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# A PNEUMATOLOGICAL THEOLOGY AND CHRISTOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHY OF CHURCH CONFLICT FOR THE POST-PANDEMIC WESTERN CHURCH TO OUTLIVE, OUTLAST, AND OUTLOVE

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A PNEUMATOLOGICAL THEOLOGY AND CHRISTOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHY  
OF CHURCH CONFLICT FOR THE POST-PANDEMIC WESTERN CHURCH TO  
OUTLIVE, OUTLAST, AND OUTLOVE

A PROJECT DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF DIVINITY  
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IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY  
SCOTT BOWMAN  
SPRING 2022

## DISSERTATION COMMITTEE SIGNATURE PAGE

This dissertation, written by

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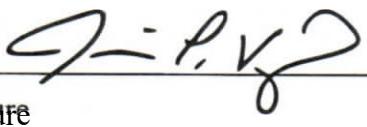
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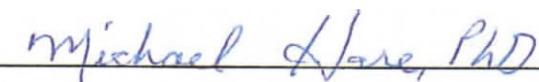
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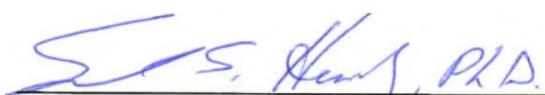
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## ABSTRACT

Church conflict is increasingly at the forefront of denominations as they suffer internal and external conflict. The need to develop a better perspective and manage relationships in church conflict may depend on the church's theology. The research of this project seeks to establish a pneumatological theology in dialogue with family systems theory and Christological philosophy of church conflict. The theology of church conflict is divided into four sections: reason, experience, history, and scripture. The Christological philosophy centers on Jesus' conflicts as every passage in the book of Luke is examined through the lens of conflict. A contextually transferrable Spirit-empowered theology and Christological philosophy of church conflict may benefit those in the pastorate who often deal with congregational conflict and the perspective they carry while managing conflict. Pastors who had attended a seminar in which the theology and philosophy were taught were surveyed. An evaluation was made to assess if the theology and philosophy of church conflict help change the perspectives of church conflict in pastors as they experience conflict in their local congregations and ministries. The theology and philosophy of church conflict may help pastors outlive, outlast, and outlove in church conflict.

*Dedication*

In honor of every pastor and congregation who has entered church conflict. May the future of church conflict be better for all who engage.

*Acknowledgment*

I first want to acknowledge and thank my wife, Rebecca Bowman, who has lovingly and patiently supported me in my educational journey our entire 15 years of marriage. My four children: Wesley, William, Whitney, and Wilson, have also been patient through reading, writing, and traveling to accomplish this level of education. Joyce Miller, my great aunt, who housed me, fed me, prayed for me, and let me put thousands of miles on her car. My church, New Harvest Assembly of God, deserves applause for their part in my education as they supported me in prayer, finances and engaged with my sermons, often filled with whatever I learned that week. I want to thank my staff, Jennifer Payton and Ryan Chrisman, who have engaged in my education, participating in the research and training over the last three years. Pentecostal theologians Kenneth and Melissa Archer have significantly influenced my development as a Pentecostal practitioner and local theologian. My cohort partners, Adam Vaughn and Joe Lee, have been friends, support, and help, as have we labored together. Ben Gee has been an intercessor and encourager. My best friend Zack Kuper has always listened to what I had to say and served as a sounding board for all my ministry trials. My dissertation committee: Dr. Vigil is a brilliant, accomplished, vigilant pastor and friend. Dr. Hare is a gracious and credible voice in the world of church conflict. I am incredibly blessed to have his expertise in the field on my side throughout this process. For many years, Dr. Hemby has been a voice in my life and has coached me through some dark nights of church conflict. He is a pastor's pastor, and it is a privilege to have him speak into my life, ministry, and dissertation.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

#### *Church Conflict*

Church community quarrels and conflicts have been observed by more than those inside the community. In the second century, Greek philosopher Celsus observed Christians quarreling and described “a bunch of frogs holding council in a swamp, or a clutch of worms assembling in the muck: all of them disagreeing over who is the worst sinner.”<sup>1</sup> Celsus proceeds to acknowledge the marginalization of the message Christians bear. As exposed through the imagery of a non-believer, conflict among Christians should sound the alarm toward a better way to get along. Solutions to getting along with one another are likely rooted in the ability to have respectful communication between conflicting parties. However, as observed in the case of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15, a departure of conflicting parties may result despite clear communication. Tensions like those found in Scripture and the contemporary church are likely to continue despite best efforts to communicate clearly during conflict.

Ken Sande, the author of *The Peacemaker*, recently wrote an article drawing attention to the “racial tensions, economic setbacks, and the most polarizing political season in recent history.”<sup>2</sup> Sande, one of the most skilled and experienced conciliation experts in the church world, is voicing the struggle to navigate conflicting times. Christians consistently focus on the

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<sup>1</sup> Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1987), 79.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Sande, “How to Prevent Conflict Before It Starts,” *Influence Magazine*, no. 34 (June 2021), 57.

conflictive and tension-filled nature of the overlapping life. Believers live in the world with heavenly citizenship. Skye Jethani writes of conflict created by such tension: “Sadly, our culture is being torn apart by leaders—both political and pastoral—who seize upon our anxiety and exploit the conflict that result from simplistic, either/or declarations.”<sup>3</sup> It is apparent that the solution to conflict may be more conflict, more complexity, more mystery, and more tension. Such a statement is a paradox. In the end, conflict is everywhere even within the groans of the universe awaiting redemption.<sup>4</sup> To paradoxically embrace conflict, which can bring transfiguration to individuals and church, is to embrace the image-changing power of conflict.

### *The Research Question*

To return to Celsus’ criticism of church conflicts manifesting as “a clutch of worms assembling in the muck,”<sup>5</sup> the statement may lead to questions about who opened the can of worms in the first place? Did the pastor do it? Did the congregation peel back the lid? Or perhaps Jesus Christ himself, through the Holy Spirit, let the worms breathe? Pastoral theologian William Willimon writes, “Where there is absolutely no dissatisfaction, no vision of anything better, no pain, there is little chance of action. When there is some measure of threat, individuals or groups mobilize, seek and integrate new information, and muster new skills and resources to meet the threat. A church in which there is a healthy amount of tension and conflict is a church alive.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> J. R. Briggs, *The Sacred Overlap: Learning to Live Faithfully in the Space Between* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Rom 8:22.

<sup>5</sup> Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, 79.

<sup>6</sup> William H. Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987), 15.

If the only way out of conflict is to turn toward conflict, then how can church leaders best manage conflict in an increasingly polarized world? Kenneth Archer, Pentecostal theologian, notes the need for a clear articulation of hermeneutical and theological community identities to better drive forward the community's interpretive future by restoring its interpretive and theological history.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, it is the purpose of the following research to articulate a clear theology and philosophy of church conflict, specifically in terms of Pentecostal spirituality (in which resides a pneumatological predisposition). Such research may help church leaders and congregations understand the theological nature of conflict and better interpret conflict as it arrives.

Alistair McGrath describes how theology draws on four different sources: scripture, tradition, reason, and religious experience.<sup>8</sup> Theology and philosophy of church conflict will be explored through McGrath's four phases, however, not necessarily in the same order. Bringing a more robust dialogue with another discipline can also establish a deeper dimension of theological understanding. Therefore, the entirety of the research project will consider Bowen family systems theory as a dialogue partner in establishing theology and philosophy of church conflict. Beyond biblical implications, the Bowen theory acknowledges the church family's operation as one emotional system.<sup>9</sup> Many emotions of church members in conflict are beyond conscious control. Not addressing the relationship between problem-causing church members will result in

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty First Century: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (London, England: A&C Black, 2004), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 120.

<sup>9</sup> Angella Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause of Church Conflicts Based on Bowen Family Systems Theory," *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 73, no. 1 (2019): 11.

a “circular causation” of events.<sup>10</sup> Not uncommon to the church context, conflict resolution wanes, and anxiety levels grow, resulting in the disaffiliation of members by their own choice. However, the Bowen family system theory addresses organizational anxiety: “The symptom is not caused by the symptom bearer alone but by the whole system: the family.”<sup>11</sup> The problem of conflict never lies solely with the person who appears to be causing the problem, but it is the whole family system of relationships. For this reason and because many sources of contemporary literature on conflict management and especially church conflict management make direct references to systems theory, the researcher deems systems dialogue as necessary.

The research question: Can a Spirit-filled theology and Christological philosophy of church conflict in dialogue with systems theory change the perspectives of how pastors manage church conflict, allowing pastors to outlive, outlast, and outlove in conflict?

### *Definition of Terms*

Many terms may be universal when describing church conflict. However, for the sake of clarity, the following terms have been defined.

- Church conflict: “To strike together,”<sup>12</sup> disagreement, serious at times, between at least two parties of church body or relationship. Church conflicts likely involve layers of both personal and organizational levels.

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<sup>10</sup> Son, “Anxiety as a Main Cause,” 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> Son, “Anxiety as a Main Cause,” 12.

<sup>12</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 10.

- Change or transformation (terms may be used synonymously throughout the dissertation):  
to make or become different by the process of the Holy Spirit and God's servant-leaders.
- Bowen family systems theory or systems theory: Dr. Murray Bowen, a psychiatrist, created a theory about human familial relationships as they operate inside the emotional family system. Edwin Friedman would later apply systems theory to church and synagogue for pastoral management of the congregation. The basis of Bowen's theory is on the family system, which operates similarly to the human body's system and its health. Each member of a family or congregation has a part to play in the emotional system and contributes to the system's health or dysfunction.
- Self-differentiation: the ability of a person to emotionally remove themselves from a conflictive situation and remain a non-emotional presence while at the same time being committed and part of the organizational system at large.
- Primary conflictive agent: the agent in any given conflict who initiates and creates friction between other parties.
- Conflict agent: members or parties of any given conflictive situation.
- Transfiguration: the researcher uses this term to refer to the unveiling of conflictive agents: (1) into the image of Christ in conflict or (2) unveiled as images of the conflict's systemic dysfunction.
- Christ in conflict: a phrase used to describe Jesus in conflictive situations as described in the gospels.

### *Contextual Relationship to the Researcher*

Edwin Friedman's work in family systems theory as applied to congregations can explain the vast majority of the issues faced at New Harvest. New Harvest began with a small group of dissidents from another church in the same town. The church's founding members departed their original church in response to a moral issue in the senior pastor's immediate family. Fallout occurred following the application of nepotism rather than biblical correction.

New Harvest has had four different pastors in its nineteen-year history. The longest tenure has been enjoyed by the current pastor who became the senior pastor at age 31. The pastoral tenure data of the church reflects the research of Strand and Rainer as a possibly unhealthy church, in need of intervention.<sup>13</sup> When New Harvest's was thirteen years old, the beginning of the current pastorate, attendance was around eighty people, with mostly older members who have adult children.

### Experiential conflict in the local church

The highest levels of conflict at New Harvest occurred during years two and four of its current pastorate. The interconnectedness of families with multiple ministry positions became unmanageable and was intensified by a hard-to-manage conflict in which no one person was at fault. Pastors' lives often reflect Friedman's statement: "Living with crisis is a major part of leader's lives. The crisis come in two major varieties: (1) those that are not of their own making but are imposed on them from outside or within a system; and (2) those that are actually

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<sup>13</sup> Greg Strand, "Pastoral Tenure," *EFCA*, December 16, 2015, accessed December 3, 2019, <https://www.efca.org/blog/understanding-scripture/pastoral-tenure>.

triggered by the leaders through doing precisely what they should be doing.”<sup>14</sup> A delicate balance was necessary to manage the many layered conflict. Friedman writes, “Most crises cannot by their very nature be resolved (that is, fixed): they must simply be managed until they work their way through.”<sup>15</sup>

### *Scope and Limitations*

The research and literature reviewed in this study will not be establishing a global church conflict theology or philosophy. The context of this study is specific to churches in the United States, even though some theological motifs may translate on the issue of conflict. Furthermore, not all strains of modern Christianity may relate to the specific Pentecostal spirituality in the context of the researcher. The philosophy portion of the research proposes a clear Christological way of addressing conflict in the congregation. All Christians should be able to examine the gospels well and see Christ in conflictive situations. Adopting a philosophy of conflict based upon Christ as the perfect axiom of humanity should be considered applicable to all who seek to be transfigured into the image of Christ.

The project undertaken is not establishing a training manual, evidential truths of conflict, or generalities about how conflict happens in the congregation. Instead, the intent is to establish a biblical and pneumatological theology of church conflict and philosophy of church conflict based upon Christ’s conflicts in the gospels, specifically the gospel of Luke. Establishing a theology

<sup>14</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York, NY: Church Publishing Inc., 2007), 27.

<sup>15</sup> Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 27.

and philosophy of church conflict is the substance of what may answer the research question about managing church conflict better. While many researchers have sought to develop a conflict model, create conflict training manuals, or establish processes to manage conflict, it is the nature of this research to develop a theology and philosophy of church conflict that can be translated into different contexts more easily. Programmatic conflict paradigms limit managers of conflict. Conflict contexts vary from congregation to congregation, but conflicts themselves are often contextual and unique. An undergirding theology and philosophy of church conflict may be more helpful than manuals and programs which cannot take conflict variances or context into account. In contrast, theology and philosophy are foundations for contextual conflict training, programs, manuals, and processes.

The ideal timeframe for completion of the project follows:

- Fall 2021, writing chapter two by completing the literature review and writing the theology and philosophy of church conflict.
- Winter 2021-22, fieldwork and seminar completion to determine the effectiveness of the church conflict theology and philosophy.
- Spring 2022, evaluating the project and drawing conclusions. Ideally, participants in the seminar are at least 12 pastors from the Kentucky Ministry Network and other local pastors in the Frankfort/Lawrenceburg, KY community.

### *Project Goals and Objectives*

The primary goal of the research is to establish a pneumatological theology and Christological philosophy of church conflict. Creating a theology of church conflict will be accomplished

through the objective of a quadrilateral: reason, history, religious experience, and Scripture. These four categories will include a church conflict literature review, a survey of systems theory, a historical study of church conflict at the Council of Nicaea, the researcher's conflict narrative and pastoral survey research already conducted, and a Pentecostal theology of conflict. A contextually transferrable Spirit-empowered theology and Christological philosophy of church conflict may benefit those in the pastorate who often deal with congregational conflict. To be beneficial, another objective to establish a theology of church conflict will include proficient knowledge in contemporary literary works on church conflict and reading Scripture through a conflict lens.

Matthew Shadle, in his research on political theology, describes how theology enriches explanations of conflict.<sup>16</sup> It is possible to see how theology can “shed light” on conflicts.<sup>17</sup> While this dissertation makes no claims about the political or global aspects of national or civic conflicts, some conflict applications remain despite the context. Shadle is correct in what theology does to conflict as it exposes and examines biblical narratives and characters of conflict, allowing the reader to put themselves into the text and therefore experience the Spirit’s work in and through conflict.

The objective for establishing a Christological philosophy of church conflict is to examine Christ’s conflict narrative throughout the book of Luke. Every person has a life narrative that includes rising action toward at least one conflict. However, conflicts usually travel in packs (or, in some cases, pacts). A particular way of reading the biblical narratives allows readers to participate in conflict narratives themselves as they read the Scriptures with their

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew Shadle, “Theology and the Origins of Conflict,” *Political Theology* 14, no. 3 (June 2013): 285.

<sup>17</sup> Shadle, “Theology and the Origins of Conflict,” 285.

context and conflict in mind. Practical Theologians Carol Dempsey and Elayne Shapiro write, “Biblical narratives have sustained readers’ attention for thousands of years. Thus, reframing them in the context of learning about conflict has the potential to expand our analytical and critical abilities.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, examining Christ in conflict through the gospel narrative is the final goal of this research. The journey of every Christian narrative is to become more like Christ; therefore, to become Christ-like in conflict, or be transfigured into Christ in conflict, should also be on the horizon of the Christian.

The final goal of this project is to evaluate and examine if the theology and philosophy of church conflict are helpful for pastors as they experience conflict in their local congregations and ministries. The research methodology section gives further explanations of the objectives to accomplish the goal above. However, objectives include hosting a seminar in which the established theology and philosophy of church conflict are taught to a group of pastors while conducting pre- and post-seminar surveys to evaluate effectiveness.

### *Conclusion*

Bringing a robust theology and philosophy of any subject is not only helpful but can be transformative to the understanding of the subject. Establishing a theology allows people to engage in the convergence of their practical life experiences and biblical theology. Examples of recent practical theologies aiding people are Fuller Seminary’s Theology of Work<sup>19</sup> and Northern Seminary’s article compilation book called *Conflict Management and the Apostle Paul*, edited by

<sup>18</sup> Carol J. Dempsey and Elayne J. Shapiro, *Reading the Bible, Transforming Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 4.

<sup>19</sup> See <https://www.theologyofwork.org/about>

Scot McKnight and birthed from their Doctor of Ministry program.<sup>20</sup> Both the production of a book and a resource website are sustainable and valuable means of a practical theology's development.

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<sup>20</sup> Scot McKnight and Greg Mamula, *Conflict Management and the Apostle Paul* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), xi.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PROJECT IN PERSPECTIVE- A QUADRILATERAL

#### *Reason: Contemporary Literature Review*

As each day goes on in the United States, life becomes more wrought with polarization and conflictive situations driving individual and congregational anxiety to new levels. Pastors in the United States are increasingly involved in a culturally volatile context. Pastors find themselves unwittingly in race riots, political polarization, and pandemic and vaccination conspiracy theories. Such conflicts are just a few of the conflictive cultural contexts pastors experience. To dialogue with the writers of church conflict resources is essential; at the same time, it should be acknowledged that the entire world has entered a new stage of conflict activity. The Bowen family systems theory applied to congregations is an often-used theory in contemporary literature to explain conflicts in the church context. Bowen's theory will be used throughout the research and may be cited simply as systems theory or family systems theory.

#### *Church in Flux*

The church organization proclaims to be a transformative community in the power of the Holy Spirit. The church is God's human intervention to transform and disciple the members of the church as well as the world at large. By definition, such a community is one in constant flux and will naturally result in conflict as the friction of the Spirit's transformative power works. The fundamental tension of the church in constant change is the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God

on earth. Theologian Michael Gorman writes, "To be in Christ is to be in constant process of transformation into his image."<sup>1</sup> Both the church's identity and individual believer resound a call to the underlying theological tension of the church organization being in present conflict as a normative experience.<sup>2</sup> Transformation and change create friction, the coming of the Kingdom of God creates a displacement of all other kingdoms that exist, and participation in God's creative plan means transformation.<sup>3</sup>

The church in the kingdom of God's transformative flux must find effective ways to address conflict management. Many factors cause heightened anxiety levels in the world at large and in church. The church is racing towards the end of time, and theological tensions are additions to the layers of conflict in the metanarrative of the Christian life. When new to a church, pastors bring a certain level of predisposed assumptions of necessary movement and view themselves as agents of change.<sup>4</sup> Author Sharon Drury writes, "The world is out of sync with God's will and Christians are in the work of helping God bring it back into alignment- 'thy Kingdom come' (Matthew 6)."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 34.

<sup>2</sup> See Jas 1:2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Sharon Drury, *Handbook of Leadership Theory of Church Leaders* (Virginia Beach, VA: Regent University, School of Leadership Studies, 2003), 53.

<sup>5</sup> Drury, *Handbook of Leadership Theory*, 55.

## Tensions

The process of Christian life and transformation raises organizational anxiety levels and begs the question: how can pastors and church leaders more effectively manage church conflict? A survey of contemporary literature outlines several factors as every church member brings certain expectations, theological tensions, marriage and family problems, struggles of holy living, and preferences to the church. Church leaders need adequate education and training to manage these conflicts. Leaders should expect disruptions to church culture and organization and "can expect it to be difficult, time consuming, and highly anxiety provoking."<sup>6</sup>

One view of church conflict is a narrative encounter; William Willimon writes, "The Bible does not present us with a unified philosophical system. It presents us with a narrative, as complex and multifaceted as any narrative, of God's dealings with humanity."<sup>7</sup> Often withheld from conflicts are the multilayered narratives and deep tensions absent from presenting conflictive issues in the church. In his book *Preaching about Conflict*, William Willimon finished the text with a story about a pastor who experienced significant resistance to change. The pastor was forced to resign during congregational insurrection after preaching about the need for change from the pulpit, and he was gone from the church within weeks. Willimon's story is the harsh reality of some conflicts in the church: "That's the way it sometimes works when there is conflict in the church and problems in the pulpit... Jesus wept over Jerusalem because he realized that his vision of 'the things that make for peace' would not be embodied fully in these people."<sup>8</sup> An appeal to the mystery contextual approach for intervention in conflict

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<sup>6</sup> Drury, *Handbook of Leadership Theory*, 53.

<sup>7</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 108.

<sup>8</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 112.

is best in these cases. Sometimes there is no formulaic response or perfect way to manage or deal with conflict in any context. The mysterious nature of conflict sometimes leaves one with their jaw dropped and a need for the greater management skill of looking through pastoral job listings. Either way, conflict is a necessary part of the narrative, for better or worse, and when taken in stride, conflict is an instrumental part of every pastor's and church's narrative. There is no resolution without a rising action and conflict. All narratives have conflict, and in real life, not all stories have cheerful endings.

### *The Need for Conflict and Change and a Refutation of Conflict Avoidance*

Eddie Gibbs, professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, writes about the inevitability of church conflict: "You can no more manage conflict than you can manage a wave when surfing. The wave is a given... Many conflicts are the necessary growing pains in the life of a community. If people avoid them or take the opportunity to walk away, they deny themselves an opportunity for growth."<sup>9</sup> Avoiding conflictive issues in the church can create opportunities for a more significant conflict to grow, as in the case of King David in the Old Testament. The prophet Samuel informed David about the sin of his two sons Amnon and Absalom, "For I have told him that I am about to judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knew, because his sons brought a curse on themselves and he did not rebuke them."<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Boa writes of the situation, "David's conflict avoidance strategy not only failed to work but eventually caused the

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<sup>9</sup> Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 112–113.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Sam 3:13

conflict to escalate. Had he dealt promptly with the issues surrounding Amnon and Absalom, Amnon's murder and Absalom's conspiracy might have been averted.<sup>11</sup> Conflict avoidance may be an internal failure to deal with interior issues of one's own soul. David had a similar sinful situation as his son Amnon who raped his sister Tamar. David, like Amnon, also performed sexual violence against Bathsheba. Church leaders who run from one church tenure to the next may be running from their internal rather than organizational conflicts. Conflict avoidance can often be about internal conflicts. Boa writes, "The key to conflict management is prompt reconciliation by 'speaking the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15). Effective conflict managers know how to balance truth (confrontation) and love (reconciliation)."<sup>12</sup>

### Hunting elephants

Robert Crosby, leader of Emerge Counseling Ministries, speaks of church staff members teaming together to hunt down organizational elephants walking around the church.<sup>13</sup> The metaphor Crosby uses is not only positive but playful in the context of church conflicts. Learning the elephant hunting skill is not an easy process, and professors Hunsinger and Latini acknowledge the skill takes "honest expression... 'the elephant in the sanctuary' cannot remain there for long without some kind of explicit acknowledgment."<sup>14</sup> Within the family system of the church,

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Boa, "Leadership Series: Lesson 19: Conflict Management," *Bible.Org*, October 21, 2005, <https://bible.org/seriespage/19-conflict-management>.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Boa, "Leadership Series."

<sup>13</sup> Robert Crosby, *The Teaming Church: Ministry in the Age of Collaboration* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), 56ff.

<sup>14</sup> Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger and Theresa F. Latini, *Transforming Church Conflict: Compassionate Leadership in Action* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 176.

however, elephants may be more than structural issues. Often, they are people with elephant problems. Joseph Girdler quoted an Assembly of God superintendent in his research as follows: "We have a responsibility to clean up those who are infecting and affecting the church."<sup>15</sup> While this quote is highly experiential, it nods toward a systems theory understanding of the church and the need for leadership to address those making the church system toxic. The unfortunate work of hunting elephant issues in church is voiced by Crosby, "Long gone is the political effectiveness of being nice. Leaders cannot nice their way through a conflict. Elephants just don't respond to niceness, they require staring down and sharpshooting."<sup>16</sup> Crosby engages conflict in church as an exciting and worthy pursuit but in a teaming effort rather than as an individual vendetta. The existence of a fine line between constructive and destructive church conflict exists. All church leaders will likely experience a failure of nerve in the face of conflict and face failure itself when confronting elephant issues. Failure is a given when addressing the complexity of church conflict; however, as Leonard Sweet writes, "Lacking the nerve of failure, we have suffered a failure of nerve—to dare to dream dreams, venture visions, and risk getting splinters that come from cutting against the grain."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph S. Girdler, "The Superintendent Leader-Shift from Pastoral to Apostolic Function: Awareness and Training in Leadership Development for District Superintendents in the Assemblies of God USA" (DMin, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2021), 112. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

<sup>16</sup> Crosby, *The Teaming Church*, 57.

<sup>17</sup> Leonard I. Sweet, "The Nerve of Failure," *Theology Today* 34, no. 2 (July 1, 1977): 148.

## Preaching through conflict

Church leaders will likely fail in addressing, mediating, and working in and through conflict.

Organizational damage happens when there is no nerve to entertain the idea of failing because of apathetic responses to conflicts of systemic nature in the church. William Willimon wrote of conflict avoidance,

I once worked with a pastor who felt that one should not respond to conflict within the parish until there was absolutely no way of continuing to avoid it. He would never have considered dragging some problem into the pulpit or giving voice to a problem on his own initiative. Hear no evil, speak no evil, was his homiletical philosophy. I was surprised how many problems seemed to resolve themselves if one just simply sat back and let things run their course. As time moved on, I discovered that a number of problems that we assumed had been resolved had simply become submerged or channeled in another direction, only to rear their ugly heads on at least expected occasions. In other words, ignoring conflict did not solve anything.<sup>18</sup>

Willimon suggests the proper pastoral response to open conflicts in the church is not to avoid them, but instead to engage them through homily: "Preaching is best thought of as the part of a total pastoral response to congregational conflict."<sup>19</sup> Preaching about conflict initially sounds as uncomfortable as an elephant hunt inside the church; however, considering transparency and honesty in the pulpit, one can be no more self-effacing. Willimon writes, "Every time we boldly confront crisis and conflict in the family of God we witness to the truth that Jesus really does make possible a community based on hope and trust. Every time we choose to evade the crisis and keep silent, we imply that our faith is not strong enough to enable us to have courage in crisis."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 51.

### A culture of passivity in the pulpit

Thomas Oden indicts the modern church for giving way to the culture of accommodation regarding the pastoral nature of reproof and correction among the congregation, which is part and parcel of church conflict. Oden writes, "We have accommodated too many of our contemporary culture's shallow, facile, assumptions about the nature of truth and reality. One of the key assumptions of our culture is unconstrained individual freedom; Let each one do one's own thing (and in a very tiny parenthesis we add: as long as others do not get hurt)."<sup>21</sup> Beyond the United States' preoccupation with individualism and ultimate freedom from anyone or any organization, church conflicts often result in emotional cutoff and members severing ties with multiple congregations throughout their church life. Therefore, as Oden notes, church leadership takes less than biblical philosophies of ministry that create environments where there is no confrontation or conflict. Conflict, which can be a work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people and congregation, is then thwarted and removed from pastoral ministry as one considers, "Timely admonition was viewed as a gift of the Spirit."<sup>22</sup> Giving way to predominant culture may not be the only reason for the changes toward non-confrontational ministry. Pastoral abuses of admonition and correction and litigious actions have created environments where conflict is not welcome. In response, Oden writes of the ideal picture of church conflict in corrections or admonishments: "It is not a coercive act that would manipulate change, but a respectful dialogue that holds up possibilities for the voluntary redirection of behavior."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1983), 212.

<sup>22</sup> Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 210.

<sup>23</sup> Oden, *Pastoral Theology*: 206.

## Conflict normalized

Conflict is a normal part of human life and a "continuous dynamic with human relationships" and can bring with it "the potential for constructive change."<sup>24</sup> Kouzes and Posner write of the importance of critical incidents as an opportunity for individuals to grow as well as the organization: "Critical incidents—chance occurrences, particularly at a time of stress and challenge—offer significant moment of learning for leaders and constituents. Critical incidents present opportunities for leaders to teach important lessons about appropriate norms of behavior."<sup>25</sup> Confronting norms of organizational behavior amid conflict is a means of creating a culture in which growth can happen. In this light, conflict is positive if it is addressed to "reinforce core values" of the organization and "reinforce the behavior you want repeated" in the organization's culture.<sup>26</sup> As it is, "Conflict can occur at any time, in any place and in any human relationship."<sup>27</sup>

## Creating a safe environment for church conflict

Since conflict is a normal part of human relationships, church leaders need to create a safe environment for conflict to happen, one that embraces conflict and does not ignore conflict.

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<sup>24</sup> John Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation: Clear Articulation Of The Guiding Principles By A Pioneer In The Field* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 15.

<sup>25</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco, CA: Wiley, 2007), 88.

<sup>26</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 88.

<sup>27</sup> Guichun Jun, "Transforming Conflict: A Peacebuilding Approach for an Intergroup Conflict in a Local Congregation," *Transformation* (02653788) 35, no. 1 (January 2018): 7.

Kenneth Boa writes, "Effective leaders don't ignore conflict. They manage it by creating an environment in which people are enabled to work through relational friction on a one-on-one basis. Only after such efforts have failed are others allowed to enter the conflict, and then only for the purpose of bringing about reconciliation. Conflicts can't be avoided, but they can be managed. And a wise leader will devote himself or herself to learning how to do just that."<sup>28</sup> Becoming a naturally genuine, open, and authentic individual is necessary for creating a safe environment for people to be themselves and be honest in the midst of conflict. A culture of trust is necessary to allow a safe environment confrontation and conflict "because you can't bluff trust."<sup>29</sup> An openness to the emotional life of self and others is not harmful when emotions are controllable. Leaders build rapport when people feel they authentically care about their interests and emotions.<sup>30</sup> Creating a safe environment as described above is long-term work and requires significant tenure and skill among church leadership. Such skill is better spoken of metaphorically as Willimon writes, "To be a pastor is to juggle five or six balls at once, trying to keep them all in the air."<sup>31</sup> For this reason, Willimon writes that he does not offer a multiple-step or form approach to pastoral conflict management. Instead, Willimon offers a certain way for pastors to see themselves as prophetic agents of change, just as Christ was in his pastoral ministry.

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<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Boa, "Leadership Series."

<sup>29</sup> Erica Ariel Fox, *Winning from Within: A Breakthrough Method for Leading, Living, and Lasting Change* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2013), 194.

<sup>30</sup> Fox, *Winning from Within*, 192.

<sup>31</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 65.

### Shifting culture needs conflict

Girdler's apostolic view of changing times and fresh looks holds that, "With an ever-shifting culture, the Church struggles to embrace out-of-the-box thinkers and those who pursue new ministry endeavors not yet known to the structure. This struggle depicts conflict and challenge, and at times persecution, yet still, the promise of perseverance."<sup>32</sup> The precipitation of cultural polarization achieving new heights and the continued decline of Christianity in the United States have created as many opportunities as oppositions. The necessity of church leadership to push headlong through conflictive situations as they arise in the church is as Girdler describes: "Spiritual leaders are not overcome by the temporal but challenged to ascend and achieve the divine perspective to which they are called."<sup>33</sup> Contrarian and confrontational leaders in the church who challenge the status quo are necessary.

### Submission and conflict

Girder has researched and written on the apostolic nature of a superintendent (denominational leadership) position. Girdler inclines that most church conflict involves submission in some form or fashion, either to God or church leadership.<sup>34</sup> Girdler also maintains that reconciliation can happen even though conflict resolution may not. Reconciliation without resolution is an essential aspect of church conflict as many conflicts in church resolve in less-than-ideal manners. The issue becomes the necessity of healthy conflict as "Nowhere is without conflicts. A local

<sup>32</sup> Girdler, "The Superintendent Leader-Shift from Pastoral to Apostolic Function," 108–109.

<sup>33</sup> Girdler, "The Superintendent Leader-Shift from Pastoral to Apostolic Function," 109.

<sup>34</sup> Girdler, "The Superintendent Leader-Shift from Pastoral to Apostolic Function," 111.

congregation is no exception to this. A healthy congregation does not mean that it has no conflicts, but that it has the capability to deal with conflict in a healthy manner.<sup>35</sup> The connotation of healthy conflict in the church is ultimate submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. One, however, must acknowledge that Christianity is no passive religion and Jesus is no passive character. To be aware of church history and biblical history is to acknowledge Christianity's conflictive past. John Stott writes, "Authentic Christianity—the Christianity of Christ and his apostles—is supernatural Christianity. It is not a tame and harmless list of rights and wrongs, spiced with a dash of religion. It is rather a resurrection religion, a life lived by the power of God."<sup>36</sup> Living authentic Christianity will assuredly stir the waters of conflict and church both inside and outside the church.

### *Effective Communication*

Effective communication can take many forms and has a broad spectrum of influences beyond verbal speech such as written policy, polity, procedure, conflict management training, positive framing of conflict, acknowledging the universal nature of organizational conflict and suffering, and discovering implications of church conflict and pastoral tenure.

Strategic leadership expert Aubrey Malphurs writes of the importance of effective communication amid conflictive situations:

Wherever there is a coup in a country and the government is toppled, have you noticed that the new regime is quick to take over the radio and television stations? It is imperative that they take their message or cause to the masses, and they will win them over through communication. Otherwise, they will likely lose power. How good are you at

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<sup>35</sup> Jun, "Transforming Conflict," 13.

<sup>36</sup> John Stott, *Christ in Conflict: Lessons from Jesus and His Controversies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 59.

communicating with your people? Are you ready to move on to the next step, or do you have some work to do on improving your congregational communication skills?<sup>37</sup>

Communication can bring about trust, especially when communicating during a conflict.

Communication is effective when expectations about transitions and changes are acknowledged and followed through within a timely manner as fluidly as possible. Malphurs encourages "robust dialogue" to help congregation and leadership build trust.<sup>38</sup> However, robust dialogue may not be desirable for those who would rather avoid conflict as robust dialogue "invites questions, challenges, even constructive but loving debate."<sup>39</sup> Malphurs reminds his readers that biblical directions of direct communication should be followed throughout constructive debates and other grievances that may arise in the church.<sup>40</sup>

### Direct communication

Conflict is universal to all human organizations, and developing a culture of trust helps prevent high anxiety levels. Healthy ministry culture shares authority, does not allow others' success to threaten, and commits to direct communication.<sup>41</sup> Doug Bixby trains his church members to avoid "triangulation" and favor direct communication associated with systems theory.<sup>42</sup> Direct communication, especially amid sharp confrontation, is essential to good decision-making and

<sup>37</sup> Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning: A 21st-Century Model for Church and Ministry Leaders* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 63.

<sup>38</sup> Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 228.

<sup>39</sup> Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 228.

<sup>40</sup> Matt 5:23-24, 18:15-19.

<sup>41</sup> Doug Bixby, "Pastor in the Middle.," *Christian Century* 133, no. 13 (June 22, 2016): 24.

<sup>42</sup> Bixby, "Pastor in the Middle," 25.

diffusing the high tensions of stakeholders. No matter how well-intentioned a rumor or second-hand account may be, such communication does not demonstrate legitimate accounts to make leadership decisions.<sup>43</sup>

Triangulation occurs when two members of the church are talking about a third member who is not present. Triangulation often happens in choir rooms and church kitchens. Bixby shows how Jesus was a direct communicator as he avoided emotional triangles by bringing the third party into the conversation and stopping triangulation.<sup>44</sup> A simple illustration helps:

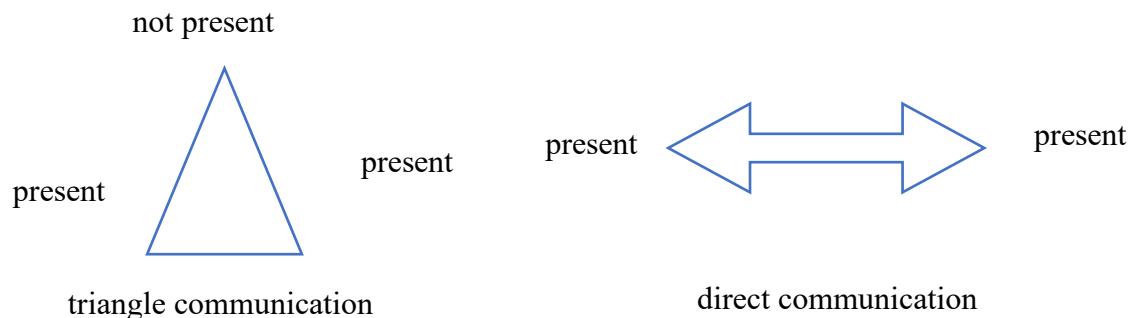


Figure 2.1 Triangle vs. Direct Communication

Jesus redirected conflicts caused by triangle communication in situations such as when Martha triangled Mary at the home of Lazarus to manipulate her into meal preparation<sup>45</sup> or when

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<sup>43</sup> Ronald Hawkins, *Biblical Leadership: Theology for the Everyday Leader*, ed. Benjamin Forrest and Chet Roden (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2017), 401.

<sup>44</sup> Bixby, “Pastor in the Middle,” 25.

<sup>45</sup> Luke 10:40.

the Pharisees triangled the woman caught in adultery.<sup>46</sup> In each case, Jesus turned the manipulative triangular communication back toward the individuals making claims about the person who was not present or unable to answer. Direct communication has the ability, as Jesus exemplified in both situations cited, to manage conflict peacefully.

