Growing in Love: The Three C’s of Marriage Transforming Conflict into Closeness

Brainstorming

What words or images come to mind when you think of the word “Conflict”?

Definitions of Conflict

1. fight, battle, war <an armed conflict>
2. mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, or external or internal demands
Overview of Conflict Section

1. Why explore Conflict?
2. Scriptural Principles
3. The Role of Emotions
4. Productive vs. Unproductive Conflict
5. The Role of Forgiveness
6. Locking Horns or Locking Arms?

Why Explore Conflict?

• All good marriages have some form of conflict.
• Conflict is easily misunderstood.
• "Emotions in the moment" can cloud our vision of conflict
• Patterns of handling conflict in unhealthy ways can have a generational impact.
• Patterns of handling conflict in healthy ways can have generational impact.
• God can use our efforts in exploring conflict to help us grow in Christ.
• How we handle conflict will have a strong bearing on our marital satisfaction and on our marriage as a witness for Christ.

Why Explore Conflict?

Less than 2% of us grew up in homes with healthy conflict.

Oliver 2010, Mad About Us

SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES

Scriptural Principles for Healthy Conflict

What is the opposite of Pride?

Pride = Self-Exaltation

• Pride elevates the self over others Proverbs 16:18 “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.”
• Finds fault with others
• Denies faults in self
• View of self is inflated
Inferiority: Devaluing What God Values

- Can range from mild levels of inferiority to strong feelings of self-hatred
- Difficulty believing God completely loves them
- Overly negative view of oneself
- Has difficulty recognizing and using their spiritual gifts

Humility: A Balanced View

- Sees others as having equal worth
- Does not exalt oneself
- Romans 12:3 “For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.”
- Does not put oneself down – Jesus never did!

Pride – Humility – Inferiority Continuum

Scriptural Principles for Healthy Conflict

- Colossians 3:1-14
  1. Focus First on Relationship With Christ
  2. Identify Flesh-Driven Reactions
  3. Practice Unity that Allows for Diversity
  4. Intentionally Apply Love Principles

#1 Focus First on Relationship with Christ

Colossians 3:1-4

1. “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.
2. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.
3. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.
4. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.”

#2 Identify Flesh-Driven Reactions

Colossians 3:5-9

5. “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry:
6. For which things’ sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience:
7. In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them.
8. But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth.
9. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds;”
10. “And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him:
11. Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.”

12. “Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, meekness, longsuffering:
13. Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.
14. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.”

Are Differences the Major Obstacle to Oneness?
- “We’re just too different.”
- “It’s impossible to understand men/women.”
- “I will never understand him/her.”
- “We have nothing in common.”
- “The things that attracted me to him/her are now driving me crazy.”

Does Being Different Make Unity Impossible?

Scriptural Principles
- Romans 12:4-5
  - “For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.”
- James 4:1
  - “From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?”

Conclusions
The Role of Differences
- God not only knows about the differences, He designed them. The problem arises when we make the differences into “the problem” instead of committing to learn about and understand them.

Focusing on Our Own Growth
- We tend to fixate on what is different in our spouse or the sinful struggles in our spouse to the exclusion of focusing on our own sinful struggles and growth opportunities.
EMOTIONS

Webster’s Definition:
- a psychic and physical reaction subjectively experienced as strong feeling and physiologically involving changes that prepare the body for immediate vigorous action
- Derived from the Latin word “emovare,” which means to move or have something to do with motion, movement, and energy
- What role do emotions play in your current patterns of conflict?

Extreme Approaches to Emotions

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<tr>
<th>Denies Emotion</th>
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<td>• We are ignoring the very things God wants to use to help us grow</td>
<td>• Blind faith in feelings can cause us to misinterpret or over-react in ways that make things worse</td>
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Three Approaches to Emotions

1. Deny or ignore them
- Views emotions as unimportant or as a lack of maturity
- Distorts our perspective and leads us to distrust our experience
- We are ignoring the very things God wants to use to help us grow

2. Allow ourselves to be controlled by our emotions
- Views the intellectual perspective with suspicion
- Can function as if all feelings are facts that need to be acted upon
- Blind faith in feelings can cause us to misinterpret or over-react in ways that make things worse

3. View our emotions from God’s perspective to bring them into harmony with our minds.

Biblical Perspective on Emotions

- Both emotions and the will are important since God has both. Example of God having emotions:
  - Genesis 6:6 “And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.”
  - Psalm 149:4 “For the LORD taketh pleasure in his people…”
  - Exodus 34:14 “For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”
  - 1 John 4:7 “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God;…”
- Christ experienced and expressed a wide range of emotions including love, compassion, joy, fear, sorrow, disappointment, frustration, rejection, loneliness, and anger.

