



Difficult conversations

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Pebble aims to cultivate the gospel vision, priorities, culture, structures and strategies that God's Word requires for the salvation of many and the glory of God.

In this e-book, FIEC church leadership consultant and senior Pebble consultant, Ray Evans, lays out the challenges and a way forward for having difficult, inevitable, necessary conversations in gospel ministry.

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Contents

Why difficult conversations are getting more difficult	4
Difficult, Inevitable and Necessary.....	8
How to have Difficult Conversations.....	13

Why difficult conversations are getting more difficult

*Challenging someone about their beliefs, choices, or actions
feels more and more problematic. What has caused this shift?*

A number of high-profile failures in the lives of evangelical church leaders have recently come to light. A common thread running through these is the note of an overly controlling personality using a power dynamic imbalance to ensure that their will prevailed over those who they should have been serving.

The question has regularly been raised: “Is the evangelical church endemically riddled with problems of overly authoritative abuses of power?”

Meanwhile - ‘out there in the real world’ - a major cultural shift has been taking place. It seems that everywhere and everyone is now aware of the dangers of micro-aggressions and oppressing others through our words and bearing, of the presence of conscious, or more likely, unconscious power plays, of power dynamics where gender, ethnicity, class structures, and so forth inevitably lead to imbalances that need deconstructing and changing.

In this climate, to have what we may call a difficult conversation - where someone is challenged about their beliefs, choices, or actions - feels as if it is going to be majorly problematic.

Power and leadership

Furthermore, the church is confused about power. We rightly say that we are to be 'servant leaders' - as Patrick Lencioni astutely observes,¹ there should be no other kind of leaders in any context, let alone the church.

But what does leadership look like, even in a servant leader? How does power work in practice? What kind of authority does any leader have?

The Church has debated authority structures for millennia - specifically the Protestant church for the past 500 years. Are we any clearer than our forefathers?

Added to this is the new development of the (at times very heated) debate between 'egalitarian' and 'complementarian' Christians about the role of men and women in church leadership. One detects that amongst 'complementarian' church leaderships, there is still a great deal of difference about how the power and input of both genders feeds into church leadership.

My observation is that church leaders, in light of all of this, are generally very nervous about their role and in particular the new challenges associated with having difficult conversations. They are so sensitive to the charge of 'abuse of power' that many skip having them altogether.

Difficult conversations now seem immeasurably more difficult.

Confused leaders

Any leader can have confused views on authority and power. Not only do we have the right/wrong, wise/unwise, and like/dislike axes to be clear on, we now must think ever more carefully about 'formal/informal/illegitimately informal' and so on.

Marcus Honeysett's new book² has served to help the church - and specifically its leaders - to become more self-aware and transparent about the way that they wield the authority and power given to them by the Lord and delegated to them by their own church. It is so very helpful.

But it can lead to 'overload' in thinking things through, and into introspection concerning proper/improper motivation which can lead on to paralysis. This anxiety can lead to a power

¹ [Patrick Lencioni: What's Your Motive?](#), Global Leadership Network (globalleadership.org).

² Marcus Honeysett, [Powerful Leaders](#) (IVP, 2022).

vacuum and someone - not necessarily recognised and appointed by the church body - will step into it.

They may even sound like a victim as they wield significant power to get their own way. They only need to be regularly negative to bring the whole of church decision-making to a least common denominator, or even to a complete halt. Strong personalities may still govern the church but by negative default.

I have certainly sensed that many younger leaders are feeling worried. They hear, on a regular basis, of colleagues and peers being charged with 'abuse of power', and they don't want to get embroiled in that too. Who wants to be known as a modern-day Diotrephes (3 John:9-10)?

So, they avoid the difficult conversations.

Passive leaders

They are also coming from a cultural context where young men are especially struggling to find a clear role in the modern world. Decades of 'conditioning' - some of it really helpful, some of it not - have led to a widespread sense of a loss of identity amongst young men/potential church leaders of the future.

It is remarkable to think that W.Cdr. Guy Gibson VC was only 24 when he led the Dambusters raid and only 26 when he was killed in action. John Petrie-Andrews did over 60 missions as a Lancaster pilot. He was 18.

As 'the Great Generation' led to the 'Builders', then the 'Boomers', Gen X, the Millennials, and Gen Z, there has been an erosion of confidence in the West that men know how to behave properly towards women, and to lead in home and church.

