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The hope of biblical peacemaking as a response to the challenge of conflict

AUTHOR | BRUCE BURGESS

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Romans 12:18 says “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all”. Bruce Burgess lays out a biblical framework for conflict resolution.

The word ‘conflict’ strikes us hard. It evokes an involuntary ‘gut level’ reaction deep within us, perhaps of pain, or danger or fear. It speaks to us of relationships that won’t heal, of people who won’t listen, of wounds never acknowledged, of conduct never discussed. It may be an extreme situation which is splitting a church, school or marriage, or it may be just that lower level of conflict which causes us to avoid someone’s company in the workplace, avert our eyes at morning tea after church, and be polite and civil when underneath we feel distant or angry.

In the face of such feelings we tend to feel largely helpless, and lose hope that things could change or be better than they are, or that issues could ever be adequately addressed. How sad that we, people redeemed by God into relationship with him, can be so affected by conflict in our own relationships that it robs us of our joy and, in some cases, our ability both individually and collectively to witness to the very gospel by which we have been saved.

I wish to share with you a biblical framework for responding to conflict

which draws upon the wonderful resources God has given us through the Bible, the example of his son Jesus and the person of the Holy Spirit. These potentially life-transforming principles will help us deal with conflict better than we currently do.

What matters most, theology or practice?

If I were to ask you what was the most important element to have under your belt in being able to respond biblically and healthily to conflict, would you say it was to have your theology about conflict right, or to have a practical framework which you could use in any conflict situation to help you address it in a way that reflected biblical principles?

Before reading on, I’d like you to answer the question—theology or practice, which is it for you? Then I’ll come clean and tell you my thoughts.

Now that you’ve considered the question, I must confess that in my view, the answer is not either/or—rather, it’s both/and. We need a framework that provides not only a right way of *thinking* about conflict from a biblical perspective, but also gives us practical guidance on how

to *deal with it* in real life. As a personal observation, based on years working in this area, it seems to me that the church, to its great loss, has historically not done a stellar job in helping its people in either area.

We struggle to put together coherently the single sentences which linger from sermons and Bible-readings past—how does the turned cheek in Matthew 5:39 fit with “if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault” (Matt 18:15)? We understand the call to “love one another: just as I [Jesus] have loved you” (John 13:34), but what does that mean in the context of the power struggles currently playing out in our church? And does the call to forgive seventy times seven (Matt 18:22) mean God wants us to be Christian doormats for the rest of our lives?

Useful reading

Thankfully, some serious work has been done in this area in recent times, and there are now various resources that bring coherent, biblically-based guidance on how to think biblically about conflict together with assistance in responding to it in a God-pleasing way.¹

The seminal work in this area is *The Peacemaker* by Ken Sande.² I consider this book to be the best overall treatment of the subject of conflict as treated by the Bible—biblical, readable, and practical (including life-application questions at the end of each chapter). As a work which takes an overview of the area of conflict, it is in this sense a ‘systematic theology’ upon the subject. It is Sande’s framework for responding to conflict that I will be sharing in the greater part of this article.

But two other works merit brief mention. The first is Alfred Poirier’s *The Peacemaking Pastor*.³ Written from the perspective of a pastor, Poirier describes himself as having been a heretic when it came to conflict, not because his theology was poor, but because of the disconnection he found between his preaching and his actual approach to conflict in his own life. Poirier’s book differs from Sande’s in that it tends to be more of a ‘biblical theologian’s’ approach, looking at the whole character of God, the biblical narrative, and the role of God as the great peacemaker of human history.

Finally, Jim Van Yperen’s *Making Peace*⁴ is distinctive in that it is more directly focused on the church itself. It describes the serious impact conflict has on community, the church’s historic failure to address conflict well, the leadership styles which enable different forms of dysfunction, and presents to us what becoming a ‘redemptive’ rather than ‘counterfeit peace’ community really looks like. In this sense, this is a work with an *ecclesiological* focus, calling the church to rediscover its calling to have what Sande would call a true ‘culture of peace’.

