

'WE DO NOT LIVE TO OURSELVES' CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN COMMUNITY

PROPER 19, YEAR A

Lectionary Texts: Exodus 14:19-31 Genesis 50:15-21 Psalm 114 Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21
Matthew 18:21-35 Romans 14:1-12

Focus Text: Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

² Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³ Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵ Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶ Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. ⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." ¹² So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

NRSV

ADDITIONAL TEXTS

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Matthew 5:9

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Matthew 18:15-22

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But [Jesus] said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves."

Luke 22:24-27

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?

James 3:13-4:1

SCRIPTURE COMMENTARY

BY CHRIS LIU BEERS, PROGRAM ASSOCIATE,
NC COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

As we turn to Romans 14, we find that there is a great deal at stake here, for Paul “recognizes a crisis confronting the congregations in Rome of some magnitude: the danger of a split which could have Jewish believers so alarmed by the abandonment of the old yardsticks of covenant loyalty that they lost their faith in Christ; the danger that a law-free Christianity might cut itself off from its Jewish roots and influence by crass insensitivity” (Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 812).

Throughout this section of Romans (chapters 12-16), Paul’s overriding concern is preserving the unity of the church. All of his advice and exhortations are geared towards upholding the fundamental oneness of Christian sisters and brothers in Christ. As Paul so eloquently states elsewhere, it is in Christ that the barriers between people are destroyed; it is only in Christ that Jews and Gentiles, for example, come to be reconciled. And yet for all of Paul’s emphasis on the vital unity of the church, conflict abounds. Corinth, Rome, Galatia, Ephesus – all places marked by Christian infighting and division as a result of the inability to resolve genuine conflicts that have arisen. Paul accepts that conflicts will naturally arise, for we all see through a glass only dimly. Conscience, history and circumstances place particular claims on us that we must address; for some Christians – perhaps recent converts, especially, eating meat sacrificed to idols is always wrong. For others, it is not a problem.

That conflict arises is understandable, even necessary. Paul’s concern lies in *how* Christians deal with conflict when it inevitably comes up. Do they deal humbly with one another, listening and working to understand the other’s perspective, or are they arrogant, disrespectful, unyielding? In our passage, Paul is especially concerned that theological conviction not become an excuse for dividing the church, for destroying table fellowship between family.

The lectionary selection for this week cuts short Paul’s argument. He continues in verses 13-15 by saying: “Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.” Here, Paul comes down on one side of the debate (he agrees with the “strong,” that it is permissible to eat meat because “nothing is unclean in itself”), but he underscores that context is everything. In the context of a community divided, the fact that something is right does not make it beneficial (see I Cor. 6:12, 10:23). He makes the point in no uncertain terms; one’s freedom – however theologically grounded – must not become a stumbling block for another. In verse 20, he says, “Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.”

Drawing on the depths of Pauline wisdom, theologian John Howard Yoder helpfully reminds us that “Conflict is normal and natural. In the context of Christian ministry there should be more rather than less of it, since truth telling, growth, change, and the demands of righteousness concur in bringing more of it to the surface. Rather than being denied or avoided, conflicts are to be processed, resolved in the light of the message of forgiveness... Conflict resolution is then a special Christian grace, but also a general Christian duty” (Yoder, *Conflict Resolution*, 6-7).

PASTORAL REFLECTION

BY REV. DAVID ODOM, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
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SCHOOL

“Are you OK?” When I recognize that my wife is in pain, I ask this simple question. In response, she often scowls at me. Why? Because both of us know that I know the answer to the question. I am actually trying to figure out if I did something to hurt her or if someone else did. However, I find it difficult to ask the question directly because I am afraid of the answer. I don’t want to be the source of pain for my wife, but by dealing with my fear in this indirect way, I usually make matters more difficult.

Perhaps you are a healthier person than I. However, I am aware that many of the people who entered ministry in my generation have a deeply felt need for those around them to be happy. I know intellectually that I can not be responsible for another person’s happiness -- not in working relationships, not in church, not in romance. However, the desire for others to be happy is deeply ingrained in me.