The church birthed in Acts 2 was, chapters later, riddled with external and internal conflict. The external conflicts of the early church are well known as persecutions, hardships, and suffering. However, internal conflict coincided. In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira's conflict results in death. In Acts 6, neglect of Hellenistic widows at the table logged the Apostles their first internal conflict. Church and conflict are universal in nature, and conflict is present from the beginning of the church's existence. A survey of contemporary literature on church conflict defines effective communication as a significant factor in managing church conflict. Effective communication can prevent, dissolve, and manage church conflict by acknowledging a universal nature of conflict, framing conflict positively, and training in conflict management.

Direct communication may appear easy, but communication and interpretation are complex in high anxiety conflicts. Messages may be skewed by emotional language or emotional listening even when a person has communicated effectively in precipitating conflict. Church conflict communication experts Gangel and Canine write: "*Protect the emotional tone of communication.* Keep in mind interpretive and relational dimensions as well as denotative. Do not assume all members of a listening group receive communication in the same way. Carefully consider how every recipient feels about what you said."<sup>47</sup> Conflict is typically emotionally

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<sup>46</sup> John 8:1-11.

<sup>47</sup> Kenneth O. Gangel and Sam Canine, *Communication and Conflict Management in Churches and Christian Organizations* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 39.

processed. God has created humans with natural emotional reactions and chemical processes to flight or fight when conflict arises. To think theologically about natural human reaction and conflict may be God's purposeful action, as overcoming immature emotional reactions via indifference is part of the process of dependence upon the Spirit to empower a person to self-control. Biblical faith trusts God for outcomes rather than trusting in one's own ability to control. In terms of the Apostle Paul, one must trust the Spirit rather than the flesh. Perhaps better understood without contradiction between the flesh and Spirit, to yield one's emotional reactions to the redeeming power of the Spirit in one's emotional response.<sup>48</sup> Effective communication requires being aware of the emotional process in both sender and recipient.

The relationship that gives context for conflict communication to happen is just as meaningful as the content of the communication.<sup>49</sup> Managing a relationship is just as important as managing the messages sent in the relationship. The struggle to communicate effectively has been long-standing in human history, perhaps no more evident than in the incident at the Tower of Babel. God confusing language and interpretation became the dividing line between peoples, causing an urban sprawl throughout the known world. Somehow in the Spirit, communication was reconciled through Pentecost with one language of the Spirit reversing the Babel incident. The overtones of communication effectiveness in church conflict emphasize the necessity of the Spirit's help in communication and interpretation. Language takes on a sort of magical viewpoint, transcending technical and scientific modes.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> R. Robert Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry* (Forest Hills, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2019), 180.

<sup>49</sup> Gangel and Canine, *Communication and Conflict Management*, 43.

<sup>50</sup> Gangel and Canine, *Communication and Conflict Management*, 72.

## People and communication

All communication sends more messages than simple language; communication sends messages about oneself and the perception of others. The language used in communication may be an interpretation of the relationship. Gangel and Canine write: "Communication researcher repeatedly reminds us not to search for meaning in statements alone. According to Berlo, '*Meanings are in people*, [they] are covert responses contained within the human organism."<sup>51</sup> Communication is as much about the person as it is about the messages being sent. The tone of voice, body language, volume, movement, inflection, eye movement, and choice of verbiage are all sending messages to the recipients. Some of these messages may send conflicting reports about the person and their intentions.

## Conflict and nonverbal messages and meanings

Since conflictive language tends to fall in the category of emotional communication, an awareness of messages sent along with verbal messages is necessary. Communication difficulties are more about intentions and relationships and despite best intentions, those relationships are often fragile at best. Harvard conflict researchers agree, "We know that even with the best of intentions, human relationships can corrode or become tangled, and, if we are honest, we also know that we don't always have the best of intentions. We know just how fragile are the heart and the soul."<sup>52</sup> Communicating during conflict adds more profound meaning to messages and

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<sup>51</sup> Gangel and Canine, *Communication and Conflict Management*, 72.

<sup>52</sup> Douglas F. Stone et al., *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2000), xxi.

can leave recipients wondering more about the deeper context of the communication than messages alone. Conflictive communication is about "perceptions, interpretations, and values. They are not about what a contract states, they are about what a contract *means*.<sup>53</sup> Non-verbal messages such as facial expressions and body language can skew meaning and interpretation. Even the biblical texts refer to Jesus expressing communication non-verbally in conflict situations such as when Peter denied Jesus: Jesus turned and looked Peter in the eye and Peter remembered Jesus' prophetic prediction about denial.<sup>54</sup> Jesus' eye contact communicated meaning non-verbally in a statement once verbal hours before. The complexity of communication during church conflict is no small task for any leader. It is wise to see mature communication as part and parcel of Christian formation.

#### Timing, audience, and appropriate conflict responses

Matthew 18 offers a biblical structure to appropriate responses in conflict. Psychologist and church conflict expert Kenneth Haugh clearly states Matthew 18's conflict confrontation with timing and audience: "1. Confront the individual privately first. 2. Confront him or her in the company of one or two witnesses. 3. Bring him or her before the congregation's governing body."<sup>55</sup> When applied appropriately, "this system as Christ established it can be very firm, caring, and loving."<sup>56</sup> Matthew 18 further exemplifies the relational difficulties of Peter's

<sup>53</sup> Stone et al., *Difficult Conversations*, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Luke 22:61

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth C. Haugk and R. Scott Perry, *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 48.

<sup>56</sup> Haugk and Perry, *Antagonists in the Church*, 48.

questions about forgiveness and conflict in the church. Appropriate use of the structure of Matthew 18 can mitigate destructive conflict in the church with direct and effective communication. The flow of audience and timing in conflict is important. If a small group or Sunday school class are the only people affected by a conflict, then communication for reconciliation and forgiveness can stay between the smaller groups in the church unless additional parties need be involved according to the second step outlined by Haugk. In other cases, if the offense was well within the public view of the entire congregation, then the appropriate response is to address the conflict and reconciliation before all. The relational context of offense and restoration according to Matthew 18 acknowledges the necessity of the church to respond and communicate with appropriate order (timing) and audience. The needs of both parties, the offended and the offenders, should be acknowledged by all involved in the conflict. Offended parties should be heard, receive answers, and in some cases receive restitution.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, there are also needs of the offender who may suffer unverbalized guilt, shame, and will need continued accountability as to not repeat the offense.<sup>58</sup> Balancing the relational reconciling structure of Matthew 18 is necessary for effective communication in the church.

### Conflict and self

In her book *Winning from Within*, Erica Fox writes of the need to center oneself and define identity because the world around is constantly changing and filled with conflict. Fox's book foci

<sup>57</sup> Thomas W. Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation: Creating a Culture OfJustPeace* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2010), 125.

<sup>58</sup> Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict*, 125ff.

are on helping the reader "get to know yourself from the inside out...Paradoxically, you can ease your way through the world outside by engaging, embracing, and integrating more of yourself on the inside."<sup>59</sup> Fox accomplishes the task of helping the reader get to know self through the "Sweets Spots" of identity: the thinker, dreamer, warrior, and lover and learning to control and balance them in organizational life.<sup>60</sup> Although each person may find themselves operating higher or lower in each sweet spot, each identity category has its own set of emotional responses. Better understanding how one operates in the emotional process of each category will help the individual close the performance gap and operate more effectively in an organization. To acknowledge the competing interests of one's own identity is to see how the thinker, dreamer, warrior, and lover all have their interests and "provide a crucial balance for you."<sup>61</sup>

Fox writes, "William Shakespeare handed down a timeless challenge: 'This above all: to thine own self be true.' Pulling that off can take a lifetime; you have to figure out what living true to yourself even means, and then find out how to make it happen in your life."<sup>62</sup> One author writes of a technique that lends itself toward aiding in removing oneself from highly emotionally charged conflict environment through the metaphor of "*getting on the balcony... to discern the adaptive challenge.*"<sup>63</sup> The metaphor allows one to be removed from an emotional situation to get a breath of fresh air on the balcony and remain connected. Becoming temporarily removed from a conflict can allow creative and adaptive thoughts to flow and at the same time reduce

<sup>59</sup> Fox, *Winning from Within*, 18.

<sup>60</sup> Fox, *Winning from Within*, 50.

<sup>61</sup> Fox, *Winning from Within*, 151.

<sup>62</sup> Fox, *Winning from Within*, 315.

<sup>63</sup> Mark Branson and Juan F. Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downer's Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2011), 223, emphasis the authors'.

stress and anxiety in conflictive parties. Whether physically removed from a situation or metaphorically, both have positive consequences of remaining true to self in emotionally charged conflicts.

### Universal and yet contextual conflict

Franklyn Koroma explains, "Conflict is universal, yet it is distinct in every church setting."<sup>64</sup> A survey of contemporary literature on church conflict unanimously resolves conflict as part of every church organization. Since there is no way to avoid conflict, the task is to learn how to dissolve, maintain, and manage conflict. Conflict occurs in an organization when the needs of one person clash with another. Church conflict often occurs when two or more groups are pursuing mutually exclusive goals.<sup>65</sup> The most outstanding leaders in the Bible experienced suffering and conflict.<sup>66</sup> Jesus' suffering and conflict-ridden ministry are evident in the gospel narratives. However, scriptural conflicts abound: King David was hunted like a wild animal by his direct superior, Paul was in constant danger from his kinsman, and Peter's life exemplifies conflict (some brought on by his actions and words). It appears the greater the leader, the greater the conflict the leader may face.

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<sup>64</sup> Franklyn A. B. Koroma, "Examination of Resources for Conflict Resolution In A Local Church Setting," *BTSK Insight* 8 (October 2011): 89.

<sup>65</sup> Koroma, "Examination of Resources," 91.

<sup>66</sup> Harry Zekveld, "Christlike in Conflict: Understanding, Responding to, and Growing through Church Struggle-A Pastor's Perspective on Conflict in Light of 2 Corinthians 1:3-11," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 27 (2016): 167ff.

## Conflict and suffering

John Stott wrote, "I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the One Nietzsche ridiculed as 'God on the cross.' In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?"<sup>67</sup> Suffering of all kinds, not the least of these for the sake of Christ's church, is not only honorable but pleasing to God. Pauline theology indicates that suffering is a divine gift from God, a privilege and grace from God himself.<sup>68</sup> Often, conflict becomes overwhelming to leaders of the church and their families. Naturally, questions are provoked in the hearts of pastors about how long they can bear such conflict or how long they should stay. Even in the context of the church of Acts, Paul and Barnabas were in such conflict about the controversial figure of John-Mark, "they had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord."<sup>69</sup>

## The Spirit at work in conflict

Not unusual to church conflicts, the results can often end in a departure of certain members from one another. Division results in frustrations, hurt, unanswered questions, and feelings of failure on behalf of members and leadership. Perhaps paradoxically, in the same chapter of Acts 15, before the disagreement and departure of the Pauline missionary force, the Holy Spirit was the

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<sup>67</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Cross* (Valley Forge, PA: Scripture Union, 2012), 32.

<sup>68</sup> Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 112.

<sup>69</sup> Acts 15:39 New International Version.

conflict management diffuser in the acceptance of the Gentiles to the Christian faith at the Council in Jerusalem. The possibility of a significant church split according to ethnic differences was imminent. However, the split was avoided because of the early communication and wisdom of good leaders.<sup>70</sup> It is interesting to note that the decision was ultimately made, not by the elders and leaders themselves at the Jerusalem council, but it was by the Holy Spirit's discernment. The words of Peter's legitimization of the Gentiles' salvation in Acts 15:8-9, "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith."<sup>71</sup> The decision of the Jerusalem council was a Spirit-empowered and Spirit-initiated decision. Furthermore, the information about the Gentile inclusion and Spirit baptism was not taken from hearsay or established rumor; they received this information in direct accounts.<sup>72</sup> Paul and Barnabas spoke to the council directly about their experience among the Gentiles.

Every person comes to church with expectations, hopes, dreams, experiences, and interests.<sup>73</sup> Many expectations that come into church need redemption and an atmosphere of love that can transcend the needs of all parties. The full realization of God's people is in tension and the kingdom of God has not fully come.<sup>74</sup> Theological and organizational tensions are both factors in church conflict management. Furthermore, the church operates as a family and every

<sup>70</sup> Hawkins, Forrest, and Roden, *Biblical Leadership*, 399.

<sup>71</sup> New International Version, Emphasis added.

<sup>72</sup> Hawkins, Forrest, and Roden, *Biblical Leadership*, 401.

<sup>73</sup> Koroma, "Examination of Resources," 100.

<sup>74</sup> The kingdom of God is in tension or flux, both here and not yet. Those who are redeemed have not yet experienced who they shall be in totality. Rom 8:19, "For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed." The church is in tension and conflict because individuals and kingdom are in tension and conflict. Conflict resolves in eschatological glory when the kingdom and God's children experience full redemption.

member is not independent of the rest of the whole system. Each member is dependent upon the expectations of other members.<sup>75</sup> The family model is not an unwarranted method of analyzing church conflict.

In Jesus' teaching, the family model of church is explicit in Matthew 12:49-50, "And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'"<sup>76</sup> The familial terms of reference to the church body go further when referencing Pauline epistles.<sup>77</sup> Angella Son, who analyzes church conflict through the Bowen family systems theory lens, sees "ineffective handling of anxiety within the church as a system" as the leading cause of conflict.<sup>78</sup>

### *Positively Framing Church Conflict*

A survey of the literature on church conflict yields not only positive tools for managing conflict but also frames conflict and valuable and energizing. Shawchuck and Heuser write, "Conflict can actually be good for a congregation; it stirs things up and gets energies flowing, perhaps allowing for necessary change. It helps clarify goals and differences of opinion."<sup>79</sup> The challenge for churches is to keep a healthy tension of conflict. Too much conflict causes high levels of anxiety, and too little conflict means that plans and visions of the church are not being challenged. No

<sup>75</sup> Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause of Church Conflicts Based on Bowen Family Systems Theory," 11.

<sup>76</sup> English Standard Version.

<sup>77</sup> Pauline familial language is clearly used in I Thessalonians.

<sup>78</sup> Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause," 9.

<sup>79</sup> Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, *Managing the Congregation: Building Effective Systems to Serve People* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 249.

challenge of church plans can cause the implementation of new ideas that may not have the greatest merit.<sup>80</sup> No conflict in the church can show the general lack of creativity in the body. However, persistent or reoccurring conflict can indicate a lack of training and resources for conflict management and resolution.<sup>81</sup> High levels of conflict tend to dominate time and resources in the church and lead to stagnation if resolution does not come in a manageable period. Church leadership and congregations require conflict resolution and management resourcing to avoid deeper levels of conflict.

### *Self-differentiation and Systems Theory*

Multiple authors have used systems theory to explain the nature and manner of best management practices in the cases of church conflict. Both Edwin Friedman and Norman Shawchuck, skilled conflict and organizational interventionists, have used the theory to explain and mediate conflict in the congregation. In recent literature, Robert Creech has authored a text called *Family Systems and Congregational Life*. Church systems theorists are already considering the book a seminal work. The family theory carries its weight as a congregation often mirrors the family on an individual level. Friedman explains the context of church and family as a triangle<sup>82</sup> as depicted below:

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<sup>80</sup> Koroma, “Examination of Resources,” 96-97.

<sup>81</sup> Bixby, “Pastor in the Middle,” 24–25.

<sup>82</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2011), 1.

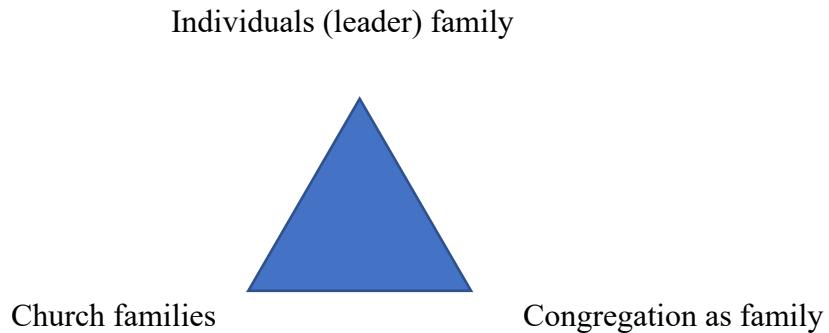


Figure 2.2 Church and Family as an Emotional Triangle.

The triangle system at large is affected by different aspects of the three sides of the triangle as "The church is a unique system that takes on many characteristics of a family."<sup>83</sup> Church congregations and the conflicts they suffer are more akin to family dysfunction than they are business dysfunction. Therefore, business model interventions and education/training have limitations of usage in the congregation. For this reason, systems theory is a better fit for congregations as illustrated above.

Self-differentiation is "the ability to put ourselves together" and the capacity of the family leader to "define his or her own goals and values while trying to maintain a nonanxious presence within the system."<sup>84</sup> Because conflict is an emotional process, becoming a well-differentiated person allows a more streamlined communication to occur in which there are fewer emotional signals to be sent or misinterpreted. It is not enough to simply know oneself and be personally

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<sup>83</sup> Norman Shawchuck, *How to Manage Conflict in the Church: Dysfunctional Congregations* (Fargo, ND: Spiritual Growth Resources, 1996), 14.

<sup>84</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 3.

clear about one's differentiation in leadership. A step further in the process is necessary as good leaders can effectively communicate their differentiated selves to the people they lead.

The family system is mirrored in the human body. If a pathogen were to enter into the system and begin making the system unhealthy, a healthy system would organically expel or heal the pathogen entering the system. Friedman writes: "Ultimately, healing and survival depend on existential categories: on vision, for example, on hope, on the imaginative capacity, on the ability to transcend the anxiety of those about us, and on a response to challenge that treats crisis as opportunity for growth (all attributes of, or best promoted by, leadership)."<sup>85</sup>

Most modern churches have no problem with the concept of Jesus healing the human body, as obviously displayed in Scripture. Healing is not often applied to the congregation as a whole, even though Paul refers to the congregation as the "body of Christ."<sup>86</sup> The concept of Jesus healing the congregational family system (the whole triangle as depicted above) could easily be applied.

#### Hints toward systemic healing

Indication of congregational/systemic healing occurred when Jesus sent the healed Gerasene demoniac back to Decapolis instead of following Jesus: "And he went away and began to proclaim in Decapolis what great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed."<sup>87</sup>

The community system received healing as the man's deliverance removed fear and true urban

<sup>85</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 5.

<sup>86</sup> I Cor 12:27.

<sup>87</sup> Mark 5:20 NASB.

legend from the community. Children could once again visit the tombs of their ancestors, parents could sleep at night without hearing the cries of a crazed man, and the oppressive nature of demons living nearby Decapolis had vanished in a moment of Jesus' healing word.

On multiple occasions, Friedman notes an individual's physical ailments as stemming from the toxicity of a system in which the individual is involved rather than the individual's own physical body as the source. Dysfunctional relationships inside the congregation are often a result of a projection from individuals unable to function well in other areas of their lives or families.<sup>88</sup> Without systemic healing, the system is affected by individual toxicity and there will likely be significant productivity problems in every area of the organization. The church will feel stalled and unable to grow both spiritually and numerically. If the underlying pathogens of the system can be healed or, in some cases, removed from the system, growth can occur as the system can run efficiently. The healthy system and well-differentiated families will naturally heal, just as the healthy human body does.

### The proverbial backdoor

The basis of systems thinking is not that the symptomatic, or problem, person is the one who needs intervention. Instead, systems theory, using the method of self-differentiation, believes "The possibilities of change are maximized... when we concentrate on modifying *our own* input, into the family."<sup>89</sup> Self-differentiated individuals (especially in the congregation's leadership) in the system's view are the body's healthy functions that allow it to either expel or make healthy the harmful pathogens that enter the system. The concern of systems theory is on the health of

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<sup>88</sup> Shawchuck, *How to Manage Conflict in the Church*, 13.

<sup>89</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 18, emphasis the author's.

the entire system rather than dealing with individual dysfunctional pieces of it. The focus is not on the individual with symptoms but on the emotional process and treating pathogens with structural modifications.<sup>90</sup> Systemic healing intervention is a proverbial backdoor to dealing with problem people in a congregation and concentrates on leadership's healthy input into the system rather than modifying symptomatic people. Leadership input is the only controllable asset to the congregation. Systemic thought curbs manipulative intentions to change people and keeps the vision of leadership on the systemic health of the church. To bring health to the organization, however, holistic and systemic treatment of the organization will likely contain elements of other conflict management styles. The contextual nature of church conflict necessitates a variety of intervention techniques, and systems thinking offers input from a multifaceted viewpoint.

### Organizational and generational healing

Shawchuck writes: "Stress and anxiety are a family affair... therefore, in order to understand the behaviors of individual members, it is important to see how persons function in their own family contexts."<sup>91</sup> The church congregation is unique as most members attend with their families, some of whom attend generationally. As the congregation leader, the pastor can see stress and anxiety transcending the individual and spanning from one generation to the next. Friedman writes, "Not only can the clergy's unique entrée into families enable us at times to foster physical healing processes but, also, a use of a systems approach to physical healing can foster a reciprocal

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<sup>90</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 18.

<sup>91</sup> Shawchuck, *How to Manage Conflict in the Church*, 17.

spiritual healing as well.<sup>92</sup> The unique position allows the pastor to look beyond individual symptoms, watch the family interaction in dysfunction, and prescribe the best means of healing. Some individual physical symptoms of illness may be healed through structural intervention and the removal of stress and anxiety in congregational families. All healing, on any level in the congregation, will contribute to healing the whole organization. Once the leadership identifies systemic problems, they can use their well-differentiated selves to outlast the conflict as they go about making structural changes preventing future conflict and diffusing current conflict.

Pathogen-carrying people in the congregation are called "dragons" by Marshall Shelley in his book, *Well-Intentioned Dragons: Ministering to Problem People in the Church*. Dealing with pathogen-carrying people is the ministry and not a byproduct of ministry; "The goal in handling dragons is not to destroy them, not merely to disassociate, but to make them disciples. Even when that seems an unlikely prospect."<sup>93</sup> Many church conflict management authors use systems theory thinking, even when they may not be familiar with the theoretical framework. Shelley writes, "Pastors... find that the best way to prevent dragon blight, or at least minimize its damage, is to concentrate on developing a healthy church."<sup>94</sup> Healthy structures will expel diseased cells and, in many cases, try to repair (disciple) them before they are expelled or naturally leave the system. Interestingly, all case studies in Marshall Shelley's book resulted in conflictive members leaving the system as they resisted becoming healthy disciples.

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<sup>92</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 122.

<sup>93</sup> Marshall Shelley, *Ministering to Problem People in Your Church: What to Do With Well-Intentioned Dragons* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2013), 34.

<sup>94</sup> Shelley, *Ministering to Problem People*, 83.

### Congregational self-differentiation and antagonism

A healthy church can take on congregational self-differentiation as "Healthy churches are confident in their own identity. They know their direction and limits. And they're less likely to be tossed about by disillusioned dragons."<sup>95</sup> Dragons in the church can be antagonists rather than simply conflictive members. Antagonists can enter into a more demonic realm of conflict as a form of idolatrous demands and church leaders need to be delivered from them. Brown, in his paper on the *Biblical Theology of Conflict Resolution*, writes: "you can dwell on your disappointments and allow it to control your life. At the very least, this will result in self-pity and bitterness... Even if the initial desire was not inherently wrong, it has grown so strong that it begins to control our thoughts and behavior. In biblical terms it has become an 'idol.'"<sup>96</sup>

Antagonists in the church will use dogmatism and absolutes, leaving no room for spiritual conversations about the conflict or what may be the deeper-rooted issues beyond the presentation of the symptoms of conflict. William Willimon encourages pastors to "Make an assessment of the individuals involved in the potential conflict. How mature are they?" Are they "trying to create congregational crisis where none exists?"<sup>97</sup> Such practical questions help church leaders have discernment about the need for their intervention into conflict and create room for healthy conflict.

Healthy conflict precludes antagonists. Self-differentiation necessarily means staying in contact with members while at the same time becoming emotionally stable. Generally, leadership should resist emotional cutoff on either side of the conflict as Jesus "had tension with the

<sup>95</sup> Shelley, *Ministering to Problem People*, 92.

<sup>96</sup> John Brown, "Biblical Theology of Conflict," May 16, 2021, [https://www.academia.edu/5505949/BIBLICAL\\_THEOLOGY\\_OF\\_CONFLICT](https://www.academia.edu/5505949/BIBLICAL_THEOLOGY_OF_CONFLICT), 5–6.

<sup>97</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 22.

Pharisees, but that does not preclude him from associating with them.”<sup>98</sup> Jesus, somehow being completely emotionally differentiated, was able to sit at the table and dine with Pharisees regularly despite their constant antagonism. An even more intense conflict lies at the table of the Last Supper. Jesus has full knowledge of Judas' betrayal, and yet Jesus washes the dust of betrayal off of Judas' feet at dinner that evening. Judas' dusty feet came from the high priests and temple guard court, from whom Judas would accept blood money for betraying Jesus. Jesus dipped in the dish together with Judas the elements of the covenant Christ was making in his blood that evening. However, Judas returns the blood money after his betrayal as a sign that the price of blood was paid by Jesus alone and no one else. The table of communion was a table of conflict. The footbath of servanthood is the footbath of betrayal. As Christ issues the warrant for his disciples to perform the same service to one another, so Jesus issues the warrant for his followers to yield to the same table of conflict and servicing footbath of betrayal. Congregations cannot live with emotional cutoff among conflictive parties in the church without blatant immorality.<sup>99</sup>

Defining the structure of the church as congregational differentiation William Willimon advises pastors to define the “nature and purpose of the church” through the pulpit as a means of both managing and preventing conflict in the congregation.<sup>100</sup> The purpose of preaching about what the church is and is not is to further define, for both new and old

<sup>98</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 186.

<sup>99</sup> I Cor 5:11.

<sup>100</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 27.

members, the church's *modus operandi*. Defining the church will create consensus over the missiology of the church. Leadership expert George Barna writes of church conflict, "The immediate crisis is likely not the fundamental problem, but is symptomatic of a deeper, systemic conflict. (Healing requires seeing the underlying structures of the conflict and learning new ways to trust God through change.)"<sup>101</sup> Church leadership should listen to conflictive agents and treat conflict as constructive rather than destructive. Hunsinger and Latini write,

If a church lacks structures to undertake constructive conflict, it is little wonder that its members have minimal confidence that initiating conflict might lead to a satisfying outcome. Many dread conflict because they have never been part of a family or community that has taught them how to enter it. The only kind of conflict that they knew about was suppressed, blocked, or destructive conflict. Putting a system in place that is sanctioned by the whole body would empower members to take responsibility for their conflicts.

Guichun Jun asserts that the reason conflict in congregations appears to be magnified, even more than individual conflicts, is because "psychology suggests that groups are more competitive and aggressive than individuals in conflict."<sup>102</sup> The significant bent of congregations (groups) toward intense conflict implies the need for structural policy, polity, and procedure. Following policy, polity, and procedure implementations throughout the organization and church life allows the structure to stand as a framework of egalitarian rights among conflicting parties (groups and subgroups) to mediate conflict and keep aggression and anxiety at manageable levels.

Church conflict expert Ken Sande has focused his ministry in recent years on the prevention of church conflict. A recent article by Sande presents his viewpoint of conflict prevention via structure to allow healthy forms of conflict and healthy systems, so efforts and emotional draw are capitalized for the ministry rather than on conflicts. Sande writes, "There is

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<sup>101</sup> George Barna, *Leaders on Leadership (The Leading Edge Series): Wisdom, Advice and Encouragement on the Art of Leading God's People* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1998), 249.

<sup>102</sup> Jun, "Transforming Conflict," 6.

one thing that is even better than successfully resolving a conflict: *preventing* a conflict in the first place."<sup>103</sup> Church conflict is manageable if the congregation has allowed leadership to implement a structure to allow healthy conflict and to foster a culture where conflict is controlled with policy, polity, and procedures.

### Competing tensions

Ongoing concerns, since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the world and culture bleed their way into the church creating additional anxious pressure. Robert Creech, who applies systems theory to church, writes: "international terrorism, domestic violence, crime, drugs, and public education... fewer and fewer people in the middle... we entered the century as recipients of the proverbial curse."<sup>104</sup> More recent issues such as Critical Race Theory, the Lives Matter movements, additional upheaval of racial violence and rioting, and debate over the Equality Act have only added to congregational and societal anxiety. According to Bowen and subsequent supporters of his theory, society has experienced significant emotional regression, and the church and its leaders are not unaffected.<sup>105</sup> Hurt has occurred in "strangely diverse ways" among most community members, and leadership needs to acknowledge the communal anxiety present at any given time.<sup>106</sup> Today, wise leaders will use conflict constructively to bring the community closer

<sup>103</sup> Sande, "How to Prevent Conflict Before It Starts," 62.

<sup>104</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 50.

<sup>105</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 51–52.

<sup>106</sup> Hunsinger and Latini, *Transforming Church Conflict*, 194.

together with healthy conflict rather than allowing conflictive situations inside the church to polarize the community further.

### *Healthy Conflict and the Power of the Spirit*

The dynamics of conflict are often complex and presenting issues are usually not the real source of the symptom.<sup>107</sup> Conflict is often multilayered and takes a skilled and discerning approach.

The power of the Holy Spirit's presence in the leader's life is an absolute necessity when managing church conflict. It appears conflictive agents travel in packs, or at least inside families and extend to pseudo-family relationships inside the congregation. When leadership suffers an attack from a dragon or pack of conflictive agents, they often feel threatened, which triggers natural survival responses.<sup>108</sup> Michael Hare writes, "Our *natural* reflexes go on automatic at times when it would be better if we had practiced a *supernatural* response enabled by the Holy Spirit."<sup>109</sup> The Holy Spirit is the defining factor in healthy conflict. The Spirit will often prompt leaders when to hold back, when to move, when to intervene, and when to speak or stay silent. At some point in the conflict management in a congregation, the pastor is likely to become the primary conflictive agent as he/she becomes self-differentiated enough to begin dealing with pathogens present in the congregation. Some pathogens may be hiding unidentified for many years until they feel comfortable showing themselves after a new pastor arrives. Congregations can likely go undiagnosed by multiple pastoral "physicians" if their tenure is no longer than that

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<sup>107</sup> Michael Hare, *When Church Conflict Happens: A Proven Process for Resolving Unhealthy Disagreements and Embracing Healthy Ones* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2019), 42.

<sup>108</sup> Hare, *When Church Conflict Happens*, 44.

<sup>109</sup> Hare, *When Church Conflict Happens*, 44.

of an average western church. Such a case can result in generational dysfunction inside the congregation. Huntsinger and Latini advocate for "Praying the Psalms, singing praises, meditating on souls, taking Sabbath rest, and contemplating the fulfillment of human need as a partial description of what it means to live in the kingdom of God: all these practices, by the power of the Spirit create a kind of peace from the unseen work of the Spirit which nourishes whole communities in trust when they find themselves during painful conflict."<sup>110</sup>

Conflict in the power of the Spirit takes on a vast array of spiritual disciplines and formation. Spiritual disciplines in conflictive situations take on spiritually formative means as people are formed in the image of Christ through conflict. Creech indicates Christo-formation when a leader applies spiritual disciplines before conflictive situations, "'What did Jesus do *before* intense situations arose?' The gospels show him practicing such classical disciplines as solitude, silence, prayer, retreat, corporate worship, and Scripture reading and meditation."<sup>111</sup> There is an inevitable overlap of self-differentiation and spiritual formation as spiritual disciplines allow leaders to manage anxiety levels in the community.

Furthermore, the fruit of the Spirit's work in the believer manifests as self-control and patience or long-suffering. Without managing one's own life with the disciplines, "With enough anxiety, and lacking the capacity to manage our reactivity, we will produce the common symptoms of the emotional process: conflict, distance, over-functioning/under-functioning, and projection. These reactions will often only intensify the anxiety and reactivity as the emotional

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<sup>110</sup> Hunsinger and Latini, *Transforming Church Conflict*, 201.

<sup>111</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 91.

system spirals downward."<sup>112</sup> The necessity of managing oneself through the power of the Spirit is absolute for the maturity of all church leadership.

Self-control is not about controlling reactions in any given situation; instead, it is more about knowing where one is on the spectrum of the human experience of emotion amid conflictive situations. To discredit one's own emotions is to discredit the human experience. Jesus experienced a wide range of emotions and perfected his reactions as he did not enter into sin. Disciplines of spiritual formation are then necessary and may need greater emphasis during times of congregational conflict.

#### Congregational triangles and forgiveness

As applied to congregations, systems theory sees the local church as a system of interlocking triangular relationships "that affect and are affected by each other."<sup>113</sup> An illustration is helpful:

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<sup>112</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 93.

<sup>113</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 107.

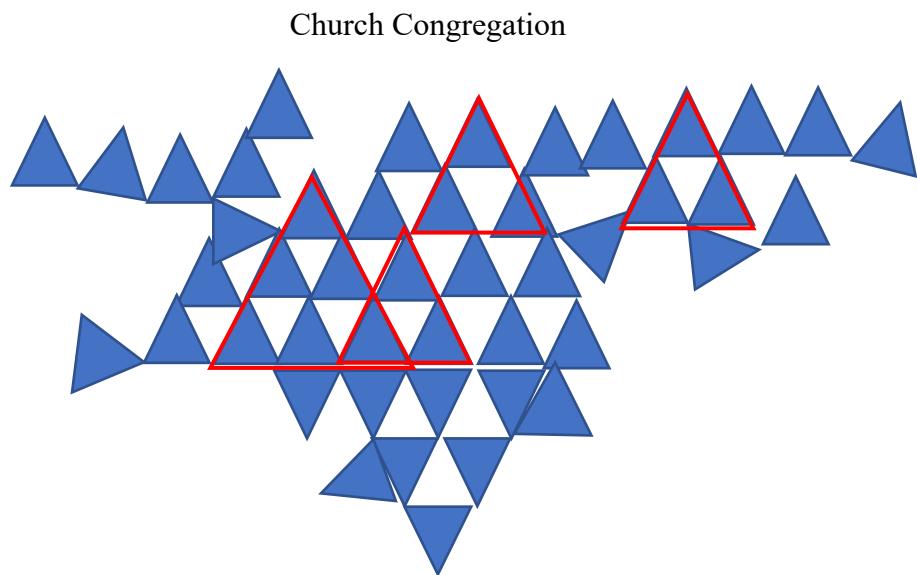


Figure 2.3 The Congregation as Triangles

Some congregational triangles are blood family relationships and others are pseudo-family or "adopted" family relationships. Some relational ground exists almost autonomously apart from the larger congregation. In larger church contexts, smaller groups naturally form as group dynamics naturally take over. The presence of congregational triangles existence is not a liability; instead, it can help pastors navigate the myriad of relationships in existence more effectively. To maintain congregational life, congregations must remember humility and forbearance, practicing confession and forgiveness. Creech writes, "Jesus and the apostles exhort Christians to forgive one another and to seek forgiveness from one another, maintaining peace in relationships."<sup>114</sup> Without repentance and forgiveness actively working within congregational triangles, they will break down and result in splits or factions. For Jesus to require forgiveness in the church is to presuppose offense will occur. The inevitability of offense is a common

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<sup>114</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 104.

denominator of living in community. Maintaining relationship in community and with God requires both confession, repentance, and forgiveness; as Jesus' prayer indicates in Luke 11:4, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us."

In the current turmoil and whitewater of societal emotional regression at large, congregations must be keenly aware of such regression leaking into the church. Polarized factions and emotional cutoff are present where people cannot have mature conversations with those who oppose their views without removing themselves from the community.<sup>115</sup> When congregational conflicts arise, they rarely involve every triangle in the group; instead, particular triangles light up with conflict. Those attached to the triangles in conflict find themselves involved despite their reluctance to enter the conflict. Whether the type of conflict is church related or personal, triangular attachment naturally draws people into conflict, passive bystander or not; conflict is a relational dynamic. Well-differentiated members can see the conflict and remain emotionally and anxiously removed while at the same time attached to the body. Some less differentiated members will attempt to create new triangles to help stabilize relationships lacking direct communication. Therefore, new triangles will form, and new conflicts will arise if other members cannot control their emotional input.

Jesus stands as the perfect example of a self-differentiated life when triangles light up around him. Jesus is "a person who functions ultimately in relationship to the will of God, as he understands it, and not in response to the togetherness forces of family, friends, or foes that pressure him to do otherwise."<sup>116</sup> A believer's relationship with God must preside over all other

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<sup>115</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 111.

<sup>116</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 148.

relational allegiances in the church community; losing sight of this relational primacy will inevitably result in a congregational process that creates intractable conflicts.

### Metaphors when health feels harmful

A heart attack patient once asked the attending physician: "How should I change my diet?" The physician replied, "If it tastes good, spit it out." While the doctor's answer was hyperbole, any approach to making an organization healthy, especially one historically unhealthy and suffered an organizational myocardial infarction, will likely be a painful transition. Sometimes a good diet is more an issue of removing unhealthy foods than it is adding healthy ones.

Henry Cloud, in his book *Necessary Endings*, uses the metaphor of pruning. Systems theory, based on the biological system of the human body, may call pruning amputation. Amputation puts the context in a more elevated state inside a congregation, as family relationships are tinderboxes for higher emotional reactions. If the church congregation is functioning as a family, then removing a family member is more akin to amputation than just removing growth from an inanimate tree. Nonetheless, pruning is "a function of cutting away to reduce the extent or reach of something by taking away unwanted or superfluous parts."<sup>117</sup> Cloud's metaphor helps the approach to systems theory. Unwanted growth, when removed, can improve the health, productivity, and fruiting of the entire tree. In many cases, fruit trees require pruning regularly.

