

# Conflict an Opportunity? I Hate Conflict!

*This article originally appeared in the Spring 2001 issue of Lutheran Education, (Vol. 136, No. 3) and is reprinted by permission. (Revised in March 2004)*

*by Ted Kober, President of Ambassadors of Reconciliation*

As I scanned my seminar audience, I couldn't help noticing a man who seemed disturbed and restless throughout the day. We finally met during the afternoon break. Chuck introduced himself, and tears began to well up in his eyes. "Ted, I just don't know how much more of this I can take!"

"Why Chuck? Did I say something to offend you?"

"No, I'm not upset with you. What bothers me is thinking of conflict as an opportunity. I hate conflict. I go to great lengths to avoid dealing with it. This Bible study is confronting me with how I handled my ministry as a professional educator for 30 years. I don't think I can make that kind of change this late in life."

Chuck served as the administrator for a Christian school system, grades K-12. He feared conflict. He had experienced the results of conflict gone bad: parents yelling, kids in fisticuffs, school board members making demands, teachers accusing, staff fired, and needy children pulled out of school. As a believer, Chuck desired to manage his schools in peace. After all, isn't that what we should expect in a Christian school?

Throughout his career, Chuck learned how to fake peace. Deny the underlying conflicts, and over time they might heal. Patch things up the best you can, and the trouble will go away. Smooth things over every time someone comes into the office with a gripe. The problem with his methodology was that it usually backfired on him. And that led him to hate conflict even more.

I reminded Chuck that God did not deny our conflict with him or try to avoid it. Instead, He sent Jesus into the world to take the full punishment for all our sins, including Chuck's sinful ways of dealing with conflict. I encouraged him to respond to God's love by trusting Him, following His direction for responding to conflict, and leaving the results up to God. Chuck thanked me for my counsel, but doubted that he would be able to apply it in his life.

A year later, I presented another peacemaking seminar in Chuck's town. Chuck returned for a refresher, but this time brought others with him—his entire faculty and a few school board members and parents. A couple of his co-workers expressed appreciation for my returning so they

could experience the life-changing event that Chuck raved about. One teacher expressed it this way:

"We wondered what happened to Chuck after he came back from the seminar. He is a changed man. The Chuck we knew always avoided conflict. Now he takes it on directly, teaching us that conflict can be an opportunity. You wouldn't believe the difference he is making in our school."

Chuck himself shared: "My entire ministry is changed. I still don't like conflict, but I have learned that conflict provides me with ministry opportunities."

## Resolving Conflict through the Four G's

Conflict may be defined as "a difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone's goals or desires." These differences can range from simple disagreements such as where to go to dinner to more serious controversies that lead to divorce, lawsuit, or someone leaving a profession.

Misunderstandings, differences in goals or objectives, and competition over limited resources all contribute to conflict. However, Scripture teaches that another force initiates or exacerbates our squabbles. St. James writes: "*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures*" (James 4:1-3).

What causes conflict? My desires. My wrong motives. Serving my personal pleasures. Sin almost always incites our conflicts. Actual sin may not spark the dispute, but two sinners in a disagreement find it all too natural to inflame the fight, defending their righteous causes with sinful thoughts, words and actions.

God's people need to acknowledge sin's role in conflict in order to respond to it biblically. To deny our sin is to deny our need for Jesus, who shed his blood on the cross for us. Admitting our sin leads us to repentance and faith, where healing and comfort are found in God's forgiveness. Proverbs teaches us, "*He who conceals his sins does not prosper; but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy*" (Proverbs 28:13).

True peacemaking is founded on the ministry of reconcili-

ation, that while we were yet sinners, God reconciled the world to himself through his only son, Jesus (see Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 5:11-21). As forgiven children, we demonstrate love for our Father through our ministry of reconciliation to each other.

In his book *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, Ken Sande summarizes what God teaches about resolving conflict in four principles, which Ken refers to as “The Four G’s”:

- **Glorify God** - How can I please and honor God in this situation, and how can I give witness to what he has done for me through Christ?
- **Get the log out of your eye** - How have I contributed to this conflict and what do I need to do to resolve it?
- **Gently restore** - How can I help others to understand how they have contributed to this conflict?
- **Go and be reconciled** - How can I demonstrate forgiveness and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict?

## Glorify God

*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks, or the church of God—even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (1 Cor. 10:31-11:1)*

Our first responsibility in stewarding our disputes is to glorify God. There’s a paradigm shift! My gut reaction to conflict is usually not, “How can I glorify God in this situation?” Instead, I am often motivated by “How can I get what I want out of this deal?” (see James 4:1-3.)

