REFORMED REVIEW

Theme: Congregational Conflict and Reconciliation

Introduction to This Issue

The *Reformed Review* is pleased to present this issue on "Congregational Conflict and Reconciliation." Although conflict is a part of life, and can be a springboard to significant change, it can also be destructive. In many North American congregations today, conflict is an increasing problem.

The writers in this issue present helpful perspectives on congregational conflict and how church leaders, especially pastors, can deal with it. Curtis Birky, a psychotherapist and educator to many pastors, begins by outlining a process of dealing with conflict more effectively by anticipating and preparing for it. Next, Stan Rock, professor emeritus of pastoral care and counseling at Western Theological Seminary, looks back on his long career and draws intriguing lessons for pastors encountering congregational conflict. Then Norm Thomasma, on the staff of the Christian Reformed Church's Pastor-Church Relations Office, gives a close examination and biblical-theological critique of Family Systems Theory as it is used by Christian pastors. Finally, Jonathan Tice, an RCA pastor and professional mediator, creatively describes the process of mediation as one possible way to deal with congregational conflict.

Although conflict in the "church militant" will never be ended, and may not even be manageable, it can be dealt with responsibly and effectively. We on the W.T.S. Publications Committee hope that this issue will empower steps in that direction.

Robert E. Van Voorst
Editor

Preparation for Church Conflict

Curtis Birky

Imagine a continuum illustrating church conflict, with "Healthy Conflict Resolution" written on one end and "Elimination of Conflict" on the other. Which end of the continuum would you like to place your congregation on? The possibility of a conflict-free congregation is alluring for good reasons. Church conflicts have produced a lot of damage—church splits, broken relationships, tainted witness, misunderstandings, consumption of energy and resources that might have been better used elsewhere. You could probably extend the list without too much effort.

Even though these negative outcomes are easily associated with church conflict, an interesting question can be raised. Do these results grow out of the conflict itself, or are they a result of the way that the conflict is handled? Furthermore, what does a congregation experience when a healthy resolution to conflict is achieved?

This article will propose that intentional preparation for church conflict is likely to reduce the number of times that damaging results occur. Because of this probable outcome, healthy resolution of church conflict is worth striving for.[1] In addition, it will suggest that the elimination of all conflict is neither a reasonable nor desirable goal for a well-functioning congregation. To begin with, the concept of church conflict will be defined and briefly discussed. Then, common types of church conflicts and possible causative factors will be examined. Lastly, preparation for handling church conflict in a healthy way will be considered.[2]

Conflict in Churches

Everyone knows what conflict is and why it's so harmful. Some participants blame, argue, and act in a mean-spirited way. Others quietly push buttons, offer subtle digs, passively infuriate, or adopt a cool, collected demeanor. Whether the conflict is overt or covert, we all know when it's happening and how it hurts.

Yet, what is described above is not actually conflict. These are simply methods of dealing with a conflict. You could probably identify other destructive ways of handling conflict that people use at work, at home, and also at churches. For the purposes of this discussion "church conflict" is defined very simply. It is those times when there are two or more perspectives about how to proceed. Are we going to do this or that? Is this or that the right way to think or believe or act? A church conflict presents us with a choice and requires a decision about how to move forward.

We are familiar with legal conflict. Two parties sit in front of the judge and argue about what is true or fair. The judge decides how things will move forward. Athletic conflict is commonly understood in our culture. Each team has its perspective about how the game should turn out and team members play toward that end. During this past year a good deal of time was spent working out a political conflict between two presidential candidates who had different perspectives about how to move the country forward. Resolving such political conflicts is generally done in an orderly and predictable manner. But what about resolving church conflict? Are there ways of doing it that can be as useful as a judgment, a scoreboard, or a voting tally?

Preparation depends, at least in part, on what kind of church conflict is encountered and on its root causes.

Preparing for Church Conflict

Identifying and understanding the root causes of common church conflicts is the first crucial step in the process of preparation. Church conflicts are often complex, and preparations need to be tailored to specific kinds of conflict. What is useful in handling one conflict situation may be less helpful in another. Once particular kinds of conflicts are identified and understood, several basic questions can be asked about preparation for handling those particular conflicts in the congregation's future.[3] Does this kind of conflict have the potential for good outcomes in the congregation? If yes, how can the congregation be prepared to handle it productively? If not, are there things that can be done to prevent it?

Engagement in the kind of preparation for church conflict suggested below needs to be an intentional choice of congregational leaders and requires adequate time and resources for education, training, and organization. It is a commitment to handling conflict directly and productively, and it requires the courage to be loving. This sort of effort is not a quick fix for conflict resolution, but it does take seriously the Matthew 18 message to try and work out conflicts among believers in church communities. This preparation could result in a congregation reducing the number of conflicts it experiences and having a better chance of resolving conflicts in a healthy way. Doing well at church conflict resolution all the time is not possible. However, whenever it is done well the participants will benefit from creating or maintaining loving relationships and from having acted with Christian integrity.

A long list of various church conflicts could likely be created by any group of experienced church leaders. Perhaps if these were analyzed some patterns would emerge. Some kinds of conflicts could be seen as more common and others as unusual. We now will examine several commonly experienced types of church

conflicts and consider how to prepare for handling them well in the congregational setting.

Conflicts Related to Different Spiritual Priorities

If one hundred Christians were chosen randomly from any large community and each described his or her faith experiences, one would expect a great deal of variation in the accounts. However, an ethnographic researcher who listened closely might begin to form categories of stories. A basis for dividing the stories into different groups would need to be established—some core element. Using a core element, i.e., age at conversion, the researcher might eventually place each story into a group. All of the stories in group "A" would be similar to each other in that they involved an early childhood conversion. Those in group "B" involved a conversion in the teenage years, and so on for the other groups.

This approach of categorizing based on a core element can be used to understand several kinds of church conflicts. The core element chosen for this purpose is identified as a person's *spiritual priority*. For this discussion, a spiritual priority is defined as the most important element in organizing a person's thinking about his spiritual life. The person may or may not be aware of the priority and its organizing role in his spiritual life.

Scott Peck, a psychiatrist who integrates Christian faith into his writings, provides a useful model of spiritual development in his book, *The Different Drum*. His theories are similar to those of James Fowler, who also writes about spiritual development and whose work is perhaps more familiar than Peck's among church leaders. Both of these writers owe much to Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which is based on the developmental psychology of Erickson, Piaget, and others. Peck's model is noted because of its simplicity and ability to illustrate a particular kind of church conflict. The comments below use his model, but they rely less on a developmental stage approach. A stage concept can imply that progression through all of the stages is valued highly and that such progression is possible. The attempt here is to avoid the appearance of attaching greater worth to later stages, or to the people in those stages.[4] Peck presents four stages of spiritual growth.[5] The concept of categories is used here to suggest that they may or may not be connected progressively.[6]

The initial category is a group organized around the spiritual priority of *survival*. People in this group face many dilemmas that grow out of their impulsive actions or words. Their misbehavior and generally unprincipled choices cause a good deal of trouble for them and make their lives chaotic. Spiritual action is frequently motivated by fear—usually of punishment from God, going to hell at death, being struck by lightning, etc.—when individual survival is in question. The old "hell fire and brimstone" and "scare them into heaven" sermons may

have grown out of trying to help people in this category. Societal examples parallel to this developmental process might be the belief that the death penalty will scare people into not killing someone, or reliance on military deterrence for national safety. Thinking in this stage is generally clear-cut, black and white, or concrete. Since survival is about the individual, not much regard for other people exists. The idea is to do the right thing so that God doesn't punish you. Church members in this category might choose to attend church so that they will be assured of going to heaven when they die.

The next category of people is organized around the spiritual priority of *orderliness*. This category is largest of the four that are being discussed, and its people likely make up a high percentage of church parishioners. These faithful people have a strong trust in the institutional church and its formalities. Their choices and actions might be thought of as rule oriented or law based. Here people experience spiritual life as going well when they are following the perceived expectations of the church. These expectations may be stated by pastors in public worship or articulated during other less formal church activities. Persons in this category may glean useful guides for right behavior and correct thinking from sermons, study classes, denominational readings, Bible study, and so forth. At other times, church participants may transfer rules into their spiritual belief system from Christian sources outside of their immediate congregations or denominations. Societal examples parallel to the spiritual orderliness category could include the placement of high value on national institutions, political offices, national policies, etc; or even strict adherence to the "letter of the law," while the "spirit of the law" may be disregarded or not understood at all.

In this orderliness group, the church's perceived laws and rules are held in high regard and obedience is the desired and fulfilling response. Thinking continues to be concrete and choices are seen as quite clear-cut, black and white with very little gray in between. A great deal of discomfort and concern may be aroused when the parishioner observes other church members paying less attention to the rules, or questioning their importance.

People with the spiritual priority of inquiry explore spirituality through questioning and skepticism. They investigate the rules and belief systems of the church and seek evidence of their validity. Some rules for right Christian living may be tossed out the door, so to speak. Someone may enter this group in the face of new life experiences such as higher education, tragedy, the encountering of a very different cultural environment, or getting to know someone from a different religious tradition. More often than not, these church members discontinue regular attendance or disassociate with their home churches or denominations. Many people in this category abandon Christianity, explore

other forms of spirituality, or drop the spiritual quest altogether. They view their previous explanations of Christian spiritual life as inadequate, incomplete, or lacking in integrity.

The fourth category of this model is organized around the spiritual priority of *integration*. Church members in this group value complex answers to questions of faith and life. Church laws and traditions are understood in terms of the "spirit of the law" rather than the "letter of the law." The individual makes sense out of Christian faith, pulling together understandings of God, the life and message of Jesus, biblical interpretation, prayer, humanness, Christian tradition, etc. Persons in this category may have a mystical sense of spirituality and talk of the connectedness of all people and all aspects of God's creation. Their thinking is often symbolic and abstract. Authority and guidelines for Christian living are highly internalized.

A significant number of church conflicts are understood more accurately when using explanations based on these categories of spiritual priorities.[7] The primary conflict dynamic is a clash of perspectives between the orderliness and integration groups of parishioners. For example, orderliness people feel secure in strict adherence to the rules—generally trusting those who have set the rules and the integrity of the rules themselves. This creates a steady and clearly understood platform or set of directives for living out the Christian faith. Integrative church members are more secure when basing their choices about Christian living on the theological and biblical underpinnings out of which the rules grow.

Some explanation is useful here. Church rules are usually formulated to address an important situation or question that Christians face in their day-to-day experience. Stated more broadly, rules are intended to provide a Christian response to a particular cultural situation, usually a new one. A temporal element may also be present—a particular period in history. For example, some years ago pool halls emerged in the cultural scene. Along with the pool table came drinking, betting, harsh language, etc. Some churches developed a rule to help protect their young people from this kind of environment. The rule was, "You may not go to the pool hall and play pool."

Probably everyone in the local church would have supported the rule. A survival group member response would have been that the pastor says it is wrong to go to the pool hall and even though I'd really like to go and play I won't, because I don't want to go to hell when I die. An orderliness perspective would have been that there is something inherently wrong with the pool hall and the game of pool itself. We can note that nearly all the pool tables—at that time—were in pool halls. An inquirer take on the situation might not have existed, because inquirers would not likely have been in church or concerned with the new rule. (If they

had been in church, they might have questioned the validity of the rule.) The integration response would have been to support the rule because there is nothing good about the pool hall environment and they didn't want kids exposed to it. When the rule was made there was no conflict between orderliness and integration perspectives about the rule. Both supported it.

Now let us fast-forward the cultural scene by twenty years. Companies have discovered that a lot of people like to play pool. Homes are being built with recreation rooms. Soon, pool tables are manufactured and sold for in-home use. Young people can, potentially, play pool at home instead of in the pool hall.

What does the church's rule look like in this circumstance? The survivor church member is not likely to take any chances with the heaven or hell risks related to the pool table. An individual with an orderliness response will be quite sure that someone who purchases a new pool table has done something sinful, because she believes the pastor has already made it clear that the game of pool is to be avoided. A person with the inquiry view is still very likely unconcerned with the validity of the church's rules. An integration parishioner buys a pool table and the teenagers in the home enjoy it greatly. It was always understood that the church's rule was about avoiding crass language, drunkenness, betting, etc., at the pool hall—and never about whether or not a set of marble balls rolled around on a smooth table with holes along the edges.

The church conflict can now form between the more concrete orderliness thinking and the more abstract or symbolic integration thinking.[8] The original problem of pool halls appearing on the cultural scene had been addressed with a good and appropriate rule: "You may not go to the pool hall and play pool." Everyone in the church supported the rule, and it was helpful in protecting the young people from the less than wholesome pool hall environment. As time went by, cultural circumstances changed. While pool halls remained much the same, the possibility of playing the game of pool in the safe and supportive home atmosphere emerged.

What about the two different interpretations of the rule? For the orderliness parishioner, the rule has become a valued guideline in decision-making about Christian living. Following the rule means that the right thing is done; and doing the right thing is important and necessary in order to have good standing as a church member, a child of God, a witness to the broader community, and so forth. From this perspective, a number of things follow. The rule's interpretation has become a part of the Christian tradition. The well being of the church itself— its standing before God—is at stake if the rule is not followed by those in the church. The wrongful act of the integration church member who bought a pool table reflects not only on that poor soul, but also on the entire congregation. Such

choices must be addressed and brought in line with proper following of the rule. In addition, the well-intentioned orderliness person may be confused about how the new pool table owner could have made such an obvious error in Christian judgment.

For the integration parishioner, the rule was seen as a useful guide in responding to a specific problematic situation. When the situation changed—i.e., teenagers could play pool without being exposed to the crude environmental factors of the pool hall—part of the rule became irrelevant. The rule was thus revised from "You may not go to the pool hall and play pool," to, "You may not go to the pool hall, however, you are welcome to play pool in our recreation room." When confronted by the fellow church member with the orderliness perspective, this parishioner is initially perplexed or surprised and then graciously explains why there is no Christian ethic violated in owning and enjoying a pool table. When this has no validity for the orderliness believer, each is likely disappointed in the other.

At this point the conflict has been established. Two different perspectives about how to proceed are clear to both parties and to those in the church who think like them. While this conflict illustration is dated, it does serve as an example of a very common, and often painful, type of conflict encountered in church life. This kind of church conflict happens over and over again because the broader culture in which the church lives and operates changes continually.

Understanding what is at stake for parishioners is a crucial first step in considering what steps a congregation can take in order to benefit from an orderliness versus integration conflict. The faithful believer whose spiritual priority is orderliness experiences the external guide—the perceived church rule—as a greatly valued and fully trustworthy basis for correct choices about Christian living. From this perspective, spiritual security, faithful living, and right standing before God are connected to respecting and obeying the highly honored rules. This kind of steady operationalization of the institutional church's traditions and teachings provides answers to many of life's questions and complexities in a comforting and useful way. On the other hand, the faithful believer whose spiritual priority is integration experiences the internal guide— the perceived essence of the rule, the foundation of the law—as a basis for correct choices about Christian living. From this perspective, spiritual security, faithful living, and right standing before God are connected to the ongoing creation of new responses or rule revisions which translate and demonstrate these values in an ever-changing culture. This kind of fluid operationalization of the institutional church's traditions and teachings provides answers to many of life's questions and complexities in a comforting and useful way.[9]

Put simply, we could say that faithful action, from the orderliness perspective, is to respond to new cultural problems by applying trusted and familiar existing church rules. And, that faithful action, from the integration perspective, is to respond to new cultural problems with tailor-made reinterpretations of Christian core values. Put more simply and exaggerated, the two responses are to conform faithfully or adapt faithfully. These contradictory priorities lead, many times, to different ways of living out the Christian life, and the related dynamics are at the heart of a high percentage of church conflicts. Two different ways of moving forward are identified.

Preparation Strategies

Church conflicts related to different spiritual priorities have potential for good outcomes in the congregation. The following are examples of the kinds of preparation strategies to consider.