Usefulness of Emotions

Emotions can:
- make us aware of good and evil
- provide motivation and energy for growth and change
- serve as a great source of information.
- tell us we have a need.
- affect our thoughts.
- give meaning to our thoughts.
- prompt us to respond.
- inspire responses from others.
- communicate what words can’t.

Oliver 2010, “Cultivating EQ”
Women tend to be:
- More relationship-oriented
- Experience emotional waves
- Reluctant to ask for what they need

Men tend to be:
- More achievement-oriented
- Fixers
- Often have difficulty picking up clues and knowing what is needed by the wife

- Lower Emotional Arousal
- Heightened Emotional Arousal
- Inaccurate Expression
- Misunderstanding and Invalidation

Healthy-Validating Emotions
- Lower Emotional Arousal
- Active and Effective Expression
- Easier to Understand And Easier to Validate

PRODUCTIVE vs. NON-PRODUCTIVE CONFLICT

Non-Productive Conflict Characteristics
- Self-protection
- Quick to blame (“You statements.”)
- Main concern is not to lose
- Swings from trying to find a quick fix to avoidance
- Spontaneous and without ground rules for engaging each other
- Focus is primarily on what the other spouse does or doesn’t do
- Involves invalidation, escalation, negative interpretation, the pursuer-avoider pattern, or global generalizations

Results of Non-Productive Conflict
- Hurt
- Isolation
- Keeping score
**Productive Conflict Characteristics**

- Makes room for differences and disagreement
- Driven by the desire to understand and to be understood
- Quick to seek and to communicate understanding to the other spouse
- Involves speaking in terms of one’s own perspective (“I statements”)
- Recognition that a difficult conversation is happening and thought is given to whether it should be re-scheduled for a different time.
- Pre-determined commitments about how conflict-filled conversations will be handled.
- Clearly splits understanding phase from problem-solving phase

**Productive Conflict Results**

- Short-term discomfort as new communication skills are acquired
- Learning new insights about yourself and about your spouse
- Greater sense of oneness
- More unity in decisions

**Conflict and Intimacy Cycle**

Stage 1: Differences
Stage 2: Disagreement
Stage 3: Conflict
Stage 4: 2 Ways to Interpret it
- Negative interpretation: A pain to avoid or a problem to solve.
  - Fear, hurt, frustration > Anger > avoid or attack reaction > division and distance
- Positive interpretation: An opportunity to grow.
  - Anticipation > loving confrontation and collaboration > understanding > increased safety > increased trust > intimacy
Stage 5: More Oneness in the Relationship

**Seven Steps Through Conflict to Intimacy**

1. Define the issue – Pray, listen, seek understanding
   - Whose issue is it?
   - What kind of issue is it?
   - Is there more than one issue involved?
   - What is my spouse’s core concern?
   - What is my core concern?
2. How important is it? High ticket or low ticket?

**Seven Steps Cont’d**

3. Do I need to apologize or ask for forgiveness?
4. What is my contribution to the problem?
5. Choose what I can do different.
6. Choose what we can do different.
7. Pray about it and just do it.

**FORGIVENESS**
Forgiveness - A grace-inspired, intentional decision and process to release a debt which usually results in changes in our attitudes, behaviors, feelings, and beliefs

Following are several categories of issues that can cause tension and hurt in relationships.

1. Errors - Mistakes:
   - We all make mistakes.
   - Examples: We forget things, break things, spill things, and so on.
   - You need to be prepared for mistakes in yourself and in others.

2. Errors - Irritants:
   - We all have them.
   - Examples: Habits, quirks, personality traits, and idiosyncrasies that one person does (usually unconsciously) that irritates another.
   - Can lead to anger, harsh words, and arguments.

3. Errors - Poor Choices:
   - We all make them.
   - Examples: Occasionally not getting home on time or making a bad decision on a purchase.
   - If poor choices are a repeated pattern and are severe enough, they may actually become offenses.

4. Offenses - Hurtful Omissions:
   - They generally happen infrequently.
   - Examples: Forgetting an anniversary or not following through on things you agreed to be responsible for.
   - Lead to hurt that needs to be repaired.

5. Offenses - Hurtful Words and Actions:
   - Sinful ways of interacting with others.
   - Examples: Yelling, harsh criticism, put-downs, and so on can lead to periods of feeling disconnected with others.
   - If this becomes a pattern, you may need help in learning how to deal with it.

6. Offenses - Major Sin/Major Harm:
   - These offenses strike at the very core of relationships violating trust, boundaries, emotional closeness, and spiritual connection.
   - Examples: Major offenses include adultery, addiction, abandonment, abuse (sexual, physical, emotional), etc.
   - Get help!

