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# DEVELOPING THE ART OF GRACIOUS DISAGREEMENT

Can we be true to our convictions without being unkind to those who disagree with us? How can being too agreeable set us up for conflict? What can we learn from our anger?

The following pages are the result of a study that has dramatically changed my attitude not only toward conflict but toward our Lord as well. I pray there is help here for you or someone you know.

*Martin R. De Haan II*

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## DON'T AGREE IF YOU DON'T

What if we are sure we are right about a contested issue of church doctrine, worship style, or use of the mission budget? What if we believe that the other side hasn't been honest in the way it has handled its side of the disagreement? How can we avoid letting dangerous people have their way?

Such questions might be especially troubling if we are also aware of the damage conflict can do. We may know of family or friends who won't darken the door of a church as a result of getting caught in the middle of a bitter split. We might know of members who routinely dismiss the thought of ever again getting actively involved in the work of the church. We may know of discouraged

pastors who have left the ministry to sell life insurance, real estate, or cemetery plots.

So, knowing the danger of church disputes, what do we do? Do we let people walk all over us for the sake of unity? No, to begin with, we need to see that the Bible gives us reason to say . . .

**Don't agree if you don't.** Don't, for the sake of peace and unity, try to be so agreeable that you lose your integrity in the process. Don't contribute to the deadly, dishonest silence that often precedes an outbreak of conflict.

Remember that Moses, Jesus, and Paul were not known for being agreeable. They did not play it safe to avoid rocking the boat. They did not pursue peace at any price. Through their example and the whole of Scripture, the Bible consistently gives us reason to believe that . . .

**Disagreement can be healthy.** While the Bible warns about the dangers of bitter disputes, it also gives us many reasons to cultivate the art of gracious disagreement. Solomon taught that safety is found in a multitude of counselors, not a multitude of nondissenting, compliant followers (Prov. 11:14). He

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*There are many reasons to cultivate the art of gracious disagreement.*

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said that the wounds of a friend are faithful (27:6), that manipulative lies of flattery are dangerous (26:28), and that real friends are to sharpen one another the way iron sharpens iron (27:17).

If we have not learned to practice healthy, animated,

and vigorous disagreement, we will not be ready to manage our response to conflict when it comes. If we have not given one another permission to test our ideas, any disagreement can feel like a personal attack. Defenses go up. Tempers flare. Feelings are hurt. We end up kicking ourselves with regret while living with the proof that “a brother offended is harder to win than a strong city” (Prov. 18:19).

If we have not learned to cultivate healthy disagreement, any issue can be dangerous. Trouble might develop over family relationships, church policy, doctrine, budgets, staff salaries, music, curricula, use of facilities, young people’s activities, or church discipline. Friction could occur around an aging pastor, a freewheeling youth director, a wealthy committee member, or a

strong-willed treasurer. Bitterness could surface over a discussion of the pastor's friends, wife, priorities, or teaching style. It might involve trends in the denomination, elimination of the Wednesday night prayer service, missionary support, or philosophy of outreach. The anger could erupt over important matters or personal irritations.

In light of the fact that almost any issue can turn into conflict, how then do we develop the kind of gracious disagreement that results in counsel, safety, and wisdom rather than conflict? That's what we are going to attempt to answer in the remaining pages of this study. Before we do, though, there's one other important matter we need to keep in mind . . .

**Conflict is unavoidable and not necessarily bad.** We don't need to feel guilty just

because we are involved in church conflict. Trouble is unavoidable. Conflict will come. It comes to the best of churches, to the best of spiritual leaders, to the best of church boards, and to the best of friendships. Conflict came to Jesus and His inner circle. It came between Paul and Barnabas, and Paul and Peter. Conflict came not only to the immature church of Corinth, but to the much more mature church in Philippi. Conflict came to the inner circle of Christ even after He had served them communion on the night of His betrayal.