That desire extends to a minister’s faith community, where tensions and unhappiness are inevitable. In years of working with congregations struggling to navigate such moments, I have learned a few lessons about conflict that are true in congregation after congregation and should provide some hope to the tension-averse among us.

- Conflict happens in congregations that are alive. It is not a sign of failure. Stories of conflict are woven into the stories of Israel, Judah, the disciples, and the early church. Many congregations seem to believe that having conflict is bad. Such an unexamined belief can create dangerous expectations. Any time significant change is introduced, there will be conflict. Any time the congregation grows and is successful in bringing in new members, there will be conflict.

- In a community of Christians, the hopeful possibilities present in conflict will only be realized when we deal with the tension in a productive way. When a congregation faces conflict openly and directly with the people involved, there is a good opportunity for the situation to result in positive change and closer relationships between people. When conflict is handled in a way that cuts off communication and silences questions, the conflict can escalate and become destructive.
- Leaders have a responsibility to both model healthy behavior and allow others to grow in their capacity to practice healthy disagreement.

So, how does a leader create an environment for productive disagreement, whether it's addressing the sort of challenges in Romans 14 or at a congregation's council meeting? On one end of the spectrum are the conflict finesse-ers, those pastors who constantly scan the congregation for unhappy people. These pastors move toward the conflict, listen carefully, speak clearly. They deal with every conflict as it comes and at the lowest possible level. In a way, they are nearly perfect at "conflict management." The downside is that these pastors often work very, very hard. The congregation is not building experience in dealing with tension because the pastor's work keeps the conflict below the "radar screen." Then there are those who avoid conflict altogether. These pastors don't have staff meetings, or they cancel them at any sign of trouble. They avoid difficult people. The downside is that, under this leadership style, conflict can intensify and spread.

In my experience, each of these extreme approaches has some merit. Some conflict should be addressed by a pastor, and some should be addressed by those directly involved. However, leaders are responsible to do more than seek personal comfort with conflict. Leaders have the opportunity to equip a community to address tension in productive ways. Thus neither of these extreme approaches is adequate. The scriptures don't offer a formula for "dealing" with conflict, but they point toward productive behaviors, such as:

- Listen, Listen, Listen.... Listen... In Romans 14, Paul wanders all over a complex issue. What I distill from this passage is to listen with open ears and heart to all members of community -- even the ones that I know are wrong before they start talking. Listening is a sign of respect.
- Go directly to those with whom you have tension.
- Be willing to start again, and again and again.
- Warning: arrogance will get you in trouble.

Learning how to act productively in the face of tension is a skill. It requires more than listening to a sermon or reading a reflection. It requires practice, feedback, and more practice. In the face of high levels of conflict, I know that bad things will happen. People will be hurt. Lives will be disrupted. In the face of such challenges, I start looking for the opportunity. One of the consequences of believing in the resurrection is that God can bring good out of bad, growth out of suffering, life out of death. Where are the people like Peter, whose denial can be forgiven and who can become leaders?

Looking for the opportunity in the face of conflict requires imagination. We must look beyond the current moment and catch a glimpse of what God is doing in the world. Finding opportunity in the face of conflict is an act of faith. In congregations, most of our conflict is not based in disagreements over our values. Most of the time, people in the congregation share much more in common than those beliefs or practices over which they disagree. Conflict is often focused on "having my way." Once we turn from our own interests to God's concerns there is an opportunity to unite.

I still wish conflict would go away. In fact, I still wish my spouse was always happy and I would never have to discern if my behavior hurt her. Yet, I know that such wishes are a fantasy. My experience and my faith have taught me that unhappiness and tension are facts of life in relationships. Such feelings are signs of hope and vitality if seen through the eyes of faith. May it be so for the tensions that you experience.

WORSHIP AID - 'WE DO NOT LIVE TO OURSELVES'

RESPONSIVE READING

Peace Is Possible

Jesus, friend and companion
 Help us to show
 Through the way we live,
 Through our actions and words
 That peace is possible

We pray to believe that peace is possible

Give us the strength and courage
 To confront evil
 And to believe in love

We pray to believe that love is possible

Show us how to fight injustice
 Without losing heart
 Show us how to live a full life
 Without becoming cynical or indifferent
We pray to believe that justice is possible

Jesus, our friend
 We pray for hope
 And the faith to believe
 In a better world.
Amen.

