

Embracing Church Conflict: *The Implications of Doctrine in “Redeeming Church Conflicts”*

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In our book, *Redeeming Church Conflicts*, we used the biblical account of the church conflict at Antioch as set forth in chapter 15 of the book of Acts as a “road map” to lay out a means by which God’s people may approach the hard realities of conflict when it comes to the local church. While not specifically addressed in our book, there is an implied trajectory of our thought, namely, that God is sovereign even over the conflicts that churches experience. What follows is the content of our presentation at a workshop for the 2014 *Peacemaker Ministries’ Conference* held in Colorado Springs on September 27, 2014. Those who attended the workshop provided numerous comments which we have incorporated as best we could to reflect the wisdom of many as they, too, realized that when conflict comes to the church an answer must be given to those who wonder, “Where is God in this fight?”

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Perspectives and Practical Strategies

Perspectives:

- I. **The Core Concept (Our Thesis):** The implications of both God’s sovereignty over everything that transpires (holy or evil, good or bad), and His unquestionable goodness and purity, compels God’s people to conform their responses and actions to conflicts in the church as responses to an assignment from Him. His reasons for making such assignments are central to His unwavering agenda to make His people HOLY. “He wants us to be a community of joy, but he is willing to compromise our temporal happiness in order to increase our Christlikeness” (Tripp & Lane in *How People Change*, New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC, 2008). We are, therefore, called to embrace church conflict as a holy assignment being used by God to change us both personally and corporately. God uses the “tragedy” of sovereign church conflict to spiritually grow and mature His people into true saints worthy of the name “Christian.” We realize the term “assignment” can be troubling for some as it carries with it a sense of immediate intentionality on the part of God. What we intend to communicate through the use of that word, however, is something more limited. We mean that the results of breaking God’s “prescriptive will” (see the “Footnote Regarding the Will of God” in Attachment 1 hereto), violating the rule of life he has laid down for his creatures, brings a consequence as if God is “assigning” this conflict to the church as a means through which change may be embraced and the biblical precepts he calls his people to follow will be done with greater caution and intentionality. We will continue to use the term “assignment” in this document, but please understand that we know of the concerns this term implies.

- II. **Focus Issue:** How do we practically link the eternal truths of God’s sovereignty, of His omnipotence, and of His goodness and purity to the tragic reality of church conflict? In other words, what do people in a church facing the assignment of conflict need to **know** and what do they need to **do**? Further, how do God’s servants (both internal leaders and external consultants) shepherd His people into the biblical perspective of embracing conflict as a providential act through a process of discovery of His purposes (which may include discipline, significant ecclesiastical change, and/or to facilitate growth in maturity and holiness, both individually and corporately)? Certainly, the reality of church conflict may reflect God’s act of cleansing his church. First Corinthians 5 and Philippians 3 speak of the reality of “evil-doers” in the church. We note in *Redeeming Church Conflict* that every church is composed of true believers and hypocrites who have not been regenerated by the work of the Holy Spirit. At the heart of many church

conflicts are those who have never “known” Christ as Savior and Lord who have no basis from which to interact with others. The purpose of God in such a conflict may be to cleanse his church of unbelief as we see in 1 Corinthians 5 where at verse 7 it says to “cleanse out the old leaven...”

While we have organized this discussion in a practical manner to address the issues of what people need to **know** and need to **do** from the perspective of church leaders and external consultants, the issue of “**be**,” that is, who people are as a matter of maturity in Christ, their Christian character that defines them and their ability to “make every effort to live at peace” (Romans 12:18), is frequently a variable over which the church consultant seeking to guide people through the deep waters of congregational conflict cannot predict or control. Christian character development is something overlooked by many churches and the discipleship required to mold an infant in Christ into a mature Saint is, while difficult and time consuming, the task that can most contribute to the prevention of church conflicts. This topic is addressed in both Attachments 7 and 8 to this document and is an issue mostly to be addressed by a church’s leadership over a long period of time.

III. Our Personal Perspective/Philosophy of Ministry in Church Conflicts:

Because we believe that God is sovereign over everything, including church conflicts, our quest as those providing consulting aid must become one aimed at assisting church leaders and members search for and discover **His purposes and His interests** in this specific church conflict. We do that by asking broad questions such as these:

1. Why did God assign this conflict to this church at this time?
2. What might God be doing through this conflict to change each individual leader/member/attender and to change this church?

