

PEACEMAKERS AND TROUBLEMAKERS – AN AWKWARD BALANCE FOR CITIZENS, LAWYERS AND CHRISTIANS

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This paper will address the following topics:

1. What is “conflict”?
2. Good news - constructive conflict
3. Bad news - destructive conflict
4. An Awkward Balance – Promoting and Deterring Conflict
5. Causes of conflict
6. The range of interventions
7. Conflict within churches - a framework of biblical attitudes, skills and procedures
8. Outcomes – “peace” in the Bible
9. Outcomes - levels of “peace” and “resolution”
10. Conclusion - wisdom and the tolerance of ambiguity

(1) What is “Conflict”?

“Conflict” can be described broadly as the actual or perceived competition of interests. That is, one interest apparently will gain priority over another interest. An “interest” is something that a person subjectively considers to be important.

So, for example:

Party’s “Interest”	Other’s “Interest”
Values living trees	Values jobs from logging
Wants an “apology”	Does not consider that (s)he is to blame
Wants money for an injury	Wants to keep money; fears floodgate
Values consultative management	Wants speed, efficiency and top down management
Wants a “life” as an employee	Wants employees to multi-skill and work long hours
Values tradition and stability	Wants modernity and change
Deal in detail	Deal with big picture

Never lie	Lie when “necessary”
Tolerance of many beliefs	Intolerance of some beliefs
Assertion of individuality	Respect for community harmony

Within Christian (and other “religious”) communities, conflict has, is and always will be a constant or dormant presence.

For example, there has always been conflict amongst Christians such as:

Party	Other
Values conformity and order	Values diversity and personal freedom
Loves liturgy and ceremony	Loves spontaneity
Values stability	Values change
Fears conflict	Sees conflict as opportunity for personal development
Hangs onto one form of authority	Values many forms of authority
Believes truth is accessible and written	Believes truth is mysterious; often not accessible
Values reason	Values emotion
Emphasises telling others about God	Emphasises strengthening existing members of the church
Values political and monetary power	Distrusts positions of political power
Believes that violence is often justified	Believes that violence is rarely justified
Seeks to change the world by social activism	Emphasises personal piety and leaves big social changes until the second coming
Traditional music (eg organs and hymns)	Current music (eg electric guitars and choruses)
Rationality	Ecstatic utterance
Truth via cognitive exposition	Truth via art, music and literature

(2) Good News about Conflict

The good news about conflict is that a certain amount of it is essential to maintain the health of any society or church. In what follows, some of the constructive purposes of conflict are set out with a few illustrations of each.

1. Prerequisite to Social Reform

In our workplace, sports club, church, nation and global village there are many established patterns of behaviour which are evil, or at least “not right”. They represent the entrenched status quo which will only change under persistent verbal, financial, spiritual, or institutional attack. These include exploitative working conditions, slavery, child labour, racism, torture, tribalism, certain dating patterns, exploitation of

labour, official corruption, national greed, environmental devastation, false advertising, trendiness, and media banality to name a few.

In the church, or the community of Christians, these institutional evils include today, and have included in the past, anti-intellectualism, comfortable power, sale of indulgences, silence in the face of murder, genocide, child abuse, convenient rewriting of history, love of wealth, absence of generosity, comfortable piety, doctrinal neatness, belated trendiness, racism, and intolerance of diversity to name a few.

None of these entrenched patterns of “normal” evil have ever been broken (or ever will be) without the loud (and often martyred) voices and activities of people like Jesus of Nazareth, Jeremiah, Paul of Tarsus, John the Baptist, Luther, Thomas More, Cranmer, Wilberforce, Shaftesbury, Ghandi, Stephen Biko, Martin Luther King. These famous names hide millions of heroes whom orthodox history books and Hollywood have never named. Their names are written elsewhere.

Nearly every benefit we enjoy in modern industrialised democracies was hard won against a powerful “establishment” by repetitive conflict.

2. To Break from Mediocrity

Conflict has been, and is usually, necessary to effect any change away from mediocrity or ignorance. One key to learning and growth is to subject ideas, beliefs and practices to critique from “the opposition”. However, in Christian terminology, attempts “to mitigate the effects of the fall”, are often not welcomed due to fear, comfortable status quo or laziness. Discoveries of the printing press, surgery, the centrality of the sun in the universe, the spherical nature of the earth, the motor car, contraception, Parliaments, division of powers, most genres of art, music and literature, compulsory schooling, female suffrage, multi-skilling, computers, immunisation, healthy diets, psychology, shorter working hours etc have all met initially with rabid opposition—including from Christian and other “religious” communities.

3. To Balance Diverse Interests

Every family, organisation, church and nation has people with a variety of beliefs, behaviours and interests. Some degree of intra-group conflict is essential to define areas of individual priority, modify behaviours, “knock off rough edges”, learn respect for diversity, and to work as a team. Without such “consolidating conflict”, the team will soon experience “fragmenting conflict”. At its best, the conflict can lead to respect and encouragement for people with a variety of different gifts and abilities. When writing to the church in Corinth in 55AD, Paul emphasises this theme of strength in diversity. “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts... (1 Corinthians 12:12-30).

Many married couples can anecdotally report that it took months or years of conflict for each to recognise and respect that the other “marched to the beat of a different drummer”.

Such consolidating conflict is especially present in times of rapid organisational growth.¹

4. Conflict as a Normal Developmental Stage

Some psychological and organisational scholars suggest that conflict is a necessary prerequisite to healthy identity and maturity. It has been said that “a person who is not a radical by the age of 20 years, and a conservative by the age of 30 years, will never amount to anything”.

On this hypothesis, maturity requires a stage of rebellion against parents and scepticism towards authority. Without such developmental rebellion, arguably a person does not discover truth with passion and experience, but rather compliantly accepts the alleged wisdom of tradition.

5. Conflict as an Encouragement of Group Solidarity and Unselfishness

One noble and regular by-product of conflict is the emergence of unselfishness and heroism within a particular group. Suffering individuals often demonstrate compassion to fellow sufferers in prisoner-of-war camps, schools, persecuted churches, socialist or capitalist nations, hospitals, and battlefields.