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<sup>117</sup> Henry Cloud, *Necessary Endings: The Employees, Businesses, and Relationships That All of Us Have to Give Up in Order to Move Forward* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2011), 17.

The pruning method is intentional and seen as a means of preserving the entire system rather than simply improving aesthetics. As already mentioned, many case studies are riddled with amputations of conflictive members from a body. Often, amputation happens more naturally as people leave the conflict or congregation rather than leadership cutting them off. There are certainly times when it is necessary to fire or remove a person from leadership or a congregation. Even Paul the apostle made congregational provision for a brother who is unrepentant in blatant sin.<sup>118</sup>

In systems theory, pruning people in the organization should be considered structural/systemic unless egregious actions require firing or removal. Amputation of members should be considered a last resort intervention in most cases. Amputations are done as a means of preserving the body as a whole; as without such an intervention, the system would likely fail or fail to thrive for many years. Structural changes to policy, procedure, and polity can work as a means of defining and effectively communicating expectations of a healthy system. With effective enforcement, violation of policy, procedure, and polity by members of the church or leadership creates a healthy system that naturally pushes out or corrects (discipleship) the agent in violation. A healthy structure is a key to the organization's health and must be enforced, which requires active participation and knowledge from leadership. Without the pastor's intervention, the system should naturally prune itself or heal itself in systems theory language. Cloud writes, "There is a big difference between *hurt* and *harm*...we all hurt sometimes in facing hard truths, but it makes us grow."<sup>119</sup> Cloud's statement leads to crucial conversations.

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<sup>118</sup> I Cor 5:13.

<sup>119</sup> Cloud, *Necessary Endings*, 21.

## Crucial conversations

The ability to have crucial conversations overlaps with self-differentiation to a large degree. The book, *Crucial Conversations*, could be renamed *Emotional Maturity* as it takes the angle of having emotionally mature conversations that are crucial to an organization and individual's health. Systems theory expresses emotional maturity as self-differentiation, while the authors of *Crucial Conversations* speak in terms of "mastering my story" and "starting with the heart."<sup>120</sup> Both ways of looking at emotional maturity emphasize what it takes to "rethink yourself from an emotional and dangerous state into one that puts you back in control."<sup>121</sup> Alternatively, as stated elsewhere, remaining a non-emotional presence amid crucial conversations and conflict is paramount for effective management. People often get defensive in conversations that bring up difficult feedback. However, dialogue is always better than monologue. Conversations are crucial when "*stakes are high... opinions vary... emotions run strong.*"<sup>122</sup> In a family environment, such as a religious congregation, crucial matters seem to run amok and often avoid disrupting the intimate context. Crucial conversations seem to be both necessary and regular in congregations. Another layer of conflict is the congregation's religious nature, which inherently adds both a theological tension and an internally religious compulsion among the members.

In charismatic and Pentecostal congregations, emotions often run high as they lend themselves to ecstatic experiences seen as extrinsically initiated by the Holy Spirit. The more emotional the congregational culture, the greater the necessity for effective communication and willingness to have crucial conversations. Sometimes zealous passion and the desire for highly

<sup>120</sup> Kerry Patterson et al., *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High, Second Edition* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill Professional, 2011), 33,103.

<sup>121</sup> Patterson et al., *Crucial Conversations*, 107, emphasis the authors'.

<sup>122</sup> Patterson et al., *Crucial Conversations*, 1.

emotional experiences can be the masks of emotional immaturity. Congregational systems theorists find, "When it comes to risky, controversial, and emotional conversations, skilled people find a way to get all relevant information (from themselves and others) out in the open."<sup>123</sup> Other masks that leaders need to unveil are sometimes shrouded in highly emotional dialogue and conveyed in absolutes, such as "God told me." Emotionally charged language is usually a red flag for leaders to remain calm and objective.

#### *On the Issue of Church Conflict Created by Immorality*

The church faces increasing numbers of well-known leaders who fall from their pulpits in ethical tragedies, usually revolving around either one of the three P's of church conflict: power, position, or pay (or one of the three P's that coincide with sexual misconduct). The Spirit's work is to expose and convict sin within the community of Christ. Instead of looking at conflict issues created by immorality as totally detrimental to the church, conflicts are opportunities for discipleship and systemic change. Conflicts should not be considered byproducts of ministry; instead, they afford discipleship moments as the Holy Spirit purifies his people. Issues of moral falls, especially among leadership, have the potential to be destructive to churches. Appropriate action is necessary and will take difficult conversations to bring about healing to the community. Taking a systems approach to issues of immoral behavior in leadership acknowledges that "almost every situation that gives rise to a conversation is the result of a joint contribution system. Focusing on only one or the other of the contributors obscures rather than illuminates the

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<sup>123</sup> Patterson et al., *Crucial Conversations*, 23.

system.<sup>124</sup> Attributing moral problems to only one member of the system discounts the systemic issues that may have created an opportunity for unhealthy conduct. To acknowledge systemic dysfunction is to see the need for change and transformation inside the system to expel or heal the unhealthy contributors naturally.

John Paul Lederach, a Mennonite Christian and professor, known for his work in conflict as a pioneer in conflict transformation, noted his Latin colleagues felt North American forms of conflict resolution and management co-opted the process of good that comes from conflict.<sup>125</sup> Lederach remembers his Latin colleagues' refusal to accept typical forms of western conflict resolutions: “‘Conflicts happen for a reason,’ they would say. ‘Is this *resolution* idea just another way to cover up the changes that are really needed?’”<sup>126</sup> In a transformational view, conflict is a necessary component of building healthy relationships in a community. The disruption of conflict in human relationships can reorder and correctly prioritize human relationships. Overlapping paradigms of family systems theory and the field of conflict transformation are well noted. Lederach acknowledges conflict as a sense of "negotiating the nature and quality of our relationship, or expectations of each other, our interpretations of our identity as individuals and as a family, or sense of self-worth and care for each other, and the nature of power and decision-making in our relationship."<sup>127</sup> All conflict happens in a relationship; even when the conflict is internal in an individual or it is in a relationship with self or even with spiritual forces.

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<sup>124</sup> Stone et al., *Difficult Conversations*, 64.

<sup>125</sup> Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 3.

<sup>126</sup> Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 3.

<sup>127</sup> Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 11.

### Training in conflict and systems theory

Training in conflict resolution for church leaders and local congregations is a form of effective communication. Leaders must be able to develop their constituents. Jesus developed an intense three-year discipleship journey with the disciples. Koroma helps church leaders acknowledge that conflict is not abnormal in church and conflict largely stems from misunderstanding.<sup>128</sup> The presence of common misunderstandings legitimates the need for training in both effective communication and conflict training as both center on effective communication as a form of resolution and management. Koroma writes, "Properly trained leaders are not usually afraid of conflict because their training on conflict management and resolution enable them to know how to make conflict productive... a well-trained person in the area of conflict listen and communicates well to break through misunderstanding to the real source of conflict."<sup>129</sup>

Direct and effective communication is helpful when trying to make conflict productive. Well-trained staff and pastors can harness the productive power of conflict and use it to make reasonable changes for the church's future. Trained leaders also have the tools that circumvent fear in conflicts and reduce the amount of anxiety present in the organization.

Beyond biblical implications, the Bowen theory acknowledges the church family's operation as one emotional system.<sup>130</sup> Many view the emotions of church members in conflict as beyond the conscious control of the member. The relationship between problem-causing church members must be addressed or can result in a "circular causation" of events.<sup>131</sup> If conflicts are not addressed, resolution will wane and anxiety levels grow possibly resulting in the disaffiliation of

<sup>128</sup> Koroma, "Examination of Resources for Conflict," 104.

<sup>129</sup> Koroma, "Examination of Resources for Conflict," 104.

<sup>130</sup> Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause," 11.

<sup>131</sup> Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause," 11-12.

members. However, the Bowen family system theory addresses organizational anxiety: "The symptom is not caused by the symptom bearer alone but by the whole system: the family."<sup>132</sup> The problem of conflict never lies with just the person who appears to be causing the problem, but it is the whole family system of relationships. In order to curb the anxiety levels of the church family, the entire system must be addressed as a whole and not as individual members. In any case, as Hare advises, the root cause must be addressed whether it lies with an individual or in the whole system.<sup>133</sup> However, even in an isolated individual's problem, a systems approach involves the entire group addressing how they may have contributed to an individual's problem if only by apathy in confrontation.

The church often negotiates high levels of emotion and conflict with splits rather than negotiation.<sup>134</sup> Splits ending communication in the Bowen model are referred to as emotional cutoff. Emotional cutoff happens when people decide not to be in a relationship with others because too much anxiety exists.<sup>135</sup> Anxiety may be caused by real or imagined threats. Training in the Bowen theory helps to reduce levels of anxiety the local congregation deals with weekly. The ability to manage conflict in the church is directly proportional to the ability of the leadership to recognize and mediate levels of chronic anxiety. Training can help the leadership and members pay attention to chronic anxiety and circumvent high levels.

Advocates of the Bowen theory for church conflict management suggest the implementation of strategies that reduce anxiety. According to Angella Son's work, four strategies can be helpful for churches. First, individual members acknowledge and identify the

<sup>132</sup> Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause," 12.

<sup>133</sup> Hare, *When Church Conflict Happens*, 107.

<sup>134</sup> Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause," 13.

<sup>135</sup> Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause," 13.

anxiety within themselves. Second, members understand the Bowen family system theory and help train lay leaders to apply the theory's suggestions to their lives and church matters. Thirdly, members see past the symptoms of anxiety.<sup>136</sup> The undesirable results of high levels of chronic anxiety in the church are not the main problem. Undesirable results, or anxiety symptoms, signify a more profound need for church members to reach out and foster a helping relationship. Fourthly, members identify theological doctrines and practices that cause high levels of anxiety in the lives of ministers and members.<sup>137</sup>

#### Open communication and the Bowen theory

Training in the Bowen theory can help conflict resolution and management and foster a culture of open communication. Effective communication includes open and honest communication from all parties involved in conflict. In addition, consultation of experts and other wise leaders are helpful.<sup>138</sup> The need for communication to be facilitated by a third party may be necessary when anxiety levels are too high. Leaders may recommend seeking a third party to keep the "common good of the church and the society at large because the church is a subset and product of its society."<sup>139</sup> Experts and third parties can often see conflict-causing problems that members engrossed in the situation cannot. Third-party consultants often see where confusion,

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<sup>136</sup> Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause," 16.

<sup>137</sup> Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause," 17.

<sup>138</sup> Koroma, "Examination of Resources for Conflict," 106.

<sup>139</sup> Oluwaseun O. Afolabi, "Alternative Dispute Resolution: A Tool for Managing Leadership Conflict in a Church," *Journal of Leadership Studies* 12, no. 4 (2019): 45.

miscommunication, and frustration begin. Effective communication is the goal despite the challenges that come along with conflict management.

According to Son, churches often deal with conflict by reducing communication between members.<sup>140</sup> Reduced communication results in members being afraid of unknowns about other people involved in the conflict. Such results only add to the risk of high anxiety in the church. Relational unknowns and failure to communicate effectively or at all only increase the risk of perceived anxiety. Actions taken by leadership to reduce the amount of communication are often devoid of considerations of the Bowen family systems theory. The Bowen theory, especially in analyzing burnout among ministers, deals directly with effective communication in the church.<sup>141</sup> Effective communication that lowers anxiety levels includes communication and education of the Bowen family system theory and open communication.

In general, the need for self-differentiated leadership is fundamental to the organization in terms of emotional maturity. Friedman observed after years of working with people and organizations in therapy that "Children rarely succeed in rising above the maturity level of their parents, or administrative relationships."<sup>142</sup> Friedman observed how working with a few top-level organizational leaders in self-differentiation could change the entire organization as the rest of the people began to match the therapeutic change happening in their leaders.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause," 14.

<sup>141</sup> Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause," 17.

<sup>142</sup> Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 8.

<sup>143</sup> Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 19.

### *Conclusion*

Leaders are unable to manipulate and control what other people do, despite the best intention.

Instead, focusing time and energy on one's input into the family system creates an opportunity for a healthier church. Erica Fox, a Harvard-trained conciliation and negation expert, writes,

Reality has leapt ahead of people's capacity to cope, no less thrive. Leaders need tools for examining how they operate, and methodologies for evolving to new mindsets and behaviors. The ability to 'lead yourself' is emerging as today's new leadership requirement." There are, of course, a myriad of factors we are unable to change in life, especially when they outside of ourselves. Rather than work toward changing other people in a futile and exhausting effort, it is best to deal with our development as a means of living in an ever more conflictive world. The rampant epidemic of drug addiction in the United States could be an emotional regression, as a way to escape society's dangerous anxious system.

In scriptural terms, Jesus told the congregation at the sermon on the mount, "You hypocrite, first take the plan out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."<sup>144</sup> Jesus does not advocate avoiding conflict with a brother. Instead, Jesus appeals to dealing with oneself first to help the other with a clear vision. Rather than asking why people are the way they are, it may be better to ask why having an emotional reaction to other people and the things they do is a natural response. Such questions create an opportunity for self-development or self-differentiation. To put it in biblical terms, all need a healthy dose of repentance, confession, and humility daily. Together they make a therapeutic "triple-antibiotic" for the soul. The answer may not always be that others need to change; perhaps it is to change one's input into the system. Even still, addressing conflicts in the church can be a lonely task for some leaders; as Willimon writes: "the pastor must be prepared to go it alone... More than likely,

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<sup>144</sup> Matt 7:5, New International Version.

the conflict will be resolved only after long and sometimes painful negotiation, discussion, and compromise."<sup>145</sup>

### *Scripture: Conflict in The Spirit*

Those involved in confusing and conflictive situations often ask journalistic questions to get to the root of apparent conflict: What is that? Who did this? How did it happen? When did this happen? Where is the one who did it? And why did you do that? When chaotic and conflictive situations arise, investigative questioning is a normal part of making meaning. Questions help understand the context, purpose, and meaning of confusing and conflictive events and help move forward with clear communication.

The basis of investigative questioning is in the five W's of journalism: who, what, where, when, why, and one can add how. Interestingly, the use of these investigative terms occurs in the first sixteen verses of Acts chapter two. Effective questioning in Acts 2 uses direct question form, passing statements, and information about the event. People who witnessed the birth of the church were trying to make meaning of the conflictive event.

### A Pentecostal theology of conflict

To grasp a Pentecostal theology of conflict for the church is to recognize that the Spirit comes at Pentecost with confusion, bewilderment, questions, and the conflictive nature of what the Spirit

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<sup>145</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 51–52.

had undertaken.<sup>146</sup> The church born at Pentecost was born into conflict. The eschatological nature of the Pentecostal church provides a vision of the end of time, a vision wrought with conflict. Wolfgang Vondey writes, “Eschatology is a doctrine of conflict.”<sup>147</sup> Conflict is a marked attribute when the Spirit breaks into time and space, if for no other reason than displacement upon arrival. The world is confronted by the church’s mission at the inbreaking of the Spirit.<sup>148</sup> The entirety of the scriptural narrative culminates in conflict at the battle of Armageddon, so trying to avoid conflict is no avoidance at all when the cosmos is racing toward ultimate conflict.

Robbie Waddell, in a recent publication, addresses myths of both the original Pentecost of Acts chapter two and at the same time addresses “ongoing division within the movement,” which “mirror identical division in society.” He writes,

It is worth noting that the paradigmatic myth for Pentecostals and Charismatics—the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2—is as complex as Azusa Street and the Memphis Miracle. The multicultural, ecumenical, and socioeconomic impulses resonating from Acts 2 are quickly challenged. Ananias and Sapphira try to avoid the financial implications of the newly inspired economy. The Greek widows are racially profiled, and the Jewish leadership of the movement struggles with the implications of the inclusion of the Gentiles. Do they have to be circumcised? Are the laws of dietary purity required or optional? Although the Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, are women permitted to hold leadership positions? What does the outpouring on slaves mean for the future of slavery? The extent to which the early church experienced any lasting success regarding social divisions is questionable. Apparently, an outpouring of the Spirit does not make a group immune to theological errors or unethical practices, nor does it produce a spiritual singularity. The most conspicuous characteristic of the New Testament is its diversity; identification of its unity, on the other hand, requires work. Paul’s constant calls for reconciliation and social reconstruction suggest that any experience of unity or social reconstruction was elusive.<sup>149</sup>

<sup>146</sup> Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology: Living the Full Gospel* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 47.

<sup>147</sup> Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology*, 221.

<sup>148</sup> Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology*, 149.

<sup>149</sup> Robby Waddell and Peter Althouse, “The Promises and Perils of the Azusa Street Myth,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 38, no. 4 (October 2016): 369.

Strong illusions of church unity are common in congregations, but examining the Pentecost event shows a more diverse and problematic postpartum congregation. The birth of the church and its postpartum dysfunction at Pentecost (continuing through the book of Acts and into the epistles) reflects the dysfunction present in the contemporary church as described by Waddell. Believing myths or creating unreasonable expectations of a church without conflicts or problems will likely raise anxiety levels even higher for congregations.

### United or untied?

Conflict can be viewed contemporarily as organized and voted-upon splits among united churches, becoming untied over biblical interpretation and doctrinal changes.<sup>150</sup> Although this dissertation is not a case study of the United Methodist Church conflict and split, it is interesting to note that UMC member Don Hand believed the conflict might have centered on the language used to communicate during the UMC's debate, doctrinal statement changes, and voting on statements. Hand inclines the language was the issue of conflict that ultimately untied the denomination.<sup>151</sup> In contrast to the Pentecost event, the diverse language of the Spirit unites, while churches post-Pentecost at large still struggle with language that divides.

The question is posed: Can the effective communication and interpretive measures used at Pentecost to rapidly dissipate misunderstandings, confusion, and conflict be used in the church

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<sup>150</sup> William B. Lawrence, “A Question of Doctrine: Whither The United Methodist Church?,” *Methodist Review (19465254)* 12 (January 2020): 1.

<sup>151</sup> Don Hand, “Sharing in Faith: Did the Conflict Begin with ‘the Language’?” The United Methodist Church, July 22, 2014, <http://ee.umc.org/what-we-believe/sharing-in-faith-did-the-conflict-begin-with-the-language>.

today? In Acts 2:1-16, Peter raises his voice (not uncommon in any conflict situation) to bring interpretative clarity to the situation caused by a conflict in the Spirit:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house **where** they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.

Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. And **when** this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. They were amazed and astonished, saying, “**Why**, are not all these **who** are speaking Galileans? And **how** is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.” And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, “**What** does this mean?” But others were mocking and saying, “They are full of sweet wine.” But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: “Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day; but this is **what** (that) was spoken of through the prophet Joel:<sup>152</sup>

Peter’s response to the sights and sounds of the Spirit’s work at Pentecost is to communicate information about the Spirit’s move, as not to leave the crowd “bewildered” and in “great perplexity.”<sup>153</sup> Peter begins to interpret the events of Pentecost in light of Joel’s prophecy using the terminology “this is that.”<sup>154</sup> A theology of conflict at Pentecost begins by investigating how Peter diffused the conflict of confused people by explaining the “this is that” of the Spirit. One can briefly answer or examine the investigative questions of the event directly from Scripture:

**Who and Why:** “**Why**, are not all these **who** are speaking Galileans?”<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> New American Standard Bible. Investigative terms have been emboldened for emphasis.

<sup>153</sup> Acts 2:6,12.

<sup>154</sup> Acts 2:16.

<sup>155</sup> Acts 2:7.

**When:** “**When** the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.”<sup>156</sup>

**Where:** “...and it filled the whole house **where** they were sitting.”<sup>157</sup>

**How:** “And **how** is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?”<sup>158</sup>

**What:** “**What** does this mean?”<sup>159</sup>

The mechanics and scientific understanding of why an event has taken place are overshadowed by the more valuable meaning of what has occurred. In any given conflict, the meaning of the conflict is the most important question answered. At Pentecost, Peter brings understanding and meaning as he diffuses the conflictive situation by differentiating what Pentecost is and is not.

#### Continuation of conflict

The issues of confusion and conflict at Pentecost appear to be a continuation of Jesus’ ministry. Walter Brueggemann notes the regularity of marvel, astonishment, and investigative questioning by onlookers in Luke 5:26, 9:43, 22:26 and Mark 1:27, 4:41, 6:2.<sup>160</sup> The meaning derived from the events of Jesus’ ministry was considered a disruption to the status quo. Brueggemann writes, “What people noticed is that life had been strangely and inexplicably changed. The change did not come by proper means, for Jesus’ *means* were as much in violation of proper order as *the*

<sup>156</sup> Acts 2:1.

<sup>157</sup> Acts 2:2.

<sup>158</sup> Acts 2:8.

<sup>159</sup> Acts 2:12.

<sup>160</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 106.

*results violated rationality... The strange newness happened in ways that did not wait for royal sanction, and they did not happen in any of the ways that administered things happen.”*<sup>161</sup> Conflict at Pentecost and beyond is simply a continuation of Jesus’ ministry, which does not seem to wait for change to come about passively; instead, change rushes in “suddenly” and “violent,” causing amazement and perplexity as at Pentecost.

### Hecklers in rhetoric

The members of the crowd who began heckling the 120 in the upper room were not average disgruntled worshippers. The crowd gathered was described by Luke as “Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven.”<sup>162</sup> Though “every nation under heaven” may be hyperbole to accentuate the diversity of the Spirit’s impact and gathering of the nations, the crowd was undoubtedly devout worshippers of the Diaspora. Craig Keener comments, “Here and elsewhere in Acts, God’s activity divides the crowd.”<sup>163</sup> It may be some level of paradox to find the 120 united by prayer in the upper room, and moments later, the work of the Spirit causes division, albeit outside the united upper room. It is the task of Peter to repair the disruption of the Spirit by explaining the work of the Spirit to the mocking crowd. Churches are not immune to this type of conflict. Many pastors find the Spirit causing disruptions as a normal part of life in the church, especially before the renewing power of the Spirit comes. One such pastor, Garry Brackett, noted after decades of ministry that a church conflict was expected before the move of

<sup>161</sup> Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 105.

<sup>162</sup> Acts 2:5.

<sup>163</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary : Volume 1: Introduction and 1:1-247* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 851.

God. Brackett began a practice of addressing his congregation to stand up and look around at each other and then saying, “Some of you will not be here if God is going to move,” speaking of the division of the crowd caused by the renewal of the Spirit in the church.<sup>164</sup> The division of crowds by the Spirit is not isolated in the book of Acts as there are other accounts “(Acts 14:1-2; 17:12-13; 19:9; 28:24; cf. 17:32).”<sup>165</sup>

#### Peter defuses church conflict

Peter rebuts accusations, assumptions, and the mocking statement (frequently another part of conflict) made by the crowd, “They are full of sweet wine.”<sup>166</sup> Peter’s interpretive measure is implemented by saying, “This is not that!”<sup>167</sup> The behavior exhibited in the upper room was not of physical intoxication but of a spiritual overflowing that signaled a new age.<sup>168</sup> The sights and sounds of the upper room were signs of a confrontation between the old life and the new creative power of the Spirit in the church. The soteriological implications of the Pentecost event are overwhelmingly confrontational as war is waged in the Spirit and demonic forces are impaired.<sup>169</sup> There is also the possibility of conflictive “personal incarnations” of demonic forces that infiltrate the church’s organizational structure and demobilize the church and its

<sup>164</sup> Garry Brackett, phone interview by Scott Bowman, April 22, 2020.

<sup>165</sup> Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Volume 1*, 851.

<sup>166</sup> Acts 2:13.

<sup>167</sup> Vonney, *Pentecostal Theology*, 16.

<sup>168</sup> Vonney, *Pentecostal Theology*, 16.

<sup>169</sup> Vonney, *Pentecostal Theology*, 202.

effectiveness.<sup>170</sup> At Pentecost, as shown by numerical contrast, the demonic powers disarmed in the upper room allowed Jesus to Spirit baptize only 120, but 3,000 are saved in a “kind of confrontational soteriology.”<sup>171</sup> Using Peter’s interpretive measure, “This is not that,” countless testimonies of people have the same story. Testimonies speak about how one used to be drunk with wine or other substances but now full of the Spirit.

#### Conflict in the Spirit: internal and external

Conflict present on the day of Pentecost is the radical shift from the old way of life (old birth) to the new way of life (born again).<sup>172</sup> The interpretive scheme is used in Pentecostal testimony: "I used to be this way, but now I am that way." At some point in time, all who believe suffered the conflict crisis between the past, present, and future. In the Spirit, these moments were fused in the cross of Christ, the resurrection, and Pentecost as past is forgiven, present redeemed, and future radically transformed into something new. For most, it took a moment of staring into the conflict of the old way of life and then into the possibility of a new way formed by the Spirit. Sometimes these moments are called crossroads, referring to the metaphorical narrative of life's journey. The experience may also be called a conflict in the Spirit and from it "a rupture and discontinuity with a person's past habits, practices, culture, and traditions" comes, and a person

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<sup>170</sup> Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology*, 202.

<sup>171</sup> Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology*, 201.

<sup>172</sup> Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology*, 47.

is born again because the conflict in the Spirit radically transforms everything.<sup>173</sup> The Spirit is the first person of the triune Godhead one meets at salvation, and confrontation occurs as the Spirit creates tension between what is and what the Spirit desires to be.

### Interpreting the present through the past

To help manage the conflict created by the Spirit, Peter is differentiating what Pentecost is not and then will further diffuse the tension of conflict by telling what Pentecost is: “This is that spoken by the prophet Joel.”<sup>174</sup> The meaning is made of conflict at Pentecost by the fusion of time. The past and present are eliminated as Peter interprets the present as “fulfilling the past.”<sup>175</sup>

There is a time-traveling motif here as Joel’s past words are now presently fulfilled.

‘And it shall be in the last days,’ God says, ‘That I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind; And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, And your young men shall see visions, And your old men shall dream dreams; Even on My bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit And they shall prophesy. ‘And I will grant wonders in the sky above And signs on the earth below, Blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke. ‘The sun will be turned into darkness And the moon into blood, Before the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come. ‘And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’<sup>176</sup>

Peter looks to Scripture to interpret the current event as he had memorized Joel’s prophecy and the Spirit quickened him to interpret the events as something spoken about in the past. Conflict diffusion at Pentecost meant to look at the Scriptures in a sort of *Deja Vu* of the Spirit. *Deja Vu*, in French, means “already seen.” Believers “relate their experience to scripture, to stories, and

<sup>173</sup> Vonney, *Pentecostal Theology*, 47-48.

<sup>174</sup> Acts 2:16.

<sup>175</sup> Vonney, *Pentecostal Theology*, 16.

<sup>176</sup> Acts 2:17-21.

events in the bible, because they interpret and authenticate their experiences as participating in the biblical events thrust anew into the present.”<sup>177</sup> Biblical history is not just printed words on a page, but it is made alive in the Spirit. One can be ushered back and forth in time to experience present situations in light of past biblical history. Historical movement or interplay between the past and present bring solace, and lower tension in conflictive situations as historical familiarity helps people reference, not a novel conflict. Instead, the community has been there before.

### Pentecostal time travel

Practically speaking, one can learn from this time-traveling interpretive and communicative motif in conflictive experiences. Conflict at work, home, and family usher back to 1 Peter 5:7: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” Back again to Philippians 4:6-7, “do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Conflictive situations in which one does not know what to do usher back even further to King Jehoshaphat, who prayed in 2 Chronicles 20:12, “We don't know what to do, but our eyes are on you, Lord.” Forward again to conflict with rebellious teenagers in Luke 9:55 when James and John desire to call fire down from heaven and burn the Samaritans alive and “(Jesus) turned and rebuked them, and said, ‘You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.’ And they went on to another village.” The time-travel motif allows application of scripture to contemporary conflicts. Church conflict experts Barthel and Edling believe the failure to trust the

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<sup>177</sup> Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology*, 16.

narratives of scripture is one of “the biggest mistakes people make in church conflict.”<sup>178</sup> The entirety of Bathel and Edling’s book, *Redeeming Church Conflicts*, is structured around the Acts 15 conflict narrative to demonstrate the necessity of scripture in church conflict.

In Pentecostal time travel, one conflictive situation may stand above the rest, conflict with another speaking negatively about one’s actions (often called triangulation and sabotage). It is necessary to move forward to Acts 15, when people came from Judea to Antioch and started a conflict with Paul and Barnabas to make the Gentile believers be circumcised. Here the disciples had to decide on an organizational level if God had accepted the Gentiles into the faith and if Barnabas and Paul’s ministry was legitimate. When Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with their conflictive agents, “the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.”<sup>179</sup> Instead of perpetual debate, where people often become more entrenched in their views, Paul and Barnabas communicated directly with the church leaders instead of talking to third parties to stabilize their views and manipulate people.

#### *Excuses: Direct Communication in the Spirit*

Direct communication happened at Pentecost in Acts 2 and the Gentile Pentecost of Acts 10. A Pentecostal theology of direct communication may offer help in church conflict as the Spirit invites people to communicate directly with the Trinity in the Spirit. By mirroring such a direct

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<sup>178</sup> Tara Klena Barthel and David V. Edling, *Redeeming Church Conflicts: Turning Crisis Into Compassion and Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 16.

<sup>179</sup> Acts 15:2.

communicative relationship, the Spirit can help pastors and congregations communicate directly with each other and diffuse triangulation and sabotage where speculations run wild. The people in Acts 2 and 10 who gathered experienced unification in one pure language of the Spirit crossing all language barriers, both Jews and Gentile traditions, and unified the people in one time, one context, to one church, by the power of the Spirit in the heart of Jesus. The beauty of the Spirit's baptism is the draw in, and in some cases pull in, to a relationship with His communal triune self. In Spirit baptism, deep relationship and direct conversation with the Father, Son, and Spirit are experienced by the fullness of a three-dimensional relationship.

The glorious tri-unity of God is drawing people to a relationship and direct conversation, which reaches its pinnacle in Spirit baptism. In Spirit baptism, one prays not in their language or even in their thoughts, but the Spirit of God directly controls the communication using human mouths, but the Spirit's tongue. God has invited diverse people (with diverse tongues) into direct communication in his triune ontology as he is already in eternal conversation with himself.<sup>180</sup> Prayer does not get to One without the other. Prayer is not to One, but to three-in-one. The Lord's prayer and John 17 are a glimpse into this trinitarian prayer. God is speaking to God, and it is God who is in eternal conversation with his triune self. At Pentecost, God draws all peoples from every nation, tribe, and tongue into an eternal and direct conversation with him daily. In Spirit baptism, Jesus offers the ability to hear God's conversation directly and the sound of God speaking to God. The communicative sound is God's conversation in direct experience with humans who are speaking words in the tongues of God!

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<sup>180</sup> John W. Frye, *Liberate Your Praying Heart* (Grand Rapids, MI: Credo House Publishers, 2017), 40–41.

Jesus is the prime example of direct communication and the repair of relationships using direct communication. Jesus is God in the flesh who directly intervened and confronted humanity for the transgressions against God's law. Kenneth Boa writes,

Jesus is not asking us to do anything he hasn't modeled for us. He gave up heaven to come down to earth, become a servant and die to repair our broken relationship with the Father. In Jesus Christ, God takes the initiative. When we come to see how important people are to God, we will value the community Christ's death makes possible. We will value it enough to take the initiative in resolving relational breakdowns.<sup>181</sup>

Spirit baptism and praying in tongues is the terminal end of what it is like to be drawn into the communal and direct communicative triune life and relationship of God. It is God who unites humans by crossing borders and barriers by the power of the Spirit, even the barrier between heaven and earth through the inbreaking of the Spirit's end times work. The relationship is held in a deeper dimension as one directly communicates to God and others in the Spirit as described in Ephesians 5:18-20: "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Since there is no way to avoid conflict, as the Spirit bore the church in conflict at Pentecost, the task is to learn how to dissolve, maintain, and manage conflict.

#### Spirit speech as a delimitation of communication

Each person is bound by the curbs of interpretation when communicating, as interpretation is "relative to the language available to them, the language in which they live and move and have

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<sup>181</sup> Boa, "Leadership Series."

their being. Writers are at most cocreators of meaning.”<sup>182</sup> Words and their meanings inherently limit communication. Furthermore, it is more limited by the ability to communicate with metaphor. To have a purely creative thought is therefore impossible to communicate as there is nothing to differentiate. However, Spirit speech may be a de-limitation of language by the Spirit generating language outside of human origin. Spirit speech, therefore, is removing or jumping the curbs of communication.

The Spirit expresses the inexpressible and intercedes through language and words impossible for people to engage without the power of the Spirit praying through this people as Paul writes in Romans: “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”<sup>183</sup> The Spirit generates communicative power delimiting human communicative curbs through prophecy, speaking in tongues, praying in tongues, tongues and interpretation, and other gifts of the Spirit. Pentecost is the reversal of Babel. Rather than many languages dividing people, many languages unite in the power of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit has a way of “taking over our mouths or our ears so that we are freed from the difficulties of judgement, meaning-making, and communication—as if by the Spirit we are taken up beyond human, worldly limits.” In time and space, the Spirit can break in and communicate an unmediated and divinely given message. The Spirit overcomes confusing interpretations and the fear of living life together, so the church can hear God’s words clearly as the Spirit speaks using many tongues in one pure language. The church needs the Spirit to take over communicative efforts in tongues, interpretation,

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<sup>182</sup> Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? (The Church and Postmodern Culture): Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 59.

<sup>183</sup> Rom 8:26.

discernment, and speech by directly speaking to his church through his church. The Spirit's delimitation of communication is a welcomed power during church conflict.

### Traveling back to Acts

Not unusual to church conflicts, the results can often end in a departure of certain members from one another. Division results in frustrations, hurt, unanswered questions, and feelings of failure on behalf of members and leadership. Perhaps paradoxically, in the same chapter of Acts 15, before the disagreement and departure of the Pauline missionary force, the Holy Spirit was the conflict management diffuser in the acceptance of the Gentiles to the Christian faith at the Council in Jerusalem. The possibility of a significant church split according to ethnic differences was imminent. However, the split was avoided because of the early communication and wisdom of good leaders.<sup>184</sup> The decision was ultimately made, not by the elders and leaders at the Jerusalem council, but it was by the Holy Spirit. Peter's legitimization of the Gentile salvation in Acts 15:8-9 show the Spirit's decisive moment, "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the **Holy Spirit** to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith."<sup>185</sup> The decision of the Jerusalem council was a Spirit-empowered and Spirit-initiated decision. Furthermore, the information about the Gentile inclusion and Spirit baptism was not taken from hearsay or established rumor; they

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<sup>184</sup> Hawkins, Forrest, and Roden, *Biblical Leadership*, 399.

<sup>185</sup> New International Version, Emphasis added.

received this information in direct communication.<sup>186</sup> Paul and Barnabas communicated directly to the council about their experience among the Gentiles.

The church in Acts was initially divided among ethnic lines. Initial internal conflicts such as the neglect of Hellenized widows at the table indicate the Spirit's desire for inclusivity and the culture of division. The thread throughout the Luke-Acts narrative is of the Spirit uniting the diversity of believers, and it appears to culminate in a conflict that leads to council in Acts 15. Of this issue, Keener writes,

In Acts 2, the Spirit had come in advance of that time to initiate the church into the eschatological unity of an ethically reconciled, cross-cultural people of God in the midst of the present age. The church in Acts, initially divided between Jewish and Gentile believers, had some problems with this reality; but those truly obedient to the Spirit were ultimately forced to cross ethnic boundaries (8:29; 10:19-20; 11:12-18). Thus, Luke intimately connects the Spirit with his theme of the Gentile mission, a theme which in Acts almost consumes the more diverse representatives of marginalized classes in the Gospel.<sup>187</sup>

Transformation necessarily causes conflict between the faulty will and thinking of humanity and the mind and will of the Spirit. The Spirit is transforming and transforming human thinking, from faulty to fixed and from exclusive to inclusive. The Spirit in the book of Acts creates this internal/external, private/communal, theological/philosophical, and ethnic conflict. The Spirit's work in conflict begins at Pentecost and the thread continues to the Council of Nicaea and today. As Keener observed above, the Gentile mission nearly eclipses the more diverse inclusivity portrayed in the Gospel. The Spirit found the conflictive moment present in the church and would not let it go without resolution, even though it may take many years to resolve significant tensions in church conflict.

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<sup>186</sup> Hawkins, Forrest, and Roden, *Biblical Leadership*, 401.

<sup>187</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Spirit in the Gospels and Acts: Divine Purity and Power* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 194–195.

Leonard Sweet writes, “The Spirit continually leads us where we do not want to go, where we had no intention of traveling. Life’s road will take many turns, come to many forks, surprise us with many corners. But the prevailing promise is that Coach Ghost will avail: ‘My God in his lovingkindness shall meet me at every corner.’”<sup>188</sup> Sweet’s statement indicates that the Holy Spirit’s direction is often not the most comfortable. However, uncomfortable or conflictive situations may be the Spirit’s path for believers. In Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas part ways. One can analyze the conflict as an apostolic division, but by the Spirit, see the redeeming value in an apostolic multiplication.

Sweet writes that sometimes when preaching ministry ordination services, he will give the candidates stir sticks.<sup>189</sup> Stir sticks remind candidates that the Spirit leads beside quiet waters, but other times the Spirit is involved in “troubling the waters” so healing can come.<sup>190</sup> The stirring of the church can be necessary, just as the surgeon’s scalpel is a necessary instrument of the healing process. Proverbs 14:4 affirms this thought, “Where no oxen are, the trough is clean; But much increase comes by the strength of an ox.”<sup>191</sup> The fruit production of the church can often involve the messy job of church conflict, but the reward has an eternal impact.