Seeking answers to those two broad questions starts us down a path of discovery that everyone in the church is invited to join. We then search for specific answers to these additional narrow questions:

1. Who are we individually when we feel we aren’t getting our way (that is, who do we become when feeling minimized, when personal desires aren’t being fulfilled, when personal heart idols drive our responses to others, etc.)?,
2. Who are we corporately as a people who have been called out of the world and gathered together in His name in this specific church when we face group conflict (that is, who do we become when mutual respect and love is lost, when fears, desires, needs and weaknesses are exposed on a group level)?,
3. Who are we as problem-solvers (that is, how do we work together in the face of disappointment, unexpected events, and the reality of spiritual warfare)?,

4. In this conflict, what has become, by default or otherwise, most important to us? Do our actions or inactions say something about us that we really don't want to say as a church? What must we repent of in order to ensure we reflect what should be important to us as God's holy people?
5. How do we unleash and employ the spiritual gift(s) of every church member in order to prevent and curb judgmental attitudes, accept differences, and knit ourselves more closely together as one body in Christ (see Romans Chapter 12, 1 Corinthians Chapters 3 and 12, and especially Ephesians Chapter 4)?

We believe that churches turning to and embracing a perspective that the conflict they face carries with it an amazing opportunity for personal and corporate discovery, do far better at resolving their conflicts than church that don't. They ask the best questions and they work together in order to be intentionally biblical in the conflict resolution tasks they face. They guard personal relationships better than those churches who focus merely on trying to quickly rush to a "solution," and get back to some sort of *status quo*.

- IV. Perspective from our book, *Redeeming Church Conflicts*:** Just as the conflict involving the church at Antioch (Acts Chapter 15) was used by God to bring about a sharper focus and clarification of true Christian doctrine (i.e., that the core of the Gospel message is justification by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone and not by any human work or effort), every church and every person in it can grow and mature through God's assignment of conflict. That is what embracing church conflict means, and it is, we believe, the biblical way of connecting God's sovereign will and man's responsibility with the tragedy of church conflict...of responding to the key theological question of "the problem of evil." At this point, please turn to Attachment 4, teaching "the problem of Evil," for definitions and clarification of the nature of this problem in the context of a church conflict.

Practical Strategies:

- I. **What people must know...dealing with the "problem of evil" as it affects the church facing conflict:**
 1. We must teach God's sovereignty (see Attachment 1).
 2. We must teach God's omnipotence (see Attachment 2).
 3. We must teach God's goodness (i.e.; His purity, justice, righteousness, compassion, etc.) (see Attachment 3).
 4. We must teach the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility regarding sin and evil (i.e., "the problem of evil") (see Attachment 4).

5. We must teach how heart idolatry takes people captive (see Attachment 5).
6. We must teach God's plan for becoming one in Christ in the church through His outpouring of spiritual gifts (see Attachment 6).
7. We must teach growth through "Dependent Responsibility" (see Attachment 7).
8. We must teach maturing in Christ by grasping "Enabled Contentment" (see Attachment 8).

Of course, for any church to be truly "complete" and "healthy" many more practices flowing from the Scriptures must be taught and followed. Among those would be the ordinary "means of grace" such as the faithful preaching of God's Word, the pure practice of the sacraments, and keeping the church free from sin through the use of redemptive, corrective church discipline. Since we deal with those topics in our book we don't repeat them here. Further, the Scriptures are very specific in the care of "one another." Many passages use that formulation. And, since the Gospel is the heart of any rightly-ordered church that too, must always be at the forefront. We have seen many churches redeem their conflicts when they have simply remembered to get back to the basics of Christianity and focus on teaching the fundamental doctrines that define the Christian faith and leave behind anything that distorts or dilutes that message.

II. What people must do...dealing with the problem of the lawyer's question, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29):

9. People in conflict must ask the "best questions" to focus their hearts and minds on the purpose of God's assignment in this conflict before attempting any solutions (see chapter 6 of *Redeeming Church Conflicts* concerning how to formulate "best questions").
10. People in conflict must resist the temptations of "mob mentality," and "group-think;" indicators of "fear of man idolatry" (see chapter 7 of *Redeeming Church Conflicts* regarding working with the dynamics of groups).
11. People in conflict must practice group mediation that first and foremost seeks to discover what God's underlying interests may be in the assignment of church conflict.
12. People in conflict must discover, unleash, and provide full employment for the many spiritual gifts God has poured out to make His church complete (see Attachment 6).

Discussion Question: How do these questions relate to the lawyer's question as set forth in Luke 10:29? What else would you add that people must do if they desire to respond to the assignment of church conflict with grace, compassion, and empathy?

III. Other Relevant Topics:

13. Member "dependent responsibility" when experiencing disappointment (see Attachment 7).
14. What growing in Christ really means during conflict: Grasping "Enabled Contentment" (see Attachment 8).

