

## Is Conflict in the Church a Curse or a Blessing?

What's the reason for conflict in the church? There are lots of bad reasons, but only one good reason. We have the chance to learn from it. The purpose of conflict in the church is to help us learn to love our enemies. A church community is a place for on-the-job training in forgiveness, love, and prayer with our opponents.

Other followers of Jesus are family, brothers and sisters through Jesus. You know that we can choose our friends but we can't choose our relatives. Conflict in the church is God's way of teaching us to love people we don't like very much at the moment.

As followers of Jesus we're often surrounded by conflicts, sometimes mired in conflicts, and often deeply embarrassed by the conflicts we're stuck in. Our situation is not new.

### The New Testament approach to conflict

The New Testament approach to conflict is through love. Jesus was quite emphatic about his commandments to love. The commandment to love God and neighbors was not a surprise, since it was part of the Mosaic laws. His teachings about love for enemies were more controversial and difficult. He said,

*You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:43-45)*

He told us to change our reactions from what comes naturally to the unnatural. No one in that time would expect someone to respond with love to hate and persecution. It's hard enough to love those inside our families and our neighborhoods. Jesus commands us to love those who are outside our normal circle of good relationships.

Even when Jesus is saying this, I believe he knows how hard it is. He says,

*If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. (Luke 6:32-33)*

Jesus tells us, quite specifically, that we're supposed to do more than these others, and actually love our enemies. Doing what he asks, takes a major stretching of the heart.

### Loving enemies is hard

It's a real challenge for us to love our enemies. Fortunately or unfortunately, most of our enemies live at a distance. They can be somewhere across the world, away in Washington D.C., at the state capitol, at denomination headquarters, in the other color states, or in organizations we can't get reach. It's hard to get to know and love someone you don't ever see or meet. John talks about a similar problem when he says,

*If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. (1 John 4:20)*

How can we get practice loving the enemies that we mostly never get a chance to see? I think it's by getting to practice with the opponents that we do see. Our conflicts—up front and

personal at the local level and delivered to our homes by television at the national and international level—give us lots of opportunities.

Learning to love our enemies does not come naturally. After all, enemies are the ones who are getting in the way of things we are trying to do and things we care about. Learning to love them takes practice, and sometimes it takes lots of practice. Sometimes we don't even try, and let our anger or disgust at what the other person is saying spill out without thinking about it.

Sometimes we let our snap judgments characterize the other person—just another limousine liberal, just another conservative redneck—so that we don't even hear the actual words they're saying. Sometimes we listen just enough to let particular words or phrases trigger our own emotional responses. Sometimes we actually try to be "polite," and treat the other courteously by completely ignoring whatever they have to say that we find offensive.

Unfortunately, all these options have something in common: they ignore the reality of the other person, and they ignore the real challenge in the conflict. What Jesus challenges us to do is to love the whole person who is our opponent. This especially includes the well-intentioned parts of their convictions that lead that person to be against us.

What Jesus is challenging us to do goes completely against our grain, just because it goes against all that we care about and all that we are trying to accomplish. It's a struggle even to keep thinking about it.

### **When we disagree, it's hard to understand people on the other side**

When we disagree, we tend to explain the behavior of others in negative terms. Those others are just selfish or just being sinful. Those others are deceptive or manipulative or just trying to get their own way.

When we run into differences that bother us, it's important to try to understand the source of the differences. In order to respect and relate to our opponent, we need to believe that they've come by their position honestly.

Each of us has a slightly different understanding of what is right, based on our different history and learning experiences. We can never truly understand another person's internal processes, so we make our best guesses based on the way we imagine that they would have thought things through.

It's hard to identify and separate the mix of thoughts, feelings, experiences, and priorities that the other is using, even when we try to understand where they're coming from. In practice, it's hard enough for us to know how we came to our own positions, and sometimes we don't even understand ourselves clearly. Understanding the person on the opposite side takes some stretching.