The diminution of an external threat sometimes leads groups to disintegrate, or retreat into individualistic occupation. “Mateship” mutates to me, my, mine.

6. Conflict as a Source of Energy

A certain number of individuals throughout history have been energised by conflict and threats. In normalcy, they are couch potatoes; in chaos, Titans.

Dormant energy and creativity blossom under threat (especially of war) to invent medical drugs, surgical procedures, health reforms, care of children, innovative technology, education centres, music and literature.

Again, it is ironical that so much energy for good can spring from conflict. Some Christians can also relate how their comfortable quietness was replaced by high energy and motivation in their service of God, only after being jolted into activity by some confrontation (with death, suffering, persecution, disease).

7. Conflict as a Source of Endurance

Conflict, like suffering, can make or break people. Some people are shaped in the school of hard knocks in preparation for roles as leaders. They exhibit the endurance of a long distance runner and persist in a difficult role despite constant attacks.

Without this training and toughening, they probably would not survive the intense pressures experienced when they rise to positions of leadership.

8. Conflict as a Sobering Reminder of Human Limitations

On occasion, conflict and suffering appear to be educational vehicles used to demolish pseudo-kingdoms of god upon the earth. Parents who model the “perfect family” suddenly are confronted by a tear-away youngest child; countries which proclaim

¹ eg Rubin, Pruitt & Kim, *Social Conflict, Escalation, Stalemate and Settlement* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994 pp 18-21).

premature utopia are ripped apart by corruption and scandal; mega-churches, glass cathedrals and purified sects are fractured by factionalism, adultery and missing funds; universities and corporations which sell salvific “success” find that they cannot walk the talk for long.

Is God’s educational hand sometimes present in the collapse of these successive Towers of Babel? The successive collapse of new Edens into factionalism may be a harsh reminder that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”, and that in the last days certain glories will fade away.

9. Conflict as an Opportunity for Personal Change and Re-evaluation of Life Goals

Nearly everyone can testify, upon reflection, of the profound effect for good that certain conflicts have had upon their lives. A clash with a teacher over work-habits; an arrest by a police officer; a bashing by a bully in a playground; a lengthy argument with a greenie or Christian colleague; a bitter exchange with a corrupt salesperson a politician, or a violent partner; a long flight from the Hound of Heaven; a lengthy debate with a boss about work conditions, or pollution of a river; a daunting battle with self over life goals, depression or illness. Each of these conflicts have provided forks in the road toward despair or inspiration. Many more illustrations can helpfully be provided by asking people to write out three key conflicts in their lives which, in their opinion, have “changed their lives”.

Conversion to Christianity and Christ is sometimes described as “surrender”, or “turning around”, or “running the race”, or fighting the fight.

Once again, there are profound ironies here. We often seek the quiet and comfortable life. Yet most of our life histories will confirm loudly that the most important growth and enrichment came through incidents or epics of conflict and suffering.

Of course, the Bible, church history and world history also depict constant “helpful” conflicts between:

- God and humans
- Humans and “the world, the flesh and the devil”
- God and the devil
- Humans, by means of debate, encouragement, reprimand, parable, boycott, revolution, reformation, demonstration
- Humans and self – the inner struggle
- Humans and the environment

(3) Destructive Aspects of Conflict

The concept of “destructive” is always difficult to measure. What is destructive for one person may be constructive, or even salvific, for another. Conflict which is damaging for one culture, may be normal or even ignored in another.

Nevertheless, the following is an attempt to unpack the ways in which conflict (“the actual or perceived competition of interests”) causes harm in human affairs:

- Conflict managed ineptly
- Lasting negative psychological and structural changes (residues) from “escalated” conflict
- Conflict with objectively evil means or goals

1. Conflict is Handled Ineptly

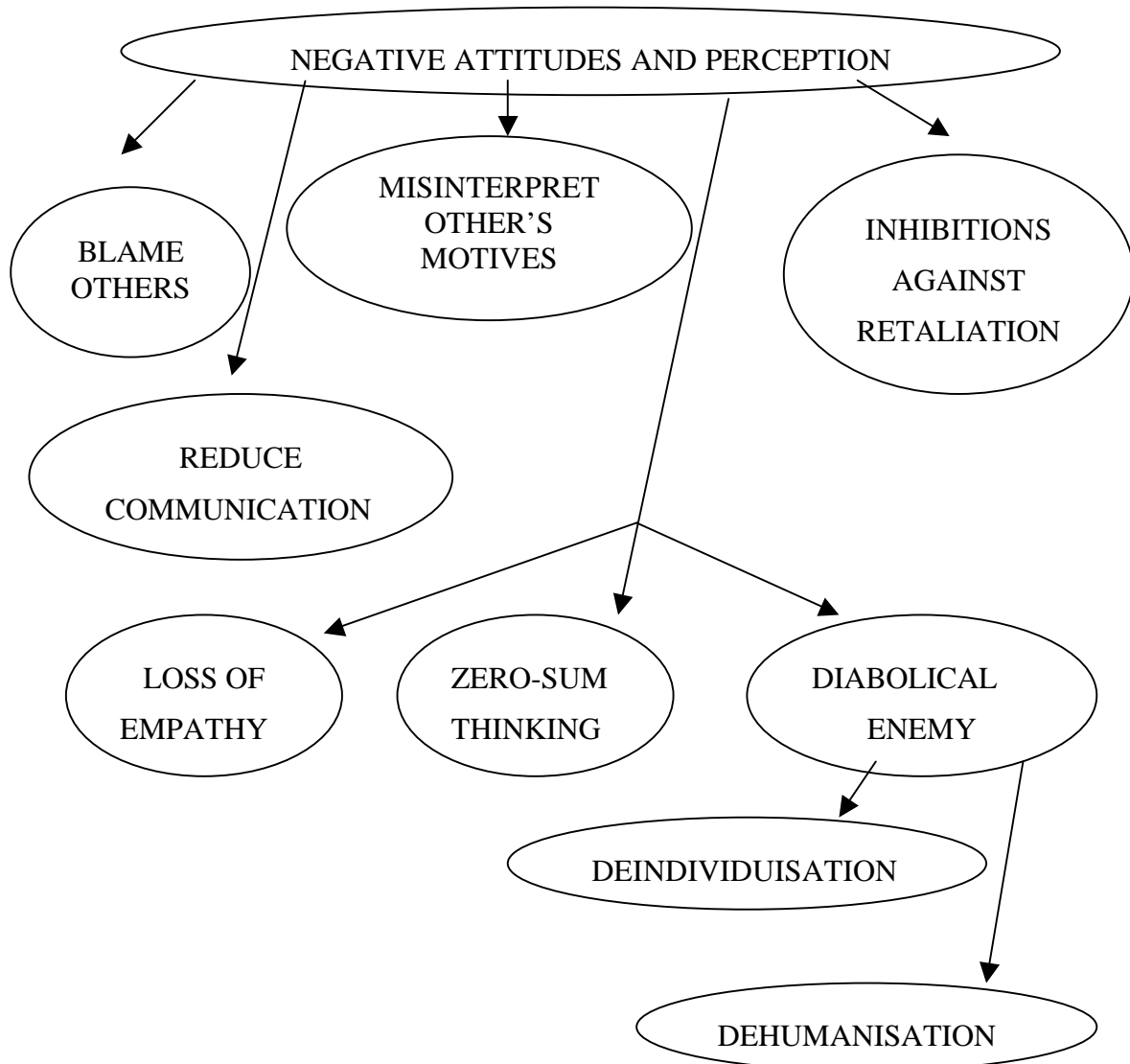
Some conflict can be compared to a virus, or to nitroglycerine. When handled skilfully, it can be harmless or helpful. However, we often respond to “normal” conflict with ignorance, habit and lack of skills. The disputants use premature gossip, silence, avoidance, aggressive language, finger-pointing, written denunciation, public ridicule, shallow forgiveness, manipulation, shunning, sacking, excommunication, damage to property, or physical assault. The virus spreads.