May God bless your service to His people and His churches as you use your spiritual gift as a church conflict consultant or church leader facing conflict in your church. Please be encouraged by these words from 2 Corinthians 4:16-18: *So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things unseen are eternal.*

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Attachment 1: Teaching God's Sovereignty

Definition of God's Sovereignty:

"To be sovereign means to be supreme, unlimited, and totally independent of any other influence. God alone has such power (Ps. 86:10; Isa. 46:9-10). The Bible teaches that God's dominion is so great that he has ultimate control over all things. His sovereignty extends over both creation and preservation (Ps. 135:6-7; John 1:3; Col. 1:16-17; Rev. 4:11). He rules over all governments (Prov. 21:1; Dan. 2:20-21, 4:35). He alone controls individual lives and destinies (Jer. 18:6; John 6:39; Rom. 9:15-16, 15:32; Eph. 1:11-12; James 4:15). At the same time, he watches over events as small as a sparrow fall from a tree (Matt.10:29)." -Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker*

"God is represented as the Creator, and His will as the cause of all things." -Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*

God's Own Testimony of His Sovereignty:

Isaiah 46:9-11 "...for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying my counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose, calling a bird of prey from the east, the man the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it."

Other Scriptural Evidence:

God controls the free acts of men: Philippians 2:13: "For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

Every man's days are numbered: Job 14:5: "His days are determined, and the number of his months is with You [God], and You [God] have appointed his limits that he cannot pass."

Only God can change the human heart: Romans 9:15-18: "'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills."

“I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a new heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

This view of God’s sovereignty is not fatalism:

“If the Old Testament presents anything of God, it presents three attributes:

First, the *omnipotence of God*, He has all power and therefore His plan will be worked out.

Second, the *holiness of God*, He is holy and therefore His plan, which will be and is being worked out, is one which is morally right.

Third, the *personality of God*, He is not some mere omnipotent force as the fatalist would maintain, but He is a Person who is infinite, whose attributes are love, mercy, wisdom, righteousness, justice, goodness, and truth. God is a person who is all powerful and all holy. The biblical picture is not one of fatalism because fatalism puts the world’s fate into the hands of an impersonal force. The Bible puts the world’s fate into the hands of God, the father, who is all righteous, all wise, and all merciful.” –D. James Kennedy, *Truths That Transform*

“Sinful man flaunts the so-called autocracy of his own will. He supposes himself to have veto power over the plans of the Almighty.” (Ibid)

Footnote Regarding the Will of God:

The will of God is often spoken of in two ways: (1) God’s decretive will, and (2) God’s preceptive will.

God’s decretive will refers to that which he purposes or decrees whatever shall come to pass. God’s decretive will is often secret or hidden.

God’s preceptive will refers to the rule of life he has laid down for his moral creatures. It is revealed in the law and in the gospel. The distinction is based on Deuteronomy 29:29: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

The secret will of God is mentioned in Ps. 115:3; Dan. 4:17, 25, 32, 35; Rom. 9:18, 19; 11:33, 34; Eph. 1:5, 9, 11. It pertains to all things which he wills either to effect (cause) or to permit, and are, therefore, absolutely fixed.

The revealed will of God is mentioned in Matt. 7:21; 12:50; John 4: 34; 7:17; Rom. 12:2. It prescribes the duties of man, and represents the way in which he can enjoy God's blessings. God's decretive (secret) will is always accomplished while his preceptive (revealed) will is often disobeyed. (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*)

Attachment 2: Teaching God's Omnipotence*

Definition of God's Omnipotence:

God is able to do what he decides to do. "Whereas God's freedom refers to the fact that there are no external constraints on God's decisions, God's omnipotence has reference to his power to do what he decides to do." -Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*

"God's exercise of power over his creation is also called God's sovereignty." (Ibid)

God's Own Testimony of His Power:

Ps. 115:3: "Our God is in the Heavens; he does all that he pleases."

Jer. 32:17: "It is you Lord God who has made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you."

Heb. 1:3: "He [Jesus] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power."

Other Biblical Evidence:

"The idea of God's omnipotence is expressed in the name El-Shaddai; and the Bible speaks of it in no uncertain terms: Job 9:12; Ps. 115:3; Jer. 32:17; Matt. 19:26; Luke 1:37; Rom. 1:20; Eph. 1:19. God manifests his power in creation, Rom. 4:17; Isa. 44:24; in the works of providence*, Heb. 1:3, and in the redemption of sinners, 1 Cor. 1:24; Rom. 1:16." -Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*

God's power is infinite and he is, therefore, not limited to doing only what he actually has done. God is able to do more than he actually does (example: Matt. 3:9). However, there are some things that God cannot do. God cannot will or do anything that would deny his own character. God cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18), he cannot deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13), and he cannot be tempted with evil (James 1:3). He cannot act in a way inconsistent with any of his attributes. -Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*

God has made us, his moral creatures, in such a way that we reflect his sovereignty. As Professor Grudem notes: "God has made us as creatures with a will. We exercise choice and make real decisions regarding the events of our lives. Although our will is not absolutely free in the way God's is, God has nonetheless given us *relative freedom* within our spheres of activity in the universe he has created. (Ibid)

Attachment 3: Teaching God's Goodness

Definition of God's Goodness:

"The goodness of God means that God is the final standard of good and that all that God is and does is worthy of approval." -Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*

All of God's attributes define what is good (worthy of approval) and in his many attributes we see his love for us. Part of God's nature is to give of himself in order to bring about blessings for others.