Glorifying God happens when we take time to remember God’s role in our conflict and then respond to it His way. My self-centered approach often assumes that the dispute is between just my opponent and me. As Christians, however, we believe that God sacrificed dearly, involving himself in all our conflicts. Jesus died because of our conflict with God, and our fights with others usually involve sin. Therefore, we have the privilege and responsibility to consider God’s perspective on the issue. Conflict provides three opportunities for the child of God: to glorify God, to serve others, and to grow to be more like Christ.

Curtis led his congregation to glorify God in response to a lawsuit brought against them by a man who slipped and broke his ankle in the church. This small church had never

been sued before, and most of its members were shocked. At the voters meeting, an angry member immediately suggested hiring an attorney, and another person declared that it should be referred to the insurance company.

But Curtis stood up to present a different approach: “How can we glorify God in this lawsuit? Perhaps God allowed this to happen for our good and for this other man’s good, and we can make a difference in this man’s life. How can we minister to this man who was hurt in our church?” Curtis reminded his fellow members of the peacemaking principles they had studied the year before in Bible study. He recommended that, before hiring an attorney or calling the insurance company, the congregation should reach out to minister to the injured man. After much discussion, Curtis was appointed to call him. In the end, two church leaders and the man who sued the church met with a Christian mediator to seek godly solutions to their differences. The church’s insurance company participated, knowing that negotiated settlements usually provide cost effective solutions.

All parties agreed to a settlement of costs. Most importantly, however, relationships were restored. The man remained an active member of this congregation, and everyone praised God for leading them to a peaceful solution. Many interests were met, and people on both sides grew more Christ-like in the process.

## Get the Log Out of Your Eye

*“You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.” (Matt. 7:5)*

We dislike confessing our sins. Our nature is to defend ourselves, justifying our words and actions, convincing ourselves and hopefully others of our rightness. However, Scripture teaches us that such thinking is deceptive: *“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:9).*

On the other hand, if we are honest about our sin to ourselves, God and others, we receive God’s grace in forgiveness and bear witness to our faith in Christ.

A few years ago I met a young man whose example illustrates this point. To fulfill graduation requirements during his senior year in public high school, Chris registered for a work-study program in the gym for a few easy credits. The honor system required him to record his time for approval by his teacher at the end of the semester.

At first, Chris completed the required tasks and documented

his work. But over time, he slacked off in his responsibilities. “After all,” he rationalized, “as long as I hand in a completed log, I’ll get credit.” Near semester end, he realized that he had neglected to maintain his log. He began to plug empty time slots with contrived tasks and then stopped himself.

“What are you doing, Chris? You’re a child of God. This is a lie. I can’t make up stuff I didn’t do. But now what? Like, if I’m honest, I’ll fail this class and maybe miss graduation. What will my teacher say? Or my friends? Or my parents! Lord, I have made such a mess of things—help me to know what I should do.”

Chris prayed for God’s guidance right up to the moment he faced his teacher, Mr. Thomas.

“Well, Chris, let me see your log.”

“I can’t show it to you, Mr. Thomas.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s a lie.”

“What?!”

Chris looked Mr. Thomas in the eye and explained that he had been skipping his scheduled gym time and intended to falsify his records to receive credit. But because he was a Christian, he realized his sin and decided to be honest with himself and his teacher. Chris confessed that he failed to fulfill his responsibilities and deserved an “F.” Mr. Thomas was incredulous.

“Why would you tell me this? I don’t understand!”

“I told you, Mr. Thomas. I’m a Christian, and because of what Jesus has done for me, I cannot live this lie. Let me tell you about Jesus and what he means to me.”

Chris then shared the Gospel with his teacher. A tear rolled down Mr. Thomas’ cheek, and he shook his head.

“I have never met a student like you. You’re right, Chris. Your work is incomplete and you deserve to fail. But you demonstrate an integrity that exceeds what I’ve found in any other student. I’m going to pass you anyway.”

Although Mr. Thomas made no profession of faith, Chris understood that his responsibility was to do what was right before God. Chris’ confession of sin also became his opportunity to share the good news of Jesus. He turned his own struggle with sin into an opportunity to glorify God, serving Mr. Thomas and growing in his faith.

