


## THE PATHS OF CONFLICT

 In the previous chapter I set out to identify one of the primary reasons I and many other church leaders are reluctant to embrace biblical peacemaking. Though orthodox in our confession of Christ, we function like Docetists. Thus we neglect to pattern our pastoral ministry in accord with the ministry of the great Pastor-Peacemaker himself. The only way to overcome our reluctance and unbelief is to embrace the Christ who *has come in the flesh*, and to see how inseparably intertwined the cross is with the hard work of peacemaking.

Once our hearts are compelled to follow Christ and his cross, we are ready to consider biblical peacemaking principles and practices. Before we can preach these things to ourselves and our people, however, it would be wise to map the common paths conflict takes as well as our typical responses to conflicts.

### Defining Conflict

The word *conflict* conjures all sorts of connotations. For the sake of simplicity, we will define conflict as “a difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone’s goals or desires.”<sup>1</sup> That is, conflict



results when my desires, expectations, fears, or wants collide with your desires, expectations, fears, or wants.

This definition is brief, making it memorable, and broad enough to cover a multitude of conflicts! However, take special note that this definition does not automatically equate conflict with sin. Conflict is not necessarily a consequence of sin, though it is assuredly a frequent occasion for it.

Most important, this definition directs our attention to the heart of much conflict by speaking of those differences that “frustrate someone’s *goals* or *desires*” (italics added). In chapter 3 we will have more time to explore this inner dynamic. For now, we can be satisfied with a good working definition that we can use and teach to the members of our churches.

### Common Occasions That Result in Church Conflicts

As leaders in the church, as workmen of God’s Word, we are not surprised by conflict. We know that the Bible is all about conflict. The “peace chapters” (Genesis 1–2 and Revelation 21–22) are but bookends to a world in conflict. While Scripture records a multiplicity of occasions that result in conflicts, there are four in particular that typically breed disputes within the local church: issues of divided allegiances, authority issues, boundary making, and personal affairs.

#### *Divided Allegiances*

Conflicts often arise over conflicting allegiances to people or ministry styles. People inhabit ministry; ministry is incarnate in people. Our likes or dislikes of certain people often develop into a party spirit in which our loyalties become directed toward a particular person rather than to Christ. In a church with multiple staff, allegiances can gather around this or that pastor in the same way that allegiances clustered around Absalom and David and eventually divided the kingdom (2 Samuel 15). In other churches, allegiances form around certain members or families of prominence in the church, such as the wealthy donor on whose financial support the church leans

(James 2) or the family who has been there from the inception of the church and without whose permission little gets done.

Consider the church of Corinth divided over differing allegiances to Paul, Apollos, Peter, or Christ, as described in 1 Corinthians 1:10–13:

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided?

Paul rightly rebukes the Corinthians for “dividing” Christ. Yet the same sort of party spirit abounds in the local church today. We see it in the allegiances certain people have to radio ministers rather than their own pastors. Your own preaching and teaching is likely to be compared to more popular speakers, and in that comparison, certain members may conclude that your preaching and teaching are lacking.

People also have divided allegiances to programs, events, projects, and ministries. I remember one conflict we had in our elders’ meeting over our youth ministry. One elder began to accuse another elder of not caring for our youth. An argument quickly ensued until we cleared the air by reminding each elder that the issue in dispute was a project, not each other’s motive. They both apologized and agreed that they shared the same motive—love for discipling our youth well—even though they differed over the way in which ministry to our youth was to be accomplished.

#### *Authority Issues*

Conflicts also arise over issues of authority. Authority issues can be classified into three types. The first is the challenge over the right of authority, which may be related to the allegiances Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 1, discussed earlier. Here people pick and choose whom they will obey and whom they deem is the true authority.

For example, in Numbers 12 we read of Miriam and Aaron challenging Moses's right to authority. They presume that they have an equal right. Ironically, in Numbers 16 Aaron becomes embroiled in a similar conflict when the sons of Korah challenge his priesthood! God lets Aaron get a taste of his own sin.