God's Own Testimony of His Goodness:

James 1:17: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."

Ps. 84:11: "No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly."

Mark 10:18b: "No one is good except God alone."

Romans 8:28: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

Even his discipline is a manifestation of his goodness: Heb. 12:10: "For they (referring to our human earthly fathers) disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness."

Other Scriptural Evidence:

Ps. 100:5, 106:1, 107:1, 34, 119:68, 104; Luke 18:19; Rom. 12:2

Other Definitions of Attributes of God's Goodness:

- God's love means that God eternally gives himself up to others (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8)
- God's mercy means God's goodness toward those in misery and distress (2 Cor. 1:3)
- God's grace means God's goodness toward those who deserve only punishment (Ex. 33:19 quoted in Rom. 9:15)

- God's patience means God's goodness in withholding punishment toward those who sin over a period of time (Ex. 34:6; Rom. 2:4)
- God's holiness means that he is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor (Ps. 99:9)
- "God is not a God of confusion but of peace." (1 Cor. 14:33)
- God always acts in accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard of what is right (Deut. 32:4; Isa. 45:19)

Taken together, can we ever conclude that God is anything but good?

Does his character reveal anything that would lead us to doubt he loves us and cares for us?

Would God, in light of all of his attributes, bring to pass anything not good even though we may not see the immediate goodness of his ways at any particular time or under trying circumstance?

If God is not perfectly good can he be said to be God?

His work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he. Deut. 32:4

Attachment 4: Teaching “The Problem of Evil”

(Note: We recognize that “the problem of evil” is usually one dealt with as a question for apologetics (defense of the faith) as attacks on the very existence of God are pursued by unbelievers. However, in the church this problem is also very real given the typically low level of theological acumen among the laity especially when conflict disrupts the status quo and believers begin to ask “Where is God in this fight?” and “Why is this happening in my church?”)

Statement of the Problem:

1. If God is omnipotent, he is able to prevent evil.
2. If God is good, he wants to prevent evil.
3. But evil exists.
4. Conclusion: Either God is not omnipotent, or he is not good. (Frame, *The Doctrine of God*)

OR

“If God does indeed cause, through his providential activity, everything that comes about in the world, then the question arises, ‘What is the relationship between God and evil in the world?’ Does God actually cause the evil actions people do? If he does, then is God not responsible for sin?” (Grudem)

OR

“If God really is good, why does he allow so much evil in the world?” (Wright)

Seriousness of the Problem:

“The problem of evil is probably the most difficult problem in all of theology, and for many atheists it is the Achilles’ heel of the theistic worldview.” (Frame)

“The problem of evil is by far the most serious objection to the Christian view of God, often carrying a great deal of moral and emotional freight along with it. Many philosophers regard it as the decisive disproof of the existence of the God of the Bible.” (Wright)

Most, if not all, Christians who have experienced divisive, destructive church conflict would agree that it was evil. They would affirm that evil exists and was manifested in

their experience as they saw valued relationships end and their church, no less, become a place of hate rather than love.

Two Kinds of Evil:

There is “natural evil” which includes anything that brings suffering, unpleasantness, or difficulty into the lives of creatures. Earthquakes, floods, diseases, and death are examples of natural evil. Natural evil is a curse that God placed on the world in response to man’s sin.

“Moral evil” is the sin of rational creatures (angels and men). Moral evil came first. “The problem of evil” focuses on moral evil since natural evil has been given an explicit answer by Scripture (it is a curse brought upon the world because of moral evil). (Frame)

Solutions Offered to Resolve “The Problem of Evil”:

(Note: Dr. Frame lists twelve “defenses” that have been offered by theologians to attempt to resolve the problem including “The Unreality-of-Evil Defense,” “The Divine-Weakness Defense,” “The Best-Possible-World Defense,” “The Freewill Defense,” “The Character-Building Defense,” “The Stable-Environment Defense,” “The Indirect-Cause Defense,” “The *ex Lex* Defense,” “An ad Hominem Defense,” “The Evil is Privation Defense,” “The Greater-Good Defense,” and “The Transcendence of God Defense.” We will deal with just the last three as they have been considered the most theologically sound by the majority of serious thinkers.)