I now meet many a wonderful young couple where the woman is confident, visionary, and properly assertive, whereas the man is in the backseat, takes his cue from her, and needs lots of reassurance. She speaks well, and he is content to watch and admire her.

There is so much to admire about that scenario. But there is a part of me that worries that this may not lead to a generation of confident male elders who take on the preaching mantle from the present generation of gifted preachers and will very much struggle with the inevitable challenges of church life.

I have often said to would-be church leaders: “You know the job is more about conflict resolution than almost anything else. The preaching is the nice bit of the job!”

Those conflicts need resolving lest the church slips into a caricature of what it should be and brings dishonour to God, where his reputation is trashed by his people. Great portions of the pastoral epistles are written to young leaders who must bring God’s word so to bear that the church behaves as it should (see for example the sustained arguments in 1 Timothy 3:14 and following, or Titus 3:1-2 and following).

One of my fellow elders, bless him, would often say to me that I needed to go and have a difficult conversation. I used to retort “Why me?” His consistent reply: “Because you are a leader and it’s what has to be done.”

They never got less difficult, but I did get used to the fact that it was part of my role to have them and have them as well as they could be had.

Difficult, Inevitable and Necessary

*Church ministry is full of difficult conversations.
Understanding that these conversations need to be had,
and how people may respond, is key to a good resolution.*

Henry Cloud, in his book *Necessary Endings*,³ points out that difficult conversations - where someone is challenged about their beliefs, choices, or actions - are inevitable because so are endings in this life. As we age, sooner or later we have to face up to the changes that will bring.

Within a family, that may mean hard conversations about what support is needed, whether a move to a different setting is needed, and then the conversation we may have to have about end of life and going home to heaven.

In a work environment, the company will change. It may mean promotion for some but not for others, or even layoffs and redundancy. These are difficult conversations to have. Problems arise, and accusations may be made by insiders or external sources about all manner of things that need addressing.

Church isn't immune. All leaders are 'interim pastors' and even a happy 'succession' will mean all kinds of changes and conversations needing to be had. Alas, often things aren't that happy and 'leavings' can be some of the most problematic times, for members or leaders.

Some of these necessary endings can be conducted much better than they would otherwise be if we knew how to have difficult conversations. We need to grow in grace, in character, and in skill so that we have good difficult conversations.

³ Dr Henry Cloud, *Necessary Endings* (Harper Collins 2011).

Reactions to a challenge

Henry Cloud points out that though all of us sin, not all respond to a difficult conversation in the same way.⁴

It's best to know the typical responses to sin being uncovered or human will being challenged. As Sartre tartly remarked: "Hell is other people" (i.e. Hell is when someone else challenges my self-autonomy, cutting across my will).

Wise (Proverbs 9:8-9)

First, he describes the person who responds to feedback well.

No one finds it easy to hear feedback when something negative is highlighted or even something good could be made better. But there is a category of 'wise' where someone responds well to it and wants to engage.

They may say that it wasn't easy to hear that, but they also recognise it may not have been easy to say it either. They want to change and recognise that the Lord may be using you to help them become more like Christ. All well and good. And oh, that all difficult conversations were with wise people.

Foolish (Proverbs 9:8)

But there is another kind – he calls them 'foolish' - who though they listen, one senses that they are not listening to understand and change.

Cloud describes some of the tactics employed by a foolish person: they may *deny* the problem; they may *deflect* criticism onto something or someone else; they may *distract* into a different topic; they may (vehemently) *defend* by going on the attack (at you). There are several other tactics that can be employed, often several at once.

I have often asked audiences what is the next word that we speak after the word 'sorry'? It's always the word 'but'! Then follows either a series of excuses or a counterattack along the lines of 'but you....'. That is the fool at work in all of us.

⁴ Dr Henry Cloud and Dr John Townsend, *How to have that Difficult Conversation You've Been Avoiding* (Zondervan, 2005).

The fool does listen to something, however: consequences. Once you have identified that the person is responding in this way, the difficult conversation may have to turn to consequences if change is not seen. Consequences such as 'We want a timesheet filled in'; 'We will have to initiate a disciplinary procedure'; 'We will have to terminate your employment'; 'You/we will have to leave' kinds of consequences.

Few of us like being that straight. If you are a (reasonably) wise person, it is usual to think that others are reasonable too. To realise that some people, Christians amongst them, just don't tick like that is a salutary awakening.

