

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction	11
Prologue: Conflicts at Second Church . . . and Elsewhere	17
<b>Part 1: The Mess We Are In</b>	<b>23</b>
1. Root Causes of Conflict	27
2. Toward a Theology of Reconciliation	49
3. Leading and Forming Biblical Community	73
<b>Part 2: Why All Conflict Is About Leadership</b>	<b>89</b>
4. A Biblical View of Conflict	91
5. Passive Responders: Why Peacekeeping Is Not Peacemaking	111
6. Evasive Responders: Why You Can't Run or Hide	121
7. Defensive Responders: Why Your Conflict Is Not About You	135
8. Aggressive Responders: Leaving Vindication for God	153
9. Church Conflict and Counterfeit Peace	163
<b>Part 3: On Becoming a Redemptive Community</b>	<b>177</b>
10. Living Under Lordship: A Call to Submission	185
11. Living into the Light: Why We Must Examine and Confront	197
12. Confession and Forgiveness: How We Must Respond	221
13. Discipline and Restitution: How We Are Re-formed	245
Epilogue: Seven Calls to Repentance	255
Appendix: Forming a Safe Place Group	261

## ROOT CAUSES OF CONFLICT

---

*For he chose us in him before the creation of the world  
to be holy and blameless in his sight.*

~ EPHESIANS 1:4

The words were printed in large letters on bright fluorescent colored signs: “Frost Heaves.” They looked like placards from a low-budget political campaign stuck in the snow. Some guys named Frost and Heaves were running for national office.

People who live in northern New England know that *frost heaves* are not the names of politicians or a type of ice cream. The two words describe what happens to our roads in March and April. They freeze and heave.

Frost heaves are caused during winter by thawing daytime temperatures followed by freezing nighttime temperatures. When water that has collected in pockets underneath the road surface freezes, the expanding ice forces the road upward, often cracking open the surface an inch or two at the peak.

Frost heaves can cause roads to rise as much as six inches, and

they usually damage road surfaces permanently. Driving a vehicle too fast over a frost heave can damage your shocks and shock your nerves.

One nine-mile stretch of road between our home and the next town must be one of the world's worst roads for frost heaves. In some sections of the road, drivers who hit the heave just right can serve dinner, view an in-flight movie, and earn five hundred frequent flier miles before landing on the other side. Well, so it seems.

When the weather breaks to temperatures consistently above freezing, the road settles down to its previous level with potholes and cracks. Eventually the road crew dutifully fills in the gaps, solving the problem until the next winter.

People complain a lot about the roads and those who crew them. But the real problem is underneath. And that's the way it is in most churches. The real conflict lies below the surface.

What is presented as the "problem" is usually a symptom of what lies underneath. As long as we treat the symptom, not the underlying problem, the conflict will return. It may lie dormant for a time, but it always comes back. Always.

In our work with dozens of conflicted churches, four systemic issues have emerged that, like water trapped under heaving roads, are the source of most crises. They are cultural, structural, spiritual, and theological issues that we must not ignore.

### CULTURAL ISSUES

Many Western churches look and act more like the contemporary culture than the kingdom of Christ. The term for such behavior is *cultural syncretism*.

By *culture* we mean a complex system of assumptions, practices, stories, and beliefs that guide how a common people think and act as well as what they value. For instance, "meeting my personal needs" is an everyday assumption and behavior in a consumer culture. Christianity is formed around a different story—Jesus' death

on the cross—requiring a different set of assumptions and practices that considers the needs of others before our own. (See Philipians 2:3–8.)

*Syncretism* is the uncritical combination of two or more different, often opposing, beliefs and practices into one. For instance, Western culture celebrates individualism and self-promotion. Christianity calls believers to love and serve others. These stories and values are fundamentally opposed. Western individualism actively persuades against spiritual vitality and mutuality, breeding autonomy instead of biblical community.

By attempting to harmonize secular values with historic Christian ideals, we unwittingly adopt habits, therapies, and practices that undermine our call to be a separate and holy people.

