

Theological Foundations
for Resolving Church Conflict
Understanding Expectations and Perceptions
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Summary

Runaway congregational conflict can have huge detrimental effects on church life and ministry. Churches are surprisingly unprepared to deal with the different perspectives organizational life brings. There is an unrealistic expectation that agreement will always mark interpersonal relationships. As a result, disputes are poorly handled and churches suffer serious tears in their social fabric.

This essay first addresses the need for members to alter their expectations of community life based on a fuller understanding of Biblical theology. Attention is then turned to the critical role a person's perception plays when congregants are at odds with one another.

I. PEOPLE'S EXPECTATIONS

Introduction

Given the great diversity of people that attend, churches can be both a source of joy and aggravation, a place of peace or conflict. In this essay, we will be delving into matters relating to interpersonal conflict. Accordingly, consider the following two remarks. Frustrated and upset, one minister verbally emoted:

“It just kills me when people are this ugly in any community, especially the church. What happened in the nominating committee last night was bald-faced character assassination. Nobody stopped it until I finally stepped in. Even then, they just sat there. Today Joan is still at it, spreading her poisonous lies about Sheila all over the congregation. What hurts so is how the people of this congregation play dead and let her keep on. I can't believe it. At times like this, it makes me sick to be the pastor of this church” (Halverstadt).

And then there is this statement of incredulity:

“I thought the church was different from other organizations - especially with regard to conflict,' a confused and depressed lawyer said to me in the midst of a painful and protracted battle between his church's vestry [board] and the school board which ran their parish day school” (Leas).

These are just two expressions of disappointment about conflict in the church. Surely, if there is one place where people want to find a respite from the world, a place of peace and harmony, it is in their church. Notice how, in both cases above, the church is distinguished from all other institutions and organizations by the use of the word, “especially.”

However, what is not realized by the majority of clergy and lay persons alike is how unprepared the church is to deal with conflict in its midst. Ironically, the one place people expect for differences to be managed well is the one place where, by and large, it is not. After fourteen years of experience one church consultant and conflict specialist declared, “I have not yet been in a church that has a decent set of understandings of how to deal with differences when they arise” (Leas). The reality behind that observation has changed little since that time. Rediger noted, “It is surprising to find how few congregations have a clear, widely known procedure for handling complaints.” How can this be?

Unrealistic Expectations

A major reason churches have so much trouble managing conflict is because it is so contrary to what people expect to find. Yet this widely held anticipation that houses of worship are conflict-free is very unrealistic. In fact, such misguided expectations only exasperate the problem. Rodger Bufford, chairman of the graduate psychology program at George Fox College writes, “Ministers don't report that they are having much conflict in their ministries because they are not supposed to have them” (Lowry & Meyers).

Through newspapers, radio, and the evening news, people are well aware of all the problems in the world. Locally or nationally the names are different but the story is always the same: abuse, rape, murder. Internationally, the names are different but the story is the same: political unrest, territorial disputes, war. No matter what the era or where the locale it never ends. But people expect a different, higher experience in the church where love is extolled as the greatest virtue. Jesus' words to his disciples are well-known: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35 NKJV).

Likewise, when pastors or Sunday school teachers look to a model of the ideal church, they inevitably turn to the snapshot of the newborn church recorded in Acts 2:44-47 (NKJV).

“Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

This passage is often cited as a description of the kind of loving fellowship that is expected to exist in our congregations today, and in fact, such love and care can regularly be found.

However, the above snapshot is only a momentary picture. Reading on in the New Testament, we discover that the euphoria of those very early days gave way to instances of false pretenses and lying (Acts 5), to serious conflict between two culturally distinct groups within the church (Acts 6), to theological contention (Galatians 2, Acts 15:1f), and to interpersonal disagreement (Acts 15:36f). As Christianity spread, we find that first-century churches had their fair share of disputes. They are spoken of in virtually every epistle. Paul's remark to the Corinthian church is an example: “I fear that there may be [among you] quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder” (2 Corinthians 12:21, NIV).

Such a state of affairs does not in any way diminish the words of Christ or the portrait of the early church. But they do acknowledge the difficult realities that churches face when diverse people from every age group, race, ethnic group, income bracket, and background come together to become part of one body. There will be strife. Conflict is a reality of the human experience. Churches are not exempt. They never were.

