Conflict resolution in the church[1]

Conflict is, alas, not foreign to the church of Christ. There may be conflict between individual members in the church, between members and the consistory, between the pastor and the consistory. Often such conflicts generate much talk in the congregation and take up a lot of the energy of the pastor and the officebearers. Other times, conflict is hushed up and only surfaces when, humanly speaking, the situation is beyond resolution.

Although there have been conflicts in church throughout its history, it is particularly today that many congregations are confronted with conflicts. They are related to and are caused by the fact that we are living in a time of change. Particularly today the church must be church of Christ in a world in which there are so many changes and in where things develop so fast that it is hard to keep up.

In the world of business and education, the subject of conflict resolution is often given due attention. People see the usefulness in avoiding conflict or repairing the damage wrought by conflict. On the other hand, the church seems more at a loss with conflict. Sometimes, people will often identify their cause with that of the truth and refuse any path towards resolution. Other times, people flagrantly put aside the truth for their own advantage. In the end, people in the church often choose to remove themselves from the conflict rather than resolve the alleged cause.

What resources does the church have to work at resolving conflict? As Reformed Christians, we believe that the Bible sheds light upon our path in all things, also in the matter of conflict resolution. Let me survey four conflicts in the church of Christ in the New Testament.

Four conflicts[2]

a) Self-sacrifice – self-service. Right after Jesus' announcement that he was about to be betrayed into the hands of men, there arose a dispute among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. In response to His self-sacrifice they brought out their self-centeredness. Jesus rebuked them by setting a little child beside Him and saying:

> *"Whoever receives this child in my name, receives me."*
>
> (Luke 9:43-46)

Christ pointed to a little child who does not have a concern for greatness.

Later, at the time of the Lord's supper (Luke 22:24f.), there arose a dispute among these disciples as to which one of them was considered to be the greatest. Christ responded by presenting Himself to them *"as one who serves"* (Luke 22:27). In the world most people seek power over other people. This is not to be so in the church. In church we are to seek the secret of serving. In the same context we read of the request of James and John, the sons of Zebedee that they be given positions of honour in His glory (Mark 10:37). When the ten other disciples heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Again Jesus, who had come to give his life for others, taught them that in God's kingdom *"true greatness is measured by our service, not by the number of our servants."*[3] The striking thing in these passages is that they did not understand the Gospel of Christ's suffering. As Christ spoke of his sacrificial death, they spoke of their pride. If we do not understand the salvation-significance of the cross of Christ, then all we are concerned to do is stake our claim for a place of honour in the coming world.

b) Community vs self-interest. The second conflict concerns a situation in the "infant" Christian church in Acts 6. There arose a "discontentment." The Grecian Jews complained about the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1). The issue was rivalry between the native Aramaic-speaking Jews and the Jews who spoke no Hebrew because they had lived abroad for centuries, had returned to Jerusalem but continued to speak Greek. To be sure, there had been tension between these groups in Jewish culture. But sadly, it was perpetuated within the church of Christ *"who by his death had abolished such distinction."* [4] How was this conflict resolved? The apostles called all the disciples together to discuss and deal with the conflict. And then something remarkable happened: They chose seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, who were Grecian Jews. They prayed and laid hands on them, and they began to exercise the office of *diakonia* with regard to "tables", whereas the apostles gave themselves continually to prayer, and to the *diakonia* of the Word (Acts 6:2, 4).

In this way the conflict was resolved, and there was much increase of spiritual blessing. The word of God spread, the number of disciples increased, and a large number of priests believed (Acts 6:7). It is a fine example of resolving conflict in the New Testament church.

c) Word vs. deed. The third conflict occurred between two leading apostles of Jesus Christ. In Galatians 2 we read Paul and Peter in open conflict in Antioch. It was not merely a quarrel between them; rather it was a conflict within the church with regard to the purity of doctrine and practising that doctrine. Peter at first had eaten[5] with the Antiochian believers. Then one day a group of Jewish Christians arrived in Antioch (Gal 2:12). From that time on Peter began to withdraw himself from the Gentile Christians and no longer ate with them. The rest of the Jewish Christians joined Peter with the result that 'even Barnabas 'was *"carried away into their play-acting."* [6] Then in the presence of everyone, Paul told Peter: You are now acting in insincerity. At first you allowed yourself the freedom of ignoring the Jewish traditions with respect to eating and drinking, when you ate with the Gentile Christians. Your conduct is not now prompted by your faith conviction, but *"by craven fear of a small pressure group."* [7] To Paul *"the truth of the gospel"* (Gal 2:14) was at stake, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and the work He finished on the cross (Gal 2:15-17). Since God justifies Jews and Gentiles in the same way, since He receives them into His fellowship, we may not separate ourselves from them on account of our traditions.