We all have experienced some exceptions to this pattern. By nature or nurture some individuals demonstrate intuitive wisdom in the face of conflict. For example, mothers and diplomats often skilfully select from their own repertoire of silence, changing the topic, humour, reprimand, tantrum or threat, with uncanny diagnostic wisdom.

2. Lasting Negative Psychological and Sociological Changes (Residues) from “Escalated” Conflict

When conflict is handled unskilfully, it causes some long term changes for the worse. “The toothpaste soon gets out of the tube and cannot be put back in”. There is a considerable amount of fascinating scholarship on this topic of “changes that endure” (See Rubin Pruitt and Kim, and bibliography therein). Even with high levels of skill, motivation and resources, peacemakers often feel powerless to reverse these consequences of escalated conflict. The disputants are permanently scarred. These enduring changes are psychological *and* structural. They can be summarised briefly by various charts and lists as follows:

EVOLUTION OF CONFLICT – PSYCHOLOGICAL CHANGES WHICH FOLLOW AND CAUSE ESCALATION²



² See Rubin, Pruitt and Kim, *Social Conflict* at pp.83-99

EVOLUTION OF CONFLICT³

Structural Changes which Cause Escalation and Make “Solutions” Less Accessible

- ◆ **Competitive Norms, Group Think, and “Right Thinking” Dominate.** (“This is the correct analysis of the conflict... We believe...”; “All good managers / unionists / Christians / Serbians know that ...”; “Don’t read those books, that propaganda”).
- ◆ **Vested Interest Groups.** (Groups of people emerge who gain status and money from the conflict eg. union leaders, expert witnesses, lawyers, weapons manufacturers, army leaders etc.).
- ◆ **Moderates are Drawn into Opposing Camps.** (Doves become hawks; “I was willing to talk to them until they did ...”).
- ◆ **Entrapment.** (“We have invested too much in this fight to withdraw now”; “We have already paid \$40,000 in legal fees”; “We have already lost 57,000 troops”).
- ◆ **Militant Leaders Appointed.** (“Let the lawyers decide”; “Fred is not much of a manager, but at least he will stand up to them” etc.).
- ◆ **Group Cohesiveness.** (“We must not show any weakness or division”; “Either you are for us or against us”; “We meet behind closed doors”; “We have sworn allegiance to ...” etc.).
- ◆ **Efficient Division of Labour in the Group.** (“We have set aside two employees to prepare the documents”; “Mary is the fundraiser; Joanne is the publicist; the lawyers are preparing an avalanche of paper; our rent-a-crowd is ready for the demonstration” etc.).⁴

