

Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict. Building Relationships for Effective Ministry* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 1993)

Part 1. Understanding Conflict and Culture

Chapter 1. The Amazing Contours of Conflict

Elmer reasons that since love requires some understanding of its object it is culturally defined: "It can be expressed *egocentrically* (my way) or *sociocentrically* (as the other person would define an act of love)" (14).

So in the West friendship and love might be expressed by inviting someone to one's home for an evening meal, with day and time set for this. By contrast, in Africa such an approach may signal a desire for a formal, distant relationship, with friendship and love expressed by the freedom to stop in unannounced, even at mealtime.

Concepts of sin are also profoundly influenced by culture. So a Westerner is prone to consider lying more serious than losing one's temper, whereas in many other cultures the opposite pertains. In many cultures, e.g. Africa, cultural values mean that truth may bow to the importance placed on relationships and not losing face.

The experience of cultural differences has the potential to become cultural conflict. When one tries to manage conflict from one's own frame of reference there is every chance of making matters worse, even if one's intentions are good. This ignites a cycle of confusion leading to further frustration and stress and perhaps even alienation.

Sinful prejudice may well express an inability to understand the cultural dynamics of a group of people. Because many Westerners have limited tolerance for ambiguity and feel compelled to provide answers to questions, it is natural for these to be provided from their own cultural frame of reference, generating stereotypes that are confirmed by selective observation, only noticing those "facts" that confirm emerging convictions. The result is to relate to people as if they were objects that can be fitted into a "box." The fact is, that when people are confronted by something they don't understand and an explanation is not forthcoming, that they will naturally provide their own explanation and this will almost always attribute a *negative* characteristic and motivation to the other person. It is rare to give the other person the benefit of the doubt.

Elmer insists that most cross-cultural conflicts are not intentional but occur because underlying cultural values and corresponding rules are not understood.

Chapter 2. Cultural Diversity Was God's Idea (And So Was Unity)

Elmer maintains that "the large majority of conflicts resulting in brokenness are caused neither by core theological values being threatened nor by overt sin. Most conflicts that disrupt our lives grow out of innocent misunderstandings, unmet expectations, failure to get all the facts, or minor irritations that fester and become problems" (24).

Western individualism does not fit with placing a high value on unity. The luxury of disposable relationships means the unity of believers is taken lightly. This unity, so

integral to glorifying God and missiological effectiveness (hence Paul's starting point at Corinth; cf. Romans 14), is modeled on Trinitarian relationships, so it is a unity that involves different functions and roles (John 17).

Chapter 3. Handling Conflict the American Way

The number-one need of overseas-based missionaries is to deal with conflict, given that relational breakdowns among themselves is the greatest problem.

From the foundational studies of Thomas & Kilmann, Elmer summarises five Western strategies for handling conflict:

1. The Win-Lose Strategy

It is sometimes necessary to take this approach, e.g. fighting for one's virginity, essential doctrines such as the resurrection of Christ. However, this strategy is typically adopted by highly competitive, usually assertive people who see right and wrong in black and white terms. Tactics include physical force, threats, intimidation, silence, verbiage (outtalking or outshouting the other person), pointing out past failures, pulling rank ("I'm your boss/father/supervisor", etc.), reward, spiritual one-upmanship.

Going one-to-one with the win-lose person generally is not productive.

2. Avoidance

This approach is valid in a number of situations:

- If a problem is trivial and not worth time and effort.
- If emotions are running high a strategic withdrawal may be wise.
- If the potential consequences are too serious, e.g. crossing the street to avoid the possibility of a confrontation with a gang in a dangerous neighbourhood.

However, those who typically adopt this strategy operate from the assumption that differences are bad and that no good can come from confronting conflict. Such people are unwilling to discuss important issues or refuse to take a stand on significant decisions.

3. Giving In

This approach is valid if the issue is of little consequence and when, over minor issues, giving in this time means next time my preference might be honoured. Also, it can be a way of letting others learn their mistake through suffering the consequences, provided these are not too serious.

However, those who typically adopt this strategy are people-pleasers who assume nothing is accomplished by disagreement and see most things as negotiable. They are easily exploited. They use phrases such as:

- "I can see your point. Maybe there is something to it."
- "Since you feel so strongly, I am not going to disagree."
- "It really doesn't matter that much. It will all come out in the wash."
- "They didn't mean anything by it. Just ignore it."
- "Sometimes you just have to take a few bumps and forget it."
- "I think I can give in, just this once."
- "Let it pass. It isn't worth making a fuss about."