(1) Initial preparation includes pastors educating themselves about the basic ideas of Kohlberg, Fowler, or Peck in order to have a better grasp of the spiritual priority categories.
(2) Sermons about controversial issues can be presented in a way that is meaningful to parishioners in each of the groups, and the issue can be stated in a way that models respect. Specifically addressing both the "letter of the law" and the "spirit of the law" could be helpful.
(3) Creating a work group that could suggest usable rules appreciated by orderliness church members could be helpful. Including an emphasis on when the rule should be reviewed might be helpful to those from the integration group. Openly identifying the spoken and unspoken rules of the church could help raise awareness about the influence of rules, especially if rules from the past that are no longer used could be named. Identifying which issues the rules address, which rules are long term, and which rules are shorter term might help people from the two groups find some common ground.
(4) Classes could be offered to teach church members about the spiritual priorities and model acceptance of the different experiences.
(5) Small groups could be structured to deal with an issue from each of the four different spiritual priorities perspectives. Ground rules for interaction could include an emphasis on accepting each group member and not trying to change anyone else's views. Participants could be encouraged to indicate which of the spiritual priority perspectives helps them deal with the issue being examined. It could be thought of as practicing what each of us experiences from God—acceptance of us where we are, or starting with us where we are.
(6) Educating each new church member about the reality of peoples' differing spiritual priorities, or about a model of spiritual development, and

emphasizing how to handle differences respectfully could slowly build an expectation that differences in a congregation are normal, and that people are tolerated despite their sincere differences.

(7) A group of interested parishioners could be trained to teach church members in different spiritual priority categories to talk respectfully to each other about controversial issues without severing their relationships. The training would need to include how to teach or model specific skills in listening and assertiveness—skills intended to operationalize love in conversation—along with recognition of spiritual categories. When the trainees eventually led groups, a strong emphasis on skillful interaction could help maintain a good group process.

Such preparation assumes an active engagement of the conflicts that are inherent between those from the orderliness group and those from the integration group. A concerted effort over the course of a year could go a long ways toward reducing tension between the groups. They might be more respectful of each other, less often question the validity of each other's faith, and be more able to engage cooperatively when decisions about how to move forward are needed. It is more likely that, in such a congregational climate, those in the inquiry category could stay within the church as they ask difficult questions and experience support in their necessary spiritual work.

Conflicts Related to Personality

Personality conflicts are commonly experienced in day-to-day church life. Most of them are described as people not able to get along due to power struggles or differences of opinion. Generally speaking, these differences of perspective about how to proceed are contained to a small number of parishioners, time limited, and restricted in scope. The whole congregation is not involved or polarized. When it is resolved, there are few lingering effects.

There is a kind of personality conflict, however, that is much more severe and can have long-lasting effects on the life of the local church. These conflicts involve parishioners who can be described clinically as having a *personality disorder* of some type.[10] Nearly all congregations have one or more people that fit this sort of descriptive category. Basic knowledge about two types of personality disorders is necessary before considering how to prevent damage from the sorts of conflicts they create in congregations.

For the vast majority of church folks, bad days and regrettable behavior happen occasionally. The difficulties these cause can generally be overcome. But for the adults with a serious personality disorder, the severely defensive response pattern anyone might display on a rare bad day is prevalent in many situations with many different people. It is a way of life. Psychologist Gregory W. Lester

says, "They wreak havoc in their own lives and in the lives of others around them. And they don't see anything wrong with what they are doing."[11] In reality, all of us display personality disorder traits—some days more, some days less. The difference is that individuals with personality disorders are on the severe end of the continuum a good deal of the time. It is a matter of degree.

Two types of personality disorders can be particularly difficult for a congregation to live with and can cause damaging conflicts in congregational life. The first, *borderline personality disorder*, has traits that are some of the most difficult to deal with. It might be described as a disorder of instability—both internally and behaviorally. These people have a difficult time holding a steady view of themselves and others. This is most notable in intimate or close working relationships. They experience exaggerated and intense responses.

Such behaviors in churches are not easily recognized, but there are some clues to suggest when you are encountering it. The most likely places will be in the close working relationships of staff, committees, long-term small groups, ongoing pastoral care, and so forth. Borderline instability is most likely to appear when contact is consistent and interactive. If you are adored as a completely trustworthy church servant one day and then, though you have no knowledge of any relational complication, are despised as a traitor to your calling the next, you may have encountered a borderline response. A church member with borderline personality disorder is unlikely to keep a steady view of someone for very long. A borderline reaction may be present when you encounter extremely intense defensiveness and anger the day following your appropriate show of emotional support, because intimacy cannot be tolerated. On the other hand, if you had not shown the support you may have encountered the same thing, because of a fear and expectation of abandonment.

Individuals with full-blown borderline personality disorders regularly set up alliances and opposition camps in organizations they are part of. Researcher Gregory Lester writes:

> I consulted with a professional's office in which a person with Borderline Personality Disorder had been hired as office manager. Within six months the previously good friends in the office were at each other's throats, and there was talk of disbanding the office.[12]

People with this disorder do this, at least in part, by treating some members of the group as "all good" and others as "all bad." They also present themselves very differently to different people or sub-groups within an organization. If the borderline dynamics are not discovered and understood, the result is nearly always polarization within the organization. For example, a social service agency may have trouble coordinating services for a client with borderline personality

disorder, because the client presents so differently to different agency workers. In such situations, it is not unusual for coworkers to doubt the validity of the impressions of their colleagues. Disagreement and conflict may result.

The same dynamics can create severe conflict in churches. Although the borderline party may be unaware of it, his way of operation can soon set up deeply charged factions within a staff, an administrative board, or a committee. The most telltale sign of borderline presence in church life may be the markedly altered state of formerly good working relationships. If the adult education committee generally worked well together and now it seems fragmented or polarized, the possibility of this personality disorder being present may need to be considered.

A second personality disorder that can be the source of church conflict is rooted in *narcissism*. Every normal person has narcissistic needs and benefits from these needs being met. Affirmation of a good effort is valued. Praise for an award is enjoyed. Special treatment on a birthday is appreciated. Words of admiration are always welcome. And it is usual for family and close friends to be happy with the recipient of such kindness.

At the other end of the continuum is the adult who organizes her life around securing a never-ending supply of praise, affirmation, special treatment, and admiration.[13] For the person with *narcissistic personality disorder*, no supply of adulation is enough to satisfy narcissistic cravings for long. Such an individual might be thought of as grandiose, arrogant, self-inflated, and having a strong sense of entitlement. Close observation reveals that the person with narcissistic personality disorder is greatly concerned with her *image.* Appearance, cultivation of reputation, external indicators of status, etc., are all used to bolster an image that elicits the desired attention. The purpose of the image maintenance is to secure feedback. So, contrary to initial impressions, narcissism is not about excessive self-love; instead, a consuming love of image is at its core.[14] Because image, like a reflection, has no depth, individuals with narcissistic personality disorder are relatively empty inside. They have very little self-awareness and an extremely limited capacity to understand someone else's experience or perspective—to walk in their shoes. Thus, responding with empathy is not possible, and genuine interest in others is not likely.[15]

Relational difficulties for people with narcissistic personality disorder are many, and these can readily cause or contribute to conflicts in churches. For example, they cannot tolerate criticism because it doesn't support their grandiose image or meet their needs for admiration. Even accurate and well-intended criticism is seen as unfounded or mean-spirited and is responded to with disproportionate defensiveness. Likewise, disagreement is problematic. Since there is both a

limited capacity to see things from another person's perspective and an elevated sense of specialness, it is surprising, if not unbelievable, that others see things differently. In addition, the differing view or perception is seen as wrong—always—and no effort is spared in establishing the other's error. Further escalation of the conflict arises when third parties are recruited for support. If they only hear the narcissistic view, they are likely to believe it because the upset presenter genuinely believes it and, therefore, sounds very convincing.

Two categories of church conflicts commonly arise out of narcissism. The first involves a parishioner or leader with the full-blown personality disorder. Such a person is concerned with image and might seek out positions of congregational leadership believed to offer power, prestige, title, and so forth. Problems related to criticism and differing opinions are likely to increase in proportion to the prominence of the church position or office. A senior or associate pastor position within a team or shared power structure would be at risk for conflict. Any pastoral position requiring genuine empathy in pastoral care or counseling would be at risk for problems. High level lay leadership positions that require a good deal of cooperative work would not be likely to go well. Severe and destructive conflicts could arise in any of these situations. On the other hand, if such an individual finds an office that matches his image, it could work out fairly well.[16]

The second type of church conflict from narcissistic origins is more subtle and more typical. Remember, everyone can be placed somewhere on a continuum of "very few" to "very many" narcissistic traits. The reality is that on some days we display these traits more prominently than on others, but the person with narcissistic personality disorder displays them regularly. It can be argued that certain social factors support the elevation of narcissistic traits. Two such factors that pertain to the position of the professional minister are presently found in Protestant church culture in the United States.

First, by and large, the laity considers the pastor to be a special person called out by God, someone who models an exemplary Christian life. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that they see the pastor as an extraordinarily spiritual person who lives a more godly life than most others can hope to attain. These presumptions are clearly communicated to young adults who decide to enter seminary training and are reinforced at times of transition to new ministerial positions. This is conveyed privately through direct comments and publicly through prayers and special church services. The message is one of admiration, specialness, status, and support.

Second, that message is very appealing to someone with even slightly elevated narcissistic needs. If that person happens to be a young, bright, dedicated church

member, the idea of being a pastor would seem quite inviting.[17] In some ways this is a very good match—the young person gets important needs met and the church gets a pastor. However, certain church conflicts may arise. For example, such young pastors, early in their careers, might be prone to accept positions beyond their level of competency. This would be an understandable response with the convergence of a trait like mild grandiosity being reinforced by church culture messages of specialness.[18] In this kind of position, the young, slightly narcissistic pastor is more likely to make mistakes due to lack of experience and excessive self confidence and is less likely to deal well with constructive criticism or disagreement. This could prompt the pastor to withdraw from the ministerial profession or to continue with a good deal of confusion and inner pain.[19] Or, it could create a dynamic of ongoing conflict between the pastor and the well-intentioned congregational leaders that is not easily resolved. If not resolved, the lack of trust that results can damage the sense of well being for both the pastor and the congregation. The congregation might wonder why they were sent such an inadequate pastor. On the other hand, they might end up being divided in their support—some standing firmly behind the still special pastor and some on the side of other congregational leaders.

Preparation Strategies

Conflicts related to personality are best avoided. In order to prevent them, the following strategies should be considered.

(1) People that exhibit strong borderline personality disorder traits should not be put in positions of church leadership. If, as is often the case, this is discovered while serving in leadership, they should not be reappointed or rehired. Straightforward support of the individual and clear statements of limitations on their future roles need to be offered simultaneously. If, for their well being or the well being of the group, they need to leave the congregation, they should be supported in this change.
(2) Parishioners with strong narcissistic traits need to be well-matched to particular leadership positions.
(3) Pastoral leaders with elevated narcissistic traits should be hired for roles suited to their experience and demonstrated competencies.
(4) Seminaries do a good service for young pastors in training, and for congregations, when elevated levels of narcissism are identified and appropriate help given prior to graduation.
(5) A lowered status for the concept of somehow being special because of "being called to ministry" might eventually help church culture change so that it invites less elevation of narcissism in pastors.
(6) Churches with concern for leaders with pronounced personality issues should suggest therapeutic help and thus make it possible to transition out of the

leadership role more easily. With professional help, it may be possible to reemerge later as a useful leader.[20]

Conflicts Related to Family of Origin

Family-of-origin conflicts might also be thought of as *transference* conflicts. The roots of this type of church conflict are found in unresolved family-of-origin issues that are transferred to the church setting. As is the case with the personality conflicts, these conflicts involve strong reactions from the participants. Parishioners or church leaders in these conflicts might not be aware of why they feel so strongly about the perspective they support because the connection to family-of-origin experiences is not easily recognized. These conflicts are thoroughly discussed in literature about church conflict dynamics written from the "family systems" theoretical perspective. The writings of Edwin H. Friedman are a good example.[21]

Families are not perfect. Even in well-functioning families, parents are acutely aware of their failures or mistakes in child rearing. Everyone enters adulthood with some psychological baggage from their family of origin.[22] Churches represent another place to have a family-like experience of being valued and cared for. It is no wonder that church members and church leaders alike hope that a church family will treat them well. When someone comes from an especially disturbed home, this need for a better experience can become pronounced and influence behavior, attitudes, and expectations in church relationships. Church participants who experienced abuse, neglect, trauma, mental illness, or addictions in their families of origin may be especially hopeful of an altruistic and healing experience. Although Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns against bringing this hope for human love to the believers' community, it seems nearly unavoidable.[23]

Toward this end, the pastor[24] may be idealized as the loving father or mother[25] that didn't exist in the years of childhood. Pastoral mistakes or failures in relationships may be especially painful for such parishioners. Extended or potent church conflicts that involve pastors can elicit responses of extreme disappointment, disbelief, or even abandonment. Failures of love are common in churches as well as families. When this happens in a church conflict situation, it may trigger deeply rooted protective responses, which can intensify the conflict within the church.

One example is the family-of-origin situation of alcohol abuse by the father. Because a child is dependent and has no other father, it is common for the child to develop (or maintain) an intense loyalty, even in the face of parenting that is neglectful, inadequate, abusive, or in other ways undeserving. When the child grows up, this same dynamic of undeserved loyalty, if never resolved, may be

transferred to the church pastor. During church conflict centered on a pastor's poor performance, it may show up as unswerving loyalty and serve to intensify an already painful situation.

Other dysfunctional family-of-origin survival dynamics such as enabling irresponsible behaviors, behaving in excessively controlling ways, victimization responses, or conflict avoidance can all cause or complicate church conflict. Problems with these kinds of transferences are especially prevalent when the conflict involves church leaders.

Preparation Strategies

Conflicts related to family-of-origin issues cannot be avoided in church settings, but some can be minimized or contained. The strategies below may be useful.

(1) Pastors need to develop awareness of their own transference issues so that they do not unknowingly act these out in their work setting. Peer consultation or supervision can be helpful in identifying these issues. When a pastor notes that intense responses similar to those experienced during painful family-of-origin circumstances are happening at work, therapeutic help should be sought.

(2) Pastors do well to educate themselves about the concept of transference. During times of church conflict, parishioners with overly intense responses may need to be referred to psychotherapy in order to get the support they need and to avoid being hurt again, or even traumatized. Pastors who know the histories of their church members might be especially helpful in making such referrals.

(3) When a highly intense church conflict does arise, members with notable transference issues should not be given central roles in the conflict resolution process.

Conflicts Related to Domination

Church conflicts related to domination of one type or another continue at a church-wide and congregational level. Usually these are couched in terms of biblical interpretation, theological positions, or formal church traditions, although they might also be understood from the "spiritual priorities" perspective referred to earlier. Domination is at work when any group of people is held in less-than-equal status because of something that cannot be changed.[26] Race, gender, and sexual orientation have all been dealt with through domination dynamics in the church—both historically and currently. More subtle elements of domination can be seen in economic or class divisions, attitudes toward age as it pertains to the elderly and to children, or even the status attached to a person's last name. Any way of establishing who the "insiders" are can be explained, at least in part, by the dynamics of domination,

because establishing "insiders" also establishes "outsiders," and "outsiders" have limited power.

Church conflicts are likely to arise whenever a dominant group is asked to share power. Whether the power is realized formally in terms of position and status, or informally in terms of inclusion and acceptance, conflict emerges. The nature of church conflict is often about differing perceptions of how to move forward, and all of these domination dynamics in the church are about differing answers to the question of how to move forward.

Preparation Strategies

Conflicts related to domination are likely to be reduced by a number of direct steps.

(1) Educating parishioners about the presence of various kinds of domination dynamics within the congregation is often fruitful. Raising awareness is an important first step, because many participate unknowingly in subtle forms of domination, such as insensitive use of language or perpetuating "insider" dynamics, and will discontinue it when they become aware of it. Intentional assimilation of new adult church members into the active life of the congregation can reduce the "insider" dynamic and inject new energy into the system at the same time.
(2) Prevention of church conflicts about more entrenched forms of domination can be based on many of the same strategies suggested in the spiritual priorities section.[27]
(3) Sermon illustrations can also convey how Jesus included the disenfranchised of his historical period. Further stressing Christ's stance of compassion as a new church rule may be helpful. This could be reinforced by having study groups identify those in the community who endure current forms of domination, or by having them develop rules of Christian living based on Christ's model of compassion toward such groups.