What happened as a result? Did the conflict continue? On the contrary, in 2 Peter 2:15 Peter calls Paul *"our beloved brother."* He speaks in such warm terms of Paul, although he acknowledges that his letters contain some things that are hard to understand (2 Pet 3:16). Apparently such an open confrontation is not to be avoided.

> *"If Paul had not taken his stand against Peter that day ... there would have been a permanent rift between Gentile and Jewish Christendom, 'one Lord, but two Lord's tables'."* [8]

Apparently there are times when brothers should not try to hush up the dispute or keep them for private discussion, but rather should be confronted publicly. Such a face-off today might lead to an unavoidable split in the church. But here Scripture shows how, when the truth of the gospel is at stake, the one leading apostle takes the other one to task in a truly brotherly way, in order to preserve the gospel.

d) Personal disagreement. A fourth conflict concerned a disagreement between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36-39. This conflict seems to be the opposite of the previous one. It does not concern *"the truth of the gospel"* as such but rather a minor matter. Paul and Barnabas had traveled together on the first missionary journey, taking a young relative of Barnabas, John Mark, with them. When Paul proposed to Barnabas that they should revisit the Galatian brothers, Barnabas agreed but insisted on taking his cousin John Mark again with them. However, Paul, who took a serious view of Mark's defection during the first missionary journey in Perga (Acts 13:13), considered this unwise. The two of them got into such a sharp disagreement about it, such an intense and passionate conflict, that they parted company. Imagine that! Paul face to face in open conflict with Barnabas, who, when all were still afraid of

him, had taken him by the hand and led him among the apostles (Acts 9:26,27). Barnabas was a good man, *"full of the Holy Spirit and faith"* (Acts 11:24). They disagreed so violently that they actually went separate ways. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus (Acts 15:39).

This is the last glimpse that Luke gives of Barnabas. This rupture ended their joint ministry. It seems that the church in Antioch sided with Paul, for the church commended Paul and Silas to the grace of the Lord (Acts 15:40). We do not read that the church commended Barnabas and John Mark to the grace of the Lord before they sailed for Cyprus.

The conflict was not permanent. Later in 1 Corinthians 9:6 Paul refers with appreciation to Barnabas as one who followed the same principle of self-support that Paul used. And in Colossians 4:10 and 2 Timothy 4:11 Mark turns out to be part of *"the Pauline circle, and, in striking contrast with the dissension he created by his early association with Paul (*Acts xv. 37f.).*"*[9] Paul writes to Timothy about John Mark that he is helpful to him in his ministry.

Additional data

The New Testament says more with regard to conflicts. In Philippians 3:16 the apostle Paul allows for disparate thinking on some secondary point. *"But he assures us, if the Lord has brought us to a common mind about Jesus Christ he will progressively bring us to a common mind about secondary things too."*[10] In 2 Timothy 2:24 the apostle says that the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome or contentious. He is ready, if it is possible, as far as it depends on him, to live at peace with everyone, and he exhorts others to do so (Rom 12:18). In 1Corinthians 9 he expresses a tender concern for "the weak." He is willing to become all things to all people so that by all possible means he might save some (1 Cor 9:22). His concern is that *"his conduct be such that he may not stand in their way of being saved."*[11] He tries to please everybody in every way, but his final concern is *"that they may be saved"* (1 Cor 10:33). In this concern he is creative.

> *"Personal considerations are totally submerged in the great aim of by all means saving some."*[12]

But there is a difference between these personal considerations and the apostolic considerations. He was able to submerge his personal considerations so that by all possible means he might save some. But in this latter apostolic purpose it was not possible for him to be considerate. Precisely then he would make clear that he did not shy away from conflict. For one thing, he knew the Lord had called him to proclaim Christ. He was under compulsion. *"Woe to me if I preach not the gospel"* (1 Cor 9:16). But he also uttered an anathema upon those who dared to change the gospel (Gal 1:9). He blames the Corinthians for so easily avoiding conflict and expresses alarm at their flirting with a Jesus other than the Jesus he preached, or receiving a different spirit from the one they received, or a different gospel than the one they had accepted (2 Cor 11:4). When he faces false teachers, then Paul does not say: 'To the false teachers I became like a false teacher.' On the contrary, then he insists on the full authority of his being an apostle of Jesus Christ. The curse of God *"rests upon any and every teacher who distorts the essence of the gospel and propagates this distortion."*[13] Paul applies it to angels as well as men (Gal 1:8f.). A gospel contrary to that which the apostle preached calls for an irremediable conflict. Paul distinguishes between approaching and pleasing men. The former he continually seeks to do. The latter he shies away from for the sake of the gospel, which is *"not according to man"* (Gal 1:11). So there conflict is unavoidable when the foundation of the Gospel is at stake, when the truth of the Gospel is at stake.