But not all have come to this understanding. Too often, for a church to acknowledge conflict in its midst when it is supposed to demonstrate love, is to confess failure. Its acknowledgment is incongruent with its highest ideals. It is analogous to faculty members at a university's department of dispute resolution publicly announcing that they are at war with each another.

Consequently, “when we imagine that conflict shouldn't exist, we are likely to engage in denial when conflict does arise” (Rediger). The finding of Peter Robinson, associate director at the Institute for Dispute Resolution at Pepperdine University School of Law supports this contention. After working with hundreds of ministers, he discovered that a pastor's preferred option of dealing with church conflict is avoidance” (Lowry & Meyers). Rediger has likewise stated, “our image of the ideal church doesn't include conflict.” He added, “this is unrealistic, of course,” and a “fallacy.”

Danger Lurks

The downside of avoidance and denial is that disputes, rather than being constructively managed, slowly simmer until they explode, catching the rest of the congregation off guard. And then the hallmark of Christian fellowship, love, is nowhere to be found. It is at times like these when people scratch their heads and say, “But I thought the church, especially the church, is not supposed to be like this.” Ron Kraybill has given the following advice to pastors and other church leaders:

“Manage conflict or it will manage you. Whenever churches have faced conflict openly, the congregations have grown stronger in the process. But whenever they have hidden from conflict, it has emerged when the congregations were weakest and least prepared. The longer the congregation hides, the more 'political' and power oriented the struggle becomes, and the more destructive its impact.”

Chaos management, a contradiction in terms, becomes the emerging paradigm instead of the implementation of a pre-designed process of conflict management.

Making Expectations More Realistic

What can be done to address the problem many churches have in dealing with conflict? The first thing that needs to be done is to change people's minds in terms of what they should expect to find in the church. The Mennonites have taken the lead among Christian denominations in this area. As a denomination, they have publicly gone on record stating,

“Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,' (Eph. 4:3) as both individual members and the body of Christ, we pledge that we shall: 1. Acknowledge together that conflict is a normal part of our life in the church” (Schrock-Shenk).

In order for such a reorientation to take place in the church at large, a major educational effort has to be made. However, to make an impact on churches, the rationale behind the effort must first be derived from the Scriptures.

A Dose of Biblical Theology

It has become apparent to this writer that there has developed a fundamental disconnect between belief and practice. The expectation that the church should be without conflict is incongruent with Biblical theology. It must be remembered that the purpose of Jesus Christ's life can best be seen against the dark backdrop of our destructive patterns of thought that typically result in conflict-producing behavior. The gospel message is that the Son of God came into the world to die for such sins. He who committed no sin bore our punishment on the cross for the wrongs we have engaged in so that we, through faith in Christ, can experience God's forgiveness.

Becoming reconciled with God, however, does not change our underlying human nature. The well-known phrase, "sinners saved by grace," recognizes the fact that we are still sinners. Very few imagine that a person's new commitment to God eradicates self-centered, conflict producing thoughts and behavior. (The difference is that the Lord now enables us to live a life more pleasing to Him, but it will not be sin-free this side of heaven).

To better grasp this point, Garry Wills' comment is helpful with regard to tarnished televangelists. He wrote, "Journalists miss the point when they keep asking, after each new church scandal, if a preacher's fall has shaken the believers' faith. Sin rather confirms than challenges a faith that proclaims human corruption." In other words, how can a faith that at its foundation asserts the predisposition of people to do wrong be shaken when people do wrong? It's like saying, "the Pope practices Catholicism. Shocking isn't it?"

Given this fact, why do churches have such difficulty dealing with conflict-producing behaviors when they understand its fundamental cause? The pattern of avoidance belies the underlying premise of the gospel message. Somehow, a fundamental disconnect between faith and practice has developed. Kevin Miller, editor of *Leadership*, a journal for church leaders, put his finger on the problem when he wrote, "evil is more subtle and more common in all of us religious people than we want to believe." In other words, religious people have a tendency to see themselves in a more idealistic light than is warranted.

The Needed Message

The message that churches should regularly reinforce to their parishioners is that conflict is a natural outgrowth of the human proclivity to be self-centered. This obvious truth transcends all races, all cultures, and all peoples. No researcher has ever found a conflict-free society or organization (Wilmot & Hocker). This accords well with the Scriptures that teach, "there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins" (Ecclesiastes 7:20 NASB).

