

NAVIGATING CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT:
ACHIEVING OUTCOMES THAT GLORIFY GOD

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Abstract

Navigating Congregational Conflict: Achieving Outcomes That Glorify God

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The subject of congregational conflict is investigated and a prescription is offered for navigating congregational conflict in a way that not only resolves issues and reconciles relationships, but also edifies the individual Christians involved and strengthens the Body of Christ—all to the glory of God. A review of recent research and contemporary literature addressing congregational conflict is proffered. Selected accounts of Old and New Testament conflicts are presented; each account going behind the facts to isolate the primary issue or issues at the center of the conflict, the parties' positions on the issues, and the real interests that are driving the parties' respective positions. Accompanying each account are relevant "learning points" for today's congregations. An examination of biblical doctrines indispensable to navigating congregational conflict and a study of the Church's handling of ecclesiastical conflict in its early and modern periods complete the background for formulating a proposed approach to navigating congregational conflict aimed at significantly reducing the negative outcomes presently experienced by many U.S. congregations due the use of *ad hoc*, haphazard approaches to resolving conflict that generally fail to sufficiently take into consideration the ecclesiastical context within which congregational conflict takes place.

This thesis is dedicated to my Dad, whose unconditional love and support made it possible for me to pursue a master's degree; and to Barbara, my wife, love of my life and constant companion on the journey throughout this age and the age to come. There is simply nothing I can say or do to express my appreciation for the support she has shown and the sacrifices she has made over the five and a half years of our life that have been devoted to my studies at RTS. To her I am forever grateful. May our Lord Jesus redeem our "lost" time

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Discord in the church I consider more fearful and painful than any other war.

– Roman Emperor Constantine the Great

Christians generally operate from the optimistic notion that the covenant community—with Yahweh at its center in its Old Testament dispensation, and Jesus Christ at its center in the New Testament dispensation—should not experience conflict, at least not in the same way and to the same extent as does the world. After all, the covenant community consists of a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God!¹ Yet, the biblical record, Church history, and the personal experiences of every Christian attest to the fact that conflict—and attempts to successfully navigate it—have, unfortunately, been and remain a part of ecclesiastical life. Nonetheless, the Church has resources at its disposal that the world does not: the Lordship and mind of Christ; the Holy Spirit to guide, comfort and heal; the Bible as the definitive guide for faith and practice; and grace, mercy and forgiveness—all divinely given, all freely received. These resources should make a difference when it comes to effectively navigating conflict. But, of the Church today, congregational conflict expert Speed Leas says:

¹ 1 Pet. 2:9.

On any given day in perhaps three-quarters of all churches the ministry of that congregation is reduced significantly as a result of non-productive conflict. In perhaps one-fourth of all churches internal conflict is so severe that it must be reduced before the parish can redirect its energies and resources toward formulating new goals and expanding its ministry.²

If there is a common thread in contemporary literature, academics, and practice related to navigating congregational conflict it is this: resolution of issues and reconciliation of relationships are the most important outcomes to be achieved and the application of generic dispute resolution processes and techniques, supplemented with occasional references to Scripture, are the means to achieving these outcomes. As a Christian for more than thirty years, an elder for over twelve years in a non-denominational “mega-church” with a Presbyterian form of government, and as a dispute resolution professional who for over twenty years has held various executive positions with the world’s largest not-for-profit dispute resolution organization, it is my belief and opinion that the application of generic dispute resolution processes and techniques, supplemented with occasional references to Scripture, are insufficient for resolution and reconciliation of congregational conflict without due consideration for the ecclesiastical context within which the processes and techniques are being applied.

Contemporary literature, academics, and practice do not sufficiently take into consideration either the context within which congregational conflict takes place or the positive spiritual impact congregational conflict can have on individual Christians and the Body of Christ. This thesis asserts that in order to be truly effective—by which is meant that outcomes ultimately serve to glorify God—navigating congregational conflict must also: (i), be built upon and arise out of an acute understanding of fallen human nature, Satan as the enemy, the Christian life (salvation, grace, sanctification, and discipleship), the doctrine of

² Speed B. Leas, *Leadership & Conflict* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 7.

the Church, and the Kingdom of God (more specifically the rule of God) and, (ii), serve to edify individual Christians and strengthen the Body of Christ. Any treatment of the subject that does not fully take into account these aspects of the endeavor only offers an incomplete prescription for navigating congregational conflict.

The primary assumption underlying this thesis is that congregational conflict is pandemic throughout Christian churches in the United States and leaves in its wake a trail of turmoil that includes such things as a loss of congregational unity, plummeting morale, an exodus of staff, a decline in giving, a reduction and/or loss of vital ministries, decreased attendance/loss of members, loss of lifelong friendships, distrust of fellow Christians, fear, anxiety, damage to the congregation's reputation, and lawsuits. This assumption is based on evidence gleaned from recent research that addresses the subject of congregational conflict, most notably "Insights into Congregational Conflict" commissioned by Hartford Seminary and the Hartford Institute for Religious Research and a 2004 survey conducted by *Christianity Today*.

A secondary assumption is that in spite of efforts aimed at effectively managing congregational conflict, incidences of it have not been significantly reduced and negative outcomes have not been appreciably mitigated. This suggests the additional assumption that congregations, in the main, approach conflict on an *ad hoc*, haphazard basis and, when they do confront it, they fail to pursue resolution and reconciliation without proper regard for the ecclesiastical context within which the conflict is taking place and, therefore, also fail to seek outcomes beyond resolution and reconciliation that serve to edify individual Christians and strengthen the Body of Christ. Given these assumptions, congregations should be asking themselves two questions: "How can we be proactive in preventing congregation-wide

conflict? And “What best practices should we follow to effectively navigate our way through congregational conflict and mitigate any potential negative outcomes of it?”

In support of the above assertion—and of the crucial importance of the two questions just posed—this paper provides a review of contemporary literature and practice in the area of congregational conflict, a summary of selected biblical accounts of congregational conflict, a systematic theological look at fallen human nature, Satan, the Christian life, the Church, and the Kingdom of God, and how the Church has approached and dealt with conflict during two periods of its history. The paper concludes, following the discussion of these topics, with a proposal aimed at bolstering present initiatives related to congregational conflict.

Primary sources in researching the topic of congregational conflict included the Bible and seven popular, often-cited books on the subject: *Church Fights*, by Speed Leas and Paul Kittlaus; *Managing Church Conflict*, by Hugh F. Halverstadt; *Making Peace*, by Jim Van Yperen; *Conflict Management and Counseling*, by L. Randolph Lowery and Richard W. Meyers; *Firestorm*, by Ron Susek; *From Stuck to Unstuck*, by Kenneth A. Halstead; and *The Peacemaker*, by Ken Sande. An additional primary source was a study titled “Insights into Congregational Conflict” commissioned by Hartford Seminary and the Hartford Institute for Religious Research. The principle limitation to the research for this paper is the fact that there is very little, readily accessible empirical data on congregational conflict. It is also not discernable from existing research whether the outcomes actually resolved the issues involved or reconciled damaged relationships. A survey of congregations using an instrument similar to Appendix A would be extremely helpful in this regard.

Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to provide the Church with a more complete prescription for navigating congregational conflict. Specifically, what is needed to bolster present initiatives is a three-fold approach that: (i), offers biblically-based curricula to clergy, ministry staff, lay leaders, and church members on how to be proactive in preventing and mitigating congregation-wide conflict, (ii), provides congregations with an understanding of Christian-based neutral third-party dispute resolution processes such as mediation and, (iii), provides access to third-party neutrals, such as Christian mediators, who are specifically trained to seek not only resolution of issues and reconciliation of relationships, but to also edify the individual Christians involved and strengthen the Body of Christ—and to achieve these outcomes by applying dispute resolution processes and techniques in the context of fallen human nature, Satan as the enemy, the Christian life, the doctrine of the Church, and the Kingdom and Rule of God. It is believed that such an approach can significantly reduce the negative outcomes presently experienced by many U.S. congregations due the use of *ad hoc*, haphazard approaches to resolving conflict that generally fail to sufficiently take into consideration the ecclesiastical context within which congregational conflict takes place.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent Research

In 2000 and 2005 *Faith Communities Today* and the *Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership*, both not-for-profit entities of Hartford Seminary and the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, conducted two extensive studies on congregational life.¹ Both studies included questions related to congregational conflict. In the FACT 2000 national survey of 14,301 congregations, 75 percent of congregations reported some level of conflict in the five years prior to the survey. The Fact 2005 study, using a shorter timeframe of two years, sent a questionnaire to a random sample of 3,000 congregations, 57% of which reported either minor or major conflict during the period. The FACT 2000 study revealed the following as common sources of congregational conflict (in descending order): (i), member's behavior, (ii), money, (iii), worship, (iv), leadership style, (v), decision-making, (vi), program priorities, and (vii), theology.² A 2004 *Christianity Today* survey³ used different categories to ascertain sources of conflict and a study of its findings showed the following (in descending order) to be the most common causes of Congregational conflict: (i), control issues, (ii), vision/direction, (iii), leadership changes, (iv), pastor's style, (v), finances, (vi), theology/doctrine, and (vii), cultural/social differences.

¹ Research Projects & Findings, 31 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.fact.hartsem.edu/research/index.html>>.

² Carl S. Dudley, Theresa Zingery, and David Breeden, "Insights into Congregational Conflict," 30 Jan. 2009 <<http://fact.hartsem.edu/InsightsIntoCongregationalConflict.pdf>>.

³ *ibid.*

Most of the popular literature on congregational conflict written over the past thirty years supports the findings of these studies. The literature's treatment of the topic, as reflected in the discussions that follow—in different ways, and often from different perspectives—either directly or indirectly addresses the common causes of congregational conflict identified in the studies.

The FACT 2005 survey explored the costs of conflict. Of the congregations experiencing conflict, 39% paid the cost in financial loss, at least temporarily. Conversely, 61% of those congregations experiencing conflict reported no loss of income.⁴ By comparison, the human cost of conflict far outweighs the financial cost. More than two thirds of those congregations that experienced conflict (69%) recalled loss of members, and in at least one quarter (25%) of the congregations the leader (usually clergy) retired, resigned, was fired, or otherwise “left” the congregation.⁵

In spring 2004, *Leadership Journal*, a publication of *Christianity Today*, surveyed 999 readers who were pastors. Of those, 506 returned the survey for a response rate of 51%. The results have an accuracy of plus or minus four percentage points.⁶ Not surprisingly, the survey revealed that congregational conflict had a significant negative impact on pastors personally. Four in ten pastors (38%) had left a pastoral position due, at least in part, to conflict. In this regard the report noted that harsh initial feelings and residual hurts are not easily assuaged, and many pastors move on because of it. Additionally, the report found that a great majority of respondents (71%) said the conflict eventually centered on them—their vision or pastoral style.⁷ Other negative outcomes reported by pastors included damaged

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ John C. LaRue, Jr., “Church Conflict (Part 1),” *Your Church* 51 no. 6 (November/December 2005) : 72.

⁷ Eric Reed, “Leadership Surveys Church Conflict,” *Leadership Journal* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2004) : 25-26.

relationships (reported by 68% of pastors), feelings of sadness (58%), a loss of trust (31%), feelings of bitterness (29%). However, in spite of these negative outcomes, almost all pastors responding to the survey reported at least some personally positive outcomes of congregational conflict: 72% said they were wiser, 44% said the experience was a purifying process, 30% said it resulted in closer relationships, and 16% said the outcome resulted in reconciliation of a relationship.⁸

The 2004 *Leadership* survey revealed not only the positive and negative outcomes of conflict on pastors personally, but also the positive and negative outcomes on their congregations corporately. In this regard, the survey reported the following positive outcomes from conflict: 42% said it helped better define the congregation's vision, 35% said it helped better communications within the congregation, and 16% reported a growth in attendance. Conversely, on the negative side, 32% reported a decline in attendance, 32% said leaders left the church, and 3% reported a loss of communication with the congregation.⁹

In 1996, Canadian researchers Frederick A. Starke and Bruno Dyck examined the causes and outcomes of congregational conflict in eleven self-governing congregations that had experienced such an intense conflict that some members from each congregation had left the parent and formed a new breakaway congregation.¹⁰ Thus, 22 congregations existed where only 11 existed before. The principle findings of the research included the following: (i), governance and doctrinal issues were the primary reasons for the splits, (ii), the parent congregations were more likely to perceive the conflict as authority-based, while those who left to form the breakaway were more likely to perceive the conflict as doctrinally-based,

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Frederick A. Starke and Bruno Dyck, "Upheavals in Congregations: The Causes and Outcomes of Splits," *Review of Religious Research* 38 no. 2 (December 1996) : p 159.

(iii), in the period immediately following the split, the parent congregations continued to experience some difficulties, but the breakaways prospered, and (vi), over time, the performance of parent and breakaway congregations converged.¹¹

Starke and Dyck also report in their study that numerous interviewees mentioned what they believed was one significant positive outcome of the split; the need for more people to become actively involved in congregational life. The authors also made the interesting observation that congregational splits also result in the formation of new congregations in ways that are functionally similar to the Diaspora of the early church; viewed in this way, they aver, the formation of breakaway congregations can be seen as a promulgation of the faith, and an improvement in the performance of the larger church. A *de facto* backhanded way of church planting.¹²

Finally, according to a blog posting dated January 1, 2009 by Dr. David Nobles, founder of Building Healthy Churches and author of *Winning the Real Battle At Church*, about 40% of church members who leave their churches do so because of conflict, very small numbers (16%) of churches report positive outcomes from conflict, 1,500 pastors leave their assignments every month in the United States because of conflict, burnout, or moral failure, and 34% of all pastors presently serve congregations that forced their previous pastor to resign.¹³

¹¹ Starke, 159.