Conflicts Related to Church Structure

A final type of church conflict is rooted in *structural* or *organizational* issues. These are more straightforward. Nonetheless, they can be difficult because they represent a change in the way things have been in the congregation. A common example is the structural conflict that follows a significant size change in a congregation—for example, when a young congregation of forty people becomes a larger congregation of three hundred people. The informal, relaxed system of communication that worked for forty people does not do as well for three hundred. A pastor-centered leadership which allowed for decisions to be made easily for a smaller group may not have the same results in the larger group.

Figuring out how to change, or even that change is needed, can be a surprisingly painful process. A pastor with different interests and abilities may be needed, or an additional pastor may be necessary to help with the increased amount of work. A formalized system of self-governance with written job descriptions will need to be developed. All of these changes have to be discussed, and with discussion comes conflict because there is often more than one idea about how to move forward.

Preparation Strategies
Conflicts about church structure can be prepared for and minimized.

(1) Pastors do well when they educate themselves and their parishioners about the usual dynamics and needs of congregations that change size. Helping church laity anticipate the needed changes is likely to reduce negative outcomes.
(2) Training the congregation's leaders about formal and informal systems of operation can help deliberate choices be made about which system, or what combination, could best meet the church's current needs.
(3) Undertaking the task of regularly clarifying matters as simple as what kinds of memorial gifts can be accepted and how the donors can expect the gifts to be handled will help the congregation avoid many small conflicts. Regular reviews or revisions of staff job descriptions, and basing staff evaluations on these, can reduce the number of conflicts related to unclear expectations. Task descriptions of committees also need regular review.
(4) The congregational mission statement can be used to help coordinate organizational effort overall and to refine organizational structure.

Conclusion

Work dedicated to preparing for church conflict is likely to translate into a reduction in the amount of conflict-related pain endured by the congregation. Some common church conflicts are best avoided, while others need to be embraced. Knowing the difference is crucial. The church's sense of community is affected greatly by choices about how conflict is handled, and preparation for good choices deserves increased effort. Handling conflict well is a worthy demonstration of Christian love and benefits all those involved.

ENDNOTES

[1] In a recent study of organizational conflict, author Susan Meyer found that adaptive conflict-handling styles reduce the amount and intensity of future conflicts. Forceful styles increase the amount and intensity of future conflicts and inhibit productivity in the work place. It is reasonable to think that these findings would apply to church organizations as well (Meyer, "Organizational Responses to Conflict: Future Conflict and Work Outcomes" *Social Work Research* 28 (2004), 183-190.
[2] A recent book suggests that we have much to learn about this (D. B. Lott, ed., *Conflict Management in Congregation* [Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001]). In part, this is because many church conflicts are

complex, and simple approaches to resolution are usually inadequate. The struggle is to find usable approaches that are also sophisticated enough to deal with the complexities.

[3] While not all kinds of church conflicts can be anticipated, many can. Those are worth preparing for.

[4] M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster). Not that Peck does this in his writing, but we readers may be prone to do so. Peck emphasizes that love among people of different stages of spiritual development is a necessary ingredient to the attainment of community.

[5] Stage 1: chaotic, antisocial; stage 2: formal, institutional; stage 3: skeptic, individual; stage 4: mystic, communal (Peck, *Different Drum,* 187-200).

[6] The core element of "spiritual priority" is not from Peck's book.

[7] Obviously, these are not rigid categories. Fluid captures it better. Some people are organized around one priority primarily, but may have moments of acting from one of the other priorities. And it is also possible to fit one group in one aspect of spiritual life and another group in another aspect of spiritual life. It might be said that all priorities are inside each of us to varying degrees.

[8] At this point, the *survival* perspective is still more motivated by fear and self-survival. The rule validity conflict is both too risky and the behavior of others may be beyond this church member's scope of concern. Meanwhile, the *inquirer* questioning of the role, if it happens at all, is usually done privately or outside the church's boundaries. (A notable exception is on the Christian college campus.)

[9] Psychological and spiritual stability, for someone from the *orderliness* group, correlates with clearly defined, well-categorized, and consistent interpretations of faith. This could also be explained, at least in part, by Piaget's concept of "concrete thinking" (non-symbolic thinking) in his theory of cognitive development. From this cognitive perspective, it is not surprising that the *orderliness* individual is likely to favor many views (political, world, marital, parenting, etc.) that are clearly defined, well categorized, and consistently interpreted. Likewise, the psychological and spiritual stability, for someone from the *integration* category, correlates with interpretations of faith that account for the gray between the black and white, that are more centered on similarities, inclusiveness, and interrelatedness, and that rely on restating the essence of faith in response to new situations. This could also be explained, at least in part, by Piaget's concept of "abstract thinking" (symbolic thinking) in his theory of cognitive development. From this cognitive perspective, it is not surprising that the *integration* individual is likely to favor views (political, world, marital, parenting, etc.) that are sensitive to cultural variations and communal values.

[10] Personality disorders are generally attributed to troubles in certain stages of development in childhood. Brain functioning and genetics are also being studied as potential causes for these disorders. Ten types are identified in the *DSM IV.*, a diagnostic book used by mental health professionals.

[11] Lester, G. W, *Power with People* (Houston, TX: Ashcroft Press, 1995), 373.

[12] Lester, *Power with People,* 377.

[13] Lester, *Power with People,* 383-387*;* See also B. L. Nicholson, "Narcissism," in H. Jackson, ed., *Using Self Psychology in Psychotherapy* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1993), 27-49.

[14] In the ancient myth, Narcissus didn't fall in love with himself, but with the image of himself in the pool—with his reflection.

[15] Unless they have learned that appearing to be interested can be self-serving.

[16] For example, if a wealthy narcissistic executive has a self-image of being a "kind and generous guy," he might do quite well as someone in charge of charitable giving to needy people in the broader community. He could do especially well if he could make the deliveries and personally receive the words of thanks and appreciation, and even better if he had an opportunity to regularly update the congregation on how many people had been helped. These experiences would support his image, serve his needs for admiration and status, and simultaneously help the congregation function well. A senior position in a highly hierarchical structure, a structure where the new senior pastor is expected to hire their own staff immediately, a church where the new senior pastor is expected to be a charismatic leader with high levels of authority and little responsibility for the day-to-day administration of the church, or a solo position might be able to meet narcissistic needs and work well or even flourish.

[17] Psychodynamic theory suggests that a marked lack of empathic and understanding responses to normal (primary) narcissistic needs during childhood produces an adult with high levels of unmet narcissistic needs. The healthy push towards growth means that such adults continue to try and get those needs met by generating empathic and understanding feedback.

[18] This can be further supported by the broader professional culture that values advancement in status and pay.

[19] The internal pain is related to a "narcissistic injury"—specialness is doubted.

[20] Seminaries do well to inform congregations of a student's readiness in the area of personality issues. Congregations who are considering hiring a minister with a history of pronounced church conflict would be wise to ask for a formal psychological evaluation and to have it interpreted by a skilled professional psychologist.

[21] Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985). Because a high percentage of church conflict literature uses this basis of explanation, it is referred to only briefly while discussing conflicts in this section.

[22] Bloomfield, H., *Making Peace with Your Parents* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1983).

[23] Bonhoeffer, D., *Life Together* (London: Harper & Row, 1954). He suggested we gather to worship God and show (not receive) God-like love.

[24] Or any other respected member of the church community.

[25] Sister or brother, son or daughter.

[26] For a detailed example, see Johnson's description of domination in patriarchy (A. Johnson, *The Gender Knot. Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997).

[27] Conflict dynamics commonly found between the *orderliness* and *integration* groups are often present in domination conflicts.

When the Dream Dies:
Pastoral Leadership and Congregational Conflict

Stanley A. Rock

My first experience as a duly installed parish pastor was thrilling. There are those special moments in ministry when time seems to stand still for the celebration of that unique bonding between pastor and people. The music was magnificent; relatives, guests, mentors, and colleagues smiled with pride and delight as I processed with the choir and judicatory representatives. For a little while, that gathered congregation of immigrant stock, farmers and settlers, commuters and local small business people was transformed into a band of faithful pilgrims, who had served their community since 1811.

Leadership as a Kept Man

Yet, after two years in this congregation, I had become depressed. I began sending out resumes to explore a number of college and university student personnel positions. I hoped to escape from a leadership position in which I felt like a "kept" man. The expectations for pastoral leadership were quite clear: to keep the traditions of many generations; to be available for pastoral duties; not to "rock the boat" in the direction of a radical gospel of servanthood in a place that fought the onslaught of urbanization. Preservation, not transformation, was the guiding perspective of most of the gentry of that land.

As I look back now on what has happened through four decades of pastoral leadership in our first congregation, I see many changes in the direction of genuine stewardship of resources for ministry. Even a few years after I had left these fine people, I could look back and identify the many new and renewed outreach endeavors they had begun—a community youth center, a daycare program for preschool children, a continuing "friendly visitors" program with the local neuropsychiatric institute, a worship and Christian education leadership team at the nearby training school for boys, which the state had placed in our "back yard." Further, during my tenure, the church entered into a significant Inter-Parish Council with five neighboring congregations and promoted family life events and ecumenical summer inspirational gatherings for children. One of the most cross-culturally significant efforts was an exchange of children (Caucasian and African American) from a Reformed church in Harlem for one or two weeks in the summer.

With regard to these outreach and educational efforts, however, I felt as if their significance and ownership was much more pastor-centered than member-centered. The congregation seemed to want my preaching, teaching, and pastoral

care efforts to be focused on the maintenance of the families and properties of the congregation. In stark contrast, my sense was that the outreach ministries would grow and flourish only as persons made them their own.

Facing the Opposition

I shall never forget one of the last encounters I had with one of our deacons before I left this ministry post. Sam was chair of the buildings and grounds committee. He was a constant thorn in the flesh. In my first week on the job, Sam complained bitterly about a beer can he held in his hand. He had found the can on the ground in back of the youth center we had going that summer. He was not at all convinced that the consistory had done the right thing to permit this use of one of our buildings. He was seldom satisfied with any decision that was made in consistory meetings. I can still see the signs of anger in his face, which would turn bright red, and the muscles in his neck, which would rise in protest. His loud angry voice rattled me, and on many occasions it took me a few hours to unwind after intense consistory meetings. I would typically try to soften the tone of the meeting. I hated conflict and did everything I could to please others around the leadership table. Years later, I realized that the raised angry voices of my parents fighting at 2:00 a.m. were somehow present to my conscious mind in the heat of my later arguments. I would get out of bed and stand between my father and my mother, when my father would have a knife or a shotgun in his hand, threatening my mother and eventually me.

I used to talk about conflict as an occasion for growth, but I seldom moved toward the conflict but rather distanced myself from those who sharply and loudly differed from one another or from me. I am not proud of myself for unloading my anger with Sam when he came to complain about the church's cemetery a week before we left town. Sam seemed confused and surprised that I came back at him with my own anger and impatience with his negative attitude.

As I look back years later, I have learned a few things about engaging conflict in a more open, less reactive manner, but my own history will always be a factor in my way of bringing leadership to the management of conflict. The incidents I mention and the dreams of the church's leadership are similar to the experiences of every pastor, but the issue of leadership is complicated today by the sense that this is a time when the church in American culture is especially anxious, as is the entire culture itself. Friedman writes:

> Chronic anxiety is more systemic; it is deeper and more embracing than community nervousness. Rather than something that lives within the psyche of each one, it is something that can envelop if not actually connect people. It is a regressive emotional process that

is quite different from the more familiar acute anxiety we experience over specific concerns.[1]

Many pastors, some of the brightest and the best, get into terribly self-destructive patterns of responding to conflict, patterns which do little to heal the pastor's own narcissistic wounds, patterns which approach conflict from an individualistic perspective, having understood the conflict in only interpersonal terms. These approaches can shake the pastor's confidence and deplete his or her self-esteem. This article will take a natural systems approach to conflict, a way that may help the pastor gain more emotional distance and objectivity.

Without withdrawing from the crucible of the conflict, I would like to explore the significance of the pastor's "non-anxious presence" as an essential ingredient of leadership. The theological perspective which most informs this approach is the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East, which understands the role of the sage as similar to the contemporary pastoral caregiver. I shall conclude with some practical strategies for implementing the best kind of continuing education that I know about and have experienced through the last twelve yeas of ministry.

A Different Way of Thinking

Twelve years ago while on sabbatical in Washington, D.C., I began a training program in family therapy led by Rabbi Ed Friedman. I soon discovered that the rhythm of this program three times a year for three days was focused on the study of Murray Bowen and Bowen's use of natural systems theory in the field of family therapy.[2] My former doctoral student, Larry Foster,[3] had introduced me to this program for clergy who were learning, in large-group and small-group settings, a different way of thinking about marital and family conflict and the role of the therapist or pastoral leader in the facilitation of healing. Friedman expresses his central thesis succinctly:

> All [clergy], irrespective of faith, are simultaneously involved in three distinct families whose emotional forces interlock: the families within the congregation, our congregation (as a family) and our own (family of origin). Because the emotional process in all these systems is identical, unresolved issues in any one of them can produce symptoms in the others and an increased understanding in one creates more effective functioning in all three.[4]

Every pastor has a certain dream or vision for his or her "folk." It is also my experience that the pastoral leader sooner or later moves through a period of "de-illusionment," in which he or she must decide to throw out or modify the dream in the face of accepting the congregation as it really is, in all of its

weaknesses and disappointments. It is at this point that God may be able to use both leader and congregation, as Bonhoeffer suggests in *Life Together*:

> Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had spring from a wish dream. The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him [or her] a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves. . . . By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world.[5]

Or the pastoral leader may choose to keep the dream and throw out the real, very human, community he or she experiences. The church moves through the seasons of faithful life, but the spirit is gone. The structures are all there, but the life has gone out of God's people. I hear this story far too often from pastors who are genuinely committed to their ordination vows, but who "mess up" morally or ethically along the way. I do not believe that our seminary education and training produces pastors who have the kind of self-differentiation that will sustain them in a pastoral relationship where all kinds of transference and counter transference takes place. At a minimum, peer supervision must follow in the first five years of ministry, building on the careful work of formation during the seminary years.

What is meant by this subtle but highly important process of transference and counter transference? Pastors bring with them into ministry a whole set of relationships that were shaped in their families of origin. The interactions and relationships of the past influence the way parish members function in their relationship with the authoritative office of minister or pastor. Many people are working out positive and negative family patterns that continue to affect their lives in the present.

In a similar fashion, clergy develop positive and negative feelings toward members of the congregational family and others with whom they may enter into a counseling relationship. Some kind of supervision is essential to assist the minister in understanding his or her counter-transference feelings. None of us wishes to allow our own "stuff" to get in the way of helping others. I might have been more effective in my interaction with the angry deacon if I had understood his anger as an important component of his sense that others on consistory were leaving him out through a process of pre-meeting decision making by a sub-group of the consistory. In the language of Bowen family therapy, the potent

content of transference/counter transference is best understood as a part of the process of working with "emotional triangles" within the family system (to be discussed later).

The Narcissistic Wound

In the sixties and seventies our culture experienced an opening up of alternative life styles, the erosion of traditional patterns of worship, and a great increase in the number of couples who were living together apart from marriage. There was an optimistic spirit of church growth and a great deal of experimenting with new forms of the church. This climate, which never really settled down, reflected a situation which demanded clear pastoral leadership. Rather than focus on the intrapsychic needs of each person in the congregation, the congregational family in the midst of conflict (like the renovation of an original sanctuary, for example) may now see the entire organism, this living breathing aggregate of people, as the unit of health or pathology. Is it ever legitimate for pastors as leaders to be uncertain about a direction without promoting even more anxiety?