In the New Testament, a similar challenge to Paul's apostolic authority is evident by so-called superapostles (see 2 Corinthians). Interestingly, Paul's response comes not by way of appealing to his official, God-given appointment ("Here are my credentials"), but by appealing to his scars—his suffering for the gospel!

The second kind of authority issue is the *abuse of authority*. Our Lord Jesus frequently emphasizes the temptation that church leaders will face when given authority. We will "lord it over others" (see Matt. 20:25–28; Mark 10:42–45; Luke 22:25–27).<sup>2</sup> Such authority abuse takes many forms, such as placing ourselves above accountability to others, using procedural processes of a church's polity to promote our agenda or keep others from advancing theirs, and applying formal discipline too quickly to those who instead need our pastoral counseling and care.

A third kind of conflict arising over issues of authority is the *failure to exercise authority*. Here the issue is not abusing our authority but failing to use our authority—being indecisive and unwilling to commit to a specific course of action.

One way this "failure to act" appears is by neglecting to delegate authority. For example, early in the administration of the Mosaic covenant, Moses discovers the pressing need to select and equip men to act as mediators and arbitrators for the people of Israel when they encounter conflicts. Jethro, Moses's father-in-law, sees that Moses's failure to delegate authority is leading to further conflict. So he instructs Moses,

Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him [i.e., to God in prayer]. Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.

Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you.

Exodus 18:19–22

Moses's failure to establish sufficient subordinate authorities to whom he could delegate the day-to-day affairs of Israel in the desert had resulted in more conflicts. So, in essence, he delegates judicial offices to address the disputes.

In Acts 6 conflict in the early church appears due to the same problem. The Hellenistic widows complain about being neglected in the distribution of aid, which is happening because no one has delegated the oversight of their needs. So the apostles take decisive steps to remedy this problem by establishing a deaconate—a subordinate and delegated authority to give oversight to this area of ministry.

A variation of this failure to delegate authority occurs when leaders are appointed to a ministry without being given specific guidelines for leading. For example, in many churches lay leaders are left wondering to whom they should report, how to file a complaint, or how to make a respectful appeal. Soon gossip, petty jealousies, turf battles, resentment, and bitterness spread. Conflict erupts.

### *Making of Boundary Markers*

Another cause or occasion for conflict is our propensity to substitute man-made boundary markers for the gospel of Christ as the real basis of fellowship. While confessing we are one in Christ, the reality is often that our unity rests upon a cultural custom or preference. My friend Jeff Ventrella calls this type of people "hyphenated Christians"—believers who judge the orthodoxy of other believers on the basis of a *good preference* rather than an *essential precept*.<sup>3</sup> For example, we tend to make the basis of our fellowship our political views (good preferences) rather than our confessional commitment to Christ (essential precepts).

So Christians divide over the "orthodoxy" of the hymnal they prefer (blue or red cover), the manner of educating their children

(Christian school, homeschool, or public school), dating options, parenting methods, and the like. The list never ends. But in each instance, a boundary marker is drawn—an invisible line in the sand whereby we begin to think of those who hold different opinions and preferences from our own in terms of “them versus us.” A gradual distancing from one another occurs. Suspicion seeps into the life of the church, and our hearts grow cold toward one another. In it all, we lose sight of the only basis for our unity and peace—Christ and his justification of us sinners by grace alone through faith alone.

### *Personal Affairs*

While the above conflicts usually involve large segments of our churches, the more typical kinds of conflict that consume a pastor’s time (and which this book particularly addresses) are the run-of-the-mill personal affairs, which Jesus is addressing when he tells us to first get the plank out of our own eye (Matt. 7:3–5). These are conflicts caused by personal sin that surface in family and marriage disputes, strained friendships, or business/employment conflicts involving church members.

This kind of discord moves James to ask, “What causes fights and quarrels among you?” (James 4:1). And it is this kind of conflict through which Christ has called us as pastors to shepherd our people. Sadly, more often than not, many of us wash our hands of such conflict and pass the person or couple off to a professional counselor, justifying our actions in the name of doing “real ministry.”