¹² *Ibid.*, 172.

¹³ David Noble and Diane Noble, *Winning the Real Battle at Church* (Kansas City: BHC Publishing, 2008), 171.

Contemporary Literature

As noted in the Introduction, *resolution* and *reconciliation* are deemed in literature and practice to be *the* most important outcomes to be achieved in navigating congregational conflict. It may rightly be said of these two outcomes that they are to the congregation and larger religious groupings what blood circulation and healing of a wound are to the body.¹⁴ In light of this predilection, and in light of the dominance and prevalence of these terms in the study of congregational conflict, it is important at this point to provide a brief definition of each and summarize the currency given to each before presenting the review of the literature.

Resolution and *reconciliation* are the twin outcomes of conflict. Popular contemporary literature devoted to congregational conflict is, however, generally inclined to exhibit two features when dealing with these twin outcomes: (i), it is overwhelmingly weighted toward the outcome *reconciliation* at the expense of the equally important outcome *resolution*, and (ii), it uses the two terms *reconciliation* and *resolution* synonymously. The following examples are illustrative of the predisposition in favor of reconciliation:

“[Reconciliation] is something so central and fundamental in our Lord’s teaching and outlook that it hardly requires exposition and exemplification. It meets us explicitly on almost every page of the Gospels. It is the most obvious, the most challenging, and even to an unsympathetic and unbelieving mind perhaps the most distinctive, typical and admirable characteristic of a specifically ‘Christ-style’ of life.”¹⁵

“All conflict involves broken relationships”¹⁶

“Conflict is first and foremost a broken relationship.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Kenneth A. Halstead, *From Stuck to Unstuck: Overcoming Congregational Impasse* (Alban Institute, 1998), 79.

¹⁵ H.H. Farmer, *The Word of Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), 24.

¹⁶ Jim Van Yperen, *Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict* (Moody Bible Institute, 2002), 97.

¹⁷ Van Yperen, 99.

Paul A. Mickey and Robert L. Wilson in their book *Conflict and Resolution*, appear to exhibit the common inclination of using the terms synonymously when they say, “Thus reconciliation is a matter of mutual recognition that a conflict is ended.”¹⁸ In all the research conducted for this paper, there was only one statement encountered that clearly delineated the difference between resolution and reconciliation and the need for pursuing both:

“The most important help given by counselors, ministers, lawyers, and others involved in the ministry of reconciliation is assisting people in finding a process that holds promise for the resolution of their disputes and reconciliation of their relationships.”¹⁹

Here, Lowry and Meyers capture the essence of the difference: *resolution* has to do with issues; *reconciliation* has to do with relationships. *Resolution* can be defined as a solution, accommodation, or settling of a problem, controversy, etc.²⁰ Resolution comes about when contending positions on issues are resolved. *Reconciliation* may be defined as “the restoration of friendship and fellowship after estrangement.”²¹ Reconciliation comes about when harmony is restored to broken relationships. Having thus defined and explained the importance of resolution and reconciliation in the literature, we now move on to the literature review itself.

Contemporary literature on the subject of congregational conflict validates the findings of the research presented above and offers a variety of prescriptions purporting how to successfully navigate it. In *Church Fights* by Speed Leas and Paul Kittlaus, the seminal work on congregational conflict of the past thirty-five years, the approach to congregational conflict is presented in light of a two-fold thesis: (i), one mark of a healthy organization is

¹⁸ Paul A. Mickey and Robert L. Wilson, *Conflict and Resolution* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973), 16.

¹⁹ L. Randolph Lowry and Richard W. Meyers, *Conflict Management and Counseling* (Word, Incorporated, 1991), 53.

²⁰ resolution. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/resolution> (accessed: March 02, 2009).

²¹ Robert Moeller, *Love in Action* (Sisters: Multnomah Books, 1994), 132.

that it can deal with conflict when it arises and that conflict can bring with it growth,²² and (ii), applying the behavioral sciences to develop strategies for managing congregational conflict²³ is appropriate. Their view and approach is organization-centric stemming from their vision of what constitutes “healthy organizational life.” The book centers on the sociological and procedural aspects of conflict. The authors’ primary focus is conflict resolution rather than reconciliation of relationships, which is somewhat the reverse of the focus of the other texts reviewed. Accordingly, their prescription for navigating congregational conflict is comprised of concepts, experiences, processes, and tools based on the application of secular behavioral sciences.²⁴ The principle process recommended by the authors for dealing with congregational conflict is third-party intervention by what they call a “referee.”²⁵ Leas and Kittlaus describe the referee-led process in much the same terms as what a mediator does in the traditional mediation process, e.g. gathering data, analyzing data, processing the issues, developing strategies for resolution of the issues and reconciling relationships.²⁶

Managing Church Conflict by Hugh F. Halverstadt, another popular and often-quoted book in the field, “prescribes an interdisciplinary method of understanding and coping with church conflicts that draws on sources specific to church systems and to Christian beliefs.”²⁷ The book’s primary theme, as indicated by the title, is on helping one become an effective manager of congregational conflict. As such, the focus is an approach internal to the congregation for dealing with conflict rather than on seeking intervention assistance by an

²² Speed Leas and Paul Kittlaus, *Church Fights: Managing Conflict in the Local Church* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 159.

²³ Leas, 18.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 62.

²⁶ Ibid., 60-157.

²⁷ Hugh F. Halverstadt, *Managing Church Conflict* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 12.

impartial, neutral third-party. The author states that his model—his prescription for managing church conflict—is an applied Christian ethic in light of a Christian worldview. He does, however, clearly state that, “the concept of enlightened self-interest found in secular theories of conflict management is not here rejected.”²⁸ From a self-help, programmatic perspective, Halverstadt’s approach offers a model filled with practical steps and advice occasionally supplemented with references from Scripture.

Making Peace by Jim Van Yperen is, in the author’s own words, a “why” book, not a “how-to” book. “The lordship of Jesus Christ, not method,” he states, “should be the object and subject of your search for answers.”²⁹ As such, his volume on congregational conflict places resolution and reconciliation squarely in the context of the Church and the Kingdom of God. Van Yperen clearly states that reconciliation is the primary premise of the book, holding that “reconciliation is not a set of principles to be followed but a life to be lived;”³⁰ “Reconciliation...is who we are;”³¹ and “...reconciliation is a constant pursuit of holiness—a way of thinking, acting, and being that forms us in the church as it changes our collective character, habits, and practices.”³² The book does not prescribe any particular intervention strategy for achieving either resolution of contested issues or reconciliation of broken/damaged relationships, but does offer for consideration the view that the Word, the Spirit, and the Church partner to bring about reconciliation within the fellowship of believers and makes the following observations:

1. Reconciliation is the work of God in Christ through submission to God’s Word, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the discernment of the church.

²⁸ Halverstadt, 10-11.

²⁹ Van Yperen, 14.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 54.

³² Ibid., 54.

2. Efforts to reconcile church conflict based upon God's Word alone will inevitably become pharisaic or legalistic.
3. Efforts to reconcile church conflict by experiencing God's Spirit alone will inevitably become subjective.
4. Efforts to reconcile church conflict by church consensus alone will inevitably become democratic.³³

In *Conflict Management and Counseling* by L. Randolph Lowry and Richard W. Meyers, the authors state that the "information is presented here in the context of the Christian faith, with substantial reference to social science"³⁴ and "Reconciliation is the overriding theme of this book."³⁵ They define *reconciliation* as a process where "the objective is not only to resolve the conflict, but also to restore the relationship of the people involved,"³⁶ thereby using the term in a broad, synonymous sense to also include *resolution*. Lowry and Meyers go on to say that, "Throughout this book, when we refer to the *ministry* of reconciliation, we are describing a ministry *all Christians* are called to perform, regardless of their choice of profession or avocation"³⁷ [emphasis in the original].

It is interesting to note that while their theme is reconciliation, the authors' actual focus is on *conflict management*, where "the minimum objective is to control the differences in a way that allows individuals or organizations to function."³⁸ Accordingly, their prescription for navigating congregational conflict is to find the right process. They say that the most important decision facing someone caught in the midst of conflict is the decision about how to handle it procedurally. "Thus," they state, "the most important help given by counselors, ministers, lawyers, and others involved in the ministry of reconciliation is assisting people in

³³ Van Yperen, 182-3

³⁴ Lowry, 3.

³⁵ Ibid., 4.

³⁶ Ibid., 28-9

³⁷ Ibid., 3.

³⁸ Lowry, 28-9

finding a process that holds the promise for resolution of their disputes and reconciliation of their relationships.”³⁹ To that end, Lowry and Meyers offer a ten-point strategy⁴⁰ they believe can make a great contribution toward more effective management of congregational conflict. In addition to this strategy, Lowry and Meyers commend the process of mediation as the third-party intervention of choice. “Mediation,” they say, “is a biblical idea. In fact, it is the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁴¹

Firestorm by Ron Susek, offers a commentary on the impact a singular instance of conflict can have on a congregation. The book, however, is not a comprehensive treatment of how to resolve issues and reconcile damaged or broken relationships arising from congregational conflict, although in chapters 12-16 Susek does discuss three internal intervention processes and one external intervention process aimed at navigating congregational conflict. The internal processes, in general terms, are (i), actions the board can take, (ii), actions the pastor can take, and (iii), actions the church, i.e. individual members can take.⁴² The external process is the employment of what Susek calls “firestorm consultants.”⁴³ Such consultants, as principally described by Susek,⁴⁴ appear to differ from mediators suggested by many other commentators, acting more like fact-finders (a viable third-party intervention virtually absent from the popular literature). Susek muddies the waters a bit by saying that a congregation must “decide what kind of authority” it wants to vest in its “consultant,” and proceeds to say that the consultant may assume the role of either *passive mediator*, *passive advisor*, or *binding arbitrator*; the various descriptions provided

³⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 186-7.

⁴¹ Ibid., 106.

⁴² Ron Susek, *Firestorm: Preventing and Overcoming Church Conflicts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 125-164.

⁴³ Susek, 165.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 169-171.

for each do not, however, comport with their roles as defined in the professional dispute resolution field and may not prove to be particularly helpful to the uninitiated. In sum, Susek's general prescription for congregational conflict, "A Plan of Action Guide" (found in the book's appendix) is presented as the means to a variety of ends, i.e. to prevent, stop, or recover from a firestorm.⁴⁵

From Stuck to Unstuck by Kenneth A. Halstead, is the most academic treatise on the subject of congregational conflict of the texts reviewed. It focuses exclusively on activities internal to a congregation, is heavy on systems and procedures, and is often more theoretical than practical. Halstead proposes using a *circular assessment* approach for moving congregations from "stuck" to "unstuck" when it comes to resolving problems. In this regard he says:

Problems...addressed by a circular process (involving people and viewpoints surrounding the problem) are often more solvable than problems defined linearly (cause/effect) through a linear process. Circular processes shift the focus from shame and blame for the problem to shared responsibility for a solution, thus minimizing defensiveness and denial. Everyone feels heard and taken seriously.⁴⁶

Halstead lists five "skills" necessary to successful implementation of circular assessment: (i), make sure that people with complaints and criticisms receive a fair hearing and that they follow a respectful process, (ii), avoid emotional commitment to simplistic cause-and-effect thinking or to one way of explaining the problem, (iii), seeing one's own role in the problem and its solution, (iv), avoid excessive analysis and identify and highlight key feedback circles in the emotional system, and (v), admit when you are stumped.⁴⁷ In the final analysis, Halstead's internal intervention approach offers secular processes and techniques, supplemented with occasional references to Scripture.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 237.

⁴⁶ Halstead, 143.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 144-48.

The Peacemaker by Ken Sande, was by far the most comprehensive treatise surveyed that deals with conflict among and between Christians. The focus of the book is decidedly on helping individual Christians deal with conflict rather than how to deal with institutional, congregational conflict, although the principles discussed are applicable to both. The overarching, if not the singular, theme of the book is *peacemaking*; quoting Sande: “How can your church produce the maximum harvest with the peacemaking talents God has given you? Start by weaving peacemaking thoroughly into the fabric of your congregation...”⁴⁸

Of the texts reviewed, *The Peacemaker* offered the most detailed and comprehensive use of Scripture applicable to resolution and reconciliation. It also effectively challenges Christians to deal with conflict as Jesus expects us to:

Whether our conflicts involve minor irritations or major legal issues, God is eager to display his love and power through us as we strive to maintain peace and unity with those around us. Therefore, peacemaking is not an optional activity for a believer. If you have committed your life to Christ, he invites you to draw on his grace and commands you to seek peace with others.⁴⁹

The book’s Appendix B contains a very good basic discussion on third-party intervention strategies such as mediation, arbitration, litigation, and what Sande calls *Christian Conciliation* which, when objectively analyzed mirrors secular mediation from a Christian worldview, using biblical standards and principles of conduct coupled with a values-oriented moral perspective.⁵⁰

While all of the contemporary books on the subject of congregational conflict reviewed here allude in some way to the elements that constitute the context within which congregational conflict takes place (i.e., fallen human nature, Satan as the enemy, the Christian life, the doctrine of the Church, and the Kingdom of God), none explicitly takes all

⁴⁸ Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 295.