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PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God of Peace, over the ages You have called us to live as peacemakers.
You have called us to be a *shalom* people.
You have called us to be Children of God.
We confess that we have not always lived out this calling.
We do not want to face the difficulties of being called Your disciples.
We take the easy way out. We avoid controversy.
We don't speak out when we know we should.
For these things we ask Your forgiveness.
We confess that we are too tolerant of conflict and violence.
We depend on our own power and position to settle differences instead of asking for Your wisdom.
Forgive us, Gracious God.
We ask that Your Spirit guide us to act with loving grace and peace.
Be with us in our continuing efforts to live like children of the One who gave himself for the sake of others,
And help us consider the other above selfish interests. **Amen.**

(adapted from *The National Council of Churches, "Prayers for Peace,"* www.nccusa.org/Prayers.html)

SUGGESTED HYMNS

✠ <i>Be Still My Soul</i>	AM 426/AZ 67/CH 566/CM 221/ LW 510/MW 757/NCH 488/UMH 209
✠ <i>Here O Lord Your Servants Gather</i>	BH 179/CH 278/PH 465/UMH 552
✠ <i>Hope of the World</i>	CH 538/LW 377/NCH 46/PH 360/ UMH 178
✠ <i>Let There Be Peace on Earth</i>	GC 731
✠ <i>O God of Love, O God of Peace</i>	AZ 546/BH 619/CH 676/LW 498/ NCH 571/PH 295/TH 578
✠ <i>Take My Life, God, Let It Be</i>	AM 292/AZ 208/BH 287/CH 609/ CM 338/LW 404/MW 610 (Alt)/ NCH 448/PH 391/TH 707/UMH 153

◆ *Hymnal Legend* ◆

✠ AM – African Methodist Episcopal
✠ AZ – African Methodist Episcopal Zion
✠ BH – Baptist Hymnal
✠ CH – Chalice Hymnal (Disciples of Christ)
✠ CM – Christian Methodist Episcopal
✠ GC – Gather Comprehensive (Rom Cath)
✠ LW – Lutheran Worship
✠ MW – Moravian Book of Worship
✠ NCH – New Century Hymnal (UCC)
✠ PH – Presbyterian Hymnal
✠ TH – The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal)
✠ UMH – United Methodist Hymnal

ADDITIONAL PRAYERS

Prayer for Shalom

Source of Shalom, God of Peace:
Grant shalom to Your people,
And let shalom spread to all Your creatures.
Let there be an end to hatred, jealousy,
And competition between people.
Let there be only great love and shalom between us all,
So that we can all gather together –
United as sisters and brothers in Christ –
Speaking to each other
And learning the truth from one another.
Source of Shalom, God of Peace,
Bless us with Shalom. **Amen.**

(adapted from NGO/DPI Executive Committee, "Promoting Respect for Cultural Diversity in Conflict Resolution,"
www.ngodpiexcom.org/conference06/download/speeches/Friday/Regev.pdf)

Liturgical Prayer

In the midst of conflict and division,
We know it is you
Who turns our minds to thoughts of peace.
Your Spirit changes our hearts:
Enemies begin to speak to one another,
Those who are estranged join hands in friendship,
And nations seek the way of peace together.

(from U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Liturgical Prayer," www.usccb.org/liturgyp/praressunreadings.shtml)

Blessed Are the Peacemakers

Blessed are you peacemakers,
Who say no to war as a means to peace.
Blessed are you peacemakers,
Who seek to resolve conflicts in the spirit of shalom.
Blessed are you peacemakers,
Who wage peace at heroic personal cost.
Blessed are you peacemakers,
Who challenge and confront judges, courts, & prisons.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
Who help those who are hurting.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
Who do not live to themselves, but unto the Lord.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
Who befriend perfect strangers.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
Who open doors for acting justly,
Loving tenderly and walking humbly with God
And all people of good will.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
Who welcome, encourage, and inspire.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
Who offer hope and healing.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
Who care and comfort.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
Who help find answers.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
Who provide stability not insanity.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
Who help restore faith and love.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
Who delight in creation, art, & creativity.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
Who see the good in others.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
Who never give up.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
Who give and give and give. Amen.