In our churches, this has both practical and theological implications. When believers look like the world, they lose their distinctive voices. They do not “shine like stars” in darkness but join in the parade. We must watch ourselves closely to see if salvation and sanctification, God’s great gifts to the church, have become privatized and co-opted into a personal transaction.

Are we gathering in community to practice and prove a way of life together, or are we privatizing faith into self-help answers that breed a kind of spiritual attention deficit disorder? Where is reverent waiting, corporate intercession, and public confession in the contemporary church?

## CHURCHES FOCUSED ON INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

These cultural conditions impact our ability to address conflict redemptively. A church founded on principles of individualism will respond to conflict out of its cultural values. Since conflict threatens private faith, we respond with the democratic ideals that form our privacy. Issues of fairness and tolerance take precedence over obedience and mutual submission.

In many churches, the remedy for conflict often makes it worse,

deepening the problem by failing to address the fundamental issue: We are trusting our ways more than God's.

All individualism leads to consumerism. When self is center, the world exists to meet one's personal needs. "Hey, I'm entitled to this!" A culture of consumerism will always value individual needs above community life. "You're important to me so long as you serve my needs."

When a church focuses on meeting the needs of individuals, Jesus and the Bible become a personal, need-meeting machine. The church becomes a collection of individuals who are fundamentally at competition with one another—competing to have their needs met. Here, the Gospel becomes a commodity distributed by supply and demand. Since no church can meet all the needs, ultimately one set of needs must be placed against the other.

When this happens, staff and members will compete to make a case for how and why their needs are greater than others. To make more compelling cases, the church becomes divided into interest groups or coalitions formed by age and individual preference.

To address these concerns, some churches offer solutions that only compound the problem. The answer, they believe, is targeting ministries and services to specific demographic or life interest groups who have the same concerns, desires, or needs. This keeps people happy for a time but further fragments the body. The attempt to meet selfish needs tends to reinforce selfishness.

The worship wars are a good example. In many churches the style of worship pits believer against believer. Coalitions form to lobby a point of view. Members are too busy counting how many hymns and how many choruses are sung in each service to actually worship God.

Instead of asking, "How can we enter into worship in mutual submission under the lordship of Jesus Christ?" we divide ourselves, forming two or three worship services according to music style. In effect we become multiple, homogeneous interest groups sharing, or fighting over, the same space. We are not the church.

Our fighting resembles our values as well. To defend our point of view, we quote Scriptures that prove how we are right and the other is wrong. We divide over narrow and legalistic notions of truth. One small church we served actually had two youth groups—one for home-school kids and the other for Christian school and public school children.

Or we separate people by having special services and support groups for the divorced, for singles and single moms, or for people with addictive behaviors. Most churches think nothing of sending their members outside the church for private therapy conducted by “experts” who are not accountable to the church and often not believers.

Well-intentioned efforts to help the hurting often miss, or deny, the power of healing given to the church. These approaches are forming us—and the church—in ways we do not see.

The church becomes a shopping center where we pick and choose what is good for us. We are not a community being formed by God’s Word and Spirit. We are individuals shaping ourselves. This strips the Gospel of its power—leaving people in their selfish individualism rather than inviting them into a transforming community of faith.

## CHRISTIANITY AND SELF-HELP

Christianity is not a “self-help” religion. Salvation is not a private decision, nor is sanctification a personal transaction. These are Western values. This is individualism, not discipleship; a cheap substitute for biblical faith.

A church that organizes itself around meeting personal needs runs the great, unintended risk of breeding autonomy rather than mutuality. It also risks a theology of prosperity (feel good now) rather than a theology of the Cross (suffering for the joy set before us). God wants us to be healthy in ways greater than our perceived needs and feelings.

We must ask ourselves hard questions about the faith people are

being saved into, when our spirituality becomes self-conscious instead of Christ-revealing.

