

SERIES: Great Church Fights

SERMON: **Understanding Conflict: A Prerequisite to Peacemaking**

SCRIPTURE: James 4:1-10

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A father heard a commotion in his yard and looked outside to see his daughter and several playmates in a heated quarrel. When he reprimanded her, his daughter responded, "We're just playing church!" Actually, that's not too hard a scenario to believe when you think about all the conflict that plagues the average church.

I consider myself extremely blessed by the fact that the two churches I have pastored over the past 32+ years have both been comparative models of unity, peace, and harmony. I've never experienced a church split and, to my knowledge, only twice have I experienced the loss of more than one family over a single issue.

The first incident was when two families quit this church in 1981 when we called Carlton Harris as our summer intern. Carlton, an honor student at Dallas Theological Seminary, was black and his wife was a Mennonite girl from Whitewater. That's all it took for several families to find another home. Interestingly, that turned out to be a significant turning point in the life of our church, as God's blessing began to be poured out in a remarkable way, I think because the Elders did what was right even in the face of strong opposition.

The second time was when three families left our church in St. Louis in 1990 because they did not feel the staff and elders were sufficiently supportive of home schooling. These families had strong isolationist tendencies and wanted a separate youth program for their kids so that their kids wouldn't become contaminated by the regular youth group. It was painful to see them go, but I think there were probably other churches better suited for them.

What I am most grateful for is that such incidents have been so few and so far between. Yet the two churches I have pastored have not been free of conflict; no church is. There have been conflicts between lay people, conflicts between staff members, conflicts between lay people and staff members, conflicts over music, over theology, over music, over personality, over music, over building projects, over music, you name it. As in marriage, I think the real issue is not, "Do you fight?", but "Do you fight fair and about the right things?"

While I don't consider myself an expert on conflict, I do believe I have learned a good deal through experience over these past thirty-plus years. I admit I was personally responsible for some of the conflicts I've weathered, and partially responsible for others. I would love to go back and relive some of those conflict situations with the present knowledge and experience I have. Unfortunately all we can do after the fact is to ask for forgiveness, work at reconciling old wounds, and hopefully teach others not to make the same mistakes we made.

You might be asking, "Why do an entire sermon series on a subject like conflict?" Well, why

not? First, it's biblical; in fact, you're going to be amazed how common the topic of conflict presents itself in Scripture. I have chosen to limit the series to six messages, but it could easily go longer. Second, it's practical. There's not a single church that is conflict-free. If you find one, don't join it because it won't stay that way long. Third, what we learn about how to handle conflict in the church can also be used to deal with conflicts at home, at work, at school, and anywhere else. Fourth, there's enough humor in some of these conflict situations that it makes for a subject that is both serious and light. I think you're actually going to enjoy this series which I have entitled *Great Church Fights*, after the title of a book by Baptist pastor, Leslie B. Flynn.

And finally, we are hosting a major city-wide seminar the first weekend in November by a wonderful Christian organization called *Peacemakers*. I want to prepare our congregation for this seminar; I think we will all get more out of it if we have studied conflict and peacemaking right out of the Bible first. Mind you, I will not be preaching the Peacemaker material; I will simply be teaching a half dozen passages of Scripture that describe various conflicts and how they were resolved. But I believe what I share with you will fit beautifully with what you will learn from the Peacemakers Seminar. I hope you will pencil in the dates of that seminar on your personal calendar and plan to attend—November 2 and 3, just five hours (2 on Friday, 3 on Saturday).

An overview of conflict in the Scripture

Without putting these in any particular order or priority, we find in Acts 6 the complaint of the Grecians against the Hebrews over the neglect of their widows. In Acts 15 there is a sharp church-wide disagreement over theology that threatens to split the church into Gentile and Jewish branches, as well as a strong personal conflict between Paul and Barnabas over whether to take John Mark on their second missionary journey, causing them to split up their great ministry team. In Galatians 2 Paul openly and publicly rebukes Peter for hypocrisy and prejudice toward Gentile believers. In 1 Corinthians there are numerous divisions in the church—over leaders, over lawsuits, over church discipline, over marriage and divorce, and over prejudice at the Lord's Table. In Romans 14 there are two factions over whether to eat meat associated with sacrifices to idols and whether the Church should observe the Jewish sabbath.

In Philippians 1 Paul talks about certain people who preached the Gospel out of envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition, actually trying to stir up opposition to Paul while he was languishing in prison. Also in the Philippian church two prominent women, Euodia and Syntyche, get into a spat which elicits a special appeal from Paul for reconciliation. And in the third epistle of John a love for preeminence leads church-boss Diotrephes to cast fellow believers out of the church. (By the way, Greek scholar A. T. Robertson once wrote an article on Diotrephes for a Baptist magazine, portraying him as one who wants to control a church according to his own whims. Subsequently 20 deacons from various parts of the country wrote the editor to cancel their subscriptions because of this "personal attack" made on them!)

