

GOD'S GLORY IN CONFLICT

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INTRODUCTION

No topic seems more relevant today than the topic of “conflict.” Alfred Poirier defines conflict as “a difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone’s goals or desires.”¹ These differences of opinion or purposes occur when the desires, expectations, fears, or wants of one group or individual collide with the desires, expectations, fears, or wants of another group or individual.² Visible examples throughout human history include conflicts between political, religious, moral, and caste ideals. The modern-day evening news is rife with examples of unresolved conflicts, and conflicts that have been resolved very quickly, often through forced means.

Conflict is now and has been at the forefront of human history since humankind’s willful rebellion against the Creator in the Garden of Eden. However, conflict may not be laid at the feet of the secular world alone as conflict also occurs among God’s people. But if God’s people truly reflect his goals and desires in their lives, why does conflict arise? Does God ordain conflict? If so, how does God use conflict in his plans and purposes? This brief study will attempt to answer these questions and in doing so will reveal that conflict is indeed part of God’s plan and program to bring glory to himself.

¹ Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor : A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 29.

² *Ibid.*, 29-30.

THE MIDDLE-WALL OF PARTITION

Preeminent in the formation and growth of the early church was the conflict that existed between Jews and Gentiles. God's call to Abraham was the beginning of the Jewish people.

Quoting Lewis Sperry Chafer, Arnold Fruchtenbaum writes:

“Israel is an ‘elect, sacred, and everlasting nation’ composed of ‘the seed of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob.’ With this nation God entered into several covenants which ‘are secured or sealed by the act of Jehovah.’ These covenants contained ‘immeasurable . . . promises.’ This election of Israel means ‘Israel stands alone in distinction from all other nations combined,’ hence, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Jews are Jews ‘because of the fact that they were born into covenant relations with God by a physical birth.’”³

For the first two thousand years of human history the only divisions among the nations were Gentile divisions. With Abraham's call Chafer writes, “there were now two division of humanity on the earth” – Jew and Gentile. Israel was “set apart as an elect nation with specific divine favors.”⁴ Given such a high place in God's plan and program, it is easy to see where conflict would arise when God sent his son to redeem Gentiles into his family.

The conflict between Jews and Gentiles could be called inevitable. The Jews were living under the supervision of the Mosaic Covenant, the Law. The Church, claiming life under the new covenant, forever changed the privileges of the Jews under the Law, and opened salvation to all people. The conflict, then, was disagreement over the preeminence of the Law over and against God's saving grace through Christ. Nowhere is this conflict more clearly addressed than in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

³ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas,: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 7:205-6. Quoted in Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, Rev. ed. (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1989), 333.

⁴ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, Rev. ed. (Dallas,: Dallas Seminary Press, 1951), 24.

THE JEW-GENTILE CONFLICT

The Apostle Paul introduces in Ephesians 2:1-10 a glorious description of the individual redemption of believers through the saving work of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Beginning in verse 11, Paul begins a detailed explanation of the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the "Body" (the universal church) from a particularly Jewish perspective. The primary emphasis of verses 11 and 12 is a series of five reminders to the Gentile believers of their previous state of separations relating to God. Verse 13 reveals the present state of Gentile believers, brought near to God in contrast to their previous state of separation.

In verses 14 through 16, Paul identifies the cause of conflict between the Jews and Gentiles; that is, the Mosaic Covenant which God established with Israel. This Covenant prevented God from granting salvation to anyone outside of the nation of Israel and resulted in hostility between Jews and Gentiles. The mediator in this conflict was Christ Jesus. His death on the cross annulled the Mosaic Covenant thereby removing the source of this hostility and bringing about peace between the two groups. The purpose of the peace created by Christ was to allow both groups, Jew and Gentile, access to God in one Spirit. Because of Christ's sacrifice, God is now approachable by both groups. Without Christ's death and the annulment of the law, non-Jews could never approach God.

A further result of Christ's sacrifice on the cross was the creation of one new unique group out of the Jewish and Gentile believers, united as one new man. Verses 17 through 22 emphasize the unity of this new "Body," the Church, which was established on the basis of the work of the apostles and prophets, and is continually being melded together into a dwelling place in which God resides in His Spirit.

