

Responding to conflict in small groups by Tom Atkins

If we want to teach our small groups to respond to conflict well, we need to make the Great Commandment a foundation for group life. We need to practice loving God and loving our neighbor. It isn't the great *suggestion*. It's a key part of our witness. God wants to reconcile all things to himself. Sin separates us from God and we cannot be at peace with him if we have conflict with others in our life – a brother, sister, coworker, friend, whoever. The Holy Spirit is not going to let us be at peace with ourselves if we're not at peace with others – and thank God for that.

So how do you teach small groups to respond to conflict well? Here are 10 suggestions:

1. **Set guidelines and expectations for the group up front.**

We've found that setting expectations cuts out about half the conflicts in small groups. We created a list of suggested guidelines that we give hosts when starting a group. They cover things like making group time a priority, keeping what's discussed in the group confidential, avoiding gossip, etc. Groups can refer back to the guidelines whenever an issue arises and remember the agreement they made with each other.

2. **Nip gossip in the bud.**

As humans, we tend to want to talk about conflict. We say things like, "Pray for my buddy Joe. He's been on those Websites again, and he's not getting along with his wife." A "prayer request" becomes a flimsy excuse to gossip. We need to keep conflict between us and the other person and avoid talking about the situation with those who are not involved.

3. **Point people to God's word to resolve issues.**

Sometimes conflict arises from a lack of biblical knowledge. Sometimes people want to do what the world says is OK, not what is biblical. You've always got to go back to God's word. Find biblical teaching that applies to the situation. And without mentioning you're doing it, teach the group on the subject that's really at the heart of the issue. That way resolution is based on Scripture, not one person's opinion.

4. **Be sensitive to EGR people (extra grace required).**

Have you heard the saying "hurt people hurt people"? It's very true in small group life. Sometimes there are people in small groups who would do better in a group like Celebrate Recovery first. We want to give everyone a chance for fellowship, but some people can pull a whole group down into conflict if they're in a season of dysfunction. We need to be sensitive to that when forming groups and make sure people get the help they need.

5. **Take the log out of our own eye first.**

Any time we're in a conflict, we need to get the log out of our own eye before attempting to remove the speck from another person's eye. We need to honestly ask, "What's my part of it?" Conflicts don't happen with just one person; it takes two people to make a conflict. It may be 90 percent one person's fault or even 95 percent, but there's still that other part. God wants us to surrender whatever *our* part is to him.

6. **Don't enable patterns of bad behavior.**

Sometimes we think the Bible says to bail out a brother or sister and help them out, but we actually make things worse by enabling bad behavior. For instance, if someone in the group is having financial problems, a good rule to teach members is not to loan money to someone in the group that they're not willing to *give*. Friendships are more important than money.

7. **Address God, self, and others in a spirit of repentance.**

Reconciliation involves repenting and confessing our part of the conflict. The first thing to do is make sure you address everybody involved. That includes God, self, and others. You've got to take responsibility for what you did in a spirit of repentance.

8. **Apologize specifically.**

When you've wronged someone in the group and need to make amends, admit what you did specifically. Be detailed. Deal with your attitudes as well as your actions. Acknowledge the hurt you caused. Tell the person how you plan to alter your behavior. This is especially powerful when in conflict with a new believer. It will strengthen their walk when they see you deal with conflict in a biblical way.

9. **Accept the consequences graciously.**

Where there is conflict, there are usually consequences as well. For instance, somebody may need to repay somebody else financially. If there are damages, they need to be repaired. It takes time to restore broken relationships. We need to face the consequences graciously.

10. **Forgive and don't dwell on the incident.**

When someone has wronged us, we need to forgive them and move on. Biblical forgiveness always includes not dwelling on the incident. When true forgiveness happens, the issue is gone. That doesn't mean you're not going to think about it, but you're never going to use it as a weapon against the other person. You're not going to talk to anybody else about the incident if you've forgiven the person. It's off the table. Forgiveness is a decision, not a feeling. God forgave us so we need to forgive others.

The Matthew 18 model

Another way to address conflict is to follow the model presented in Matthew 18:15-17. If another believer sins against us, we are to go privately and point out the fault. If they listen and confess, we have won that person back. But if we are unsuccessful, we are to take one or two others back with us so that everything can be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If the person still refuses to listen, we are to take our case to the church. If the church decides we are right but the other person won't accept it, we are to treat the other person as we would a pagan or a tax collector.

The first point to note is that resolution starts just between the two of you. What God intends is that if there is a conflict between two people, it's kept between two people. And when we go to the other person, the goal is to restore the relationship, not to confront the sin. We need to go in love and listen with gentleness. That's what transforms people and resolves conflicts.

But sometimes a one-on-one meeting isn't possible, or the results aren't good and you need to go back with someone else. If one party is intimidating, boisterous, or controlling and the other party is meek and mild, you may want to have two people come with you. If there was abuse going on, or there's a possibility for somebody to get angry, make sure you have another person there.

If that step also fails to bring resolution to the issue, take the matter to the church. If it gets to this point, think of it as a great teaching opportunity – an opportunity to talk about what Christ's love is all about. We want to make sure that we don't become Pharisees. We don't want to become God's police looking for problems. We want to be there as humble servants helping people. We want to give grace without compromising God's principles.

God's kindness leads us to repentance. His power is greater than any evil, and when we unleash it through prayer in a spirit of love, we will see reconciliation in our small groups.