Here I would call attention to the special skill of "coaching," which leads towards transformation. "Coaching" in a helping relationship of leading or caring is primarily a skill, which requires a certain kind of "non-anxious presence." The caregiver/leader brings to the relationship a kind of objective empathy. One can identify with another's change goal, concern, or area of new learning, but the effective coach recognizes the place of what James Loder calls "the void," the absence of divine energy in human experience. The coach works to keep from getting caught up in the triangles of resistance, which would get in the way of real transformation, by not doing the other person's work for them. The coach maintains emotional distance from the individual player or "family team," yet remains connected to the individual or team. In summary, the coach communicates resilience and hope by:

- Joining with the individual (or couple or family or congregational leaders) but remaining separate as well.
- Not over-functioning by doing the other's work.
- Responding in ways that demonstrate a deeper understanding of what is really at stake in the person's life (the game, or group's goals).
- Offering challenging, open-ended questions and responses.
- Remaining accepting and nondefensive, yet deeply engaged in the movement toward new learning, new behavior, new discovery.

Richardson helps us with the following set of questions:

- How would you rate your own level of over- or under-functioning compared to functioning responsibly for self and in relation to others? Are there any

ways in which you may have participated in the projection process in your church?

- Have you as a leader experienced any impairment of your own functioning at the emotional, physical, or functional level? If so, do you see any connection between that and anxiety in your church?
- Does any of your experience of stress relate to a sense of responsibility for others?
- When you experience expectations others in the church have of you, or when there are uncomfortable circumstances, to what extent do you use emotional distancing to deal with these?
- Do you have any other particular methods to get others to distance from you? How do you typically get people to "back off" from you?
- Have you ever taken the risk of being open and vulnerable in a situation where you were tempted to hide and keep your distance?
- What conflicts with others are you involved in now? To what extent have you been able to identify your part in the difficulties and to be open about this?
- Have you allowed yourself to take on the anxiety of others, making yourself responsible for something which is actually their responsibility? If so, how has this affected both you and them?
- Are there ways that you are allowing someone else to be responsible for things that are your responsibility?[6]

These questions are like a litany of confession for pastoral leaders who really want to lead with maturity and wisdom. Unfortunately, so many pastoral leaders have such impaired self concepts that they are not able to find a measure of objectivity and appropriate self-evaluation. This deficit alone is enough to send a pastor into depression. The pastor's own sense of self must be strong enough to manage criticism from whatever source.

Friedman was fond of helping clergy see themselves as not simply installed in a position but joined in a marriage to a congregation as an "over-functioning spouse." The pastoral leader takes care of, provides for, and nurtures the congregation, shores up the ragged edges, calms the troubled waters, and holds this disparate family together. In so doing, this same leader may block other members of the congregational family from differentiation, from finding their own, freer way. In Bowen's terms, the head becomes too fused with the body. Leadership has failed to define itself clearly.

In the midst of the conflict the pastoral leader may suffer all kinds of physical problems (e.g., ulcers, heart attacks, cancers) and/or emotional problems (e.g., stress breakdowns, sexual acting out, marital stress, family troubles, and spiritual losses, questioning one's call). We do not do any favors to the church or to the person in ministry formation by certifying those persons in ministry who are so

emotionally vulnerable that they cannot define themselves and learn to take a stand in the midst of conflict, knowing that conflict is an inevitable part of ministry. In a study of sixty-five male clergy who were involved in affairs, Pete Steinke found narcissism to be one of the major factors in the clergy profile. He summarizes:

> Pathological narcissism is really a cover-up for the lack of self-importance that one feels but does not notice. Actually people with this character disorder love themselves poorly, if at all. . . . The narcissist invests in a "false self," using grandiosity to conceal vulnerability. At the core of narcissism is a deep fear of humiliation.[7]

Bowen natural systems therapy would say that the way out is for the pastor to become a more self-differentiated leader, to know where he or she is going, to articulate a vision, to realize a balance in functioning between self-definition and staying connected with others. Most of all, the pastoral leader must work at being a non-anxious presence in the midst of the conflict and reactivity of the families of the congregation. The more the leader is able to remain less anxious and more self-defined (not self-focused or self-centered), the more he or she will be a force influencing the total system.

Leaders must learn to spot the early warning signals within. What kind of person in a relationship "hooks" you? Is it the sarcastic or controlling person? The supercritical perfectionist type, the seductive type, or the dependent personality? The key to change in any system is the nature of the presence of the change artist, not his or her administrative or technical expertise.[8]

Friedman was fond of saying: "When things are going well, watch out for sabotage." There is a kind of perversity in human nature which resists any change from the homeostatic inclination of the organism. Bowen and Friedman saw "family emotional process" as a major phenomenological way in which a family functions. To understand family emotional process is to illuminate the natural order of things. Effective leadership recognizes patterns of multigenerational transmission across the generations, emerging almost mysteriously from a careful examination of perennial forces in one's family of origin.

For example, the apostle Paul writes eloquently about the nature of caring, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ," (Gal. 6:2), and then a few lines later (v. 5), "For all must carry their own loads." There is a kind of built-in ecological balance in these two aspects of living in community. This balance is what the sage recognizes and articulates in the wisdom literature of the Bible and of the ancient Near East. The paradoxical

nature of family life is evident: "Those who trouble their households will inherit the wind, and the fool will be servant to the wise" (Prov. 11:29).

For most of his professional life, my colleague Robert Coughenour has been studying the relationship between the role of the sage in the ancient Near East and the identity of the pastoral leader/counselor. Coughenour offers a carefully written, well-researched overview of a wisdom theology which does not attempt to escape the realities of living fully and faithfully in an ordered creation.[9] Here is a biblical/theological foundation for pastoral leadership which focuses more upon the interpersonal and systemic nature of congregational conflict than upon the particular content of the conflict. Coughenour challenges the pastor counselor (leader) to "know the wonder expressed by the fear of the Lord, to "be open to greater reception, deeper insight, hopeful faith, and moral and spiritual discernment."[10] It is this "radical amazement" (Prov. 1:7 or 9:10), this sense of wonder (Heschel), that is "a starting point for the knowledge of relatedness to ourselves, to others, and to the world."[11] This kind of interior work, this kind of self-understanding and courage, equips a pastoral leader to face what Friedman called the "emotional triangles of resistance" present in every effort to reduce the intensity of clergy/congregational relationships.

Emotional Triangles of Resistance

Bowen natural systems family therapy helps one understand one's place in the family constellation. It may be that the pastoral leader who examines carefully his or her place in the pastor's family of origin will come to see some of the same interaction patterns in his or her relationship to certain members of the congregational family. Consider my relationship to the angry deacon who kept trying to get me to be more outspoken concerning property matters. I found myself in a triangle with John (the vice-president of consistory) and with Sam. I worked hard to get them to communicate with each other in a fundamental way. Instead, I often felt responsible for their inability to understand each other's point of view. I bore the stress that they should be working through. It is a leadership art to stay out of the triangulation process. I could not change the relationship between these two men, one a professional businessperson and the other a blue-collar plumber. I could only change myself and determine how I could be present with them and be more self-disclosing about my values, whatever the content of our discussion. I needed to learn how to identify my own emotions and thoughts and then to communicate my own understanding to Sam and John.

At age sixty-seven, I am more skilled at accurate self disclosure, but I still feel like the little working-class kid who wants to be safe and comfortable with others and therefore does not get heard. This is an ineffective way to function. There are

many pastors like me, who frustrate the work of ministry because they are fearful of taking positions that are unpopular with the majority.

There are times when I have taken a stand and have felt the emptiness and sadness of having to speak my heart and mind concerning a matter which had split the faculty and administration in the seminary where I taught. On the other hand, I shall never forget the stands I have taken on matters of spouse abuse, child abuse, and sexual harassment in parish and seminary. There are occasions when taking a stand can send the entire ecclesiastical system into a different configuration.

Epilogue: The Colleague Group

We were never meant to be loners in the ministry. In the initial commitment to the Friedman Post-graduate Seminars in Family Emotional Process, the design offered a three-day format: (1) one day given to family of origin groups, in which we presented our genogram under the guidance of Friedman's faculty (skilled in Bowen theory and practice), (2) one day given to some aspect of Bowen natural systems theory or application to family therapy or to the church as an emotional system, and (3) one day focused on case studies brought by seminar members.

Continuing participation was voluntary after the first year of three seminars. Our group of fifteen core members has met primarily in Washington, D.C., for at least twelve years. Our family of origin groups have had considerable continuity and function with an intimate knowledge of one another's history and personal/professional growth. Each small group member is free to update the rest of the group concerning the work in which the revisiting of significant family of origin issues has affected one's functioning in ministry.

This outcome has been life-serving and cost-effective to most core group members. Most core group members would rate this experience as the best ecumenical continuing educational journey of their entire lives.

ENDNOTES

[1] Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve, Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (Bethesda: The Edwin H. Friedman Foundation, 1999), 9.

[2] For a brief overview of Bowen theory and natural systems therapy, see Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church, Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Vancouver: Self-Counsel Press, 1995). See also Richardson, *Family Ties That Bind, a Self-help Guide to Change Through Family of Origin Therapy* (Vancouver: Self-Counsel Press, 1984, 1995).

[3] See www.clergyseminars.net for a sample of clergy seminars in the Midwest led by Foster.

[4] Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985), 1.

[5] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 26-7.

[6] Richardson, *Growing*, 142.

[7] Peter L. Steinke, *The Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, vol. 8, no. 4, 61.

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[9] Robert A. Coughenour, "The Sage and the Pastoral Counselor," *Reformed Review* 55 (2001-02), 147-158. See also his "Beginnings of Wisdom," *Perspectives* 5 (September, 1990).

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[11] Ibid.

Utilizing Natural Family Systems Theory to Foster Health in Congregations: Murray Bowen as Teacher of Congregations

Norm Thomasma

"Natural family systems" theory is a way of thinking about human behavior drawn upon widely by theorists and consultants working to resolve congregational conflict and promote congregational health. The development of this approach is credited to Murray Bowen and is typically referred to as "Bowen Theory." I believe there is value in reflecting upon the normative nature of Bowen Theory for congregational life. In this paper I hope (1) to affirm significant congruence between family systems theory and biblical givens, (2) to identify areas of likely or potential divergence, and (3) to suggest some ongoing conversations that are invited by this connecting of family systems theory to congregational life. [1]

An Introduction to Bowen Theory

Murray Bowen was something of a pioneer in the field of human behavior. His lectures, many of which are now on videotape, reveal a fertile imagination and thoughtful approach to individuals, families, and groups. His keen intellect was particularly striking as he delivered his lectures in a casual style with a keen but restrained wit. He laid the foundation for what would become a significant innovation in psycho-social understanding for the later half of the twentieth century—an approach called "natural family systems theory." Trained as a psychiatrist at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, Bowen eventually became the director of the Georgetown University Family Center, where his insights on family life continue to be explored and expanded. Edwin Friedman is credited with extending Bowen's insights to issues of leadership and organizational life, particularly in the church and synagogue.

A case can even be made that Bowen Theory has become the dominant theoretical framework informing the philosophies and strategies of church consultants and congregational theoreticians today. Perusing the catalogues of the Alban Institute or many North American seminaries, experiencing a training session of the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center, studying the Healthy Congregations program developed by Peter Steinke,[2] or completing training to become a "specialized interim minister," one cannot but be impressed with how they have arisen out of the theory of natural family systems. Friedman's *Generation to Generation, Family Process in Church and Synagogue*[3] has become a seminal work in this area. Friedman's post-graduate seminar was attended by a number of current practitioners, including Larry Foster, who has introduced

Bowen Theory concepts to many at Western Seminary. The influence of Bowen Theory constitutes a noteworthy trend.

On some levels this is a remarkable phenomenon. Bowen's theory of human behavior arose out of his observations of the human and animal world, a perspective that was greatly influenced by a Darwinian naturalistic model. Much of Bowen's research crosses easily between the world of animal behavior and the world of human behavior. His evolutionary understanding, influenced significantly by Darwin's theories, appears throughout his work. In this regard, I would observe that the twentieth century church has, on many fronts, been less than receptive to Darwin's thinking about the development of the various species inhabiting the planet. Considering that Bowen Theory is widely used in the Christian church, exploring for points of incongruence with the tenets of the Christian faith also seems prudent. This exploration is undertaken with significant appreciation for what has contributed to the development of natural family systems theory.

First, we explore points of congruence and mutual enlightenment. Within the Reformed field of the Christian church there is a generous and hospitable perspective on nontheological fields of inquiry and a recognition that these arenas of discovery can enhance our understanding of the biblical drama and the Christian life. The Belgic Confession asserts the world is an "open book," the reading of which can be helpful on many fronts. Richard Mouw reminds us of the value and integrity of this perspective in the Reformed faith.[4] But it can also be said that the "insights" of the psychosocial disciplines have been less palatable to the Christian church than have those of other disciplines. Brand and Yancey's *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*[5] is a fitting example of how ready the church has been to embrace insights from the field of physiology and medicine. But the insights of Freud, Skinner, and the social scientists have been less widely embraced, so the strong connection between Bowen Theory and congregational life is noteworthy.

It does seem to be the case that Bowen Theory alerts us to aspects of the family of God that might otherwise be overlooked or misunderstood. This perspective suggests to us new approaches in considering congregational vitality, signs of resilience, and desired qualities of church leaders. It may also help us clarify what has happened when a congregation has been "derailed" by ineffective leadership or by unexpected currents of change.

Bowen's initial focus was directed toward patients diagnosed with schizophrenia. Over time he broadened his study to include first the mother of the identified patient, then both parents, and, finally the entire family. Through extensive observation he concluded that the "identified patient" was greatly

affected by the behavior of the family and that the most lasting improvements to the identified patient came as attention was focused on the person or persons within the family most motivated and able to change. When these individuals changed, the emotional system of the family changed, thus fostering the more lasting changes in the identified patient. The same principles have been extended to other "families," such as congregations, particularly by Friedman in *Generation to Generation*.

In working with various members of a family, Bowen developed a core concept to his theory, the concept of *differentiation of self*. All humans need to manage the twin but opposing needs of the need for *individuality* and the need for *togetherness*. Persons with a relatively high level of self-differentiation are more effective in managing this tension by defining a self, remaining a self, staying in emotional contact with the family or group, and taking responsibility for self without impinging on the welfare of others. This requires that a person act and react more from a thinking process than a feeling process. Well- conceived disciplines such as physical exercise, proper diet, and sufficient rest are all factors in enhancing if not increasing one's self-differentiation.

A significant aspect of managing one's self is managing one's anxiety. The management of one's anxiety is a key factor in remaining a self in the context of increasing family or group anxiety. The demonstrated insight and courage required to manage one's anxiety and remain self-differentiated is commonly observed as *maturity*.

Bowen theory focuses considerable interest on the functioning of the brain and how anxiety affects its functioning. Paul Mclean's work on the *triune brain* has been adopted and applied within the application of family systems thinking. Mclean's research postulates there are three sections of the brain consisting of the brain stem area, the limbic system, and the neo-cortex. Since the brain stem section of the brain is similar in structure and function to that of reptiles, it is called the *reptilian brain*. Its function has to do with automatic systems within the body, including the fight/flight mechanism. This part of the brain acts and reacts quickly and functions to protect the safety of the individual. The limbic system, similar in structure and function to that of mammals, is called the *mammalian brain*. This part of the brain provides the ability to herd, to nurture, to play, and in some cases, to fight. Its functioning includes connecting within community.

The large section of the brain unique to humans is called the *neo-cortex*. The neo-cortex, comprising 85 percent of the human brain, is the region in which higher level thinking occurs, such as imagination, problem solving, and self-reflection. Research indicates that, as people become more anxious, they tend to act and

react less out of the neo-cortex, the thinking brain, and more out of the mammalian or reptilian centers of the brain. This line of observation helps explain the rise in immaturity and reactivity in highly anxious families, groups, or congregations.

Bowen Theory and the Bible

This brief summary provides us with key aspects of Bowen Theory that can expand our appreciation for selected passages of the Bible. *Philippians* 4:2-9 is such a passage. These verses stand as part of a larger letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi. An annotated commentary on key aspects of this passage will illustrate how the previously outlined insights of Bowen Theory might enhance one's appreciation for this passage. I will also suggest areas of potential disconnect as I move through this passage, some of which will be addressed later in the essay.