Is there an answer? Dr. Frame responds to that question by saying, “That depends on what you mean by an answer. If you are seeking an explanation that will vindicate God’s providence in every instance of evil, I certainly cannot supply that, and I doubt if anyone else can, either. I think we can supply a totally satisfying theoretical reconciliation between divine sovereignty, goodness, and evil. The mystery of God’s relation to evil is one that will, I am convinced, never be completely dissolved in this life, and I am not sure whether it will be in the next.” (Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*)

(1) Evil is a Privation Defense:

This “solution” redefines evil as an absence of good but not a mere absence of good but a privation or deprivation. This means that evil is nonbeing, not a substance or object. Evil is nonbeing, and God does not create nonbeing. The problem with this solution is raised by asking the question “Should we regard evil as ‘nothing,’ a mere limitation or

privation of goodness?" Also, there is no biblical reason to assert that created things by nature tend to slip into nonbeing, to lose their being, or become corrupt. (Frame)

(2) The Greater-Good Defense:

The most common form of the greater-good defense is the freewill defense, which argues that God rightly risks the possibility of evil in order to allow human beings the greater benefit of libertarian freedom of choice. Also, in Scripture there are examples of positive uses of evil: to test his servants (Job; 1 Pe. 1:7; James 1:3), to discipline (Heb. 12:7-11), to preserve lives (Gen. 50:20), to teach patience and perseverance (James 1:3-4), to redirect attention to what is most important (Ps. 37), to enable comfort to others (2 Cor. 1:3-7), to bear powerful witness to the truth (Acts 7), to give greater joy when suffering is replaced by glory (1 Pe. 4:13), to judge the wicked, both in history (Deut. 28:15-68) and in the life to come (Matt. 27:41-46), to bring reward to persecuted believers (Matt. 5:10-12), and to display the work of God (John 9:3). It is certainly true when God brings pain and suffering upon people, he has a good purpose (see Joseph's comment to his brothers, Gen. 50:20). And Paul says, "In all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Rom. 8:28). Recognizing and affirming this principle is an essential element in any Christian response to the problem of evil. It is essential to realize that even though God does bring evil into the world, he does it for a good reason. Therefore, in this solution, it is held that God does not *do* evil in bringing evil to pass. (Frame)

There is valid insight in the greater-good defense. Scripture provides many examples of God bringing good out of evil. But, as Dr. Frame notes, "it is important for us to define *greater good* theistically. The greater good should be seen, first of all, not as greater pleasure or comfort for us, but as greater glory for God. This solution, however, while appealing, doesn't really answer the problem because the problem of evil asks *how* can God ordain evil without authoring it (and, therefore being to blame for it). And, as Calvin pointed out, the distinction between remote and proximate cause is also inadequate to the question however useful it may be as stating who is to blame for evil. Nor is it a solution to say that God permits, rather than ordains, evil. God's permission is as efficacious as his ordination.

(3) The Transcendence of God Defense:

The transcendence of God plays a significant role in a biblical response to the problem of evil. Because God is who he is, the Covenant Lord, he is not required to defend himself against charges of injustice. There is but one place in Scripture where the problem of evil is explicitly addressed: Romans 9:19-21 (while the book of Job raises the problem Job never learns why he suffered). Here, the answer to the problem of evil turns entirely on God's sovereignty. It is as far as could be imagined from the greater-good freewill defense theory. It brings to our attention that God's prerogatives are far greater than ours. "It may seem that this solution makes God the author of evil, but that

objection confuses two senses of the word *author*. The phrase *author of evil* connotes not only causality of evil, but also blame for it. To author evil is to do it. But saying God is related to the world as an author to a story, we actually provide a way of seeing that God is not to be blamed for the sin of his creatures." (Frame)

Conclusion: Evil exists and it is not nonbeing. The greater-good defense refers particularly to God's lordship attribute of control; that he is sovereign over evil, and uses it for good. The transcendence of God defense that we see in Romans 9 (and Job) refers to God's lordship attribute of authority; he is the final standard of what is good or evil. "Scripture never assumes that God owes us an explanation for what he does." (Frame)

Attachment 5: Teaching Heart Idolatry

(NOTE: This topic is taught extensively by *Peacemaker Ministries* so we mention here just a few helpful ideas concerning what we believe should be emphasized when teaching the members of a church in conflict.)

The Pervasive Nature of Idolatry:

Every Christian, indeed every person, should understand that every decision they will ever make is driven by some sort of desire. Desires, very broadly, take a person in one of only two possible directions:

- The direction of satisfying self
- The direction of satisfying the Great Commandment to love God and to love neighbor (Matt. 22:37-40)

Every decision aimed at satisfying self has the potential of becoming an idol and the source of great interpersonal conflict (James 4:1-4).

Even the desire for an apparently good thing can become an idol:

- “We know that every natural impulse, however innocent, in itself, may stand between God and us, and so become an idol.” –C. S. Lewis
- “The evil in our desires often is not in what we want, but that we want it too much.” John Calvin
- “Desires love to disguise themselves as things we need or deserve, even good things. But no matter how good or legitimate a desire may look on the surface, if we can’t be content, fulfilled, or secure without it, that desire has probably become an idol that has diverted our love and trust from God.” –Ken Sande

What Idols Frequently Look Like:

- The need for acceptance (fear of man idolatry)
- The need to be right (control idolatry)
- And anything else frequently stated as a need that is central to one’s life and acts as if God could not make you happy and secure without the addition of something else.