My youth pastor recently told me about a conversation he had with a fellow youth pastor in a megachurch with multiple staff. As they discussed ministry, my youth pastor shared how that afternoon he and several elders would be working with a family in a domestic abuse case involving a rebellious teenager. The fellow pastor’s response was not all that atypical: “Oh, we don’t spend our time doing that. We send them to the counseling center in town so we can commit ourselves to ministry.” For him, reconciliation and ministry were divorced from one another. Ministry had become reduced to discipling people who have no present problems.

Of course we can appreciate the reason for this course of action. We have not been adequately trained to enter the real lives of real people and minister in real time—the kind of things that conflicts force upon us. And if we do step in, the result often is little better. We find ourselves caught in a vortex of “he said,” “she said.” Intending only to help, we find ourselves a third party in the conflict, accused by both parties of taking sides. In the end, we vow never again to get involved in people’s “personal affairs.”

These, then, are the four most common occasions in which church conflicts arise: divided allegiances, authority issues, boundary making, and personal affairs. As church leaders, we must be equipped to respond to these kinds of conflict in a manner that is realistic about the ongoing effects of indwelling sin, that is biblically wise, and above all, that is confident in the vital and penetrating changes Christ’s gospel can effect in people’s lives.

### **The Chaos of Conflict and the Call for Clarity**

Conflict and sin are necessarily complex. Conflict brings chaos, darkness, and confusion. Peacemaking, by contrast, is deliberate and necessarily simple. Into the midst of chaotic conflict, the pastor as peacemaker must enter with the brightest of lamps and guide his fellow brothers and sisters who have been blinded by conflict. He must be simple, clear, and direct, helping them see things as they really are.

In the violent and chaotic times of the prophet Habakkuk, the Lord called the prophet to write down his revelation and “make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it” (Hab. 2:2). Today that same call for clarity is needed as we seek to help our people in their conflicts.

An initial step our own church leaders have taken in this direction is to talk clearly and openly about our own struggles with sin, our need for daily renewal, and the hope and promise for reconciliation that are alone found in Christ our Peacemaker. This confession must begin by those in leadership. Unfortunately, church leaders are often the last to confess their sin and admit their need for wisdom and reconciliation. The sins we preach against are rarely our



own. The sinners about whom we preach, those who need Christ, are never ourselves or people within our church. Christ and his gospel remain largely for those sinners outside the church. Here within the church's sacred walls we stand as false saints no longer in need of Christ. The church becomes our holy bus. We have our ticket to heaven. We step aboard, and we expect everyone to take their proper seats and behave. Thinking we have preached Christ, we instead burden our people with heavy loads of legalism.

What true confession recovers is the glorious Reformation's insight of the transforming gospel of justification by grace. Martin Luther taught us that Christians are amazing creatures—at one and the same time justified and sinful (*simul justus et peccator*). What a freeing message that is! As such, we pastors can be ruthlessly honest about our sin, our struggles, and our conflicts within and without. As justified sinners, we need no longer to pretend or cover our sin with false attitudes like, "I'm OK, you're OK." Rather, we can confess our sins to one another (James 5:16) and fear no condemnation, having great hope that the Christ who has saved and justified us is sanctifying and leading us to live as reconciling peacemakers.

Confession, then, is the first step in exposing things as they really are, shining light into the chaotic darkness of conflict. It keeps us ever mindful that we are sinners saved by grace. The leaders in my church regularly remind ourselves and our members that as such, we will continue to have conflict in our church. For example, in every membership class I tell prospective members that at some point I will offend them, but there is a way of recourse for them to approach me or the elders and staff to be reconciled.