And those are just some of the more prominent New Testament conflicts. Without referring to any particular quarrel, the Apostle Paul exhorted the Philippians to "do everything without

complaining and arguing," appealed to the Ephesians to "endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," pleaded with the Romans, "if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone," and chided the Galatians for "biting and devouring one another."ⁱ

But please realize that conflict didn't start with the founding of the Church on the Day of Pentecost. The people of God have always struggled to get along with each other. During His earthly ministry Jesus' apostles argued about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom, and then ten of them got indignant with James and John when their mother asked if her two sons could sit at his right and left hand in the Kingdom. The disciples also tried to stop an exorcist who wasn't a member of their "exclusive club." Martha argued with Mary, Peter argued with Jesus, and the disciples rebuked the people who brought their children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them.

And if you go back to the OT you find as much conflict among the people of God as in the NT. In fact, during the wilderness wanderings the Israelites perfected conflict to a degree probably never observed before or since. It's no wonder someone wrote,

*To dwell above with saints we love,
That will be grace and glory.
To live below with saints we know;
That's another story!*

Now it's very important for us to grasp the fact that not all conflict is of the same kind, nor should it all be handled in the same way.

Common kinds of conflict in the Church

I suggest to you that there are three main categories of conflict—positive, negative, and neutral. In other words, sometimes it's good to generate conflict, sometimes it's sinful, and sometimes it just happens. Let's tackle the negative first.

Negative conflict: that which is generated by antagonism, immorality, or heresy. Kenneth C. Haugk, a Lutheran pastor and psychologist and the founder of Stephen Ministries, wrote a fascinating book entitled *Antagonism in the Church*. I have quoted him before, but it bears repeating. He defines antagonists as

" . . . individuals who, on the basis of non-substantive evidence, go out of their way to make insatiable demands, usually attacking the person or performance of others. These attacks are selfish in nature, tearing down rather than building up, and are frequently directed against those in a leadership capacity." ⁱⁱ

Please understand that we are not talking here about constructive critics. Constructive critics also create conflict for us since none of us likes to be criticized, but they produce what I call healthy conflict. (Unfortunately, sometimes leaders are too insecure to accept constructive criticism and anyone who offers it is immediately deemed an enemy or at least suspect). Nor is an antagonist to be confused with those who might be called "squeaky wheels." These are people who are

never quite happy with the direction of ministry and let everybody know it.ⁱⁱⁱ

The antagonist is much more dangerous than either the constructive critic or the squeaky wheel, and he requires unusual discernment and wisdom on our part. Just to be sure we understand the difference, let me put these three in perspective:

The constructive critic is a friend. He creates healthy conflict for us, and we will prosper if we are willing to listen to him.

The squeaky wheel is an irritant, but while the conflict he stirs up may require special grace and patience to live with, he presents no significant threat.

The antagonist is a first-class trouble-maker.

By the way, we need to be careful not to identify too many people as antagonists. If we're seeing antagonists behind every bush, it's probably a reflection of some serious problems in our own leadership or relationships. I would say I've known only three or four true antagonists in 33 years of pastoral ministry, and only one was what I would call "hard-core." Of course, sinful antagonists are present *not only* in the church—you will find them in every ministry, at work, at school, in athletics, perhaps even at home.

Other kinds of negative conflict are created by immoral people—for example, those who are pathological liars, who gossip constantly, who engage in sexual immorality, or are power-hungry. Heretics also create negative conflict in the Church, especially when they hide their false teaching behind a facade of holiness or when they worm their way into positions of leadership.

Neutral conflict: that which is generated by differences in perspective and personality. People see things differently. They have different visions, goals, methodology, interests. One is left-brained and analyzes things to death. The other is right-brained and feels everything deeply. If you're married you know what I'm talking about. Guys, does your wife ever complain about what you do with the remote control? As they say, men don't care what's on TV; they just want to know what *else* is on TV. And that can produce conflict.

By the way, in calling these conflicts morally neutral I am not suggesting that there is *never* any sin associated with them. The difference of opinion may be over amoral issues, but the conflict can easily degenerate into sin.

Positive conflict: that which is generated by a commitment to truth, holiness, and integrity. An Elder Board confronts a pastor about suspected heresy. A wife confronts her husband with evidence of an affair. Parents demand to know where their 16-year-old has been when she comes home at 2:00 am. In each case conflict results, but it is stirred up by someone who cares enough to confront and desires the best for the other person.

Now what we want to do during this series is to look at one or two examples of each of these kinds of conflict from the Scriptures and see how they were resolved. We will look for principles to apply to the various kinds of conflict in which we find ourselves. My hope and prayer is that we will prevent many conflicts from even arising and will be equipped to resolve those that

occur despite our best efforts to prevent them.