“The most basic question which God poses to each human heart is this: Has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart’s functional trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight?” -David Powlison

Change is Possible:

We can reveal our idols through understanding who or what rules our behavior, the Lord or an idol? What do we worship, the Creator or the created? “The secret to change is always to identify the idols of the heart.” - David Powlison

“People change when they see they are responsible for what they believe about God. Life experience is no excuse for believing lies; the world and the devil don’t excuse the flesh. People change when biblical truth becomes more loud and vivid than previous life experience.” -David Powlison

The Greatest Misery:

“The greatest misery of them all is for God to give you up to your heart’s lusts and desires, to give you up to your counsels. Psalm 81:11-12: *But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.* Oh let me not have such a misery as that for to give me what I would have, to give me my heart’s desires is one of the most hideous judgments in the world. The nearest of all the blackest sign of a reprobate is this: for God to give a man up to his heart’s desires.” -Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*

Attachment 6: Teaching God's Plan for Becoming One in Christ's Church - Spiritual Gifts

God's Plan Concerning Spiritual Gifts is a Way to Embrace Conflict and Unify the Church:

Surprisingly, there are relatively few places in the Scriptures that specifically speak to "how" God intends to build his church.

- Of course, the Great Commission is central to his building plan (Matt. 28:18-20)
- Also, Matthew 16:18-19, where Jesus tells his disciples that he will "build" his church on the foundation of Peter's testimony that Jesus is the Christ, the cornerstone. The context of this plan is his building authority manifested in the opening of the kingdom through the good news of the gospel and regulating its purity in the church through the closing of the kingdom to the unrepentant through church discipline (the "keys of the kingdom" and the authority to "bind and loose"). This authority he passes to men (the elders and members of the church) as they gather in his name (Matt. 18:20 and 1 Cor. 5:4-5).
- To build God's church elders are to be appointed in every church (Acts 14:23; Ti. 1:5)
- But there is also another specific way God says he will build his church, and, simultaneously, it will also build unity. That way is through the identification, employment, and consistent use of the spiritual gifts that His Spirit pours out on the members of the church:

Ephesians 4:

Vss. 2-3: "...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bear with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace..."

Vs. 4: "There is one body and one Spirit..."

Vs. 7: "But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure (Greek: metron, the endowment) of Christ's gift..."

Vss. 12-13: "...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God..."

Vs. 15: "...we may grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

God's church-building formula for unity in the church is centered in the identification and use in ministry of each member's spiritual gift.

1 Corinthians 12:

First Corinthians 12 adds to this revealed church-building and church-unifying strategy:

Vs. 7: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Vs. 18: "God arranged the members in the body [the church], each one of them he chose."

Vs. 20: "As it is, there are many parts, yet one body."

Vss. 24-25: "*But God has so composed the body... that there be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.*" (emphasis added)

Vs. 27: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

It seems clear that God's plan to overcome divisions in the church, to embrace the evil of conflict, hinges on the identification and full mobilization of each member's spiritual gift. As each member contributes their gift to the building of the church there is to be no demeaning judgment, only encouragement so that every member is affirmed and embraced in unity.

Embracing God's assignment of church conflict should be a matter of seizing the opportunity to sort out what part each member is and to then so order the church in unity as it grows up into its head, Jesus the Christ.

Insight from Dr. Wayne Grudem:

"But spiritual gifts not only equip the church for the time until Christ returns, they also give a foretaste of the age to come."

Even the diversity of gifts should lead to greater unity and interdependence in the church (see 1 Cor. 12:12-13, 24-25; Eph. 4:13), and this diversity in unity will be a foretaste of the unity that believers will have in heaven."

Attachment 7: Teaching “Dependent Responsibility”