### **We have different callings**

Where do our differences come from? For followers of Jesus, they come from our different life experiences and from the different ways we understand the priorities of the gospel. We're born with a unique combination of gifts, talents, and abilities. These are tuned by our life experiences, some flowering and some lying dormant. Our life experiences provide us with models for action and reaction, as well as patterns for understanding what compassion, love, and sin actually mean in practice.

Our experiences also expose us to different kinds of needs and the very different ways that injustice and suffering are experienced by those around us. Our calling is the place where the needs we encounter and the capabilities we have meet the opportunity to act.

Our commitment to our particular calling comes through and is strengthened by our experiences. The lives of our children, for example, can bring a whole new awareness of an area of need. In the 1980's, several senior executives in major corporations had daughters facing resistance in their business careers. As a result, they suddenly became advocates for advancement of women in their organizations. At the same time, one friend of mine, seeing the struggles faced by her mentally ill son, became an advocate for the concerns of those struggling with mental illness. Our life experience puts a personal face on an otherwise abstract cause, and this is what gives us the determination and energy for taking action.

Our gifts and experiences are the foundation for our particular calling, and these are different for each of us. Our own calling leads us to our priorities, personal and public, for addressing the needs we see.

Deep in the commitment to my own priorities, I may see your priorities as appropriate, irrelevant, or completely backwards. We may end up in conflict for resources, helpers, and public support. This is not necessarily a bad thing, since all of the causes we support need to have their own advocates.

Our different life experiences are also the lens through which we read the scripture and hear the gospel message. Based on our perspective and our sensitivities, we each put different weight on different parts of the gospel we hear. Sometimes we fall into thinking that others are stupid or malicious because they do not read the same sections with the same focus and sense of urgency.

We bring a common commitment to follow Jesus to our understanding of his teachings. Since we differ in perspective and priority, we often find ourselves disagreeing about which teaching is most important, about how we're supposed to act on particular teachings, or even about what the scripture "meant" to say in the first place.

### **Media involvement worsens our conflicts**

Much of our conflict is played out under the watchful eyes of the communications media, which amplify what they see for a wider audience. The impact of the presence of the media is to exaggerate our differences and exacerbate our conflicts. This may not be malicious or necessarily even intentional on the part of the media representatives, but simply happens as a result of the way the media work.

News media are most interesting to their audience when this content is farthest from normal. What is expected, what is normal, is boring. We read our newspapers and magazines, watch our televisions, and listen to our radios to experience something different from our ordinary daily life. As a result, our news specializes in publicizing the extremes, showing our most spectacular behavior, our most outrageous statements, and our most foolish consequences. The result is to enhance the perceived differences in our conflicts.

Unfortunately, news will always be most successful when it is most extreme. The spectacular sells best and keeps the attention of its audience. The same principle applies in the entertainment media, in television and movies, as well. Fictionalized versions of current events and the conflicts driving drama also get more attention when they incorporate the spectacular.

Another factor in entertainment is that identifying with the “good guys” is more fun when the “bad guys” are not sympathetic at all. This results in one-sided portrayals of the participants in a conflict, showing all the best of the “hero” side and all the worst of the “villain” side. The audience, while participating in the drama and being entertained, is more polarized when they encounter the reality of the conflict in daily life.

### **Conflict is a process, not a project**

The reality is that even best argument will almost never bring an opponent over to our side. In a conversation, our opponent has probably heard all that we have to say before we even start. While we’re talking, presenting the best evidence we have, our opponent is busy thinking, not about our good points, but about how to present and defend the opposite point of view.

To be fair, while our opponent is talking, we’re not really listening either, not really open to how the things being said might actually be right. Argument doesn’t result in a change of position on either side. So why should we waste our time talking at all?

Conflict is really not about results but about process. We tend to see conflict as about winning and losing, about having things my way, or about my having to put up with things your way. In fact, the results of the conflict, the rewards of victory or the losses of defeat, are only secondary.

