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# Dealing with Conflict in the Church: Insight from the New Testament

By Colin Patterson, Assistant Director of Bridge Builders

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### **Facing up to conflict**

The subject of conflict is close to my heart because of my own experience of ordained ministry, first as a parish clergyman, then as a diocesan training officer, and most recently as a staff member of Bridge Builders (a charitable organisation that provides training for church leaders). My vocation was nurtured in a lively evangelical Anglican church. Belonging to that church was a very positive experience for me, and I suppose I expected that once I was ordained I would find that other churches were broadly similar. However, during my first curacy I encountered behaviour that I had simply never come across amongst Christians before. For example, people walked out of meetings without explanation when they disagreed with what others were saying or doing. There was talk of “praying out” unpopular vicars. Rudeness seemed to go unquestioned.<sup>1</sup> What to do? Somewhat at sea, I wondered why I had been taught nothing at theological college about how to handle this sort of thing.

This first real taste of church conflict drove me to start re-examining the Bible, and I came to the conclusion that, even amongst those who claim to be biblical Christians (and that included me), there is often little serious attention given to what the New Testament says about responding to conflict. Thus began a journey of discovery in which I gradually realised how much my own life has been based on unhelpful *avoidance* of conflict. Some years on, having worked with church members from about half the parishes in the Diocese of Durham, and with ministers from most of the main denominations, I have come to the conclusion that until I was ordained I had nearly always belonged to churches that were well stocked with people from a similar background to my own, and in each congregation I had only ever had close contact with a fairly small group of like-minded friends. My mechanism for protecting myself from conflict was, in fact, a form of apartheid.

Yet the New Testament sets out a vision for something better than apartheid. In this article I want to explore something of how the early Christians struggled to make that vision a reality.

### **Different understandings of conflict**

But first I need to do a little clearing of the ground, because I have discovered that conflict means different things to different people. On a number of occasions, I have asked groups of Christians on training courses to say what words or phrases come to mind when the word “conflict” is mentioned. The responses are instructive. They indicate that many people think of “conflict” as a high-intensity word, associated with war, intransigence, and deep hatred. I encourage such people to extend their idea of conflict, so as to include disagreement and tension, even when they are not very intense. In other words, I think it is helpful to recognise that there are different levels of conflict. At “entry” level, people have differences over something that matters to them. The resulting tension need not lead to deepening animosity, but it may do so. Then angry exchanges may escalate into taking of sides, refusal to talk, complete shunning, sustained bullying or physical violence. It is our common experience that the deeper the animosity, the more intractable the conflict becomes. So, I maintain, it is best to take preventive measures early. When an intractable conflict has started out as something less intense, it would have been a good idea to name it as conflict at an early stage, and do something to stop it escalating.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of this was in my own church, some in others.

I also ask people to say what sort of feelings and behaviour they associate with *church* conflict. Almost invariably the first things to be mentioned are negative: fear, hiding, raised voices, guilt, withholding information, and so on. However, I often eventually get some responses that link conflict with more positive ideas like “bringing matters into the open” and “sorting things out.” I wonder why these do not spring more immediately to mind? Perhaps again it is because of feelings about the word “conflict”. Church people tend only to name something as conflict once it has become damaging. I suggest therefore that it is helpful to adopt a notion of conflict which allows that it is not *inherently* destructive. Everything depends on the way people choose to respond when they sense tension in the air. Sometimes they respond to the warning signs in a constructive way; sometimes they don’t.

So it seems to me that the fundamental question for churches is not, “How can we be free of conflict?” but rather, “How can we handle conflict, as soon as it arises, in the right way?” I want to show how the New Testament offers a distinctively Christian answer to that question.

## **Conflict in the New Testament**

To some extent the answers you get from reading the Bible depend upon the questions you ask. For example, it is possible to come to the New Testament as essentially a textbook, and ask, “What should Christians believe?” This approach sometimes has value. But, in my experience, conflict amongst Christians is not solely, and often hardly at all, about disputed matters of belief. It does not, therefore, get us far to assume that all we need to get from the Bible at times of conflict is right doctrine. We touch upon far more of the relevant territory when we come to the Scriptures as a *narrative of events* leading to, and springing from, the coming of Jesus. If we then ask, “Where do we see evidence of conflict in the New Testament?” the short answer is, “All over the place!” Using a wide-angle lens, we see a gospel message that tells of a Saviour whose life and death were a focal point for the cosmic battle between good and evil.<sup>2</sup> Focusing more narrowly, we find a story about people not unlike us, who faced evident tensions and hostility. What is more, the narrative deals appreciably with conflict *between Christians*; it is not just a case of believers versus an unbelieving world. There is no room for any romantic notion that if today’s Christians were only like those in the early church they would have no in-house problems. As far as I can see, the New Testament recounts conflict between Christians in a way that is neither over-stated nor under-stated. It’s just there, waiting to be examined.