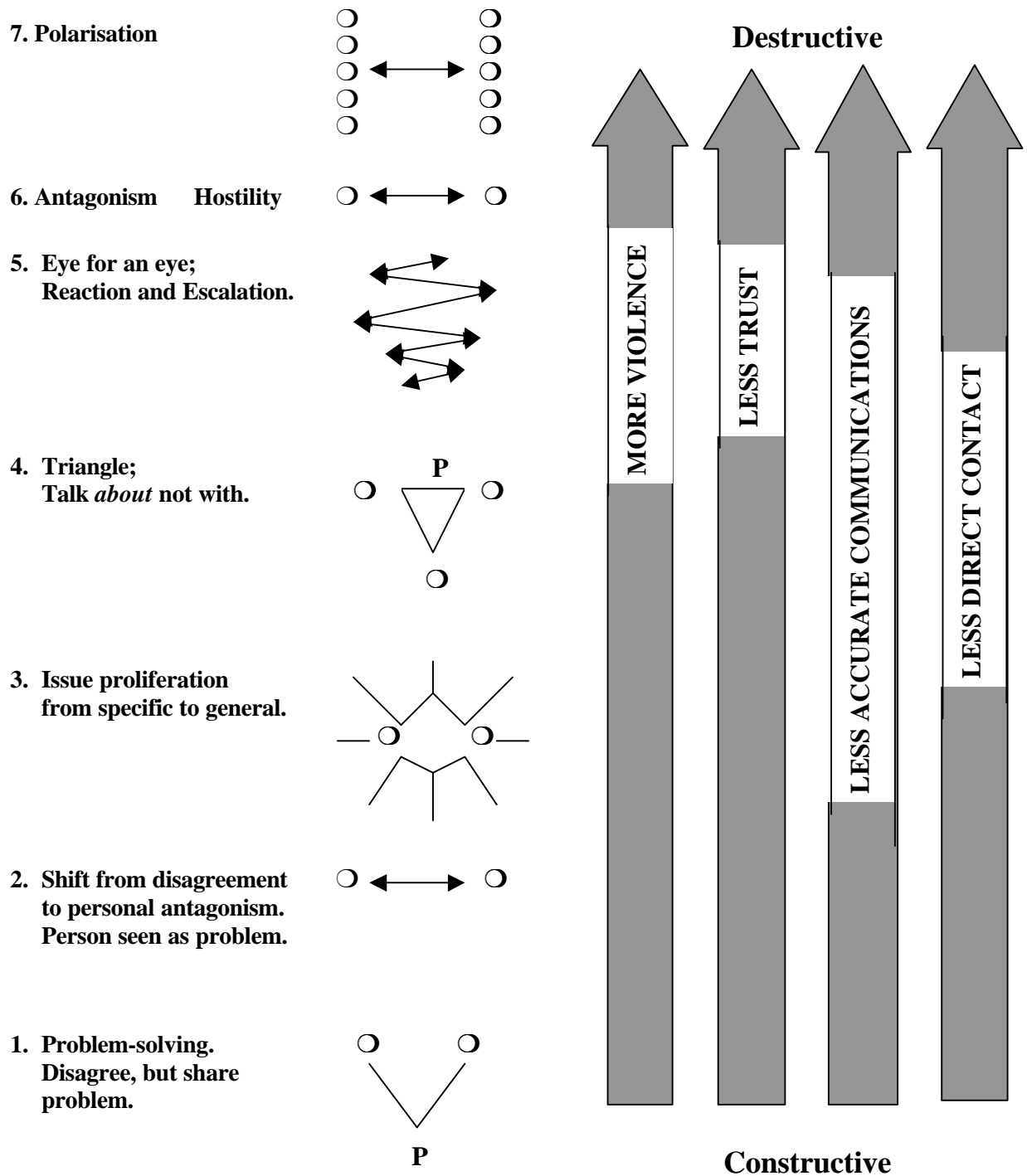
Many other writers have created useful visual images to demonstrate how “things change” as conflict escalates. “Escalation” is itself a description of those structural and psychological changes.

For example, John Paul Lederach has developed the following helpful chart on the “Social Transformation of Conflict”. This diagram has been used by the writer during mediation intakes to help clients analyse the history of their organisational conflict. Clients often smile when they discover visually that they have walked a well-trodden and documented path.

³ J H Wade *Representing Clients at Mediation and Negotiation*, April 2000 (pp9-14)

⁴ See generally Rubin, Pruitt & Kim, *Social Conflict* (1994) Chs 6 & 7

Social Transformation of Conflict⁵



⁵ John Paul Lederach, Mennonite Conciliation Service, 1989

Speed Leas, a renowned mediator of organisational and church conflicts, actually ranks the degree of escalation by number, thereby showing disputants how much work must be done to “resolve” the conflict, and how the range of remedies narrows.

Levels of Conflict and Tension in Organisations

1. Problem to solve

Characteristics:

- desire to problem-solve
- general focus on problem itself
- some risk-taking between sides
- general openness about people, information

Intervention Strategy:

- mutual problem-solving; consensus-building
-

2. Disagreement

Characteristics:

- self-protection; possible desire for help
- efforts to point out inaccuracies of other side
- growing emotional level, edginess
- non-disclosure of information

Intervention Strategy:

- mutual problem-solving possible; work at trust and team-building
-

3. Contest

Characteristics:

- positional bargaining
- perceptual distortions and false assumptions
- dialogue is uneasy
- subgroups and coalitions emerge

Intervention Strategy:

- attempt mutual problem-solving; use structure, ground rules
-

4. Fight/flight

Characteristics:

- desire to withdraw or cause other to withdraw
- willing to hurt or humiliate the other
- winning “on principles” more important than problem-solving
- factionalism and negative stereotyping

Intervention Strategy:

- authority of leadership; majority vote
-

5. Intractable

Characteristics:

- desire to destroy opposition
- any means justify the ends
- “the fight must go on”
- ideological warfare

Intervention Strategy:

- enforce separation; expel disruptive parties⁶
-

⁶ Adapted from Speed Leas, *Moving Your Church Through Conflict* (Alban Institute, 1985)

3. Conflict with Objectively Evil Means or Goals

This is a difficult category of destructive conflict to describe in any helpful way. In its most extreme forms, it is easy to provide examples, such as – German efforts to exterminate Jews, intellectuals, and gypsies by systematic murder between 1936-1945; and a thousand other racist and murderous governments in South Africa; Kosovo; Ethiopia, Uganda, Somalia, East Timor, Spain, Italy, etc; and of course, the murderous campaigns of the Inquisition, the Crusaders, the slave trade, and the Spanish Conquistadors, clothed in thin veneers of rationalised righteousness or religion.

However, after such a list of “clear” horrors, the categories became murky. This is because the very nature of the psychology of escalation of conflict is that we always label the “other side” as objectively improper, illegal, unethical, or evil in both their goals (“to destroy us, the environment, peace, truth etc”) and their means (“by lies, deception, power, trickery, violence, threats, corruption, litigation etc”).

Thus this destructive category of conflict provides a convenient rationalisation for both governments and litigation lawyers; the IRA and the British government; for the Arabs and the Israelis; for various Protestant and the Catholic tribes; for both Muslim and Hindu tribes; for both employer and union groups; for the injured and insurance companies; for environmentalists and developers etc. Each pair echoes the cry “My cause and methods are righteous (or at least justifiable); yours are not”. However, the comparative evils of means and goals are now too difficult to measure in the complex history of motive, misinformation, misunderstanding and massacre (or lies and litigation). Lawyers are well aware of the difficulties of unstitching degrees of righteousness amongst warring families, businesses and themselves.

Some “outside” analysts try to re-categorise some such entrenched conflicts as examples of mutual ignorance and poor skills in handling the conflicts in their “early” days (perhaps 2 or 200 years ago?), rather than as initially examples (as the disputants would like to rationalise) of 100% evil goals and means on the part of the “other”.