Vs. 2: "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord." Paul's open appeal to two conflicted parties in the Philippian congregation suggests that Paul did not see their conflict as isolated from the rest of the congregation. He seems to recognize that a congregation is an emotional system in which everything is connected. Like a family, if there is tension is one aspect of the family, there are causes and effects throughout the whole system or congregation. Recent commentators using social-scientific methods of interpretation also point out the system-wide importance of this issue.

Vs. 3: "Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel. . . ." Paul's open request that others play a constructive role in the resolution of the issue indicates that he is looking within the larger family of the congregation to access some capacity for conflict resolution. He does not see the interpersonal issue between the two in conflict as "just between them." It could even be the case that Paul recognizes these two church members as too anxious or reactive to resolve their own issues and that others in the congregation may be more able to grow, change, and work toward a resolution of the issues. As in a family system, the observable symptoms or the persons with the presenting issues may not be the place to look for the most lasting resolution.

Vs. 4: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" This phrase presents us with an illustration of how Bowen Theory and attention to brain functioning might be extended into the practices of a faith community. I would contend that this challenge of Paul is a way of helping the congregation think larger thoughts, thoughts that connect them with their maker/redeemer—thoughts that also arise out of the creative, imaginative, and most human part of the brain.

It is worth noting that the dominant Pauline metaphor for personal redemption is that of being "united with Christ" or being "in Christ." Setting one's thoughts on "things above" and having the "mind of Christ" are strong emphases in Paul's writings. Paul's challenge to "rejoice in the Lord" may well be a challenge that helps people think, meditate, and act out of the most creative, imaginative aspect of their brains.

Vs. 5: "Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near." Paul connects gentleness with the assurance that the Lord is proximate both in time and space. His challenge to the Philippian believers connects the nearness of their Lord with the faith reality that their wellbeing does not depend upon their self advancement or self-protection. And, given the proximity of their advocate and protector, they have the resources to foster a gentle center rather than an anxious center.

This does, of course, suggest some potential disconnects between Bowen Theory and the Christian faith. It bears noting that a source of Pauline gentleness or calm courage is a relationship with another person who is nearer than some might realize. Being joined to this other person is a source of strength and mature response, perhaps even a support to one's self-differentiation. Later, we will look at the level of congruence and incongruence between being self-differentiated and being united with Christ.

Vs. 6a: "Do not be anxious about anything. . . ." In the context of congregational conflict and tension, Paul challenges the Philippians to manage their anxiety. Here we see a clear indication that Paul recognizes how unmanaged anxiety becomes counter-productive to a congregation under duress. Our experience also demonstrates that conflicted congregations are often highly anxious congregations and, thereby, congregations in which people are not differentiating themselves from the group, are reacting automatically rather than thoughtfully, and are demonstrating behavior less mature than helpful. Anxious, conflicted congregations are often deficient in what they most need—creative, imaginative, problem-solving thought.

It also bears noting that, although Philippians 4:6 is a well known and often memorized passage, it is seldom understood in its biblical context, a context of congregational tension and conflict. In this way Bowen, Friedman, and Paul seem much more on the same page than many Christian congregations in which the subject of conflict is often avoided or banished to the "acknowledge only if necessary" regions of congregational conversation.

Vs. 6b: "with thanksgiving . . ." Brain research indicates that the human brain is not able to hold both appreciative thoughts and fearful or angry thoughts

simultaneously. The inspired Apostle Paul seems to understand how thanksgiving functions to help people think and act from the most thoughtful parts of the brain. One theme throughout the scriptures is a recommendation to thankfulness and caution toward chronic complaint. Perhaps the Israelites waiting for Moses to return from Mount Sinai were not at their best not only in terms of behavior, but also in terms of brain functioning.

Vs. 7 & 8: "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-- think about such things. . . ." Again, Paul's attention to the mind is apparent. Not akin with Bowen, Paul appeals to what God can do for a person's heart and mind. Akin to Bowen, Paul challenges these believers to manage their own thinking and so direct their thoughts that the part of them which is most reflective, imaginative and even *human* is engaged with "best thinking," a strategy that Paul indicates as advisable for Christian disciples.

Vs. 9a: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice. . . ." As Paul ends this line of thought, he recommends practices that will serve them well as individuals and as a congregation. There is a fertile connective line between the disciplines Bowen suggests that can help move a person toward self-differentiation or maturity and the spiritual disciplines that the church, through the years, has recognized as contributing to the health and well-being of the Christian disciple.

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*,[6] Dallas Willard recommends that disciples of Christ need to develop "off the spot" disciplines to act with maturity and grace when they find themselves "on the spot," that is, at a time of opportunity, challenge, or threat. This is a fertile line of thinking upon which to expand. When people are under pressure or "on the spot" they are, by nature, inclined to be anxious — responding with fearful, self-protective, and less mature expressions. But, through practiced disciplines that train both the mind and the emotions, a person is able to prepare for those times of pressure when they feel "on the spot."

In Bowen Theory, the individual is challenged to do some "off the spot" work, particularly in regard to family of origin, as a strategy to enhance one's functioning in "on the spot" situations such as at the office or as a leader in a congregation. Acknowledging that the "on the spot, off the spot" differentiation is not always clear or clean, we can find some value in the principle of preparation. Paul's challenge toward "practice" is congruent with this concept. Most of us need practice to become prepared for the unexpected confrontation or the unusual opportunity. A well ordered life will include practices that enhance one's functioning on emotional, relational, and spiritual levels.

Vs. 9b: "And the God of peace will be with you." This summary benediction of Paul serves well to transition our pondering into some of the theological congruence and incongruence that Bowen Theory presents.

Bowen Theory presents eight basic concepts. In the last seasons of Bowen's life, he was beginning to develop a ninth concept, "spirituality." His development of this concept is only partially available to us. Bowen recognized that religious beliefs function in the lives of individuals and families. His approach was not to consider the possible veracity of particular beliefs but rather to see how holding these beliefs influenced a person's level of functioning as an individual and as part of a family or group.

Here we begin to see some potential disconnects between the biblical story and the primary assertions of Bowen Theory. At the root of the Christian church is the belief that God created the world; that God's only Son became an historical figure by birth; that he lived in a particularly cultural context; that he was executed on a cross; that he rose from the grave and ascended into heaven—all of which are attested as historical events. Although Christians generally hold that believing and acting on these attestations leads to a certain quality of life, their "functional" effect on a person's life has little to do with their foundational place in the life of Christians or the church. The starting points for the Christian faith are revealed events, rather than observed activity. This fact of faith should not be lost. To be sure, Bowen did not intend to engage in a conversation about ontological truth. Rather, he was interested in human behavior and how behavioral functioning was affected by religious belief. So, on some level, critiquing his position is illegitimate. On the other hand, we do well to remember that the veracity of Christian belief is not, first of all, based on how it contributes to our human functioning.

On another front, it is noteworthy to observe maturity or self-differentiation as defined by Bowen and maturity as modeled and taught by Paul. There is a remarkable distinction. Bowen's interest focused on how well a person was able to define a self and remain a self, while remaining connected to the family or group. He introduced a concept called *fusion* as he observed people functioning not as a self, but as attached to another. This attachment is seen as a loss of self and a less mature way of being.

But Paul, in various places and ways, indicates that his strength, his courage, his comfort, his very *self* arises from being attached to another—to Christ. From Paul we hear such things as, "For me to live is Christ," "I want to know Christ," "Christ's power working within me." It's as if Paul has been de-selfed as he becomes fused or united with Christ.

Paul would argue differently. He would suggest that one cannot be truly one's self without being united with Christ, one cannot be truly free without being bound to Christ, one cannot "grow up" without growing in Christ. As noted above, the dominant description of salvation in the New Testament is "union with Christ." Paul's care-free spirit about life and death arises out of a union with the one who has conquered life and death.

Bowen might counterpoint that fusion refers primarily to two coterminus individuals and not to the relationship of a current human being and a historical figure who no longer coexists in the same time or space. This, of course, gets us to a crucial belief of Christians that Christ arose from the dead and lives today.

This in turn leads us to recognize some of the unique practices of Christ's followers both as individuals and as a group: Prayer as a key aspect of relating to the God who made and redeemed us. Worship, both personal and corporate, as a purposeful focus on another in such a way that Christians believe they again find themselves having the mind of Christ as a picture of maturity. These are all strategic aspects of the Christian life that could be seen as less than helpful from a narrow understanding of Bowen Theory.

One additional disconnect bears mentioning. As Bowen and Friedman consider the possibility of a person intentionally working toward change, particularly growth in self-differentiation, they observe that the work is difficult and, generally, minimal in effect. Although they grant that small changes can hold significant benefits for a person's functioning as a self in a group, they are not optimistic that many of us can make much change in our own lifetimes. Over generations, the possibilities for growth in self-differentiation within individuals of an extended family do increase.

The biblical record and our own observations within the Christian community would suggest a more optimistic picture. Rahab, the harlot of Jericho, gives a clear anticipatory signal of God's interruptive grace, a grace that liberates from a futile life, welcoming people from sinful, chaotic families into the shalom of the kingdom of heaven.

 There are also indications that individuals can change significantly within the space of their own years. The disciple Peter stands as a good example of a relatively immature person who appears as a brash "strong leader" on some occasions and a man totally unnerved by a servant girl on another. The apostle Peter, by contrast, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is able to remain calm and clear when faced with a variety of challenges and threats. His movement toward maturity seems remarkable and miraculous. An essential dimension of the

gospel is how it moves people from darkness to light, from *lostness* to *foundness*, from being without hope to having hope. This is, at the core, a highly optimistic picture in terms of the potential for change.

And this optimism seems also to be transgenerational. The prophets foresee a day when the saying, "the parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge," will no longer be true (Jer. 31:29; Ezk. 18:2). These passages anticipate a time when the sins of the parents will be less consequential for their children.   One clear dimension of the gospel is that blessings are articulated for "you, your children and all who are far off, for all whom the Lord will call" (Acts 2:39).

It is very clear that the church exists in the "already but not yet" tension between our Lord's first and second coming. But, in the context of this interaction, we do well to affirm that the foundational creed of the Christian church is about historical events, that the gospel has a way of changing people in remarkable albeit incomplete ways, and that miracles do happen. As we benefit from the insights of Bowen Theory, we need to recognize it as a window through which we can see important aspects of individual and communal life, but not as the front door into that life.

Further Possibilities of Bowen Theory for the Church

Finally, I would like to invite further contemplation of some intriguing possibilities that arise when the church uses Bowen's natural family systems theory.

The first pertains to the central concept of Bowen Theory, differentiation of self. At this level, an individual is able to manage the forces of individuality and togetherness that are inherent in life. In this regard, I find it noteworthy that several major controversies of the ancient church pertained to the nature of God, particularly the trinitarian nature of God. One could argue that the variables being argued had to do with the *individuality* and *togetherness* of the three divine persons. And it is this co-eternal, co-divine community that created the cosmos of which we are a part. It is worth pondering, then, how the concept of self-differentiation as a core issue for every human may resonate with a core reality of togetherness/individuality of the divine creative community. In what way does our bearing the image of God design us for this tension? How has the fall complicated this process? Finally, how does being regenerated and growing up into Christ create a context in which we can move toward self-differentiation that, at some level, mirrors the divine wholeness of the tri-personal God?

Another area of ongoing dialogue pertains to the intentional pursuit of personal maturity and capacity for leadership within the community. Bowen theory

challenges ministry leaders to work at "growing up" within their own families of origin, thereby increasing their capacity to be calm, relationally connected, and unconditionally constructive leaders. In *The Leader's Journey*,[7] Herrington, Creech, and Taylor have picked up on this theme and, along with an emphasis upon understanding congregational dynamics, have outlined the role of strategically conceived and practiced spiritual disciplines in the mature functioning of congregational leaders. This approach invites greater attention, especially within Reformed circles in which the covenant nature of the church is emphasized. Understanding persons as "individuals in community" and understanding that this community has both concurrent and historical dimensions is a perspective that can be enriched and informed by reflection on Bowen Theory. Additionally, reflecting biblically and theologically on the nature of individuals and communities could provide greater understanding and sense of propriety around the growing use of family systems theory to support and strengthen Christian congregations.

Finally, the application of Bowen Theory to Christian congregations is a relatively recent phenomenon. As a variety of Christian thinkers become familiar with this construct and look at it from their various disciplines, we can anticipate increased insight and clarity as to the suitability and reach of this thinking in the church's pursuit of God-honoring, kingdom-enriching patterns and practices. To that end, may God continue to provide us with rich arenas conversation in which light leads to light.

ENDNOTES

[1] Much of what is contained in this essay is drawn from my work in a Doctor of Ministry program at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois. The title of the dissertation is, "The Utilization of Bowen Family Systems Theory in Teaching Healthy Corporate Life in Congregations—Implications and Applications." It was completed in 2001.

[2] Peter Steinke, *Healthy Congregations* (Lutheran Brotherhood, 1999).

[3] Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation, Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (Guilford Press, 1985).

[4] Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

[5] Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980).

[6] Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (Harper Collins, HarperSanFrancisco, 1988).

[7] Jim Herriington, R. Robert Creech, and Trisha Taylor, *The Leader's Journey, Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

Conflict Resolution in the Local Church

Jonathan Tice

Conflict abounds in human relations. It can be intense, and it is usually unpleasant. In a time of conflict people often do not know how to help themselves or, if they know, are so caught up in it that they find themselves to be ineffective. What can you do in light of this situation? A great deal, as it turns out! Conflict does not have to ruin lives. There are many ways to respond to and resolve conflict constructively.

However, in the heat of the moment, it is difficult to bring these principles to bear in a systematic way. This requires mental and emotional discipline. We talk about being disciplined in Bible study, prayer and other "spiritual disciplines," but not in the process of engaging and resolving disputes. To do so requires effort. It is quite easy to get anxious or frustrated and walk away from conflict. Further, to stop what we are doing and be disciplined about engaging a conflict constructively requires an investment of time and energy. Often we say to a group, or to ourselves, "We don't have time to do this now," but do we come back to it? Or we say, "This will sort itself out," or "Time heals all wounds," but frequently such statements betray giving in to a lack of discipline. To stay with a conflict through the process to reconciliation, or to manage a conflict constructively over time, is no easy thing.

Several years ago, I received training as a professional mediator. Since that time, I have participated in resolving numerous conflicts and had the opportunity to reflect on them at length. I have also delved deeply into the literature of social psychology and formal conflict resolution studies, especially that based on game theory, to examine in detail the structure and dynamics of many types of conflict. Here I will share the results of some of my work. In particular, I will discuss the implications of competitive versus collaborative behavior in the management and resolution of conflict.

First, we must describe the environmental conditions out of which the collaborative process called mediation has grown. It is important to understand historical context in this situation, because the failure of America's primary method of dispute resolution has a great deal to teach us about the attitudes we inherit in efforts to resolve conflict. Further, by understanding how and why the mediation process works in a more formal setting, we will be able to see how to apply it to contexts that are more informal and to conflict resolution in general.

Mediating Versus Adjudicating

It used to be the case that serious disputes went to court as lawsuits. The American court system is an adversarial process. The parties plead their cases and the judge decides what to do. This is an example of a solution imposed by a neutral third party. There is a winner and a loser, and often the winner takes all. The parties in such cases

often have little say regarding the details of the final decision. The terms of settlement are in the judge's hands. Little if any give and take between the parties is possible. As a result, fine-tuning the terms of settlement to fit the lives of the parties is not an option. Compliance with judges' decisions often had to be compelled by court order. Another undesirable outcome from use of the litigation process is the delay in reaching a settlement, due to endless appeals in an attempt to "win" in a higher court by having the original decision reversed. In addition, a settlement imposed by a third party often did not allow for the underlying causes of the conflict to be addressed or the relationship between the parties involved to be repaired. In effect, the emotional charge of the conflict continued for each of the parties. I pay you X or you do Y, but we are still angry at each other. Both of us still believe we are right. This seems tolerable when the parties are impersonal entities, such as corporations or government agencies. However, when the parties have to live with each other afterwards, as is the case in disputes involving labor relations, neighborhoods, churches, and families, the conflict festers under the veneer of a resolution. The chances are high that the emotional content of the conflict will remain the basis for people's feelings about, and actions toward, others. It might even increase. This is particularly true if the "winners" of the court case glory in their victory and feel as though they can act with impunity toward the other party in the future. The court case itself may be "settled," but the conflict lives on, anger and resentment are nursed, and hostilities will likely erupt again at another time. Round one is over; round two is still to come.