(adapted from Pax Christi, "Prayers and Liturgy," www.paxchristi.org.uk/litgy.HTML)

ADDITIONAL HELPS

▪ **QUOTES** ▪

The loudest voices we hear are those who advocate for conflict and divisiveness.

John C. Danforth

We need more conflict resolution skills taught in the schools and more emphasis on non-violent means of resolving conflict.

Patricia Ireland

*Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation.
The foundation of such a method is love.*

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict - alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence.

Dorothy Thompson

▪ PERSONAL VIGNETTE ▪

Division and Reconciliation in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Conflict occurs at many different levels: individual, congregational, even denominational. This vignette focuses on some of the conflicts and the processes of healing and reconciliation that have taken place among Presbyterians in the United States. All information and quotes are taken from James H. Smylie's book, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1996).

We begin by looking back to the Civil War: "Presbyterians could not repress debate over slavery, and, with it, the nature of the federal union. As did the U.S. Congress, they tried to gag those who wished to discuss the issue at meetings of church governing bodies.... Articulate African-American Presbyterians kept the issue before the public... Even as whites attempted to avoid the issue, they became more and more divided.... Under these tragic circumstances, southern Presbyterians withdrew from the national assembly. They organized the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America [which later became the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS)]."

"In 1983, Presbyterians in the UPCUSA [which was a merger between the historical PCUSA and UPCNA Presbyterian bodies] and the PCUS took an important step to overcome the Civil War past. In the 1970's, concerned for the scandal of division and to manifest the unity of the body of Christ, the denominations appointed a Joint Committee on Presbyterian Union to renew efforts to heal the split." This committee "was made up of equal members from the UPCUSA and the PCUS, representative of minorities and other interests. In the negotiations, the Committee attempted to satisfy those who had biblical, evangelical, and spiritual concerns, as well as those who wished to protect the rights of women and minorities in the church organization."

"The General Assemblies meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1983, finally approved the plan. The new General Assembly elected J. Randolph Taylor, born in China, a civil rights leader, and pastor of the Myers Park Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC, moderator of the new Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As his first act, he led the new denomination in grateful worship to God."

"In 1988, Presbyterians prepared another study titled 'Is Christ Divided?' This emphasized the variety of God's gifts and the need to value different experiences and expressions of Christian faith, hope, and love in order to remain together for the sake of the Presbyterian family and the whole Christian community."

While it took over a century, these Presbyterian denominations were able to overcome their historical division caused by the Civil War. This kind of visible witness of the *re-membering* of the Body of Christ required great courage and integrity, sacrifice and compromise, sensitivity and listening on the part of everyone involved. Today, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) stands as a witness to the power of reconciliation over division.

▪ CONTACTS AND OTHER RESOURCES ▪

- ✦ www.acrnet.org – The Association for Conflict Resolution (ACR) is a professional organization dedicated to enhancing the practice and public understanding of conflict resolution. ACR represents and serves a diverse national and international audience that includes more than 6,000 mediators, arbitrators, facilitators, educators, and others involved in the field of conflict resolution and collaborative decision-making. Anyone interested in the field of conflict resolution is welcome to join.
- ✦ www.healthychurch.org – The mission of the Center for Congregational Health in Winston-Salem is to assist congregations in becoming healthier communities of faith. The Center provides consultants and trained leaders to assist congregations in meeting ongoing challenges and opportunities in a changing world. The Center strives to serve by: 1) guiding – helping congregations and their leaders know what to do, 2) healing – helping congregations and leaders through conflict that may accompany change, and 3) growing – helping congregations and leaders prepare for and experience growth in their ministries.
- ✦ www.alban.org -- The Alban Institute is an independent center of learning and leadership development with a focus on congregations. Located in greater Washington, D.C., Alban is a not-for-profit, membership organization that develops and shares knowledge through consulting, publishing, research, and education programs.