The trends above are occurring in both traditional and contemporary churches. Each trains people to think and to act more like individuals and less like a body. Transactional churches form consumers, not parishioners. These are the seeds of conflict.

### HOW DO WE MEASURE FRUIT?

Years ago I wrote for a marketing firm that served many large, national Christian organizations. To encourage greater giving, the marketing firm I worked for frequently included an offer in its fundraising appeal. “If you send a gift of \$25 today, we’ll send you a copy of [Famous Pastor’s] most recent book.”

It worked. More people gave in order to get something back. Our marketing firm argued, as marketing executives do, that we were being successful because the donor list was growing and more people were giving. This was half true. It was an argument from quantity, not quality. For instance, no one asked what kind of donors we were forming.

For our Christian clients we could spiritualize our success by saying our efforts were “bearing fruit.” No one thought to ask, “What kind of fruit?” This question leads us to the problem with every marketing-driven strategy. What, or who, are we forming? Are we forming believers or consumers?

Our fund raising, in the end, actually had little to do with philanthropy. We were not attracting donors; we were building a book club. There is a qualitative difference between someone who gives in order to get something back and someone who gives for the joy of giving. Giving to the poor for a tax deduction is not the same as giving to feed and clothe the poor.

This same dynamic applies to the church. It is not enough to measure fruit by building facilities, increasing programs, and growing attendance. We must ask, “What kind of fruit are we forming?”

## WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE ARE WE FORMING?

Think for a moment about why people go to your church.

Of the more than 5,000 people we have interviewed during the past eight years, in traditional as well as contemporary churches, most believers evaluate their church positively or negatively in consumer, transactional terms. Christians choose a church for the same inclinations and motivations that they choose a supermarket.

*Q. Why do you go to Grace Church?*

*A. Because I like the music.*

*Q. Why do you go to Shaw's Supermarket?*

*A. Because I like the produce section.*

Christians have come to view the church with the same habits of thinking and patterns of practice as every other aspect of our consumer culture. We shop for church the way we shop for melons.

Some argue that this is inevitable and expected in our culture. If we are to reach our world we need to speak its language. The church must be relevant if it is to be serious and focused on reaching the lost.

The fact is, all churches employ some kind of marketing, whether it is a sign out front or announcements in the bulletin. Marketing is not evil, but it is not theologically or spiritually neutral either.

There is no question that marketing works in a consumer culture. Many unbelievers have found Christ, and many "nominal Christians" have found their way back to the church. We ought to have the apostle Paul's passion for reaching the lost.

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the

law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19–23)

The question is whether the methods that are so useful in attracting people to faith are in any way sufficient to grow believers to maturity.

The problem with infant Christians is they are, well, infantile. Like babies, they tend to whine or cry when something they want is changed or taken away. The writers of two New Testament letters cautioned immature, nongrowing Christians:

I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. (1 Corinthians 3:2)

In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. (Hebrews 5:12–13)

Young believers can quickly revert to the values of contemporary culture—insisting on their way by having a vote and lobbying for their point of view. This leads to coalitions, politics, and efforts to control. Lost is a community of righteousness where God's will is worked out through mutual submission, speaking the truth in love, repentance, and forgiveness.

#### “THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT”

Means shape ends. Certain methods bear certain kinds of fruit. When the church becomes a place of transactions we make to get

what we need or want, God becomes a product made after our consumer tastes and desires. We would never say this, of course, but these habits and practices are woven into the fabric of market-driven approaches. In reality, the credo is “The customer is always right.”

Where you start has direct impact on where you end up. If the starting point is self, it is very difficult to end with the lordship of Jesus Christ. Church leadership structures also illustrate this principle. Autocratic structures appeal to people who need and want order in their lives. God is the lawgiver. Democratic structures attract people who want to feel better about their lives and themselves. God becomes the need-meeter. In each, Christianity becomes something we control and do alone. We make God in our image, not ourselves in His.