The significance of Paul's message should not be missed. In Ephesians 2:1-10, the Gentiles are reminded of the amazing changes that have been accomplished in their situation. Now, not only have they been reconciled together with the Jews into uniquely new persons (Christians), but they are also equal members of the household of God. They also have an equal position within the newly unified body of believers, the Church, which is the place where God dwells in His Spirit.

GOD GLORIFIED BY THE CONFLICT

The preceding conflict was mediated by God through his son Jesus Christ. This mediation resulted in all believers, both Jew and Gentile, being united into one family as sons and daughters of God. Yet the conflict was ordained by God to show both Jew and Gentile they could now approach him as Father. The Jews had never experienced this relationship with God and certainly the Gentiles, prior to their salvation, would not have understood such a relationship with a god. Yet the mediating work of Christ through his death and resurrection brought two groups in conflict together as a family, and has established them as his children and heirs.

As children of God, Christians are called upon to imitate God because of our likeness to him (cf. Eph. 4:25-32). As Poirier writes,

“To imitate God is to imitate Christ. And the very possibility that we can imitate God and Christ is because through Christ and in Christ, we have become the children of God. . . For Paul, to be an adopted child of God, to be like God, is to be one who makes every effort to pursue peace in the household of God. . . When disciples of Jesus pursue peacemaking, we reflect most what it means to be the sons and daughters of God.”⁵

⁵ Poirier, 101.

Therefore, as Christians we glorify God by pursuing peacemaking which reflects his image in our lives. By uniting Jew and Gentile believers into one body, the resulting peace within God's family has brought glory to himself.

THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO CONFLICT

Clearly, in response to conflict the ultimate role of believers in Christ, as sons and daughters of God, is one of peacemaker. Yet this role has little meaning unless the relational aspect of believers to each other is fully understood. This relational aspect is grounded in the theology of *sonship*. J. I. Packer describes sonship as “the supernatural gift which one receives through receiving Jesus. . . The gift of sonship to God becomes ours, not through being born, but through being born again.”⁶ However, sonship is not a gift per se; it is the result of regeneration. As such, it is preferable to view believers as begotten children of God whom he loved so much that he has adopted them as his heirs. This adoption *is* a gift that relates to the privileges believers have as his children – i.e., it is how believers enter God's family. So we have been adopted into God's family, he is our Father, and fellow believers in Christ are “in relationship” to each other within the family of God.

Poirier shares two practical effects of sonship in relation to Christians' perception, orientation, and motivation in conflict resolution or peacemaking – i.e., how Christians are to understand and respond to conflict.⁷ First, “sonship reshapes people's perceptions of the ‘other’ person in conflict.” No longer are people to be looked upon as impersonal objects; rather, the people involved in the conflict are to be identified as “who they really are – brothers and sisters

⁶ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God Zondervan Pub. House, C, Pastor's ed., Pastor's Ed.* (Downers Grove, Ill.,: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 181.

⁷ Poirier, 109-111.

in Christ.” Second, “sonship motivates people in conflict by reorienting their focus toward God and away from themselves.” The conflicts are no longer “us against them” or “me against her.” God is the third-party in the conflict and he serves as not only their loving “Father who disciplines his sons,” but also as “the King who subdues the hard-hearted.” Therefore, Christians are to be reminded that “they are not alone, that whatever obstacle may present itself to them, God can supply their every need to be reconciled to their brother.”

CONCLUSION

The objective of this discussion has been to illustrate how God has ordained conflict to glorify himself. The example cited was the uniting of God’s chosen people, Israel, with his adopted sons and daughters, Gentiles believers, into one family. These two groups were at odds with each other over the Law, and the privileges now granted each party being united in Christ. The ensuing peace between brothers and sisters in Christ, sons and daughters of God, reflects and brings glory to God who is our Father.

We can claim the gospel is God’s power for the salvation of sinners when we live by its saving power, proving ourselves capable of getting along.⁸ We can claim God is King over all when we, as his sons and daughters, make peace like our Father, trusting his kingly power to change people’s hearts. By our responses as peacemakers, the world can see us truly glorifying God as his sons and daughters by manifesting our Father’s mercy, compassion, and love toward one another.⁹

⁸ Ibid., 111.

⁹ Ibid.

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