I think it would be helpful to spend the remainder of our time this morning examining a few verses from the fourth chapter of James. This passage talks about conflict from a theological perspective. Rather than describing a particular case of conflict, it analyzes conflict in general.

The most common source of church conflict (James 4:1-6)

It suggests to us that when believers are at war with each other, it is usually because they are at war with themselves and ultimately because they are at war with God. Let's read 4:1-10. If you don't have a Bible with you, this passage is found on page 920 of the Bible in the pew rack in front of you. If you don't even have a Bible, please take that one with you as our gift.

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. This is the Word of the Lord.

Believers are at war with each other. (1) Notice that James doesn't ask whether there are fights and quarrels among us—he assumes it. As I have already indicated, I believe some fights and quarrels in the church are legitimate and justified. It is clear that "peace at any price" is not a biblical concept. James, however, is clearly concerned about the kind of arguments and conflicts that cannot be justified. That is, they cannot be ascribed to righteous zeal but rather to selfish ambition.

The fact of the matter is that most fights and quarrels in church are *not* legitimate or justified. In his book, *The Unity Factor*, my friend and fellow Free Church pastor, Larry Osborne asserts that "the fiercest battles in our churches are seldom fought over theology. More often, they are fought over change, sometimes even the slightest change." They are also fought over personalities, over music preferences, over leadership style, over Roberts' Rules of Order, and over injured feelings. Why? James offers an interesting insight here in the first verse. It is that believers are often at war with one another because . . .

Believers are at war with themselves. (1-3) "What causes fights and quarrels among

you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" Frustrated desires, he says, lead to conflict. I don't know if the killing mentioned here (verse 2: "you kill and covet") is literal or figurative. Some people can kill with their looks and kill with their words, and I'm inclined to think that is probably what is meant. But even literal physical violence is not unknown in the history of the church. Some pastors could tell you about deacon meetings that ended in fist fights. Far more have ended with verbal violence or seething tempers—all due to frustrated desires.

What are some of those frustrated desires? Let's name a few: power and influence certainly qualify. Some people desperately desire to be power brokers in the church; they want to be in on the decision-making, and if those desires get frustrated they can cause a lot of trouble. One man I knew expressed real anger to me that he had never been elected to the Elder Board in our church in St. Louis. It seems to me that an argument could be made that the very presence of such an attitude would disqualify him from serving as an Elder.

Even good things can lead to frustrated desires. A person may wish to sing solos but isn't asked; or to teach an adult Bible study, but people don't respond; or to build friendships but people don't seem to return their hospitality. If such disappointments are not handled properly such people can generate a spirit of contention. And that's seems to be happening to James' parishioners.

Let's face it, friends. Believers are often at war with each other because they are at war with themselves. But let's back up one step even closer to the source of the problem. Believers are often at war with themselves because . . .

Believers are at war with God. (4-6) Look at verse 4: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." The label "adulterous people" seems strange in a passage addressed to believers, *until* one realizes that he is probably not referring to physical adultery, which hopefully is relatively uncommon in the church, but rather to spiritual adultery, which is very common in the church. This is, in fact, a term borrowed from the OT. God had brought Israel into a covenant relationship with Himself, but they had been unfaithful to Him through idolatry, disobedience, and compromise with the pagan cultures around them. So the prophets accused the people of being spiritual adulterers.

James sees the same problem in the church of his day—too much fraternizing with the enemy. Christians don't want to be different; they don't want to stand out in the crowd; so they borrow the world's priorities; and they pursue worldly pleasures. But what they often fail to consider is that the world hates their Heavenly Father, and when they fraternize with the world they stir up God's jealousy.

Verse 5 is difficult to translate, and your Bible probably has several footnotes offering various translations. I think the best is the NASB translation: "God jealously longs for the spirit that He made to live in us." "Spirit" here is probably not a reference to the Holy Spirit, but rather to the human spirit, and the point is that God jealousy desires our total allegiance. He is intolerant of

rivalry or unfaithfulness. He will not play second fiddle to anyone. He wants us to be *in* the world but not *of* it.

Friends, it's not *difficult* to be a friend of the world and a friend of God at the same time; its impossible! Of course, that doesn't mean it's impossible to be a friend of worldly people; rather one can't be a friend of the world-system—meaning its priorities, its goals, its sensualities, its securities, its strategies.

Let me just stop here and ask this morning, “Is your love quotient for the world stirring up the jealousy of God?” Think about your attitude toward possessions, prosperity, security, sports, pleasure, stewardship, and even church? Are those attitudes worldly or are they godly? A Washington D.C. pastor whose church was attended frequently by President Carter in the late 70's received a phone call early one Sunday morning: "Can you tell me if the President is expected to attend church today?" "That," the pastor patiently replied, "I cannot promise, but we do expect God to be here, and we fancy that will be sufficient incentive for a reasonably large attendance." Even in our worship we can be found fighting against God.