History shows that the "honeymoon experience" of new relationships is always followed by testing and trouble. Any expectation to the contrary will result in disappointment. It makes far more sense, therefore, not to pray that the Lord would keep us from

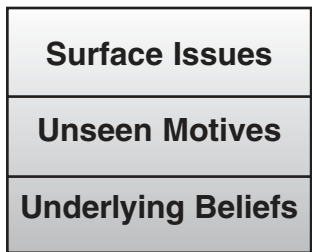
conflict, but that He would enable us, as gracefully as possible, to manage our response to it. Our challenge in the words of Paul is, “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Rom. 12:18).

But how do we develop such an attitude when faced with people who obviously do not have our best interests at heart? How do we cultivate the art of gracious disagreement in the presence of people who don’t even like us? One of the most practical things we can do is realize that as far as conflict is concerned . . .

**The problem is not the problem.**

Disagreement over issues is not what causes us to walk all over one another. Disagreement is not what causes board and committee meetings to erupt in anger. The real story of conflict occurs not

in what we are disagreeing about, but in why and how we are disagreeing. Until we get below surface issues to our own unseen motives, we have not even begun to deal with the problems that are dividing us. And until we get below our unseen motives to the underlying beliefs that form them, we will still have a very shallow approach to conflict.



Our differences might be important. Our concerns might be critical to the life of the church. What we need to see, however, is that issues do not cause conflict. Unseen motives and underlying misbeliefs cause conflict.

# LOOK BEHIND THE ISSUES

To cultivate relationships that enjoy the freedom of healthy disagreement, we need to develop an understanding of unseen motives.

## MOTIVES BEHIND ISSUES

The issues in a conflict are like the tip of an iceberg.

Underneath are the unseen motives that cause healthy disagreements to turn sour.

The apostle James showed us that unseen motives can cause us to be like trouble looking for a place to happen. He made it clear that if we resent the

attention or recognition that someone else is getting (envy), or if we are committed to getting ahead even at the expense of others (self-seeking or selfish ambition), we have a hidden conflict of interest that will shape and sour our approach to disagreement.

Paul, on the other hand, showed us that if our motives are right, we can act graciously—even toward those who are against us.

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there” (Jas. 3:13-16).

Even if we are convinced that the other side is caught in serious error, our goal can be for their good. Encouraging such concern for those who are against us, Paul wrote, “A servant of the

Lord must not quarrel [lit. fight] but be gentle to all,

able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil” (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

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***Friends can enjoy intense, animated debate without attacking one another’s character or turning mean.***

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James and Paul are not alone in their emphasis on the role of right attitudes and motives. The whole Bible is a book of the heart. The Scriptures teach us that if our motives aren’t right, our knowledge, faith, and self-sacrifice are of little

value in the eyes of God (1 Cor. 13:1-3). Over and over the Word of God calls for the kind of love that is a motive before it is an action.

The Scriptures are also clear about what happens when bad motives displace good ones. After being served communion on the night of our Lord’s betrayal, it was envy and selfish ambition that caused the disciples to argue about which of them was the greatest (Lk. 22:14-27). Then in the hours that followed, envy prompted the leaders of the Jews to demand the arrest and execution of the Son of God (Mt. 27:18; Mk. 15:10). They hated this miracle-worker, not just because they disagreed with Him but because He was occupying their space. He was a threat to the attention and affection and influence they wanted for themselves.

## BELIEFS BEHIND MOTIVES

Conflict could be defined

as “two or more people trying to occupy the same space or control the same limited resources.” This is what was happening in the dispute between the herdsmen of Abram and Lot. There wasn’t room for both of them.

Abram’s response was peaceful—offering Lot his choice of land. But Lot took advantage of his uncle’s generosity by choosing the

best part for himself. He chose the plain of Jordan, which was so lush that

Genesis likens it to the garden of the Lord.

The reason for Abram’s generosity goes beyond his good motives.

Abram was able to be so vulnerable because he was being taught by God to realize that his well-being was not found in his own clenched fists but in the open hand of the One who was leading him (Gen. 13:14-18).

“Then Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the South. Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. And he went on his journey from the South as far as Bethel . . . And there Abram called on the name of the Lord. Lot also, who went with Abram, had flocks and herds and tents. Now the land was not able to support them, that they might dwell together, for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock. . . . So Abram said to Lot, ‘Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren. . . . Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, then I will go to the left’ ” (Gen. 13:1-9).