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<sup>188</sup> Leonard Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 201.

<sup>189</sup> Sweet, *I Am a Follower*, 130.

<sup>190</sup> Sweet, *I Am a Follower*, 130.

<sup>191</sup> New American Standard Bible.

### Diversity and conflict at Pentecost

The issue of diversity is conflictive. The etymology of diversity describes turning aside or parting ways. Pentecost makes the paradoxical claim of unity despite diversity. The Holy Spirit unifies many tongues, nations, and cultures at Pentecost. Initially confusing, the Spirit brings about salvation to many who gathered to observe the sights and sounds of the Spirit's work. Even among Jesus' disciples, diversity was present in characters such as Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector. Christ unites Simon and Matthew, yet their backgrounds were as polarizing as possible in the Jewish world. Unity in the Spirit and diversity are therefore not mutually exclusive. Pentecost is the indication of that brand of diversity that was in the early church. Bewilderment and confusion become normal when the Spirit moves, particularly as the Spirit causes diversity and conflict.

### Distribution of power at Pentecost as conflict management and prevention

Systemic problems can occur in church when too much power rests in individual families or small groups rather than being distributed. Pentecost is an affirmation of the intentional distribution of power. Contrary to the Hebraic religious culture where religious, political, and economic power was widely held by the small group of Pharisees, Sadducees, and lawyers, the power of the Holy Spirit was distributed without sectarian concerns. Peter's sermon text indicates the broad distribution of power: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in

those days, and they will prophesy.”<sup>192</sup> The distribution of the Spirit’s empowerment blurs the lines of traditional power-holding peoples. Historically drawn religious and cultural lines existed among ethnicities, women, children, and enslaved peoples. However, the Spirit erases lines of demarcation and empowers all people in the church. The Spirit is the initiator of power distribution among the early church. The apostles begin to learn the conflict management tactic of the Spirit by distributing power in response to the conflict between Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews in food distribution in Acts 6. Rather than responding to the conflict by the apostles holding on to power, they empower seven more people to accomplish ministry tasks without favor or partiality.

The apostolic power distribution included a diverse step toward breaking cultural lines by choosing Nicolas of Antioch as one of the seven, as Nicolas converted to Judaism. One of the largest divisions over the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebraic Jews would have been language. Hellenistic Jews would have adopted Greek as their mother tongue and likely some Greek dress and apparel. However, Hebraic Jews would have had the more traditional Aramaic language. Hellenistic Jews would have been from different backgrounds outside of Jerusalem, while Hebraic Jews would have been local to Jerusalem and Galilee.<sup>193</sup> The church leaders are beginning to embody the Spirit’s work at Pentecost as they manage and diffuse conflict like the Spirit by distributing power, making decisions with ethnic and language inclusivity, and multiplying empowered leaders. Rather than hold power among the twelve apostles and secure their positions, the Spirit empowers more people. Scholars believe all seven names of those

<sup>192</sup> Acts 2:17-18 NIV.

<sup>193</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Volume 2:3:1-14:28* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1254ff.

chosen in Acts 6 were Greek and represent a sect of Hellenized Jewish followers of Christ.<sup>194</sup>

The choice of conflict management by the Apostles embodied the Pentecostal ethos of Acts 2. The results of the internal church conflict of Acts 6 were incredible church multiplication and salvation; such results may not have been possible without the conflict and disruption of organizational homeostasis. Further diversification among the church would be reflected by women church leaders named in the epistles.

#### Babel, Pentecost, and the post-partum church

The link between the odd coupling of the biblical narratives in Pentecost and Babel represents the diversity of languages present by God's enablement and the underlying confusion in both events. Tongues are divided over the heads of 120 in the upper room, and tongues were divided at the tower of Babel. While confusion laced the events, the Spirit was at work. The listed nations of Acts 2 indicate that the Spirit reverses the division that took place at Babel, which spread a unified people into many nations. Now, in the Spirit, the nations are united by one language of the Spirit. Old Testament theologian Michael Hieser writes, "Three thousand Jews came to believe in Jesus as a result of the events at Pentecost (Acts 2:41), and those three thousand Jewish converts went back to their homelands after the Pentecost pilgrimage. These new disciples were the seeds of the gospel, Yahweh's plan to reclaim the nations."<sup>195</sup> The Spirit was at work to reclaim the diversity created at Babel by unifying them in the Spirit. The

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<sup>194</sup> Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Volume 2 3:1-14:28*, 1254ff, 1286ff.

<sup>195</sup> Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 302.

Pentecost event attracted diversity, and the diversity created by Pentecost and the subsequent Gentile Pentecost would create more conflict leading to the Council at Jerusalem, which resulted in inclusivity.

Pentecost is not a matter of who is in or out of the community; instead, it embraces many. Amos Yong professes to develop “a Pentecostal Theology of Inclusion.”<sup>196</sup> Yong establishes a more global and inclusive charismatic community, one in which denominational and dividing lines are blurred in “a pneumatological ecclesiology derived from the Pentecost narrative.”<sup>197</sup> Such an ecumenical dialogue and egalitarian commitment in ecumenicism is an interpretation of Pentecost as a sign of the Spirit’s desire to be inclusive and create an opportunity for a diversity of tongues from many different voices as a means of renewing theology. Yong notes that William J. Seymour interpreted the early Pentecostal revival in the United States as the lines of ethnic color were “washed away in the blood.”<sup>198</sup> Michael Heiser interprets Pentecost as the eschatological diversity of Jesus becoming King of All Kings, every tribe, every tongue, every nation united (not uniform) under the banner of Christ the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!<sup>199</sup> Pentecost theologian Chris Green addresses the issue of conflict and Pentecost similarly to Hieser, as the wonder of native languages being spoken in Acts 2 “not only signals the reversal of ‘Babel’—an overcoming of the confusion and fear and conflict that poisons our attempts to live together in shalom—but also points to the reconstitution of the people of God as a ‘nation’

<sup>196</sup> Amos Yong, "Poured Out on All Flesh: The Spirit, World Pentecostalism, and the Renewal of Theology and Praxis in the 21st Century — European Research Network on Global Pentecostalism," 6, no. 2, *PentecoStudies*, 19, <http://2ww.glopent.net/pentecostudies/online-back-issues/2007/yong-2007.pdf/view>.

<sup>197</sup> Yong, "Poured Out on All Flesh," 22.

<sup>198</sup> Yong, "Poured Out on All Flesh," 20.

<sup>199</sup> Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 364.

of priests for the world.”<sup>200</sup> The concern of the Spirit at Pentecost was a diversely united people under the rule and reign of God coming forth as a new nation among many nations. The unity of this new nation would not be by proximity as at Babel; rather, it would be unity in the Spirit who transcends time and space.

The conflict that began at Babel was resolved in part by Pentecost; however, as the Acts narratives indicate, ultimate consummation of conflict can only be put to rest eschatologically. Willimon writes, “Luke’s picture of primal harmony is more of a goal than an accurate description of the way things really were in the early church. Paul says, ‘When you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it’ (1 Cor 11:18). Christ calls all to be part of his kingdom, but because of the inclusiveness of that kingdom, because of its high goals and difficult tasks, conflict is inevitable.”<sup>201</sup> Not only is conflict inevitable, but the Spirit appears as the initiator of conflict at Babel and Pentecost. It is also the Spirit who creates tensions of living for Christ post-Pentecost, or in other terms, living in the tensions of the church postpartum. The confusion, division, and conflicts apparent at Babel and Pentecost are understandably interpreted as God’s work. Pentecost is only the initial resolution of the conflict, as the church continues to carry the conflicts of racial and ethnic reconciliation and inclusion today.

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<sup>200</sup> Chris E. W. Green, *Sanctifying Interpretation: Vocation, Holiness, and Scripture* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2020), 45.

<sup>201</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 33.

## Reconciliation

Acts 15 offers a picture of Spirit-led and empowered conciliation. Paradoxically Acts 15 also offers conflictive departure when Paul is unwilling to travel with John-Mark. Despite the paradox of unity and ministry division, effective church resolutions and conflict management are not measured by short-term disputes or conflicts but by long-term reconciliation. Paul and John-Mark must have reconciled as Paul writes in 2 Tim 4:11, Paul writes to Timothy, “Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.” Whatever reconciliation occurred, Paul is now willing to work with John-Mark despite their former disagreement. Churches should not be defined by their conflicts; their reconciliations should define them.

## Conclusion

There must be an openness to a resolution made by God through the Spirit and not only from human decisions in any conflict. The Spirit is the one who manages conflict best. Conflict management in the church can, by the Spirit, discern what something is and is not. Then the church can look deeply at the Scripture to travel in time and find situations not unlike present conflicts and insert oneself into the text. Conflict in the Spirit is about the Spirit bringing management and resolution to the conflict by bringing about a future He desires as time is fused.

### *Another Look into a Theology of Church Conflict*

In his classic book *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, Ken Sande writes, “every conflict that comes into our lives has somehow been ordained by God. Knowing that he has personally tailored the events of our lives should dramatically affect how we respond to them.”<sup>202</sup> The crux of Sande’s conflict management theology lies in the fact that Christians serve a good God who has his glory and human interest both at heart. The foundation of a biblical theology of conflict management rests in a sound biblical theology of suffering. Ken Sande writes, “The fact that God is good does not mean that he will protect us from all suffering. Rather it means that he will be with us in our suffering and accomplish good through it (Isa. 43.2-3).”<sup>203</sup> Johnathan Edwards wrote that the Old Testament figure of Job’s mourning life’s changes and tragedy is the story of all people.<sup>204</sup> Loss, grief, tragedy, and hardship are the genuine truth of every person on the earth.

Despite the glamourized versions of the church painted on social media and television, there are always underlying tensions and strife associated with any organization. Willimon writes, “While a superficial listening to the scripture suggests that every early congregation lived in peace and perfection, careful, honest exegetical attention to the text reveals that conflict, rejection, and disagreement were part of that experience.”<sup>205</sup> Behind every glorious local church, some leaders bore their detractors’ pain, anxiety, confrontation, conflict, criticism, and sabotage. Add to a leader’s perils is the spiritual sabotage of the Adversary. Doug McPherson and Ben

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<sup>202</sup> Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 54.

<sup>203</sup> Sande, *The Peacemaker*, 55.

<sup>204</sup> Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Day by Day: A 40-Day Journey with the Daily Office* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 101.

<sup>205</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 85.

Tertin write of *Learning to Love in Faith, Rather than Fight with Power*, “The strongest leaders, the most morally astute and theologically robust believers in the group must let the tail wag the dog sometimes, and as they watch budgets bleed and plans fall through, they don’t bat an eyebrow because they trust. *Truly* all fear buckles under love and faith in God alone.”<sup>206</sup> Trusting in God’s ultimate justice is the appeal of the Christian leader who can endure the sabotage and hardship associated with leadership. The foundation of the life for all Christian leaders who will endure to the end is allegiance to Jesus Christ despite surrounding circumstances. God’s justice is served at the end of time, and one must leave room for such justice.<sup>207</sup>

Soren Kierkegaard wrote of the Christian life and tribulations in his journal and can be applied to the ministry of a pastor in church congregations: “God creates out of nothing and everything which God is to use he first reduces to nothing.”<sup>208</sup> Conflicts for many biblical characters bring about the most extraordinary presence of God they often ever experienced, as the first Christian martyr, Stephen, teaches. The defining factor for Stephen was to experience the presence of the Father and Son as the heavens opened and was engaged in physical conflict immediately after theological conflict. The defining factor for Moses was the presence of God and dwelling face to face after the frustrations of listening to the Israelites’ complaints. The defining factor for Paul was the intimacy of hearing God’s voice despite the berating voices of his critics. Stephen, Moses, and Paul are all case-in-point examples of a living life with spiritual

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<sup>206</sup> McKnight and Mamula, *Conflict Management and the Apostle Paul*, 69.

<sup>207</sup> See Rom 12:19.

<sup>208</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Soul of Kierkegaard: Selections from His Journals* (North Chelmsford, MA: Courier Corporation, 2012), 245.

self-differentiation. Jesus was the only perfectly self-differentiated person who frequently is in isolation, but never alone as God's presence and Spirit were present.<sup>209</sup>

God has a way of reducing his people to nothing to allow for the dust to settle so he can gather it and recreate them in the image God desires. Conflict, suffering, and sabotage are places of divine formation. The presence of God is where leaders are transformed into Spirit-empowered conflict managers, and in conflict, pastors develop their fundamental identity. To be a pastor is to be a conflict manager. Very little of Moses' leadership experience happened outside the desert; it is debatable that all his leadership expertise was made in the desert. John the Baptist made divine formation the fundamental basis for his entire ministry as Jesus came on the scene, "He must become greater; I must become less."<sup>210</sup>

Kierkegaard experienced what could be called self-differentiation or emotional maturity as he writes of life's tribulations,

remain quite indifferent towards them, absolute indifference toward them is victory. Such thoughts aim at making you anxious, they want to make you so anxious that in your cowardice you imagine that you are responsible for them, they want to enter into you by way of anxiety, fatter upon you the idea that you listened to them and rested in them and so on, and all this is in the agony of your responsibility... You are right to fight temptation by flying, running away. It does not help against tribulation because the thoughts follow you. Here the proper tactics are: do not be afraid, keep perfectly calm, absolutely indifferent.<sup>211</sup>

Although Kierkegaard does not use the terminology of Bowen's theory, what he calls indifference may be self-differentiation or emotional maturity. Ken Sande also calls for responses with humility and "keeping a tight rein on your emotions."<sup>212</sup> Self-differentiation is

<sup>209</sup> Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: It's Impossible to Be Spiritually Mature, While Remaining Emotionally Immature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 97.

<sup>210</sup> John 3:30, New International Version.

<sup>211</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Soul of Kierkegaard*, 246-7.

<sup>212</sup> Sande, *The Peacemaker*, 156.

the ability to be oneself with minimal reactivity and take a non-emotional stand in a highly emotional system.<sup>213</sup> Indifference, rather than responding in a flight from a challenge or emotional reaction, means the leader's self is secure and known in Christ alone. Alternatively, as Friedman would describe, self-differentiation is "the capacity to become oneself out of one's self."<sup>214</sup>

Self-control is primarily a fruit of the Spirit's work in a believer's life. Self-control requires significant humility and other fruits of the Spirit to be active such as patience instead of reactivity. Theologian David Fitch writes of his church modeling the Acts 15 council: "The true test of our humility and vigilance as readers of the Scripture comes when there is conflict among us... And those who have questions must be heard, and those who have a position to advocate must be patient. We have at times sat, prayed, discussed, waited in silence often into the night until we too could say, 'It seemed good to us having become of one mind' and 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Acts 15:25, 28)."<sup>215</sup> The desire is to see the church active with communal discernment of the Spirit's work rooted in humility and self-control. The body of Christ should be mature enough to come together and be assured that the Spirit's decision-making skills in the community are better than private interpretation.

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<sup>213</sup> Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, 183.

<sup>214</sup> Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, 183.

<sup>215</sup> David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2005), 150–151.

### Choosing leadership full of the Holy Spirit

Hare suggests the apostolic model of conflict management was first mitigated by choosing leaders full of the Holy Spirit according to Acts 6. Hare writes, “As we approach the practical matters of sorting out the issues and developing strategies for intervention, we would all do well to notice a foundational prerequisite for the apostolic method of decision-making prior to any action: their dependence on God’s Spirit!”<sup>216</sup> The church of Acts is one modeled by dependence on the Holy Spirit for their mission and life. Without such qualifications, which can be considered structural changes for theological input, to the church organization as it chooses leaders, conflicts may abound as leaders do not avail themselves to the Spirit’s work in church conflict.

### Theology as conflict management

Jim Van Yperen, who has a church conciliation ministry leader, believes theology has primacy in all organizational structures: “Digging deeper for the roots of conflict will reveal that theology drives structure, structure drives relationships and relationships drive behavior.”<sup>217</sup> According to Van Yperen, the basic outline of the conflict theology’s primacy is illustrated below:<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Hare, *When Church Conflict Happens*, 51.

<sup>217</sup> Barna, *Leaders on Leadership*, Van Yperen is a contributor to this book, 253.

<sup>218</sup> Barna, *Leaders on Leadership*, Van Yperen is a contributor to this book, 254.

Theology → Structure → Relationships → Behavior

Figure 2.4 Primacy of Theology

Therefore, every conflict is rooted theologically and biblically; no superficial symptomatic correction will quickly do away with church conflict without addressing the deeper theological issues. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul addresses a church conflict involving sexual immorality present in the church. Paul's reply is theological as he addresses a practical guide to dealing with the offenders and theological discourse on the nature of sin as yeast which leavens the entire batch of dough.<sup>219</sup> Paul's response is also a nod toward the systemic nature of sin as it is present and unconfronted in the church. Paul's theological crux lies in the statement, "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed."<sup>220</sup> The Passover festival was one of remembering deliverance from the oppressive hand of Egypt, a type of sin. The system's purity relies on the deliverance from sin through the sacrificed Lamb and the congregation to "keep the Festival... with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."<sup>221</sup> In Paul's metaphor, it is the work of the entire congregation to confront and remove sin from the system, lest the entire system becomes impure.

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<sup>219</sup> I Cor 5:6.

<sup>220</sup> I Cor 5:7.

<sup>221</sup> I Cor 5:8.

### Church conflict as a salvific act of the Spirit

Church conflict expert Jim Van Yperen examines church conflicts as theological in the root: “All church conflict is ultimately theological. God wants to change the way we think about the church so that we might become His people.”<sup>222</sup> The confrontation of sin in the conflict present in the Corinthian church addressed above could be seen as the Spirit’s salvific work through conflict. Paul’s process for confronting the sexual immortality would result in the salvation of the offending brother, “so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord”<sup>223</sup> and also the church body at large as it would be purified of its systemic illness referenced metaphorically by Paul as leaven.

Theologian David Fitch describes the church biblically as the body of Christ who “gather together to resolve conflict and forgive one another (Matt 18:15-20), we discern and make decisions (Matt. 18:15-20).”<sup>224</sup> As Fitch describes, half of Matthew 18 is dedicated to the intentional and transformational conflict. Conflict in the church is not constant but has ebbs and flows and is best managed by a skilled pastor. Conflict transformation pioneer John Paul Lederach uses an effective metaphor for leadership and conflict engagement in relationships as an “understanding of the greater patterns, the ebb and flow of energies, times, and even whole seasons, in the great sea of relationships.”<sup>225</sup> Continuing Lederach’s metaphor of conflict, conflicts are necessary to transform the church when the tides and seasons are right.

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<sup>222</sup> Jim Van Yperen, *Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict* (New York, NY: Moody Publishers, 2008), 46.

<sup>223</sup> I Cor 5:5b.

<sup>224</sup> Fitch, *The Great Giveaway*, 40.

<sup>225</sup> Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 16.

Similarly, Fitch presses the issue of conflict as an elemental part of the church, even engaging in conflict resolution as a salvational act (1 Corinthians 5).<sup>226</sup> The predisposition of salvation is conflictive in the clash of the flesh and Spirit, to the holy and unholy. Salvation is a conflictive deliverance from the enemy's grasp, and the church moves in and out of conflict with its members as a salvational action by the Spirit of God. The Spirit's actions are “‘inner workings’ that make possible the community’s functioning and identity as the body of Christ.”<sup>227</sup> Suppose conflict is a fundamental part of the church's functioning. In that case, fear of conflict may be fear of the Spirit's ability to stir the congregation toward change and transfiguration into the bodily image of Christ. The whole body experiences conflict in the Spirit, no single member of the family is without trip and tremor of another member's symptoms. Systemic healing comes through a salvific confrontation with the underlying disease present in the body and not just the symptomatic individual. If the Spirit comes, the Spirit comes in conflict with many other things.

In God's salvational work, the Spirit conflicts with one's sin and lack of trust in Christ as universal king. To be born again is to have recognized the need to die to the flesh and be made new. Confrontation is with the dead way of living in the past and the contrast with a new life. To be baptized into Christ is to be baptized into conflict in the Spirit. Peter is conflicted when Pentecost came to the Gentiles in salvific fashion at Cornelius' house.<sup>228</sup> The Spirit led him to this conflict with visions and the destruction of traditional views of God's saving work. William Willimon writes of the conversion experience as a “disruptive, major altercation.”<sup>229</sup> Willimon

<sup>226</sup> Fitch, *The Great Giveaway*, 41.

<sup>227</sup> Fitch, *The Great Giveaway*, 41.

<sup>228</sup> Acts 10.

<sup>229</sup> William H. Willimon, *Pastor: Revised Edition: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*, Revised edition. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016), 215.

noted, “C.S. Lewis spoke of his life before his conversion as ‘before God closed in on me.’”<sup>230</sup> The church is the extended arm of Christ into the world, necessarily calling it to repentance. The church is calling the world to face Christ, have a conflict with him, and be converted through repentance in the power of the Spirit. Without the conflict of competing interests, those of the flesh, the devil, and Christ, there is no salvation. Pentecostal soteriological metaphors revolve around the salvific effects in cosmic conflict as one is saved from darkness and brought into the light.<sup>231</sup> The underlying motif of the metaphor is the conflict and cannot be avoided. Therefore, the church becomes the site where conflict is accepted and welcomed as the church engages in spiritual warfare for the souls of those held by the enemy. The competing interests can create conflict and are, at times, competing goods for the congregation. However, some conflicts enter a far more spiritual realm.

Richard Niebuhr writes of the conflict all Christians have been drawn to: “From this beginning the fact that there was and is a conflict, the facts of God’s grace and human sin are understood... Each is quick to point out that he was on the wrong road until he was stopped and turned round in his tracks by another will than his own.”<sup>232</sup> The conflict Niebuhr speaks of is the conflict of wills between God and humans. Each person acknowledges the conflict of wills at the moment of repentance and reception of God’s grace. Christians are therefore born in conflict, and it may become second nature to them as they become who they shall be.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Willimon, *Pastor: Revised Edition*, 216.

<sup>231</sup> 1 Pet 2:9.

<sup>232</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1956), 150.

<sup>233</sup> See I Jn 3:2-3, I Cor 3:18.

## Biblical characters of conflict

The myriad of conflicts that exist in the scriptures is astounding. The first occurrence of conflict is in the heavenly realm. Conflict occurs in the heavenly realm between God, Satan, and humans (Gen 3:1-7, Job 1:7-12, 2:1-7; Ezek 28:12-19), between brothers (Gen 4:8), and even between Jesus and people (for most of His earthly ministry). As he left his family of origin at Ur Abraham was conflicted, choosing to follow God's call into Canaan (Gen 12). Joshua and Caleb conflicted with the other spies as the poem recalls, "Joshua the son of Nun, And Caleb the son of Jephunneh, Were the only two that ever got through, To the land of milk and honey."<sup>234</sup> The Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson for the purpose of conflict as Judges 14:4 concludes, "(His parents did not know that this was from **the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront** the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel)."<sup>235</sup> George Barna writes of the necessity of conflict in the life of believers for growth through the eyes of biblical characters:

Think about where we would be, for example, if Noah had not built an ark in 'holy fear'; if Abraham had refused to sacrifice Isaac; if Moses had not challenged Pharaoh, or pled before God to preserve stiff-necked Israel; if Joshua had not marched around Jericho, or Rahab had not hidden spies; if Gideon, Samson, Samuel, David, Jesus and followers of Christ throughout the two thousand years of history since Calvary had regarded human opinion more than the will of God. **The narrative of our faith requires conflict. By it we learn and grow.**<sup>236</sup>

As disparaging as it may be to acknowledge the necessity of conflict, Jesus is conflicted by the will of God in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the Garden, Jesus was "admitting in a moment of weakness that the 'Spirit is willing, but the body is weak' (Mark 14:38) ...for this is the Spirit that moves Jesus to the cross to offer himself up for the redemption of humanity. This very Spirit

<sup>234</sup> Unknown author.

<sup>235</sup> Emphasis Added.

<sup>236</sup> Barna, *Leaders on Leadership*, 242, emphasis added.

descended on Jesus as he went into the baptismal waters in identification with the lost, and it is the Spirit who drove Jesus into the desert to face humanity's enemy (Matt. 3-4).<sup>237</sup> The Spirit is the driving force behind Jesus at all times, often driving him toward conflicts in the Spirit for the sake of all humanity. Jesus was able to overcome the flesh in Gethsemane by the Spirit as he yielded to God in prayer: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."<sup>238</sup> In the Spirit, Jesus faces conflict head-on, yielding himself to the Spirit's work through conflict.

### Opposition as conflict

Church transition expert Dan Southerland writes about the Old Testament figure of Nehemiah as the only character who should not have experienced opposition as he tried to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.<sup>239</sup> Southerland writes,

Anyone who is trying to do something for God will face some opposition. There is always opposition when you lead the church through transition. There will be opposition from those who do not understand the change. There will be opposition from those who understand the change but just don't like it. There will be opposition from those people whose kingdom you are messing with. There will be opposition from those people who the enemy controls. There will be opposition from those people who just love to be contrary. You have each of these groups in church.<sup>240</sup>

Opposition is a normal part of any Spirit-led leadership. Southerland, using Nehemiah's rebuilding narrative, advises leaders to expect opposition and stay on track.<sup>241</sup> The first

<sup>237</sup> Frank D. Macchia, *Justified in the Spirit: Creation, Redemption, and the Triune God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 176.

<sup>238</sup> Luke 22:42.

<sup>239</sup> Dan Southerland, *Transitioning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 112.

<sup>240</sup> Southerland, *Transitioning*, 112.

<sup>241</sup> Southerland, *Transitioning*, 113, 119.

admonition creates a disposition for the second in that the only way to stay on track in the vision and mission of the church is to realize there will be many who oppose God's will for a community. Consistency and longevity are keys to bringing about lasting change in any community. Moses exemplified such longevity despite his myriad of conflicts with the people of Israel, not the least of them 40 years of wandering without any home of their own.

## Conclusion

Taking a deeper look at the theology of church conflict allows a genuine understanding of authentic expectations leaders should have for the congregation. Leadership must be honest with their expectations about people's problems, conflicts, and spiritual development. Self-differentiation and fruits of the Spirit such as self-control and patience are genuine works of the Spirit necessary for managing church life. Church conflict can also be considered a salvific act of the Spirit as a confrontation with sin issues can save a member's spirit. Finally, biblical characters of conflict help manage human and Christian life expectations as one learns from their failures and opposition.

## *History and Conflict*

Applications for Rodney King's famous question, "Can't we all get along?" are relevant in nearly every context of human relationships. King was the subject of a brutal beating by police in Los Angeles 30 years ago. Subsequent conflict resulted in race riots erupting around the United States. King's rhetorical question has no easy answer and necessitates another question: "How do we all get along?" The vast diversity of humanity, culture, backgrounds, history, and nature of

conflict creates tensions when trying to answer any question related to conflict. Conflict not only permeates modern church culture, but it permeated the early church too. Acts 15 shows unity in the Council at Jerusalem over the highly conflictive issue of Gentile inclusion. However, Luke describes a "sharp disagreement" between Paul and Barnabas in the same chapter. The conflict caused the ministry teams to part ways in the work of ministry.<sup>242</sup> Considering the leaders this division occurred among, it could lead one to believe such disagreement and division in the church may be more common than most would like to give credit. If this conclusion is true, it circles back to the question, "How do we all get along?"

#### History of church conflict

John Stott engaged conflict issues in ecumenical conversations as "a candid and serious 'dialogue'" and not a blind effort to unite.<sup>243</sup> Leonard Sweet writes, "It is harder than you think to listen to others, to test claims against evidence, to compare different cultural sources of authority. Listening is not an innate trait or gift of nature. Listening is a talent to be cultivated with all its complexities and complicities. Listening involves an openness to voices other than one's own or listening to voices from other than one's own tribe."<sup>244</sup> The many voices in the global church deserve to be heard, and dialogue will often help shape a better future for the church if people can learn the "how" of communication.

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<sup>242</sup> Acts 15:39, New International Version.

<sup>243</sup> Stott, *Christ in Conflict*, 23.

<sup>244</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2019), 113–114.

### Community task

In part, one knows another through the community surrounding them. Christians can learn about someone they love by observing the relationships the loved one has with other people. If such logic is actual in human relationships, it must also be true of the relationship Christian communities have with God. Christians have much to learn about God through dialogue with other Christian denominations and Christian faith traditions. Dialogue is better than monologue, the community is better than isolation, and in practicing this belief, much can be gained through openness to diversity.

### Dialogue in conflict communication

Jackson Wu believes the Apostle Paul was making the same argument for clear dialogue as “we can only grasp the riches of the gospel ‘together with all of the Lord’s people.’”<sup>245</sup> The diversity of the patchwork quilt that is the worldwide Christian community should cover and comfort believers rather than cause separation at the seams. However, these statements are held in tension; the same Apostle Paul, who also wrote the words in Ephesians about the necessity of the voice of “all the Lord’s people,” parted ways in sharp disagreement with Barnabas. Wu reminds, “We are all blind to the riches of the gospel that come from the limitations of our cultural and theological traditions.”<sup>246</sup> Open and clear dialogue with the diversity of Christian backgrounds

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<sup>245</sup> Jackson Wu, *One Gospel for All Nations: A Practical Approach to Biblical Contextualization* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), xiv. Reference to Ephesians 3:18.

<sup>246</sup> Wu, *One Gospel for All Nations*, xiv.

and traditions will be helpful as the church moves forward in managing conflicts in an increasingly polarized world.

### History as conflict prevention and management

History may prove to be a defining intervention in any imminent conflict. History and historians may well be able to prevent and resolve contemporary conflicts. It could be like the person sitting in the back of the annual church business meeting who raises her hand to be acknowledged when a pivotal decision is before the congregation. She simply says, "We've been there before, let's not go back down that road again." Such a historian and local church narrative can prove beneficial for future churches and future church conflict.

A historical overview of the first post-biblical church council at Nicaea may help those dealing with contemporary church conflicts, especially in council. Erkki Tuomioja, a historian, writes, "To assert that those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it may or may not be accurate, but ignorance will always increase the risk of being made an unconscious prisoner of history and prey to the machinations of politicians seeking to exploit history for their own ends."<sup>247</sup> A local church historian could be necessary as pastors often change churches and are unaware of local conflict history. At the very least, a certain level of briefing should be done from one pastor to the next to inform them of outstanding liabilities, historical church narratives (including conflicts), and any secure documentation of conflicts and narratives pertinent to the

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<sup>247</sup> Erkki Tuomioja, "History and Conflict: How Can Historians Contribute to Conflict Resolution and Conflict Prevention," *Historians without Borders*, July 25, 2017, 9, accessed January 7, 2021, <https://www.historianswithoutborders.fi/en/history-conflict-can-historians-contribute-conflict-resolution-conflict-prevention/>.

new pastor.<sup>248</sup> In addition, any reactionary or less than boiler-plate policy, polity, and procedures should be part of such a pastor briefing. Likely, the task will take significant effort on behalf of the board, elders, incoming and outgoing pastors, and staff. History is essential as signified by the political criminalization of Holocaust denial in several countries.<sup>249</sup> Written history may be an excellent means of conflict management in churches. Although local church histories do not often take the form of historical narratives, written policies, polity, procedures, and board and business minutes are a form of narrative history. The church's leaders should be well-versed in local church histories to help diffuse high organizational tensions.

Hare noted, "In my experience, 90 percent of the underlying causes of organizational conflict have structural roots."<sup>250</sup> Managing history gives way to the possibility of examining the "warts and all" of the organizational history.<sup>251</sup> Such "warts" are often unseen to newcomers and examining present structure can be accurate local history.

### Historical monuments

In recent United States history, the purging of historical monuments has served as painful reminders to the wounds of many. Likely, this will prove to be unnecessary as Tuomioja writes,

A regime change, whatever the viciousness of the former regime, should not and cannot entail erasing history, or the eradication of all the very concrete marks and monuments of the *ancient regime* has left. A cultured approach to historical monuments should leave an environment where traces of all our history, the more unpalatable and unsavory parts of it included can be seen and, as time passes, can be regarded as historical relicts which need

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<sup>248</sup> Paul exemplifies pastoral briefing when he sends his protégé Timothy a warning about a past conflict he had with Alexander in 2 Tim 4:14.

<sup>249</sup> Tuomioja, "History and Conflict," 2.

<sup>250</sup> Hare, *When Church Conflict Happens*, 70.

<sup>251</sup> Tuomioja, "History and Conflict," 3.

not unduly bother future generations but will serve as focal points in understanding our common past.<sup>252</sup>

All too often, churches try to erase the past blunders of congregation members and former pastors. Building monuments in the church to remember historical events is uncommon, except for relic church buildings and classrooms standing empty and disused. The necessity of organized local historical accounts, at the very least in written historical narratives and excellent policy, procedure, and polity, can become marks of healthy organizations that are apt to see the good and bad of their history. Tuomioja notes that no one has demanded the Roman Colosseum be demolished for its bloodied and horrible history.<sup>253</sup> History serves the leader's future, and the history of conflict has implications beyond written church history. Knowing where an organization has been can help the pathway of the organization's future.

### *Church Councils: Historical Structure of Church Conflict Resolution*

The term council refers to "a meeting of any group of people with responsibility to deal with issues facing the group."<sup>254</sup> The Roman Catholic church continues to see church councils as their primary avenue for pursuing peace and resolution to significant conflict in the church.<sup>255</sup> Local churches may rarely call their meetings councils, but elder and board meetings utilize similar conflict resolution techniques. Products of local councils may not be theological and doctrinal creeds; however, they are written in minutes and publishable statements. Councils are necessary

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<sup>252</sup> Tuomioja, "History and Conflict," 6.

<sup>253</sup> Tuomioja, "History and Conflict," 7.

<sup>254</sup> Joseph Francis Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church: A History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>255</sup> Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 3.

for church sustainability and conflict resolution. However, according to historical precedent, they are only biblical if the Holy Spirit is the primary resolution agent.

### Into church conflict history

The general or ecumenical nature of the Council of Nicaea is "widely accepted today."<sup>256</sup> The term ecumenical was not in use at the time of the first church council and therefore did not appear in the literature surrounding the period. The creed developed at Nicaea is generally accepted by all Christian denominations. What is significant to note is the "church's conciliar tradition goes right back to the apostolic age and that the guidance of the Holy Spirit working through the community was seen as the most effective way of achieving harmony and resolving difficulties."<sup>257</sup> The spirit of a church council reflects the desire for unity and the resolution of church conflicts through the power of the Holy Spirit's work. The church council at Nicaea is in form and circumstance much like the Council of Jerusalem, as a Holy Spirit-empowered decision and resolution. Biblical church formation should position the local church to resolve conflicts with the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the early church did. Later organized church councils can be considered less valuable as many are only applicable to the Roman Catholic Church, especially the last three councils.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 4.

<sup>257</sup> Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 14.

<sup>258</sup> Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 4.

### Effective nature of council

Seldom is an event in Christian church history realized as pivotal in the moment, even though the product of a conflict resolution, like the Council of Nicaea, is essential for the church. In fact, the list of councils of the church was not established until one hundred twenty years later after the first council at Nicaea.<sup>259</sup> Conflict resolutions seldom end conflicts immediately and conflict lingers after the formation of resolution documents. Marshall Shelley writes, "In real life... stories go on; the ends don't tie quite so neatly" even when policies or statements are made to best communicate the resolutions of the church's conflicts.<sup>260</sup>

### Council rules

The church councils eventually began setting ground rules, including disciplinary methods. Council rules manifested in 675CE and banned shouting, disturbance, joke-telling, idle stories, and other divisive practices, all based on Scriptural admonishments.<sup>261</sup> Similarly, many church polity documents call for the use of *Robert's Rules of Order*,<sup>262</sup> or some other type of parliamentary law. Despite the rules adopted after Nicaea, uproars still occurred, as there will likely be in church conflicts also. Despite a council vote of 316 to 2, many justifications for creedal support were less than orthodox. Consequences of breaching the ground rules of council

<sup>259</sup> Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 14.

<sup>260</sup> Shelley, *Ministering to Problem People*, 32.

<sup>261</sup> Norman P. Tanner, *The Councils of the Church: A Short History* (Pearl River, NY: Crossroad, 2001), 19.

<sup>262</sup> Henry M. Robert, *Robert's Rules of Order* (San Francisco, CA: Blurb, Incorporated, 2019).

would include temporary ex-communication or stripping the right to attend the council.<sup>263</sup> Creeds were typical products of the councils, such as in the case of Nicaea; the creed was one of the most outstanding products of any church council and "remains today, almost word for word, the basic creed of most Christian churches and is widely used in liturgy."<sup>264</sup>

#### Reaction to conflict: Nicaea's council

The Nicaean creed came in response to a conflict over the priest Arius' teachings against the Triune Godhead, specifically the deity of the second person of the Trinity and the place of the Holy Spirit among the Godhead. Many church statements are formulated in reaction to conflict rather than preventative of conflict. It has been said in many places and times; necessity is the mother of innovation. Further additions to the Nicaean Creed expanded the original wording (likely by anti-Arian agents) to include a direct refutation of Arian conflictive statements against the pre-existence of Jesus Christ as the second person in the Godhead.<sup>265</sup> What is important to realize is the "amazing creativity" of the church creed at Nicaea while at the same time remaining faithful to Scripture.<sup>266</sup> Church councils and church conflict resolutions can have lasting impacts on the whole church community. Conflict councils should be seen as opportunities for innovation and creativity in the church rather than cumbersome and time-consuming. Theologian David Fitch criticizes churches for their belief

<sup>263</sup> Tanner, *The Councils of the Church*, 19.

<sup>264</sup> Tanner, *The Councils of the Church*, 21.

<sup>265</sup> Tanner, *The Councils of the Church*, 22.