Now what exactly is the connection between the believers' fraternizing with the enemy and thus stirring up the jealousy of God, on the one hand, and conflict in the church on the other hand? I think it is this: If we're not at peace with God, we cannot be at peace with ourselves, and if we're not at peace with ourselves we cannot be at peace with others. It's just a vicious cycle.

How do we resolve conflict and achieve peace? (4:7-10)

1. Take God seriously. Quit fighting and humbly submit to His sovereign control. Verse 7 reads, "Submit yourselves, then, to God." The term "submit" is a military term that means "get into your proper rank." When a buck private acts like a general, there is going to be trouble! The secret is to submit to the sovereignty of an all-wise, all-loving God. .

2. Take Satan seriously. Verse 7 says, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” I believe one of Satan's greatest temptations is the temptation to instant gratification, as opposed to “delayed gratification.” And he uses it even in the church. We want what we want when we want it. And Satan loves to see us fight for it. "Resist him," urges James, but we will never resist him until we take him seriously. We will end up fighting with ourselves, with God, or with our fellow-believers instead of fighting Satan unless we see the threat he is to our unity and peace in the church.

3. Take sin seriously. Verse 8 reads, "Come near to God and He will come near to you." And how do we draw near? By dealing with the sin in our lives. Verse 8 reads, "Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded." Both our hands and our hearts need cleansing. God requires repentance from both the external behavior (signified by the "hands") that has resulted in quarrels and fights and the internal attitude (signified by the "heart") that has produced it. Deed and disposition are both important to God.

And to show his readers that God demands a deep heartfelt sorrow for sin he adds, "Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom." At first this might sound like God is some kind of cosmic killjoy, but this verse has to be balanced with the hundreds of verses that speak of joy and happiness and celebration that should characterize the Christian's experience. What James seems to be fighting is the casual attitude towards sin that seems to have invaded so much of the church today. To those who presume too much on God's forgiving and merciful nature this passage offers a plea for a radical, thoroughgoing repentance. We must take sin seriously.

4. Take prayer seriously. According to James the frustration believers often experience (and which produces many conflicts) is the result of prayer failure. Either we fail to pray at all or we pray with wrong motives. Look back at the last part of verse 2 and 3: "You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives." Clearly what God wants us to do with our desires is to take them to Him in prayer instead of getting so frustrated that we get angry and start fighting.

Let's use as an example a person who wants desperately to teach an Adult Bible Fellowship. First, he should pray about that desire—ask God if He would move the people in charge to open up an opportunity. But he must also examine his motives. Why does he want to teach? Is it because he's convinced he has the gift of teaching? Is it because he loves to study and prepare? Is it because he loves people and wants to help them? Those are all good motives. Or could his motive be that he's got some pet hobby-horses to communicate or because he's got the gift of gab or because teachers get a lot of respect and attention?

Conclusion: Our passage ends appropriately with the exhortation in verse 10, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up. To humble ourselves before the Lord means to recognize our own spiritual poverty, to acknowledge our desperate need of God's help, and to submit to his sovereign will for our lives. When we try to exalt ourselves and seek our own way, using natural ability, status, money, intimidation, politics, manipulation, or any other human tactic, the result is inevitably destructive conflict in the church.

But when we humble ourselves to seek God's face and God's timing for the fulfillment of our desires, the result is peace. Perhaps the best conclusion I could offer is found in James 3:17,18: "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness."

Let's pray. Father, we confess that we are creatures of conflict. Help us to know when to create it, when to avoid it, and when to accept it. Help us to develop a culture of peacemaking here at First Evangelical Free Church. Thank you most of all for the peace that Jesus purchased with You by His death on the Cross. Amen.

i. That last phrase reminds me of a man who was bitten by a dog and became violently ill. The doctor explained, "You've been bitten by a rabid dog and you are dying of hydrophobia. There's nothing I can do for you." The stricken man asked for a pencil and paper, then spent a long time thinking and writing. When he returned from seeing another patient, the doctor remarked, "You certainly are making a lengthy will." The patient retorted, "I'm not making my will; I'm making a list of people I'm going to bite."

ii. Kenneth C. Haugk, *Antagonists in the Church*,

iii. Sometimes squeaky wheels can't even tell you why they're unhappy—they may just have personalities that tend to be negative. Larry Osborne writes that . . .

"The natural response is to oil these squeaky wheels. We alter our plans or given them extra attention in the hope of silencing their criticism. Unfortunately, it seldom works. Most squeaky wheels keep right on squeaking for a simple reason: they don't squeak for a lack of oil; they squeak because it's their nature to squeak. Wise church leaders know an important paradox: Church harmony is inversely related to the amount of time spent oiling squeaky wheels." (Larry Osborne, *The Unity Factor*).