## Gently Restore

*“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (Gal. 6:1).*

Loving confrontation may sound like an oxymoron. Nevertheless, our heavenly Father confronts us in love, for the sake of love, and exhorts us to do likewise (see Heb. 12:4-11). Instead of going directly to our brother (Matt. 18:15-17), however, we often find it easier to deny conflict altogether or to talk about our opponents to someone else. Some Christians contend that they follow Scripture when they get in their adversaries’ faces to tell them off. Confronting others in love for their good is rarely done well, even among children of God.

Such was the case in the conflict over church/school issues between Pastor Stan and Susie, the school board chair. Each sinned against the other in public meetings and private sessions. Susie gossiped about Pastor, judging his motives about nomination elections and accusing him (to others) of manipulating funds and people. Meanwhile, Pastor Stan informed his supporters that Susie was leading a protest against him, undermining his role of pastor, especially questioning his spiritual authority.

Church/school relationships deteriorated and positions became polarized. Church staff were pitted against faculty, and the two camps became entrenched for the anticipated battles. The beloved third grade teacher was publicly chewed out by the Director of Christian Education (DCE) in front of confirmation students over the use of a classroom. Tensions escalated when the principal of 25 years resigned because of stress. The teachers banded together and demanded that the DCE be fired or they would strike and not teach school. The church education board asked for the DCE’s resignation, and he and his family left the church. Church members loyal to Pastor and the DCE called for immediate investigation and resignation of education board members. Parents of school children formed their own action committee, circulating petitions for Pastor’s removal. The other casualties? Long term church members left the church or became inactive, and several children were transferred to the public school.

Pastor Stan and Susie were not the only sinners in this war. But had these two leaders been able to confront each other in love early in the controversy, they may have helped avert the tragedies. With Bible study and prayer, our peacemaker team individually coached Pastor and Susie to meet one another, to confront, repent, confess, and forgive. Pas-

tor denied any serious friction with Susie, dismissing our counsel. Susie resisted similar advice, but finally agreed to approach him.

The first meeting seemed fruitless. Pastor denied any responsibility for the skirmishes, and Susie felt justified in her anxieties that he would shrug her off. But within a few days, Susie's gentle words began to weaken Pastor's confident justifications. He came back to our team for more counsel and prepared to make confession. Before the entire church staff, school staff, and church lay leaders, Pastor Stan confessed his sinful words and actions that contributed to the conflicts, including his shrugging off of Susie's confrontation. Among others, Susie publicly forgave her pastor and confessed her own sins of gossip and slander. Tears of joy and relief softened hardened hearts from the two factions, and this miracle of reconciliation planted seeds of peace that remain today, several years later. Gentle restoration glorifies God, serves others, and helps us grow in our Christian walk.

## Go and Be Reconciled

*“First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. (Matt. 5:24)*

Peacemaking is not passive but active. Jesus says, “Go!” not “Wait around until the other person comes crawling to you.” Reconciliation requires disputing parties to meet with each other, not complain or gossip to others. Christians miss the opportunity for improving relationships that comes from mutual confession and forgiveness when they avoid the very individuals with whom they should reconcile.

Furthermore, parties are not the only ones who suffer. Something we often overlook is how bystanders are affected by our actions. Consider this: when Christians fight, at least ten others watch. If you are a Christian leader, such as a parent, elder, teacher, pastor, board member, or business manager, your silent audience is much larger.

While administering my father's estate following his death, I became entangled in a nasty lawsuit between the estate and Bob (not his real name), another Christian who leased one of the estate's commercial properties. He was unable to pay the rent, and he refused to vacate the property, so I filed a lawsuit against him to collect past due rents and evict him from the property.

I expected the legal process to be quick and decisive, but nearly a year later we were still fighting in the courts. Before one of our court hearings, Bob appealed to me to submit our lawsuit to Christian mediation, but I refused. Convinced that I was legally right, I felt confident I would

prevail. As a fiduciary representing the interests of the estate's creditors, I believed that secular creditors would not approve of my submitting a lawsuit protecting their financial interests to Christian mediation. Finally, I reasoned that Bob did not act like a Christian anyway.

However, when I nearly lost in an appeal case and was summoned to court for a third round, reality set in and I counted the costs. I had spent nearly \$100,000 in legal and administrative fees, and the matter remained yet unresolved. I reconsidered Bob's offer to try Christian mediation. While I could justify myself by saying that I was the first who went directly to him to be reconciled early in the process, it was Bob who later came to me, following Christ's command to “go and be reconciled.” After receiving godly counsel and taking time to pray, I agreed to Christian mediation.

