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Don't Be Hamstrung

Call it pigheaded politics. Long after the War of Independence, England and the United States almost fought each other a second time, because of a hog.

The problem began in 1846 when the nations signed a treaty setting the border between America and western Canada. Though the wording seemed clear, conflict soon erupted on San Juan Island in Puget Sound which separated the two countries. Due to differences in how the treaty was interpreted, both claimed the island.




While the politicians argued, Britain's Hudson's Bay Company used the island as a giant sheep ranch. But sixteen Americans also lived on San Juan, including Lyman Cutlar. He lived next door to Charles Griffin who managed Britain's sprawling sheep operation but there was a fragile peace. Then on June 15, 1859, a black boar owned by Griffin dug up some of Cutlar's potatoes. Furious, the American shot the pig dead. Griffin demanded \$100 in compensation. Cutlar scoffed. Both men complained to their governments.

When Sir James Douglas, the governor of British Columbia, ordered Cutlar to pay up, U.S. army general William S. Harney sent 461 soldiers to San Juan. The Americans built a fort, brought in some big guns and declared the island U.S. property.

In response, the British sent five warships with 2,000 soldiers to take the island by force. But their commander showed restraint. "I refuse to involve two great nations in a war over a squabble about a pig," said Rear Admiral Robert Baynes. He kept his men aboard ship and, though both sides had their guns ready, neither wanted to shoot first.

The stand off continued for two months. With the Civil War looming, the Americans were especially reluctant to take on the British, so



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President James Buchanan sent in his best negotiator who promptly fired General Harney. Though the two countries remained deadlocked over ownership of the island, they agreed to put down their guns and let an international referee decide the issue. Both kept a token army on opposite ends of the island and nothing much happened for ten years.

Ironically, Kaiser Wilhelm 1 of Germany was chosen to oversee the matter. He appointed three experts who finally rendered their verdict in 1872. San Juan Island went to the U.S. Lyman Cutlar had already left.

There are some powerful lessons here for individuals, families and even churches facing conflict. Somewhere along the line, tension always comes down to sovereignty, turf wars and control. We all stake our claim and generally expect people to stay in their place. Our rationale usually ends with, "I have to stand up for my rights!" or "It's the principle of the thing!"

Yes, boundaries are important. Most relationships need clear, consistent rules to set expectations, foster healthy responsibility and provide guidelines for growth. But when tension arises, we need to emphasize interdependence, not ownership of the situation. In each of our meaningful relationships, we need each other and that, above all else, should dictate our response. Anger and argument bring escalation. Communication and compromise open the door to resolution.

Don't be fooled. Every stand off leads to a standstill. The truth is, each person, family and church has something important to do but precious little will get accomplished as long as energy and emotion are syphoned off by petty arguments. No pig is worth the terrible price.

That's especially true in the church where feuds often arise over money, tradition and personal preferences. While we keep our guns trained on each other, the real enemy sneaks up on all of us. While we're distracted, the world dies.

Just as Jesus didn't cling to his rights but gave them up for the sake of others (Phil. 2:5-11), we need to meet conflict with the Christ-like characteristics that will usher in respect and understanding: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. "*Since we're living by the Spirit, let's follow his leading in every part of our lives,*" says Paul. "*Let us not become conceited or provoke each other...*" (Gal. 5:25, 26) Even with those we find difficult, it's better to be at one than at war.

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