Another way we seek to bring clarity to conflict is by confession at the congregational level. Our people need to confess the gospel corporately as it relates specifically to conflict. One way we do this as a congregation is by regularly reciting a sort of "creed" called the Peacemaker's Pledge. The opening paragraph frames our commitment to peacemaking by reinforcing the centrality of the gospel in shaping our response to conflict. It reads as follows:

As people reconciled to God by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we believe that we are called to respond to conflict in a way that is remarkably different from the way the world deals with con-

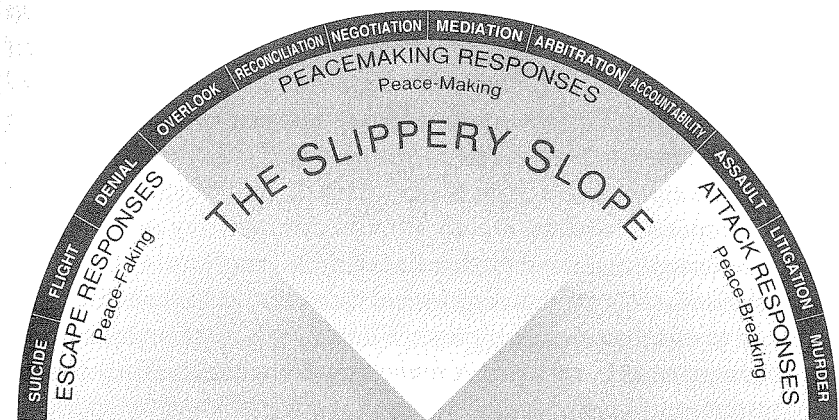
flict. We also believe that conflict provides opportunities to glorify God, serve other people, and grow to be like Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Our obedience in pursuing peace must be the outflow and overflow of hearts fully aware of being saved by the Prince of Peace. The gospel is God's power to save, reconcile, and renew sinner-saints daily in the midst of our confusing, chaotic lives, molding and reshaping us into a reconciling community serving a reconciling Lord.

There remains a third way to bring clarity to the chaos of conflict. We cannot help people live in peace if they are ignorant of how they themselves break peace. If we desire to help our church members become peacemakers, we must help them discern the habitual ways in which they respond to conflict. We can do this by helping them chart their paths on the "Slippery Slope."

### Our Responses to Conflict: The Slippery Slope

We are all familiar with the "fight-or-flight" response when our lives are threatened. Ken Sande vividly captures this typical pattern of response to conflict in his Slippery Slope diagram.<sup>5</sup> It helps people to place themselves on the "map" of a conflict and effectively gauge the way they are responding.



The Slippery Slope. Taken from Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* © 2004. Reprinted with permission of Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group.

The Slippery Slope divides typical responses to conflict into Escape/Flight Responses and Attack/Fight Responses. These are placed on either side of the center portion of the slope called Conciliation or Peacemaking Responses. The objective is to help people operate on top of the slope (the Conciliation Responses zone) in order to keep from falling off into either the Escape or the Attack zones.

### *Escape Responses*

The left side of the Slippery Slope, the Escape Responses to conflict, may be thought of as *peace-faking* responses.<sup>6</sup> Such responses often look like *peacemaking*, but they are not. In actuality, the person seeking to escape removes himself or herself from the responsibility to respond to conflict biblically. There are three categories of Escape Responses: denial, flight, and suicide.

*Denial.* Denial means pretending that conflict does not exist (Prov. 24:11–12). This is a self-deceiving response. We tell ourselves that nothing is the matter instead of facing the angry spouse, child, parent, or church member and dealing with the conflict biblically. Denial is also the best way to describe the state of those who simply refuse to take any action to resolve a conflict biblically.

*Flight.* Flight is simply running from one's conflicts. As church leaders, you will see people get upset over something or someone in the church. One person offends another, and the other takes up an offense (or at least the perceived offense). A common Flight Response is when the persons in conflict take measures to avoid facing each other. In my church we have had cases where disputing persons separate themselves from one another by deliberately sitting on opposite sides of the church sanctuary during worship. Another Flight Response is when a person quits the ministry or refuses to serve any longer in the church as a result of conflict.