So, what are we to make of what we read? No conflict can be understood properly without some attention to the context. Hence I propose to investigate the way in which New Testament authors addressed the types of conflict that arose within the churches of their time. I will be looking at the *pastoral purpose* of the New Testament documents. Taking various writers in turn, my essential questions will be “How do they write about conflict?” and “Why would Christian ministers deal with things in this way?”

Here, then, are portraits of people who wrestled with the practical task of encouraging the church to be what it was meant to be.

### **1. The Epistle-writers**

I begin with the writers of the New Testament epistles, because those are the documents that most obviously address the circumstances of the early churches. The content of the various letters arises out of discernible contexts, and we can make productive links with our own context. I will look at

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<sup>2</sup>E.g. Luke 10:18, John 12:31, 1 Cor 15:25, Phil 2:6-11, Col 1:21-22, Rev 12:1-12

each of the major writers,<sup>3</sup> examining how their writing about conflict is illuminated by what we know of their lives and ministry.

## A. Paul

I begin with Paul because his letters<sup>4</sup> include the earliest New Testament documents (and therefore give a window into the first sorts of tension to spring up in churches), and also because they are full of contextual clues. He writes in response to particular circumstances, often having no established precedents to follow, and often on the move. His letters, particularly those written in the heat of the moment, give us considerable insight into the concerns of a minister of the gospel, responding to conflicts in the first Christian fellowships of the Gentile world.

Paul touches upon conflict between Christians in all of his letters.<sup>5</sup> He refers occasionally to squabbles between named individuals (Phil 4:2, Phm 10) or to particular people who have opposed him personally (Gal 2:11, 2 Tim 4:14) but more often he addresses *groups* that are in conflict with one another. As we read his letters, we come face to face with heated issues that arise when different groups - often with considerable cultural differences - must work out the consequences of acknowledging the same heavenly Father. Jewish and Gentile believers follow the same Lord but have completely different backgrounds; they cannot easily agree about how to be distinctive as the people of God (Gal 2:11-14, Phil 3:2-3, Eph 2:11-22). Christians offend other Christians by their stance on idolatry (1 Cor 8). Within the same church, groups line up behind their preferred teachers (1 Cor 1:10-12 & 3:1-4). Rich people and their slaves worship the same Christ; can they behave at home as if slaves are mere possessions then treat each other as brothers and sisters when gathered with the Christian fellowship (Eph 6:5-9, Col 3:22 - 4:1, 1 Tim 6:11-12)? These and other issues were potentially very divisive within the church.

Paul's response to these conflicts springs from his own overwhelming experience of God's grace. He has, of course, had plenty of practice at stirring up conflict. As a Pharisee, he has pressed fellow Jews to be rigorous in doing those things that set them apart from Gentiles (Phil 3:4-6). He has spearheaded an operation to arrest Christians, and watched with satisfaction as some are executed (Gal 1:13-14, Acts 9:1-2 & 8:1). But, even though Paul has fought against the Lord Jesus, God has been merciful to him (Acts 9:3-6, Gal 1:15-16, 1 Tim 1:15-16). His letters are full of passion because he is by nature a passionate man, but now that passion is fired by love for God and turned towards reconciliation (2 Cor 5:11-20). Now we see him expressing a deep personal concern for those to whom he writes (Rom 1:11; 2 Cor 2: 4 & 11:28; Gal 4:19-20; Eph 1:15-16; Phil 1:4-6, 3:18 & 4:1; Col 1:9 & 2:1; 1 Thess 1:8) and praying for them to be gripped by an inner sense of God's grace (Eph 1:15-19 & 3:14-29). He begs disputing individuals to reach agreement (Phil 4:2), and he appeals to those who are cold-shouldering him to open their hearts (2 Cor 6:11-12) rather than compel him to be severe (2 Cor 10:1-2).

I think it is important to read Paul's letters as outpourings of a heart on fire, not as abstract doctrinal treatises or detached logical arguments. The purpose of his doctrinal passages is to re-warm the hearts of the Christians to whom he writes; the purpose of his logic is to expose the incongruity of refusing to be at peace with others when God has made peace with you (Rom 6, Col 3:1-15). Paul

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<sup>3</sup> I will make no reference to Hebrews: not because it is irrelevant but because it is anonymous and so is not very amenable to the approach I am adopting here. Neither do I make reference to John in this section of "Epistle-writers". I have deferred him until later, because I think that he is best understood by seeing how his gospel supplements what we learn from his letters.