"Errors" call for forbearance while "offenses" are dealt with through forgiveness.

- Colossians 3:13 "Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any; even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye."
- Ephesians 4:1-3 "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called. With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."
Common Misperceptions About Forgiveness

- Some people believe forgiveness must be requested before it can be granted.
- In actuality, forgiveness can be given to someone who:
  - Is no longer living
  - Doesn’t acknowledge any harm was done
  - Is not repentant
  - Only acknowledges a portion of the severity of the transgression, etc.
- Remember that forgiveness only requires one person while reconciliation requires two cooperating parties.

Common Misperceptions Cont’d

- By forgiving, you are not simply “getting over it.”
  - Some of the transgressions you may have experienced are very serious and cannot be simply overlooked.
  - God does not excuse sin or deny its severity; neither should we.
  - Remember that, “God’s mercy cannot override His holiness. Offenses demand payment.”
  - The solution that God offers for all sins for all time is Jesus, the perfect Son of God, who died to pay the penalty for sin.

Common Misperceptions Cont’d

- Some people incorrectly believe that forgiveness:
  - Denies the seriousness of sin.
  - Lets people “off the hook” too easily.
  - Places too much responsibility on the victim.
  - Is unjust.

Common Misperceptions Cont’d

- In contrast, true forgiveness:
  - Acknowledges a wrong has occurred.
  - Recognizes that the wrong has created an obligation for repayment from the offender.
  - Recognizes that often the offender cannot provide adequate compensation for the hurt.
  - Realizes that revenge, although a natural desire, isn’t a godly or healthy solution.
  - Releases the debt over the offender.

Common Misperceptions Cont’d

- There are times when the offender does provide some payment for their wrong.
- Example, a drunk driver kills someone in an accident
  - The driver may be convicted by the law and go to jail.
  - However, that payment does not begin to cover the losses experienced by the family members and friends of those who died.
  - Those losses are greater than that which the transgressor could ever provide compensation.
  - Those are the losses that are acknowledged during the forgiveness process.

What Forgiveness IS NOT

- Forgetting:
  - One does not completely forget an offense when forgiving.
  - The often cited phrase, “Forgive and Forget” sometimes leads people to believe that forgiveness means that one will truly forget the memory.
  - The phrase “forgive and forget” doesn’t come from the Bible.
  - Christ-like forgiveness for human beings means that we will not hold anger, bitterness, or hostility “over the person’s head.”
  - Therefore, instead of trying to literally forget a memory, the goal is to be released from the unhealthy emotional tie it has to you.
**What Forgiveness IS NOT Cont’d**

- **Pardoning:**
  o Legal term that means to release from punishment, or to not punish, for some crime or offense.
  o Even when someone is forgiven, they may receive consequences for their actions.

- **Apologizing:**
  o An acknowledgement and expression of regret for a fault, injury, or insult.
  o A sincere apology means that the offender is:
    1. acknowledging the wrong they have done
    2. accepting responsibility for it
    3. acknowledging the hurt caused
    4. is willing to accept the consequences.

**What Forgiveness IS NOT Cont’d**

- **Reconciling:**
  o Reconciling is the process whereby two people take steps to rebuild a relationship that has been hurt.
  o Though forgiveness may lead to making a relationship right, it does not in and of itself, bring about reconciliation.
  o Reconciliation is actually the work that both people, the offender and the offended, do together to restore a broken relationship.

**What Forgiveness IS NOT Cont’d**

- **Avoidance or denial:**
  o Sometimes people are so hurt by something that they quickly say, “I’ve already forgiven it.” in order to try to avoid having to feel the pain of the injury.
  o Forgiveness is not simply a way of avoiding dealing with someone or something to get around pain or conflict.
  o It is also not the same as denying we were truly hurt by someone’s words or actions.

**What Forgiveness IS NOT Cont’d**

- **Excusing the offense:**
  o Forgiveness does not give the offender the right to offend again.
  o Healthy boundaries are important so that we do not simply allow another person’s hurtful or sinful actions to continue.

- **Easy or cheap:**
  o True forgiveness is not simply a few pleasant sounding words.
  o It is hard work that involves a true and lasting change of behavior.

**What Forgiveness IS NOT Cont’d**

- **Trust:**
  o Trust in relationships is built and maintained over time.
  o Depending upon the seriousness of an offense, trust may be slightly diminished or even destroyed.
  o Forgiveness may lead to the process of trust being restored as part of reconciliation, but trust isn’t a prerequisite for forgiveness.
  o Trust is earned over time, and the person who committed the offense must accept that regaining trust will occur as a process over time.