Contrast this to the Bible’s description of the church as a people who gather for and with others at the foot of the cross:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:3–8)

A church organized around meeting needs breeds selfishness, and it inevitably leads to competition, control, and conflict. The apostle James says as much:

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. (James 4:1-5)

## WHERE GOD FORMS HIS PEOPLE

Is your church actually encouraging people to think and act like the world? Are you forming believers who are not a “people”?

The church is the spiritual “place” where God forms His people. We are chosen to be people who are being transformed into Christlikeness. The problem is that we have become so accustomed to thinking and acting like individuals we cannot even see or accept that we are forming selfishness, not godliness—until a conflict or crisis arises. God has called us into a kingdom much greater than our selfish needs, dull familiarity, and easy assumptions.

Scripture stands in stark contrast to the narcissistic and autonomous thinking of our self-absorbed world. God wants to remake and redeem our needs before He meets them. He calls us into a culture formed by the Cross.

## STRUCTURAL ISSUES

All conflict is complex. The natural human response to conflict is to simplify and, at times, to vilify. The complex evidence surrounding the conflict is often ambiguous and contradictory, and individuals and coalitions trying to make sense of it will describe competing views of reality based upon partial facts or events. These descriptions may be compelling in part, but ultimately inadequate to explain the whole.

Often people on all sides of a conflict will tend to minimize their personal responsibility while seeking to blame or disparage others. In extreme situations, some will seek to elevate themselves or try

to strengthen their position by demonizing or negating others.

## SEEING THE SYSTEM DYNAMIC

These inadequate conflict responses are part of the “system dynamic”<sup>1</sup> that creates the climate for the conflict as well as increases the time and effort it will take to resolve it. By *system dynamic* we mean the interrelationship of external and internal forces that influence our decisions and create the conditions for conflict. A system dynamic is a structure that underlies the way we organize, work, lead, and make decisions in organizations, including churches.

For instance, members of Third Church were in deep conflict concerning why the elders had “forced” a pastor to resign. Wanting to simplify, some said the issue was racism. Others said it was about flaws and failure in the pastor’s character. Still others mentioned financial pressures. All of these forces and more were part of the system that created the conflict in the first place and influenced negative responses to the conflict that made the crisis worse.

In our final report to Third Church, we wrote the following to explain our call for systemic change by asking all leaders to resign:

*Our assessment found multiple patterns of thinking and habits of acting by individuals and the church that are part of the culture of the church. That is, the findings reveal systemic as well as personal failure. These represent fundamental spiritual and theological issues that must be examined, explored, and addressed. Habits formed and practiced over many years do not change easily or quickly. They do not go away merely by saying, “I’m sorry,” or, “You are forgiven.”*

Rather, transformation will require dedicated time and submission to a process that will:

☞ examine, identify, and confess past failure;

- ☞ identify root needs, causes, or flaws in character, behavior, or thinking;
- ☞ unlearn negative habits practiced over time;
- ☞ relearn new habits of behavior and thinking; and
- ☞ reconstitute personal character and church culture.

To change any system, one must change the underlying structure—the system dynamic. Any change that fails to address the underlying structure is insufficient.

By suspending and temporarily replacing the role and function of present leadership, all church members and leaders will learn new ways to think and act together while depending upon God’s Spirit rather than human effort.

This is a thoroughly biblical principle. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, and especially in the ministry of Jesus, God brings spiritual transformation by turning the assumptions and expectations of His people upside-down, *often by placing His people in a position where they must trust God completely*. Spiritual transformation often follows systemic change.

As long as the church focused on one part of the system, not the whole, complete reconciliation was not possible. Reconciling a systemic conflict must be adequate to address or account for all the underlying forces in the system.

Of course, this means to be redemptive we have to think and discern systemically. But this is what is missing in most leadership and reconciliation models for the church. That is, we train leaders to lead and to reconcile in ways that follow the cultural and structural assumptions that create the climate for conflict in the first place.