If you are not in leadership, you will be able to avoid such people. But leaders will have to confront lest the foolish person brings havoc in their wake. And to confront will mean having to bring consequences to the fore.

Not only is that hard, but especially so today when it feels like a particularly direct power play and the person can (so easily) express their victimhood. It goes against the grain of a normally 'nice' leader to be like this, so it might just not happen.

But Christ didn't place you into leadership to just be nice. You are appointed to provide and protect the flock, and that from the foolish person as well as the downright evil.

'Evil' (Titus 3:10,11)

The third category of reaction he describes is the one where there is a definite sense of wrong/evil/destruction. He, somewhat colourfully, says these are the people you confront with "guns, lawyers and money"! Whatever you might make of that phrase, he is trying to point out that such evil can't be dilly-dallied with.

There are roaring lions, angels of light, and harm doers, such as Alexander the metalworker (2 Timothy 4:14-15) whom Satan uses to stop or ruin the Lord's work. Some such wear the uniform of 'Christian' but they may be falsely masquerading (1 Timothy 6:3-6). Sometimes they may be real believers but are so gripped by sin as to backslide and be the vehicle of wrong, not right (Matthew 16:25).

Perhaps Paul had all this in mind when he counselled Titus to "warn a divisive person once, then twice", but once they had 'shown their spots' he said, "having nothing to do with them. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned." (Titus 3:10-11)

Such conversations are difficult, but they have to be had.

Called to have difficult conversations

The final reason we will explore for why such conversations must be had is that that is what our calling entails.

Elders are like ‘dads’ to the family of God. Not ‘Father’, but nevertheless caring, loving, guiding, instructing, providing, and so forth like a dad would. You can see this in the lives of leaders in action in the Bible. Paul describes himself using this kind of mum/dad language as he reassures the young church at Thessalonica that he really loves and cares for them (see 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12).

Here are just three examples of that in practice.

Notice how direct the conversations were. They are in different cultural settings from each other, and from us, but they underscore that the most humble, loving leaders needed to have difficult conversations.

- **Moses** (Exodus 16:1-8; 17:1-4; 18:13-27; Exodus 32; Numbers 12, 14, 16; Deuteronomy 31-34). It’s amazing how Moses survived the enormous stress he was under for decade after decade. Time after time he had to lovingly confront even his own nearest and dearest, and even when people let him, and especially the Lord, down so much.
- **Paul** (Acts 20:17-38). This is an astonishing conversation all round. Not only does Paul set a really high bar for what authentic ministry looks like (and feels like – see v19), but he doesn’t beat around the bush as he directly challenges these leaders (Acts 20:28-31). That must have been quite something. Yet what is amazing is the response of Acts 20:36-38 – more tears. But they weren’t tears of relief that he was, at last, leaving them after such a scorching, but because they loved him dearly and knew his difficult words were for their utmost good and came from a heart of sincere love and humility.
- **Titus** (Titus 1:10-16). As Paul explains to Titus why elders must be appointed (Titus 1:5), it becomes clear quite quickly that their role isn’t just to give themselves to ‘the positive’ but they have to deal with ‘the negative’ and that is so that damage might be limited and true health return to the families of God on Crete (Titus 1:10-15). The tone is urgent, serious, and demanding. The situation demands action and conviction; it isn’t a ‘consider it in your own time’ pleasantries.

I for one would love some help here. Many good things have been written about power, and its abuse. I hope to have learnt from them. But few have addressed the problems associated with these kinds of difficulties.

One leader in a little booklet most helpfully discussed what you do with 'Mr and Mrs Dragon'. But many others don't face up to the reality that when Christians sin, dealing with that sin will feel quite a difficult for anyone sensitive to the charge of 'power abuse'. And some shrill voices will cry that at the least provocation.

How to have Difficult Conversations

*When a difficult conversation is needed,
how can we go about them to reach a resolution,
whilst avoiding an abuse of power?*

In the first two chapters, I've explained why difficult conversations - where someone is challenged about their beliefs, choices, or actions - seem to be getting more difficult and why they can't be avoided. So, when such a conversation is needed, how can we go about them?

Let's start with a most helpful emphasis in Marcus Honeysett's book.⁵ He argues that good, servant leadership will be transparent about the formal authority structure in the organisation they serve. They will follow the processes that the organisation or church has mutually agreed on without short-circuiting them with anything underhand or 'cloak and dagger'.

