

HEALING THE BODY OF CHRIST Biblical Models for Dealing with Church Conflict

Jesus did not say, "Conflict you will always have with you," but well he might have. Conflict is a fact of life in this world, both because of deeply held convictions and because of stubborn human sinfulness. Even in the church from the earliest times Scripture tracks the development and resolution of dissension, as well as the hope for healing of faithful Christians when conflict confronts them. This is exemplified in the words of Paul to the church at Corinth: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (I Cor. 1:10).

In their heart of hearts, most local church members, in order not to jeopardize the mission God has entrusted to them, want to agree with one another or at least to find a way to work together in spite of differences of conviction. The question is how. American Baptists have no bishops. But when conflict arises within a congregation, especially if it involves a ministerial leader, often my phone rings with the urgent appeal to intervene with the authority of a bishop in order to resolve the dispute and restore harmony. Within our polity, however, no person external to the congregation has the authority to impose anything, even order. It is the congregation alone that has both the authority and the responsibility to make its own decisions and its own peace.

Although vested with that authority, never is it necessary for a local church to work on its own toward conflict resolution. Churches have the option of turning to outside resources. Often that means a hired consultant who specializes in a business model of conflict management. We know too well that acting out differences according to the mean-spirited and uncivil ways of our road rage age too easily, becomes the default system within a church in conflict. Similarly, turning to technical expertise to sort out the conflict can become the default system of the church. Another option - rooted in the Bible's teachings - is to attempt to bring all disputing parties into the covenant relationship that ought to constitute any church and then to work toward "holy manners" or behavioral covenants to guide relationships in the future.

A covenant differs from a contract in that it is arrived at not be a process of bargaining, but by God's gracious initiative. Also, a covenant establishes relationships that go beyond mere obedience to behavioral stipulations. Covenant relationships hold together God and humanity. They also hold human beings together in a moral community of trusting relationships. While in our heads we ascribe to this theological truth about the church, too often we have failed to develop and maintain practices that product relationships capable of enduring over time through difficulties and disagreements.

By the grace of God a local church can recover a covenantal spirit of openness to the Spirit and to one another, guided by the conviction that God's covenant is irrevocable and sufficiently strong to hold us as we struggle together. Jesus left behind a church that, ideally, functions as a body of united followers who, having achieved wholeness, can be about God's business of mending the torn web of humanity.

There exist spiritual practices, or ways of faithfulness, that can move us toward this goal. I encourage your congregation to explore some of these means (listed on the resources page) given by God for the healing and wholeness of faith communities.

- We can focus on worship as our primary business even and, perhaps, especially at church business meetings, after which our other business will be transformed.
- We can engage in spiritual discernment processes such as the model known as Worshipful Work, seeking first and throughout our business to hear God rather than always being driven by parliamentary procedure in a rush to a vote that determines winners and losers.
- We can enter into a dialogue process called Common Ground, which opens members of a community in disagreement to hear one another when they have reached an impasse concerning how the Bible informs faithful response to a particular situation or issue.
- We can cultivate and model holy manners through congregational behavioral covenants developed through discussion of such works as a commentary on the Rule of Benedict or a book on behavioral covenants in congregations.
- We can engage in a season of Jubilee for communal release and repair through forgiveness.
- We can seek to enter into a Sabbath rhythm of life, to be still in order to know and trust God and to get our priorities aligned with God's.
- We can train effective pastoral relations committees to ensure a productive partnership among ministerial leaders and church members.

Our God is a God of abundance who has blessed us with enough resources and then some to fulfill our calling. Among these are resources for the healing of the Body of Christ when it is torn apart by strife. Like our Lord, we will bear the scars of our wounding, but by the grace of God we can be freed to rise up whole and holy to enter into a new day of making disciples.

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