Many seminaries recruit and train pastors to think, speak, and act alone. Few seminaries teach pastors how to build and work with an interdependent team, or how to anticipate and reconcile patterns of sin and corporate conflict. Though church conflict is widespread in the West, most church leaders have no formal or practical

training in confronting and resolving conflict. Further, most resources published to assist leaders through church conflict teach that all conflict is interpersonal. Conflict is interpersonal and a lot more.

Too often pastors address problems from within the flawed assumptions of their culture and training. Unable to see how problems are forming, and how their leadership is often a cause, church leaders employ legalistic or democratic remedies to issues that require Spirit-directed discernment, repentance, and forgiveness. Meanwhile, leaders have to deal with members who, as noted above, insist on rights and want to “vote” instead of submit.

#### TREATING THE DYNAMIC IN RIGHT- AND LEFT-HANDED WAYS

So leaders resort to right-handed and left-handed ways of leading in order to gain control or keep the peace.

Right-handed leaders will try to keep order by centralizing power. A right-handed pastor will preach about submission and authority while employing a hierarchical, top-down management style that often becomes legalistic. The result is a church organized to protect a leader instead of to point to Christ.

Left-handed leaders think and act in the opposite direction, encouraging a decentralized, unfocused form of management that fails to lead or to grow a people. Here the object and subject is also the leader, who will often elicit sympathy by playing the wounded victim. The result is a Christian landscape that compromises truth to keep the peace. (More on the right-handed and left-handed philosophies and practices will come in chapter 2.)

We find leaders like this because we unintentionally form them. Few seminaries screen their graduates for character or calling. Instead they continue to produce leaders who are guided by knowledge and methods centered on a structure that fits their training or gifting.

If the leader is a teacher, the church is built around the pulpit ministry. Monologue is the primary means of communication—people sitting passively listening to the pastor expound. If the pastor

is an evangelist, the church will be built on attracting and saving unbelievers.

In these and many other cases, the leader often works alone instead of building an interdependent team. Often a pastor will resist building a team because he is easily threatened by others who may be gifted in areas he is not. When these pastors do assemble a team, it is often made up of people who pose no threat to the pastor because they either think alike or are less gifted than the pastor.

So our churches grow and suffer in direct proportion to the strengths and weaknesses of one person. These leaders model autonomy, not community. The church easily falls into conflicts and cults of personality.

Church constitutions and bylaws reveal the same weaknesses. Wooden and institutional, these documents often lack a spiritual vitality, deferring instead to objective rules or subjective ideals that fail to address underlying structures and ignore or undercut biblical principles. Many remedies presume a spiritual maturity seldom present.

To address these issues systemically we have to ask what forces are guiding us. All of these are structural, systemic problems that foster conflict.

#### SPIRITUAL ISSUES

As we have just seen, much of church conflict can be understood by its cultural and structural origins. These external forces contribute to but are secondary to a more fundamental root cause of church conflict—a spiritual one.

#### WHEN A KNOWING OR FEELING FAITH REPLACES A LIVING FAITH

Many of our churches have lost (or never found) a balanced understanding of holiness and application of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. We do not know what it means or what it would

look like to live in, walk by, and sow to the Holy Spirit. All that is left is a notion—not a real living—of holiness, a preoccupation with a right-handed knowing or a left-handed feeling faith.

For some churches, knowing Scripture is everything. If we were to draw a figure representing this “knowing” faith, we would draw a huge head atop a stick-figure frame. In other churches, experiencing God or reaching the lost is so consuming that, to picture them, we would draw obese frames supporting a tiny head or brain. Feeling churches can often become like the Corinthians, “a mile wide but an inch thick,” while rational churches can become like Pharisees, arrogant and self-righteous.

When all the data is in, we are most in conflict because we are not what we claim to be. Our churches lack “spiritual authenticity.” We claim to be crucified with Christ, but it is “I” who lives, not Christ. We think and act with our personal needs first in mind. We claim to be forgiven, but we refuse to confess or forgive, excusing ourselves and blaming others. We claim to honor and submit to leaders while we gossip about them and attack their authority. We claim to be the bride of Christ while divorce and marital infidelity thrive in both pulpit and pew.