The most important result of our conflicts can be the way we engage them, the things we do and say and feel while we’re engaged in battle. Do we come out a more like Jesus—more loving, more caring, more open to those around us—or do we come out more angry, more disgusted, and more ready for violence the next time?

What is the fruit of our conflict in our own souls, apart from the transitory points that have been won or lost? The point of conflict is not about winning and losing, but about learning to work with those we want to fight with. It’s about learning to love others, right in the middle of our differences and our anger.

We brothers and sisters who are adopted children of God through Jesus are one family. We may not have much in common with the others who’ve responded to the call of Jesus, and we may not even like them. They’re our brothers and sisters nevertheless.

You can choose your friends, but you really can’t choose your relatives. We’re all one family in Christ. Our conflicts and our differences are all part of God’s training program, to teach us to love those that we don’t like much at the time. What matters most is not the particular points won or lost, but the transformation that happens in us when we interact with each other.

### **Conflict is a growth opportunity**

Conflict is the arena in which we can learn to love better. Conflict brings together the things that make love difficult, and conflict challenges us to get better at loving in spite of the obstacles. In conflict we have the opportunity to learn how to live with each other.

We can learn how to listen to each other and learn to understand and to respect each other. We can learn to sympathize with each other, to feel empathy and compassion at times when they don’t come naturally. We can learn to get along with each other, to make compromises and to take turns. We can even learn to work together, to collaborate and support others in areas we share, even in the irritating presence of important ideas that we don’t share.

As James says,

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)*

This is always one of our least favorite quotations, because none of us really likes to face trials. When we face conflict, we see it as a trial that has a clear goal in the victory of our position, in the success of the concerns we stand for.

In fact, the challenge of conflict is not in the struggle to win, but in the opportunity to grow. We receive an opportunity to grow in love for our neighbors, for our friends, and for our enemies through the way we approach and live out our conflicts. By maintaining our determination to love in the midst of conflict, we have the opportunity to grow into that ability to love which Jesus showed. We share that love when we're mature and more completely like him.

Our goal should not be to win for ourselves or even to win on behalf of the values we defend and advocate. The goal is to let Jesus show in our behavior, through all of our efforts. The way we approach our work is far more important in showing the impact of the gospel in us, than any of our actual achievements. Paul says,

*For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:17–18)*

We show the power of God when we demonstrate it working in us. We let the power of God be seen in us when we live transparently, hearing our call and then living it in a way that shows Jesus through us. All of our work, all of our striving, and all of our results need to point to Jesus this way and not to ourselves.

### **Life in dynamic tension**

We live in tension between opposing needs in many areas of modern life. Labor and management struggle to defend the interests of the groups they represent. If labor won all of the battles, terms would be so generous that the companies become less competitive in the marketplace. If management won all the battles, costs would be kept so low that working families wouldn't be able to live decently.

I'm glad that both sides live in their ongoing conflict, and that they manage to work together the rest of the time. Dynamic tension provides a balance that addresses the primary needs of both parties, as well as a way to protect either party in extreme situations.

The usefulness of dynamic tension depends on the honest efforts of the opposing parties. Should negotiators do their best for the side they advocate? Of course. Should negotiators hate their opponent for winning a particular point? No. The loser owes the winner at least respect, honest acquiescence, and courtesy. If the losers are followers of Jesus, they also owe the winner love and compassion. And the winner owes the loser the same, no matter how hard fought the battle.

The role of advocate for a cause is an honorable one, and entering conflict on behalf of that cause can be a valuable calling. Many different groups are in need of defenders and advocates. But the way we practice our advocacy is critical.

Advocates need to respect the integrity of their opposition, to treat their opponents with the same honesty and respect that they expect to receive themselves. Advocates should sympathize

with their opponents' efforts and empathize with their opponents' concerns, while still defending the interests of those in their charge. Serving our particular side in the conflict well serves all sides in the conflict by working toward usable common ground.

### **Our opponent is our colleague**

Whatever the issue, the main thing we have in common with our opponent is that we believe the issue matters. We care about it in a way that those who don't join the fray simply do not. If we're open to getting to know our opponents and to understanding the reasons behind their positions, we'll find new and unexpected brothers and sisters.

