



Exploring tough questions  
facing youth today

# **FIGHT RIGHT**

**A Christian Response to Conflict Resolution**



The Pastoral Center

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## Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth

### » OVERVIEW

When conversing online, the acronym IRL stands for “in real life.” The virtual world of social media, text chats, blogs, and more have the power to remove us from the real world. What we experience online can skew our perspective on what it means to be human. It can numb us, incite us, distract us, depress us, confuse us, and make us rude or impatient. Strangely, this supposedly “social” and “connected” technology can profoundly disconnect us from others.

Religious faith can also place us in a bubble, especially when it distances us from others. When we keep the prophetic message at a safe distance, obscured in theological language and abstractions, we are missing the whole point. And when we see our parish as an insider club that serves itself, we can forget the radically inclusive message entrusted to us: God’s love is for *everyone*, and God expects us to transform the *whole world* through that love.

Through the incarnation, God showed up in the real world to show us that our faith is not just about talking the talk, but also walking the walk. It can be risky. It can be confusing. It can hurt. But living out our faith can also bring us great purpose, peace, and joy.

This series connects the Bible with the tough questions that youth (and adults) encounter in their neighborhood, in school, among friends, and even online. This process will help you as a leader break open these issues in a fun and meaningful way, sparking conversation and the kind of life change Jesus invites us to embrace.

### » THE ROLE OF PARENTS

As children enter middle school and high school, they become more independent, self-reliant, and, well, self-centered. This can bring parents to make assumptions that this is the time to step back, giving their child more space to form their identity. While there is truth to that at some level (adolescents definitely shouldn’t be smothered), this is a stage of life when parents should in fact *lean in*. The apparent confidence and bluster youth show on the outside can mask the insecurity and confusion on the inside. Youth need their parents to be involved more than ever.

### » WHOLE FAMILY FORMATION

Parents are the primary teachers of their own children, and parishes are waking up to the fact that faith formation programs need to bring parents into the process if they hope to see faith passed on to the next generation. Recent studies give us more and more evidence that the role of parents is the most important factor in determining whether a child will embrace faith as they move toward adulthood. Research from the Center for the Applied Research on the Apostolate shows that parents who talk about their faith and show through their actions that their faith is important to them are more likely to have children who remain Catholic.

## More about Whole Family Formation >>>

To learn more about how your parish can take a comprehensive whole family approach to faith formation, visit [GrowingUpCatholic.com](http://GrowingUpCatholic.com).



While whole family events with elementary-aged children are on the rise, the role of parents can be an afterthought in youth ministry. We have designed the sessions in this series to work with or without parents present, and we encourage you to offer them as parent-child events.

If you choose to involve parents, it is important to consider before each session how to best do so. Many of the activities in this series are high-energy, creative, or silly. Some parents may need some encouragement to get out of their heads and have fun with the group. A few activities involving physical contact would be inappropriate for parents and youth to participate together, and we have noted them as such.

There are a number of ways to approach discussions with parent participation. Unless you have a small group, you will likely want to break into smaller groups for conversation. Some youth may be self-conscious and unable to be completely honest and open in a group situation with a parent present. For this reason, you may choose in some cases to assign parents to different groups from their own children, or to have separate parent and child groups altogether. Be sure to cover expectations around confidentiality. It is inappropriate for a parent (or youth) to share with another parent what their child said in a small group.

Note that even if parents and their children do not share all conversations together in the session, they will still have a valuable shared experience and can have extended conversations about it later.

### >> **THANK YOU**

The role you play in gathering, animating, praying with, and forming youth is a valuable one. Thank you for all you do to serve the church and its families!

# » FIGHT RIGHT «««

## A Christian Response to Conflict Resolution

### » INTRODUCTION

Why doesn't instruction about the "facts of life" include the nature of conflict? Certainly conflict is an ever-present reality, as natural and inevitable as the rising of the sun in the morning.

Many of us learn at an early age to think of conflict as something bad or dangerous, the opposite of love, harmony, and unity. The reality is that conflict is a necessary part of the most loving, harmonious, and united relationships. People in these relationships have learned that conflicts spring from the fact that people are simply *different*. They have learned to value differences precisely because differences bring excitement and growth to a relationship. To deny conflict is to deny those differences. To deny those differences is to deny people their God-given uniqueness. And to deny that is to take the life out of a relationship. The only place where there is never conflict is the graveyard.