⁴⁹ Sande, 56.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 273-74.

of them into consideration and none sufficiently maintains an explicit focus on the importance of these elements all the way through its presentation. Perhaps this is because the authors presume an acute understanding of these elements already exists—along with generally high levels of Christian maturity, ecclesiastical sophistication, and biblical literacy—among their contemporary Christian audience. Such a presumption, however, appears to be contradicted by the evidence. Both empirical research and the literature clearly indicate that congregational conflict is widespread in U.S. congregations today and, more importantly, the anecdotal evidence suggests that congregations generally approach disputes and conflict on an *ad hoc*, haphazard basis and, therefore, are neither proactive in preventing and mitigating congregation-wide conflict nor appeal to third-party biblically based intervention processes such as Christian mediation as a means of effecting resolution and/or reconciliation.

CHAPTER 3
ACCOUNTS OF SELECTED OLD TESTAMENT AND
NEW TESTAMENT CONFLICT

This chapter considers several accounts of congregational conflict within both the Old and New Testament dispensations of the covenant community of faith. The presentation of the material—rather than simply rehearsing the facts related to each account, goes behind the facts to isolate the primary issue or issues at the center of each dispute, the parties’ positions on the issues, and the real interests that are driving the parties’ respective positions. Approaching the material in this manner offers important insight into the dynamics of each conflict and highlights, by virtue of both positive and negative outcomes, the importance of effectively navigating congregational conflict in a way that edifies individual Christians, strengthens the Body of Christ, and glorifies God. Accompanying each account are relevant “learning points” for today’s congregations. Given that the Bible is the definitive guide for matters of faith and practice for all things Christian, it is only appropriate that the accounts discussed here constitute the largest segment of this thesis.

Joseph and His Brothers

Chapter 37 of Genesis presents the account of the conflict between the sons of Jacob. Envious of the special favor Joseph enjoyed from his father, coupled with Joseph's dreams that suggested Joseph might even be favoured by providence,¹ his older siblings conceived a plan to kill Joseph and rid the family of him. Initially, the brothers had no intention of killing Joseph, till their envy had by indulgence acquired a greater degree of strength. The issues at the root of this conflict are: (i), Jacob loves Joseph more than any of his other sons and, (ii), Joseph's brothers are envious and jealous of him. The brothers' position is that they want Joseph dead. Joseph's position is that he does not want to die at the hands of his brothers.² Joseph's interest is simply to fit in and be accepted. As for the brothers, their interest is to assuage their envy and jealousy and remove the threat Joseph represents. The conflict results in three short-term outcomes and one long-term outcome. First, Joseph is separated from his family. Second, Joseph's brothers deceive their father and maintain the pretense for years. Third, Jacob is caused, unnecessarily, great emotional distress. God, in the long-term, however, used the conflict for good; to save many lives,³ thus glorifying himself.

The indispensable learning point from this account for every congregation today is that threats to a congregation's welfare come more often from within than from without. As Martin Luther observed, "Jacob with his whole Church is subjected to the devil and all his angels to such an extent that it is not strangers, nor enemies, not heretics, but sons born from himself, and educated and taught in the Word who kill their innocent brother."⁴

¹ Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50: From Abraham to Joseph* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 159.

² Gen. 42:21. "We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen."

³ Gen. 50:20.

⁴ Ronald S. Wallace, *The Story of Joseph and the Family of Jacob* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 16.

Moses and the Israelite Congregation

Several episodes of congregation-wide conflict, as recounted in Exodus 15, 16, 17 and Numbers 14, arose early and late in Moses' experience with the congregation of the Israelites in the wilderness. The first came exactly one month after leaving Egypt when, as the people trekked from one oasis to another, the euphoria surrounding the miraculous escape at the Red Sea gave way to the harsh realities of life in the wilderness. Food was now in short supply and public dissatisfaction soon surfaced and broke into a clamorous outcry against the leadership of Moses and Aaron.⁵ Next, when the congregation of the Israelites came to Marah, having traveled for three days in the Desert of Shur without finding any water, they found they could not drink its water because it was bitter. So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?" Next, during the second month of the Exodus, while traveling through the Desert of Sin, the whole congregation again grumbled against Moses and Aaron when the people ran out of the food brought from Egypt. This was followed by an episode of grumbling that occurred almost immediately following their departure from the Desert of Sin when the Israelites found no water at Rephidim. Finally, approximately a year and a half later, as the Israelite congregation stood on the threshold of the Promised Land, they grumbled yet again; this time in response to the report from the spies sent to explore the land that the land's inhabitants were giants.

The presenting issue in each of these episodes is the Israelites' penchant for grumbling and murmuring. However, there are also two underlying issues: (i), the people's lack of faith in Yahweh and, (ii), the people's lack of trust in Moses' leadership. In each episode, the

⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1986), 116.

people have two positions: (i), they want their basic needs met without ever being in want, and (ii), they want life to be pretty much like it was back in Egypt. Moses' positions throughout the episodes are: (i), things in the wilderness are not going to be like they were in Egypt, but Yahweh will meet all the people's needs and, (ii), the people need to have faith in Yahweh and trust Moses' leadership. The people's real interests, underlying their positions, are security and comfort. Moses' interests are that he wants to fulfill the mission to which Yahweh has called the Israelites and he wants the Israelites to develop their spiritual lives by trusting in Yahweh. In the final analysis, the people's penchant for grumbling led to a most unfortunate outcome: the failure of that generation to enter the Promised Land.⁶

These episodes reflect the classic tension that arises in a congregation when the leadership's "new" mission and vision for the congregation ruffles the felt needs, wants and desires of some (or many) of the members. New or revised missions and visions provide fertile ground for congregational conflict.

Joshua and the Altar at Geliloth

In the twenty-second chapter of the Book of Joshua we read that a dispute broke out between the tribes of Israel who had settled east of the Jordan River and those who settled in Canaan on the west side. The Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh had asked for, and were granted from Moses, parcels of land east of the Jordan as their inheritance⁷ on the condition that these tribes join the rest of the tribes in the conquest of Canaan, after which they could return home. When the conquest was complete, Joshua released the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh, blessed them and sent

⁶ Num. 14:20-23.

⁷ Num. 32:1-33.

them on their way. Upon their return, the tribes built an imposing altar on the border of Canaan at Geliloth near the Jordan. When their fellow Israelites (the western tribes) heard about the altar they assembled to go to war against the eastern tribes, believing they had committed apostasy and rebellion.

Before launching an attack, however, the western tribes sent a delegation to confront the eastern tribes to express their concern over what the western tribes were interpreting as an act of apostasy. The eastern tribes were astonished at the delegation's accusations. Their intent in building a replica of the LORD's altar was to have it serve as a testimony to the commitment of the eastern tribes to remain loyal to Yahweh and to their continued right to worship Yahweh at the tabernacle—even though they lived outside the Promised Land.⁸ The western tribes' delegation was glad to hear that the eastern tribes had not acted unfaithfully and so returned home, talking no more about going to war against their brothers living east of the Jordan.

The dispute in this episode arose from the eastern tribes' building a replica of the LORD's altar on the border of Canaan at Geliloth near the Jordan. The western tribes' position was that the altar was an expression of apostasy and rebellion. The eastern tribes' position was that the altar was an expression of their commitment to remain loyal to Yahweh and of their continued right to worship Yahweh at the tabernacle. The Israelites' interest was to maintain unity of the tribes and fidelity to Yahweh. The eastern tribes' interest was to protect the right of their descendants to worship Yahweh in the tabernacle: "In the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, 'You have no share in Yahweh.'"⁹ The

⁸ NIV Study Bible, study note Josh. 22:27, page 321.

⁹ Josh. 22:27.

outcome was peace between the tribes; one of the few Old Testament conflicts that resulted in a positive outcome for all concerned.

This episode reveals two closely related key learning points about congregational conflict. First, in almost every conflict there is an element of poor communication or no communication between the parties. Second, people have a tendency to jump from conflict origination to “war” with little thought of alternatives to resolution. In this regard, the following observation from Dale Ralph Davis is worth noting:

There is something ugly about human nature. The moment disagreements arise, the immediate reaction is to resort to arms. The Israelites made no attempt to understand. At once there was a determination to fight it out and to eliminate those whom they had misjudged. Without attempting to find the truth, they rushed to ‘make war.’¹⁰

The Request of James and John

Matthew, Mark and Luke¹¹ all record an occasion in which the twelve disciples argue among themselves about which of them is the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, brought them together and provided sound counsel that, if followed, would resolve the issue. His words were simple and to the point: “Anyone who wants to be first, must be the very last and servant of all. He who is the least among you all—he is the greatest.” This was a mild, yet firm rebuke against any attempt at establishing a pecking order among the Twelve.

Taking the rebuke to heart was apparently short-lived, at least for the brothers James and John, to whom Jesus had given the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder. The hotheaded brothers had been doing some thinking. So to try to establish a pecking priority in the coming kingdom, they requested the two top spots.¹² They even enlisted their mother in the conspiracy and like many over-ambitious-for-their-children mothers she was a willing

¹⁰ Dale Ralph Davis, *Joshua: No Falling Words* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000), 166.

¹¹ Matt. 20:20-24, Mk. 10:35-41, Lk. 9:46-48.

¹² Leslie B. Flynn, *The Twelve* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 51.

accomplice.¹³ Adding a further element of intrigue to their plan is the possibility that their mother, Salome, may have been a sister of Mary; if so, they were cousins of Jesus.¹⁴ Jesus firmly advised the brothers that the positions on his right and left were not his to give and quickly dispelled any notion that the positions were glamorous, clearly indicating they would be ones of hardship. No matter that Jesus put James and John in their place, the brothers' bold and unseemly initiative did not sit well with the rest of the Twelve, for when they heard about it they were indignant. Here is a major conflict that threatens Jesus' ministry. The presenting issue is James and John's bold request of Jesus to give them the top two positions in his ministry. The secondary issue is their apparent disregard of Jesus' earlier admonition against any attempt at establishing a pecking order. Which of the two caused the greater disgust amongst the other ten is hard to say.

It seems obvious that the brothers' position is that they believe they were deserving of the top two spots, perhaps solely based on their family ties to Jesus. Their interest in wanting the two positions also seems obvious—they, and the other ten for that matter, saw the positions as ones of power, and inherent in positions of power is the ability to exert influence and control. The position on the matter taken by the other ten disciples was one of two things: (i), the brothers' asking for the positions on Jesus' left and right is appropriate, but the spots should go to some of them rather than to James and John, or (ii), the brothers' asking for the positions was completely inappropriate and offensive given Jesus' earlier admonition, and Jesus should issue the brothers a sterner rebuke. If the former, the interest of the other disciples was likely their own individual ambitions, i.e. each of them also aspires to one of

¹³ Flynn, 52.

¹⁴ Kendrick Strong, *All the Master's Men* (Chappaqua: Christian Herald Books, 1978), 123.

the two top spots. If the latter, their likely interest was having James and John “put back in line.”

To address the conflict, Jesus summoned together all the disciples, not just James and John. His theme again, as it had been in response to the “who’s the greatest” controversy, is “servant leadership,” this time clearly contrasting “leading by serving” with the way the rulers of the Gentiles and their high officials exercise authority. “Not so with you,” he declared. The immediate outcome was peace within the ranks, but the disciples did not learn the lesson yet, for a short while later, right in the Upper Room the night before the cross, they would argue again who would be the greatest.¹⁵

This account illustrates that unbridled ambition can be a source of congregational conflict. Pushy people are not popular, especially when pushing for what others want.¹⁶ Pastors and ministry leaders, therefore, need to be ever vigilant for the presence of unbridled ambition among a congregation’s staff and lay volunteers, constantly reinforcing the notion that “the way up is the way down”¹⁷ as a hallmark of “servant leadership.” The spirit of Diotrephes often creeps into ecclesiastical circles today. Diotrephes is described as one “who loveth to have the pre-eminence.”¹⁸ It is a vain, self-seeking attitude which makes one want to become a church boss, lording it over their brethren.¹⁹

The Inequitable Distribution of Food to the Widows

In the wake of the powerful events at Pentecost, the transformed covenant community of the New Testament continued to experience rapid growth, which posed a number of

¹⁵ Flynn, 53.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ 3 Jn. 9.

