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Creating a Climate for Consensus

CALVIN L. PHILLIPS

The question is not “will there be conflict in the church?” Rather, the question is “when conflict comes will it be constructive or destructive?” Will it be transforming or demoralizing? Will it stimulate creative energies or will it create mistrust and disharmony? Will it draw the church together or create factions?

Frank was new to the church. He brought with him the zeal, excitement, and idealism of a new convert. He knew that conflict was all around us in the world and even within ourselves. But he thought the church would be different. He wanted and expected to find a haven of peace and good will.

CONFLICT IS INEVITABLE

The truth is that a church with no conflict is a church with no strong kingdom commitments. In fact, it is very likely a dying congregation. The book of Acts relates many instances in which conflict stimulated the spread of the gospel. Conflict over serving tables released the apostles for evangelism (Acts 6:1–6). Conflict in the form of persecution scattered the Jerusalem church and launched it on its world-wide mission: “That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1). Then there was the conflict between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark which resulted in the formation of 2 evangelistic teams (Acts 15:36–41).

Soon, Frank was to learn that there was ongoing controversy over including women in the group that served the Lord’s Supper. This issue was a highly emotional one, with feelings equally intense on both sides. Some church members even refused to accept communion if served by a woman.

Frank had thought that the church would be different from other organizations. He thought that there would be more acceptance, more flexibility, more good will, more love, more respect for others. The irony of the situation is that because the church asks for a total commitment, it is much more likely that there will be conflict in the church than in groups which appeal to the periphery of one’s personality.

One cannot have a community of faith without conflict. This is due to the diversity of the membership and individuality of the members who have deeply held convictions. The problem is that for some churches, sharp conflict becomes a way of life. It is as though the members do not seem to know that in the church you can love one another, trust one another, and create a climate of peace and reconciliation.

Instead there is a spirit of criticism, bitterness and animosity.

Even though Frank was disillusioned, he stayed with the church and came to realize the divine-human character of the church. He learned that while the church has a divine head, a divine creed, and a divine purpose, it has a very human membership. In fact, the peace and harmony for which we long has been elusive from the very beginning. The book of Acts and the epistles bear witness to this.

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The goal of every church should not be to avoid conflict but to create a community of faith in which a spirit of love and reconciliation prevails. A quality of all congregations should be a predisposition to love one another and to act in a loving manner within all relationships and under all circumstances. When that exists, conflict can be taken in stride.

THE QUICK FIX

Rather than consciously building a climate of love and reconciliation—a climate for consensus—the temptation is to wait until there is a crisis, then to try a short-term solution. Most ministers and church leaders want, above all, to preserve the peace. More often than not when conflict arises it is dealt with on an ad hoc basis. But the quick fix is rarely satisfactory. Favorite responses are either avoidance or suppression. This may be called reconciliation, but often it is in reality only a cease-fire. Sometimes what appears to be the absence of conflict is the repression of conflict. Ill feelings fester and the congregation becomes unhealthy, or a controversy erupts somewhere else.

Or, to change the metaphor, the congregation becomes a pressure cooker that continues to build up steam, which sooner or later will explode. This will result in groups becoming polarized, or in some leaving

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the church; others will withhold their offering, some will become grumblers. The word in the Old Testament, particularly in Numbers, is murmuring. Accusations are made. Adjectives with highly critical connotations are employed: words like selfish, bossy, deceptive, and thoughtless pepper the conversation.

Another approach is to call a congregational meeting and let everyone who wishes to sound off. This is rarely helpful; in fact, it may be the equivalent of throwing gasoline on the fire. It normally causes opinions to be polarized; individuals are forced to be more rigid in their positions and thus become less flexible.

Another quick fix that is often used is just to “put it to a vote and get it over with.” It may come to that eventually, but it is far better to make decisions by consensus, even though that may be a very slow process. If there have to be winners and losers, it should come only after thorough preparation. Just putting issues to a vote doesn’t “get it over with.”

The ad hoc approach is likely to bring out the worst in people. Virtues readily become vices. Persistence becomes stubbornness, caring becomes domination, ambition becomes self-interest, firmness becomes bigotry. The church becomes a dysfunctional church, robbing the whole congregation of the joy of the Christian faith and stifling growth of the kingdom.

BUILDING CHARACTER

We ought not to consider conflict resolution a technique to learn but as an opportunity to create character. At best we should think of these techniques, which we can learn from the social sciences, as stopgap measures to be used only until we build the body to maturity. Conflict management, to borrow a phrase from the social scientists, is not then a technique, but rather it is a long-term effort of teaching, modeling, and applying scripture to human situations.

For the long term, let us consider how some very familiar passages of scripture would create a climate in which conflict would be creative and energizing. Take the familiar passage from Ephesians: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity

of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Eph 4:11–16).

While this passage has a much wider application than conflict, let us for the moment relate it to the way a church handles conflict. The application of one phrase after another would make a conflict a transforming experience. It takes years of teaching and modeling for a congregation to come to this understanding of the nature and purpose of the church.

Note these phrases: "building up the body of Christ," "unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God," "to maturity," "the measure of the full stature of Christ," "no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine," "speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way," "the whole body, joined and knit together," "promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

How could one take any one of these phrases seriously and then engage in hurtful conflict? If just half of these phrases were absorbed into the bloodstream of congregations, there would be no more church splits or even factions within the church.

Another passage, which if taken seriously would transform a congregation, is from Philippians: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (Phil 2:3,4).

Think of the impact it would have on decision-making if each counted the other better than himself/herself. If a congregation had learned through the years to make that passage a part of its ethos, conflict when it came would but serve to promote love and good works.