The fact is that conflict at its inception is *neutral*. Whether it becomes a negative force or a positive force depends on how we respond to it. Most dictionary definitions of conflict are decidedly negative: "1. to be contradictory, at variance, or in opposition; clash; disagree. 2. to fight or contend; do battle. 3. a fight, battle, or struggle, esp. a prolonged one; strife." What is being described here is not simply conflict, but conflict that has escalated into a negative force. A more helpful definition is this one: "the interplay of differences between two or more entities acting to meet needs." This accurately reflects the neutrality of conflict, and leaves open the possibility that it can become a positive force. The true opposites of love, harmony, and unity are hate, discord, and division. And the key to whether we live at one end of that spectrum or the other is how we respond to differences and the conflict that rises naturally from them.

Conflict has been a particular problem for Christians. Somewhere along the line the church began to equate "being Christian" with "having no conflicts." After all, we are supposed to love one another, aren't we? But even the Bible is packed with records of conflicts, from Adam and Eve, to Abraham, to Moses, to the prophets, to Jesus himself! Just read the letters in the New Testament—conflict was an ever-present reality in the early church. Most of these conflicts are not simply examples of what we are not supposed to do. No, these conflicts show us that God uses conflict to achieve divine purposes. As peace and conflict mediator Ron Kraybill has pointed out, "Conflict is the arena of God's revelation." One of the most helpful examples for the church today is the story in Acts 15 of the conflict over circumcision. God moved in a council of church leaders who met to discuss the controversy, and the result was the opening of the church to the Gentiles, and the beginning of a new era of witness and growth. Some say, ruefully, that change cannot occur without conflict. What they mean is that conflict is an



### CONFLICT:

the interplay of differences between two or more entities acting to meet needs.





## EXTENDER SESSION

Extender sessions suggest special activities related to the issue of the unit. They help accommodate the diversity of parish schedules. Since each unit is undated, participants may study units in their entirety and still participate in special events of the parish that get scheduled simultaneously with youth group time. Extender sessions can be used anytime, but the one for this unit best follows **Session 5**. Calculate now whether or not you will be using the extender session.



unfortunate side effect of change. The reality is that without conflict there is no change! The greatest example, of course, is Christ crucified. Without the cross there can be no resurrection.

The youth of today are fortunate to live in a time when our understanding of conflict as a positive force is growing by leaps and bounds. The witness of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, and Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani activist for female education and the youngest-ever Nobel Peace Prize recipient, are inspiring examples of conflict as a force for positive change. Yet for most of us, the conflict we experience is in our everyday relationships at home, at work, in school, and at church. But the same principle still applies. These sessions are designed to help participants learn how to respond to conflict with skill and insight, not because conflict is a necessary evil that they need to eliminate, but so that, through an appreciation of differences, they can bring life, excitement, and positive change to their relationships.

When conflict came to a previous generation, they said, “Oh no, not again!” Our hope is that when conflict comes to this generation, they will say, “I wonder what God is trying to tell us now!”



## THE SESSION PLAN: The parts of the session guide

» **Faith story.** The session is rooted in this Bible passage.

» **Faith focus.** The story of the passage in a nutshell.

» **Session goal.** The entire session is built around this goal. What changes—in knowledge, attitude, and/or action—do you desire in your group?

» **Materials needed and advance preparation.** This is what you will need if the session is to go smoothly. You'll feel more at ease if you've taken care of these details before you meet your group.

## » FROM LIFE TO BIBLE TO LIFE

The teaching plan we use is called *life-centered*. However, when we write each session, we always begin with Scripture. We ask, what does this particular passage say, especially to youth? Each session moves from life to Bible to life. So the Bible is really at the center of this way of teaching.

In every session we try to hit upon a tough question participants might ask. Find out what questions on this issue are important for *your* group. By all means, bring your own input and invite your group members to add their own experiences.

## » TEACHING THE SESSION

The five step-by-step movements will carry you from *life to the Bible and back to life*. Each session takes about 45 to 50 minutes. If there is a handout sheet for the session, take note of any complementary activities and stories.

