Confronting Conflict

People = Problems

To dwell above with folks we love,
O yes, that will be glory.
To live below with folks we know –
Well, that's another story!

Why?

- different backgrounds,
- different temperaments,
- different feelings,
- different sets of values,
- different ways of looking at things,
- different levels of spiritual maturity,
- different ways of interpreting Scripture,
- different ways of thinking.

When we relate to people there are bound to be problems. Such was true even in those pristine days of the NT church. Have you ever heard people express a longing that their church could just be like the NT church? Well it wasn't so perfect even then. Why? Because there were people in that church, too.

1. Policies of the Church

Acts 6:1-7 - Disagreement on perceived discrimination between the Hellenistic Jewish widows and the Hebraistic Jewish widows in the distribution of food.

2. Perceptions of Doctrine

Acts 15:1-5ff - Disagreement on the question of circumcision. "This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them." (v. 2)

3. Personal preferences

Acts 15:36-39 - Paul and Barnabas disagree over whether to take John Mark with them again. "They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company."

4. Principles of conviction

Gal. 2:11-14 - Paul opposed Peter to his face over what he perceived as hypocrisy over legalism. I wonder what Peter would have had to say for himself.

There is a difference between *problems* and **conflict**.

Problems are differences of opinions about:
the ways,
the means,
or the ends
of dealing with real-life issues.

- A "ways" problem is a difference of opinion on what method should be used to accomplish a certain goal.

- A "means" problem is a difference of opinion of how much time, money, or effort is to be used to reach the goal.

- **An "ends" problem is a difference of opinion of what the goal is.**

Ross Stagner says that conflict "is a situation in which two or more human beings desire goals which they perceive as being attainable by one or the other, but not by both" [The Dimensions of Human Conflict, p. 136].

Problems are differences of opinions,
different points of view,
different perceptions about what to do,
different understandings of the situation,
different attitudes toward the leadership,
different priorities about alternatives, or
different outlooks on life.
These differences should be called problems, not conflicts. Problems are all based on the fact that no two persons are alike.

Problems are normal. They are to be expected. They are natural. Problems are not bad or evil, although we often think they are.

With these definitions in mind, think again about the four illustrations of problems in the apostolic church we noted earlier. What was the problem in each: ways, means, or ends?

Ways, Means, or Ends?

1. Acts 6 - distribution of food to Hellenistic widows.

Doesn't seem to be an ends problem, because no one wanted these widows neglected. It was either a ways problem [what method of distribution would assure equity] or a means problem [how much should be apportioned to each group].

Ways, Means, or Ends?

2. Acts 15:1-5 - issue of circumcision.

Not an ends problem, because they all desired people to be saved. Seems to be more of a ways problem [what method or procedure is necessary to accomplish salvation].

Ways, Means, or Ends?

3. Acts 15:36-39 - issue of John Mark.

Again, not an ends problem, since they both were desirous of the same goals. Seems to be a case of ways, where the disagreement is over whether using John Mark is the best way to help them accomplish their common goal.

Ways, Means, or Ends?

4. Gal. 2:11-14 - Peter's apparent hypocrisy over associating with Gentiles.

I would call this an ends problem, since Paul's goal was to demonstrate the oneness of Jew and Gentile before God, and Peter's goal was not to face antagonism from the party of the circumcision.

Problems are concerned with ideas (ways, means or ends of doing something); conflicts are concerned with feelings. The two are not the same. Conflicts are not big problems; they are completely different. People go into conflict over problems.

Conflicts are desperate feelings of threats to one's self-esteem that can lead to drastic acts of self-defense. (Win-Win Relationships by H. Newton Malony)

When do problems become conflicts?

Malony suggests that "conflicts occur when persons become so upset that they cease being reasonable and react impulsively, defensively, and drastically."

The key thing to keep in mind is that conflict is a state of mind that results from some perceived threat to our self-esteem.

Whenever we face problems we experience stress. In order to solve the problems we have to negotiate, compromise, adapt, change, convince, etc. We can't deny that the process is stressful.

But when we move from stress to distress, we have crossed the line into conflict. In distress, we feel that "we are in great danger of being annihilated or humiliated." (p. 13) Our self-worth is at stake. The issue is no longer how to solve the problem but the devastation I will feel if I come out on the losing side of this disagreement.

Check on feelings

1. We feel we must win an argument no matter who gets hurt.
2. We feel a threat to our leadership or intelligence.
3. We feel we could not possibly be in error.
4. We feel angry with the other person.