Here are three structures we use in our church. I put them out for an example, not as a blueprint. However, I think there is merit in the way they were constructed (before my time) to try to reflect the various checks, balances, and inputs from the various biblical passages on leadership and membership in the New Testament.

1. Members' meetings

Here's what our formal guidelines of church practice set out, so that everyone knows what the structure and process of decision-making is:

'The meetings also give the elders and deacons the opportunity to share their ideas and plans. Open discussion and personal communication with leaders on all aspects of church life are welcomed. In following the teaching of the Bible and through discussion of how it applies to us, the church together seeks to discern the 'mind of Christ' for the church.

⁵ Marcus Honeysett, [*Powerful Leaders*](#) (IVP, 2022).

At members' meetings sometimes formal decisions are made and ratified. Important issues that affect the life of the whole church...are brought to the whole church. Unanimous consent is sought on these issues.

The authority invested in elders is an authority which is to be consistent with the Bible's teaching, and so consent is obtained by a fair use of Biblical arguments. Church members have the right to dissent from the actions of the eldership if they show sufficient scriptural ground for doing so.'

For example, we once appointed a deacon who wasn't married. A small number of members felt that wasn't biblical as they were convinced that the requirements of 1 Timothy 3 required a person to be married with children. The elders listened to the viewpoint, and then responded with a reasonable argument from scripture that what the apostle was describing was a description of a typical person, not an exhaustive or exclusive list of what must be present.

The proof of that assertion was that Paul himself was single when he wrote, as far as we can tell (1 Corinthians 7). Though a married person with children can demonstrate important qualities required for office bearing, it is not impossible for a single person to do that. If such a person were later to marry and that then not exhibit the qualities required, then a review of that person's continuing in office may be required.

The folks weren't persuaded. So, their conscientious position was registered, but the rest of the whole church thought it right to continue. And we did that with mutual respect for one other's biblical positions, but without being paralysed either. Now in all of this there is an asymmetry of power between elders and members, and elders need to be especially careful and wise as they use this power. It is not an easy tension to keep, but it is true to what we regard as our biblical, nuanced constitution. The structure serves us well.

2. Disagreeing and parting well

Sometimes things don't work out quite as neatly. Here is an example from the Bible of a (very) difficult moment. Note it wasn't about 'right/wrong'; Paul didn't accuse Barnabas of sin. It's just that of the two ways forward, they couldn't come to agreement. So, there was a parting.

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in

Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord (Acts 15: 36-40).

The Reformers and Puritans knew that this might be a difficulty, as not everything is tidily stowed away or tied down in the New Testament. They said this:

‘There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word...’ (Westminster Confession of Faith)

The light of nature and Christian prudence may end up meaning different things to different people, and sometimes that can’t all be reconciled.

We have tried to encapsulate situations like this in our formal processes. This is how we phrase it:

‘We recognise that differences on issues may arise within the family of God. This may lead to a parting of ways, but this should be done in a spirit of ‘family love’.

If members find that serious differences arise between themselves and the beliefs and practices of the church and if, after consultation with the leadership, it proves difficult for them to continue in membership, they shall be encouraged to join another Bible-believing church.’

Our transparent structure allows for ‘ways-out’ without necessarily demeaning anyone’s point of view. It’s just an honest way forward, which also recognises that differences will arise between believers, but that each family of God can still function.

The structure has helped the leaders to have difficult conversations within proper formal boundaries which are spelt out.

3. Challenging sin in the church

The next clearly spelt out process is to deal with open sin in the life of the church. First, the procedure for dealing with office-bearer wrongdoing:

‘If there are concerns about the teaching or behaviour of any elder or deacon these should be presented in a Biblical manner to the person concerned; that is by being brought by two or three

witnesses. If the complaints are found to be substantiated, then disciplinary action should be taken, and the church's opinion sought as to the desirability of the person continuing in their role.'

Second is a process of dealing with sin in the life of members:

'We believe that membership of this church should be a joy coupled with a genuine sense of responsibility. If a member holds to a doctrine which is regarded as heretical or repeatedly and persistently lives in a way that brings dishonour to the name of Christ, it is the duty of the eldership to seek to restore this person to holiness and wholeness.

