

November 28, 2010

# The Peacemaking Church

## *Peace Begins With Me*

As Christians we are called to be peacemakers. The gospel calls us, by the mercy and grace that reconciled us to God to be reconciled to one another and to be reconciliators – peacemakers in the world and in the church. And last week we saw that the path to peace leads through an attitude and posture of humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance which is the means to maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace. God has made us one – the unity that characterizes the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Godhead is ours by virtue of our new birth in Christ. We cannot create or destroy this unity, but we can fail to cultivate it, to experience it, and to demonstrate it. And the demonstration of this unity is the testimony to the world of the truth of the gospel and that Jesus Christ is Lord. So we are commanded to be in a serious hurry to maintain this unity that we've been given.

The fact that we must **maintain** the unity of the Spirit implies that there is conflict aimed at **disrupting** our unity. The Bible takes it for granted that there will be conflict in the church, but that is not necessarily a bad thing. To be sure, there is conflict that is only destructive and doesn't do anyone any good. But all conflict is not bad. Conflict comes from the fact that we are all different. We were all created as unique individuals with different opinions, convictions, desires, perspectives and priorities. Most of these are not inherently right or wrong, just different. As Paul lays out the differences that are in the members of the Body of Christ, he doesn't bemoan the fact that we are different, rather he celebrates it. When those differences however meet in conflict, the goal is always to seek unity – not **uniformity**. And instead of avoiding conflict at those points or trying to enforce our opinion on the matter, we need to learn to accept our differences and rejoice in the fact that God did not make us all look alike and work together with one heart and mind for the sake of Christ.

There is conflict that is simply destructive and not beneficial and James describes that in chapter four of his letter: *What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.* **James 4:1-2** When conflict is the result of sinful desires or actions that are too serious to be overlooked, we need to avoid the temptation to run away or blast away. Instead we need to pursue the road to peace.

In his book, *The Peacemaker*, Ken Sande describes what he calls the 'Slippery Slope of Conflict'. Essentially he says that in any kind of conflict there are three basic responses – escape, attack, and making peace. A lot of people are wired into **escaping conflict** – especially in the church. All conflict is seen as sinful and wrong and any kind of disagreement should be avoided. And so these people will do one of three things: They will deny that there even is conflict; or they will simply run away from it. I need to say here that there are situations especially involving cases of physical or sexual abuse where that response is the appropriate thing to do until a trustworthy mediator can be involved in the situation to bring peace. But when these people who are wired to escape conflict lose all hope of ever resolving it, they may even seek to escape the conflict by taking their own lives. That obviously is the ultimate escape response.

But then there are those who are wired to **attack** – confront things head on, regardless of anyone's feelings or situation. These people are more interested in winning what they see as a power struggle than in preserving the relationship. They see this as an opportunity to assert control and eliminate the opposition. Typically these people will try to overcome their opponent by using **litigation** – asserting their rights through legal means. If that doesn't work they may step it up a notch and attempt to intimidate by **assaulting** the other person, either verbally, like slander, libel, gossip, or even to the point of physical violence. In the most extreme attack response to conflict, these people may feel they have no choice but to eliminate the other guy – **murder**. While most people who call themselves Christians wouldn't actually kill someone, they are however guilty of murder because of the hate in their hearts.

But in the middle of these we find the **peacemaking** response. These are biblical guidelines on how to resolve conflict peacefully – on the one hand not denying that conflict occurs, and on the other hand not trying to destroy the object of our frustration. First of all, we can simply **overlook** the offense. This is not denial, but rather acknowledging the fact that we were offended but choosing to deliberately overlook the offense for the sake of Christ. *A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, And it is his glory to overlook a transgression.* **Proverbs 19:11**

A large percentage of our conflicts fall into this category. Most of the time we need to simply overlook the offense or the hurt because the issues are not that serious. Usually when we are offended it is because we needed to be offended because we were not walking as Philippians 2 tells us we ought to walk: *Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves ; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.* **Philippians 2:3-4** However, if the offense is too serious to overlook or has somehow damaged the relationship, we need to seek **reconciliation**. *"Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go ; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering."* **Matthew 5:23-24** Or Galatians 6: *Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness ; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.* **Galatians 6:1**

But even if we have worked through the relational aspects of peacemaking, there still may be material issues related to property, money or other rights that need to be dealt with in **negotiation** where both parties deal with the real issues of compensation and restoration that satisfies the legitimate needs of both. *'...do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.'* **Philippians 2:4** The Bible also recognizes those instances where one of the parties cannot be compelled to make peace on his own and calls for someone to **mediate** the conflict. *"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private ; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.* **Matthew 18:16-17**

