meeting, pray together, and openly discuss why the family is having a conflict. Review the roles of each member of the family and insist that each one fulfill his/her biblical role. Point out the sin/failure and address it biblically. Rebuke those who are guilty.

This probably will not happen if the parents are the ones causing the conflict. We can't expect children to get control of this situation by themselves. If the parents are the source of the conflict, someone outside the family may have to get involved.

- c) If you can't solve the problem internally, consider the option of seeking Christian counsel. Bring a church leader into the picture to see if he might have some good advice. Consult the pastor. Set up an appointment with a Christian counselor.

- d) In some cases, the family may have to implement drastic, radical measures. Issue an ultimatum: "Shape up or ship out." You may have to tell a rebellious child to leave home. You can't sacrifice the entire family because you don't want to confront the source of all the problems.

In some cases, you may have to isolate the guilty person or isolate your family from the cause of the conflict. E.g., the abusive uncle, the alcoholic aunt, the controlling mother-in-law, the adult child who contradicts everything you believe in.

Cf. Deut 21:18f—stoning a rebellious child; I'm not advocating stoning, but in some cases, it's necessary to remove the offending person from the family.

BTW, when that happens, it's the choice of the person who is causing the conflict, not the fault of the rest of the family. Christian families should not feel guilty for refusing to tolerate or to accept a member of the family who refuses to respect the rest of the family. The offending person has chosen to isolate himself by his offensive behavior. A Christian family need not compromise its values by accommodating the sinful behavior of one member.

- e) Pray for and love those who are causing the conflict. Be willing to forgive those who are guilty once he/she/they repent and change their behavior.

Quote: When you have done all that you can to restore the relationship but the conflict remains unresolved, release the relationship to God.⁴

The Bible warns us that “if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another” (Gal 5:15). Conflict has the ability to destroy the home. So we dare not ignore it or just live with it. We should be able to solve conflicts.

Because people are sinners, some conflicts remain with us. Some people will never submit to biblical standards for living, and they will thus continue to be a cause of conflict. You can't change other people, and you can't pick your relatives. All you can do is try your best to manage conflict and reduce it as much as possible.

Within your own, immediate family, you need not live with continuous conflict. If everyone in the family agrees to follow biblical standards, then conflict should be fairly rare and usually quite minor. It's only as we stray from biblical standards that conflict becomes more significant. As a family grows in its commitment to God and his ways, conflict should reduce. As a family strays from its commitment to God and his ways, we should not be surprised if conflict increases.

And I should also say that if children are experiencing abuse within the home, they need to talk to someone outside the family—me or another authority. That's one family secret that children do not need to keep.

Don't tolerate continuous conflict in your home. Do what is necessary to address conflict and reduce it or even eliminate it. God wants the Christian home to be happy, peaceful, and harmonious. Don't settle for anything less.

⁴ Mary J. Yerkes, “Family Ties: When Conflict Strikes Close to Home.” Focus on the Family, 2008.
<https://www.focusonthefamily.com/get-help/family-ties-when-conflict-strikes-close-to-home/>