4. *Compromise*

This approach may be valid if certain goals or hopes are but of moderate importance to us and also in an emergency of when time is a critical factor.

Those who typically adopt this strategy assume that life is a series of tradeoffs, the art of negotiating to some happy middle ground. But this approach favours a party with disproportionate power and it also means that one or both parties must give up something and that something may in fact be very important. This can lead to a desire to “even the score” or to adopt a win-lose position next time.

5. *Carefronting*

This strategy, often rationalized by an appeal to Matthew 18:15-17, involves directly approaching the other person in a caring way, seeking a win-win solution. But this presupposes:

- That both parties are able to relate face to face with honesty.
- That both parties will commit to preserving the relationship, while openly expressing the values/goals each wishes to protect or achieve.
- That a creative solution can be found that enables both to “win”, without either giving up anything of value, thereby preserving the relationship.
- That emotions will be kept under control.
- That both will be able to separate the person from the issue.
- That neither will be satisfied with a solution till the other is also completely happy with it.

Elmer questions whether Matthew 18:15-17 is the only way to handle conflict and how cultural variables influence mode of approach.

Chapter 4. Conflict and Cultural Values

Elmer contends that the carefronting approach works best in a culture that values a direct, confrontational, one-on-one approach, especially Western cultures. In most cultures directness is considered rude and immature. Western grammar, favouring the active voice, contrasts with a grammatical stress on passive and stative voices in most other cultures. But even in indirect cultures there are times when directness is acceptable, e.g. every effort to solve a problem through indirect means has already been tried or a person understands indirect messages but refuses to respond appropriately or if one is a member of the ‘in-group’.

“Directness in language implies that one can speak to a *problem* without offending the *person*” (49). While Western culture ostensibly separates the person from the problem, in reality the distinction is not precise. But in cultures which value harmony, solidarity and group cohesion there is no such distinction.

Westerners are prone to misinterpret an indirect method of handling conflict as involving:

- Lack of courage to confront the person.
- Unwillingness to deal with the issue.
- Lack of commitment to solve the problem.
- Refusal to take responsibility for one’s actions.

Elmer recounts the example of Eunice, a black South African maid who was employed to help his wife. After hearing a crash in the kitchen, Elmer, careful to avoid expressing anger, asked, "Eunice, did you break a dish?" She replied, "The dish fell and died." At the time Elmer couldn't understand why she couldn't give a straight answer; why she was unwilling, as an adult, to accept responsibility for her actions.

Elmer explains the importance of "saving face", "not causing another to feel shame" and "maintaining honour" in many cultures, with shaming before one's family, friends or esteemed colleagues to be especially avoided at all costs. Shame, loss of face and dishonour occur (1) when one does not live up to certain goals (e.g. the Japanese student denied entry into the preferred university); (2) by the actions of a family member (e.g. becoming a Christian in a Muslim society); (3) by it being suggested one is responsible for a problem or difficulty that exists; (4) by being unable to fulfill another person's expectations (e.g. Eunice feeling she had failed to meet Elmer's supposed expectations of being able to handle dishes without breaking them); (5) by becoming out of solidarity with the group; (6) by being identified with a minority out of harmony with the majority (e.g. in many Two-Thirds World countries people will vote with the majority to avoid loss of face).

In the Two-Thirds World the majority-rule procedure is seen as schismatic and disruptive of harmony. Westerners find it difficult to understand why people in the Two-Thirds World may seem to be unanimous in their vote, yet be evidently uncommitted to the decision and unwilling to get involved in the implementation process.

Westerners in the Two-Thirds World need wisdom when faced with two rival groups (villages, tribes, barrios, clans or districts) in proximity to each other. Understanding of the relationship between the two groups is vital. If it is possible to work with both groups lay the foundation by meeting with leadership from both groups at the same time. Keep time and budget commitments equally divided between the groups, keeping records if required. Maintain regular joint meetings with the leadership.

Christianity threatens vested interests - the vocation and status of religious leaders in their community, the worldview people have held for centuries. Conflict often focuses exactly at the point of the vested influence. In managing such situations, the outsider needs to seek to protect people's dignity.

Elmer cites the example of how missionary Bruce Olson handled conflict with the traditional tribal healer when seeking to bring healing to Motilone tribespeople afflicted with pinkeye. At first the healer rejected Olson's proffered Terramycin as alien. Olson, after contracting pinkeye, asked her to heal him. After the failure of her attempts, he persuaded her to use Terramycin along with her normal procedures. She went on to be encouraged and perceived agent of healing not only for Olson but the entire tribe. This led to her being the channel through which disinfectants and other health measures were successfully introduced to these tribal people, with even health centres established, administered and staffed by Motilones.