<sup>266</sup> Tanner, *The Councils of the Church*, 22.

that the pastor, with good skill, can arrive at the single right interpretation of the Scripture. No community need be involved. And since no conciliar process for doctrinal disputations in evangelicalism exists, conflict is inevitable. So when the pastor; elders, and congregation come together over a conflict in the church, they naturally proceed to arguing over who is right. They do not come together as members of the same body pursuing the same purposes in Christ to pore over Scripture in the unity of the Holy Spirit to discern the next way to go (Acts 15).<sup>267</sup>

Fitch further criticizes the church's use of modern CEO-business-style leadership methods as having created opportunities for pastors to be dictatorial and refuse the process of conciliar conflict management. Conflicts ensue when they cannot be resolved in community and with conciliar efforts empowered by the Holy Spirit. It has become expected in the modern church environment that "pastors might handle conflict via the terms of a top-down organizational chart as opposed to a patient discernment of a body of people guided by the Spirit."<sup>268</sup>

### Slow movements

As a general rule of conflict resolution, creedal resolution statements having a majority or even unanimity of support do not always solve the conflict entirely, and the original conflict may linger for many years. Slow movements toward church conflict were true of Nicaea: "The creed of Nicaea proved its worth initially for than a century, though the Arian controversy was slow in resolution."<sup>269</sup>

Conflictive agents may keep the conflict alive by criticism of the resolution or even spurring other minor conflicts. Future councils of the church would tweak, backtrack, and clarify

<sup>267</sup> Fitch, *The Great Giveaway*, 82.

<sup>268</sup> Fitch, *The Great Giveaway*, 72.

<sup>269</sup> Tanner, *The Councils of the Church*, 23.

the creed at Nicaea; however, "the process is indicative of the mood of the early council: frequent visit to the sources, from which new insights are drawn, cautious steps forward—a desire for consensus all the way."<sup>270</sup> After statements of resolution in church councils, the church should formulate a structure to revisit or refine them later to conceive unity, consensus, and purity. Furthermore, modern litigious behaviors in the west teach that once a statement has been made, having good notes of the process and written documentation or audio recordings during high levels of conflict is wise. Such documentation is helpful for journaling the events for memory (history) and actions taken for any future issues of liability. Historical narratives of church history, including local church history, are essential as it has been often said, those who forget the past are condemned to relive it.

### Lingering conflict

As already stated, church conflicts have a way of lingering on as conflictive agents continue to keep the basis of their arguments alive with whomever they can find to help stoke the fires of conflict. The first church council at Jerusalem, led by the Apostle James and head of the Jerusalem church community, was one such occasion for lingering conflict. Acts 15 records the Holy Spirit's work in the council to bring about a resolution of acceptance for the Gentile community into the Christian church, no small matter in the church world. Tensions were high as Paul had already been ministering to and baptizing Gentile believers in Christ. Paul presents his case for Gentile inclusion and subsequently "James, speaking on behalf of the other leaders under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28), agreed that the missionaries could go to the

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<sup>270</sup> Tanner, *The Councils of the Church*, 30.

Gentiles."<sup>271</sup> Though the biblical account seems quite definitive, the conflict continued even among the Apostles. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul mentions a reoccurrence of the same Gentile conflict with the Apostle Peter and their companion Barnabas. When members of the Jerusalem fellowship arrived in Antioch, Peter began to divide tables between Jew and Gentile and Paul rebuked Peter to his face in a church dinner.<sup>272</sup>

#### *Excuses: The Issue of North and South Galatia*

The Galatian letter describing the conflict between Peter and Paul in 2:11-14 is a matter of some debate. A cursory knowledge of the issue is necessary to make the statement about Peter's reversion to Jewish exclusivity in Galatians chapter two. Scholars have long debated the dating of the Galatian letter as it pertains to its geographical context. Paul and Peter's conflict at Antioch described in Galatians 2 is a matter of biographical index.<sup>273</sup> Generally explained, if Paul wrote the Galatian letter to the church in the north, it was written before the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. Inversely, dating the letter would fall after the Jerusalem Council if Paul wrote the letter to the south.<sup>274</sup> Did Paul and Peter's conflict about dividing tables among ethnic lines precipitate the council, or was it regression by Peter after council unity? To keep this excurses brief, scholars such as Richard Longenecker, F.F. Bruce, and W.M. Ramsay agree the probability

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<sup>271</sup> Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 15.

<sup>272</sup> See Gal 2:11.

<sup>273</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians, Volume 41* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2017), lxxii.

<sup>274</sup> Longenecker, *Galatians*, lxxii.

favors the South Galatian hypothesis.<sup>275</sup> Furthermore, in his commentary on Acts, Craig Keener agrees with the South Galatian letter destination favoring Luke's geographical detailing and Riesner's argument that Paul never entered into North Galatia on that particular journey surrounding Acts 15 when he and Peter were both in Jerusalem.<sup>276</sup> To conclude, it is more than likely that the Galatians 2 conflict between Paul and Peter was over Peter's departure from the conciliatory unity of Acts 15 and Paul's constant refutation of Judaizing. Issues such as these show lingering internal conflict in the church despite past agreement in council statements.

Although the biblical account found in the second chapter of Galatians does not offer Peter's defense, "Paul's account gives the first example of a recurring problem in conciliar history: believers, even leaders, who were reluctant to accept conciliar decisions."<sup>277</sup> Evidence of written history in other church councils also tells stories of conflictive agents, often leaders in the church, who may even agree with the council's decision but will keep the conflict alive afterward.<sup>278</sup> Lingering conflict is nearly inevitable even when a conciliar consensus is made with the majority or better

Layers of conflict among agents and imperial influence

Despite Constantine's political pull, some good comes from the layers of conflict present in Nicaea. "Division in the church is worse than war," said Constantine as he told the bishops to

<sup>275</sup> Longenecker, *Galatians*, lxviff.

<sup>276</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary : Volume 3: 15:1-23:35* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 2326–2327.

<sup>277</sup> Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 15.

<sup>278</sup> Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 15ff.

come to some type of unity on the divisions among them.<sup>279</sup> Though all but two bishops agreed in the council, the issue was nearly universally seen as unsettled at that time.<sup>280</sup> Despite the lack of settlement, conflict at Nicaea laid the "cornerstone for the orthodox understanding of Jesus Christ. That foundation has stood ever since."<sup>281</sup> Once again, despite the lingering and layers of conflict, conflict has a way of bringing about changes with a positive result even though they may be very long term. Scripture often quoted for such a matter is, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."<sup>282</sup>

### Conflict images

Visual implications in a council of early church bishops should have been enough of an image to know the conflict would likely be layered and linger as "many bearing scars from Roman persecutions—'some had the right eye dug out; others had lost the right arm,'" and others "'deprived the use of both hands by the application of red-hot irons'" gathered at Nicaea.<sup>283</sup> The primary conflict agent against the unity of the Nicaean council was Arian Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia. The Arian bishop was well connected, a great public speaker, and was able to communicate his doctrinal error to many people. The bishop went as far as to marginalize the

<sup>279</sup> Bruce L. Shelley, "The First Council of Nicea," *Christian History* 9, no. 4 (November 1990): 10.

<sup>280</sup> Shelley, "The First Council of Nicea," 10.

<sup>281</sup> Shelley, "The First Council of Nicea," 10.

<sup>282</sup> Rom 8:28 New International Version.

<sup>283</sup> John D. Hagen Jr., "The Real Story of the Council of Nicea," *America* 194, no. 20 (June 5, 2006): 19–20.

Council of Nicaea and the creed it formulated by making "disparaging remarks about Constantine's mother" (as Constantine's mother had been his father's mistress).<sup>284</sup> Sabotage, such as accusations of factual or less than accurate remarks, is not uncommon in contemporary church conflict. The images of church councils may serve as monuments for the less than desirable movements of historical narratives.

#### The Athanasius attitude: outlive and outlast

The Arian bishop had some success in his marginalization; however, another target did not fall so easily. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, became the target for the Nicaean debate. Those who opposed the divinity of Christ were known as Arians and those who supported the Nicaean Creed were known as Niceans.<sup>285</sup> Even though Arius died "of an intestinal hemorrhage in a public toilet, which the Niceans enthusiastically interpreted as a sign from God," the controversy lived on through Constantine's sons.<sup>286</sup> Athanasius would suffer greatly from his position and, though working to refine his theology, was still exiled multiple times by his opposition in the political world. Emperor Julian the Apostate (who came to power after Constantine II died childless) would abandon Christianity and yet still remark about the Arian vs. Nicean debate: "Wild animals do not attack one another as fiercely as do these Christians."<sup>287</sup>

Athanasius endured many criticisms and debates, not the least of them political rather than theological. Over the reigns of four emperors and thirty years, Athanasius was exiled five

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<sup>284</sup> Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 25.

<sup>285</sup> Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 26.

<sup>286</sup> Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 26.

<sup>287</sup> Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 27.

different times.<sup>288</sup> On one occasion, Athanasius was leading a vigil service when five thousand troops of Constantius broke down the doors and murdered many worshipers.<sup>289</sup> It would have seemed an imminent end for Athanasius; however, the worshipers picked Athanasius up and ushered him out the back door, somehow smuggling him through the soldiers.<sup>290</sup> The overall grit and steadied will of Athanasius are what prevailed against imperial terror

In Thom Rainer's book, *Breakout Churches*, Rainer writes about the typical cost among leaders of churches who became breakout churches: "The cost of becoming a breakout church, ironically, is most often the result of problem and conflicts with other believers. Many of the comparison church leaders grew weary of the struggle with fellow Christians. The breakout church leaders had no fewer conflicts, but they decided to persevere despite the pain and struggles."<sup>291</sup> In Rainer's research criteria, breakout churches are considered those that went through a period of decline and then had a pivotal upward turn toward growth rather than continued decline. Interestingly, Rainer's research "could find no evidence of greater challenges and problems with comparison churches" and "no evidence of lengthier challenges and problems with comparison churches. And we saw no indication that the breakout pastors had a higher threshold for pain. It just seems that the breakout church pastors made the decision to persevere, and that they sought God's strength to see them through their trials and difficulties."<sup>292</sup> The Athanasius attitude to persevere is one of breakout church leadership. Furthermore, Rainer's

<sup>288</sup> Hagen Jr., "The Real Story of the Council of Nicea," 20.

<sup>289</sup> Hagen Jr., "The Real Story of the Council of Nicea," 20.

<sup>290</sup> Hagen Jr., "The Real Story of the Council of Nicea," 20-21.

<sup>291</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009), 193.

<sup>292</sup> Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, 193.

research does not indicate any level of difference between experienced conflict in churches that have had a breakout period and those which continued to decline. Therefore, the issue is not a matter of the presence of conflict; instead, it is an issue of the ability to endure conflict by leaning on the Spirit's empowerment as a means of sustainable strength.

### *Conclusion*

Adopting the Athanasius attitude is a sure way of understanding the "how" of leading and getting along through conflict. Leadership should support the orthodox conciliar decision even when the powers of political forces and other leaders may oppose it vehemently. Furthermore, Athanasius managed to outlast the conflict, but he also outlived many of the significant conflict agents of Arian support. Arius himself died; even though his position lived on through Constantius II, the emperor also died. In a long-lasting conflict, when the agents of conflict either leave the conflict or die in conflict, the ability to reach complete resolution may soon result. However, agents such as Athanasius are necessary to outlive and outlast the opposing conflictive agents, or the opposition would likely gain ground.

Suppose the Holy Spirit is the primary resolution agent in the conciliar creed or conflict resolution of the church. In that case, agents who remain in support of the Spirit's resolution work through the ensuing conflict will be upheld by the Spirit's power to outlast and outlive the conflict, no matter how long it may continue. The work of the Holy Spirit is in conflict, just as Gregory of Nyssa continued the work of conflict resolution in support of Nicaea with his clear articulation. Gregory took the baton from Athanasius and put conflict to rest in the power of the Spirit rather than through simple human grit (although human grit is sure to be present).

Historical conflict is impossible to ignore, and subsequent councils may result in bringing about full resolution just as "a council to meet in Constantinople in 381... put an official stamp on the end of Arianism.<sup>293</sup>

Taking into account the Council of Nicaea was called in 325CE, it would appear the conflict was not fully resolved until after fifty-six years of waxing and waning conflict was over. In a modern Western culture, where instantaneous change and resolutions are nearly idolized, church conflicts may take an extended period to resolve. Pastoral tenure could also affect conflict resolution as the ability to outlive and outlast conflict and conflict agents is not a trend in western churches, with national averages of pastoral tenure so low.

Paul Franzen, who wrote a training manual called *Effective Church Councils*, believes the office of deacon was implemented because of the conflict over the marginalization of the Greek-speaking widows and orphans.<sup>294</sup> Structure, polity, and policy have their place even in the hodge-podge of the early church in the book of Acts. Furthermore, Franzen believes the Apostle Paul would not have come to such a central role in the New Testament without the various conflictive situations he led the early church.<sup>295</sup> Franzen writes, "no century of Christian church history has escaped controversy. Conflict accompanies the people of God on their journey of faith and discipleship,"<sup>296</sup> and "Conflicts help congregations achieve clarity on important issues."<sup>297</sup> While it may be a consolation to know the history of church conflict, it can be disheartening to realize

<sup>293</sup> Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 29.

<sup>294</sup> Paul S. Fransen, *Effective Church Councils: Leadership Styles and Decision-Making in the Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Pub, 1985), 35.

<sup>295</sup> Fransen, *Effective Church Councils*, 35.

<sup>296</sup> Fransen, *Effective Church Councils*, 35.

<sup>297</sup> Fransen, *Effective Church Councils*, 35.

no "Pax Romana" in the church will happen until Christ achieves eschatological hope. That is, until Christ takes back the in-person role of shepherd/pastor of the people of God, conflict will occur.

### *Conflict Experience*

Significant church conflict can be a fiery baptism of experience for many pastors. Jesus' statement about loving enemies<sup>298</sup> presupposes the Christian community would have conflictive partners in life as a natural outworking of being human. Conflicts have a way of more clearly defining the conflictive agents involved.<sup>299</sup> Such revelation of character can prove to help or hurt the conflictive situation. In embracing the tribulations of ministry, one finds that conflicts are not associated with the ministry; instead, conflicts are the ministry. Understanding the nature of experiential conflict leads to introspective questions for pastors. As Richardson describes, "Rather than asking the question, 'How do I change the church?' Bowen family systems theory suggests the minister should ask, 'What do I need to work on to improve my functioning within the emotional system of the church so that I can better represent the Gospel?'"<sup>300</sup> The depth of learning coming through the Christo-formative process leaders experience in conflict should reframe the frequent view of conflict among congregations as being "wrong and dangerous."<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Matt 5:43.

<sup>299</sup> Ron Susek, *Firestorm: Preventing and Overcoming Church Conflicts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1999), 23.

<sup>300</sup> Jenny Brown and Lauren Errington, *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry: Grappling with Theory and Its Application Through a Biblical Lens* (Sydney, AUS: Family Systems Institute, 2019), 9.

<sup>301</sup> McKnight and Mamula, *Conflict Management and the Apostle Paul*, 51.

It is necessary to give birth to a new view in the biblical frame allowing pastors and congregations to view conflict not as a means of being right or wrong but as an opportunity for growth.

### Experience and health

The health of ministers in conflict, who can experience chronically ailing organizational situations of anxiety, is paramount. The techniques that were useful during high levels of church conflict in the author of this dissertation's experience were those of self-differentiation, similar to biblical characters who practiced "going away" (differentiation) to pray like Jesus and Moses. Although many ministers focus on church growth formulas, data, and technique as the means of growth, the focus may need to be on removing the "clog in the pipe" of the underlying emotional process.<sup>302</sup> According to Friedman's work and Scazzero's application of systems theory to Christian ministry, training will allow leadership and staff to experience a long-term and sustainable ministry that is emotionally healthy and mature.

### Systems theory and experience

In his application of Bowen's theory to Christian ministry, Ken Morgan states, "Undifferentiation flows from unresolved parental attachment and the extent to which the work of growing away from the parents and into an individual adult remains incomplete."<sup>303</sup> Families exhibiting fusion

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<sup>302</sup> Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 31.

<sup>303</sup> Brown and Errington, *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry*, 210.

in the church who hold many positions and power create higher anxiety levels as they transfer familial anxiety into the organization. Bowen's theory relies on the biological system processes of the body and applying them to human relationships on a systems level. Balance in the biologic and social world between differentiation and togetherness occurs when, "cells with different functions cooperate for the preservation and procreation of the organism. The collective success depends on cells maintaining their individual biological integrity, defined by their outer membrane and specialized functions."<sup>304</sup> Experience has taught Friedman and Scazzero to look closely for unresolved parental attachments in families or low levels of differentiation, especially among leadership and staff. In the context of the author's experience, the contrast of parental detachment and low versus high differentiation among staff members caused a greater level of anxiety and conflict. Leading well depends on the ability to know self and understand the leader's limits. In this way, the leader has seen the walls of "their defined outer membrane and specialized functions."<sup>305</sup>

High levels of church conflict and anxiety create an opportunity to rely on fasting, prayer, and consultation of experts rather than fixing other people. The possibilities of organizational change and health are maximized when leaders modify their functioning and input into the system.<sup>306</sup> In this way, leaders are doing exactly what they are supposed to do: lead. Furthermore, the pursuits of education and activities of differentiation outside of church life were inherent and unintentional ways of differentiating the author from pastors' typical "rescuing" behavior.<sup>307</sup> Some emotional triangles pastors would have typically been drawn into and

<sup>304</sup> Brown and Errington, *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry*, 209.

<sup>305</sup> Brown and Errington, *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry*, 209.

<sup>306</sup> Brown and Errington, *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry*, 228.

<sup>307</sup> Brown and Errington, *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry*, 122.

emotionally exhausted to the point of burnout can be avoided by pointing oneself toward a self-differentiated life. Physical distance from the congregational problems and anxiety may also offer emotional distancing while maintaining pastoral connection.

### Contextual Applications

Churches experience a plethora of church conflict problems: financial strains; organizational tensions; suicide; youth and children misconduct; worship leader retirement; music style paradigm shift; war veteran PTSD; loss of membership; lack of formalized policy, procedure, and polity; the resignation of staff and contractor; violation of policy; resignation of a board member; sacred cows; and a myriad of other problems.

Furthermore, issues present in individual families often make their way into the counseling chamber of the pastor. Though all of these situations may not directly affect the church, they can affect the pastor, and, therefore, cause a chain reaction in his/her own family and indirectly on the entire system. The tangled web of causation can be overwhelming when conflicts appear on multiple levels. Generational observance can allow the pastor to identify conflictive issues that will make their way into the church and create opportunities to bring systemic healing. A pastor skilled in systems theory can do much good for healing the church family system by helping to heal the individual family system that makes up the church. Majority-size churches (churches under 100 members in the United States) are often filled with generations of the same family. This occurrence should be an advantage to pastoring people and not a disadvantage, especially when families are healthy or becoming healthy.

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## Current research

One particular issue of church conflict management is in the tenure of the church pastor. New pastors often bring new changes early in tenure, and caring for individuals is of extreme importance. Furthermore, "New pastors tread into chaos the moment they become the pastor of a local church," and it is necessary to identify and adapt to these crises early on.<sup>308</sup> The congregation's perception of the credibility of the pastor will grow with the pastor's ability to lead through the seasons of crisis in years two to five of pastoral tenure. Gary Allen writes, "While conflict itself may be uncomfortable or even painful, if the resolution process is positive the congregation can gain confidence in their abilities, increase the level of trust in their pastor, and each other, and learn how to utilize the process."<sup>309</sup> In short, church conflict is a positive opportunity for all parties involved to grow, to grow in relationship, and for the pastor to rapidly become the pastor of the church in the eyes of the congregation.

In analyzing research by the Evangelical Free Church of America, Greg Strand found "pastors are not considered a part of the locality until they have been there five years," and many church members do not feel that the pastor is "their pastor" until after about five years.<sup>310</sup> Feelings of disassociation from the pastor can be a significant barrier to communication. Time is necessary to establish trust, which is often born out of coming through conflict early in the pastor's tenure. Thom Rainer's research in pastoral tenure indicates the same analysis when

<sup>308</sup> Brad Hobbs, "The Relationship between a Pastor's Perception of Credibility, Focus, and Church's Organizational Crisis and the Process of Leading Change within the First Five Years of His Tenure" (Ph.D., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018), 174, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

<sup>309</sup> Gary R. Allen, "Conflict Management Training for Local Church Leaders in the Illinois District of the Assemblies of God" (D.Min., Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2005), 99, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

<sup>310</sup> Strand, "Pastoral Tenure."

stating, "most relationships do not establish fully until they go through one or two major conflicts."<sup>311</sup> Rainer and Strand's research consistently indicates that years two to five of the pastor's tenure are filled with conflict, and it is on the other side of these years of conflict when congregations feel the pastor is "their pastor."<sup>312</sup> Trust takes time to build in human relationships, and not the least of these relationships is in a pastor-congregation relationship. William Willimon writes of the tenure issue, "New pastors go through what is sometimes called 'the honeymoon' stage. More accurately, what feels like 'the honeymoon' is really the probationary period. This is a time of mutual testing, mutual probing. If the congregation finds that the pastor is a person who is trustworthy, then the stage is set for the first real crisis."<sup>313</sup> Surpassing the honeymoon of ministry is just the beginning of creating opportunities for pastoral creditability amid the ensuing crisis. Congregations need a pastor who is courageous enough to stay past the honeymoon period and address conflicts present in the congregation, "Even in a congregation's darkest hours, the Christian faith provides the resources necessary for making sense out of difficult situations and surviving them."<sup>314</sup>

In churches that commonly experience short pastoral tenures, congregation members may feel wounded or hurt by previous pastors. Trust relationships can take more time to build and are often made through the adversity of conflict.<sup>315</sup> It may be better for pastors not to assume a

<sup>311</sup> Thom S. Rainer, "Why It Takes Five to Seven Years to Become the Pastor of a Church," *Church Answers Blog*, August 21, 2017, <https://thomrainer.com/2017/08/why-it-takes-five-to-seven-years-to-become-the-pastor-of-a-church/>.

<sup>312</sup> Rainer, "Why It Takes Five to Seven Years to Become the Pastor of a Church,"; Strand, "Pastoral Tenure."

<sup>313</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 35.

<sup>314</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 17.

<sup>315</sup> Rainer, "Why It Takes Five to Seven Years to Become the Pastor of a Church."

pastorate at a new church unless they plan on staying at least seven years. Pastors in years two through five need to be aware that communication is distorted or limited by the shortness of their tenure. Pastors often communicate from the pastor's position, yet many respondents do not hear that communication from "their" pastor. Only time and a relationship built on trust can transcend such barriers to effective communication. Data collected by Greg Strand indicate "the typical period for significant conflict is in years 2 to 4," and "nearly 9 out of 10 churches in America are in need of turnaround leadership."<sup>316</sup> Rainer reported that the years of crisis for pastors are typically years 1-5, with a peak at year 3.<sup>317</sup> Rainer's research parallels conflict in the life of Jesus, which also peaked at year three of his ministry tenure.<sup>318</sup> The apparent problem is voiced by Greg Strand and Thom Rainer, who both report that most pastors do not stay at any given church past year five in the United States.<sup>319</sup>

### *Pastoral Conflict Experience Survey*

In order to help assist pastors and congregations with effective conflict management training, awareness, tools, and theology, a survey was developed in the fall of 2019 while researching church conflict in Theory and Practice of Ministry.<sup>320</sup> The survey used qualitative and quantitative questions among pastors of the Kentucky Ministry Network of the Assemblies of

<sup>316</sup> Strand, "Pastoral Tenure."

<sup>317</sup> Thom S. Rainer, "The Lifecycle of Pastors," *Church Answers Blog*, November 2, 2011, [https://thomrainer.com/2011/11/the\\_lifecycle\\_of\\_pastors/](https://thomrainer.com/2011/11/the_lifecycle_of_pastors/).

<sup>318</sup> Thom S. Rainer, "The Dangerous Third Year of Pastoral Tenure," *Church Answers Blog*, June 18, 2014, <https://churchanswers.com/blog/dangerous-third-year-pastoral-tenure/>.

<sup>319</sup> Strand, "Pastoral Tenure."; Rainer, "Why it Takes Five to Seven Years to Become the Pastor of a Church."

<sup>320</sup> Samuel Hemby and Scott Bowman, "Church Conflict Survey" (Southeastern University, 2019).

God. Most pastors who replied to the survey were Kentucky Network Presbyters. Presbyters are often longer-tenured pastors in the Network. Of the 20 ministers that responded to the survey, 11 were identified as presbyters, nine were lead pastors.

A few overlapping implications of the analysis of the data collected were revealed. First, pastors who believed they were communicating most effectively with their board, leadership, and congregation indicated they were dealing with less conflict in the church. Pastors who reported seldom having conflict in any given year or seldom having serious conflict in the church believed they were effectively communicating with their congregation or staff/board always or often. Only one minister reported occasionally communicating effectively with board/staff.<sup>321</sup> This finding also correlated effective communication with longer pastoral tenure. Of the seven pastors who believed they always communicated effectively with their congregation or leadership, five had average tenures over 11 years. Of the seven pastors who reported the average number of years in each pastorate as over 11 years, only one reported having occasional serious conflict. The other six pastors reported seldom having serious conflict. Pastors who have an average church tenure of 6-11 years, which was the largest group surveyed (nine of 20 pastors), most of these pastors reported experiencing conflict often or occasionally.<sup>322</sup>

One conclusion of this data could be that pastors with longer tenure feel they are communicating more effectively because they have taken the time to learn the skill of communicating in context. Another area of effective communication can be understood in bylaws, procedures, and policies that help communicate effectively with staff, congregation, and leadership. Clear communication in these areas may facilitate conflict management or even

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<sup>321</sup> Hemby and Bowman, “Church Conflict Survey”.

<sup>322</sup> Hemby and Bowman, “Church Conflict Survey”.

prevent conflict. Policy, procedure, and bylaws can have a wide-ranging effect when it comes to communicating effectively. Only 2 of the 20 pastors surveyed indicated the church had job descriptions, training, leadership training, and clear expectations or core values in place as part of their facilitation or prevention of church conflict. Most pastors referred only to their district-adopted bylaws (which only contains recommendations for using an arbitrator) or reported having no conflict prevention or facilitation policy or bylaws in place.<sup>323</sup>

Organizational polity, policies, and procedures are not the more appealing parts of ministry but are necessary for effective communication. Church polity is about communicating expectations of righteousness in both directions: for leaders and congregation. Clearly communicating these values may curb conflict frustrations by effectively communicating the “why and what” of church polity and policy. Righteousness reigns supreme in the order of the organization. Polity, policy, and procedure exist in written form to be followed for righteousness’ sake on an organizational level. The leader who desires righteousness is filled inside and outside, in the organization and outside the organization, with the purity that righteousness produces.

Recent research by Brad Hobbs on *The Relationship between a Pastor’s Perception of Credibility, Focus, and Church’s Organizational Crisis and the Process of Leading Change within the First Five Years of His Tenure* found the most crucial element for pastors leading change in the first five years of tenure is leading with a love for people.<sup>324</sup> Hobbs writes: "New pastors perceived their creditability increased when people perceived the pastor cared for them as individuals and their communities."<sup>325</sup> The congregation's perception of the creditability of the

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<sup>323</sup> Hemby and Bowman, “Church Conflict Survey”.

<sup>324</sup> Hobbs, “The Relationship between a Pastor’s Perception of Credibility,” 173.

<sup>325</sup> Hobbs, “The Relationship between a Pastor’s Perception of Credibility,” 173.

pastor will grow with the pastor's ability to lead through the seasons of crisis in years two to five of pastoral tenure.

Policies, polity, and procedure have a way of communicating effectively with all those involved in the church body. Rather than one person, often the pastor (who has lower creditability), or board making an arbitrary decision, policy is resolved by a larger number of people who want what is best for the whole organization. Decisions become streamlined because policy, polity, and procedure are already in place and effectively communicated. In some churches where these measures are not in place already, it may be necessary for a pastor to bring such policies or request them from other well-established churches. Job descriptions communicate ministry expectations in written form and procedures for violations of those expectations. Organizational communication practices ensure everyone has their due share of equity and fairness as the ministry goes forward.

### Conflict management training

All 20 pastors surveyed reported that the pastor, leadership/board/staff, or congregation had little to no conflict management training. Only half of the surveyed pastors reported having adequate training; the other half reported having little, very little, or no conflict management training. This research section may have the most disparaging results.<sup>326</sup> Research by Yoo Hyoung Kang on the "Result of Teaching Conflict Management to Church Members" found that the group who received conflict management training "underwent significant changes."<sup>327</sup> As a result of the

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<sup>326</sup> Hemby and Bowman, "Church Conflict Survey."

<sup>327</sup> Yoo Hyoung Kang, "Result of Teaching Conflict Management to Church Members" (D.Min., Oral Roberts University, 2005), 117, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

training and research by Kang wrote, "results testify to the absolute need of implementing a training program to help church members to manage their conflicts."<sup>328</sup> Furthermore, results of research conducted by Gary Allen on "Conflict Management Training for Local Church Leaders in the Illinois District of the Assemblies of God" stated, "Every effort should be made to teach conflict management as an ongoing process and as a basic element of pastoral preparation and local church discipleship and leadership training."<sup>329</sup> Training in conflict management can lower the severity of conflicts, disarm fear and anxiety, and may also have implications for the impact of church conflict on the ministers and their families<sup>330</sup>

All 20 ministers surveyed reported being personally affected by church conflict. Eight pastors reported that church conflict consumed time. Most pastors reported that church conflict affected them physically (loss of sleep, physical health) and emotionally (anxiety, frustration, relational tension, emotionally draining). Nine pastors reported that it affected their family, causing strain, difficulty, and tensions (often with the pastor's spouse). One pastor even reported that it caused him to question his calling to ministry. Fifteen of the 20 pastors reported stress, anxiety, or frustration from experiencing church conflict.<sup>331</sup>

### Implications of pastoral Church Conflict Experience Survey

Conflict management training for congregations, boards, pastors, and leaders will have far-reaching impacts on church conflict management. Training in the Bowen family systems theory

<sup>328</sup> Kang, "Result of Teaching Conflict Management to Church Members," 117.

<sup>329</sup> Allen, "Conflict Management Training for Local Church Leaders," 95.

<sup>330</sup> Allen, "Conflict Management Training for Local Church Leaders," 98-99.

<sup>331</sup> Hemby and Bowman, "Church Conflict Survey."

can lower anxiety levels in congregations and give pastors and congregations the tools to cope more productively.<sup>332</sup> Practical analysis and measuring of church and individual anxiety levels can help manage anxiety and prevent patterns of emotional cutoff. Half of the pastors surveyed reported that the resolution of major conflict resulted in people leaving the church. While some circumstances warrant such departure, spiritually mature people may help diffuse situations from getting to the point of cutoff. Effective training in church conflict and the Bowen theory can help circumvent emotional cutoff and bring a higher level of maturity and effective communication practices to the entire body of Christ. Bowen suggests certain practices to mature and self-differentiate individuals.<sup>333</sup> Only three pastors surveyed gauged the main characters of their church conflict's spiritual maturity level to be above average, and nine of the pastors gauged the main characters of the conflict to be below average or lower in spiritual maturity.<sup>334</sup> According to Gary Allen, conflict management training can be viewed as a church discipleship technique and warrants a significant impact on a believer's maturity.<sup>335</sup>

Christians who reach spiritual maturity level four have a Kingdom-Centered mindset and are more likely to involve themselves in personal sacrifice for others and "foster brotherhood and sisterhood."<sup>336</sup> People of this maturity level are more apt to see others' situations beyond their preferences and minister to their needs. Spiritually mature people could be instrumental in

<sup>332</sup> Norman Thomasma, "Utilizing Natural Family Systems Theory to Foster Health in Congregations: Murray Bowen as Teacher of Congregations," *Reformed Review* 58, no. 2 (February 10, 2005): 119–128, 123.

<sup>333</sup> Thomasma, "Utilizing Natural Family Systems Theory," 123.

<sup>334</sup> Samuel Hemby and Scott Bowman, "Church Conflict Survey."

<sup>335</sup> Allen, "Conflict Management Training for Local Church Leaders," 98-99.

<sup>336</sup> Timothy S. Gibson, "Proposed Levels of Christian Spiritual Maturity," *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 32, no. 4 (2004): 302.

circumstances of church conflict as they do not react in self-preservation but act in "justice and shared community."<sup>337</sup> Spiritual maturity, discipleship, and training have implications for all parties in church and are not limited to congregations. Leaders and pastors must be necessarily involved.

Training in the Bowen theory may also help curb the statistic of short-tenured pastors. Generally, a strong correlation exists between longer-tenured pastors and church health.<sup>338</sup> Angella Son offers a summary of Friedman's consultation with the Bowen Family Systems Theory that indicated characteristics causing burnout among ministers:

1. Degree of isolation between the congregation and other congregations in its own faith community or limits local community.
2. Degree of distance between the lay leadership and the general membership.
3. Extent to which the lay leadership allows the congregation to pre-empt its entire emotional life (no other friends or social networks).
4. Degree to which the lay leadership has intense inter-dependent relationships with one another beyond their congregational functioning, such as being related through blood, marriage, or business.
5. Inability of the lay leadership, particularly the 'president' or the senior warden, to take well-defined positions, independent of the complainers.<sup>339</sup>

Son's summary stated in number four was true among 9 out of 20 pastors surveyed. These nine pastors indicated that the problem-causing members involved in the church conflict always or often had deep interconnected relationships with other church members. Another six pastors indicated that these relationships among conflictive members were present occasionally. Son advises ministers to recognize these characteristics, try to protect themselves from being caught in established dynamics, and address characteristics via an approach with the Bowen Theory.<sup>340</sup>

<sup>337</sup> Gibson, "Proposed Levels of Christian Spiritual Maturity," 302.

<sup>338</sup> Strand, "Pastoral Tenure."

<sup>339</sup> Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause," 17.

<sup>340</sup> Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause," 17.

According to the survey results, pastors reported a wide variety of conflicts they encounter in their churches. Reports of conflictive situations were rarely repeated, and some examples of surveyed pastors' church conflicts are as follows: music differences, correction, tradition, dissatisfaction, sexual misconduct, marriage issues, former pastor's problems, control, and finances. Almost no single most conflictive problem was repeated among the surveyed pastors. Yoo Kang encountered much the same issue in his research on church conflicts writing, "the reality of the presence of a variety of conflict in the church must be accepted."<sup>341</sup>

For shorter-tenured pastors, it is necessary to take the long view of the church: "Leaders take the long view and patiently await the end of all things for God is the one who will make all things right."<sup>342</sup> If conflictive partners could acknowledge and redirect all frustration, move on from it, and return it to God, they could channel their discontent to the Spirit, Christ, and their Heavenly Father. Congregation members could make their complaints and petitions to the One who can do something about them. To some degree, tensions and conflicts in the church are an eschatological cry for total redemption and consummation. Blaming leadership as the source of conflicting interests within congregations is not uncommon; however, this blame may not always be true. Christians long for a perfect future world. Taking up a level of theodicy is helpful. One must be well aware that all creation is in process and, therefore, by definition, imperfect.

Unreasonable expectations of the church being perfect is a fouled concept. Constant grace and forgiveness must be at the forefront of every frustration. Interestingly, many pastors (at least seven) used the term "frustration" about their experience with church conflict. Romans 8:20-22 uses the same terminology: "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its

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<sup>341</sup> Kang, "Result of Teaching Conflict Management to Church Members," 117.

<sup>342</sup> Hawkins, Forrest, and Roden, *Biblical Leadership*, 247.

own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope<sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."<sup>343</sup> Church conflict is a reminder that churches, pastors, and leaders have not yet arrived at perfection, and conflict creates opportunities for discipleship, change, and transformation. Although church conflict may not be the most comfortable for pastors through the early years of ministry, William H. Willimon, in his book, *Pastors*, invokes the memory of the first church martyr: "Stephen reminds us that leadership in the church is cruciform."<sup>344</sup> Despite the "pelting" of conflicts the pastor may experience, a consistent vigilance is necessary to do what is best for God's people and honor God through the calling to leadership.<sup>345</sup>

Leadership experts Kouzes and Posner, researching "Personal-Best" leadership experiences, found the best leaders described, "dealing with misfortune, with turbulence, and with unexpected difficulties and hardships... venturing out into unchartered waters- personally, professionally, and organizationally."<sup>346</sup> Grit and determination must be part of the pastor and church leader's mentality to do what is necessary for the kingdom of God and Christ's church. Kouzes and Posner describe "psychological hardiness" as necessary for leaders to cope positively with stressful environments.<sup>347</sup> Though mental hardiness may be necessary for both leadership venues, church and business, the business world lacks a significant theological hope. Scripture

<sup>343</sup> New International Version, emphasis added.

<sup>344</sup> William H. Willimon, *Pastor: Revised Edition: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*, Revised edition. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 74.

<sup>345</sup> Hawkins, Forrest, and Roden, *Biblical Leadership*, 263.

<sup>346</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Learning Leadership: The Five Fundamentals of Becoming an Exemplary Leader* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 101.

<sup>347</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *Learning Leadership*, 122.

constantly gives the church an eschatological hope that one day all conflict will be resolved and replaced by a blessed union of working together in peace.<sup>348</sup> Peace and justice are on the horizon, and this hope allows pastors, leaders, and congregations to endure what is necessary until the end.<sup>349</sup>

## Conclusion

The experiential survey help show certain commonalities of pastoral experiences with church conflict. Research may help implement effective conflict management in contemporary churches. Conflict is an inherent and normative part of the church, and the question is not about church conflict resolution but church conflict management. Furthermore, the conflict experience survey decidedly voiced the need for effective communication to prevent and manage church conflict. Effective communication can take many forms and has a broad spectrum of influences: policy, polity, procedure, conflict management training, positive framing of conflict, and acknowledging the universal nature of organizational conflict and suffering. Reflecting on church conflict experiences is a necessary component of building a church conflict theology.