(4) An Awkward Balance – Promoting and Deterring Conflict

Herein lies the task of good citizens and of Christians – to distinguish between destructive and constructive conflicts, to promote the latter and to prevent and manage the former. Of course, this is a breathtaking task. In simpler terms, the task is to promote “good” conflict and deter “bad” conflicts. Given the tendency of conflict to turn nasty, it often seems a lot safer to just minimise all its forms.

The bible, and the history of Christians, holds both of these roles as peacemaker and troublemaker in an awkward tension. No clear recipe is provided to get the “right” balance. The history of Christians shows us that “we have done what we ought not to have done; and we have not done what we ought to have done.”

Examples of the unresolved tension in the bible between peacemaker and troublemaker can be illustrated briefly in the following chart:

Peacemaker	Troublemaker
1. “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19)	1. “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19)
2. “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you...” (Matthew 18:15)	2. “If [your brother] refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as [an outsider].” (Matthew 18:17)
3. “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.” (Acts 15:19)	3. “[Paul and Barnabas] had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company” (Acts 15:39)
4. “The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them.” (Acts 15:6-7)	4. “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn – a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.” (Matthew 10:34-36)
5. “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgivings be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may have peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Timothy 2:1)	5. “Now listen, you rich people, weep and wait because of the misery that is coming upon you...Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you.” (James 5:1, 4)
6. “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.” (James 3:17-18)	6. “Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves? (Matthew 21:12)
7. There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to heal a time to mend a time to be silent a time to love a time for peace	7. and a time to kill and a time to tear and a time to speak and a time to hate and a time for war (Ecclesiastes 3)
8. (Jesus speaking) “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace.” (John 16:33)	8. “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

How then can the right choice be made in each situation? This is a question asked by every competent medical doctor and other skilled helper. Some helpful guidelines are found in the vast literature on causes of conflict and range of possible interventions.

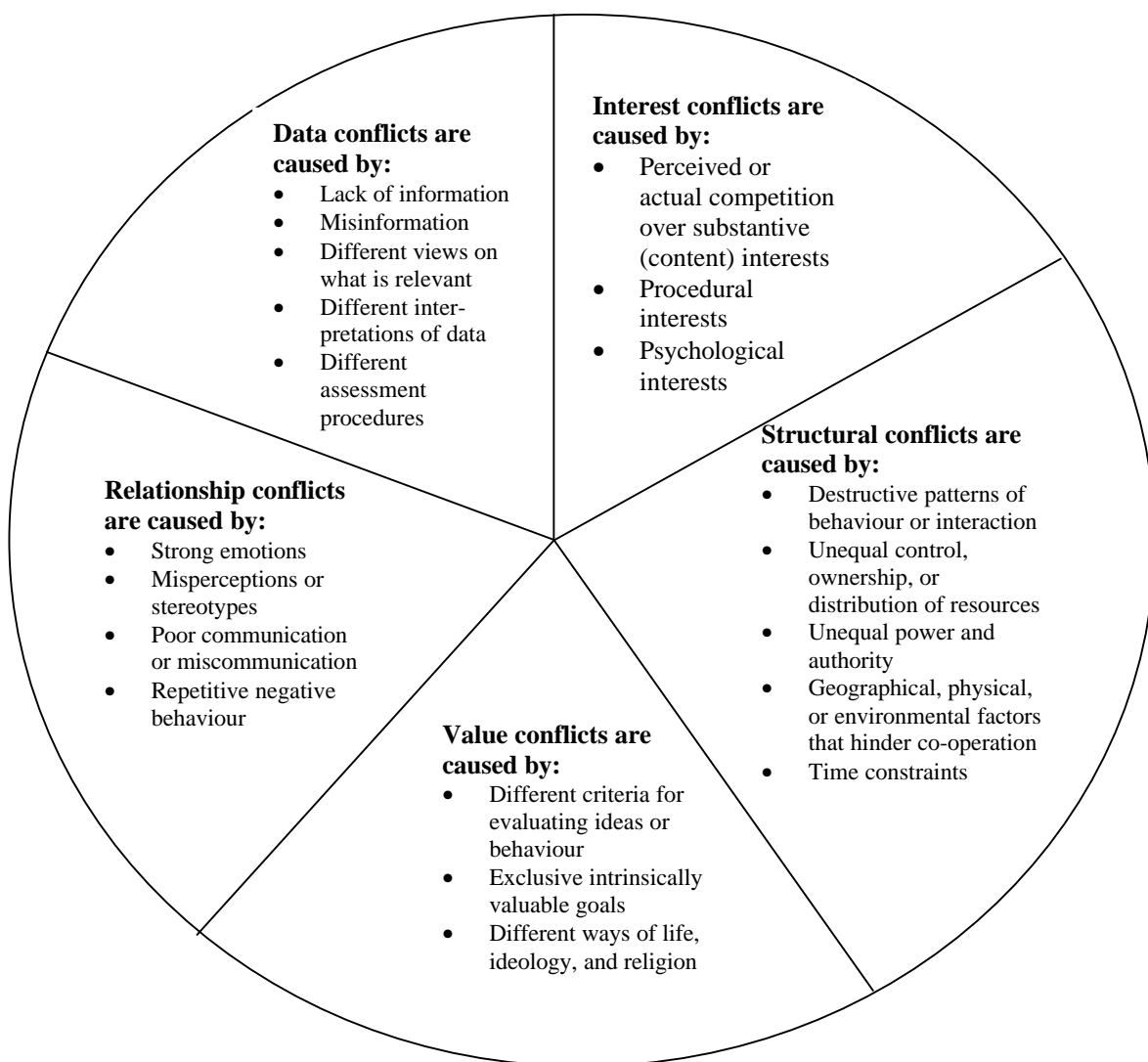
(5) Causes of Conflict

Before intervening to assist a person involved in conflict, a skilled helper or representative should make some attempt to determine:

1. the causes of the conflict.
2. the degree of escalation which has occurred.

Wrong diagnosis will inevitably lead to the wrong intervention. As with physical illnesses, a correct diagnosis is needed before appropriate treatment can occur.

There are many helpful models developed to assist in the diagnosis of causes of conflict. One particular favourite is sometimes known as “Moore’s pizza”, or “Moore’s circle of conflict”. This is a diagrammatic representation of the five (often overlapping) causes of conflict developed by Christopher Moore.⁷



⁷ C. Moore, *The Mediation Process: practical strategies for resolving conflict* 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers 1996).

