PEACE MAKING PASTOR

A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict



ALFRED POIRIER

"Pastors serve on the front lines of the spiritual war that engulfs this world. All too often their greatest battles take place within the church itself, where they are caught in the crossfire of personal, theological, or congregational conflicts. These endless skirmishes leave many pastors—and their families—so exhausted and wounded that they lose their joy for ministry or leave the pastorate altogether. This book provides a gospel-centered strategy for equipping pastors to be highly effective peacemakers who can lead their flocks safely through conflict while building a culture of peace in the church."

Ken Sande, president, Peacemaker Ministries

"In solidly scriptural fashion a veteran pastor here explains how the local church through its leaders can become the community of peace and safety that it is called to be rather than the hotbed of hostilities that it too often is. This is a very salutary book on a very sensitive subject."

J. I. Packer, board of governors' professor of theology, Regent College "A culture of peace should characterize God's covenant people. *The Peacemaking Pastor* by Alfred Poirier is a solid overview of biblical peacemaking, which can help pastors and their churches carry forth the gospel of peace in their personal, family, church, and community lives."

Tony Evans, senior pastor, Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship; president, The Urban Alternative

"Funded by an unusual combination of research and practical experience, Alfred Poirier's *The Peacemaking Pastor* is essential reading for everyone who cares about the peace and purity of Christ's visible church. Every pastor and elder knows the challenges to 'preserving the unity of Christ's body in the bond of peace,' but this book offers rich wisdom for this task. Read it *before* the storm and you will be much better prepared to handle it!"

Michael Horton, professor of systematic theology and apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

"Pastor Poirier calls himself 'a peacemaker-wannabe' but he does something in this book that can really help the church today deal with conflicts and schisms that disrupt our life together in Christ. He gives us a thoroughly biblical, theologically sound perspective on the ministry of reconciliation within the local church. Every pastor and church leader, and every student preparing for the ministry, should read this book!" Timothy George, dean, Beeson Divinity School of Samford University; executive editor, *Christianity Today*

"The Bible tells us to be at peace with all, as much as it is up to us. In a world full of conflicts comes this welcome new book by Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict.* The book provides great insights on how pastors can be a significant part of the solution, and not merely on the sidelines."

D. James Kennedy, senior pastor, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church "The Peacemaking Pastor is pastoral theology at its best. It is, first, theology, a profound biblical exploration of the gospel of God's grace in the cross of Christ and of its power to overcome the conflicts that divide us and damage our witness. This is not, first of all, a handbook of negotiation techniques and communication skills, but rather an exploration of what it means for pastors to cast themselves on the mercy and heart-changing power of God, and then to lead people in conflict to do the same. And, because The Peacemaking Pastor is theological, it is profoundly pastoral and practical, peppered with illustrations from the author's experience that show Christ's power to smash our hearts' idols, break down walls of suspicion and self-defense, and bring us together in surprising unity and love. Pastor, if you are looking for tools to make others behave better and to make conflict "just go away," while you yourself remain unchanged, you should steer clear of this book. But if you are prepared to be challenged to live by faith in a God whose grace can heal relationships in ways beyond our imagination, take up and read—and pray and preach and counsel."

Dennis E. Johnson, academic dean and professor of practical theology, Westminster Seminary California

"Worldwide there are more than 7,500 theological schools, seminaries, Bible colleges, etc., training women and men for ministry. Each of these institutions should have a required course for all its students on reconciliation and peacemaking. Alfred Poirier's work, *The Peacemaking Pastor*, would be the ideal textbook for these courses. It provides very practical insights in an area that has been neglected for too long. *The Peacemaking Pastor* would also be ideal for every pastors' conference and every training program for missionary, denominational, and church staff. An excellent tool for everyone involved in ministry."

Manfred W. Kohl, vice president, Overseas Council for Theological Education "Human conflict is a given in families, marriages, churches, small groups, and the world. Peacemaking is not in the Beatitudes because Jesus is just putting in filler. Peacemaking is core to being a Christian. So what Alfred Poirier offers is not simply another task in an impossible list of tasks. He's giving to the pastor some of the very tools that will inform every other part of ministry—preaching and teaching, small group leader training, the church budget—in helping pastors to become truly the peacemakers who are blessed."

David Powlison, lecturer in practical theology, Westminster Theological Seminary;

editor, Journal of Biblical Counseling

"Combining his long pastoral experience with vulnerability and biblical scholarship, Alfred Poirier identifies the idols of our sinful hearts while providing help and new hope. For those of us who love the local church and want it to reflect the glory of the God of peace, we will keep this book near our desk. We will want to use it as a training manual with our leaders."

Donald L. Bubna, coach, conciliator, and consultant

THE PEACEMAKING PASTOR

A BIBLICAL GUIDE TO RESOLVING CHURCH CONFLICT

ALFRED POIRIER



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Introduction

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

James 3:17–18

Christ is the reason many enter the pastorate. Conflict is the reason many leave. Most seminarians enter the pastoral office unaware of and illequipped to respond to the conflicts they will inevitably face in their churches. Many young pastors enter their calling naïvely, believing that orthodox preaching, well-ordered worship, and a sufficient number of different venues for discipleship will be all they need to grow their members in faith and their church in numbers. Once in the pastorate, however, the reality of conflict and an inability to respond to it in a wise, godly, and gospel manner soon cripple both their effectiveness as pastors and their church's witness.

A recent study by Hartford Institute for Religious Research concluded, "Here in the United States, conflict is a synonym for congregation." The same study stated that "75 percent of congregations reported some level of conflict in the past five years." Yet another study cites conflict and the stress it causes as the leading cause for pastors involuntarily leaving local church ministry. The results of these studies pose a question not only for churches but also for Bible colleges and seminaries, particularly concerning the way we train pastors.

A series of surveys conducted by *Christianity Today* confirms this evident deficiency in pastoral training. Pastors listed conflict management as the most needed training they lacked in their seminary or Bible college studies. In another survey pastors confessed that the two chief contributors to what they deemed as low points in their ministry were internal church problems or conflicts and poor relationships with their leadership board. 4

Yet another survey, ominously titled "Forced Exits," reveals that conflicts cause many pastors to leave their churches (or get fired!) and that churches as a whole, and their leadership in particular, are unprepared to respond to conflict. John LaRue Jr. summarizes his findings with the following:

Other causes [for forced exits] included personality conflicts (with congregations and/or church boards) and unrealistic expectations (by both pastors and congregations). In churches where the pastor was compelled to leave, conflict between the church board and the pastor were two-and-a-half times more likely to have occurred than in typical churches. Conflict among church staff was another factor. Terminated staff members were nine times more likely to have had a personality conflict with a senior pastor than were staff members who were never discharged. 5

LaRue's findings on pastoral conflict in the churches should not surprise us, nor should the fact that conflicts abound in our churches. What ought to surprise us is that churches, Bible colleges, and seminaries alike provide little if any pastoral training in how to address these conflicts. Hopefully this book can play a small but significant role in making up for this deficiency in pastoral preparation. Even more, I hope those already in ministry will find in these pages a message of renewal for their love of Christ, his gospel, and the supremacy of God's glory in his church.

The Contemporary Context of This Book

The past thirty years have witnessed increasing endeavors toward mediating disputes outside the civil courts, or what is sometimes known as alternative dispute resolution (ADR). Today a steadily growing number of universities and law schools offer courses at both undergraduate and graduate levels in ADR. For example, there are Harvard Law School's Program on Negotiation, the Straus Institute at Pepperdine, George Mason University's Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, and the University of Colorado's Conflict Research Consortium.

Associations also have formed to provide accreditation, teaching, and skill development for those interested in this kind of work. The American Arbitration Association (AAA) is the oldest, having been around for about seventy-five years. Another well-known association is the Society for Professionals in Dispute Resolution (SPIDR). As good as it may sound, this

rise in the theory and practice of conflict resolution has depended largely upon the work of secular mediators relying on secular sociological and psychological theories of conflict.

During this same period Christians have established their own dispute resolution groups. These ministries have sought to address the issue of conflict from a decidedly Christian perspective and methodology. Such groups as the Alban Institute, the Conflict Transformation Program at Eastern Mennonite University, and Peacemaker Ministries, as well as individual Christian practitioners of mediation and arbitration, are potential resources for seminaries and Bible colleges to utilize in their training of pastors. 6

Written materials from a Christian perspective range from broadbased treatments of conflict resolution (e.g., *Leading Your Church through Conflict and Reconciliation: 30 Strategies to Transform Your Ministry*, edited by Marshall Shelley) to those focused on pertinent issues in peacemaking (e.g., *Helping Angry People*, by Glenn Taylor and Rod Wilson). However, even these works on Christian conflict resolution evidence deficiencies in the theory and practice of conflict resolution in the following ways. 9

First, they approach conflict resolution principally through the adoption of mere pragmatic responses. The key word is *mere*. Acquiring the right skills (such as communication and listening skills) and utilizing the right methods (such as interest-based negotiation) achieve at best only a modicum of change. In my experience, real change comes in people's attitudes toward conflict and reconciliation through a renewed vision of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the engine that drives the train of reconciliation. Unresolved conflicts between Christians have less to do with people being skillful than with them being sinful. And that is where the pastor comes in, for Christ has ordained us to be preachers of the gospel of peace—a gospel that alone can uproot the sins of bitterness, envy, pride, and covetousness.

Second, contemporary Christian conflict theory is deficient in reckoning with the Godward dimensions of conflict. When discussing anger, revenge, offense, lying, and other emotions and behaviors that characterize conflicts, Christian conflict theory rarely frames these matters in terms of the sinful heart's opposition *to God*. Consequently, it overlooks the deep and rich biblical theme about human motivation, such as idolatry, lusts, and

cravings. When it does treat matters of the human heart and the whys and wherefores of human nature, it typically appeals to psychological models that are less than biblical.

It is evident, then, that there is still a need for greater development of Christian conflict resolution theory and practice that is biblically rooted and theologically integrated within the larger corpus of Christian thought and teaching.

Third, current models for peacemaking (both secular and Christian) share a common shaping influence that is insufficient for peacemaking in the local church—the law-court model. The church, however, needs a more ecclesiastically tailored paradigm on which to build its peacemaking practices.

That the law-court model dominates current theory and practice of conflict resolution is understandable for the simple reason that contemporary conflict resolution arose as an alternative to our formal civil justice system. Most of the early theorists and practitioners came from within the legal or political professions.

There are several advantages to using this paradigm, the most significant being that the law-court model brings a greater degree of sophistication in dealing with substantive and technical legal issues that Christians face. Matters of due process, equity, and justice assume a needed central role.

This model is not, however, without its deficiencies. Law-court model mediation tends to focus on immediate problem solving rather than looking deeper at personal issues, feelings, and relationships. It frames the matters in dispute mostly in terms of offenses and injustices and interprets outcomes merely in terms of restitution that needs to be made. But it fails to address the matters of the heart, such as anger, bitterness, unforgiveness, and unrepentance that fuel conflict.

Again, the law-court model of mediation tends toward eventoriented resolutions rather than mediation over an extended period of time. Thus it neglects to address the sinful habits that recur in people's lives and fails to allow for the ongoing change and renewal necessary to break these habits.

The law-court model also directs the mediation process toward issue settlement rather than aiming at the reconciliation of relationships. Coupled with this objective is reliance upon the outside expert (also known as the "hired mediator") who comes in, mediates a dispute, and then leaves. Thus this process overlooks the ongoing help and assistance so necessary in

reconciling and building longterm relationships. To put it more vividly, current conflict resolution practice looks more like four hours in the emergency room than a month of home recuperation therapy.

What is still needed, then, is conflict resolution theory developed for and practiced in the context of the local church. We need a model that rests upon the uniqueness of the church of Jesus Christ. Christian conflict theory must be theologically rooted and ecclesiastically integrated.

Yet the greatest hindrance to pastoral peacemaking are three hidden assumptions we make about it.

First, too often pastors view peacemaking as only a tool of ministry rather than a habit of being. Instead of *being* ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19–20), we confine peacemaking to special crisis situations within the church. This flawed assumption blinds us to the multidimensional and even cosmic character of the ministry of reconciliation. Since God reconciled all things in heaven and on earth to himself through the death of his Son on the cross (Col. 1:19–20), then we who are the children of God are redeemed *to be* reconcilers.

Second, we tend to assume that peacemaking is meant to be merely corrective and not something constructive. Yet the ministry of reconciliation God gives us is chiefly to build Christ's people to be peacemakers and his church to be a culture of peace.

Finally, for too long, we have tended to view peacemaking through the lens of various ideologies rather than through the lens of Scripture. We have failed to explore what it means that God has given pastors "the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:19) and that we are Christ's ambassadors of reconciliation.

To begin to move in these more positive directions, we must recover the foundational truths of the church's faith. Our doctrines of revelation, God, man, Christ, Spirit, church, and eschatology must inform the goals and practices of peacemaking at every point. For example, we need to be asking how God's sovereignty ought to shape our responses to conflict. Are these conflicts intrusions into ministry, accidents and obstacles to the gospel, or are they assignments from God—the very means by which he causes us to see our poverty and the riches of his wisdom, power, justice, and mercy (see James 1:2–5)?

Furthermore, as a church we must learn to view parties to a dispute not simply as individuals with competing interests. We must see them as who

they are: brothers and sisters in the body of Christ who are caught in the rebellion and bondage of sin, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and called to love and serve one another in the community bounded by gospel, sacrament, and discipline.

We must also broaden the very concept of discipline beyond formal church censures of the extreme form (suspension, deposition, excommunication). "Discipline" should include the whole of the Christian life that we are to live under our heavenly Father's discipline (Heb. 12:1–14).

Finally, we as church leaders need to reorient our priorities, striving to recover the wisdom of mediating and arbitrating disputes to the common labor of Christlike people rather than leaving it to the special purview and labor of legal experts (though such expertise may be needed). We also must envision for ourselves a more holistic ministry, expanding the ministry of the Word to include not only preaching but counseling, teaching, and equipping God's people in the pursuit of peace. This reorientation, in turn, must encompass all our members, for the Bible admonishes all members to pursue peace with each other. (See Ps. 34:14; Matt. 5:9, 43–45; Mark 9:50; Luke 6:35–38; Rom. 12:18; 14:19; 2 Cor. 13:11; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:2–6; Col. 3:15; 1 Thess. 5:13; 2 Tim. 2:22; Heb. 12:14; James 3:16–18; 1 Peter 3:11.)

These are some of the changes we as a church need to set into motion in order to recover the ministry of pastoral reconciliation. It is in light of my passion to see the church recover this ministry that I have written *The Peacemaking Pastor*.

The Design of This Book

One of my primary objectives in writing this book has been to ground peacemaking on a solid biblical and theological foundation as well as to place it within its ecclesiastical context. Because I draw from what I have learned in my own pastoral ministry, which has been shaped by Reformation theology and Presbyterian ecclesiology, I cannot claim to have written strictly from a broadly evangelical, much less ecumenical, perspective. Nevertheless, I am confident that those from other theological or ecclesiastical traditions can not only benefit from this book but also customize and apply my insights to their particular church tradition.

My hope is that this book will begin to remedy the current deficiency in pastoral studies by providing pastors-in-training as well as seasoned pastors with an overview of biblical peacemaking from the unique vantage point of the pastor. My prayer is that my insights will help to strengthen pastors and their churches as they carry forth together the gospel of peace to a watching world.

I have sought to organize this book within the framework of who we are as people in conflict (chapters 1–3), who God is as a reconciling God (chapters 4–5), and how, therefore, God calls us to respond (chapters 6–13). Specifically, chapter 1 is autobiographical— the musings of a reluctant pastor-peacemaker. I wrote it with the desire to give you hope that God can change even the most reluctant pastor into a true peacemaker.

Chapter 2 surveys the paths of conflict down which churches commonly travel and individuals typically tread. Chapter 3 sets out to discover what causes or motivates these conflicts. Taking up the apostle James's very question, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" (James 4:1), this chapter pierces beneath the surface of our conflicts to observe the sinful dynamics of the heart. It is here where we see our great need for the gospel of reconciliation.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn our focus to the foundation of peacemaking. We first look to theology proper—the nature and character of our Triune God—to anchor our discussions about peacemaking. Who is God? What does the Triune nature of the persons of the Godhead teach us about peacemaking? How should God's character guide our thoughts and practices about making peace? Chapter 5 continues in this same vein, turning our attention to who God is as our Father and who the church is as his family. It explores why Scripture uses familial language particularly in the contexts where it addresses church conflict. Peacemaking, we will see, happens in the nexus of the church as God's family and we as his children—brothers and sisters of one another.

Beginning with chapter 6 and extending through chapter 12, we look at specific practices of peacemaking: confession, forgiveness, negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and church discipline. Though we are familiar with some of these practices, they all need to be framed within the context of the previous chapters that lay out the foundation of our theology of reconciliation.

Chapter 13 closes with practical steps to take toward becoming a peacemaking church. It attempts to answer the questions that this book will raise: Where do I go from here? How can I begin to recover for myself and my church a pastoral ministry of reconciliation?

I offer this book not as one who has practiced everything about reconciliation that Scripture teaches or has practiced it well. I am a sinner saved by grace. I am still a pilgrim on my way. Nevertheless, in the spirit of the apostle Paul, I say:

Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Philippians 3:13–16

1 <u>Hope for a</u> <u>Heretic</u>

I did not plan to be a heretic. It just happened. I woke one day to find in the mirror a pastor with a tired face and a weary soul. I had entered the pastorate eager to walk in the footsteps of the pastorate and practice what the ancient church called the care of souls (*cura animarum*). But I woke that day frightened to find that I did not care anymore. I was tired of the conflicts, the sin, the gossip, the threats, the divisions, and the dissensions. You know what they look like:

- You receive a call from a man asking if a John Smith attends your church. You answer, "Yes." He identifies himself as a Christian attending a well-known church in your city and tells of a \$95,000 breach of contract dispute he has with Mr. Smith. And you ask yourself, *What am I to do?*
- A prominent man who is a deacon in your church and well-known in the community deserts his wife. She is pregnant with their fourth child. He establishes a new residence and cuts off all financial support for his wife and children. Your leaders tell you to let him go without causing a stir. And you ask, *What am I to do?*
- After five years in prison, a convicted child molester writes to tell you he has come to Christ and upon his release desires to become a member of your church. Fear spreads like wildfire among the church's families. Some threaten to leave if you let him in. Others threaten to leave if you do *not* let him in. And again you ask, *What am I to do?*

What am I to do? is a question pastors ask a lot. I do. Do you ever dream of leaving your church for a less contentious one? Do you ever pray that the difficult people will just go away? I do. I know I should not, but I do. Seminary did not prepare me for conflict in the ministry. We are taught well how to exegete Scripture, but we are given little guidance in learning to exegete people. We feel ill-equipped to handle conflicts of this magnitude.

At times in the midst of these conflicts, we wonder whether God has really called us to ministry. We ask, *What am I to do*?

My answer came by turning to Christ the Peacemaker. Only then was I willing to confess the heresy in my heart.

Confessions of a Fainthearted Peacemaker

The Bible is all about conflict and Christ the great Peacemaker. Yet I would be less than honest to say I "delight" in peacemaking. I have no difficulty ascending the pulpit week after week and preaching Christ and him crucified. I have great joy in teaching classes on "Seeing Christ through the Old Testament." When pastoring in those venues, I am at my peak.

However, something changes within me when I step down from the clear heights of the pulpit and into the fog and confusion of my people whose lives are at war. I know I am called to be a peacemaking pastor, but I must confess that I hate conflicts. Even hearing about another one makes me cringe. I either go on the attack or take off running. The one thing I do not do naturally is move to make peace.

At best, I am a fainthearted peacemaker, a peacemaker-wannabe. It is easy to be the mediating peacemaker when the conflict is between God and man. It is quite a different thing to put oneself between two angry men. Yet this fear of conflict is not the problem in itself. Faintheartedness is just a symptom of a greater problem: I am a recovering heretic.

I do not say this for shock effect. Heresy is not something "out there," but it is "in here." Heresy is not just a matter of the head; it is a matter of the heart. It is but another way of speaking of idolatry, 1 and the human heart is an idol factory. 2 So it is from the heart that all heresies arise. And since idolatry arises from our hearts, it touches us all—even pastors. It is heresy in the heart that keeps us from hearing, seeing, knowing, believing, trusting, obeying, and imitating the true Jesus whom we pastors say we serve.

"But of what heresy are you guilty," you inquire, "and how has it affected your call as a peacemaker? For surely you have not confessed or believed heretical doctrines." And you are right. To the contrary, I heartily confess the great creeds of the Church: the Nicene, the Chalcedonian, and the Athanasian Creeds. However, there are more covert and subtle forms of heresy that have slithered their way into my life and ministry.

A Closet Heretic

After twenty-five years of facing numerous conflicts in the church and hearing the often unpleasant and nagging call to make peace, Christ has shown me that I am a closet heretic. Moreover, I have found I am not alone. I have been in the fellowship and company of many good pastors and church leaders who all admit in various ways of our common heresy—Docetism. Remember that heresy of the ancient church? Docetism is failing to believe that *Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*. Docetism is the belief that the Son of God only appeared to be, or seemed to be, fully man.

Of course we confess that Christ is fully human, but we do not live or minister in full accord with our profession. We do not act as if Christ really *humanly* moved among us. We pastor people as if Christ knew no enemy, never felt the pang of angry threats, and remained unperturbed by the hard-hearted, never feeling exasperated by the petty bickering among his disciples jockeying for power, privilege, or recognition. Consequently, when conflicts arise, we act as if Christ's person and work have little relevancy or hope to offer. We act as if Christ cannot relate or, perhaps, that our parishioners cannot relate to Christ.

We behave this way because unbelief has crept into our lives and ministries. As heretics at heart—as "twenty-first-century Docetists"— our heart's impulse is to flee reality. We prove our poets right when they say, "Humankind cannot bear very much reality." How true. We cannot bear much reality; life is too hard. We fear being entangled in the messy lives of others; love is too hard. So we flee, and in fleeing we run from him who calls us to care for souls, to love the unlovely as he has loved us.

This heresy manifests itself in little ways. Think about how often we as church leaders dread committee work. The nitty-gritty need to plan, to weigh competing interests, to look out for the needs of others, to plot a course of action while trying to anticipate the unexpected. And we have to do all this with other human beings who, like us, are hard to listen, quick to speak, quick to get angry, disagreeable, slow to learn, stubborn, narrow-minded, and rash and who "just don't get it." Yes, committee work is arduous and grueling, demanding of body and soul.

Consequently, many of us take flight. We grumble and complain. We look for a way out. No wonder the hard-charging, single-minded, pastor-aspope model of ministry is preferred. But you need not be such a pastor to

qualify as a Docetist at heart. Some of us take flight by hiding behind our "primary pastoral duties." Maybe for you it is preaching and teaching, management, or missions. Whatever the duty, we gravitate to what we like best, what is easiest for us. And there's the rub. Conflict never is easy. It never clocks in at 9:00 a.m. and leaves at 5:00 p.m. or knocks on the door of our study to ask if this is an appropriate time to talk. And conflict never comes with a fixed agenda.

So we hide. Instead of facing the grimy residue of painful conflict in the eyes of our congregants, we leave it to others. Rather than coming alongside them and bearing their burdens, rather than holding out salvation by repentance and forgiveness in Christ, rather than being Christ to them, we offer our people knowledge through our preaching and efficiency through our management. And we think that is enough. As such, we become mere pulpiteers rather than pastors, managers rather than ministers, clerks rather than clerics.

Sadly enough, such pulpiteers, managers, and clerks are esteemed highly in many Christian circles. Think about it. How often are we as pastors identified as "great pastors" because we are great preachers or great managers? Conversely, how often do we hear the apostolic title of "slave" extolled in the pastorate (see Rom. 1:1; Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:25; 2 Tim. 2:24; Titus 1:1)? And how often is the apostolic badge of bearing "the marks of Christ" heralded as the true credential for Christian ministry (see Gal. 6:17)?

Do not misunderstand my words. As pastors, we are called to preach, teach, manage, and be involved in missions. These responsibilities are our special calling. My challenge is that we do not preach and teach enough! We do not manage wisely. We take part in missions without a mission for reconciliation.

Jesus was a preacher and teacher. He managed men. He set his face toward a definite mission. But his ministry was conducted not only on the hillside to the crowds but also across the table with sinners. And did not the apostle Paul do the same? Does he not tell us that he taught publicly and from house to house (Acts 20:20)? Paul did not picture his preaching and teaching ministry as that of an eloquent orator but as that of a mother and father of children (1 Thess. 2:7–8, 11–12). The ministry of reconciliation, the ministry of the Word, the care of souls, looks less like a professor in a

lecture hall or a manager in a conference room and more like mom making dinner for the family or dad coaching his child to run a race.

As pastors and church leaders, then, we need to be and must be intimately a part of the lives of our people. We cannot flee from reality; we cannot fear involvement. We cannot avoid conflict. For we do not want to preach and counsel mere words; we want to preach and counsel the living Word. When our words are disconnected from the hardships of life, from the conflicts of heart and home, we become mere purveyors of knowledge, not pastors.

If this is true pastoral ministry—ministry of the incarnate Word— then why are we so prone to flee from it? We are heretics at heart because, ultimately, we seek to circumvent that greatest event of Christ's enfleshment—his death for us upon the cross. Docetists flee the cross. We fail to fully believe the *truth* that Christ has come in the flesh to suffer death for a pain-stricken, conflict-ridden world. Consequently, we fail to truly love our people as God has called us to love, to be peacemakers living life under the shadow of the cross.

How, then, does Scripture address our dilemma—our unbelief and, more specifically, our disconnect between the *truth* of Christ and *love* for people? Surprisingly, 2 John has the answer.

Scripture Speaks

In a remarkable way, 2 John sets forth concisely these two fundamentals of the faith. First, the Christian faith unites truth and love. Second, it is love of the truth that supports true love.

The apostle John begins his little letter by greeting a house church that he calls the "elect" or "chosen lady and her children," affirming his affection for them by adding, "whom I love in the truth" (2 John 1). And he blesses them in verse 3 with a benediction: "Grace, mercy and peace . . . will be with us in truth and love." That is, the blessings (grace, mercy, and peace) are obtained and sustained "in truth and love."

Yet the apostle says more. He does not toss out these great words carelessly, leaving us to bring our own interpretations to bear. Instead, he defines them for his church in terms of their *source*. It is not any grace, mercy, peace, truth, and love of which he speaks, but only that which is

"from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son" (2 John 3). That is, he defines these great words of the Christian faith christologically—in terms of the incarnate Jesus Christ. The logic is simple: to reject Jesus as God's Son in the flesh is to reject God as Father. If you have not the Son in the flesh, you have not God. And if you do not have the Son incarnate, you do not have true grace, mercy, peace, truth, or love.

This truth is made more evident when we consider the relationship between verses 4–6 and verses 7–11. In verses 4–6 John calls the church to *love*. Specifically, in verse 5 we hear the call to peacemaking captured in an almost formulaic imperative: "I ask that we love one another." John's command here recalls Jesus's own dominical commandment in John 13 when he says, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35).

In verses 6–11 of 2 John, the apostle declares the *truth* about Jesus. He speaks of Jesus as "coming in the flesh" (v. 7). Unfortunately, the NIV translators omit the conjunction *hoti* that begins verse 7. This conjunction can be very mild and almost nonexistent—merely marking an introduction to the next thought. Or it can have the stronger explanatory sense of *for*. If we were to add the latter, we would see more clearly John's point:

And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love, [for] many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.

2 John 6–7

The apostle roots the call to love like Christ (peacemaking) in the truth about the person of Jesus Christ (Christology). Both love and truth are not abstract ideas for John but concrete descriptions of the person and work of Jesus Christ. True obedience and love is obeying and loving as Christ obeyed and loved *in the flesh*.

John's fear is that the church's love will be diluted and perverted by the heresy of Docetism—denial that Christ has come in the flesh. Christ defines true love. If Christ has not come in the flesh, if he walks two feet above the dirt and sin of life, then his love also operates two feet above the rest of

humanity. In the end, to deny Jesus has come in the flesh is to defeat true love—loving one another and even one's enemies as Christ has loved us.

The apostle, then, connects love and truth—peacemaking and Christology. And this passage is not an isolated example. John argues similarly in chapter 4 of his first letter. He says that love—true love—comes from God, and he goes on to define love in verses 9–10 in terms of the Father's giving of his one and only Son. He further characterizes love by how it is demonstrated in Christ's own work as a mediator, which Robert Reymond so winsomely calls Christ's conflict work. John puts it this way: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:9–10). Love, then, not only comes from God but is also fully revealed and manifested in Jesus Christ's coming in the flesh to make atonement for our sins, to reconcile with his enemies.

The apostle John addresses the issue of truth earlier in the same chapter when he tells us that there are two sources of spirits: the Spirit of God and that which comes from the Spirit of God, and the spirit of the antichrist and that which comes from the antichrist. And how do we detect that which is from God? He tells us in 1 John 4:2–3: "Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist."

That John can define the antichrist by who he is not—anyone who cannot confess that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh"—tells us much about that brief confession. It is likely a shorthand way of expressing the great and profound truths that encompass what it means for Jesus to be the God-man—the Messiah of God, the Savior of the world. It implies his preexistent glory as the Son of God. It makes explicit his incarnation, his coming in the flesh. It assumes the character of his life in the flesh as the obedient servant doing his Father's bidding. It speaks particularly of his humiliation, suffering, crucifixion, atoning death, justifying resurrection, and reconciliation.

In brief, this Christ who truly "has come in the flesh" is the same Christ who truly has loved us by laying down his life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. In fact, by virtue of the fact that God the Son has come in the flesh, he alone is qualified to be the mediator between God and man, to reconcile man with God. Thus the apostle John once again demonstrates the

vital relationship between love and truth. Love is made possible because of the truth of who Christ is. Peacemaking can be embraced because Christ is the incarnate Peacemaker.

By Way of the Cross

As I said above, I am a heretic at heart because many times in the face of grim reality—of bleak circumstances, sticky conflicts, and impenetrably hard hearts—I have fled the cross. Yet John's epistles show us that the real Jesus saves by way of the cross.

Instead of fleeing the world, Jesus Christ embraces us sinners, us rebels, in all our filth, wavering, double-mindedness, hesitating, duplicity, lies, thefts, adulteries, and idolatries. He rescues us from them all! He steps down into our pit rather than just shouting from on top. He steps down, picks us up, and carries us out. He cleans us off and dresses us anew. He never lets us go.

This is the Christ who has come in the flesh! The Scriptures are replete with the record of his humanity, of his suffering. He hungered, thirsted, and grew weary. He wept, sweat, and agonized in his suffering. He was crucified, died, and was buried. And he settled conflicts. He reconciled us to God and us with one another.

Christ is no phantom. The real Jesus is no Hollywood Jesus walking two feet off the ground. The ministry of the Pastor of pastors is the ministry of the God-*man*—a man whose feet are blistered and dirtied by the long, hot days of walking dusty roads. In Christ we find a pastor whose hands are calloused by being about his Father's business—hands clasped in prayer, touching lepers, wiping eyes full of tears, and breaking bread. The first Pastor was a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. The first Pastor was a lover of the real world even as he came to change the real world.

Moreover, the first Pastor came to change this pastor's heart, and if you are a fellow heretic, he came to change your heart as well. Our heretical hearts are world-denying, but true Christianity is world-saving. And this is a trustworthy saying: Jesus Christ came into the world to destroy the works of the devil and to suffer and die in the place of sinners. And by his death we are healed. That is what orthodoxy is. It is the truth in action, the truth in love. And orthodoxy mends the heart—your heart and mine!

This same Christ who saves us now calls us to imitate him, to model our ministries as church leaders after the pattern of his pastoral ministry. In light of his example, the repeated calls to the vigorous labors of peacemaking take on new meaning and become more familiar:

- "Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (Ps. 34:14).
- "Let us therefore *make every effort* to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (Rom. 14:19).
- "*Make every effort* to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).
- "*Make every effort* to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).

He made every effort. He toiled. He labored. He struggled with sweat, blood, and tears. And he toiled, labored, and *struggled for peace*. He is the first and only true Pastor. He is the first and only true Peacemaker.

Implications

How, then, ought a true faith in and confession of *Christ coming in the flesh* radically shape our understanding of the pastoral call and particularly our pastoral endeavors in peacemaking in our local church? If we are called to serve as church leaders, if we are called to the pastorate, we must recapture the full-blooded humanity of Christ's own pastoral person and ministry, particularly as our great Peacemaker. Failure to train our people and our leaders as peacemakers is a failure in Christology, for peacemaking is Christology.

Peacemaking is all about Jesus Christ, his person and work, as its ground, message, and manner of being. Jesus is the ground of peacemaking through his reconciling death. The gospel of Jesus is the message of peacemaking that we pastors bring to our people in conflict. And even the mode or manner of peacemaking is shaped by Christ himself, who was humble and gentle of heart and would not break a bruised reed. God's cosmic work of reconciling all things in heaven and on earth to himself is through the person and work of Christ. In Christ, God reconciles all things to himself (see 2 Cor. 5:18–21; Col. 1:19–22).

What God do we say is the reconciling God but the God of Jesus Christ? What family of God do we mean but the family of God united in Christ who

receives all his blessings? What is the call to confess sin and grant forgiveness but the call to recognize Christ for me and Christ in me?

What is negotiation but looking out for the interests of others, and what example has the apostle Paul given us for this but Christ himself (Phil. 2:1–10)! What is mediation but walking in the footsteps of Christ our Mediator, Christ our peace? And what is arbitration and church discipline but being stewards of the keys of the kingdom, which are the keys of Christ?

Peacemaking is Christology. That is why amid the real tumult of our conflicts, the frail, weak, pastor-peacemaker perseveres in his labors, for Christ is his hope, joy, calling, and crown. It is on this premise—peacemaking is Christology—that the rest of this book is written. It is this premise that has guided my elders, my deacons, and the many men and women of our church to strive to be reconcilers and peacemakers in the midst of this very messy, flesh-and-blood world, as the rest of this book will describe. And it is this truth that has changed me, a reluctant peacemaker and a recovering heretic, into a pastor who embraces afresh the ministry of reconciliation.

R. S. Thomas's poem "The Priest" captures well the real nature of our calling and this ministry:

The priest picks his way
Through the parish. Eyes watch him
From windows, from the farms;
Hearts wanting him to come near.

The flesh rejects him.

Women, pouring from the black kettle, Stir up the whirling tea-grounds Of their thoughts; offer him a dark Filling in their smiling sandwich.

Priests have a long way to go.

The people wait for them to come

To them over the broken glass

Of their vows, making them pay With their sweat's coinage for their correction.

He goes up a green lane
Through growing birches; lambs cushion
His vision. He comes slowly down
In the dark, feeling the cross warp
In his hands; hanging on it his thought's icicles.

"Crippled soul", do you say? looking at him

From the mind's height; "limping through life On his prayers. There are other people In the world, sitting at table Contented, though the broken body And the shed blood are not on the menu".

"Let it be so", I say. "Amen and amen".

This is to what the Lord has called us—the care of souls, a ministry over the "broken glass" to a world that sees us "limping through life" and who are quite content without the "broken body and shed blood" on their tables. Yet this is exactly what the world needs— crippled reconcilers, crippled peacemakers, whose strength is their constant companion, Christ Jesus, and whose support is the wooden crutch of his cross.

2 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." 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). 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*. 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 conflict. We also believe that conflict provides opportunities to glorify God, serve other people, and grow to be like Christ.4

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. 5 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. 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. 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. 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). 8 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*. 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? 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).10 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. 11 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. <u>12</u> 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

As 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 thirty-four percent incidence among non-born again adults." That is, in terms of our marriages, we Christians are indistinguishable from pagans. Our marriages are breaking.

The Offered Solution

Understandably, a wave of books aimed at repairing the cracks and restoring our marriages has flooded our Christian bookstores. However, they commonly fall into two categories. One kind emphasizes developing skills, such as how to improve communication, become more intimate, or better define roles. The other explores the dynamics of relationships,

unveiling the mystery of what makes men and women do what they do, telling us what makes our spouses tick. This kind of book realizes that a hammer is only as good as the person who wields it. Skills are not enough. You have to understand people. You need to know what is in their hearts.

So what, according to these Christian authors, makes us tick? Why do our marriages break? What kind of counsel do they give? A book on marital conflicts aimed at the counseling pastor and cowritten by a noted psychologist and a pastor advises us to counsel spouses to love each other. So far so good, until we peer a little deeper into their definition of *love*. Whereas biblical love is defined as those attitudes and actions that imitate God in Christ (John 13:34; Eph. 5:1–2; 1 John 4:10)—the sacrificing of self for the highest good of another (even one's enemies)—these authors redefine love as "the will to value and to avoid devaluing people." They contend, "The basic task in a marriage . . . is for spouses to consistently love (will to value and not devalue) each other, which will build trust and security and will provide a basis for solving practical problems." 2

Moreover, these authors couple two actions that are inherently different. For them, the origin of *valuing* is found in recognizing the merit of the other. Valuing says, "You deserve this of me; therefore I will value you according to your worth, in proportion to your value." But biblical love says, "I will love whether you deserve it or not." Biblical love is disproportionate to the merit, value, or worth of the other. That is why God calls us to love our enemies!

Nevertheless, these authors seem oblivious to the difference. In fact, they believe they find support for their proposition in Scripture. They appeal to Matthew 13:44 (the parable of the hidden treasure) for their interpretation of love as valuing the worth of another: "[Love] is valuing and not devaluing people. . . . Jesus loved us. As he told in the parable of the hidden treasure (Matt. 13:44), we were a treasure buried in a field. Jesus found that treasure and sold everything he had on earth (his life) to buy the treasure." Is For authors Everett Worthington and Douglas McMurry, the "treasure" in Jesus's parable is not God's kingdom but us!

I was surprised to read this, for no commentary even suggests such an interpretation. They have turned the entire parable on its head. Jesus's parable is about *God*'s kingdom. *His* doing. *His* reigning. *His* saving. *His* Son. The great treasure is God and his Son. Jesus is the pearl of great price! Yet the authors of this book make a gross exchange. For them, the parable is

not about God but about us. It is not God's kingdom that is the great treasure but us.

Another very popular book about love written by Christian psychologists makes the same substitution. At the heart of this book is the authors' view that we are all empty cups—needy people. They say, "[We have a] Godgiven need to be loved that is born into every human infant. It is a legitimate need that must be met from cradle to grave. If children are deprived of love—if that primal need for love is not met—they carry the scars for life."4

This theory of "unmet needs" is a psychological theory taken right out of Freud, early behaviorists, and the humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow. 5 Even though secular psychologists have critiqued this theory, evangelicals continue to buy it because the theory of needs is initially plausible. 6 And we make it plausible by giving it an evangelical twist: It is *Christ* who meets our unmet needs, *Christ* who fills our cups. And he is the one who heals the wounds and scars that have formed from being deprived of the love we need. 7

Do you see what we have done? We have taken secular theory and concealed it with a thin veneer of Christ. We have replaced God's story of man's fall and Christ's redemption with man's theory of unmet needs. Where once Christ was the one who died for our sins in order to appease God's holy wrath and save us from ourselves, now he is the filler of empty cups. Where once we exalted in the grand promise of God's justification of sinners, now we delight in the idea of God filling "me" with self-justification. In essence, we have traded in the golden chalice of God's glory for the pottery bowl of man's worth.

Moreover, we have redefined man's greatest problem. The problem used to be defined in terms of sin and guilt, rebellion and condemnation. The pressing question was, "How can sinful people be right before a holy God?" But now our problem is that we are empty cups that need to be filled.

Though initially this might not sound like such bad news, really it is the counsel of despair. Sin is a moral category, and a person's morals can be changed. A sinner can be saved and sanctified. But a leaky cup is an ontological category, and ontological things cannot change. Once a dog, always a dog. Once a leaky cup, always a leaky cup. You can fill a cup, but a cup remains a cup—something always leaking and always needing to be

filled. Thus the message implied is that we are broken and cannot be fixed. We are leaky cups.

As such, our marriages are in trouble—not because of *who we are*, but because of what we *do not have*. The problem with me is you. You have not, my parents did not, and society is not filling my empty cup and meeting my unmet needs, whatever those may be—happiness, significance, love, affection, purpose, and so on.

Seen in this light, it is no wonder conflicted marriages have little hope, often ending in dissolution. And as shown above, the present solution offered has no power to help or effect change in these marriages. What, then, is God's answer? What causes (and resolves) conflicts?

What Causes Conflict?

If asked, "What breaks a marriage?" your initial response might be that Scripture points to our poor communication skills. James 3 is all about the dangers of the tongue. We are told that the tongue corrupts the whole person and sets the course of his or her whole life on fire.

James's emphasis upon the tongue comports well with the book of Proverbs, where we find frequent calls to guard our tongues and watch our speech. For example, Proverbs 11:12 says, "A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue." James echoes the same truth when he instructs, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19).

So in one sense, I would agree with your response: Scripture gives us wise counsel as to how we are to communicate. God wants us to become skillful with our words. But from where do words come? When couples fight, from where do the well-aimed lies, accusations, and condemnations come? Christ answers, "From your heart."

Our Desires

Christ explains, "The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Matt. 15:18–19). According to Jesus, reckless words come from

the heart. Out of the heart the mouth speaks. It is the heart that turns the tongue to make it either a fount of blessing or a fount of cursing.

What, then, breaks a marriage? James asks the question this way: "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" (James 4:1). Notice how he does *not* answer. He does not tell us that it is by reason of our unmet needs or by your failure to value me for all that I am. Instead, by way of a rhetorical question, he answers, "Don't they come from *your desires that battle within you*?" (James 4:1).

We typically answer the *why* of conflict with a *who*. "Why is there a conflict?" we ask. And immediately we point to a *who*—our children, our spouse, or another brother or sister in Christ. We blame our boss, our pastor, or our colleague at work.

But James says conflict starts not with him nor with her, but with us—with *me*. *My desires* cause conflict. And my desires can break a marriage. They are set over and against my wife's desires, so I wage war with her to get what I want. The source of conflict, then, is not something I lack or need but rather something I want—my desires. We are not empty cups needing to be filled. We are cups overflowing with pride, ambition, conceit, and selfish desires. In the same way, our hearts are not empty and passive but full and active, brimming over and spilling out. In brief, conflicts erupt in our homes and our marriages because there are desires in our hearts.

Several years ago I had the opportunity to help a church in conflict. When I arrived and spoke to the various parties, I initially found a great consensus among them. They were all united about one thing: the problem, their problem, was not them—it was the other person! The elders blamed each other for breaking confidences. They blamed the people for not submitting. They blamed the pastor for being incompetent ("his sermons don't feed me"). And they blamed the pastor's wife for gossiping about them.

Of course the congregation was no better. They blamed the elders for poor leadership. They blamed them for waffling on their decisions, being authoritarian, and neglecting to inform the congregation about their decisions.

Finally, the pastor and his wife blamed the elders for secret meetings, for publicly humiliating them in a congregational meeting, and for "being out to get them." They also blamed the people for being fickle.

The point is that everyone answered the *why* with a *who*. They saw the source of conflict as residing in another, not themselves. Eventually they even began to blame us, the peacemakers, for not giving them the help *they wanted*. But they never looked at themselves— at their hearts, at their desires.

That was the congregation I faced on Sunday morning as I preached, introducing them to James 4 and praying, "Lord, open their eyes to their own desires." Knowing there were a number of engineers in the congregation, I began my message with a lab experiment— a physics lesson. Taking a cup of water in my left hand, I hit the cup with my right hand, and as was expected, water fell to the floor. I then asked, "Why is there water on the floor?" I directly appealed to the many Ph.D.s and engineers in the audience.

They were quick to answer, "You hit the cup."

"Wrong answer," I replied. "Anything more scientific?"

"For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction," they replied.

"No!" I said. "You failed your first physics class. Why is there water on the floor?" I kept hitting the cup harder and harder. They offered several more answers and finally gave up.

So I answered, "There is water on the floor *because there is water in the cup!* That is God's answer to the *why* of conflict."

Conflict erupts and with it all kinds of evil—slander, gossip, blame-shifting, malice, anger, factions, and so on—because there is evil in our hearts. That is why James holds the mirror of God's Word to our face and says, "Take a long look at yourselves, at your desires, wants, expectations, motives, goals, needs, wishes, longings, drives, and pleasures. All these reside in your heart."

In twenty-two years of counseling couples, I can count on one hand the times in which one of the parties sought counsel in order to seek personal change. The initial request for counsel is typically, "Pastor, change *her*," not "change *me*." The typical prayer for our marriages is, "Lord, open *my spouse's* eyes," not "Lord, open *my* eyes."

As peacemaking pastors we must teach our people to pray like David: "Search *me*, O God, and know *my heart*; test *me* and know *my* anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in *me*, and lead *me* in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23–24). As church leaders, we are called to turn people's eyes first on themselves, on their own attitudes and actions,

because James's first lesson is that reconciliation of conflicts must begin by having the parties examine themselves and their desires.

Our Demanding Desires

James does not stop there, however. He wants us to look not only at ourselves and our desires but particularly at the dynamic of our desires. Our desires are not just desires, but they are *demanding* desires. Look again at James 4:2: "You *want* something but *don't get it*. You kill and *covet*, but you *cannot have* what you *want*. You quarrel and fight."

Do you detect the pattern of behavior James describes? First, we start with our *desire*—we *want* something. That might be okay. But soon our desire rises to the level of a *demand*. Now we not only *want* but we insist we *must have* what we want. This demand quickly morphs into a dictatorial demand with godlike *expectations*—others must serve you and meet your desires.

Then our desires hit our spouse's wall: *He won't give me what I want. She does not want me to have what I want.* In turn we become disappointed, maybe even despondent. Frustrated, we assume the role of godlike judge and *damn* our spouse. We *punish* him or her, as verse 2 so powerfully conveys: "You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight." 9

Our Damning Desires

We see this theme of punishing later in James 4:11–5:6, where James highlights common areas of conflict. What he really is addressing are the perspectives people have in conflict. Our desires reveal how we truly see ourselves.

Specifically, in verses 11–12 James speaks of those who defame their brother and usurp God's role:

Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

That is exactly what we do. We appoint ourselves judge and lawgiver of others—we damn them. We judge our spouse as if we were God on the day of judgment and condemn and reject them.

In verses 13–16, James addresses those who see themselves as sovereign—godlike with respect to their agendas.

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.

We are presumptuous. We claim with our mouths what we will do and where we will go. And if our spouse resists, if he or she stands in the way of our godlike agendas, woe to our spouse.

Finally, in chapter 5, verses 1–6, James speaks to those who live as if the earth were their home. Their god is money and wealth, and they employ all their efforts to build the city of man rather than the city of God. Many couples fight over how to spend their money, and they often think their problem is not having enough money. Yet James counters that myth here by showing us our godlike possessiveness, our acquisitiveness, our discontentment, and our reckless neglect of others in order to get what we want. We each see the earth as "mine," so when someone else has what "rightly belongs to me," conflict escalates.

James aptly uses the language of warfare: "battle," "fight," "kill." And like warfare, our strategies can be quite subtle. We set up camp, dig our trenches, and settle in. Rather than reconciling, we stagnate. We hunker down for what can turn into a long, cold war between a husband and wife. And if we do not divorce, we lead separate lives, settling for a happy truce: "I will fulfill your desires, and you fulfill mine. Don't point out my flaws, and I won't point out yours. You don't have to confess your sins if I don't have to confess mine." We leave our "enemy" to his or her own desires and devices, which is an equally vicious form of hatred and just as deadly as war.

So far James has shown us that our desires not only "desire," but they also demand and damn. A fourth dynamic of desires is that they *distort* what we see.

Early in my pastorate when counseling couples, I became quite perplexed at how radically different each spouse's story was of his or her marriage. It seemed like I was talking to people from two separate marriages, living in two separate households. I could not understand this discrepancy until I realized that our desires distort what we see or perceive. We view our marriages from the vantage point of our "wants."

Numbers 11 gives us an excellent example of this dynamic. Think of Israel as married to Christ in the desert. One day on the way to her new home, the Promised Land, Israel accuses God of not providing what she *needs*: "Give us meat to eat," she demands (v. 13).

Now that surely is not an unreasonable request or desire. Why then does Israel's desire result in a major "marital" dispute? Modern psychologists might say that Israel is being denied a primal need—food! But that is not the real heart of the conflict. The problem is not meat, nor is it unmet needs. Israel's problem is the *cravings* of her heart.

If you were a marriage counselor and you asked Israel, "What is your marriage like?" this is the story Israel would tell: "If only we had meat to eat. We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" (Num. 11:5–6). Listen to Israel again in verse 18: "We were better off in Egypt!" And again in verse 20, she laments, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"

Do you see the dynamic? Israel tells her story through the eyes of her desires—her distorted desires. Her desires shape and bend all that she hears, sees, and remembers. If you knew nothing of her real history, you might have thought you were listening to an objective story. If you were Israel's marriage counselor, you might ask: "Who is this husband of yours? Why has he taken you out of Egypt? And why does he refuse to take you back there? What crazy idea compelled him to take you away from so fine a home and force you to follow him into the desert? Surely your husband, the Lord, seems quite selfish and negligent, even abusive."

When collecting data from a couple, one thing I have learned is not only to listen for what they say but also for what they do not say. Think about what Israel fails to say. She forgets the death angel passing over, God leading her through the Red Sea, the Lord providing her daily bread, and his promise to lead her to the Promised Land. The sinful cravings of her heart have blinded her to the gracious provision and abundance of the true God.

That is why she remembers the onions and garlic in Egypt and forgets the brick and mortar. She remembers the melons and forgets her slaughtered babes. She remembers the cucumber in her teeth, while forgetting the whip on her back. In reality, the fish she ate was salted with her tears. And her dishes of sweet leeks were embittered by the toil of slavery. Here in Numbers, we see Israel's desires blinding her to the truth of *God*.

Our desires do the same. Blind to God's goodness, our memories distort our perception of him, thinking of him as a negligent, abusive God. Or we forget him altogether. Of all the memory lapses our desires cause, the chief is our memory of *God*. When listening to the story of people in conflict, there is too often a deafening silence. God is missing in their stories. They are silent about God's Word and promises. They are silent in thanksgiving, confession, and forgiveness. Whatever they may confess, they act as if God is not present. They speak as if there were no good news that God is an ever-present help in times of trouble.

Desires, then, distort our perception of reality. They magnify some things while minimizing others. Unfortunately, it is God who often gets minimized. Therefore, one of the first steps in conflict is helping people understand that they do not see well—that their desires are distorting their perception of what is going on.

Deceived by Our "Good" Desires

There is yet another important dynamic of desires to consider. We need to know how they can deceive us even when they are *good* desires.

Let us return to James. In chapter 4 his word for *desires* (v. 1), or *wants*, is without qualification. He does not say, "Your *sinful* desires." Surely some desires are overtly sinful: hatred, envy, malice, sexual lust. But other times —most of the time—our desires are good. They turn bad when we start "serving" them—when we treat them as *gods* and they rule over us. As someone once said, "Good goods make bad gods."

The evil is not in what we want but in wanting it too much. It is not in the desire but in making the desire an ultimatum (when only God is ultimate and only God should give ultimatums). 10

A wife might question, "What's wrong with wanting my husband to be faithful? To love me? To be the spiritual head of the family?" Or a husband might wonder, "What's wrong with wanting a little time to myself after a long day?" or "Why can't I expect her to show me a little respect?" How should we answer? James teaches us that nothing is wrong with their desires, but everything is wrong with the *degree* of their desires if they are raised to godlike proportions—if their desires rule their lives.

By making this distinction, we can see how our good desires—even our overtly "godly desires"—can truly deceive us. They look so good that we often are blinded to the fact that they are controlling us.

The Lord powerfully brought this truth home to me. One night after dinner I called my wife and children to family worship. I went to get my Bible, and when I returned, I was struck by the look of boredom on their faces and the sense of resistance and disrespect communicated by their body language. Through all this, I ignored them and began as a dutiful father to do the right thing—or so I thought. I read the Scripture, asked the questions, and proceeded to hear only the lamest of responses. I became angry and eventually erupted.

"What's the matter with you? Don't you love God? This is God's Word. What's wrong with you?" No sooner were the words out of my mouth than the Holy Spirit convicted me. I confessed my sin, my critical spirit, my own willfulness, and my false accusations. I had desired a good thing, a very good thing—family worship. But a good good makes a bad god. My desire for family worship was mixed with a desire for self-worship, and self-worship won out. I demanded a show of respect. I damned my family for not giving it to me. Above all, I erected and served a god in the very place where we were meant to worship our Savior. I was ready to sacrifice my family on the altar of family worship!

Our Idolatrous Desires

In verse 4 of chapter 4, James peels back the final layer of our conflicts and reveals what is in the heart—*idolatry*. He tells us that we fight with our

spouses because we have a secret love. We are carrying on a furtive affair: "You *adulterous* people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." This is shocking language because when we are in conflict with another, we do not think of ourselves as adulterers, as enemies of God. And this is the worst kind of adultery—infidelity to God, which Scripture calls idolatry.<u>11</u>

James teaches, then, that our fights reveal our real desires, and our real desires reveal that our hearts are in love with idols. It is the idols of our desires that we love most, not God.

This counsel equips us with a radically Godward understanding of our conflicts. The real problem is not simply that we have broken relationships with others. We have a broken relationship with God. Our sinful conflicts reveal and reflect our broken relationship with God.

Moreover, this concept of idolatry sheds even more light on the dynamics of our desires. Idols are counterfeit gods. As gods, they direct and rule over us. And we, in turn, worship, fear, serve, love, trust, and obey them. Like God, our idols promise and threaten us. If they get what they want, they promise us happiness. If they do not get what they want, they curse us and threaten death.

As counterfeit gods, idols are lawgivers. They command us. They shape our affections, direct our decisions, and motivate our behavior. What we do, we do because we obey the command of our god.

Do you see why idols are so deadly? Idols of the heart, our demanding desires, become *godlike*. And when they are displeased, they judge and condemn. They are powerful because they rule us. They are deadly because they lead us to kill.

When I want something and my wife keeps it from me, I get angry and bitter. My anger exposes what I deem most valuable—my idol. In my effort to worship my idol, to appease my demanding desire, *I am ready to sacrifice my spouse on the altar of that idol*.

Furthermore, I become the prosecuting attorney for my idol. I lead my wife before the bar of my court, and I become her judge, jury, and executioner. I sacrifice her and our marriage in order to satisfy my desire. As James says so well, "You kill and covet because you cannot have what you want" (James 4:1).

This picture is unsettling, leaving us with many questions. How can we break free from such idolatry? If our godlike desires are the chief cause of conflict, *how do we change our desires*? How do we stop sliding into either the path of escape or the path of attack? What can set us free from this vicious dynamic of demanding, distorting, and damning desires?

God's Answer

The answer is so obvious that most of us miss it: the gospel. Our relationships, our marriages need the gospel. And you need to know the gospel that your marriage needs.

Missing the Gospel

Why do most of us miss the gospel? If the gospel is the Good News to change lives and to reconcile the estranged, why is there so little appeal to the gospel in pastoral practice? Why are so many church leaders reluctant to get involved as peacemakers? Surely a major reason is that we minimize the gospel and its life-changing power. We have done this in two primary ways.

One way is by relegating it to the past. Most people think of the gospel in terms of entering the *front door* to God's house. It is the door through which we step or, more precisely, the door through which we *stepped*. That is, we took our step "back then," in the past, long ago, and it has no present, vital reality for us today. It bears no present value.

The other way we minimize the gospel is by relegating it to the distant future. Here, the gospel is the *back door* through which we exit. We think of it in terms of what we will need in the future when we *exit* this world and enter heaven.

Transformed by a Promise

What then is the gospel? If the gospel is neither an entrance door nor an exit door, then what is it? Again, the answer in Scripture is so obvious that we do not see it. The gospel is the air we breathe in the house of God. To change metaphors, the gospel is the conversation taking place in the house

—our Father speaking to us, his children, about the gift of his Son. The gospel is the ever-present and powerful *life-transforming story with a promise* for all who hear and believe.

We forget that we are changed and sustained by God's Word. The gospel is literally "Good News"—not new commands, but good news. It is a good story. It is the news of a person—Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior, and Lord. It is the story of his doing, dying, works, faithfulness, and obedience as a servant even unto death on the cross for sinners like you and me. And with this story comes a promise: believe and be transformed, justified before God, set apart, and adopted as one of God's own children. Believe and be given a new life and a new disposition with new desires—to love God with one's whole heart, soul, mind, and strength and one's neighbor as oneself.

The gospel story also comes with the promise of a new relationship. As in marriage, the groom's promise initiates the marriage. And as in marriage, it is a word of promise that needs to be spoken daily.

Who of us having sworn our love and fidelity to our spouse, now after five, ten, or twenty-five years says, "Of course I told her I loved her then. Isn't that enough?" And who of us thrives in our marriage on only a past promise? None of us, for what sustains and changes our marriages is the present and constant retelling, by word and deed, of our promises made and love sworn. And the promise needs to be spoken most when there is estrangement, alienation, and transgression. Only then in the telling and hearing of the promise of atonement, forgiveness, and reconciliation will people change and confess their sins, ask forgiveness, make amends, and renew their commitments.

Let us look more carefully at the dynamic of the gospel and ask ourselves: How do we change our desires? What if our soul is more like a smoldering wick than a furnace ablaze with a holy passion for God?

We saw earlier that our fighting and quarreling in marriage is a sign that we love something *more* than we love God. Our relationship with our spouse reflects our relationship to God. The cracks and fractures in our marriages reveal our false loves and illicit desires— we love ourselves more than we love God.

So how do we supplant those sinful desires with holy desires? We uproot and replace them, as Thomas Chalmers once preached, only by the great and "expulsive power of a new affection"—a new affection found only in the gospel!

As believers, we confess that we love because *God* first loved us. In other words, we profess to live by faith because of the promise God first made to us. Nonetheless, in everyday life we fail to remember this gospel dynamic: first narration, then exhortation; first promise, then precept. First the Word as gospel, then the Word as guide.

We forget this dynamic in our relationships and especially in our conflicts. We talk salvation by grace but walk as if salvation is by works. Pretty soon, we no longer are even talking salvation by grace.

