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Grace in the Midst of Conflict

by Scott Stoner

Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.

—Winston Churchill

All relational systems experience conflict at times. Relational systems are any group of two or more people who are in an ongoing relationship, such as couples, families, work teams, congregations, friendships, etc. When relational conflict occurs, we can respond with grace, which will create the best chance of the dispute being resolved, or we can respond with judgment, pettiness, and blame, which will usually inflame the conflict.

One important principle to keep in mind during conflict is to always “keep the problem the problem,” and not make a person or persons the problem. Imagine a congregation that is experiencing a decline in membership, or a family that is experiencing division over political differences. To keep the problem the problem means that all parties involved focus on the issues at hand and not on blaming each other. In the first case, the problem is declining membership. In the second, it is the different viewpoints that are held within the family. It will not be helpful to blame a person or persons for being the problem; this will only escalate the conflict. To agree to work together on the declining membership issue, and to agree to love and respect one another in the midst of different political opinions, is to practice grace in the midst of conflict. It takes courage and strength to offer this kind of grace.

As the quote from Winston Churchill reminds us, it takes courage to listen, to overcome the need to be right, and to choose to put our energy into offering grace when we are surrounded by conflict.

Making It Personal: In general, what is your natural response when you find yourself facing conflict? Do you deny or avoid it? Do you inflame it by making others the problem? Or do you find a way to offer grace and the possibility of healing?