This is evident when Paul writes about the sins in the church in Corinth. He addresses the internal division in the church. He singles out the case of the incestuous man, with regard to which sin they have taken a certain amount of pride (1 Cor 5:1-13). He does not advocate *"that only the sinless can be members of the Christian community;"* rather, his concern is that *"those who persist in the very activities from which they have been freed through the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb* (v. 7) ... *do not belong to this new community."*[14]

To be sure, the apostle pleads for *"acceptance of one another despite diversity of attitude regarding certain things."*[15] There are things with regard to which the apostle says: Each one

should be fully convinced in his mind (Romans 14:5). We need to respect Christian freedom for the sake of coexisting amicably in the Christian fellowship. But there are other things with regard to which the apostle says that they do not square with the new life in Christ by the Spirit.

If a member of the church persists in a grievous sin from which Christ has redeemed him, then the church must recognize the conflict that has arisen and apply strict discipline. It must distance itself from him who has taken on the character of the world. "They must remove the man for their own sake, so that they may truly be the new people of God in Corinth."[16] In the name of the Lord Jesus they are to hand the man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature maybe destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord (1 Cor 5:5).

This, then, is included in dealing with conflicts in the church of Christ. This is in line with what Christ teaches in Matthew 18:15ff.

Basic guidelines[17]

On the basis of this overview, let us articulate the basic guidelines we need for dealing with conflict in the church of Christ, according to the Bible.

1. Wisdom. *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"* (Prov 9:10). The fear of the Lord is the proper posture before the face of the Lord. This will put all conflict under and before him.

2. Love for God and love for the church of Christ. Selfless, self-denying love to the brothers and sisters in the Lord is the key to dealing with conflict.

3. Patience. Particularly as consistory we need patience and also practical experience that teaches us patience. Without this practical experience in patience we blunder, even though we may have the best of intentions. Being impatient often goes together with intolerance. We also need endurance.

4. Biblical soberness. We need to be free from exaggerating and from being over-excited, whereby we lose sight of the true proportions.

5. Faith as a certain knowledge. Knowledge keeps in perspective that the church is the body of Christ. Christ preserves His church through all conflicts.

6. Faith as an assured confidence. Often conflicts in the church arise because we lack self-confidence. Lack of self-confidence often comes from a lack of confidence in God. Tension in the church often stems from a collective lack of faith as confidence.

7. Christian hope. Paul overcame conflicts through living out of that hope, by (or 'in') which we are saved Rom 8:24). One day we will overcome all tensions and conflicts.

8. The ability to be humble with regard to our role in resolving conflicts. Who says that we can resolve them? Or who says that we are the right person for it? What sort of pride is this? To think that ... will bring about a nervous breakdown or much frustration

9. Faithfulness in truth. Fidelity is of utmost importance. It will manifest itself in small things, will never be acknowledged, for instance, in committee minutes.

10. Thankfulness. Scripture says: *"In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you"* (1 Thess 5:18). God uses conflicts in this dispensation in a remarkable way, of which He alone knows the secret. Moreover, shall we not thank the Lord that He does not cast us aside in spite of our conflicts? We are not thankful for a conflict, but thankful in the midst of a conflict or troubles. It is true what the Psalmist said: *"Though I walk in the midst of trouble, Thou wilt preserve my life"* (Psalm 138:7).

1 April 25, 1992, Dr. W. van 't Spijker spoke on this topic at a conference of office bearers. Cf. W. van 't Spijker, "Conflict Beheersing in de Gemeente van Christus," *Ambtelijk Contact* 31 (June 1992), 70-78. On that occasion, in addition to various church historical angles and scriptural references, he brought out a number of psychological and sociological insights and perspectives. On April 5, 1997, he presented a sequel to this address. Cf. W. van 't Spijker, "Conflict Beheersing in de Gemeente van Christus," *Ambtelijk Contact* 36 (June 1997), 70-78. On that occasion he focused on some church historical lines and particularly scriptural lines.

2 Cf. W. van 't Spijker, opus cited, 73-75.

[3] Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Let's Study Mark* (Edinburgh" Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 174.

[4] John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 121.

[5] The expression "taking his meals" refers to the fellowship meals of the early Christians, but probably includes a reference to celebrating the Lord's supper, cf. W. Hendriksen, *Galatians* (NTC) (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 90; Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (NICNT) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 106.

[6] Ronald Y. K. Fung, op. cit., 109.

[7] John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way* (The Bible Speaks Today), (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 52.

[8] John R. W. Stott, op. cit. p. 52.

[9] Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Tyndale Bible Commentaries) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 172.

[10] Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Let's Study Philippians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 87.

[11] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 490.

[12] Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1958), 139.

[13] John R. W. Stott, op. cit., 25.

[14] Gordon D. Fee, op. cit., 224.15

[15] John Murray*, The Epistle to the Romans* II (NICNT) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), 178.

[16] Gordon D. Fee, op. cit., 215.

[17] Cf. W. van 't Spijker, op. cit. , 78.