

TRANSFORMED BY CONFLICT?!

by Bruce Burgess, National Director, PeaceWise

When was the last time you saw someone remarkably transformed, for the better, by conflict?

For many of us, the very idea seems to border on the scandalous, as we reflect on painful times in our own lives, and hurts we have witnessed others experience even in the midst of Christian communities. Our 'gut theologies' when it comes to conflict incline us to a tendency, recognised by secular and Christian writers alike, to view conflict as something inherently bad from which nothing good can come and that generally is best avoided or 'got over with' as soon as possible.² We see little of God in the midst of conflict, and rarer still do we actually contemplate that God may have purposes that he is wanting to achieve through a conflict, or, stranger yet, purposes he is wanting to achieve *through us*, through a conflict.

Armed with these gut level responses to conflict, our expectations about conflict are generally fulfilled. We expect it to be highly toxic and it is. We see little good could possibly come of it and it doesn't. We envisage relationships being injured and they are. We struggle to see a way to forgive and so we don't. We cannot see God glorified and he is not.

Such a gut theology presents an intriguing challenge for us, as it represents something of a disconnect between our faith as believed and our faith as lived. At an intellectual level, we sense that as Christians we somehow *should* be able to respond to conflict in ways that are readily identifiable as being seasoned with demonstrably more love, grace, wisdom, ownership of our own personal wrongdoing and willingness to forgive others for theirs than we see in the world around us.

And it is right that we should sense these things in our spirit, as this reflects our knowledge of biblical principles well familiar to us, which exhort us to...³

- love one another, even as Christ loved us
- seek to demonstrate grace in our own lives, even as we ourselves are saved by God's grace;
- not be wise in our own eyes, but to draw our wisdom from the fear of the LORD
- be better at identifying the logs in our own eyes than the specks in others
- bear with each other and forgive as Christ forgave us
- value personal reconciliation with others even above our own worship of God
- be peacemakers, with the peace of Christ ruling in our hearts as many members of one body living in unity together

When our minds present us with such an internal checklist, and our hearts call us to live this way, but at the same time we struggle to do so in practice, the question that arises is why this should be so?

The *Why?* question is answered at two levels. On the one hand it is a reflection of the age-old wrestling match with sin so poignantly captured for us by Paul in his description of striving to do the 'good he wants to do', failing, and ultimately only being rescued by Christ from this situation.⁴ So it is that for reconciliation, when it occurs, it is ultimately God (and his Holy Spirit working within us) who is the author of the heart change that leads to such wonderful redemptive scenes taking place in our lives. This is why deep and fervent prayer remains such a central part to all reconciling endeavours.

The second answer to the *Why?* question is that the whole area of how to respond with both a right theology (what we *think* about conflict) and a right praxis (what we are called to *do* in conflict) has not historically been an area of focus for the Christian church. We have not generally been well taught what to believe about conflict, and so our gut theologies (often derived from painful

personal experience) guide us. And when it comes to what to do, we largely wing it based on our instinctive responses.

But there is a better way! We need to learn that conflict itself is not inherently sinful, but rather neutral; the question is more whether our *responses* to conflict will be sinful and destructive, or will they be seeking to glorify God and constructive. We need to learn to ask questions like:⁵

How can I please and honour God in the midst of this conflict?
Is God seeking to change me in some way through this conflict?
Is God wanting to use me in this conflict to bless others? (for example by lovingly forgiving them or perhaps even by lovingly confronting them in a way that leads to genuine repentance and reconciliation)

Coupled with these questions, we also need to learn the skills of *how* to deal with conflict in real life – the ‘how to’s’ of confession and forgiveness, and heart examination and having difficult but redemptive conversations and loving confrontations.

When we ask questions such as these, and we seek to learn these life skills that perhaps we have never been taught, we open ourselves up to God working miracles of such transformative majesty and redemptive power in our lives that we would say – such things are possible only through God. Broken relationships are healed, unhealthy patterns of behaviour sometimes built up over a lifetime are changed, people’s relationships with God himself come back to life and the witness to Christ shouts triumphantly into secularism’s challenge to be any different to the rest of the world at all.



If you would like to learn more about how to respond biblically to conflict in your life or the lives of others, we encourage you not to miss the wide range of training offered by PeaceWise, a national cross-denominational ministry organisation dedicated to *Promoting peace and reconciliation in relationships through biblical principles and the power of Christ.*

For full details and to book online, see www.peacewise.org.au

¹ An earlier version of this article first appeared in the October 2007 edition of *Summa Supremo*.

² See for example secular writers Dukes, Pisolish and Stephens’ observations in *Reaching for higher ground in conflict resolution*, 2000, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, p.20 and the Christian writer Hugh Halverstadt’s reflections in *Managing church conflict*, 1991, Westminster Press, Louisville, pp. 2-3.

³ See for example John 13:34, 2 Timothy 2:11-12, Ephesians 2:1-8, Proverbs 3:7, Matthew 7:1-5, Colossians 3:12-17, Matthew 5: 23-4, Matthew 5:9, Ephesians 4: 29-32.

⁴ See Romans 7: 7-25

⁵ These questions are found in Ken Sande’s *The Peacemaker* 3rd ed Baker Books, 2004.