This process of restoration is always painful and difficult and sometimes appears to fail. The eldership will endeavour to help the erring member to see the magnitude of their sin and their need to turn away from it by the power of the gospel of Christ. If such measures lovingly and yet firmly applied do not result in meaningful change, it will be necessary to apply further measures of Biblical church discipline. Initially this will mean a member will be suspended from the privileges of membership and subsequently will be removed from membership if there is no change in the situation.

The elders promise to approach such matters prayerfully, humbly and with genuine concern to fully restore the errant and to protect the interests of the church family and God's glory.'

Having structures and processes doesn't solve the problem in and of itself, but it certainly helps to overcome the concern that decisions are being made arbitrarily, or simply to protect those already in power.

Let's now move on to actually having the conversation.

Prepare yourself

Of course, humility is the key, and a good dose of self-awareness and confession are crucial (Matthew 7:1-5). Praying for the other person, and especially that God would bless them, may help take away the myriad of false motives that can invade our hearts - justifying ourselves, winning the argument, extracting an apology, revenge, and so forth.

Henry Cloud⁶ suggests that you should clearly think through and write down the main things you want to say, and make sure you keep on track - no matter how much someone wants to get off that agenda. “Yes, I know the economy is doing badly, and bills are going up, but I want us to come back to the issue of ...” type of thing.

You can’t control the outcome of the conversation. Rarely have I been able to predict how a difficult conversation may go – that’s why they are difficult! But I can, before God, be responsible for my own preparation, reactions, and words. The outcome is with him.

Understand their responses

[I mentioned previously](#) some of the ‘tactics’ people use to avoid facing the issue you are trying to bring them to face up to (denial, deflection, defence, dismissal etc). They will question your motives, your attitudes, your words, your right to speak to them in all kinds of ways so as to avoid the issue.

Gently but firmly keep bringing them back to the point at stake (2 Timothy 2:24-26 – key verses in all of this). Be prepared for the various ways that people can be cleverly distracting. Even when you try your best, adults can make very poor decisions and live with negative consequences. It’s a tough thing to come to terms with but part of our respecting people as responsible individuals is letting that happen.

‘Boundary’ conversations

Cloud suggests that using the ‘boundary concept’ is useful. This concept is not to constantly counteract what the other person is saying but affirm your own perceptions, and especially feelings.

When you do ‘A’, I feel ‘B’.

So, for example, you help legitimise what you are stating by describing the effect the person is having on you when they act or speak in a certain way. You don’t have to question their motives, you just describe your own reactions. You don’t have to legitimise, justify, or rationalise all that you feel, you are just saying “this is what I feel when you...”

⁶ Dr Henry Cloud and Dr John Townsend, [How to have that Difficult Conversation You’ve Been Avoiding](#) (Zondervan, 2003).

Your response is authentic; it is how you feel due to their words or behaviour. And those feelings are not something you want to continue.

Saying what you want, accepting what might happen, clarifying consequences

He urges the person initiating the conversation to be crystal clear about what you want from the conversation and from the person.

“Don’t beat around the bush but keep to the point” is his advice.

He suggests that if the person doesn’t want to listen to the effect they are having, then you move on to spell out the consequences of them not responding in a way that is helpful to you.

In his book he looks at lots of scenarios – courting and married couples, parents, employment situations, and so forth. But the concepts he uses are equally useful in a church situation.

Helpful closures

In a church conflict setting, one useful practice may be the use of ‘the agreed statement’. Rather than both parties relaying their take on things to anyone who wants to listen, the idea is that both parties write down their ‘version’, then pass it to the other party. Both edit what they want to be said until they can come to a common denominator, and then promise to keep to that script to whoever they talk to.

The agreed statement may be as minimalist as “We agreed that parting company was the best way forward”, or it might be much more fulsome. But the point is that such a statement is not imposed by one party on the other. It is not a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) designed to protect the powerful against the other. Both parties edit down to what they feel they can both honestly say.

Then it becomes a matter of Christian integrity to stick to the agreed statement. It means that both parties can trust that an honourable way forward has been found and no one is ‘telling another story’ behind each other’s backs. That alternative only leads to just further misery, bitterness, and sadness.

Conclusion

I have only just been able to touch on this hugely significant matter. You will have many more insights than I and could articulate them better.

So, why don't you get in touch and share yours so that we can together establish a much better 'working practice' than the church hassles and hurts that many experience and are marred by, sometimes for the whole of their lives.



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