Because of these features, plus the time-consuming backlogs and high costs of using the court system, the courts have been searching for more effective ways to settle cases. Processes developed for this purpose are called Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). Mediation is a type of ADR. It was first used in labor relations, then in neighborhood and community disputes, and is now being used to resolve divorce, child custody, and many other types of civil litigation and interpersonal conflict. It is more cost-effective, quicker, and the parties get an outcome that they are more likely to accept. It also offers the parties the potential for reconciliation and personal growth. In biblical terms, mediation might be called peacemaking.

Mediation provides parties with a structured process of conflict resolution based on discussion, problem solving, and negotiation. Instead of a judge imposing an arbitrary decision, a neutral third party, the mediator, assists the parties in working though the issues in the dispute, empowering them to structure a settlement that can be mutually agreed upon. Because the parties must come to terms *together,* such settlements have a high rate of compliance by the parties. In addition, the processes address the underlying issues that generated the conflict in the first place. Thus, underlying issues can be resolved, relationships can be repaired, and reconciliation can take place. The courts, it seems, have discovered the process Jesus advocated in *Matthew* 18:15f.

In return, given the intensity, even seeming intractability, of the disputes the courts deal with, they have given back to the church a wealth of techniques that are applicable not only in resolving litigation but also in helping people in everyday disputes, the kind that pastors encounter continually, day in and day out. Pastors should note, for example, that mediation is a healthy process for moving families through the crisis of divorce.

Neutrality in the Role of the "Third Party"

A word must be said here about the role and ethics of the so-called "Third Party." Third parties, those who facilitate the process or are engaged in the work of mediation, do not suggest or impose "solutions." Rather, they facilitate the discovery of possible solutions by the parties themselves. Pastors and qualified lay people are often called upon to play a mediating role in conflicts. Thus, familiarity with the best practice of mediators, and the role of the neutral party is important for healthy conflict resolution in the church.

Ethical standards of behavior for professional mediators are codified by the American Bar Association. Of greatest importance for our review here is the necessity of third party neutrality. A neutral party has no vested interest in a specific solution and is not perceived as biased by any of the other parties. The role of the neutral party is to assist the parties through the process of conflict to resolution, and at the same time to avoid being co-opted into the process as a player. Remaining neutral is a difficult challenge, especially when parties are appealing to the neutral party for validation of their facts, perceptions, or agendas. No one can do it perfectly, but with practice and attention to what is appropriate to the role, the skill will build over time. The most important thing is to *know yourself*, know what you believe, know how you respond to people and their options. Learn to recognize what buttons might get pushed while you listen, and think through how not to get hooked into the dispute. You are the grantor of a level playing field. If you find yourself angry with one party, or advocating a position, step back and evaluate whether you can continue in a neutral role.

How could a pastor do this in a church? Two main points should be remembered.

First, while it is true that you may know the parties involved in a dispute, that may not, in and of itself, indicate significant bias. Be aware of what you want to happen, whom you like, favor, or dislike. Be aware if you seek the approval of one of the parties, or if one of the parties is perceived as a solid supporter of your ministry and the other party less so. Be honest with yourself and with them about this. Previous relationships with any of the parties must be described, and you must be sure that it will not color your judgment. If you are unsure, do not participate in the neutral role; rather, bring someone else in to help. Don't be afraid to hand a problem off to a colleague or consultant. Never be unable to say, "I don't think I can remain neutral here; we should get someone else to help."

Second, if there is a serious controversy in your congregation and you want to make your own views known, bring in a third party from the very outset. Having a stake in the outcome of a dispute, that is, a desired outcome, and then taking on the role of the "neutral" facilitator is the fastest way to corrupt the process.

Observations on the Best Practice in Conflict Resolution

In addition to what I have observed and learned through the practice of mediation, a second foundation of my research comes from the academic study of human behavior across several disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, international relations, and negotiation studies, to name a few. Each from its own perspective has addressed the question: Is there a way to predict, scientifically, how people will react to each other in and through a conflict? Structured situations, called games, were designed to test the consistency of participant's responses in conflicts. From those experiments, observations were drawn and principles compiled that describe the elements of conflict. Once these elements were defined, methods for management or resolution could be set out, tested and refined. Of particular importance for this essay are the types of communication that occur routinely in conflicts that:

(a) Cause a conflict to escalate, that is, worsen to the point that a resolution is unlikely.
(b) Facilitate the de-escalation of a conflict, that is, allowed the parties to move toward a resolution.

Based on these observations, professionals in dispute resolution have developed tools and tactics for helping parties work through a conflict constructively. Interestingly, these tools work as effectively in a dispute between neighbors as they do in disputes between nations. Although the following comments come largely from my own observations and experience, they are consistent with the best and most advanced research available.

What, Specifically, Is Conflict?

We have been created as communal creatures, and so we experience varying levels of interdependence in our lives. Membership in the community gives us a sense of belonging and purpose; an innate sense of value is placed on our feeling good about belonging. On good days we celebrate that as community. Membership in a community also helps us work together to achieve larger and more complex goals than we could achieve alone. We do this by sharing resources and dividing up work.

Within this interdependence, we navigate our way around and through conflicts all day long. Rules, norms of behavior, both formal and informal, help us avoid having to negotiate with others to get through simple common transactions, such as deciding who goes first at a traffic signal. Polite behavior and a good deal of turning the other cheek help keep our interpersonal conflict to a minimum. Inevitably, though, breakdowns in communication occur and conflicts arise.

The Latin word for conflict literally means, "to strike."[1] When we are struck, a force hits us. Thus, conflict can be defined generally as a situation or issue that forcefully encounters us, and we become engaged in it. The process of engagement may be gradual or sudden.

Conflict is not all bad. It can tell us what is important to us; it tells us what we value, what we need, what we desire to have happening around us (sometimes we do not even know a thing was important to us until we find ourselves fighting for it). Conflict can be constructive in some ways, if managed skillfully, but all too often, we find that it devolves into something destructive. Some people, having been hurt, become conflict avoidant because it is just too scary for them to engage with another with whom they disagree. Unfortunately, ignoring conflict tends to cause it to worsen, not get better.

Conflict, though fluid, can be described as having levels of intensity, and there are many ways of categorizing them. The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary[2] lists three keywords in the definition of conflict that give us insight into its levels of intensity:

- *To contend:* This might be the gentlest level of conflict. When we contend over something, we can usually work through our differences without too much trouble. We contend with things throughout our day with minimal investment or discomfort.
- *To clash:* Here we have greater intensity; more is at stake, and so we are willing to be more aggressive about getting what we want. This level requires more of our energy and creativity to resolve. When we clash with someone, we experience greater distress.
- *To fight:* Now we find ourselves involved in verbal combat, the degree of intensity is escalating, spiraling upward with each exchange. We might be wondering how far this go will: will someone back down or give up? Will someone blow up, causing things to get out of control even nasty? At this level, the relatively smooth flow of life is disrupted, and we experience real angst and the associated emotional and physical symptoms. At this level, adrenaline plays a key role in our responses, and the fight or flight response kicks in.

To these three key words, I would add *war*. War is the ultimate form of conflict. War is the use of violent force to compel another to do our bidding or be destroyed in the process. War is the essential breakdown in the human ability to solve problems. One might say, "Just kill them; problem solved!"

Therefore, conflict has various levels of intensity, and we respond to each other with various degrees of intensity as well. Each level of conflict uses corresponding amounts of resources, time, and energy (both physical and emotional) and tests our ability to interact with others. Conflict can also test our ability to use power and leadership

appropriately. It causes us to examine our principles and beliefs, to ask what it is we need and how far we are willing to go to get it. When parties are willing to invest far more resources to "win" than the benefit they would accrue from any potential agreement, sociologists say that they are "entrapped."[3] In this case, having conflict in their lives might be the real need being served rather than the content of the particular dispute.

The level of the conflict will be determined by the orientation of the parties, the degree of polarization with which the issues are framed, and the kinds of tactics the parties are willing and allowed to employ. Let us consider each of these three determinants in turn.

1. The Orientation of the Parties

We live in a competitive society. Resources are limited and we must compete for them with others. This can be a good thing, insofar as it helps us clarify what we need and why we should get it. Further, competition can motivate us to get things done. Competition also causes us to refine our physical and mental skills so that we can accomplish our objectives. We compete for the time and attention of those important to us. We compete for money to accomplish the material goals we desire. We compete for stimulation, recreation, and entertainment when we play games.

Likewise, we compete to be heard; that is, we compete in the realm of ideas. Competition in the realm of ideas forces us to refine our ability to communicate more effectively with others, to influence others, and to persuade them to see things our way. Only then can we count on them to give us their support.

"Friendly" competition has its own unique tone and ground rules. In friendly competition between groups there is a willingness to include everyone. Although such competition my have a winner, the tone is collaborative, and we enjoy playing and being with one another in a friendly, yet challenging way. When we compete for resources within a family or a church, there is an assumption that fairness and the benefit of all will constrain what any one party will get. We don't win at the other's expense, or in a way that harms or injures the people close to us. In such situations, we limit how much we ask for or expect to get. This is often called asking for a reasonable amount. We also limit how far we will go to get it; this is called playing fairly.

To draw an analogy, when we engage conflict in this same "friendly" way, we are committed to a resolution that is good for everybody. This approach is sometimes called looking for a win/win situation. It is part attitude, part commitment to the welfare of the other party, and part agreement not to use tactics that are aggressively one-sided. In our society, however, most competition has quite a different tone and is based on the win/lose model. With win/lose competition comes aggression, especially when losing costs you dearly. Uncontrolled aggression can easily turn into hostility,

which in turn carries an undertone of impending violence. We see aggression expressed as a key element of competition in business and politics as well as throughout our culture.

The market economy currently provides the dominant rubric for defining American culture. It is a highly competitive win/lose environment. In this model of social interaction you do not compete with a friend, or an opponent, you have an adversary, even an enemy. The underlying mantra driving activity in the market is, "I will get what is mine!"

Moreover, the impact on our culture of books such as Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* has been tremendous, especially in business. The new business paradigm, one of aggressive competition and business as war, has exposed millions to elements of tactical thinking. Yet, on balance, very little ethical critique has accompanied this shift. Ethical attitudes and the actions that follow from them are often seen as mutually exclusive to effective use of tactical advantage. In many cases, "playing nice" or "playing fair" are seen as weaknesses, and hindrances to success in modern business competition. Business is war. Accordingly, business planning now takes place in the war room, and negotiation and problem solving between parties are seen as elements of warfare. In such situations the one who shouts loudest and longest, the one who plays the hardest, wins.

In the realm of ideas, such combat has created a significant shift in the way we communicate with one another. As advertisers compete for our dollars and product loyalty, we are barraged with offers for better services. Rarely, however, are we given sufficient information to evaluate those offers objectively. Marketing has always involved hyperbole and spin as contrasted with detached objective analysis. This activity can be as seemingly benign as sharing only the positive aspects of a product while withholding information about a product's limitations or flaws. It can be as malignant as the use of unreasonable exaggeration, partial truth, or outright deception. In the end, however, we become accustomed to information presented in a skewed fashion, and we learn to do it ourselves in order to be "successful."

Arguing forcefully for what you believe, that is, trying to persuade others to adopt your point of view, is not destructive in and of itself. However, it can become so when conveying the quality and benefit of one's ideas is abandoned in favor of a win/lose mentality. When dialogue turns into debate, and the genuine exchange of information stops, we are no longer describing, discussing, or evaluating the best, most helpful ideals so that we can put them into practice. Rather, we are engaging in a one-sided argument in an attempt to press a specific idea. Rather than discussing the benefits of various positions we are experiencing a form of verbal combat. In such cases, critique gives way to counter assertion in an attempt to tear the other position down. It becomes almost impossible for us to reflect on the ways a position might be helpful,

may legitimately challenge what we believe, or may require us to alter a position we have become heavily invested in defending.

Much of the discussion we encounter on television and in other public discourse is illustrative of such verbal battle. We encounter problems when we import this behavior into our personal lives and use such tactics with people we must live, work and worship with. Such behavior also has serious implications during a conflict. If the attitude of one party is to win at any cost, or win at the other party's expense, that party may present a highly biased, one-sided explanation of the conflict. In return, the other party will usually become defensive, and may engage in verbal combat over the information presented. Often a person will express frustration with this tactic by saying that the whole picture, i.e., "the truth," is not being presented. If exchanges like this are allowed to continue, trust between the parties will erode.

If you are working with people in a conflict, allow both parties to tell their versions of events without interruptions. When they are finished, try to reconcile only those items that prevent them from moving forward. Remind them that we all describe our experiences of events differently.

The ability to steer parties away from hostility and defensiveness is key to progressing toward conflict resolution. The rebuilding of trust is also vital if progress is going to be made. Thus creating a shift from an attitude of win/lose to win/win, from competition to collaboration, is the first and most necessary step in the process of resolving conflict. A good way to facilitate that shift is to point out the inevitable damage that will occur to all parties if the behavior continues. I tend to think that people seek help with conflict because they recognize, on some level, that they are trapped in a destructive process and want to get out of it. That motive provides powerful advantage in setting both a constructive tone and effective ground rules for moving forward.

2. The Degree of Polarization with which the Issues Are Framed

You may have noticed that, increasingly, the media frame things in polarized terms, especially when covering politics. When presenting a topic, we are given representatives from the extremes to present their points of view. This presentation style adds to the perceived level of conflict and in turn heightens our sense that something is happening, that this is "news." In fact, the debate may have been going on over decades with little change. What we see are people at each other's throats, rather than people who are seeking agreement and are willing to talk constructively together. I have the impression from the media that in politics agreement is a near impossibility. Clarity of position, as contrasted with polarization of positions, is helpful when we must cast a vote for or against a proposition. Voting by nature is a competitive, win/lose process. The clearer the positions, and the more they are different, the easier it is for us to know what we are voting for, and against.

In a conflict, however, when issues for discussion are consistently framed as opposites (opposed to each other), it is difficult to move parties together without all parties feeling that they are compromising excessively. Few positions *need* to be framed as mutually exclusive. If possible, state the conflict as a problem to be solved, rather than positions that are opposed to each other. We can work together to solve problems more easily than we can compromise our views. This is called reframing. A frame, intellectually as in art, constrains the point of view in which things are seen. Polarization, as a type of frame, has a great deal of impact on our approach to an issue, what kind of discussion will ensue, and the type of outcomes that are possible.

You will encounter people who simply will not budge. This is particularly true in situations where the issue is abstract, represents an expression of their values, and is tied to their sense of self. I often wonder whether such behavior isn't mostly defensive, to avoid the possibility of change. For such people looking at things in another way is too scary; it is almost as if even considering a change is a betrayal of themselves or God. It is rare for them to engage in a true dialogue. Here we encounter the power of repetition to engrain positions in people's minds, to make it almost impossible for them to change their opinions. If the parties remain stuck in their original language, people can still agree to disagree on important issues and choose not offend or hurt one another. Just because we do not agree, even on important things, does not mean we are entitled to treat each other with disrespect. In a conflict, I would bring the discussion down to the practical by asking, "How are we going to behave so this conflict isn't erupting into our daily interactions?" Often I suggest the parties make discussion of the topic out of bounds.

3. The Kinds of Tactics the Parties Employ

What causes conflicts to escalate? Aside from environmental/situational elements that are beyond our control, several behavioral factors come into play. Below I list some of the behaviors and tactics that contribute to escalation. It might seem a matter of common sense not to behave in any of these ways, but it is amazing how often you will find them arising in daily discourse.

- Personalizing the conflict, making it about the person rather than the issues or the behavior of the person. This tactic includes character assassination, labeling, mocking the person and attacking his or her credibility per se rather than the credibility of the other position and information. In politics, this is called the smear campaign, or mudslinging.
- Overmatching in a verbal exchange, as opposed to a reciprocal response. In this situation, our response is more aggressive, or out of proportion to the tone and content of what the other party is communicating. It can signal a desire or willingness on our part to fight.
- Exaggerating the consequences of adopting the other party's position. Saying something like, "If you do that the whole world will fall apart."