Our motives and approach to conflict will not be shaped by rules but by whether or not we join Abram in trusting the Provider God. Are we willing to let Him provide for us on His terms and in His time? Or do we believe our security depends on our ability to take matters into our own hands?

This is not to say that we are to lie down and let people walk on us whenever they want. Love doesn't always give others their way. Sometimes they need to feel the weight and intensity of our concerns and convictions. In the process, however, they need to sense that our disagreement is gracious and loving in nature. They need to know that we are not resisting merely to protect our own interests. And the only way we can be so loving is to rest in God's ability to provide for us.

People who know they are secure in God's hand find their motives shaped in that awareness. They learn to live with grace, to disagree in kindness, to

### **Surface Issues**

What we are agreeing or disagreeing about.

### **Unseen Motives**

Why we are agreeing or disagreeing, and whether we are for or against one another.

### **Underlying Beliefs**

What we believe about God, ourselves, and our circumstances. These beliefs shape not only why we are disagreeing but how we are doing so.

love freely, and to trust God from day to day when matters beyond their control do not go their way.

By the way, remember Lot? When he chose what he thought was the best land for himself, he got the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in the bargain.

## MISBELIEFS BEHIND CYCLES

We repeat cycles of conflict when we assume that what

we want is always what we need, or when we are more concerned about the people who are against us than the God who is for us. Misbeliefs are the fuel of ongoing cycles of conflict. They lead us to think that it is up to us to take matters in hand, and that if we don't protect ourselves no one else will.

Underlying misbeliefs also help to explain why the apostle Paul wrote as he did to disputing parties in Philippi. He must have known something of the

matters that were separating them. Yet he didn't even mention the specific issues.

Instead, he wrote as if the details could be worked out once both sides came to terms with the underlying misbeliefs that had caused them to turn away from the Lord and against one another.

His prescription to break the cycle of injury and conflict seems to have been twofold. On one hand, the apostle asked others to come alongside the disputing

church members and relieve some of their stress. It appears that fatigue and the burden of trying to do

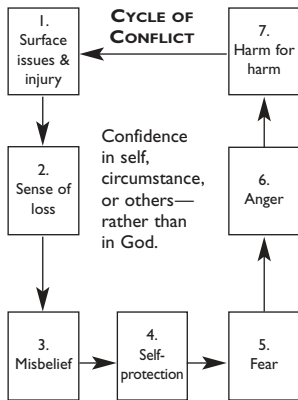
"I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life. Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:2-7).

too much for the Lord might have made them vulnerable to conflict.

Then Paul reminded them, in several different ways, that their well-being was not wrapped up in getting or demanding right treatment from one another. Twice he encouraged them to rejoice in the Lord. He urged them to be known for gentleness because “the Lord is at hand.” He reminded them to replace their anxiety with prayers and dependence on God. Then, after assuring them of God’s ability to give them peace of mind, and while cultivating a thankful confidence that they could find help in the hands of God, Paul encouraged them to think—not about what was wrong but about what was right (Phil. 4:8-9).

By addressing the real issues of underlying belief, Paul gave them a means of breaking the cycle of conflict

that could have spread to many others. He knew that the formula for unity is not found in agreeing about all issues. Neither is the solution merely in knowing that we should find it within ourselves to love one



another. The answer for those who know God is to have the right beliefs about Him in the troubling circumstances of life. This alone will enable us to avoid the self-protection, fear, and anger that otherwise lead to returning evil for evil and harm for harm.

# WATCH FOR SIGNALS

## THE YELLOW LIGHT OF SELF-PROTECTION

Because envy and selfish ambition cause us to protect our own interests at the expense of others, they should be regarded as flashing yellow lights. When they show up in our life, they signal, "Caution! Danger! Be prepared to stop!"

This is not to say that any effort to protect ourselves is wrong.

Without due caution and concern for our own safety, we would all die early deaths. Wise people do not thoughtlessly put themselves in harm's way.

"Where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. . . . Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, 'The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously'? But He gives us more grace. Therefore He says: 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee" (Jas. 3:16; 4:1-6).