All of these works bring tremendous depth to our efforts to change patterns of responding poorly to conflict into responses that reflect the nature of our God, the hope of the gospel, and the teaching of the Bible on how to think about and deal with conflict.

The four Gs: a biblical framework for responding to conflict

In *The Peacemaker*, Sande presents a four-part framework for responding to conflict, which he calls ‘the 4 Gs’.

The framework involves a progression starting with God, then focusing on

‘my’ contribution and responsibility, before moving to ‘your’ contribution and responsibility, before ending with the goal of the parties being reconciled—the desired ‘us’ outcome.

Step one: Glorify God

Key question: How can I please and honour God in the midst of this conflict?

The most notable element of Sande’s first principle in responding to conflict—glorify God—is that it starts with God and not with us! Rather than begin with questions of “how can I achieve what I want in this conflict?”, Sande takes us back to considering the very nature of not only conflict, but also our personal role within it.

First, he confronts our ‘gut theology’ of conflict, which tells us that conflict is always bad. This feeling about conflict is what, at an individual level, leaves us feeling hopeless and, at a community level, can lead whole churches to develop an unwritten culture of ‘we don’t do conflict here’. Sande turns this thinking on its head by rejecting the notion that conflict itself is inherently bad—it is an inevitable outworking of the sinful human condition—and instead arguing that it is our

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responses to conflict which are ultimately either sinful or God-pleasing (pp. 30-31).

Sande presents the radical notion that, rather than being inherently bad or sinful, we need to see conflict as an *opportunity* for God to work in our lives and the lives of others.

The Bible teaches that we should see conflict neither as an inconvenience nor as an occasion to force our will on others, but rather as an opportunity to demonstrate the love and power of God in our lives. This is what Paul told the Christians in Corinth when religious, legal and dietary disputes threatened to divide their church:

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or

the church of God—even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (1 Cor 10:31-11:1, NIV)

This passage presents a radical view of conflict: It encourages us to look at conflict as an opportunity to glorify God, serve others, and to grow to be like Christ. (p. 31)

Conflict, then, acquires a whole new dimension of hope as it becomes a chance for us to trust God, obey him, lovingly serve another person, or even grow in our own personal walk with God. We learn to consider ourselves not as people who have to ‘fix’ the conflict ourselves, but to be stewards of the conflict, seeking to be obedient to God in working out his purposes in the midst of the conflict.

This might sound a little ‘pie in the sky’ until I share a real life example. In one mediation between a man and a woman working in a Christian not-for-profit ministry, two parties who were initially friends became profoundly alienated from each

other. They saw no hope for any forward movement or resolution. Hearing each other’s stories was incredibly painful for them, yet they remained tentatively open to trusting God and what he was doing through the conflict.

After some heart-rending times of sharing, one party was able to haltingly but gently reveal how this person’s critical and aggressive conduct was affecting them and others in the workplace. Meanwhile, the other person had come to the point of brokenness and had already prepared a most beautiful confession, acknowledging how hurtful and destructive their behaviour had been. The person asked for forgiveness, which was freely given amidst tears. The two people were beautifully reconciled, were able to work through their differences, and continued to work collaboratively together for many years.



Significantly, however, God used the conflict:

- as an incredible ‘ripple-effect’ witness within the ministry workplace to the power of God
- to help each of the parties to grow significantly in their trust of God and the power of prayer
- to help one party to radically change their behaviour towards others when they disagreed or were annoyed with them
- to restore the personal relationship of one of them with God himself, and to work through elements of anger in their life against God.

What an opportunity this conflict ended up being, even though neither of the parties would ever have conceived of any of these outcomes as being remotely possible when it began.

Step two: Get the log out of your own eye

Key question: How can I show Jesus’ work in me by taking responsibility for my contribution to this conflict?