Who are we trying to fool, God or ourselves?

Many of our churches are sick and dying because they are pretending to be the church. Worse, many of us are invested in our dysfunction. We do not really want to be well; we just want to feel better. We want the problem to go away. But we do not want to pay the price. Our identity has been formed around our pathologies.

The pagan world looks on and sees no viable contrast, no difference affected by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Cross is robbed of its power.

#### **BEING HOLY—TOGETHER**

The Gospel offers the power to change our lives, to renounce our past, and to form new habits of righteousness. God instituted the church as the social, spiritual realm for this transformation to take

place. When the church gathers in mutual love and submission under God's Word and Spirit, we have the opportunity to hear God speak in ways that change and form us. This is our calling: to be separate and holy. "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15–16).

This is not news, of course, but it is rarely practiced. When preached it is usually objectified into some legalistic rules or impersonal exhortation to change. "God says, 'to be holy, do this . . .'"

We have lost the sense of what it means to be a holy people. We are not a called-out, called-together, spiritual house where God is forming us. Consequently, we are not forming people around the character of God. We may fill heads with great knowledge and fill hearts with good feeling, but we frequently forget the tangible ways God has given us to reconstitute our lives in Christlikeness.

Reconciling conflict is not about knowing or feeling. It is about obeying and being. That is, holiness is a craft, a discipline that requires a community of others to practice. We cannot be holy alone.

Further, God says, "Be holy," not, "Do holy," or, "Think holy." Thinking and doing follow sacrifice and transformation (1 John 3:18). Christians are called to be transformed: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2).

The test of transformation does not end with the renewed mind. The renewed mind must result in specific habits and practices that test and prove God's will. God appoints the church to be the place where this happens.

Not long ago I had a conversation with a Christian leader about Christian virtues and character. I suggested that virtues are formed in the church. My friend protested this and argued that many virtues, such as honesty, could be learned outside of the church, even alone.

"Yes," I replied, "but honesty outside the church is not Christian honesty."

A person need not be a Christian to be honest. But Christian honesty or truth-telling is different in form and purpose. It is formed by the description and discovery of what it means to follow Jesus Christ, who is Truth. Truth cleans and grows the church up into Christ.<sup>2</sup>

It is in the body of Christ that our virtues find authentic meaning and life. There is no Christianity in Scripture outside of the church. There are no Lone Ranger Christians.

Most Christians know what is right and wrong. They know God desires holiness. But many Christians have no idea how holiness might happen in the context of others. They come to church but remain alone to follow their feelings, rules, or methods. When they fail, they must hide their sins for fear they might be found out or run out of the church.

The point of the Cross, of the church, and of Scripture is that you cannot change yourself. Change is the work of God operating through His Word, His Spirit, and His people. All three are necessary.

## THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

Finally, there is a theological root to our conflicts. By theology we mean the study of God—who He is and what He requires of His people. In this sense we combine theology with ecclesiology—the study of the church.

All church conflict is theological. Our theology has more often been shaped by—rather than transform—the cultural, structural, and spiritual aberrations discussed above.

## INTEGRITY VERSUS AUTONOMY

One example of this is the way our understanding of church unity has changed from spiritual integrity to spiritual autonomy.

The English word for *integrity* comes from the word *integer*, referring to a “whole number,” a “complete entity,” or something

“undivided.” In the church, integrity means being undivided in your relationship to God, yourself, and others. Integrity requires community, a collective commitment to “one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” While many speak of “integrity” and “community,” most Western churches are spiritually and functionally autonomous.

The word *autonomy* comes from the Greek *autonomia*, meaning “self-ruling.” To be autonomous means to be independent and self-governing. In the church, this has come to mean individual privacy, preferences, and rights on personal and corporate levels. It accounts for the rise of independent and nondenomination churches as well as democratic governing structures.