<sup>4</sup> I make the assumption that Paul is the author of all the letters attributed to him.

<sup>5</sup> The letters to the Thessalonians are the ones least concerned with specific issues of dispute, but even so they indicate that idle busybodies were causing at least minor trouble (1Thess 5:14, 2 Thess 3:11 & 12)

sees boasting and rivalry as symptoms of hard hearts that are not open to the Spirit (Rom 2:1, 17-24 & 3:27-30, 1 Cor 1:29-31, Gal 5:15-16 & 6:14) so the nub of his argument in response is this: remember God's generosity and imitate his sacrificial self-giving (Rom 12:1 & 15:7, Eph 4:32 - 5:2, Phil 2:1-11). He urges each Christian to recognise the diversity of God's grace at work in others (Rom 12:3-8) and works out in specific detail what it means to make peace (Rom 12:9-21) and not to judge others (Rom 14). In short, he writes as he does to show his readers what embodied grace looks like.

If we could ask Paul "How do you respond to conflict in churches?", he might well say, "I weep at the damage done by contentious people. I pray for them and urge them to live up to their calling, responding to God's grace by being themselves gracious. I once believed sternness was the only way to put people right. Now it is only my last resort."

## **B. James**

In contrast to Paul's epistles, those of other New Testament authors are not usually addressed to specific churches or individuals. We may assume that such epistles deal with more general issues of conflict. I turn to James first because he is sometimes thought to be the most sharply different from Paul.

James, the brother of Jesus, grew up in a family that fell into argument over the behaviour of the eldest son (Mark 3:21). James' views on conflict need to be seen against that background. He knew what it was to be angry when someone else claimed to be doing unconventional things in God's name, and as a younger brother he no doubt felt envious of Jesus at times. Yet he came to see Jesus as the fulfilment of all God's promises, after the risen Lord appeared to him (1 Cor 15:7). In fact James rapidly became a pillar of the church (compare Acts 1:14 with Acts 15:13-21 & Gal 1:19). Once he stopped seeing Jesus as a rival or a liability, he was in an unparalleled position to reflect on how to live at peace with one's nearest and dearest. He had known Jesus day by day as they grew up together, being taught the Scriptures, learning obedience, grasping the simple practicalities of how to live in relationship with others.<sup>6</sup> He must have eventually seen Jesus as a model of upright living, whose behaviour and precept went hand in hand, for James' letter is in many ways a commentary on both the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and on the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>7</sup>

How, then, did James engage with conflict in the church? We may surmise that he lived constantly with the tensions that arose once the early church ceased to be simply a tight-knit fellowship in Jerusalem. As the leader of the Jerusalem church, he must have received a steady stream of news about the growing number of new Christian communities, further and further afield. Apparently his knees were hardened by praying constantly for the forgiveness of the people.<sup>8</sup> His epistle, because it was probably intended as a circular letter (Jas 1:1), addresses a range of difficulties which we need not assume are all concentrated in one fellowship. Even so, he makes some remarkably strong statements against those who fight, quarrel, kill and covet (4:1-3). Evidently James was greatly grieved at the thought of rich oppressors (5:1-6), favouritism (2:1-9) or poisonous speech (3:5-12, 4:11-12) being found amongst Christians.

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<sup>6</sup> For an elaboration of these points, see the excellent essay on James in Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, HarperCollins, 1998, pp67-71

<sup>7</sup> Jas 4:6 is a direct quotation of Prov 3:34 and many other verses from Proverbs find parallels in James (see Prov 2: 3-6, 10:19, 11:18, 16:27, 19:3, 24:23, 27:1). James (5:11) offers Job as an exemplar of perseverance in the face of trial, and other verses from Job find parallels (see Job 5:11, 7:7, 13:28, 15:35, 31:16-17, 34:19). Jas 5:12 is a precis of Matthew 5: 33-37.

<sup>8</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 1, trans. Kirkopp Lake, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), p 171

The letter of James has sometimes been dismissed as rather a rag-bag of admonitions.<sup>9</sup> But I suggest that, to the contrary, it is a vigorous exploration of the theme set out in its opening verses, namely that we should rejoice when we face trials, because through them we can be brought to maturity and are driven to seek wisdom from God (1:2-5). Although the trials may be “of many kinds” the thrust of the rest of the letter suggests that James has principally in mind the trial of getting along together as Christians. The whole letter hinges on the idea that the wise person knows how to make peace (3:17-18), and there is highly practical advice on how to submit to one another and to God by speaking less and listening more (4:7-10, 1:19-20). James writes as he does because he wants disputing Christians to recognise the symptoms of a heart that needs to be purified (3:11-12), and to understand that peacemaking depends on things as basic as being alert to the needs of others (1:27 & 2:16), speaking thoughtfully (3:2), watching where you sit (2:3-4), and persevering in trying circumstances (1:12). He had seen in his brother a living demonstration of precisely these things.