1. When church members face conflict they face a decision, to either labor together to respond and resolve their conflicts with grace or to simply continue the fight through escape and/or attack responses. The decisions that are made reveal where the boundaries of faith lie. Many people fail to distinguish that their faith, while given as a gift of God (see Ephesians 2:8-9), is also a responsibility to be borne and practiced through the personal effort of each person who carries the gift. The concept of “dependent responsibility” is foreign to many but is an important element in the outworking of the conflicts that may come to the church family. Jerry Bridges, who has written so many books on the Christian life, recently addressed the matter of “dependent responsibility” in his book *The Transforming Power of the Gospel* (NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2012). What follows are quotes from that book that describe what “dependent responsibility” means and how believers are called to *work* with the *gift* they bear as God’s eternal children.
2. “The transformation process the Bible describes is much more than a change of conduct or improved human morality; it is actually a work of the Holy Spirit in the very core of our being. In the only two instances in Scripture where the word *transformed* is used, it occurs both times in the passive voice. We are *being* transformed (see 2 Corinthians 3:18), and we are to *be* transformed (see Romans 12:2). In both instances, we are the object, not the agent, of the transformation process; the agent is the Holy Spirit. We do have an active role to play in this process. All the moral exhortations and commands in the New Testament assume our responsibility to respond to them.”
3. “Just as we must look outside of ourselves to Christ rather than our own performance for assurance of our acceptance by a holy God, so we must look outside ourselves to the Holy Spirit to work in us and enable us to work.”
4. “As the agent of our transformation, the Holy Spirit both works in us and enables us to work.”
5. “We know that to some degree we can change our conduct but not our hearts, that is, the deep inner core of our being. Only the Holy Spirit can do this, and he does this monergistically (working alone). How does the Holy Spirit bring about these kinds of change? He works monergistically in at least three ways: He brings conviction; He creates desire; He creates change.”
6. “How do we connect to the power of the Holy Spirit? We do it by faith—by renouncing any confidence in our own willpower and relying entirely on the Holy Spirit to empower us.”
7. “Dependence on the Holy Spirit has been a growing process for me (Bridges). In chapter 1, I recounted how I had embraced for a time a totally passive approach to spiritual growth, with its slogan “Just let Jesus live His life through you.” As God rescued me from this thinking, I began to understand the biblical principle

of dependent responsibility, meaning I am responsible for my pursuit of holiness but am dependent on the Holy Spirit for His enabling power.”

8. “The Scripture that expresses most plainly the principle of dependent responsibility is Philippians 2:12-13. Verse 12 says we are to work out our salvation; that is we are to work out in our daily lives the new life that has been implanted within us at the time of our salvation. This is our responsibility. But verse 13 tells us that we can do this because God is at work in us, both to will and to work. This verse not only implies our dependence but actually assures us that we can work because God is at work in us.”
9. “The Puritans understood the concept of dependent responsibility. They used to say (and this is not an exact quote but captures the attitude), ‘Work as if it all depends on you, yet pray as if it all depends on God.’ They labored diligently to become more like Christ, but they also prayed diligently because they knew they were dependent on the Holy Spirit to make their labor effective. This is the way we apply the principle of dependent responsibility.”

Attachment 8: Grasping Enabled Contentment

(Compiled by Dave Edling)

1. Some people have never become settled and serving members of the church because they lack contentment. These discontented people are frequently at the center of church conflict. Lack of contentment is a spiritual maturity issue that is directly related to conflicts in the church.
2. What is Christian contentment? “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.” –Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Jeremiah Burroughs was a Puritan pastor/preacher of the congregational persuasion. His sermons on the topic of a Christian’s contentment in book form were first published in 1648, two years after his premature death at age 47. The book has been reprinted eight times, the latest in 2005.)
3. Scripture: Philippians 4:11: “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.”
4. Burroughs states: “I have learned – Contentment in every condition is a great art, a spiritual mystery. It is to be learned as a mystery.”
5. The doctrinal conclusion from Philippians 4: 11-13 is this: “That to be well skilled in the mystery of Christian contentment is the duty, glory and excellence of a Christian.” – Burroughs
6. Scripture: 1 Timothy 6:6: “Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment...”.
7. God’s wisdom is counter-intuitive. The real secret of contentment is a type of self-sufficiency...that is, meaning that we are not a prisoner of our circumstances or self-needs. Circumstances don’t need to be what drives us.
8. “Being content doesn’t mean ruling out praying for and working for positive change. A true test of learning contentment is what I do when circumstances don’t change and I don’t get what I want. Do I continue to trust God then?” – Patsy Evans, wife of pastor Brad Evans and frequent writer/blogger
9. “Learning contentment is hard work, and I am a reluctant student.” “The main emphasis of life should be conforming to God’s will. I am not a prisoner of my circumstances or felt needs; they don’t drive or control me. I may see my life as terrible and elevate comfort as my goal. At this point, I am making an idol of my

circumstances. Instead, I am called to be a prisoner of Christ (Eph. 3:1).” – Patsy Evans

10. Scripture: Hebrews 13:5: “Let your conversation be without covetousness, and be content with such things as you have.”