This area is the hardest for people to address, yet the one that yields the most profound transformative results when it is. A great distinctive of a Christian response to conflict is that we recognize the reality of sin. Sande observes:

The Bible teaches that many disagreements are the direct result of sinful attitudes and behavior. As James 4:1-2 tells us, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but you don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight...” (p. 30)

Often, what drives people to behave sinfully towards others when they respond to conflict is that what began as a good desire has become an all-consuming one.

We often couple our apologies with qualifications and justifications—ifs, buts and maybes, which, once offered, shoot our apology down in flames.

A fear (loss of relationship, power, etc.), a craving (power, recognition) or a sense of misplaced trust in ourself (“only I know what’s best here”) starts to take an ever-increasing role in our thinking or behaviour, resulting in judgement and punishment on others who do not meet our demands.

The remedy for this behaviour is repentance and confession—replacing the ‘idols of our heart’ with worship of the one true God. Although we find this

extremely challenging, Scripture exhorts us to make this a practice of our lives:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)

Many of us struggle to admit we have done anything wrong. We are able to clearly see the specks in our brother’s and sister’s eyes, but stubbornly refuse to admit the extent and impact of our own ‘plank-filled’ sinful behaviour. Yet if we are willing to allow God to break through this hard-heartedness, we can experience the freedom that comes from repentance, coupled with the promise of knowing God’s forgiveness. Time and again I have seen a deep, authentic, heartfelt confession become the key to unlocking brokenness and opening up a pathway to restore a relationship between Christians in conflict.

However, once we reach the point of being willing to confess, we may still stumble badly over *how* we actually say sorry. We often couple our apologies with qualifications and justifications—ifs, buts and maybes, which, once offered, shoot our apology down in flames. Rather than offering clean, unqualified confessions, our tendency is to give guarded and self-justifying explanations, emaciated confessions devoid of detail, heart or expressions of willingness to change our behaviour—let alone true acknowledgements of the depth of hurt caused. If we do risk asking

to be forgiven, often it is expressed as if the apology entitles us to quick forgiveness; rarely will we say something as gracious as “I know that I hurt you deeply, and I hope that *in time* you may be able to forgive me for the pain I caused you”.

Apologies for significant offences typically need careful, prayerful preparation, and benefit greatly from being written out before being given. Yet our relationships will benefit immeasurably if we learn to make good confessions part of who we

are, part of our marriages, and part of what we seek to teach our children.⁵

Step three: Gently restore

Key question: How can I lovingly serve others by helping them take responsibility for their contribution to this conflict?

Being able to own our wrongdoings is vital, but the biblical peacemaker is also called to be willing to lovingly raise with another the things they have done which have been hurtful or sinful—their contribution to the conflict. This is what Jesus had in mind in his teaching on conflict in Matthew 18, when he encourages us to go to our brother (or sister) when they have sinned against us (verse 15). Note that the intention is not that we might simply point out his or her fault, but rather that ‘if he listens to you, you have gained your brother’ (i.e. the relationship is restored). This teaching comes bookended between the parable of the lost sheep whom the shepherd searches for to restore them

helping them work through an issue we can see is affecting their relationship, not only with us, but also with others around them—then we are a long way down the path of being heard. We may become God’s instruments in opening a window through which the Holy Spirit is able to work in their hearts, to enable them to address and change hurtful or sinful behaviours.

In the context of the church, leaders need to accept this God-given mantle. Too often, matters of ongoing damage to the life and witness of the church are left to fester, go completely undealt with, or are approached with a hard and heavy hand that leaves people bruised and unrestored, because sin is hard to address and leaders feel ill-equipped in this area.⁶ Yet the Bible is absolutely overflowing with calls for us to address such matters directly and redemptively as part of being the body of Christ—see for example Matt 5:9, 18:15-20; 2 Cor 5:11-21; Gal 6:1-2; Phil 4:2-3; Jam 3:18.