If we could ask James, “How do you respond to conflict in churches?”, he might well reply, “I know only too well that anger, bitterness and envy work against the purposes of God. I urge people who find themselves caught up in such attitudes to pray for wisdom, mourn over the state of the church and learn to listen to God and to each other.”

### C. Peter

Peter was by temperament enthusiastic and uncomplicated, a man who would have a go (Mt 14:28 - 30 & 17:4, Jn 18:10). He said what he meant and would speak up for the whole group of disciples (Mt 16:16, Jn 6:68-69). Peter’s formative experiences included being publicly opposed by both Jesus and Paul (Mt 16:23, Gal 2:11). He knew what it was to be adamant and then have to climb down (Mk 14:31, Jn 13:8-9 & 21:15-17). Moreover, he lived in the knowledge that Jesus had specifically commissioned him for suffering (Jn 21:18-19). Not surprisingly, then, his two letters address the themes of humble leadership and persevering in the face of persecution.

In his first letter, Peter puts conflict centre-stage. Christians, he acknowledges, find themselves at odds with the unbelieving world around them (1 Pet 1:7). As examples, he deals with relationships between subjects and rulers, slaves and masters, wives and husbands, recognising that unbelievers with social power often lord it over believers (2:13 - 3:2). When such Christians submit to others, says Peter, it will be a good witness, either because they are doing their duty without complaint, or because they are suffering unjustly without retaliating (2:15 & 19, 3:1), as Jesus did. The call to follow in the steps of Jesus is an important theme (2:21, 4:12-16), but Peter does not address here, in his first letter, any specific issues of conflict *between Christians* (although he does touch upon general qualities of godly living that would promote peace amongst the brethren, e.g. in 1:22 - 2:1 & 3:8-10).

It is worth noting, however, that he does briefly hint at a possible source of such conflict, namely elders lording it over those in their flock (5:1-4). The behaviour of leaders becomes a major theme in Peter’s second letter, where false teachers receive very strong condemnation (2 Pet 2). What is interesting, though, is that in Peter’s substantial diatribe against false teachers, he does not refute any particular item of false teaching. Rather, he paints a stark picture of the motivation behind destructive heresies. He is alerting the church at large to the danger of leaders who are arrogant and indifferent to the harm they cause. They are, he says, greedy, exploitative, boastful and driven by their own lusts (2:3, 10 & 14). By appealing to the wrong desires of the human heart, such people

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<sup>9</sup> Luther notoriously described it as “a right strawy epistle .... for it has no evangelical manner about it.” Form critics have commented on the lack of any sustained argument, e.g. Dibelius: “No continuity in thought whatever.” (Dibelius, *James*, Eng. trans. Fortress Press, 1975, p6.)

encourage the very opposite of all that makes for peace (2:18). We may infer that Peter writes as he does because, recognising that his own death was not far off (1:14), he was increasingly aware that ungodly men might gain influence in the church once the leaders who had been personally commissioned by Christ were gone. He had learned from Jesus that you cannot be a Rock until you have learned humility.

If we could ask Peter, “How do you respond to conflict in churches?”, he might well say, “In my experience, it can be dealt with at a person-to-person level by being straightforward and willing to accept rebuke. Arrogant leaders are one of the few things that I get really angry about. The example set by leaders is powerful, either for good or for ill.”

## 2. The Gospel-writers

A primary purpose of the gospel-writers was to present eye-witness testimony about Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Whether they did so for the benefit of *believers* is less clear cut than in the case of the epistles. The gospels could be viewed as purely evangelistic documents. However, I want to take as a working assumption the idea that the early church in general believed Christians should model their lives on that of Jesus, and would regard whatever was known about the events of his life as instructive for Christian conduct. What will emerge is that the gospels offer four different portraits of Jesus, each of which brings out different aspects of his character and teaching that are relevant to conflict between Christians, in addition to the value they have for introducing unbelievers to the person of Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

### A. Mark

We do not know much about Mark, but we have enough information to guess that he was, by temperament, someone who shied away from conflict. Paul thought he lacked stickability (Acts 15:38). Yet Barnabas his cousin (Col 4:10), and eventually Paul too (2 Tim 4:11), found him to be a dependable co-worker, a trait he may have inherited from his mother, who made her home a place of welcome in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). Moreover, if (as seems likely) his gospel was the first of the four to be written, he was unique in founding a genre, and what he chose to write about Jesus is therefore highly significant.