Flight is also a common response of those under church discipline or likely to come under discipline. When they become aware of the church's intentions, they often stop attending church. They choose to flee rather than be corrected. And we are likely to respond in kind, saying "good riddance" to them rather than calling them to be reconciled.

At times flight is a permissible response to conflict. For example, in certain marital or parent-child conflicts, physical separation of the parties for a limited time may serve to prevent either or both of them from physical harm. Of course, in such cases, this form of flight is only most beneficial if the parties are undergoing counseling by a pastor (or another trustworthy church leader) who is equipping and teaching them how to deal with the harmful behaviors (e.g., alcohol or drug abuse) that contribute to the violent outbursts in the midst of family disputes.

*Suicide.* Finally, the ultimate Escape Response is suicide or the threat of suicide.<sup>7</sup> This is always a wrong response to conflict. Yet do not think that as leaders of "good" churches you will be immune from having to deal with such responses. I had one case in which a teenage girl responded to her parents, who caught her in bed with a boyfriend, by slashing her wrists that night in the bathroom. Then she ran out of the house and wandered the streets around her neighborhood. At that point, she was exhibiting several classic Escape Responses.

On another occasion, a man feeling guilt and shame for stealing some photographic equipment locked himself in his bathroom and threatened suicide. While this response to conflict may appear extreme, we must remember that for every two homicides in the United States, there are three suicides. And suicide is the second + leading cause of death among college students and the third leading cause of death among youth overall (ages fifteen to twenty-four).<sup>8</sup> Clearly, we pastors and church leaders need to anticipate this response to conflict and prepare to address it.

### *Attack Responses*

If you remember, we labeled the Escape Responses as *peace-faking*. Conversely, we may consider the Attack Responses as examples of *peace-breaking*.<sup>9</sup> There are three common ways in which people in conflict bring pressure to bear on their opponents in order to defeat their claims and eliminate their opposition. They are assault, litigation, and murder. All three can be conceived both broadly and narrowly, informally and formally.

*Assault.* Assault may be thought of more narrowly as physical assault or more broadly as the threat of force. Here one or both parties attempt to intimidate the other by physical, verbal, or financial threats in order to compel the other party to give in to their demands. In one case, a pastor in Florida was threatened physically when, in the midst of a congregational meeting, an opponent challenged him to step outside to physically fight in order to determine who was going to stay and who was going to leave!

We pastors are not immune ourselves from engaging in such ungodly behavior. We use our authority to squelch all opposition. We cloak our authoritarian ways under the guise of having a prophetic ministry. We exchange the pulpit of peace for a bully pulpit. In a church in the Northwest, the pastor I was counseling openly admitted that he thought of his office on the same level as an Old Testament judge, which entailed commanding people to submit, ousting rivals by publicly shaming members, and being the sole judiciary in his church.

Assault also has the narrow sense of *physical* violence. Conflict that leads to violence is sadly a reality in too many Christian marriages and—let us be truthful—even in our marriages. Often such violence comes just short of personal physical abuse. Punching holes in the wall, throwing furniture around, and waving kitchen utensils as potential weapons are all examples of inappropriate ways to threaten and intimidate another person.

*Litigation.* In its broader and informal sense, litigation includes all forms of gossip, slander, and the uncharitable judgments whereby people “plead their case” to another in order to garner support against their opponent. It is this kind of litigation that acts as a catalyst to the forming of factions within the church.

In its narrow and formal sense, litigation is attacking one’s opponent in civil court. While at times this is justifiable, it ought to be rare when the conflict concerns Christians (see 1 Cor. 6:1–8). Unfortunately, many pastors and church leaders never notice such “civil” matters. They find 1 Corinthians 6 irrelevant because they believe such civil actions taken by Christians extend far beyond the realm of their pastoral oversight. As such, the church is abdicating its jurisdiction over the so-called secular interests and pursuits of

its members. We will examine further this area of civil disputes in chapter 10.