And then there are those cases that defy the previous methods and we move to **arbitration**. When the parties cannot agree even with a mediator, then a judge needs to be appointed to listen to the arguments and bring a binding decision to settle the thing. Paul told the Corinthians that they needed to appoint their own judges to decide things instead of going to the law courts. *When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?* **1 Corinthians 6:1-7**

Finally, on the far end of the peacemaking spectrum is accountability through **church discipline**. If someone who professes to be a Christ follower and ultimately refuses to be reconciled and do what is right, Jesus commands that we as the church formally intervene to hold them accountable and promote repentance, justice and forgiveness. *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.* Matthew 18:17

As Christians, followers of Christ, we are called upon to be peacemakers. Romans 12:8 says, *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* Romans 12:8 That is, **peacemaking begins with me**. So far as it depends on me – live peaceably with all. That implies that we have a responsibility not only to live in such a way that peace becomes our characteristic – but that when conflict arises, as it inevitably will, we work hard at reconciliation. We refuse to either run away or blast away, responses that lead to **KYRG – kiss your relationship goodbye** – but we humbly, gently, patiently and with forbearance work to restore relationships.

As believers we need to understand that **conflict provides opportunities**. We should view conflict as neither inconvenient, nor as occasion to grab control of things but as an opportunity to demonstrate the power of God and the love of Christ in our lives. This is what Paul told the Corinthians when personal preferences, legal restrictions and convictions of dietary rules threatened to divide the church: *So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me as I am of Christ.* 1 Corinthians 10:31 – 11:1 This passage encourages us to view conflict as an opportunity to **glorify God**, to **grow in Christ** and to **give in service to others**.

## Glorify God

Conflict provides us the opportunity to glorify God. '*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*' That is we bring Him honor and praise by demonstrating His love and grace, mercy and forgiveness to one another and the watching world. We glorify God by **trusting Him**. We trust that He is a sovereign God and that nothing comes into our lives that has not first passed through His loving hands, and the conflict we face is meant to make much of Him in our lives. We hold tightly to the liberating promises of the gospel – trusting that Christ has forgiven us our sins and calls us to forgive others. We trust God that He is using the pressures of this conflict to help us grow to be more like Jesus. We trust in His assurance that He is always watching over us, that He always intends good for us and delights to display His power in our weakness, and His grace is sufficient in everything, even when we are offended and hurt most deeply. As we do that, those who watch will have opportunity to see that God is real and His salvation is real and glorify God themselves.

We glorify God by **obeying Him**. Especially when it is hard. Obeying the commands of Christ without compromise honors Him by showing that His ways are absolutely good and wise and dependable. "*Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.*" **Matthew 5:16** Obeying Him demonstrates that we really know Him and love Him. '*If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.*' **John 14:15** Obeying what Jesus tells us shows that He is in truth our treasure and delight and that He is worthy to be loved more than life.

We glorify God also as we **imitate Him**. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: '*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children ; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.* **Ephesians 5:1-2** Notice the focal point of imitating Christ – '*...just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us...*' He loved us and gave Himself up for us. That is the difficult part – giving up our cherished opinions, giving up our right to feel hurt and abused, giving up our right to be treated well – as Christ did for us. Conflict should always bring us to the cross where the Lord we love gave up everything to save us.

Finally, we glorify God by **acknowledging Him**. We acknowledge Him in conflict by asking Him to help you trust Him, obey Him and imitate Him. It is recognizing that we cannot do what we must on our own and appealing to heaven for help. It is coming boldly to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. It is demonstrating the grace we have received to those who oppose us and giving credit to God and pointing them to Christ and giving Him glory. It is refusing to wallow in your hurt, your offense, your sense of being wronged and lay all that at the foot of the cross and giving Him glory. If we fail to glorify God in conflict, we will inevitably glorify something else. As Ken Sande noted: '*By your actions you will show either that you have a big God, or that you have a big self and big problems.*' [*The Peacemaker*, Ken Sande, p.34] If we fail to draw attention to God, we will draw attention to ourselves and God will not get the glory due His name.