Incredibly, in just two Saturday meetings with Christian mediators, Bob and I reconciled our personal differences through mutual confession and forgiveness; and we settled the financial differences through negotiation. What the legal processes failed to do after a year of fighting and tens of thousands of dollars, God's process for reconciliation brought final resolution.

I thank God that He used people like Bob and other Christians to help me develop a new perspective in this conflict. It was not just about Bob and me. In fact, hundreds of others were directly and indirectly affected by our dispute.

I overlooked how many others were hurt by our conflict. I evicted nearly 200 subtenants and storage customers to regain control of the property, and I employed Bob's former employees to help me negotiate new leases with them, requiring them to repay rent to the rightful owner. My wife and son, and Bob's family, all suffered because of our weariness and pent-up anger at home. Yes, there were hundreds of people affected by a fight between two Christian brothers over property and lease rights, and many were amazed when they heard that we reconciled and resolved our conflict.

Bob's efforts to “go to be reconciled” glorified God, served me and countless others, and helped us both to be conformed to the likeness of God's son.

## Opportunity for Ambassadors of Reconciliation

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the*

*message of reconciliation. We are, therefore, Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us (2 Cor. 5:18-20).*

We are always giving witness to something. The way we respond to conflict reveals how we apply or fail to apply our faith in Christ. Others observe our actions and are often influenced by them, even when we are unaware.

My dispute and reconciliation with Bob demonstrated that to me. Three years after our settlement, Jerry, one of my business consultants in this case, sought my advice for healing his marriage after he experienced a one-night fling with another woman. I was amazed that Jerry would ask me about such a personal matter. We did not know each other socially or through church. Our relationship was strictly business--I was his client. Reminding Jerry that I was not a marriage counselor or a pastor, I asked him why would he ask me for help.

His answer floored me: "Ted, remember when you settled with that man who didn't pay your rent on that commercial building? I never saw any business deal work like that before! I figured that any man whose faith would help him reconcile with a legal enemy through confession, forgiveness and negotiation, could also help a guy like me when I failed my wife and God. Your faith means something to you in everyday life, and that's what I need now." Because he witnessed my conflict, from my failures and repentance to our reconciliation, I was given an opportunity to speak biblically to a business associate about his marriage, including his sin and the promise of God's forgiveness for us through Jesus. Conflict became an invitation to share the Gospel to a business associate. By God's grace, Jerry and his wife were reconciled over time and their marriage healed.

How little we appreciate how others are affected by what we believe are private disputes! People watch and talk about others' conflicts every day. And when they talk about your fights and mine, knowing that we are Christian, they judge whether our faith makes any difference in how we deal with disagreements. St. Peter calls us to put our faith into daily practice when he says, "*Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us*" (1 Peter 1:12).

Because sin either causes or aggravates conflict, Christians have a message for quarreling people. Ambassadors of reconciliation are charged with the privilege and responsibility to bring comfort to the guilt-distressed and the message of repentance to the sin-entrenched. Opportunities called conflicts abound in our personal lives and among those we serve.

Chuck learned to overcome his fear of conflict when he began to see it as an opportunity for ministry. Curtis taught an entire congregation to glorify God in the face of a pending lawsuit. Chris found an opportunity to profess his faith in Christ to his high school teacher when he confessed his sin. Susie and her pastor led many others to reconciliation when they applied God-pleasing methods to confront one another. In the midst of a legal battle, Bob came to me to be reconciled, and with the help of Christian mediators our relationship was healed and our dispute settled. These Christian ambassadors recognized that the conflicts with which they struggled were opportunities for the ministry of reconciliation. Parties and witnesses were all comforted with the message of forgiveness and the peace that passes all understanding.

Let us demonstrate our Christian faith in Jesus through our conflicts, confessing our sins and forgiving one another as God through Christ forgives us. May God grant us each his grace to recognize that conflict provides opportunities for living the Gospel we proclaim, so that Christians and pagans alike will recognize us as Jesus' disciples.

*[Jesus said,] "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).*

## References

Kober, Ted. *Confession & Forgiveness: Professing Faith as Ambassadors of Reconciliation*. 2002, St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House.

Sande, K. *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*. 2004: 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Sande, K. & Kober, T. (1998). *Guiding People through Conflict*. Billings, Montana: Peacemaker Ministries.

Sande, K. & Kober, T. (1998). *Responding to Conflict Confessionally: A Peacemaker Bible Study for Lutherans*. Billings, Montana: Peacemaker Ministries.