Elmer elicits the following principles for dealing with conflict:

1. Whenever possible, choose friendship over confrontation.

2. Use local ceremony, technology and personnel in the introduction of change as often as possible.
3. Introduce change in such a way that it does not violate the patterns and roles of people with vested interest and in a way that does not exalt yourself.
4. Build upon what is known and practiced (for example, vaccination was introduced as another form of traditional bloodletting).
5. Ensure that sustaining the change does not depend upon the presence of the outsider.
6. Keep central the role of the Holy Spirit, for "without Him there would have been no real or lasting development" (Olson).

Part 2. Cultural Diversity and Conflict Resolution

Chapter 5. Mediation and the Mediator

The use of a mediator is a common indirect strategy for handling conflict in the Two-Thirds World. Elmer illustrates how an American lady got a local mosque to lower the volume of its loudspeakers by talking to her guard, who talked to other guards, with the problem eventually becoming known to those inside the mosque. Also an American father in the Philippines was able to stop harassment of his children by avoiding potentially shame-causing face-to-face communication with other parents and instead relating his problem to the local butcher.

Elmer observes that even through a mediator it is easy for Westerners to make direct accusations. However, in general blame should not be placed on another, not even through a mediator.

Confusion and frustration arise when locals from the Two-Thirds World call upon Westerners to mediate for them, though often the Westerners concerned are not aware that this is being asked. Westerners, expecting and perhaps even advising direct communication with the other person involved in the conflict, lose the confidence of locals, disappointed that Westerners, despite having power, are not willing to use it to solve problems.

There are some situations in which mediators are actually used to cause conflict, e.g. witch doctors, priests, sorcerers and other kinds of mediums who may cast spells, perform incantations, practice exorcisms and communicate with the dead.

An effective mediator is someone who understands one's own perspective and holds considerable influence with the other party, being deemed not to be too partial by the other party. The mediator is not simply seeking to reconcile, interpret and negotiate but, much more positively, to integrate the two parties, so that both will share a strong consciousness of belonging to the same group, enabling personal identity to be experienced in community.

Elmer notes that God's way of dealing with conflict ultimately involves using a mediator, Jesus.

Chapter 6. The One-Down Position and Vulnerability

This is a position to adopt in a conflict situation when use of a mediator is not possible or appropriate. It involves putting oneself in debt, obligation or obvious deference to

the other party. In this case one may even call on the very one endangering one's own honour to save one from the shame that will otherwise eventuate.

Elmer gives the example of Don who found himself faced with a much more expensive restaurant bill than had been orally agreed on with the manager when he took colleagues there for a meal. Valuing his relationship with the manager, Don was eager to avoid direct confrontation and to cause the manager shame and loss of face. He was also determined not to simply cave in and be adjudged weak and easy to manipulate. He asked to see the manager, expressed his appreciation for the food and service and confessed his embarrassment because the bill had turned out to be much more expensive than he had thought; that he was unable to pay the extra amount himself and it would be very humiliating to ask his friends to contribute. The manager now did not want to cause Don shame and ended up giving a new total, only a few dollars more than the orally agreed-upon amount (otherwise the manager would have lost face by exposing the fact he had intentionally violated the agreement), which Don was happy to pay, also realizing the manager was unlikely to try this again.

Elmer discusses the problem of being pressured to pay a bribe in some situations in the Two-Thirds World and gives advice on how to deal with this: courteous deference; expressing one's sense of shame and apologizing for any deficiency in meeting requirements, no matter how trivial and unimportant it may seem; wait around (this may cause the authorities concerned shame); be graciously persistent. Further, after one has succeeded to negotiate this problem without paying a bribe, return, if possible, within 48 hours with a gift for the official to express appreciation.

Western Christians find it difficult to know what to do when placed in a situation where they must choose whether to spend time with clustered high-status people or clustered low-status people. Another problem encountered in the Two-Thirds World is that it is not nearly so serious to shame someone in the "out-group" as it is to shame someone in the "in-group." Also gift-giving can be used to create dehumanizing indebtedness. Sometimes, Westerners themselves by their generosity place people in a one-down position in which they feel so indebted as to be robbed of their dignity, so that anger, bitterness and hostility may even result. Elmer advises Westerners to channel generosity anonymously through an appropriate third party.

Chapter 7. Storytelling and Proverbs

Storytelling - the instructional, corrective and nuanced use of words via parables, legends, fables, proverbs, forms of role-play, allegory and stories - is yet another indirect means for handling conflict in the Two-Thirds World. Elmer provides two African illustrations of using this strategy.