- ✦ www.forusa.org – *The Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR)* envisions a world of justice, peace, and freedom. It is a revolutionary vision of a beloved community where differences are respected, conflicts are addressed nonviolently, oppressive structures are dismantled, and where people live in harmony with the earth, nurtured by diverse spiritual traditions that foster compassion, solidarity, and reconciliation. FOR seeks to replace violence, war, racism, and economic injustice with nonviolence, peace, and justice. As a part of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR), which has affiliates in over 40 countries, they are an interfaith organization committed to active nonviolence as a transforming way of life and as a means of radical change.
- ✦ www.safeyouth.org/scripts/teens/conflict.asp – *The National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center* provides a wealth of information on youth violence prevention, sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other Federal agencies. They hold that positive things are happening, making it less and less likely teens will experience a violent event, such as a school shooting. At the same time, they recognize that there is a need to provide resources for people in situations of conflict and potential violence. Where do you go if you're wondering how to help a friend who is depressed, what to do if someone you know is planning to commit a violent act, or how to start a non-violence program in your school?
- ✦ www.cpt.org – *Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT)* arose from a call in 1984 for Christians to devote the same discipline and self-sacrifice to nonviolent peacemaking that armies devote to war. Enlisting the whole church in an organized, nonviolent alternative to war, today CPT places violence-reduction teams in crisis situations and militarized areas around the world at the invitation of local peace and human rights workers. CPT embraces the vision of unarmed intervention waged by committed peacemakers ready to risk injury and death in bold attempts to transform lethal conflict through the nonviolent power of God's truth and love. Initiated by Mennonites, Brethren, and Quakers with broad ecumenical participation, CPT's ministry of Biblically-based and spiritually-centered peacemaking emphasizes creative public witness, nonviolent direct action, and protection of human rights.
- ✦ www.cartercenter.org/peace/conflict_resolution/index.html – War and civil strife continue to be the most significant impediments to sustainable development and basic human rights. Devastation from such conflicts has impoverished countries in every major region, in many cases wiping out the achievements of decades of development. *The Conflict Resolution Program of the Carter Center* focuses on preventing, resolving, and ending armed conflict. Other Carter Center programs work on post-conflict peacebuilding. The program monitors many of the world's armed conflicts to better understand their histories, the primary actors involved, disputed issues, and efforts being made to resolve them.

KEY FACTS

HOW DOES CONFLICT RESOLUTION WORK?¹

Most conflict resolution programs follow a series of steps that include:

- **Setting ground rules:** Agree to work together and set rules such as no name-calling, blaming, yelling, or interrupting.
- **Listening:** Let each person describe their point of view without interruption. The point is to understand what a person wants and why they want it.
- **Finding common interests:** Establish facts and issues that everyone can agree on and determine what is important to each person.
- **Brainstorming possible solutions to the problem:** List all options without judging them or feeling that they must be carried out. Try to think of solutions where everyone gains something.
- **Discussing each person's view of the proposed solutions:** Negotiate and try to reach a compromise that is acceptable to everyone involved.
- **Reaching an agreement:** Each person should state his or her interpretation of the agreement. Try writing the agreement down and checking back at a later time to see how it is working.

Conflict Resolution for Churches?²

Not a Side Issue

Why should churches be interested in the practice of conflict resolution? Well, put at its most basic, any body of people would be better off not being damaged by internal disputes, wouldn't they? Even simple self-interest suggests that it's worth trying to resolve conflict. But churches can go further than that.

Churches have a mandate from their founder to motivate them. Jesus said to his disciples, "Blessed are the peace-makers for they shall be called children of God" and "Let your light so shine that others may see your good deeds and praise your [God] in heaven." In other words, Christians – children of God – show the family likeness to [God] when they are taking active steps to build peace. It's not surprising that in Jesus' final heartfelt prayer for those who would bear the light after him, he asked that they would be brought to complete unity – a sign to everyone that the love of God had filled their hearts. For Jesus, faith is meant to be something attractive.

I'm sure that, right at this moment, there are people walking into churches all over the world who are struck by the togetherness of those who follow Jesus. I know people whose lives have been changed by just such a visit. And yet that is not the whole story. Also at this moment, some church meetings are degenerating into shouting matches. Some Christians are being anything but straightforward with each other. In Britain, where I live, the church gets bad press because of very public wrangling, and at least some of the criticism is deserved. As a Christian who feels that at times I have been a part of the problem, I want the church to do better at handling conflict.