Therefore, when a dispute in the church occurs, parishioners should hardly be surprised. Rather, it should be anticipated and seen for what it is, the natural and normal course of human interaction. Such a message regularly communicated will be a major first step in modifying the

statement of shock, “but I thought the church is supposed to be different,” to an affirming, “this congregation really knows how to address and resolve conflict and strengthen the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Indeed, those who study human behavior find that “love only endures when dissension is faced openly” (Bolton).

II. PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS

Making the Transition

Changing expectations is the first of two major steps that will help churches to better deal with conflict. The second has to do with the way conflict is viewed once it has emerged.

Question: when does one draw the line between a healthy difference of opinion and destructive arguing? Answer: when people become “antagonists.” The etymology of the word “to antagonize” comes from Greek, meaning “to struggle against” (ajntagwnivzomai, Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker). Hence, when someone starts directing energy away from a given problem and begins to struggle against another person, the line demarcating destructive conflict has been crossed.

The Need to Erect a Wall in Our Minds

When people begin to undermine the other, it does not bode well for the future of that relationship or for the social setting in which it occurs. The original issue is no longer the real issue. The problem is now identified as a person. He is / she is / they are the problem. In a highly inter-relational setting such as a church, sides begin to form. If the dispute does not get resolved, people begin talking less constructively to each other and more negatively about each other with those in their own circle. Each faction views the other with growing suspicion and ignores what they have in common. Thoughts become increasingly judgmental and condemning. Questions of the other's character, competency, credibility, or spirituality are raised. Emotions affect reasoning. Exaggeration, false assumptions, and other distortions in perception increasingly occur. Parties belittle each other. Action begets counteraction and the conflict escalates. The nasty spirit that surfaces may be as ugly as any found in a secular setting. Why?

“For one thing, parties' core identities are at risk in church conflicts. Spiritual commitments and faith understandings are highly inflammable because they are central to ones' psychological identity.... When church folk feel that their worldview or personal integrity is being questioned or condemned, they often become emotionally violent or violating” (Halverstadt).

It goes without saying that this escalating cycle of conflict must not be allowed to occur. Rather, a wall must be established in each person's mind prior to the point of personal attack, and (2) a concerted effort must be made to bring back parties who have scaled that wall. These two objectives are foundational and must be met if churches are to effectively resolve conflict. Indeed, these are not just good ideas. They are rooted in Biblical theology and must be clearly enunciated to churchgoers on a regular basis.

The Theological Foundation

Volkan has observed that people in battle have “the tendency to portray one's own tribe or ethnic group as human while describing other groups as subhuman.” An illustration of this concept

occurred on an individual level when a U.S. government official made the following statement about another elected official with whom he was in conflict. Speaking to an intervening third party the first man said, "Let's get this straight. We're dealing with a subhuman species here - this is not a human being we're dealing with" (Wilmot & Hocker). Such labeling, however, does nothing to manage the conflict. It only creates a more entrenched enemy. Lewis Smedes, who noted this tendency to negatively portray an adversary, put it this way,

"We shrink him to the size of what he did to us; he becomes the wrong he did. If he has done something truly horrible, we say things like, 'He is no more than an animal.' Or, 'He is nothing but a cheat.' Our 'no more thans' and our 'nothing but's' knock the humanity out of our enemy. He is no longer a fragile spirit living on the fringes of extinction. He is no longer a confusing mixture of good and evil. He is only, he is totally, the sinner who did us wrong."

Such a direct attack on another person is very common in the midst of interpersonal strife. Nevertheless, it cannot be allowed to stand, especially in the church. It flies directly in the face of the Judeo-Christian worldview that holds there is no essential difference between any of us. The Scriptures teach that God "made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth," Acts 17:26 (NKJV).

Though some might like to think that others are intrinsically second-rate, this is patently false. The Scriptures couldn't be more explicit regarding our moral deficiencies, "for there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," Romans 3:22-23 (NIV). Soviet dissident and Pulitzer Prize winner, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who became a Christian while in a Russian gulag, later wrote with great insight,

"If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."