For whom was he writing, and is it right to suppose that Mark had a pastoral aim? We have little to go on, as Mark never states his purpose: his gospel is simply “the good news about Jesus Christ” (Mk 1:1). Tradition has it that he based it on Peter’s evangelistic sermons,<sup>12</sup> so it may have a better claim than any other book of the New Testament to be a “no frills” presentation of the person of Jesus for those who are starting from scratch. Certainly, it concentrates on vivid action rather than long speeches, and reads rather like a series of personal encounters<sup>13</sup> with Jesus. It is quite plausible that this approach matches Peter’s style of preaching.

I do not think there are any clear indications that Mark wrote with specific issues of church-based conflict in mind. But I think it is quite conceivable that he distilled Peter’s memories of Jesus as a model for ministry (*cf* 1 Peter 5:1-4). Jesus emerges in Mark’s Gospel as someone acting with confidence and authority in the thick of conflict. We see him able to silence a demonic outburst in

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<sup>10</sup> This has been argued well by Richard Bauckham in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Eerdmans, 2006)

<sup>11</sup> This idea of four “portraits” is explored well by Richard Burridge in *Four Gospels: One Jesus?* (SPCK, 1994)

<sup>12</sup> Eusebius preserves the statement of Papias (AD 70 - 130) that “Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately all that he remembered of the things said and done by the Lord, but not however in order.” *Cf* 1 Pet 5:13 for the close relationship between Mark and Peter.

<sup>13</sup> Stuart Blanch brings out this point in *Encounters With Jesus* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1988).

the synagogue (Mk 1:21-28), resisting a complaint that he is not available (1:35-39), answering an unspoken criticism of his ministry (2:8-11), defending his departure from the custom of fasting (2:18-22), deeply distressed and angry at the stubbornness of Pharisees yet continuing to heal on the Sabbath (3:1-6), stopping evil spirits from calling out that he was the Son of God (3:11-12), and refusing to be taken in hand by his family, who thought him mad (3:31-34) .... and all this within the first three chapters! Then he copes with two people pleading for help at once, yet without being rushed (5:21-43); he copes with tired disciples being harassed by crowds (6:32-36); he copes with trying to move about in secret and still being trailed (7:24). Most strikingly, he sets his face towards his death in Jerusalem (8:31) and maintains his course despite continuous misunderstanding (8:32, 9:31-32, 10:32-34) and petty rivalry amongst his disciples (9:33-37, 10:35-45). On arrival at Jerusalem, he engages in a deliberately provocative act (11:12-17), tells a pointedly accusing parable (12:1-12) and routs opponents in open debate (12:13-40), yet he is able to choose the moment at which he will be arrested (14:1 & 41-42), and from then on offers no resistance whatever (14: 48-49). In Mark's telling, this all comes thick and fast and yet presents a picture of someone who gave a carefully chosen response to conflict whenever it arose, sometimes deliberately damping it down, sometimes deliberately bringing it to a head. The picture is very striking.

If we could ask Mark what he thought about conflict in the church, he might perhaps say, "It has been hard for me, learning to face up to conflict, but it has been the path by which God has formed me. My goal is to be like my Master: strong when it matters, focused on doing good even when I am angry, and persevering with those who are slow to learn the way of Christ."

## **B. Luke**

I now turn to the remaining three gospel writers and begin with Luke because he is the most specific about why he wrote his two-part work. We can reasonably infer from his sudden appearance in his own narrative, three quarters of the way through (Acts 16:10), that he was not a first-hand witness of the majority of what he writes about. Yet as he became actively involved in missionary work he was at the same time investigating what had gone before. He was aware of other accounts (Lk 1:1), yet he still thought it worth composing his own, in order to add to what was believed by those who had already been taught about the Christian faith (Lk 1:3-4).

Luke seems unwilling to draw much attention to himself,<sup>14</sup> yet something of his own character emerges in his writing. As a doctor (Col 4:14), he was presumably used to dealing with crisis in an unflappable way, and he comes across as a dependable team player, alongside Paul and others. Indeed he alone is with Paul during his final imprisonment (2 Tim 4:11). Luke seems to be a methodical man (Lk 1:3) who ferreted out information that is not presented in any other gospel.<sup>15</sup> Because of his concern for telling the whole story, we have a unique "Volume 2", The Acts of the Apostles, which shows the continuity between the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the early church.<sup>16</sup> A possible pastoral purpose is therefore clear: Luke wanted the church to understand the story of its own birth and growth, so that it would remain faithful to the example of its founder and the apostles that he appointed.

It is instructive to compare Luke's gospel with Mark's and note how Luke's particular emphases might have taught the church in relation to conflict. Of note are a number of incidents which show

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<sup>14</sup> He does not mention himself by name in Acts; there are simply "we" passages.

