



Leadership Through Conflict

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INTRODUCTION:

Due to changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, churches and parishioners have faced severe trials. Many have not been able to attend work or school. In many cases, finances have been severely affected. We have not been able to worship together as is our custom ... and God's command.

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:23–25).

Our routines have been upended. This brings increased stress and uncertainty. And stress and uncertainty do not help us to be our best. Congregations and their leaders (both pastors and lay leaders) have attempted to meet the requirements of local officials while remaining faithful to God's Word.

Even in the best of times, when everyone is healthy and there are no immediate threats, conflict can be intimidating and frightening. But in the midst of difficult current events, conflict can seem downright horrific. But the same God who promised He would be with us always (Matthew 28:20) has also promised that He will guide us each day (Psalm 32:8). In this Bible study, let's look to God's Word as we seek to provide leadership through conflict.

I. ORIGIN OF CONFLICT

In chapters 3 and 4 of Genesis, conflict erupts between God and man, and then erupts between mankind.

Read Genesis 3:1–5.

Who is creating conflict? *Satan.*

Who does conflict affect? *Adam, Eve, their descendants and all creation.*

Is there a winner in this conflict? Why or why not? *No, not even Satan. He has played a role in his own destruction (see Genesis 3:15).*

Read Genesis 4:1–10.

Who is creating conflict? *Cain (and Satan, working in his heart to create jealousy).*

Who does conflict affect? *Abel (who is murdered), Adam and Eve who mourn the first child's death, and God who sees His creation destroyed.*

Is there a winner in this conflict? Why or why not? *No.*

When you face conflict, you can take heart in this: You are not the first one to deal with conflict. And you will not be the last. Conflict is in our sin-filled nature (Romans 5:12).

In the Old Testament, conflict abounds! Do you recall biblical accounts where people were in conflict with one another, or with God? What are some that come to mind?

- *Abraham/Lot - Their tribes fought over land (Genesis 13:5–13)*
- *Moses/Pharaoh - Moses pleads with Pharaoh to let the Israelites go (Exodus 5)*
- *Israel/Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Minor Prophets, etc.)*
- *David/Saul (1 Samuel 19)*
- *Ahab/Elijah (1 Kings 18)*

Conflict can threaten our well-being. It can threaten our health, our finances. And when destructive conflict arises we can easily go on the defensive to protect ourselves, or on the offensive to “eliminate the threat.” Both of these approaches do damage to all involved. The relationship that we have with our brothers and sisters in Christ is torn asunder.

Conflict is destructive, but there is an antidote.

II. GOD'S ANSWER TO CONFLICT

The moment that conflict reared its ugly head, God had an answer. **Read Genesis 3:15.**

Note from *Lutheran Study Bible* on this passage:

“Note movement in the text, which begins with conflict between the woman and the serpent. Then it moves to conflict between the descendent of the woman and descendent of the serpent. But, unusually, it concludes with conflict between the woman's descendent and the serpent himself. Clearly this verse is not simply about the origin of the conflict between humans and snakes, but about a conflict that will culminate with the defeat of the serpent by one who will descend from the woman. This points to Christ and His defeat of Satan on the cross, and for this reason this first is often called the “protoevangelium” (the first promise of the gospel).”¹

Our conflict with God is at an end through Christ — we are His children. The conflict between God and His people has been washed away in the waters of Baptism.

Read Romans 6:1–5.

What is our relationship to God in Christ after our Baptism? *We are no longer in conflict, but we are “in Christ,” and as Christ is one with the Father, so we are one with Him, and with all believers. (See John 17:20-23: “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe*

¹ Quotation taken from the notes from *The Lutheran Study Bible*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016.

that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”

Still, Ephesians 6 admonishes us to be prepared for battle (conflict) by putting on the armor of God.

Read Ephesians 6:11–12.

Are we under attack? *Yes.*

From whom? *The rulers, the authorities, the powers of this dark world, and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12).*

We do face battle with the world, our sinful nature and Satan. We have heard these three enemies named in countless Bible studies. But who is not on that list? Our neighbor!

What is our relationship to our neighbor after our Baptism? *Revisit John 17:20–23. In Christ we are one, and always praying for our unity!*

Baptism is our antidote to conflict with our neighbor:

It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

“Righteousness and purity forever” includes a right relationship to God, and a right relationship to our neighbor.

How many commandments deal with our relationship to God? *Three.*

How many commandments deal with our relationship to our neighbor? *Seven.*

III. CONFLICT FOR GOOD

God often takes a tool from Satan’s hands, and refashions it to bring life. Perhaps you recall the preface to Holy Communion for Holy Week:

“It is truly good, right, and salutary that we should at all times and at all places give thanks to You, Holy Lord, Almighty Father, Everlasting God. On the tree of the cross you gave salvation to mankind that, whence death arose, thence life also might rise again; and that He who by a tree once overcame likewise by a tree might be overcome, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Therefore with angels and archangels...”

God has ripped a tree from the hands of Satan, and refashioned it to bring life, for the benefit of His church. Is it possible that God can also take conflict from the hands of Satan and use it for the benefit of His bride, the church?