Illustration

A dramatic illustration of this comes from a surprising source, the television program, "60 Minutes," and the segment entitled, "The Devil is a Gentleman." The story is about Adolf Eichmann, one of the chief architects of the Holocaust. Mike Wallace posed this question near the beginning of the piece, "How is it possible, you ask yourself, for a man to act as Eichmann acted, do as Eichmann did? Was he a monster? A madman? Or was he perhaps something even more terrifying: was he normal?"

A riveting answer came during Mike Wallace's interview with Yahiel Dinur, a concentration camp survivor. He was called to testify against Adolf Eichmann at the Nuremberg trials in 1961, some 18 years after the Nazi personally sent him to Auschwitz. Wallace observed that the sight of Eichmann by Dinur at the trial, "unleashed a shattering, disabling response." A film clip of the trial was replayed on the broadcast. Dinur walked into the courtroom. Upon seeing Eichmann, Dinur was overtaken by emotion and fainted.

Wallace remarked, "Why did Yahiel Dinur collapse? He says it was the realization that the

Eichmann who stood before him at the trial was not the godlike army officer who had sent millions to their death. This Eichmann, he said, was an ordinary man, an unremarkable man. And if this Eichmann was so ordinary, so human, says Dinur, then he realized that what Eichmann had done, any man could be capable of doing - even Yahiel Dinur." Dinur asserted, "I saw I am capable to do this. I am capable exactly like he."

Of course, countless thousands were involved in Germany's campaign of annihilation. Eerily, the conclusion is the same. "It was not crazed lunatics who created and managed the Holocaust, but highly rational and otherwise quite normal bureaucrats" (Ritzer). As 60 Minute correspondent Morley Safer reminded viewers in a different Holocaust story, "evil can have a very ordinary face." This is because there is a line dividing good and evil in every human heart.

Elaborating on his metaphor of the "line," Solzhenitsyn added,

"During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood."

This is akin to what William James stated over 100 years ago. James observed that a man "has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups" (Lemert). It underscores the fact that how we act or the "face" we put on changes in the various circumstances we encounter. The truth is our totality of personhood is more than words we speak or any given act we engage in.

Keeping The Proper Perspective

Yet in the midst of interpersonal conflict, we tend to stereotype our adversaries by their worst behavior. We tend to inaccurately characterize others by deriving from one or more callous acts an all-encompassing negative view of that person. The remarks of one of the great Christian thinkers of the 20th century, C. S. Lewis, are relevant here. Commenting on the dictum, "hate the sin but not the sinner," he stated,

"I remember Christian teachers telling me long ago that I must hate a bad man's actions, but not hate the bad man: or, as they would say, hate the sin but not the sinner. For a long time I used to think, this is a silly, straw-splitting distinction: how could you hate what a man did and not hate the man? But years later it occurred to me that there is one man to whom I had been doing this all my life - namely myself. However much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit or greed, I went on loving myself. There had never been the slightest difficulty about it."

There's probably not a psychologically healthy person on the planet who can't identify with these words. In essence, we all have established in our minds a wall that separates who we are and what we do. Why? Because who we consider ourselves to be and what we do at a given moment in time are not necessarily the same. Consequently, to accord anything less to others is to engage in hypocrisy.

Therefore, when we attack another's personhood, not only do our all-inclusive assessments of negativity invariably miss the mark, but they also make conflict more intractable. One person's reductionist view of the other disputant will inevitably be rejected by the one who is being attacked. That's why peacemakers urge parties to refrain from assailing the other's character.

Illustration

Consider the following: "Former President Jimmy Carter was criticized by some for treating military leader, General Raoul Cedras, as a legitimate player during his successful mediation to resolve the crisis in Haiti in 1995. The national consensus was that Gen. Cedras was simply a cruel dictator, undeserving of the legitimacy and regard shown him by President Carter. But Carter wisely appealed to the military leader's 'sense of honor, sense of dignity.' He knew that people don't want to participate in problem-solving dialogue when you insult them. Carter's mediation succeeded because he steadfastly focused on the need for reconciliation, avoiding the temptation of treating Cedras as a Bad Person" (Dana).