What we need to do, however, is make sure that we are not protecting ourselves without regard for the interests and needs of others.

The self-protection James wrote about isn't healthy for anyone. It's the kind of self-interest that causes us to call attention to the faults of others so we

can “cash in” on their mistakes.

From James’ point of view, this kind of self-protection should be viewed with great caution because it produces confusion and evil (3:16). It is evidence of unfulfilled and frustrated desires (4:1-4). But even more important, this kind of self-protection is a symptom of a wounded pride that

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***This kind of self-protection is the opposite of faith.***

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causes us to act as an enemy of God (3:17–4:6).

Wounded pride says, “I deserve better treatment than I’m getting. I’m justified, therefore, in taking matters into my own hands and doing whatever I have

to do to beat back those who are against me.”

Wounded pride says, “No one knows my needs better than I do, and if I don’t take care of myself no one else is going to.”



At this point the flashing yellow light has been ignored. Wounded pride has not only given way to misbeliefs about our ability to know and help ourselves, but it has also made us an enemy of God. Even though we might not realize it, we are now fighting heaven itself. We have entered into a conflict far greater than mere family or church.

## THE RED LIGHT OF ANGER

As we learn to see self-protection as a yellow light of caution, we can also learn to see anger as a red light of

urgent warning. It signals the danger James was concerned about when he wrote, "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (1:19-20).

Too many of us misread anger as an expression and prerogative of strength. In most cases, however, anger

signals unrecognized weakness. When we "lose our temper" in the process of trying to protect ourselves, we are not giving evidence of strength but of

"The women sang as they danced, and said: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.' Then Saul was very angry, and the saying displeased him; and he said, 'They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed only thousands. Now what more can he have but the kingdom?' So Saul eyed David from that day forward. And it happened on the next day that the distressing spirit from God came upon Saul, and he prophesied inside the house. So David played music with his hand, as at other times; but there was a spear in Saul's hand. And Saul cast the spear, for he said, 'I will pin David to the wall!' But David escaped his presence twice. Now Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with him, but had departed from Saul" (1 Sam. 18:7-12).

profound weakness. Being quick to anger puts us in great danger, for "whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls" (Prov. 25:28).

Such weakness is what we see in the fearful rage of Saul. His fear was not the kind of fear that causes men to run from a burning building or

from sin. His anger was not the kind of controlled anger that causes people to act against injustice and evil. His anger toward David was not strong or well-reasoned (as it is in Ephesians 4:26). Saul feared a man when he should have been fearing God. He feared man too much, and God too little. His anger should have been directed not at David but toward his own sin.

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***“Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls.”***  
**Proverbs 25:28**

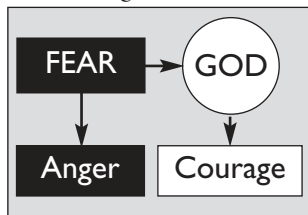
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David also knew what it was to be afraid. His psalms make that clear (Psalms 3 and 4, for

example). He spent years running from Saul’s attempts to kill him. The difference is that David didn’t respond to his fear by taking it upon himself to kill the king who was trying to kill him. He could have done so, pleading self-defense. But David is known for saying that he would not lift his hand against the Lord’s anointed (1 Sam. 24:6). He is famous for admitting his fears and then holding those anxieties up before the Lord.

Instead of letting fear drive him into uncontrolled anger and vindictiveness, David let his fears drive him to God. Time after time he saw God replace his fear with courage.



## THE GREEN LIGHT OF GOD'S WISDOM

When we ignore yellow lights of self-protection and

red lights of anger, accidents happen. People who were once enthusiastic for Christ end up like wrecked and abandoned cars. Their eyes no longer sparkle at the mention of Christ or the church. Many refuse to darken the door of a church.

Because of such damages, James urged us to recognize the way God's wisdom and His Spirit work in our lives.