New life does not come by way of commandment but by way of the Good News. J. Gresham Machen, one of the great evangelical scholars of the early twentieth century, knew this well. Steeped in the theology of God's grace, he saw clearly that God's power to change lives is in the message of *his love*, *his work*, and *his doing*. Says Machen,

From the beginning Christianity was certainly a life. But how was the life produced? It might conceivably have been produced by exhortation. That method had often been tried in the ancient world; in the Hellenistic age there were many wandering preachers who told men how they ought to live. But such exhortation proved to be powerless. Although the ideals of the Cynic and Stoic preachers were high, these preachers never succeeded in transforming society. The strange thing about Christianity was that it adopted an entirely different method. It transformed the lives of men not by appealing to the human will, but by telling a story; not by exhortation, but by the narration of an event. . . . Where the most eloquent exhortation fails, the simple story of an event succeeds; the lives of men are transformed by a piece of news. 12

We pastors agree with Machen when it comes to getting saved, but we are full of unbelief when it comes to saving marriages. One way we err in counseling is that we forget that the gospel we preached on Sunday is what we must also apply in the counseling room. I find this especially true when I am working with a couple or other persons who are resistant to the gospel. I tend to want to hit them harder with the law.

We are stricken by an inveterate tendency toward promoting human effort rather than seeking heartfelt hearing and trust. The apostle Paul rebuked the Galatians for this very thing: "Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal *by human effort*?" (Gal. 3:2–3).

So how do we begin to restore our relationships? How do we overcome the sinful desires that are causing fights and quarrels in our marriages? If we are to restore and overcome, if we are to become people who desire God above all, it will be by hearing again and again the glorious story of God's pursuit of us! The call to love (Eph. 5:1–2) and the call for husbands to love their wives (v. 25) both follow the announcement that Christ has and continues to love us (v. 2). One father in the Lord told me, "Alfred, just preach the gospel to your wife and begin by preaching the gospel to yourself. You will never have joy in God unless you stand firmly upon the foundation of his joy over you." 13

The Promise: God Gives More Grace

Preaching the gospel is precisely the approach James takes. Having rebuked his hearers for their idolatrous desires, which have led to conflict, James now turns their eyes away from themselves and each other and upon the goodness and grace of God as he gives himself to us in the gospel. James first tells of the jealous love of God for us, and then he describes the riches of God's generous grace.

God's Jealous Love for Us

Preaching the gospel is precisely the approach that James takes. He begins to turn the corner in chapter 4, verse 5, reminding us first about God's jealous love for us: "Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?"

This question is the New International Version (NIV) rendering of an admittedly difficult sentence. So the NIV helpfully gives alternative translations in the footnote: "that God jealously longs for the spirit that he made to live in us" or "that the Spirit he caused to live in us longs jealously." In both of these translations, the main difference in comparison to the NIV's translation is that God or his Holy Spirit is the subject of the verb *longs*. Though linguistic arguments are inconclusive, the context favors God as the one who longs jealously for our spirit. In verse 4, James begins his call to repentance by pointing out our spiritual *adultery*. It appears more reasonable to assume that James continues this same line of

thinking in verse 5 by reminding us of God's jealousy for us, his people. God is the jealous husband.

God's jealousy can sound to us like "frightening law," making us think of God as a consuming fire. Yet the Lord's jealousy presupposes his covenant love. And his love is neither transitory nor fickle. The Lord's love is not aimless, but it pursues us in accordance with his sovereign and gracious purposes. And the Lord's purposes are to redeem for himself a people who will glorify his name as the God of mercy, justice, and truth. It is because of this purpose-driven love that the Lord threatens us with his discipline. He will not let us go. He will be reconciled to us and us to him.

That is the beginning of the Good News. Our God is jealous for us. When we sleep with our idols, he will find us and awaken us, calling us to repentance and reconciliation. He will not let us go.

God's Generous Grace to Us

God is more than jealous for us. As James 4:6 says, he is the God who "gives us more grace." James backs this assertion with Scripture, mentioning grace yet again. Citing Proverbs 3:34, he says, "That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble'" (James 4:6). God gives us more grace. If the Lord demands faithfulness of us, he gives what he commands and more. <u>14</u>

The very mention of grace should break upon our ears like thunder in the mountains. For in the heat of controversy, we are tempted to give up. At the root of conflict, we find not only inordinate desires but also despair and unbelief. We stop believing God can change us, let alone change the other party. We especially grow cold to the truth that grace effects change. That is why James's counsel here is so radical. It jolts and awakens us to the amazing power and abundance of God's grace.

James draws attention to the transforming power of this grace earlier in his letter when he reminds his readers that God's grace is what changed them through giving them new birth: "He chose to give us birth [to bring us into being] through the word of truth" (James 1:18). It is understood that he means the gospel (the greatest manifestation of God's grace) when he speaks of the "word of truth" because the same phrase is used four other places in the New Testament where it means the gospel (2 Cor. 6:7; Eph.

1:13; Col. 1:5; 2 Tim. 2:15). Furthermore, later in the same chapter James speaks of the "word planted in you, which can save you" (James 1:21).

This word is the gospel Word about what God has *already done* for us in Christ. It tells of God's purposes to save us in the giving of his Son, Jesus Christ, securing for us freedom from condemnation as well as justification, forgiveness, acceptance, peace, and reconciliation.

Moreover, this grace in Christ that God gives is a *continual grace*, not just a past act of salvation. The word *gives* in the clause "God gives more grace" promises an ever-flowing, never-ceasing, very-present fount of grace. God's grace pours out every moment, every day, and his mercies are new each morning. He gives freely and richly. And he gives all that we need for putting to death our godlike desires and for restoring our relationships. That is the nature of God's grace. J. A. Moyter says of this verse,

What comfort there is in this verse! It tells us that God is tirelessly on our side. He never falters in respect of our needs; he always has more grace at hand for us. He is never less than sufficient, he always has more and yet more to give. Whatever we may forfeit when we put self first, we cannot forfeit our salvation, for there is always more grace. No matter what we do to him, he is never beaten. We may play false to the grace of election, contradict the grace of reconciliation, overlook the grace of indwelling—but he gives more grace. Even if we were to turn to him and say, "What I have received so far is much less than enough," he would reply, "Well, you may have more." His resources are never at an end, his patience is never exhausted, his initiative never stops, his generosity knows no limit: he gives more grace. 15

Do you believe that? Do not answer by looking at yourself or your spouse. In terms of our ability to be reconciled, we are like Abraham and Sarah, who in each other's eyes were as good as dead! We must begin to reconcile our conflicts not by sight but by faith in God's promise of "more grace."

Putting Faith in the Gospel

James has further counsel for people in conflict (James 4:6–10). Having held out the promise of grace, he does not stop there.

Notice first what James does *not* do. After pointing out our fights and conflicts, after telling us that our God is a jealous God, he does not

immediately present a list of techniques to deal with anger, nor does he teach a lesson on "Ten Steps toward Effective Communication." 16

Then consider what James does say, especially as it pertains to marriage. Four times in four verses James focuses our attention on *God* (James 4:6, 7, 8, 10) because he wants us to be radically vertical in our focus. People in conflict must begin with God, for at the heart of broken relationships is a broken relationship with the Lord. If our marriages are breaking, it is because our first marriage is broken. If men are leaving their wives and wives their husbands, it is because they have already left God. So James calls us back to God.

The only way to return to God—to recover God in our conflicts— is by believing in the gospel. After telling us about God's jealous love, James utters great words of promise and hope: "But he gives us more grace," and again, "God opposes the proud but *gives grace to the humble*" (James 4:6). But it is not enough for us to *hear* these gospel words, these words of promise—we must believe as well (see Gal. 3:2, 5). So James urges in verse 8, "Come near *to God*."

In other words, James urges us to put our faith in God because he knows that the only way out of conflict is by reconnecting with God, turning again to him as the fount of grace, help, provision, wisdom, strength, and forgiveness.

Putting Feet to Our Faith

As we put our faith in God, we quickly discover that faith has feet to carry out what we believe. As our feet fit a pattern, a way of walking—right foot, left foot—so too faith's feet fit a pattern. There is a way of walking in the ways of the Lord that is found throughout the Scriptures, and James applies it here: Promise precedes commandment; commandment is followed by greater promise. Right foot, then left foot; promise, then precept.

God commands us to repent, to turn back to him, to walk in his ways. But the way out of alienation, the way out of conflict, is by promise, then precept. That is why God motivates us by his very great and precious promises. The first promise set forth in James 4, as we have seen several times now, is found in verse 6: "But [God] gives us more grace." And that is the first promise we need to hear and believe in the midst of our struggling relationships. Especially when conflict abounds—when noses are bloodied, hearts torn, and eyes full of tears—we need to hear there is help, help from God. We need to know he gives more grace if we are to turn from the sinful demanding, distorting, and damning desires that rule over us and instead turn and submit to God—the true and only lover of our souls.

Again, in chapter 4, verse 8, James commands, "Come near to God." But he adds the promise to empower our obedience of faith: "and he will come near to you." In conflict, we flee God. God is the last person we think of. My rights, my reputation, my agenda take center stage. In it all, I remove myself from God. Yet James promises a way back: "Come near to God and he will come near to you."

Finally, in chapter 4, verse 10, James calls out to us, "Humble yourselves," but even that command is supported by the promise: "and he will lift you up." Pride is the engine of our conflicts. I must prove my cause is right. I must win. You must lose. One might think that a simple command like "humble yourself" would be sufficient to overcome our pride. But James adds the promise, for the promise energizes and renews faith in God—faith that God is in control and will in his time make the righteousness of our cause shine like the noonday sun.

Specific Steps for Our Feet to Take

Sustained and motivated by these promises, James encourages us to take specific steps. He calls us to repentance—to turn from the sinful ways we acted in conflict and walk according to God's ways. But what exactly does repentance look like?

The apostle gives us his amplified version: submit, resist, come near, wash, purify, grieve, mourn, wail, change, and humble yourselves (James 4:7–10). Repentance, then, is more than feeling sorry for having sinned. It consists of a number of changes in the direction of the heart.

First, we *submit to God* and *draw near to God*. Submission is not passive. It is not "non-resistance" but an active enlisting. It is putting ourselves under the allegiance of another. It is taking our desires, no matter

how "good and godly," and always subduing them to the mind-set, "Father, not my will, but thine be done." If conflict began with "I want," we settle it by returning to what "God wants." That is what it means to submit to God.

Second, repentance is *resisting the devil* and his temptations. By mentioning the devil in relation to conflict, James is not implying that we can attribute our immoral behavior to demons, nor is he suggesting that peacemakers are exorcists of the "demons of anger." In fact, the devil is not new to James's discussion on strife and conflict (see James 3:1–4:12), so we must consider his counsel about the devil in this context.

In chapter 3, verse 6, James reminds us that our tongues are set on fire by hell. In verse 15 he shows that the wisdom from below is of the devil. And what does it look like? According to verses 14–16, the works of the devil are manifested in hearts full of selfish ambition, boasting, envy, disorder, and every kind of evil. Repentance, then, is resisting the devil's temptation to give ourselves over to such evil practices.

Third, repentance is the call to *draw near to God*. Turning from the devil means turning to God. Drawing near to God means actively and deliberately cultivating fellowship with him and not with the world. We fail as pastor-peacemakers here if we only *call* people to turn to God but do not *show them how* to draw near to him. Though James does not specifically describe what this fellowship looks like, we can do that from the rest of Scripture. People in conflict must be shown how and what to pray as well as what Scriptures to read, memorize, meditate on, and act upon.

One way I do this with my own congregation is by encouraging them to study James 3–4, journaling their thoughts and questions as they read the passage. I ask them to consider this question: "As a person in conflict, what is James saying about my tongue, my desires, my adulteries, and my demanding, distorting, and damning of others?"

The fourth step of repentance, James teaches, is to *cleanse your hands*, *you sinners*. By *hands*, he means our outward behavior, our actions. In other words, we must put a stop to death and mortify, wash, and throw out specific and concrete sins. Maybe it is always having to have the last word in a conversation, being quick to speak and slow to listen, or being quick to anger. This practical, concrete counsel is the kind pastors and other church leaders must give their people to help them identify their sin and cleanse themselves from it.

James tells those in conflict not only to cleanse their hands but also, on the flip side of this counsel, to *purify their hearts*. The meaning of *purify* is explained by those to whom the command is addressed: "you double-minded." To purify, then, is to rid our heart of double-mindedness, for when it seeks to serve two masters—God's desires and our desires—our conflicts erupt.

Notice that the greater weight of James's counsel falls neither on behavioral changes nor heart changes. As a wise peacemaker, he deals with both. Humans are a psychosomatic unity, and thus a plan for change must take into consideration the whole of man—as soul and body, attitudes and behaviors, heart and hands.

James has in a very concise way guided us down the path of true gospel-generated repentance. He roots repentance in the abundant grace of God to the humble. He sweetens repentance with the promises of God. He addresses matters of the heart and hands, our motives and our actions. And he ends with God's grace: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and *he will lift you up*" (James 4:10). What a promise! God takes relationship-breakers and transforms us into peacemakers. He remakes us in the image of his Son.

Personal Examples

Let me conclude with some personal examples to illustrate how I have applied James's counsel to my own life. The first is the way these truths have changed my parenting. It is easy to think that my children "know the gospel." So I get impatient when they do not do what they are supposed to do, because I think they should know better.

I remember a time when I asked my daughter if we could talk because her behavior needed correcting. I was about to begin our conversation with "the bad news." But the Lord caught me in my tracks and helped redirect my steps. So I began instead with the Good News. I took her to Ephesians and began to tell her who she was in Christ. I told her she was chosen by God before the foundation of the world, that she was predestined to be one of his adopted daughters, that Christ shed his blood for her, and that the Holy Spirit was sent to seal her so that nobody could take her away from God. I told her she was part of God's new family, the church. And I told her that all she was and will be was from God.

Only then did I begin to talk to her about areas in which she needed to grow. But she stopped me short, sharing, "Dad, you know when you told me who I was in Christ? I need to hear that more." Her words were like an arrow piercing my bones. How could I have been such a foolish father? For I myself know how much I need to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ. Who was I to think my daughter needed it less?

The other example is with my wife. In reading Scripture together, we began to talk to one another about what God had done for us in Christ. We affirmed the gospel to each other and in each other. Though we had difficult issues to deal with, such as our children, our finances, and our treatment of one another, we began with and emphasized the God who gives more grace! It was hearing the gospel again and again from one another that compelled us to trust and obey God more.

As pastors called to be peacemakers, we must come armed with law and gospel, gospel and law. We must understand that the conflicts people are in are conflicts in people—conflicts in their hearts, conflicts of desires, demands, and idols. These are true strongholds that are impregnable except through the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it is this gospel that we were (and are) called to preach and teach.

Holding out the gospel and applying it to people's lives is what makes peacemaking for the pastor a joyful experience in the end. For what greater joy is there than to see a couple reconciled, not merely to save their marriage and spare their children, but also to see them embrace anew the gospel of their Savior?

<u>4</u> <u>God's Glory in Conflict</u>

The responses to conflict we have reviewed in the last two chapters pertain to the horizontal dimension of life—our dealing with other people. What is assumed by some and neglected by most, though, is the *Godward* dimension in our understanding of and responses to conflict. In this chapter we will explore this Godward dimension of peacemaking by looking at who God is as a reconciling God.

Where Is God in This Conflict?

I remember mediating a conflict between the director of a worldwide relief organization and the consulting firm he hired for fundraising. The allegation on the part of both parties was breach of contract. The director had withheld paying for the services he alleged the consultant failed to provide. The consultant, on the other hand, argued that he had provided his services as stipulated in the contract and simply wanted the money owed him (about \$25,000).

I distinctly remember the attitude the director of the Christian relief organization brought to the meeting. Upon meeting me, he demanded, "I hope you can get this over with today. I have important ministry to do." Clearly, he did not see God in this conflict. Instead, he saw this mediation as a hassle, as an obstacle to his ministry and to God's work. He was blind to the matters of injustice demanding remedy, to broken promises needing confession, to issues of forgiveness and restitution awaiting resolution, and to his severed relationship with a brother in Christ that was crying out for the reconciling grace, power, and wisdom of the gospel.

Furthermore, he viewed the whole matter as a justifiable *problem* that needed to be *fixed* so that he could carry on with "true ministry." Though he would never confess this of God, he functioned as if God were in a box—a box called "ministry," cordoned off from the realities of conflict in this life.

What about you? What is your own attitude toward conflict with respect to your ministry? Do you see peacemaking as a fundamental character of the pastoral calling? Or do you view the conflicts in your marriage, family, and church as amoral intrusions keeping you from the important moral matters of preaching the gospel? Do you find yourself grumbling about conflicts in the church as annoying detours keeping you from your "real calling"? Or do you ever consider it pure joy when you encounter all manner of conflicts, trials, and tribulations?

These are hard questions, but they are important to ask. It is strange that we as pastors, called to preach the gospel of grace to sinners, balk at having to deal with real sinners with real sin in real and messy situations. If we are to apply the Word of God to every aspect of life—sin and all—we must change our attitudes about conflict. Since it is God and his purposes we tend to forget in conflict, it would be best to start by asking: who is God, and what are his purposes with respect to conflict? Let us begin by sketching the basics of a God-centered and Christ-centered view of peacemaking as a way of glorifying God.

Our Triune God of Peace

Conflict is everywhere. It erupts unexpectedly, catching us off guard and leaving us perplexed by the anger, unreasonableness, and even belligerence of another. A spouse who a few minutes before was laughing is now red in the face and yelling at us. A daughter stomps off angrily to her bedroom, murmuring under her breath, "I hate him." An elder meeting that begins with a benign agenda five hours later finds the members stonewalling, the discussion in a stalemate, and the pastor thinking about looking for another church.

When the ancients looked around, they too seemed to see conflict as one of the fundamental realities of human existence. It is little wonder that when they wrote their cosmologies, they began with the gods fighting among themselves. 2

What does inspire wonder, though, is how the biblical story begins so differently. The first part of Genesis is not a story of the gods, much less the gods fighting. Creation begins with the *God of peace*. And his creation is at peace—it is "very good" (Gen. 1:31). Rather than conflict, there is peace,

order, harmony, and love, all of which are encompassed in the Hebrew understanding of the term *shalom*. Everything and everyone is in his or her proper place offering right and just praise to God.

Moreover, our God of peace—the Christian God—is the Triune God. He is no undifferentiated deity. He is one God who eternally consists in the three persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So our Christian story begins and ends with the Triune God—and all the attributes and manifestations of his glory.

For Christians, our fundamental confession of the blessed Trinity carries with it some important implications. First, God is a God of personal relationship. The three persons of the Trinity do not dwell and act in isolation. God's oneness, his unity, consists in the mutual indwelling of the persons of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In other words, these three persons of the Trinity exist in an eternal, *interpersonal relationship* with one another. Thus God, by nature, is radically personal and radically relational.

Second, because our Triune God is by nature a relational God, God's attributes of goodness and love are not secondary but primary. Goodness and love do not and cannot exist in a vacuum. Goodness can only be done in relation to another. Love can only be given in a relationship with another. Such goodness and love aptly describe how the persons in the Trinity have eternally related to one another. They are among the defining characteristics of who our Triune God is, as Scripture readily confirms (see John 3:35; 5:30; 14:31; 17:1–26). In confessing the Trinity, then, Christians confess that from all eternity, God, in the persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, exists in a *personal relationship that is perfect in love and goodness*.

No relationship could better demonstrate the essence of *peace*. When we confess the Trinity, we confess that God is a God of peace! Conventional thinking, in keeping with its ancient predecessors, understands peace as a state of being that comes only subsequent to conflict—as a condition that follows disorder. But because peace is an attribute of the eternal, Triune God, we know that peace precedes conflict. Moreover, peace precedes creation. When the apostle tells a conflicted church that "God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (1 Cor. 14:33), he is saying more than that God wants us to stop fighting. He is rooting our very nature in the reality that we are created and redeemed in the "image of God"—in the God of peace.

At the beginning of redemptive history, we find that God is all in all. And so he shall be once again, at the consummation of all things (1 Cor. 15:28). Everything will be restored to a right relationship with everything else, and all will be under God and at peace (2 Peter 3:13). To this very end, Jesus, on the night he is betrayed—on the night preceding the greatest injustice that mankind would ever commit and witness, on that night preceding the climax of the cosmic conflict between heaven and hell—does not teach his disciples about conflict management but about the persons of the blessed Trinity. And Christ prays for the consummation of our union with this Triune God of peace and love: "My prayer is not for [the disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20–21). God, then, is a God of peace from beginning to end.

We should not overlook the significance of this divine attribute. Since peace is grounded in the nature of God, peace is not a human construct nor an ideal state of affairs captured only in dreams and wishes. Nor is it merely a redemptive result. Rather, as a divine attribute, peace is a fundamental reality. Conflict, sin, disorder, and confusion are *aberrations* in God's good creation. But when Christ returns, just as creation began in peace, so peace will reign once again. Thus, when we as church leaders minister as peacemakers, we are in keeping with one of the deepest bedrocks of reality, the Triune God of peace. Peacemaking is nothing less than a work of the Triune God in union with us, the sons of God, who through that union labor to bring about that great day of peace by rectifying wrongs and setting relationships right, all under the lordship of God.

God Ordains Conflict

Only by grasping the deep reality of the Triune God as the God of peace can we begin to recover a truly biblical understanding of conflict. If peace characterizes the eternal relations of the Triune persons of God and his original creation, and if man's fall disrupted that peace, the resulting reality of sinful conflict should neither surprise nor confuse us. It certainly does not surprise or confuse God. Since all things, including conflict, are from God and through God and to God (Rom. 11:36), then conflict itself has a

place in God's great plans and purposes. In fact, Scripture tells us that God ordains conflict for his redemptive purposes.

As Seen throughout Biblical History

Redemptive history begins on this note. Following Adam's sin, the Lord curses the serpent, declaring, "*I will put enmity* between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers" (Gen. 3:15). Notice that the Lord does not merely respond to conflict; he ordains it. It is the Lord who puts enmity between the sons of God and the sons of the devil (see 1 John 3:7–10).

Robert Reymond most appropriately sums up the entire redemptive work of the Messiah as "conflict work." Observes Reymond, "From the very beginning of redemptive history the saints' everlasting hope was made to rest in the triumphant 'conflict work' carried out by the Messiah." He hears the cries of the oppressed and of those denied justice. He loves his enemies and does good to us, sending the sun and rain upon us though we do not deserve it. He pursues us, intruding into our lives and awaking us from the slumber of our sin, crying, "Wake up, O sleeper" (Eph. 5:14). He calls us to turn from our idols and turn back to him, to lay down our arms and submit to his terms of peace. And he is patient, tolerant, and kind toward us in the hope that it will lead us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Moreover, he holds out to us astounding promises of justification, adoption, transformation, and glory. He sends to us his ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19–21), and he trains us, his children, to be peacemakers (Matt. 5:9).

Starting in Genesis 3, *conflict* is the very drama of biblical history. The serpent lies and accuses God of keeping Eve from great good—from being like God. Cain kills his brother Abel. Jacob's sons betray their brother Joseph. The children of Israel grumble against Moses and against God, imputing to both evil motives. Moses, in response, is tempted to resign his office rather than persevere in leading the church in the desert. David, hunted and hounded by Saul, faces the delectable temptation to take revenge.

And what about great David's greater Son—Jesus our Lord? Conflict followed him all the days of his life. If there is ever a story to tell of fear,

hatred, lust, falsehood, greed, and the systemic nature of sin and injustice, it is the story of the life of Jesus leading to his crucifixion. Yet Peter preaches on Pentecost that God *ordained* it all; by his set purpose and foreknowledge, God handed his own Son over to wicked men (Acts 2:23).

In all things, then, God ordains conflict according to his sovereign, wise, and good purposes. This great truth must be our central confession, our anchor in the midst of conflict, so that we are compelled and emboldened to be true ambassadors of reconciliation—to persevere as peacemakers. For conflict tries our true theology. It tests us and sifts our hearts, revealing what we truly believe and hold fast to. If we truly confess and believe that God ordains conflict, instead of cursing it, we can consecrate it. Instead of seeing conflict as an accident in a cosmos of chaos, we can accept it as a God-given assignment for our good and his ultimate glory. Most important, rather than perceiving conflict as an obstacle to our ministry, we can welcome it as an opportunity to minister.

As Seen in the Results of the Curse

As shown above, conflict is the substance of biblical narrative. It is the focal point around which many of the stories of redemptive history have unfolded, demonstrating the antithesis between the children of God and the children of the devil, the city of God versus the city of man.

Conflict also is seen at a more basic level. It is a result of the curse. It is one of the many ways the curse has afflicted human life. As with any other evil that is the result of the curse, such as natural disasters and accidents, conflict is to be viewed in a decidedly God-ward way. Jesus demonstrates this principle well in Luke 13:1–5. Recalling two tragedies that represent both natural and moral evil, Jesus responds by pointing to the *god-relatedness* and moral challenge of both incidents: "Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:5). Whether we face suffering or moral evil, Jesus calls us to set our eyes upon God.

The writer to the Hebrews also addresses the necessity of a God ward perspective in suffering and conflict (Heb. 12:7–14). Rather than spurning hardship, he urges us to endure it as *God's fatherly discipline*. As such, he calls us to embrace an attitude of learning and rejoicing in the midst of our sufferings, hardships, and conflict. And he concludes with an exhortation to

peace and holiness: "Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul also calls us to rejoice in our sufferings because "we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Rom. 5:3–4). Conflict, says Paul, is the crucible for changing lives. It is the refining fire by which God burns, breaks, and molds peace-fakers and peace-breakers into peacemakers.

James, in dealing with various conflicts among those to whom he writes, begins his letter with a similar exhortation: "Consider it *pure joy*, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (James 1:2–3). James's counsel here is somewhat shocking—consider conflict *pure joy*? Joyous is certainly not how we typically view it. But if we are to be Godward in our thinking, then we must learn to see conflict through God's eyes, ever aware of how he is using it to mature us and strengthen us in our faith.

All these passages are significant in shaping how we are to understand and respond to conflict and suffering. Conflict often arises when things do not go our way or according to our expectations. We are frequently disappointed. But Scripture teaches that conflict is not an obstacle, but an opportunity to glorify God and to see his wisdom and power at work, bringing about peace, righteousness, and reconciliation.

God Purposes Peace

Even as Scripture speaks throughout of God's sovereignty over everything, including conflict, so also it teaches us that the Lord *purposes peace*. God is the God of peace and is himself a peacemaker.

God's purpose for peace is eminently evident in his name. The Father is called the "God of peace" (Rom. 15:33; 16:20; 1 Cor. 14:33; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 4:6–9; 1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 13:20). Paul's valediction in Romans 15:33 is not merely "God be with you," but "the *God of peace* be with you all. Amen." Later, after issuing his greetings to various brothers and sisters in Christ, he encourages, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Rom. 16:20). These encouraging words in both chapters 15 and 16

are not mere pious formulas of blessing but ardent prayers offered in full awareness of the tensions between Jews and Gentiles in the infant church.

God's purpose for peace is also apparent in his character. Giving all manner of advice and counsel to the Corinthian church, a church known for numerous conflicts, Paul concludes his counsel by founding it all upon who God is: "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (1 Cor. 14:33). That God is who he is, teaches Paul, ought to determine how we worship him and how we purpose peace in our lives with one another.

This message of God as a God of peace is also communicated through each person of the Trinity. Each of Paul's letters begins with a salutation of peace: "Grace and *peace* to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philem. 3). In all these salutations, the Son, as well as the Father, is said to bring peace. We ought to expect this since the prophets foretold that the Messiah would be the Peacemaker, that the Davidic King would be the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6; see also John 14:27). Furthermore, the Spirit is the agent of the Father and Son's peace in our lives. It is the Spirit who transforms us and causes us to bear the fruit of peace (Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:3). As we saw earlier, we see here once again that our God, the Triune God, is the God of peace.

When we think of God in these terms—as the God of peace—we are not to think of his peace as merely the absence of disorder or the cessation of conflict. Nor is his peace a mere appendage to who he is or an abstract attribute of his person. Rather, it is his name. To speak of God as the God of peace is to describe God in terms of the historical outworking of his name and character (as we will see in the next section). This historical outworking is most supremely manifest in the person and work of his Son. The sum of God's work in his Son is described in terms of peacemaking. According to 2 Corinthians 5:19, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them." God's purpose, then, in every sermon we preach, in every word we counsel, is to reconcile people to himself so that they might live at peace.

Consider the other ways we find in Scripture of how God purposes peace. First, God blesses his people with peace. The Lord tells Aaron, the high priest, to declare,

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.5

Numbers 6:24–26

Do we rattle off this benediction in a perfunctory manner, or do we bless our people with an ardent affection for them from God, that they may be blessed with his peace? This old covenant benediction of peace is fulfilled by our new covenant High Priest when Jesus says to his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27). This peace is the peace that is ours today, the peace with which we are to bless our people!

Second, God makes provisions for peace by means of his *covenant of peace* (Isa. 54:10; Ezek. 34:24–25; 37:26; Mal. 2:5–6; see also Isa. 9:6; Micah 5:3). The Old Testament prophets prophesied that God would make a new covenant called the covenant of peace. Interestingly, this covenant of peace follows the work of the new David, the Servant of the Lord, the Messiah. It is a covenant of peace because Christ makes us to be at peace with God and secures peace for us. 6 As ministers of the new covenant, we are rightly ministers of the covenant of peace.

Finally, God's purposes for peace are evident in how the estate of glory is characterized by peace. In Isaiah 2:4 we find that in the day of the Lord, the Lord will settle our disputes. And with the coming of the Messiah, Isaiah says, "Of the increase of his government and *peace* there will be no end" (Isa. 9:7).

Talk of peace, the hope for peace, and the hard work of peacemaking ought not to be solely the pursuit of social liberals or wide-eyed idealists. Rather, such talk, hope, and work ought to mark most those who believe in the God of peace and his Son, the Prince of Peace. Peacemaking is thoroughly biblical in its reality and mandate.

God's Glory in Peacemaking

It is not enough to know that God is sovereign over conflict and that he desires his people to live at peace. We must also ask why. Why does God ordain conflict? Why does he purpose peace? The answer hinted at and briefly uncovered is that he does so *for his own glory*. God ordains conflict and purposes peace for his name's sake.

This truth is nowhere more evident than in the story of the golden calf found in Exodus 32–34. Here, and particularly in Exodus 33:18–34:7, Scripture presents us with the first and most extensive self-description of God by God, wherein he describes himself in terms of his glory. Typically God's glory is understood as the visible summary of his attributes. Yet in this story of idolatry, betrayal, rebellion, and sin, God demonstrates his glory as consisting chiefly in the display of his free and sovereign mercy (reconciling mercy) against the backdrop of his holy justice. That is, God's glory shines most radiantly in who he is as Reconciler and Peacemaker. It is this understanding of his glory that shapes and dominates the unfolding story of redemption and ultimately leads us to Christ.

First and Foremost a Peacemaking God

We begin with Exodus 33:18 when Moses asks to see God's glory. Many of us unwittingly misconstrue Moses's request. Hearing his cry to see God's glory, we assume that he wants an experience of God for the sake of experiencing God. For example, as one scholar describes, Moses is "seeking a special manifestation of God which would leave nothing to be desired (cf. John 14:8). Moses had a craving to come to grips with God as he was in himself." When we hold to this interpretation, we make Moses out to be more like a mystic than a pastor. More important, we fail to remember the context of his cry. We forget that Moses, as the pastor of Israel, is leading a stiff-necked people in the desert.

In light of this context, we can be certain that Moses is not looking for a special manifestation of God, nor is he seeking some ecstatic experience with God. If he were, the Lord simply could have shown Moses a glimpse of his immensity, omniscience, or omnipotence. But he does not, for Moses is not looking to experience the glory of these attributes. Rather, he is hoping to know the glory of God's *mercy*. Moses pleads as a pastor for a desperately sinful people. He faces the very practical, real-life problem of a

people in conflict with their God. He needs to know what *kind of God* the Lord is who will go up with this rebellious people to the Promised Land without destroying them.

The entire context of chapters 32–34 of Exodus compels us to this conclusion. Brevard Childs accurately describes the situation that leads up to Moses's prayer:

[Chapters 32–34] have been placed within an obvious theological framework of sin and forgiveness. Ch. 32 recounts the breaking of the covenant; ch. 34 relates its restoration. Moreover, these chapters are held together by a series of motifs, which are skillfully woven into a unifying pattern. The tablets are received, smashed in ch. 32, recut, and restored in ch. 34. Moses' intercession for Israel begins in ch. 32, continues in ch. 33, and comes to a climax in ch. 34. The theme of the presence of God which is the central theme of ch. 33 joins, on the one hand, the prior theme of disobedience in ch. 32, and on the other hand, the assurance of forgiveness in ch. 34.9

The narrative in these chapters rings of estrangement between the Lord and his people. Like an unfaithful wife, Israel has been caught in her husband's bed with another lover. Justly angry with such an adulterous bride, the Lord cries out to Moses, "I have seen these people . . . and they are a *stiff-necked* people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation" (Exod. 32:9–10).10

But Moses will have nothing of it. He intercedes for this stiff-necked people by pleading for two things. First, he prays that the Lord would not destroy Israel but, instead, uphold his name—lest the nations defame him by saying the Lord smote Israel out of evil intent (Exod. 32:12). Second, Moses pleads that the Lord would remember his covenant promises to Abraham (v. 13). Hearing these pleas, the Lord relents (v. 14).

But the Lord's relenting does not mean that he and Israel are reconciled. Later, he tells Moses that he will not go to the Promised Land with Israel. Again, the Lord describes his people in the same way—they are *stiff-necked*. Consequently, they can only be assured of exciting his anger again (Exod. 33:3). So instead of the Lord going himself with his people, he promises Moses to send an angel in his place.

We might think that Moses would be wise to settle for this half-measure of tolerance, but he does not. In the next scene, we find Moses meeting with

the Lord "outside the camp some distance away" (see Exod. 33:7–11). Things have not gotten any better; God and his people are still not reconciled. It is as if we were witnessing an estrangement between wife and husband, living in two separate homes. Israel is in the camp, and God is outside in his tent some distance away.

Moses will not let the situation rest. He wants the Lord himself, not an angel, to go up with Israel: "Remember that this nation is *your* people" (Exod. 33:13). The Lord finally seems to concede to Moses's request: "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (v. 14).

At this point it might appear that the Lord fully grants Moses's request. Yet the Lord only promises to be with Moses, not with the people. The Lord says in verse 14, "My Presence will go, and I will give *you* rest." But this *you* is second person *singular*, referring only to Moses. It is not *you* plural, referring to all Israel.

It is only in recognizing this distinction that the English reader can make sense of Moses's continued protest in verses 15–26. Moses knows that the Lord is *not* promising Moses what he wants. He does not want the Lord to go with him alone but with him *and God's people*. Moses wants true reconciliation. So Moses mediates on behalf of the entire community, reasoning, "If your Presence does not go with *us*, do not send *us* up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and *with your people* unless you go with *us*? What else will distinguish me and *your people* from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (Exod. 33:15–16).

It is in view of Moses's mediation for the entire community to be reconciled to God that the Lord finally grants his true request in verse 17. He promises to go with his people. It is important for us to remember that through this entire sequence, Moses is not overcoming God's reluctance, but *seeking* God's *highest willingness*. He is not seeking to change God's mind but seeking to know the mind of God.

With this as his intent, Moses still grapples with a lingering question. Knowing God and knowing God's people, how can God's anger not flare up again and destroy his people, just as God had predicted (Exod. 33:3)? Despite all that Moses has learned about God, he needs to know God more. It is for this reason, in light of the Lord's expressed willingness now to go with Israel, that Moses is prompted to request, "Show me your glory" (Exod. 33:18). Moses's request arises out of his need to know *what kind of*

God the Lord is who promises to go with the *kind of people* Israel is—a stiff-necked people.

We should not lose sight here of a linguistic leitmotif, a recurring theme, in the narration of this story. Three times the Lord depicts Israel as *stiff-necked* (see Exod. 32:9; 33:3, 5). This phrase is not a description of an individual sin but of the people's character of heart. Implied is that Israel can only attract God's just response to sin—his holy wrath. So in effect, Moses is asking, "Can you go up with this people, God? Can you dwell among this stiff-necked people without your wrath eventually destroying them? What guarantee can you give, O Lord, that you will dwell among and even bless this people with grace, rather than consuming them with your wrath?"

Moses's present concern is, what kind of God is the Lord? He seeks a better knowledge of God's character in order to gain assurance that God's choice to go with Israel is not contingent upon the people's character. If it is, the nation will soon be undone, consumed in the fire of his holy anger. The Lord knows Moses's concern (and loves him for it), so he answers, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. . . . When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by" (Exod. 33:19, 22).

God declares the kind of God he is. The Lord portrays his own character in terms of describing his glory. To Moses's request to see his *glory* (Exod. 33:18), God promises that before Moses will pass his *goodness* and a proclamation of his *name* (v. 19). God's glory is his goodness, his name, himself. If God's glory is synonymous with his name, what is his name? That is given in Exodus 34.

Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.

God's glory, his goodness, and his name consist principally in the display of his mercy and his justice. Yet we see from the text that these two are not symmetrical with respect to God's glory. God defines *first* and *foremost* his abounding mercy to sinners. His grace precedes his judgment. Moreover, God gives his mercy a preeminence that is absent in his description of his wrath. When he describes his mercy, he lists virtue upon virtue (seven, to be precise) to paint in many colors, as it were, his abounding love. He describes himself as compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. In contrast, God depicts his wrath by simply stating twice that he will punish the guilty. 11

Thus, in answer to Moses's plea to know what kind of God the Lord is, God answers that he is first and foremost a God of mercy, grace, and compassion. But he also clearly states that he is a God of wrath. Therefore, let no man presume upon his mercy or take it for granted. Yet let every man know that it is God's propensity, his preference, his inclination to lavish his mercy upon sinners. 12

But does Moses understand God's answer? Some of the Bible translations would lead us to think not. Moses's follow-up prayer in verse 9 seems to give the impression that his request to the Lord to forgive Israel is a request made *despite* God's character: "O Lord, if I have found favor in your eyes," he says, "then let the Lord go with us. Although (*ki*) this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance" (Exod. 34:9).

The interpretation of this verse hangs on whether we should read the conjunction *ki* as concessive ("although") or as causative ("because").13 We should read it as the latter because the trajectory of the unfolding of God's character in light of Israel's great sin does not lead Moses to pray cautiously to a reluctant God ("although these are a stiff-necked people, please forgive them"). Rather, it leads Moses to see that God's own self-disclosure as sovereign and supremely merciful is the bedrock reality that can embolden him to pray, "Because! Because this is a stiff-necked people, forgive them!" Moses is really praying, "O Lord, because you are the Lord, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin, forgive this

stiff-necked people. As you have declared your glory rich in mercy, show mercy." Moses is not praying to overcome God's reluctance but to take hold of what he has finally discovered in God's revelation of himself—God's highest willingness to show mercy to his enemies, to stiff-necked people like us!

Before we see how this theme gets echoed and developed throughout the rest of Scripture, it is utterly crucial to our understanding of God not to overlook the significance of this passage. Up to this point in the canon of Scripture, God has made himself known as a compassionate, gracious, forgiving, and reconciling God solely through his works. Yet here in Exodus 34:5–7 for the first time he reveals himself by word. He declares who he is, defining himself and proclaiming his character.

Before this point, God has given us only short accounts—usually just a word or brief phrase—as to the kind of God he is. He is Abraham's shield (Gen. 15:1), the Lord (Gen. 15:7), Almighty God (Gen. 17:1), the God of Abraham (Gen. 26:24), and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod. 3:6). He also declares, "I am who I am" (Exod. 3:14), and he describes himself as gracious (Exod. 22:27).

Yet now in Exodus 33:19–34:7 the Lord declares the fullness of his name, giving us a mini-theology about himself. There is no other passage in all the Old Testament Scriptures like this self-declaration; it is replete with synonyms of the Lord's goodness and mercy. Most notable is not only how the Lord defines himself but what he omits. We all know that the Lord is omnipotent, omniscient, immutable, immense, and so on. Yet when he defines himself, he delights to define himself not by these attributes but by magnifying his mercy even as he reminds us of his justice. It is in this context that we can first begin to understand that God ordains conflict and purposes peace because he wants to show us the glorious tapestry of his mercy and justice.

God's Glory Come in the Flesh

This marvelous declaration of God's glory, particularly in the revelation of his mercy and justice, is echoed down through the centuries. God's self-description as rich and abundant in mercy in reconciling a stiff-necked people to himself becomes the ground of hope for all the Old Testament

saints. The godly pray it, the psalmists sing it, and the prophets preach it. 14 And in Israel's darkest days, the Lord promises a new covenant, a manifestation of God's mercy and forgiveness greater than that given by the old covenant: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jer. 31:33). This promise is *grounded* in a greater day of forgiveness, 15 when atonement would be made that speaks better than the blood of bulls and goats—that is, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. On this basis, the Lord declares, "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jer. 31:34, italics added to emphasize how the word for indicates the grounds for the promise).

What prophets foresee in shadow, the New Testament apostles see in reality. The apostle John opens his Gospel announcing that the glory Moses sought to see and for which the Old Testament saints longed has now come to us in the flesh in the revelation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

The themes found in the context of this proclamation (John 1:14–18) strongly echo the themes in Exodus 32–34: the quest to see God (Exod. 33:18 with John 1:18), God dwelling with his people (Exod. 33:14 with John 1:14), the revelation of his glory (Exod. 33:18; 34:5 with John 1:14), and the heart of that glory as *grace and truth* (Exod. 34:5–6 with John 1:16–17). By intentionally "hyperlinking" to Exodus 33:18–34:7, John shows us that Moses's request to see God's glory is finally and fully answered in the incarnation of God's one and only Son.16

Paul the apostle understands that the glory of God is most manifest in the reconciling work of God's Son. Thus he understands his own ministry, and by extension the ministry of all pastors, as a ministry of reconciliation. Observes Paul, "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" (2 Cor. 5:18–19).

A ministry of reconciliation is not an appendage to real ministry. Peacemaking is not one skill among many that pastors keep in their ministry toolbox. Peacemaking is the embodiment of pastoral ministry even as Christ is the embodiment (incarnation) of the God of peace. By word and

by deed, every moment of a pastor's life is a moment wherein we call others to be reconciled to God. And every word we preach or counsel ought to be the Word (John 1:1) that is full of grace and truth—the Word of peace.

Conclusion

As we have seen, conflict comes like a mighty wind, toppling everything that does not have its roots in God. For this reason, a theology of the God of peace is absolutely necessary if we are to plant our feet firmly in the foundation of God's character as Peacemaker. Only then will we be able to pursue true peace and reconciliation.

Moreover, a theology of the God of peace is eminently *practical*. Though in this chapter we have focused largely on rich theological truths, we must not miss the practical nature of these principles. Conflict separates. Conflict isolates. Even as well-intending peacemakers, our peacemaking endeavors can leave us feeling very alone. Yet by deepening our biblical understanding of God and conflict, we can see that the call to peacemaking is God's call to come alongside *his* ministry of peace. God is the chief and foremost peacemaker, and we are his servants, his ambassadors of reconciliation. We do not work alone in our endeavors to call men to be reconciled to God and to one another. God is with us—the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

God's propriety in peacemaking and his powerful presence in the midst of peacemaking should strengthen our resolve to persevere as ministers of reconciliation. Peacemaking is hard work. It is "conflict work." Christ is the supreme example of the hardship, suffering, and misunderstanding that awaits true peacemakers. Ever present is the temptation to give up in the face of opposition or to succumb to cynicism in the face of perpetual sin. But cynicism is just another word for errant theology—a theology of unbelief. True faith, the faith that perseveres in peacemaking, is the faith whose eyes are turned and fixed on God. This is the faith that sustained Moses in the face of a rebellious, conflicted, and stiff-necked people. And this is the faith that must sustain us if we are to be and minister as the sons of God. Like Moses, we need to continually renew our vision of God, so that we may see ever more clearly the glory of the Lord.

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

Exodus 34:5-7

PEACEMAKING IN THE FAMILY OF GOD

We saw in the last chapter that God's glory as a reconciling and peacemaking God is revealed most fully in the glory of the One and Only—Jesus come in the flesh. In light of this reality, it is no surprise that Jesus, God's Son, is Peacemaker in the likeness of his Father. So too, those who become the sons of God through the peacemaking of Jesus Christ are also called to clothe themselves with the reconciling compassion, mercy, and truth of their heavenly Father and their elder Brother, as we will see in the pages to come.

Peacemaking flowers and bears fruit in the rich, theological soil of sonship. 1 We need not look further than Matthew 5:9 to find Jesus's eschatological vision of glory for his disciples cast in the language of sonship, and sonship itself inextricably bound to the practice of peacemaking: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."

In this chapter we will see that biblical peacemaking must avail itself of the riches of the biblical theology of redemption if we are to be effective peacemakers and peace motivators. And a biblical theology of redemption finds at its apex the blessings and privileges of sonship, including the love, intimacy, status, and responsibility that should adorn those who belong to the family of God.

What the Pagans Are Saying

Unfortunately, when the world turns its attention to the church, it finds little evidence that we are the sons of God, for it finds little evidence that we are makers of peace. The church looks more like a bunch of fighting street orphans than sons and daughters sitting peaceably at the family table. It is no wonder that the world is little convinced of our "Good News." Nor does it surprise us when the world points and says, "The problem with Jesus

is that he had disciples" (Bertrand Russell), or "If Christ were here now, there is one thing he would not be—a Christian" (Mark Twain). Such cutting remarks are not limited to grumpy, old atheists. The witness of the church before a watching world has turned such individual sentiments into national proverbs. For example, there is a French proverb that observes, "He who is near the church is often far from God." And a German proverb remarks, "In the visible church the true Christians are invisible." 2

If the world is little convinced that Jesus is God's Son and that we are the children of God, it is due less to any apologetic deficiency and more to the disunity and dysfunction of our life together as the family of God. The church's failure in peacemaking is due in large measure to our failure as members to believe and appropriate the biblical truth that the church is God's family. Biblical peacemaking will only become firmly rooted in the church when we recover the meaning and practice of the church as the family of God.

To explore these ideas further, we will start by considering the significance of sonship as a major theological category. We will also look at various Old and New Testament passages that highlight the nature of God as our Father and us as his children, calling us as such to imitate him. Then we will examine several New Testament texts that emphasize the familial nature of relationships within the church, especially in the midst of conflict. Finally, we will conclude by reflecting on the practical importance of sonship for peacemaking.

Theology of Sonship

Jesus's connection between "peacemakers" and being called "sons of God" is not an arbitrary one. Peacemaking is the defining characteristic of sonship. And of all Christian virtues and actions, peacemaking reflects most the meaning of being a son or daughter of God. To understand this idea more fully, it would be good to take a sweeping look at the scope and depth of the biblical doctrine of sonship.

While Scripture uses many metaphors and images to depict our redemption, not all are equally weighted. Some hold greater significance and import than others. Sonship is one of these images. Though typically systematic theologians have subsumed the doctrine of our adoption as sons under the doctrine of justification or set it between justification and sanctification, it is more than one redemptive pearl among many. Recent scholarship has advanced the claim that sonship is best seen as the apex of sanctification, the goal for which God has made us. 3

If this claim is true, we must not relegate our individual identity as sons and daughters and our corporate identity as family to a minor place in our theology, as if our sonship were one image among many that Scripture uses to describe God's relationship with the church. Rather, we must recognize the fundamental character of sonship, acknowledging its significance not only to our theology but also to our Christian walk. In order to appreciate it more fully, we will consider the general evidence that sets sonship among the greater themes of Scripture.

First, the significance of sonship is proved by its dominant presence in several key programmatic passages of Scripture (Rom. 8:15–32; Gal. 3:15–4:7; Eph. 1:3–6; Heb. 2:1–18; 12:1–14; 1 John 3:1–3). By *programmatic* I mean those texts that give the sweep and order of God's redemptive purposes. When Scripture discusses predestination, glory, the atonement, the Spirit's work, the new covenant, and our sanctification, sonship is in view.

For example, *predestination* and sonship go hand in hand. This relationship may shock many of us since the very word *predestination* seems to connote pictures of a cold, steel mechanism. But such connotations do not appear in Scripture, nor do they ever seem to be in Paul's mind. Rather, for Paul, God's predestining purposes are charged with images of family. So the apostle tells us that God predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:5–6). In similar language, Paul says that those God foreknew, he predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that the Son may be the firstborn among many brothers (Rom. 8:29).

Both of these passages are key programmatic passages. Both speak of God's grand plan, and both do so in terms of sonship (both Christ's and ours). God's predestining purposes are centered in his Son, Jesus Christ. As such, we who are "in Christ" by faith are more than members—we are adopted sons. Predestination, therefore, is not some cold, dead doctrine but the glorious purpose of God not merely to redeem sinners but also to make sons—people who desire, think, and act like their heavenly Father.

Second, sonship is the distinctive mark of the new covenant. In Galatians 3:26–4:7 Paul likens the radical shift in the status of God's people in redemptive history to the transition from being slaves to being sons. We are no longer in the quasi-slavery estate of underage sons living under the everwatchful eye of a tutor. Now that Christ has come, we have received the full rights of sons.

J. I. Packer forcefully reminds us of this old/new covenant distinction when he observes, "Everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. Father is the Christian name for God." While God is spoken of as Father in the Old Testament, God's fatherhood takes on grand significance in light of the revelation of his Son. It is with the coming of Christ that the Lord brings "many sons to glory" (Heb. 2:10). It is with the coming of Christ that the apex of God's plan of redemption comes to full light—with the whole "creation wait[ing] in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed" (Rom. 8:19).

A third line of evidence showing the significance of sonship in God's redemptive purposes is that sonship is a key characteristic of our sanctification. We see this most overtly in Hebrews 12, where we are called to persevere amid the trials and temptations of life, enduring hardship and discipline as the sons of God:

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons.

Hebrews 12:4–7

The disciplines of the Christian life are the disciplines of the children of God. What happens in our life is not merely the evidence of *God* at work but also of our *heavenly Father* at work.

All these reasons call us to see that sonship is of immense significance for understanding the Christian life. I will never forget a conflict case in my church in which the biblical teaching about sonship so radically led to reconciliation. There were two families in conflict who came to me for mediation. Over a period of a year and a half, after three separate mediations, I seemed to be making little progress with one of the fathers of the families. Finally, I decided to spend some time teaching him about sonship and helping him apply it to his Christian life.

After a period of about four months, he called me one day to confess his stubbornness over the past year. "Pastor," he said, "I just realized how stubborn I am." I laughed to myself, as this very criticism was one that he resisted most. He continued, "I see now that I am God's son. I am part of a new family. I do not have to be like my father or brother." During our conversations, he had often spoken of the dynamics in his own family, such as holding grudges and being critical, manipulative, and stubborn. He went on to share with me his renewed understanding of the truth that he was now God's son, and he drew the first and most important implication: "Since I'm God's son, I want to be a peacemaker like his Son." With that truth in heart, he began to take concrete steps to be reconciled to the other family in the church. Sonship led to building not only his family, but the family of God.

As this man recognized, our status as sons and daughters of God should radically shape how we respond to conflict—in the likeness of our Father the Peacemaker. In light of this principle, let us further consider what Scripture teaches about God as our heavenly Father and how we as his children are called to imitate him.

Like Father, Like Son

"Like father, like son" is not only a common proverb, it is a biblical truth. In Scripture, sonship is about likeness. We see this from the very beginning of the biblical story. The parallel expressions of God creating man in his likeness (Gen. 1:26–27) and Adam having a son in his own likeness, in his own image (Gen. 5:3), argue for sonship and likeness as being mutually explanatory. That is, to be "like" God is to be a "son of God." To be a "son of God" is to be "like" God. To be made in the image and likeness of someone is to be made a son. To be a son is to be made in the image and likeness of one's father. By setting God's creation of Adam in parallel with Adam having a son, Moses depicts God as a father establishing his family. Thus, if you want to know what it means for God to create man, you must

ask, What does it mean for man to be God's son? What does it mean to have God as one's father and know oneself as God's child?

Our Kingly Father, the Peacemaker

Both the Old and New Testaments present two intertwining images of God as King and as Father. God is King over all the nations and especially over his people Israel (Exod. 15:18; 1 Chron. 16:31; 2 Chron. 20:6; Pss. 22:28; 47:2, 7–8; 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1; 146:10; Jer. 10:7, 10; 46:18; 48:15; 51:57; Micah 4:7; Zech. 14:16–17; Mal. 1:14). Also, God is Israel's Father, and they are his sons and daughters (Exod. 4:22; Deut. 8:5; 14:1; Jer. 3:19; 31:9; Hosea 11:1). He is not just any father but God the King as Father. And God is not just any king but the King who is Father to Israel. The image of the King-subject relationship conveys powerful protection and rule coupled with obedient submission. The image of the Father-son relationship is that of Begetter and begotten—indicating likeness. Israel is to be like her God, the King, her Father.

The image of God as kingly Father has much to teach us in terms of peacemaking. In the Old Testament God's reconciling work often gets expressed in the familial terms of how a father treats his sons. For example, in Psalm 103 the psalmist cites Exodus 34:6–7, in which God describes himself as merciful and compassionate. The psalmist declares, "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Ps. 103:8). He continues his praise by calling attention to the specific manifestation of God's compassion and abounding love—his forgiveness: "He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:9–12).

Yet the psalmist does not stop there. He adds an important qualifier in his description of God's forgiveness. He defines God's forgiveness as a *fatherly* forgiveness: "As *a father* has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him" (Ps. 103:13). God's mercy and forgiveness are a *fatherly* mercy and forgiveness. The glory of God *as*

father is his being compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love—not treating us as our sins deserve.

Intertwined with this theme of God's fatherly care of Israel is the image of his kingship. In verse 19 the psalm comes to its climax, declaring, "The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all."

The implications for us as the adopted sons of God are not difficult to see. As sons of our Father, our lives, ministries, and churches ought to evidence the same kind of compassion and grace. And as loyal subjects, we know that such grace-filled living is possible because we have great confidence in our King, who rules and reigns over the hearts of men. Furthermore, as the sons of God, our own response to offense should be like our heavenly Father's—slow to anger and abounding in love. And like our Father, we should not treat others as their sins deserve.

Another text worthy of our attention is Jeremiah 31, where we find the promise of the new covenant (vv. 31–34). In this chapter, God declares his kingly power by summoning the nations to hear of his royal plans to restore exiled Israel (vv. 10–14). And his plans will prevail because he is King of kings. He rules over all.

It is easy to overlook, however, the fact that Jeremiah frames this kingly declaration in terms of God's *fatherhood*. Early on in the prophecy we hear the Lord promising to redeem Israel, and he anchors his promise in his unique status as Israel's Father: "They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, *because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son*" (Jer. 31:9). This theme harkens back to Exodus 4:22, in which God tells Moses to tell Pharaoh to let his "son" go. Now again the Lord declares his intentions for his people—his son. He will redeem them from exile and bring them back to himself because he is Israel's *Father*. Later, in Jeremiah 31:20, the same paternal cry is heard: "Is not Ephraim *my dear son, the child in whom I delight*? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him,' declares the Lord."

In light of these earlier verses that provide the context for the declaration of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34), it is evident that the new covenant will be the covenant the *Father* makes. Moreover, the new covenant promise itself intimates a further revelation of the Lord as Father, to be made known

only in the final and full revelation of God's redemption through his Son, Jesus Christ—which is precisely what the New Testament announces.

Jesus not only reveals himself as the obedient Son of God, but he also calls his disciples into a distinctive relationship with God as Father. As he imitates his Father by loving his enemies, so he calls us to imitate our Father by being forgiving and merciful to our enemies. For example, in the Sermons on the Mount and on the Plain, Jesus defines the unique character of God's kingly rule over the subjects of his kingdom in terms of his fatherly peacemaking. Notice how Jesus presents God to us as our merciful Father, our Father who loves his enemies: "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. . . . Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:44–45, 48). Luke provides the parallel account: "But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:35–36). Notice also that in both accounts. Jesus tells us to love our enemies in order to manifest those characteristics that most define us as sons and daughters of God, for children act like their Father.

Furthermore, Jesus demonstrates that our Father's distinctive glory lies in loving his enemies, because who among the gods loves his enemies? None but our Father Yahweh! And as his children—as those who love our enemies—this distinctive glory is also to be ours. For as Jesus makes explicit, even pagans can love those who love them.

I cannot help but grow tired of how many churches boast that they are a "friendly" church. As important as friendliness and a welcoming spirit are to the church, they are not the goal, but the baseline of our life together. What the world needs to see in action is our love for our enemies, compelling them to say, "How they love their enemies! How they walk in the footsteps of their heavenly Father, the King!"

Sonship, Peacemaking, and the Apostle Paul

Passages that associate sonship and the image of God as our Father with peacemaking are not confined to Jesus's teachings. We also find them in the New Testament letters. The apostle Paul makes much of this association in his letter to the Ephesians.

In Ephesians 2:17–19 Paul addresses the longstanding, historically rooted conflict between Jew and Gentile. Though religious and ethnic differences are the greatest grounds for conflict, Paul announces on a celebratory note that Jew and Gentile, those who were hostile toward one another, have now been brought together through Jesus Christ. Note well how Paul casts this declaration of peace in the language of the family of God: "[Jesus] came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the *Father* by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's *household*" (Eph. 2:17–19). Do not miss how Paul switches metaphors midstream from being citizens to being members of God's household, God's family. And the peace Christ preaches and secures is a peace in having access not merely to God but to God as Father. That is why Paul can say we are God's household—brothers and sisters with one another.

Another section of Ephesians that connects sonship with peacemaking is Ephesians 4:24–5:2.5 Paul grounds our ethical behavior toward one another in the reality of our being the children of God. To consider Paul's instruction in this passage as a call to peacemaking may seem to some as taking too much exegetical liberty. But a closer look reveals that throughout his letter, Paul has been preparing us to understand this dynamic.