(6) The Range of Interventions to Conflict

Many catalogues have been written in an attempt to systematise the variety of human responses to conflict. The catalogues are not prepared in an evaluative fashion, but rather as a description.

For example, Rubin, Pruitt and Kim suggest four basic responses of yielding, avoidance, contending and problem-solving. These can be expanded readily into shock, denial, avoidance, gossip, public ridicule, social isolation, economic isolation, problem solving, negotiation, negotiation with the assistance of another, imposing an authoritative decision (boss or arbitrator), imposing an authoritative decision by “state” decision-maker (a judge), a vast catalogue of types of confrontation and manipulation, threats of violence, actual violence, systematic violence.

Once a helpful catalogue in the supermarket of conflict responses is created, this leads inevitably to the more difficult ethical and strategic diagnostic question – which intervention or response at what time for which type of conflict? For Christians, this question is particularly important as we have special responsibilities, watching neighbours, and often a poor reputation for not walking the talk.

(7) Conflict Within Churches – A Framework of Biblical Attitudes, Skills and Procedures

In my opinion, the Bible is not aimed to be an encyclopedia on all areas of helpful knowledge. Nevertheless, there is a framework or skeleton of teaching on the management of conflict within Christian communities. This framework of attitudes, process and skills can be helpfully expanded by the vast learning on conflict management. The author particularly recommends the writings and instruction of Speed Leas, church conflict consultant attached to the St Alban Institute in California. The multiple layers of complexity in diagnosis and intervention go far beyond the few basic starting principles mentioned in this paper.

What follows are fourteen biblical directions about attitudes, process and skills for Christians managing the church.⁸ It should be emphasised that lists such as this can be shortened, lengthened, expanded dramatically, debated and corrected as biblical interpretation continues. The list is not sequential. The skills and attitudes are mandatory. Other procedural steps and escalating interventions are “optional” in the sense that they require wisdom and judgment to choose the right one for the right conflict. **Some** of these guidelines can be extended to conflicts **outside** the church.

Christians in conflict should:

1. Each focus on trying to please and honour God, 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1; John 8:29; Psalm 19:14; John 14:15-31) and remember that a host of critics and seekers are watching our role-modelling (1 Peter 3:15-16; 1 Peter 2:12).
2. Each work first on removing the log(s) from our own eyes (Matthew 7:3-5). This is a humbling experience – but should not necessarily stop us proceeding onto later steps.

⁸ See particularly K. Sande, *The Peacemaker – A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (2nd ed, 1997) and bibliography at the end of this paper.

3. Each decide whether or not this is an appropriate situation to “overlook the offence” (Proverbs 19:11; Colossians 3:13; Proverbs 17:14, Romans 12:18). This may amount to potential denial and avoidance. But on many occasions a conscious decision to agree to disagree, or to forgive quietly and move on is a wise intervention. Here, an ability to laugh and not take oneself too seriously may be the right biblical response (see Appendix A for congregational value differences).
4. Pray for all involved in the conflict, especially the “opposition” (Luke 6:27-28). The repeated act of prayer for the “enemy” has a profound effect on deterring unnecessary escalation, rationalisation and self-delusion.
5. Vigorously guard the tongue and gossip. (James 3:5-6; Proverbs 12:18; 13:3; Proverbs 26:20).
6. Remember the golden rule – “do unto others as we would have them do to us” (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:27-28). This regular procedural check, like steps 1, 2, 4 and 5, again provides a helpful brake on the standard dynamics of escalation, self-righteousness and rationalisation. “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink” (Romans 12:20-21).
7. Take the initiative and go and discuss the conflict with the “opposition” (before we engage in other “religious” activities). (Matthew 5:23-24). That is, do not wait for others to begin the difficult dialogue. Of course, this intervention, like all interventions, stands in direct tension with other responses such as 3 – “overlooking the offence”. Again, it takes wisdom, consultation and experience to match the right intervention with the right conflict (“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone”: Romans 12:18).
8. In any conversation, be an excellent listener (James 1:19). This difficult skill is now expanded upon in many helpful books and articles. Hopefully, most of us have at least one friend who role models listening for us.
9. In any conversation, seek to “build up” and encourage other people in certain areas, even if asking them to change in others (1 Peter 3:9; Proverbs 15:23). This principle is again echoed in modern communication and dispute resolution literature – “seek the good in all people”; “gain trust before giving advice”; “listen hard for any possible areas of agreement”.

Once again, equivalent biblical directions for Christians may seem too trite and pithy. For most of us, the direction hides complexity. This is because the development of these skills takes years of reflective practice and watching outstanding role models.

10. “Confront” and “rebuke” the person(s) who continues to cause offence (Matthew 18:15). Because this intervention is difficult, it is often not attempted. We revert to “don’t rock the boat”, “don’t cause bad vibes”, “don’t be such a hypocrite”, or “what if you are wrong?”

No doubt, there are many skilled degrees of “confronting” and “rebuking”, from the humorous to the highly assertive. We all have vivid examples of when this intervention was appropriate and deft; when it was appropriate, yet ham-fisted; and when it was both inappropriate and clumsy.

11. “Confront” and “rebuke” repetitively (Matthew 18:15). The timing, process, place and people should be strategically varied, but this intervention involves a dripping tap, not a single event.

12. Take one or two others along to be witnesses to (and perhaps facilitators of) the discussions (Matthew 18:15-20).

Obviously again, there are important unstated “details” such as who to take, in what capacity, when, where, how to raise the topic, how to respond to resistance, who talks, who listens etc?

This New Testament process reflects many modern dispute system designs in that the available interventions are progressively more public, coercive, procedurally risky and expensive. Nevertheless, “loop-backs” to earlier steps such as private meetings, apologies and forgiveness are always possible. By way of analogy, disputants can still privately settle at the door of the mediation, arbitration or court. As lawyers are well aware, the presence of two or more witnesses *may* assist to reduce the data chaos of “he said, she said” which prevails after private conversations.