Churches Listen, Please

But does that mean churches should listen to conflict resolution professionals? I think it does. It would be arrogant for Christians to suppose they have nothing to learn from what is now a well-established field. During the second half of the twentieth century a huge body of good practice was established, and is now widely applied: in the workplace, in international diplomacy and in grass-roots community groups. If it didn't work, the whole idea of conflict resolution would have quickly fizzled out.

Churches, however, shouldn't just listen. They should positively welcome a set of principles that chime in with biblical wisdom. James the brother of Jesus wrote to Christians who were fighting one another, "Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." That sums up a lot of practical advice given in the Bible about making peace, and points to ideas that are widely accepted as keys to conflict resolution. Techniques vary, but there is always an attempt to create a safe space where tension can be reduced, and disputing parties can start to listen to one another. Often there will be a third party or two present, helping them to stay relatively calm and see a wider picture. Then, once the essential issues of the dispute are clear, it may be possible to reach decisions that rest on some commonly-held values and take account of concerns on both sides. If you want to see a worked example of just such an approach, look in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15. Read the story of the first major council of the Christian church and notice the care that was taken to make sure both sides were heard and neither was simply steam-rolled.

Churches Question, Please

Not surprisingly, there are many Christians working in the field of conflict resolution. Yet some would say that, as they have put the techniques to good use, they have nevertheless been left with some questions. For example, John Paul Lederach, a North American Mennonite with international experience of dealing with conflict, found himself uncomfortable at times with the approach he had been taking. He looked at the usual terminology of conflict resolution and started to examine some of the (perhaps unspoken) aims. It came to a head when he was working in South America and someone asked him, "Is this resolution idea just another way to cover up the changes that are really needed?" He saw the point. Talk about "resolution" and you risk taking a superficial view of a conflict, reducing it simply to a problem to be solved. If you aim only for a neat "deal" you could end up treating symptoms rather than tackling the root causes of disease.

Do It For a Change

I've just used an organic metaphor. That's because a group of people is more like an organism than a piece of machinery – and so, when things are going wrong, it may not be helpful to talk about "fixing" them. Here, churches should pay special attention. The Apostle Paul refers to Christians collectively as the Body of Christ, and so the language of disease and health is certainly appropriate.

One key to better health is to take preventive measures: a better diet, more exercise, and so on. Well-maintained systems cope better with stress and infection. Lederach recognized that, likewise, conflict studies had begun to focus on management as well as resolution. The point here is that people get angry or anxious about decisions that seem unfair or ignore their concerns. When that happens, the way that problems are being dealt with is itself part of the problem! Lederach began to highlight an important goal of conflict management: attending to structures of decision-making. Again, I think the value to churches is obvious. Being quick to listen can be as basic as managing meetings carefully.

But conflict management can seem a bit glib. If the message is, "You don't have to be thrown off course by conflict – just take the right steps to control it," then I'm inclined to respond that in real life conflict is not that predictable. It's about people, not just problems and processes, and sometimes it's just messy and painful. Here, we can press the Body metaphor further. When there is conflict in the life of the church, think of the pain as a wake-up call, and different individuals as organs of the body that are not working together properly. See conflict as a positive tool for learning how to live with differences, and you can focus on restoring relationships in order to make the body stronger.

Lederach started developing the idea of conflict transformation. It's a notion that embraces what is good about conflict resolution and management but goes further. Conflict transformation attends to presenting problems and decision-making structures, whilst saying that healing of relationships is also important. Forgiveness, reconciliation, changing hearts and minds, prayer: all of these come into it, and each of them is a journey towards wholeness that can be kick-started by the symptoms of conflict.

¹ National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, "Conflict Resolution Fact Sheet for Teens," www.safeyouth.org/scripts/teens/docs/conflict.pdf.

² London Mennonite Centre, "Conflict Resolution for Churches?" by Colin Patterson, www.menno.org.uk/bbarticles/conflictresolution.