First of all, we should note that the theme of peace looms large in Paul's letter to the church. He begins and ends his letter with a benediction of peace (Eph. 1:2; 6:23). In chapter 2 he shows how the "dividing wall of hostility" between Jew and Gentile has been destroyed by Christ, who "is *our peace*" (Eph. 2:14). Jew and Gentile have become one through Christ, who has *made peace* (Eph. 2:15). In fact, Paul describes Jesus's own ministry as one of *preaching peace* (Eph. 2:17). For Paul, Jesus is Peacemaker and Reconciler.

What is true of Christ, God's Son, ought also to be true of the adopted sons and daughters of God. Paul makes this explicit when he shifts his attention directly to the church beginning in chapter 4. Here Paul calls us to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). The possibility of "making every effort" to keep the unity of the Spirit rests on the reality of the unique unity of God and of his

church. As Paul reminds us, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and *Father* of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4–6). Having one Father assures that our pursuit of peace as his children will not be in vain.

Paul is not finished. In Ephesians 4:24–32 he fleshes out in more specific ways what "making every effort to keep the unity" looks like. He focuses on our relational dynamics. Let us carefully consider this section.

We typically tend to focus on the series of explicit behaviors and attitudes that Paul either condemns or commends in verses 25–32. What is often missed is that Paul has deliberately framed his call to make peace in terms of *sonship*. Paul begins by telling us to "put on the new self, created to be *like God* in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:24). This language has strong allusions to Genesis 1:27. Words and phrases like "new self" (literally "man"), "created," and "to be like God" echo the events and original purposes of God at creation when he made humans in his own image and likeness to be his children. 6 By this allusion to creation, Paul shows that redemption is re-creation.

God re-creates us in his own image, not after the image of Adam, the first man, but after Christ, the second man, or the last Adam. The new self (literally "man") of whom Paul speaks here (Eph. 4:24) is none other than Jesus Christ. This new man that we are to put on, says Paul, is "created to be like God" (v. 24). In the subsequent verses (Eph. 4:25–5:2), he defines and develops for us what it means "to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (v. 24). Specifically, he contrasts the attitudes and behaviors of the "old man" with the attitudes and behaviors indicative of the "new man" in Christ.

Though it initially appears in these verses (Eph. 4:24–5:2) that this new man idea applies to us as individuals, Peter T. O'Brien reminds us that it "has both corporate and individual connotations." Early in Paul's letter the new man describes the new family of God consisting of Jews and Gentiles united by faith in Christ (Eph. 2:15). Christ is the covenant head of this family, God's household. Christ is the cornerstone and capstone of God's new temple (Eph. 2:19–20).

Both the individual and corporate connotations are necessary for Paul's call to peace since he urges each of us not only to put on the new man (in other words, Christ) but also to conduct ourselves as *members* of one body

(Eph. 4:25), treating each other with kindness, compassion, and forgiveness (v. 32).

From this corporate perspective of the "new man," we can better see that Paul's list of sins and expressions of righteousness (Eph. 4:25–5:2) are *relational*. The behaviors condemned are *relational sins*—sins that divide us and give rise to conflict and dissension within the church. Paul lists these as lying to one another (v. 25), getting angry at each other (vv. 26–27), stealing from one another (v. 28), and speaking in ways that hurt one another (v. 29). Finally, in verse 31 he adds in rapid sequence, "bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice."

Likewise, the behaviors Paul commends can best be described as *relational righteousness*. First he calls us to "speak truthfully to [our] neighbor" (v. 25), and he roots this command in our fundamental relationship as members of the one body of Christ.

Next, he calls us to replace stealing with the attitudes and actions that provide for the needs of others (v. 28). In verse 29 he says that our speaking is to "benefit" and edify others. Finally, in verse 32 Paul calls the church to "be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other." 10

Ephesians 5:1–2 is the summary and conclusion of the passage we have been studying. These concluding verses return to the theme of our new creation, serving as a thematic inclusion to what we heard in Ephesians 4:24. Paul's own summary of his litany of ethical commands in 4:25–32 is a call to imitate God because of our *likeness* to him, because we are God's *children*. Here the sonship theme is made explicit: "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ Jesus loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:1–2).

To imitate God is to imitate Christ. And the very possibility that we can imitate God and Christ is because through Christ and in Christ, we have become the children of God. Jesus himself unites these realities of *likeness* to God and sonship and love by embodying them. Jesus, then, becomes the basis, motive, and model for our own attitudes and actions as the sons and daughters of God.

What then, according to Paul, does it mean to act as children of God? It means to act as peacemakers. For Paul, to be an adopted child of God, to be like God, is to be one who makes every effort to pursue peace in the household of God. We might even think of Ephesians 4:24–5:2 as Paul's

own exposition of Jesus's beatitude in Matthew 5:9 where Christ says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." To be a son or daughter of God is to be a peacemaker.

When disciples of Jesus pursue peacemaking, we reflect most what it means to be the sons and daughters of God. For like our heavenly Father and his glorious Son, we glory in being compassionate, merciful, and forgiving toward our enemies.

The Family of God as the Context for Peacemaking

The theme of God as Father and his people as his children obviously is developed more extensively in the New Testament than in the Old Testament. 11 The difference is not between God as hard taskmaster in the Old and loving Father in the New. There is only one God and one Father, the same yesterday, today, and forever. The contrast is not theological but redemptive-historical. The difference between Old and New, as Packer so eloquently describes, is that God's self-revelation and redemption reaches its watershed in the New Testament in the coming of God's Son— Jesus Christ. 12

Jesus is the unique Son of God. He is the true, obedient Son of God. He models for us what life as a child of God is—gentle, humble, merciful, and righteous. And he promotes in us a new consciousness of God as Father, teaching us to pray, "Our Father . . ." (Matt. 6:9).

Since the doctrine of sonship is so significant to the Bible's theology, it should not surprise us to find that it impresses itself everywhere upon the Bible's ecclesiology. If God is our Father through Jesus Christ his Son, then our relationship with one another is more than that of fellow disciples. We are more than colleagues at the same institution of learning. Our relationship, as Jesus and the apostles teach us, is familial.

We are likely to miss this dominant image of the church in Scripture, however, if we narrow our field of inquiry simply to words like *family* or *household* used to designate the church. But when we register the semantic domain of familial language, we discover a rich array of images depicting the church and our relationships within as a family (see Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Peter 4:17; possibly Heb. 3:5–6).13

For example, whenever God is called Father, by implication we are in view as his children, his sons and daughters. Again, when Jesus and the apostles address us as brothers and sisters, they are implicitly acknowledging us as members of God's family. Other terms and phrases that imply the reality of family life are those that relate to coming into the family—such as *adoption*, being *born*, and being *born again*. In addition, there are words that describe our future hope in light of who we are within God's family—such as *heirs*, *inherit*, and *inheritance*. When we consider all these words and phrases, we find that familial language is clearly a potent and pervasive description of God's church.

For this reason, Robert Banks argues that "the comparison of the Christian community with a 'family' must be regarded as the most significant metaphorical usage of all." He adds, "More than any of the other images utilized by Paul, it reveals the essence of his thinking about community." 14 Paul S. Minear likewise argues, "Finally, this cluster of images—father, household, sons, brothers—constituted perhaps the climactic articulation of that new fellowship in faith whose bonds were as strong as the power of the cross." 15 Consequently, though it is not the only image of the church, the church as family is a dominant one that we neglect at great cost. In light of its significance, let us examine four key texts about the church as family and its relationship to conflict.

1 Timothy

Paul makes explicit the purpose of his first letter to Timothy in chapter 3, verse 15. There he tells Timothy that he wants him to know how God's people ought to conduct themselves. And he specifically describes God's people not as in the *church* but as in *God's household*: "If I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth."

While *household* is a rare designation for the church, 16 we find that the image of the church as family shapes much of Paul's counsel to Timothy. Paul thinks of Timothy as more than just a member of his staff. Early in the letter, he affectionately calls Timothy his "son" (1 Tim. 1:2, 18). Hence, we ought to think of Paul's counsel to Timothy as *fatherly* counsel. As a father

disciplines and trains his sons (Heb. 12:4–7), so Paul disciplines and trains Timothy.

The family character of the church is also evident in Paul's subsequent teaching on the character and qualification of overseers and deacons. These are men called to provide order and government to the church. In light of this calling, Paul's expectation of both elders and deacons is that they prove themselves as *fathers*. He requires them to manage well their own *families* as a qualification for managing the *family of God*. Implied is that pastors and church leaders are to rule as fathers.

Moreover, of all the members of a household, the father is to be the chief peacemaker. Paul makes this requirement clear when he defines the character of a prospective elder (or pastor) as one who must "not [be] violent but gentle, not quarrelsome" (1 Tim. 3:3). In contrast, later in the same letter Paul characterizes the false teacher as one who is given to quarrel and conflict: "[He] is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions" (1 Tim. 6:4). False teachers are not true fathers of God's children.

Paul expresses the same expectation again in 2 Timothy 2:24–26 in which he instructs Timothy to be a peacemaker:

And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

Do we see the implications of Paul's instruction for our calling? As pastors and church leaders, we ought to be people who are knowledgeable in the principles and practices of biblical peacemaking. Second Timothy 2:24–26 is speaking to us. God calls us to be kind to everyone, able to teach, and not resentful toward those who oppose us.

As fathers of God's family, we will be opposed. We will be opposed by other church leaders, our wives, and our children, as well as by the members of our church. Yet in the midst of it all, we are to conduct our lives as true fathers, patterned after our heavenly Father, not given to quarreling and fighting but to reconciling—compassionate and gracious,

slow to anger, abounding in love, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin.

Returning to 1 Timothy, let us consider Paul's brief but revealing description of how we as church leaders are to interact with those in our congregation: "Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your *father*. Treat younger men as *brothers*, older women as *mothers*, and younger women as *sisters*, with absolute purity" (1 Tim. 5:1–2). Here is a summary of all the members of the church, and all are described in terms of family. Paul instructs Timothy to view his relationships within the household of God in terms of these familial relationships.

Likewise, we as pastors and other church leaders are not to think of our people merely as members but as fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters. I find Paul's last admonition about how we are to treat younger women particularly relevant in light of the present sexual scandals that plague the pastorate. Paul directs us to think of the younger women as sisters, and accordingly, to treat them with absolute purity.

As those in a position of authority, we pastors are tempted to abuse our position of trust in order to inflate our pride or satisfy our sinful desires—even at the expense of our flock. We can begin to put such sin to death by regarding the members of our church as brothers, fathers, mothers, and sisters.

Many of the conflicts we have with our people are the result of our failure to see them as family members. There is a direct correspondence between how we reduce them to mere people filling the pews and our lack of true table fellowship with them. We are even guilty of rushing into formal censure because we see our members more as nameless numbers than as our father, mother, brother, or sister. Again, we can begin to seek genuine peace when we learn to regard our people as our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Matthew 5

If the church is a family with God as our Father, and if we are sisters and brothers of one another, then our conflicts with one another are *family* conflicts. Not without reason, then, Scripture employs the term *brother* in some of the most inflammatory situations we face to remind us of the

egregious character of sinful conflicts. It is as if the Lord or the apostles were questioning, "You are in conflict *with whom? Your brother?* How can that be?"

Let us turn to Matthew 5:22–24, where Jesus exposits the sixth commandment prohibiting murder. Indicative of Jesus's teaching on the commandments is that he directs our attention from the overt and extreme acts prohibited by the commandment (in this case murder) to the more covert and "normal" attitudes that generate murder—anger and hatred:

But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his *brother* will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his *brother*, "Raca," is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your *brother* has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your *brother*; then come and offer your gift.

Matthew 5:22–24

It is important to note that four times Jesus describes the "other party" to our conflict as our "brother." Jesus's teaching is primarily directed to the Christian community. This observation is not to dismiss the relevance that the commandment has for unbelievers but simply to set forth the principle that "judgment . . . begin[s] with the family of God" (1 Peter 4:17).

More significantly, Jesus repeatedly reminds the disciple in conflict that his relationships with others in the church are distinctively family relationships. As such, when they are unreconciled, they incur all the greater judgment. According to Matthew 5:23–24, an unreconciled conflict with a brother is reason to stop worshiping the *Father*. If *sons and daughters* are to worship their *Father* rightly, they must first put down their gift at their *Father*'s altar and go and be reconciled to their *brother*. How you treat your brother is emblematic of your relationship to your Father.

One way we seek to implement this principle in our church is by guarding the Lord's Table. When we celebrate the Lord's Table, we encourage any Christians who are refusing to be reconciled with their brother or sister to withhold themselves from partaking of the Lord's Supper and, instead, to go immediately after church to their brother or sister and seek to be reconciled. Over the years I have had several members in our

church share how they have heeded this instruction. They were willing to abstain from the Lord's Supper until making a good faith attempt at reconciliation because they understood the great significance Christ places on unity within family relations.

Matthew 18

Matthew 18:15–19 is another classic passage on conflict resolution. Again, we overlook too easily Christ's *intentional* use of familial language. If we are to be reminded that we are brothers and sisters in Christ, it is especially in the midst of our conflicts. Instead, too often we reduce this passage to a set of mechanical steps and proceed to punish another with little regard that the offending party is a sibling in the family of God. Yet Jesus sets his guidelines for discipline in the contextual framework of the *fatherly love and concern* seen throughout the entire chapter. His focus is not simply on someone sinning and being confronted but on how to restore our wayward *brother* in *the context of the Father's family*.

The chapter opens with this theme in view when Jesus sets before his disciples a child and tells us that the Father's little children are the greatest in his kingdom (Matt. 18:1–4). Notice here how the Scriptures again weave God's roles as Father and King. The two images must not be separated.

In verses 5–9 of Matthew 18, Jesus warns those who would cause one of the Father's little ones to sin. Then in verses 10–14 the Father is likened to a shepherd who cares for each individual sheep. The passage concludes with assurance of his fatherly care: "[The] Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (Matt. 18:14).

In Matthew 18:15–20 *brother* and *father* language opens and closes the text. In verse 15 the sins addressed are sins of brother against brother. In verses 19–20 Jesus instructs us in the exercise of discipline by promising the Father's blessing and wisdom.

This family theme continues in Peter's subsequent discussion with Christ, when he asks the Lord how often he should forgive his *brother*. Jesus answers with a parable and then concludes with reference again to his Father, issuing a threat to those who do not take forgiveness seriously: "In his anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my *heavenly Father* will treat

each of you unless you forgive your *brother* from your heart" (Matt. 18:34–35).17

For many people, the severity of the Father's punishment of the unforgiving one appears to be inconsistent with the many great evidences elsewhere of his bounteous mercy and forgiveness. But Jesus sees no such inconsistency because he truly knows his Father. God the Father punishes failure to show mercy and to forgive not despite his character but because of his character—because he is the Father of all mercy and forgiveness.

Matthew 18 makes it evident, then, that in teaching about church relationships, Jesus sets our conflicts in the framework of family relationships—relationships with our brothers and sisters. The one who sins against us is our brother. The one to whom we are to go is our brother. The one we are to seek to win and restore is our brother. And all these peacemaking efforts fall under the blessing, wisdom, strength, and imitation of our heavenly Father.

Peacemaking is not of secondary significance in the family of God. Peacemaking defines the character of God our Father, and it must define the character of his sons and daughters. It must be the mark of his family.

1 Corinthians 6

The final major passage on conflict resolution in Scripture is 1 Corinthians 6:1–8, where Paul addresses the matter of taking our disputes before civil courts. He is deeply distressed about the church's poor witness before a watching world—just as church leaders today ought to be troubled about the church's misconduct in conflict before unbelievers.

Specifically, Paul chides, "If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it *before the ungodly* for judgment instead of before the saints? . . . But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this *in front of unbelievers*!" (1 Cor. 6:1, 6). Paul sounds a note of shock when he accuses us of cheating and wronging one another. Yet he says more than that we wrong "another." Paul explicitly reminds us in verses 6 and 8 that the "other" we wrong is our "brother." "But instead, one *brother* goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers! . . . Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your *brothers*" (1 Cor. 6:6–8).

Paul's point is clear. We are family—God's family. The issues at hand are not about you or me but about "us," the family of God. And our conflicts are not to be flaunted before the world; they are to be kept within the family. Keeping family matters confidential should serve as one of the chief incentives for peacemaking. 18

Applying Sonship to Our Peacemaking

A recovery of the theology of sonship to peacemaking has very concrete application for the actual practice of peacemaking. Let me share just two practical effects of sonship in relation to people's perception, orientation, and motivation in peacemaking.

First, sonship *reshapes people's perceptions of the "other" person* in conflict. Anger, hatred, bitterness, envy, selfish desires, and vain ambition not only lead us into conflict, but they also pervert and distort our perception of people in conflict. This distortion is evident in many ways. We turn people into impersonal objects, treating them like tools. Rather than viewing them as people with whom we are "in relationship," we see them as instruments to advance our agendas and gratify our desires. Once used, we discard them.

When we treat people like objects, it is easier to demean them with our words. Jesus points out this very dynamic in Matthew 5:22, where he warns against allowing our anger to give way to abusive speech. In conflict, rather than referring to the other person as "brother," we call him "*Raca*" or "fool." Jesus himself was the object of this type of abuse when, in response to his casting out a demon, the Pharisees accused him of working through the power of Beelzebub (the devil, Matt. 12:22–24).

An even more subtle way we demean people is by referring to them in one-dimensional language that diminishes their status as brother or sister. We drop personal names like "Mike" or "Linda" and speak instead of "him," "her," "them," "parties," "defendants," "plaintiffs," "members," and so on.

A good example of this type of language comes earlier in biblical revelation. When God catches Adam in his sin, one can hear the disdainful tone of his reply when he indirectly accuses God, saying, "the woman you put here with me" (Gen. 3:12). Similarly, in a passage where the word

brother is used frequently to highlight the egregious nature of Cain's murder, Cain excuses himself of responsibility by deriding his relationship to Abel: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9). Here as spoken by Cain, the word brother is not a word of affection but of contempt.

Another way we demean is by the tendency to demonize those with whom we are in conflict. How quickly the other person becomes our enemy, our opponent. How quickly we impute evil and malicious motives to those who differ from us or who disapprove of our actions. We hastily assign them a place at the "devil's camp," all the while setting up our own camp, training for "us versus them" warfare. Recognizing this dynamic of demeaning that is so prevalent in conflict, we as peacemaking pastors must seek to recover the language of family, helping the persons involved in conflict identify who they really are—brothers and sisters in Christ.

Second, sonship motivates people in conflict by reorienting their focus toward God and away from themselves. Conflict tends to polarize our relationships and contract our field of vision to the mere horizontal frame of reference. We see only "the other side" and are blind to our God—the blessed Trinity. We reduce the parties in a conflict to "us versus them" or "me against her." People in conflict lose sight that there is a third party to their conflict—God. They forget that he is near and powerful and that he is not only their Father but also their King. He is the Father who lovingly disciplines his sons and the King who subdues the hard-hearted. Pastors equipped with a robust theology of sonship will seek to reorient the eyes of the persons in conflict. Pastors will remind the parties that they are not alone, that whatever obstacle may present itself to them, God can supply their every need to be reconciled to their brother.

Scripture's own methodology to motivate the saints to make peace is demonstrated by its frequent use of sonship language. Moreover, as we have seen, interconnected with the reality that God is our Father is the aweinspiring quality that God is our King, the King of kings! As Father-King, God is mighty to make peace and powerful to change hearts, able to bring all persons and situations under his mighty fatherly rule—including our own unbelief! Of course, the greatest motivation to lift the eyes of the downcast, the despairing, the conflicted, is the gospel itself, which tells us that our heavenly Father loves us and gave his Son for us and sends his Spirit into our hearts crying, "Abba, Father." As John Owen asked, "If the love of a father will not make a child delight in him, what will?" 19

In brief, when we are lost in the fog of conflict, we can regain a clear perspective, the right direction, and heartfelt motivation through recovering the biblical theology of sonship. And by recovering sonship, we can return to a vital vision of the church as the family of God—a family that "make[s] every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).

The Christian church lacks credibility in its witness to Christ when it displays to the world its impotence in resolving conflicts. How can we claim that the gospel is God's power for the salvation of everyone when we so often fail to live by its saving power, proving ourselves incapable of getting along? How can we claim God is King over all when we, his sons and daughters, refuse to make peace like our Father, doubting his kingly power to change hearts?

One chief way to recover our witness is to rediscover God's creative and redemptive purpose for us as his sons and daughters and for ourselves as a family of brothers and sisters. We represent God best as our Father when we act as his children—trusting him for power and wisdom and obeying him as peacemakers.

Of all God's people, it should be the pastors of God's family who practice peacemaking the most. What greater joy is there but to teach our people (our brothers and sisters in Christ) to be peacemakers after the likeness of their heavenly Father? And what might the world say when it sees us truly glorifying God as his sons and daughters by manifesting our Father's mercy, compassion, and love toward one another? This challenge is unique to us as church leaders, and by God's grace, we will embrace it.

$\frac{\underline{6}}{\underline{\text{Confessing Our S}_{\text{INS TO}}}}$

People in conflict are easily blinded by the sinful attitudes and actions that obstruct their vision. Unable to see things as they really are, they feel justified in what they say and do to one another. It is no wonder that instead of seeking reconciliation, the blind keep fighting, blaming the other, and hurling accusations.

Dealing with this type of self-perpetuating conflict involves far more than following the how to's of peacemaking. As wise peacemakers, if we hope to bring lasting resolution to difficult conflicts, we must start by stepping back to look at the big picture, which is exactly what we have done in the first few chapters of this book. We began by trying to better understand who we are as people in conflict— people who, instead of keeping Christ and the cross front and center, succumb to unbelief and fall into sinful patterns of response because of the sinful desires ruling in our hearts (chapters 1–3). We went on to consider who God is as Lord over conflict—a God whose glory is manifest most as a reconciling God and whose peacemaking attributes are most readily displayed in his fatherly care and kingly rule over us (chapters 4–5). Having laid that foundation, in the remaining chapters we will focus on the practice of peacemaking— the "nuts and bolts" of peacemaking.

On second thought, "nuts and bolts" is a poor way to describe what really takes place. Peacemaking is not about people fixing people like a repair worker might fix an appliance. Peacemaking is more like surgery—eye surgery. Pastors are called to the subtle skill and delicate practice of helping our brothers and sisters remove the planks from their eyes, enabling them to see their need to confess their own sin and grant forgiveness. For if we are ever to witness true reconciliation, the peacemaking process must begin with confession.

The seam of reconciliation is sewn through the process of confession and forgiveness. If the bond is weak here, the reconciliation that takes place will be vulnerable to subsequent tearing and rupture. Thus as church leaders, we

must be experienced in the theology and practice of confession and forgiveness. We will explore the nature of biblical confession in this chapter and then we look more closely at biblical forgiveness in chapter 7.

Guarding from False Confession

James instructs us to confess our sins to one another (James 5:16). I have witnessed lengthy conflicts dissipate like the morning mist through a single, heartfelt confession of sin. As in my experience, most Christian mediators will tell you that the turning point of a mediation comes when one party begins to sincerely repent.

Unfortunately though, the confession that pours forth from people's lips is often stillborn. It is dead. Think about biblical characters such as Pharaoh, Balaam, Achan, Saul, and Judas, who all confessed, "I have sinned." Yet their confession later proved to be halfhearted, false, stillborn, dead. Who of us has not made a confession such as theirs or witnessed this type of confession from those we have counseled? 1

There are two ways we can keep those in conflict from making a false confession. First, we must help our people come to true repentance by truly grasping and embracing God's mercy offered to us in Christ, and second, we must help them distinguish between regret and real repentance.

Apprehending God's Mercy in Christ

The Westminster Catechism provides a clear definition of true repentance. Asking, "What is repentance unto life?" it answers, "Repentance unto life is a saving grace [Acts 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:26], whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin [Acts 2:37–38], and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ [Joel 2:12; Jer. 3:22], does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God [Jer. 31:18–19; Ezek. 36:31], with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience [2 Cor. 7:11; Isa. 1:16–17]."2

As we can see, true repentance is a saving *grace*. And the source of all saving graces is God. God is the giver of the grace of repentance. Repentance is not something one can produce by resolution or by working oneself into an emotional state of grief. Therefore, we cannot force people

in conflict to repent, confess their sin, and make amends. But we can (and must) call them to confess their sin with the hope that God will grant them a repentant heart.

The catechism goes on to tell us that a repentant heart is the result of a sinner apprehending the mercy of God in Christ. True repentance is grasping the mercy of God in Christ by faith, setting a person free and making him or her willing to repent truly and lastingly.

Both Saul and David confess, "I have sinned," but David's prayer of repentance reveals the difference between their two confessions— David throws himself upon the mercy of God. He prays, "Have *mercy* on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions" (Ps. 51:1). What drives David to repent truly and lastingly is an apprehension of God's abundant mercy.

Stillborn confessions of sin are at heart godless confessions of sin. As a peacemaking pastor, I have erred at times by calling people to confess their sins to one another without adequately turning them first to God and his mercy. Consequently, their confessions were made in their own strength, apprehending their own self-righteousness. Their confession of sin became a subtle and deceitful form of works-righteousness: "I'm sorry—now get off my back." On the other hand, I have found it a great joy to hear people making heartfelt confessions when they have come to truly understand God's mercy in Christ. These people demonstrate the contrite and broken spirit that God says is better than sacrifice and which he finds most pleasing.

Distinguishing between Regret and Repentance

The second way to guard conflicted people from making false confession is to help them distinguish between regret and real repentance. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul, the apostolic peacemaker, writes: "For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Cor. 7:9–10). Here Paul addresses the difference between regret ("worldly sorrow") and true repentance (the result of "godly sorrow"). What is this difference? Regret and repentance differ from each other in at least three ways: with respect to

God and self, with respect to sin and self, and with respect to others and self.

God and Self. Regret is a result of fearing man, whereas repentance is the fruit of fearing God. Fear of man is a snare, says Solomon (see Prov. 29:25), and one of the ways it snares us is by fostering in us a sense of regret. We regret that others have found out about us and that we have been exposed. In response, we run from God and attempt to cover and protect ourselves from the penetrating gaze of others, just as Adam ran from God and hid himself in the garden. Once we feel adequately "covered," instead of seeing our sin for what it is, we rush to win people's sympathy for the "injustice" done to us, and we garner their support for our side of the story, for our righteousness in the dispute.

Repentance, on the other hand, runs first to God. It throws itself before God and upon his mercy, even as David casts himself on the Lord, pleading, "Have mercy on me, *O God*, according to your unfailing love; according to *your* great compassion blot out my transgressions" (Ps. 51:1).

We know the grace of repentance has been given to a person if he draws closer to God and embraces his mercy in Christ. In other words, a person who truly confesses his sin to his brother makes much of the atonement of Christ for him. He knows the penalty of his sin has been paid for by Christ, and thus the guilt of his sin can no longer condemn him. Rather, clothed in Christ's righteousness, he is free to approach the throne of grace to receive mercy.

In contrast, regret seeks its own atonement. In an effort to ease a guilty conscience and to repair whatever damage has been done to our image, regret pursues a number of creative options. For example, instead of truly confessing sin, regret compels a person to offer substitute sacrifices. I knew one missionary who, instead of repenting for his sin and making restitution for a debt he owed, assuaged his conscience by pointing to all his missionary labors in helping the poor. Only when this dynamic was pointed out to him, did he begin to see the subtle lie he had been telling himself all along—sacrifice is better than obedience!

Real repentance receives the sacrifice that pleases God the most—the sacrifice of his Son. And just like David, repentance says, "You do not delight in sacrifice. . . . The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart" (Ps. 51:16–17). Furthermore, repentance realizes that at heart sin is self-satisfied. Thus repentance seeks to shift the object of a

person's satisfaction from sin to God. Like David, it cries, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation" (Ps. 51:12). Truly repentant people are those who have a serious joy about God and the things of God. They make much of God. They fear, love, trust, and obey him, and their delight is in God. Such affections and devotion are the sign of true repentance.

Sin and Self. Regret and repentance also differ with respect to sin and self. Whereas regret sorrows over not being as great as one thought, repentance sees oneself as one really is. For example, regret bemoans, "I can't believe I did that," but repentance confesses, "I can believe it, and that is only the tip of the iceberg."

Though regret is saddened by sin, it does not repent, nor does it see the need to do so. It only resolves not to sin again, saying, "I can't believe I did that. I am not really that kind of person. I won't do that again. It was just a little lapse because I was under stress. It is not as if I sin all the time." Repentance, conversely, grieves over the sinfulness of sin. Understanding sin's gripping nature, repentance cries with Paul, "What a wretched man *I am!*" (Rom. 7:24).

Regret laments over the fruit of sin, whereas repentance sorrows over both the fruit and root of sin. Thus when David cries, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5), repentance pleads, "Create in me a pure *heart*, O God" (v. 10). True repentance repents of the root of sin—the sin in our hearts—not just the outward manifestation of our sin.

While regret feels sorry for sins of commission, repentance is sorry for both sins of commission and omission. In fact, repentance repents for even our best acts of righteousness, for it knows that in God's eyes our righteousness is but filthy rags.

Others and Self. Finally, regret and repentance differ with respect to others and oneself. Regret or worldly sorrow leads either to self-righteousness or self-condemnation. When we beat ourselves up, we also beat others up. We resent others when they wrong us, and we are quick to take offense and point out their faults.

Repentance, on the other hand, leads to Christ's righteousness. We rejoice that we are not condemned. We glory in Christ's perfect obedience and love, and soon, like Christ, we too mourn over the sins of others and seek to help them be reconciled to God. In this spirit, David implores, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation. . . . Then I will teach transgressors

your ways, and sinners will turn back to you" (Ps. 51:12–13). True repentance makes a person an evangelist, a reconciler, a true brother or sister in the Lord who helps other brothers and sisters when they sin.

Whereas regret either makes us despise others in their sin or entices us to join them, repentance compels us to restore others. Repentance causes a person to share, "I too am a sinner like you. Let me show you the good way that leads to God and life." Likewise, regret moves a person away from the people of God, but repentance restores one to true fellowship with God's people.

True Confession

As pastors and church leaders, our desire is that our people confess their sins to one another and that their confessions are real like David's and not false like Saul's. Thus in the midst of conflict, we must teach afresh the nature of true repentance. We must work and pray that through the preaching of the gospel, our people could apprehend God's mercy in Christ and be able to distinguish between regret and real repentance, ultimately knowing the grace of true repentance. Yet even then our work will not be finished. If our people are to make true confessions of their sin, we must help them remove the plank from their eye.

Getting the Planks out of Our Own Eyes

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us that before we can call another to account, we must first call ourselves to account: "How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matt. 7:4–5). Jesus implies that sin blinds. Conflicts confuse. Specks look like planks and planks like specks. As pastor and peacemaker you must learn to detect the blinding effects of sin. The people in conflict whom you counsel will be blind to the ways they may have contributed to, been the occasion for, or exacerbated a conflict.

For example, in conflict we have a tendency to garner support from others for our "just" cause. We surround ourselves with "yes" people who agree with our take and telling of the story. Furthermore, we tend to magnify the faults of others, turning specks into planks, all the while diminishing our own offenses, reducing planks into specks. Even worse, we do not think about our own culpability. Rather, our thoughts become consumed with the other person. That is why Jesus commands us first to get the plank out of *our own* eye.

Getting the planks out of our eyes involves two key steps. The first is recognizing and confessing to God the sinful attitudes that have driven our sinful words and actions. Second, we must confess our sins to our brother. This step involves understanding what makes for a good and godly confession. Let us look first at confessing our sinful attitudes.

Confessing Our Sinful Attitudes

Attitudes drive actions. My anger drives the reckless way I accuse you. My fears convince me to ignore your requests to "get together to talk about this." My anxiety pushes me to take control, to coerce, or to flee.

Attitudes are also windows to the idols of our heart. Our fears, anger, and anxiety reveal the gods we trust, serve, and worship in place of the true God. For example, if we fear how someone might respond to us, it is probably because we are putting our hope in people's approval rather than trusting in God and seeking his approval. Since our sinful attitudes reveal this deeper disorder of worship, true confession of sin to a brother or sister requires us to first confess our sin to God.

Philippians 4:2–9 provides great help in this matter. Throughout his letter, Paul implies the presence of fragile or even fractured relationships in the church at Philippi. In the second chapter Paul calls the Philippians to unity, telling them to be "like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (Phil. 2:2). He warns them against the sinful attitude of self-ambition and vain conceit or pride (v. 3). Consequently, he calls them to humility, to look out for the interests of others (v. 4). And he anchors his entire exhortation in the willing self-abasement of Jesus Christ, who being in very nature God, became a servant obedient to death on a cross (vv. 5–8).

In light of the gospel story, Paul commands them, "Do everything without complaining or arguing" (Phil. 2:14). Clearly, pressures without and

within are weakening their bonds, and some, like Euodia and Syntyche, are openly at odds with one another. Their conflict has gone public.

The context makes it evident, then, that Philippians 4:2–9 is not an addon of pious advice but a final call for the church to align itself with God's purposes. Repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation are needed. Consequently, Paul admonishes, "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord" (v. 2).

Paul's counsel does not stop there, however. What happens between Euodia and Syntyche affects the whole family, the entire community. A weakness or fracture in one relationship is concern for all. So in verse 3 Paul calls the entire church to assist these women in resolving their dispute. Confession and forgiveness often take more than two people struggling to resolve their differences. Reconciliation takes the body of Christ. So Paul adds, "Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side."

Paul's concerns about the conflict brewing in verses 2–3 does not end here. Instead, he directs the entire church Godward. Knowing how conflict blinds people to God, Paul sets their hopes on God in the midst of their conflict. In doing so, he highlights several attitudes that reveal their idols, and he gives them hope in the Lord who repairs hearts, reconciles relationships, and makes people to be at peace:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable— if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4:4–9

People in conflict often have little room in their thoughts for God (see Ps. 10:4). We may use his name, but we use it in vain. This tendency to leave

God out is evident in the frequent sense of despair we feel in conflict. We despair in the possibility of the other person ever changing ("They just don't get it"). We despair in ourselves ("That is just the way I am"). And we are especially prone to give up on God. That is why Paul's counsel focuses on our relationship with God. Look at the imperatives: "Rejoice in the *Lord*." "The *Lord* is near." "Present your requests to *God*." And look again at the promises: "And the peace of *God*... will guard your hearts and your minds." "And the *God* of peace will be with you" (Phil. 4:4–7, 9).

Euodia and Syntyche will confess their sins one to the other and grant forgiveness only when they both set their hearts and eyes on the Lord—the Lord who gave his life for them, is with them, and promises them peace. In other words, the true work of peacemaking must begin with brothers and sisters worshiping the Peacemaker.

To a conflicted and helpless people, to the despairing, anxious, and angry Philippians, Paul preaches *practical* worship—that is, worship of God in light of this present and concrete conflict. He pauses them in their warring and turns their hearts toward God. He says in effect, "Get your eyes off yourselves and onto God. Do not curse this conflict but consecrate it to God. Consider who he is and what he has done for you and your brother. God is in this conflict, he is sovereign over it, and he will rule and reign through it. It is God who will reconcile and change us. That great truth is a reason to rejoice and not despair."

Thus it is not strange that Paul's initial commandment to people in conflict is for them to "rejoice in the Lord" (Phil. 4:4). This command is not just a general call to praise God but a specific call to praise the chief and central work of God—the Lord Jesus. "Rejoice in the Lord" is a reminder of the gospel of grace—of Christ's atoning and reconciling work. We have God's peace and his promise of peace because we have been justified by his blood. Our blindness to sin and unwillingness to forgive reveal more than a failure to think of God. They reveal our failure to remember our own offenses against God and his amazing grace and acquittal of our sin.

When offended by another, we forget God's kindness, tolerance, and patience toward us. We forget the ten thousand talents of debt he has canceled (see Matt. 18:22–35). "Rejoice in the Lord" is Paul's code to help us remember and thank the Lord for his grace of reconciliation. Philippians 4:4 is Paul's hyperlink to Matthew 18:22–35. There, in response to Peter's question about how to respond to his brother who sins against him, Jesus

tells the gospel story. That is, Jesus takes Peter vertical. Over and against the one-hundred-denarii offense of our brother, Jesus points out our tenthousand-talent offense against God. And yet, he reminds us, God our Master forgives us.

One way to help people see their blindness to God's reconciling work and Word is by way of a drawing. While they are telling me about their conflict, I draw two circles representing them and the other party. Then I retell their story to make sure I have heard them accurately, pointing to their circle and then to the circle of the other party with whom they are in conflict. Finally, I ask, "Have I understood you well? Do I have all the facts?" When they are satisfied that I do, I then draw a big question mark over the two circles and ask, "What's missing?" Usually they are stumped. They think they have told the whole story.

At that point I turn to Philippians 4:2–3 and, using the two circles, I talk about Euodia and Syntyche. Back and forth the pen goes, and I ask again, "Who's missing? Paul has yet to speak of whom?" Eventually their eyes light up. They see their story in a new way. God is missing! At that point, I show them how Paul does not omit God but directs the Philippians to God in verses 4–9.

Paul's call for us to rejoice in the Lord has a final component. "Rejoice in *the Lord*" is a call to realign our attitude and agenda with God's. The Lord's agenda must be our agenda. When we begin to reorient our focus on the Lord and his agenda, we begin to see that this conflict is not an accident but an assignment from God, and that the Lord's agenda is a redemptive and reconciling agenda.

Paul goes on in verses 5–6 to apply theology to the sinful attitudes of the heart. These are the attitudes that reveal our *godlessness* in conflict. In verse 5 Paul says, "Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near." Again, this counsel appears cryptic and unrelated to the call for Euodia and Syntyche to be reconciled—until we think about what conflict begets. Conflict breeds callousness. Offenses make us furious. In the midst of conflict, we are prone to become irritated and resentful toward others. We become quick to speak, slow to listen, and quick to anger, wielding our tongues like reckless swords and running roughshod over people. No wonder Paul counsels those in conflict to be gentle.

But he does more. Paul attaches a reason—a *Godward* reason: "Let your gentleness be evident to all. *The Lord is near*" (Phil. 4:5). This declaration

is both a promise and a warning. It holds promise for us who need the grace of self-control: God is present to help—he has not forsaken us, and his grace is sufficient for us. Yet it warns us who are too proud to exercise self-control: The Lord is present and near. His holy eye is upon us to see if we turn to him for help. Let us then act with reverence toward God and gentleness toward one another.

If conflict breeds callousness, it also engenders anxiety. Thus Paul tells us next to put off our anxiety and replace it with prayerful trust of God: "Do not be anxious . . . but . . . by prayer . . . present your requests to God" (Phil. 4:6). Whatever Euodia and Syntyche were fighting about, it is not difficult to imagine them struggling with anxiety, worry, and fear. In conflict, our hearts are filled with fear about the consequences we expect to face or about the time it will cost to seek resolution. Furthermore, when someone brings a charge against us, we fear being found out, exposed, and publicly embarrassed. As gossip inevitably abounds, we fear that our reputation will be blighted and our name sullied. We even fear a lawsuit.

It is evident, then, how anxiety and fear can become strong gods, and sadly, our hearts will too readily cower at their threats and surrender to their rule. Rather than responding to conflict in a *principled* manner, we follow the fears it incites. We deny the problem, ignore the problem, build barriers to protect ourselves, or respond aggressively.

Rarely do we humble ourselves before God and take him our petitions, which is precisely what Paul directs us to do. He instructs the church to put off anxiety by replacing it with prayer and thanksgiving. Anxiety must be taken to God, and our conflict must be put in the perspective of all that God has done and is doing in our lives.

When we cast our anxieties on the Lord, Paul promises, God's peace will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Notice how this promise supports the imperative, how grace secures law. We can pray because our God is a prayer-hearing God who gives the grace of peace to his anxious children.

Finally, charges Paul, "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable . . . think about such things" (Phil. 4:8). Conflict causes us to lose perspective and see things myopically. The object of offense looms large on our horizon. That is why Paul bids us to turn our thinking to that which is noble, true, and good. He is not bidding us to put on rose-colored glasses nor to dismiss the wrong

done to us. Rather, he is cautioning us not to allow a particular offense to poison our relationship with the other person. When we get tunnel vision, we see only the other person's offense against us. This perspective leads to further uncharitable thinking and blinds us to all the good the other person has done. So Paul is urging us to see things as they really are.

I remember a late night when I sat alone in my living room, stewing even as I read my Bible! My wife had wronged me earlier that day, and as time passed, it had grown into a mountain of offense. Slowly God's Word began to break through my stony heart with the message of his grace and forgiveness for me. As that happened, my wife's offense was put into proper perspective. I realized that the speck of her sin had become a plank in my eye, blocking from my vision the last twenty-five years of her love, affection, and service to me, my children, and others. God's Word of grace convicted me of my sin. I had not only sinned against my wife but against God. I broke down and confessed my sin to God. I held firm to his promise of forgiveness. I then ran to the bedroom where she was sleeping to wake her and confess my sins.

Just as in my case, only the gospel can give new sight—first to see God anew and then to see our brother or sister in the right perspective. As peacemaking pastors, we are called to help restore eyesight by bringing the corrective lens of the gospel to bear on our people's distorted vision of themselves in conflict. We must work to get our people *to see the Lord* in all his glory, wisdom, power, goodness, justice, mercy, and truth as it bears upon their conflict. By the Spirit and through the Word, we can help open people's blind eyes to see sinful attitudes of anger, anxiety, and fear that blind them to both God and their brother.

Confessing Our Sins to Another

Once we have helped someone identify and confess their sinful attitudes to God, we can then help them make a good confession to the other party. Too often we as church leaders assume that our people know what a good confession is. That assumption is perhaps too charitable. I have witnessed too many times how poor confessions have actually aggravated the sense of offense that already troubles the offended. Ironically, the confessor too often subverts the very intent of his or her confession by using an

accusatory tone of voice or making a halfhearted appeal. At the same time, the very ones who are asked to forgive are often made to feel like they are to blame. As James says, "This should not be" (James 3:10)!

I have found Ken Sande's "Seven *A*'s of Confession" to be an extremely helpful, practical guide for teaching my people how to make a clear confession. 4 I will elaborate briefly on each of these *A*'s with my own slight modifications, subsuming "acknowledge the hurt" under "admit specifically," 5 and adding "allow time" as a last *A*.

1. Address Everyone Involved. The first way people weaken their confession of sin is by failing to address everyone involved in the conflict. The first person we must address when we confess our sin is God. As David says in Psalm 51:4, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done evil in your sight." Though David has sinned against Bathsheba and ultimately confesses to her, he understands that his most grievous sin is against God. Sadly, over my years of pastoring and counseling, when I have asked people in conflict, "Have you confessed your sin to God?" most have admitted that they have not. Conflict truly blinds us to God. Nevertheless, this admission opens the door for pastors to perform the very work to which God has called us—leading people back to God. It also gives opportunity for us to announce to them God's great promises of forgiveness and cleansing (see 1 John 1:8–9). He forgives us even when we confess our failures in confessing.

Sin affects not only the person we have directly offended but also the others indirectly involved in our conflict. A while back, I asked my wife if she would like to go for an evening walk. I was feeling pretty good about myself taking the initiative and desiring her friendship. She said yes and started getting ready. I waited. When she wanted to take the dog, I conceded, but then she could not find the leash. When she found one, it was broken, and then she found another, but the lock was missing. And as she went to find another, I exploded. "Fine. You go with the dog. I've got work to do." And I stomped off to my office to write a sermon—probably on peacemaking!

The next day, while memorizing Galatians 5:22 on the fruit of the Spirit, God broke through my stony heart and showed me my sin—my impatience. He showed me that not only had I been impatient but also unloving, unkind, harsh, intemperate, and so on. That night at the dinner table, I knew I had to confess my sin not only to my wife but also to my daughters, for they had

all heard and seen my actions. Our sins may be against a specific person, but they often involve others. Therefore, we need to address everyone involved: God, the person we offended, and the others watching.

2. *Avoid* If, But, *and* Maybe. A second way people weaken and often destroy a confession is when they add specific qualifiers to their confessions. A good example is a statement made by a United States senator a few years ago in which he confessed to making sexual advances on certain members of his female staff. Look for the key words that ruin this confession: "If any of my comments or actions have indeed been unwelcome, or if I have conducted myself in any way that has caused any individual discomfort or embarrassment, for that I am sincerely sorry. My intentions were never to pressure, to offend, nor to make anyone feel uncomfortable, and I truly regret if that has occurred with anyone either on or off my staff." 6

The key words are *if* and *my intentions*. *If*, *but*, and *maybe* are confession stoppers. They effectively erase every word confessed before and after them. Moreover, they turn a confession into a subtle form of blame-shifting and often shift the blame to the one from whom we are seeking forgiveness!

The same can be said for "it wasn't my intention." While it may be true that we did not intend to harm anyone by the action we took, "it was never my intention" does more to exonerate ourselves than to admit the real wrong we have done and the offense we have committed. The second *A* of a good confession, then, is to "avoid" such qualifiers as these.

One way to test the strength of our confession is to say it to God. What would God think if we told him, "Lord, please forgive me by the blood of your Son, Jesus Christ, but know that *it wasn't my intention* to sin," or "*If only* I wasn't under so much stress, I would not have sinned against you"? Hearing how these qualified comments minimize our sin before the Lord, we can better understand the inadequacy of our confession. We can see how such a confession diminishes not only our guilt but also Christ's atonement.

3. Admit Specifically. In teaching people to make a strong confession, we must instruct them to admit their sin specifically. When people confess their sin by simply saying, "I'm sorry," or "I'm sorry if I hurt you," it begs the question, "Sorry about what?" What is missing is specificity. Consequently, generic confessions make it appear to the offended party that the offender does not understand the gravity of his or her offense.

It is important to note here that *admit specifically* does not suggest that forgiveness depends upon our admitting each and every sin in some medieval confessional sense. Rather, by confessing honestly and specifically, we are informing the party from whom we seek forgiveness that we recognize the gravity of our offense and thus how we have sinned against and hurt him or her.

Generic confessions also show little evidence that the offender is truly repentant for his or her sin. Note again the senator's statement given above. He states that he is apologizing for what he has done, but his apology is undone by his earlier comment, "I will not make an issue of any specific allegation." How can he be "sincerely sorry" when he is not convinced of how he has specifically offended? Moreover, rather than focusing on himself and the gravity of his offense, he focuses on how it affected the offended: "If I have conducted myself in any way that has caused *any individual discomfort or embarrassment*. . . . My intentions were never *to pressure*, *to offend*, *nor to make anyone feel uncomfortable*" (italics added). In other words, his way of saying "I'm sorry I hurt you" misrepresents his offense, making it appear merely to be the cause for *the offended party's emotional disturbance* instead of acknowledging it for what it really is—a transgression of God's moral law. Thus his confession fails to demonstrate any evidence of true repentance.

One way I help people in conflict make specific confessions is by presenting them with two examples. I will say, "Of these two, tell me what sounds to you like a sincere confession." Then I will confess, "I'm sorry you got so upset." After that, I will make a sincere, specific confession: "John, I want you to know that as I've thought about what I did to you, I've come to realize that I wronged you. I publicly embarrassed you that night at the party. It was wrong, and I know it must have hurt deeply." Inevitably, they see the marked difference between the two types of confession, and they are more likely to hear how they can sincerely confess their own sin to the party they have offended.

Another way to encourage people to be specific when they confess is to remind them that Christ died for their specific sins, not just generic sins. For example, Matthew 5:22 teaches us, by way of implication, that Christ died for the specific, reckless words we speak to each other, like "Raca" and "fool." Christ forgives not only generic sinfulness but also our specific sins. 7

Finally, as when I instruct people to avoid qualifiers, I will test the strength of their confession by challenging them to say it directly to God. For example, in a mediation caucus, when people are willing and ready to confess their sin, I will review for them the Seven *A*'s of Confession. Then I have them rehearse for me what they plan to say. Inevitably, the confession uses several "I'm sorry's" and lacks anything specific or concrete. So I ask them if this is how they would confess their sin to God. Then I "play it back for them," as if the confession were being made to the Lord. Usually when they hear it through "God's ears," they begin to realize how weak and inadequate it sounds.

4. Accept the Consequences. In a good confession, a person acknowledges that he or she must accept the consequences of his or her actions. Many people have trouble forgiving because the one confessing fails to accept the consequences for his or her offensive behavior. Theologically we might say that a person makes such a confession because he or she divorces God's justification (God forgives) from his sanctification (God's call for us to produce the fruit of repentance), embracing the former while rejecting the latter.

I was involved in a case in which a church treasurer came into the pastor's study saying she needed to confess a sin. She had been embezzling money from the church for several months and had stolen a substantial sum. After confessing her sin, the pastor assured her of God's forgiveness. As she got up to leave, he told her that she would have to approach the church leaders to see how she could make restitution. At that, the woman became angry: "But I confessed my sin. And you said I was forgiven." She did confess her sin, but she was not willing to accept the consequences of her behavior.

In this kind of case, we as peacemaking pastors must help the confessor think through and accept the potential consequences of his or her behavior, thus embracing not only God's forgiveness but also his call to repentance. This process leads naturally to the fifth feature of a good confession.

5. *Alter Your Behavior*. A good confession will also include one's commitment, *by God's grace*, to *alter* one's behavior. If our goal is to grow to be like Christ, then confession is not enough. We need to alter our behavior. We must put our confession into action by replacing sinful habits with holy ones, just as Paul urges in Ephesians 4:31–32: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of

malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Furthermore, we will prove the sincerity of our confession if we are earnest about changing our behavior. This desire to change is made tangibly evident when the offender lists in his or her confession the actions he or she will take to remedy the offense. One of the great benefits of sharing these plans is that the offended person is more likely to forgive.

6. Ask Forgiveness. A good confession not only admits sin but it also asks forgiveness. In twenty-five years of pastoring, I could count on both hands the times I have heard, "Will you please forgive me?" Most of the time when confessing, people assume that the request for forgiveness is assumed in their apology. So I commonly hear, "I'm sorry," and in response, the offended party grants forgiveness.

But this assumption is not correct. A good confession needs to include a real request. We need to ask the person we have offended, hurt, or harmed, "Will you please forgive me?" because by asking, we recognize and acknowledge that we do not and cannot forgive ourselves. We must ask another to forgive us since our offense was against another, and that person alone (besides God) can release us from the debt of our sin against him or her by forgiving us.

7. Allow Time. The final step in making a strong confession is to allow time for the offended party to forgive. Assuming the person we are counseling has made a good confession of sin, it remains incumbent upon us as peacemaking pastors to help the one confessing a sin to distinguish the difference between *God's* immediate response to a confession made and the various reasons why the one who has been offended may be slow to respond.

When we ask God to forgive our sins, he forgives us immediately, for he has promised to forgive us when we ask. Thus the apostle John encourages his people, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). As a pastor or spiritual leader, it will be important to point out to those you counsel this and other passages of Scripture that assure us of God's forgiveness. 8

While God forgives us immediately, humans do not. Sometimes people are unwilling or slow to forgive. This response itself can become a cause for a subsequent conflict. Their slowness to forgive may cause the person who confesses his sins to think he remains unforgiven. If the confessor's

conscience is tender, he could continue to be troubled by this lack of forgiveness and develop feelings of bitterness and dejection.

In this kind of case, it is important for us to help the confessor allow the offended person time. We must teach him that the offended party needs time to pray about the confession and work through his or her feelings. Moreover, we must help the confessor separate his responsibilities from those of the people who are called upon to forgive. For example, if I confess my sin to a brother, I cannot and should not be the one who demands he forgive me. Before God, it is my responsibility to confess my sin, while it is his responsibility to forgive.

The counsel to allow time is not a counsel to do nothing. Rather, we can encourage the confessor to use this waiting period to reflect upon the seriousness of his sin and how ruinous it is, while at the same time contemplating how great Christ's atoning work is on his behalf so that God can forgive the confessor. We also ought to encourage the confessor to pray for the offended person who is struggling to forgive him. The confessor can reflect upon his own slowness to forgive as well as the many things that could tempt the person who was offended not to forgive, which will thus rob the person of his or her joy in the gospel. Thus the confessor can pray that the offended person would be set free from bitterness, thoughts of revenge, and the grief of loss. Taking these steps is a proactive way to *allow time*.

In summary, these Seven *A*'s of Confession are a helpful guide to walking a person through his or her confession of sin to another. They should not be taken woodenly, of course, as if the only true confession requires each *A* to be fulfilled. Instead, think of these Seven *A*'s as a checklist or a rough outline for constructing a meaningful confession of sin.

Reflections on Confession

Every time we are in conflict we need to consider the part we have played and confess it. How might I have offended the other person? What was my tone of voice? What should I have said or done that I have left undone? What have I said or done that I should not have done? Every conflict we are in is an opportunity for self-examination. Like David, we need to pray, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my

anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23–24). I am always amazed at this cry of David. A few years back our nation's capital was in turmoil over the appointment of an independent counsel to investigate our president for violations of the law and misconduct. Here in Psalm 139 David calls for God's Spirit to be that independent counsel, asking him not to search mere documents but to search his heart. This call demonstrates true biblical leadership, as David recognizes that confession of sin must begin with me, with us, with pastors. Let us lead by teaching and by example.

A wonderful story of the power of God's present grace for those who confess their sin recently came to my attention at Peacemaker Ministries. A particular denomination requested Peacemaker Ministries to present a peacemaking seminar prior to their national assembly. Afterward Peacemaker Ministries received a letter from one of the denominational leaders. He shared that having heard Christ's call to be peacemakers, business at the national assembly could not continue as usual. Instead, the assembly experienced a true peacemaking spirit of brotherly love. As the denominational leader relayed,

The committee working on the revision of the covenant of membership voluntarily took back their work, saying there were new issues that need to be addressed in the light of the peacemaker conference. The committee working on the book of discipline reported and engaged the Assembly in some discussion of viewpoints, but the work itself was returned . . . to look harder at the issues raised by the call to be peacemakers. A hard-working committee dealt with a conflict that had simmered for twenty-five years. They reported on the last day and gave a balanced report and urged all parties to ask, "What have I done to contribute to the present conflict?" Following the report, there was prayer and the singing of a psalm. During the singing one of the men on one side of the issue was observed with his arm around a man on the opposite side of the issue with tears coming down his face. 9

We should not see such a spirit of peacemaking as abnormal but rather as the norm for God's leaders. What glory was given to Christ that day and to his church when an entire denomination of ministers began to get the planks out of their own eyes, confessed their sins, and granted one another forgiveness! May such confession become a regular practice in the lives of our families, churches, and denominations so that the world will see the gospel of grace in how we live.

Almighty and most merciful Father;

We have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep.
We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.
We have offended against your holy laws.

We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us.

But you, O Lord, have mercy on us, miserable offenders.

Spare, O God, those who confess their faults.

Restore, O Lord, those who are penitent;

According to your promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of your holy name. Amen. <u>10</u>

7 Granting True Forgiveness

As we saw in chapter 6, Christ calls us as spiritual leaders in the church to go and gently restore our erring brothers and sisters in the hope that they will confess their sin to God and to the one they have offended. Yet as part of this process, one question we often fail to ask of the offended is, "Can you, should you, overlook this offense?" In this messy world that constantly kicks up sin, should we look at every offense as a call to "go and be reconciled," or does God allow us to overlook and tolerate some sin?

I use the word *tolerate* in its Latin sense—"to bear or endure a burden." To tolerate another's sin is not in any way to diminish the absolute moral commandments God demands. Rather, overlooking sin requires the judgment of sin. To tolerate sin is to make the previous judgment that this person has indeed done moral wrong. So tolerating or overlooking sin can only be rightfully done by first assessing sin as what it is—an offense against God and neighbor.

When Should We Overlook an Offense?

Overlooking or tolerating sin in another requires more than an initial judgment of sin. It also requires the judgment of forbearance— the judgment that at this time I will bear with, endure, and be long-suffering toward another person's particular sinful attitude or action. We make this judgment recognizing that sanctification is incremental change, and thus we wait upon the Lord to change that person in his own perfect timing.

This response to sin should not be new to us, for God himself tolerates sinners. Though every sin deserves God's wrath, he does not strike us down immediately for every offense. Instead, he exercises "kindness, tolerance and patience" toward us in the hope that we will turn from sin and turn to him (Rom. 2:4). It is because God is long-suffering toward us that we are

called to be long-suffering toward others—to be patient despite their sin (Eph. 4:2).

Because God is the first parent, we have his parenting model to follow. As a wise parent, God does not shake his fist at his children for every infraction of his rules. Instead, he chooses to work on the fundamental and essential areas where we need to improve. We, too, in our Father's footsteps, seek to *tolerate* our children's minor sins in order to help them focus on their perpetual, gripping sins—those that lead to life-dominating habits.

It is no wonder, then, that God encourages us at times to *overlook* an offense: "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to *overlook* an offense" (Prov. 19:11). "A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man *overlooks* an insult" (Prov. 12:16). Overlooking an offense is a righteous expression of a peacemaker if the offense is not serious. Of course, the word *serious* begs the question, "How do we determine whether an offense is serious, and when do we as pastors counsel people to overlook the offense?" And there are other related questions: "How can we distinguish the real virtue and grace of overlooking from the counterfeit of *denial* or *flight*?" And when are we true peacemakers and not simply peacefakers?

Since these questions require specific information about the case in question, we cannot lay down absolute rules. Rather, we must seek greater wisdom. As I mentioned earlier, overlooking requires two kinds of judgment, which I referred to as the judgment of sin and the judgment of forbearance. These two judgments work in tandem with one another. First, the judgment of sin wisely recognizes and identifies sin. Then, the judgment of forbearance seeks to discern the nature, quality, and character of a specific sin as it differs from other sins.

The Westminster Larger Catechism, a historical document and subordinate standard of many Presbyterian and Congregational churches, provides an exceptionally helpful aid for guiding us in this distinction. In question 150 it asks, "Are all transgressions of the law of God equally heinous in themselves, and in the sight of God?" It answers this question with a big "No," saying in effect that while all sins are heinous or wicked in God's sight and in our own, not all sins are *equally* heinous. God considers some sins more heinous than others. This qualification is warranted by

Scripture, which grades sin and provides several general criteria for deeming one sin as more heinous than another. 1

What, then, makes some sins more heinous? What criteria should we use when considering whether to overlook an offense? The catechism answers with four general guides to discerning which sins are more heinous than others.