11. Some quotes from Burroughs’ *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*:

- a. “Here lies the bottom and root of all contentment, when there is an evenness and proportion between our hearts and our circumstances.”
- b. “The way to be rich is not by increasing wealth, buy by diminishing our desires.”
- c. “If you can get your heart to be more burdened with your sin, you will be less burdened with your afflictions.”
- d. “There is a power of grace to turn this affliction into good; it takes away the sting and poison of it.”
- e. “God has given a Christian such a power that he can turn affliction into mercies, can turn darkness into light.” Quoting Luther who wrote in commenting on Galatians 5:17, “A Christian becomes a mighty worker and a wonderful creator, that is, to create out of heaviness joy, out of terror comfort, out of sin righteousness, and out of death life.”
- f. “I know nothing more effective for quieting a Christian soul and getting contentment than this, setting your heart to work in the duties of the immediate circumstances that you are now in, and taking heed of your thoughts about other conditions as a mere temptation.”
- g. “A gracious heart is contented by the melting of his will and desires into God’s will and desires; by this means he gets contentment.”
- h. “The mystery of contentment consists not in bringing anything from the outside to make my condition more comfortable, but in purging out something that is within. Now the men of the world, when they would have contentment, and lack anything, Oh, they must have something from outside to content them. But a godly man says: ‘Let me get something out that is already in, and then I shall come to contentment.’” “The way to contentment is to purge out your lusts and desires that are within you.”
- i. “A Christian finds satisfaction in every circumstance by getting strength from another, by going out of himself to Jesus Christ, by his faith acting upon Christ, and by bringing the strength of Jesus Christ into his own soul, he is thereby enabled to bear whatever God lays on him, by the strength that he finds from Jesus Christ.”
- j. “A gracious heart gets contentment from the Covenant that God has made with him.”
- k. “God must have liberty for these three things: (1) That notwithstanding his promise, he will have liberty to make use of anything for your chastisement. (2) That he must have liberty, to make use of your wealth, or liberties, or lives, for

the furtherance of his own ends, if it is to be a stumbling block to wicked and ungodly men. God must have liberty, though he has made a promise to you he will not release the propriety that he has in your possessions and lives. (3) God must have sufficient liberty to make use of what you have, to show that his ways are unsearchable, and his judgments past finding out. God reserves these three things in his hand still."

- l. "Every time a godly man reads the scriptures and there meets with a promise, he ought to lay his hand upon it and say, 'This is part of my inheritance, it is mine, and I am to live upon it.' This will make you contented; it is a mysterious way of getting contentment."
- m. What some of the martyrs said: "Though we have but a hard breakfast, yet we shall have a good dinner, we shall soon be in heaven."
- n. "The lesson of self-denial is the first lesson that Jesus Christ teaches men who are seeking contentment."
- o. "A man who does not know his own heart does not think what need he has of affliction, and for that reason is uneasy, but when God comes with afflictions to the man or woman who have studied their own hearts, they can say, 'I would not have been without this affliction for anything in the world, God has so suited this affliction to my condition, and has come in such a way that if this affliction had not come I am afraid I should have fallen into sin.'"
- p. "The greatest misery of them all is for God to give you up to your heart's lusts and desires, to give you up to your own counsels. So you have it in Psalm 81:11-12: 'But my people would not harken to my voice, and Israel would none of me,' – what then – 'So I gave them up to their own counsels.' Oh let me not have such a misery as that, for to give me what I would have, to give me my heart's desires is one of the most hideous judgments in the world."
- q. "The nearest of all the blackest of a reprobate is this: for God to give a man up to his heart's desires."
- r. "Nothing befalls you, good or evil, but there is a providence of the infinite eternal first Being in that thing; and therein is God's infiniteness, that it reaches to the least things, to the least worm that is under your feet." "There is nothing that befalls you but there is a hand of God in it – this is from God, and is a great help to contentment."
- s. "When you are in a ship at sea which has all its sails spread with a full gale of wind, and is swiftly sailing, can you make it stand still by running up and down in the ship? No more can you make the providence of God alter and change its course with your vexing and fretting; it will go on with power, do what you can. Do but understand the power and efficacy of providence and it will be a mighty means helping you to learn this lesson of contentment."
- t. "God's ordinary course is that his people in this world should be in an afflicted condition. We are therefore not to be discounted with it, seeing God has set such a course and a way, and we know it is the will of God that it should be so."

- u. "Usually the people of God, before the greatest comforts, have the greatest afflictions and sorrows."
- v. "Contentment delivers us from an abundance of temptations. The Devil loves to fish in troubled waters."
- w. "Let it be as great an affliction as it will, it is not as great as your sin."
- x. "Is your affliction greater than others? Then in this you have an opportunity to honour God more than others. You should consider, does God afflict me more than other men? God gives me an opportunity in this to honour him in this affliction more than other men, to exercise more grace than other men. Let me labor to do it then."
- y. "The things we lack, if we are godly, are things of very small moment in comparison to the things we have, and the things we have are things of very great moment."
- z. "Oh, do not be content with yourselves till you have learned this lesson of Christian contentment..."

Church conflict presents many opportunities for growth, but will the people involved in the conflict take the opportunities presented? It is the job of the leader, be that the pastor or the professional church intervention specialist, to draw people to a realization that God has not been caught by surprise by their circumstances nor has He abandoned them. No, He is calling them all to change. They need to realize anew that no progress will be made unless they are ready to change and that those who refuse to change cannot change anything. Embracing church conflict can be the fertile ground to demonstrate **dependent responsibility** and to grow in **Christian Contentment** but unless taught with power and conviction people will not be drawn to the opportunity. May God enable you to be His instrument of truth calling people to a new understanding of His grace even in their afflictions.