<sup>15</sup> Of note are the birth narratives (Chs 1 & 2), the stories of Mary & Martha (10:38-42) and Zacchaeus (19:1-10), several parables (12:13-21, 15:8-16:31, 18:1-14) and the Emmaus road encounter (24:13-35).

<sup>16</sup> There is a "passing on of the baton" in Acts 1:4-8, and the rest of Acts is devoted to the outworking of Jesus' commission to his disciples.



those closest to Jesus engaged in dispute. As I have already indicated, such incidents are by no means absent from Mark's gospel, but Luke adds more of them: the misunderstanding between Jesus and his parents at the age of twelve (Lk 2:41-51); his rejection by the people of Nazareth (4:14-30); the desire of the disciples to call down fire on a Samaritan village (9:51-56); the argument between Martha and Mary (10:38-42); the continuance at the Last Supper of the dispute about who is the greatest disciple (22:24-30 *cf* 9:46-48). Furthermore, the same "warts and all" view of Jesus' followers runs on into Acts: ethnic groups grumble against one another about the way aid is distributed to widows (Acts 6:1-6); a major council is called to settle an argument about whether Gentiles must keep Jewish laws (15:1-31); Paul separates from Barnabas when they disagree about taking Mark (15:36-41). Luke's investigations clearly showed him a community in which conflict did not need to be swept under the carpet. In fact he demonstrates that growth could result from dealing with conflict openly.

Also of note is the way that Luke draws attention to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Firstly, the Spirit is frequently mentioned in relation to Jesus' ministry. After his temptations he returns to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit" (Lk 4:14); he announces at Nazareth that the Spirit is upon him as promised by Isaiah (4:18); he is "full of joy through the Holy Spirit" when demons are overcome (10:21); he teaches his disciples to ask for the Holy Spirit when they pray (11:13); he gives instructions "through the Holy Spirit" to the apostles after his resurrection (Acts 1:2). Secondly, the narrative of Acts serves up frequent reminders that the same Holy Spirit empowered and led the disciples after Pentecost. We notice in particular that at key moments the gospel message breaks down barriers between Jews and Gentiles as a result of quite specific directions from the Spirit. Sometimes this comes in the context of prayer (10:19 & 11:12, 13:2), sometimes in the context of careful discussion (15:28).

It is clear that Luke writes as one for whom transformation of fraught relationships was an experienced reality, as was unity in the Spirit. Moreover, unlike any of the other New Testament authors, he writes from the perspective of a Gentile.<sup>17</sup> He joined a community in which Jews were initially in the majority, and he became a long-term, and dearly loved, co-worker with Paul, a Jew. To present a narrative that is so shot through with hope, yet so ready to record conflict, he must surely have believed himself to be providing the worked examples of Paul's dictum, "There is neither Jew nor Greek ...in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

If we could ask Luke what he thought about conflict in the church, he might well say, "It happens, and if we face it in the right way very positive things can result. But it can also be very damaging when people are unwilling to hear any fresh word from God. I don't want Christians to forget the story of how God has led us. We follow Jesus' example by spending time in prayer before taking important decisions. When we take counsel humbly together we are clear what the Spirit is saying."

### **C. Matthew**

Like Luke, Matthew augments Mark's work with quite specific extra material,<sup>18</sup> although he does not say why he does so; hence we can only make educated guesses. It seems likely that, as a tax collector, Matthew lived on the receiving end of considerable resentment (Matt 9:9-13). His dramatic conversion would have been a source of great joy for him but of some uneasiness amongst other believers. For all we know, some of his fellow disciples may have been personally swindled

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<sup>17</sup> In Col 4:14, Paul mentions Luke separately from the Jewish co-workers that he lists earlier (Col 4:10).

<sup>18</sup> Apart from the material on which I will specifically comment, this includes the birth narrative (1:18 - 2:23), detail of the passion narrative (esp. 27:1-10, 51-54, 62-66 & 28:11-15), the great commission (28:16-20), and a number of parables (13:24-30, 13:44-48, 18:23-34, 20:1-16, 21:28-31, 25:1-13, 25:31-36).

by him. Perhaps they were suspicious of his sincerity to begin with. In those circumstances, it seems likely that he in particular was struck by Jesus' insistent demand for sheer, practical forgiveness. Matthew must have been concerned to preserve the full range of Jesus' teaching, for he presents it in more substantial and organised blocks than any of the other gospel writers (5:1 - 7:29, 13:1-52, 18:1-35, 23:1 - 25:46). And, once again, we can discern a pastoral purpose: he certainly intends the church in particular to take note, for he is the only gospel writer to mention references by Jesus to "the church" (16:18, 18:17), and he uniquely records important teachings which assume that "brothers" will need to work at reconciliation within the fellowship of God's people (5:23-24, 18:15, 21 & 35).