13. “Tell it to the church” (O; Matthew 18:17). In dispute system design language, this intervention has escalated into the realm of arbitration. The disputing Christians are required (presumably by the church) to submit the details of the dispute to a church court of some description (and *not* to elect readily to use a state court – 1 Corinthians 6:1-8).

This raises many questions around what lawyers call “due process” or “procedural justice”. What should the qualifications of the judges be? What evidence? What time limits? What documents? What helpers permitted? What publicity?

Once again, church history is filled with illustrations of gross procedural injustice effected by church courts presided over by tin-gods, and ham-fisted zealots. Some helpful historic role-models are needed to show how success is at least possible in this situation.

14. “Treat as an unbeliever” (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13). Where the church court or arbitration finds gross fault on the part of a Christian “non-conformist”, then formal excommunication is a possible outcome. Even though sacking is an available biblical sanction, once again does not provide details of due process, duration or restoration. Nor does the passage or history suggest that the decision of the church will always be right!

However, the fact that courts sometimes err does not undermine the statistical usefulness of courts when compared to other long-term decision-making alternatives such as decisions by CEOs, cliques or vigilantes.

Jesus’ own life is marked by persistent generosity to insiders, and daily association with various non-conformists outside the church. Therefore, presumably even where the drastic intervention of excommunication is imposed on a Christian, it should normally be viewed as a “temporary” state? This drastic, but occasionally statistically necessary, intervention of excommunication should perhaps be placed in tandem with the question “when, and on what conditions, should a child be excommunicated from his/her family?” (or should a family be excommunicated from its child?). The glib answer is “sometimes”.

Is there a distinctive “biblical” or “Christian” rule-book on managing conflict which differs from the wisdom accumulated in mainstream conflict management practice and literature? This writer’s answer at present is equivocal. The best secular and the best sacred insights appear to overlap substantially. (There is no benefit in comparing best to worst.) However, two dramatic differences exist in

the previous list of 14 principles – namely 1 and 4. That is, Christians are commanded to develop the attitude of seeking to please and honour God; and the skill and habit of praying for the “opposition”.

Summary

To summarise, Christians are *commanded* to manage conflict within the church with:

1. **Attitudes or “hearts”** which seek to please God and provide role-models to watching others.
2. **Skills** which include being an excellent listener; encouraging others; the ability to say hard things winsomely; wisdom to make appropriate choices of interventions; controlling one’s own tongue and gossip.
3. **Mandatory procedures** which include removing logs from our own eyes; prayer for the opposition; doing unto others as we would want done to us; consulting and choosing which intervention at what time is probably best for which conflict.
4. **Optional procedures** including:
 - Overlooking the offence
 - Planning meetings wisely
 - Taking the initiative to meet and talk
 - “Confronting” and “rebuking”
 - Taking “witnesses” to a meeting
 - Setting up an ad hoc or institutional church court and using “due process” (procedural justice)
 - Exclusion of a Christian from a certain Christian community (at least for a time-out)

(8) Outcomes – “Peace” in the Bible

In the Old Testament, the word for “peace” in classical Greek (εἰρήνη) occasionally means the absence of war. However, more commonly the concept of “peace” is translated from the Hebrew word “shalom”.

Shalom is far higher on the scale of aspiration and success than the absence of violence (important as that building block is)

“*Shalom* is a comprehensive word, covering the manifold relationships of daily life, and expressing the ideal state of life in Israel. Fundamental meaning is ‘totality’ (the adjective *shalem* is translated ‘whole’), ‘well-being’, ‘harmony’, with stress on material prosperity untouched by violence or misfortune. Peace is ‘the untrammelled, free growth of the soul [ie person] . . . harmonious community; the soul can only expand in conjunction with other souls . . . harmony, agreement, psychic community; . . .

every form of happiness and free expansion, but the kernel of it is the community with others, the foundation of life”⁹

In the New Testament, the “big” shalom concept of peace was repetitively glimpsed in Jesus’ life. Then “shalom” was actually achieved in one breathtaking victory (an analogy to D-Day on 5 June, 1944) over corruption, torture and execution. This tension between the “already and the not yet” of right relationships continues until the Second Coming. (There was still a long period of mopping up after D-Day).

“Miracles are signs of the Kingdom in removing disorder and creating wholeness (Mark 5.35, Luke 7.50, John 7.23), but the peace of unbroken union with the Father in the midst of adversity, which is the supreme gift of Jesus to the disciples and which is to be distinguished from all forms of worldly security (John 14.27), is dependent upon his final victory over the chief enemies, sin and death (John 16.33). Hence it is that after the resurrection the Lord greets his disciples with ‘Peace’, shows them the marks of the passion and passes on to them his own mission and victory over sin (John 20.19-23,26). The life, death and resurrection of Christ can be called God’s gospel of peace for all men (Acts 10.36:cf. Isa. 52.7, Eph. 6.15.2.17; cf Isa. 57.19.)”¹⁰

These grand kinds of peace and harmonious relationships (when justice and peace kiss):

1. are yearned for throughout history and occasionally experienced for fleeting moments;
2. were glimpsed in startling fashion many times during Jesus’ short life on earth;
3. were dramatically and bloodily made possible at Jesus’ resurrection;
4. are responsibilities (“ought” propositions) for all leaders in positions of power;
5. are responsibilities which Christian communities have been *ordered* to aim for. (Though we as Christians are often reminded that our responsibility and reality often diverge).

“Life in the Church and the calling of peace are coincident (Col. 3.15). In the Church, which is the sphere where the powers of the Kingdom are operative through the Spirit (cf. Gal. 5.22 for peace as a fruit of the Spirit), there is to be a harmony of righteousness and joy because the weaker brother is not grieved by the overriding of his conscience (Rom 14.15-17).”¹¹

⁹ Alan Richardson ed, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, London: SCM, 1975 p 165

¹⁰ Ibid, A Richardson ed at p 166

¹¹ Ibid, A Richardson p 166.

Mediators, diplomats and lawyers rarely see grand shalom peace emerge after a dispute. Occasionally, there are tears, apologies, forgiveness, wine, cheese, pizza, respect, thanks, generosity and resolution to work together in the future – occasionally. Lawyers and mediators are regularly criticised for not aiming higher on the “peace” scale than a begrudging settlement and exchange of dollars. Nevertheless, lesser varieties of peace are often welcome outcomes in Hobbesian cultures of fear, force and fraud.