Who Sinned?

First, we should ask the question: who sinned? Sins are more heinous according to the status or privilege of the person who offends another. A sin is less likely to be overlooked if committed by one who is highly respected and who "knows better," rather than by one who "does not know better" (see 2 Sam. 12:14; 1 Kings 11:4, 9; Rom. 2:17–24; 1 Cor. 5:1–13). An offense committed by a Christian who has confessed Christ and knows the Ten Commandments is more heinous than the same offense done by a non-Christian who neither has God's written Word nor has been taught it.

In the same way, a person in authority is more liable than his or her subordinates (see 2 Sam. 12:7–9; Jer. 5:4–5; Ezek. 8:11–12; Rom. 2:17–24). When the offense is committed by a parent, teacher, or civic authority, there is more likelihood that the sin should not be overlooked. This principle is true for those of us in church office as well. Rather than adopting a "good boys club" mentality that overlooks the offenses and failings of our fellow leaders, we should be the ones who welcome criticism most. 2 We should be the first to recognize the serious nature of our sin, and if it is of a public nature, we must take the opportunity to lead our people by example through our own public confession.

Against Whom?

Second, we deem sins more heinous than others according to the status of the person we offend. Here we must ask: against whom was the offense made? Is this sin one that openly dishonors or mocks God? In one sense, all offenses dishonor God, but particular offenses publicly defame his name or cause. For example, the merchants selling their goods in the temple were openly and blatantly sinning against God. Thus Jesus storms in to clean the

temple, crying out, "You have made [my father's house] 'a den of robbers'" (Luke 19:46).

Furthermore, we must ask: do the offended occupy positions of authority? To sin against an elder or pastor is more serious than to sin against a peer. Jude describes the wicked by saying that they reject authority and speak evil of celestial beings (Jude 1:8; literally, "glories"). Isaiah depicts the moral decay of Israel by foreseeing youth rising up against the old and the base against the honorable (Isa. 3:5). Paul instructs Timothy that he is to warn the church not even to entertain an accusation against an elder unless the allegation is brought by two witnesses (1 Tim. 5:19; cf. Deut. 19:15).

It is also more grievous to sin against someone in close relationship with us, like a spouse or a brother in Christ, than against a stranger or an unbeliever (1 Cor. 6:8). Paul tells the Corinthian church to let God judge the sins of the world, but he reprimands them for neglecting to judge those of the household of God. The member committing incest with his stepmother is to be convicted and cast out if unrepentant (1 Cor. 5:1–13), because a little yeast leavens the whole loaf. In other words, his impurity is to be taken very seriously because it can potentially corrupt his fellow believers in the body.

Finally, a sin is more heinous if committed against weaker persons. Jesus pronounces a "woe" on anyone who causes one of his little ones to sin (Matt. 18:6–9). While this warning is surely for the wicked, it also has application for Christ's disciples. The apostle Paul argues for something similar when he speaks of offending our weaker brothers (Romans 14; 1 Cor. 8:11–12). He expresses shock over certain Corinthian believers who, having a strong conscience with respect to Christian liberties, are tempting those of a weaker conscience by their prideful actions.

What Is the Nature of the Offense?

Third, some sins are more grievous than others according to their nature and quality. In some cases, the motive driving sin differs. Was the money stolen from the church as a result of physical want or out of a desire to indulge a pleasure (Prov. 6:30–32)? In other cases, the willfulness of the sin must be considered. Was it done in ignorance or in knowledge of the

express letter of the law? Solomon's sin of marrying many foreign wives is said to be egregious because God had revealed himself to Solomon and had explicitly commanded him not to sin in this way (1 Kings 11:9–10).

Sin is more heinous if it is acted upon rather than just expressed in attitudes or words. Even though we might overlook the sin of a person who yells angrily at his spouse, we would be obligated to respond if he physically struck her. Or whereas we might overlook a broken commitment to meet for dinner, we would not overlook a broken promise involving weighty legal or financial considerations.

For example, we had a case in which a young woman sought to rent from another member of our church. She promised tenancy and paid her rent money. But after four days, the young woman moved back in with her parents without giving due notice to her landlord. The landlord approached me for counsel, wondering if she should pursue mediation or arbitration or simply *overlook* the offense. In this case, we decided the offense should not be overlooked because the *nature* of the offense warranted that we call the offending party to repent, to make reparation, and to carefully consider the serious nature of keeping legal and financial promises even when it hurts (see Josh. 9:18–20; Ps. 15:4; Matt. 5:33–37).

There are many other qualities of offenses that the catechism gives for us to consider. Is the offense done in light of greater knowledge, after mercy has been shown, or after private or public censure? Is it committed publicly, deliberately, maliciously, or frequently? Examining these qualities can provide needed guidance for determining whether we should overlook an offense.

What Were the Circumstances?

Finally, we can assess the seriousness of a sin and judge whether it is wise to overlook by considering the time and place of the offense. Was it done on the Lord's Day or during worship? Was it publicized in such a way that by overlooking it, we would allow the church to become polluted?

For example, a member of my church had an altercation with another brother in a local restaurant over a business deal. Threatening words were exchanged and all this done very publicly. Hearing of the incident secondhand, I inquired about the matter. The member of my church thought

he could overlook the offense of the other. Yet, this was a matter that could not be overlooked but had to be dealt with—and was through mediation.

In summary, there are four general criteria we can use for assessing whether a sin should be overlooked or addressed: Who sinned? Against whom was the sin committed? What is the nature of the offense? And what were the circumstances of the offense? As leaders in the church, we must carefully apply these criteria to specific instances in the lives of our people so we may counsel them wisely as to how to respond.

Of course, we must also apply them to our own lives. An incident to which all four criteria apply involves my own sin. One time while telling a story about myself, I took the Lord's name in vain. Should those listening have overlooked this offense? In this case, several factors revealed that it could not be overlooked. First, I, the offending party, was the pastor. Second, the people I offended (besides the Lord) were my flock, which included the weaker ones and children who have a difficult time controlling their speech. Third, the nature of the offense was that I used the Lord's name as a mere interjection, cheapening God's holy name. And finally, the time and place of the offense was on the Lord's Day, during the preaching of God's Word!

Two Diagnostic Questions

There are two diagnostic questions, not covered by the catechism, that can assist us in determining whether to overlook an offense. First, is the offense a persistent sin, a habitual sin, or the result of bondage to a particular sin? Paul tells the Galatian churches to restore those who are *caught* in sin (Gal. 6:1). Siede's comments about *prolambano*, the Greek word for "caught," are helpful here: "In Gal. 6:1 Paul encourages clemency toward a sinner, if he is 'overtaken in any trespass.' Here *prolemphthe* suggests that the 'sinner has been forcibly laid hold of by sin before he was able to reflect." In other words, he is trapped in sin and cannot free himself. Thus we are called to act in mercy by trying to free him.

I once saw a young man in my congregation at a local bookstore. He was by the magazine stand, and as I came from behind him, I could tell that he was looking at pornographic material. While I could have slipped out unnoticed, I knew that as his pastor, the most loving thing to do was to

approach him. Because of the explicit nature of the material, I could not overlook this offense. Pornography is crippling and life-dominating. Truly, he was "caught" in this sin. So I gently went up to him and put my hand on his shoulder. When he turned around to see who it was, his face turned bright red with shame and guilt. As ashamed as he was, this encounter was the beginning of his repentance, lots of counseling, and a greater knowledge of God's mercy and power to save sexual addicts.

The second diagnostic question asks: is the offense hindering my relationship? A good way to determine whether a sin can be overlooked is to assess any changes in your relationship with the person who offended you. I give myself the "two-day test": *if* I find myself frequently reflecting upon my brother's or sister's sin for more than two days, *if* it is there when I rise and when I go to sleep, *if* I think about it while I am showering and when I am driving, and *if* I am reticent to greet this fellow believer at church, *then* I cannot overlook the offense. I must address the matter with the person.

It is evident from these questions that how we respond to another's offense is a wisdom call. In some cases, Scripture indicates it is best to overlook the offense—to bear the burden of another's sin. In other situations, it is most charitable to go to the other person with the hope of freeing our brother or sister from the sin that has entangled him or her.

True Forgiveness Is Not...

Even though there are times when we determine it most charitable to overlook an offense, sometimes this judgment of charity is really just a cover for unforgiveness. And there are many other subtle forms that unforgiveness takes. If we are to detect them, we must understand the nature and character of biblical forgiveness.

There is no better place to begin our study of forgiveness than to recall the astounding things the Bible says about it. Forgiveness is one of the chief acts by which God expresses the greatness of his glory (Exod. 34:7), and it is the sine qua non of Christ's atonement (Heb. 9:22). The only article in the Lord's Prayer to which Jesus adds explanation is the one about forgiveness (Matt. 6:12–14). Forgiveness is the ground of the new covenant (Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:12) and the very thing for which Jesus and Stephen prayed for their

persecutors (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60). It is the promise attached to the call to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38). When Jesus explains why he must pour out his life unto death, he says his purpose is forgiveness; forgiveness is signified in the giving of his cup (Matt. 26:28). And Jesus calls us to declare the grand message of forgiveness to the world (Luke 24:46–47).

Do you see a glimmer of the glory of true forgiveness? Do your people see this glory? As peacemaking pastors, we need to recover for our people the glory, significance, and practical relevance of biblical forgiveness. Just as they need our guidance when confessing to a brother or sister in the church, so they need our help in learning how to grant true forgiveness. In any type of peacemaking process, such as negotiation, mediation, or church discipline, godly forgiveness must be continually taught and practiced, because it is absolutely crucial for true and lasting reconciliation between conflicted parties.

As we continually teach and reinforce to our congregation the significance of forgiveness, we must also be aware of and ready to counter the voices in our culture (and even in the evangelical subculture) speaking to them about the same issue. The *notion* of forgiveness has become more popular over the last ten to twenty years. I heard someone recently say, "To err is human, to forgive . . . trendy." Today, forgiveness is a hot topic. Even more so, forgiveness is now a legitimate topic for analysis and discussion among psychologists. 6

As good as this trend sounds, the church can hardly welcome it. The result of forgiveness becoming more fashionable has not led to greater clarification but to severe distortion of biblical forgiveness, which in turn has led to greater confusion about its true nature. It is no wonder, then, that forgiveness has its critics!

Nonetheless, God uses heresy and falsehood to compel the church to think about, articulate, and practice biblical truth more carefully and consistently. In other words, our culture's trend toward forgiveness is the church's wake-up call to guard vigilantly the biblical truth of forgiveness.

If we are to stand guard, however, we must know the errors and distortions about forgiveness that challenge us. 7 We must know what forgiveness *is not*. First, Christian forgiveness is not, as the world perceives, indulgence or appearament of the wrongdoer. And second, it is not a therapeutic form of self-help—a view that much of the church espouses

today as a result of the dominant influence of a therapeutic model. Let us examine both of these views in greater depth.

Forgiveness Is Not Indulging the Wicked

To secular ears, Christian forgiveness can appear fatalistic—a call to docility before the threat of real evil. Sadly, such accusations often apply. In our eagerness to settle disputes, we easily are tempted to settle for superficial repentance. We rush to make the offended party forgive without equally addressing the offender's real offenses—the outstanding issues of justice that remain in making restitution—and without recognizing the gravity of the offender's sin.

The effect of this process is the opposite of what we intended. We get a mere apology rather than a true confession of wrongdoing. We see the offender nodding to the idea of needing to change rather than taking concrete steps to recompense the one against whom he has sinned and alter the offender's behavior. Compound this practice over the years, and soon a settled fatalism with respect to forgiveness penetrates our hearts.

The popular press has been quick to note such fatalistic forgiveness:

- An Edmonton woman is run down on a crosswalk and killed. Eight months later, when the driver is fined \$400, the woman's daughter shakes his hand and tells him he is forgiven.
- A cabby is suddenly shot dead by two sixteen-year-old passengers. His careening cab kills a woman. The presiding judge refuses to move the trial from juvenile to adult court. The woman's husband responds, "It's okay; I don't want a stiff penalty for the 'two little boys.'"
- A young man is stabbed to death by a friend during a late-night drinking party. His mother says she has no "bad feelings" toward the killer and that "he has suffered enough."
- Mollie McLeod is sexually abused by her pastor as a young girl.
 Later, in her twenties, she goes public and writes letters to certain
 members in her congregation telling them what happened. They all
 reply that she should forgive her abuser. She instead calls on her
 denomination to revoke her pastor's ordination. The denomination
 has yet to respond.

These are not stories of true forgiveness. They are the sad resignation of people who have given up on justice and have no hope for reconciliation. They are the sorrowful movements of the soul sucked of its life by a cynical world that believes, "There is no God; there is no justice. All that happens just is." Forgiveness, which ought to be one of the greatest moral acts of humankind, is reduced to a shrug by cynical shoulders acquiescing to the dark despair of fatalism.

Over a hundred years ago, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche leveled scathing criticisms against Christian virtues, particularly forgiveness. He accused Christians of perpetrating a lie by calling weakness "virtue" and servile submission "humility" and by adorning repressed anger or cowering appearement with the name "forgiveness." 9

The charges have continued to our present day. Secular ethicists condemn the Christian teaching and practice on forgiveness. It appears to them as if we deny justice, trivialize great offenses, condemn the victim, and accommodate the wicked. Another erroneous view of forgiveness that comes from within the church is the therapeutic view of forgiveness.

Forgiveness Is Not a Therapeutic Form of Self-Help

The world's charge that Christian forgiveness is indulgence of the wicked comes in part as a result of the church's own doing. Dominant voices in evangelicalism unwittingly encourage this very criticism by treating Christian forgiveness as a form of self-help therapy. They perceive forgiveness not through the biblical lens of a Christ-centered theology of reconciliation but through the therapeutic lens of a person's psychological well-being. The therapeutic lens puts the person, not God, at center stage in reconciliation. The therapeutic lens reduces the world to the confines of the autonomous individual rather than seeing that person in the broader community of faith. Consider the following quotes that are indicative of this perception of forgiveness:

The only way to heal the pain that will not heal itself is to forgive the person who hurt you. . . . When you release the wrongdoer from the wrong, you cut a malignant tumor out of your inner life. You set a prisoner free, but you discover that the real prisoner was yourself. <u>10</u>

Christ's way was the way of giving forgiveness even before asked, and even when it was not or never would be asked for by the other. 11

In both statements, forgiveness is understood within the context of the individual rather than within the framework of a relationship between persons. In the first quote, forgiveness is envisioned as being mostly about me and not about us. It is about healing my inner psyche rather than restoring a relationship between another and myself. In the latter quote, forgiveness is merely unilateral. There is little if any aspiration to see it carried out in the actual transaction of rebuke, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Not only does the therapeutic form of forgiveness typically limit itself to the context of the individual, but it also minimizes the nature of sin. It downplays the *other*'s sin against *me*. This dynamic is not surprising, because when sin is taken out of the context of relationships, suddenly it does not seem so serious.

Look for this dynamic in the following comments about sin and forgiveness:

Forgiveness is God's invention for coming to terms with a world in which, despite their *best* intentions, people are unfair to each other and hurt each other deeply.<u>12</u>

Sometimes our personal struggles, too turbulent to contain, spill over to affect innocent bystanders. We do not mean to hurt them; they just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. 13

The therapeutic view of forgiveness, as captured in these statements, evinces a low view of sin and evil. Instead of recognizing people's total depravity, it assumes innocence and requires little claim of personal responsibility. Contrary to Isaiah, who in contrite response to his sin cries, "Woe to me! . . . I am ruined!" (Isa. 6:5), this view engenders a rather dispassionate attitude toward sin: sin happens. Sin "spills over." Victims are just unwary travelers who find themselves in "the wrong place at the wrong time."

What is disturbing is that this secular, therapeutic view of forgiveness is being integrated with, if not supplanting, the biblical view of forgiveness in the church. Many of our scholars, theologians, pastors, and counselors are

misconstruing the richness of biblical forgiveness. If *they* are confused, who can blame those who sit in the pews? Who of us has not heard such remarks as:

- "How can I forgive you when my feelings haven't changed? I'm still upset about what you did."
- "How can I forgive them? I can't forget what they did."
- "I'll forgive you, but I don't want to have anything to do with you."
- "It's okay."

As pastors, we must be aware of these common misconceptions of unforgiveness that result in its misapplication and unbiblical practice in daily life. We need not only to preach and teach about forgiveness but also to specifically and concretely apply what it really entails—what it looks like between brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Forgiveness, then, is not indifference to the wicked, nor is it a method of pacifying one's psyche. As the Christian church, we are called to demonstrate to a skeptical, watching world what forgiveness really is, and thus we must understand and embrace it ourselves. With this calling in mind, let us turn our attention to God's Word and see how Christ defines forgiveness.

Biblical Forgiveness Is...

One of Jesus's primary teachings about forgiveness can be found in Matthew 18. Though verses 21–35 explicitly address forgiveness, the first twenty verses set this passage in the context of restoration and peacemaking in the family of God and thus, by way of implication, have much to teach us about forgiveness.

Biblical Forgiveness Is Recognizing the Sinfulness of Sin

As we saw above, the world often finds Christian forgiveness as a mere placation of the wicked. In our rush to forgive, we often fail to take note of the seriousness of the sin or offense committed. To that degree, we side more with the offender and neglect the person offended.

Jesus's teaching and practice is radically different. He always takes sin seriously, as is especially evident here in Matthew 18. One of the first

things Jesus's instruction does is not promise but warn:

If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!

Matthew 18:6–7

In issuing this warning, Jesus makes an important point that must not be overlooked: sin is inevitable. As Jesus says, "Such things must come." This remark is not meant to be fatalistic, but it serves, rather, to sharpen his warning against those who perpetrate sin. Sin does not "just happen"; it is no accident. *People* sin. *People* offend. Whether intentionally or not, people —*moral* agents—commit sin. By placing such offenders under the divine "woes" ("Woe to the world . . . woe to the man through whom they come"), it is evident that Jesus considers offenders morally culpable for their offenses. The substance of these "woes" reveals the gravity of sinning against another. Christ warns in horrifyingly vivid language that it is better to have a millstone wrapped around your neck and be cast into the sea than to cause another to sin.

Often in seeking reconciliation between offender and offended, we fail to give such counsel to the offender. We may charge him or her with sin, but rarely do we help the offender see the weighty consequences of his or her sin against another. Consequently, we need to realign our counsel with the counsel of Jesus, who frequently couples his call to obedience with warnings of the consequences of sin. For example, in addressing what might be considered by some as "low-level conflict"—being unjustifiably angry and cursing another—Jesus issues severe warnings:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders *will be subject to judgment.*" But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother *will be subject to judgment*. Again, anyone who says to his brother, "Raca," is *answerable to the Sanhedrin*. But anyone who says, "You fool!" will be *in danger of the fire of hell*.

What we think is a slip of the tongue, an unfortunate outburst in a time of stress, Christ condemns by showing us that such "little sins" deserve the maximum penalty—hell.

We must not overlook the significance of Matthew 18:6–7 for understanding the nature of forgiveness. By prefacing his teaching on reconciliation and forgiveness with this warning against sin and its dire consequences, Jesus would have us neither indulge the cruel nor be indifferent to the concerns of the one offended. True forgiveness is not an excusing or ignoring of evil. Rather, biblical forgiveness—forgiving as God forgives—recognizes the grave nature of sin in all its moral depravity. In other words, forgiveness recognizes the sinfulness of sin.

Consequently, when we call a person to forgive another who has offended him or her, we are not asking the offended person to minimize the extent to which the offender is responsible for his or her sin ("Well, everyone sins") or to minimize the offense ("It was nothing"). True forgiveness is when the offended looks upon the offender and sees the offender's sin as justly deserving the wrath of God in light of God's great holiness.

Christian forgiveness, then, is granted from a position not of weakness but of true moral strength and clarity of vision. Because biblical forgiveness alone recognizes the heinousness of sin against a holy God, it alone understands the immensity of the gift given in uttering the words, "I forgive you." 14

This gift, of course, is full payment for sin, which is exactly what the gospel declares that Christ has given us! The forgiveness that is won by Christ comes at the price of *his death* for real offense, for true guilt. The very necessity of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God as the ground for forgiveness should be sufficient to answer any accusation that Christian forgiveness is merely ignoring sin, trivializing sin, or indulging the wicked. Christ has not dismissed sin; instead, he has paid its price in full.

Biblical Forgiveness Is Covenantal

Christian forgiveness not only recognizes the sinfulness of sin, but it also sees God for who he really is. In other words, true forgiveness acknowledges God as the creator of, Lord over, and giver of forgiveness, and as such, it seeks to be carried out according to his perfect design. So we must ask: what is God's design for forgiveness?

God designs forgiveness to take place within his covenant community. Even at creation, God made not only Adam but Eve. He made not only "me" but "us." We are born in a family. And our families are part of larger communities, one of which in particular is the community of faith. Here, in the community of faith, the family of God, our relationships are established upon and regulated by our union with Christ (Eph. 4:11–16). Each of us enters this community by the gospel word, signed and sealed through the gospel sacraments. Herein, in the body of Christ in union with Christ we learn that we are inextricably bound together in covenant with each other. From within that community of faith, we learn to extend forgiveness to our family and friends and even to our larger civic community. I forgive my spouse, my child, my parent, my brother, my sister, my neighbor.

Jesus reminds us of the covenant nature of these relationships in the three following passages:

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Matthew 5:23–24

If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.

Luke 17:3

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

Matthew 18:15

Notice how Jesus speaks not of forgiving the enemy, offender, or sinner but of forgiving *your brother*. Furthermore, Jesus frames his entire teaching on forgiveness in Matthew 18 in the context of the family of God (as we saw in chapter 5). For Christ, then, forgiveness primarily takes place not just within community but within the Christian community, the community of the forgiven. In other words, it takes place among those with whom we are most strongly bound in covenant.

This communitarian nature of biblical forgiveness exposes the faulty assumptions underlying the therapeutic model of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not, as this model assumes, individualistic and psychic. Forgiveness does not begin and end with the person who is forgiving, nor is its emphasis on how forgiveness can help me. Whatever benefit forgiveness may have to me personally, it is not about *me*—it is about *us*. It is about people created by God to live in relationship with him and one another. As such, we are in the depths of our identity lovers of people and restorers of broken relationships. We are indeed our brother's keeper!

Biblical Forgiveness Is Foremost about God

The covenantal, horizontal character of biblical forgiveness itself presupposes its radically vertical dimension—forgiveness is about us and God. As we saw in our study of confession, forgiveness is first and foremost about God. It is not just an ethic, as modern therapists would categorize it. Forgiveness is a theology—a theology built around God at its center.

Consider how the entirety of Scripture presents this radically Godcentered, vertical understanding of forgiveness. Who we are as forgiven people is all about who we are before God. According to the Psalms, the truly blessed man is the man *God* has forgiven ("Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit," Ps. 32:1–2). When David confesses his sins of adultery and murder, his confession and plea for forgiveness are directed first and foremost to *God*, because he recognizes that it is God whom he has offended ("Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight," Ps. 51:4). The great promise of the new covenant, the hope of humankind, is that with

the coming of the Christ, *God* will grant forgiveness once and for all ("For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more," Jer. 31:34). And it is this message of forgiveness that *God* commissions his people to proclaim to the world ("[Jesus] told them, 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem,'" Luke 24:46–47). Finally, *God's* own impulse to forgive and the pattern of forgiveness that he models to us compels us to forgive our neighbor: "Forgive *as the Lord forgave you*," exhorts Paul (Col. 3:13).

We can begin to understand why this vertical dimension of forgiveness is so important by returning to Matthew 18 and looking closely at the concluding parable. Peter's cry, "How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" (v. 21), is no simple inquiry. His question comes with anguish because he feels that forgiveness is difficult.

Christ responds, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matt. 18:22). His answer implies something far worse and yet far more wonderful. Forgiveness that begins with people is impossible. It is impossible because only those whom *God* forgives can forgive their brothers and sisters. We forgive because God has forgiven us. Forgiveness, then, is first and foremost about God because without God, there is no forgiveness.

In light of its divine nature, we cannot and must not reduce forgiveness to a therapeutic technique ready and waiting to be applied by anyone who wants to be trained. Becky Pippert illustrates this point well. As a Christian author and speaker, she tells the story of auditing a class at Harvard called Systems of Counseling. She writes,

We were looking at a case study in which the therapist, using psycho-dynamic psychotherapy, helped the patient uncover a hidden hostility toward his mother. Before the professor proceeded to the next case, I raised my hand and asked: "Let's say the patient returned a few weeks later and said, 'I'd like to get beyond my anger. I'd like to be able to love my mother and forgive her.' How does psychodynamic psychotherapy help a person with a request like this?" There was silence. Then the professor answered, "I think I would say, 'Lots of luck!' If you guys are looking for a changed heart, you're looking in the wrong department."15

This professor recognized that forgiveness cannot be generated in the classroom or the therapist's office by mere human wisdom, technique, or endeavor. It is something supernatural, something miraculous. Forgiveness is a divine gift and work. It is part and parcel of the Messiah's restoration of the cosmos.

Forgiveness not only begins first and foremost with God, but it also flows from God. In other words, forgiveness is of a divine nature and comes by divine power. Forgiveness is impossible by mere human power. Peter must learn this lesson when he aims to forgive not two or three times, but seven times. Here Peter is the epitome of the perfect man apart from grace. He strains to be better than average, but even as "better"—even as "best"—he still must put a limit on his ability to forgive.

Jesus's response reinforces what Peter is beginning to see—the vanity of forgiving in his own strength, according to his own wisdom, by his own measurements of success. Forgive your brother not seven times, commands Jesus, but times without end. (That is, "times" not in the finite sense of time but on God's eternal timetable.) Christ's command to forgive shows Peter the bankruptcy not of the weak but of the strong, not of the worst but of the best.

While Christ's response might at first appear to be a counsel of despair, he does not stop there. By telling his parable of the forgiving master, he reminds Peter (and us) of the great power of God, of his infinite mercies toward us, of his remembering our sins no more. By implication, he magnifies the greatness of God's life-changing grace by which people are forgiven, justified, regenerated, and continually indwelt with God's Spirit. In essence, Jesus is telling Peter that the same power and grace that works forgiveness in Peter's life will enable Peter to forgive others. The work of forgiveness *is possible* with man only because nothing is impossible with God. Thus Peter learns that forgiveness is first a gift before it is a command. For what God commands, he gives. 16

As peacemaking pastors, we must regularly remind our people that forgiveness is first and foremost about God. Just like Peter, they will recognize that true forgiveness will not be easy, so we must hold out for them the hope that forgiveness is possible not by way of technique nor by their own strength but by full faith in God and his forgiveness of them. Forgiveness is possible when the Holy Spirit works in our heart, directing

our faith to the person and work of Christ, for the glory of God our Father—who forgave us and adopted us as his own. Only in this redemptive context can we call our people to forgive.

Biblical Forgiveness Is a Promise

Up to this point, our study of forgiveness has shown us that biblical forgiveness recognizes the sinfulness of sin and upholds the primacy of God in the reconciliation process. But as pastors and church leaders, how are we to help our people grasp these rich concepts and translate them into a functional understanding of forgiveness? In our ministry of the Word, how do we describe the nature of forgiveness and explain what it looks like? When we counsel our people to forgive, what, in essence, are we telling them to do?

One way to answer these questions is by asking: what does it mean for God to forgive? The Westminster Larger Catechism helps us by providing the following definition of the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer ("Forgive us our debts . . ."): "We pray for ourselves and others, that God of his free grace would, through the obedience and satisfaction of Christ, apprehended and applied by faith, acquit us both from the guilt and punishment of sin, accept us in his Beloved; continue his favour and grace to us, pardon our daily failings, and fill us with peace and joy, in giving us daily more and more assurance of forgiveness." 17 This definition sets forth two principle actions God takes when he forgives: God releases us from debt (acquits us) and he blesses us (accepts us). Then it adds that he "continue[s] his favour and grace to us," implying that both God's release and blessing have a future focus. They both can have a view toward the future because God has promised to do both not just today, but tomorrow, and all the days following.

For our purposes, the point on which we want to focus is that both actions flow out of a promise. In other words, for God to forgive means that he *promises* to release us from a debt and to bless us.

This promise becomes more evident when we remember the terms of the new covenant. In Jeremiah 31:34, God declares, "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Here God grounds the new covenant on the better promise to forgive us. Forgiveness is defined as

God not remembering our sins. That is, the Lord *promises* not to call to mind our record of wrongs against him and use our record against us. He *promises* not to accuse us before others. He *promises* to remember our sins no more.

All that God promises to us is enfleshed in Christ. As Paul proclaims, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor. 1:20). Commenting on this verse, Calvin winsomely reminds us that "we enjoy Christ only as we embrace Christ clad in his own promises." 18 We might paraphrase that and say we enjoy Christ only as we embrace God's promise to forgive us in Christ.

The promise nature of forgiveness and reconciliation is heard in many places in Scripture. One such place is in the Aaronic blessing, a familiar passage used frequently in our liturgies (see Num. 6:24–26). Though this blessing never uses the word *forgiveness*, it exudes the character of forgiveness. Even as it presupposes an initial state of alienation, it holds out the greater hope of reconciliation. If curse is God's judgment on his people for sin, blessing is God's promise to forgive our sin and be reconciled with us.

Moreover, because this blessing is given as a benediction, it is singularly promissory in nature. Though given in the form of a prayer, the blessing is a promise. The Lord tells Moses, "So they [Aaron and his sons, the high priests] will put my name on the Israelites, and *I will bless them*" (Num. 6:27). What the high priest is commanded to pray, the Lord promises to give.

While it first might appear that this blessing is comprised of three separate and distinct blessings, a closer look will reveal that each subsequent blessing is the unveiling of the deeper and richer characteristics of one promise—like the unfolding of a flower. The first blessing is, "The Lord bless you and keep you." Here the high priest invokes God to do us good and to preserve and protect our covenant relationship with him.

The second blessing is, "The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you." The high priest calls upon the Lord to be present with us and to make his presence ("face") particularly gracious. Sin alienates us from God and others, so the high priest calls the Lord not to be far from us but to be near to us—to make his face shine on us. He prays that God will not allow our sin to hinder his relationship with us.

The third blessing is, "The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace." God promises that instead of remaining alienated, he will be reconciled to us. Where once his face was turned away in righteous anger, in wrath, now God promises to turn his face toward us—not to take a mere momentary glance, but to gaze upon us with delight, affection, and attention, and to bid us come near with his welcoming smile.

What is the result of this blessing? The concluding request is that the Lord will "give you *peace*." This is the grand word we hear announced upon our justification (Ps. 32:1; Rom. 5:1) and the word of blessing used in Paul's salutations—"grace and peace to you." In the announcement of this one word, we hear the gospel promise. God promises peace.

Fortunately, the Aaronic blessing is not meant only for the ancient Jews or confined to the Aaronic priesthood. What is found here in shadow is revealed in full in the brilliant radiance of Jesus Christ, for it is Jesus who is now our true High Priest. Aaron was a vague and imperfect type of the one to come. How much more, then, now that Jesus Christ has come, does this promise of blessing pertain to us with even greater assurance of reconciliation and God's favor! Do we remind our people of these great truths when we pronounce this benediction upon them? Do they hear this benediction as coming from the risen Christ, seated at the Father's right hand, and assuring us of his gift of reconciliation?

As pastors, one effective way to help our people grasp the nature of forgiveness is to teach them that when they forgive another, they are making promises similar to the promises God has made to us. Ken Sande summarizes the many biblical promises of forgiveness into four key promises that are simple and memorable, and thus readily transferable truths to help our people remember what they are doing when they forgive. They are four promises I can put on a three-by-five-inch card and tape to my refrigerator, lest having forgiven, I forget what I promised. The four key promises of forgiveness are

- I will not think about this incident.
- I will not bring it up and use it against you.
- I will not talk to others about this incident.
- I will not allow this incident to stand between us and hinder our personal relationship. 19

These four promises are what it means to "remember your sins no more." The memories of the other person's offenses against us are replaced

by forgiveness that is the fruit of the memory of what God has done for us (see Luke 6:27–28; Eph. 4:31–5:2; Phil. 4:8–9).

Of course, forgiving is usually not a one-time event but a process. The tense of the verb *forgive* is past imperfect. We forgive someone and then continue to forgive. We promise and then continue to keep our promises. In other words, we forgive as God has forgiven us in Christ. God justifies us once and for all. Yet as we daily go to God in prayer, asking forgiveness, he affirms his forgiveness of us, promising blessing and not curse.

Biblical Forgiveness Is Implemented in Two Stages

Recognizing forgiveness as a promise, we must now consider how it is implemented. Scripture sees forgiveness in two stages. One stage is what takes place in our hearts, and the other stage is manifest in our actions. We can call the first "dispositional forgiveness" and the second "transactional forgiveness."

Dispositional Forgiveness: Mark 11:25 is the basis for having or adopting a disposition of forgiveness. There Jesus commands, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." Here the work of forgiveness is viewed prior to any actual transaction between the offender and the offended party. Christ calls the offended person to forgive the offender from the heart prior to any actual transaction at which time the offender repents and the offended forgives.

Dispositional forgiveness asks: what is your attitude toward the person who offended you? Its context, as Jesus shows, is prayer, worship, and praise. It arises not out of your relationship with the offending party but out of your relationship with your heavenly Father. As you are considering how God has forgiven and blessed you, the image of your offender arises. And God calls you to consider the offense in terms of your own relationship with him—the one whom you offended, who sought after you and forgave you. This progression of thought and change of heart is very similar to what Jesus teaches should take place (Matt. 18:21–35). In light of the master's mercy on his indebted servant (the vertical relationship), the servant, in turn, is called to show mercy to his fellow indebted steward (the horizontal relationship).

Sometimes the appearance of dispositional forgiveness is deceiving. What some people claim to be dispositional forgiveness ("I've forgiven him in my heart") is actually an unwillingness to be reconciled, a cover for bitterness. We know that a person has little disposition to forgive if he or she will not go and show the offender his or her fault (Matt. 18:15), rebuke the one who sins against him or her (Luke 17:3–4), free the offender from bondage to a sin (Gal. 6:1), or pray for the offender.

In true dispositional forgiveness, if we are the injured party, we have an inner *readiness* to forgive and a resolve to love our enemy. We do not dwell on the offense by holding it against him, nor do we gossip to others about it. Rather, we are poised to offer the promises of forgiveness to an offender who confesses, and to release him from the debt of the offense against us. In other words, we take the initiative to do everything that can be done to be reconciled. Furthermore, in the likeness of our Lord, we are not overcome by our offender's evil, but we overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21), showing kindness, tolerance, and patience (Rom. 2:4). And we continue to speak the truth in love, in the hope that God will grant the offender repentance and lead them to confess their sin and ask our forgiveness.

Transactional Forgiveness: In dispositional forgiveness we reach out to our enemy, ever pushing toward the final step of transactional forgiveness, because transactional forgiveness completes the forgiveness process. Forgiveness can never be made in full without this final step because dispositional forgiveness is unilateral; only one person is actively pursuing forgiveness. Transactional forgiveness, conversely, is bilateral. Both the offended and the offender are involved—the offended rebuking, the offender repenting; the offender confessing, the offended granting forgiveness.

In transactional forgiveness we take specific steps toward being reconciled with the one who offends us, and he or she, in turn, responds. In Luke 17:3 Jesus instructs, "If your brother *sins*, *rebuke* him, and if he *repents*, *forgive* him." Notice the pattern he describes: sins, rebuke; repents, forgive. Likewise, in Matthew 18:15 Jesus teaches, "If your brother *sins* against you, *go and show* him his fault, just between the two of you. If he *listens* to you, you have *won* your brother *over*." Again, observe the pattern: sins, go and show; listens, won over. The bilateral nature of this transaction is clearly evident. Both parties are laboring in love. As such, forgiveness can be made in full.

These two stages of forgiveness rest upon the divine pattern. God elects to forgive us. He procures all that is needed for our forgiveness by sending his Son to make atonement for us, raising him from the dead, giving him the promised Holy Spirit and pouring out that Spirit upon his church, and sending people to call us to repent. In the process, God showers us with his kindness, tolerance, and patience. Up to this point, the whole of redemptive history is *dispositional*. Only when God grants us a new heart and enables us to confess our sin and repent do we become involved in the actual transaction of forgiveness.

Concluding Thoughts

Let us briefly summarize what we have learned about forgiveness. Biblical forgiveness recognizes the sinfulness of sin and does not settle for fatalistic appeasement. Instead, it comes with that creative and lifechanging gift that only Christ's mercy and wisdom offer. Biblical forgiveness is not a therapeutic form of self-help to cure the autonomous soul. Rather, it arises out of the recognition that we are a people bound by covenant, a covenant sealed in Christ's blood. It is a covenant that God made and by which he binds us together as his family, as his children. In light of these great truths, biblical forgiveness assumes that we can and must forgive because we are first and foremost the greatly forgiven. Biblical forgiveness is modeled upon God's own forgiveness of us in that we promise the offender not to hold his offense against him. Finally, biblical forgiveness is both dispositional and transactional. True forgiveness is the heart ready and willing to forgive as well as the anticipation of the offender's eventual confession upon which the promises of forgiveness may be conferred.

If we are wise pastors, we will not be naïve to any of these false notions about forgiveness that our culture has embraced and that have pervaded our assemblies. Rather, we will seek to expose the lies and to rebuild the ruins —to recover for our people in word and deed what it means to live a reconciling life together. As we seek to rebuild, it will be helpful to continually examine our own practices of forgiveness as well as those of our church. Thus we must ask ourselves some of the following questions:

- Do we make the four promises of forgiveness (or similar promises) when we forgive?
- Is the promissory nature of forgiveness what the world sees when it looks in at our church, or is this the kind of forgiveness our church needs to recover?
- Does our church practice forgiveness as indulgence of sin, as a form of therapy, or as true biblical forgiveness?

Moreover, we must remember that as church leaders, our call to the ministry of reconciliation in the community of the forgiven assumes an entire complex of graces. Forgiveness is not a tool or skill but a holy habit practiced in conjunction with other graces—worship, sacraments, prayer, and discipline. By these God transforms sinners into sons and sons into brothers. This forgiveness is the forgiveness Jesus wants us to practice.

Finally, as we set about restoring the glory and goodness of Christian forgiveness in the body of Christ, we must be on the lookout for opportunities to share the hope that we have. For we can be certain that the magnetic power of true forgiveness will draw a broken world to Christ.

Looking Outforthe Interests of Others

Confession and forgiveness are foundational to biblical reconciliation. Without them, our resolution of conflicts that arise over material matters will achieve little more than Solomon's compromise—cutting the baby in half. Of course, Solomon's compromise is meant to point out the very thing for which we have been arguing—conflicts are about *persons* before they are about *problems*. Conflicts concern God, you, and me before they concern the problems of how to allocate funds in the church budget, whom to hire, what program to eliminate, which curriculum to select, and the other myriad problems that face us each day.

There remain, nonetheless, problems to be resolved. So we must consider how to move from the reconciliation of persons to the resolution of the problems. How do we resolve our differences in a way that does not settle for a simple Solomon's compromise?

The last two chapters have been devoted to addressing personal, heart issues in conflict, or *peacemaking and persons*. In this chapter we will shift our focus toward *peacemaking and problems* in an effort to address the material issues in conflict. Wise peacemaking pastors anticipate that conflicts will erupt over these types of issues, and thus they will seek to preclude them by training their leaders and people to negotiate in a way that fulfills one of the primary calls of the gospel—the call to look to the interests of others (Phil. 2:3–4). As pastors, we have numerous opportunities to coach our people to negotiate in a wise, biblically consistent manner. Let me give you an example.

Debbie and Jean asked me to talk with them about a very important matter. I knew by the tone of their voices that this matter was serious. As we met, they sat across my desk expressing their concerns and fears. The youth council was hotly disputing the curriculum they were to use.

Debbie and Jean were two godly and able leaders who had oversight of the elementary age girls' youth ministry. Things had gone well for the past two years, but with this year's new crop of teachers, things began to unravel. Some of the teachers were offended by some of the material being taught. Some thought it was not age-appropriate, while others thought it was appropriate for any age! Then there were those who were ambivalent about the whole matter. Suspicions began to rise and uncharitable judgments started to surface, inciting people to question the orthodoxy and spiritual maturity of the opposing sides. Some just wanted peace. Finally, Debbie and Jean called for a meeting of all eight teachers. When they came into my office, that meeting was just a few hours away. Looking distressed, they asked for help: "Pastor, what should we do?"

I had only one hour to give them. How could I adequately prepare them to respond to the conflict that was brewing, if not near boiling? As a peacemaker, what pastoral counsel was I to give them?

I decided that hour was best spent teaching Debbie and Jean how to look to the interests of others. In shorthand, I taught them about negotiation. I did not settle the dispute for them; instead, I *coached* them by walking them through the negotiation process. 1

To negotiate is to confer with another person over a matter of common interest in order to reach agreement. Negotiation differs from mere discussion of personal matters in one important way. Unlike simply sitting down and discussing personal issues (such as anger, sorrow, guilt, and the like), negotiation involves a conflict in which some *thing* of substance is the object of dispute and the parties to the dispute are seeking to come to some kind of agreement. Whereas personal issues are dealt with by confession and forgiveness leading to reconciliation, substantive (or material) issues are dealt with by conference and consensus (or negotiation) leading to agreement.

An obvious example of negotiation is the purchase of a building. My own church recently negotiated with another church for the purchase of their building. The substantive issue was "the sale/purchase of the building." Both churches' representatives were responsible to their respective constituents. They could not simply walk away. An agreement of some kind had to be reached.

Not so obvious are the more mundane matters that people negotiate every day. For example, when you and your wife want to go out to eat, if she prefers Chinese and you prefer Mexican, you have an occasion for negotiation. You must eat some type of food (the substantive issue in dispute), and therefore you *must come to some substantive agreement*. It is

this added element that distinguishes negotiation from mere discussion and requires greater wisdom.

If we think of our own churches, we can see that our people negotiate about many issues great and small, including the selection of church officers, the criteria for calling a pastor, staff salary and compensation, Sunday school curriculum, the budget, use of the facilities, employment policies, youth activities, church music, and even the color of the carpet! In Debbie and Jean's case, the youth curriculum for girls was the matter in dispute.

The challenge for us all is this: are we negotiating in a manner that reflects who we are as the children of God? In other words, as we negotiate, do we recognize that the other party is a person made in God's image, possibly even a brother or sister in Christ? Are we ever mindful that God is truly sovereign, even in the negotiation process? Do we look out for the other person's legitimate interests and seek to promote his or her welfare? With these questions in mind, let us first consider three basic negotiation styles.

Basic Negotiation Styles

Three basic negotiation styles are *competitive*, *cooperative*, and *biblical*. To more fully understand biblical negotiation, we will examine a biblical style of negotiation in light of the other two styles.

Competitive Negotiation

Competitive negotiation is simply a tug-of-war in which you aggressively pursue your own interests and let others look out for themselves. It is sometimes referred to as a win-lose negotiation style or a zero-sum situation because for someone to win, the other must lose. In other words, it is largely adversarial. Its competitive approach insists, "I'll get what I want; you won't." People who always have to have the last word negotiate this way. It is also typically the approach of those who take their conflicts to court.

Competitive negotiation is what was taking place in our girls' youth council. People had already taken positions on the curriculum and had

adopted a win-lose mentality. Either they were going to get their way or the "enemy" would win.

Cooperative Negotiation

A second style of negotiation is cooperative negotiation. Cooperative negotiation is a partnership in which you deliberately seek solutions that are beneficial to everyone involved. We call this approach a win-win style of negotiation. It is the prevalent model today in secular mediation circles, as taught by Roger Fisher and William Ury of the Harvard Negotiation Project in their bestseller *Getting toYes*. While cooperative negotiation clearly borrows from *common grace* truth and helps to bring civility to conflict resolution, it remains essentially godless in terms of its basic assumptions.

For example, Fisher and Ury confess, "Getting to Yes is not a sermon on the morality of right and wrong; it is a book on how to do well in a negotiation." Here we can see that for Fisher and Ury, ethics generally considered (much less religiously determined) are divorced from the operations and mechanics of getting along with others. The result is the assumption that people can do quite well without God, his gospel, and the truth.

An additional consequence of cooperative negotiation is that people simply are taught how to sin more effectively. They learn how to get what they want in a more streamlined way. A New York professor who teaches negotiation at Syracuse University called Peacemaker Ministries and insightfully remarked that he was having difficulty teaching cooperative negotiation because he found that at best it only got people to act out of self-interest, finding the idol they could satisfy, rather than truly promoting righteousness, goodness, and justice. In other words, he recognized that in the cooperative approach, the parties ultimately conspire to help each other get what each other wants—period.

Biblical Negotiation

As Christians, we must not be satisfied simply with cooperative negotiation techniques. Rather, we need to develop a biblically based and theologically sound method of negotiation that is founded on the reality of God, his moral law, and the gospel of Christ and that is taught and practiced in the context of the Christian church. We will call this method "biblical negotiation."

What distinguishes the biblical approach from the cooperative secular style of negotiation is that the latter leaves out the Godward aspect of negotiation. Specifically, in cooperative negotiation the negotiators do not ask what is just and fair according to God's standard, nor do they address the motives of the heart in light of Scripture—confronting selfish ambition, vain conceit, and other impure motives, and urging parties to look out for the interests of others.

If Debbie and Jean had negotiated their conflict according to the cooperative approach, they could have been tempted to just "be nice." They could have returned to the youth council and put together an agreement that simply patched things up. Then the issue in dispute, the curriculum choice, would have been compromised and settled—cut up, so to speak, and handed out like Solomon's baby. Everyone's interests would have been met. But in the end these satisfied interests, if not in accord with God's interests, would have been as good as dead.

Biblical negotiation looks not only to the interests of others but also to *God's* interests by seeking to combine the truth of *God's* Word, a thirst for *God's* justice and mercy, and a hunger for *God's* wisdom. Moreover, the parties to biblical negotiation resolve to help each other get the things they need that are agreeable to God's will.

These conditions of biblical negotiation imply that there are times when one *ought not* negotiate for any reason. One such case is when Ahab asks Naboth to sell him his vineyard (1 Kings 21:1–3). Naboth rightly refuses Ahab's request because God's law forbade Naboth to sell his land (see Lev. 25:23–34). However, there are many other times when we are called to participate in biblical negotiation. For occasions such as these, God has provided us with key Scriptures to inform, guide, and govern our thinking as we seek to consider the interests of others:

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Matthew 22:39

Love . . . is not self-seeking.

1 Corinthians 13:4–5

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.

Matthew 7:12

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:3–4

Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

Matthew 10:16

Moreover, the moral law of God and the chief commandment to love ought to shape the way we negotiate with others. The moral law gives substance to what it means to do good to others and to love them. Love, in turn, calls our attention away from our own self-interests and toward the interests of others.

Understanding the Godward impetus of biblical negotiation as well as these biblical directives that govern its process is not enough. We as church leaders still need a way by which to translate these principles and truths into teachable, practical steps that our people can apply when negotiating. Perhaps the simplest way to coach our people in the negotiation process is by walking them through what Peacemaker Ministries calls the PAUSE Principle of Negotiation.

Ken Sande devised a memorable acronym for outlining the basic steps in negotiation. The acronym is PAUSE:

P = Prepare

A = Affirm relationships

U = Understand interests

S = Search for creative solutions

E = Evaluate options objectively and reasonably (according to God's standards of justice)4

PAUSE is the very process through which I coached Debbie and Jean, advising them to take these steps when they returned to the youth council to try to reach consensus about the curriculum.

The PAUSE Principle of Negotiation

To help Debbie and Jean see how the PAUSE Principle of Negotiation is applied to real life, I referred them to Daniel 1 for an example of biblical negotiation. Here we find that the Babylonians have recently taken Daniel captive, and the king's chief official selects Daniel as one of several Israelite nobles to train for service in the king's palace. Part of this process would involve eating and drinking daily portions from the king's table, which Daniel resolves not to do for fear of defiling himself.

Prepare

Think what could happen if Daniel were to pursue competitive negotiation in this situation. He could kill the chief official, or he could try to flee with his friends and escape from Babylon. But Daniel does neither. Instead, he negotiates with the chief official. While we are not told that he prepares for this negotiation, we can assume that he does. His wise proposal does not arise out of thin air; Daniel must sit down and think things through. He must *prepare* when, what, and where he will negotiate with the chief official.

In the same way, we need to teach our people to *prepare* their minds and hearts for negotiation. Scripture is replete with admonitions for us to give

thought to our ways and to plan for doing good (see Prov. 14:8, 15, 22; Isa. 32:8). Too often we speak before we think, showing no regard for the interests or needs of others. This tendency is all the more evident when we are presented with a problem such as Daniel's. Instead of quieting our hearts and minds in godly preparation, we act and speak impulsively with the intent of serving our own agenda, which only serves to exacerbate conflict.

Preparation was the first thing I addressed with Debbie and Jean. We put our heads together and developed a list of what we needed to do to prepare. Our list looked something like the following:

- 1. *Pray.* Ask the Lord to open our eyes to ways we may have contributed to the conflict.
- 2. *Get all the facts*. We should not assume we know everything.
- 3. *Identify the issues and concerns of each of the parties.* We cannot look out for their interests if we do not know what they are.
- 4. *Identify the desires of the heart*. If we elevate these desires to demands, they become idolatrous, ruling our hearts.

For example, as leaders, Debbie and Jean desired "peace"—a false peace that involved no conflict. Their initial thought was not for doing right but simply for avoiding conflict. They needed to identify this misguided desire. When they did, they realized that other women in the youth council would have a very similar desire. In fact, some women had already talked about quitting because they did not want to deal with the stress of fighting. When Debbie and Jean prepared their hearts by identifying their sinful desires, they found common ground with many of the women on a matter to which they could speak. Thus they could redirect the group to seeking God's interests—sisterly love and true, righteous peace.

Other ways in which people can prepare for negotiation include the following:

5. *Seek godly counsel*. Debbie and Jean did this when they sought my counsel as their pastor. Yet I myself was able to counsel them only because I previously had sought the counsel and training provided by Peacemaker Ministries. In a similar way, when our church sought to negotiate the purchase of another church's facility, our elders solicited the counsel of others more qualified than themselves who shared their basic convictions about biblical negotiation. They

- wanted to consider not only their own interests but also the interests of the other church.
- 6. Develop options that might be agreeable to the other party. It is easy to get myopic about the possible options that might facilitate mutual agreement over a matter in dispute. Part of preparation is beginning to admit one's blindness to other options. Debbie and Jean prepared to negotiate by resolving to admit to the group their own blindness to the other options by which the curriculum issue could be settled. When the time came for them to share, their openness encouraged the other women to think outside the box.
- 7. Anticipate the reactions and objections of the other party, and seek to preclude them by biblical and reasonable answers. One of the first things Debbie and Jean discovered as we talked was that their biggest mistake had been failing to teach the teachers! They had failed to make clear the nature of the curriculum and how it could be taught and the range of doctrinal opinions the church leaders allowed. Debbie and Jean knew these oversights were their fault, so they prepared to confess them to the teachers. Consequently, the first thing they did when they entered the negotiation was to confess their sin and ask for forgiveness. This initial step on the part of Debbie and Jean went a long way in redirecting the group's focus from attacking one another toward having each teacher examine her own contribution to exacerbating the conflict, confessing her sin, and granting each other forgiveness.

Affirm Relationships

After we discussed the steps for preparing, I spoke to Debbie and Jean about how to *affirm relationships*. Scripture calls us to love others in a particular way—as brothers and sisters in Christ. Specifically, Peter exhorts his people, "Live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, *love as brothers*, be compassionate and humble" (1 Peter 3:8). In biblical negotiation it is paramount that we affirm our relationship with our brother or sister in Christ. We negotiate less *about a product* and more *with a person*. Whether we are discussing Sunday school curriculum or the purchase of property, we are speaking to brothers and sisters and seeking

their best in Christ. We are not parties in negotiation; we are joint heirs of grace who are negotiating. It is this relationship that we must seek to protect and preserve by speaking the truth in love.

In light of this principle, I directed Debbie and Jean to Daniel 1 and asked, "How does Daniel affirm relationships?" I wanted them to see how much more they could expect God's grace than Daniel. For unlike them, Daniel faces two seemingly insurmountable obstacles to his affirming the chief official. First, the chief official is not a believer—not a brother or sister in Christ. Second, he is Daniel's superior. Debbie and Jean observed that, despite these difficulties, Daniel does affirm the relationship. Though the chief official is not a brother in covenant, Daniel, recognizing that the official is made in God's image, first applies the principle of the Golden Rule ("Do to others as you would have them do to you"). Second, Daniel avoids what the Westminster Larger Catechism calls the sins of the inferior. He shows respect for authority and understands his rightful place—in a position subordinate to that of the chief official. The text makes this dynamic evident in several ways.

First, Daniel asks the chief official *for permission* not to defile himself by eating and drinking the royal food and wine (Dan. 1:8), and he precedes his appeal by requesting, "Please . . ." (v. 12). Daniel does not revolt against, mock, belittle, threaten, or make demands of the chief official. Next, he speaks in such a way as to acknowledge his subordinate position and to express his devotion to authority. Specifically, he calls himself and his friends "your servants" (vv. 12–13), thereby acting with honor and respect. Finally, Daniel affirms the chief official's authority by asking him to be the judge: "Please test your servants. . . . Then compare . . . and treat your servants in accordance with what you see" (vv. 12–13).

Having gleaned much from Daniel, Debbie and Jean sought to apply his wisdom to the issue at hand. We specifically discussed what it would look like for the teachers to affirm their relationships with one another. At that point, Debbie mentioned that the group had already split into factions with respect to the curriculum. They were not regarding one another as sisters in Christ sharing a common faith, hope, love, and forgiveness. Though they were in truth children of the same God, they were acting as enemies.

Therefore, Debbie and Jean needed to direct the group, and each of the women in the group, to remember their unity in Christ. I suggested a few Scriptures, and we rehearsed how they might use these verses to call the

women to see afresh who God is as their heavenly Father, who they are as daughters of God and sisters in Christ, and what they share in terms of the one Holy Spirit—common goals and bonds as believers and a common source of help and wisdom in Christ (see Matt. 7:7–12; Eph. 4:1–6; Col. 3:8–17; James 1:5; 1 Peter 3:8).

Understand Interests

The third step in biblical negotiation that I discussed with Debbie and Jean is to *understand the interests of others*. I showed them Philippians 2:3–4, which provides much guidance in this matter: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." In order to help Debbie and Jean appreciate what this verse means, I drew the three levels of a dispute—issues, positions, and interests. Usually we are aware only of the first two levels—issues and positions. We could compare these levels to the part of an iceberg that juts out of the water—easily visible to the naked eye. Interests, on the other hand, lie below the surface. They escape our consideration. Let me explain what I mean.

Issues. The issue of a matter under negotiation is easy to discern. It is the "tip of the iceberg" that we can see. It can be defined by asking a question. In Debbie and Jean's case, the issue was: what curriculum should we use? Issues are the tangible and measurable matters. They are the presenting problem or reason for having to negotiate in the first place.

In Daniel's case, the issue in dispute is: what food ought Daniel to eat? That is the matter over which Daniel and the chief official negotiate. It is tangible (food), and it is the overt reason for Daniel seeking to speak to the chief official.

Positions. If the *issue* is the very tip of the iceberg, the *position* is the portion directly beneath it. Whereas the issue can be framed as a question, the position is the respective answer to the question as given by each of the parties involved. In Debbie and Jean's case, the positions were simple. One group answered the issue by demanding, "Keep the curriculum; do not change it." The other side responded, "Throw it out!"

As Debbie, Jean, and I looked over Daniel 1, it was obvious to us what the initial positions are on the question of whether Daniel should eat the king's food: the chief official says yes; Daniel answers no.

Most of our negotiations end at a point like this one when we as the parties state our opposing positions. Rather than trying to listen and discern the other party's underlying interests, we keep reasserting our own position. Thus our conversations become circular, repetitive, and frustrating.

When we begin to sense little receptivity from the other party, we go to war. We dig further into our positions, garnering support from those on the periphery. We attempt to get what we want by sheer force, threat, or number. And when the other side does not budge, we uncharitably accuse them of being obstinate, unwilling, and unreasonable for not accepting our point of view. This wrangling goes back and forth, growing into a conflict that often rips apart friends and sometimes even churches.

This downward progression describes well what had begun to happen in our youth council. The positions were not simply positions. They soon became strongly held and guarded *beliefs*. One side accused the other of becoming "heterodox" and compromising their faith, while the other side accused them of being pharisaical and legalistic. Whatever interests they once shared were all but lost in the fury and fray of the conflict.

Does this scenario sound familiar? As a peacemaking pastor coaching negotiation, you must call your people to be wise counselors by drawing out the interests of the heart. As Proverbs 20:5 directs us, "The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out." I shared with Debbie and Jean how Jesus provides us with a great example in his own response to a man who wanted him to arbitrate his estate. In Luke 12:13–15 we read: "Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.' Jesus replied, 'Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?' Then he said to them, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.'" Jesus does not simply say no; he takes aim at the man's heart, his interests, his motivations. I encouraged Debbie and Jean to do the same. So we discussed what it means to understand the interests of others.

Interests. If issues and positions are the top 10 percent of the iceberg, interests are everything below the waterline, hidden from view. Interests are the motivations that underlie each party's position—their concerns, desires,

expectations, limitations, values, and so on. These interests may be sinful or righteous or simply different from our own.

Interests are often implicit or tacit assumptions. When they do surface, they are framed in the language of desire: "I want X," "I wish for X," "I desire X," or "I need this or that to happen." Coaching people in negotiation is helping them to draw out the real interests that are motivating the other party.

As I coached Debbie and Jean, I asked them the following questions to help them identify the interests represented among the youth council: What was generating the conflict over the curriculum? What interests did each person have in holding so steadfastly to her position? How could Debbie and Jean uncover the true factors that governed the dispute—factors that would be necessary to address to come to an agreement? To answer this last question, I encouraged Debbie and Jean to ask three questions to further uncover the interests of the respective people in the youth council: (1) What does each person want to preserve? (2) What does each person want to avoid? (3) What does each person want to achieve?