These teachings are very pointed, and repay more careful study than there is space for here. However, I must make two important points about how they apply to conflict. Firstly, they are in essence exhortations to *take the initiative* when a broken relationship needs to be restored. Notice that the reader is not let off the hook: Matthew wants you to know that, whether the grievance is yours (18:15) or the other person's (5:23), Jesus said you should go and try to be reconciled; indeed God will not forgive you unless you forgive others.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, the whole of chapter 18 addresses the reality that there can be one-upmanship and rancour amongst believers. This chapter opens with Jesus' disciples asking, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" It records that Jesus urged forgiveness from the heart (v35), confronting the one who offends you (v15), and involving others only as a last resort (vv16 & 17). It warns that what we do for good or for ill at times of conflict has heavenly consequences (v18). Then there is a promise: "If two of you agree about anything they ask for, then God will do it" (v19); in its context, the promise is very unlikely to be a charter for naming and claiming, much more likely to mean that if the two agree to set aside grievances God will grant them the power to forgive, and to restore their relationship.<sup>20</sup> All these ideas, set cheek by jowl, go so much against the grain of normal human behaviour that we must assume Matthew is quite deliberately highlighting them as kingdom values.

If we could ask Matthew what he thought about conflict in the church he might well say, "I have found that peace with others is something you have to seek actively. I urge every Christian to deal with resentment straight away; otherwise it deadens public worship and impedes your relationship with God. I do not want the church to conveniently forget this uncomfortable teaching of Jesus."

#### **D. John**

I take the view that the author of John's Gospel was a Judean disciple, not a member of the Twelve, and that the same person wrote the Johannine epistles and the Revelation.<sup>21</sup> John comes across in these writings as a contemplative man<sup>22</sup>, a deep well rather than a surging river, saddened by those who love to be first (3 Jn 9). It is reasonable to suppose that John's writings are shaped by his

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew appends a qualification - forgive, or you will not be forgiven - to the Lord's Prayer (6:14-15) and records uniquely Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant, which points out the same principle (18:21-35).

<sup>20</sup> There seems to be a deliberate literary architecture in the way Matthew uses promises of divine presence. At the start of the gospel, the promise "Emmanuel: God is with us" is given when Jesus is born (1:23). At the end, the Great Commission offers a promise that Jesus is with his disciples in mission (28:20). But in the middle (18:20) there is a promise to be with disciples in *conflict*.

<sup>21</sup> For the strong evidence against the traditional view that the Johannine writings are the work of John, the brother of James and son of Zebedee, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p358 ff (Eerdmans, 2006)

<sup>22</sup> This is indicated by his love of symbolic language, e.g. "Word" (Jn 1:1 & 14, 1 Jn 1:1), "light" (Jn 1:4-9, 8:12, 9:1-5, 1 Jn 1:5-7, 2:8-11), "water" (Jn 4:1-15, 7:37-39), & "bread" (Jn 6:26-35); and by his openness to visionary experiences (Rev 1:10).

knowledge of the Christian community at Ephesus, where he spent most of his later years.<sup>23</sup> As we know from elsewhere in the New Testament, that community had its share of conflict: Paul prophesied as he left Ephesus for the final time that it would be disrupted by false teachers (Acts 20:29-31) and he later sent Timothy to try to sort out pastoral problems there (1 Tim 1:3).

We know, from three sources, about John's direct response to church conflict. Firstly, his epistles insist that if there is hatred amongst Christians, it means they have lost their love for God (1 Jn 2:9, 4:12 - 5:2, 2 Jn 5-6, 3 Jn:11). Secondly, his message for the Ephesian believers, as given in the Revelation of Jesus, contains a warning that, if they do not return to their first love, their church will lose its lampstand (Rev 3: 4-5). Thirdly, Jerome records a tradition that at the end of John's life, when he had to be carried into Christian meetings, he had one simple message for the Ephesian church: "Little children, love one another." Imagine the impact of simply getting up and saying that every Sunday!

This is a consistent message about the primacy of love amongst Christians. So, does John's gospel beat the same drum? Like Luke, John gives a reason for writing his gospel: he wants his readers to have life by believing in Jesus (Jn 20:31). Unlike Luke, John claims to have been deliberately selective about what he includes (Jn 20:30); and, according to at least some manuscripts, he wrote so that his readers "may *continue* to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God". With this reading in mind, I want to examine the other indications that John has a pastoral purpose in placing his unique portrait of Jesus before the church.