Integrity and autonomy offer two radically different kinds of “oneness.” Autonomy celebrates independence and self—one alone. Integrity celebrates interdependence—two or more becoming one together. The Western church has replaced integrity with autonomy.

#### SPIRITUAL INTEGRITY: A COMMON BIBLICAL THEME

Spiritual integrity, or oneness, is a common theme throughout Scripture, with metaphors such as marriage and the Trinity illustrating the call to be one. Isaiah wrote that God will rejoice over Israel as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride (62:5). The Old and New Testaments speak of apostasy as “adultery.” The apostle Paul wrote of the mystery of “two becoming one” in marriage and the church.

Jesus prayed that the church might be one, linking our oneness with each other to the unity of the Godhead:

. . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:21–23)

The apostle Paul echoed Jesus' prayer when he urged the believer to be "like-minded," literally "of one mind" or "of one accord" (see Philippians 2:2, 20). Oneness is a frequent admonition and description in the writings of Paul.<sup>3</sup> The biblical call is for the church to be "harmonious in soul, in tune with Christ and with each other. . . united in thought and feeling . . . like clocks that strike at the same moment."<sup>4</sup> Paul writes, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus . . ." (Philippians 2:5 NKJV).

Integrity is broken whenever a thought or act places personal interests above the interests of others. When people separate themselves from others they begin to think and act in ways that deny the lordship of Christ. This invites sin and separation.

When Jesus is Lord, leaders are no longer condemned to work out salvation by personal power or in secrecy. The church is neither surprised by sin nor fearful to admit failure. When made aware of sin, the sinner rushes into the light of others, where the sin can be confessed and forgiven, and steps for restitution and restoration may be worked out. Integrity acknowledges lordship and rushes sin out into the light.

We rarely expose our sin in the church because most of us are self-protecting and self-governing. Sin is a private matter. To protect feelings we keep sin in the dark. Rather than submit to a redemptive process of open confession and restoration, we cling to our rights and reputations. In raw terms, we lack spiritual integrity.

## WHY GO TO CHURCH?

Let's return again to the simple question, "Why do you go to church?" Most Christians we have interviewed have never thought about this question, assuming the answer was obvious. When forced to frame an answer, most fumbled for an adequate response.

Two reasons stand out. People say they go to church either out

of habit or to meet a personal need. Rational (or “right-hand”) believers hope to know more. Emotional (or “left-hand”) believers hope to feel better. Typically each wants it in a three-point sermon or five easy steps. An interesting dynamic unfolds as the interview progresses: Hearing themselves speak, most realize what they are saying lacks integrity. Their words are hollow and inadequate—something far less than what the church is supposed to be. Still they rarely have an answer that satisfies, one that has purpose or meaning beyond themselves.

Do we know what the church is for? This is a theological problem that we will come back to in the next chapter. For now, two summary points should be made:

1. Conflict is always a complex interaction of cultural, structural, spiritual, and theological forces. Most conflict surfaces and displays interpersonal symptoms that have underlying systemic, theological roots.
2. The theological problem stated above is the deepest root. Theology drives all the others. All church conflict is ultimately theological. God wants to change the way we think about the church so that we might become His people.

What about your church? As you read the descriptions above, which dynamics of conflict do you see present in your situation?

Like frozen water pushing under the surface of a road, the only way to resolve and redeem church conflict is to identify its spiritual, cultural, structural, and theological roots; and then to address them. Pray that God will reveal what lies under the surface in your church.



## Notes

---

1. This term was coined by Jay Forrester, who created the field of system dynamics.
2. Notice John 17; Ephesians 4:12.
3. Romans 12:4–5; 15:5–7; Ephesians 2:14–16; 3:6; 4:4–6, 25.
4. Philippians 2:2, Robertson's *Word Pictures in the New Testament* © 1930; as cited in Ken Hamel, *The Online Bible*, version 2.5.2 (Oakhurst, N. J.: Online Bible Software, 1995).