We can refer to his description as the "green light" of God's wisdom. Keep in mind, however, that we

"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?" (Jas. 3:13-4:1).

cannot resolve conflict by following these "traffic lights" in our own strength. We must be willing to let God produce a spirit and wisdom in us that is:

**Pure.** The wisdom that comes from God is free from the contamination of envy and selfish ambition. It corresponds to the interests of God Himself, whose purpose is to rule over and provide for a kingdom of "righteousness

and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

**Peaceable.** The heart that is at peace with God desires peace with others. It has no need to attack, insult, exploit, deceive, or prey on others. Instead, words and actions encourage trust while dispelling fear and anger.

**Gentle.** This is the quality of knowing when to show the kind of restraint that does not stand on the letter of the law and on rights but on mercy.

### **Willing To Yield.**

This is a submissive approachability that enables a person to listen carefully to the needs and concerns of others. It is not a submissiveness that indulges the selfishness of others; it seeks their good and surrenders to truth.

Full of mercy and good fruits. In the awareness of another’s need, the wisdom that comes from God desires to reach out in kindness—

relieving and sharing pain by the sharing of strength and gifts received from God.

### **Without Partiality.**

Because such kindness is prompted by the goodness of God and not by a selfish strategy of giving to get in return, this kindness is not swayed by what another person has to offer.

### **Without Hypocrisy.**

Because wisdom from above is a skill that comes from a heart resting in God, its actions are not merely superficial and designed to get human approval. It is an “honest” wisdom of the heart.

This is the path of peace Christ followed as He confronted conflict. We cannot force it on others. But we can use it to evaluate our own relationship to the One who desires to help us do our part in promoting peace. At the hint of conflict, the green light of James 3:17 is the “signal” to follow.

# MANAGE YOUR SIDE OF THE CONFLICT

## SETTLE FOR WHAT YOU CAN DO

God does not expect us to be passive in the presence of conflict. He encourages

the art of

gracious disagreement.

Like iron

sharpening iron

(Prov. 27:17),

friends test one another's ideas

against the

standard of the Word of God.

When conflict

arises, God has

told us how to

take initiative in cases of:

**Irritations.** Before trying to “judge” a speck in your brother's eye, check your own eye for a “log” of pride or hypocrisy (Mt. 7:1-5).

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector” (Mt. 18:15-17).

## Arguable

**Convictions.** Discuss, accept, and respect people's need to be true to their own faith in God. Let others give account of themselves to the One who will judge us all (Rom. 14:1-23).

**Doctrinal Issues.** Test everything by the standard

of Scripture.

Convene

wise

leaders to

prayerfully

resolve

difficult

issues. Avoid

arguable

issues and

so-called

brothers

who, when

confronted,

deny sound doctrine (Acts 15:1-35; 2 Tim. 2:15-26).

**Injury.** If someone sins against you:

**1. Go one to one** to the person who has injured you. Don't talk around to

gain allies. Apply damage control by trying to limit the knowledge of the problem. If that doesn't work . . .

**2. Take two or three witnesses** with you to hear both sides of the issue and to increase the pressure on the other party.

If the person still doesn't respond, and if your witnesses agree that you have been seriously wronged . . .

**3. Tell it to the church.** Make the offender be accountable to the spiritual family he claims as his own. When public disclosure is done in a loving yet firm way, it offers the hope of bringing a sinning person to his senses.

But if the pressure of the church brings no desire on his part to attempt to resolve the issue . . .

**4. Treat the person as an unbeliever.** This does not imply that we are to be mean-spirited, since Jesus taught us to love our

enemies. Yet to be "for them" we must be "against them" in their sin. Both Jesus and Paul taught that we should formally disassociate with stubbornly unrepentant people (Mt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:11-13). These people must know that they are not in

<b>1</b> Go One To One	<b>2</b> Take Two Or Three Witnesses
<b>4</b> Treat As An Unbeliever	<b>3</b> Tell It To The Church

good standing with the church. The burden must be on them to show why they should be considered fellow members of Christ. It will help them to face their spiritual issues, and it gives us a way of resolving one-sided and lingering problems.

## REMEMBER WHAT HAS BEEN DONE FOR YOU

The Matthew 18 principle described on the previous page needs to be kept in perspective. Use it as a process when you are sinned against. But in the process, don't forget who you are and what has been done for you.