**What Forgiveness IS NOT Cont’d**

- **A feeling:**
  o We can’t wait to forgive until we feel like forgiving someone or are no longer feeling the effects of the offense.
  o Forgiveness is an act of obedience through which God can guide us.

- **Dependent on time:**
  o A phrase that is sometimes quoted about relationship hurts is, “time heals all wounds.” Unfortunately it isn’t true!
  o While the passage of time can sometime help us get perspective on a hurt, time itself doesn’t heal anything!
  o We could more accurately say, “Time plus forgiveness leads to the healing of wounds.”
Biblical Stories of Forgiveness

- The story of Joseph  (Genesis 30-45)
- The unmerciful Servant  (Matthew 18:23-35)

Steps Toward Forgiveness Using the R.E.A.C.H Model

- **Recall the hurt:** The first step involves acknowledging that hurt occurred.
  - The goal of this step is to accept that you have been wronged and to focus on moving forward.
  - The extremes of either denial of the pain or of obsessively replaying the event over and over in your head are not helpful.

R.E.A.C.H Model Cont’d

- **Empathize:** In this step towards forgiveness, feelings such as anger or cold, detached feelings are replaced with empathy.
  - For example, try to see the scenario from the other person’s perspective.
  - Note that the more horrific the act of transgression was, the more difficult it is to show empathy.
  - When empathy is too difficult, first try sympathy. For example, you can think, “How horrible it must be to have a conscience so seared that he could have done …”
  - Another way to work through the empathy step is to remember that forgiveness is extended with grace and that we didn’t deserve forgiveness from God.

R.E.A.C.H Model Cont’d

- **Altruistic Gift of Forgiveness:** Humility and gratitude are required in this step as we realize that we need and have received forgiveness.
  - Consider how you felt when you needed forgiveness.
  - How did you feel after you had done something wrong and were forgiven by God and by others?
  - Because we have received the gift of forgiveness from both God and other people, we offer forgiveness to others.

R.E.A.C.H Model Cont’d

- **Commit to forgive:** Make a firm commitment to forgive and set an Ebenezer to remember it by.
  - An Ebenezer is a marker or memorial (described in 1 Samuel 7:12) that reminds us that God has helped us to get to this point.
  - This is most effective if you tell someone else (e.g., the person who wronged you, your spouse, a friend, a minister, etc.) about your commitment to forgive so that you can come back to this when painful memories from the past come up again.

R.E.A.C.H Model Cont’d

- **Holding Onto Forgiveness:** When you occasionally remember things from past incidents that you have worked at forgiving, don’t get discouraged. Rather,
  - Recommit to forgive, commit the event and the person to God, and go on.
  - Having a memory of a hurtful event that sometimes comes up does not mean that you haven’t forgiven.
Best Practices for Handling Conflict

- Recognize the role of gender, personality, family, and preference factors
- Identify warning signs of unproductive conflict and disengage
- Learn how to reschedule difficult conversations to a later time when appropriate
- Set aside regular times for a “working date” to discuss difficult areas and to release pressure and set common expectations in the relationship.
- Learn to have a difficult conversation where each feels safe, respected, and understood

How to Lock Horns

1. Turn your relationship into a competition and keep score.
2. Make being right the most important goal in any discussion.
3. Take the Sinatra approach and be inflexible: “I did it my way.”
4. Regularly bring up offenses of the past. (Often and in detail).
5. Always fight for the absolute correctness of your perception of things and never make room for your partner’s perception.
6. Put your self first - make sure your needs always get met, at whatever cost.

How to Lock Arms

- Make a commitment. Choose to stay married and by choosing to make it work. This is a radical notion in our divorce prone culture.
- Create a relationship vision. Most couples spend more time planning a two week vacation than they do considering how they would like their relationship to be.
  - If we could design this relationship any way we wanted it to be, and we knew we couldn’t fail, how would we like it to be?

How to Lock Arms Cont’d

- Design a relationship that is a “safe-place.” Not just safe from physical or emotional abuse, although of course that is crucial. What I mean is create an environment where it is safe to be your self, feel and think what you feel and think, with room to grow as a person.
- Make an ongoing, lifetime commitment to do two things:
  1. As much as humanly possible, understand a totally different gender than your own. Not better or worse, just radically different.
  2. Completely understanding one other person. Part of locking arms is the commitment to work at totally understanding one other person in life.

How to Lock Arms Cont’d

- Remember that relationship conflict is inevitable. Fighting is optional. It is always a choice.
- Learn to look at the world through the eyes of your partner. You don’t have to agree with how they see things, or even understand it completely. You do need to be able to see through their eyes.
- Form a partnership that uses each of your own unique skills to the fullest.