*Murder.* As suicide is the ultimate Escape Response to conflict, murder is the ultimate form of attack. While you will find this kind of response rare in the church, the root of murder—hatred—is not rare! Jesus expounds the sixth commandment in Matthew 5:22–26 in terms of both its covert and overt expressions. He first takes us to the root of murder (anger and hatred) and warns us against it. Then he indicates two overt expressions of anger and hatred: broken interpersonal relationships (Matt. 5:23–24) and legal disputes (Matt. 5:25–26).

All these expressions conjoined one day in an important pastoral visit. I had taken a member of my church to lunch, knowing that he had been having financial difficulties in his business. During our conversation, he expressed a deep hatred for a former employee who was a Christian. This man had left his employment, had taken many of this man’s largest accounts, and had become a competitor in the same business, costing my church member a sizeable loss of income (estimated at around \$100,000).

With a family to care for and having experienced a rapid loss of income, it was understandable why this man felt very angry, deceived, betrayed, and vengeful. He told me that soon he was going to advertise a drastically reduced rate on his services in the hope of causing his former employee’s business to go bankrupt.

Here was a man with “murderous” thoughts who needed help to address both the issues of the heart (his bitterness and anger) as well as the issues of injustice (need for mediation and possibly restitution).

All this is to say that the murder response to conflict, broadly understood, is not so rare an issue in the pastorate. And the remedy will involve more than counseling a person not to become angry or advising him or her about whether to file a lawsuit. Members of your congregation will have to deal with issues of real injustice against them. You can be assured that their responses will be less than godly. You can also be assured that God has given us in his Word and in the wise counsel of many the wisdom and power we need to minister to those who have been greatly mistreated.

At this point, we should assess our own patterns of responding to conflict. What are your propensities in the face of conflict? Escape? Attack? Flight? Fight? Do you clam up or yell? Do you tend to blame others for conflict? Do you minimize the problem?

Have your spouse or a close friend assess you in this area, because knowing our propensities in conflict is absolutely necessary if we as church leaders are to be peacemakers. Jay Adams reminds us that one of the chief sources we have in counseling people is ourselves (1 Cor. 10:13).<sup>10</sup> You are more like the person you counsel or with whom you are in conflict than you are unlike him or her. When you come to grips with your own sinful habits of response and learn to turn from them in true repentance, faith, and obedience to God, then you will be on your way to becoming a peacemaking pastor.

### *Conciliation Responses: Personal Peacemaking*

Fortunately, these two major (and often sinful) ways of responding to conflict are not the only ways to respond in a dispute. There is a third way—Christ's way. Here we will consider six biblical and godly responses to conflict that we call Conciliation Responses.<sup>11</sup> Conciliation Responses fall into two subcategories: *personal* and *assisted* peacemaking responses. We will consider personal peacemaking responses first.

There are three personal peacemaking responses: overlooking an offense, discussion-reconciliation, and negotiation. In these scenarios, the parties in conflict seek to resolve their own dispute without recourse to a third party to act as mediator or arbitrator.

*Overlooking an Offense.* This response comes out of a magnanimous heart. Unlike the person in denial (which can be mistaken for overlooking), the person who overlooks an offense is not oblivious to the offense, nor does his or her choice to overlook arise out of unbelief and despair, as it does in denial. Rather, he or she deliberately decides to forgive the offender and not to pursue any form of correction or admonition.

The biblical warrant for overlooking is found in a number of passages. For example, in Proverbs 19:11 we read, "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense." (See also Prov. 12:16; 17:14; Col. 3:13; 1 Peter 4:8.) We shall examine

this biblical response in greater depth in chapter 7 and ask when it is appropriate.

*Discussion-Reconciliation.* When an offense cannot be overlooked, we are called to go and show our brother his fault or our sister her fault (see 2 Sam. 12:1-14; Prov. 28:13; Matt. 5:23-24; 18:15; Luke 17:3; Gal. 6:1). Thus the second kind of personal response to conflict is discussion leading to reconciliation. Discussion-reconciliation deals with those personal offenses best addressed and resolved by confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In our usage, discussion involves more than simply improving communication. It is dealing with the matters of the heart (see chapter 3 for more about this).