Much of John's gospel is devoted to portraying the persecution meted out to Jesus by the Judean rulers. The dynamic in these passages is coldly hostile, in sharp contrast with other scenes which breathe the warm air of personal relationship. The same contrast appears in the words of Jesus: some people know him, he says, but others do not.<sup>24</sup> This knowledge is characterised in a number of ways by John. Firstly, he draws special attention to a disciple who was particularly close to Jesus (Jn 13:23, 19:26, 21:7 & 20).<sup>25</sup> Secondly, in John's gospel far more than in the synoptics, we see Jesus in *dialogue* with other people, sometimes on a single occasion (3:1-21, 4:1-26, 9:35-38, 18:28-38), but also on a continuing basis with his closest disciples (1:35-51, 4:27-38, 6:5-10, 6:60-71, 11:1-44, 13:1 - 16:33); we also get unique insight into Jesus' conversation with his Father (11:41-42, 12:27-28, 17:1-26). Thirdly, personal relationship is given special prominence by recording Jesus' metaphor of sheep that know the shepherd's voice and listen to him (10:1-30). And, as if to illustrate the relationship between Jesus and his sheep, Chs. 13-17 are full of a sense of intimate fellowship between Jesus and his friends.

In fact, John chooses to devote one quarter of his narrative to describing Jesus' interaction with his disciples during his last evening with them before being arrested. This is highly significant. Here John seems to be presenting Jesus as a model of pastoral care, preparing his disciples to face conflict. Remember the context: as he begins the Last Supper, Jesus knows that in future his disciples will have to work together and make their decisions without him. Now note the implications of what John records. With a towel in his hand, Jesus dramatically portrays what servant leadership means (13:1-17), he warns his disciples what they must face (15:18 -16:4, 16:32), and he promises the help of the Spirit (14:15-26, 16:7-15). Moreover, he treats his disciples with great sensitivity, alert to their grief at his warning that he must soon leave them (14:1-4 & 27, 16:5-6), and recognising that there is a limit to what they can bear at present (16:12). As John relates all this, it is almost as if he is saying, "Look how obtuse we were; Jesus could so easily have despaired

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<sup>23</sup> Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus (AD 190) states that John died in Ephesus, and Irenaeus that he wrote his gospel there.

<sup>24</sup> The word "know" and its cognates are used more than 120 times. Jn 8:19, 10:14 & 17:3 are important examples.

<sup>25</sup> The traditional view is that the "beloved disciple" is John himself.

of us at this moment. Yet Jesus prayed for us with great hope (Ch.17). Though he faced deep sorrow himself, he prayed that we would be full of joy (17:13).” Surely it is deliberate that Jesus’ prayer is placed as the climax of the pre-passion narrative. By doing so, John is saying in capital letters that the deepest desire of Jesus’ heart was that others would find the Father through the unity and love of his disciples (17:20-21).

If we were to ask John what he thought about conflict in the church, he might have said, “I realised at the first Easter that good relationships amongst Jesus’ followers are not optional. If they become locked in bitter conflict, the church has no message and one day it will die.” “A church like that,” he might add, “needs to re-ignite love for its Saviour. Its leaders should pray, reintroduce Christians to Jesus, and urge them to listen to their Shepherd.”

## Conclusions

A strong message emerges from this brief New Testament survey. It is clear that, to all of the New Testament authors, practical ministry meant dealing with conflict within the church. Furthermore, all of them responded to conflict in ways which depended on formative experiences in their own lives. Yet, although each person’s experiences were quite distinctive, for all of them faith in Christ was the *most* formative one.

I have identified a number of their key imperatives. Some are Godward in their thrust: respond to grace (Paul); seek wisdom (James); be open to the Spirit (Luke); cultivate a relationship with Jesus (John). Others focus on one’s response to fellow Christians: persevere with those who are slow to learn the way of Christ (Mark); deal with resentment swiftly (Matthew); challenge arrogance in leaders (Peter). What is striking is that these imperatives are all about the motivation for, and the practicalities of, maintaining real community - *koinonia* - amongst Christians. By contrast, the New Testament authors give no significant attention to *systems of church government*. That does not mean that there was *no* church government. Authority and order in the church were certainly valued, and important decisions were certainly made. But case-law was thin on the ground. The approach was generally to apply first principles to specific situations and to focus primarily on *right attitudes*.

Furthermore, as pastors, the New Testament writers did not merely commend these attitudes; they also modelled them. Their approach, faced with conflict in the flock, was to encourage and exhort, not to coerce. They saw prayer as their principal source of power.

Christians nowadays inhabit a very different world. And yet, although the presenting issues of conflict amongst them may be different, the spiritual challenges that the conflicts throw up remain much the same. Today, as then, a distinctively Christian way of facing conflict is to approach it in a spirit of grace and peace, and to be prepared to learn what that will look like, worked out in the everyday run of events.