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<sup>348</sup> Isa 2:4 New International Version, “He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.” See also, Micah 4:3.

<sup>349</sup> Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 216.

### *Christological Philosophy of Church Conflict: Christ in Conflict*

Many people view conflict as a negative aspect, even viewing conflict as part and parcel of the fall of humankind.<sup>350</sup> However, conflict is not sin, but it is often defined by sinful reactions to conflict such as violence. Conflict transformation expert Ellen Ott Marshall believes “To be is to be in conflict.”<sup>351</sup> Ott Marshall also believes conflict is not a result of the fall of humankind. Marshall instead believes conflict is a result of creation, leading one to believe that the Genesis repeated statements of God’s creative movements as “It was good” necessarily create conflict by defining what is not good.<sup>352</sup> By examining every passage in the book of Luke with conflict lenses, the concept appears similarly to Ott Marshall’s beliefs about conflict: everything is conflict, and conflict is everything. Jesus either uses conflict or initiates conflict as a means of communicating gospel and kingdom message. Conflict affords the opportunity to bring about transfiguration and change, help learn and unlearn, and prod the deepest parts of human motive and worldview. Jesus mastered the art of conflict to communicate the gospel and transform and transfigure people. Christ’s conflict methodology, applied to a time where conflict and polarization are constants, may be the path forward for the church. Conflict can be a legitimate seedbed and philosophy of pastoral ministry as Christ himself is a controversialist. To view conflict in a new lens creates opportunity rather than “a roadblock to real ministry but is an occasion for real ministry.”<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Ellen Ott Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics: Conflict, Faith, and Human Life* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 5.

<sup>351</sup> Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 1.

<sup>352</sup> Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 5.

<sup>353</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 50.

### *Conflict Transfiguration*

Jesus creates tensions and ways of making people think differently about the kingdom and God's revelation. Conflict offers excellent opportunities to bring about transfiguration and change.

Every conflict offers the agents of conflict the opportunity to be transfigured by the presence of the Holy Spirit, who is often the initiator of conflict, especially in the church. One conflict author, Anita Bradshaw, writes, "Conflict may, in fact, be a sign of the Holy Spirit's activity.

The Holy Spirit is a guide, a teacher, and provoker."<sup>354</sup> Transfiguration is a term inherently understood as a Spirit-empowered move to change an individual's image to Jesus' image, or in the congregation's case, the body to look more like its head. When pastors and preachers become the primary conflictive agent in the church and world and can control, mediate, push and pull, and move in and out of conflicts as means of causing change and transfiguration, the church can move more forcefully toward a healthy system. The basis of Conflict Transfiguration is on the application of family systems theory and Jesus' pivotal statement in Luke 12:49-53,

I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

Family systems theory, congregational health, theology, and the Christology of conflict management all converge in Luke 12. Jesus' pivotal statement addresses conflict in the family system and Christ himself as the primary and initiating conflict agent. Ideally, the conflict agents

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<sup>354</sup> Anita L. Bradshaw, *Change and Conflict in Your Congregation (Even If You Hate Both): How to Implement Conscious Choices, Manage Emotions and Build a Thriving Christian Community* (Woodstock, VT: LongHill Partners, Incorporated, 2015), 37–38.

are being transfigured into the image of Jesus Christ through the conflict and by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit and Jesus can be seen as present and working to resolve or manage conflicts and the initiator and subsequent mediator of conflict to bring about transfiguration. Therefore, conflict transfiguration allows the pastor or kingdom communicator to become Christ in conflict and the conflict's primary conflictive agent and initiator.

Organizationally, the church is the primary missional vehicle of the mission to convey the kingdom message of the gospel to the world. However, internal conflict arises as missional churches look outward; sometimes, the organization turns on its leaders. Crucifixion is both the inevitable and intended outcome of conflict transfiguration. New pastors often parallel the three-year ministry of Jesus as conflict escalates. The parallel conflict is the overarching narrative of conflict transfiguration. The Luke 12 pivotal passage is likely 18-24 months<sup>355</sup> into the ministry of Jesus, and apparent conflict escalates at three years ending in crucifixion.<sup>356</sup> In parallel, as shown in other places, two to three years is when a new pastor experiences the highest level of conflict. Therefore, if suffering and pain are inevitable in conflict, the only appropriate action may be to get better at suffering. Self-differentiation is a means of managing suffering brought on by conflict.

High levels of anxiety are central stopping mechanisms in the flow of organizational efficiency in systems theory. When high levels of organizational anxiety stop the system's progress and efficiency, the system slows to a grinding halt in nearly every capacity. Spiritual communication, pulpit communication, and organizational movements are thwarted through high

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<sup>355</sup> Zondervan, *NIV, Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 1666–1667.

<sup>356</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Charts of the Gospels and the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 56,86,88.

levels of conflict and organizational anxiety. A particular commitment to outlast the conflict (resilience) by the pastor operating as Christ in conflict, according to Luke 12, will allow the pastor to come through conflict with a greater level of congregational confidence in the leadership of the pastor. To outlast and outlive conflict is essentially a pastor's resurrection after he/she has spiraled downward towards crucifixion and the grave. If a new pastor does not experience a crucifixion story, the preceding pastor likely has one to tell.

Suffering produces transfiguration, as expressed in Christ's suffering case of Hebrews 2:10, "In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make **the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered.**"<sup>357</sup> Jesus was transfigured first via suffering. Any person working diligently to convey the Gospel of Jesus Christ should consider their ministry to run parallel to Christ's. The resurrection must come if a failure of nerve is avoided in the escalating conflict.

While it may seem wise to go into a new pastorate with significant shifts in organizational change and arrive as the primary conflictive agent, a more Christological timeline is best. The new pastor should instead follow the 18 to 24 months as necessary to understand the culture, context, conflicts present, and establish close relationships. Then the pastor can most wisely become the primary conflictive agent with conflict intelligence. Suffering comes inherently with the Christ-centered pastoral ministry. In Jared Alcantara's book, *Learning from a Legend, What Gardner C. Taylor Can Teach Us about Preaching*, Alcantara quotes a sermon by Gardner, whom himself is remembering playwright Henrik Ibsen: "'Who taught me to sing?' And the answer comes back, 'Sorrow taught me to sing.' 'Who taught me to pray?' 'Trouble taught me to pray.' 'Who put you on your knees? 'When the world knocked me down, there was

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<sup>357</sup> New International Version, emphasis added.

nowhere else to go except to my knees.”<sup>358</sup> Gardener captures the reality for those who experience conflicts in life. From wherever conflicts may come, pain and trouble create opportunities for positive personal change. Positive change happens as “Pain makes us rely more on God.”<sup>359</sup>

### Parallel pastorate

Hebrews 5:8-9 gives context to pastoral ministry, “Though he was God’s Son, he learned trusting-obedience by what he suffered, just as we do. Then, having arrived at the full stature of his maturity... he became the source of eternal salvation to all who believably obey him.”<sup>360</sup> Congregational members come and go in conflict, and the maturity of the pastor is critical for the congregation’s health to be emotionally differentiated throughout the conflict experience. Remaining emotionally mature during conflict leaves the door open for the return of many members. Self-differentiation is a means of endurance or resilience to outlive and outlast the conflict experienced in pastoral ministry. Jesus is the only fully self-differentiated individual and experienced perfection through obedience to suffer. The parallel of the pastorate is necessary to embrace in the journey down the *Via Dolorosa*.

Although many may resist Christological timeline to become the primary conflictive agent, especially in contexts of high-powered, personality-driven leadership, Christ exemplifies an entirely different scheme. The plan of Jesus in conflict is intentionally set toward Jerusalem.

<sup>358</sup> Jared E. Alcántara, *Learning from a Legend: What Gardner C. Taylor Can Teach Us about Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 24.

<sup>359</sup> Alcántara, *Learning from a Legend*, 24.

<sup>360</sup> The Message Translation.

The escalating conflict that would reach its pinnacle on Calvary required a more profound motivation.<sup>361</sup> The additional layer of conflict is of cosmic proportions in Christ's veiled battle with Satan and death. For Jesus, despite the apparent defeat, his victory was paradoxically ensured by death. Resurrection is impossible without death. For pastors leading churches, the paradox of following Jesus is realized in the path Jesus first walked that leads to the cross.

### *The Mystery of Conflict*

Sometimes sharp conflict in congregations is not so easy to discern as conflicts are not necessarily engrossed in moral arguments of what is right or wrong and rather “between competing<sup>362</sup> goods.” John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite theologian (a community known for its peace-making emphasis), wrote about the interpersonal movements inside the body of believers in his work, *Body Politics*. Yoder draws attention to the nature of what it means to be human: “To be human is to have differences; to be human wholesomely is to process those differences, not by building up conflicting power claims but by reconciling dialogue.”<sup>363</sup> Dialogue is often more helpful to the Christian community than monologue.

All dialogue is socially helpful, and “Conflict is socially useful; it forces us to attend to new data from new perspectives... by processing conflict, one learns skills, awareness, trust, and hope.”<sup>364</sup> The benefits of conflict dialogue are likely too significant to list when conflict is

<sup>361</sup> Luke 9:51.

<sup>362</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 90.

<sup>363</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Walker, MI: Herald Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>364</sup> Yoder, *Body Politics*, 8.

viewed positively. The lasting effects of conflict benefits go beyond the restoration of a person to the community in conflict.

Estimating logical outcomes of church conflict seems possible but is not necessarily predictable. In systems theory terms, conflict is an emotional process rather than a logical process and appeals to the mysterious nature of the human experience. The disciples indeed considered Christ's plan of death and resurrection mysterious. Some people leave churches because of conflict, and others come to the conflict to add to the mystery. What may necessarily have been used for evil can illogically turn to good by God's Spirit. A level of mystery, a word meaning "to shut the mouth," should be acknowledged during conflict and when trying to predict conflict outcomes. Insecurities of conflict outcomes are better left outside of board rooms, church offices, and meeting halls, while at the same time acknowledging the mysterious work of the Spirit's initiation of conflict. On the surface, conflict appears as chaos or mystery, but in the sight of God, conflict is predictable and expected.

### Spiritual mystery

Conflict takes many forms; one of them can be in a layer of cosmic proportions. Powers, principalities, and rulers may be adding to the conflictive layers even discerning eyes have trouble seeing. Prodding these sometimes-demonic layers, they will become identifiable. Dark or evil overtones to conflict happen even when one tries to keep the best regard and hope for the character of conflictive agents.

Jesus uncovered layers of spiritual and demonic influence even among his chief apostle. Peter was directly rebuked by Jesus, “Get behind me Satan!”<sup>365</sup> Good or honorable intentions may have demonic proportions. Layers of spiritual conflict can often go unnoticed until a discerning gift is present to identify them. Layers of spiritual or systemic sickness are usually hidden from new people coming to a church organization. It may not be unusual to have spiritual layers of conflict buried among people closest to the pastor on arrival (Peter). Later, these same agents are revealed as antagonists in later conflict (Peter at Caesarea-Phillipi or Peter the night of betrayal). The question is when the layers of spiritual conflict are exposed, how do those carrying demonic and humanistic influence react to the light? Do they answer the call toward true discipleship and dive deeper into Christ’s rebuke, or do they run away and wait for another time to come out under shadow? Church conflict experiences can defy logic itself. In the end, the presence of mystery lends itself to the pastor’s need for absolute dependence upon the Holy Spirit to navigate the mystery church conflict.

### Cosmic conflict

Eschatological concerns of conflict are always at play in the spiritual realm as Girdler writes, “Although the players may be invisible, we live in the context of a titanic war in which the opposing forces of light and darkness contend for the souls of men and women. Scripture assures us that although this invisible war is real, it is also temporary; God himself will bring history to a point at which this cosmic conflict will be finally resolved.”<sup>366</sup> Girdler’s research explored real-

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<sup>365</sup> Matt 16:23.

<sup>366</sup> Girdler, “The Superintendent Leader-Shift from Pastoral to Apostolic Function,” 112.

life encounters of denominational leadership in church conflicts, and they were often described as highly spiritual and possibly demonic. John Stott writes of the spiritual nature of the Sadducees' controversies with Jesus as their "minds had become blinded by prejudice or by rationalism or by the Greek culture they had absorbed. They no longer submitted to the revelation of God."<sup>367</sup> Likely, the Sadducees' submission was toward the revelation of the demonic world. Pastor Jim Cymbala addressed a similar trend in the American church: "Today, we have an anti-authority spirit in America that says, 'Nobody can tell me I need to change. Don't you dare.'"<sup>368</sup> Cymbala indicates, "about 90 percent of the time, the problems people describe to me are not their real problems," and the challenge is to "get to the bottom-line spiritual issue."<sup>369</sup> Jesus has a way of cutting directly to the spiritual heart of problems in his controversies, as Cymbala indicates is necessary.

John Stott seeks to prove Jesus was a controversialist through examining his many conflicts with religious leaders as Jesus directed "the inquirer's attention to God himself."<sup>370</sup> The work of Christ in conflict was to appeal towards God, the ultimate authority, while at the same time validating that Christ carried God's authority with him on earth. Stott was trying to see Christ in conflict to refute many of the bending cultural trends happening in the church today. Pastors can become as Christ in conflict to bring conflict for the cause of transfiguring agents into the image of Christ via controversies similar to those of Christ in the gospels.

<sup>367</sup> Stott, *Christ in Conflict*, 49.

<sup>368</sup> Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire: What Happens When God's Spirit Invades the Hearts of His People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 127.

<sup>369</sup> Cymbala, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, 127.

<sup>370</sup> Stott, *Christ in Conflict*, 97.

### Breaking patriarchy: a family systems approach to Luke 12:51-53

In the Gospel of Luke, the chapter 12 passage is overwhelmingly pivotal.<sup>371</sup> Despite the Lukan angelic announcement at the birth of Jesus, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests,” peace on earth appears as a paradox in Jesus’ ministry. Swords, the word used for division by Matthew when citing the paradoxical statement of Luke 12:51, are generally not known for their peaceful function. A sword functions as a tool of dividing flesh, and this division must be what Jesus meant to do.

The rational and historical sense of the Messiah’s arrival was ultimate peace. When Jesus reprimands his followers for believing the deceptively easy thoughts toward categorizing Jesus’ ministry as peaceful, the homeostasis of the family is disrupted. Jesus meant to go after the entire system, beyond the religious system; he also wanted to carve up the family system. Ellen Ott Marshall links the Luke 12:51 passage to Jesus’ initial sermon at Nazareth and writes, “He might as well have said, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to do disruptive, contentious, and quarrelsome things!’”<sup>372</sup> Jesus’ initial severance activity was a well-placed slice between the patriarchal relationship of father and son. To deepen the pain of the sword’s division, Jesus sets the entire homeostasis of internal family relationships tumbling to the floor, all while peaceful angelic Christmas songs play in the background. In-laws, father and son, mother and daughter, everyone has a conflict with everyone else. Conflict is everything, and everything is conflict, to take on the poetic nature of Jesus’s words. Division comes by ultimate allegiance toward Jesus only. Matthew adds insight to the paradox of family division through cruci-formation in conflict

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<sup>371</sup> See appendix: Matrix of Jesus’ Conflict Management Techniques.

<sup>372</sup> Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 76–77.

as made explicit in Matthew's expansion of the conflict initiated by Jesus in Luke 12, and a layer of paradox is evident as life is gained apart from the paternal relationship,

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household." Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

Jesus is the new paterfamilias, and he claims total allegiance, breaking patriarchy and other filial ties.

#### Blood relationships disrupted and semiotics of conflict

Differentiation between familial allegiances is not just severing ties for their own sake. It appears Christ is encouraging differentiation from one's own family of origin and fusion with himself as a new family of origin. The covenant Christ creates is "in my blood" as new relationships are formed through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.<sup>373</sup> The prophetic fulfillment of Simeon's moment in Luke 2 culminates in a prophetic word to Mary referencing Jesus' conflictive self, "Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and **to be a sign that will be spoken against**, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'"<sup>374</sup> Simeon's prophecy is directed at Mary and indicates that Jesus' presence is a sign of conflict among many. The Greek word for sign is semiotic. Modern semiotics is the study of

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<sup>373</sup> Luke 22:20.

<sup>374</sup> Luke 2:34-35, New International Version, emphasis added.

signs and symbols and their interpretation. The signs and symbols of conflict are sometimes obvious and other times shrouded by nearly demonic veils. Jesus' presence in any given system will likely be a sign that conflict is imminent.

Anita Bradshaw attributes the following quote to German theologian Jügen Moltmann, "Show me a church where there is no conflict, and I will show you a church where the Holy Spirit does not reside."<sup>375</sup> In the church context, Christ's presence disrupts homeostasis, resulting in people rising and falling. Friedman writes,

The concept of homeostasis also helps explain a system's resistance to change... There are family members who seem to function as the anxiety trap for their system, and who regularly go to their form of a 'plumber' to be disgorged so that they can protect the rest of their system again... Ironically, the same qualities that allow for 'familiness' (that is stability) in the first place, are precisely what hinder change (that is, less stability) when the family system is too fixed.<sup>376</sup>

The Luke 12:51 division (sword) is first present in Luke 2:35 as it is prophesied to pierce Mary's soul. The semiotic of the sword present in Jesus' family is creating division and prophetically tied to the crucifixion of Christ. The sword reappears in John 19:26-27 as filial schism while the sword pierces Mary's soul as Jesus is dying on the cross. Jesus assigns his mother's long-term care to John the beloved and not his own brothers by blood: "When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, 'Woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home."<sup>377</sup> The semiotics of conflict are all present: Christ, the sword, blood-related family, and the newly created family of Christ. Christ's nuclear family is not divided for long as scripture shows his

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<sup>375</sup> Bradshaw, *Change and Conflict in Your Congregation*, 39.

<sup>376</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 24–25.

<sup>377</sup> New International Version.

brothers come to faith post-resurrection.<sup>378</sup> One can hypothesize that the conflict of filial schism Jesus enacted with his mother may have created an opportunity to press his brothers to faith, along with Christ's resurrection. Craig Keener comments on the Acts 1:14 passage indicating Jesus' blood-brothers new faith,

Jesus taught that disciples must be prepared to risk alienating and losing the support of their families for the sake of the kingdom (Luke 14:36; 18:29; 21:16), including by caring for the needy more than for near kin who were not so needy (14:12). Jesus had treated his own family accordingly, **ranking discipleship above family ties** (8:19-21; cf. 18:22-30); **that his family now followed him** (Acts 1:14) **might encourage others who had to make similar sacrifices** (cf. 16:31-32).<sup>379</sup>

The actions of Christ's severing sword created the opportunity for others who may have to take the same course of action in conflictive relationships. Systemic changes, brought through the disruption of homeostasis, affect both the larger system as well as the nuclear family. Jesus disrupted both his own family system and the religious system simultaneously. The redeeming hope of total allegiance to Christ is the salvation of brothers and sisters in blood and bond. Or, in systems theory terms, Jesus has changed the genealogy (genogram) of those who give their full allegiance to him as depicted below:



Figure 2.5 A New Family of Origin

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<sup>378</sup> John 7:5, Acts 1:14.

<sup>379</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary : Volume 1: Introduction and 1:1-247* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 749, emphasis added.

### Untying constrictive family knots

A well-defined self is more attractive to a lover than a self who is so enmeshed and tied up in the identity of the other. Separation of the overdependent union between family members was the mechanism through which Jesus would break the patriarchal allegiance once for all. Edwin Friedman writes extensively about congregational families with applications of systems theory. Friedman once wrote about a family business in which a well-educated son began computerizing inventory.<sup>380</sup> The ensuing division is one mirroring the Luke 12 poem as Friedman writes, “There followed a struggle for control of the company stock that pitted father against son, mother against daughter, and it almost destroyed the firm. A similar dispute almost destroyed a small church when the son of a previous leader tried to substitute pledge cards for passing the plate.”<sup>381</sup> Any level of disruption to the homeostasis brought into a system so intricately tied together by family or pseudo-family relational ties is bound to be less than peaceful.

### Systemic diagnosis and the other conflict transfiguration

Jesus’ name-calling, such as “white-washed tomb” and “brood of vipers,” was directed toward the family line of scribes and Levites to cause internal division and ultimate allegiance to Christ rather than family ties to tradition and religion. Name-calling, a conflict management tactic of Jesus,<sup>382</sup> should not be considered a simple insult but naming and diagnosing systemic dysfunction (i.e., co-dependency, racism, addiction, and other pathologies of systemic

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<sup>380</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 203.

<sup>381</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 203.

<sup>382</sup> See appendix, *Conflict Matrix*.

dysfunction). Some may feel uncomfortable with the image of Jesus as the primary conflictive agent. However, John Stott writes, “The popular image of Christ as ‘gentle Jesus, meek and mild’ simply will not do. It is a false image. Certainly, he was full of love, compassion and tenderness. But he was also uninhibited when it came to exposing error and denouncing sin, especially hypocrisy. Christ was a controversialist.”<sup>383</sup> Conflictive agents, as they are transfigured by the conflict and name-calling as diagnosis, indicate systemic disease on the one hand. However, on the other, Christ in conflict sees the other conflict parties transfigured to be who they were beyond outward appearance. Conflict parties opposing Jesus were transfigured and diagnosed by Christ in conflict as “hypocrites,”<sup>384</sup> “child of hell,”<sup>385</sup> “blind guides,”<sup>386</sup> “fools,”<sup>387</sup> “whited sepulchers,”<sup>388</sup> and “brood of vipers.”<sup>389</sup> Transfiguration always happens in conflict, either in transfiguration to Christ in conflict or transfiguration as an unveiling of actual appearance. Conflict has a way of causing people to define themselves, their positions, and their true identity. Not all transfiguration and self-defining is pleasant and welcoming, but it is always revealing. Willimon writes, “Jesus preached away more people than he won.”<sup>390</sup> Jesus was known for his bold and confrontational statements addressing issues considered to be against the truth, such as, “You are badly mistaken,”<sup>391</sup> and “Are you not in error because you do not know

<sup>383</sup> Stott, *Christ in Conflict*, 43.

<sup>384</sup> Matt 23:15.

<sup>385</sup> Matt 23:15.

<sup>386</sup> Matt 23:26.

<sup>387</sup> Matt 23:17.

<sup>388</sup> Matt 23:28.

<sup>389</sup> Matt 12:34, 23:33.

<sup>390</sup> Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, 64.

<sup>391</sup> Mark 12:27.

the Scriptures or the power of God?"<sup>392</sup> Jesus intentionally placed questions to provoke conflictive agents to escalation as well as deep introspective thoughts such as "How do you read it?"<sup>393</sup> and "Have you not read?"<sup>394</sup> Jesus' questions created controversy as Jesus calls into account skewed interpretations of Scripture long muddled by traditions and teachings bending toward misunderstanding and ignorance.<sup>395</sup>

Keener describes the insult as a specific expression of his opponents' character, "the alleged behavior of newly born vipers apparently became proverbial in ancient Mediterranean thought... the newborn creatures chewed their way out of their mothers' wombs, killing their mother in the process."<sup>396</sup> Jesus makes similar indications of the teachers of the law's actions concerning their parents and widows in Mark 7:11-12 and Luke 20:46-47. The Luke 20 passage indicates the appearance of the teachers of the law as only a shroud to "devour widows' houses." Jesus' systemic diagnosis references the conflictive agent's "reprehensible" immorality despite the Pharisees and teachers of the law's claim of "honorable decent."<sup>397</sup> Thus diagnosing the system's deep-rooted sinful behavior is a transfiguration of the opponents of Christ's true image. Jesus saw people as they were, he saw them transfigured before him, and the hypocritical masks were laid aside.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> Mark 12:24.

<sup>393</sup> Luke 10:26.

<sup>394</sup> Mark 12:26.

<sup>395</sup> Stott, *Christ in Conflict*, 47.

<sup>396</sup> Craig S. Keener, "'Brood of Vipers' (Matthew 3.7; 12.34; 23.33)," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28, no. 1 (September 2005): 7.

<sup>397</sup> Keener, "'Brood of Vipers', 11.

<sup>398</sup> Hunsinger and Latini, *Transforming Church Conflict*, 67.

### Conflict as an opportunity for self-definition

John Lederach writes: “Conflict is an opportunity, a gift...conflict flows from life... rather than seeing conflict as a threat, we can understand it as providing opportunities to grow and to increase understanding of ourselves, of others, of our social structures.”<sup>399</sup> Conflict creates an environment where people must define themselves and make statements identifying who they are and their purposes in the relationship. For better or worse, self-identifying statements are positive identifications made in the relationship. Those defined by conflict who express Christian character are revealed as patient people. Kreider writes while quoting early church father Cyprian, “Patience is a distinctive sign of the Christian; it enables believers to live ‘in the way of Christ’ amid the crisis of their lives. Patience will ‘temper anger, bridle the tongue, govern the mind, guard peace... extinguish the fire of dissension, restrain the power of the wealthy, teach us to pardon our offenders quickly and to ask pardon of other.’”<sup>400</sup> Patience is the fruit of Christ’s Spirit necessary for every church leader enduring conflict. Leaders who allow conflict to do its work in patience will reap a great reward if they do not allow their Christ-like patience to be thwarted or the culture’s constant desire for unmitigated growth (which is more akin to obesity than healthy increase) to sabotage health.

Kouzes and Posner write of life’s conflicts and challenges as self-defining moments of one’s heart, true intentions, and desires: “Challenges, difficulties, setbacks, and hardships are all familiar sights on the leadership landscape. And one of the things they cause you to do is to come face-to-face with yourself. They are a rather harsh way of reminding you of what’s most

<sup>399</sup> John Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 18.

<sup>400</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 30.

important to you, what you value, and where you want to go.”<sup>401</sup> Conflictive moments bring people face to face with themselves, perhaps more than with the people they conflict. Conflictive moments take on a better opportunity to address the issues of self-image, self-value, self-identity, and self-efficacy rather than opportunities to make change happen for others. All conflictive parties will face themselves in conflict; it is what one does with the transfigurative opportunity as they face themselves in conflict. Some people will hide from conflict, not because of the conflict itself, instead, they hide from what they saw in themselves.

Conflict pastor Jim Van Yperen contributed to Barna’s *Leaders on Leadership* when he writes, “conflict defines a leader.”<sup>402</sup> Not only does conflict create opportunities for self-definition, Van Yperen believes conflict is a defining part of leadership. Conflict escalation occurs, and people further polarize themselves, reaching emotional cutoff if not mediated. However, defining oneself in conflict allows for de-escalation. The one who defines themselves does not allow the other conflictive party to threaten by accusation, whether true or false. Confession, repentance, and humility are necessary to de-escalate high tensions. A humble attitude allows dialogue rather than quick problem-solving techniques that often refuse another’s concerns.<sup>403</sup> To define oneself through conflict is an attempt to de-escalate conflict and is itself a transformative work.

Knowing self is essentially making some summary claims about one’s self-identity. Therefore, decisive claims about self, becoming, and limitations in identity are essential factors

<sup>401</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *Learning Leadership*, 103.

<sup>402</sup> George Barna, *Leaders on Leadership (The Leading Edge Series): Wisdom, Advice and Encouragement on the Art of Leading God’s People* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1998), 239, quotation is from Van Ypern’s contributed article to Barna’s work.

<sup>403</sup> Barna, *Leaders on Leadership*, 245.

in conflict management. However, a decisive nature will inherently bring about conflict with others as former university president Mark Rutland notes: “If you are a decisive person, you are going to piss people off. If you decide to stay alive tomorrow, that in itself is liable to make somebody unhappy. Once you settle that in your mind, it’s strangely liberating.”<sup>404</sup> The conflict created by defining and deciding may cause short-term fallout, but people respect a leader trying to be authentic to themselves and others in the long term.

### A deeper exegesis

Luke 2:49-53,

I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

John Nolland comments, “Jesus has been commissioned to cast down upon the earth the fire of eschatological purgation, which is associated with that coming judgment.”<sup>405</sup> Angelic promises of “peace on earth” are likely indications of eschatological peace. What must come before peace is purgation to create a landing space for Jesus’ kingdom of peace in the latter days. Any proclamation of the coming of Jesus means breaking of the most intimate of ties (purgation), even those between family members. Jesus appears to be quoting Micah 7:6, “For a son

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<sup>404</sup> Mark Rutland, *ReLaunch: How to Stage an Organizational Comeback* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2013), 120.

<sup>405</sup> John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34, Volume 35B* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 707.

dishonors his father, a daughter rises up against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law— a man’s enemies are the members of his own household.”<sup>406</sup> The passage’s context in Micah’s poetic misery is his lament over the lack of trustful relationships, evil present in the world, and evil against himself. However, Micah concludes his ultimate allegiance and trust lie in the Lord in verse seven, “But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me.”<sup>407</sup> The purpose of Jesus’ quotation is to spur the same measure as Micah; a severance and lament of all the world’s relational ties are to be transfigured to sole trust and allegiance toward Christ. However, even Christ indicates he wished the process of fiery purgation were already underway.

Whether Jesus wished the kindling of the fires of division were started earlier in his ministry is debatable; what is not debatable is his acknowledgment of imminent strife he was to undergo (baptism) and the strife he was engendering among people.<sup>408</sup> The baptismal floodwaters are likely the imagery Jesus is creating among family strife, one of purgation, and hinting at the culture's patriarchal foundations. Just as Jesus is resolute to face the ensuing conflict in Jerusalem, Jesus is resolute to undergo the baptism by the sword as a pioneer of all those who will follow after him. Jesus first experiences paternal emotional cutoff as he describes in excruciating pain, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>409</sup> and it leaves one to question which pain was more intense: paternal cut-off or the nails in his hands and cross on his back? Either way, it was most undoubtedly excruciating.

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<sup>406</sup> New International Version.

<sup>407</sup> New International Version.

<sup>408</sup> Nolland, *Luke 9*, 708.

<sup>409</sup> Matt 27:46, New International Version.

### Peace and the peacemaker

The peace in Jesus' ministry is muddled at best. Nolland comments, "The language here (Luke 12) is deliberately paradoxical: 'peace' is self-evidently the goal of Jesus' ministry and of the Jewish eschatological hope that Luke confidently presents as finding its fulfillment in connection with Jesus."<sup>410</sup> Further juxtaposition of John the Baptist's forerunning ministry to "turn the hearts of the fathers to their children"<sup>411</sup> exists in Jesus' Luke 12:51 statement. Paradoxically, Jesus is identifying himself as the creator of the tension between father and son, and at the same time, his ministry, according to John, is unification. Household division and conflict is not a byproduct of the ministry of Jesus; it is his destiny.<sup>412</sup> The ensuing conflict is centered in family life and costly to those who follow Jesus, but the eschatological hope in Jesus, the "prince of peace" who will bring all conflict to a close in the future. A peacemaker is often misunderstood, as peace is a long-term eschatological peace rather than bringing peace to the present moment. In summary, the reference to Micah 7:6 is paramount; the conflict anticipated is worth the intimate and personal cost to follow Jesus, as the path to lasting eschatological peace has only one Way, via Christ's conflict sword.

### Purposeful severance in grafting

Jesus knew the allegiance of patriarchy and family relationship would be some of the most challenging bonds to break. Jesus must sever these relationships with swaths of the sword only to

<sup>410</sup> Nolland, *Luke 9*, 709.

<sup>411</sup> Luke 1:17.

<sup>412</sup> Nolland, *Luke 9*, 710.

reattach later a new familial line, or in other terms: graft.<sup>413</sup> Grafting by necessity takes a severance to allow for new branches as Paul inclines of the Gentile inclusion in Romans 11:17-24. Severance comes to the vine's existing branches as well as the branches to be grafted. There is no escaping the sword of conflict, not even for Christ into whom one is grafted. In conflict transfiguration, based on the Luke 12:51 passage, Jesus takes on the primary conflictive agency to bring about purposeful severance. Friedman describes something similar in systems theory terms: "The capacity of clergy to be paradoxical, challenging (rather than saving), earthy, sometimes crazy, and even 'devilish,' often can do more to loosen knots in a congregational relationship system than the most well-meaning, 'serious' efforts. Again, this is not because being paradoxical affects the content in the heads of others (reverse psychology), but because the act of being playful frees others by forcing them out of their serious 'games.'<sup>414</sup> Church leadership expert and researcher George Barna writes:

Some will agitate, constantly raising irritating questions about the necessity for change. Others will become so distraught that they will leave the congregation. Do not fret over such departures. Everyone grows differently. As the church moves in one direction, God may be calling those people to grow in a different way. That may mean introducing them to a different body, one that is more aligned with their views. Vision sometimes has a cleansing element to it, which reflects changing needs, conditions and growth. These changes can be emotionally painful, but they can be healthy for the church.<sup>415</sup>

Jesus may have been being somewhat playful at the end of a long discourse of teaching in Luke 12; the passage could quite possibly have had such a challenging tone in verse 51: "You think I came to bring peace! Ha! I came to bring a sword!" The context of expectation the Messiah

<sup>413</sup> See Matt 8:21ff, Luke 9:59ff, 14:26.

<sup>414</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 209.

<sup>415</sup> George Barna, *The Power of Vision: How You Can Capture and Apply God's Vision for Your Ministry* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1992), 148.

carried would have been a war on the Gentiles,<sup>416</sup> but Jesus reverses this expectation and brings the war into the family system. Jesus had a way of creating conflicts that revealed dysfunction and warped thinking stemming from broken hearts. Jesus seemed always to be driving conflict toward the heart and spur transfiguration of the conflictive agents he engaged. Luke 12:51 is therefore pivotal in that Jesus was communicating the kingdom through conflict. Before Luke 12:51, Jesus is the initiator of conflict in two cases: Luke 7:11-17 as Jesus does battle with death and poverty over the widow of Nain's son, and in Luke 9:1-11, he is in conflict with demons, disease, and inhospitable cities.<sup>417</sup> However, the tide turns in Luke 12:49-57 when Jesus identifies himself as the primary conflictive agent. From this point on, in the majority of conflicts, Jesus is identified as the initiator and primary conflictive agent. Most of the book of Luke can be structurally categorized as the conflict narratives of Jesus. Some of Jesus' most used conflict diffusion techniques include asking questions, teaching, parabolic exposition, healing, and rebuke. The closer Jesus gets to Jerusalem, the more he escalates conflict and yields to the compulsion of the Spirit's will.

It should be noted, “unction” is a term commonly used to describe the passion and push of the Holy Spirit in an individual’s life to spur transfiguration. Unction of the Spirit appears to have lead Jesus head-on into the conflicts he experienced and will likely lead many others into the same conflict of the Spirit even when defeat is apparent. Peace is eschatological, though all experience some level of peace now. Not all conflicts end well or are diffused, many in Jesus’ case are left open, but all conflicts ultimately resolve in the eschatological glory of the risen Christ. The declarative statement of Christ immediately before his death is much like one made

<sup>416</sup> Zondervan, *NIV, Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, 1775.

<sup>417</sup> See Appendix, *Matrix of Jesus' Conflict Management Techniques*.

at the end of an epic story, “It is finished,”<sup>418</sup> and is more a statement akin to that of the end of a wrestling match than a theological treatise. Craig Keener cross-references the “It is finished” statement directly to Luke 12:50, speaking of Christ’s baptism of vicarious judgment that he will undergo.<sup>419</sup> The link described by Keener is the proof positive of Jesus’ intention to transfigure all humanity through the conflict in which he engages in people and for people. If Jesus had taken the position of primary conflictive agent too early in his ministry, it would have been too much *unlearning*, more closely related to drinking from a firehose. Jesus waited; the timing was perfect, as too much of the “‘new wine’ would have burst their minds.”<sup>420</sup>

### *Christ in conflict and conflict transfiguration*

Developing the field of conflict transfiguration means it is necessary to delineate it from the field of conflict transformation. Although both fields seemingly overlap and use systems theory as a theoretical framework, conflict transfiguration differentiates itself from conflict transformation in the object of what is being transformed and transfigured. The difference is more than simple terminology. Conflict transformation is about transforming conflict; conflict is the object transformed.<sup>421</sup> However, conflict transfiguration is about the transfiguration of people into Christ’s image in conflict or transfiguration of other conflictive agents and antagonists in conflict as a revelation of their true character and nature. Christ saw people as they were, transfigured before him. Jesus imaged people as they were transfigured and subsequently named and

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<sup>418</sup> John 19:30.

<sup>419</sup> Zondervan, *NIV, Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, 1775, 1853.

<sup>420</sup> Sweet and Beck, *Contextual Intelligence*, 134.

<sup>421</sup> Hunsinger and Latini, *Transforming Church Conflict*, 30ff, emphasis added.

diagnosed their spiritual condition: “white-washed tombs,” “blind guides,” “hypocrites,” and others. Nomenclature has changed over the years from conflict resolution to conflict management and most recently, by in large, to forms of positive conflict views creating opportunities for conflict transformation. However, post-COVID-19 pandemic, it may be necessary for the field of conflict research to adopt conflict transfiguration

Looking once again at the convergence of systems theory, conflict transfiguration, and Luke 12:51, it could be possible to re-translate the passage, “Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, *I came to disrupt the homeostatic patterns of life.*” The agents of conflict against Jesus believed they would sabotage Jesus by killing him, but in turn, their sabotage accomplished Christ’s will for all humanity. Jesus interrupts the homeostasis of religious and sociological systems, and sabotage ensues, breeding escalation to higher levels of conflict. Jesus embraces the tension of conflict and becomes the primary conflictive agent post-Luke 12:51. Jesus also endures the sabotage of those who seek to restore the homeostasis of the system.<sup>422</sup> Paradoxically, the saboteurs accomplish the finishing touches of Christ’s severing sword through crucifixion. Jesus is transfigured through the conflict which ultimately results in the resurrection. All those who follow Christ will walk the road toward the same transfiguration by death and resurrection.