At this point, I again had them turn to Daniel. I asked them: What interests, both common and different, did Daniel and the chief official have? What did each want to preserve, avoid, and achieve? As we have seen, positions tend to be mutually exclusive and incompatible. Such positions can make it appear that we share nothing in common with the other party and that there is no room to move toward resolution. Had Daniel looked only at the opposing positions that he and the chief official held, no agreement would have been reached.

But Daniel looked far beyond these positions by putting into practice Philippians 2:3–4 and Proverbs 20:5. By virtue of the proposal he makes, Daniel surely proves that he has thought through not only his own interests but also those of the chief official. In the process it is evident that he discovers commonly shared values on which both can agree.

For example, the chief official's interest is to obey the king (Dan. 1:10). Daniel is not opposed to that, but he wants to obey his God (v. 8). The chief official wants healthy students (v. 10). Daniel shares that same goal (v. 13). The chief official fears he might lose his head (v. 10). Daniel clearly is sympathetic to the poor man's dilemma since he makes a respectful appeal to the official to consider an alternative means of attaining the same goal—healthy students (vv. 11–14). As we can see, while Daniel and the chief

official *differ* as to whom each ultimately should obey, they *share* a common interest in nurturing Daniel's bodily health.

It is by means of this common interest that Daniel negotiates. Notice that what Daniel negotiates is not the *end result* but a *process*. Remaining considerate of his superior, he looks out for his interests and negotiates a process whereby after a time, the chief official can inspect Daniel and his friends to see if their shared goal (healthy students) can be achieved through Daniel's new diet.

Daniel's example makes it evident that even though positions give parties little bargaining room, interests allow them the freedom and creativity to negotiate. Whereas positions put parties at loggerheads, interests often dovetail.

Seeking to walk in Daniel's footsteps, Debbie and Jean considered the possible interests of the opposing sides—both the different and shared interests. They agreed that all the teachers wanted (1) God's truth to be known, and (2) no one's conscience to be violated by teaching material she might consider objectionable (in keeping with Romans 14). By focusing on these shared beliefs, the group was able to start looking at real options.

In summary, whenever we negotiate, we must be aware of our own interests, the other person's interests, common interests, and differing interests. And above all, we must separate sinful interests from godly interests.

Search for Creative Solutions

The fourth step in negotiation is to *search for creative solutions*. With all interests considered, creative solutions can be proposed. It is this step, of course, that proves Daniel's wisdom. Think of the foolish solutions he might have considered: "I'll start a revolt." "I'll flee from Babylon." "I'll give in and disobey God—surely he understands my predicament. It is better for me to eat the king's food and, by living, be able to advise the king in weightier matters." But Daniel does not respond any of these ways. Tremper Longman's remarks are helpful here: "Daniel does not panic; he does not grow angry. He simply chooses another strategy to accomplish his goal. We see here the beginnings of a theme that will develop throughout the narratives concerning Daniel. He is the incarnation of a wise man—a

man who knows how to navigate life. He knows the right action for the right situation; he knows the right word to effect a godly result."

One technique helpful in discovering creative solutions such as those which I proposed to Debbie and Jean is *brainstorming*. Brainstorming seeks to free people from the myopic mind-set and fixed-pie mentality often found in negotiations. A "fixed-pie" mentality believes that for one party to "win" the other must "lose" and vice versa. In a fixed-pie world, either Daniel would have starved or the king withdrawn his demand. However, rarely are such solutions wisest or best. Daniel knew how to think "outside the box." His creative solution sought the interest of the king as well as his own.

The first stage of brainstorming is to pray and ask the Lord to give the group wisdom, insight, and creativity. Second, everyone in the group is allowed to offer solutions without any initial criticism from others—no matter how zany the proposal might be. During this part of the session, people are allowed to piggyback on the ideas of others. One of the great effects of this exercise is that the opposing sides are now acting as one. Having discovered common interests, now they can act together to come to practical solutions.

Evaluate Options Objectively and Reasonably

Immediately after searching for creative solutions, parties should take the fifth and final step of biblical negotiation—evaluate the options objectively and reasonably. By objectively, we mean that the options must be evaluated based on facts and unbiased assessments such as scriptural standards of justice, standards that are legitimate for both sides (even if legal, these must be just or in accordance with God's law), verifiable or measurable facts (such as written documents), opinions of trusted advisors, regulations or statutes, the "going rate" or "industry standard," and precedent. By reasonably, we mean that the options ought to be weighed in accord with sound judgment as compared to being groundless or irrational.

I told Debbie and Jean that they would have to be especially vigilant about keeping the youth council focused on the issues and facts while they evaluated their options, as the members of the group would be tempted to return to making uncharitable judgments, impugning ill motives on the part of others. I also told them that they might need to help the group come up with a solution like Daniel's, where if the substantive issues could not be settled, the two sides would have the option of negotiating a process. That process simply might be taking the curriculum issue to the church leaders and letting them decide.

As it turned out, the youth council came up with several proposals. One was to adopt a review board, consisting of members from both sides of the dispute, to review the curriculum. They would make sure that any material considered objectionable would not be included in the lessons that were to be taught publicly. This plan would allow the teachers and parents who did not find the material objectionable to take it home and teach their children.

Summary

Biblical negotiating is looking out for the interests of others. This way of thinking is not easy, however, for the remnants of indwelling sin—vain conceit and selfish ambition—seek to sabotage us every step of the way. Negotiating the matters of the heart is even more challenging. Throw conflicting desires into the mix and you can have a bonfire of the vanities!

The best way to keep brewing conflicts from bursting into flames is to apply the PAUSE principle. The PAUSE principle can serve as a brake—helping people to be *quick* to listen, *slow* to speak, and *slow* to become angry (James 1:19). Pausing reminds us that something far more important is at stake than the material issue in dispute—our relationships with God and one another.

The PAUSE principle also serves as a map, providing a general overview of the territory we must traverse as we seek to navigate through conflict. It also gives clear direction on how to channel our theology into very practical steps that are easy to understand. As I mentioned earlier, I had only one hour with Debbie and Jean to prepare them. It was not enough that *I* knew how to negotiate; *they* needed to know how. Because of these types of situations, we have sought to make the PAUSE principle an essential part of leadership training in our church, and we even introduce it in our new members' class. Our goal is to live our lives in obedience to the apostolic command and conformed to our Lord's example:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.

Philippians 2:3–7

Making a Respectful Appeal

At this point, we need to address two final matters about wise negotiation. The first is teaching others how to make a respectful appeal, and the second is dealing with difficult people. Let us begin by looking at making a respectful appeal.

There are two major reasons or occasions why a person might appeal to another to reconsider his or her decision: (1) It is necessary for the person's superior to make a wise decision based on accurate or new information, or (2) the person has bound himself or herself to another by promise, and circumstances are such that he or she or those the person represents would suffer egregiously or would break God's law if he or she attempted to keep that promise.

With respect to the first reason, as I mentioned earlier, at times negotiations are not between equals. Often the other party is either under our authority or over us in authority. In Daniel's case, for example, he was subordinate to the chief official. Thus it is necessary for wise servant-leaders to provide those under us (such as our wife, children, and church members) a way in which they can respectfully appeal to us when they disagree with our decisions.

First Peter 3:7 is helpful here as it gives us a window through which to observe such a relationship—that of husband and wife. Peter instructs, "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers." The phrase "weaker partner" has provoked all manner of consideration as to the sense in which the wife is "weaker." But we can infer from the text that the person who is the weaker partner is weak with respect to her being in a

subordinate position. That is, as a subordinate, she benefits as well as suffers from the consequences of those in authority over her.

Since the larger context of this section of 1 Peter concerns the negative consequences of having harsh masters (2:18) or a husband who does not believe the Word (3:1), it is likely that Peter is calling husbands to be especially sensitive to the often difficult station of their wives as the weaker (or subordinate) partner by treating them with respect and as joint heirs of life. In other words, Peter wants those in authority to put themselves in the place of their subordinates by trying to understand their interests and empathize with their challenges, fears, and concerns.

One way we can help our spouse, our children, or the members in our church is not only by *telling* them they have a right to appeal our decisions but also by *showing* them how to make a respectful appeal. In the church, there are several ways to show them. First, let your people know how and when they can approach the leadership of your church with a request for you to reconsider actions you as a session have taken. Second, make sure that the people who are assigned a certain task know to whom they are immediately responsible so they know to whom they can appeal. Third, inform your people as to how decisions are made in the church, correcting any false expectations they may have. (For example, many churches do not their members the difference adequately inform about between representative leadership versus congregationalism.)

Often church leaders feel threatened by the prospect of inviting respectful appeals because implicit in many appeals is constructive criticism of the church's decisions, policies, leadership, and so on. This response is unfortunate because when church leaders are resistant to constructive criticism, they invite conflict. Furthermore, they fail to take the opportunity to demonstrate to their people that they are not mini-popes making infallible decisions regardless of the people's interests.

Inviting respectful appeals does not make us subject to every whim of our parishioners but communicates to our people that we are eager to be *servant-leaders*. As servant-leaders we must strive to learn from our mistakes and to make it a joy for those under us to follow our leadership. Moreover, as we strive to imitate the model of servant-leadership set forth in 1 Timothy 3:4–5, 12 and Titus 1:6, we must be wise and faithful managers of our household who ask ourselves: are we doing anything or acting in any way that exasperates our people in their attempt to submit to

us and follow us (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21)? This question, of course, is best asked *preventatively*—before problems arise. So when you anticipate problems, take action to preclude them. Let me give you an example of what this type of situation would look like.

A few years back our session was asked to consider an intergenerational Sunday school class program (later called Covenant Classes). We encouraged this program, and a couple years later we had two such classes. The decision then came as to whether we should adopt this kind of class for the entire church (we were having logistical difficulties supporting both age-specific and intergenerational classes).

We knew that such a change would cause a stir, so we did the following: First, we called for a special congregational meeting to present our goal for instituting the Covenant Classes as the primary and only form of Sunday school teaching. Second, we answered the *why* question, giving the reasons we as a session had decided to take this action. Then we answered the *what if* question. Most change, especially major change in form and structure, is perceived as a risk, if not a loss. There is always the unknown. What if it does not work? Are we stuck with it? What if it does not accomplish the purposes we hope it will? We answered the *what if* question by telling our people that we would institute the program for a year and then come back to them with an evaluation to see if we had accomplished our goals. At that time, we would decide whether to continue with the new Covenant Classes.

Next we *encouraged* our people to give us their *feedback* throughout the year. We said, "Tell us what is working and what is not. And suggest ways we can fix the problems, or let us know what you think is not fixable." We kept the lines of communication open. We wanted their hearts to approve. We wanted them to own this new ministry and not simply to bear up under a heavy-handed decision imposed from the session.

We have not always acted so wisely with our people. But this time by affording our people an opportunity to make a respectful appeal to their leaders, and by following through with our own proclaimed desire to listen to our people, the final result was a very peaceable transition to a new and major ministry that was received enthusiastically by nearly everyone in the church. And those who did not like the decision did mention that they were fully satisfied with the decision-making process. As leaders we had acted with sensitivity and consideration toward those under us.

Dealing with Difficult People

In negotiation you will eventually come up against those who staunchly refuse to negotiate or even to speak with you. These people refuse to confess their sin or respond to your appeals. When it is not possible to involve other people or processes (for example, when the church cannot get involved or a lawsuit is inappropriate), what are you to do? What counsel do you give those who are in such a situation? To begin answering these questions, let me describe a scenario that may be similar to a situation you will someday face.

Kay came in for counseling on a Saturday in late November. The rings around her eyes made it obvious that she was run-down. She said she had not slept in two weeks. Fear flayed her soul like a leather whip would the body. She was visibly shaking.

Kay began her story by describing her working conditions. A single woman, she worked as a legal secretary for a very difficult man who was belligerent, arrogant, and bombastic. He was proud and loved to poke fun at her and her Christian faith. And according to Kay, it was his habit to yell, scream, and mock, even with his clients! So Kay came to the church that day asking if it would be right to leave her job.

"Pastor, may I look for another position? A local judge is in need of a secretary, and I know he'd hire me."

I told Kay that surely there was no divine commandment to stay under persecution if there was a just way to escape it. Christians throughout the ages had fled from persecution.

Kay felt relieved. Then I added, "But I'm concerned that you might take the same problem with you to the next place you go."

"What do you mean?" Kay asked.

I took her to 1 Peter 2:18–25 and Romans 12:14–21, passages which directed our discussion about suffering unjustly and responding in difficult situations to difficult and abusive people. One of the questions I asked was, "Kay, *how* have you responded to Bart, your employer? How have you used your tongue? Paul tells us to bless those who curse us. Have you blessed him? Have you prayed for him?"

Kay's demeanor changed. She bowed her head in a look of shame. "No," she said. "I haven't."

Again I prodded, "Kay, when you and your co-workers have lunch, do you speak well about Bart? Or do you cut him up and serve him to your friends for lunch every day?"

Rather sheepishly, she answered, "Yes, you're right. I haven't blessed him; I've cursed him. He has made my life a wreck. But I see what you're saying—I haven't loved my enemy."

We talked about revenge and how to deal with injustice. We looked at Jesus's own example that Peter gives. When Jesus is insulted, he does not retaliate but entrusts himself to his Father who judges justly (1 Peter 2:23). Part of my counsel to Kay was to follow Christ here. I wanted her to understand that she was enduring exactly what Scripture describes so clearly.

Finally, I referred her back to Romans 12:21. I asked the one question that my own flesh resisted. I cringed to go there. Here was a verse that I had often wished were not in Scripture: "Kay," I asked, "have you 'overcome evil with good'? What good can you do to overcome Bart's evil?"

Not surprisingly, Kay initially smarted at the thought of doing good to a man who had perpetually and intently done evil to her. She also wondered what specifically that "good" would look like. He was wealthy; she was poor. What could she give the man who seemed to have everything and need nothing?

By the Holy Spirit's guidance, it soon dawned on me what that "good" might be. Aware of Kay's fine culinary skills, I suggested that she bake Bart a cake. Christmas was about four weeks away, and that would be a good time to bake him a cake—as a Christmas present.

This idea seemed to be a good way—a positive "good"—to give to Bart. Kay agreed and then proceeded to act wiser than her counselor. She did not wait for Christmas, for to give the cake at Christmas might be something Bart would expect (even though she had never given him one before). Instead, Kay wisely made the cake for that Monday. She arrived early that day and immediately headed to Bart's office. Bart was not in, so she set the cake on his desk and then went to work.

As Kay tells it, Bart entered the ring that day as always. Like some world wrestling champion, he pushed open the door, gave his usual growl, barked a few orders, struck a few blows, and disappeared into his room, slamming the door behind him.

Kay waited in fear and trembling. A few minutes later, out Bart came holding her cake in his hands and acting very surprised. "Is this for me?"

Kay told him that it was.

"What is the occasion?" Bart asked.

"None," said Kay. "I just wanted to bless you with a cake."

No one would think that a cake given in love could turn an alligator into a teddy bear, but it did! Kay and I continued to meet. I told her that Bart's new gentleness might not last that long, and sure enough, it did not. Bart fell back into his old ways. But according to Kay, the office had changed. Kay and her friends began praying for Bart, blessing those who cursed them and overcoming evil with good.

About two months went by and I asked Kay if she had gotten the new job. "Oh," she said, "I've decided not to apply. Things are going well at work. I'm sleeping well. And Bart really needs someone to pray for him. I love my job and feel sorry for that poor man. You know, pastor, no one loves him. He has alienated everyone—family, friends, and colleagues. He doesn't make cutting references to me anymore, and he doesn't put down my faith, though he still barks orders at everyone alike. No, I think I'll stay."

Not every attempt at "overcom[ing] evil with good" will turn out as wonderfully as it did for Kay. But Christ does not call us to find out what will work before we act. He calls us to walk by faith in his Word—to love our enemy *even if it does not work* in the short run.

Concluding Thoughts

Negotiating disputed matters, looking out for the interests of others, and dealing with difficult people are all inescapable parts of living in this world. Everyone "negotiates." While we must deal first with the issues of the heart, there will be many substantive or material matters that need to be resolved as well. These matters will encompass budgets, strategies, ministry goals, personnel, and many other substantive issues that must be negotiated. The question will not be *whether* we negotiate these matters but *how* we will negotiate. Will we work to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to get angry? Will we labor to build consensus as we look out for each other's interests? In the midst of heated and heartfelt discussion, will we keep ever

before our eyes the ground of our unity even as the apostle Paul reminds us in his great letter of unity—the letter to the Ephesians?

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:2–6

We can only do this by God's grace and wisdom, which he has so abundantly given us through his Word and by his Spirit. The PAUSE principle, looking out for the interests of others, learning how to make a respectful appeal, and dealing with difficult people are all ways of wisdom to help us negotiate the matters of life with one another with gospel love and justice. They are the tools with which a pastor can and must equip his people if they in turn are to become effective peacemakers.

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The PAUSE principle provides a helpful and effective tool that we as pastors and church leaders can use to coach our members in wisely responding to conflicts when there are substantive matters at stake. But what happens when the negotiations break down, when communication between the parties reaches an impasse? What if the parties, try as they may, cannot settle their differences by coming to an equitable solution? What if they cannot come to agreement on their own?

God has not left us without hope. He instructs his people to get help, to seek assistance. The next five chapters examine the character of *assisted* peacemaking in terms of mediation, arbitration, and church discipline. Before we turn a keen eye toward the specifics of mediation, however, let me paint with broad strokes the picture of pastor as mediator.

The Bible: The Greatest Mediation Ever Told

Mediation and arbitration sound like technical legal tools. They seem more likely to be found in a lawyer's briefcase than in a pastor's Bible. Yet Scripture argues otherwise. While there is a "technical" side to both mediation and arbitration, and a wise mediator knows well to seek counsel from those with technical expertise, mediation at heart is less about "tools" and more about "a way of being." Mediation is about *being* a mediator—a biblically governed, Christ-rooted, and church-centered mediator. If you do not want to be a mediator, put down the Bible, for its passion is for peace and peacemaking. Recall how frequently Scripture calls us to peace. Let these verses cascade over your ears and hearts so that you may hear afresh God's declared passion for peacemaking:

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:3

Live in peace with each other.

1 Thessalonians 5:13

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

Hebrews 12:14

Did you hear the imperative that calls us to a vigorous life as peacemakers— to make every effort to do what leads to peace, to keep the peace, to live in peace? Peacemaking does not appear to be an option, much less a tool, but a way of being. Furthermore, as a result of human nature, peacemaking is a necessary way. Implied in these verses and throughout Scripture is that people break peace—peace splinters, friendships fracture, relationships rupture. Most important, these verses demonstrate that God is zealous about peacemaking, that he has a passion for peace. Should not we, then, who are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation, share his passion?

Mediation and arbitration are not the privileged domain of the legal community. Mediation is about being a mediator, and the gospel itself is the grand metanarrative of the God-man Mediator and his redemptive mediation. The implications of this paradigm bear much significance for us as pastors. We who say we have been called to the ministry of reconciliation ought to be most familiar with and transformed by this story of mediation. If we know our Bible and our God, we know that the call to peacemaking—to mediation— has its roots not in a few scattered verses but in the rich, deep soil of the divine story that extends as far back as the garden, the fall of man, and God's promise of a mediator.

From Genesis 3 to Revelation 21, the Bible is a book abounding with conflict—man against God, God against man, man against man. But the Bible is more. The Bible is God's special revelation of his Reconciler. It is the good news of God's promise of a Mediator— the coming Prince of Peace. The story of redemption is a story of reconciliation, and that reconciliation is all about *assisted* peacemaking. Redemption calls for *divine* action; we cannot save or reconcile ourselves. Reconciliation demands another. Reconciliation requires the Messiah as Mediator.

It is this promise that pastors put front and center on the table of all disputes. Amid the clutter of broken contracts, violations of trust, and legal briefs, the good news is that the Mediator stands between God and humans. Here is a very present God, the God-man, promising help for people in bondage to their anger, lusts, deceits, and desires. Here the Mediator comes with promise and power to reconcile enemies, pay debts, restore confidences, keep promises, and make restitution.

In other words, the Messiah is our Mediator in every dispute. He is the Prince of Peace who brings peace to a world in conflict. Thus terms and titles such as *mediation*, *arbitration*, *assisted peacemaking*, and *pastor as peacemaker* ought not to be foreign to us if our ears are properly tuned to sacred Scripture. Mediation should not be a concept or process that the world teaches the church but a precious and primary truth that the church teaches the world. Mediation is the biblical story.

In Genesis 3 we find the first and fundamental conflict. Humankind rebels against God, and the two become estranged. Starting here and following, Scripture presents several case studies before the bar of God's court: *God v. Adam and Eve; Adam v. Eve; Cain v. Abel; Lamech v. Whoever gets in his way.* And so the conflicts go, afflicting even the apostle Paul when he and Barnabas argue over Mark's suitability for ministry. Who of us has not read that story shaking our heads in bewilderment, asking ourselves, "Even Paul? Even Barnabas the mediator?" Conflict is everywhere!

Every book of the Bible is filled with cases of conflict between God's people! On this basis alone some might disparage the Bible or Christian faith as a source of help, reasoning, "Look at how they fight among themselves!" But this very record of pervasive conflict between humans and God and between people and their fellow humans ought not to be a point of embarrassment but of hope, because these cases are *God's* record.

He recorded them for us. And through them, he counsels the way of peace to his covenant-breaking people.

When we take the time to read Scripture and carefully examine these cases, we find that God is not sitting far off in the cool shade of the day, away from the heat of our conflicts. Instead, he puts himself dead center in the midst of our fights and quarrels. He stands in the furnace of our hatred, malice, and strife, even as he stood with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And this God, the God of peace, redeems us from the fire. This God, the Prince of Peace, takes these very flames of conflict and makes them his refiner's fire, purifying the sons of Levi.

The story of redemption, then, is a story of conflict and reconciliation. Its chief character is a reconciling God. Its main message heralds 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" (2 Cor. 5:19). That message is our fundamental hope. As pastors, we do not enter into the middle of warring parties alone or on our own. Our God has preceded us. He has equipped us by his Word and Spirit. And all this rests upon the work of his Son. Christ has come. Christ has risen. Christ now rules. Christ now mediates through us, for he commissioned us to be peacemakers.

Therefore, whatever mediation work we do, we do in and through Jesus our Mediator. "In Christ" is where pastors stand to mediate, to help people in conflict. It is to Christ that we lead people, opening the door through his Word and ushering them to this "in Christ" place. This place alone is where peace is found.

The biblical doctrine of justification, the fount of all redemptive blessings, finds its vitality "in Christ"—in union with Christ. Paul concludes his great treatment of justification by faith with a word of peace, and both are through and in our union with Christ: "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God *through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Rom. 5:1). Paul then unfolds the glories of this "in Christ" place in order to assure us of God's love, repeatedly depicting God's love as an unrelenting pursuit of reconciliation with us through the mediation of another—his own Son. Reconciliation is found in Christ. Paul explains, "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God

through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation" (Rom. 5:10–11).

We cannot glide over these verses. They are spoken with sharp edges, revealing the deeply carved valleys and heaven-spiking mountains of God's love *in conflict*. A passage like this makes our talk of alternative dispute resolution, of mediation between differing parties, seem bland, pale, and nondescript. For Paul the matter at hand and heart is not a tame dispute. It is about hatred and enmity. Biblical reconciliation plays out on a field of blackened souls, red faces, screaming voices, raging anger, heated passions, vengeance, and blood. Biblical reconciliation alone remedies the hellish power that shapes dull, pink flesh into reckless slashing swords that cut and decapitate. For the apostle Paul, the matter at heart is not about a mere difference but about being enemies.

Being enemies implies a history, a heritage of hate that is longstanding and that involves rivals and rival families—the children of God against the children of the devil. Being enemies awakens us to what is at stake and what it will take to secure reconciliation. It will take nothing less than death—the death of another—the very death of God's one and only Son. The story of Christ's substitutionary, reconciling death is the ultimate drama of biblical peacemaking. Every other conflict pales in comparison.

Can you see now how biblical peacemaking is not just one tool pastors reach for in a crisis? It is a way of being. As people reconciled to God by the death of his Son, as people who are "in Christ" our Mediator, we are sent out as ambassadors of reconciliation and peace (2 Cor. 5:18–21). This this commissioning, has huge implications. Pastoring is calling, peacemaking. Pastoring is mediating. Everything we do is peacemaking because that is who we now are in Christ the Mediator. Preaching is peacemaking. Praying is peacemaking. Administering the sacraments is peacemaking. Leading and discipling are all peacemaking. Pastoring is all peacemaking, not because peacemaking illegitimately assumes the jurisdiction of the other roles of a pastor, but because the integrating point of the universe is the one man and mediator, Jesus Christ, and we as pastors are his servant-mediators. We are servants of the gospel—the gospel of mediation. It is the great story we proclaim to others of intimacy, betrayal, and restoration and whose central character we hold out as the one mediator between God and mankind—the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5).

What then do we do as servant-mediators? What part do we play as peacemaking pastors? We play a supporting part that is in one sense very simple. Paraphrasing Paul, we enter the room of enemies pitted against each other and announce, "We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus's sake" (2 Cor. 4:5). In other words, pastors mediate Christ. Pastors bring to the table of enemies the feast of the Lamb. Mediation, reconciliation, is getting enemies to eat of the slaughtered Lamb and drink of his blood. Here opposing bloods that flow thick with the venom of hatred are reconciled by the stronger, deeper blood of the Lamb.

In short, pastors are waiters serving the Lamb to sworn enemies. Pastors are busboys washing the dirty dishes of our hatreds, anger, lusts, deceits, malice, and filthy words in the purifying stream of Christ's blood. It is tiring work. It is battle work. It is Messiah work. But we are compelled to persevere, because serving this way is at the heart of our calling as pastors, as mediators.

Paul: The Quintessential Mediator

I love the truth that the Bible is all about peacemaking and that Christ, its central character, is our great Mediator. But as glorious as these truths may be, I am never eager to enter the room of enemies pitted against each other in order to "mediate Christ." In fact, by nature, I am always looking for the nearest door out. The one thing I do not naturally do is move to mediate!

That is why several years ago I looked for someone to mentor me as a mediator. I found him in the apostle Paul. Since pastoring is mediating, I was not surprised to find in a person like Paul much wisdom for the practice of mediation. Paul was an appointed apostle of Jesus Christ, the Great Pastor of our souls. He was appointed to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, to be an ambassador of Christ, calling all people everywhere to repent and be reconciled (see Acts 17:30 and 2 Cor. 5:20). As a Jew who had become an apostle to the Gentiles, Paul knew intimately the dynamics of conflict between Jew and Gentile and the overwhelming promise and power of the gospel of reconciliation.

If any man was to wear the mantle of mediator, it was Paul. His letters are mediation letters, calling men and women to be reconciled to God

through Christ. And in his letters, Paul is always presenting Christ, in his person and work, as the means to reconciliation.

I knew I could learn much from this mediator-apostle, so I returned to his Epistles and began to pour over them again. But they did not appear to be the same as I remembered them. The theology I had learned was all there—yet it was different. Something had radically reshaped the way I read and understood it. Paul's Epistles no longer looked like the books I had on my shelves—the tomes of systematic theology, expositions of biblical theology, and scholarly commentaries. They were, to my surprise, letters! But they were not just any kind of letter. Paul was writing as a pastor to people typically in conflict. Paul's letters were the counsel of a mediator to people needing reconciliation, and his counsel was permeated with the gospel of peace.

For example, I used to hear Paul's opening salutation as a formulaic epistolary filler, when in fact, Paul begins his letters with the theme of peace. "Grace and peace" is his typical salutation. 1 This greeting is no perfunctory heading like our own "Dear John." Rather, for Paul, "grace and peace" is like an artist's miniature black-and-white sketch of some grand mountain scene that he later will take back to his studio and develop into a full-scale painting à la Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, or Albert Bierstadt.

In the same way, "grace and peace" captures in miniature form the majesty of God's great work of redemption that Paul develops in the remainder of his letters. 2 Yet these words are more than miniatures. They are the first mention of the gospel—the first step this mediator takes in drawing estranged people back to God and to one another. From the outset, Paul's letters of counsel are about God's work of reconciliation.

Thus we are not surprised to find Paul ending his letters in much the same way. He frequently closes his letters by blessing the churches with "God's peace" (see Rom. 15:33; 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 4:7–9; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Thess. 3:16). Peace for Paul is that objective and final estate, that reconciliation with God and one another that the gospel of Christ brings about. It is this peace that is uppermost in Paul's affection and that he longs to see poured out on God's people. That is why Paul is the quintessential peacemaker. Therefore, it should profit us greatly to examine his letters through the spectacles of peace as we seek to better understand the practice of mediation.

1 Corinthians: Wisdom for a Mediator

Let us consider in particular Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. No one would dispute the fact that the Corinthian church was rife with conflict (save for the Corinthians themselves). When Paul finally comes around to addressing the specific concerns of which the Corinthians had informed him, he already has taken six chapters to address their divisions and factions, of which, it appears, they were so blindly unaware. One cannot help but think that Paul smiles somewhat wryly when he writes in 1 Corinthians 7:1, "Now for the matters you wrote about." Whatever pressing issues the Corinthians thought they had, conflict does not seem to be one of them! They were blind to their "denominational loyalties" and their worldly character, of which their jealousy and quarreling were evidence. They were blind to their failures to exercise discipline, allowing incest in their midst to go unchecked. And they were blind to the gross anomaly of brother suing brother in the secular courts.

How could they not see their factions, their quarreling, their leaving undone those things they ought to have done, and their doing that which they ought not to have been doing? As pastor-mediators, the first lesson that we can learn from the Corinthians is that mediators are people called to work with the blind, to lead them out of the darkness that veils their sight. Moreover, if we are to shed life-giving, eye-opening light into the darkness of disputes, it cannot be our own. It must be the light of Christ, the light of the gospel.

The Corinthians' blindness to their disputes also has implications for us beyond the immediate disputes we face as mediators. There is much more that God wants us to learn from their poor example. We, like the Corinthians, are often blind to the real issues, the primary issues, we ought to address. In fact, our inability to see the real issues calls into question the very questions we tend to ask. Is it possible that our prolonged debates—over biblical counseling in seminary curriculum, biblical-theological preaching versus application, worship songs and styles, and so on—are not addressing the real questions or at least do not have the weight we attribute to them? Might our seminaries and churches be like the Corinthians—discussing the things of secondary importance as if they were of primary importance?

A good friend of mine recently was called as an associate pastor to help build stronger relationships among the congregation. One of his former professors belittled the call in an off-handed way, asking, "Why don't they just hire a psychologist?" That professor is a man fully committed to the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. But in his mind, it is as if the pastor's role is limited to what he says behind the pulpit and what he does behind the table. When I heard that story, I could only shake my head. What kind of pastors are we shaping for tomorrow's church if we disparage the work of building, reconciling, and restoring relationships within the church—the very matters of primary importance? Why are we so quick to belittle the very work that Paul did in his letters to the Corinthians?

The truth is, as pastors you are mediators. You cannot be otherwise. The issue is not whether you will be a mediator but what kind of mediator you will be. Will you stand aloof as couples in your church move to separate and divorce? Will you be blind to the ruin of relationships and, like the Corinthians, quarrel and pursue other things? Will you flee to another church when the going gets tough? Or will you, like Paul, bring to the table of people's disputes the gospel of the Mediator (1 Cor. 3:11)?

Paul makes a similar point using the metaphor of a building. He says that everyone in the church is involved in building the church. The question is: on what foundation is he or she building and with what materials—sticks and stubble or silver and gold (1 Cor. 3:10–15)?

The real silver and gold by which we mediators help the blind and rebuild relationships is the gospel. Mediators mediate the gospel. The first thing we announce to warring factions must be the gospel.

If this approach sounds surprising or unusual, it is because it is counterintuitive. It is not how we are likely to respond to the daily conflicts we face. For example, what is your first response when you hear there is a conflict in your church? How are you most likely to react when your spouse accuses you, threatens you, or demeans you? How do you engage parties who have long stopped listening to each other? If you are at all like me, your intuitive response—if not one of despair, retaliation, or indifference—will certainly fall short of being full of grace. But here in Corinthians, Paul is reminding us that our response should be the message of the cross—the gospel of Christ the Mediator.

Paul communicates this message in several ways. His letters are peacemaking letters, the very words of which flow from the wisdom and experience of a skilled co-mediator, always pointing us to the Chief Mediator, Jesus Christ. But he most notably mediates the gospel in his frequent appeals to our union "in Christ" or "with Christ." For example, notice how Paul begins his letter to the conflicted Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 1:2, he calls them the "sanctified in Christ Jesus" people. Paul addresses conflicted people by pointing out their common ground. He tells these warring factions, "You are Christ's people."

Another example is when Paul gives thanks to God for those at war! Again, this approach may seem wholly counterintuitive to us. How can Paul give thanks to God for a people so conflicted? And remember, those to whom he speaks are also at war *with him*. Paul's letters, particularly to the Corinthian church, are letters addressed to people who include his enemies. Paul is not blessing their factions. Rather, by giving thanks to God, Paul lifts the eyes of the conflicted off their crisis and fixes them on Christ: "I always thank God for you because of his grace given you *in Christ Jesus*" (1 Cor. 1:4).

Thanksgiving is not the language we typically hear at the table of enemies. But wise pastor-mediators like Paul enter the hot, stuffy, soul-choking room of complaints, accusations, lies, and threats and open the window to usher in the brisk, fresh, life-giving air of thanksgiving. And it is thanksgiving for grace in Christ Jesus. We can sense that for Paul, grace is only grace because it is Christ's grace. The gift is the Giver.

We must stop and consider how extraordinary Paul's words are to this divided, factious, quarreling, incest-tolerating, suit-filing church. Put yourself in his place. When you hear church members fighting, leaders quarreling, the Sunday school teachers bickering, spouses shouting, and factions forming, is your default mind-set thanksgiving? Does your mind run to the "in Christ place," or do you tweak your résumé and check out the churches with vacant pulpits? Do you move on, or do you move toward Christ? To be frank, my default mind-set is decidedly not one of thanksgiving. I feel more like I am "in hell" than "in Christ." Yet the psalmist reminds us of God's abiding presence, especially in life's bleakest moments: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps. 23:4) and "If I make my bed in the depths you are there" (Ps. 139:8). Christ is in our conflicts. For that very

reason, Paul can give thanks in the midst of the crossfire between warring believers and not just when reconciliation is in sight.

Another time Paul points to our union with Christ in order to mediate the gospel is when he appeals to the Corinthian factions to stop warring. He makes his appeal "in the name of *our* Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:10). The word *our* is particularly important because it expresses our unity in the midst of our plurality—our hope that however divided and broken we are, we nevertheless have one Lord. It is because we are in him that unity can be attained and maintained. Thus Paul can ask rhetorically, "Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor. 1:13), anticipating the answer, "No." No, Christ is not divided. Christ is not a commodity to be bought and sold to the highest bidder, nor is he a slave to our self-interest claims. We cannot declare, "Christ is ours," and imply, "therefore, he is not yours." Yet that is exactly what Christians in conflict do. We seek a monopoly on Christ. Christ justifies me, not you. Christ supports my version of the story, not yours. Christ approves of me and my responses, and he condemns you. So Paul asks, "Is Christ divided?"

Here again, pointing to our union in Christ, Paul brings several factions together by directing them to the crossroad of redemption— to the cross. As pastors, we must see how all this talk of peacemaking and mediation, of helping people in conflict, is showing us that conflict provides open doors of opportunity for the gospel to be spoken afresh and heard anew.

Could our own reluctance to enter into the fray of conflict as peacemakers be due to our impoverished understanding of the gospel? Could our disparaging of pastoral counseling and peacemaking be due to the mind-set that the gospel is just an entrance door to the kingdom and an exit ticket to heaven? Is our own failure to be peacemakers the result of seeing conflict through secular eyes instead of seeing it for what it is—a spin-off of the great cosmic battle waged between God and Satan, between the Spirit and our sinful nature (Matt. 6:13; Luke 22:31; Gal. 5:16–17; James 4:1–4)?

It must be. For the very reluctance we have toward peacemaking does not surface when we are called to respond to physical pain. Pastors consider themselves some of the chief care providers for those who suffer physically. We are quick to make our rounds at the hospital, to hold the hands of those suffering from stroke, miscarriage, cancer, and the whole unholy host of sickness and disease. And we seek to be skilled in discerning for our people

the mysterious ways of God with humans when the acts of providence afflict them in their flesh.

Yet there is a great disconnect here. How is it that on the one hand we who specialize in comforting the suffering at the same time flee from assisting the conflicted? Why does physical suffering demand our attention and pull on our heartstrings when the soul-crippling disease of sinful conflict does not? Why are we fleet of foot to alleviate physical suffering yet guilty of foot-dragging in our efforts to alleviate conflict? I do not have answers to these questions. They haunt me. They shame me.

Could it be that similar to Paul's thorn in the flesh, peacemaking exposes most our weaknesses as pastors? There is no doubt that peacemaking pushes us beyond our comfort zone—beyond the boundary of our "safe" ministerial duties. Take preaching, for example. I can preach Christ's gospel from the pulpit and easily be satisfied by a compliment or two from afar. But when I must dodge the arrows of warring spouses, when I must "try the case" between disgruntled ministry leaders, when I must breathe the threats of quarreling members, when I must find my way through the fog of their conflicting stories, then I find myself hopelessly lost. The message that seemed so strong and clear on Sunday, in the bright light of the sanctuary with God's people gathered together, now appears impractical, weak, and insufficient for the night of conflict.

These are the moments when we sense just how weak we are and just how precarious the pastoral calling can be. And times like these are the very reason why we as pastors, as peacemakers, as mediators need to hear the gospel afresh for ourselves before we can bring it to others.

Another way Paul mediates the Corinthians' disputes through the means of the gospel is by showing how the gospel humbles. It is not oversimplifying to say that conflicts are caused by pride. This relationship becomes quite evident when we recognize the many ways that pride dresses itself. Besides the common and overt boasts and threats of peace-breakers, pride can be manifest as a pity party—the selfish resolve not to get involved, or acquiescence to the demands of another for the sake of a false peace. Pride can flare like a raging forest fire or conceal itself like smoldering underbrush.

Whatever form pride takes, Paul takes an axe to it. He reminds the various factions within the Corinthian church who they really are and from

where they have come. And he calls them to consider anew the very antithesis of pride—Christ and his cross:

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

1 Corinthians 1:26–31

The problem with parties in conflict is that there is little of the right kind of boasting. There is little boasting about Jesus Christ. There is little glorying in his mercy, his forgiveness, his wisdom, his righteousness. It is their very blindness to the supremacy of Christ that Paul seeks to expose. When everyone has been boasting about their party leader—Apollos, Peter, and Paul—the apostle turns their eyes to their Savior, Lord, and Mediator, the one in whom they live and move and have their being.

Paul continues his call to humility when, at the conclusion of this section where he addresses the various factions, he reminds the Corinthians that if they have anything, it is because they have been given it in Christ:

Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "Do not go beyond what is written." Then you will not take pride in one man over against another. For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

1 Corinthians 4:6–7

Pride has escalated their differences into distinct denominational divisions. Each faction thinks of their distinct differences as self-generated and as a ground for their own righteousness. Paul humbles them by a

message of grace: "What do you have that you did not receive?" That is, everything you have that makes you unique from your brother or sister is a God-given difference that is not an item of which to boast but something to be used for building the church.

A final example of Paul appealing to our union in Christ is his frequent reminder to the Corinthians that to fight against a brother or sister is to fight against Christ. Underlying this idea is the reality that Christ is in all, and all represent Christ to each other. Hence, Paul can say that to destroy a brother or sister is to destroy Christ's temple (1 Cor. 3:16–17).

In chapter 8, when addressing the "stronger brother" vis-à-vis the "weaker brother," Paul appeals to both about the self-giving love that characterizes Christ's atonement and about how the effect of that atonement is their union with Christ. Specifically, when chastising the stronger for destroying his weaker brother, Paul explicitly describes the injured brother as one "for whom Christ died" (1 Cor. 8:11).

There is in this phrase "for whom Christ died" a claim of ownership. Often in disputes we are careless in the way we treat or regard those who oppose us. We reduce our brother to an "it." We describe him in nondescript terms, like "him" or "the other party." Paul the mediator calls the different parties to task. He reframes their perspective on one another in his conclusion by emphasizing the unique redemptive relationship we sustain with one another—we are brothers (1 Cor. 8:11–13). As such, we are bought with Christ's blood and belong to Christ. One cannot escape the sacredness, sanctity, and preciousness this truth must have for Paul. To harm a brother is to harm a member of Christ. He might be a "jar of clay," but he is carrying something of extraordinary treasure.

Moreover, by describing the weaker brother as the one "for whom Christ died," Paul seeks to set the stronger brother in stark contrast to Christ. He holds up Christ as a mirror and asks, "Do your attitudes and actions look like his?" Whereas the stronger brother has been asserting his "knowledge," his "rights," and his "self" over and against his weaker brother, Paul points out the antithetical stance of Christ. Unlike the attitudes and actions of the stronger brother, Christ denied his rights for this brother. Christ humbled himself for this brother. In love, Christ gave himself unto death for this weaker brother.

Do you see how Paul mediates between disputing brothers? He quickly seeks to diffuse the fighting by awakening the disputants as to who they are.

They are not enemies but brothers in Christ. This is the question we too must put to our people: Against *whom* are you fighting? Is he not your *brother*? We must also ask: How are you acting—like Christ? Or are you asserting your rights, your self, your demands?

Paul's counsel does not stop there. He goes on to say to the strong, "When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, *you sin against Christ*" (1 Cor. 8:12). This statement ought to shock us, but it is so fundamentally Pauline! Ecclesiology is Christology! This brother is more than a brother. He represents Christ.

Take this to heart. Apply it to your people in the midst of their conflicts. Open their eyes that they might see against whom they are truly fighting. How justified we all sound to ourselves in the reckless way we spread rumors, fling accusations, and ruin our brothers and sisters, all without any consideration that we speak and act against Christ.

Who of us when fighting with another—be it our spouse, children, brother, or sister—see ourselves fighting against Christ? Who of us, if Christ were visibly present, would curse him to his face, falsely accuse him, strike at him, threaten him, demean him, impute ill motives to him, or say, "I love you, but I don't like you"? These are the questions we must put first to ourselves and then to the people to whom we minister as we come to them as mediators in the midst of their conflict.

Conclusion

What I have done in this chapter is to muse in writing about this process we call mediation. Hopefully my musings have at least given you pause to reconsider the nature of your pastoral calling. They have mine, and they continue to give me pause. At first I found the language and terms of mediation and arbitration legalese. They seemed to shelter a hidden power beyond the simple tools I had for helping my people. But then came the paradigm shift. The Bible changed—or better yet, I changed. I started to see in Scripture answers, guidance, and direction for the very practical, commonplace, nitty-gritty details of life.

Along with these new insights, I began to find my mind transformed from old patterns of thinking that really had not served me all that well. The entire Bible came alive to me and struck me at the core of my calling. God's

Word was not my pastor's toolbox in which could be found a few useful instruments for reconciliation. Rather, the Bible *is* God's reconciling word to us. This is Christ speaking to us in the midst of our sin and suffering, our broken promises, shattered relationships, and soured marriages. This is Christ's powerful word of reconciliation meant to make us be at peace with God, with our fellow humans, and within ourselves. Christ is our peace, our Mediator, mediating our many disputes and making us one. What a privilege, then, we pastors have to carry Christ's reconciling word into conflict and, by his mysterious gospel power, see lives changed, relationships reconciled, and bonds of unity strengthened.

10 Mediation and Arbitration

Jesus Christ is our Mediator, and as his servants, we are called to mediate his grace—not in any sacerdotal or priestly sense but as ambassadors of reconciliation. But how does "mediating the gospel" practically play itself out in the everyday conflicts of life? What does helping people in disputes look like? In chapter 8 we saw that coaching our brothers and sisters in negotiation is a simple but vitally important way that we can help our people become peacemakers, and it is an area where we as church leaders can grow in wisdom and skill. In this chapter we will carefully examine the mediation and arbitration *processes*, two other practical ways that we can help our people resolve conflicts, especially when there are substantive matters that need to be addressed.

While we will look at some of the more formal procedures involved in mediation and arbitration, keep in mind that mediation and arbitration are an ordinary part of everyday life. Who of you fathers is not daily an arbiter of your children's disputes? Who of us does not frequently stand between parent and child, brothers and sisters and mediate our family disputes? Mediation and arbitration are simply a continuum of all those many ways we assist people in conflict.

With this principle in mind, let us turn our attention to the practices of pastoral mediation and arbitration, familiarizing ourselves with their biblical roots as well as their contemporary expressions. Let me begin with a story that poses a question for pastors and other church leaders: is mediation a pastoral matter?

Is This a Pastoral Matter?

A local businesswoman called me a while back inquiring as to whether a certain person (I will call him Mr. Jones) was a member of my church. I told her that he had been but that he had moved out of state a year ago.

The other end of the line went silent. So I piped up, "How can I help you? Are you looking for him?"

With a note of great frustration, the businesswoman shared how my former member had an outstanding debt with her business to the tune of fourteen thousand dollars. For over a year the business tried to get his money. But he did not return their phone calls or respond to their letters. The very few times they made vocal contact with him, Mr. Jones had made lots of promises like "just wait until tomorrow."

After she finished her story, I asked, "Why are you calling me?"

She replied, "Because we are a Christian business and do not believe in taking our brothers into civil court. So we called you thinking that as his pastor you could help us. We want to see Mr. Jones pay and are willing to go into Christian mediation or arbitration to remedy our dispute. We believe the church should help, even as it says in 1 Corinthians 6."

This business's theology and ecclesiology were surprising and refreshing. They wanted to obey Scripture, and they knew what God required. It is a rare Christian business or organization that seeks to practice and apply biblical principles. So I told her I would try to find out as much as I could about Mr. Jones's whereabouts and do all in my power to get this money matter settled.

After just a few phone calls, I found out that Mr. Jones and his family had settled in a church that belongs to our sister denomination. That gave me hope. Surely, I thought, this matter will be dealt with in a timely and biblical manner. What I did not expect was the cold response I got when I called the pastor of the church at which Mr. Jones was now a member!

When I got the pastor on the phone and explained the matter to him, telling him that I called to give him a heads-up and to offer help, his response was, "Who do you think I am to get involved in a person's business life? I'm a pastor! I can't get involved in people's affairs like that! I haven't the time. I am already overwhelmed ministering to people. You called the wrong guy. I'm a pastor, not a judge." And with that he abruptly hung up the phone.

His response posed a good question—pastor or judge? Was this a pastoral matter for which he should have taken responsibility? Maybe he should have handed it off to his deacons who deal with financial matters. Maybe he should have advised this sister and brother to take the disputed fourteenthousand-dollar issue to a small claims court or to call a Christian lawyer.

What would you do? Do you believe this type of conflict is a pastoral matter?

This pastor's response is symptomatic of a much bigger issue in the contemporary evangelical church. At the heart of this issue is the question of what it means for churches to "pastor" their people. In other words, what responsibilities do we as church leaders have with respect to the lives of our members? Does our jurisdiction extend only to a person's spiritual life (worship, prayer, Bible reading, family devotions, and witnessing), or does it include his or her business and social life?

For example, when it comes to money, are we responsible only for making sure that members tithe, or are we also responsible for encouraging them to spend the rest of their money wisely? The answer becomes quite apparent when we examine the whole of Scripture and learn that "pecuniary sin" includes not only the failure to tithe. It also includes neglecting to pay credit card debt and debts owed to creditors and failing to keep one's business promises, oaths, and contracts.

Sadly, this pastor's response was typical of many responses I have heard. However much we trumpet the inerrancy of Scripture and its sufficiency, we function like Protestant liberals—establishing our canon within the Canon. Our Bibles look more like that of Thomas Jefferson. We select, cut, and paste what we like and are willing to obey, and we regard the remaining passages, such as Matthew 18:15–20 and 1 Corinthians 6:1–8, as bearing no authority or relevance in our lives.

A Litigious Society

We are living in a very litigious society. 1 Or, as Jerold Auerbach so eloquently describes, we are a people of legal *piety* whose "law is our national religion; lawyers constitute our priesthood; the courtroom our cathedral, where contemporary passion plays are enacted." 2 Understandably, then, we are blind to the mandates of Matthew 18:15–20 and 1 Corinthians 6:1–8. We are unaware of how and why Christ has appointed the church to its unique role of resolving disputes among believers and being light to the world.

There are at least two reasons for this blindness. The first is that people perceive fewer institutions in society as being able to provide real help in

resolving conflicts. Chief Justice Warren Burger observed this problem over twenty years ago when he said, "One reason our courts have become overburdened is that Americans are increasingly turning to the courts for relief from a range of personal distresses and anxieties. Remedies for personal wrongs that once were considered the responsibility of institutions other than the courts are now boldly asserted as legal 'entitlements.' The courts have been expected to fill the void created by the decline of church, family, and neighborhood unity." 3

In the same way in which the church has abandoned pastoral counseling and handed over its jurisdiction to modern psychology and the counseling movement, the church has also abandoned its rightful role and jurisdiction over the civil disputes between Christians. If the church does intervene, it is only over matters in which there is overt doctrinal error or immorality.

This abdication of responsibility has served only to strengthen people's perception that the church is inadequate and unjustified in involving itself in the civil disputes between Christians. The very idea of church leaders having a legitimate right and authority to act as a "court"—having real jurisdiction over its members' doctrine and life, including financial or business dealings, and having the ability to make binding judgments upon them—is wholly alien to our contemporary evangelical understanding of the church and its leadership.

Concurrent to the church's abdication of its God-given authority, people have inflated their trust in civil authority. We place greater hope than ever in our civil courts to remedy the injustices done to us, real or perceived. Eugene Kennedy insightfully comments, "The courts, as perhaps the last institutions with authority intact, became the instruments for displacing blame, some real and some imagined, onto third parties. The staggering increase in malpractice suits, most notably against physicians but also against parents, individual teachers, and school systems, was a major indication that people wanted somebody to pay when things did not work out evenly or fairly in their lives." In theological terms, Kennedy is saying that when people reject a sovereign God, they demand redress by a sovereign court. Today, Americans expect the courts to do what they believe God cannot. 5

Unfortunately, such attitudes are found also within our churches. That our Lord has given to us our civil courts for resolving some civil and criminal conflicts is not in dispute. However, for too many Christians, these are the *only courts* God has given. It is a strange and foreign idea to them to view their church leaders as God's appointed court for his church. Yet this is exactly the way God views those he appoints to govern and rule his church. God commands his church to have its own ecclesiastical courts and processes for settling disputes within the family of God. The fact that we do not see these courts and processes practiced within the modern evangelical church is proof not only of how we have abdicated our God-given authority as officers in Christ's church but also of how we have developed a deficient ecclesiology.

At this point it would be wise to pause and ask yourself if there are any ways your church has been blind to the mandates of Matthew 18:15–20 and 1 Corinthians 6:1–8. And, on the flip side of the same coin, what are you and the other leaders in your church doing to ensure that you obey God's Word? In his article "Toward a Biblical Theology of Litigation: A Law Professor Looks at 1 Corinthians 6:1–11," Robert Taylor confesses that 1 Corinthians 6 poses a number of difficult questions that the church must begin to ask—questions with which we must wrestle if we are to obey God. For example, he asks,

What theological rationale might be offered for these Pauline views? Why is litigation cast in a negative light but mediation in a much more favorable one by St. Paul? . . . What understanding of litigation and mediation, whether explicit or implicit, do the interpreters of St. Paul entertain? . . . Would this Christian biblical theology of litigation have anything to say to our contemporary hyperlitigious society where Christians sue Christians without experiencing the slightest qualm? And why is it better for Christians to lay down their rights and suffer injury than to litigate? In short, why shouldn't Christians sue one another and what's wrong with litigation? 6

To these questions we might add: What kind of teaching and training must church officers and their members receive in order to obey 1 Corinthians 6, not to mention Matthew 18:16? And what pitfalls might church leaders encounter if we rush too readily into this area we have neglected so long?

These must be the kinds of questions we ask ourselves and our churches if we are not to be charged with denying *sola Scriptura*. Though we boast in our confession of sacred Scripture, our failure to practice mediation and arbitration is, in effect, an implicit denial of Scripture. In particular, we

stand guilty on two counts. First, by refusing to obey Scripture's call for the church to act as our court in civil disputes, we deny Scripture's authority over *all* areas of life. Second, by taking our disputes to the civil courts and seeking judgments according to civil law, we treat the secular courts as law as a *quasi* tradition equal in authority with Scripture.

Yet God has given the church to be a court for mediation and arbitration between believers. Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 6 are not suggestions or options but divine mandates. We have no other choice but to obey God and to apply ourselves as pastors to be trained and to train and equip our members in recovering the true ministry of reconciliation that the Lord graciously has given us for our good and his glory.

A Unique Calling of the Church?

As we saw in chapter 9, the first and most obvious reason that churches should play an active part in people's lives with respect to mediation is that Christ himself is our Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). As our Prophet, Priest, and King, he reconciles us to God and God to us. So mediation is legitimate for the reason that it is part of the biblical call of the *imitatio Christi*—the call to "imitate Christ."

Mediation is also indirectly advocated throughout Scripture, where we find men and women practicing mediation in its broadest sense. That is, men and women stand in the gap between two warring parties. Abigail, in 1 Samuel 25, is a classic case in point, as she stands between her husband, Nabal, and David, pleading with David to cease from carrying out his impending attack. In the New Testament, Barnabas acts as a mediator, helping the suspicious church of Jerusalem to reconcile with and accept the apostle Paul (Acts 9:19–27). Moreover, as we saw in chapter 6, Paul himself instructs the Philippian church to get involved in helping Euodia and Syntyche to "agree with each other" in the Lord. That is, Paul calls for assisted peacemaking—for mediators to "help these women" (Phil. 4:2–3).

A text we should consider more closely is Matthew 18:16, a verse nestled in the context of Jesus's call for restoration of a brother who sins. In verse 15, Jesus tells us to go privately to a brother who sins, show him his fault, and seek to restore him. Because Jesus leaves the nature of the sin unspecified, we should not exclude certain sins. For example, returning to

the issue of so-called "pecuniary sins," we should not exclude breaking contracts, failing to pay debts or restitution, and other "business" sins.

If this initial step proves ineffective, Jesus commands a second step in response: "But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Matt. 18:16). This verse poses an important question for us as Christians and pastors: what does Jesus intend when he tells us to "take one or two others along"?

Jesus finds support for including others in the process of restoration by appealing to Deuteronomy 19:15: "One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." This verse deals with the necessity of having more than one witness in order to render a judicial verdict, as is evident from the fact that the two or three are said to be "witnesses." Therefore, it seems that Matthew 18:16 is not talking about mediators but about witnesses to a civil offense or a crime.

If Matthew 18:16 is addressing only the need for witnesses to a civil offense or crime, then it would appear that it is not a text that clearly calls us to mediation. However, further reflection on the character of these witnesses compels us not to conceive of their function so narrowly. Upon careful examination of this verse, we will find at least two lines of evidence that suggest that these witnesses are less like witnesses and more like counselors.

First, unlike verse 17, where we are told to "tell it to the church," verse 16 remains a nonjudicial meeting. Matters are still being discussed and dealt with informally, and there is no judge hearing the case. For that reason, the one or two others taken along should not be thought of as witnesses for the prosecution. Jesus still envisions the possibility of the offending brother listening, and if he does, the process of reconciliation ends there. There is no need to bring the case to the church court.

Second, in all three verses (Matt. 18:15–17), the issue that determines if the restoration process should move forward is whether the erring brother "refuses to listen." This determining factor implies that those seeking to restore him are doing more than giving testimony in support of an allegation of wrongdoing. We ought to assume that these one or two others taken along are speaking, counseling, exhorting, and rebuking—making every effort to compel their brother to listen—rather than merely stating the

evidence for his offense. That is, the one or two taken along in verse 16 are primarily acting as counselors.

Thus it is evident that the context of verse 16 presents these "witnesses" as acting with broader intent than that of a witness who gives evidence in court. However, we are not to assume that they have no witness function. These words would appear to include not only the word of the alleged offending brother but also the word of the brother who initially brings the charges against him. So the two or three are needed to hear and to be witnesses to the words of both the offending and the offended parties—in order to establish the validity of the case brought by each. Surely they will assess the strength of the allegations made, and if the allegations are frivolous, they will say so to the offended brother. But if they are not, they will reinforce to the offending brother the serious nature of the allegations brought against him and call him to repentance. Furthermore, Jesus's citation of Deuteronomy 19:15 may have a proleptic force, anticipating step three when these two or three must no longer act simply as counselors but as witnesses in a church court against the brother who refuses to listen to counsel.

Matthew 18:16, then, cannot be summarily dismissed as irrelevant to the call for the church to practice mediation. Rather, it lends support to what in the broad sense may be called "mediation." That is, Jesus is calling for one or two witnesses to act first as counselors for both parties to the dispute. Only after assessing the validity of the allegations and the refusal of the offending brother to listen are they are to act as witnesses before the court of the church.

We have seen, then, that Matthew 18:16 does envision a ministry of mediation within the local church. If this is true for its members, how much more those who exercise authority within the church. Mediation is part of our pastoral agenda.

I became more persuaded of this conviction recently when I was involved in a year-and-a-half-long mediation. I was familiar with the standard mediation process where the time allotted to come to agreement is limited to one or two days. However, in this case we were mediating between two families in the church, and the process involved both brief crisis mediation and long-term counseling in order to reconcile the relationship. A major part of that counseling was shaped by my resolve to hold out the gospel again and again, applying its key truths to particular aspects of the conflict

over that extended period of time. The turning point in the case was when the Holy Spirit moved powerfully in one of the parties, softening her heart and enabling her to truly hear and believe all that I had been teaching her about who she is in Christ—to hear and believe the gospel.