¹⁹ Flynn, 51-2.

logistical and administrative challenges. One such challenge, as told in Acts 6:1-5, erupted in a dispute between two diverse groups of Christian disciples: Grecian Jews and Hebraic Jews. The Hellenists [Grecian Jews] were Jews who had been influenced when Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire in 332/331 B.C.²⁰ A Hebrew was of pure Hebrew stock and had retained the language and traditions of his ancestors. Unlike Jews who had become Hellenized, the Hebrews considered themselves to be special and did not want to associate with anyone outside their society.²¹ Dissensions would be very likely to arise between these two classes of persons. The Jews of Palestine would pride themselves much on the fact that they dwelt in the land of the patriarchs and the land of promise; that they used the language which their fathers spoke, and in which the oracles of God were given; and that they were constantly near the temple, and regularly engaged in its solemnities. On the other hand, the Jews from other parts of the world would be suspicious, jealous, and envious of their brethren, and would be likely to charge them with partiality, or of taking advantage in their contact with them.²²

Yet, in His providence, God chose to bring these two groups together in the early days of the fledgling Christian church. However, the occasions of strife would not be destroyed by their conversion to Christianity.²³ In short order, a dispute arose between the two groups. The issue causing the conflict is that the Grecian widows in the congregation were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. In response to this inequity, the Grecian Jews filed a complaint with the Apostles against the Hebraic Jews in the congregation. In the interests of fairness and the welfare of their widows, the Grecian Jewish Christians took the

²⁰ Mal Couch, ed., *A Bible Handbook to the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), 244.

²¹ Couch, 244.

²² Barnes' Notes, Electronic Database, Acts 6:1.

²³ *ibid.*

position that there needed to be equity in the charitable distribution. In light of the fact that it was the Grecian's who file the complaint it is safe to assume that the position of the Hebraic Jewish Christians was that the distribution was already equitable and their interest was to maintain the status quo. In bringing the matter to the Apostles for resolution, the Grecian Jews adopted a collaborative approach to the conflict, hoping for an outcome that would meet the interests of both groups. The Apostles knew that if the church was going to continue to grow there must be equity among members of all backgrounds.²⁴ Thus, appropriate to their role and status, they adopted a mediating approach that quickly resolved the conflict by establishing a means of providing an equitable distribution of resources within the congregation.²⁵

This episode offers two lessons for congregations today. First, no matter how large or small a congregation, there are within it diverse ministries, groups, cliques, and "factions," etc. each contending for its own interests, wants, needs, and desires. And second, ministry leaders need to be proactive in preventing and mitigating conflict arising out of "competition" for ministry resources.

Peter and the Circumcised Believers

No sooner had the conflict involving the equitable distribution of food to the widows been resolved than another Church problem arose, one of great magnitude and difficulty. It concerned the relation of Gentiles to Christianity, and the great detail given in Acts 11:1-18

²⁴ Couch, 245.

²⁵ Acts 6:2-4 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

shows the importance with which the event was regarded.²⁶ The problem began when the Apostle Peter was divinely summoned to Caesarea to minister to the family of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a Gentile.

Peter's visit resulted in the gift of the Holy Spirit being poured out on Gentiles and Gentiles being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. But more to the point, Peter *stayed* with Cornelius and his family for several days—fraternizing with them! The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”²⁷ It is interesting to note from this reaction that Christianity was accepted as a reformed Judaism, and not Judaism's successor.²⁸ It is also interesting to note the issue causing the conflict. It was not against the Gentiles becoming Christians, but against the terms of equality so evident in Peter's fraternization.²⁹

Much dissatisfaction was created in the Church, when intelligence of the whole transaction came to Jerusalem. On Peter's arrival, his having ‘gone in to men uncircumcised, and eaten with them,’ was arraigned as a serious violation of religious duty.³⁰

Peter's position in the matter was three-fold: (i), God has made it clear that He does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right,³¹ (ii), the life and work of Jesus Christ has abolished, in God's eyes, any distinction between Jews and Gentiles who are in Christ, and (iii), the circumcised believers need to change their

²⁶ W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Apostle Peter: Outline Studies in His Life, Character, and Writing* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 111.

²⁷ Acts 11:1-3.

²⁸ E. M. Blaiklock, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 97.

²⁹ Thomas, 114.

³⁰ W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1892), 164.

³¹ Acts 10:34-35.

attitude and accept the fact that socialization with Gentile believers is perfectly acceptable. Peter's interest was in promoting unity within the transforming covenant community. In contrast, the circumcised believers asserted that Peter's socializing with Gentiles constituted a serious transgression of Jewish law and custom and as such had stained, if not forfeited, the honour (sic) of his apostleship, and ought to come under the censure of the church.³² Their interest in so asserting was to maintain strict fidelity to Jewish dietary laws and customs that prohibit Jews from eating with Gentiles lest they, the Jews, become defiled by eating ceremonially unclean food. Yet, after hearing his explanation, Peter's opponents had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."³³

This episode provides three lessons for preventing and mitigating congregation-wide conflict. First, gather all the appropriate facts before confronting a fellow believer with a perceived transgression of the congregation's behavioral norms, policies, practices, traditions or doctrines. Secondly, this episode teaches Christians to be open to a move of God that challenges (threatens?) congregational traditions. Third and finally, congregational conflict can be minimized when Christians recognize that God accepts diverse people into the covenant community and when, like Him, show no favoritism.

The Council of Jerusalem

Even though Peter's opponents lodged no further objections after hearing his recitation of the events that took place in Caesarea—and even praised God for granting Gentiles "repentance unto life," subsequent events proved that their discontent was only partially

³² Matthew Henry's Commentary, Acts 11:1-18 Peter's Vindication, II.

³³ Acts 11:18.

assuaged. The smouldering (sic) feeling of discontent, which had existed from [the first Gentile converts], increased and became more evident as new Gentile converts were admitted to the Church.³⁴ Acts 15:1-30 tells of how the discontent escalated from a disagreement about the appropriateness of socializing between Jewish and Gentile Christians to a major dispute between the two groups over what Gentiles must do, or not do, to be saved.

Primarily due to the missionary efforts of Paul and Barnabas, the Church was becoming well-established in Gentile territory, most notably in the city of Antioch in Galatia. At a certain point, some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” It appears that these men remained in Antioch for some considerable time, gradually insinuating, or openly inculcating, their opinion that the observance of Jewish Law was *necessary to salvation*.³⁵ This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.³⁶

To the Gentiles this teaching must have been a shock. They had not been brought up on the law, and their spiritual experience since their conversion had proved quiet satisfactory without the observance of all the ceremonies.³⁷

The older converts of Antioch had entered the Church by way of the synagogue, and had automatically accepted certain prohibitions as a rule of life. They had no thought of any other possibility...the new converts of Galatia knew nothing of Judaism and there is no evidence at all that Paul enforced upon them any preliminary condition of conformity to Jewish rules.³⁸

The argument became so sharp that the church at Antioch decided to send delegates to discuss the matter with the Apostles and elders at Jerusalem. Paul, Barnabas and some others

³⁴ Conybeare, 165.

³⁵ Ibid., 166.

³⁶ Acts 15:1-2.

³⁷ Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), 257.

³⁸ Blaiklock, 111.

went to Jerusalem and were welcomed by the church. This meeting constitutes the first official council of the Christian church. The question before the assembly was whether Gentiles could be saved apart from circumcision and the legalism of the Mosaic system.³⁹ Paul and Barnabas spoke first. Reporting all that God had done through them, their position was that circumcision should not be required of Gentile converts because Gentiles, just like the Jews, are saved *only* through the grace of the Lord Jesus. The interest driving their position was to seek affirmation (vindication?) of the work God had called them to do in Antioch. Some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees spoke next, taking the position, in no uncertain terms, that except by circumcision and obedience to the Law of Moses, one may not be saved through Christ; in other words, Gentiles cannot become Christians without first becoming Jews.⁴⁰ Their interest in taking this position ran strong and deep—they wanted to protect the very heart and soul of Judaism. They had no interest in accepting a re-interpretation of ancient prophecies, or seeing Israel melt into the Church, or seeing the minority of the chosen lose identity, privilege, and special place in a global organization.⁴¹ Peter spoke next. He aligns with Paul and Barnabas; his position being that since God had brought the Gentiles to faith without the law, there was no need to insist that the Gentiles become Jews to be saved.⁴² His interest was to see to it that the Church avoided putting on the necks of the Gentile disciples a yoke that neither the Jews of the day nor their forefathers have been able to bear.⁴³ Finally, James, the representative of the Jerusalem elders, addressed the assembly. Striking a mediating position, he agreed that circumcision

³⁹ Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 451.

⁴⁰ Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, eds., *Mercer Commentary on the Bible: Acts and Pauline Writings* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 37.

⁴¹ Blaiklock, 97.

⁴² George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 392.

⁴³ Acts 15:10.

should not be required and said, “We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God,”⁴⁴ but then added, as a compromise to the party of the Pharisees, that Gentile converts should at least be instructed “to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.”⁴⁵

Through James’ leadership a compromise was reached. The Council sought to resolve the conflict by issuing a letter addressed to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia that did three things: (i), it disavowed the instigators by saying they went to Antioch without the Jerusalem church’s authorization, (ii), it took circumcision off the table as a requirement for salvation, and (iii), it instructed that the Gentiles are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. While the recipients were glad for the letter’s encouraging message, it is important to note that the compromise was only partially successful in settling the conflict.

There was a certain weakness in the compromise. The Pauline sympathizers would regard the imposition of certain legalities as a strong recommendation; the Judaizers would regard them as conditions for salvation...the Epistles are indication enough that the controversy was not settled by the disowning of the extremists...We know from the first Epistle to the Corinthians that, in spite of the efforts of the apostles, sects tended to emerge in the early Church.”⁴⁶

What from this episode can the Church today take and apply when navigating congregational conflict? First, all parties involved in a conflict need to be involved in resolving the conflict. There is an axiom of dispute resolution that says, “The parties best able to resolve a conflict are, given the right circumstances, those who caused it.” Secondly, just as the Jerusalem church provided an appropriate forum for addressing the conflict, so congregational leaders should provide an environment that is conducive to resolving issues

⁴⁴ Acts 15:19.

⁴⁵ Acts 15:20.

⁴⁶ Blaiklock, 114.

and reconciling relationships. Third, disowning extremists may produce a short-term truce, but they almost never work toward an enduring peace. Fourth and finally, successful resolution of issues that threaten or arise from deeply held convictions, values, beliefs, traditions or doctrinal positions call for insight, faith, self-abnegation, magnanimity, and a transcendent view of God rarely found in any but the most enlightened souls.⁴⁷

Paul and Barnabas

Following the Council of Jerusalem, Paul proposed to Barnabas⁴⁸ that they retrace the steps of their first missionary campaign to see how the fledging churches were faring. This plan did not materialize, however, because of a dispute about whether John Mark should accompany them.⁴⁹ Acts 15:36-41 tells us that Barnabas wanted to take along John Mark, who was his cousin. Paul disagreed, arguing that the young man deserted them in Pamphylia when they were on their first trip and, therefore was unreliable and unfit for service. Luke, in writing about the incident, uses the strongest language possible to indicate the intensity of the dispute. It is not a mere honest difference of opinion; it is personal.

This quarrel was much more closely connected with personal feelings than that which had recently occurred between St. Peter and St. Paul,⁵⁰ and it was proportionately more violent. There is little doubt that severe words were spoken on the occasion.⁵¹

Barnabas' interest was with his concern for John Mark. He no doubt wanted to give the young man a second chance. His dearest wish was to see his young kinsman approving

⁴⁷ Ibid., 97-98.

⁴⁸ Contrary to general impression, Barnabas is a colleague of Paul's and not a subordinate assistant. He is the older of the two and at this time probably had a higher status than Paul, both in Antioch and Jerusalem being that he played an important part as intermediary between the churches in the two cities. Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 61.

⁴⁹ Mills, 39.

⁵⁰ Gal. 2:11-16.

⁵¹ Conybeare, 193.

himself as a missionary for Christ.⁵² Mark was too valuable a man to be thrown aside for one mistake.⁵³ Paul's interest, on the other hand, was with his concern for the mission's success. Based on past performance, Mark was a bad risk and the life of the young churches should not be jeopardized by a careless or unreliable worker.⁵⁴ Mark had been tried once and had been found wanting.⁵⁵ The disagreement became so sharp that the immediate outcome was a parting of ways. It is not difficult to understand the obstinacy with which each of the disputants, when his feelings were once excited, clung to his opinion as to a sacred truth.⁵⁶ Yet, despise the intensity of the dispute; we should not suppose that Paul and Barnabas parted, like enemies, in anger and hatred. It is very likely that they made a deliberate and amicable arrangement to divide the region of their first mission between them.⁵⁷ Barnabas took Mark with him to Cyprus; Paul took Silas, one of the men who had been a delegate to Antioch from the Jerusalem council,⁵⁸ with him to Syria and Cilicia. While the immediate outcome appears to be an unfortunate one—the breakup of a wonderful ministry partnership—the conflict actually produced a positive result: a multiplication of missionary efforts that led, in part, to the strengthening of the churches in Galatia.

The following maxims gleaned from this episode are instructive when it comes to navigating congregational conflict: (i), a good work may be blessed by God, though its agents are encompassed with infirmity,⁵⁹ (ii), changes, which are violent in their beginnings, may be overruled [by God] for the best results,⁶⁰ (iii), in most disputes blame is a shared

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Tenney, 274.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Conybeare, 193.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 194.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Tenney, 274.

⁵⁹ Conybeare, 193.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

commodity, (iv), obstinately clinging to opinions and positions as if they are “sacred truths” creates a major barrier to resolution, and (v), the purest Christian zeal, when combined with human weakness and partiality, may lead to misunderstanding⁶¹ and conflict.