Notice that I have not used the term *confrontation*. Discussion better captures the scriptural directives of this second response in three ways. First, Scripture tells us to do more than just confront. We are to instruct, advise, warn, and train as well as rebuke (see Rom. 15:14; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 6:4; 1 Thess. 5:14, 21; 1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 3:16). Discussion reminds us that we are to go to our brother or sister with much more than the hammer of confrontation. Our conflict resolution "toolbox" ought to have a variety of tools for the hard work of reconciliation.

Second, discussion better encompasses the reality that in our teaching, warning, advising, and even rebuking, there must exist a two-way conversation. We go not only to speak but to listen. In fact, we listen first, then we speak (James 1:19). Discussion reminds us that the way of the wise is to listen before we speak (Prov. 18:13).

Finally, in the command to "go and be reconciled" (Matt. 5:23-24), we go aware of our own frailty and vulnerability to sin, our own self-deceptions, and our own slowness to heed the warnings and embrace the promises of Scripture. Moreover, we go as brothers and sisters—members of the family of God. Hence, when we go, we go gently and with the intent to restore the relationship of a brother or sister (see Gal. 6:1).

*Negotiation.* Whereas discussion-reconciliation deals with the personal offenses that lead to conflict (bitterness, gossip, guilt, shame, and so on), negotiation concerns the substantive issues that need to be addressed in conflict. Typically, the substantive matter in a dispute is the concrete, measurable, and objective issue over which the parties are in disagreement. This may be the time or place of a



meeting, the terms of a contract, a written policy or practice of a church, the selection of hymns, the curriculum for Sunday school, and so on. Since negotiation is very much a part of the pastorate, we will carefully examine the PAUSE Principle of Negotiation in chapter 8.

### *Conciliation Responses: Assisted Peacemaking*

Now we will turn from personal peacemaking to assisted peacemaking, which involves mediation, arbitration, and accountability, or church discipline. In each of these scenarios, rather than seeking to resolve the dispute between themselves, the parties in conflict call upon others for assistance.

*Mediation.* Mediation is assisted negotiation.<sup>12</sup> Here conflicted parties call upon one or more persons to facilitate mutual communication in the hope of resolution. The biblical warrant for this, of course, is in the very work of Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.

As pastors whose ministry is conformed to Christ, we too are called upon to be mediators. When members are disputing with one another, it is our calling that compels us to enter in, to come alongside each party, and to assist them to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. As pastor-mediators, it is our responsibility to call each party to account before God with respect to how they conduct their affairs with one another. Our place is to offer godly counsel and wisdom. Like Christ, we say to each, "Come, let us reason together." (See chapters 9 and 10 for further discussion.)

*Arbitration.* In arbitration, parties who fail to reach a voluntary solution take their dispute before one or more persons who, acting as judges, are empowered to render a binding decision on the matter. Unlike mediation, the parties seeking arbitration forfeit their control over the agreement. (See chapter 10 for further discussion.)

*Accountability/Church Discipline.* The third assisted peacemaking response is accountability or church discipline. Church discipline may be defined as ecclesiastically assisted mediation or arbitration. When a member of a local church refuses to heed the counsel of

the church elders, and all efforts to bring him or her to repentance fail, the church court is called upon to intervene.

In formal church discipline cases, the church court prosecutes the case against the unrepentant member, rendering an ecclesiastically binding decision. If the defendant is found guilty, the church court has leeway to apply several censures against the person.

The entire matter of church discipline is one that requires much instruction and wisdom. Most denominations provide a degree of help here through denominational policies. Yet as we will see, there is still much the modern church needs by way of instruction, not only in the principles but also in the practices of church discipline (see chapters 11 and 12).