Upon drawing this case to a close, I could not help but compare my different experiences in mediation. I realized that the typical mediation practice, which was event-oriented, was not sufficient for the task of resolving this dispute. Not only did this particular case take an extended period of time but it also took a church. It took a body of believers who together adhere to a biblical theology and who meet regularly for corporate worship. It took the regular preaching of God's Word and the administering of the Lord's Supper, which I have always guarded by warning those in conflict not to partake if they have not taken steps to be reconciled with their brother or sister (see Matt. 5:23–24). You can imagine how this warning exerted gentle but firm pressure upon the conflicted families to persevere in the hard work of reconciliation. Finally, it took others within the church, including elders and trustworthy friends of each party, who were instrumental in moving the parties toward reconciliation.

I am emphasizing the central role of the church in mediation in order that we as pastors might be encouraged again to see that peacemaking is not a task reserved for lawyers or professional mediators. It is our calling. It is what it means to "rule" over a church (1 Tim. 3:5; 5:17). Christ has given us the church, with its duly appointed elders, as the specific context for resolving our disputes, for restoring peace and justice, and for bearing the sweet fruit of reconciliation (see Matt. 18:15–20; Luke 17:1–10; 1 Cor. 6:1–8; Eph. 3:10; 1 Thess. 5:12–13; 1 Tim. 3:1–8; 5:17; Heb. 13:17).

Christian Mediation

Having had somewhat of a bird's-eye view of contemporary mediation, let us look now at some of the specifics of mediation. These include the role of a mediator, the goals of a mediator, and the mediation process.

The Role of a Mediator

Mediation is when parties in conflict call upon a third party to assist them in reaching a mutually agreed upon settlement of their dispute. The key word here is *assist*. Unlike a panel of arbitrators or a church court, mediators do not decide for the disputants what their agreement will be. This decision is left to the disputants to mutually determine. However, Christian mediators do help shape the final agreement by giving wise biblical counsel.

For example, a Christian mediator may counsel a party to look beyond the bounds of what is *legal* to what is *just and equitable*. In one case I helped mediate, part of our counsel as mediators was to inform one of the parties of the usurious rate of interest he was imposing upon the other party in his contract. He needed to be reminded that the other party from whom he was seeking to extract such interest was his *brother* in Christ. Furthermore, one of the mediators, familiar with the standard rate allowed for certain agreements, was able to tell this man that the amount of interest he had levied against his brother was illegal. Such specialized knowledge is most beneficial in the selection of mediators.

One of the first agreements parties need to come to in a conflict is their choice of the mediator(s). In the church, the mediator(s) will often be the pastors or church officers. Yet, as the example above demonstrates, often other men and women known for their wisdom, specialized knowledge, and godly character are best suited to serve as co-mediators. In our own church, we have encouraged our staff, elders, and several other gifted and interested people to take the mediation training provided by Peacemaker Ministries. I would encourage you to pursue such training for the leaders and members of your church.

Mediators assist parties in a dispute in several ways. First, mediators are often called upon to help encourage the reluctant party to enter into mediation. This request is similar to the all-too-typical scene of the wife seeking marital counseling from her pastor and asking him to encourage her husband to come for counseling.

Second, mediators provide for the brothers or sisters in conflict a renewed degree of objectivity that they have lost in pursuing their dispute. Having lost this objectivity, they are seeking a mediator whom they can trust to give godly and impartial counsel to them. As pastors and church leaders, you already possess tremendous trust and acceptance by your members, as shepherds who care for the good of their flock.

Finally, mediators assist brothers or sisters in conflict by channeling the flow of communication between the parties, clarifying confusing issues, and improving the overall understanding of each of the parties. Mediators, in effect, assist brothers or sisters in conflict to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry (James 1:19).

The Goals of a Mediator

A mediator not only needs to keep in mind the broader goals that guide peacemaking (glorifying God, serving others, and growing to be like Christ) but he or she also must seek to achieve more specific goals in the concrete task of mediating a dispute so as to secure a durable settlement or agreement. Three specific goals the mediator needs to work toward are:

- process satisfaction (1 Cor. 14:40)
- *personal* satisfaction (Matt. 7:12; James 2:1–4)
- product satisfaction (Prov. 28:5)8

As pastor-mediator, you must seek to ensure *process satisfaction*. This means that you are ever mindful that *how* a mediator leads believers to agreement is just as important as the *what*, or the substance, of their agreement. As pastor-mediator, it is incumbent upon you to make sure that the separate parties clearly understand what the mediation *process* will entail, that the process itself will proceed in an *orderly* manner, and that the parties are treated evenhandedly (1 Cor. 14:40). You are to treat each party to the conflict as you yourself would want to be treated.

One of the process concerns you should have in a mediation is that everyone has been provided the necessary information about the process to be followed, as well as a fair opportunity to present his or her side of the matter. Another process concern is that everyone has been given time guidelines, which should serve to anticipate and correct any false expectations as to what a few hours or even a day or two of mediation will reap.

Recently, I failed in just this way. I was negligent in making clear the time issues of the mediation process. I was mediating a labor dispute between one of my elders and one of his employees, who was a member of my church. We had set aside a full day for the matter, yet I failed to inform both of my brothers as to what they could reasonably expect out of the

mediation in that amount of time. The employee assumed that the mediation would last only this one day and that nothing else would happen. At the end of the day, when many issues remained outstanding, he left the mediation very frustrated. Though he was leaving for vacation the very next day, he took the time to express his disappointment with me by letter. He said his entire vacation was ruined because the mediation really was not over. Of course, I knew that the mediation was not over, and I knew he was going on vacation. I expected us to pick up after he returned, but I did not make this clear to him. So in this case, I failed to ensure that he would have process satisfaction.

This failure on my part led the church member to feel that no one, including me, was listening to him—in this case, a central issue in the dispute. These feelings, in turn, fed his own ongoing negative perceptions about his employer and those in authority. All these factors, triggered by my own negligence, made it more difficult for both parties to settle their conflict.

Second, as pastor-mediator you must also seek to secure *personal* satisfaction, which means that you ensure that you and each of the parties are treating each other respectfully and equally (see Matt. 7:12; James 2:1–4). One of the great models of peacemaking is God himself, who frequently reminds us that he is not partial and equally warns us not to be partial nor to show favoritism when judging. The mediator acts as umpire, calling both parties to speak the truth in love and gently reprimanding those who break the ground rules for civil discourse. Here is where matters of offense, rebuke, conviction of sin, repentance, and the granting of forgiveness should come into play.

During meditation what becomes very evident is that the substantive issue, the matter at hand, is the presenting problem. But what escalated the conflict to a firestorm were the many little (or big!) ways the believers offended or took offense against each other in the dispute. For example, when a party breaks a contract or fails to pay a debt, the pastor-mediator must not think that simply arranging for this party to repay the debt will be sufficient for forming a durable agreement. Rather, this negligent party may need to confess his or her sin of breaking an oath to a brother or sister, evading follow-up phone calls, and lying. Moreover, both parties may need to make confession for slaying one another with hurtful words. There is ample reason why Jesus speaks of brothers in conflict as getting angry and

calling one another names like *Raca*. All these sins need to be confessed, and for each of them, forgiveness needs to be granted. We as pastormediators should find great joy in situations like these, for there is abundant opportunity for us to show the very real and present power of the gospel in the nitty-gritty details of life's messy moments.

Finally, the pastor-mediator must seek to secure *product satisfaction*. *Product* refers to the substantive issue(s) with respect to persons or property. For example, in the case of a debt not paid, the mediator would need to make sure that the matter of payment of debt is addressed and the manner of settling the debt is clearly and equitably spelled out in the mediation agreement.

As you examine these three specific goals, over which do you as a mediator have the greatest control? You have very little influence over the product. In a contract or real estate dispute, for example, you have little to do with the actual terms of those agreements. But you have far greater control over the manner in which the *process* is conducted and the way in which each of the *persons* conducts himself or herself toward the others. More often than not, if mediation agreements later dissolve, it will be not because of how the substantive issue was resolved but because of a failure in the process or a failure to address personal issues.

The Mediation Process

The general process of mediation can be broken down into three phases: (1) the premediation phase (getting the parties into mediation), (2) the mediation itself (resolving the conflict), and (3) the postmediation phase (securing a durable agreement).

Unlike conflict counseling, when you are counseling only one person in a conflict, in mediation you are dealing with at least two parties. As you might well know, counseling two people is not a matter of simple addition. There is an exponential increase in information, issues, interests, emotions, concerns, and expectations. Consequently, mediation presents many possible pitfalls into which a mediator can fall when trying to help two parties in conflict with one another.

It is not my intention to elaborate much more with respect to process issues. However, let me direct you to two helpful resources for steering

one's way through the mediation process: Ken Sande's book *The Peacemaker* and his booklet *Guiding People through Conflict*. <u>10</u> Both resources can provide detailed guidance as you seek to assist the parties in conflict before, during, and after mediation.

My primary use of *The Peacemaker* is in the premediation phase, when I am attempting to get the parties to the table. During this time, I have the parties read selected sections from the first six chapters of Sande's book in order that they may see the benefits of entering into mediation and how it can help them glorify God, serve others, and grow to be like Christ. I also want the parties to begin shifting their thinking from accusing, blame-shifting, minimizing their sin, and other sinful habits to getting the log out of their own eye. In addition to reading, I also typically assign some of the questions at the end of each chapter as homework for both parties, which will help to prepare them for their first mediation meeting.

The second resource, *Guiding People through Conflict*, is particularly helpful in the mediation itself. It walks you through the individual steps of a mediation. And at the back of the booklet there is a checklist to which the mediator can refer to make sure he has done all that needs to be done in each phase of the mediation.

The primary benefit of mediation for both pastors and the parties involved is that they get to see afresh the wisdom and power of the gospel. Their sin, God's holiness, Christ's atonement, the church as family, and their own participation in the process as peacemakers renews their faith in the reality and relevance of the gospel. They see Christ's lordship as extending beyond the spiritual to the seemingly "unspiritual" and mundane affairs of their lives. God appears larger now. He is Lord over all of our life—including our disputes, our business, our financial dealings, the contracts we sign, and the promises we make. Mediation by the church makes us see all the more that Christ the Lord is our Mediator, our Wonderful Counselor, and our Prince of Peace.

Church Arbitration

If conflicted parties are unable to resolve their dispute through mediation, they always have the option to pursue arbitration. In the following paragraphs we will look first at the apostle Paul's instructions about

arbitration in 1 Corinthians 6. Then we will briefly examine some of the particulars of arbitration.

1 Corinthians 6

We should not be surprised to find that 1 Corinthians 6:1–8 is another passage the church has long avoided. The Corinthians themselves neglected to mention this matter of civil litigation to Paul when they asked for his counsel. Our neglect mirrors theirs. And like the original Corinthians, our neglect only proves how much more our thought and practice has been shaped by the world than by God's Word. Much work must be done in this area of arbitration if we are to be obedient to God and his Word and to faithfully shepherd his people.

To put it in context, 1 Corinthians 6:1–8 is Paul's second reproof to the Corinthians with respect to their church discipline practices, or failure thereof. In chapter 5 Paul reproves them for their failure to judge a man committing incest. Here in chapter 6 Paul reproves the Corinthians for a related issue—failing to submit their disputes to the church for judgment. By implication, Paul is also criticizing the church leaders for their failure to establish a forum to which the Corinthian Christians could submit their disputes for arbitration.

Perhaps more important to observe than the context of 1 Corinthians 6 is Paul's emotional state. Paul is outraged and aghast at the actions of the Corinthians. He follows with six more rhetorical questions asked in sharp staccato that are thinly disguised rebukes. In verse 4 Paul mocks the Corinthians, calling them to appoint even men of little account rather than airing their disputes before unbelievers. And lest they do not get it, he explicitly tells them in verse 5 that he says all these things to their *shame*.

Paul's anger rises to fever pitch in verses 9–10 when he issues a strong warning against adulterers, homosexuals, idolaters, thieves, the greedy, slanderers, and swindlers as those who will not inherit God's kingdom. Surely Paul is associating the actions of the Corinthians who drag their brothers and sisters into court with this list of those who live in deliberate and overt rebellion against God.

To understand Paul's words of admonishment, we first must understand what Paul is *not* criticizing. Paul is not saying that disputes should not arise

—he is no naïve utopian. Nor is he advocating a rejection of all courts. He expects there to be church courts for settling disputes between believers. Nor should we assume that Paul is condemning all legal proceedings, for he values such proceedings in Romans 13:1–7, where the matters under consideration are what we would call criminal acts (instead of civil acts).

Paul is, however, criticizing the Corinthians on several counts. First, we can infer from Paul's description of the secular judges that their courts have a different standard and method of arriving at judicial decisions. They are the courts of the "ungodly" (1 Cor. 6:1) and the "unbelievers" (v. 6). Paul contrasts them with the church court, which is the court of the saints (vv. 1–2) and believers (v. 5). Paul understands the need for dispute resolution, but because the secular standard and method of judicial activity is so different from that of believers, he expects the church to have in place its own forum for resolving disputes among its members. And he chides the Corinthians for their failure to provide such a forum.

Paul, then, poses his first challenge to us: Do we have a forum for arbitration in our churches? Are we prepared to handle the civil disputes between believers? If not, why not? What ought we to do to remedy our own failures, lest we come under the same rebuke that Paul gives the Corinthians?

Second, Paul is criticizing the way in which these disputes are affecting the witness of the church. Twice Paul expresses shock that the Corinthians are taking their disputes "before the ungodly" and "in front of unbelievers" (1 Cor. 6:1, 6), because when Christians take their disputes out of the church and publicly air them in the secular courts, they denigrate Christ's name, wisdom, and power before the world. This course of action stands in direct contrast to the church's mission to be a light to the world!

Again, these matters pose further challenges to us: Are our churches known in our communities as places of mediation and arbitration? Do your people know that when disputing with a brother or sister, they can appeal their case to you or to other church leaders? Do we understand that the witness of our church is the witness for Christ, and do we take that witness seriously? As Paul insists, "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated" (1 Cor. 6:7). Paul is not saying that we should never have *disputes* among us. Rather, he is speaking of *lawsuits*. That is, Paul is describing a church that has "gone postal"—brother has taken up arms against brother. Instead of love, we have an

adversarial spirit, self-serving interests, self-promoting antagonism, suspicions, uncharitable judgments, greed, and the like ruling the church. Brothers, this should not be!

That such strife and dissension exists *among brothers* is Paul's final charge against the Corinthians. Their actions betray the very nature of the church as the family of God. Three times in verses 5–6 Paul stresses that the ones they are dragging into court are *brothers*: "I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers [literally *brothers*]? But instead, one *brother* goes to law against another [literally *brother*]—and this in front of unbelievers!" Moreover, Paul concludes his rebuke of the Corinthians exasperated that they are acting this way toward fellow believers: "Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your *brothers*" (v. 8).

The Corinthians' actions evidence a wholesale disregard for the unique character of Christ's church and its mission, and much to our shame, our actions often demonstrate the same. Oh that we would recover the same passion for Christ and his church that Paul had and, by God's grace, seek to institute the policies and practices necessary for resolving our disputes through mediation or arbitration.

How Arbitration Differs from Mediation

We have gotten a small taste of Paul's passion for peacemaking in our exposition of 1 Corinthians 6. Now let us highlight some of the particulars of church arbitration by comparing it with mediation, beginning first with a simple definition.

Arbitration is a process whereby parties agree to explain their dispute to another person or persons to whom they have given the authority to render a binding decision on the matter. This process is what Paul seems to have in mind in 1 Corinthians 6. And in many ways, it is similar to the hearings held by the Old Testament judges whom Moses appointed to settle the disputes of the people of Israel (see Exod. 18:17–27; Deut. 16:18–20).11

There are a couple significant ways that arbitration differs from mediation. The most important difference is that parties to arbitration hand over the power of judgment to another—the arbiter—thus limiting their influence on the way the dispute is resolved. Explaining this limited aspect

of arbitration to disputing believers can serve as good incentive for them to enter into the hard work of mediation because in mediation each party has far more control over the nature of the agreement.

Arbitration also differs from mediation in that it primarily deals with substantive issues (the product), whereas Christian mediation spends considerable time addressing personal issues and the matters of the heart. The arbiter does not engage in any personal counseling during the resolution process, nor does he address either party privately. If the arbiter does offer counsel, he does so publicly, addressing both parties.

However, though the arbiter himself abstains from engaging in personal counseling, this does not preclude having others within the church come alongside the parties in dispute and give them counsel about the personal issues involved. Furthermore, arbitration within the local church does not preclude seeking counsel outside its own membership—such as appropriate legal counsel or other professional expertise—to help it arbitrate matters. As of yet, our own church has not arbitrated any substantive disputes between our members. We have, though, had members in our church involved in disputes with other Christians outside our church, and in those instances, we have relied on Peacemaker Ministries' services to guide us through the process.

For example, recently I received a call from a man asking if a Fred Anderson attended my church. I said he did. The man then identified himself as a Christian attending a well-known church in town and went on to relay the circumstances leading up to this call. It seemed that Fred Anderson had violated a contract and now owed the man a sum of ninety-five thousand dollars. The part I played was to get my brother in Christ, Fred Anderson, to the table. We appealed to Peacemaker Ministries, and both men agreed to submit their dispute to them and be bound by a mediation-arbitration agreement.

In a mediation-arbitration agreement, the parties to the dispute first attempt mediation. If that does not succeed, or if there are remaining substantive issues to be addressed, they move their mediation case into an arbitration court. This was precisely how the resolution process proceeded with Fred Anderson. While many of the personal issues were addressed during mediation, the substantive issues—how much was actually owed—was taken to arbitration. There, an arbitration judge heard the case and rendered a binding decision. While the process was not perfect nor the

brothers fully reconciled, the church had fulfilled its responsibility to resolve its disputes in-house and not before the secular courts. It was faithful to uphold Christ's good name and exercise justice.

For my part, I grew in my understanding of how to pastor my people "where they are at"—in the nitty-gritty, messy details of their lives, encouraging them to be keepers of their word, to honor their contracts, to confess their sin, to grant forgiveness, and to glorify God. I hope I have inspired you toward the same goal.

Dare We Take It before the Ungodly?

Mediation and arbitration are two major forms for assisting our people in reconciliation. More than simply legal matters, they are *pastoral* matters. More than simple tools of the trade, they are ways of *being*—being mediators, being judges, being peacemakers. Above all, they must have a proper place and function in the church, the family of God, where Christ reigns through his Word and Spirit, binding our hearts in Christian love.

That love for which the world will turn to Christ is a practical love. By taking our disputes before the ungodly, we publicly witness to a god other than Christ. But by obeying Christ the Lord and practicing mediation and arbitration within his church, we demonstrate the real presence of Christ in his church, in this world. And that may make the world sit up and say, as they did in the days of Moses, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us? . . . And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws?" (Deut. 4:6–7).

11 Church Discipline Principles

As we have seen in chapters 9 and 10, mediation and arbitration are ways of assisting our people to be at peace with one another. In the pages to come, we will learn how church discipline is yet another means of assisting conflicted parties to move toward reconciliation. However, whereas the peacemaking practices of mediation and arbitration rarely elicit disdain, the very mention of "church discipline" provokes all manner of negative responses. *Mediation* sounds like peacemaking, but *church discipline* sounds like punishment. *Reconciliation* is a user-friendly term; *discipline* is not. Yet as R. C. Sproul reminds us, "The church is called not only to a ministry of reconciliation, but a ministry of nurture to those within her gates. Part of that nurture includes church discipline." 1

I remember how one person attending our membership class visibly twitched when he heard me speak about church discipline. Only after hearing his story did I appreciate his vehement reaction to it. His reaction was shaped by his experience of seeing church discipline abused rather than practiced properly according to God's Word. He had come out of a church where one Sunday, before the entire congregation, arbitrarily and without prior notice, the pastor excommunicated certain members of his church—even to the point of dividing spouses and families.

Interestingly, this man who was telling me the story remained with the church and under this pastor for another year before leaving. When I asked him why, he said that he had been raised to view the pastor as God's spokesman. Challenging, questioning, or resisting the pastor was tantamount to challenging, questioning, and resisting God.

Only after suffering through more outrageous behavior did he sense that things were not right. He became disenchanted and decided to leave—not only the church but also the city. He came to Billings and heard good things about our church. Yet even after spending nearly a year developing friendships and relationships in the church, and even though he saw

firsthand our peacemaking practices, he still winced when he heard the phrase "church discipline."

While this man's experience is a bit unusual and extreme, nevertheless, people entering our churches bring with them various assumptions about God, human freedom, and authority, as well as their own experiences that profoundly shape their views of what it means to be part of the body of Christ in a local church. All these factors inform or misinform their conceptions about church discipline.

For example, many tend to equate church discipline with only its most extreme and public form—excommunication. This understanding of church discipline is similar to the way people interpret "disciplining a child" to mean "corporal punishment." Sadly, we church leaders have done little to change this misperception. We ourselves tend to reserve the use of the phrase "church discipline" for only acts of formal censure of the most public or extreme kind, such as excommunication.

One of the adverse effects of this narrow interpretation of church discipline is that people have come to think of it more in terms of an incident or event rather than an ongoing process. In other words, we do not conceive of discipline as a normal aspect of the Christian life—as a summary of disciplined Christian living consisting of self-discipline, regular and frequent encouragement, admonition, warning, prayer, preaching, heeding God's Word, repentance, pursuit of righteousness, and so on. Instead, we have reduced discipline to a singular act of punishment and relegated it to the termination of fellowship within the Christian community, or excommunication. Our own congregations are evidence of this way of thinking, as they would be more likely to view discipline as something that interrupts and jolts the Christian life than something that subtly and readily defines the Christian life from its inception.

Another misperception of church discipline stems from people's understanding of authority. For many people, any exercise of authority is abuse of power. I am not talking about real pastoral abuse of authority, as my friend experienced at his church. Instead, I am referring to the general cultural ethos that we might call the Nietzschean suspicion—the amorphous suspicion that all authority is only a grab for power or a desire to maintain the structure of power. This suspicion of power gets played in the minor key when people associate *discipline* with always being harsh, unloving, impersonal, and formal. Again, there may be reason for this association

based upon their real experience, particularly if they have seen church leaders be impersonal and harsh in their treatment of members. But, as the old axiom about discipline teaches, "abuse does not rule out use." Just because some abuse their authority in discipline does not rule out the proper use of discipline.

There is a flip side to this suspicion of power that also factors into the common disdain for church discipline. It is the infatuation with freedom. We may sing in our churches, "Blest be the tie that binds," but in reality our autonomous spirits shout, "Freedom first!" We confess that marriage is a one-flesh union, but so many in our churches point to the imaginary fine print that God would never want us to remain in an unhappy marriage. We talk about how we are members in the body of Christ, the temple of God, the family of God, but these corporate images are mere metaphors. Since human autonomy is flourishing in our churches, it is obvious that in our minds, the reality that these images represent is not far greater but far less than the images. We are not *really* creatures created in covenant but noble beasts who enter into social contracts and exit when they impose or limit our freedom.

While it is not my intent to probe further into the issues related to authority and freedom, even recognizing that these cultural forces are at play ought to help us reexamine our own views and those of our people when together we think of what it means to "be the church" and what it means to corporately embrace and practice church discipline. In membership class I will often pose the following question in an attempt to provoke people to thought: "Who do you know in our church who is presently under discipline?" Then, before they can answer, I blurt out, "Everyone! We are all under discipline, for everyone in Christ is a disciple of Christ, and disciples are simply people under discipline."

Of course it is not our people alone who have a problem with discipline. We as pastors do, as is evident by our resistance to the call to discipline others. Who of us has not reasoned, "I'm afraid of legal threats," "It is unloving," "We ought not to judge," "I don't know how," "It is too time consuming," or "I fear what others might say about our church"? And our excuses go on.

I remember counseling a pastor in Indiana. The pastor he had replaced had a reputation as a great pastor who "grew his church." Sure enough, his church had grown from a few people to a membership of over four hundred —because as a church, they took in people "as they are." And unfortunately, this former pastor and his elders let the people remain as they are.

Now that the new pastor was on the scene, he was encountering resistance from his elders about how to deal with a former member. When they learned that this member was in an adulterous relationship, the elders let the man leave and attend another local church with a letter of transfer! Their excuse was, "We don't think discipline is the loving thing to do."

A Brief Historical Sketch

One way for us pastors to begin to confess our own reticence and resistance to exercising church discipline is to study how the church historically has handled this area of pastoral ministry. John Calvin does much to elucidate this matter for us, so I will give you a brief historical sketch by appealing to this spiritual forefather of the Reformation.

Sixteenth-Century Reformation

The Reformers gave great impetus toward the recovery of church discipline. For them, church discipline became a matter of great importance. While there is dispute as to whether they deemed discipline a mark of a true church, all the Reformers saw discipline, if not a mark of the essence (*esse*) of a true church, as something necessary for its well-being (*bene esse*).3

Surely pride of place for this recovery goes to John Calvin who, in discovering biblical church government, equally recovered biblical church discipline. As one recent Calvin scholar noted, "To trace discipline through Calvin's ministry is essentially to write anew his biography." 4 Calvin was expelled from Geneva, Switzerland, in 1538 over the issue of his disciplinary proposals, and his stance on discipline was the condition for his return three years later in 1541: "I would never have accepted the ministry unless they had sworn to these two points: namely to uphold the Catechism and the discipline." 5

As in our day, Calvin is aware that many people "in their hatred of discipline, recoil from its very name." Nevertheless, he does not recoil from

the necessity to exercise discipline within the church. And he answers the question of its necessity by asking rhetorically,

What will happen if each is allowed to do what he pleases? Yet that would happen, if to preaching of doctrine there were not added private admonitions, corrections, and other aids of the sort that sustain doctrine and do not let it remain idle. Therefore, discipline is like a bridle to restrain and tame those who rage against the doctrine of Christ; or like a spur to arouse those of little inclination and also sometimes like a father's rod to chastise mildly and with the gentleness of Christ's Spirit those who have more seriously lapsed. . . . Now this is the sole remedy that Christ has enjoined and the one that has always been used among the godly. 6

It is important to note two things about this quote. First, Calvin has in view the discipline of "those who have more seriously lapsed." Second, in light of such a person who has seriously lapsed, he counsels the church to discipline such a person as a father would his child—mildly and gently. Whatever caricature many may have of Calvin, here is another example that proves us wrong. Calvin calls us pastors to be gentle fathers of our flock.

While Calvin does not list discipline as a mark of the church in his *Institutes*, he does argue for its necessity to preserve the church in his reply to Cardinal Sadoleto. Calvin's letter to Sadoleto is his defense of the Genevan reform and against the advances of the papacy. A substantial aspect of Sadoleto's appeal to the Genevans to return to Rome is his argument that the Roman church alone bears the marks of Christ's true church.

It is in light of this controversy that Calvin counters, claiming that a true church exercises discipline (which he claims the Roman church does not): "There are three things upon which the safety of the church is founded and supported: doctrine, discipline, and the sacraments." The key word here is *safety*. Though Calvin does not regard discipline as one of the marks of the church, he does see discipline as that which *preserves* the church. While the gospel is the soul of the body of Christ, discipline is its sinews, holding the church together:

Let us understand this: if no society, indeed, no house which has even a small family, can be kept in proper condition without discipline, it is much more necessary in the church . . . as the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so does discipline serve as its sinews, through which the members of the body hold together, each in its own place. Therefore, all

who desire to remove discipline or to hinder its restoration—whether they do this deliberately or out of ignorance—are surely contributing to the ultimate dissolution of the church."

Clearly, discipline for Calvin is a vital part of a true church. Whether considered as a mark (Belgic Confession), one of the "keys of the kingdom" (Heidelberg Catechism, Westminster Confession), or a means of grace (Calvin's writings, Canons of Dort), discipline is the sinews of the body of Christ.

The Modern Period

Despite the strides Calvin and the early Reformers made with respect to instituting church discipline, its practice, not surprisingly, appears to be a perennial problem for ministers. Just a couple of generations after Calvin, Richard Baxter (ca. 1656), in his book *The Reformed Pastor*, laments the estate of the church in his day: "My second request to the ministers in these kingdoms is that they would at last, without any more delay, unanimously set themselves to the practice of those parts of Church discipline which are unquestionably necessary, and part of their work. It is a sad case, that good men should settle themselves so long in the constant neglect of so great a duty. The common cry is, 'Our people are not ready for it; they will not bear it.'" Without letting us shift the blame to our people, Baxter points his finger at us ministers and asks to our shame, "But is not the fact rather that you will not bear the trouble and hatred which it will occasion?"9

A recent church intervention carried out by Peacemaker Ministries demonstrated how fitting Baxter's words are for today. The lead mediator was fielding objections that one of the church's elders was making to church discipline. This elder was a professor of systematic theology at a major evangelical seminary. As you read the following objections that he raised, ask yourself if your own heart has ever raised similar ones:

- People will simply leave the church and go to another church if they are confronted.
- Modern people will not accept this kind of accountability—they will accuse us of being judgmental and legalistic.
- It takes too much time, and in a large congregation there is no way we could follow up on all the people.

• Teaching on discipline is inconsistent with our emphasis on grace and the love of God.

To each of these objections, the lead mediator responded by citing Scripture. Finally, after listening and being persuaded, the professor admitted, "Well, I guess we just have to be biblical." Is this response not the only response we can make? However much our own hearts resist the difficult and unpleasant task of discipline, the real issue is: what does the Bible say? We must demonstrate that our allegiance to God's Word is not an empty confession but an actual practice.

While we can easily document the failures of the church, the history of the practice of church discipline is not all grim. For example, from our own country's history, Lynn Buzzard documents the disciplinary practices of five frontier Baptist churches from 1781 to 1860. He finds that between them, these churches heard 1,636 individual cases of church discipline, and they heard many of them more than once, often five or six times. These cases covered a wide variety of conduct, such as drinking too much, neglecting to pay debts, failing to deliver on promises, defaming a neighbor, Freemasonry, and false teaching. 10 Clearly, churches have practiced discipline at different points in history. But what makes this list so interesting are the kinds of sins these frontier churches deemed worthy of consideration. When was the last time someone in our church was disciplined for failing to pay debts, to fulfill contractual obligations, or to keep other promises?

The tide, however, seems to be changing. My own labors for Peacemaker Ministries have allowed me the privilege to teach church discipline throughout our nation in many different churches and to a wide spectrum of evangelical leaders. I can attest that there are pastors and church leaders who, while admitting to the church's failure to practice discipline, equally express an earnest desire to recover a biblical view of the church, and discipline as a nurturing aspect of it. Let us turn our attention, then, to these very matters—to the biblical principles of church discipline.

Basic Biblical Principles of Church Discipline

One place to start in recapturing a biblical view of church discipline is by asking: What does it mean for a person to have faith in Christ? What does it

mean to trust him? To a great measure, Christ answers these questions in his Great Commission to his disciples when he says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:18–20).

Reflecting on Jesus Christ as Lord

The Christ in whom we believe and trust is the risen Lord. He is the one to whom all authority in heaven and earth has been given. Moreover, he is our crucified Lord, whose gospel gently but powerfully allays any suspicion we may have toward the authority and power vested in him or any fears we may have of surrendering our personal freedom unto his sovereign authority and rule. As Christians, we are ever mindful that Christ's royal crown sits on a thorn-pierced head. Thus we willingly follow in his steps, in the *via dolorosa*, as cross-bearing disciples. And by our union with Christ, we cast off all arrogant claims to be our own authority or to secure individual freedom. We are now servants of Christ Jesus, slaves of Christ, disciples of the Lord.

It is this risen Christ who commissions his disciples to disciple the nations. Disciples are people under Christ's discipline, even as Christ himself was under his Father's discipline during his earthly pilgrimage. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, Christ "learned obedience" through suffering (Heb. 5:8). And it is by his obedience even unto death on a cross that Jesus claims the name that is above every name—"Lord." Jesus Christ is Lord.

As we seek to be Christ's disciples and to "go and make disciples," it will greatly encourage us and persuade our listeners if we are faithful to remember and to communicate the essence of what it means for Christ to be our Lord. The biblical idea of "Lord" is not to be reduced to raw, unfettered power. "Lord" is the covenantal name of God—a relational name. That Jesus Christ is Lord tells me, the Christian, that I am not my own but have been bought with a price, the blood of Christ. That Jesus is Lord tells me that I am not alone, but I belong to the covenant people of God. Thus it is a

corporate confession before it is the confession of any one individual. And it is the confession of the One who already has authority over us. None of us enters this world alone. We come into existence with a preexisting authority and identity, being named, defined, and directed not by ourselves but by others: God, parents, family, relatives, friends, church, city, and country. So in a similar way, when our people enter into church membership, they enter into the midst of a people already in existence, bound by the promise that the Bible refers to as the covenant of grace, the new covenant.

Christ the risen Lord then tells his disciples to baptize. Baptism is an initiating and *including* sacrament. It is a sign of our union with Christ, and by it, our breach with sin. "We died to sin," Paul exclaims, "how can we live in it any longer? . . . all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death" (Rom. 6:2–3). Baptism then is a means of discipline. It marks a man, woman, or child as distinct and separate from sin and the world. It marks our belonging to a new people—God's family. Baptism is a badge of being a disciple—a person under Christ's discipline.

Because baptism includes us into God's covenant community, it implies we can be excluded. If God signifies by baptism, "my people," so too baptism implies that upon certain grounds there may be a forfeiture of that relationship in which God says to us, "not my people."

By association, we should not forget the other sacrament the risen Lord has given us—the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is an ongoing and maturing sacrament. When it is administered, each communing member is called to examine and judge himself or herself as sinners needing Christ (1 Cor. 11:27–28). The Lord's Supper, then, is a regular means of conforming our lives to Christ's discipline, and a major part of that process is the recognition that we are members of one body, one faith, one Spirit, one Father, and one Lord (Eph. 4:4–6). We are disciples who sup not only with the Lord but also with each other, and by it, we express our unity in discipline.

The Lord Christ in his Great Commission also tells his disciples to teach the new disciples to obey everything that he has commanded. This ministry of the Word is one of the principal means of grace, whether it is ministered corporately (by preaching and teaching), in group settings (such as family or Bible study), or individually. Jesus prays, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). In other words, God's Word not only

teaches us about the truth and how to obey the truth, but it also changes us, empowering us to turn from our sinful ways and live the truth. Thus it too is a means of discipline.

It is apparent, then, why Paul instructs Timothy and Titus, two teaching elders, to exercise regular discipline in the church through the means of the preaching and teaching of God's Word. Specifically, Paul tells Timothy,

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for *teaching*, *rebuking*, *correcting and training in righteousness*, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: *Preach* the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; *correct*, *rebuke and encourage*—with great patience and careful instruction.

2 Timothy 3:16–4:2

Notice how Paul teaches in chapter 3, verse 16, that the Word is not only instructive but corrective. Yet what characterizes this correction is not only *rebuking* but also *training*. In other words, true biblical discipline, as exercised by the ministry of the Word, is not only corrective, telling people what not to believe or do, but also *morally educative*, helping people learn to be wise in all dimensions of their lives.

Along similar lines, notice Paul's list in chapter 4, verse 2 of how to effectively use Scripture (to "correct, rebuke and encourage"), together with the earlier list in verse 16 (for "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training") suggests that the ministry of the Word is *multidimensional*. We teach and rebuke; we encourage and warn; we correct and train. All these activities are part of the nurturing ministry of the Word and the interrelated practice of church discipline.

Let us now turn to Titus and look more closely at Paul's instructions to him, specifically in relation to how he is to use the Word: "You must *teach* what is in accord with sound doctrine. Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, *self-controlled*, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. Likewise, *teach* the older women. . . . [who can in turn] train the younger women . . . to be *self-controlled*. . . . Similarly, *encourage* the young men to be *self-controlled*" (Titus 2:1–6). What Paul envisions for the

ministry of the Word is much broader than what many of us have been taught in seminary, and it extends far beyond what can be accomplished through a Sunday sermon. Paul instructs Titus to aim his teaching at specific classes of people: older men, younger men, older women, younger women, slaves, and freemen. In other words, Paul is showing the need for small group settings where the Word can be taught and applied more directly and specifically to different people with different life needs. How and what Titus teaches an older woman about exercising self-control (and the other character qualities he lists) will be different in some ways than how and what he teaches the young men.

Even more important than the breadth of Paul's vision for the Word is the focus of his vision. In telling Titus how to apply God's Word, Paul again and again speaks of the need to teach the people to be self-controlled—that is, self-disciplined. In other words, Paul is teaching that all of God's people are people under discipline, and as such, we ought to conform our lives to the Lord by learning self-discipline. As the Lord's disciples, we are people bound to God's covenant Word. Our standards, morals, goals, desires, and entire philosophy of life change when we enter Christ's church and hear God's Word. We no longer take our cues from the culture or our own individual wants and desires, but we are now led by God's Word. And that Word is a gospel Word that teaches us to say yes to Christ and no to ungodliness.

In Titus 2:11–14 Paul speaks of this gospel "no" that is the fruit of God's grace. Again, Paul's instruction to Titus is enlightening here:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Most people think of grace as the liberty to always say yes to everything, including their sinful desires. They do not have to worry about sin anymore because grace has provided them with a new arrangement—they sin, and God forgives. But Paul, the apostle of grace, argues to the contrary. Grace, he says, teaches us to say no, for grace shows us where true

freedom lies—not in sin and debauchery, but in self-controlled lives. Grace, then, teaches us discipline.

Paul goes on to show that grace is about self-giving—Jesus's self-giving. And the purpose of Jesus's self-giving, says Paul, is that he might redeem (or free from bondage) for himself a *people* eager to do good. From these verses we can deduce that discipline is more than just an individual issue. It is a corporate issue that involves the whole of the body of Christ. We are disciplined together. We are taught to say no together.

Interestingly, Paul concludes this part of his letter by urging Titus to teach the matters addressed in chapter 2 to his people and to teach in a particular way. He charges, "Encourage and rebuke" (Titus 2:15). Thus we see again that teaching is not merely instructive; it is corrective. Teaching is not just encouraging, but it is discouraging. In short, teaching is disciplining.

Discipleship, then, is the discipline of the church, and the discipline of the church is all about discipleship. As such it involves far more than the church court publicly pronouncing censure against someone. It involves the church using the various means of grace to faithfully nurture Christ's disciples so that they might grow in the knowledge, love, and worship of Jesus Christ as the *risen* Lord. Hence, discipline actually begins with the regular pastoral duties of discipling God's people through preaching, teaching, counseling, and equipping the saints (see Eph. 4:11–13; Phil. 4:9; Col. 3:16; 1 Tim. 4:13–16; 2 Tim. 3:16–4:2; Titus 2:1–3:11). Besides these, true biblical discipleship also includes establishing contexts for intentional mutual encouragement through *small groups* (see, e.g., Mal. 3:16; 2 Tim. 2:2; Titus 2:2–6; Heb. 3:12–13),11personal devotions, and *self-discipleship* (see Psalm 1; 1 Cor. 9:24–27; 1 Tim. 4:16). One could argue that 98 percent of the ministry of the Word occurs in these general and informal discipleship contexts.

By emphasizing how the practice of the general and ordinary means of discipleship is church discipline in action, you will do much to change your people's perception that discipline is an event or incident that abruptly ends life in the Christian community under the extreme measures of excommunication. One common way our own church seeks to teach these things is to encourage informal public confession of sin. As leaders we encourage such confession and strive to model it when the occasion presents itself. I myself have made public apology several times for my

sins. By our example, we stress to our people that we in authority are also under authority. Jesus Christ is *our Lord*.

Moreover, when one of our people does wrong, particularly if his or her wrongdoing is of a public nature, and the pastoral staff or elders become involved in ministering and counseling the person, we encourage him or her as an expression of repentance to make a public confession of sin. The venue for this type of confession is the Sunday morning service when we call for praises, prayers, and confession. We have found that when someone does stand and confess, it is almost always followed by a joyful spirit of holiness that comes upon our church. It is joyful *holiness* in that others are moved to examine their own sins. As a pastor, I have found that my counseling load typically rises after such public confession. It is *joyful* holiness in that public confession always entails a public announcement of forgiveness. Consequently, my people express greater and more frequent thanks for the grace of God in forgiveness.

Public confession of sin also helps us to counter the misconception that *discipline* pertains only to certain more heinous sins. Many of us are familiar with the saying, "We discipline the bedroom and not the boardroom," which simply means we are more likely to discipline for glaring sins such as sexual immorality than for more subtle sins such as unethical business practices. This saying has become a proverb because we have failed to see discipline as discipleship—as helping people submit *all* aspects of their lives to the lordship of Christ.

Since discipline is indeed discipleship, then all manner of sins may warrant the discipline process detailed in Matthew 18:15–17. An examination of Scripture reveals that no specific sin warrants church discipline more than others. So, for example, in 2 Thessalonians 3:6 Paul says we are to invoke discipline on those who are idle and do not work. In 1 Timothy 5:20 he commands us to discipline and even publicly rebuke those in authority (elders!). In Titus 3:10 we are told to practice discipline on those who are contentious or divisive persons. And in Galatians 6:1 we are called to discipline any brother who is ensnared in sin. The point is that discipline is not simply for fornicators, drunkards, or spouse deserters but for all who seek to follow Christ.

All in all, discipline is not a word or practice to fear. Rather, it is a ministry of nurture, care, concern, and opportunity. It is in the context of discipleship that we should begin teaching our people about discipline, for

discipleship is simply learning to become disciplined in the graces of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Keys of the Kingdom

Earlier we saw how Paul concludes his counsel to Titus by instructing him to teach, encourage, and rebuke "with all authority" (Titus 2:15). Here Paul explicitly recognizes and affirms the authority vested in Titus as a church officer. By so doing, he implies that the church is not a democracy but a hierarchy. The body of Christ, the family of God, is an authority structure. We are not only members of one another, but some are specially called to be pastors (or shepherds), overseers, or elders, which are offices of authority.

This authority structure is not something the church established on its own but is a visible expression of Christ's present authority that he has vested in the church. As the Westminster Confession says in chapter 30.1, "The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, has therein appointed a government, in the hands of church officers . . . to these officers the keys of the kingdom are committed." 12 Just as the foundational principle of church discipline is Jesus's own lordship, so the primary supporting principle is that Christ exercises his lordship in and over his church through his representatives, the teaching and ruling elders of his church.

As pastors, elders, and overseers, we need to recover this language, this truth, that Christ has given us the keys of the kingdom. To move in this direction, we first need to ask: what precisely are "the keys of the kingdom of heaven," and from where do they originate? In the paragraphs that follow, we will explore the answers to these questions. Then we will consider how these keys should shape our exercise of church discipline in both the broader sense of discipling and in the narrower sense of formally censuring a member—even to the point of excommunication.

Old Testament Origin

The "keys of the kingdom of heaven" is a phrase that is metaphorical in nature. To understand its metaphorical sense, we would do well to understand what the keys originally were.

In Old Testament times, the chief operations officer was the chief steward of a king or ruler. In Isaiah 22:22 we read about Eliakim, who was the steward for King Hezekiah. The Lord says about Eliakim, "I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open." We should take this verse literally. 13 Keys in that time were made of wood and were very large. According to the custom of the day, the steward would wear the keys of the house of David, the keys of the kingdom, not on a chain by his side but on his shoulders. There they would serve as a badge of his privilege and responsibilities.

As chief steward, Eliakim had the sole authority to open or shut the doors of the palace, thus controlling access to the royal treasuries. It would be left to his discretion whom to admit or refuse access into the king's presence. Take note, though, that even though this great authority was given to him to execute wisely and responsibly, it was not his own. Eliakim exercised the privileges of those keys under the authority of the king. They were not the keys of Eliakim's house but of the house of David.

The Old Testament origin of "the keys of the kingdom," then, carries a strong sense of stewardship. To use the keys is to act as a steward of the master's house.

New Testament Application

By familiarizing ourselves with its Old Testament origin, we will better be able to understand what the phrase "keys of the kingdom" means today. In Revelation 3:7 the apostle John records the words of the risen Christ who applies Isaiah 22:22 to himself, declaring, "These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open."

In this text, Eliakim is identified as a *type* of Christ. That is, the status and responsibilities conferred to Eliakim are similar to and correspond with the status and responsibilities of Christ. Jesus is the one who, acting for his Father, has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. He alone holds the keys to heaven and hell. He alone allows us access into the treasuries of grace. And he alone has charge over who enters God's kingdom and who does not (Matt. 11:27). So the keys represent *Christ*'s authority over his church (Rev. 3:7).

Pastors, elders, and overseers, however, do not have absolute authority as Christ has. So what is the nature of our authority? Surely the image of the keys signifies to us that we do not act on our own authority. Our authority is relative to and derived from Christ's authority. Christ is the master of the house. We are his stewards. We are to exercise our authority relative to and in accordance with Christ's Word and truth.

The nature of ecclesiastical authority as a stewarding of Christ's authority finds support and explanation in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18. In Matthew 16:18–19, after Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus confers upon him the right and responsibility to rule over his church: "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you *the keys of the kingdom of heaven*; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:18–19). Christ promises to build his church. Over his church he establishes leaders, in this case, Peter, and by implication, the other apostles. Jesus then sums up the nature of Peter's leadership by describing it metaphorically as the keys of a steward, or the "keys of the kingdom."

Jesus goes on to describe more specifically the nature of this leadership in terms of *binding* and *loosing*. To exercise the keys of the kingdom is to "bind and loose." This phrase is relatively unfamiliar to us, but because neither Peter nor any other disciples ask Jesus what he means, we can assume that it is familiar to them. "To bind and to loose" is a semitechnical legal phrase that refers to the judicial authority of the elders of the synagogue. 14 To *bind* means to declare something unlawful and prohibited. To *loose* means to declare something lawful and permitted. Such declarations were made with respect to the interpretation of the Torah.

By extension, when the elders bound someone, they removed and excluded him from fellowship within the synagogue. Conversely, when they loosed someone, they included him in synagogue membership.

Christ, therefore, by giving Peter the keys, is giving Peter the authority to admit or exclude someone from the kingdom. This authority resides in Peter, and particularly in Peter's confession of the gospel (Matt. 16:16). It is the gospel preached that binds or looses. The gospel is the authority Peter wields. Those who have faith in Christ are admitted to the kingdom, but those who reject Christ are condemned and excluded from the kingdom.

What is granted to Peter in Matthew 16 is also given to the church in Matthew 18, and especially to those who rule the local church. In Matthew 18:15–20 the context is that of seeking to restore a brother or sister to Christ and his church. Yet Jesus envisions the reality that certain ones in the church will, at some point, refuse to listen to the counsel of individual members (negotiation, v. 15), multiple members (mediation, v. 16), and even the church leaders (church arbitration, v. 17). In the case that the unrepentant sinner refuses to listen even to the church, the church ought to treat him as it would a pagan or a tax collector—excommunicate or disfellowship him.

Immediately after describing how the church can decide to cast out a brother (or a sister), Jesus expressly states that he will stand behind the officers of his church in the exercise of their duties. And he assures them of their right and responsibility to exercise such discipline by way of conferment. What they bind or loose on earth will have been bound or loosed in heaven (Matt. 18:18).

This authority is real, enforceable authority. Thus Jesus reiterates, if not even clarifies Matthew 18:18, when he says, "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven" (Matt. 18:19). Again, if isolated from its biblical and theological context, this verse poses problems, as it appears to give the disciples a blank check for whatever they ask (much like John 15:7, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you"). But clearly a blank check is not what Jesus is offering. Rather, he is promising his church, and especially her officers, to stand behind their censures and discipline as they exercise the keys of his kingdom.

Such a promise ought to put a holy fear in us all. It reminds us that our little local church is nevertheless *Christ's* church. Moreover, it assures us pastors, overseers, and elders that when we make a judicial decision according to Scripture, in faith, and for God's glory, we are, in effect, applying *Christ's* judgment to the unrepentant person. Jesus's word of promise is a word of encouragement to do the hard thing.

Verse 20 of Matthew 18 caps off this section. Again Jesus makes another promise: "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." He promises the church that he will be present in her exercise

of the keys, conceived both broadly (preaching and discipleship) and narrowly (judicial decision making).

This promise is as sobering as it is assuring. I remember well the first time I participated in the most extreme form of discipline—excommunication. One of our deacons had deserted his wife, who at the time was pregnant with their fourth child. Though remaining in the city, he not only left home and established a new residence, but he also cut off all of her financial support.

The Sunday came, after repeated yet unsuccessful attempts to restore him, when the elders issued their judgment against him and expelled him from membership in the body of Christ. As the pastor, I was responsible to pronounce publicly this censure against him. That day we happened to have many visitors from the university, lots of graduate students, and even a professor. They were unbelievers—inquirers.

I would be lying if I said that I entered the pulpit that day like any other day. My heart was very heavy with sorrow, as were the hearts of my fellow brothers and sisters and elders. And in the weakness of my flesh, part of me was looking for a way out, so that I did not have to perform so disagreeable an act. And part of me was doubting, questioning, "Who am I to say who is or is not a member of Christ's church?"

Yet by God's grace it was this passage, particularly verse 19, that supported me. It assured me that what I was doing was not only a right but also a God-given duty. On the other hand, realizing it was a God-given duty reminded me that if I failed in my duty, I might win the approval of those sitting in the pews, but I would face the anger of God.

And the Lord was true to his Word. Though my message that morning was with fear and trembling, through tears and distress, God sustained and directed me. I thought I surely had disaffected the unbelievers. They would never come again. They would slander our church, calling it abusive. But God blessed my words, as only time would prove. During subsequent weeks, we heard back from the students and the professor. The professor shared, "That is the first church I've known that really practices what they believe." He was intrigued by this and began to attend, listening attentively to the gospel, and a year later he made a profession of faith.

In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Christ has given his officers "power, respectively, to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it to

penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel; and by absolution from censures." 15 Here we find great encouragement and great responsibility. The power and authority granted us encourage us to do the hard work of discipline. Yet at the same time the Westminster Confession implicitly warns us that to neglect this responsibility and privilege—these "keys" that Christ has given—is nothing less than to despise Christ's gifts to us as leaders of his church.

In the last few pages we have come to better understand what it means to wield ecclesiastical authority. Our authority is as stewards of the mysteries of God, as stewards of Christ's household. Our authority is real, given by Christ and supported by him. Yet it is derived from and relative to his authority. Thus we must exercise discipline, both general and specific, informal and formal, with great care. And we must exercise it according to the purpose for which Christ intended, as we will see in the following paragraphs.

Purpose of the Keys of Discipline

Traditionally, the church has sought to fulfill three primary purposes in exercising Christ's keys: God's honor, the church's purity, and the sinner's restoration. The Westminster Confession summarizes these three this way:

Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the Gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer His covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders. 16

First, the church exercises discipline for the sake of God's honor or his glory. As our chief end is to glorify God, and God's chief end is to glorify himself, so the chief purpose for exercising the keys of the kingdom is for God's glory (Ezek. 36:20–23; Rom. 2:24; Titus 2:5, 8).

Paul, citing Isaiah, chides the self-righteous Jews for behavior that discredits God's name: "You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: 'God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you'" (Rom. 2:23–24). Paul is painfully aware that failing to exercise discipline gives the world an occasion to deny Christ. But

when the church demonstrates to a watching world her commitment to disciple herself—calling people to repent, to turn away from sin, and to turn back to God—we glorify God. And we make the world slow to blaspheme and quick to wonder about the hope that compels us.

Glorifying God is also the end goal of the repentant. When people are disciplined and restored to Christ, they have the opportunity to give thanks to God for rescuing them from their foolish and sinful ways. One way our church tries to foster this spirit of thanksgiving is to stress to those who err and get caught that their "getting caught" is an evidence of God's goodness and love to them. I ask those I am counseling, "Do you know why you got caught?" And I tell them the answer, "Because you are a son (or daughter) of the great King. He loves you too much to let you continue down the path of destruction." By more fully recognizing God's loving and shepherding heart, the repentant truly can thank God and glorify his name.

Second, the church exercises the keys for the purity, or the holy health, of the church. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for failing to discipline a member committing incest by reminding them that "a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (1 Cor. 5:6),17 which is another way of saying that sin spreads. A few years ago, there was a church in California where one leader became sexually involved with a secretary. Sadly, the other leaders neglected to discipline him and allowed him to remain on staff. The next year seventeen of the marriages of those in senior leadership broke up. These numbers should not surprise us. Unchecked sin grows like a cancer in the body of Christ. Therefore, we must exercise the keys vigilantly to protect the purity of Christ's church.

If you recall, Calvin argues, "The safety of the church is founded and supported" on doctrine, discipline, and the sacraments. 18 As we saw, his key word is *safety*. The purpose of discipline is for the safekeeping of the church's doctrine, our sacraments, and our life together in the body. I remember when we had to excommunicate an older son, a covenant child in the church. Ted was about nineteen years old at the time. While seeking to remain at home, he refused to abide by his parents' household rules. Moreover, he refused to abide by Christian standards of morality. On the day of his excommunication, his father stood up before the entire assembly of our people and thanked the elders for making this hard call, because Ted's behavior was already having a deleterious effect upon the other children. Ted's father understood that the censure of the church was a way

to keep the rest of the family safe from the abusive and morally degenerate behavior that marked their brother.

Finally, the church exercises Christ's keys toward the purpose of restoring the sinning brother. Restoration to fellowship is the desired goal Christ sets before us in Matthew 18:15 when he commands, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, *you have won your brother over*." The combined themes of discipline and restoration are evident in many other Scriptures as well. We discipline because we want to restore a brother to full fellowship (see Prov. 11:30; James 5:19–20).

Discipline requires the courage to set a captive free (Gal. 6:1) and the compassion to restore a brother or sister. Discipline loves a brother enough not to leave him in his sin and consign him to the misery of its bondage. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin. It is a ministry of mercy." 19 Like Bonhoeffer, we must learn to think of discipline as a mercy.

Concluding Thoughts

As we have seen, Scripture portrays church discipline in a much broader sense than the modern church typically perceives it. It is a mark of the church and a means of grace, and it constitutes the church's authority. Consequently, church discipline is wide in scope because it is a fundamental part of the most familiar practices of our churches—baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the ministry of the Word—and it affects all of the church's members. The church of Christ is the body of Christ's disciples. Disciples are people under discipline.

This discipline is formally and properly an exercise of the keys of Christ's kingdom. It is a matter of stewardship. As leaders, Christ has given us great encouragement and responsibility in the care of his church. He calls us to bind and loose, to cast out and to bring in. And he calls us to do all these things for the sake of his glory, the church's purity, and the sinner's restoration.

This calling has never been easy for the church. Our fear of man has too often resulted in our great reluctance to discipline. We have bought into the lie that "what works" is measured by how many people like us and attend our church. Fortunately, we have a great heritage in our fathers of the Reformation. They too lived in troublous times. They too faced the task to change the character and practices of the church. Yet it was their commitment and obedience to Scripture that compelled them to persevere in their times. And that same commitment on our part will enable us to prevail in our own time.

12 Church Discipline Practices

In the previous chapter we sought to expand our understanding of the *principles* underlying biblical church discipline. We saw that discipline is discipleship, and discipling is discipline. Discipline is simply the ordinary and expected way of living under the lordship of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus's lordship that provides the foundation for the church's exercise of discipline. And it is from Christ's authority as Lord that the church derives her authority to discipline—to act as stewards of the "keys of the kingdom"—in order to exalt God's honor, protect the church's purity, and restore sinners.

Now we turn our attention to the practice of church discipline. Knowing that we have authority to exercise discipline and knowing why we exercise discipline is not enough. We need to know how to exercise discipline in the family of God.

The Manner of Exercising the Keys

Too often the *how* of discipline is conceived too narrowly in terms of the four steps of discipline given in Matthew 18:15–20. Yet the rest of Matthew 18 is equally instructive with respect to this topic. Preceding verses 15–20, three passages cast light on the *manner* in which Jesus's disciples ought to care for God's people and carry out discipline. First, in verses 1–4 Jesus addresses our attitude, calling for humility. Second, in verses 5–9 Jesus tells us how we are to relate to one another about the seriousness of sin. Finally, in verses 10–14 Jesus shares a parable of the good shepherd going after the lost sheep, showing us the heart of a true shepherd. Verses 15–20 bring a marked *familial* perspective to bear on the exercise of discipline and particularly emphasize how church leaders are to discipline as fathers discipline their family.

Though we probably should assume that Jesus was accompanied by more than the twelve apostles, nevertheless, we should not forget that Jesus's words are addressed directly to the Twelve in their imminent capacity as leaders of the infant church. So Matthew 18 is an account of Jesus's instructions to his disciples and particularly to the church leaders.

A brief examination of this material is needed, then, if we are to exercise discipline in the way that Jesus commands us. Let us take each issue in turn and consider how it should shape our practice of discipline.

With Humility

Matthew 18:1–5 begins with a question put to Jesus about status, position, and power in the kingdom: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (v. 1). Jesus answers by calling a child to his side and telling his disciples that they will not enter the kingdom unless they become like little children. Jesus points out not the innocence of the child but the child's humility, as expressed by the child's lack of concern about status.

Status concerns are a subset of fear-of-man concerns. When we ask the status questions ("How will my actions affect my standing before men?"), we are functionally confessing man as Lord. Childlike leaders exercise discipline humbly, not with a view to their status ("Will people approve or disapprove of our actions?") but with a view to Christ's lordship ("How ought we to wisely steward the keys Christ has given us?"). If you recall, it was the fear-of-man issue that compelled the systematic theology professor to discount the "practicality" of church discipline. 1

Humility of heart is the fundamental attitude we must demonstrate in all our interactions with our people, and especially in the many and varied ways we discipline our people. One very obvious way for us as church leaders to express our humility is to confess our own sins publicly when necessary. Let me share some examples from my own church.

A few years ago, my relationship with my secretary was beginning to deteriorate. I had not been treating her as I should have, and she was finding it harder and harder to work under me. Instead of leaving, she asked our church administrator to help her make a respectful appeal to me. She neither fled nor attacked but sought to be a peacemaker. We had a mini-mediation, clearing up many misunderstandings, confessing sin, and granting forgiveness.

While I surely did not need to share this matter with my entire congregation, I thought it wise, upon getting my secretary's permission, to point out to them the wise, loving, peaceable, and humble attitude with which she handled this matter. Furthermore, I wanted them to see that even we as pastors need and want to be approached and criticized to our face—in a spirit of respect and graciousness, of course—rather than being criticized and slandered behind our backs. This confession gave me opportunity to share with my people how I may offend them, and that as a pastor, I am not above the discipline of others—including those in functionally subordinate positions. It also gave me the opportunity to call my people to pray for me because I am a man in need of prayer.