- Making cutting remarks, using sarcasm, put downs, name calling, trying to make the other party look silly.
- Using a condescending or patronizing tone.
- Bullying or threatening.
- Interrupting people while they are talking. This is a sign of disrespect and a signal that you are not listening to what they other party is trying to communicate.
- Characterizing the other's position in a derisive way. This shows disrespect for the person's integrity; it is also the first step from persuasion to propaganda.
- Creating linkages between positions that are not necessarily linked, especially when the linked item has negative connotations, such as, "Everyone who believes x also believes y." This tactic is a form of guilt by association, either with an idea or with other people. This is a form of stereotyping and prejudging that signals to the other party that you have made up your mind and are not really listening to what they have to say.

Useful Questions To Ask When Approaching a Conflict

1. Who are the parties, the people with an interest, the ones who have a stake, or are involved? The primary parties are the ones driving the conflict. They are the ones who are most invested in it. Others may be on the periphery, and still others may have been drawn in against their will.

2. Where is the locus of the conflict? Here are some examples:

- Within an individual being played out with another or a group
- Between individuals
- Between an individual and a group
- Between individuals in different groups but not necessarily between the groups themselves
- Within a group
- Between groups

Remember, the larger the group the more formal the process of discussion becomes. Note the differences, for example, in the formality of meetings from consistory, to classis to the general assembly. Also note that there are always discussions in the meeting, in public, on the record, and those that take place outside the meeting in private: e.g., in the parking lot or parlor on the phone or via email. Interestingly enough, instant text messaging now allows for private conversation to take place discreetly in the public meeting!

3. What is the dispute about, what issues are in play, what is this really about? Examples:

- Who should lead, or how power should be shared or used

- Priorities, how resources should be allocated, including money and how a pastor's time and attention should be used
- How to respond to a situation or issue
- How planning should be done
- Trust, especially a situation when people do not like each other very much.

4. Where does the conflict come from? Is there anything of significance that helps explain why the problem is coming up now?

5. What personality types are involved and how might each approach the conflict? What was their relationship like prior to the conflict?

6. How are the issues framed? How could they be reframed?

7. Have all the issues been identified? Can they be separated and organized so that they can be engaged one at a time? Do any need to be clarified? Are all the issues out in the open? Are there any hidden agendas or unacknowledged issues? Remember: sometimes the presenting issue is not the core issue.

What Is Going on Here? Four Levels

I often describe these levels of behavior as a train. The process is like the train on the tracks. It is laid out and it moves forward. It is how we get from point to point. The content is what is in the boxcars of the train. It is the topic matter, what we are dealing with. The interpersonal level can address either process or content. We might have feelings about train rides, we might have feelings about riding the train with others, we may not trust the conductor or engineer (which would indicate loss of neutrality on the part of the third party). All of those feelings are examples relating to the process. We might be very uncomfortable with how we feel about the cargo. It could be inert or explosive, and we might have strong feelings about the baggage other people put on the train. Those are interpersonal issues having to do with the content. All are at play throughout a conflict. If, however, the process issues can be separated and agreed upon at the beginning, the conflict will be easier to resolve. There is no reason to wait until a conflict heats up to address how it will be dealt with in an organization. How we interact with each other in times of stress is always better addressed sooner rather than later, in the midst of difficult discussions.

A process for conflict resolution can be designed by a third party and imposed or suggested to those involved. Alternately, the parties themselves can design it. One might introduce the first option by saying, "In such situations, I find it helpful to proceed in this way. . ." or, "This is what I propose we do." The second option could be raised by asking, "How do you want to proceed?" or "How do you want to handle

this?" Often parties are looking for guidance on good, fair process. If they are using a process that is inherently unfair, it is appropriate to intervene.

Fair Process Questions to Ask, and Elements to Include

Ask if everyone will be treated fairly by this process. Whom does the process favor? Does anyone have an advantage because of the rules? If anyone is being excluded or needs to be asked to join the process, you must work to ensure fairness.

When making choices about the scope of a discussion, be aware of what content you are excluding and why. Share that information with the parties/group.

Ensure that the process is free from manipulation by any of the parties. No one party should be allowed to influence the process unduly or to manipulate the rules in such a way that others are silenced.

Allow people to voice objections and to make suggestions in forming the process.

Be sensitive to power imbalances and the different ways people are likely to participate in the process. Ensure that everyone will have the right to be heard, not just the most assertive persons in the group.

All the relevant information should be presented in as unbiased a way as possible. No one should be allowed to hold pertinent information back. In addition, participants should be allowed to ask questions.

Agree to keep the discussion respectful and civil, and enforce the ground rules.

Tactics to Be Used in Engaging a Conflict Constructively

Effective communication is of the utmost importance in conflict resolution. If you are formulating your next comment while the other person is talking, you are probably not listening for more than a flaw in the argument. Inasmuch as impromptu communication is imperfect and positions will often be exaggerated in an attempt to persuade, you will find flaws to attack, but you will miss the larger point of what the other is trying to communicate. In addition, you may forget that by talking with you at all the other person is trying to connect with you. This pattern of poor listening is sometimes called "talking past one another." Try to stop your inner voice, listen, take notes if necessary, do not interrupt, and think before you speak. Use a time of silent prayer to gather your thoughts and listen for God's still small voice behind the din of the arguments. If you cannot do that, suggest a cooling off period, or get the help of a neutral third party to guide you in talking together.

Remember to have respect for each other. It is easy to stop respecting a person if you do not agree with what he or she is saying or trying to accomplish. Often respect has already been eroded on the path to conflict. If you offer the other party a new helping of "benefit of the doubt," respect may take hold again. If it does not, you have lost nothing and have been gracious, more credit to you.

Desire to achieve an agreement acceptable to all or most, and to make necessary efforts and compromises to reach that agreement. This is a choice you make, a stance from which all actions will follow. We must choose to seek reconciliation rather than nursing anger.

Identify common ground and interests. Often, remembering what we have in common, even if it is primarily the stress of the current situation, is enough to create a bridge between us.

Understand the other parties' points of view, and if possible why they feel strongly about this situation. Ask what is at stake for them, and then ask yourself: If this were at stake for me, how would I react?

Check out assumptions, especially about the others' motives. We tend to assume that people mean to hurt us, especially in a conflict. Be open to the possibility that we sometimes hurt one another without intending to do so. Try to make a habit of reading people's actions in their best light, rather than in their worst. We often do not know people's motives for things unless we check with them.

Share information, listen responsibly, ask open-ended questions, and engage in effective problem solving. This includes getting information you need and may not have on hand.

Be creative; try different ways of coming up with options. Brainstorming is a commonly used process in which people generate ideas (no matter how silly they may sound) for several minutes, then evaluate them for practicality. Try with all your heart not to become rigid about the way your goals must be achieved.

Be willing to compromise or give something up as an act of good faith. Even a small shift in attitude and tone can have a dramatic effect on others. Do not underestimate a small act of conciliation or even a conciliatory comment. Often these small moments can mean the difference between reaching an impasse and moving forward.

Seek a balanced position. As the song goes, "We can't always get what we want, but if we try sometimes we can get what we need." Choosing to seek a peaceful coexistence means compromise and accommodation. It means giving up our "me, me, me," greedy urges. It requires an openness to saying "yes, I can give you that." I tell parties at a

mediation, "You will not walk out of here with everything you want, but if we succeed you will all be able to live with what you agree on, and you will know that every option has been explored to meet as many of your needs as possible."

Minimize negatives. If getting what you want causes a problem for someone else, be ready to do what you can to ameliorate that impact. There may be a way to minimize harm or have the other's needs met in a different way.

Allow one another to save face, or at least agree to disagree or set the issue aside.

Hold talks on neutral ground, and/or invite a neutral third party to facilitate the discussion.

Advice for Those Acting as Third Parties, or Mediating Influences in Conflict

As a third party you can call people on their behavior. By that I mean describe and educate them about what is in bounds and out of bounds. This can be a part of the process that includes learning more effective behavior. Be ready to suggest an appropriate way for them to express themselves, and be judicious. People resent being corrected.

Allow people to vent their feelings. Cutting them off just traps all that frustration inside, and it will probably come out later, at the worst possible moment. In addition you risk sending the signal that you do not take their feelings seriously. This will lead to their being frustrated with you, neutralizing to some extent how much you are able to help. You must have their trust to be effective, and this means listening to the intensity of their feelings. Venting can also give you clues as to what is going on under the surface of the dispute.

Set the tone and ground rules for communication and call unhelpful behavior out of bounds. You are the referee, but all parties must make every effort to abide by the rules. You cannot take responsibility for their behavior.

When things get heated, be ready to say, "Stop!" Then redirect the conversation in a constructive way. Declaring an impasse is also an option. An impasse does not mean that there is no solution to the problem; it means that at the moment these parties are not able to find a solution. Declaring an impasse sometimes has the benefit of causing the parties to reinvest in the process and try harder to succeed.

Beware of the following types:

- Those who are looking for a fight. They will almost always behave in such a way as to get one.
- Those who have a chip on their shoulder, and those who are already angry from dealing with other disputes. They will happily transfer that anger onto you and the present situation.

- Those who are offended if you ask questions. I find this especially true of some professionals who are used to holding power. They sometimes come to feel they are above explaining themselves or the reasons for their actions.
- Those who have no intention of seeking a resolution. They will simply rebuff you or stonewall, repeating the same thing again and again. Such people are not honestly engaged in the process, but may wish to appear to be.
- Those who are emotionally imbalanced. If mental or emotional illness is involved, no amount of reason will prevail. It is best to try to be gracious with such people but to minimize the amount of turmoil they can cause in a group.

Conclusion

I have listed many elements that determine whether a conflict will be engaged constructively or destructively. In conclusion, let me give a brief summary of collaborative versus competitive behaviors and of how one set leads to reconciliation and the other to estrangement.

<u>Collaborative Behavior</u>	<u>Competitive Behavior</u>
Supportive and caring attitude and behavior toward others	Unsupportive, potentially hostile attitude behavior toward others
Even-tempered and empathetic responses	Readiness to respond in an aggressive manner
Sharing responsibility for the problem and solution	Denial of responsibility for the problem and solution
Scrupulously fair process	Willingness to exploit any advantage
Fair play, no striking back	Willingness to use reprisals, to hurt, to punish
Readiness to explore possibilities and offer options good for all parties	Readiness to make demands, utter threats, and seek victory for one's position
Remaining flexible	Remaining stuck
"We are all in this together; we will stay with it until we find a win/win."	"There are only good guys, us, and bad guys, them. We *will* win, so they *must* lose!"

The world around us is teaching us to be more and more competitive in our daily interactions and more and more aggressive in the way we engage conflict. Without

reflecting on this trend and putting alternative conflict resolution skills into practice we could easily be engulfed by such ideas. They are striking our culture with significant force. In the end, the choice of how we respond is ours.

ENDNOTES

[1] NSOED: *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* on CD-Rom. Oxford University Press, 1996.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Donelson R. Forsyth, *Group Dynamics,* 2nd ed. (California: Brooks/Cole 1990), 367.

Book Reviews

By Grace Alone: Stories of the Reformed Church in America, by Donald J. Bruggink and Kim N. Baker, (reviewed by Elton J. Bruins)

Calvin for Armchair Theologians, by Christopher Elwood, (reviewed by I. John Hesselink)

Discerning the Spirits: A Guide to Thinking about Christian Worship Today, by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. and Sue A. Rozeboom, (reviewed by Barry L. Wynveen)

The Essence of Christianity, by Bruno Forte, (reviewed by Ralph W. Vunderink)

Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics, ed. Vincent Bacote, Larua C. Miguelez, and Dennis L. Okholm, (reviewed by Donald K. McKim)

An Introduction to the Theology of Religions, by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, (reviewed by Terrance L. Tiessen)

Jesus in the New Universe Story, by Cletus Wessels, (reviewed by Ralph W. Vunderink)

The Path of True Godliness, by Willem Teellinck, (reviewed by Tom Schwanda)

The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, Vol. 4: *The Age of the Reformation*, by Hughes Oliphant Old, (reviewed by Tom Schwanda)

Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity, ed. Wallace M. Alston, Jr. and Michael Welker, (reviewed by Barry L. Wynveen)

By Grace Alone: Stories of the Reformed Church in America, by Donald J. Bruggink and Kim N. Baker, The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, No. 44, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004. ix, 222pp., $29.00.

After having served as the founder and general editor of the Reformed Church in America's Historical Series since its inception in 1969, Donald Bruggink now makes his contribution to the series as an author of a new history of the denomination. He was joined in this major endeavor by Kim Baker, his former student at Western Theological Seminary, who was primarily responsible for the format of the book and many of the sidebars that enhance the beauty and the quality of the volume.

The book consists of twenty chapters written in story form. The subjects of the stories are selective, not comprehensive as was the case in general histories of the Reformed Church published in the past. The book resembles somewhat *Reformed Church Roots,* written by Arie R. Brouwer in 1977. Brouwer's work was also in story form and lavishly illustrated. *By Grace Alone* brings the history of the denomination up to date, of course, but it is more comprehensive than Brouwer's as well. Bruggink, as a professional historian, has written a more substantive and scholarly book, one geared to the general reader, however, and not the specialist. *By Grace Alone* is designed for readers who have an interest in reading a denominational history that has weight and causes one to think.

The book has a broad appeal for several reasons. The first is that the text is beautifully and amply illustrated. Several of the pictures have not appeared in print before. The denominational archives, which has been built up under the direction of Russell Gasero at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, gives historians many more opportunities for finding good illustrations. In addition, several of the illustrations were pictures taken by Bruggink, who is an able photographer himself.

The chronological charts placed strategically throughout the book are attractive and extremely helpful. For example, on page 112 the reader can follow key events in American religious life from 1550 to 2000 on the top half of the chart and particular events in the life of the Reformed Church on the bottom half of the chart. Events from 1800 to 1860 are found on page 120 denoting events in European history on the top part of the chart in contrast with religious events taking place in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands and in the United States.

Another novel feature is the use of sidebars. They contain miniature stories about well-known church members or subjects of special interest. For instance, a full-page sidebar on page 65 gives the story of the famous Indian chief Geronimo

and the Apache Mission in Oklahoma. The chief was baptized at the Reformed Church mission located in Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

Particularly valuable in the book are the stories about the Reformed Church that have not been significantly dealt with before in its histories. One is the role of women, who virtually moved mountains in the denomination in eras that were very male dominated. Native-, African-, and Asian-Americans are also given good space in the stories as well as in the sidebars.

The final chapter, entitled, "What's Next?" is a good analysis of the Reformed Church today. By showing the considerable diversity in church life throughout the denomination and the country at present, Bruggink postulates a vision for the future. Variety and diversity are much more welcomed in the twenty-first century, and as a result the denomination is again more involved in urban areas. Older congregations that have been willing to change are reaching out to people of various ethnic backgrounds. Possibilities for growth are no longer limited to suburban areas, where the Reformed Church has had its traditional strength, but effective outreach is seen in many geographical areas, resulting in a more vital and stronger church life. Bruggink uses historical analysis in order to provide a vision for what lies ahead for the church. All denominational leaders must read this chapter carefully.

Questions could be raised about some interpretations of points in the church's history. For instance, the description of the beginnings of Hope College in the book is dependent upon old sources. Recent studies consider Philip Phelps Jr. to be the primary founder of the college and not Albertus C. Van Raalte, who was the founder of the Holland Colony (p. 133). It is inevitable in a history book of this length that some errors would have crept into the text. For instance, the name of Edward Tanjore Corwin was misspelled on page 110, and some terms are spelled inconsistently: dominie or domine, Dort or Dordt. For the most part, the text is remarkably free of errors, and many of these errors and inconsistencies can be corrected in the second edition. That there will be a second edition is a certainty as this interesting, well-written history is sure to sell out soon. Church libraries must have copies, and many church members will want to have their own copies. Books in the Historical Series have a reputation for quality. Serious readers who have enjoyed reading previous publications in the historical series will add to the number of purchasers as well.