Chapter 8. Inaction, Misdirection, Silence and Indefinite Persons

Elmer refers to a non-Western church in which members deliberately withheld a significant amount of financial support by way of seeking to indirectly communicate to the pastor that he should be looking for another ministry. He also gives the example of a Two-Thirds World community where the post office became unhelpful by way of indirectly communicating to a Western missionary that he needed to control his dog properly and stop it from killing chickens. Inaction was also used by an anti-South African petrol station attendant who mistakenly thought a Western missionary must be South African because of his car's South African number plates. Misdirection (placing

the blame elsewhere, "scapegoating") is used by a Chinese merchant who, not wanting to lose face, casts the blame elsewhere for failure to deliver a purchased lamp which he discovers is actually out of stock.

Part 3. Implications for the Gospel Message

Chapter 9. Communicating the Gospel Across Cultures

As Elmer reflects upon the failure of early attempts to present the gospel to Hindus, Muslims and animists he identifies as missing an understanding of shame and how it should influence strategies for witness.

The following points emerge from Elmer's consideration of this matter:

1. Focusing on the individual in group-oriented societies is dangerous, especially if such focus exposes shame, failure or shortcoming.
2. In many cultures, where there is no clear concept of sin and forgiveness, gospel presentation needs to move from the sense of shame (cf. Rom 9:30-33; 10:9-11).
3. God has taken responsibility for removing our shame.
4. Jesus bore our shame on the cross (cf. Heb 2:11; 6:4-6; 12:2).
5. Christians from individualistic cultures need to understand "the trauma of the terrible stigma attached to one who casts shame on family and friends by departing from the traditions" (143) and to provide a new nurturing family.

Chapter 10. Power and Winning: the Twin Diseases

Elmer begins by relating the tragic story of pious, but strict Christian parents whose two compliant daughters both abandoned home and completely rebelled after graduation. He lists Carl Rogers' five response styles in person-to-person communication, from most frequent to least frequent:

1. Evaluative: "some indication of right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral, wise or stupid, approval or disapproval, acceptance or rejection" (151), e.g. "That music doesn't sound very Christian."
2. Interpretative: seeking to ascertain the correct meaning of the other person's statement or behaviour, without appearing evaluative, e.g. "I have been listening to your music; can you tell me the words and the message it is communicating." To avoid any suggestion of an evaluative response voice and body language must not be negative. This response is less likely to invoke a defensive reaction and to keep communication channels open.
3. Supportive: communicates acceptance, e.g. "You seem to really enjoy that music."
4. Probing: exploring an issue through questions and leading statement. Non-threatening probing responses include:
 1. What were your feelings as you were listening to that music?
 2. What thoughts or reasons prompted you to buy that cassette?
 3. Tell me more about the music you are listening to. It seems important to you.

In a conflict situation this response can be helpful, e.g.

- How do you think the other person felt when you said [did] that?
 - Can you think of any good reason the other person did [said] that?
 - If you were in the other person's shoes, what would you have done differently and why?
5. Understanding: assuming good listening skills, this response involves communicating to the other person that his/her perspective is understood and the

person accepted, e.g. "Let me tell you what I think I heard you say and tell me if I am hearing you accurately." A desire to understand is signaled by such responses as:

- You must have felt very sad [happy, surprised, disappointed, frustrated].
- Then what happened?
- So you think that...
- It seems to me that...

Elmer states that none of the response styles is either good or bad and that there are two critical considerations:

1. How frequently a given style is used. Rogers discovered if a person uses one type of response 40% others perceive he/she is making that response all the time, even when he/she isn't.
2. The appropriateness of the style for the occasion.

Elmer concludes that if adopt a win-lose approach 40% of the time then others will perceive me as *always* trying to win, to be right, to be superior, to be ahead.

Elmer explains how difficult it is for missionaries, for all their talk of empowering others, to give up the power they have due to their education and knowledge and ability to raise money. Also, being generous in a cross-cultural context carries complications because giving is power: "It is power to control valuable resources. It is power to select who is to receive and who will not receive. Therefore, it is power over people" (156).

So reciprocity is needed, but "it is a Western limitation to think of reciprocity in... restrictive, materialistic categories" (157). However, reciprocity can be effected in intangibles, e.g. fulfilling the desire for more open, honest, even intimate relationships. So nationals may feel excluded from the real-life concerns and lives of the missionaries who, for example, may share their personal lives only in missionary prayer meetings, "carefully concealing them from their host-country brothers and sisters", e.g. one missionary's comment: "I only let them look at my life, as it were, through a keyhole. They saw only a small part of me, and only what I wanted them to see" (157). Yet without reciprocity no friendship exists, only a lopsided donor-receiver connection.