Transfiguration comes as one walks as Christ in conflict. Those who create conflict meant for evil are transfigured and revealed as who they are, exposed by their sabotage. Those on the other side of the conflict are transfigured through suffering as the Spirit upholds and

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<sup>422</sup> See Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, page 186, for more information on efforts to restore homeostasis and ensuing trauma.

sustains them in conflict, and they will emerge transfigured into the image of Christ in and through conflict.

### *Conflict Intelligence*

#### Conflict management tactics of Jesus

Jesus managed conflict; he did not always try to resolve it. It appears Jesus managed to cause more conflict than he resolved.<sup>423</sup> Mark DeYmaz, in his book, *Disruption*, writes, “As you might imagine or know from experience, being a peacemaker is not at all easy. It takes faith, courage, and sacrifice as well as prayer, patience, and persistence to set aside your own personality and preferences for the sake of the greater good. In word and deed then, peacemakers are often misunderstood, misjudged, and maligned.”<sup>424</sup> Jesus was a peacemaker, but not the one everyone anticipated. Peace came through the long vision, an eschatological vision, but divisions would be created through conflict in the meantime. Metaphorically, peacemakers wield the surgeon’s scalpel and clean wounds of their illness. No one desires to go under the knife (or sword) except to see long-term goals of more permanent healing. Peacemakers are not generally identified for the scalpel they carry, but neither did they identify Jesus as Messiah by the sword he carried and used for surgery on human hearts rather than defeating Gentiles at war. Many people would desire organizational leaders to wield a sword to cut off the people they oppose rather than see the sword sever their dysfunctional ties, bringing healing.

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<sup>423</sup> See Appendix, *Matrix of Jesus’ Conflict Management Techniques*

<sup>424</sup> Mark DeYmaz, *Disruption: Repurposing the Church to Redeem the Community* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 172.

People's problems and conflicts are not a side effect of ministry and the gospel work; problems/conflicts are ministry. Transfiguring to become Christ in conflict is taking the long view as an effective witness to Christ. The unique position of long-term ministry and gospel communication allows ministers to see systemic dysfunction from generation to generation and mediate and control conflict to bring about systemic healing. The mysterious shifting patterns of conflicts are opportunities for Christ(s) in conflict to recognize the opportunity of the often volcanic and ground-shattering opportunities for change. Conflict intelligence then, in biblical terms, is to be "absorbed into the mind of Christ and turn the energy of those shifts into opportunities."<sup>425</sup>

### Trouble in paradise

Organizational healing is a community task and is often led by systemic healers such as pastors. Friedman writes, "One of the most universal experience of clergy everywhere is that things can appear to be going smoothly when suddenly there is 'trouble in paradise.'"<sup>426</sup> Jesus said something similar, "Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets."<sup>427</sup> Too many pastors and change agents have the problem of dealing with systemic symptoms rather than the dysfunctional processes of the system. Congregational systemic dysfunction appeals beyond the congregation to the church's work in the world as the world is one extensive dysfunctional system. The same works of a minister in

<sup>425</sup> Sweet and Beck, *Contextual Intelligence*, 25.

<sup>426</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 202.

<sup>427</sup> Luke 6:26 New International Version.

the congregation can work for the community system in which the church is part. Martin Luther King Jr. is an excellent example of addressing systemic dysfunction in the larger community from the church's platform. Dealing with symptoms only allows the diseased agents to stop their symptoms periodically; they will inevitably rear their heads again in the future. Observations of one family generation to the next allow people to see dysfunction's signs and symbols and apply the severing sword of healing with skilled hands. Friedman wrote, "family issues rarely surface spontaneously, and even when they appear to, they do not have to continue on malignant thresholds."<sup>428</sup> The appearance of systemic troubles within a church or community system are no encumbrances to ministry; instead, they are opportunities for positive changes and systemic healing.

### Snapshots of conflict

Reading the signs of conflict is a necessary skill to become Christ in conflict. The skill of knowing when to push and pull people into conflict and when to wait or listen is an art form of conflict intelligence itself. Freidman inclines that the self-differentiated leader is the only one who can mediate such transfiguration of the conflictive agents. Christ, the only fully differentiated person, knew well how to manage conflict in a way that was not just best for himself but the entire universe. Well-differentiated leaders can stop and take snapshots in conflict and recognize interaction dynamics, standing apart from the emotional process like a cameraperson. When someone reflects on a photo, they usually have deep emotions tied to the picture. However, the cameraperson stands apart, watching the hugs, joy, pain, and triggers of

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<sup>428</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 202.

emotion on display. These snapshots allow them to work the angles of conflict to bring about systemic healing rather than simply treat the symptoms.

### Core narratives and questions that expose them

Jesus' conflict management technique to diffuse conflict and at the same time distribute new metaphors to live and work by inundates the gospels. Kouzes and Posner, leadership experts, found in conflictive and critical incidents that "storytelling was the only thing that worked" and were "powerful tools for teaching people about what's important and what's not, what works and what doesn't, what is and what could be."<sup>429</sup> Furthermore, change expert John Kotter advises leaders to use metaphors as a means of creative interaction between "word/image" to make the "message memorable."<sup>430</sup> Storytelling is likely a pivotal means of effective communication for any change effort or during conflicts, as Jesus exemplified.

Jesus was the master questioner, and a skilled questioner has the therapeutic ability to expose to the core narratives by which people live. The first time Jesus speaks in the scriptures, he is asking questions of his parents in a family conflict as Joseph and Mary searched for the boy in Jerusalem, "'Why were you searching for me?' he asked. 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?'"<sup>431</sup> A significant component of Jesus' conflict management tactics was asking multiple questions.<sup>432</sup> Through various conflictive moments, Jesus went layers deep into the core of a person's story. While Jesus was deep into the core of consciousness, he would find the

<sup>429</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 90-91.

<sup>430</sup> John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1996), 91ff.

<sup>431</sup> Luke 2:49, New International Version.

<sup>432</sup> See Appendix, *Matrix of Jesus' Conflict Management Techniques*.

masterful way to remove the dysfunctional core narrative and replace it with a one Jesus newly created. Church conflict experts Hunsinger and Latini note that well-differentiated pastors, who have no interest in “being right” but withhold judgment in conflicts and effectively ask questions prompt “the parishioner to look inward and explore her own feelings further. The pastor keeps her focus on her parishioner’s feelings as they point to underlying needs”<sup>433</sup> Good questions and genograms (charts of a person’s ancestry or even an entire city) are a way of discovering the history of a family system to give a skilled peacemaker the ability to cut away familial dysfunction. Jesus used story and parabolic teaching to create a new narrative or new metaphor for people to live. Parabolic teaching and metaphor are another conflict management tactic.<sup>434</sup>

Questions themselves are invocative—questions lead to a conversation—opening an engagement to both listen and be heard in dialogue. Matthew Croasmun writes: “Jesus asks questions. He engages people—his followers, his critics, and strangers he meets along the way—inviting responses from them, genuinely interested in what they have to say.”<sup>435</sup> Dialogue through effective questioning teaches the other to hear a voice outside of self. Essentially, Jesus uses questions to draw people into conversation with himself and, in turn, teach them to listen to the voice of God.<sup>436</sup> Though discerning the voice of God is no easy task, conversational dynamics with God will likely not go unnoticed, even to the most resistant. In the moment of effective questioning, one must be present to the other in dialogue. Christ is calling those in church conflict to continue the same, present to one another and Christ in dialogue. Keeping

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<sup>433</sup> Hunsinger and Latini, *Transforming Church Conflict*, 88.

<sup>434</sup> See Appendix, *Matrix of Jesus’ Conflict Management Techniques*.

<sup>435</sup> Matthew Croasmun, *Let Me Ask You a Question: Conversations with Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2018), 7.

<sup>436</sup> Matthew Croasmun, *Let Me Ask You a Question*, 11.

Christ's image in a person in view while looking a conflictive agent in the eyes is just as necessary as being present to Christ in dialogue.

When the critics come blazing into offices and among leadership, reactions by leaders to do introspective evaluation are not a bad option. Effective questioning, even self-questioning, leads people to define themselves better and differentiate themselves from others and the system they are apart. A healthy church or community symptom is that, when the pastor/leader turns up the heat of conflict, the congregation and leadership react with creativity and positivity rather than with anxiety or shut down. Creative reactions rarely desire to go back to homeostasis.

## Conclusion

It has been said, H.G. Wells wrote, "At 50 everyone gets the face he deserves." Similarly, Van Yperen writes, "Conflict reveals who we really are."<sup>437</sup> There is a particular spirit to the congregation and individuals of conflict that will necessarily reveal itself, although it may take some time. Conflict has a way of transfiguring people into the image of who they truly are, some are white-washed tombs, and some are rapidly changing into the image of Christ in conflict. To examine conflict in light of Christ's conflicts lends itself to the belief conflict itself requires transfiguration. Many improperly managed church conflicts have left people with the taste of adrenaline and flight or fight experiences. To see a clear theology and philosophy of church conflict based on Christ in conflict may help transfigure conflict into a more palatable experience.

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<sup>437</sup> Van Yperen, *Making Peace*, 24.

The severing grace of Christ's sword of division is one to be embraced rather than resisted, even when it breaks deep-rooted patriarchy. Christ's ministry of transfiguration is unavoidable; even to sabotage the process of transfiguration is transfiguration and only yields to the resurrection experience. The Spirit desires to redirect "energy-filled anxieties" to build a positive construction through conflict rather than simple resolution.<sup>438</sup> Conflict can be transfigured to what it has always been, a constructive means of the Spirit who desires to bring about transformation and change to natural and divine relationships.

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<sup>438</sup> Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 28.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### THE PROJECT NARRATIVE AND FIELD WORK

#### *General Perspective*

Stanford leadership expert Jim Collins writes toward the need for conscious effort to grow in character as a leader:

Indeed, for those of you with a strong, charismatic personality, it is worthwhile to consider the idea that charisma can be as much a liability as an asset. Your strength of personality can sow the seeds of problems when people filter the brutal facts from you. You can overcome the liabilities of having charisma, but it does require conscious attention.<sup>1</sup>

The depth of the theology and philosophy of church conflict in this dissertation may sufficiently help pastors do the long work of growth in character and conflict management. To discern the effectiveness of the Spirit-filled theological quadrilateral (reason, experience, history/tradition, and Scripture) along with the Christological philosophy of church conflict, presented in chapter two, a seminar will be developed. Qualitative research will be collected, including a pre-seminar (including baseline data on the subject of church conflict) and a post-seminar survey to ascertain the effectiveness of this dissertation's theology and philosophy of church conflict. The five individual parts (quadrilateral and philosophy) will be taught in the seminar, and surveys will be evaluated.

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't* (HarperCollins, 2001), 73.

### Research context and participants

The research context for this dissertation will primarily be the ministers of the Kentucky Ministry Network of the Assemblies of God. The Kentucky district superintendent has volunteered his help to advertise and encourage the ministers of the network to attend the conference. The research process will include inviting local ministers in the Frankfort/Lawrenceburg, Kentucky area (outside of the AG network) to participate. The facilities of New Harvest Assembly of God in Frankfort, KY will be the location of the seminar.

Of the 12 ministers who attended, the demographics were diverse. Attendees included one Charismatic Roman Catholic Priest (full-time), an African American Baptist Pastor (bi-vocational), and the rest of the ministers were in the Assemblies of God context. However, the AG ministers were diverse in their ministry context. Three of ten pastors (full-time) were Hispanic; also, one youth/family pastor (bi-vocational) and one worship pastor (bi-vocational) were represented. Two Kentucky network executive pastors (full-time) participated as well as a federal prison chaplain (full-time) who pastors multiple congregations in the prison system participated. The remaining two pastors were lead pastors (one bi-vocational and one full-time). Two of the ministers were females, and the rest were male. Only two of the pastors were under the age of 50, with the exception of one African American and three Hispanic pastors, the other ministers were Caucasian.

Multiple education levels were represented. Three ministers had a bachelor's degree, three had master's degrees, and three had no degrees. Two ministers had doctorates, and one minister had a denominational school of ministry education. Two ministers made no indications of their tenure in the pastorate. Six ministers have been at their current church between 0-5 years, one

minister had a tenure of 12-16 years, and two ministers had tenures of 17-22 years. Most ministers indicated they had over 23 years in ministry.

#### Instruments used in data collection

The evaluating criteria for theological works relied heavily upon Jackson Wu<sup>2</sup> and John Frame<sup>3</sup>; pre-seminar and post-seminar surveys were created. However, after consulting with methodologist Jennifer Carter from Southeastern University's Jannetides College of Business and Entrepreneurial Leadership, it was discerned that the research question would need to be revised to more accurately fit the timeline allowable. Initially, the research question was as follows: Can a Spirit-filled theology and Christological philosophy of church conflict in dialogue with systems theory help pastors manage church conflict better, allowing pastors to outlive, outlast, and outlove in conflict? After revision, the research question now reads: Can a Spirit-filled theology and Christological philosophy of church conflict in dialogue with systems theory **change the perspectives of how** pastors manage church conflict, allowing pastors to outlive, outlast, and outlove in conflict? The change of focus in the research question allows for an evaluation of the theology and philosophy of church conflict as perceived by pastoral practitioners rather than measuring the outcomes of implementing the theology and philosophy of church conflict. However, the survey will still intend to discover if the perspectives have changed and if the pastors perceive the theological and philosophical work to be faithful, sound, and practical.

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<sup>2</sup> Jackson Wu, "How to Assess Theological Arguments," *Jackson Wu Blog*, August 29, 2017, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jacksonwu/2017/08/30/assess-theological-arguments/>.

<sup>3</sup> John M. Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 369–370.

## Narrative and procedures

The created seminar invitation can be found in the appendix and supplemental materials used for the seminar teaching. On December 22, 2021, the advertisement for the study was shared publicly in the Kentucky Ministry Network's Facebook group and at the Network's Acts 2 Journey event, where many ministers from the network gathered.

After speaking with the Kentucky Ministry Network Superintendent, the seminar was scheduled for January 21, 2022, with the following schedule:

9:00am-9:30am Breakfast and Pre-seminar Survey

9:30am-10:50am Session One: Reason

10:50am-11:00am Break

11:00am-11:50am Session Two: Experience and Tradition

11:50am-12:30pm Lunch

12:30pm-1:20pm Session Three: Scripture

1:20pm-1:30pm Break

1:30pm- 2:20pm Session Four: Philosophy

2:20pm-2:50pm Post-seminar Survey

Besides the Kentucky superintendent's invitations, ministers were invited via text message and phone call. Local Frankfort/Lawrenceburg area ministers were invited as well as pastors from the Kentucky Ministry Network. Reminders of the seminar were sent one week before the seminar, and 14 ministers responded with positive confirmations. However, days before the messages were received, some ministers either had COVID-19 or were recovering in quarantine. For this reason, with the global COVID-19 pandemic at such high levels, attendance

was thought to be lower than expected. On the date of the seminar, 12 ministers were in attendance.

### Presentation of the data

The chart below represents the data collected during the seminar. Some “no” responses were included and indicated in the chart. Questions in bold type were repeated in both surveys or represented the most critical data collected.

Table 3.1 Survey Data

<b>Baseline Questions:</b>						
How often in your ministry do you experience serious conflict in church?	Always- 2	Occasionally-8	Seldom-1	Never-1		
How often does conflict occur in any given year?	Always-1	Often-2	Occasionally-5	Seldom-3	Never-1	
Did those conflicts result in church splits or membership loss?	Often-3	Ocassionally-2	Seldom-5	Never-1	(One no response)	
Have you felt well-equipped for church conflict?	Often-4	Occasionally-2	Seldom-5	Never-1		
How often are you personally experiencing a high level of anxiety?	Always-1	Occasionally-3	Seldom-7	Never-1		
How often would you access your church being at a high anxiety level?	Often-3	Ocassionally-3	Seldom-5		(One no response)	
<b>Baseline Questions:</b> How often would you access your board/staff/leadership at a high anxiety level?	Occasionally-6	Seldom-6				

How often were the problem-causing members involved in church conflict, have deep interconnected relationships with other members of the church? Ie. family members, business, pseudo-family relationships, marriage, intimate friendships, ect.	Always-1	Often-7	Occasionally-3	Seldom-1		
How often were conflicts only among church leadership?	Often-2	Occasionally-3	Seldom-2	Never-2		
In the church conflicts you have experienced, how often were the people the conflict involved those you would consider “spiritually mature.”	Often-5	Occasionally-3	Seldom-2	Never-2		
How often do the same conflictive issues reappear?	Often-3	Occasionally-5	Seldom-4			
In your opinion, do the main characters of the conflict know the Bible well?	Always-1	Often-4	Occasionally-3	Seldom-4		
Have the main characters of conflict been observed in consistent spiritual disciplines? Ie. Bible reading, prayer, fasting, holy living, ect.	Always-1	Often-1	Occasionally-6	Seldom-3	(One no response)	
How often do you access the level of anxiety/stress in your church?	Occasionally-3	Seldom-5	Never-2		(Two no response)	
Do you have at least one meeting a month with your staff or leadership team?	Always-4	Often-2	Occasionally-3	Seldom-2	(One no response)	
<b>Baseline Questions:</b> Do you have meetings with your board or elders 1-2 times a month?	Always-4	Often-3	Occasionally-1	Seldom-2	(Two no response)	

Do you believe you are effectively communicating with your congregation?	Always-3	Often-5	Seldom-1	Never-1	(Two no response)	
Do you believe you are effectively communicating with your staff/board?	Always-3	Often-6	Occasionally-1	Never-1	(One no response)	
To what extent have you received, in your ministry education, church conflict management training?	No Training-1	Very Little Training-2	Little Training-5	Adequate Training-2	Two no response)	
Has your leadership/staff/board received conflict management training?	No Training-3	Very Little Training-5	Little Training-2	Extensive Training-1	(One no response)	
When considering the main characters of conflict in your church, what would you gauge their spiritual maturity level to be?	Poor-1	Below Average-3	Average-3	Above Average-4	(One no response)	
To what extent has your congregation received conflict management training	No Training-3	Very Little Training-4	Little Training-3	Adequate Training-1	(One no response)	
At any given church during your ministry, in what years of your ministry did you most experience conflict?	Years 2-3 (5)	Years 4-5 (4)	Years 6-10 (1)	Years 11+ (1)	(One no response)	
In church conflict, what length of time have those involved in the conflict been in your church?	Years 0-1 (1)	years 4-6 (5)	Years 7-8 (1)	Years 9+ (4)	(One no response)	
How beneficial do you think a 3rd party arbitrator would have been beneficial in resolving and managing church conflicts?	Little Beneficial-1	Beneficial-7	Very Beneficial-3			
<b>Pre-Seminar Survey Question:</b>						

Do you feel attending this seminar will help you in your personal spiritual journey?	Beneficial-2	Very Beneficial-8	Extremely Beneficial-1		(One no response)	
Do you feel attending this seminar will help you grow in Christ and spiritual maturity?	Likely-3	Very Likely-5	Extremely Likely-3		(One no response)	
Are you open to changing your perspectives of church conflict?	Open-2	Very Open-6	Extremely Open-4			
Do you feel having a theology of church conflict is important?	Important-2	Very Important-6	Extremely Important-4			
Do you feel having a philosophy of church conflict is important?	Somewhat Important-2	Very Important-6	Extremely Important-4			
Do you believe it is possible to manage conflict in the church as Jesus did in his ministry?	Somewhat Possible-1	Possible-2	Very Possible-7	Extremely Possible-2		
Are you hesitant to accept a new theology and philosophy of church conflict?	Not Hesitant-9	Somewhat Hesitant-2	Extremely Hesitant-1			
Do you feel church conflict is important to address with a theology or philosophy?	Somewhat Important-1	Important-2	Very Important-7	Extremely Important-2		
How much conflict management training did you have prior to this session?	No Training-2	Little Training-2	Some Training-5	Adequate Training-2	Extensive Training-1	
Are you rigid in your theological and philosophical perspectives pertaining to church conflict?	Not Rigid-6	Somewhat Rigid-2	Rigid-2	Very Rigid-2		
Do you have formulated perspectives on managing church conflict?	Little Formulation-5	Some Formulation-3	Very Forumlated-3		(One no response)	

<b>Pre-Seminar Survey Question: How do you view church conflict?</b>	Negatively-4	A Little Postively-3	Postiviely-4	Very Positively-1		
Do you feel equipped to enter into church conflict?	Somewhat Equipped-7	Equipped-3	Very Equipped-2			
<b>Do you feel implementing a new theology and philosophy of church conflict is possible?</b>	Not Possible-1	Somewhat Possible-1	Possible-5	Very Possible-4	Extremely Possible-1	
<b>Do you feel implementing a new theology and philosophy of church conflict would be effective in managing church conflict?</b>	Somewhat Effective-3	Effective-5	Very Effective-4			
<b>Do you feel implementing the presented theology and philosophy of church conflict would be helpful?</b>	Somewhat Helpful-3	Helpful-1	Very Helpful-6	Extremely Helpful-2		
<b>Would you be interested in reading a book(s) about church conflict the researcher suggests</b>	No Interested-1	Somewhat Interested-2	Interested-4	Very Interested-4	Extremely Interested-1	
<b>Post-Seminar Survey Questions:</b>						
<b>Has your perspective on church conflict changed after attending this seminar?</b>	Little Change-1	Some Change-5	Large Change-5	Extreme Change-1		
<b>Do you feel better equipped and more ready to enter into church conflict that you may have been avoiding in your context?</b>	Little Better-1	Some Better-5	A lot Better-5	Extremely Better-1		
Has this seminar been helpful to your ministry philosophy and theology?	Some Helpful-1	Helpful-2	<b>Very Helpful-8</b>	Extremely Helpful-1		

<b>Post-Seminar Survey Questions:</b> Are there aspects presented in the teaching you will pursue more knowledge of in the future.	A few aspects-1	Some Aspects-5	A lot of Aspects-5	Many Aspects-1		
<b>Has your view of church conflict changed?</b>	Some Change-6	A lot of Change-6				
<b>How do you view church conflict?</b>	A little Positively-6	Positively-3	Very Positively-2	(One no response)		
Do you think the theology and philosophy presented could be harmful to your church?	Not Harmful-9	A little Harmful-2	(One no response)			
Is the theology and Christological philosophy presented faithful to Scripture?	Faithful-1	Very Faithful-5	Extremely Faithful-6			
Is the theology and Christological philosophy presented faithful to the Pentecostal tradition?	Faithful-4	Very Faithful-4	Extremely Faithful-4			
Is the theology and Christological philosophy presented Faithful to the history of the church?	Faithful-4	Very Faithful-3	Extremely Faithful-5			
Is the theology and Christological philosophy presented reasonable according to contemporary literature (reason and logic) and legitimacy of systems theory as a means of congregational conflict management?	Reasonable-2	Very Reasonable-8	Extremely Reasonable-1	(One no response)		
Is the theology and Christological philosophy presented Faithful to the experience of church conflict?	Faithful-4	Very Faithful-6	Extremely Faithful-2			
Do you disagree with parts of this teaching?	No Disagreement-10	Some Disagreement-2				

<b>Post-Seminar Survey Questions:</b>						
<b>Do you believe it is possible to manage conflict in the church as Jesus did in his ministry?</b>	Somewhat Possible-1	Possible-2	Very Possible-5	Extremely Possible-3		
<b>Does the theology presented differ from your own practical theology of church conflict?</b>	No Difference-3	Little Difference-6	Some Difference-3			
Comparatively, is the theology of church conflict presented appear to be more effective in congregational management than your own practical theology?	Not more effective-2	More effective-6	Much More effective-3	(One no response)		
Are you hesitant to accept the theology and philosophy of church conflict presented?	No Hesitant-9	Somewhat Hesitant-2	(One no response)			
Are the arguments for the theology of church conflict logical?	Logical-3	Very Logical-5	Extremely Logical-3	(One no response)		
<b>Are the arguments for the theology of church conflict and Christological philosophy able to be translated into your context?</b>	Somewhat trasnlatable-2	Translatable-2	Very translatable-6	Extremely Translatable-1	(One no response)	
Are the arguments for the theology and philosophy of church conflict, contradict with other scripture or the biblical narrative?	No contradication-10	Some Contradiction-2				
Would the theology and philosophy presented be recognizable to people of the Scripture's original context?	Recognizable-4	Very Recognizable-6	Extremely Recognizable-2			

<b>Post-Seminar Survey Questions:</b>						
Are the scriptural texts the theology and philosophy of church conflict are based worthy of putting such theological weight upon?	Worthy-4	Very Worthy-7	(One no response)			
Does the theological argument directly contradict other biblical doctrines?	No contradication-11	Contradicts-1				
<b>Would you be interested in reading a book(s) about church conflict the researcher suggests?</b>	Not Interested-1	Somewhat Interested-1	Interested-3	Very Interested-4	Extremely Interested-2	(One No response)
Do you think church conflict is over emphasized in the teaching?	Not Over emphasized-11	Somewhat overemphasized-1				
Is the theology and philosophy compatible with the biblical context (of a text or set of passages)?	Compatible-5	Very Compatible-4	Extremely Compatible-3			
Is the theology and philosophy consistent with your understanding of the biblical languages (e.g., syntax, grammar, etc.)?	Consistent-5	Very Consistent-4	Extremely Consistent-2	(One no response)		
<b>Do you feel implementing the presented theology and philosophy of church conflict is possible?</b>	Possible-4	Very Possible-5	Extremely Possible-2	(One no response)		
<b>Do you feel implementing the presented theology and philosophy of church conflict would be effective in managing church conflict?</b>	Somewhat Effective-1	Effective-3	Very Effective-5	Extremely Effective-3		

<b>Post-Seminar Survey Questions:</b>						
<b>Do you feel implementing the presented theology and philosophy of church conflict would be helpful?</b>	Helpful-5	Very Helpful-4	Extremely Helpful-3			
Does the theology and philosophy align with biblical Christian values and piety?	Aligns-4	Significant alignment-2	Extreme Alignment-5	(One no response)		
Are any parts of the theological quadrilateral or philosophy create trivial issues?	No Issues-2	Little issues-2	Some issues-4	A lot of Issues-1	(Three no responses)	
Do you feel the theology and philosophy was communicated clearly to you?	Somewhat Clear-1	Clear-1	Very Clear-5	Extremely Clear-4		
Are there parts of the teaching that you found difficult or that you will continue to wrestle through?	No parts-3	Little Parts-5	Some parts-4			
<b>Does the teaching get to the heart of the issues of church conflict?</b>	Somewhat does-1	It does-2	Very much does-4	Completely does-4	(One no response)	
<b>Do you feel you could practically implement this theology and philosophy into your own life?</b>	Some Implementation-3	A lot of Implementation-7	Extreme Implementation-1	(One no response)		
<b>Do you feel you could practically implement this theology and philosophy into your ministry?</b>	Little Implementation-1	Some Implementation-3	A lot of Implementation-7	Extreme Implementation-1		
<b>Do you feel you could practically implement this theology and philosophy into your secular work?</b>	Little Implementation-1	Some Implementation-5	A lot of Implementation-4	Extreme Implementation-1	(One no response)	

<b>Post-Seminar Survey Questions:</b>						
Do you feel there may be better ways of addressing conflict in the church than what was presented?	No better ways-3	Some better ways-8	Many better ways-1			
<b>Considering the information, you received in the seminar, do you believe you can better love your congregation through conflict?</b>	Some Better-1	Better-1	Much Better-8	Extremely better-2		
<b>Considering the information, you received in the seminar, do you believe you can better manage the congregation.</b>	Better-3	Much Better-7	Extremely Better-1			
<b>Considering the information, you received in the seminar, do you believe you can better manage church conflict?</b>	Some Better-1	Better-2	Much Better-9			
<b>Considering the information, you received in the seminar, do you believe you can better outlast church conflict?</b>	Better-2	Much Better-9	Extremely Better-1			
<b>Considering the information, you received in the seminar, do you believe you can better thrive in conflict (outlive)?</b>	A little Beneficial-1	Very Beneficial-6	Extremely Beneficial-5			
<b>How beneficial did you find the information shared today?</b>	Somewhat Better-1	Better-3	Much Better-6	Extremely Better-2		
<b>Do you feel better prepared for you church leadership ministry?</b>	Always-3	Often-7	Occasionally-2			

<b>Post-Seminar Survey Questions:</b>						
<b>Do you believe training in the theology and philosophy of church conflict presented can reduce the amount of anxiety in your churches?</b>	Always-3	Often-7	Occasionally-2			

#### Summary of the methodology, narrative, and fieldwork

The data were collected via paper surveys and compiled in the chart above to be analyzed in the following chapter. The research intended to engage 12 participants; despite complications from the COVID-19 pandemic, 12 pastors completed the seminar and research surveys. The data collected appear to be sufficient to measure if the perspective of church conflict has changed among pastors who have been taught the five components of the researcher's theology and philosophy of church conflict. Although not all data may be helpful for analysis, it was collected to be expansive in the church conflict experience and discover the validity of the presented church conflict theology and philosophy. Judging the quality of theology and philosophy is somewhat subjective in nature. However, qualitative research can uncover aspects of another's understanding and knowledge of the world and can give insights useful for future dynamics in the provided field.<sup>4</sup> In summary, the possibility of change in perspectives of ministers who have

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<sup>4</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research - Second Edition* (Eugene, OR: SCM Press, 2016), 209.

engaged in this seminar is the primary means of evaluating the effectiveness of the research presented.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE PROJECT EVALUATED

#### *Introduction*

The data collected in the seminar included responses to 25 baseline questions, 17 pre-seminar questions, and 47 post-seminar questions. A Likert scale was utilized for all questions asked. The central focus of the data analysis will be on 22 questions of the survey to evaluate if the ministers' perspectives have changed about church conflict in the pre/post-seminar surveys. All data are considered valuable to the experience of church conflict and for future research; however, all data collected may not be utilized to evaluate changes in ministers' perspectives in church conflict.

#### Baseline data analysis

Baseline data reveals that 10 of the 12 ministers surveyed experience serious conflict in the church, at least occasionally. Ministers who felt well-equipped for ministry were nearly split. Half of the respondents indicated they felt well-equipped often or occasionally, and the other half felt equipped seldom or never. When asked about the minister's personal anxiety levels and their board/staff/leadership's anxiety levels, the responses were nearly the same as when asked if they felt well-equipped for church conflict. The baseline data reveals that almost all ministers feel the everyday experience of church conflict. The almost even split of ministers who feel well-equipped suggests either no training or inadequate training for church conflict has occurred in those surveyed. The conclusion about the ministers' lack of training is supported because only

two ministers indicated they obtained adequate church conflict training in their education. Furthermore, only one minister indicated their church board/staff/leadership or congregation had adequate church conflict management training.

Most ministers indicated that problem-causing members of the congregation were often or always in deeply interconnected relationships with other church members. Most ministers also showed that the same conflictive issues often or occasionally reappeared. The research then suggests the conflict has not been dealt with entirely or that conflicts often linger for some time before totally being resolved. The baseline data further reveals that even though 9 of 12 ministers believe they are effectively communicating with their congregation and staff/board, conflict still occurs, and conflictive issues continue to arise among most ministers surveyed. When asked about the correlation between the minister's tenure and the most conflict experienced in any church, nine ministers indicated it occurred in years 2-6 of tenure. Years 2-6 have been a common thread for the highest levels of conflict experienced throughout this dissertation in literature and other experiential surveys.

#### Baseline survey summary

The baseline survey indicates the often-reported nature of church conflict experienced by ministers, especially in years 2-6 of tenure at any church. Furthermore, it appears ministry education is not equipping ministers well for church conflict, despite indications of advanced degrees in the ministers surveyed. However, the ministers seem to have the ability to cope and overcome church conflict as the length of tenure suggests, despite inadequate church conflict training. Better conflict training in churches and for ministers may also reduce the amount of

anxiety present in a congregation, which can create a greater culture of personal and group efficacy in their desire to fulfill the ministry vision. Most ministers' responses indicating that problem-causing members of the congregation were often or always in deeply interconnected relationships with other church members give credence toward a systems theory approach to managing conflict in the congregation. The ability of ministers to access and be aware of the systems present in their congregation can likely help the ministers manage anxiety and conflict to a better degree.

### *Pre-Survey Data Analysis*

The pre-seminar survey was designed to evaluate the readiness of the ministers to change their perspectives and assess their views of conflict before being taught the researcher's theology and philosophy of church conflict. All ministers felt attending the seminar would help them grow in spiritual maturity and help them in their personal spiritual maturity. All ministers were open to changing their perspectives of church conflict, with half of the respondents indicating they were very open and four extremely open. It would be inadequate to believe that the readiness to change perspectives means that the ministers did not already have some form of theology and philosophy of church conflict in their ministry. An openness to change one's perspective on any subject must indicate to some degree that one has a perspective on any given subject. Ten of 12 ministers believed that having a philosophy and theology of church conflict was either very important or extremely important. Nine of 12 ministers expressed no hesitation in accepting a new theology and philosophy of church conflict. All ministers believed that addressing church

conflict with theology or philosophy was important. Half of the ministers described some indication of rigidity in their theological and philosophical perspectives of church conflict.

#### Important pre-survey questions to be repeated in post-survey

The ministers indicated that implementing a new theology and philosophy of church conflict was possible, with only one minister feeling it was not possible to implement. All ministers felt a new theology and philosophy would be effective and helpful to some degree in managing church conflict. To help indicate the minister's interest in the field of church conflict, the question was asked about interest in reading a book the researcher suggests. Only one minister indicated no interest.

The most valuable data of pre-seminar perspectives were collected in the following question, and the data are displayed graphically below. The question was repeated in the post-seminar survey.



Figure 4.1 Pre-seminar church conflict view

The data indicate a wider distribution of perspectives on church conflict; however, the majority view was at least a little positive. The researcher hypothesizes that the negative perspective of church conflict will change dramatically post-seminar.

#### Conclusions of pre-survey data

The survey results indicated that all ministers were ready to learn and were open to changing their perspectives about church conflict. However, some rigidity implied that ministers must have already formed a theology and philosophy of church conflict to some degree. Furthermore, each minister likely had a formed theology and philosophy of church conflict already; however, the researcher hypothesizes their theology and philosophy is expected to be more experiential.

Figure 4.1 above indicates an even distribution of views on church conflict, with the majority

having some level of a positive outlook. The researcher hopes that the seminar will help ministers shape a more positive perspective of church conflict.

#### *Post-Survey Data Analysis*

The primary goal of this dissertation has been to see indications of change in perspectives among ministers on church conflict after the presentation of the researcher's theology and philosophy of church conflict. A shift in perspective may allow ministers to outlive, outlast, and outlove during church conflict. The first question of the post-seminar survey is the simple answer to the research question, as indicated in the chart below.



Figure 4.2 Post-seminar perspective change

All ministers reported a degree of change in their perspective of church conflict post-seminar as no ministers reported no change. The best indicator of the change is not just the degree of change that occurred but if the perspective of church conflict is more positive than before the seminar. A similar question to the one depicted in Figure 4.2 shows six ministers indicated some change and six indicated a lot of change in their view of church conflict. The repeated question from the pre-seminar survey is the best indication of the change of perspective in the ministers evaluated, as Figure 4.3 shows for comparison.



Figure 4.3 Pre-seminar church conflict view for comparison



Figure 4.4 Post-seminar church conflict view

Figures 4.3 and 4.4 demonstrate that all negative views of church conflict have changed. Post-seminar, all ministers viewed church conflict positively to some degree, excluding the one no response. Positive church conflict views decreased, and very positive church conflict views doubled. The most significant effect of the church conflict theology and philosophy is that no ministers indicated a negative view of church conflict, confirming the researcher's hypothesis that there would be a significant increase in the positive view of church conflict after the seminar. Furthermore, all ministers felt better equipped and more ready to enter into church conflict they may have been avoiding to some degree. All ministers also indicated that the seminar was helpful to some degree in their ministry philosophy and theology.

### Anomalous data

The post-seminar survey indicated low variance in the participants' theology and philosophy of church conflict and the researcher's theology and philosophy. Three ministers reported no difference in their own theology of church conflict, six said little difference, and three reported some difference. Therefore, it may be reasonable to conclude that pastors naturally develop an experiential theology and philosophy of church conflict. Despite the appearance of low variance in the ministers and the researcher's theology of church conflict, the ministers still found the presented theology and philosophy of church conflict more effective than their theology and philosophy. Six ministers reported the theology as more effective, and three reported the theology as much more effective. Only two ministers said the theology was not more effective (one minister did not respond). The research may indicate the need for a better formulated and articulated version of the ministers' beliefs about church conflict. The formalization of beliefs, when well stated and articulated, strengthens theology when it is confirmed by another, more formal researcher. In a sense, the presented theology and philosophy of church conflict may have given voice to what the pastors already believed to be true about church conflict.

### Repeated survey data

Questions repeated in the post-seminar survey that were asked in the pre-seminar survey showed very little change. Little change in data from repeated questions is likely because the questions asked were confirmed to be accurate by the respondents that it is possible to implement a new theology and philosophy of church conflict and that it would be helpful to do so. Interest in reading a book on church conflict suggested by the author increased in the post-seminar survey.