Confrontational peacemaking requires a spirit of humility. There is never a basis for pride. All of us are, at best, forgiven sinners asking others to admit to the kind of sins for which we have already been forgiven. All of us have

committed sins against God that are far more serious

than any sins committed against us. Apart from God's mercy and the inexpressibly wonderful rescue of Christ, all of us would spend eternity in a place of eternal darkness and irreversible loss.

This spirit of grateful humility is what our Lord had in mind when He instructed us to confront one another with issues of personal injury. After teaching about the importance of confronting a sinning believer with his fault, Jesus told a

"Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat,

powerful story about forgiveness. It was a story about a man forgiven of millions of dollars' worth of debt who then turned around and refused to forgive someone who owed him a very small amount of money.

In this story, debts were called in. (It helps no one to overlook honest obligations.) There were admissions of debt and appeals for mercy. But when the person who was forgiven much refused to show mercy to one who owed little, the unforgiving party found

saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses" (Mt. 18:23-35).

himself in worse trouble than he had ever been in before.

When faced with the emotion and confusion of conflict, there is no better place to look than to the cross of Christ. It is there in the anguish of our Savior that we see the reality of our own sins. It is there that we are also reminded that we have every

reason to deal with the sins of others as God has graciously dealt with us. It is there at the cross that we are reminded to confront one another, not to get even but to get a chance to forgive.

## PROTECT THE FAMILY NAME

By now it is apparent that the spirit and process of a biblical approach to conflict are quite different from natural tactics of:

- **Avoiding**—seeking peace at the expense of both truth and love.

- **Attacking**—seeking peace by intimidation, force, or violence.

- **Appeasing**—seeking peace by giving in to evil.

- **Negotiating**—seeking peace by working with mutual self-interests.

- **Litigating**—seeking peace through the protection of the courts.

While we

might see a time and place for each of these approaches to conflict, it is apparent that they do not reflect a biblical approach to solving arguments in the church. The Scriptures, for instance, make it clear that when the people of God use

the legal system to resolve “family” issues they are not only admitting spiritual failure, but they are damaging the name and interests of God.

But it’s also true that when people are going through a divorce, a church split, or a bitter dispute, talking about the priority of God’s reputation and interests can sound

“Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? . . . Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated? . . . You were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Cor. 6:1,5-7,20).

hollow. People who are angry, hurt, and frightened about possible outcomes are apt to feel that there's not much they can do at this point to protect the name of God. They feel that God can take care of His own interests.

Yet, there is no more compelling reason to work for peace and unity. Nothing is more important than learning to see God's reputation and interests behind our own. When advising a young pastor about conflict, Paul wrote, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity" (2 Tim. 2:19).

Sometimes in the heat and distraction of an

argument we forget the inherent link between our name and the name of Christ. Sometimes when we are angry we forget that deferring to God's name and interests is always in our best interest.

Sometimes when stumbling under the weight of wounded pride we forget how passionately our Lord prayed for our unity—not

"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them" (Jn. 17:20-23).

only so that the world might know that the Father sent Him, but also that the world might know that the Father loves us (Jn. 17:23).

# FOCUS ON YOUR PROVIDER

## THE SOURCE OF UNITY

The costly results of church fights show the importance of Paul's appeals for unity.

There is no way we can adequately estimate the damage conflict does to the name and reputation

of God. There is no way to assess the enormous loss of credibility before an unchurched world. There is no way we can accurately appraise the loss of confidence, conscience, and spiritual passion that occurs when the people of God turn on one another, and by bitterness and anger and

meanness act as if they had never heard of Christ. Everyone loses and no one wins.

“If there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:1-5).

Just saying that church fights hurt everyone, however, does not solve conflict.

Making a rule of peace does not put peace in our heart.

Internal peace comes not from knowing about Christ but from

knowing Him. It comes from knowing the strength of His presence, the gentleness of His wisdom, the goodness of His plan, the depth of His love, and the sufficiency of His Spirit to provide for us—even in conflict.