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THE PERSONALITY OF A CHURCH

What are the characteristics a church should seek to develop in order to have a proper climate for conflict resolution?

1. It should learn to pray. Every letter of Paul to a church begins with a discussion of his prayers on its behalf. A church must seek God's will in all its decisions and under all circumstances. Besides, one can't fight with someone for whom one is praying.
2. It should seek the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5). The church is the body; Christ is the head. He is Lord of all (Col:18). The church must submit to his lordship and seek to exalt him in all decisions and activities.
3. It should develop a passion for unity (Eph 4:3, 4:13). The scriptures abound with passages championing unity and likewise teem with passages condemning division; e.g. "I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them. For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded." (Rom 16:17,18).
4. It will develop a concern for the welfare of the body (Eph 4:12,16), recognizing that what one does to or for the body is what one does to or for Christ.
5. It will highly esteem every member, listen to each one's wishes, feel each member's hurts, treat each person with honor and respect (Phil 2:4). It should manifest the fruits of the spirit. It will never be manipulative, but will always be above board and fair.

6. It will speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). All parties will be mutually submissive to the word of God. The church will not sacrifice right doctrine, things essential, for the sake of growth or peace. It will recognize that it is the truth that unites us, but that truth should be spoken in love.
7. It should build itself up in love (Eph 4:16). It will take care to build relationships that are intimate and caring. "Blest be the tie that binds" is more than an old hymn—it is a dynamic in the church. Where loving relationships exist, conflict will be taken in stride. In a home where love is, conflicts are not destructive.

A congregation that possesses these seven characteristics will turn conflict into an energizing force for progress.

THE NATURE OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

There is a need to understand the nature of church membership. "Belonging" involves the idea of fitting in. In Acts 12:1 there is the interesting phrase, "King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church." Belonging to the church was costly then and it is costly now. It cost James his life (Acts 12:2).

There comes a time when we must "ask not what the church can do for us but rather ask what we can do for the church." To believe that the church exists only to meet our needs produces awfully selfish people.

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Church membership involves a sharing of life. It involves sharing the hurts and triumphs of others. It involves placing the needs of others above one's own.

Belonging carries with it the idea of fitting in. To belong to the church is to fit into a group that is brotherly. It is to be at home among folk who love one another. If it so happens that you are truly brotherly, you will find such an atmosphere the most pleasant and congenial in all the world. If you are of a contrary spirit you will find such an atmosphere quite oppressive and embarrassing.

There are so many places where we just don't fit in. That apparently is what happened to Judas. He began that high adventure of faith and service just as others did, but little by little he changed. Finally, that night in the upper room, he left Jesus and his little band of followers and went unto his own place. He didn't fit.

Belonging to the church involves self-giving, fitting in, and building up the brotherhood. Church membership should never be looked upon as cheap or easy.

A CHURCH TESTED

When Packard graduated from seminary, a minister friend recommended him to the Bell Avenue Church of Christ. Packard hesitated because he knew the church had a history of conflict, having had eighteen ministers in its thirty-year history. He agreed, however, to meet with the elders and to preach a trial sermon. By a small margin, the church approved his coming and he accepted. Then began the challenge of transforming them from a body that had many ills to a healthy congregation. They didn't seem to know that in the church members love one another, trust one another, and "count the other as better than oneself."

But the months turned into years and the years into decades and the church was gradually transformed. They had learned to love one another and to build up the body. Conflicts were taken in stride and were dealt with maturely and positively.

Then came the crisis. At 4:00 a.m. one cold Sunday morning in January, the fire department called Packard and said tersely, "Your church is on fire!" The fire department made a valiant attempt to save the

building but failed totally. Never before had there been so many decisions to be made, and every one could be a point of controversy.

How would this church, which in years past had been such an unloving church, deal with all the decisions? It turned out that even though there were hundreds of ideas to be processed, the only major conflict was whether or not to relocate. Within a week after the fire, many of the leaders, including Packard, began to talk about relocating, primarily because parking was woefully inadequate. Just a mile and a half away, eight acres situated beautifully, were available. To some, the wisdom of relocating was stunningly obvious, but many others felt strongly about rebuilding on the old site. Facts and figures were gathered and made public, house meetings were scheduled in many neighborhoods, small group meetings were held at the church. People were heard, no one's opinion was taken lightly.

After several weeks, there came the inevitable congregational meeting. Some families were divided, good friends had different opinions. It was a tense evening. Again there was full discussion. Finally, the vote was taken with 75% voting to relocate and 25% voting for the old location. Then came the biggest triumph. One who desired not to relocate stood on his feet and said, "You know that I wanted to stay at the old site, but this was all done in the open, everyone was treated fairly. Now let's all get behind it and get this new building built." Not a soul was lost to the church.

A CHURCH OR A CROWD

The long-term process of building a church with an attitude of love and reconciliation had born fruit in the crisis. When a climate for consensus has been created, a church will not be immobilized by differences of opinion, but rather will be the better for it. When the amount of tension is at a very low level, there is no incentive to build community, and when the dissatisfaction level is low there is no incentive to look to a better way of behaving or programming.

The conclusion, then, is not that conflict is evil and therefore is to be avoided at all costs. The goal of every congregation ought to be to build a church that is mature in faith and relationships. Then when conflict comes, it will be a catalyst for doing things better. It will actually help a church fulfill its mission.

When D. Martyn-Lloyd Jones reflected on his London ministry, he noted with regret that he had built a great crowd but that he had not built a great church. When conflict comes, "a great crowd" will have to be reliant on the strategies of the social scientists for a cure-all, but a "church" will rely on its being the body of Christ.

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