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to the flock (verses 12-14), and Jesus’ teaching on the need to have a continuously forgiving heart towards others (the seventy times seven and the parable of the unmerciful servant, verses 21-35).

This is tricky territory. Each of us can probably think of someone who we find it difficult to raise issues with, and we struggle even at the thought of sharing with them what they have done to contribute to a conflict. One of the keys here is our attitude and approach. There is a world of difference between a gracious, gentle, well-prepared sharing conversation, and one where we are unprepared, judgemental, and desire to prove ourselves right and others wrong.

We can learn how to raise issues with another, especially when we begin with an acknowledgement of our own wrongdoing and request forgiveness. However, a central element will be the state of our heart. If we approach with a genuine desire to serve the other person—perhaps even

and repeatedly remind them of the gospel and urge them to repent of their wrongs. This treatment is designed to bring conviction to stubborn people, with the purpose of leading them to turn from their sinful ways and to be restored to fellowship with God and fellow believers. (p. 194)

Step four: Go and be reconciled

Key question: How can I demonstrate the forgiveness of God and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict?

When someone hurts us, two of our most common reactions are either to run (an escape response) or to hurt them back (an attack response). Yet these responses only escalate the conflict.

Jesus teaches us in the Lord’s prayer to pray that God would forgive us “as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6:12). Paul exhorts us to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph 4:32). Whilst it is one thing to know that we are ‘duty-bound’ as a matter of obedience to forgive, it is another thing altogether to be able to forgive freely and from the heart.

Here we encounter one of the true distinctives of a Christian framework of responding to conflict. Whilst secular works tell us of the merits of forgiveness as a means to our own personal healing from bitterness or anger,⁷ we need to understand that forgiveness is not a selfish act done so that we may become well, but rather an inherently interpersonal act with an inherently redemptive relational agenda. If I am to forgive you, it means that I am willing no longer to hold the event against you; it will not be the barrier that it was to our relationship together. The destructive power of the hurt has been dealt with.

A common struggle encountered when working with people in conflict is this: “I know I need to forgive, and I even would like to forgive, but the offence is so great that I just can’t”. The reality of such situations and feelings is important to acknowledge—some hurts run so deep that they seem beyond us to address. And they are. For so long as we seek to force ourselves to forgive, we will rail against the offence, our sinful natures urging us not to forgive—“they don’t deserve it”—especially if they have not repented,

Rather than seeing sin as a matter to be addressed through a form of church discipline which is purely punitive or exclusionary in character, Jesus’ command (if a person refuses to listen to the church) is to treat the person trapped in their sin “as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt 18:17). Yes, this involves treating them as a non-believer; there may well be consequences such as a loss of membership privileges and leadership or teaching responsibilities. However, the emphasis is not to be punitive, but rather to be seeking to help the person repent and turn from their sin and be restored to full participation in the life of the church. As Sande argues, the person in this position is not to be ostracized from the church at the very time when they are most in need of help, but rather becomes a target for evangelism:

... instead of talking to them in superficial ways, we should graciously

confessed and asked for forgiveness.

In these cases, we point people to the cross, as the one and only ultimate basis for being willing to forgive another. To see just how greatly we have been forgiven—that this forgiveness cost God his own Son—is to find a reason outside ourselves to free us from the chains of bitterness and resentment. As we look to the cross, and as we pray in desperation that God would give us a heart to forgive, we find our heart softening and a willingness to forgive another. Not because they deserve it, but through the humbling and redeeming recognition that *we* did not deserve it, yet God still forgave us.

As God ministers to our spirit, and we freely and voluntarily forgive, so the promise of restoring our relationship unfolds before us, along with the hope of a new relationship with the person with whom we have had conflict.⁸

Building a culture of peace in the church

The church reflects the things we emphasize—through what we teach, model, pray about, have our small groups study, invest time and money into, and incorporate into our ministry planning and structures. Every church needs to be seeking to better equip its leaders and members to deal with the challenge of conflict in preparedness for not if but *when* it arises, whether on a large scale or small.