Conflicts of Allegiance in Corinth

Word came to the Apostle Paul that divisions had arisen in the church plant at Corinth.⁶² The precipitating issue causing the divisions was that discrete groups staked out their positions within the congregation by allegedly aligning themselves with one of the already well-known Christian leaders—Paul himself, Apollos, Peter and even Christ. As a result, jealousy and quarreling broke out within the congregation.

Those saying, “I am of Paul,” were, in the main, Gentile converts, men brought up free from the bondage of the Mosaic law and free from the influence of Jewish ideas and usage. Their interest was to press to extremes the liberty of the gospel.⁶³ Those saying, “I follow Apollos,” were men who endorsed the teachings of Paul, but had no personal loyalty to him. They prefer the preaching style and Alexandrian learning of Apollos.⁶⁴ The interest of this party was to form a philosophical Christianity for themselves.⁶⁵ Those saying, “I follow Cephas (Peter),” were Judaizers who apparently came to Corinth with letters of commendation⁶⁶ and were determined opponents of the Apostle Paul.⁶⁷ Their interest was to undermine Paul’s authority, whose apostleship they denied.⁶⁸ Those saying, “I follow

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² 1 Cor. 1:11-13, 3:3-9.

⁶³ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), xii.

⁶⁴ Conybeare, 379.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ 2 Cor. 3:1.

⁶⁷ Hodge, xiii.

⁶⁸ Conybeare, 378.

Christ,” were probably the more extreme members of the Judaizers.⁶⁹ Their interest appears to have been setting themselves up as having a closer connection with Christ, which they denied to the others.⁷⁰

It is clear from the text that each of the factions assumed a competitive approach in advocating for its position; hence the quarreling. In response to the conflict, Paul, through his letter, assumed a mediating role:

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?⁷¹

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.⁷²

Fallen human nature has a tendency to put people in positions of authority up on pedestals. Christians, even after coming under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and giving Him alone their allegiance, are, sadly, not immune from this propensity. The danger for congregations today, as it was in the first century Corinthian church, is the development of mini personality cults within congregations which, if not discouraged, may lead to unhealthy divisions and conflicts. Matthew Henry, in his commentary on First Corinthians addresses this danger and offers sound guidance on how best to avoid it.

The ministry is a very useful and very gracious institution, and faithful ministers are a great blessing to any people; yet the folly and weakness of people may do much mischief by what is in itself a blessing. They may fall into factions, side with particular ministers, and set them at their head, glory in their leaders, and be carried by them they know not whither. The only way to avoid this mischief is to have a modest opinion of ourselves, a due sense of the common weakness of human understanding, and an entire deference to the wisdom of God speaking in his word. Ministers are not to be set up in competition with one another.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 378-379

⁷⁰ Hodge, xiii.

⁷¹ 1 Cor 1:13.

⁷² 1 Cor 3:5-9.

All faithful ministers are serving one Lord and pursuing one purpose. They were appointed of Christ, for the common benefit of the church.⁷³

Paul Opposes Peter

The letter to the Galatian churches issued by the Council of Jerusalem to resolve the controversy over Gentile circumcision was essentially a compromise between contradictions: the validity of the law and its non-validity. The practical decision that the Jewish Christians should continue to observe the law and the Gentiles be free from it left it undecided which of these principles should take precedence over the other when they should come into that conflict which was sooner or later inevitable.⁷⁴ A visit to Antioch by the Apostle Peter, subsequent to the Council, and the later arrival in that city of “certain men from James,” provided the catalyst for that inevitable conflict. The account is found in Gal. 2:11-16

The reason for Peter’s visit to Antioch is not known. What is known, however, is that he joined himself to the community of believers and, following the practice of the Christian Jews there, ate with the Gentile Christians. When the men who were followers of James⁷⁵ arrived from Jerusalem they contended that Peter’s conduct in eating with the Gentiles was not only not required by the Jerusalem agreement, but was in fact contrary to it, since it involved disregard of the law by Jewish Christians.⁷⁶ The resulting pressure brought to bear upon Peter caused him to stop eating with his Gentile fellow-Christians. Others, including the venerable Barnabas, followed suit. The situation also caused the church to become

⁷³ Matthew Henry's Commentary, 1 Cor 3:21-23.

⁷⁴ Ernest De Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd. 1988), 114.

⁷⁵ It is not implied that the men came to Antioch at James’ request or instruction.

⁷⁶ Burton, 101.

divided, socially at least, into two, and placed enormous pressure on the Gentile Christians to take up observing Jewish dietary laws in order to restore unity within the congregation.⁷⁷

When Paul arrived on the scene and learned of Peter's conduct, he was livid. In his zealous indignation, he opposed Peter "to his face" and castigated him publicly for his hypocrisy. Paul's position was that Peter's own previous conduct showed that he recognized that the law was not binding even on Jewish Christians, and that it was therefore unjustifiable and hypocritical for him to refuse to eat with Gentile Christians.⁷⁸ Paul's interest was two-fold. First, to keep Gentile converts from being brought under the law; and second, to establish, once and for all—per the intent of the Jerusalem Council (in Paul's view), that Jewish Christians were also released from the obligation to keep the law with regard to food as well as circumcision. For Paul, the true, unmodified content of the gospel was at stake.⁷⁹ Peter, by his actions, appeared to take the position that the Jerusalem visitors were correct; although it is more likely, as Paul indicates, his actions were motivated by fear. The outcome, which had enormous theological significance, is captured in Paul's concluding words on the matter: "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified."⁸⁰

The salient learning point for congregational leaders from this episode is to be prepared to navigate conflict arising out of errant behavior or misinterpretation of policy by close, well-meaning ministry associates, and when such confrontation is necessary, to keep in mind

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), 97.

⁸⁰ Gal. 2:15-16.

the admonition of Matthew Henry: “The necessary censures of those who have offended ought to be managed without noise.”⁸¹

The foregoing discussion highlights the fact that the biblical record is rich in accounts from which many lessons for navigating congregational conflict can be gleaned. Those congregations that are sufficiently well versed in these biblically-based lessons, and are proactive in preventing and mitigating conflict effectively, are those least likely to experience congregational conflict extensively. Or as Matthew Henry put it:

In the best-ordered church in the world there will be something amiss, some mal-administration or other, some grievances, or at least some complaints; those are the best that have the least and the fewest.⁸²

⁸¹ Matthew Henry's Commentary, Matthew 1:18-25 The birth of Christ, III. 2.

⁸² Matthew Henry's Commentary, Acts 6:1-7 The appointment of deacons, I.2.(2.)[2.].

CHAPTER 4

EXAMINATION OF DOCTRINES INDISPENSIBLE TO NAVIGATING CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT

There are several Christian doctrines that are essential to effectively navigating congregational conflict: the doctrine of fallen human nature, the doctrine of Satan, the doctrine of the Christian life (consisting of discipleship and the doctrines of salvation, grace, and sanctification), the doctrine of the Church, and the doctrine of the Kingdom of God. Any treatment of the subject that fails to give due consideration to the importance of these doctrines, so foundational to Christianity, offers a prescription for navigating congregational conflict that is markedly deficient.

The Doctrine of Fallen Human Nature

Nowhere else in all of literature or the annals of man is there to be found, other than in the Bible, a satisfactory account for the origin of conflict and the reasons for its enduring effects. In the heavenly congregation, the first congregation created by God, there appears to have been a period of unity between God and the congregants—the angelic host. The duration of this period of unity is unknown, but it is known that it came to an end when Lucifer, the highest-ranking and most powerful member of the congregation, rebelled.

How long his integrity and allegiance to God lasted, we do not know. It would appear that for a period too long for our finite minds to fathom, he was a trusted and obedient lieutenant of the Almighty...¹ But then, after much true and pure sailing, Lucifer, the creature subject to the Creator, decided to lead a revolt.²

Though the conflict originated within Lucifer, it quickly spread as he set about recruiting forces within the created congregations to support his rebellion.

As a creature he lacked the ability to create beings. For him the only possible way to obtain subjects was through the persuasion of other creatures of God to join his rebellion. If his kingdom were to rule over both heavenly and earthly spheres, he had to persuade both angels and humans to join him.³

The first chapter of Genesis indicates there was also a period of unity between God and the beings of the second congregation He created. Adam and Eve, in their unfallen state, experienced the absence of conflict within the relationship between them and in their relationship with God. Tragically, all that changed with Satan's deception in the Garden of Eden:

The same method Satan used, in trying to circumvent God's limitation of his own being, was again applied in Eden. It had about the same effect and result that it had in the other Eden; it engendered rebellion and ruin!"⁴

Motivated as he was by his supreme desire to be like God, it is reasonable to suggest that Satan was jealous both of the relationship God had with Adam and Eve and of God's reign over the newly created order; so right from the beginning Satan knew he would do everything possible to get Adam and Eve to side with him in his rebellion against God.⁵ This, then, we may logically conclude, was his purpose in planning his encounter with Eve.

Against this backdrop the Bible presents the Genesis account of how sin and conflict (one of

¹ John Wesley White, *The Devil: What Scriptures Teach About Him* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1977), 32.

² White, 36.

³ Renald E. Showers, *What on Earth is God Doing?* (Neptune: Loizeaux Brothers, 1973), 13.

⁴ C. Theodore Schwarze, *The Program of Satan* (Chicago: Good News Publishers, 1947), 29.

⁵ Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Serpent of Paradise: The Incredible Story of How Satan's Rebellion Serves God's Purposes* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 41.

sin's many manifestations) crossed the threshold into our world. Thus, the proximate cause of sin and the resulting human conflict is Adam and Eve's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden.

Derived from the doctrine of the Fall is the doctrine of imputed sin, which holds that all humanity is tainted by the guilt of Adam's first sin inasmuch as he is the federal (representative) head of the whole human race. Closely associated with the doctrine of imputed sin is the doctrine of total depravity. Total depravity means that fallen human nature is corrupt, perverse, and sinful throughout. The adjective "total" does not mean that every person is as totally or completely corrupt in his actions and thought as he possibly could be. "Total" is used to indicate that the *whole* of man's being has been affected by sin—the corruption extends to every part of the person:⁶ intellect (his thinking), emotions (his feelings), and will (his doing).⁷ Thus, fallen human nature, with its attendant doctrines of imputed sin and total depravity, provides the only sure point of departure from which to understand, navigate, manage, resolve, and reconcile conflict whether secular or ecclesiastical. John Wesley White correctly observes:

The whole direction of history was determined by what happened in the Garden of Eden. No social scientist, historian, philosopher, or theologian can fully understand man—what he is, where he came from, or where by his own predisposition he is going—unless he reckons with the events which occurred in the Garden of Eden.⁸

The Christian Life

(Discipleship and the Doctrines of Salvation, Grace, and Sanctification)

⁶ David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1963), 18-19.

⁷ Ben Lacy Rose, *T.U.L.I.P. Sermons on the Five Points of Calvinism* (Franklin: Providence Publishing House, 1991), 11.

⁸ White, 55-56.

Four elements of the Christian life are indispensable to navigating congregational conflict: *salvation, grace, sanctification and discipleship*. *Salvation*, defined as Jesus' mission to save the lost, has a present as well as a future dimension;⁹ it is both temporal and eschatological. In its temporal dimension, salvation's effect is regeneration of the individual's fallen human nature. God, through Christ, effects a change which is radical and all-pervasive, a change which cannot be explained in terms of any combination, permutation, or accumulation of human resources.¹⁰ Although a mystery, salvation's regeneration explains how a person who is dead in trespasses and sins, whose mind is enmity against God, and who cannot do that which is well-pleasing to God can answer a call to the fellowship of Christ.¹¹ In its eschatological dimension, salvation is synonymous with eternal life.¹² It means not only the redemption of the body [at the resurrection] but also the restoration of communion between God and humanity that had been broken by sin.¹³ This dimension of salvation is ultimately pictured in Revelation 19 as the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

Salvation comes from the Lord¹⁴ and this fact brings us to the doctrine of grace. God is not in the business of helping us save ourselves.¹⁵ *Grace* is God's selecting from among rebellious humanity a people for himself based solely on God's own initiative because there is nothing meritorious within the chosen that warrants their selection. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by

⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 73.

¹⁰ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955), 96.

¹¹ Murray, 95.

¹² Ladd, 71.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁴ Jn. 2:9.

¹⁵ Michael Horton, *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991), 71.

works, so that no one can boast.”¹⁶ If God saves us apart from our works, then he must choose us apart from them, too.¹⁷ The significance of grace for navigating congregational conflict is this: A people saved from the very gates of hell through no effort of their own, and knowing that there is nothing in and of themselves that makes them even remotely worthy of being saved, should unhesitatingly exhibit to others, “especially to those who belong to the family of believers,”¹⁸ the grace they themselves have so freely received; expressing grace in conflict is manifested by exhibiting humility, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and love.