- 1. Focus.** Intended to create a friendly climate within the group and to *draw attention* to the issue.
- 2. Connect.** Invites participants to *express* their own life experience about the issue, through talking, drawing, role playing, and other activities. Also uses memory, reason, or imagination to get the group thinking about *why* they view the issue the way they do.
- 3. Explore the Bible.** What does the Bible *say* about the issue? With a minimum of lecturing, dig into the faith story and search for answers to questions raised in the first activities. The Insights from Scripture section will help clarify the faith story. Help participants discover how the faith community understands the Bible passage.
- 4. Apply** the faith story. What does the Bible passage *mean* for contemporary life? This is the “aha!” moment when participants realize the faith story has wisdom for *their* lives.
- 5. Respond.** Why does the Bible passage *matter*? What will the group do about the issue in light of what they have learned from their own experiences set alongside the faith story? How can we *live* the faith story rather than pass it off as a mere intellectual exercise?

## » LOOK AHEAD

Here are reminders for what you need to do for the next session or two.

## » INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

Here is a resource for Explore the Bible. Don't try to use all the material given. Take what you need to lead the session and answer questions your group may have. Let the Insights section inspire you to think and study more about the passage for the session.

## » HANDOUT SHEETS

Occasionally, there will be a handout sheet to complement your session. If you choose to use this, make enough copies for the group in advance of the session. These sheets may include questions, stories, agree/disagree exercises, charts, pictures, and other materials to stimulate thinking and discussion.

Generally, no participant preparation is required unless the session plan calls for you to contact selected group members for specific tasks.



**“I’ve learned from that wonderful mother of mine that you’ve got to learn how to disagree without being disagreeable. That’s held me in good stead all my life.”**

Abraham Lincoln Marovitz,  
senior judge of U.S. district  
courts, quoted in Studs  
Terkel's *Coming of Age*



SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE



## »» SESSION 1

# DIFFERENCES MAKE THE DIFFERENCE! »»

### »» KEY VERSES

As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." (1 Cor. 12:20, 21)

### »» FAITH STORY

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

### »» FAITH FOCUS

Conflict is a fact of life. Paul knew it, and so did the Christians in Corinth. For Paul, and for other writers of the Bible, the goal of the faithful life is not to eliminate conflict, but to deal with it in a positive way.

In this passage Paul lays the groundwork for a positive understanding of conflict that can transform how we relate to each other. Using the image of the church as a body, Paul asserts (1) that the very differences that cause conflict are a necessary part of God's creation; (2) that the conflict resulting from differences can be viewed not as something negative, but as a means whereby the Holy Spirit reveals God's will and inspires growth; and (3) that the best way to transform unhealthy conflict into healthy conflict is to acknowledge and celebrate differences for the good of the whole.

### »» SESSION GOAL

Help participants challenge their negative assumptions about differences and open themselves to the positive effects of healthy conflict.

### »» Materials needed and advance preparation

- Chalkboard/chalk or newsprint/markers
- Bibles
- Copies of the handout sheet for Session 1 (see Apply)



## TEACHING PLAN

### 1. FOCUS 7-8 minutes

»» **Option A:** Ask participants to respond to these true/false statements (possible answers in the sidebar on p. 5) by *standing up*, if they believe the statement is true, and by *sitting on the ground* if they believe it's false. Allow a little bit of time for discussion of each statement and the responses.



## Answers to True/False:

### 1. True.

But rather than being negative, conflict can lead to positive change.

### 2. False.

Handled constructively, conflict can strengthen relationships.

### 3. False.

How we deal with conflict determines the outcome, positive or negative.

**4. False.** Separating the conflict from the person/group is critical.

**5. False.** Perceptions of the problem, as well as aspects of right and wrong concerning it, will likely be different anyway.



1. Conflict is a fact of life.
2. Relationships usually get destroyed by conflict.
3. In the end, all conflicts finish in violence.
4. Usually, one can point to a single person or group as the source of a conflict.
5. Figuring out who's right and who's wrong is the most important part of resolving a conflict.