5. We feel that we would like to withdraw from and avoid the other person.

6. We feel we are being forced to surrender to viewpoints with which we do not agree.

7. We feel we are being belittled or ignored.

8. We feel the other person is being totally unreasonable.

Solution

II Tim. 2:24-25 - But the servant of the Lord must not fight (machomai, from the same root as "sword," machaira) [he must not get out his sword, so to speak], but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting [instructing, disciplining, training] those who are in opposition...." We can't do this when we are in conflict.

Be kind to all

Treat the other person with respect.

Be considerate.

Be willing to listen.

Be gracious with your words.

Monitor your feelings.

Speak and act in love (other person centeredness)

Able to teach

Research and learn all you can about the issues.

Broaden your knowledge base.

Analyze the ways, means, and ends involved in the problem.

Encourage the other person to do the same.

Patient when wronged

Be prepared not to get your own way.

Don’t take criticism of your idea as criticism of you as a person.

Try to understand how the other person feels.

Surrender the outcome to the Lord.

With gentleness correcting [instructing, disciplining, training] those who are in opposition…."

Keep your cool. Keep your voice down.

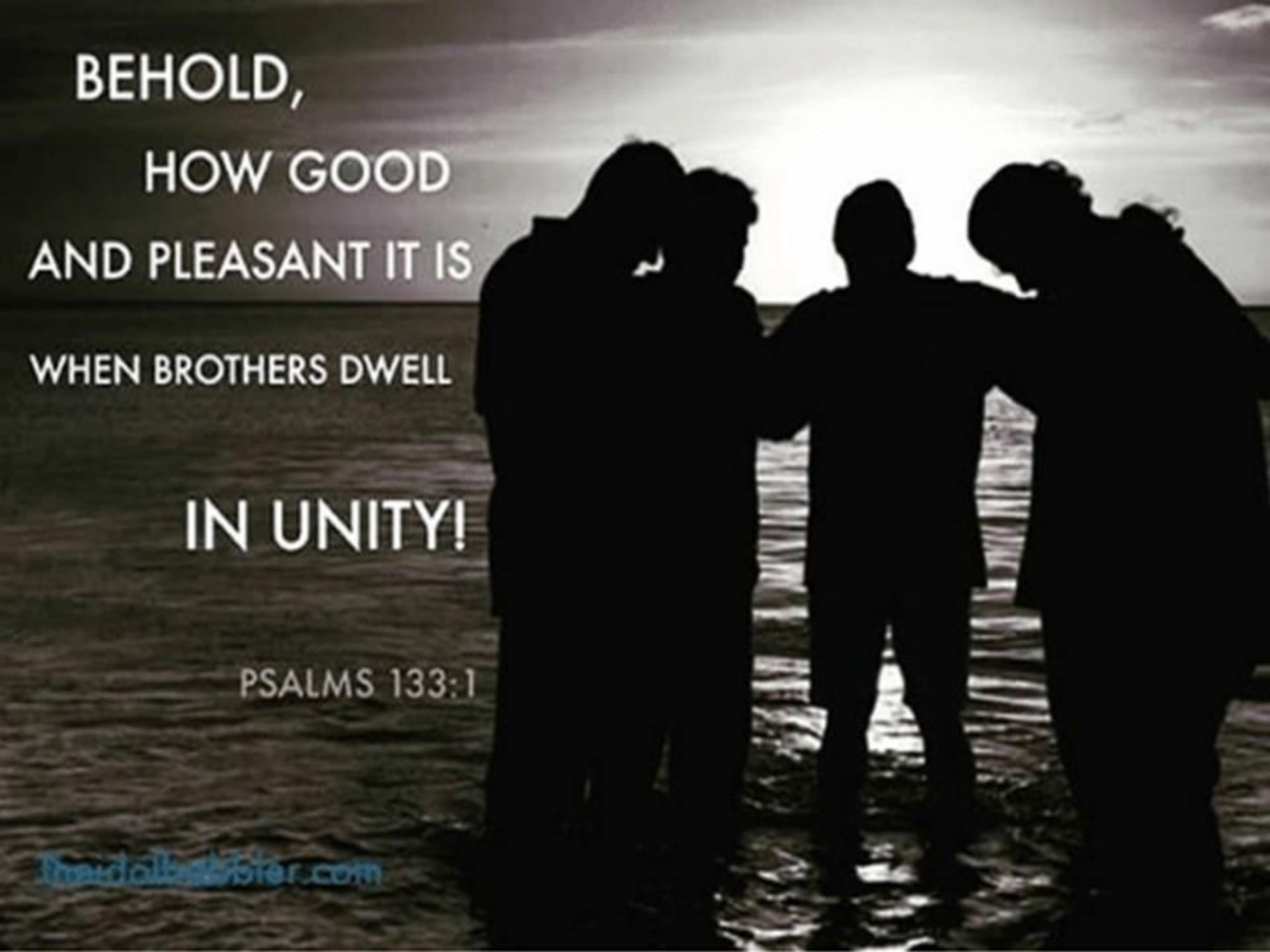
Make suggestions, not ultimatums.