## Grow in Christ

Conflict always provides the opportunity to grow in Christ. One thing conflict does is throw a spotlight on all those areas we still fall short of the glory of God. If we see conflict as one means the Holy Spirit uses to expose our sinfulness instead of focusing on the other person's sin and wrongdoing, we will begin to understand how conflict indeed provides opportunities. God does love us and does have a wonderful plan for our lives – and that loving plan is to conform us to the image of His Son. '*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son...*' **Romans 8:28-29** What that implies is that there is a lot of what is in us that does not now look like Jesus and God's intention is to make us look like His Son. God's highest ambition for you is not to make you comfortable or prosperous or happy – it is that you would be made to look like His Son in all things – and conflict has a way of bringing that purpose to pass.

As conflict highlights our sin and weaknesses, as it exposes our sinful thoughts and habits and desires, our stubborn pride and bitter attitudes and unforgiving hearts, it grants us the opportunities to confess and repent and draw near to the throne of grace where we receive that mercy to overlook offenses and find the grace that gives us the power to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us and bless those who curse us and pray for those who mistreat us. (Luke 6:27-28) The power of God is best demonstrated in our weaknesses and nothing highlights those like conflict. **The lessons of mercy are never learned where that quality is never needed.** The virtues of forgiveness, patience, faithfulness, humility and forbearance are never developed when they are never required. **In fact the times of greatest growth are most often the times of greatest conflict.**

## Give in Service to Others

Conflict also provides opportunities to give in service to others. As Paul reminded the Corinthians: '*Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.*' This is an attitude, not of me first, but 'you first'. At the heart of Paul's admonition here is the good of others. So often we are seeking our own advantage – what is best for us, especially in conflict. But Paul's heart was to seek the good of the other guy. Even to the point of putting himself at a disadvantage. Because His goal was to glorify God and imitate Christ, his attitude was other-centered and not self-centered.

The wisdom of this age says, 'Protect yourself – don't let people take advantage of you – look out for your own interests first'. But the wisdom of God says "*But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.* **Luke 6:27-28** Conflict provides us opportunities to demonstrate the love of God to those who are our enemies – to do good to those who hate us – to bless those who curse us and to pray for those who mistreat us. So when conflict arises we have to ask ourselves – how can I demonstrate the love of God toward this enemy? What is the good I can do for this one who hates me? How can I bless the one who is cursing me? And how can I pray for the guy that is mistreating me? We don't usually think to do these kind of things when we face conflict. But we need to understand that these are the very things the Lord commands us to do in these very situations.

What this means is that peace begins with me. If there is to be peace with my brother or sister, if there is to be reconciliation and restoration of relationships – then I am on the spot. This is what Jesus says in Matthew: *Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.* Matthew 7:1 – 5

We don't have time here this morning to fully develop this whole passage but we'll just close here with the fifth verse: ***You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*** When Jesus talks about conflict here, ***His focus is not on the issue but the attitude of the heart.*** Peacemaking begins with me – me who has the log in the eye, not the me with the speck. It is recognizing that if we see a speck in our opponent's eye, it is because we are seeing a tiny reflection of the huge log in ours. The point of the passage is that peace begins with me – not with the other guy. We need to take the initiative, not to attempt eye surgery on our brother, but to take the thing out of our eye that is not allowing us to see clearly.

In closing, I want to leave you with these four peacemaking principles that we will develop more fully in the next few weeks. The first thing we must consider in any conflict is the glory of God. **Glorify God.** That is how can I please and honor God in this situation? What is it that will bring Him the most glory. The second thing is to look at ourselves. **Get the log out.** What have I done to contribute to this conflict? Where am I at fault? Only then can we take a look at the other guy and consider how to **Gently restore.** How can I serve others by helping them take responsibility for their contribution to this thing? Finally we need to **Go and be reconciled.** How can I demonstrate the forgiveness of God and help find a God-glorifying resolution to this conflict? My prayer is that we would be known as peacemakers and not peacebreakers and in all that we do we would bring God glory.

*Our gracious God and Savior,*

*Grant that we would be peacemakers and not peacebreakers. Help us to understand and embrace that peace begins with us. Forbid Lord that we would treasure our self-interests and pride above reconciliation and peace. May Your glory and Your honor be our highest priority. Open our eyes to see that conflict provides us opportunities to demonstrate the love of God to those who are our enemies – to do good to those who hate us – to bless those who curse us and to pray for those who mistreat us. May we pay the price required to spread peace and reconciliation with others, as You have so graciously done with us. Grant O Lord that we would live in the shadow of the cross where Your mercy triumphs and grace abounds. Let us embrace the liberating promises of the gospel that called us by the mercy and grace of God and live as peacemakers in the world and in the church, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.*