Do you recall any conflict during Luther’s time?

- *Luther stood against Johann Tetzel, who was selling indulgences.*
- *Luther stood against Cardinal Thomas de Vio Cajetan, who condemned him at his hearing.*
- *Luther stood against Pope Leo and his Papal Bull, which denounced Luther.*
- *Many other conflicts could be mentioned....*

Would you call that conflict a blessing? *Yes, by the grace of God the Gospel once again had free course through the world: justification by faith, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia.*

Even in the midst of conflict in the church, we recall with grateful hearts that God is present.

As Luther wrote in his explanation to the Third Article of the Creed: “In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.”

As we grow and live with one another, God has promised to be with His church. His Son is the Head of the church. And the Holy Spirit “calls, gathers and enlightens” the church. That means in every worship service, in every board meeting, in every council meeting, in every voter’s meeting, the Holy Spirit is present to enlighten His church.

For further study: Those of you who have the *Lutheran Study Bible*, please have a look at p. 1867. You will find Acts 15. Acts 15 details the Council of Jerusalem, where a dispute arose. This story describes two errors in dealing with conflict:

- Conflict in matters of doctrine where we do not stand firm; and
- Conflict in matters of missional strategy where we do stand firm, but perhaps do so in error.

“Both errors may fuel a party spirit a work of the flesh as described in Galatians 5:19–21, which undermines trust and unity among Christians. Resolution of conflict in the church requires careful discernment, responsible discussion, patience and devotion to fellow members of Christ’s body.”²

IV. CONFLICT STUDY

In the Christian church we do have different opinions and thoughts about the best way to address many situations. People of good will can dialogue and share their positions. Researchers have noted five root causes of conflict: values, interests, information, organizational structure and relationships. Can you think of a time when you saw a conflict with one of these root causes at the center?

Possible church arguments:

- *Values — have there been conflicts between doctrinal purity and mission outreach?*
- *Interests — have there been conflicts between those who prefer certain worship styles?*
- *Information — have there been conflicts over who has access to information?*
- *Organizational structure — have there been conflicts over voter’s meetings and the authority of various groups in a congregation?*
- *Relationships — have there been conflicts between personalities?*

Are there blessings from conflict, when two viewpoints seek to be heard? Yes! Below, those blessings are listed:

- Stimulating creativity
- Promoting organizational vitality
- Helping individuals and groups establish identities
- Inspiring new ideas
- Motivating change
- Serving as a safety valve to indicate problems

Can the Holy Spirit:

Stimulate creativity? (Hint: look at the Psalms.) *The sheer wonder and creativity in the Psalms showcases the ability of the Holy Spirit to stir the human heart. Shakespeare’s creativity cannot match David’s output under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Psalm 23 is perhaps the most beloved and comforting text in all of history.*

² Quotation taken from the notes from *The Lutheran Study Bible*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016.

Promote organizational vitality? (Hint: See Matthew 28.) *The Holy Spirit brought forth the Christian church, which has remained faithful to God throughout the ages. Art, music, hospitals and the sheer proclamation of the Gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit will enable the church to stand for all eternity.*

Help individuals and groups establish identities? (See Acts 11:19–26.) *The church took on the name “Christian” and today the church still grows, as we are given new identities in Christ.*

Inspire new ideas? (See Acts 6:1–7.) *We will always be faced with new challenges. But the Holy Spirit will continue to guide and lead the church of Christ.*

Motivate change? (See Acts 17:16–34.) *Even for those who do not know Christ, the Word is proclaimed, and many come to faith by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Serve as a safety valve to indicate problems? (See Acts 15.) *When believers go astray, it is the task of the church to speak the truth in love with the goal to win our brother/sister back, and remain faithful to God’s Holy Word.*

When dealing with someone with differing viewpoints:

- Focus on the issue, not the individual. Look for a God-pleasing solution.
- Remember the goal: to remain faithful to God and His Word, and to strive for unity and peace.
- Remember that the Holy Spirit is present to move you and everyone else to a God-pleasing solution.

Conflict can be challenging. But at the same time, it can help us grow. As a leader, you must be aware of the damaging nature of conflict, but also be confident that conflict can be a catalyst for change, under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Closing Prayer: Father, we thank You for the gift of the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers and enlightens Your church. We pray for His continued presence in our midst. When we seek to dialogue with our brothers and sisters in Christ on important matters, guide our thoughts and tongues. May we always focus on issues instead of personalities. Guard us from the evil one, and allow us to walk in Your ways to the glory of Your holy name. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

I also suggest that, at congregational meetings of any kind, you use the prayer “To Open A Congregational Meeting” found in *Lutheran Service Book*, p. 307:

“Almighty God and Lord, as You have called us to labor in Your vineyard, so grant us now Your presence. Enlighten and guide us by Your Word that in all matters of deliberation we may always consider the best interest of Your Church and this congregation. Let Your Holy Spirit rule and direct our hearts that, in the spirit of Christian love, we may present and discuss matters and be kindly disposed toward one another, to the end that all we say and do may please You; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.”