There is incredible benefit to the

kingdom to be had by seeking to build a culture of peace in our churches, where people within the congregation have the right theology and skills to respond to conflict in God-pleasing ways. As this occurs, leaders become free to focus less on conflict and more on ministry. The church becomes a safe and joyful place. Disagreements need not have only negative outcomes, but can become opportunities for God to achieve his purposes in the lives of those involved, sometimes in incredibly surprising and faith-growing ways.

As a church body develops a common language and ways of dealing with issues, relationships become stronger, conflicts and struggles with sin are handled redemptively, and—blessing beyond blessing—the church's outward witness to the gospel itself is enhanced. This is because, in a cynical society, seeing a church community deal with conflict well is an inherently unexpected yet profoundly attractive and authentic expression of the gospel.

For those who are not yet believers, seeing conflict handled in a way where wrongs are acknowledged and confessed, forgiveness granted and relationships restored gives rise to the very real prospect of a response that says, “Wow—see how these Christians love each other! This is real, this is redemptive, this is true community—tell me more.”

Conflict is still tough, but not in any way impossible for the God that we serve

and depend upon. As we seek to apply the principles found in the Bible, we find great hope for us personally, that relationships seemingly unable to be repaired might yet be restored, and that God might use the conflict itself for his greater and good purposes.

May it be our aim to grow in our ability to personally respond to conflict in ways that please and honour him, and to develop within our churches cultures of peace, where true ‘shalom’ is found and where the reality of lives redeemed by the gospel and lived in healthy, joyful relationships are displayed for all to see. **B**

Bruce Burgess is the National Director of PeaceWise, a cross-denominational, not-for-profit peacemaking ministry that both teaches biblical peacemaking and provides conciliation services to Christians seeking help with conflict. The mission of PeaceWise is ‘Promoting peace and reconciliation in relationships through biblical principles and the power of Christ.’ <http://www.peacewise.org.au/>.

ENDNOTES

1. The three works mentioned are not in any way an exhaustive list of Christian writing on the subject, but are important works with the strong combination of being both biblical and practical in their approach.
2. Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1982.
3. Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2006.
4. Jim Van Yperen, *Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict*, Moody Publishers, Chicago, 2002.
5. For practical assistance on how to give a good apology, including a list of seven things which can change our confessions from weak ones to strong ones, visit PeaceWise's website at <http://www.peacewise.org.au/Peacemakingprinciples/3Getthelayoutofyourouneye.aspx>.
6. As Van Yperen observes, “the way leadership responds to the conflict will always determine if, how, and when the conflict is reconciled. The problem is that most church leaders have little or no practical training in biblical conflict resolution” (p. 25).
7. See for example Carl Schneider's ‘What it means to be sorry: the power of apology in mediation’ in *Mediation Quarterly*, 2000, vol 17, no 3, pp. 265-280.
8. For further guidance on how we can know that we have forgiven someone, and the promises we can make to demonstrate this forgiveness, see *The Peacemaker* (pp. 204-224), or PeaceWise at <http://www.peacewise.org.au/Peacemakingprinciples/5Goandbereconciled.aspx>.

Discussion questions

1. Do you agree that conflict often presents “an opportunity for God to work in our lives and the lives of others”? Why/why not? Have you seen or experienced this yourself?
2. Do you struggle to say sorry, or to admit openly (and without qualification) when you've been in the wrong? What have you learned from this article about apologizing?
3. Look up some of the key passages mentioned in this article (James 4:1-2; Matt 18:15-20; Gal 6:1-6; Eph 4:31-32). What do they teach us about conflict, forgiveness and peacemaking?

Prayer points

- Pray for conflict situations in your own life or family or church or workplace. Pray that biblical principles of peacemaking could be followed.
- Pray for your own heart—that it would be ready both to repent and forgive.
- Give thanks for the peace that God has won through the cross.