Finally (no true/false on this one), ask participants what words or phrases immediately come to mind when they hear the word "conflict." Have them call them out and quickly list them on newsprint or a chalkboard. Ask the group to make observations about the list. Ask: *How many words or phrases are negative? Are any positive? What does this say about our understandings of conflict? Where do these understandings come from?*

## 2. CONNECT 12 minutes

Ask for three examples of conflicts that youth might experience. These might include a misunderstanding between friends, classmates, or teammates, a fight between a boyfriend and girlfriend, or an argument with a parent. Ask for volunteers to create "statues" or poses, or make faces, that express their impressions of or emotional reactions to each conflict (or, quickly share phone photos of people reacting to conflict). Ask the group to make observations about what they have seen.

Ask:

1. *Where does the conflict come from in each instance?*
2. *Do these conflicts have anything in common? What?*
3. *How much was the conflict caused by differences between you and the other person or persons in your story?*

As discussion gets going, let participants add other experiences of conflict. In each instance, try to discover where the conflict was caused by differences.

## 3. EXPLORE THE BIBLE 15 minutes

**Shift to the next activity by saying:** *It seems that conflicts are primarily caused by differences. If so, why did God create so many differences in the world? Let's see what the Bible tells us....*

Present a list of the following body parts: **Brain, ears, eyes, mouth, stomach, arms, hands, legs, and feet.** Assign participants to represent body parts depending on how many people are in your group:

- A. 4-18 people: Pair up and use as many of the body parts as you have pairs.
- B. Three or fewer: Have each person choose a body part.
- C. More than 18: Divide into groups of three (or more as needed).

**The task:** *Try to convince the others that your body part is the most important of all.*

Give each individual or group 2 minutes to identify what is most important about their body part from their point of view. Then have everyone come together. Each individual/group gets 3 minutes to try to convince the other groups that their body part is the most important of all.

Then ask: *How did you feel during the Great Body Part Debate?*

Pass out Bibles. Now read 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. Continue the discussion:

1. Think about the passage, and then say what you think was happening during the debate.
2. What, in your own words, does the passage have to say about differences?
3. Does the passage identify any one part of the body as the most important?

#### 4. **APPLY** 15 minutes

Go over the **Conflict Cycle** (handout sheet) with the group. (If your group likes role plays, act out Matthew's response to conflict in the "Going Down" cycle.) Ask: *How does Matthew's response to conflict reinforce a negative view of differences?* Point out how the repetition of the cycle escalates the conflict.

Then ask: *How can we reverse the cycle from a negative cycle to a positive cycle?* (Again, role play Matthew's response to conflict in the "Going Up" cycle, if it helps your group.) Ask: *How does Matthew's response reinforce a positive view of differences?*

#### 5. **RESPOND** 7-8 minutes

» **Option A:** Have participants divide into small groups for the various body parts you listed earlier. Give them 2 minutes to list all the other parts, and brainstorm reasons their group body part needs each of the other parts. **OR**, instead of dividing again, share with the group how your body part needs at least one other body part. For example, the "Hand" group may list: "Arm: connects us to body, helps us reach things on top shelf," and so on. Then have them come together and share their reasons with each other. Ask:

1. How does this exchange feel different from the first one?
2. Why does it feel different this time around?

» **Option B:** Have participants create a new list of words and phrases that describe their response to the word "conflict." Write it on newsprint or a chalkboard. Have them contrast this list with the first list.

» **Option C:** Identify an imaginary line from one end of the room to the other as a continuum, and assign one end as **negative**, and the other as **positive**. Have participants place themselves on the continuum in response to the following statement: "*When I first came to this session this is how I felt about conflict.*" Have people who are near each other on the continuum gather in groups of three or four and talk with each other about why they placed themselves where they did. Give an opportunity for each group to sum up their discussion for the large group. Then have them place themselves on the positive/negative continuum in response to this statement: "*This is how I feel about conflict now.*" Report to the group as a whole. Help participants identify any insights they received, as well as any questions or anxieties about conflict they still have.

» **For all options:** Sum up by saying something like this: *Conflict is a normal and natural part of life, and arises from our differences. Differences can lead to unpleasant and even painful conflict. But the Bible tells us that differences are a gift of God, and that conflict can be healthy and positive. The next sessions will help us put this truth into action.*

Close with prayer.