Salvation and God’s grace, however, do not eliminate sin from the heart and life of the Christian. There is still indwelling sin. The believer is not yet so conformed to the image of Christ that he is holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners. It is the process of sanctification that is precisely concerned with this fact.¹⁹ *Sanctification* is “that gracious and continuous operation of the Holy Spirit, by which He delivers the justified sinner from the pollution of sin, renews his whole nature in the image of God, and enables him to perform good works.”²⁰ Sanctification has as its aim the elimination of all sin and complete conformation to the image of God’s own Son.²¹ It has two dimensions: one passive, one active, one soteriological, one ethical. Soteriologically, sanctification is passive and denotes that all Christians belong to God. We are God’s people.²² In this sense, sanctification does not designate growth in ethical conduct but is a redemptive truth.²³ It is from this passive dimension an appeal is made to the active dimension. Since Christians have been sanctified—

¹⁶ Eph. 2:8-10.

¹⁷ Horton, 72.

¹⁸ Gal. 6:10.

¹⁹ Murray, 143.

²⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 532.

²¹ Murray, 143.

²² Ladd, 564.

²³ Ibid.

set apart to be God's people—we are to live as God's people and shun all that would defile.²⁴ Therefore, when it comes to congregational conflict, the passive, soteriological dimension of sanctification should persuade us that all the energizing grace and power necessary to navigate it effectively comes from God; and the active, ethical dimension should have the same effect as does grace—an unhesitating willingness for Christians to exhibit humility, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and love (especially to one another). While sanctification is in large part a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, it is not a work in which the Christian can remain passive.

Finally, Christians are disciples of Jesus Christ. *Discipleship* to Jesus involves far more than just being a follower of his; it means nothing less than the complete personal commitment to him and his message. Jesus' disciples are those who have received the life and fellowship of the Kingdom. As such, citizenship in God's Kingdom means the renunciation of one's own will so that the Kingdom of God may become the all-important concern of life. It means death of self, of personal ambition and self-centered purpose. In the place of selfish attainment, however altruistic and noble, one is to desire alone the rule of God.²⁵ Discipleship, therefore, must necessarily be an uncomfortable process of reorientation and of abandonment of the self-centered values of human society in favor of the divine economy, in which "Many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Mark 10:31).²⁶ If Christian disputants are to rise to a higher level of navigating conflict, they must exhibit spiritually mature behaviors and attitudes and apply biblically prescribed standards of conduct. These come by submitting ourselves to the lordship of Jesus Christ under His Word, through His Spirit. But the road of discipleship is not an easy one:

²⁴ Ibid., 565.

²⁵ Ibid., 130.

²⁶ Ibid., 234.

We are prone to distraction. We are far too easy on ourselves. We don't want to get up and practice. We want heaven from our armchairs. So we make a commitment to Christ, then that fades, then another one, then a spiritual breakthrough, and then a slack patch. We are all over the place. Our minds are set on ourselves, or on our finances, or on the opinions of the Christian community or on the success of our ministry. We find easier goals and substitute foci. We become anxious, stressed, harried and spiritually weak. We need to come to a point of final decision where we look at the mess, pull ourselves together and decide with all that is within us to focus ourselves totally on Christ alone and pursue single-minded, focused, disciplined mastery.²⁷

Christians, when confronted with conflict, are to do what Jesus did when in conflict with Satan in the wilderness: Trust in God's word of truth and obey through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. Discipleship calls Christians to radical self-knowledge in relation to the gospel of Christ's grace; to search out all corruption, deceit, and depravity of our hearts, hands, and tongues; to know God in fellowship with our blood-bought brothers and sisters;²⁸ to exhibit behaviors and apply standards of conduct Jesus expects of those who bear His name. Diligent discipleship helps congregations navigate conflict redemptively.

The Doctrine of the Church

Congregational conflict takes place in a context that is unique, an environment completely different from that within which secular organizations exist and function. Congregational conflict takes place within the Church—the covenant community of faith consisting of a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, the “called out ones”: the *ecclesia*. The distinctive of the Christian Church is that it originated with God, not man. This fact makes the Church so radically different from all

²⁷ John Edmiston, “The Management of Stress, Burnout, Threat, Conflict and Misunderstandings in the Ministry,” available from http://www.eomtc.com/articles/pastoral_stress.htm; Internet; accessed 16 March 2009.

²⁸ David Powlison, *Power Encounters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 110.

other organizations it may be said to be, not just at the head of the class, but in a class by itself.²⁹

The Church forms a spiritual unity of which Christ is the divine Head. It is animated by one Spirit, the Spirit of Christ; it professes one faith, shares one hope, and serves one King. It is the citadel of the truth and God's agency in communicating to believers all spiritual blessings. As the body of Christ it is destined to reflect the glory of God as manifested in the work of redemption.³⁰

The Church was ordained in the counsel of God before the foundation of the world.³¹ Its visible manifestation in human history began in Genesis 3:15. In response to Satan's deceit and man's rebellion, God at once stepped in and divided humanity in two. Thus by divine fiat were the Church and the world separated from each other and set in opposition one to the other.³² From that point forward, the Church, the *communio sanctorum*—consisting of the whole body of the elect throughout all ages—has been expected by the world, and has had the expectation of itself, to exhibit a “higher standard” of life: ethically, morally, and socially. The Church is the “light of the world,” “a city on a hill,” called by Jesus to let its “light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”³³ Therefore, one of the main tasks of the church is to display in this present evil age the life and fellowship of the Age to Come.³⁴ One area in which the Church can let its light shine and demonstrate to the world the Age to Come is how it navigates conflict. To paraphrase the apostle Paul, if the Church responds to conflict in exactly the same way as does the world, we are to be pitied more than all men.³⁵ Christians, by grace, belong to the most phenomenal organization in all of human history and we should resolve conflict and

²⁹ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 36.

³⁰ Berkhof, 564.

³¹ Eph. 1:4-5.

³² Kuiper, 37.

³³ Matt. 5:14-16.

³⁴ Ladd, 113.

³⁵ 1 Cor. 15:19.

reconcile relationships in keeping with Whose we are, absent the worldly elements Paul feared he might find among the believers in Corinth: quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.³⁶ The Church has the resources at its disposal to do better than that.

The Doctrine of Satan

In the Fourth Gospel, the world is seen to be in the grip of an evil supernatural power called Satan.³⁷ He is the god of this age,³⁸ whose objective is to blind the minds of men and women that they should not apprehend the saving power of the Gospel.³⁹ Satan is the archenemy of God and of Christ's Church. Among his many goals is to hinder the Church's ministry. To this end, he intends to spread division by inciting caricature, suspicion, lies, accusation, and hostility among God's people. After all, he is in the business of propagating himself in our attitudes and actions.⁴⁰ His supreme goal is to exert moral lordship. He sabotages both truth and love if he can conform us to his image.⁴¹ We are vulnerable to be taken captive to Satan to believe his lies and do his will.⁴² Given the incipient, single-focused, evil intention of this enemy, congregations, when confronted with conflict, should give "the devil his due," rather than dismissing the possibility of his involvement. Satan as the author of sin lurks behind every conflict. Christians who willingly partner with the enemy to instigate and stir up congregational conflict should be mortified by their complicity.

³⁶ 2 Cor. 12:20.

³⁷ Ladd, 263.

³⁸ 2 Cor. 4:4.

³⁹ Ladd, 440.

⁴⁰ Powlison, 16.

⁴¹ Ibid., 18.

⁴² Ibid., 109.

Those who sin against the light do “more evil” than those who sin in the darkness.⁴³ Fortunately, Jesus’ goal is also moral lordship, making us like himself by the power of the Spirit and the truth of the Word.⁴⁴

The Doctrine of the Kingdom of God

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, one cannot effectively address or discuss or implement conflict resolution and relational reconciliation among and between Christians without placing the entire enterprise squarely within the context of the Christian’s and the Church’s relationship to the Kingdom of God and, by inference, the rule of God. Of this relationship, George Eldon Ladd says, “The church is the community of the Kingdom but never the Kingdom itself. Jesus’ disciples belong to the Kingdom as the Kingdom belongs to them; but they are not the Kingdom. The Kingdom is the rule of God; the church is a society of women and men.”⁴⁵ Ladd subsequently notes some of the practical implications the rule of God has on those who live under it in the Kingdom of God:

Our central thesis is that the Kingdom of God is the redemptive reign of God dynamically active to establish his rule among human beings, and that this Kingdom, which will appear as an apocalyptic act at the end of the age, has already come into human history in the person and mission of Jesus to overcome evil, to deliver people from its power, and to bring them into the blessings of God’s reign.⁴⁶

Dallas Willard holds that God’s Kingdom or “rule” is the range of his effective will, where what he wants done is done. The person of God himself and the action of his will are the organizing principles of his kingdom, but everything that obeys those principles, whether by nature or by choice, is within his kingdom.⁴⁷ In the person and mission of Jesus Christ,

⁴³ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁵ Ladd, 109.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 18-19.

⁴⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 25.

the Kingdom of God came into the world to overcome evil, to deliver people from its power, and to bring them into the blessings of God's reign. Individual Christians and the Church are the beneficiaries of Christ's work and discipleship and sanctification are principle means through which God's rule is manifested in all areas of the Christian life.

Jesus came among us to show and teach the life for which we were made. He came very gently, opened access to the governance of God with him, and set afoot the conspiracy of freedom in truth among human beings. Having overcome death he remains among us. By relying on his word and presence we are enabled to reintegrate the little realm that makes up our life into the infinite rule of God. And that is the eternal kind of life.⁴⁸

Christians are pilgrims in the world. Our true citizenship is in a Kingdom that transcends the time and place of this present age. The eternal kind of life, ultimately to be realized at Jesus' second coming, is available now. Salvation, grace, sanctification, discipleship, and the communion of the saints through the Church are ours now. This should excite and motivate Christians to manifest the rule of God in every aspect of their lives—including conflict, whether individual or corporate. As citizens of the Kingdom of God, subject to the rule of God, we are to produce fruit in keeping with repentance.⁴⁹ Effectively navigating congregational conflict provides an excellent opportunity for doing so.

⁴⁸ Willard, 27.

⁴⁹ Matt. 3:8.

CHAPTER 5
ECCLESIASTICAL CONFLICT IN EARLY AND MODERN
PERIODS OF CHURCH HISTORY

Paraphrasing 1 Cor 10:12-13, it may be said that no conflict has seized any congregation except what is common to the Church. In the first five centuries of the present Church age, ecclesiastical conflict centered on doctrinal (primarily christological) issues. From the seventeenth century to the present, ecclesiastical conflict has primarily centered on the divergent philosophical views of liberal and conservative theologies as they contend for primacy within Protestantism. In the intervening centuries ecclesiastical conflict centered mostly on practices related to ecclesiology itself culminating in the events of the Reformation. This chapter briefly addresses the conflicts of the early and modern Church periods, forgoing a discussion on the period of the Reformation due to space limitations.

The Early Church Period

The various ecclesiastical conflicts in the early Church period culminated in the convening of five ecumenical councils in the 4th and 5th centuries. The escalating dynamics at play in these councils are common to many congregational (and denominational) conflicts.

There is a precipitating issue. There is the development of “parties,” each staking out a position on the issue. The issue takes on the characteristics of a contest which each party wants to win. The contest becomes a battle when the focus shifts from the issue to

principles. Finally, each party views its opposition as so threatening or evil it must be punished or eliminated.

Of the first five ecumenical councils, three are especially illustrative in this regard: The Council of Nicaea 325 A.D., the Council of Ephesus 431 A.D., and the Council of Ephesus 449 A.D. Commending the Ephesus council of 431 for study are its colorful cast of characters, its political intrigue, and its exceptionally low moral character. Commending the council of 449 are the autocratic, heavy-handed, unscrupulous, and illegitimate actions of its presiding bishop; the courage, political acumen and theological intelligence of the Roman pope; and the dreadful brutality which, according to some reports, resulted in the bishop of Alexandria murdering the bishop of Constantinople. Despite the intriguing fact that nowhere in the Church's history does ecclesiastical conflict make Christianity less attractive than in the two Ephesian councils,¹ only the Council of Nicaea has been chosen for discussion here because, space limitations aside, Nicaea's events are illustrative for our purposes.

Theologically, the event that precipitated the Council of Nicaea was the Arian heresy. Arius, for whom the heresy is named, was a presbyter in the church of Alexandria, Egypt who, early in the 4th century, propagated the notion that Jesus Christ the Son was subordinate to God the Father. Unfortunately for Arius, he pressed and overstated the view of subordination by teaching that there was a real difference in essence between the Father and the Son. Christ, he said, was neither God nor man, but something in between, a lesser deity of sorts. Arius expanded on this tradition and used stronger language than anyone before,

¹ Pope Leo I wrote in a letter to Emperor Theodosius II following the council of 449 that what happened at Ephesus was "an insult to the faith, an injury to all the churches of the world." Philip Hughes, *The Church In Crisis: A History of the General Councils: 325-1870* [on-line book] (Manassas, VA. : Image Books, 1964, accessed 30 December 2008); available from <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/CDHN/coun5.html>; Internet.

bluntly stating that the Son was a created being.² These views of Arius gained popularity, much to the displeasure of Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria (Egypt). Alexander called for a North African council to deal with the issue. The Council of Alexandria, A.D. 321, excommunicated Arius and deposed him of his position as presbyter. Matters continued to be quite tense and it looked as if there might be a schism of sorts, with those supporting Arius separating from those supporting Alexander. When Constantine the Great, who had recently (324 A.D.) secured his position as the sole ruler of the Roman Empire, heard of the doctrinal dispute going on in the Church, he decided to intervene to facilitate a resolution. The whole Church was summoned by the emperor to meet the following year (325 A.D.) in Nicaea, in Bithynia.³ Constantine's invitation for Christendom to convene at Nicaea posed the issue in the form of a simple question: "What is the precise relationship between the Father and the Son?" Constantine himself delivered the opening address, but as eloquent as he was, his plea fell on deaf ears. The bishops soon grouped into parties.⁴ Hosius, the aged bishop of Spain, it is said, sensing the tension, whispered into Constantine's ear, "Why don't you suggest we include the term *homoousios*⁵ to describe the relationship of the Son to the Father?" Constantine took the bishop's advice. At the end of the day, most, but not all, of the bishops signed the creedal statement containing the term *homoousios*. The three bishops who refused to sign the statement were excommunicated, banished, and anathematized. The Council of Nicaea adjourned in July of 325 A.D., but hardly was the Council closed when the

² The eternal generation of the Son from the will of the Father was, with Origen, the communication of a divine but secondary substance, and this idea, in the hands of the less devout and profound Arius, who with his more rigid logic could admit no intermediate being between God and the creature, deteriorated to the notion of the primal creature. Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post Nicene Christianity A.D. 311-600*, vol. 3, *History of the Christian Church*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1910), 620.