### *Evaluating the Presented Theology and Philosophy*

Specific questions were asked to better evaluate the theology and philosophy of church conflict. These questions focused on the theology and philosophy's faithfulness to scripture, conflict experience, practicality, logical nature, and ability to get to the heart of church conflict. All responses indicated the theology and philosophy presented in the seminar to be logical, compatible with and faithful to the scriptural text, practical for managing church conflict, and able to get to the heart of church conflict. Furthermore, all ministers (with exception of one response) indicated the arguments for the theology and philosophy of church conflict were to some degree translatable to their context, useful for managing church conflict, and possible to implement.

Despite the positive indications listed above, nine ministers believed there may be some level of a better way to address conflict in the church. It is unlikely that the view described is a critical view of the church conflict theology and philosophy presented as much as it may be the minister's openness to learning new ways to manage conflict in the church.

### Future use of the church conflict seminar

At least three ministers gave unsolicited feedback to the researcher that the seminar presented could be helpful for churches all over the Kentucky Ministry Network and beyond. As the survey has already indicated, there is a significant need for church conflict management training as part of ministers' educational and enrichment journey. The seminar presented may be used for training in churches and ministry networks. One possible venue that was presented was for the

seminar to be used among the Bishops of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Lexington for their annual training.

#### *Summary of Post-seminar Data*

The research effectively evaluated a change in ministers' perspectives on church conflict.

Overall, the data indicated a positive difference in the view and perspective of ministers when considering church conflict in light of the theology and philosophy of church conflict presented in the seminar. The research goal appears to have been met entirely as the surveys were able to measure not only a change in perspectives among ministers but also to what degree of change.

Potential modifications could be made to the surveys themselves. Although it can help evaluate the overall experience and theological soundness of the seminar's content, the amount of data collected may have proven to be too extensive. Future research may include less data collection so as to not fatigue participants or cause them to lose interest.

Effective keys to the effectiveness of the project revolve around the researcher's consultation with a methodologist who helped focus the measurable data in the period allotted for the research. Future research may revolve around the researcher's original desire to measure the effectiveness of the theology and philosophy of church conflict as it would be implemented by a minister within their church context. A case study might be a good research opportunity for the future if a minister were to adopt the theology and philosophy of church conflict presented.

Other conclusions about the nature of the theology and philosophy's ability to help ministers outlive, outlast, and outlove in church conflict were confirmed as survey data indicated the information they received in the seminar would cause them to love their congregation better,

better manage conflict, better outlast conflict, and better thrive (outlive) in church conflict.

Further conclusions are reflected in the data of the survey that indicate all ministers believed training in the theology and philosophy of church conflict presented in the seminar could reduce the amount of anxiety in the minister's churches to some degree.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PROJECT CONCLUSIONS

#### *Introduction*

David Woolerton issued an important harbinger for the church, which applies to the conclusion of this dissertation: “Whenever ‘two or three are gathered’ in Jesus’ name, it seems like there’s bound to be a fight.”<sup>1</sup> The desire to research church conflict was deeply pragmatic. At the beginning of my doctoral journey, I was in the middle of a boiling point of church conflict. My usual reaction to any unexplored territory is reading and writing, especially when considering theological topics. My response may seem counterintuitive by plunging deep into conflict, but that is precisely what happened. I have, nearly in every way, desired to immerse myself in church conflict. I recently preached a series called: “Christ in Conflict,” while simultaneously completing my research project and reading contemporary literature on systems theory and church conflict. Perhaps it is a Pentecostal instinctive to become “baptized” when the Spirit moves, even when the water is turbulent as it is in church conflict.

Developing a theology and philosophy of church conflict metaphorically created an operating system. Theology and philosophy are base-level operating systems in which contextualized programs run. The myriad of conflicts and church contexts are so vast, it is unlikely one single program can address all needs. David Brubaker, who has developed his own church conflict and change theology, writes:

Christian congregations tend to trace their core values to the founder of their religion, Jesus of Nazareth, and to the Christian Scriptures that contain his teaching. And they are much more likely to refer to interpretations of the founder’s teaching and behavior as a ‘theology’

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<sup>1</sup> David E. Woolerton, *Mission Rift: Leading through Church Conflict* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021), xi.

rather than a ‘theory. A shared theology can motivate action in a congregation, whereas a theory generates mostly indifference.<sup>2</sup>

Establishing a base layer of theology and philosophy in which pastors can operate and teach their congregations in reference to church conflict can allow a shared experience and motivation for addressing church conflict in a more positive outlook. Church conflict can be constructive rather than destructive, especially when the church sees the presence of the Spirit and Jesus Christ in the conflict.

### *Lessons Learned*

#### The Spirit in conflict

It seems quite logical to conclude that the Spirit is often the instigator of systemic change and transformation in the church, which often precipitates church conflict, and if this is true, church conflict resolution can only come through the power of the Spirit. Therefore, it is impossible to manage conflict well or resolve conflict without the Spirit’s work in the life of conflict managers and the congregation in which conflict abides. Ministers who avail themselves of the work of the Spirit may be the ones who are able to thrive or outlive conflict. Theologian David Fitch, in explaining and defining the nature of the church, describes a people who “gather together to resolve conflict and forgive one another (Matthew 18:15-20).”<sup>3</sup> The church’s reliance on the Spirit to move in the community is connected to its identity as a people who not only gather but gather purposefully to engage in conflict.

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<sup>2</sup> David Brubaker, *Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 101.

<sup>3</sup> Fitch, *The Great Giveaway*, 40.

### Conflict escalation and variance

Conflicts are sure to come; the rapidly turbulent world brings often brings conflict to the world stage, such as the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Reports have surfaced that conflict theology is emerging from pulpits in Ukraine: “‘Go closer to meet those who are against you or fighting you,’ Yuriy Kulakevych, foreign affairs director of the Ukrainian Pentecostal Church, told his congregation... at God’s Peace Pentecostal Church in the capital, Kyiv. ‘We are not only to enjoy peace ourselves but to share it.’”<sup>4</sup> Another report headline reads, “Ukrainian American Churches Deploy Praise as a Weapon.”<sup>5</sup> The Spirit is leading the church in Ukraine to reflex in a Christological manner as their pastors lead them through conflict and with a Christological theology of conflict.

The variance in types of conflicts is innumerable in the church context. Ministers not only need training in church conflict, but they also need every tool available to them to help manage conflict better. Systems theory is a valuable tool for managing conflict; however other resources that address conflicts over structure, organizational, and culturally rooted issues are also needed. In David Brubaker’s book, *Promise and Peril*, Speed Leas makes a note of Brubaker’s openness to managing conflict in a myriad of ways:

Brubaker recognizes that much of Edwin Friedman’s family systems theory is more useful in small (family-sized) congregations than in larger (pastoral-, program-, and corporate-sized) churches or synagogues.” Friedman’s theories gave me a lens to use for the assessment of certain dynamics in congregations, but I found these insights difficult to apply, especially in large congregations—as Brubaker confirms.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Jason Casper, “Amid War and Rumors of War, Ukraine Pastors Preach and Prepare,” *Christianity Today*, last modified February 21, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/february/ukraine-russia-churches-donetsk-luhansk-putin-independence.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Emily Belz, “Ukrainian American Churches Deploy Praise as a Weapon,” *Christianity Today*, last modified February 28, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/february/ukraine-new-york-city-evangelical-church-us-russia.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Brubaker, *Promise and Peril*, ix–x.

Although this research relies heavily on systems theory as a dialogue partner for reason in developing a theology of church conflict, the valuable lesson is learned that contexts vary widely, and it is better to use what works in each situation. Contrarian leader Stephen Sample states: “what works in one context at one point in time won’t necessarily work in a different context at the same time, or in the same context at a different time. Thus, every leader is locked in a moment-to-moment struggle with context and circumstances of his own place and time, which raises the question of whether he can ever truly hope to be the master of that struggle.”<sup>7</sup> As contextual struggles change, God does not. Suppose one can understand what God makes of conflict. In that case, contextualizing a theology and philosophy of church conflict according to pneumatologically and Christological dispositions may be the best route for leaders amid conflict struggles. Rather than a leader in conflict being captive to time and space, essentially making history the controller of conflict outcomes, acknowledging a sound theology of conflict places God over and above outcomes. The inability to know exactly what may work in the myriad of different struggles and contexts may seem like utter chaos to any leader. However, conflicts that feel like chaos are not chaotic to God as he stands above all contexts in all times and places.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, understanding God (theology) in conflict and how he works through conflict is likely a better solution for transportability to any given context and may be helpful to build other church conflict methods and manuals.

The context of the Assemblies of God in Kentucky trends toward family-sized congregations where systems theory can significantly manage conflict and the congregation well.

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<sup>7</sup> Steven B. Sample, *The Contrarian’s Guide to Leadership* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2003), 191.

<sup>8</sup> Ps 29:10-11.

Therefore, an eclectic and well-researched conflict theology and philosophy are necessary and more artistic and unstructured than scientific and rigid. In my management of church conflict, an eclectic style has been used. Even when addressing more significant issues of systemic dysfunction, structural changes were necessary to bring about systemic change to create congregational healing in the long term. All church conflicts will likely need aspects of every field of conflict management to manage the conflict well.

### Conflict as an opportunity for discipleship

The nature of church conflict can take massive amounts of time and communication. Brubaker writes: “Various studies have shown that organizational leaders and managers spend up to 25 percent of their time managing conflict. Experienced pastors know that during times of crisis, conflict management duties can become all-consuming.”<sup>9</sup> I have found it essential to learn that church conflict is not an inhibition to the ministry; it is the ministry. Jesus exemplifies conflict ministry as he artfully engages conflict with great purpose and skill. Jesus appears to know the exact time to push and pull conflict into the forefront as he disrupts to bring about systemic change and healing. Avoiding conflict is no avoidance at all, especially when Jesus is the one leading conflict to bring about his desired will. Resistance toward church conflict is likely resistance or quenching of God’s Spirit and Christ’s presence in the church. Woolerton echoes the same sentiments:

Our job is not to resolve conflict. Our job is to develop healthier ways for our congregations to carry out our divine mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ and showing our neighbors that love can, in fact, transform the world (John 13:35; 17:25-26). Conflicts actually are contexts within which that equipping and discipling can take place in the

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<sup>9</sup> Brubaker, *Promise and Peril*, 104.

church. Instead of looking at conflict's *content*, we must turn our eyes to the conflict's *context*.<sup>10</sup>

In the middle of my research, I tested my theology and philosophy of conflict in a dispute with a neighbor. While it would be presumptive of me to say that I won the conflict in any form, I was able to share the gospel with the man and ask for his forgiveness. It is unlikely a time or context would have arisen in which I would have had the chance to share the gospel's message, but conflict gave rise to the context for sharing. It seems that conflict is fruitful as it creates many opportunities for both internal and external transformation and transfiguration.

Conflict is as much about the minister as it is about the congregation

The aspect of self-differentiation in systems theory as applied to congregations teaches a minister to be more concerned with their input into the system rather than the problem-causing members.

Rather than futile efforts to change others through manipulative efforts or power, leaders can change their input into the system as a controllable variable. Ken Blanchard writes: "*Be the change you want to see in others.*"<sup>11</sup> A minister's ability to thrive during conflict is pivotal, not only for the church's sake but for family and self. The spiritual disciplines take on differentiating effect in the leader's life and create an opportunity to control emotions and become a non-anxious presence. To outlive conflict is not simply to make tenure the number one goal; rather, to outlive is to thrive holistically during church conflicts. Tenure, however, has implications for church health and a pastor's ability to outlast conflict. More than sheer grit and determination,

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<sup>10</sup> Woolverton, *Mission Rift*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *Lead Like Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 2008), 209.

leaders must be concerned with what the Spirit is speaking to them through the conflict.

Essentially, conflict is a catalyst for internal change in the pastor's life and external change in the organization and its members.

### *Ministry context applications*

Chris Corbett, in her dissertation, wrote of the transformative effects of both her experience and ministry to others through the doctoral project: "I felt a strong anointing in that moment; it was a great feeling to know God was working... What began as an implementation for my doctoral program turned into an experience where God reached into kids' hearts. I am thankful to have played a part in the work He accomplished."<sup>12</sup> The changes that happen to a minister through the doctoral project are likely just as important as the project itself.

Throughout the process of research and writing, I have been teaching what I have learned to my congregation and staff. I recently felt in my spirit that there were some theological issues with our bylaws that needed to be addressed. Several years prior I had addressed the same issue and encountered great resistance; however, this time the dialogue and theological conversation that has been spoken of with my leadership have been amicable, enriching, and mature. This change indicates to me that there is a greater level of maturity and positive outlook in how the leadership is handling conflict. The degree to which the leadership is managing conflict better may also be proportional to the congregation's ability to do the same.

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<sup>12</sup> Chris Corbett, "Intentional Beginnings: A Curriculum to Assist Parents in Raising Emotionally and Spiritually Healthy Children" (D.Min., Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2015), 125, accessed May 19, 2021, <http://www.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/1675245511/abstract/866F4A7E66334B07PQ/1>.

The context I pastor in is a family-sized church. Therefore, literature and the application of systems theory as applied to congregations has given my congregation and me an ability to see things we could not see before. My staff and I are currently teaching a systems theory-based discipleship curriculum in our Sunday School class, and it has proved to engage people well. People are being edified personally and organizationally as we engage one another from a more mature and self-differentiated position. Brubaker postulates what conflict can do for the church when managed well: “What if we assumed that every conflict involving Jesus-followers was a context for sanctification—where the Holy Spirit would be present and at work, redemptively shaping the character of those involved for the sake of the greater witness and mission of the congregation. (Rom 5:1-5)?”<sup>13</sup> Giving congregations a clear picture of a theology and philosophy can frame the conflict as a positive and potentially transformative and transfigurative for the life of the entire congregation. Engaging the theology and philosophy of church conflict appears to be beneficial in the lived experience of my congregation. The openness to the Spirit’s work in conflict essentially teaches how to love each other better. Conflict surrounds us and seems to be escalating by the moment. To outlove in conflict is to love like Christ in conflicts.

### *Limitations of the Project*

As already stated, systems theory may have limitations in larger congregations. Engaging the congregation in conflict well will require structural, cultural, family-system, and many other factors. Using the wisdom of the Spirit to discern the tools of conflict management is an art form. Excellent church conflict management is not this or that; it is both.

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<sup>13</sup> Woolverton, *Mission Rift*, 157.

The amount of data collected in the project may have created limitations in the cumbersome amount of data to analyze. Some changes to discover more intricate details of church conflict may necessitate case studies or interviews with church leaders and congregations. Furthermore, the project's original intention was to see if a theology and philosophy of church conflict could help pastors manage conflict better. However, because of the limitation of this project, the investigation only evaluated if the pastors' perspectives of church conflict changed. Research to learn the efficacy of church conflict management using theology and philosophy of church conflict would be a much longer study, possibly over many years and in multiple congregations. This dissertation project, while inherently limited, gives credence to further exploration of the field and the institution of church conflict theology and philosophy among practitioners.

### *Considerations for the Future*

The research indicated that pastors operated with a level of theology and philosophy of church conflict, most likely experientially. However, giving an academic and credible voice via a formulated church conflict theology and philosophy may allow pastors to be affirmed in their theology and feel established in their beliefs of conflict management practices. A future place for this theology and philosophy of church conflict may be found in an informed pastoral journal as a resource for pastoral practitioners. Helping other pastors depend on a theology of church conflict to outlive, outlast, and outlove in future conflicts will likely bring about systemic health in the congregation.

Further research among Hispanic churches for utilizing the theology and philosophy of church conflict in dialogue with system theory may be beneficial. The Hispanic church may benefit from systems theory as many churches have a natural family operation and group size. Unsolicited feedback from two Hispanic research participants indicated the need for better conflict management.

Furthermore, the Pentecostal context may benefit significantly from systems theory as applied to the congregation as Pentecostalism has traditionally been a movement that processes both theology and the practice of ministry in an emotional way. As a Pentecostal, I can see how the emotional process of spirituality present in the church can be a strength as well as a weakness. An awareness of the emotional processes present in a Pentecostal context may help churches manage conflict better.

### *Concluding Remarks*

The initial images of criticism presented by Celsus at the beginning of this dissertation are ever-present with the church: “a bunch of frogs holding council in a swamp, or a clutch of worms assembling in the muck: all of them disagreeing over who is the worst sinner.”<sup>14</sup>. However, in increasingly conflicting times, the church can emerge as a great conflict manager through deep contemplation of the theology and philosophy of church conflict. This dissertation project has affirmed the value of a theology and philosophy of church conflict in dialogue with systems theory and its ability to change pastors’ perspectives in managing conflict. A robust theology and philosophy of church conflict can bring helpful and transformative/transfigurative understanding

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<sup>14</sup> Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, 79.

to the perpetual issues of church conflicts. As a practical theology, the theology and philosophy of church conflict presented in this dissertation can help pastors outlive, outlast, and outlove in church conflict.

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**APPENDIX A:**  
**Matrix of Jesus' Conflict Management Techniques**

Gospel Narrative	Opposing Conflicting Agent(s)	Initiator of Conflict	Conflict	Diffusion technique	Result	Conflict/confrontation diffused?	Notes
<b>Luke 2:41-52</b>	Parents	Jesus' parents	Parental expectations not met	Asking two questions	Misunderstanding and Jesus' subsequent subjection to parents	Yes	
<b>Luke 4:1-12</b>	Satan	Satan	3x Desert Testing	Answering with Scripture	Satan departs and testing experience ends in victory	Yes	
<b>Luke 4:16-30</b>	Jews of synagogue	Those in the Synagogue at Nazareth	Nazareth synagogue murder attempt	Answering with Scripture, teaching	Slips away	Yes	
<b>Luke 4:31-37</b>	Demons	Demons	Demonic power encounter	Rebuke and command to come out	Amazement, Report spread to surrounding areas/growth of creditability	Yes	
<b>Luke 4:38-41</b>	People who were sick, diseased, and possessed	Sickness, People who brought sick and diseased to Jesus	Fever, sickness, disease, demons	Rebuke, laying on of hands, healing	People are healed, silencing if demons	Yes	
<b>Luke 4:42-44</b>	Crowds	Crowds	Crowds seeking Jesus who was in seclusion	Teaching	Kept on preaching	Yes	
<b>Luke 5:1-11</b>	Peter and fishermen	Peter	Resistance to Jesus instruction	Miraculous catch of fish/use of metaphor	Conviction of fishermen and calling and following of disciples	Yes	
<b>Luke 5:12-16</b>	Disease/Leper	Leper	Question of willingness to heal	Healing/Willingness to heal	News spreads, crowds gather, slips away, growth of creditability	Yes	
<b>Luke 5:17-26</b>	Pharisees, teachers of the law	Pharisees and teachers of the Law	Question of authority to forgive sins	Asking two questions, teaching, healing and forgiveness of sins	God glorified, people filled with fear, growth of creditability	Yes	
<b>Luke 5:29-39</b>	Pharisees and scribes	Pharisees and teachers of the law	Association with unclean people/attack on spiritual practices	Teaching by use of metaphor and parable	Unknown-left open	Unknown	
<b>Luke 6:1-11</b>	Pharisees	Pharisees	Violation of ritual sabbath	Asking two questions, healing	Pharisees filled with rage	No	
<b>Luke 6:17-19</b>	Disease, unclean spirits	Large diseased crowd and those troubled by	People came for healing and trying to touch Jesus	Healing, power coming from Jesus	Healed them all	Yes	

		unclean spirits					
<b>Luke 7:2-10</b>	Sickness unto death	Centurion	Petition of healing for gentile	Healing and marvel at faith	Healing of servant	Yes	
<b>Luke 7:11-17</b>	Death, poverty	Jesus	Funeral for widow's dead son	Compassion, raising dead	Report spreads to surrounding area/growth of creditability	Yes	
<b>Luke 7:24-35</b>	Pharisees and lawyers	Pharisees	Rejection of Gods purpose	Asking two questions/teaching	Unknown-left open	Unknown	
<b>Luke 7:36-50</b>	Simon the Pharisee	Simon the Pharisee	Association with unclean people	Parable/asking two questions	Forgiveness for unclean woman/growth of creditability	Yes	
<b>Luke 8:19-21</b>	Jesus mother and brothers	Jesus mother and brothers	Inability for family to see Jesus, likely to correct him	Teaching	Unknown-left open	Unknown	Frequency of conflicts appears to escalate
<b>Luke 8:22-25</b>	Wind and waves/faithless disciples	Disciples	Sinking boat on the sea	Rebuke of wind, waves, and disciples	Fear and amazement/growth of creditability	Yes	
<b>Luke 8:28-39</b>	Demons/herdsman and townspeople	Demonic, Demons, Townspeople	Demonic power encounter/fear of townspeople and death of pigs-economic loss	Deliverance/leaving town	Proclamation/growth of creditability	Yes	
<b>Luke 8:40-55</b>	Hemorrhaging woman/Death/mourners	Jarius, Hemorrhaging woman, opposing mourners	Touch by unclean person/Request for healing and subsequent death/unbelieving mourners	Healing/Asking a question/raising the dead	Amazement/growth of creditability	Yes	
<b>Luke 9:1-11</b>	Demons, disease, inhospitable cities	Jesus	Sending disciples out to confront disease, demons, and inhospitable cities	Empowerment of disciples, shake dust from feet, teaching, curing	Much accomplished/plexed Herod/crowds followed/growth of creditability	Yes	
<b>Luke 9:12-17</b>	Disciples	Disciples	Question of feeding the 5,000 and intentions of Jesus	Multiplication of food and use of disciples to multiply	Crowds are satisfied in complete dependence on Jesus, extra food leftover	Yes	
<b>Luke 9:37-43</b>	Demons, crowds	Father of possessed boy	Disciples unable to cast demon out	<b>Name calling,</b> rebuke demons	Healing, amazement/growth of creditability	Yes	

<b>Luke 9:44-50</b>	Disciples	Disciples	Argument about greatness/desire to prevent ministry by others	Teaching with child as example, instruction to not hinder other ministers	Unknown-left open	Yes	
<b>Luke 9:51-56</b>	Samaritans, Disciples	Samaritans, Disciples	Rejection by Samaritans, disciples of wrong spirit	Rebuke, self identification, leaving	Disciples corrected, rejection and going elsewhere	Yes	
<b>Luke 9:57-62</b>	Would-be followers of Jesus	Man walking along the road calling to Jesus	People's desire to follow Jesus but unable to leave	Three times use of metaphor	Unknown-left open	Unknown	
<b>Luke 10:13-23</b>	Chorazin, Bethsaida, towns who reject the disciples	Chorazin, Bethsaida, towns who reject the disciples	rejection of the kingdom of God	Teaching, prayer, redirection of disciples attitude	Unknown-left open	Unknown	
<b>Luke 10:25-37</b>	Expert in the law	Expert in the law	Questions about eternal life	Asked two questions and told parable of Good Samaritan	Correct reply by expert in the law	Yes	
<b>Luke 10:38-42</b>	Martha	Martha	Attempt to manipulate sister Mary through Jesus	correction/teaching	Martha Corrected	Yes	
<b>Luke 11:14-32</b>	Demons, crowds, sign seekers	Unknown initiator of conflict with demon, Some of the crowd	Accused Jesus of being demon possessed	Teaching, asked one question	People taught, corrected, and redirected by use of OT passage	Yes	
<b>Luke 11:37-53</b>	Pharisees and experts of law	Pharisee, Jesus perpetuates conflict	Jesus did not ceremonially wash before meal	Asked question, Issuing a series of Woe's, reference to OT passages	Opposition fiercely increased against Jesus by conflictive agents	No	Rise in Conflict nature of Jesus' reactions
<b>Luke 12:1-21</b>	Pharisees, someone in the crowd with dispute against brother	Jesus incites/prophecies about conflict with Pharisees, Someone in the crowd	Yeast of Pharisees, issue of hypocrisy	Teaching, asked question, told parable, assurance of present of HS in conflict	Unknown, left open	Unknown	

Luke 12:49-57	Families, extended families, the whole earth	Jesus identifies himself as primary conflictive agent by posing the issue in the form of a ask question.	Jesus came to not bring peace but division	Asked two questions, teaching, parable	Unknown	Unknown	Asking questions is important, it probes the motive of hearts and conveys that people you are interested in them as individuals and their experience with the conflict. It also diverts the concern from conflict to self and introspective looks. Timeline of pastoral ministry and conflict that follows the life of Jesus. How may this reflect upon pastoral tenure? 3 years for them crucify Jesus about the same amount of time to crucify the pastor.
Luke 12:54-59	Crowds	Jesus	Harbinger of coming judgement	Name Calling/Admonishment to interpret the times via metaphor and story	Left open	Unknown	
Luke 13:1-5	People present	Jesus	Issue of some sinner worse than others	Call for all to come to repentance	Left open/Told Parable of fig tree and fertilizer	Unknown	
Luke 13:10-20	Infirmity of crippled woman (Satan)'/	Jesus/Synagogue leader	Satan's binding through crippling/H healing on the Sabbath	Name Calling/telling two parables of the kingdom with questions to introduce parables	Opponents humiliated/People delighted	Yes	Following verses contain a parable with it's own conflict story
Luke 13:31-35	Pharisees/Herod	Pharisees/Herod	Pharisees tell Jesus to leave/Herod threatens death	Name Calling/Foretelling of Crucifixion/Sorrow over Jerusalem/Prophesied of eschatological resolution	Unknown	Unknown	
Luke 14:1-23	Disease of swelling/Pharisees/experts of the law	Jesus	Disease of man with swelling/Issue of healing on the Sabbath	Questioning/real life example/teaching on practical life wisdom/telling a parable	Healing/Apparent acceptance of teaching and parables at the Pharisees house	Yes	
Luke:1 4:25-34	Crowds following Jesus	Jesus	Cost of following Jesus	teaching/telling three parables	Unknown	Unknown	

<b>Luke 15:1-31</b>	Pharisees	Pharisees	Muttering Criticism of Jesus acceptance of tax collectors and sinner	Telling the 3 parables of the lost	Unknown	Unknown/purposely left open	
<b>Luke Chapter 16</b>							Entire chapter contains 2 parables and short teaching, all with conflict stories
<b>Luke 17:1-9</b>	People who cause others to stumble	Jesus	Issues of causing another to sin	Pronouncement of judgement/teaching on forgiveness/two parables	Unknown	Likely	
<b>Luke 17:11-</b>	Leprosy/Nine lepers who didn't return	10 Lepers	Disease of the Lepers and need for cleansing	Healing as they went/asking probing questions about 9 other lepers	Yes/partially unknown about the return of the other lepers	Yes/partially	
<b>Luke 18:1-14</b>							Jesus tells two parables containing conflicts
<b>Luke 18:15</b>	Disciples	Jesus	Disciples did not allow children to come to Jesus	Rebuke/teaching about kingdom	Likely resolved	Likely	
<b>Luke 18:18-29</b>	Certain ruler	Jesus	Jesus, when asked a question creates conflict	Asked question/Correction/teaching	Left open	Unknown	
<b>Luke:18:31-34</b>							Jesus tells of impending conflict with Gentiles who will kill him
<b>Luke 18:35-42</b>	Blindness	Blind man	Conflict between blind man and those who led the way for Jesus who rebuked him/disease of blindness and Jesus passing by	Blind man called louder/Jesus heard and healed the man	Healing	Yes	
<b>Luke 19:1-27</b>	People saw acceptance of Zacchaeus	People who saw	People muttered because Jesus was a guest of a sinner and tax collector	Jesus was a guest of Zacchaeus	Zacchaeus gives to poor and repays cheating/Jesus proclaims salvation in Zacchaeus house and states his purpose of finding the lost/Tells	Yes	

					conflict parable of kingdom		
<b>Luke 19:28-40</b>	Pharisees	Pharisees	Crowd of disciples proclaim Jesus as Messiah entering Jerusalem	Replied to Pharisees of rocks crying out if people do not	Apparent resolution	Likely	
<b>Luke 19:41-44</b>	Jerusalem	Jesus	Impending rejection and crucifixion	Weeps over city/prophecies over city	Crucifixion in Jerusalem within a few days	Yes	
<b>Luke 19:45-48</b>	Money changers in the temple	Jesus	Temple courts being sold in	Quotation of two Scriptures/driving out those who were selling	Chief priests and teachers of the law looking for ways to kill him	Left open and would conclude in a few days	Note clear signs of escalation with opponents
<b>Luke 20:1-19</b>	Chief priests and teachers of the law and elders	Chief priests and teachers of the law and elders/Jesus	Questioning Jesus authority	Asking a series of questions/telling parable of the Tenants/quoting Scripture	Teachers of the law and chief priests looked for a way to arrest him, but feared the people	Yes-Jesus clearly takes control of the conflict by telling a parable against his opponents	Note clear signs of escalation with opponents
<b>Luke 20:20-26</b>	Spies of the Chief priests and teachers of the law and elders	Spies of the Chief priests and teachers of the law and elders	Trying to entrap Jesus/issue of paying taxes to Rome	Use of Roman coin to teach and asking a question	Opponents are astonished and unable to trap him	Yes	Note clear signs of escalation with opponents
<b>Luke 20:27-39</b>	Sadducees	Sadducees	Questioning Jesus about marriage in the resurrection	Teaching	Such a good answer no one dared ask him any more questions	Yes	
<b>Luke 20:41-47</b>	Sadducees and those listening	Jesus	Jesus identifying himself as Messiah and warning against teachers of the law	Quoting Scripture/Asking two questions/warning about teachers of the law and pronouncement of judgment	Unknown	Unknown	Jesus seems to be escalating conflict himself at this point
<b>Luke 21:1-4</b>	Everyone who gives in the temple	Jesus	Contrasting the poor widow's temple gift and the all other givers	Elevation of poor widow by contrast	Unknown	Unknown	Jesus seems to be escalating conflict himself at this point

<b>Luke 21:5-37</b>	Disciples	Jesus	Warning disciples about their vain remarks of the temple stones	Prophetic warnings, parable,	Left open	Yes, continued teaching day by day.	Warnings of impending conflict and fall of Jerusalem and admonishment to stay vigilant
<b>Luke 22:1-38</b>	Judas/Chidf priests and teachers of the law/Satan	Judas	Betrayal	Covenant meal and promise of prophetic fulfillment about him/prayer	Jesus allows himself to be betrayed	Yes- Appears Jesus lost conflict	Appearance of cosmic conflict Layer with Satan reaching peak
<b>Luke 21:39-44</b>	The Father	Jesus	Request to remove the cup of God's wrath on sin	Yielding of will to drink the cup	Crucifixion and vicarious atonement	Yes- Appears Jesus lost conflict	Appearance of internal conflict layer of Jesus and appearance of cosmic conflict
<b>Luke 21:47-52</b>	Crowd there to arrest Jesus/Jesus own follower	Arresting crowd/Jesus own follower	Betrayal/Arrest of Jesus/Follower of Jesus cuts off ear	Yielding to betrayal and arrest/Healing man's ear/Questioning	Crucifixion and vicarious atonement	Yes- Appears Jesus lost conflict	Escalation to criminal level/appearance of conflict layer of violence
<b>Luke 21:54-62</b>	Peter	Peter	Denial of Jesus as foretold him	Looking straight at Peter	Peter weeping bitterly	Yes- Appears Jesus lost conflict	Appearance of conflictive layer with own followers
<b>Luke 21:63-65</b>	Guards of the high priest	Gaurds	Mocking, insulting, and beating Jesus	None	Left open	Yes- Appears Jesus lost conflict	Appearance of conflict layer of violence
<b>Luke 21:66-71</b>	Elders, Chief Priests, teachers of the law	Elders, Chief Priests, teachers of the law	Questioning Jesus of his messianic identity in accusative manner	Reply of eshcataloginal vision/answering affirmatively of their accusation	Legal Jewish condemnation	Yes- Appears Jesus lost conflict	Appearance of Jewish law criminally conflict layer/
<b>Luke 23:1-46</b>	Whole assembly/Pilate/Herod	Whole assembly	Accusation of subverting Roman nation and opposition of Caesar, with claim of kingship	Answering truthfully/not answering Herod/yielding to exchange for Barabbas/Yielding to violence of punishment and crucifixion/quotation of Scripture/prayer to the Father and forgiveness	Jesus crucified and died, yielding to death	Yes- Appears Jesus lost conflict	Conflict agents against Jesus has now grown exponentially/escalation has climaxed to Roman court/Appearance of layer of conflict between Jewish leaders and Pilate
<b>Luke 23:35-43</b>	Accusing soldiers and by-standing crowd/Criminal on the cross	Accusing soldiers and by-standing crowd/Criminal on the cross	Accusation and testing	No answer to accusations/refusal of gull wine analgesic	Salvation of criminal who defended him/Jesus embraced full suffering of the cross	Yes- Appears Jesus lost all present conflicts	Appearance of conflict layer between two other crucified with Jesus

<b>Luke 24:1-12</b>	Death	Jesus	Death on Cross and burial in tomb for three days	Resurrection from the dead	Cosmic conflict with Satan finished	Yes. Lingering conflict will ensue until eschatologicall y being put to rest, however conflict will include many other crucifixions	Crucifixion and resurrection are not instantaneous resolutions, but they are final.
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APPENDIX B  
Seminar Materials

## **A Spirit-filled Theology and Christological Philosophy of Church Conflict**

**Friday January 21st 9am-3pm  
@New Harvest Frankfort  
3864 US HWY 127 South  
Frankfort, KY 40601**

**9:00am-9:30am Breakfast and Pre-seminar Survey**

**9:30am-10:50am Session One: Reason**

**10:50am-11:00am Break**

**11:00am-11:50am Session Two: Experience and  
Tradition**

**11:50am-12:30pm Lunch**

**12:30pm-1:20pm Session Three: Scripture**

**1:20pm-1:30pm Break**

**1:30pm- 2:20pm Session Four: Philosophy**

**2:20pm-2:50pm Post-seminar Survey**



**Scott Bowman, DMin.  
Candidate  
Southeastern University**

This one day seminar will help add value and meaning to the conflict you face in the midst of pastoral ministry in the church. Discover the Spirit's work in conflict and a fresh look at how Jesus managed conflict in his ministry.

**RSVP or More Information Please Contact:**

**Breakfast and Lunch Provided    No Cost: Open Invitation to  
All Pastors**

# The Lifecycle of Pastoral Ministry<sup>1</sup>

## Years 1-2 The Honeymoon Phase

Pastor and congregation have a blank slate and both have great expectations for one another. This season does not last long.

## Years 2-3 The Conflicts and Challenges Phase

No pastor and no congregation are perfect and these imperfections are discovered during this time. Often both pastor and congregation become disillusioned and dissatisfied. The spiritual health of the pastor and congregation usually determine the severity of the conflict and crisis.

## Years 10+ Mystery

Challenges continue into this phase and both pastor and congregation are in need of growth and invigoration. Not much data exists beyond this point, but the data that does is encouraging for long tenured pastors.

## Years 6-10 Fruitful Growth

If the congregation and pastor are able to work through the conflicts, these will often be the most fruitful years of ministry and growth for the church. This is also when the church begins to view the pastor as “their pastor” as they have gained credibility through successfully managing conflict and change.

## Years 4-5 Crisis and Realignment

Often, many new members have come to the church, congregations are at times threatened by the new membership. Many pastors will leave or be forced out during this time. If the congregation and pastor can manage these years well a fruitful harvest is likely on the way.

<sup>1</sup>Thom S. Rainer, “Five Stages of a Pastor’s Ministry,” *Facts and Trends*, May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016, <https://factsandtrends.net/2016/05/31/five-stages-of-a-pastors-ministry/>; “Why it Takes Five to Seven Years to Become the Pastor of a Church,” *Thom S. Rainer*, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017, <https://thomrainer.com/2017/08/why-it-takes-five-to-seven-years-to-become-the-pastor-of-a-church/>; Thom S. Rainer, “The Dangerous Third Year of Pastoral Tenure,” *Thom S. Rainer*, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Thomas S. Rainer; “The Lifecycle of Pastor’s,” *Thom S. Rainer*, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011, [https://thomrainer.com/2011/11/the\\_lifecycle\\_of\\_pastors/](https://thomrainer.com/2011/11/the_lifecycle_of_pastors/).

# What can Pastors do?

1. Pray, fast, study, and grow! Keep you spiritual, physical, family, mental, and social health at the forefront. Healthy pastors make healthy congregations.<sup>1</sup>
2. Sheer grit and spiritual determination are necessary for good leadership.<sup>2</sup> If conflict gets really bad, seek an arbitrator as most AG bylaws provide for one. Be aware of year three!
3. When you get to your new church, look for possible areas of conflict and try to address them by effectively communicating. Communicate early and often. Policy and procedure are good ways of preventing conflict and help the effective communication of expectations. MinistrySafe Sexual Abuse Awareness Training and background checks are a must! Have good policy, check out your bylaws and see if there are holes in them that can create possibilities for conflict (ie., Staff and board, family relationships).
4. Check your expectations: clearly define your congregation, your own, and board's expectations. Unsatisfied expectations create friction and tensions. Communicate clearly through them.
5. Communicate what I'm telling you. Show your leadership, board, and congregation the Pastoral Lifecycle Research and keep communicating it, especially as you approach years three and four. You may not experience the research like this, but most of you will. Generally, if people can see the solid research evidence, they can better anticipate the future and adjust their expectations.
6. Finally, embrace the tension. You are on the frontlines, the missional edge, you are the M.A.S.H. unit where the kingdom of God meets the kingdom of darkness. There will be a displacement of all other kingdoms as you see God's kingdom becomes visible. Your longer tenure creates healthier churches!<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thom Rainer, *Seven Habits of Long-term Pastors*, Southern Seminary Equip, <https://equip.sbts.edu/article/7-habits-long-term-pastors>.

<sup>2</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Learning Leadership: The Five Fundamentals of Becoming an Exemplary Leader* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Thom Rainer, *Seven Habits of Long-term Pastors*.