**HOW  
CONFLICT  
AFFECTS US**  
"Conflicts that go unresolved can damage self-esteem, the ability to trust, and overall outlook on life. Conflicts teach about relationships, trust, life, forgiveness, and ultimately, about God."

Jim Still-Pepper



**Depending on  
how we respond  
to it, conflict  
can either:**

EXCLUDE or INVOLVE  
CONFUSE or CLARIFY  
ENMESH or DEFINE  
DEADEN or STIMULATE  
CLOSE or OPEN  
DIVIDE or UNITE



## »» LOOK AHEAD

The next session uses toy or pictorial representations of five specific animals. Gather these. There is also an option to download and administer an inventory to help participants discover their personal response to conflict. Familiarize yourself with the directions for taking and scoring the inventory, if you choose to use it.



»»  
“Though I am  
different from  
you, we were  
born involved in  
one another.”

T'ao Ch'ien



## INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

In this passage we find one of the most fully developed statements of Paul's theology of the church as the Body of Christ. It is sandwiched between a discussion of the meaning of communion and the famous “love chapter.”

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul explains communion as both a memorial to Christ's body broken on the cross, and a ritual act that transforms the community into the Body of Christ. Paul is concerned about the integrity of the Body, and he admonishes some in the church at Corinth, who, through their disregard for others, eat and drink judgment upon themselves, and tear down community. He calls the Corinthians to “discern the body,” that is, to be mindful of community in everything they do.

Chapter 13, which immediately follows the metaphors of the parts of the body, ties together for the Corinthian Christians all issues having to do with community—which needs to be understood in the context of sacrificial love. This chapter is powerful on its own, but it has even more power when seen as a continuation of Paul's discussion of community in chapter 12. This was certainly Paul's intention, for he closes chapter 12 with a transition into chapter 13: “And I will show you a still more excellent way.”

## »» WELCOME TO THE DANCE

The chapter 12 passage, seen in this broader context, is the heart of Paul's understanding of the church as the Body of Christ. Using the image of the human body—one body made up of many parts—he describes the marvelous interplay between diversity and unity. Each needs the other; they are partners in an ongoing dance of community. Diversity without unity is chaos. Unity without diversity is a bland and lifeless uniformity. Furthermore, Paul makes it clear that diversity is not a problem or aberration that unity holds in check or corrects. Diversity is intended by God, and is a necessary component of unity. For Paul, this is most clearly seen in the distribution of different spiritual gifts among the various members of the church. While the gifts are different, they all come from one Source. And, most importantly, the different gifts are given for one and the same purpose: to build up the community of faith. As one commentary puts it: “The common good is served by the contribution of many different types of persons inspired by the Spirit, each possessing a special gift essential to the life of the church” (*The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*).

## »» CONFLICT IS.

Where there are differences, there will be conflict. This leads to a most important and liberating realization: Conflict is not in itself wrong or bad. In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul doesn't scold the Corinthians for having disputes and disagreements. He scolds them for the way they are handling them! *The important thing is how people respond to conflict.* Conflict is initially neutral. Depending on how we respond to conflict, however, it has the power to either break down community, or strengthen community. The goal of community life then, is not to eliminate all conflict; that is neither possible nor desirable. The goal, rather, is to respond to conflict skillfully, expectantly, and redemptively. When we can do that we discover something else: the thread of the Way of God weaving through conflict!

## » MAKING THE CONNECTION

Negative or unhealthy conflict develops when individuals lose sight of their own connectedness to the whole. When that happens, differences are perceived as threatening, as a challenge to be overcome. Positive and healthy conflict develops when people understand that their own personal well-being is linked with the well-being of others, and, more importantly, with the well-being of the whole Body.



**“Civilization . . . is the acceptance,  
and the encouragement, of differences.”**

Mahatma Gandhi



# THE CONFLICT CYCLE



How we respond to conflict depends on what we believe about it. Our response always has consequences. Those consequences confirm and reinforce our beliefs about conflict. So the next time conflict occurs we respond in the same way. Like an elevator, the conflict cycle goes in only two directions: up or down.