³ J. F. Bethune-Baker, *An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1903), 164.

⁴ Murphy, 29.

⁵ *Homoousios* is a Greek term meaning "of the same substance."

old party factions broke out with as much rancor as before... the controversy was far from over.⁶ The *ad hoc* process employed prior to and during Nicaea for navigating the Arian controversy was seriously deficient, for the outcome resulted in four decades of continuing ecclesiastical turmoil over the issue which was not resolved until the Council of Constantinople in 381.

The Modern Church Period

From the seventeenth century to the present, ecclesiastical conflict has primarily centered on the divergent philosophical views of liberal and conservative theologies. Rare is the church today that has not been confronted with some crisis as a result of the theological division between liberal and conservative Christians.⁷ Liberal theologians and orthodox theologians occupy different theological territories and, it would seem, there is little sense in trying to make those territories identical. Conservatives generally hold that liberal theology discredits and destroys the foundations of Christianity as Christianity has been known in all ages from the time of its origin.⁸ Liberals, on the other hand, generally hold that their theology, with all the inadequacies which mark every theology and despite the distortions which infect any theology from the intellectual and cultural milieu of the Age of its birth, is the least inadequate, most credible and cogent interpretation of Christian Faith in the nineteen centuries of its history.⁹

⁶ John Anthony McGuckin, "The Road to Nicaea," *Christian History & Biography* Issue 85 (Winter 2005): 23.

⁷ Richard J. Coleman, *The Issues of Theological Conflict: Evangelicals and Liberals* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), x.

⁸ John Horsch, *Modern Liberalism: The Destructiveness and Irrationality of the New Theology* (Scottsdale: Fundamental Truth Depot, 1920), 3.

⁹ Henry P. Van Dusen, *The Vindication of Liberal Theology: A Tract for the Times* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 17.

While the principle of compromise is a necessity to doing business in the marketplace, to the adherents of contrary theological views, it means surrender or extinction. The late RTS professor Harold O. J. Brown noted, “When religious groups compromise their foundational beliefs in order to coexist with the late sensate culture rather than challenging it or standing against it, they in effect consent to their own liquidation.”¹⁰ Both sides of the liberal/conservative theological debate seem to have taken this cautionary note to heart, neither wanting to compromise their foundational beliefs lest they fear, in doing so, they “consent to their own liquidation.”

A good starting point for coming to a historical understanding of the conflict between liberal and orthodox theologies is the Age of Enlightenment ushered in by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 which ended the Thirty Years’ War and propagated the notion that religion was no longer the primary reason over which to fight a war. With the memory of religious wars still very much in mind, people began to seek religiously neutral answers.¹¹ The Enlightenment was the period in European history from the end of the Thirty Years’ War to the French Revolution (1789-1799). The period was characterized by a self-conscious break with traditional values and authority. The principal figures of the movement (primarily from France, Germany, England, Scotland, and Italy) had in common a commitment to intellectual freedom and a belief that tradition—especially traditional religious authority—was an obstacle to human progress. The movement’s key characteristics were: (i), *autonomy*, (ii), *reason*, (iii), *optimism*, (iv), *a romantic notion of nature*, and (v), *tolerance*. The Enlightenment’s scientific thinking and philosophical thinking were built on the ideas of

¹⁰ Harold O.J. Brown, *The Sensate Culture* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1992), 67.

¹¹ The advent of the Enlightenment produced an atmosphere where religion was consciously pushed down or forced into the background of society.

intellectuals and academicians such as Rene Descartes, Isaac Newton, and John Locke. Correspondingly, the Enlightenment's theological thinking was built on ideas such as those of Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648). Cherbury believed that appeals to religious authority, which emphasized differences rather than similarities among religions, were singularly responsible for the intellectual and political violence of the seventeenth century. He cautiously hoped a religion of reason, common to all, could orient future political activity toward the attainment of peace in an enlightened society.¹² In 1624 Cherbury wrote *De Veritate* (On the Truth) in which he argued for a natural religion that was not dependent upon supernatural revelation and on which all rational people could agree. Herbert believed that all men had certain innate (self-evident) principles imprinted on their hearts. His *notitiae communes* (innate principles) were: (i), God exists. One does not need the Scriptures to know who God is, (ii), it is also self-evident that God should be worshiped, (iii), one should practice virtue, (iv), there is an obligation to repent of sins, and (v), there are rewards and punishments after death. Resident in Cherbury's principles are the foundational concepts of *deism*, which has been defined as "the negative criticism of claims for the uniqueness and divine character of any revealed religion (including Christianity) and the positive affirmation that a religion based on reason and nature is sufficient for salvation."¹³ Deism, with its strong moralistic overtone, became *the* Enlightenment religion of many of the eighteenth-century intellectual elite,¹⁴ reducing Christianity to a few basic tenets, i.e., there is a God; He is nice; and we ought to be nice too.

In the Enlightenment, man began to look for life's answers in new places. The starting point of inquiry was no longer God but the self. Reason and nature supplanted

¹² Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21.

¹³ McDermott, 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

Scripture as the primary sources of faith and practice. God became overshadowed by human reason. By the end of the 18th century, the theological struggle within Christianity was a debate about the relationship between “natural religion” based on abstract principles and “revealed religion,” said to be based in the religious experience recorded in Scripture.¹⁵ This struggle is the immediate ancestor of the conflict between liberal theology and conservative theology that raged throughout the 20th century and, in the 21st century, remains the source of many of the controversies plaguing congregations and denominations alike; the current ongoing strife within the Presbyterian Church USA and the worldwide Anglican communion being but two examples.

Today, the major on-going issues in contention between liberal and conservative theologies through which the Church must navigate are: (i), The Bible, primarily its character and authority; (ii), God, primarily the nature of his being and his function vis-à-vis man and the world; (iii), anthropology, primarily man’s nature, his relation to God, and his developmental potential, (iv), sin, primarily its nature and its effect on humanity, (v), Jesus Christ, primarily his nature and the meaning of his life, and (vi), the Gospel, primarily its nature and meaning for humanity. The tenaciousness with which adherents hold to their respective positions on each of these issues highlights an axiom of conflict: when it comes to negotiation and compromise, the last thing on which people are willing to yield or “negotiate away” are closely held values—the most unyielding of which are religious beliefs. Compromise, to the adherents of contrary theological views, means surrender or extinction. Neither of these presently appears to be an acceptable outcome for the adherents of either liberal or conservative theology.

¹⁵ Ibid., 18.

In sum, the history of the Church clearly shows that questions of theological and religious principle, and the conflicts they spawn, are extremely difficult to navigate. This is primarily because they are not to be adjusted, like political measures or compromise, but must be fought through to their last results, and the truth must either conquer or (for the time) succumb.¹⁶ The unfortunate aspect of this is that historically and contemporarily, the Church's approach to navigating conflict arising out of theological, ecclesiastical, and philosophical principles has been haphazard and, in the main, devoid of a proactive approach aimed at effectively navigating conflict for the glory of God.

¹⁶ Schaff, 621.

CHAPTER 6
PRACTICAL IMPLICATION:
A MORE COMPLETE PRESCRIPTION FOR NAVIGATING
CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT

Undoubtedly, most American Christians would agree with the primary assumption underlying this thesis: congregational conflict is pandemic throughout Christian churches in the United States and leaves in its wake a trail of turmoil. Most Christians would likely also agree based on the cumulative evidence presented above, that present initiatives appear not to be sufficient in preventing and mitigating congregation-wide conflict. The primary practical implication of this study, therefore, is that there exists a need for a more complete prescription for navigating congregational conflict. Accordingly, presented here is a three-fold approach aimed at bolstering present initiatives that: (i), offers a biblically-based curriculum to clergy, ministry staff, lay leaders, and church members on how to be proactive in preventing and mitigating congregation-wide conflict, (ii), provides congregations with an understanding of Christian-based neutral third-party dispute resolution processes such as mediation and, (iii), provides access to third-party neutrals, such a Christian mediators, who are specifically trained to seek outcomes that not only resolve issues and reconcile relationships, but also edify the individual Christians involved and strengthen the Body of Christ—and to achieve these outcomes by applying dispute resolution processes and

techniques appropriate to the ecclesiastical context. It is believed that such an approach can significantly reduce the negative outcomes of conflict presently experienced by many U.S. congregations due the use of *ad hoc*, haphazard approaches to resolving conflict that generally fail to sufficiently take into consideration the ecclesiastical context within which congregational conflict takes place.

A Biblically-based Curriculum

As asserted in Chapter 1, contemporary literature, academics, and practice do not sufficiently take into consideration either the context within which congregational conflict takes place or the positive spiritual impact congregational conflict can have on individual Christians and the Body of Christ. For example, the syllabi of undergraduate courses on conflict from three seminaries reviewed for this paper—one each from Union Theological Seminary,¹ Assemblies of God Theological Seminary,² and Reformed Theological Seminary³—all appear to give insufficient attention to the subjects of fallen human nature, the Christian life, the doctrine of the Church, Satan as the enemy, and the Kingdom of God.⁴ Similarly insufficient are the most popular contemporary books on the subject of congregational conflict. While each alludes in some way to the five scriptural subjects just mentioned—and makes at least a passing reference to being written from a biblical perspective

¹ Thomas Porter and Randall Styers, “Peacebuilding: Conflict Transformation, Mediation, and Restorative Justice” [on-line course syllabus] (Union Theological Seminary, 1999, accessed 13 June 2008); available from <http://www.h-net.org/~peace/hpsyll-styers.pdf>; Internet.

² Cheryl A. Taylor, “PTH 626 Conflict Resolution in the Church” [on-line course syllabus] (Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2006, accessed 2 October 2008); available from http://www.agts.edu/syllabi/resident/2008fall/pth626ctaylor_fall08_res.pdf; Internet.

³ Tommy Kiedis, “Change and Conflict Management #2PT 544” [on-line course syllabus] (Reformed Theological Seminary, 2007, accessed 24 April 2009); available from http://www.rts.edu/Site/Academics/Docs/Syllabi/Orlando/2007_04_2PT544_Change_and_Management.pdf; Internet.

⁴ Perhaps this is because being seminary courses it is understood that students in attendance already possess an acute understanding of these topics as well as generally high levels of Christian maturity, ecclesiastical sophistication, and biblical literacy?

or Christian worldview—none explicitly maintains a focus on these subjects all the way through its presentation. The following biblically-based curriculum proposes to address this deficiency:

Navigating Congregational Conflict A Proposed Curriculum

Congregational Disputes & Congregational Conflict

- Similarities
- Differences

Resolution & Reconciliation

- The Importance of the Distinction

Conflict in the Context of the Church

- The Uniqueness of the Church as an Organization
- The Distinctives of Congregational Life Contributing to Conflict
- The Relationship Between the Church and the Kingdom of God

Origins of Congregational Conflict

- The Doctrine of Satan
- The Doctrine of Original Sin (The Fall)
- The Importance of Genesis 3:15

Insights from Old Testament Conflicts

- The Issues, Positions & Interests of the Parties
- The Parties' Approaches to Conflict
- Lessons for Congregations

Insights from New Testament Conflicts

- The Issues, Positions & Interests of the Parties
- The Parties' Approaches to Conflict
- Lessons for Congregations

The Matthew 18 Strategy

- Its Application
- Its Misapplication

Congregational Conflict in the Context of the Christian Life

- The Regeneration of Salvation
- The Response to Grace
- The Dimensions of Sanctification
- The Spiritual Disciplines of Discipleship

Congregational Conflict in the Context of the Kingdom & Rule of God

- The Nature & Extent of God’s Reign
- The Kingdom’s Eschatological Dimension
- Life in the “already, but not yet”
- Overcoming Evil with Good

Principles, Skills & Techniques for Preventing & Mitigating Congregational Conflict

- The Dispute Resolution Continuum
- Axioms of Conflict Resolution
- Communication & Personality
- The Fundamentals & Dynamics of Negotiation
- Approaches to Conflict
- Interventions for Resolving Conflict

Christian-Based Third-party Dispute Resolution Processes

When conflict arises, individual Christians and congregations must decide how best to navigate the conflict. An informed decision in this regard requires an understanding of the various third-party dispute resolution processes, such as fact-finding, mediation, and arbitration, suitable for such purposes. *Fact-finding* is a process in which an independent, neutral fact-finder conducts an investigation and issues a written report. Generally, the fact-finder’s report does not include recommendations for settlement, but rather offers a summary of facts and determinations of credibility. Fact-Finding is particularly effective when parties are facing a difficult and significant decision with limited or conflicting information and they want a truly neutral investigation and report because their common interest lies in negotiating a settlement. Fact-Finding by a Christian fact-finder, cognizant of the unique ecclesiastical environment, provides congregations with a confidential, impartial investigation and report

that can serve as the basis for a mutually satisfactory outcome—directly negotiated between the parties themselves—that edifies the individuals involved, strengthens the Body of Christ, and glorifies God.