This link between our behavior in conflict and our

personal dependence on Christ is why Paul reasoned as he did with the Philippians. He didn't just tell them to make peace with one another by following the example of Christ. He said, in effect, "Since you are so well taken care of, doesn't it make sense that you would start looking out for one another? If your hearts have been softened by His kindness, and your anxieties removed by His promise to father and shepherd you, doesn't it make sense for you to let Him make you into a kinder and a gentler people?"

Paul linked our effort in conflict with God's ability to provide for us. After

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:12-15).

summarizing what Christ has done for us, he went on to call for self-discipline and seriousness of attitude. He asked for such caution and effort, however, in light of the fact that God is at work in us, giving us all we need to co-operate with His plan for us. It is in this awareness of God's presence that Paul urged us to do everything without "complaining and disputing." This is the way to be "harmless" in a violent world. This is the

answer for a kinder and gentler church.

## THE LIMITS OF UNITY

The unity we have described deserves a closer look.

If we are not careful, we are apt to miss those moments of firm and gracious confrontation that a commitment to Christ requires. In Galatians 2:11-16, for instance, Paul described how he publicly confronted the apostle Peter over a serious issue.

At first glance, you might wonder how this confrontation between

apostles fits with Paul's repeated appeals for church

unity. Paul, however, never asked for the kind of oneness that compromises the interests or doctrines of Christ. Just as important, Paul never encouraged us to protect or cover one another at the expense of what is right or true. Look again at Galatians 2:11-16 and Philippians 2:1-5. While these two texts look and feel very different, there is something

"Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, 'If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified'" (Gal. 2:11-16).

very similar about them. In both cases, Paul argued passionately for the interests and cause of Christ. In both cases, Paul asked for unity based on right beliefs. In both cases, Paul showed how important it is to look out for one another and not just for ourselves.

Paul apparently believed Peter was thinking too much about the approval of “certain men [who] came from James” and not enough about the doctrine of salvation or the needs of the Gentiles. By hypocritically separating from the Gentiles when these Jewish legalists came to town, Peter betrayed the interests of the Gentiles. He helped these Jews perpetuate their legalism and was giving mixed signals about salvation by faith.

We can assume that Paul was Christlike when he confronted Peter, expressing self-control and grace, and

not being quick to anger. We can also assume that he made an issue of Peter's behavior not because the correction increased his own stature over Peter, but because if Peter's actions were allowed to go unchecked it would help no

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***Christ never called for the kind of unity that compromises truth.***

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one and hurt everyone. This was not an issue of pride but of consideration for the truth of the gospel. Paul's example is a reminder to us that while our motive must be to protect one another, we should never knowingly become enablers for one another's sin.

# QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Isn't a lack of confidentiality the biggest source of conflict in the church? Wouldn't putting a stop to gossip stop conflict?**

Proverbs 26:20 seems to suggest as much. It says, "Where there is no wood, the fire goes out, and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases." But how do you stop gossip? Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Mt. 12:34). You can't change the mouth without changing the heart. This inspired truth sets a standard but doesn't solve the problem.

Any rule, whether organizational or biblical, does not get to the heart of church conflict. That's why the New Testament requires that church leaders be Spirit-filled (controlled)

men who have a reputation for godliness (1 Tim. 3:1-13). To meet these qualifications, they must have far more than a knowledge of church policy or biblical law. Their hearts must have been broken by their own sin and changed by the grace and love of God.

When the hearts of church leaders are not under the rule of Christ, no rule of confidentiality will keep their self-protective attitudes from leaking out into the congregation. Without Spirit-given motives and deep underlying beliefs about the all-sufficiency of God to meet personal and church needs, they will not have the spiritual confidence and freedom needed to manage conflict according to the principles of Scripture. Without a personal knowledge of the help of Christ, we will not be able to show the gentleness of Christ in conflict.

**Won't an emphasis on motives cause us to do the very thing Jesus warned us not to do: judge the motives of others?**

Yes, it will if we fail to do what Jesus told us to do: First be concerned about the condition of our own heart. If we have taken inventory of our own condition, we will not arrogantly judge the hearts of others.