By publicly confessing, I was able to indirectly counsel my people as to how they should respond to conflict humbly—without calling undue attention to myself or flattering my secretary. Most important, I had opportunity to call attention to the goodness and glory of God our Peacemaker. The salutary effect my confession had upon my congregation confirmed my reason for doing it. Some people who had assumed I was unapproachable came to me to thank me for showing them a new way of pastoring. Friends of the church told me that my actions played a major part in their decision to become members. As they said, "This is a safe place to be." Others thanked me for setting a good example and acknowledged that my confession exposed their own lack of humility and renewed in them a desire to walk humbly with God.

What I had done as an individual, my board of elders had also done a few years before. We made a public confession of sin to a specific member and his family for things we ought to have done but failed to do and for things we should not have done. We prefaced our confession by telling our congregation why we were making public confession, and we called upon them to pray that God would change our own sinful hearts.

The case in point involved this man's status "under care" at our church and presbytery. To come "under care" is a ecclesiastical status whereby a man notifies his local church and presbytery that he wants to pursue the ministry and is willing to submit to their counsel and guidance for his preparation. Because of several issues and concerns that we as a session raised, he eventually resigned this status and decided not to pursue seminary. While we were convinced that the issues were not black and white (from our perspective there was fault on both sides and serious

concerns that needed to be addressed), the *manner* in which we disciplined this brother was rash and callous.

After we elders had confessed our sins to our congregation, this young man and his family granted us forgiveness. There were many tears shed, and surprisingly, they were tears of joy. Upon seeing church leaders publicly humble themselves and confess their failings, many in the church —members and visitors alike—approached us and expressed gratitude for leading by example and living the very things we confess as a peacemaking, gospel-driven church.

Jesus's call for us to be humble like children is a call for leaders like us to be humble. Abuse of authority does not happen in a moment; it comes at the end of a long walk whereby we gradually depart from first things—our first love. It begins with the gradual omission of daily confession and glorying in the holiness and mercy of God in Christ—of making little of the gospel.

Recovering a good and appropriate use of authority, however, is only a bent knee away. One of the first things I encourage pastors and church leaders to do when they want to grow as peacemakers and see their church flourish in a culture of peace is to begin by confession and prayer, which is simply humility in action.

With a Serious View of Sin's Destructive Nature

Following his call for us to be humble, Jesus then instructs his disciples about how they should treat his "little ones" (Matt. 18:5–9). A recurring theme runs through this section—"cause to sin." Jesus warns both the world (v. 7) and Christians (v. 8, "your") against causing another to sin.

For Jesus, discipline rests upon a profound view of God's holiness and sin. Church discipline is not about having a censorious or hypercritical attitude toward the less righteous. It is about taking sin seriously. Sin is against God, neighbor, and self. Sin is lawlessness, and it is the seed of destruction. Sin, not cultural peccadilloes, sends people to hell, and all sin is subject to the danger of hell. Anger, cursing, lusting, breaking one's oath, and swearing oaths fraught with loopholes are all sins that call for discipline because they all put a person in danger of hell. 3

Thus it is apparent that the consequences for failing to discipline have eternal ramifications. Discipline is not simply about keeping the flock in the bounds of our local church but keeping it bonded to God in covenant. It is little wonder, then, that Jesus reserves some of his harshest words and severest warnings for those who cause or are the occasion for others to sin: "But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!" (Matt. 18:6–7).

If unchecked sin mocks God, turns the church into a hothouse for more sin, and consigns the sinner to hell, then we must not fail to take sin seriously nor neglect the exercise of discipline. Christ is gentle and humble of heart, yet he also stands with whip in hand to drive away all who would turn his Father's temple into a den of thieves. Christ's cleansing of the temple is itself an act of divine discipline, demonstrating that being gentle and taking sin seriously are not opposites. Rather, a true hatred of sin compels a greater love for the lost.

With a Shepherd's Heart

Lest we think that hating sin necessarily leads to a harsh and censorious attitude in carrying out church discipline, Jesus follows his condemnation of sin with a parable of the good shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to go after the sheep that has gone astray (Matt. 18:10–14). Here Jesus draws for us a picture of what kind of heart and attitude pastors are to have in exercising church discipline. Church discipline is to be carried out with a shepherd's heart.

Like all of Jesus's parables, this one comes with a bite. Just when we are quick to pat ourselves on the back for good shepherding, Jesus shows us how far our hearts are from that of a true shepherd. He is aware of just how easily we let discipline cases slide. Many of us look at a straying sheep and, resolving to show "unconditional acceptance," we conveniently turn our heads the other way so as to avoid their "emotional distress." Others of us, weary of pursuing and nursing the same weak sheep, often quietly think, *Good riddance!* Moreover, we tend to gravitate toward the healthy rather than the weak, the righteous rather than the unrighteous, pursuing the

ninety-nine instead of the one. And we rationalize that in any human endeavor, a 99 percent gets you an A with accolades.

Jesus also is aware that we are lazy, that we make excuses, and that we can use our position as pastors for self-aggrandizement. Or we simply are paralyzed by the conflicting messages that call us to be anything but a shepherd:

pastor as chief professor of his own captive seminary pastor as CEO running a profitable, market-driven corporation pastor as stand-up comedian and a generally feel-good guy pastor as fascist dictator standing against the world for his own little causes

pastor as church watchdog publisher, always pointing out the failings of the other churches in his denomination or in the larger evangelical community

pastor as mystic wordsmith and ritual maker, who appears only on Sunday morning and Wednesday night to give us the Word for today We should not lose sight of the fact that Jesus's parable about the good shepherd makes strong allusions to its Old Testament compliment in Ezekiel 34. Jesus is making a point: "Do not be like them." And he is defining the pastorate anew: "This is what it means to pastor my people." Therefore, it would be good for us to look again at the prophet's dire warning against the shepherds of Israel in his day.

Ezekiel 34 preaches judgment and promise—judgment on false shepherds and promise of the Good Shepherd. *Shepherd* is a metaphor of might as well as tenderness. The Lord says of David, "You will *shepherd* my people Israel, and you will become their ruler" (2 Sam. 5:2).4*To shepherd* suggests not only nurture and care but also leading (directing the flock to pasture), protection (guarding against wolves), and discipline ("your rod and your staff, they comfort me," Ps. 23:4). In fact, the shepherd's staff signifies both protection and correction—striking at wolves and correcting wayward sheep.

However, in Ezekiel 34 we find the shepherds carrying out neither action. Thus, the prophet calls down woes on the heads of Israel's shepherds. He condemns them for not taking care of the flock, not strengthening the weak, not healing the sick or binding up the injured, and not bringing back the strays or searching for the lost (Ezek. 34:2–4).

The lost in this case, as in Matthew 18, are not unbelievers but the sheep of Israel (Ezek. 34:2), members of the covenant community who have gone astray. Interestingly, Ezekiel's indictment against the shepherds is a list of failures, or omissions, in their care of these sheep. In other words, they have abused their authority by neglecting their authority. Moreover, these failures are summarily described as having "ruled [the flock] harshly and brutally" (v. 4).5 How many of us are stung by the reproof of failing to evangelize, yet here and in Matthew 18 the real reproof aimed at pastors is our neglect to seek the lost and wandering. It is our care of the believer, not the unbeliever, that is in view. God will judge us as to how we pastor his covenant people.

The prophet derides the pastors using their position of authority and trust for personal profit and gain all the while neglecting their calling to care for God's flock. Unlike these false pastors of Israel, Jesus, the true Shepherd of God's people, now teaches his disciples how to shepherd—what it means to provide for, protect, care for, nurture, and discipline his people. It means to go after the strays. It means we rejoice in the hard work of restoration of the sinner.

Though omitted by Matthew, Luke's parallel account adds that the shepherd not only finds the lost sheep but also *carries it back* to the flock on his shoulders (Luke 15:3–7). Kenneth Bailey, noted biblical scholar who brings to his reading of Scripture the rich insights he has gathered from Middle Eastern customs, encourages us not to overlook this seemingly incidental point. Citing Ibrahim Sa'id, Bailey comments, "Sa'id observes that the shepherd placed the sheep on his shoulders, 'knowing that the hard work is yet before him.' This theme of the burden of restoration is important to note. The story does not end with the finding of the sheep. After the sheep is found it must be restored. It is the restoration with its implied burden and expressed joy that is the center of the second stanza and thus the climax of the entire poem."

Jesus's parable did not register with his original audience as a sweet sentimentalism. They understood his teaching to imply that restoration *is* burdensome. Finding the lost is one thing. Restoring is quite another. Hard work, a heavy burden, the long walk back home, perseverance—these are the things awaiting those who seek to restore the member who has gone astray. Yet with the hard work comes great joy—the lost sheep is restored to the flock.

Jesus, therefore, sets our eyes on the hard-won prize—restoration. As any pastor can attest, there is greater joy in the restoration of the one who has gone astray than the ninety-nine who are safe in the fold.

As Family Discipline

So far we have discussed the manner of exercising the keys of the kingdom. We are to do so with humility, with a serious view of sin, and with a shepherd's heart. Yet according to Matthew 18:15–20, there is another way we should conduct ourselves—with the understanding that exercising the keys is *family* discipline.

In verses 14–15 of Matthew 18, Jesus shifts metaphors from flock to family, shepherd to Father, telling us, "In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (v. 14). The story of the shepherd is a story about our Father in heaven. Similarly, pastoring is not only about tending the flock, but it is also about caring for the family—God's family. We heard this same theme in the previous passage, where Christ refers to the members of our congregation as God's "little ones," and to God as their "Father in heaven" (Matt. 18:10–11). These recurring familial images suggest that church discipline is family discipline.

Matthew 18:15 reinforces this idea. When Jesus tells us to go to the sinner and show him his fault, he speaks not simply of another, but of our *brother*: "If your *brother* [or sister] sins." Pursuing the sinner who has sinned against us is the pursuit *of* a brother *by* a brother. It is a family matter. As such, it should serve as a powerful reminder of the wonderful equality we have before our Father. It should awaken us to the truth that the one who offended us is more *like* us than we think. He is family. He is brother to me, and I am brother to him.

Since church discipline is family discipline, we ought to impress upon the minds and hearts of our people that discipline is the responsibility of each member of the family of God. When Jesus says, "If your *brother* sins," he is speaking of us all: adults and children, men and women, church officers and laypeople. Christ's love ought to compel us all to look out for, search after, and work toward restoring our erring brother or sister. We should not be blind, however, to the reality that those we love and seek to restore will not always receive us as brothers. Sadly, the erring one will frequently interpret our efforts to restore him from sin as unduly intrusive. He will tell us to mind our own business and charge us with being harsh, unloving, and self-righteous. Those who err will even question our authority, asking, "Who do you think you are, telling me I'm wrong?" In it all, he will take up the same defense as Cain, arguing, "You are not your brother's keeper. It is none of your business what I do." Yet we must answer, "Yes, I am. You are my brother and I come as your brother, knowing the power of temptation, the bondage of sin, and the greater power of the Savior. This is my business; it is the business of love, the business of the kingdom of God."

Matthew 18:15–20 teaches us that as church leaders, we come not only as brothers but also as fathers. If discipline is within the family of God and the person under discipline is our brother or sister, then the leaders exercise that discipline not only as brothers but also as the fathers of the church.

According to Christ, if we seek to serve as church leaders, we must imitate our Father in heaven who seeks the lost in fatherly pursuit (Matt. 18:14). Moreover, from 1 Timothy 3 we know that we are required to prove ourselves first as husbands and *fathers* in our homes, for we cannot manage the household of God until we have learned to manage our own households. One way we manage our own homes is by discipling our children. As we saw in the last chapter, discipleship is discipline. To discipline our children is part of discipling them. If we have learned to disciple and discipline our own children, then we are far better equipped to serve in official capacities in the church, acting as "fathers" of our people.

The image of how a father disciplines his children is nowhere more vivid than in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is a book about a father counseling, encouraging, instructing, rebuking, correcting, and training his son in righteousness, and teaching him how to think and act wisely. It is all about discipline. Thus, as church leaders, we only stand to profit from a good reading and study of Proverbs. 7

Fatherly Discipline as Modeled in the Proverbs

Proverbs directs us as pastors in two ways. First, it emphasizes how necessary it is for us as church fathers to discipline our "children." Proverbs teaches us that a father demonstrates genuine love for his son when he disciplines him: "but he who loves [his son] is careful to discipline him" (Prov. 13:24; see also Ps. 94:12; Prov. 6:23; Heb. 12:1–14; Rev. 3:19).

Love and discipline appear as opposites to many. When most of us think of God as Father, our immediate association is *love*. But not many of us associate him with *discipline*, and if it does come to mind, we rarely think of it as *good*. Yet it is good, for exercising discipline is the very thing that God says characterizes fathers, and especially himself.

The writer of Hebrews counsels his drifting flock by telling them that they have failed to heed the word of encouragement that addresses them as sons. They have forgotten that the hardship they are suffering—the Lord's discipline—is the very sign of his love for them:

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

Hebrews 12:4–6, citing Proverbs 3:11–12

The writer to the Hebrews quotes this "filial" word of encouragement directly from Proverbs. He assumes that the attitude and actions of the father of Proverbs reflect the attitude and actions of our heavenly Father, who disciplines those he loves. So too ought we who are appointed as fathers of our own churches to seek to reflect our Father by disciplining those we love.

The love that a father has for his son as expressed in the act of discipline is nowhere more evident than in our heavenly Father's "discipline" of his own Son. Again, the writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus *learned* obedience. In other words, he learned obedience from his Father's discipline of him—though in Christ's case, this discipline was not corrective but instructive, educative, and maturing. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ as the Son of God did not escape discipline. In fact, although he was God's Son, as the God*man* Jesus shared completely in our humanity, enduring all things yet without sin, including his Father's discipline, even as

we must endure likewise as God's adopted sons (Heb. 2:14, 17; 4:15; 5:8; 12:4–7). The Father expressed his love for his Son by allowing him to endure the hardship of discipline.

If love is expressed in discipline, then we can see that our failure to discipline our members is a failure to love, or as Scripture more boldly states, a sign of hate. For Scripture warns, "Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt" (Lev. 19:17), and "He who spares the rod hates his son" (Prov. 13:24; see also Prov. 5:23). So the question for us as church leaders should not be, "Do we discipline or not?" Rather, we must ask, "Do we love our people enough to discipline them?" And when people argue that discipline is unloving, we should counter by contending that it is just the contrary—to fail to discipline our people is to hate them.

Proverbs also directs us pastor-fathers by showing us *how* to discipline our "children." However much Proverbs counsels the use of the rod, it does not present it as a panacea. Rather, Proverbs indirectly teaches fathers several compelling ways to motivate their children to choose wisdom and flee from folly.8

First, the writer of Proverbs assumes throughout his book the delight, joy, and mutual pride fathers and children have for one another. This underlying assumption comes to explicit expression in Proverbs 17:6: "Children's children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children." God designed children to cherish and bless their parents, and parents to cherish and bless their children. 9 Fostering and capitalizing upon our children's affection for us and desire to please us is a great way by which we as parents can motivate our children toward wise living. In the same way, God designed us as church leaders to love and bless the members of our congregation, and they in turn bless us. If we can nurture this dynamic in the family of God, we will find it far easier to compel our members to pursue godly living.

Second, the father presented in Proverbs earnestly and affectionately appeals to his son to listen (see Prov. 1:8; 4:1, 10, 20; 5:1, 7). The father does not say, "Listen, you," but, "Listen, *my* son." He does not coldly threaten, "Because it's the law," but he gently implores, "Because it's *your father's* instruction." His language is personal ("my," "your"). It is repeated. And it is an affirmation of the "your father—my son" relationship. 10 Most importantly, it powerfully motivates his son to respond to his appeal.

This type of appeal is an important part of church discipline because discipline strains relationships. When we as pastors have to discipline one of our members, anger and resentment can estrange our relationship with that person. An erring brother or sister often feels alienated from us as their leaders. Sadly, rather than gently imploring them on the basis of our relationship as their friends, brothers, and pastors in Christ, we leave our brother or sister high and dry with the cold demands of the law. We neglect to understand, counsel, and pray with them, leaving them with little motive to heed our discipline or seek to be restored to Christ and the family of God.

Third, Proverbs teaches us to discipline appropriately and effectively. The father does not approach his son in some cookie-cutter fashion, for not all sinners are scoffers, fools, or wicked. Some are just simple and naïve. So the father disciplines his son in a manner *appropriate* to who he is and what he has done. Similarly, not every brother or sister to whom you must go to address a fault errs in the same way or for the same reason. Wise pastors wield God's Word wisely and appropriately. They use it to teach those who need instruction, to rebuke those who are trapped in sin, to correct those who are easily misguided, and to train the immature. 11

Furthermore, this father in Proverbs does not present his son with a list of bare commands. He understands that discipline that results in mere outward conformity to a set of rules is not *truly* effective. Rather, this father seeks to win his son's heart: "My son, give me your heart" (Prov. 23:26). He wants the truth to change his son in the inner parts. He desires to teach him wisdom in the inmost place 12 because he knows that true change is from the inside out.

But it is not simply heart change this father desires to see in his son. We often find him associating the attitudes of the heart with the actions of the eyes, fingers, or neck (Prov. 3:3; 6:21; 7:3; 23:26) because he longs for whole life change. He calls his son not simply to take a different step but to navigate a whole new course of life. Holy habits of soul and body are what he seeks.

Helping our people develop life changes that are in keeping with heart changes is an important goal for pastors, for we cannot think we have discharged our duties well by simply telling people, "Just stop sinning!" People are *trapped* by sin. When they repent, we must help free them from the sin that entangles them by helping them put off sinful habits and develop a lifestyle of reform. Like disciplining a child, a slap on the hands

may suffice for the act of disobedience, but a wise parent will follow up with words of instruction and guidance so that the child will not repeat the error of his or her ways. Construction must follow correction.

Fourth, the father-pastor of Proverbs motivates his son to pursue a wise and disciplined life by reminding him how the promises of God work for him. For example, he calls his son to trust in the Lord by following this imperative with the reassuring promise that God will make our paths straight: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and *he will make your paths straight*" (Prov. 3:5–6). In similar fashion, this father weaves a beautiful tapestry of gospel word with lawful counsel throughout the rest of the book of Proverbs. He points out applicable promises to counter the temptations of life that drive us to sin, such as the temptation to fear man (Prov. 29:25), to be greedy and stingy (Prov. 19:17; 28:25), and to take revenge (Prov. 20:22; 25:22).

As I have emphasized earlier in this book, it is easy for us pastors to motivate more out of fear and threat than out of promise. Yet this approach is nearsighted, because though the law may guide, it also condemns. Only the gospel, only the promises of God, have the power to set us free from the captivity of our fears, anger, misery, despair, lusts, and laziness. Like the father in Proverbs, we too as pastor-fathers must weave for our people a multicolored garment of law and gospel, of warning and promise. We too must learn to skillfully shift our tones according to the need of the moment —trumpeting rebuke to the hard-of-hearing and whispering correction to the ones who already sense their guilt and shame.

A final way this Proverbs father wisely motivates his son is by helping him view life from an eternal perspective. Specifically, he speaks of consequences not only in terms of the immediate benefits of wisdom or the miseries of folly but in terms of life and death (Prov. 14:12; 18:21). For he recognizes that the issues at stake in discipline are not trivial. They are enormous. His son's eternal destiny hangs in the balance. As C. S. Lewis reminds us, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors." 13

Such are the people we as pastors seek to restore. If we seek to faithfully discipline the immortal souls God has placed under our care, James has words of great encouragement and promise for us: "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will *save him from death* and cover over a multitude of sins" (James 5:19–20). Redirecting a person's eternal destiny is the joy, the drama, the sheer immensity of the pastoral office. None other has been specially appointed to this task of being midwives to heaven! And none should know better than we what the eternal consequences are for those who refuse to listen to God, to his church officers, and to his church. So it is with great joy and great sadness and weeping that a pastor plies his trade in the care of souls.

As we have seen, pastors are fathers, and fathers discipline their children *wisely*. Now let me conclude my observations about "fatherly discipline" by briefly calling attention to the very real problem of abuse.

Fatherly Abuse

As pastors, shepherds, fathers, and men in authority, we as church leaders must guard against the many ways we can abuse our authority and treat our people harshly, all in the name of "exercising discipline." One of the reasons that discipline is neglected or, when practiced, seen as cold and impersonal is that we who exercise discipline are cold and impersonal. We do not view the person who has sinned as a brother or son, a sister or daughter, but as an enemy. Instead of making pleas of affection, we come with our guns loaded, highly suspect of his or her motives, words, and actions.

Much of the reason for this attitude is our failure to cultivate relationships with our people. When we have failed to develop relationships, people are more likely to bristle when we must exercise discipline. So we approach them defensively, expecting the worst. In the words of the wise: *rules without relationship lead to rebellion*. This simple principle serves as another reminder of the gospel story of redemption. First, the Lord establishes a covenantal relationship with us. Then, and only then, does he place us under his rule and exercise discipline. In the same

way, we who exercise the keys of the kingdom abuse our authority if we do not establish and maintain gracious relationships with those we lead.

Another way of abusing our authority is by interpreting Christ's commands in Matthew 18:15–17 in a mechanical sense—where *efficiency* is measured by how fast we can get the offender out of the church. Restoration of a brother or sister in Christ is a process, and a slow process at that. As church leaders, we will be tempted to use our authority in abusive ways as this process gets dragged out. Recalcitrant sinners can provoke great resentment. Their very demeanor of anger, bitterness, and dishonesty can tempt us to respond in kind. So instead of seeking patiently to *restore*, our minds are set on retaliation, and we unwisely seek to expedite sensitive matters.

One way to guard against this temptation is to remember what we saw in our discussion of James 4 (see chapter 3). Even a good desire like "restoring the sinner" can become a godlike demand, provoking us to exercise the extraordinary authority of formal church discipline when the matter at hand calls simply for wise, gentle, and persistent counsel and teaching. Formal church discipline, in which the leaders act as a court in prosecuting a case against a brother or sister, is to be recognized for what it is—an *extraordinary* measure. As such, it should not be entered into hastily. Such a step should come at the *end* of a long process and only after we have exhausted and proven ineffective all measures to restore, only after the unrepentant individual gives ample proof of his or her unwillingness to repent.

Practically speaking, this process involves pursuing our wayward brother or sister face-to-face and not by formal letters on church stationary. And it may involve seeking the help of others who have greater rapport with the person needing discipline. Through it all, we must be long-suffering and patient as we seek to open blind eyes. And we always must take care to treat our erring brother or sister as we would want to be treated.

Tell It to the Church

What I have been arguing all along is that we tend to take *minister* out of "administer discipline." In church discipline, we get the proverbial cart before the horse. Process takes precedence over purpose. Technical rules,

procedural books, *Robert's Rules of Order*, and so on become for us in our leadership meetings the fine art of straining at gnats and swallowing camels —which is why I have chosen to postpone technical process issues. By relegating them to secondary matters, I do not want to suggest that due process issues should be disregarded. Most denominations provide their church leaders with handbooks that detail denominational policies and procedures. These should direct you in the discipline process, explaining the kinds of censures you can bring against a person and how to conduct a judicial court equitably. Therefore, I encourage you to consult these resources for guidance.

My specific concern in this section is to explain what it looks like to "tell it to the church." First we must understand who exactly "the church" is. Then we must consider how to pursue the wandering sheep and how and when to involve the entire church body in this process.

Who Is "the Church"?

From our examination of the keys of the kingdom, it should be clear that "church" in Matthew 18:17 refers first to the church conceived in terms of its representative rulers. The only people who should be exercising discipline are those who have been given legitimate authority to act in that way. These are the elders of the church (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Thess. 5:12–13; 1 Tim. 3:1–8; 5:17; Titus 1:5–9; Heb. 13:17), also called pastors/shepherds, overseers/bishops, or pastor-teachers. 14

There are, however, disciplinary cases in which circumstances make it appropriate to "tell it to the church"—that is, the entire believing body of the local church. The biblical doctrine of the church as the body of Christ reminds us that what happens to one member necessarily affects the entire body. As Paul teaches, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (1 Cor. 12:26; see also 1 Cor. 12:12–27). We are to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15).

Furthermore, Paul also teaches that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough (1 Cor. 5:6). The sin of one affects all. That is why in 2 Thessalonians, when addressing how the church ought to censure a person, Paul addresses not just the elders but also the entire body at Thessalonica,

warning them to take special note of a member who does not obey the apostolic instructions. He tells the whole church to "keep away from" and to "not associate with" such members, in order that they may be shamed and brought to repentance (2 Thess. 3:6, 14–15). In 1 Corinthians Paul calls the entire assembly to meet and expel the man committing incest (1 Cor. 5:4–5, 13). And in Matthew 18:17 Jesus tells the entire church to treat the expelled man as a pagan and tax collector.

Pursue the Wandering Sheep?

Having established who "the church" is in Matthew 18:17, the question remains: how do we go after the straying sheep? In other words, what is involved in "tell[ing] it to the church" when a person withdraws from the church? (I have in mind a withdrawal as a means of escaping discipline rather than a legitimate withdrawal by which a member desires to attend another church for justifiable reasons.)

What then are we to do? What if a person leaves for a serious sin—like being contentious and divisive—before discipline is concluded? Even then we cannot compel him or her to remain in our church. But neither can we simply let the person go. What we can and must do in a case like this is to continue disciplinary proceedings. In other words, we take the discipline process as far as we can go.

We continue for two reasons. First, we want to be able to make every effort to restore the unrepentant sinner. For example, if a person under discipline withdraws from membership and begins to attend another local church, we ought to inform that church that the person left our church while under discipline (no other details need to be mentioned) and that we are seeking that person's restoration and reconciliation to us. We should also encourage that church to ask the person in private about the problem and to convey our desire for restoration.

Taking this course of action causes the person under discipline to realize that he or she cannot just slip away. At the same time, it warns the other church to be on guard. As someone once said, "It never helps to take a Jonah on board" (see Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:6; 2 Tim. 1:15; 2:16–18; 4:10, 14–15; 3 John 9–10).

We must be prepared, however, for the possibility that this other church may slam the door in our face. Unfortunately, many churches today are flippant with respect to grievous sins and refuse to address them. For example, we had a woman who was disciplined for committing adultery, to which she not only admitted to but continued to persist in. During our disciplinary proceedings, and in order to escape discipline, she began to attend another church, and even after her excommunication and notification by us, the other church let her sing in the choir!

If by God's grace the other church agrees to our request, and if the person under discipline admits to the problem, then we should seek a mediation (which would include the person and representatives from both churches) and pray for restoration. If the person refuses to cooperate with the other church's efforts, hopefully the other church will set boundaries to his or her fellowship with them until he or she repents.

The second reason we continue the disciplinary process is to bring closure. By bringing closure we assure our church that rather than neglecting our responsibilities, we have exercised our authority with care. We also assure them that we care for them and love them enough to go after them. For we have demonstrated that we have not let the wandering brother or sister slip away and fall into sin. We have diligently pursued restoration with them.

Part of bringing closure involves officially informing our church regarding the status of the person under discipline. If someone rejects the discipline of our church, we have a right to change their status (by removal from membership), to notify the congregation about that change, and to officially remove them from under our care and oversight.

Involve the Entire Church Body?

When the church is seeking to restore an unrepentant sinner, as in the above example, at what point should others in the church be told? The general rule of thumb is that throughout the disciplinary process and at all levels of discipline, only those with a legitimate right to know ought to be informed. As we have learned, discipline begins informally and privately. Brother goes to brother (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1). And if necessary, the

brothers in dispute may seek counsel from a church leader or another person who can truly help (Matt. 18:16).

The same level of discretion ought to be maintained throughout all the stages of discipline until there is a need to announce it to the church. In most discipline cases, the first time the entire congregation needs to be informed is in the event of an excommunication. I would encourage the same even for a censure of suspension from partaking of the Lord's Supper. On the other hand, the censure to depose someone from church office requires notice to be given to the entire congregation (2 Thess. 3:6–14; 1 Tim. 5:19–20).

When it becomes necessary to inform the congregation, church leaders ought to think and pray about how they can most wisely and discretely present the disciplinary matter. Typically churches have publicly announced censures on Sunday morning during the main worship service. Some churches, including my own, have begun to rethink this policy. We have found that our main worship service on the Lord's Day is a mixed crowd of believers and unbelievers, members and nonmembers. If we are to take family discipline seriously, it seems more biblical (as well as legally prudent) to make such an announcement at a specially called congregational meeting that only members may attend. In other words, because the matter at hand is a family matter, what is shared ought to be shared only with the family. Therefore, we send a letter only to members calling for a special congregational meeting.

Once we gather our members together, we make sure to inform them of four key issues. First, we inform our members of the nature and ground of the censure we are giving the unrepentant person. (We do not go into graphic detail but share only enough to prove that he or she indeed committed the sin.) Second, we instruct them as to the nature of the new relationship that the person under censure now has with respect to membership (such as suspension from the Lord's Supper, deposition from office, or excommunication). At this point, we warn our members against gossip and remind them this matter is a "family matter" and is to remain within the context of the local church. Third, we call every member to examine themselves with respect to their own sins and sinful habits and encourage them to put to death the misdeeds of their sinful nature (Col. 3:5–10). Finally, we offer prayers for the person's restoration to God and the church.

As is evident, these special meetings can become great times of teaching and caring for our people. We have found that they often result in what I earlier called a "joyful holiness." After dealing publicly with a discipline case in this type of setting, it is not unusual for our church leaders to see an increase in their counseling load as well as an increased interest in discipleship and small group involvement because godly discipline promotes discipleship.

Conclusion

Church discipline is everywhere. Every word we speak as pastors in the pulpit, in our teaching, in our counseling, and in our people's homes is a word of discipline. These are generally *easy words*. What is hard is when a person refuses to listen and we must take steps to press the person to repent. No one likes it. Yet the exercise of fatherly instruction and discipline for maintaining and promoting peacemaking in the household of God is both good and vitally important. Let me leave you with this quote by the great nineteenth-century Scottish pastor, Robert Murray McCheyne, who confesses to his own transformation in thinking about church discipline:

When I first entered upon the work of the ministry among you, I was exceedingly ignorant of the vast importance of church discipline. I thought that my great and almost only work was to pray and preach. I saw your souls to be so precious, and the time so short, that I devoted all my time, and care, and strength, to labor in word and doctrine.

When cases of discipline were brought before me and the elders, I regarded them with something like abhorrence. It was a duty I shrank from; and I may truly say it nearly drove me from the work of the ministry among you altogether.

But it pleased God, who teaches His servants in another way than man teaches, to bless some of the cases of discipline to the manifest and undeniable conversion of the souls of those under our care; and from that hour a new light broke in upon my mind, and I saw that if preaching be an ordinance of Christ, so is church discipline.

I now feel very deeply persuaded that both are of God—that two keys are committed to us by Christ: the one the key of doctrine, by means of which we unlock the treasures of the Bible; the other the key of discipline, by which we open or shut the way to the sealing ordinances of the faith. Both are Christ's gifts, and neither is to be resigned without sin. 15

Do you believe the keys of the kingdom are Christ's *gifts*? Clear biblical teaching on church discipline and the gentle pastoral practice of discipline do not repel believers; rather, they attract people to our churches. People feel safe as members of God's family. In fact, they want to be members in such a family. Thus, the keys Christ has given to us are for our good and his glory. Use them! Amen.

Toward Becoming a Peacemaking Church

 ${f I}$ n the previous chapters we explored some of the underlying theology and practices of peacemaking. We began by taking a close look at who we are as people in conflict. We saw that we have native propensities to either go on the attack or take the nearest path of escape, rather than seeking to be reconciled. Moreover, according to the apostle James, we are a people embroiled in conflict because of the sinful desires that rule our hearts. Next, we developed a theology of reconciliation on the basis of God's own reconciling character and the nature of his church as the family of God. From there, we dealt with confession and forgiveness—the meat and potatoes of reconciliation—and with negotiation, all of which are a crucial part of personal peacemaking. Following that, we turned our attention to several assisted peacemaking processes: mediation, arbitration, and church discipline. Yet you may still be asking: How do I begin? How do I begin to become a peacemaking pastor and equip my church to be a peacemaking church? In this remaining chapter, I want to outline simply and briefly how you can begin to apply in your local church the principles and practices we have covered.

Moving toward a Culture of Peace

The first thing to recognize is that this book issues a call to change. We must change how we view our calling and the way we pastor. We must change the way we feed our flocks, rule and oversee the ministries within our churches, discipline those who go astray, and counsel those in conflict. Simply said, we must change the way we "do church" and "are church." The question is: how do we begin?

Enthralled by the Gospel of a Resurrecting God

If we desire to become peacemaking pastors, we must begin by remembering who we are. We are called first and foremost not as pastors but as sons—adopted sons of God. This Good News, this gospel news, must be and can be the only fount from which all our actions flow.

I have realized that I, like Martha, have often chosen to serve the causes of God over and above loving him as my Father and being loved by him as his son (see Luke 10:38–42). And I have found myself to be in the company of many pastors who, by nature, are more like Martha than Mary. We are kitchen-Christians, opting to spend our time in the kitchen rather than at Jesus's feet. We would rather work than worship, help than hear, cook than commune.

Kitchen-pastors win people's attention and praise because we get things done. We often can feel good about ourselves when we have completed our daily "to do" list because we get greater mileage out of *doing* than *being*. We find our righteousness in a deed well done rather than in the deed done by Another.

All these things became apparent to me during a reading of Oswald Chambers's *My Utmost for His Highest*. This devotional was written by the nineteenth-century Scottish pastor who was converted under the ministry of Charles Spurgeon. Chambers was a man committed to living his utmost for God's highest glory. So in this devotional he warns, "Beware of anything that competes with loyalty to Jesus Christ." I found this declaration to be challenging, as it warns us to guard our own hearts from betraying us. It reminded me that even pastors like myself will substitute something else for devotion to Jesus.

Chambers continues, "The greatest competitor to devotion to Jesus is . . ." How do you think he finishes the sentence? How would you finish that sentence? What competitors to Jesus should we be encouraged to avoid? Leisure activities? Old, sinful habits? Chambers answers, "The greatest competitor to devotion to Jesus is *service for him.*" 2

Shocked by Chambers's conclusion, I was quick to rebut, "But the Lord needs people who will serve him. Didn't Jesus call us to pray for laborers? Isn't the failure to be peacemakers a failure to do the work of the ministry that we ought to do? How, then, can I tell others, especially pastors, that the greatest idol to beware of is service to Jesus?"

Yet further reflection revealed that Chambers is right. Our service, our ministry, our "pastoral profession" too often gets in the way of our devotion

to Christ. Becoming peacemaking churches requires peacemaking pastors. And to become peacemaking pastors, we must first learn to sit like Mary at the feet of him who is the Prince of Peace. He does not need us, but we desperately need him.

So I challenge you to listen again to the glorious gospel as if for the first time. If peacemaking is ushering people into Christ's presence, then peacemakers themselves need to know where Christ is to be found. And Christ is only found as he gives himself to us in the gospel of peace. The apostle Peter teaches us that when we are not maturing in our faith, when we are not adding to it knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love, it is because we have forgotten that we have been cleansed from our past sins (2 Peter 1:5–9). We have forgotten the gospel!

How, then, can we recover the gospel anew so that we serve Christ on the basis of his righteousness and not our own? In one sense we cannot. We cannot bring ourselves to God. God must come to us. He must renew. He must make alive. The good news is that the Lord does call us in the gospel itself. More important, though, is to recognize where God issues that call. God calls us to renewal chiefly through conflict and suffering. The fire of conflict is the furnace of renewal. The conflict from which we are now running away is the very place and sanctuary into which God bids, "Come. Come and be changed." For in death, there is life; in weakness, strength; in repentance, renewal.

It is also important to recognize what kind of God issues our gospel call. Our God is not merely a helping God. He is the God of the resurrection. Abraham did not only believe in the God who rules the crises of life; he also believed in the God who gives life to the dead (Rom. 4:17). The apostle Paul tells us that in Asia he suffered greatly—that he was under pressure beyond his ability to endure. He despaired even of life and felt the sentence of death (2 Cor. 1:8–9). Yet, shares Paul, all this suffering happened so that he would learn to rely not just "on God," but "on God, who raises the dead" (v. 9).

To become a peacemaking pastor is to recover this singular truth that God is a resurrecting God. Our Triune God is not in the construction business, nor is he building an empire or even a church. He is resurrecting for himself a people—a people who will wear his name, bear his likeness, and share in his glory.

God does not want programs or projects; he wants *people*, which is why he so often scraps our pet projects. He wants us as people, and he wants our hearts. Of course, God uses programs and projects, and he calls us to plan and build. But he uses all these things to raise for himself a people so that we might glorify his name—the great name of the resurrecting God, the name of the risen Lord Jesus Christ—in all the earth.

We pastors, as the shepherds of his people, glorify his name in our lives when we stop trusting in ourselves and relying on our own abilities and instead start recognizing our unbelief and our desperate need for a Savior. Though well hidden in our subtle patterns of self-righteousness, our unbelief guickly manifests itself in a number of ways in the midst of suffering and conflict, including despair, anger, hatred, discontentment, complaining, envy (especially of other pastors), a critical spirit, gossip, blame-shifting, excusing ourselves, defending ourselves, neglecting our duties, failing to serve others, fear of failure, boasting, poor listening, neglect of others, and the list goes on. We will never come to Christ, to the God of resurrection, until we are laid low in our estimation of ourselves by recognizing these fruits of unbelief. Only then will we come to him crying out, "Lord, I need a resurrection. Lord, you are the resurrection and the life." Only when we cry out in our weakness as peacemakers will we see anew God's power to reshape us in the likeness of his Son—the Peacemaker.

Therefore, for a church to become a true peacemaking church, renewal must start in the hearts of the leaders by their hearing afresh the Good News that our God is a God who raises the dead—even dead pastors. Once we as leaders are gripped by this gospel of peace, we can call our churches back to biblical peacemaking, leading from weakness, not strength—or better yet, leading by God's strength revealed in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).

Let us not underestimate, then, the present power of the gospel of peace, resurrection, and renewal. Christ's bride, his church, remains a fragmented body because of sin, ignorance, unrepentance, and immaturity. Hearing the gospel anew is the only thing that will renew us and compel us to be ambassadors of reconciliation. The apostle Paul himself makes this very point in his second letter to the Corinthians:

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves

but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 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. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

2 Corinthians 5:14–20

Amen! O Lord, enthrall us by the gospel of your resurrecting power.

Using the Ordinary Means of Grace

The next step toward becoming a peacemaking church is the most ordinary and obvious. We must utilize the ordinary means of grace that God has given us to promote peacemaking in the family of God. As pastors, you and the other appointed church officers are called to preach and teach the Word, administer the sacraments, and exercise fatherly discipline over your flock. As you carry out these responsibilities, consider how the following means of grace can serve regularly as platforms for highlighting the gospel of peace and for calling your church to a life of peacemaking.

Worship. First, plan your worship. The corporate worship of the church on the Lord's Day is a prime venue for promoting peacemaking. Pastors typically can plan the worship service or work with others on a worship team toward that end. Seize the opportunity you have to better direct your people's attention to the character of God as Peacemaker.

One very direct way to worship God as Peacemaker is by planning special worship services during the year that promote or highlight the biblical truths about peacemaking. Just as many churches have a "Missions Sunday" (or week or month), you could also set aside one Sunday of the year as a "Peacemaking Sunday."

It is probably more effective, however, to speak a word of peace every Sunday. As you and your worship team plan next year's worship, think about what incremental changes you could make to more deliberately extol

Christ as Peacemaker and promote his gospel of peace. Ask yourselves some of the following questions:

- How might we exalt the great name of God as he discloses himself to Moses in Exodus 33–34?
- How can we continually call our people to confessing their sin, forgiving one another, and treating one another as brothers and sisters in the family of God?
- How can we regularly exhort our people to submit every thought and activity of life to the lordship of Christ our peace, seeking peace in all their relationships?
- At the same time, how do we apply these exhortations to the hearts of our people, encouraging them that as the great Reconciler, God is willing and desirous to help us in our daily conflicts?

Second, think of new ways to address your people, or explain to them how the common ways you address them are not empty expressions. Think of the ways in which the apostle John frequently uses terms of endearment as he affectionately addresses his congregation. He calls them "my dear children," "dear friends," and "brothers." John is not unique. Paul, Peter, James, Jude, and the writer to the Hebrews all use various terms of endearment when addressing their people.

Furthermore, Paul takes every opportunity to make his heartfelt affection for his people known. For example, in his letter to the Philippians, he begins by expressing his love for them: "It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:7–8). Here Paul nearly oozes with tender feelings for his flock. He does not just think these feelings; he goes public with them (see also Gal. 4:19; Col. 2:1; 1 Thess. 2:6–8). Paul actually likes his people! His manner of pastoring is surely an example for us.

Third, think of ways you can introduce each song to underscore its message of atonement and forgiveness, its call to repentance, and its reminder of God's goodness to recalcitrant sinners like ourselves whom he has delighted to call his children! If you are not the worship leader, you might want to take the time to give your worship leader a rich and robust theology of peacemaking.

Fourth, think of new ways to utilize Scripture readings or responsive readings during worship that focus on peacemaking themes such as confession of sin, forgiveness, judging one another, the use of the tongue, what causes conflict, and so on. You might also want to use the Peacemaker's Pledge as vow. We use the Pledge once a year in conjunction with our Peacemaking Sunday. It serves as a way for our entire congregation to renew their covenant commitment to peacemaking. Then when conflict arises, as it certainly will, we can refer to the Peacemaker's Pledge to remind the conflicted parties of their covenant commitment to God and to one another.

Fifth, think of how and for what you pray. The pastoral prayer ought to be shaped by the gospel of peace, just as the psalmist encourages us to pray for the peace of the church: "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: 'May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.' For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, 'Peace be within you'" (Ps. 122:6–8). We ought to pray regularly in our worship services for peace—peace in our church, among our officers and lay leaders, and among the pastoral staff. We ought to pray for peace in our marriages, families, neighborhoods, work environments, schools and universities, cities, states, and country. And let us not forget to pray for peace for our missionaries. Conflict troubled and eventually divided the first mission team in the New Testament when Paul and Barnabas sharply disagreed over the selection of Mark as fellow missionary (Acts 15:36–41). And conflict weakens and divides many of our missionaries today. They desperately need our prayers for peace.

Finally, if you do not already, conclude your worship services with the great high priestly benediction of Numbers 6:24–26:

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The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.
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If you use this benediction frequently, take time occasionally to remind your people of its significance. The Lord our God wants us to be at peace with him and with each other.

Preaching the Gospel of Peace. One of the central elements of worship is the reading and preaching of God's Word (1 Tim. 4:13). Preaching the gospel is the best way to instill in your members God's own passion for peace as well as his sovereignty in times of conflict. And it is the most effective way to remind your people how he longs to see his children exhibit his mercy, truth, goodness, love, justice, and holiness by loving one another, looking out for one another's interests, confessing their sin to one another, and granting each other forgiveness.

According to Scripture, both the content and the goal of preaching are to declare the *gospel of peace*. Peter tells all who are gathered in the house of the Gentile Cornelius that God sent to Israel the message "telling the good news [gospel] of peace through Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:36). Similarly, Paul, writing to the Ephesians, describes Christ as the one who "preached peace" to Gentiles and Jews (Eph. 2:17). And later in the same letter he describes the armor of God as consisting of our feet fitted with "the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" (Eph. 6:15).6

In these passages it is clear that Paul is alluding to the prophecies of Isaiah that foretell the great day of redemption that will be announced by the proclaiming of the Good News. He is referring particularly to Isaiah 52:7: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" Here is the Old Testament picture of a preacher preaching the gospel of peace. His feet are swift and his voice trumpets the words of joyous victory and redemption: peace, good tidings, salvation, your God reigns. This preacher is first and foremost Christ himself, as Paul argues in his great tribute to the Prince of Peace:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

This entire passage exalts the person and work of Christ as the Peacemaker. The word *peace* resounds four times. And Paul uses other expressions to convey his multifaceted work of peace: making the two one (v. 14), creating one new man (v. 15), reconciling both of them to God through the cross (v. 16), preaching peace (v. 17), and being the Mediator through whom both Jews and Gentiles have access to the Father by the one Spirit (v. 18).

Moreover, Paul declares at the outset not simply that Christ is the Peacemaker but also that Christ *himself* is our peace (v. 14). Peace is a person before it is an activity. Peace is a person before it is a sermon. It is because Christ is the embodiment of God's peace that Christ can make peace as well as proclaim peace. 8

In light of this grand picture of the supreme peace preacher, Jesus Christ, it becomes evident that all biblical preaching is aimed at preaching Christ our peace. And this preaching entails not just proclaiming biblical truths but declaring these truths in the power of the Spirit—and thus *in the presence of Christ himself*. When we preach, Christ is in our midst, speaking to us in the proclamation of the gospel, directing his words not merely to the individual in his vertical relationship to God but also to the covenant community in their horizontal relationships with one another.

These high and holy realities that Christ preaches peace, that he is our peace, and that he is present in our midst to make peace ought to embolden us to preach Christ more clearly as the Prince of Peace. For it is only through Christ and his gospel that we will know peace with God as well as with each other.

Perhaps the most effective way to preach this gospel of peace is by setting aside time to preach expository-topical sermons on peace themes. 10 Of course, it works best to preach these sermons for the most obvious occasions. For example, when we have set aside a Sunday to conduct a special meeting for censuring a member, I will usually preach a sermon on a topic pertinent to either the exercise of the keys of the kingdom or the offense committed—without naming names.

Recently we excommunicated a single woman who wanted to marry an unbeliever more than she wanted to be united with Christ. She denied the faith, renouncing the four vows she took. So I preached on not being yoked unequally with unbelievers, with specific application to marriage. This act

of discipline afforded me the opportunity to speak the gospel of peace in a manner particularly edifying to the singles in our church.

Other topical sermons and sermon series on peace themes that I have preached have focused on the very issues we have studied in this book:

"Getting to the Heart of Conflict" (James 4)

"Confession, Forgiveness, and Church Discipline" (Matthew 18)

"Taking Your Brother to Court" (1 Corinthians 6)

"The Discipline of the Lord" (Hebrews 12)

"The Importance of Church Membership" (Heb. 13:17)

In each case I have presented the topic at hand in the framework of Christ as our peace, his church as our family, his grace as our power, and his truth as our guide.

Sacraments. If the sacraments are visible signs and seals of the gospel of peace, then we should find the sacraments and the times we administer them as great opportunities for displaying visibly Christ who is our peace. For example, baptism is a sign and seal of our engrafting into Christ, our partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's. Baptism is being inducted into God's covenant family and being united to *one* body. Thus it is significant when Paul, in dealing with the conflicted church at Corinth, counsels them by reminding them of their baptism and what it signifies: "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor. 12:12–13).

Baptism is baptism into one body by one Spirit. Baptism unites us to Christ, and it is as his body that we stand in covenant community before God. Thus by merit of their baptism and their union with Christ that it signifies, Paul shows the Corinthians that they are to set aside the many things that divide them into different factions (Jews or Gentiles, free or slave).

Union with Christ is union in his peace. Union with Christ is union with his body. Consequently, in Colossians Paul grounds the command to "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" in the reality that "as members of one body you were called to peace" (Col. 3:15). And that reality that we are members of one body, in turn, necessitates the call to peace. In light of our union with Christ and what that entails, we can see that baptism into the

body of Christ carries with it the call to peace. It is here in the body of Christ, through his Spirit, that we are bound by covenant oaths to care for and look after one another. Here in the covenant body we confess our sins to one another and forgive one another as the Lord forgave us.

We ought to reinforce this call to peace when we baptize new members. In our own church, after a person has sworn his or her vows publicly and has been baptized, we ask our entire congregation to swear to keep the unity of the body in practical ways: "Do you, brothers and sisters, accept these as members of this body as Christ has accepted you? And do you promise to pray for them, to encourage, admonish, love, and look out also for their interests in all humility realizing that God has fit them into our body for our edification and his glory?" Baptism, then, like the gospel it reveals, is a rite proclaiming Christ as our peace and a proclamation declaring that the rule of his peace governs our relations.

The Lord's Supper is another opportune time in the life of the church to remind your people of the reconciliation we have with God and with one another through Christ's peacemaking blood. The Corinthians had not only forgotten this blood-bought reconciliation represented by the wine and the blood, but they were also defiling the Lord's Supper by their peacebreaking! Thus Paul admonishes them for their blatant misconduct, and he warns them as to the manner in which they should take communion.

Paul specifically warns the Corinthians to examine themselves and to recognize "the body of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:29). Biblical commentator Anthony Thiselton argues persuasively for understanding the phrase "recognizing the body" as referring to us Christians discerning our distinctive life as one body and "not as individuals." He calls that distinctive life the recognition that we are "the having-died-and-being-raised-one-body-of-Christ" people. 11 In other words, our social identity rests upon and arises out of our union with Christ in his death and resurrection. And the sacrament, as a visible expression of his death and resurrection, marks our life as conformed to the crucified and risen Christ.

Therefore, as pastors, we should use the Lord's Supper to remind our people that if we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection, we cannot carry on socially as the world does. We cannot look only to our own interests. We cannot think too highly of ourselves while looking down on others. And we cannot refuse either to confess our faults or to grant forgiveness.

One way I hold out this reminder is by guarding the table. I encourage my people not to partake of the sacrament if they are unwilling or have not yet taken steps to be reconciled to a brother or sister with whom they are presently at odds. I remind them of our Lord's own words in Matthew 5:23–24, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."

What is interesting in this passage is that Jesus pictures us remembering the conflicts in our lives during worship—true worship. Worship in Spirit and truth should result in remembering those with whom we are not yet reconciled. For we cannot worship the God of peace and hate our brother or sister, nor can we eat from the Lord's Table when our heart and mouth are full of bitterness. And true worship should encourage us that the God of peace will be with us if we need to go and get reconciled.

As you can see, the call for reconciliation and peace never will prove unnecessary. Conflict has an uncanny ability to make the best of theologians and saints live like brute beasts (Ps. 73:21–22). Thus we must be vigilant to incorporate peacemaking in its many forms—including mercy and justice, truth and goodness, confession and forgiveness—to our worship, our preaching of the Word, and our administration of the sacraments.

Utilize, then, the rich means of grace that God has given you. Peacemaking is best taught not in a single session nor on a given Sunday but frequently and in little bits. If we are to have peacemaking churches, we must build brick by brick, training our churches in the disciplines of peace.

Assessing Yourself, Your Leaders, and Your Church

Once the gospel is set front and center in our affections and the ordinary means of grace serve regularly to highlight this gospel, the next important step toward becoming a peacemaking church is for us as church leaders to assess ourselves. David, the son of Jesse, provides a great example for us in Psalm 139. He calls for an Independent Counsel to investigate his life, his heart, his thoughts, his practices, and his ministry. He calls for the Holy Consultant who does more than give counsel. He asks, "Search me, O God,

and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23–24).

This prayer is where you and your leaders can begin. Ask the Lord to probe your heart and your ways to reveal those sins that keep you from effectively carrying out your calling. Pray this prayer not only as individuals but also as your church's ruling body. Our churches will not change until we, the leaders, change.

As the Spirit answers your prayer and begins to reveal those sins that are creating obstacles to your ministries, you and your leaders must lead by confessing your own sins. You can start by asking some hard questions. Following is a sample of questions to ask yourselves with respect to peacemaking:

- How do we as leaders typically respond to conflict?
- How well do we practice biblical peacemaking?
- Do we view conflict as an opportunity (James 1:2–5)?
- Are we familiar with the biblical mandate to "make every effort" as peacemakers (Rom. 14:19; Eph. 4:3; Heb. 12:14; see also Ps. 34:14; Rom. 12:18; 1 Cor. 1:10; James 3:17–18)?
- What kind of orientation or training is provided to inform new leaders about their authority and about the principles and practices of peacemaking (for example, authority-responsibility structures, the appeal process, and peacemaking practices)?

Such self-assessments engender a culture of peace. A few years ago our deacons provided a great example of what it looks like for leaders to assess themselves. It began when we as elders recognized that over the years the elders and deacons had grown apart. As elders we were blind to the way we had contributed to our estrangement from our brothers. So we called for a meeting—many meetings. But the first meeting surprised us all. The deacons came with a confession of their sin. The president of the deacons started by detailing the way the deacons had undermined their elders. This corporate confession lead to several other deacons individually confessing how they each had sinned against us elders.

Rather than using this first meeting as a forum to air all their complaints against us, the deacons seized it as an opportunity to assess all their leadership weaknesses and to confess their sins. Thus they did much to unite our hearts with theirs. While subsequent meetings were necessary and

important for addressing specific issues and finding solutions, it was this first meeting that radically shaped and renewed our drive to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Once you and your leaders have walked through the vigorous but rewarding process of praying for God to reveal your sins, asking the hard questions, and confessing ministry-crippling sins, you should begin a study on peacemaking. Ken Sande's book *The Peacemaker*, 12 which includes discussion questions at the end of each chapter, would be a great book to study with your leaders. You could cover it in about a year's time. If peacemaking is the mark of a son of God, how can we not make this study the most important item on our pastoral agenda?

Training Your Leaders

Once you have assessed your leaders and your church, the next step to take is to train your leaders in peacemaking. 13 I would encourage you to begin by teaching the substance of this book. Instruct your leaders on the matters of the heart and how to wisely apply God's Word to the common issues of the heart (e.g., depression, anger, desires, and fear). My own church utilizes the wealth of resources offered by the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF). 14 I particularly recommend their pamphlets on anger, desires, and marriage. Walk your officers through a theology of God as Peacemaker and the church as the family of God, and spell out the implications of each for peacemaking. Teach your leaders and staff to make a good confession, to discern false views of forgiveness, and to practice forgiveness in light of its promissory nature. Finally, train them how to coach negotiation, and teach them the fundamental principles and processes foundational to mediation, arbitration, and church discipline.

In our own church, once our leaders committed to becoming a peacemaking congregation, we began to set aside funds each year for certain key members to be equipped by Peacemaker Ministries. 15 Over time we have built up a small but powerful cadre of reconcilers. It is composed of nonofficers and officers, women and men—people to whom our members can turn for help in responding biblically when conflict occurs. I would encourage your church as well to take this opportunity to provide key members with further hands-on training in mediation.

Assessing Your Church

If your church is to become a peacemaking church, you cannot let the process of change come to a standstill after you have assessed yourself and your leaders. You must move a step further by assessing the church at large.

Recently our church went through an assessment utilizing the Peacemaker Ministries church assessment tool. It assessed both our leaders and our membership not only with respect to our peacemaking skill level but also with respect to our theology and attitudes that either promote or impede peacemaking practices. 16 I highly commend this church assessment tool to you.

As you make your own assessments and identify changes that your church needs to make, try to anticipate the objections and obstacles that you and your congregation will encounter as you seek to implement the necessary changes. It goes without saying that such foresight is necessary before you make any concrete changes. And again, whatever changes you do make must begin with you as leaders. Adopting peacemaking as a new way of life cannot be imposed from the top; it must be taught and modeled first by the pastors and church leaders.

Peacemaking and Covenant Membership

Finally, if you desire to see your church transformed into a peacemaking church, you must carefully address the issue of church membership—of having accountable members who have formally and voluntarily submitted themselves to the body of Christ. Church membership provides yet another platform from which pastors can promote the gospel of peace and draw out its implications for life in the body of Christ.

Paige Patterson, noted Southern Baptist statesman, in bemoaning the decline of church discipline and pleading for its recovery, insists that what the church must first restore is a biblical view of church membership:

Church discipline must be recovered as a practice of the local church. This proposal is especially hazardous in a litigious age. Furthermore, the abuses associated with church discipline in earlier eras leave little healthy precedent from the recent past. Radical pluralism and toleration of heresy or aberrant behavior of almost any variety are allowed, as the churches often shirk loving responsibility while hiding behind a misplaced sentimentalism

masquerading as "love." . . . *Restoration of meaningful church membership* through such discipline would curtail shallow evangelism, and it would also restore a measure of *integrity to church membership*. <u>17</u>

What Patterson says here about church discipline can and ought to be expanded to include all the disciplines of peace, for which this book has been an apology. In other words, in order to more readily recover and practice the disciplines of peace, the church must first have a robust view of church membership—of living as one body in covenant community—because peacemaking is not about making *individuals* peacemakers. It is about how we as members of the *one body of Christ*—who share in one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father—keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3–6). Christ has already made us to be one. Peacemaking is how we as a body, by his Spirit, seek to keep that unity.

Our failure to see peacemaking from this covenantal perspective is ultimately the result of buying into the lie from the Enlightenment period that faith is merely a private affair between our hearts and God. We have little sense of the corporate dimension of our faith, our responsibilities toward our brothers and sisters, our respect for church authorities, or the earnest care we ought to have for wayward Christians. Whatever the church may seem to us when we gather together on Sunday to worship in our solemn assemblies, at heart we are loners, each turned inward and traveling our separate ways. In short, we are a people who give no significance or value to body life, much less covenant membership, if we give it any thought at all.

Since this type of radical individualism defines the culture in which we live, along with privatized religion, mobile societies, and their corresponding tenuous relationships, we cannot assume that those entering our church understand the essence of covenant membership—of real accountability in the body of Christ. Even if they have been members of other churches, they still are likely to have a deficient view of biblical membership. For many churches present membership as being optional and uneventful, requiring little more than a two-hour informational class and promising little added privilege to one's life in the church.

Thus it is incumbent on us to teach and model for our people (especially to those who are new to our congregation) the biblical foundation for

church membership and its implications for church life—especially if we are to recover peacemaking in the church. In my own church, the very first class for new members is spent doing just this—giving a defense for church membership.

The Biblical Basis for Covenant Membership

The justification for covenant membership rests firmly on what the Bible itself asserts about the nature of the church. Scripture implies that the local church has a clearly identifiable and accountable membership. It implies this membership in several ways.