This was the attitude that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King took as he led the U.S. civil rights movement in the mid-twentieth century. Despite the backdrop of centuries of slavery and the inequities that followed emancipation, he did not lead a movement guided by revenge. Applying the ethical teachings of Christ, Rev. King subscribed to a non-violent approach to injustice. He taught, "Non-violent resistance is not aimed against oppressors but against oppression" (Lemert). That is, he defined the "enemy" not as persons [whites], but as a state of being unequally treated. What a tremendous difference this made and makes in managing and resolving conflict!

Fisher and Ury explain, "Under attack, the other side will become defensive and will resist what you have to say. They will cease to listen, or they will strike back with an attack of their own." Moreover, they add, "if you make a statement about them that they believe is untrue, they will ignore you or get angry; they will not focus on your concern."

When this kind of personal insult takes place among Christians, it poisons the social atmosphere of the church. Inevitably, as the criticized party seeks to defend him or herself, conflict escalates. A "church split" may be right around the corner. That is why it is so essential to keep our perspective in check. Wilmot and Hocker have well said, "Transforming a conflict depends on perceptual and/or conceptual change in one or more of the parties. Perception is at the core of all conflict analysis."

Hence, our perspective must be properly enlarged so that we do not personally attack an opponent's identity or critically stereotype an opponent's personhood. It is wrong. It is counterproductive. It is hypocritical because we do not apply that same standard to ourselves.

CONCLUSION

A reading of the New Testament makes it clear that friction among Christians, as with other groups, is normal and should be expected. This understanding in no way diminishes the goal of love. Rather, such a realization opens our eyes to see what love must overcome to reach fulfillment. Essential to this process is a disputant's perception that does not dehumanize the

personhood of the other party. A Biblical perspective and understanding of these two foundational areas by the disputing parties represents a major first step toward the resolution of their conflict.

This perspective should also point to the need for churches to establish a proactive conflict management process to protect the unity of the church. Establishing such a system conveys two important messages to your members: (1) "Interpersonal conflict is a normal part of congregational life. Let's not be perplexed by it." (2) This church, in particular, is prepared to address differences as they arise in a manner that strengthens the social fabric of our fellowship instead of tearing it apart." What do you think such a two-fold message will do for your congregation? Like a net under a trapeze artist, it will provide a sense of security. For those who have been "burned" in a prior church experience, it will also bring a sense of relief.

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Introduction

Two intensifying processes take place throughout the stages of unresolved conflict: (1) an increasing personal frustration over the unresolved issue(s), and (2) an increasing negative perception of the character of the other person / people. Church conflict can deteriorate to such an unmanageable level, that barring a miracle, a major rupture within the church is inevitable. The need for a congregation to call upon the services of a conflict resolution specialist before the conflict goes beyond the point of no return can be pivotal to the church's health, well-being, and even functional survival. Consider the escalating stages of unresolved church conflict.

1. (Sometimes) An Uncomfortable Feeling

Something doesn't feel right. You can't quite put your finger on it. Nothing explicit has been mentioned.

2. A Problem To Be Resolved (issue-focused)

An identifiable problem has emerged and dealing with that matter is the focus. The participants are civil and respectful to one another as they each share their perspective. Solutions are proposed and, in most instances, issues are resolved in a calm and collaborative fashion to everyone's satisfaction. But if this is not the case....

3. A Person To Differ With (other person-focused)

The focus of conversation changes from what should be done and what is the best solution, to a debate of who is right and who is wrong. Frustration sets in because the attempt to achieve one's goals is undermined by another. Parties may become more cautious in dealing with each other. The dispute can still be constructive if the parties make a greater effort to see the other person's point of view. On the other hand, if the matter is not resolved, the situation can easily deteriorate into destructive conflict.

4. A Dispute To Win (issue-focused, greater intensity)

Collaboration wanes. Other issues adding to the conflict often appear, confusing matters. Disputing parties communicate less to each other and more about each other with those who take their respective side. And while there may not be an intent to hurt one's opponent, it often results. Because the overriding goal is for one's needs to be met or interests to prevail, there appears to be less concern about how that affects others, further exacerbating the conflict. One side comes to believe that the other cares little about them. As one side seeks to achieve its goals, the other side feels like their interests are being all-too-readily dismissed or sacrificed. Action then begets counteraction. The longer this conflict remains unresolved, the more a person's own identity comes into play.