Mediation is an extension of the negotiation process. When two or more disputing parties are not negotiating effectively or are at an impasse, a neutral, impartial mediator with no stake in the outcome is brought in at the parties' joint invitation to try to improve communication and move them toward a negotiated settlement of their own making. The mediator has no authority to unilaterally propose terms of settlement or impose a particular settlement. Unlike more adversarial processes like arbitration and litigation which look to the past in order to find fault, assess blame, and impose a resolution, mediation is collaborative—discounting much of what happened in the past and looking to the future to determine how the parties can work together for their mutual benefit, resulting in a settlement agreeable to both. Mediation is particularly effective when disputing parties have an ongoing relationship and need to not only resolve disputed issues, but to reconcile broken or damaged relationships. Broken or damaged relationships are often an integral issue in congregational conflict and mediation, of all dispute resolution processes, is best-suited to address this dimension of the conflict. Mediation also provides the opportunity to craft creative solutions that not only effectively address the precipitating issue, but also the parties' underlying interests and needs. The ideal mediation for a congregation is one that is conducted by a Christian mediator cognizant of the unique ecclesiastical environment within which congregational conflict takes place and provides a process that edifies participants in their Christian walk and strengthens the Body of Christ, in addition to resolving disputed issues and reconciling broken or damaged relationships—all to the glory of God.

Arbitration is the process where two or more disputing parties engage a neutral, impartial arbitrator who, sitting as judge and jury, conducts a semi-formal hearing on the issue in dispute and, based on the evidence and testimony, renders an award—a final and binding decision that is enforceable by the courts (in most jurisdictions). Arbitration is particularly well-suited for disputes where a negotiated settlement is not (or perceived not to be) achievable, where a determination needs to be made as to rights and responsibilities, or where parties have an honest difference of opinion on a matter and simply need a trusted and respected third-party to decide the issue. Arbitration is not a good option if the parties' real need is reconciliation of their relationship. Arbitration conducted in the context of the Church usually differs from secular arbitration in that the arbitrator conducts the proceedings from a biblical worldview and renders an award based on scriptural principles in addition to what is generally considered just and equitable.

Access to Christian Mediation

In recent years, mediation has become the prescription of choice for resolving congregational conflict. This parallels a similar preference for mediation that has developed in secular society. This final section, therefore, will deal only with accessing Christian mediation rather than access to the full spectrum of dispute resolution services.

A search on Google for the term “Christian mediation” returned 4,880 results. The same search on Yahoo returned an astonishing 23,000 results and on Ask.com 998 results. Research for this paper, however, revealed that actually finding and accessing Christian mediation services (at least through the Internet) is difficult. The aforementioned searches indicate there is only one organization offering Christian mediation on a nationwide basis:

Peacemaker Ministries. This is not particularly surprising considering that most mediation activity, secular as well as Christian, is provided by sole practitioners. Mediators available through Peacemaker Ministries, however, are not ubiquitous—only 88 mediators are available through its website. Sole practitioners of Christian mediation either have no presence on the Internet or are flying under the radar of the most popular search engines. These findings indicate there exists a need to make Christian mediation more accessible. To this end, seminaries and denominations could play an extremely valuable role by developing the capacity to provide the Body of Christ comprehensive information about Christian mediation and access to lists of “qualified” or “approved” Christian mediators. In this regard, seminaries and denominations would do well to seek Christian mediators who mediate not as a vocation, but as a ministry. Seminaries and denominations could also consider developing full-scale “departments” or “offices” of conflict and dispute resolution services. Regardless of form, the two key points here are these: (i), the Body of Christ needs greater access to third-party neutrals, such as Christian mediators, and (ii), such third-party neutrals must be specifically trained to seek outcomes that not only resolve issues and reconcile relationships, but also edify the individual Christians involved and strengthen the Body of Christ—all to the glory of God, and to achieve these outcomes by applying dispute resolution processes and techniques with due regard for the ecclesiastical context within which they are operating and from an acute understanding of fallen human nature, Satan as the enemy, the Christian life, the doctrine of the Church, and the Kingdom and Rule of God.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This study grew out of a concern from personal experience that congregational conflict is a principle tool of Satan used for hindering the effectiveness of the Church's ministry. It was, therefore, my desire as a dispute and conflict resolution professional of almost twenty-five years' experience to investigate the subject of congregational conflict to determine what, if anything, I might be able to contribute to present initiatives aimed at helping congregations effectively navigate conflict so its outcomes would glorify God rather than Satan.

The study of recent research and contemporary literature presented in this thesis confirmed that congregational conflict is wide-spread in Christian congregations throughout the United States today. The study also confirmed that intra-church conflicts result in negative outcomes such as a loss of congregational unity, plummeting morale, an exodus of staff, a decline in giving, a reduction and/or loss of vital ministries, decreased attendance/loss of members, loss of lifelong friendships, distrust of fellow Christians, fear, anxiety, damage to the congregation's reputation, and lawsuits, and that such outcomes hinder the Church's ministry.

In addition to the literature review the accounts of congregational conflict within both the Old and New Testament dispensations of the covenant community of faith and the study of the Church's handling of ecclesiastical conflict in its early and modern periods reveal that the Church's approach to navigating conflict arising out of theological, ecclesiastical, and philosophical principles has been haphazard and, in the main, devoid of a proactive approach aimed at effectively navigating conflict for the glory of God. Finally, a systematic, theological examination of the doctrines of fallen human nature, Satan, salvation, grace, sanctification, the Church, and the Kingdom of God support the notion that an acute understanding of these doctrines is indispensable to navigating congregational conflict in a way that edifies the individual Christians involved and strengthens the Body of Christ. Any treatment of the subject that fails to give due consideration to the importance of these doctrines, so foundational to the Christian life, offers a prescription for navigating congregational conflict that is markedly deficient.

Given the principle findings of this study—that the Church's approach to navigating conflict has been, and remains, haphazard and devoid of a proactive approach aimed at effectively navigating conflict in a way that glorifies God; that congregational conflict is widespread in Christian congregations throughout the United States today; and in spite of current efforts aimed at effectively managing congregational conflict incidences of it have not been significantly reduced and negative outcomes have not been appreciably mitigated—my conclusion is that there exists a need for a more complete prescription for navigating congregational conflict and, therefore, have proposed such a prescription consisting of three elements: (i), a biblically-based curriculum for clergy, ministry staff, lay leaders, and church members on how to be proactive in preventing and mitigating congregation-wide conflict,

(ii), an information “campaign” aimed at providing congregations with an understanding of Christian-based neutral third-party dispute resolution processes such as mediation and, (iii), access to third-party neutrals, such as Christian mediators, who are specifically trained to seek outcomes that not only resolve issues and reconcile relationships, but also edify the individual Christians involved and strengthen the Body of Christ.

The following quote from George Eldon Ladd offers a fitting conclusion to this study, for it both recognizes the Church’s shortcomings and the Church’s call to be an exemplary witness to the world. In so doing it is, in part, an exhortation for the Church to navigate congregational conflict in a way that brings glory to God the Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ:

If Jesus’ disciples are those who have received the life and fellowship of the Kingdom, and if this life is in fact an anticipation of the eschatological Kingdom, then it follows that one of the main tasks of the church is to display in this present evil age the life and fellowship of the Age to Come. The church has a dual character, belonging to two ages. It is the people of the Age to Come, but it still lives in this age, being constituted of sinful mortal persons. This means that while the church in this age will never attain perfection, it must nevertheless display the life of the perfect order, the eschatological Kingdom of God.¹

¹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 113.

APPENDIX A

BRIEF SURVEY ON CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT

1. Which of the following best describes your role in your congregation?

- Pastor
 - Associate Pastor
 - Officer (elder, deacon)
 - Ministry Leader Volunteer
 - Other, please specify
-

For the purposes of this survey, congregational conflict is defined as follows:

A dispute generally recognized as a “contest” that has come to the attention of most members of the congregation and is characterized by one or more of the following: (i), loss of perspective on the issue(s); (ii), problems and solutions have moved to the background ; (iii), groups and coalitions begin to form, but are not yet factions; (iv), allies begin to commiserate with each other; and (v), it become difficult to separate issues from persons.

2. During the last five years has your congregation experienced any conflicts that meet this survey’s definition of congregational conflict?

A dispute generally recognized as a “contest” that has come to the attention of most members of the congregation and is characterized by one or more of the following: (i), loss of perspective on the issue(s); (ii), problems and solutions have moved to the background ; (iii), groups and coalitions begin to form, but are not yet factions; (iv), allies begin to

commiserate with each other; and (v), it become difficult to separate issues from persons.

- No
 - Yes, and it was not very serious
 - Yes, and it was moderately serious
 - Yes, and it was very serious
3. With your congregation in mind, are most congregational conflicts resolved through internal intervention processes, e.g. actions taken by pastor and/or officers, external intervention processes (such as mediation), or a combination of both?
- Internal intervention processes only
 - External intervention processes only
 - A combination of both internal and external processes
 - Other, please specify
4. Regarding the lasting/residual impact of conflicts (meeting this survey's definition) on your congregation in the last five years, how would you describe the quality of the outcome(s) of the conflict(s)?
- Very Satisfactory (i.e. glorified God and edified the congregation)
 - Satisfactory (i.e. believed to be acceptable to God and the congregation)
 - Unsatisfactory (i.e. likely disappointed God and tolerated by the congregation)
 - Very Unsatisfactory (i.e. dishonoring to God and damaging to the congregation)
 - No such conflict within the last five years
5. Of the two following statements, which comes closest to describing how conflict is handled in your congregation?
- We generally handle conflict on an *ad hoc* basis; reacting to each situation by using whatever means seem appropriate.
 - We promote and follow a thoughtful, biblically based proactive approach to conflict so that disputed issues are resolved and damaged relationships reconciled at the earliest point possible, through the most appropriate means possible, for the best result possible.
6. With your congregation in mind, which of the following best describes the method most often used to deal with **serious** congregational conflict between the onset of conflict and the eventual outcome?

- Pastor alone unilaterally makes a decision.
 - Pastor and congregation's officers (elders, deacons) unilaterally make a decision.
 - Pastor alone works collaboratively with disputants to achieve a mutually acceptable outcome.
 - Pastor and officers together work collaboratively with disputants to achieve a mutually acceptable outcome.
 - Leadership seeks outside third-party counsel/advice on how to handle the conflict.
 - Leadership engages an outside third-party dispute resolution professional, such as a mediator, to work with all parties to achieve a mutually acceptable resolution.
 - Other, please specify.
7. Regarding the outcomes of a conflict in your congregation over the last five years, select from the following options the *one* that best describes the most common result.
- All issues were satisfactorily resolved and all negatively affected relationships were reconciled.
 - All issues were satisfactorily resolved, but some negatively affected relationships were not reconciled.
 - Only some issues were satisfactorily resolved and only some negatively affected relationships were reconciled.
 - Only some issues were satisfactorily reconciled, but all negatively affected relationships were reconciled.
 - No issues were satisfactorily resolved and no negatively affected relationships were reconciled.
 - Other, please specify.
8. Do you feel you have sufficient education and training to efficiently and effectively respond to congregational conflict (as defined for this survey) so that disputed issues are resolved and damaged relationships are reconciled in ways that edify all involved and bring glory to God?
- Yes
 - No
 - Not sure
9. Would you be interested in receiving education and training—either personally or for your congregation's leadership or for your members at large—that would promote and foster efficient and effective responses to congregational conflict so that disputed issues are resolved and damage relationships are reconciled in ways that honor and respect all involved and bring glory to God? **Select all that apply:**

- No
- Yes, for me personally
- Yes, for my congregation's leadership
- Yes for my congregation members at large

10. If you or your congregation's leadership/members were to receive education and training in how to take a proactive approach to conflict in general and congregational conflict in particular, please rank the following sources in order of preference from which you would take such education and training. Mark your first choice 1, second choice 2, and so on.

1	2	3	4	5	6	Not Sure
<hr/>						
A respected secular dispute resolution/conflict management organization.						
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<hr/>						
A respected secular sole-practitioner in the dispute resolution/conflict management field.						
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<hr/>						
A Christian-based dispute resolution/conflict management organization.						
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<hr/>						
A respected Christian sole-practitioner in the dispute resolution/conflict management field.						
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<hr/>						
A seminary.						
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<hr/>						
My denomination.						
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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