

A BIBLICAL STRATEGY FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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An Essay

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by

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Churches, especially Southern Baptist churches, are famous for fostering and housing serious conflicts. However, the local body of believers usually develops a bad reputation among the unchurched and unbelievers based upon how irresponsibly these conflicts are resolved. Still, what most people neglect is that mankind has a fallen nature and always will be subject to failure, falsehood, confusion, disunity, and various other implications of sin.

The purpose of this essay is to propose a biblical strategy for conflict resolution based upon the mandates and procedures prescribed for believers to follow primarily in a congregational, local church setting drawn from the Scriptures. First, this essay will define conflict and its source. Second, the author will demonstrate the possibility of conflict resolution. Third, this essay will develop biblical support as to why conflict ought to be resolved. And fourth, the author will submit three different platforms in church life that are conducive to conflict resolution: the unity of the church, the purity of the church, and the doctrine of the church.<sup>1</sup>

First, conflict finds its roots in sin. This fact is clearly seen as early as immediately after the Fall when conflict arose between the first two brothers. In this situation, God approached Cain exhorting him to resolve the situation in a godly manner lest sin overcome him.<sup>2</sup> However, Cain chose not to be obedient to the admonishment of God, and submitted to the sinful inclinations of his heart resulting in murderous activity

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<sup>1</sup>John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 126.

<sup>2</sup>God demonstrates that there was the possibility for Cain to resolve his anger and jealousy towards his brother that not only would dissolve the conflict but also would combat the power of sin in his life when God says in Gen 4:7, "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

and the pronouncement of his infamous response to God, “. . . am I my brother’s keeper (Gen 4:9)?” Cain’s reply epitomizes the disposition of a person who refuses to be reconciled to his brother or neighbor (Mk 12:30-31).

Interestingly enough is that this first instance of personal conflict surrounded the success and failure of glorifying God. Abel presented an acceptable sacrifice to God whereas God rejected Cain’s offering. Thus, another conclusion may be drawn from this scenario which promotes the idea that the root of conflict is the failure to glorify God.<sup>3</sup> The apostle Paul affirms this position when he commands his readers to do everything for the glory of God and in the name of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor 10:31; Col 3:17). Thus, conflict is rooted in sin which is defined as anything that fails to glorify God (Rom 3:23).

Second, an essential characteristic in a biblical strategy for conflict resolution is having an understanding that conflict is capable of being fixed. If the source of conflict is sin, then it follows that along with the promise of the forgiveness of and power over sin in Christ so also there is the possibility of finding solutions to everyday problems. Paul says in Colossians 3:13, “bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” So, not only is sin in general open to forgiveness but also personal conflict through the saving and atoning work of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:56-57).

Third, conflict resolution is a necessary part of the Christian walk and life of the church. The opposite of conflict is peace. The Bible in many instances refers to God as the “God of peace” (Rom 15:33, 16:20; Phil 4:9; 1 Thess 5:23; Heb 13:20). Are not

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<sup>3</sup>Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, rev ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 20.

Christians supposed to be “imitators of God (Eph 5:1)?” Furthermore, the author of Hebrews directs his readers in Heb 12:14 to “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Additionally, Paul exhorts the church at Ephesus to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3).” Likewise, after he teaches what the Thessalonian church should do to a person who does not give heed to the contents of his letter, Paul delivers a benediction to the people which sums up the disposition that their local assembly ought to embody which says, “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way (2 Thess 3:16).” Hence, conflict resolution is necessary and imperative in order for Christian men and women to exemplify lives of peace and holiness unified in Christ for the glory of God (Rom 15:5-6).

Fourth, the Scriptures teach three main areas of concern that stand out as viable candidates for immediate conflict resolution. First, conflict must be resolved for the sake of preserving the unity of the church. As mentioned earlier, Paul tells the Ephesians to be eager in retaining unity within the church. Paul purposely follows this plea with a discussion on the unity and oneness of the body of Christ. In a similar contextual setting in 1 Cor 12:26, Paul states that, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” Therefore, conflict resolution is absolutely necessary for maintaining unity which reflects people who are equally made in the image of the Triune God.

Second, conflict must be resolved for the sake of the purity of the church. Within the biblical canon, Scripture gives a constant theme of the necessity of removing evil from the midst of the God’s people (Deut 19:19, 21:9, 24:7; Jdg 20:13; Ezek 20:38; 1

Cor 5:13). In one of the most famous passages on congregational church discipline in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul ends his teaching on what to do about the sexually immoral brother in the church by quoting the Deuteronomic concept, “Purge the evil person from among you (1 Cor 5:13).” God’s people are to be holy and blameless; thus, sinful behavior and activity has no place inside the church (1 Pet 1:15-16, 2:9).

Third, conflict must be resolved for the sake of preserving the sound doctrine of the church. The local church is responsible for maintaining orthodox theology that coincides with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul implores the churches of Galatia to discern and reject any false gospels (Gal 1:6-8). The local congregation has the right and the responsibility for dealing with conflict that is produced by false teachings and a different gospel that is contrary to the “gospel of the blessed God” and the one in which Paul himself had been entrusted to proclaim and to uphold (1 Tim 1:10, 6:3).<sup>4</sup>

In conclusion, all conflict resolution must submit itself to the procedures of Matt 18:15-20. This section is not simply a description of how to handle personal disputes. Rather, Christ alludes to the local assembly of believers as the ones who have the final appeal if the individuals are unable to resolve the matter on their own (Matt 18:17). This process presupposes regenerate church membership due to the fact that only Christians are truly capable of humbling themselves under the commandments of God and thus resolving conflicts not for selfish gain but instead for the good of Christ’s church and for the glory of God in all things. Therefore, all conflict resolution is intended

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<sup>4</sup>Mark E. Dever, *A Display of God's Glory: Basics of Church Structure* (Washington, D.C.: 9 Marks Ministries, 2001), 34-5.

to be redemptive and to serve as a proclamation of the gospel.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 124-5.

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