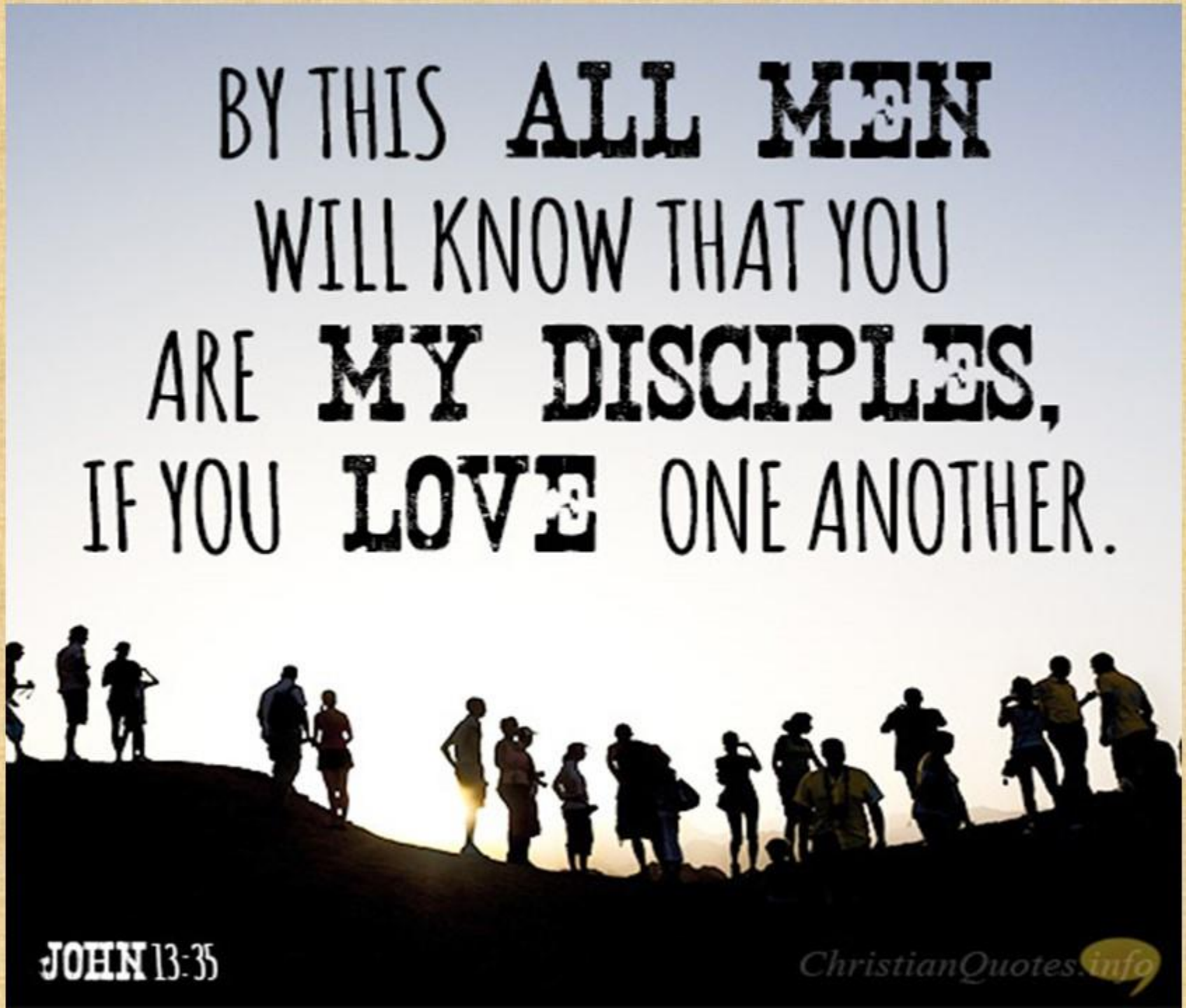
Explore options with the other person.

Consider possible compromises

(win/win ideas).

Pray together for the Lord's solutions.


BEHOLD,
HOW GOOD
AND PLEASANT IT IS
WHEN BROTHERS DWELL
IN UNITY!
PSALMS 133:1


BY THIS ALL MEN
WILL KNOW THAT YOU
ARE MY DISCIPLES,
IF YOU LOVE ONE ANOTHER.
JOHN 13:35
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