First, Christ calls the church to administer baptism, the *rite of admission* (Matt. 28:18–20; 1 Cor. 12:12–13). As we saw earlier, baptism is baptism into one body. This body is not only the universal body but also the particular and local body—like the church in Corinth.

Second, the New Testament writers identify the churches *by their number* and *location*. In Acts, Luke tells us that a particular church consisted at one point of three thousand persons and later of five thousand persons (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14). The point is that the saints of a church can be counted. Members are countable, and thus they are accountable! The apostle Paul identifies members by their location. He addresses his letters not only to the church in Rome or Corinth or Philippi but also to the many house churches outside those cities (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 1:2). You could have said in the early church, "I belong to the church that meets at the home of Priscilla and Aquila." In other words, members can be located!

Third, Christ prescribes the process of discipline to restore the wayward brother, even to the point of removing a person from fellowship by a formal, judicial act of excommunication (Matt. 18:15–20). One cannot be excommunicated from those with whom he has not previously communicated! To be cast out implies by necessity that the person was once in.

Fourth, the New Testament writers assume that Christians can identify their leaders to whom they have voluntarily submitted themselves (1 Thess. 5:12–13; Heb. 13:17). And conversely, they expect the leaders of a church to be able to identify those members for whom they must give an account (Acts 20:28–30; 1 Thess. 5:12–13; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1–4). If the sheep

must know their shepherd, so too the shepherd must know his sheep. Yet God will not hold a pastor liable for failing to discharge his duties as shepherd over sheep that he cannot determine are his own.

Covenant membership, then, wherein Christians function as the one body of Christ by binding themselves in oath to other Christians and placing themselves under submission to their respective authorities, is implied in a number of different passages throughout Scripture. To put it simply, church membership is the biblical norm. Scripture never envisions "Lone Ranger" Christians.

The Formal Membership Process

Scripture does not make explicit, however, the exact manner by which church leaders are to *knowingly* receive and *identify* a person as a member. Clearly, our Lord has allowed the appointed church officers latitude at this point. We can, nonetheless, justify three basic steps of church membership as warranted by the nature of corporate covenant-making so evident in Scripture itself.

First, those who enter into covenant cannot consent to the terms of that covenant unless they are *informed* as to its promises, stipulations, and attending sanctions. 18 Even as the Lord informed his people when he entered into covenant with them, so too the local church must inform its prospective members of the tenets of the faith and the practices of the local church in order that they may give their informed consent to be joined in membership. For this reason, the church must provide some form of instruction. Therefore, the first step we require prospective members to take is *to attend the membership class that our church provides*. 19

True love informs and calls for knowledgeable consent. Thus, the subsequent lessons in membership class ought to adequately inform new members as to the doctrine and life of the church that may be distinctive to them. We do not want them, after they have become members, to be surprised by either our doctrine or life. We want to treat them as we ourselves would want to be treated. So from the first time a person is introduced to our church, there is not only an emphasis on peacemaking but also on speaking the truth in love, both of which are just an expanded way of speaking and preaching the gospel.

Second, just as those who enter covenant must bind themselves in covenant, so too must prospective members bind themselves to the church. One of the ways they bind themselves is by giving their informed consent to the appropriate church leaders—the leaders appointed to exercise the keys of the kingdom for the church. By giving their informed consent, prospective members acknowledge that their failure to keep these covenant promises may incur the judicial action of the church leadership to discipline or even remove them from membership. Thus the character of their informed consent obliges that it be witnessed (as a public and legal action), formal (so as not to be entered into lightly but with all sobriety), standardized (so as not to be handled differently with different members on an arbitrary basis), and recorded (for the better preserving and establishing of the agreement). For this reason, the church must provide a procedure of inclusion. Therefore, the second step we require of prospective members is to verbally express and sign in writing their acknowledgment of the terms of covenant membership during an interview conducted by our elders.

Another way prospective members bind themselves in covenant is by giving their informed consent to the larger church body. For this reason the church must provide a public membership ceremony. Therefore, the third step we require of prospective members is to *partake in this membership ceremony, wherein they take their vows before the church*, and, correspondingly, the entire church receives them.

In summary, peacemaking assumes church membership. Peacemaking needs church membership because we cannot learn to live in unity by living individually. Rather, we must voluntarily place ourselves in community with and in submission to the one body of Christ. Furthermore, Scripture implies church membership, showing that members are identified by several tangible and defining factors. Finally, the nature of covenant-making directs the process of church membership, calling for the church to inform prospective members of its life and doctrine and calling for prospective members in turn to give their informed consent to be joined to the body.

Practical Peacemaking: A Case Study

Many have questioned whether peacemaking really works. Will it really benefit my church? I can attest that it does. But let me answer with an anecdote from my own pastoral experience. The sharp edge of conflict could have destroyed our church so easily when we were faced with the decision as to whether we would receive into membership a convicted child molester. I will call him John.

After being called as pastor to Rocky Mountain Community Church (RMCC) in 1992, I learned about John over a period of five years through the reports and stories my elders shared. John, I was told, had been invited to RMCC by Karen, a member of our church. Karen was aware that John was despairing and troubled. His wife recently had been unfaithful to him and left him for another man. So she invited him to come to worship and hear the Good News of Jesus Christ. John came, and shortly thereafter, he confessed Christ as his Lord and Savior.

Then the church learned that John had turned himself in for sexual misconduct with a neighbor's child. By this time, the church was certain of the sincerity of John's conversion. Furthermore, he had convinced us that he had committed his crime in a drunken stupor, that it was a one-time event, and that this child was his only victim. (All the above were true, except for the last one. John had abused another child but had not told us.)

Armed with that knowledge, many of our elders and church members showed up in force before the local judge to vouch for John's changed character. The judge was convinced and did not press charges against John. But very soon after his court appearance, a local school counselor heard from John's daughter that he had molested her also. Based on this information, John was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison and five years of probation.

While John was in prison, several elders of the church wrote to him and counseled him, calling him to repent and believe in the Lord. It was only after spending one and a half years in prison that God used these letters to help John fully own his crime and repent of his sin. Up to that point, he blamed others for his imprisonment.

All these events happened before I was called to serve as the pastor of RMCC. When I came to RMCC, we began to send John my sermons on tape, and things appeared to be going well for him. Every so often the church would pray during public services for John to endure patiently the

hardships of prison life, to learn the lessons God was teaching him, and to wait patiently for the day of his release.

That day was fast approaching. As I look back, I see now that I was partly in denial and partly grossly ignorant of what his release would mean. It was about four months before his January 1997 release when things began to erupt. During one Sunday morning worship service in September 1996, the church leaders prayed for John's impending release and mentioned to our people the possibility of his return to Billings and his expressed desire to join our church. The entire church woke up that Sunday. Phones started ringing right after the service, and people called me for "counseling"—not to receive it but to give it. It was me they wanted to counsel.

Before long, two distinct kinds of responses arose in the church. On the one hand, there were those who threatened to leave. You can appreciate their reason: "We're not interested in a church that is not willing to protect our little girls." Neither was I. Up to this point, our elders had given our congregation few specifics as to what our reception of John would look like, so our people had reason to fear. I feared too. My own daughters were still young at the time, and I myself was having second thoughts about the wisdom of letting a convicted child molester into our church, much less into our lives.

Fear was not the only response. On the other hand, there were those who argued that since the gospel is a gospel of forgiveness and peace, we should open our arms to John and accept him as Christ had accepted us—*no strings attached*. I appreciated their reasons, suffering pangs of conscience when I thought of not accepting John into membership. What would we be saying about the power and wisdom of the gospel of Jesus Christ if we failed to receive this child molester as a "brother in Christ"? Could we really say, "The gospel is not for you. It's only for the 'not-as-bad-as-you' kind of people"?

Christ's very name and purpose would be at stake if we did not receive him. But it seemed we would be exposing our children to the potential of being violated if we did.

Neither of these positions was totally persuasive to us elders, yet both had to be addressed if our church was not to split apart. In order to navigate our way through this maze of conflicting desires, we studied God's Word and used the PAUSE Principle of Negotiation. 20

First, we wanted to *prepare*. I remember going to the Department of Corrections and asking them to help us. John's probation officer informed us of the nature of John's probation and the stipulations required for his release. Interestingly, we found out later through the grapevine that they had never before had a church ask for help from their office.

We learned from John the exact time of his release. We also spent time hammering out the biblical principles on which we would take our stand. As we began to reevaluate the issue in light of these principles, we came to see it more clearly as an age-old issue: *How does sanctification relate to justification in the life of the church and in the acceptance and governance of her members?*

Second, we wanted to *affirm relationships* and emphasize our common love, cause, and purpose (Phil. 2:1–4). Our elders called for two special congregational meetings. At these meetings we sought to help our people work together (rather than against one another) in solving this problem by emphasizing our relationship in Christ. We reminded them over and over again that we are brothers, not enemies. Furthermore, we invited them to air their opinions, fears, concerns, and questions in brotherly disagreement. We wanted all to have the opportunity to speak and all to know they were being heard.

These meetings also gave us the opportunity to present to our people the theological basis for receiving John back into our church and eventually into membership. We explained to both sides the biblical relationship between justification and sanctification and how it applied to this issue. Thus we first affirmed those who wanted to receive John into membership on the basis of God's grace, showing that to refuse to accept him was tantamount to denying him the gospel of justification—the pardon for sin and righteousness of Christ that come by faith to *all* who believe. However, we also affirmed those who feared the consequences of allowing a child molester on the premises, acknowledging that gospel love does not eliminate gospel wisdom. We explained that if John was a true believer, then he was not only justified but he was also *being* sanctified. As a sanctified believer, John would be under Christ's lordship through the watchful oversight and discipline of the elders and would be willing to submit to our counsel and heed our correction.

Third, we sought to *understand interests*—God's and our own. In this situation, the issue was, *Should we receive into membership a convicted*

child molester? The positions were, Yes, we should, and, No, we should not. Of course focusing on issues and positions alone got us nowhere. But as we sought to understand interests, we began to look at the matters of the heart, including our desires, expectations, fears, and goals. We also identified common as well as differing interests, which provided us the opportunity to encourage our people to look out for each other's interests. One of the interests shared by many was that John be held responsible for lying to the church and violating our trust prior to his imprisonment. So we determined to see this incident addressed as part of his accountability plan. Throughout the larger process of seeking to understand interests, we came to agree on the biblical directives that should guide us as well as a plan for moving forward.

Finally, we tried to *search for creative solutions* and *evaluate our options* objectively and reasonably. There were several problems we had to resolve. Even though we had agreed on the theological issue of how justification and sanctification applied in this case, we still had to address the wisdom issue of how best to respond to John. After seeking to assess our options and choose the best solutions, we agreed to accept John into membership contingent upon the following conditions intended to promote his holiness, the safety of our children, and our growth together as the body of Christ.

Public Confession

First, if John were to return to our church, he would need to confess publicly to the congregation his sin of deceiving us prior to his incarceration. Many in the congregation still felt betrayed by his deception and for true reconciliation to take place, John had to confess his sin to the congregation. We understood the need to keep this confession "general" so as not to stir fear in the hearts of the children who were present. Yet on the other hand, it had to be specific enough so that our adults would know what he was confessing.

Oversight

Second, we told our congregation that the elders, deacons, and I would provide John with spiritual oversight. Specifically, I agreed to meet weekly

with John for counseling during his entire time of probation (five years). 21 I asked John to allow full disclosure of all matters pertaining to his sin. Agreement was made between myself, John's sexual abuse counselor, and his probation officer to exchange all pertinent information to help John break a cycle of lying and concealing facts. One of the key factors in our oversight of John was full disclosure of his sexual sin to the entire leadership and membership. One of the key documents to hold all of us accountable to this was the Covenant Commitment.

Covenant Commitment

Third, we promised our congregation that we immediately would ask John to sign a "covenant agreement" with us stipulating the nature of our relationship with him and our expectations of him. We drafted this agreement with the help of John's probation officer (especially with respect to the terms of his parole) and his sex offender treatment counselor. More importantly, we based it on biblical wisdom.

This covenant agreement helped John as a convicted sex offender to know what we expected of him and what he could expect of us. It also served to assure our congregation that this man would be held accountable in an ongoing manner.

What this commitment consisted of besides John having to commit to our oversight and regular attendance in worship, included the following:

- 1. To honor the terms of John's parole and protect him from false accusations, John will scrupulously avoid having any contact with a minor child without the immediate presence of another adult. He will remain in the continual presence of adults during all church activities and whenever children are present. He will not be directly involved in any ministry involving minors.
- 2. Moreover, in keeping with the court order dated January 1, 2002, as issued by Judge Smith [not the judge's real name]:
- a. John will not use or possess pornography, erotica, X-rated materials, videos, adult books that promote sexual immorality of any kind, particularly incest. Neither will John frequent any establishment where such materials are a chief item of sale or enter any adult book stores, topless bars, or massage parlors.

- b. Nor will John have any contact whatsoever with his victim(s) and/or their families by any means or in any manner: in person, by telephone, through writing, by email, by regular mail, or through a third party. John must also stay at least 1,500 feet away from the victims and their families for the duration of his sentence.
- c. John will comply with all other conditions<u>22</u> imposed by the court or his treatment program as presently administered under the care of Counselor Jones [not the counselor's real name] of the Christian Counseling Center's sex offender treatment program.
- 3. John may, at his own discretion, enjoy fellowship with families in the church who do not have minor children. He will not accept invitations for fellowship with families with minor children until he has met the following requirements:
- a. First, he must make sure that an elder has talked with the parents to inform them of John's limitations and how to properly minister to him.
- b. Second, he must notify his Counselor of his intentions to fellowship with that family and his whereabouts during that time. This can be done simply by way of leaving a message at his Counselor's answering service.
- 4. John authorizes the elders to inform current and future friends and members of the church about his past and to describe his current walk with the Lord.
- 5. John authorizes his parole officer, professional counselor, the pastoral staff, and elders of this church to talk openly and candidly with one another and to disclose to one another any and all information, insights, or concerns they have regarding John.

I remember one day speaking with a couple who, upon learning about John, began to consider leaving our church. I asked them, "Where would you go?" They mentioned a well-known church in town. I then asked, "Do you know who the child molesters are in that congregation?" They looked a bit flustered by my question and realized they did not.

I then appealed to them by explaining why the safest church was ours. They were confident that we as a church were committed to peacemaking and church discipline. Furthermore, they knew that our elders had not hidden from the congregation information about John. And most important,

they heard in the covenant agreement exactly what measures we would take to guard John against reverting back to his sexual sins.

After further discussion, they looked at each other and the husband said to me, "Well, I guess we will stay after all. This is a safe church. We do know that you elders care for us and are willing to make the hard calls."

In addition to serving our own church, the covenant agreement proved useful to others in our community. Our local Prison Fellowship ministry requested to modify and use it for their ex-prisoners. And God used it in the lives of both the probation officer and the sex offender treatment counselor to demonstrate to them the power of his grace and the wisdom of his Word. They were amazed any church would get this involved in a sex offender's life.

Explanation to the Public

Fourth, we drafted a letter to send to our members and friends titled "Why Would We Invite a Convicted Criminal into Our Church?" It was a simple explanation intended for the widest public use. Hence, we neither cited various Scripture proof texts nor explained the theological basis for our attitudes and actions. This document proved helpful for convincing the reluctant to accept such a man into our midst. It reads as follows:

Why Would We Invite a Convicted Criminal into Our Church? An Open Letter from Your Elders to the Members and Friends of Rocky Mountain Community Church

Most child molesters have a difficult time overcoming their destructive habits. If someone does not help them to change, they are likely to hurt other children. In other words, if we in the church shun such people, we are actually increasing the odds that other children will eventually be harmed.

We see this as an opportunity to break the destructive cycle in at least one man's life and to increase the likelihood that he will never hurt another child. We believe that the best way to do this is to offer him genuine friendship, provide him with meaningful accountability, and help him to change the destructive attitudes and habits that led to his prior offenses.

We enter this relationship with our eyes wide open. We recognize and grieve over the seriousness of his previous crimes, and we know that there is a risk that he will offend again.

Yet we are hopeful. We have seen the power that Jesus Christ has to deliver people from their sins and transform their lives beyond recognition. We have experienced that forgiveness and change in our own lives, and we pray that Jesus will use us to help this man find similar freedom. As you can see, the emphasis is, "We'd rather help this man, so that he doesn't offend again, than do nothing and see other children get hurt."23

Challenge to Our People to Be Christ's Church

Finally, we challenged our people to see that our Lord was giving us a precious opportunity to witness to his goodness, wisdom, grace, and power to change lives. Many in the church responded enthusiastically to our challenge. Some invited John over to dinner (giving the necessary notices and taking the necessary precautions). Others invited him to join them for family outings. And several encouraged him to attend our annual family camp. All of these experiences incorporated John into body life and helped him see what it means for both husbands and wives and fathers and daughters to relate to one another.

Furthermore, a local Christian businessman had a job waiting for John when he was released from prison. A couple of years later one of my elders hired John—because John was qualified. As an employer, this man willingly agreed to have the probation officer and sex offender counselor inspect his business site to make sure it was a safe place for young female employees to work alongside John.

One evidence of God's great grace was when an elderly Christian couple, whose grown children attend our church, found out about John's housing needs. They graciously took John in as a renter of their downstairs apartment and proved to be much more than just landlords. They were like a father and mother to John—baking him goodies, encouraging him, and seeking his help to watch their dog and care for their house. My point in sharing all these examples is that reconciliation takes a church, and in our case, the church universal.

The Heart of the Conflict and the Greatness of God

The biggest trial for me was yet to come. Once John had been admitted to our church, had publicly confessed his sin to us, and had signed his covenant agreement with us, I visited his probation officer to seek his advice and counsel. He told me that it would be necessary for us to inform all our new members of John's offense during the tenure of John's probation—that is, for the next five years!

You can imagine the look on my face when I realized that for the next five years, during the course of our annual membership class, I would have to tell all the prospective members that we have a convicted child molester in our congregation. That would really make them want to join our church! I remember complaining to God, "How can I grow the church if I have to tell new members of our special member?" I feared I would see my ministry dry up and wither right before my eyes.

Though I believe intellectually that conflict provides opportunities to glorify God, to serve others, and to grow to be like Christ, at that moment I believed none of these truths in my heart. Instead, I began to view this conflict as a curse, as an obstacle to my ministry, as a very bad accident. Truth be told, I became rather godless.

It was while reading the letter of James that the Spirit began changing my heart, helping me to consecrate this conflict rather than curse it (James 1:2–5). I began to see how God has sovereignly placed it in my life to give me the opportunity to magnify the greatness of his wisdom, power, and mercy. And he had sovereignly placed it in the life of my church to turn us from fear to faith, to grow us in wisdom, and to show us that when we are weak, he is strong (James 3:18–4:12).

God is so good! What at first appeared to be a great evil turned out to be the *high point* every year in our membership class. After presenting the biblical teaching on the gospel, peacemaking, and church discipline, I would introduce the story of John, sharing how God had mercifully guided us through the process of receiving a sex offender as a brother in Christ.

By the time I had finished speaking, many eyes glistened with gospel tears. It was then that I would have John step out of the group and introduce himself in person. At that point, tears were streaming down people's cheeks. Here was no abstract message on peacemaking, but walking, living proof of God's gospel of peace.

John would wonderfully and graciously invite them to ask any questions. Typically, the people were dumbfounded. There was not a whole lot to say. Sometimes, though, a few would ask how he was doing. And he would tell them about sharing meals and going to local games with some of our families and about attending our church family camp. His life was a picture of one growing each day in grace, and his face was the face of a man finally at peace with God and others.

Making Changes to Address the Need

One lesson we learned the hard way was that our oversight plan was not thorough enough. We had overlooked the obvious and learned the need for impromptu house checks when, about a year and a half into John's probation, we received a call from his boss. He informed me that John's probation officer had taken him from his workplace and demanded to search his house. The search produced several books on incest as well as pornographic magazines.

For this breach of his parole, John was incarcerated and tried. I made several visits to him in the local county jail and used this time to help him trace the steps leading to his fall into pornography. At his trial, the court placed more strictures on John, including the requirement to enter a sex offender treatment program. After his release, John appeared before the church court (which consists of our elders) and confessed his sin using the Seven *A*'s of Confession.

John's confession prompted us elders to ask ourselves how we could better care for him. Knowing that the life of addiction is one of deceit and fantasy, we wanted to be certain that John was not reading or looking at pornographic material. So we drafted a house check agreement that would allow us to periodically and spontaneously enter John's house and search for any contraband material. The pertinent section of the Covenant read as follows:

John willingly agrees to give permission to any of the pastoral staff, elders, and deacons to make spot checks on his home in order to hold him accountable to the terms of this covenant. These checks will seek to determine whether John is keeping his home clean and orderly and whether or not he is in possession of prohibited materials as specified above in this covenant.

With this revised plan in place, John's change with respect to his habit of sexual sin became evident day-by-day, month-by-month. One of the clear evidences of his change was that John stopped blame-shifting and began more and more to take responsibility for his own choices, sin, and crime. At the appropriate time, and under the counsel and direction of his sexual abuse counselor, probation officer, and myself, he reconciled with his daughter, who lived out-of-state. A similar attempt was also made to reconcile with his neighbor and her daughter, though to no avail.

Celebration and Thanksgiving

On January 27, 2002, our church held a special congregational meeting to honor John for successfully completing his probation and sex offender treatment as well as to honor a few of the most prominent people in his life who helped him—his counselor, his landlord, and his employers. It was a great day and a great time of celebrating and giving thanks. It reminded me of the passage in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Finally, though my story has made John appear somewhat passive, he was anything but passive. None of the requirements we placed on John would have turned out for the good had the Lord not mightily converted him. John humbled himself again and again, getting the log out of his eye, confessing his faults, and working very diligently to comply with an immense amount of practical work with respect to his sanctification.

He memorized Philippians with me, and then, on his own initiative, he went on to memorize James. He dealt with anger, loneliness, frustrations at work, and personal care issues, and he willingly shared the most intimate details of his life.

John's willingness to submit to our agreements, to submit to the counsel of his secular and church advisors, and to introduce himself every year to our prospective members are much of the reason why he succeeded. He turned first to God, humbling himself in God's sight, and God gave him much grace. No wonder he is a man we love. He is our brother in Christ!

Conclusion

Does peacemaking work? Does it really benefit a church? John's story is my answer. Peacemaking works because Christ is alive, and he is our peace. He makes us to be at peace; he forgives all our sin; he restores our souls; he purifies our hearts; he replaces old sinful habits with holy habits; and he makes us a people, his people, his sons and daughters. What does it take to make peacemaking work? It takes the *doctrine* and *discipline* of peacemaking. These must direct us as we aim to lead our churches in becoming peacemaking churches.

Specifically, we must strive for the regular preaching, teaching, and ministry of the Word, the practice of humility, the continual turning to the gospel, and the frequent confession of sin received with the equally frequent response of forgiveness. And as church leaders, we must seek to exercise patience, kindness, restraint, and discipline toward those who oppose us. These doctrines and disciplines of grace are what make disciples of peace.

We live in an age that rejects both doctrine and discipline. It seeks to achieve peace through other means—means that have shown themselves to be most evident failures. We live in an age when people do not like fences. But it is fences we need—not the fences of Pharisees but the boundaries of God's law and gospel. In his book *Orthodoxy*, G. K. Chesterton reminds us of the value of such fences:

Doctrine and discipline may be walls; but they are walls of a playground. . . . We might fancy some children playing on the flat grassy top of some tall island in the sea. So long as there was a wall round the cliff's edge they could fling themselves into every frantic game and make the place the noisiest of nurseries. But the walls were knocked down, leaving the naked peril of the precipice. They did not fall over; but when their friends returned to them, they were all huddled in terror in the centre of the island; and their song had ceased.24

In the same way, the regular use of the ordinary means of grace along with the specific policies and practices of peacemaking are the very things that make for a peacemaking church. Like the rules of a game and the lines drawn on the field, so too, the doctrine and discipline of peacemaking make for great play!

Change, lasting change, often happens incrementally. God transforms our lives one step at a time, one breath at a time. So it is with becoming a peacemaking church. Implementing peacemaking principles and practices is less about instituting specific seminars and programs than it is about continually preaching, counseling, and living the gospel of peace. There is nothing magical about peacemaking other than the "magic" of the gospel itself. God has already given us the ordinary means of grace that work in extraordinary ways to create, shape, and transform sinners into the sons of God.

Notes Notes

Introduction

- <u>1</u> . Carl S. Dudley, "Conflict: Synonym for Congregation," Faith Communities Today, 2000, http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/fact2000/topical_article3.htm (accessed March 8, 2006).
- <u>2</u> . Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Pastors in Transition:Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 39.
- <u>3</u> . John C. LaRue Jr., "Profile of Today's Pastor: Ministry Preparation," *Your Church*, March/April 1995, http://www.christianitytoday.com/cbg/features/report/5y2056.html (accessed March 15, 2006).
- <u>4</u> . John C. LaRue Jr., "Profile of Today's Pastor: Ministry Ups and Downs," *Your Church*, July/August 1995, http://www.christianitytoday.com/cbg/features/report/5y4048.html (accessed March 15, 2006).
- <u>5</u> . John C. LaRue Jr., "Forced Exits: A Too-Common Ministry Hazard," *Your Church*, March/April 1996, http://www.christianitytoday.com/cbg/features/report/6y2072.html (accessed March 15, 2006).
- <u>6</u> . For a list of many other peacemaking agencies offering help for churches, see the article by Marlin Thomas, "Managing Conflict," *Leadership Journal* (Spring 1998), http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/812/812065.html . Thomas provides one-sentence summaries of each of these organizations.
- <u>7</u>. Marshall Shelley, ed., *LeadingYour Church through Conflict and Reconciliation: 30 Strategies to Transform Your Ministry* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1997).
 - 8. Glenn Taylor and Rod Wilson, *Helping Angry People* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997).
- <u>9</u> . One notable exception is the resources and training developed by Peacemaker Ministries, located in Billings, Montana. See, for example, Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

Chapter 1: Hope for a Heretic

- <u>1</u> . C. FitzSimons Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy: An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1994), 23.
- <u>2</u> . John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:108.
 - 3. T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," in Four Quartets (New York: Harvest/HBJ Book, 1943, 1971), 14.
- <u>4</u> . Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 536.

<u>5</u> . R. S. Thomas, *Poems of R. S. Thomas* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1985), 60–61.

Chapter 2: The Paths of Conflict

- 1 . Sande, The Peacemaker, 29.
- <u>2</u> . For other passages where the disciples are prone to wonder who is the greatest, and for Jesus's response to such quests for power, see Matt. 23:11–12; Mark 9:34–35.
- <u>3</u> . Jeffrey J. Ventrella, "When Preference Becomes Precept," *New Horizons*, May 1999, http://www.opc.org/new horizons/NH99/NH9905d.html (accessed February 12, 2005).
 - 4 . Sande, The Peacemaker, 259-61.
- <u>5</u>. Ibid., 22. Ken Sande is president of Peacemaker Ministries (<u>www.hispeace.org</u>). Peacemaker Ministries' purpose is to equip and assist Christians and their churches to respond to conflict biblically. Peacemaker Ministries provide a great array of Christ-centered, gospel-driven resources for pastors, church leaders, and local churches to recover the lost ministry of reconciliation.
 - 6 . Ibid., 24.
- <u>7</u>. Suicide can also be a way of attacking another person. The person attempting suicide does so in order to get back at the person(s) with whom he or she is in conflict. Expressions such as "I hope you're happy now" and "See what you've led me to do" are the language of attack for some who choose suicide.
- <u>8</u> . #1–<u>Teenage-Suicide.com</u>: Prevention and Treatment for Teenage Depression, http://www.1-teenage-suicide.com (accessed May 1, 2002).
 - 9 . Sande, *The Peacemaker*, 24.
- 10 . Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 21.
 - 11 . Adapted from Sande, The Peacemaker, 22.
- <u>12</u> . Christopher W. Moore, *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986), 14.

Chapter 3: The Heart of Conflict

- <u>1</u> . Barna Research Group, "Family: Divorce (2001)," Research Archive, http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=20 (accessed March 15, 2006).
- 2 . Everett L. Worthington Jr. and Douglas McMurry, *Marriage Conflicts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 39.
 - 3. Ibid.
- <u>4</u> . Robert Hemfelt, Frank Minirth, and Paul Meier, *Love Is a Choice* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 34.
- $\underline{5}$. Maslow says, "What makes people neurotic? My answer . . . was, in brief, that neurosis seemed at its core, and in its beginning, to be a deficiency disease: that it was born out of being deprived of certain satisfactions which I called needs in the same sense that water and amino acids

and calcium are needs, namely that their absence produces illness. Most neuroses involved . . . ungratified wishes for safety, for belongingness and identification, for close relationships and for respect and prestige." Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, 2nd ed. (New York: Van Nostrand, 1968), 21.

- <u>6</u>. For a secular critique of need theory, see Philip Cushman, "Why the Self Is Empty: Towards a Historically Situated Psychology," *American Psychologist* (May 1990): 599–611.
- <u>7</u>. See Edward T. Welch, "Who Are We? Needs, Longings, and the Image of God in Man," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 13, no. 1 (1994): 25–38.
- <u>8</u> . See Alfred Poirier, "Revival in the Church," *Equip Magazine* 2, no. 6 (November/December 1996): 7–9.
- 9. Scripture has many stories to this effect, but see 1 Kings 21 for one vivid illustration of this dynamic in the life of Ahab, the king of Israel, when he does not get what he wants from Naboth the Jezreelite. See also 1 Samuel 25 where David reaches for his sword to murder Nabal and his men when they refuse to give David what he wants.
- <u>10</u>. Calvin speaks here of having inordinate desires. See his comments under James 1:13. John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John W. Fraser, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960).
- 11. The theme of "idolatry as adultery" is prevalent in the Old Testament. For example, in Ezekiel 23:37 the Lord says of Israel, "They committed adultery with their idols." And the prophecy of Hosea begins, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife . . . because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord" (Hosea 1:2).
- <u>12</u> . J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 47–48. Citations are from the 1981 edition.
- 13 . Jack Miller in personal conversation. The late Jack Miller was pastor of New Life Presbyterian Church and founder of World Harvest ministry. His legacy continues through the work of World Harvest Missions and especially their Sonship discipleship materials.
- 14. This is an allusion to Augustine's famous quote about God's grace: "Give what you command and command what you will." This is the quote that provoked Pelagius to controversy and resulted in Augustine's great expositions on the nature of saving grace. See Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), book 10.29, 10.31, 10.37; pages 202, 206, 214, respectively.
 - 15 . J. A. Moyter, *The Message of James* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 150.
- 16 . Such "helps" make up the lion's share of counsel in conflict resolution. Matters of the heart as well as the God-directedness of the heart surprisingly are omitted. This is not to say, however, that learning how to use one's tongue in a godly fashion is unnecessary. James 3 and Proverbs both give instruction as to how to use our tongues to edify others.

Chapter 4: God's Glory in Conflict

- <u>1</u>. Of course, this is exactly what our response should be according to James 1:2.
- $\underline{2}$. Many of the ancient cosmologies begin with a big bang—gods fighting with gods, and from the aftermath of their wars, the world is created.
- <u>3</u>. For excellent expositions on the doctrine of the Trinity, see Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History,Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Protestant and Reformed, 2004); Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).
 - <u>4</u> . Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 536 (italics added).
- 5. One cannot help but see the language of "grace and peace" in the Aaronic blessing and wonder if Paul's own salutation is but a variation of this priestly blessing.
- <u>6</u> . The New Testament is replete with references to the new peace that is the result of Christ's redemptive work (e.g., Rom. 5:1; Eph. 2:13–15; Heb. 13:20–21).
- <u>7</u>. In his article on the Hebrew word *ykh*, John E. Hartley argues that as a verb *ykh* is synonymous with *ryb*, and means "to contend or to initiate a lawsuit." But here, it means "to arbitrate, judge, or rule." Hartley cites Isaiah 2:4 as an example: "In the last days, Yahweh will rule over an era of global peace, for he will judiciously arbitrate disputes among all peoples." See John E. Hartley, "xky (*ykh*)," in *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 2, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 441–45.
- 8. E. F. Harrison, "Glory," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 443.
- 9 . Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical,Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 557.
- <u>10</u> . The word *stiff-necked* serves as a dramatic motif in this narrative. It heightens the question as to whether the Holy God can live among this rebellious people (see Exod. 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9).
 - 11. Stated both negatively ("he does not acquit") and positively ("he punishes").
- 12 . See Thomas Manton, who says, "but the main of his name is 'his mercy and goodness." From Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, vol. 9 (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1872), 465. See also Romans 9:18–24 for further proof that God's justice or wrath serves the greater display of his mercy. John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans* 9:1–23, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).
- <u>13</u> . According to S. R. Driver, "The character of the people of Israel is here made the motive for being treated with favour and forgiven." S. R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus: In the Revised Version with Introduction and Notes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 367. See also John Piper's discussion in Piper, *Justification of God*, 81 and n. 8.
- 14 . As argued above, Exodus 33:18–34:7 is one of the most significant theological passages in the Old Testament, as it is the first extended self-description by God of himself. Its significance is proved in part by how frequently it is appealed to throughout the rest of Scripture (see Num. 14:18; 2

- Chron. 30:9; Neh. 9:17; Pss. 86:5, 15; 103:8; 111:4; 116:5; 145:8; Jer. 9:23–24; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2; Micah 6:8; 7:18–19; Nah.1:3).
- <u>15</u> . It is a new day because it is the eschatological day of the Lord. Jeremiah 31:31 begins by announcing what God will do in the "days that are coming." While God's promises of forgiveness and of being Israel's God are old promises, the *newness* of the new promises will be their effectiveness—an effectiveness that is a direct result of the eschatological event, Christ's coming in the flesh.
- <u>16</u> . So Carson, Köstenberger, and Ridderbos affirm in their commentaries. Yet as Ridderbos notes, "Though most interpreters acknowledge the connection with Exodus 33 and 34 at least in regard to the expression 'grace and truth,' only a few explore this link more deeply." Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 57. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 129, and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 45.

Chapter 5: Peacemaking in the Family of God

- 1. I would like to thank Professor Allen Mawhinney for suggesting this image. Sonship is the biblical doctrine of God's relationship to his covenant people as Father and us as his adopted sons. Dr. Mawhinney is one of the few contemporary theologians who has sought to make up for the lacuna in theological studies on the subject of biblical sonship. See, for example, "Baptism, Servanthood, and Sonship," *Westminster Theological Journal* 49, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 35–64. Also see Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1987).
- <u>2</u> . I cannot trace the precise source of the quotes attributed to Russell and Twain. The French and German proverbs are found in *The International Thesaurus of Quotations*, comp. Rhoda Thomas Tripp (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1970), 82.
- <u>3</u> . John Murray, the late professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, calls adoption "the apex of grace and privilege." See John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 134.
 - 4. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 182.
 - 5. See also Colossians 3:1–17 where Paul unites peacemaking with "new creation" language.
- <u>6</u>. While the word *son* is not found in Genesis 1:27, we find that it is implied in the concepts of "likeness" and "image." Genesis 5:1–3 and Luke 3:38 both make this dynamic explicit. Adam is God's *son*.
- $\underline{7}$. This "new man" theology underlies Paul's understanding of Christ (see Rom. 5:12–19; 1 Cor. 15:45–49; 2 Cor. 4:1–16; 5:17; Col. 3:1–17).
- <u>8</u>. Paul makes this connection explicit in Romans 13:14 when he tells us to *clothe* ourselves with *Jesus Christ*.
 - 9. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 331.

- $\underline{10}$. We should not miss how even this last verse (Eph. 4:32) mirrors the character of God found in our study of Exodus 34:6–7. This connection only strengthens our contention that God's glory is the revelation of his mercy to undeserving sinners. God's glory is forgiving his enemies and being reconciled with them.
- <u>11</u>. God as "Father" is found only about 15 times in the Old Testament, but 245 times in the New Testament (which is only a tenth of the size of the Old).
 - <u>12</u> . See Packer, *Knowing God*, 181–208.
- <u>13</u>. D. A. Carson provides an excellent discussion of this difference between exegetical and systematic domains of discourse (which often leads to theological conflict) in D. A. Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields," in *Justification:What's at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. Mark Husband and Daniel J. Trier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 46–78.
- 14 . Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 49. Banks, I believe, overstates himself when he speaks of this image of the church as God's family as the *essence* of Paul's thinking on the church. Paul adopts several models or pictures of the church. However, I would not suggest that all of these images are equally valuable. Unlike other images, such as the body of Christ, the image of family of God/sonship is of a fundamental biblical and theological nature undergirding both the *historia* and *ordo salutis*.
- 15. Paul S. Minear, *Image of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 172.
 - <u>16</u>. The term *oikos* is used in 1 Tim. 3:15; elsewhere *oikeios* is used (see Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19).
- $\underline{17}$. We must not misconstrue Jesus's point as supportive of a works-righteousness view of salvation. Rather, Christ merely points out that we know true believers by their fruit. Believers demonstrate true belief by forgiving others.
 - 18 . See more on confidentiality in chapter 12, "Church Discipline Practices."
 - 19. John Owen, Collected Works, vol. 2 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965), 36.

Chapter 6: Confessing Our Sins to Another

- <u>1</u> . Consider Pharaoh, who continued to oppress God's people (Exod. 9:27); Balaam, who continued to seek Israel's destruction (Num. 22:34); Achan, who hid the idols instead of destroying them (Josh. 7:20); Saul, whom the Lord rejected as king (1 Sam. 15:23); and Judas, who hanged himself (Matt. 27:3–4).
- <u>2</u> . Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q.A. 87 in *Westminster Confession of Faith: Together with the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism with the Scripture Proofs*, 3rd ed. (Atlanta: Committee for Christian Education and Publication, 1990), 27.
- <u>3</u>. The grammatical difficulty is the phrase "you, loyal yokefellow."The forms are singular. But, if singular, who then is *gnesie syzyge*? Is this someone in the congregation? Epaphroditus? Moisés

Silva comments: "On the basis of our limited information, the most reasonable interpretation is that the appellative is in effect Paul's way of inviting the various members of the church to prove themselves loyal partners in the world of the gospel. (On Paul's use of the second person singular to address the recipients of the letter, cf. Rom. 2:1, 17; 8:2; 9:20; 11:17ff; 1 Cor. 14:17; 15:36; Gal. 6:1. Most of these instances, however, are negative in tone.)" Moisés Silva, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 222.

- <u>4</u> . Sande, *The Peacemaker*, 126–34. The more serious the offense, the more necessary it is to make full and detailed confession.
- $\underline{5}$. To apologize means to acknowledge one's regret for wrongdoing. I subsume this act under admitting specifically because there is sufficient overlap in these two to present them as one. The idea is to express regret about *some specific thing*—not some amorphous, abstract "fault." Equally, we do not simply admit a list of specific items; we express emotional and moral regret for having done them.
- <u>6</u> . Former Senator Robert Packwood, as reported by the Associated Press, "Oregon Senator Accused of Many Sexual Advances," *Billings Gazette*, December 11, 1992.
- <u>7</u>. I am not at all suggesting that confession can only be true if one confesses every specific sin. In that case, none of us could render a complete confession. Rather, I am seeking to counter the common error people make by confessing only very generally that they have sinned and done wrong.
- <u>8</u> . Passages rich and explicit in gospel promises of forgiveness or salvation pervade Scripture. Some I commonly use are Exod. 33:18–34:7; Ps. 103:8–13; Jer. 31:34; Ezek. 18:30–32; Rom. 3:9–26; 5:1–11; 8:1; 2 Peter 3:9.
 - 9. Internal letter written to David Edling of Peacemaker Ministries. Used with permission.
 - 10 . From the Book of Common Prayer (New York: Seabury Press, 1953), 6.

Chapter 7: Granting True Forgiveness

- $\underline{1}$. For example, Leviticus 4:1–6:7 speaks of unintentional and intentional sins, sins of omission, and willful sins. See Westminster Larger Catechism, Q.A. 150–51 in *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 109.
- 2 . See my booklet, Alfred J. Poirier, *Words that Cut: Learning to Take Criticism in Light of the Gospel* (Billings, MT: Peacemaker Ministries, 2003).
- <u>3</u> . Calvin understands "glories" to refer to civic or ecclesiastical authorities. In contrast, other translators see Jude's reference to "glories" as referring to angelic beings. Either way, the strength of Jude's disapprobation arises from the fact that the wicked reject those of eminency and authority.
 - 4. See Westminster Larger Catechism, Q.A. 151, 3 in Westminster Confession of Faith, 112.
- <u>5</u>. Burghard Siede, "Take, Receive," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 750. The *pro* acts as an intensifier of the verb.

- <u>6</u> . See Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor: Social Scientists Discover the Power of a Christian Virtue," *Christianity Today* 41, no. 1 (January 10, 2000): 38–45.
- <u>7</u>. See my article on contemporary Christian integrationist views on forgiveness in Alfred J. Poirier, "Taking up the Challenge," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 18, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 30–37. To see how the "therapeutic" worldview has pervaded our culture, see Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 1987).
- <u>8</u> . See L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), for his extended discussion of these two general trends.
- 9. "Weakness is being lied into something meritorious . . . an impotence which does not requite into goodness of heart; anxious lowliness into humility; subjection to those one hates into 'obedience' . . . inability for revenge is called unwillingness to revenge, perhaps even forgiveness." In Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (1967; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 1st essay, sec. 14, 47. This volume contains both titles by Nietzsche. See also Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976). Wiesenthal relates a story in which a Nazi begs forgiveness from a Jewish prisoner for crimes committed against the Jewish people. The Jew finally leaves the man in the misery of his guilt and thereby leaves the reader with the question: would I, should I, have forgiven the man? Accompanying this story are responses by thirty-two of the world's great theologians, ethicists, and philosophers each trying to answer the question Wiesenthal poses.
- <u>10</u>. Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 133. Page citations are from the 1996 edition. In another definition of forgiveness, note the result clause: "Forgiveness is overcoming negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors . . . *so that* the forgiver can be healed" (italics added). Found in J. M. Brandsma, "Forgiveness," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling*, 2nd ed., ed. David. C. Benner and Peter C. Hill (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 468.
- 11 . David Augsburger, *The Freedom of Forgiveness* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), 36. My contention with Augsburger is his assertion that Jesus forgives even those who would never ask for forgiveness. Augsburger fails to consider the biblical dynamic that while the offended person's disposition and desire may be to forgive the offender, actual forgiveness only takes place when the one who offends, in response to the offer of forgiveness, actually repents (cf. Matt. 18:15–35; Luke 17:1–3; 24:46–47; Acts 2:38). Margaret Gramatky Alter seems to fall into the same lack of clarity as Augsburger when she stresses that Jesus's "forgiveness is not contingent on an apology," or that "Jesus includes Zacchaeus before he repents," or again that "forgiveness precedes repentance" in Margaret Gramatky Alter, "The Unnatural Act of Forgiveness: Exploring Jesus' Radical Method of Restoration," *Christianity Today* 41, no. 7 (June 1997): 30. Both Augsburger and Gramatky Alter err by failing to distinguish what I call dispositional from transactional forgiveness.
 - <u>12</u> . Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, xii (italics added).

- 13 . Ibid., 10.
- 14 . Sin has lost its heinousness. Most people think of sin as a peccadillo rather than recognizing it for what it is—an attempted overthrow and assassination of God, who alone is all wise, holy, good, and just.
 - 15. Becky Pippert, *Hope Has Its Reasons*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 117.
 - <u>16</u> . Augustine, *Confessions*, book 10, 29, 31, 37.
- <u>17</u> .Westminster Larger Catechism, Q.A. 194 in *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 148 (italics added to both quotations).
 - <u>18</u> . Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:426.
 - 19 . Sande, The Peacemaker, 209.

Chapter 8: Looking Out for the Interests of Others

- $\underline{1}$. Throughout this chapter I refer to this case. The reader should know that this case, though based on a real situation, is also a composite scenario of many cases that have involved coaching church members in negotiation.
- <u>2</u> . Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, *Getting toYes*, 2nd ed. (NewYork: Penguin Books, 1991). Fisher and Ury's work continues to receive popular acclaim. It comes out of the Harvard Negotiation Project, one of the leading organizations dealing with conflict resolution along the whole range of relationships, from domestic relationships to business relationships to international politics.
 - 3. Ibid., 154.
 - 4 . Sande, The Peacemaker, 227–28.
- 5. The Westminster Larger Catechism, Q.A. 128 in *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 84–86. According to the Larger Catechism, "The sins of inferiors against their superiors are, all neglect of the duties required toward them (Matt. 15:4–6); envying at (Num. 11:28–29), contempt of (1 Sam. 8:7, Isa. 3:5), and rebellion against (2 Sam. 15:1–12), their persons (Exod. 21:15) and places (1 Sam. 10:27), in their lawful counsels (1 Sam. 2:25), commands and corrections (Deut. 21:18–21); cursing, mocking (Prov. 30:11, 17), and all such refractory and scandalous carriage, as proves a shame and dishonour to them and their government (Prov. 19:26)."
- <u>6</u>. Tremper Longman III, *Daniel in the NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 52–53. Longman argues (along with Calvin) that the issue was not kosher food laws per se but their desire to give God the credit for their appearance and wisdom.
 - 7. Ibid., 54.
 - 8 . See Poirier, Words That Cut.

Chapter 9: Pastor as Mediator

<u>1</u>. So it is with ten out of thirteen letters (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2; Titus 1:4). In his letters to Timothy, Paul adds *mercy*.

And in his letter to Philemon, the words *grace* and *peace* are found in two adjoining phrases. Thus, we could say that "grace and peace" is Paul's exclusive salutation.

- <u>2</u> . S. E. Porter, "Peace, Reconciliation," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 695–99.
- <u>3</u>. It seems that Paul's knowledge of the quarreling in Corinth came by way of Chloe's agents (1 Cor. 1:11). Scholarly conjecture posits that Chloe's people are likely not from the Corinthian church but some other church, possibly from Ephesus. But they had relations with the Corinthian church.

Chapter 10: Mediation and Arbitration

- 1. Jethro K. Lieberman, *The Litigious Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).
- 2. Jerold Auerbach, *Justice without Law?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 9.
- <u>3</u>. Chief Justice Warren Burger, "Annual Report on the State of the Judiciary," *American Bar Association Journal* (March 1982): 68; quoted in Judith M. Keegan and Glenn G. Waddell, "Christian Conciliation: An Alternative to 'Ordinary' ADR," *Cumberland Law Review* 29, no. 3 (1998–1999): 583.
- <u>4</u>. Eugene Kennedy, "The Looming 80's," *NewYork Times Magazine*, December 2, 1979; quoted in Lieberman, *Litigious Society*, vii (italics added).
- <u>5</u> . Lieberman, *Litigious Society*, 3. Lieberman provides examples of the increasingly litigious character of the courts in ancient Rome during the early first century.
- <u>6</u> . Robert Taylor, "Toward a Biblical Theology of Litigation: A Law Professor Looks at 1 Cor. 6:1–11," *Ex Auditu* 2 (1986): 105–6.
 - 7 . Sande, *The Peacemaker*, 31–37.
- <u>8</u> . Ken Sande and Ted Kober, *Guiding People through Conflict* (Billings, MT: Peacemaker Ministries, 1998), 20.
- 9 . On impartiality with respect to God's character, see Deut. 10:17; 16:19; 2 Chron. 19:7; Job 34:19; Prov. 24:23–24; Matt. 22:16; Luke 20:21; Acts 10:34; Gal. 2:6; 6:7–8; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; 1 Peter 1:17. On impartiality with respect to man, see Exod. 23:3; Deut. 1:17; Prov. 22:22; Mal. 2:9; James 3:17.
 - <u>10</u> . Sande, *The Peacemaker*; Sande and Kober, *Guiding People through Conflict*.
- <u>11</u>. See Brian S. Rosner's excellent study of this section in which he argues persuasively that Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 6 is scripturally grounded in Moses's own judicial concerns and wisdom in appointing just and equitable judges. Brian S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5–7* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 94–122.

Chapter 11: Church Discipline Principles

- 1. R. C. Sproul, *In Search of Dianity* (Ventura, CA: GL Publications, Regal Books, 1983), 182.
- 2. See chapter 7, "Granting True Forgiveness," for earlier discussion on forgiveness.
- <u>3</u> . See The Belgic Confession, "Article 29: The Marks of the True Church," in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988), 108. The Heidelberg

Catechism, Lord's Day 31, Q. 83, considers discipline as one of the keys of the kingdom. The Canons of Dortrecht, article 17, along with the Word and sacraments, views discipline as a "means of grace." The Westminster Confession affirms the same and devotes an entire chapter to expounding the nature and character of church censures, *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chap. 30.

- <u>4</u> . Stephen M. Johnson, "The Sinews of the Body of Christ: Calvin's Concept of Church Discipline," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 (Fall 1997): 87.
 - 5. Ibid., 88, citing William Monter, *Calvin's Geneva* (New York: Robert E. Krieger, 1975), 97.
 - **6** . Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1229–30.
- 7. John Colin, ed., John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoleto: A Reformation Debate (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 63.
 - <u>8</u> . Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1229–30.
- 9. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (1974; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 46–47. Citations are to the 2001 edition. Wilhelmus à Brakel (ca. 1700) makes a similar complaint: "Thirdly, the exercise of church discipline is almost entirely neglected. There is no longer a model of what the church ought to be. Men are therefore satisfied if many people come to church, and if many members are accepted. Such churches are then referred to as flourishing churches. In many, if not most localities, those who can recite the Lord's Prayer, the Twelve Articles of Faith, or have memorized a few questions are accepted as members. A sufficient knowledge of fundamental truths is no longer required, and they also do not require actual separation from the world and a life which to some degree conforms to the image of Christ. If their lives are not entirely ungodly, all is well." Wilhelmus à Brakel, Th.F., *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout, 4 vols. (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), 2:72.
- <u>10</u>. Lynn R. Buzzard and Thomas S. Brandon Jr., *Church Discipline and the Courts* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1987), 56–57.
- <u>11</u> . In the case of Titus, Paul seems to suggest interest-based small group teaching. That is, teaching appropriate to older women, younger women, older men, and younger men. By wisely aiming the Word to particular people with particular interests, the sword of the Spirit becomes more like a surgeon's scalpel.
 - 12. Westminster Confession of Faith, 30.1 in Westminster Confession of Faith, 94.
- <u>13</u> . See Geoffrey W. Grogan, "Isaiah," in *Isaiah–Ezekiel*, vol. 6, of The Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 143.
- <u>14</u> . Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. H. de Jongste (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), 360; Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 90, 94.
 - 15. Westminster Confession of Faith, 30.2 in Westminster Confession of Faith, 94.
 - 16. Westminster Confession of Faith, 30.3 in Westminster Confession of Faith, 94–95.

- <u>17</u>. For example, see Galatians 5:9 with respect to the doctrine of the Judaizers; see 2 Tim. 2:17 with respect to the teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus.
 - 18 . Colin, John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoleto, 63.
- 19. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper &Row, 1954), 106.

Chapter 12: Church Discipline Practices

- <u>1</u> . See chapter 11, "Church Discipline Principles," under the section "A Brief Historical Sketch: The Modern Period."
 - <u>2</u> . In the space of four verses, the verb *skandalizo* and noun form *skandalon* are used.
- <u>3</u> . For anger and cursing, see Matthew 5:22; for lust, see Matthew 5:28–30; for breaking oaths or taking them with loopholes, see Matthew 5:33–37.
- <u>4</u>. The verb form for "to shepherd" (*poimaino*) is used in the New Testament as a near synonym for "to rule" (see Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15).
- <u>5</u>. The word *brutally* is used only two other times in the OldTestament. The actual phrase "rule brutally" is found only two other times—in verses 43 and 46 of Leviticus 25. There it is a prohibition instructing the Israelites how not to treat their fellow Israelite bondmen. They are not to rule them brutally. Exodus 1:13–14 presents a similar idea when the Egyptians are depicted as brutally or with severity making the Israelites serve them. Clearly, Ezekiel's use of this phrase shows how degenerate pastoring had become in his day when the rulers of Israel treated their own people as the Egyptians had in the land of slavery. See *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, based on the lexicon of William Gesenius, trans. Edward Robinson, ed. Francis Brown, S. R. Drivers, and C. A. Briggs (repr., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 827.
- <u>6</u> . Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, combined edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 148.
- <u>7</u>. See George M. Schwab Sr., "The Proverbs and the Art of Persuasion," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 14, no. 1 (Fall 1995): 6–17.
 - 8. George Schwab's article (see note 7 above) did much to stimulate my thinking in this area.
- <u>9</u>. One of the most insightful apologists today is J. Budziszewski and his work on our "moral and social design"—that God has made humans in a particular way. See J. Budziszew–ski, "The Third and Fourth Witnesses," in *What We Can't Not Know* (Dallas: Spence, 2003), 86–106.
- $\underline{10}$. "My son" is used twenty-three times in Proverbs. "Your father" is used three times. More frequently, the father stresses their relationship by teaching his son the effect his actions will have upon the father.
- <u>11</u>. Second Timothy 3:16–17 teaches not only the kinds of use for which Scripture is profitable but also, by implication, the different kinds of persons to whom Scripture is directed. The ignorant need teaching, the recalcitrant need rebuking, the mistaken need correction, and the immature need training. Of course, any single person may need all of these at one time (cf. 1 Thess. 5:14).

- <u>12</u>. David knows that God desires the same for him, and he asks God to work this change in him in his great confession of sin in Psalm 51:6.
- <u>13</u> . C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses, Revised and Expanded Edition*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 19.
- 14. To compare how interchangeable these titles are, all referring to the same group of men, see Titus 1:5 (elders) along with verse 7 (overseer), and Acts 20:17 (elders) along with verse 28 (overseers and shepherds).
- <u>15</u> . S. Maxwell Coder, "Biographical Introduction," in *Memoirs and Remains of R. M. McCheyne*, ed. A. A. Bonar (1947; repr., Chicago: Moody, 1978), xxii–xxiii.

Chapter 13: Toward Becoming a Peacemaking Church

- <u>1</u> . Oswald Chambers, "It Is the Lord!" *My Utmost for His Highest: An Updated Edition in Today's Language*, ed. James Reimann (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 1992), January 18, http://www.rbc.org/utmost/index.php?month=01&day=18 (accessed March 8, 2006).
 - 2. Ibid., (italics added).
- <u>3</u> . John uses *paidia* (1 John 2:13, 18) and *tekna* (1 John 2:12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21), both of which the NIV translates as "dear children." He also uses *agapetoi* (1 John 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11), which the NIV renders "dear friends." John uses *brothers* only once as a form of address (1 John 3:13).
 - 4. Sande, The Peacemaker, 259-61.
- <u>5</u>. Question 155 of the Westminster Larger Catechism asks, "How is the Word made effectual to salvation?" The answer is, "The Spirit of God maketh the reading, *but especially the preaching of the Word*, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation" (italics added). In *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 117–18.
- <u>6</u> . It is difficult to determine whether to take "the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" as a subjective genitive or an objective genitive. In other words, is Paul describing a readiness that the gospel confers (subjective genitive) or a readiness that is conferred by the preacher (objective genitive)? Either way, what concerns us is that the gospel is here a gospel *of peace*.
- <u>7</u>. Note well the emphatic focus on Christ by way of the intensive personal pronoun *autos*. Elsewhere in Paul's letters we find the same (see Eph. 4:10–11; 5:23, 27).
- $\underline{8}$. There is dispute as to the precise situation Paul has in mind when he speaks of Christ who came and "preached peace." Was it during his earthly sojourn? His death on the cross? During his postresurrection appearances? Or did Christ preach peace through the agencies of his apostles? I think it best to say that Paul is not so much seeking to tie down the *when* as to show that the entire work of Christ, mediated through the Spirit, is a work of peace preaching.

- 9 . See J. Mark Beach's article, "The Real Presence of Christ in the Preaching of the Gospel: Luther and Calvin on the Nature of Preaching," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 10 (1999): 77–134.
- $\underline{10}$. Peace themes are those truths that highlight the gospel of peace: atonement, justification, confession of sin, forgiveness, body life, and so on.
- <u>11</u> . Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 897. See pages 891–99 for a discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:29 and subsequent verses.
 - <u>12</u> . Sande, *The Peacemaker*.
- 13 . For materials suitable for training church leaders to lead their church toward becoming a peacemaking church, visit Peacemaker Ministries' website where a host of resources have been specifically designed with the local church in mind. Moreover, materials for the entire congregation are available—books, tracts, small group Bible studies, and resources for teaching children as well as a comprehensive course of training for those who desire to become reconcilers. See www.hispeace.org.
 - <u>14</u>. See their website, <u>http://www.ccef.org/home.htm</u>.
- <u>15</u> . For more information see Peacemaker Ministries' Reconciler Training Program, http://www.hispeace.org/html/tra.htm .
- <u>16</u> . For many more practical tools and helps to transform your church into a peacemaking church, including assessment tools, see <u>www.hispeace.org</u> .
- <u>17</u>. Paige Patterson, "My Vision of the Twenty-First Century SBC," *Review and Expositor* 88, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 43–44; quoted in David W. Hall, *The Arrogance of the Modern: Historical Theology Held in Contempt* (Oak Ridge, TN: Covenant Foundation, 1997), 33 (italics added).
- <u>18</u>. See the various covenants in Exodus 20–23; Deuteronomy; and Joshua 24. For more on this, see K. A. Kitchen, *The Bible in Its World: The Bible & Archaeology Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), 79-85.
- 19. Membership class lasts for twelve weeks. Each class lasts an hour and a half. Our curriculum revolves around the six vows that new members take to unite with the church. They cover our views of Scripture, God, salvation, Christ, church, sacraments, worship, small groups, peacemaking, and discipline.
 - 20 . See chapter 8, "Looking Out for the Interests of Others."
- <u>21</u> . See Patrick Carnes, Ph.D., *Out of the Shadows*, 2nd ed. (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1994). See also Edward T. Welch, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave—Finding Hope in the Power of the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001).
- <u>22</u>. Among the other conditions imposed by the court were these: maintaining employment, no possession of firearms, no frequenting of bars; the necessity to get permission to travel out of his assigned district, etc. See a copy of Conditions of Probation and Parole.

- 23. Ken Sande, an elder in our church, composed this letter to the public.
- 24 . G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1959), 145.

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