The principles behind our positions and the processes we use to get to our positions are universal. We share them with our opponents. The experiences and information we bring are unique to our own perspective, and our own understanding can be enriched by hearing those of our opponents.

Hearing and understanding do not mean that we necessarily change our own positions, of course, but they do give us the opportunity to widen our knowledge of the complex reality behind our conflicts.

The best example I have seen of a way to appreciate our commonality came in a discussion of ordination standards for practicing homosexuals. Participants held the full spectrum of positions, from strongly in favor of ordination to strongly opposed. No one expected that the conversation would change anyone's mind or position.

Each participant, taking turns around the table, got their turn to speak for as long as they wanted. Participants could say anything they liked, in any order, but there was no cross talk, no other conversation or questions during their time to speak. Others gave respectful attention to the person whose turn it was to speak.

The flow of the speakers' comments, each in turn, was amazing. Each in their own order covered the same basic territory. Each talked about the scripture and how they understood what the bible had to say. Each spoke about their homosexual friends or relatives, and how the issue was brought home personally to them. Each spoke about how they came to their convictions, and why they thought their position was important.

Each also spoke about the opposition and where the opposition's concerns seemed to have validity. Each spoke about their own personal struggle, as they came to decide where to stand. Each spoke about the weakness of their particular position, and about their concern that it wasn't perfect. Eventually, each ran out of things that they wanted to say, usually in about five to ten minutes.

In the end, we realized that each person around the table had struggled with scripture and with relationships, with principles and with their impact on real human lives. We realized that we had a lot in common—our caring about the issue, our caring enough that we really wanted to do the right thing, our uncertainties about our own positions, our recognition of the legitimate concerns of our opposition.

We came to respect each other more and respect each other's thought process, even though, as expected, no one changed their position on the issue. We came to empathize with each other's struggles, with a liberal member's fight with homophobia as well as a conservative's grief over broken friendship. We didn't change our advocacy positions, but we

did realize that the values that united us were deeper and stronger than the strategic concerns that separated us.

On any given issue, we may succeed or we may fail. We may find that our point is accepted by the powers that be, or we may find that it is rejected. We may find ourselves living with an uncomfortable compromise, or we may find ourselves stuck with situations that cause us great grief. When we care deeply, anything less than the success of what we have been called to do hurts us personally.

With whom do we share these risks and this pain? We share them with our opponents in the conflict. Those who don't care—those who don't strive—don't suffer this kind of disappointment. Our hearts should go out to our opponents who try so hard and care so much. In our defeats, we should be able to sympathize with the apparent victors, knowing that no success is so complete that it will last forever. It's our opponents, those who also care deeply, who are closest to us, not those who pass by without caring at all.

There's a wonderful line from a movie that captures this aspect of our situation. In the film *Grumpy Old Men*, two neighbors have an ongoing conflict that lasts for years. Finally one of the combatants is ill, and his neighbor goes to see him in the hospital. He's brought up short when the hospital attendant asks, for her records, whether he is "friend" or "family."

He doesn't know how to answer. "Enemy" is not one of the options. It wasn't an option for him going up to a hospital bed, and it isn't an option for us now in the church. "Friend" or "family"—those are the two options for us, as we face our opposition, and both call for our love.

### **We can receive the blessing**

The point of our conflict is not to win it, but to demonstrate the way we live as Christians through it. It is our golden opportunity to learn to love better, to grow into the kind of love that Jesus showed.

We're called to continue to live in conflict, to live in tension with those who are called to different perspectives and different ministries from our own. This doesn't mean that we advocate for our own calling any less strongly. It does mean that we need to recognize the conflict as a gift of God, and as a challenge that enables us to grow in love, if and when we choose to respond to it appropriately.

May the Holy Spirit grant us the power and the judgment to live our own callings with courage, and to continue to grow in Christ-like love in and through our conflicts.