Elmer observes that one "mistaken assumption that leads to cross-cultural conflict is the notion that ownership of resources automatically entitles a person or group to have sole power of managing those resources" (158). While preaching that God owns all things, Western Christians tend to operate as though they are actually co-owners with God, insisting on confining stewardship of those resources to themselves.

Elmer observes how indignant missionaries can become when 'despite all they have done' the recipients of their beneficence turn on them. He compares this situation with that experienced by the pious parents described at the beginning of the chapter, who had displayed profound commitment to their daughters and had made considerable sacrifices for them, only to later experience tragic rebellion.

Monological thinking must give way to dialogical thinking.

Chapter 11. Communication Principles for Conflict Resolution: A Case Study from Joshua

In dealing with the conflict situation raised in Joshua 22. He elicits the following principles:

1. Declare allegiance to God. Effect: Both parties can share a common ground.
2. Be ready to be proved wrong. Effect: Emotions are defused and brought under control.
3. Send "I" messages rather than "you" messages. Effect: defensiveness is disarmed, and open communication becomes much easier. The elders' repeatedly used "you" or "yourselves", raising the emotional pitch, whereas the two and one-half tribes used the plural of "I".
4. Explain your reasoning. Effect: Motives and intentions are clarified. Elmer observes that in conflict between Christians malice and ill will only enters after a series of miscommunications and misunderstandings, with most conflicts not arising from malicious intent or any desire to suddenly plunge into sin.
5. Speak to the issue, not to the person. Effect: Genuine understanding of the situation can be reached.
6. Pursue understanding before agreement. Effect: It becomes easier to work out a long-term resolution.
7. Pursue a win-win resolution. Effect: Reconciliation is achieved.
8. Make unity a major concern. Effect: God's glory is revealed.

Chapter 12. Principles for Managing Conflict

Preliminary considerations when there is engagement with people from another culture or ethnic group:

1. The majority of people in the world value relationships above most other values.
2. Most people do not separate the person from the person's words or acts, e.g. avoid "Don't take this personally, but...".
3. Begin by observing, asking nonjudgmental questions, learning and seeking understanding. Avoid thinking of cultural differences as either good or bad.
4. "[When] with people different from ourselves, we need to be particularly careful about making evaluative statements, blame statements, 'who-is-responsible' statements or comments that single out one person or group as the cause of a problem" (179).
5. In ambiguous or conflictual situations set aside direct, confrontational strategies in favour of indirect ones.
6. In getting to know a new culture build at least one good friendship with a person who can serve as cultural interpreter and cultural bridge-builder.

Ten general rules for dealing with conflict:

1. Ask whether this is worthy of attention or should be let go.
2. Make your approach one of concern for the person and for preservation of the relationship.
3. Seek understanding through inquiry before forming judgments and making accusations (blaming).
4. Separate facts from rumour, partial information, feelings and interpretation.
5. Consider how much stress the relationship can bear; this will help you tell how much time and sensitivity will be required.
6. Put yourself in the other person's place and try to appreciate his or her perspective on the matter.

7. Address behaviours rather than motivation.
8. When you detect tense emotions or defensiveness, back up and give assurances of friendship and your desire to understand.
9. Frequently acknowledge and summarise what the other person has said to assure accuracy of understanding for both parties.
10. Believe a win-win resolution is possible if both parties can remain calm, understand each other's interests and negotiate with integrity and fairness.

Principles for cross-cultural conflict resolution, especially when dealing with people in or from the Two-Thirds World:

1. The degree to which shame, face and honour are core cultural values will determine how important it is to choose the indirect method.
2. If the other person has had extensive exposure to Western culture, sensitive directness may be acceptable, understood and not offensive.
3. All forms of confrontation should occur in private, if possible, so as to minimize any loss of face.
4. Familiarise yourself with the stories, parables, fables, legends and heroes of a culture in order to appropriately interpret their use in conflict situations.
5. Understand the various indirect methods used in the Two-Thirds World and be alert to which ones are used and under what circumstances.
6. Build a close relationship with a host-country person who will be able to help you interpret confusing situations.
7. Ask God for help in understanding and applying unfamiliar conflict resolution strategies.
8. Scripture is the final judge of all cultural forms; prayer and discussion may be required before some cultural expressions are embraced.