<div align="right">Elton J. Bruins</div>

Calvin for Armchair Theologians, by Christopher Elwood, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002. xiii, 182pp.

It would be difficult to find a more winsome and readable introduction to Calvin's life and theology than this. One of a series that also includes Augustine and Aquinas, these sprightly, learned little volumes are also enhanced by cartoons, in this case by Ron Hill. Some people may be put off by the cartoons, feeling they cheapen the quality of the book, but I suspect most readers will find them delightful.

Although this is a semipopular approach to Calvin, one should not dismiss it as light and unreliable. The author, who is associate professor of historical theology at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, wrote his doctoral dissertation on Calvin at Harvard Divinity School. Hence he has the scholarly credentials to write a book on this subject. Fortunately, he is also a gifted writer so the text reads very nicely. In addition, he is quite aware of current cultural trends, so there are references to Bruce Springsteen, Dr. Seuss, Dale Carnegie, and the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series.

The treatment of Calvin's theology is balanced, fair, and often very perceptive. Elwood is especially good in his handling of difficult issues such as the Servetus affair and predestination. There is only one factual error. The author attributes the first catechism that was used in Geneva after Calvin's arrival to Farel rather than Calvin. I also question his description of the Third Book of the *Institutes* as "The Inner Work of Healing." I would prefer "The Holy Spirit and Personal Renewal."

In the last chapter, "Calvin's Children," he deals with a wide range of topics: the question of Calvinism and capitalism; Calvinism, church government and democracy; the Synod of Dort; and the Puritans. He also touches on the impact of Calvin on Schleiermacher, the Princeton theology (Hodge and Warfield), Karl Barth, and liberation theologies. Missing, however, is any mention of neo-Calvinism (Bavinck and Kuyper).

One might raise questions about a few other matters, but overall this is a splendid achievement. I recommend it heartily to laypeople as well as ministers and theological students.

<div align="right">I. John Hesselink</div>

Discerning the Spirits: A Guide to Thinking about Christian Worship Today, by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. and Sue A. Rozeboom, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. 185pp., $18.00.

Discerning the Spirits is a proposed treaty for the worship wars that still rage in many churches. The negotiators of this treaty are Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., president of Calvin Theological Seminary, and Sue A. Rozeboom, a doctoral student in liturgics at Notre Dame University. These diplomats were sent forth on a peace-making mission by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and financed by the Lilly Endowment (Preface, ix).

The negotiation begins with a theological presentation, "The Things of the Spirit," which describes the present impasse between the proponents of "contemporary worship" and proponents of "traditional worship." This theoretical description of the problem is followed by a descriptive chapter, "Costa Mesa, South Barrington, and Rome: The Rise of Contemporary Worship."

The terms of the treaty are laid out in the chapter, "The Bond of Peace: The Worshipping Church." Churches who are engaged in the struggle are addressed in the chapter, "Unity in Diversity." This unity is ultimately based on the churches confession of the doctrine of the Trinity and the principle of koinonia (community).

The treaty is subsequently sealed in the final chapter, "God's Story and Ours: The Worshiping Church." Using Robert Webber's observation in his book, *Worship as a Verb*, the negotiators' argue for worship as a Christocentric narration in the church.

This is a book that should be read by every pastor, worship leader, and worship committee. Whether God's people prefer a contemporary or traditional style of worship, we need to bring the glory to God and to love one another.

Barry L. Wynveen

The Essence of Christianity, by Bruno Forte, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. xiv, 132pp., $22.00.

The author, professor of systematic theology at the Pontifical Theological Faculty of Naples, Italy, contrasts the Trinitarian core of the Christian faith with certain claims of nineteenth-century postmodernism. Forte has selected Ludwig Feuerbach's polemical stance (1841) that genuine language about God amounts

to speaking about ourselves; that is, when we address God, we really communicate with ourselves. He then probes Adolph von Harnack's 1899-1900 lectures, "The Essence of Christianity," which reduced the Christian message to God's fatherly love for humankind and humanity's universal response of love.

Over against Feuerbach's "unhappy love" and Harnack's "tranquil love," our author squarely places the gospel's "crucified love," the Son coming from the Father in the incarnation, surrendering to death on the cross, and returning to the Father at Easter. This coming from and returning to—within the one deity of love—is the model for Christians who are "servants out of love," and who as believers find community within the Church.

Forte presents an adroit rebuttal to a select number of postmodern critiques of the Christian faith; evangelical Protestants can appreciate his biblical stance. His retrieving of the Augustinian images of the lover, the beloved, and love remains a welcome choice. Further, his comments on a future reconciliation between Jews and Christians (cf. Romans 11:25-26) are biblically sound and may already partly be implemented by so-called Messianic Jews. The author's last chapter on Mary, regrettably, is less successful. The Bible affirms that Mary is the mother of Christ; church history has elevated her to a "unique depth" in the divine life of the triune God.

Ralph W. Vunderink

Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics, ed. Vincent Bacote, Larua C. Miguelez, and Dennis L. Okholm, Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004. 245pp. $23.00.

The ongoing issue of the nature of scripture and its appropriate interpretation for evangelicals is the focus of these essays from the 2001 Wheaton Theology Conference. Twelve well-known leaders address the issue in three major parts: "Scripture and the Evangelical Tradition," "Scripture and Evangelical Exegesis," and "Scriptures and Evangelicals in Postmodern Context."

Those acquainted with earlier disagreements will find a much more moderate, conciliatory, and irenic tone to these pieces than in the earlier literature. The writings of the last quarter century, while not dissolving the key issues, have at least given a sense of perspective. This younger generation of scholars is able to look more dispassionately on earlier wranglings and to address important questions without recourse to defensive posturing or casting aspersions on the faith and commitment of others who seek to identify themselves as evangelicals but without an endorsement of the concept of inerrancy and what its proponents

said was necessarily entailed in an affirmation of the authority of scripture. So this is refreshing.

Consider, for example, the editors' introduction, where it is noted that "Grenz, McCormack and Dayton argue that the emphasis on an inerrant Bible rested on prior philosophical commitments that reflected the beliefs of the day" (8). The three writers unpack this a bit differently, but the overall recognition is salutary.

Also of interest: John Brogan's claim that he is not persuaded that "the 'inerrant in autographs' position is an adequate view of Scripture" (107). Also Kent Sparks's piece on accommodation in the inscripturation and interpretation of scripture that leads to his statement: "To make God out as errant is heresy; to make the human authors of Scripture inerrant is docetism" (131).

Further perceptive pieces by Bruce Ellis Benson, John R. Franke, Daniel J. Treier, and David Alan Williams consider today's postmodern context. Williams concludes the volume by suggesting that "we need not be put in the situation as to have only one metaphor for truth." He argues that the wide range of scriptural metaphors should be "exploited in addressing the concerns about truth in our postmodern context" (243).

It is refreshing to hear evangelical voices, steeped in scholarship, address these important topics with sensitivity, openness, and without rancor. This bodes well for ongoing discussions and bridge-building between the evangelical community and the wider ecumenical world.

Donald K. McKim

An Introduction to the Theology of Religions, by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003. 372pp., $29.00.

Kärkkäinen offers a brief review of biblical perspectives on religions and surveys the high points in the history of a Christian theology of religions, but he gives most of his attention to more recent developments. In a helpful review of ecclesiastical responses to the question of the plurality of religions, Kärkkäinen treats the Roman Catholic Church, mainline Protestant churches (Lutheran, Reformed and Methodist), free churches (Anabaptists, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Charismatic movements), the evangelical movement, and the ecumenical movement. In each case, he cites formal statements wherever possible.

Nomenclature to describe the various positions one finds within the Christian church continues to plague theologians of religions. Kärkkäinen chooses the

following: ecclesiocentrism; Christocentrism; and theocentrism. Ecclesiocentrism is marked by its insistence that one must have the revelation concerning Christ, which is normally only available through the witness of the church, in order to be saved. Christocentrism allows for the possibility that some of the unevangelized may be saved through Christ's work, but it grants that other religions may "play some positive role in God's overall plan of Salvation" (169). Theocentrism denies that Christianity is intrinsically superior to other religions. But these three terms clearly correlate to the traditional categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, which he also uses quite frequently.

Wisely, Kärkkäinen notes the difficulties of placing particular proposals within one of these three groups, and he indicates points at which he had difficulty making such decisions. Nevertheless, his concise descriptions of the proposals made by key representative theologians are clear and helpful, so that readers get a fine view of the current scene and are able to make their own judgments about how best to locate the various proposals within a typology.

Given Kärkkäinen's goal of providing an introduction, his selection of representative theologians is apt. This book will serve well as an introductory textbook in the subject but will also be helpful to all Christians who strive to formulate their own understanding of the role of the religions within God's purposes in the world, an issue which no one should avoid.

<div style="text-align: right">Terrance L. Tiessen</div>

Jesus in the New Universe Story, by Cletus Wessels, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003. xiii, 240pp., $25.00.

To many believers, the Christian faith comprises a three-layered universe, with heaven above, the earth in the middle, and the underworld below, the earth having been created seven thousand years ago. In this setting, Adam and Eve were created good, but fell into sin. As a result, all of humanity became sinful and needed a savior.

The author exchanges this familiar picture for a new one, an emerging universe, in which humans appeared a long time ago, *homo sapiens* came on the scene more recently, and Jesus was born two thousand years ago. Rather than coming "from without," Jesus is a human being "from within" the emerging universe, who through his resurrection opened up a deeper dimension within this cosmic drama.

The author, who is professor and president emeritus of Aquinas Institute in Minneapolis, links the human need for salvation to the Christian notion of sin.

But he reinterprets the Old Testament story about sin in the light of the Pauline parallel between Adam and Christ, considering these two figures symbolic rather than historical personalities (176). Further, he accepts the presence of chaos as part of the universe, and suggests that out of chaos can come forth order. Human violence, evil, and sin, which change the balance of nature, are "contrary to the evolutionary drive of the Earth" (184), but nature can be healed through Jesus. Even an emerging universe calls for a savior to deliver it from human sin.

To some readers, especially to those who wish to integrate faith and current cosmologies, this new picture of a dynamic God working within an changing universe is appealing. To others, however, Wessels's Christology should be fleshed out and given more "definite shape" (x), before the older notion of faith is to be partly discarded.

<div align="right">Ralph W. Vunderink</div>

The Path of True Godliness, by Willem Teellinck, trans. Annemie Godbehere and ed. Joel R. Beeke, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003. 300pp.

Willem Teellinck (1579-1629) is often called the father of the *Nadere Reformatie* (or the Dutch Second Reformation), a topic that was dear to the heart of Eugene Osterhaven (1915-2004), former professor at Western Theological Seminary. Gene was a member of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society that produced this work and was always a strong advocate of any efforts to recover a vibrant and Spirit-inspired Reformed piety for today. Teellinck desired to claim the same power from God and piety for the church in the seventeenth century.

Joel Beeke provides a valuable introduction to the life and times of Teellinck as well as an overview to his ministry. One of the critical factors that contemporary readers must face in reading ancient texts is sensitivity to the context so that we do not project our own expectations or agendas on earlier generations. Beeke's excellent treatment of church life in seventeen-century Netherlands is most helpful in sketching this background to assist our reading of this outstanding work.

One of the primary goals of the *Nadere Reformatie* was the recovery of a practical godliness that both informed the mind and inspired the heart. *The Path of True Godliness* reflects this critical integration, revealing the importance of walking with God for every Christian. Teellinck begins this treatment of sanctification by exploring the character of true godliness. He then examines both the kingdom of darkness that seeks to oppose God and the kingdom of grace that inspires faithful living for God. The remainder of this work considers the various means for attaining and motivating us toward the practice of godliness.

Contemporary students and scholars of Christian spirituality would refer to this book as spiritual theology. It is packed with refreshing wisdom and insights that are as relevant today as when they were first penned in 1621. I offer a few illustrations both to enlarge your awareness and to stimulate your own desire to read this practical work. "People who are yet to be won for Christ or are very weak in the faith are much better led by example than by rules" (p. 134). "Let those who would live lives of true godliness be mindful of the flaws of their own understanding and not overly trust their own judgment" (p. 193). "It is the same with us in spiritual battle. We have not been defeated until we no longer resist" (p. 236). Teellinck speaks powerfully across the generations and declares to us the perennial truths of walking with God in practical godliness and with heart-felt devotion. This outstanding book deserves a broad and enthusiastic readership. The result will be a life more focused on living to the glory of God and the good of our neighbor.

Tom Schwanda

The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, Vol. 4: *The Age of the Reformation*, by Hughes Oliphant Old, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. xiii, 556pp., $45.00 (paper).

This is the fourth volume of a projected seven-volume history of the reading and preaching of scripture within the Christian church. Structurally and metaphorically, at least for Protestants, it also represents the midpoint of this great series. The first three volumes powerfully captured the foundation from which many of the Reformers turned for their own inspiration and theology of preaching and worship. In volume four the preaching of the Reformations, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, are introduced and analyzed. The remaining three volumes will reflect the impact that the two Reformations had on the ministry of the Word as it has developed in the ensuing centuries.

Beginning with Luther, the author guides us in understanding the dramatic transition that occurred from the medieval period. This trajectory develops first through the unfolding Protestant representatives of Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Capito, Bucer, Calvin, and finally reaching England in the homiletical examples of Hugh Latimer and John Hooper. This in turn is followed by a treatment of the Roman Catholic reformation, highlighting the examples of Luis of Granada, the Jesuits Francis Xavier and Robert Bellarmine, and finally exploring Charles Borromeo and Frances de Sales. The seventeenth century is well represented by a rich treatment of the Puritans (e.g. Perkins, Sibbes, Preston, Thomas Goodwin, Manton, Flavel, etc.) and Anglicans (e.g. Lancelot Andrews, Donne, Jeremy Taylor, John Tillotson, etc.). The remainder of the volume examines the

flowering of Protestant orthodoxy in Germany (e.g. Johann Gerhard, Heinrich Muller, etc.), in France (e.g. Pierre du Moulin, Jean Daille, etc.), and in the Netherlands (e.g. Teellinck, Voetius, Cocceius, and von Lodenstein). The final chapter reviews the practices of preaching during the age of Louis XIV (e.g. Jacques Bossuet, Louis Bourdaloue, Fenelon, etc.).

This volume is enhanced by the author's earlier training in art history, which shines through at numerous places on the canvas of church history. His ability to illustrate how the various preaching styles reflect the art of that period enlarges the richness of this history of worship. Additionally Old is always interested in making connections between the practice of preaching and how it was seen as an act of worship. While space prevents doing this significant work full justice, this is a valuable resource for tracing the growth and transition of the history of preaching and the ministry of the Word, especially during the critical stage following the medieval period.

<div align="right">Tom Schwanda</div>

Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity, ed. Wallace M. Alston, Jr. and Michael Welker, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. 449pp., $49.00.

This book addresses the question, "What does it mean to be Reformed?" The chapters originate from a 1999 consultation of Reformed scholars at the Internationales Wissenshaftsforum in Heidelberg, Germany. The current volume is a follow-up to a previous publication, *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, edited by David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). The present publication attempts to explore "the rich, structured pluralism that we find in Reformed theology today" (x).

Although Luther, Calvin, and other sixteenth-century theologians are used as referents for these articles, Fredrick Schleiermacher and Karl Barth are often cited as the way for the twenty-first-century Reformed theologian to address contemporary challenges.

What is fascinating about this volume is the diversity of Reformed theologians who contributed to it. In addition to the traditional Europeans and North Americans, there are also presenters from Asia and South Africa.   Most of these presenters address their papers out their own contextual experience. For instance, Asians will address the whole issue of pneumatology. South Africans will address the issue of apartheid and the Council of Reconciliation.   Leann Van Dyke from Western Theological Seminary addresses the topic of theological education from a Reformed perspective. Botond Gaál has a fascinating story

about the past and the present work at the Reformed College at Debrecen, Hungary.

The book makes a contribution to the ongoing discussion about our Reformed identity in a changing milieu, while at the same time interacting with Christian brothers and sisters in other traditions.

Barry L. Wynveen

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