

HOW NOT TO SPLIT A CHURCH

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It often comes to pass in this evil world, that great differences and controversies arise between ministers and the people under their pastoral care ... and although contests and dissensions between persons so related are the most unhappy and terrible in their consequences ...yet how frequent have such contentions been.¹

Jonathan Edwards

Introduction: A glaring omission

Not one of the books on pastoral ministry that I read in seminary or since seminary has a chapter on church conflict. Yet every pastor I know who has been in ministry for more than five years has been through some kind of disruptive conflict situation. This is a major oversight in the training of pastors (and church members).

Most Christians—including pastors—have never received any training on how to handle church conflicts.

Philippians 2:1-5: A corrective measure

The <i>context</i> of Paul's instruction	Phil 4:2-3
The <i>content</i> of Paul's instruction	Phil 1:27-2:5

Six Ways Not to Split Your Church

1) Meditate on the joys of unity

Philippians 2:1-2

Encouragement, consoling love, fellowship, affection, and compassion had all gone on holiday since the Euodia and Syntyche spat had begun. Paul wanted the Philippians to meditate on the joy they had forfeited by letting that conflict burn.

2) Allow no self

Philippians 2:3a

Illustration:

James 3:16	Phil 1:15-17
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¹ Quoted in Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, reprint (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 312.

Selfish ambition is to proclaim publicly your loyalty to a noble cause, but in your heart to be dedicated to your own cause.

Expansion: Allowing no self means...

A) Allow no jealousy Prov 27:4

B) Refuse to take revenge Prov 24:29

- not active revenge
- not revenge imagined, fondled, and caressed in the mind

C) Consider gossip to be as evil as God does Prov 25:23; 26:20-22

Why gossip is evil:

Four rules to stop gossip:

1. *Refuse to nibble.* "Let's pray for Elder Bill right now, that God will help him, rather than talk about him behind his back."

2. *Be the last link in the chain.* If someone says something to you, make sure that you don't repeat it to anyone else.

3. *Go to the source.* If you have a question about something a person said or did, go to that person—the source—not ten other people who are as ignorant as you are.

4. *Right the wrong.* If you've been guilty of gossip, go, ask forgiveness, and correct your wrong.

D) Be willing to yield Prov 17:4; Titus 1:7

If you're part of a church conflict, most likely, you want *your* way just as badly as they want *theirs*.

3) Allow no conceit

Philippians 2:3a

Expansion: Allowing no conceit means...

A) Don't use harsh, inflammatory words Prov 15:1

B) Avoid jumping to conclusions

Prov 12:15 Prov 18:17
 Prov 18:13

Have you ever found that one person's report of a conflict situation gave you *all* the facts you needed? Leaping to conclusions is an event in hell's Olympics, not heaven's.

C) Don't personalise offences Ecclesiastes 7:21

Don't search through people's words, gestures, tones of voice, and facial expressions with a microscope trying to find something to be offended by.

Examples: Exodus 16:2, 82 Corinthians 2:5-11
 Phil 1:15-17

D) Repent when you've sinned Prov 28:13

The conceited person is so busy pointing out everyone else's sin, failures, and offences, that he finds no time to repent from his own.

Reject tactics for avoiding repentance:

- anger
- listing the faults of the other people involved
- throwing up a smokescreen of irrelevant personal issues
- changing your story so that you'll appear in a favourable light

4) Allow no *me-first* attitudes

Philippians 2:3

The most dangerous *me-first* attitude in church conflict: Prov 27:5

Churches don't split because people in that church confront sin; they split because they don't. All churches have conflict, but those that practice the Matthew 18 process of graciously confronting sin are better prepared to put out those fires than those that don't (Eph 4:26-27).

5) Adopt an *others-first* attitude

Philippians 2:4

Expansion: Adopting an *others-first* attitude means...

A) Don't fight for others

There is a wrong way to put others first. Fighting for others usually only produces conflict where there would be none.

1 Cor 1:10-12

Num 11:26-30

B) Exercise Christian tolerance

Col 3:12-13

C) Trust and talk to your leaders

Believe the best about your leaders: Often conflict-fires start in the church because church members or pastors are so quick to believe the worst about their elders.

Elders do fail, make bad decisions, and sin: If it appears they have, go talk *to* them not *about* them. Often you will find that someone's accusation against them was only half the story. At other times, you'll disagree with their six-of-one, half-a-dozen-of-the-other decision. In that case, support them as a wife does when her husband makes a hard decision that she wouldn't have.

D) If you have to leave your church, leave like a *mouse* not a *lion*.

Prov 29:9

6) Imitate Christ

Phil 2:5-8

All the principles of Philippians 2 find their completion in Christ.

Conclusion:

Sometimes church conflict is a matter of doctrine, but most often it is a matter of *character*. Philippians 2:1-5 teaches the character need to put out conflict-fires as or before they burst into life. It teaches you how *not* to split your church.