5. A Person To Attack (other person-focused, greater intensity)

A power struggle emerges. Parties now see themselves as adversaries and "antagonists" (a Greek word that means "to struggle against," as in Hebrews. 12:4). When people begin to struggle against each other, watch out! An invisible line is crossed that does not bode well for that relationship or for the church.

At this stage, original issues and context become secondary. A myopia sets in. The problem is

now identified as a person. He is / she is / they are the problem. An “us against them” mentality sets in. Emotions adversely affect objective thinking. Selective perception confirms and fuels negative stereotyping. Once stereotyped, the other side can be “written-off” as _____ (fill in the blank). Parties avoid each other and assume the worst of the other. In the absence of direct communication, each faction views the other through an increasingly distorted filter of suspicion, false assumptions, exaggeration, misinformation, and misperceptions.

Moreover, whereas each side justifies its own hostile behavior as reactions to its opponent and to external circumstances, the actions of one's adversaries are attacks attributed to internal deficiencies in their character, competency, or spirituality. Public admission of having exercised poor judgment or of having made a mistake becomes increasingly unlikely. In this negatively charged environment, such an acknowledgment would likely open oneself to embarrassment and further criticism. The disputing parties protect themselves, their vulnerabilities and insecurities, by attacking.

Researchers have found that the usefulness of direct, head-to-head negotiations decrease as the intensity of the dispute increases. Resistance intensifies against an adversary's ideas often because it is one's adversary who proposed them. Negotiation may totally break down because of the apparent futility of further effort. Unilateral acts become the next logical step which inevitably lead to an escalation of the conflict. The need for a third-party mediator to bring needed perspective and constructive communicative processes to the conflict is great.

6. My "Face" To Save (self-focused, greatest intensity)

The term "face" refers to how a person is viewed by others. As long as someone is viewed as a respectable member of the community, all is well. But when one's public image is seriously challenged, watch out for a significant escalation of the conflict.

To have one's public image challenged is to be attacked on a very personal level. It is to be charged with maintaining a false facade. The attacker seeks to publicly “unmask” the other person's true and despicable identity. To the extent that this “insight” is believed, the prior course of the conflict is reinterpreted. With these new lenses, words or actions that may have been originally perceived in a positive light are now viewed as part of a larger, deceitful strategy. False motives are attributed throughout. The conflict is no longer understood in terms of shades of gray. It is perceived in terms of black and white and an ideological battle between the forces of good versus evil.

To “save face” against such an attack on one's identity, people will respond with an equally ferocious assault of their own. Disputants will unleash a torrent of negative descriptions against those who have attacked and maligned them, attempting in turn, to undercut and discredit them. They will label those on the other side as unreasonable, immoral, untrustworthy, mentally unbalanced, and/or sub-human. This conclusion justifies almost any action against the other side, exacerbating the cycle of conflict to dangerous levels.

7. A Person To Expel, Withdraw From, or Ruin (other person focused, greatest intensity)

The parties are locked in an all-or-nothing battle. The church is no longer big enough for

everyone. The solution is either to drive out the problem person or people or leave the church. Or, the conflict may be so personalized, intractable, or irrational that the adversaries would rather suffer private loss or the church's ruin to see their opponent defeated. "Together into the abyss" they go, as one individual soberly described it.

8. The Aftermath

When the dust settles, the worship, fellowship, and the work of the church, as well as the individual lives of those involved are adversely affected, often for years to come. For some, winning the battle or driving a person from the church is still not enough. The ruination of a person's reputation may continue long after the battle is over. Another faction will express shame and bewilderment for what they have said or done. They may lose confidence in themselves for having lost control of themselves. Others will deny the depth or severity of their actions. Still others, acknowledging their embarrassing actions, will blame those who led them.

Pastor Joe McKeever, referring to his church that had split five ways in the two years prior to his accepting the call to pastor that congregation, commented, "I was especially careful during my first four or five years here. We spent a lot of time addressing the issues of guilt and disappointment. Many felt guilty for their actions. The rest were disappointed - in their friends, their pastors, themselves, even God."

Conclusion

If your church is experiencing ongoing conflict, don't wait until it is too late. Do as the Bible says, "pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another" (Ro. 14:19). One of those things is calling upon the services of a peacemaker. Jesus, after all, sanctioned such work (Mat. 5:9).