### *Three Dynamics of the Slippery Slope*

Having surveyed the six biblical responses to conflict, in conclusion let me point out three dynamics about the Slippery Slope. First, notice how biblical Conciliation Responses move from more private to more public responses. Initially, the circle of confidentiality is drawn narrowly. Yet it gradually enlarges if there is need for assistance in peacemaking or if there is resistance to peacemaking. Personal responses such as reconciliation and negotiation concern only the parties in a conflict. If mediation or arbitration is needed, the circle of confidentiality expands to include mediators and arbiters. If church discipline is needed, then leaders of the church become involved and, if necessary, the entire church may need to be notified. In conflict resolution, the more private a matter can be kept, the greater hope there is for reconciliation, because confidences are more apt to be broken as more people become involved in a dispute.

Second, notice that the costs increase as you move from left to right on the slope. By "costs" we mean loss of control over the outcome (e.g., negotiation, where you decide, versus arbitration, where another decides for you), the financial expense for resolving the dispute (e.g., the nonexistent costs of personal discussion versus the hefty fees of mediation), and the effort and involvement of others (i.e., one-on-one versus multiple parties). This dynamic

ought to prompt us to encourage parties to “settle their matters quickly before they get to court” (Matt. 5:25).

Finally, note well where the focus of attention is placed in each of these responses to conflict. In the Escape Responses the focus is upon *me*. In the Attack Responses the focus is upon *you*. And in the Conciliation Responses, the focus is upon *us*. The effect of each unbiblical response is a rupture, if not a ruin, of relationship. Conversely, the great promise and potential of peacemaking is reconciled and strengthened relationships. It is the latter that Christ, our Prince of Peace, calls us to pursue and for which he commends us as the “sons of God” (Matt. 5:9).

For many people in my congregation, the simple act of drawing the slippery slope while talking about a present conflict is the first step toward recognizing and admitting their sin and contribution to conflict: “Pastor, I think I’m in the escape zone.” “Pastor, I am a litigator—when offended, I prosecute and accuse, gossip and slander.” Moreover, seeing that there is a third way (six ways, in fact!) to respond to conflict biblically gives people hope that they can break old habits and begin digging a new path in the direction of peace.

We began this chapter by clarifying what we mean by conflict and by mapping out the common occasions for conflict in churches. Then, seeing that conflict brings confusion and chaos, we recognized the related need to bring clarity to those in conflict. An initial step in this direction is taken when leaders willingly confess their own sin and speak clearly about the promise of Christ’s gospel. As shepherds of Christ’s church, we must recover the gospel of grace that confesses we are *saved sinners*. Only the gospel frees us from concealing our sin and our weaknesses and allows us by faith to stand on Christ’s promises and obey his commands to make peace. Only when we as leaders confess our sin and seek to live out of the grace given us in the gospel can we lead our people to do the same. Finally, we stepped back and mapped out our typical responses to conflict and the ways to move forward toward pursuing biblical reconciliation. Yet there remains one more consideration to be explored in our analysis of conflict—that is, the heart of conflict.

### 3

## THE HEART OF CONFLICT

**A**s we saw in the last chapter, conflicts tread a number of different paths. But conflicts come packaged as people. People, not paths, start conflicts. And people, not paths, are the ones who make peace. Our aim in this chapter is to get to the heart of conflict. To know what rules people’s hearts is to know what rules their conflicts. Once we understand what rules their hearts, we can better apply the gospel so that changed hearts will lead to changed lives.

To help focus our attention on the dynamics of the human heart, we will look initially at marital conflict. I do this for two reasons. First, marital conflict is one of the hardest kinds of counseling to do—the spouses seem so intractable in their positions, the stakes so high, the emotions so volatile, and the volume so notably “turned up.” Second, marriage counseling is a staple of pastoral counseling. I find that about one-third of my counseling cases are marital. In fact, it appears that now more than ever, the larger evangelical church needs the gospel of peacemaking for our marriages. The Barna Research Group published in 2001 the results of a survey they did on marriage and divorce. They found that “overall, thirty-three percent of all born again individuals who have been married have gone through a divorce, which is statistically identical to the