**How can we know when to make an issue out of something that another person has done? Doesn't the Scripture say that love covers a multitude of sins?**

This can be a very difficult call. There are times when it is better to overlook a fault, but never because we are afraid to say something.

While asking God for wisdom, try asking, "Is the problem hurting the reputation of God? Is it

hurting the other person's relationship with us? Is the problem hurting others? Is it hurting himself?"

Be careful when quoting "love will cover a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8). That does not mean that love will enable another person to conceal unrepentant sin. It is saying that love will do whatever is necessary to promote forgiveness and reconciliation. Proverbs 27:6 says, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." Sometimes love must confront before it can offer to forgive and cover.

**What about our Lord's example when from His cross He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know not what they do"?**

Jesus' plea was not that His executers be forgiven of all their sins, but that they not be held accountable for their role in crucifying the

Son of God. They didn't realize what they were doing.

We too can look at those who have hurt us in ways they are not aware of and breathe the same kind of prayer to heaven: "Father, forgive them; they don't know the harm they are doing."

On the other hand, when the Scriptures tell us to forgive others as God has forgiven us, this is not a call for blanket and unconditional forgiveness. God does not extend the once-for-all forgiveness of salvation until we admit our sin (Lk. 18:9-14). And when it comes to issues of family forgiveness, the Scriptures once again call for confession of known sin in order to know forgiveness (1 Jn. 1:9).

**Isn't forgiveness as much for ourselves as for others? Doesn't it release us from the bitterness that would otherwise eat us up?**

There are two ways of looking at this. A spirit of forgiveness, rooted in what God has done for us, does release us from bitterness. We realize that the other person does not have it within his power to "ruin us" as long as we are in the hand of God. At the same time, we do not have the right to "let someone off the hook" if he is stubbornly refusing to come to terms with his wrong. This is the point of Matthew 18.

**What if all efforts to resolve our problem are not working?**

If the conflict is such that church leaders and representatives are not able to pray and talk together without bitterness and anger, and if no one from within the church can help the disputing parties see what is behind their anger and how far they are from the Spirit of Christ, then help must be sought from an outside mediator.

If attitudes are right, people who cannot resolve their own problems will be willing to ask for whatever outside help is needed to get insight and wisdom for working through differences. But if there is an unwillingness to get help because of the embarrassment it would bring, then questions of pride must be addressed.

**Why would God let His people go through the pain of trouble and conflict?**

In 1 Corinthians 11:18-19, the apostle Paul wrote, “I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you.” Another translation says, “so that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.”

In other words, church conflict brings out the best

and the worst. It is a strong indicator as to who is actively believing in God and who isn't. Anger and bitterness show to what extent we have been depending on ourselves, on others, or on our circumstances rather than on Christ.

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*“He who is of a proud heart stirs up strife, but he who trusts in the Lord will be prospered.”*

**Proverbs 28:25**

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Anger and bitterness are red flags signaling one of two possibilities. They either show that even though you know Christ as Savior you aren't walking with Him, or they show that you have never known Him at all. If you know Him but haven't

been walking with Him, then I hope this booklet has helped you to get in touch with your own heart and with Him.

I have not described specific case studies of current church fights, because specifics are not the issue. What counts is how we respond to conflict and why. Do we have a gracious spirit that shows others that even if we disagree with them on issues we really are for them as persons? Can they see evidence of our good motives and intentions? And more important, can they see evidence that our motives are rooted in our deeper confidence in Christ and in our relationship to Him? If so, then we are probably the kind of peacemakers who by graciousness, truth, and dependence on God reflect His family likeness (Mt. 5:9).

Don't misunderstand. We don't become children of

God by mediating broken relationships. We become His children by trusting in the "one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5).

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***“Blessed are the  
peacemakers, for  
they shall be called  
sons of God.”***  
**Jesus (Mt. 5:9)**

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Only when we bear the family resemblance of His Son can we bring peace to conflict. This family likeness is what we desperately need and what the Spirit longs for.

Paul urged all believers “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). And Jesus prayed that His followers would be one so that the world would believe that He was sent from God (Jn. 17:21). May we be answers to His prayer.

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