“Successful” Outcomes and Obedience

Christians are not commanded to achieve successful outcomes when managing conflict. We are commanded to be “faithful” – that is, adopt certain attitudes, apply certain skills and processes. The short-term outcomes may be very disappointing to us. Conflict may escalate and rage. Jesus does not say anywhere that obedience will necessarily lead to short-term reconciliation, harmony, or even the absence of violence.

Nevertheless, it is personally encouraging when some level of apparently “successful” outcome is achieved on this earth.

(9) Levels of “Peace” and “Resolution”

In the literature on conflict management, there is regular discussion of:

1. What are the different possible levels of ‘resolution’ of any conflict?
2. What level of “resolution” and “peace” can be achieved by a particular process, or series of processes?

On the first question “resolution” or “peace” can be achieved at many shallow or deep levels. For example, to create some arbitrary and overlapping levels:

Level 1 – Violence Reduction Short-term

Violence is reduced temporarily (time to bury the dead; temporary ceasefire; police guards installed; agreement to come no closer than 200 metres etc).

Level 2 – Violence Reduction Long-term

Violence is reduced long term (establishment of zones of influence; buffer zones; prohibition of weapons; hostage exchange; inter-marriage between tribes etc).

Level 3 – Safe Isolation

Disputant retreat to physical isolation (“I will never contact you again”; “I will never trade with you again”; “we are moving far away”; “I think you should go to your room before I say something that I will regret” etc)

Level 4 – Minimum Cooperation

Hatred, stereotypes and distrust remain, but some cooperative venture, eg sport or commerce, recommences (“Never turn your back on them, but we need their timber/oil/fish”; “I will never forgive them for what they have done, but our children will eventually play soccer with their children”.)

Level 5 – “Settle” , but Deep Residues Remain

An individual monetary or property dispute is “settled”, but belief systems and emotions remain conflicted (“We got the money from the insurers, but they are still greedy and deserve to suffer”; “I finally won the piano from my father-in-law, but he is an unscrupulous and evil man” etc).

Level 6 – Doubt Created about Beliefs and Behaviours

Disputants begin to set aside some of the emotions, belief systems and structures attached to escalated conflict. That is, they begin to create cognitive dissonance for themselves between their own entrenched beliefs, emotions and behaviours. Eg

- “We shook hands.”
- “We both apologised for the past.”
- “I realised that some of the new members were genuine.”
- “It was the first time I had understood some of the pressures on him at that time.”
- “We agreed that we would no longer communicate via lawyers.”

Level 7 – Risk-taking and “Trust”

Disputants immediately take small or big “risks” by making themselves vulnerable. (eg “I will deliver the machinery to you by Friday”; “I am very sorry for what happened last week”; “I am handing that important client over to you”; “We will move one quarter of our troops/guns/writs/furniture by 4pm on Saturday”.)

Level 8 – Personal Insight and Investment in Future Relationship

Disputants acknowledge their own weaknesses and establish a realistic communication system to manage future conflict (eg “Look as you know I sometimes fly off the handle; what should we do if, I lose patience in the future?”; “How can we set up a trouble-shooting team to anticipate these problems” etc.)

Level 9 – Forgiveness and future Relationship

Disputants forgive one another in words and emotion, and re-establish respect and affection. (“I am genuinely sorry for . . . , and I want to cooperate closely with you on . . .”; “What can I do to make this work again?” etc.)

Of course, these nine levels of settlement, “peace” or resolution can be multiplied many times. Reflective mediators regularly write about the many possible levels of “success” which are possible when disputants come to a negotiation. In some conflicts, the act of just attending a mediation or negotiation is a momentous “success” on several measures.

When some of the greater goals are not achievable, there are many smaller key successes which can be achieved in meetings, negotiations or mediations. There is a naïve tendency for some statisticians, lawyers or disputants to have only two labels for negotiation – either “successful” or “unsuccessful”.

Of course, “success” may consist of necessary small building blocks such as:

- They attended the meeting

- We agreed on the venue
- They were organised
- They allowed us to speak
- We summarised our interests on one page
- (s)he smiled twice
- The meeting room was comfortable
- I understood their concerns more clearly
- Some of my assumptions are probably not correct etc.¹²

¹² (See other examples of “goals” and “success” at “legal” mediations in J.H. Wade, Representing Clients at Mediation and Negotiation, October 2000 p 57-58.)

Joint Client and Representative Goals

From your experience as a negotiator, disputant, representative or mediator, what joint client and representative goals or measures of success do you see at the mediations and negotiations which you attend?

Seen Often = 3
 Seen Occasionally = 2
 Seen Rarely or Never = 1

JOINT CLIENT AND REPRESENTATIVE GOALS?	RANK
1. To be compliant with a legal requirement to attend	
2. To make a presentation about the merits of a case or solution	
3. To listen; to understand the motivations and interests of the "opposition"	
4. To be listened to	
5. To regain client control from professionals or inertia	
6. To give an appearance to outsiders (eg. bosses, courts, relatives) of behaving reasonably	
7. To gain insights into alleged facts, evidence and interpretation of rules from the "opposition"	
8. To sow seeds of doubt with the opposition	
9. To create a deadline for a meeting for a disorganised "opposition"	
10. To meet in a comfortable environment	
11. To have unruly opposition under some constraint by the mediator	
12. To create doubt by having the mediator express an opinion about the reasonableness of opposition's claims	
13. To clarify whether our claims are reasonable by having the mediator express an opinion	
14. To wear down the opposition with another time-consuming and expensive meeting	
15. To evaluate the skill and credibility of opposition witnesses	
16. To reach a settlement within the predicted range of outcomes	
17. Other?	
18.	
19.	
20.	
21.	

Diagnose Causes of Conflict and Appropriate Interventions Overtly

Having some systematic knowledge of the many possible layers of “peace”, and meanings of “success” is vital for lawyers, diplomats, parents and other human beings. This systematic knowledge leads to an ability to discuss what are *minimum goals* and *realistic goals* (as compared to aspirational goals such as peace, shalom, harmony and good-will) of any conflict management or peacemaking intervention.

The absence of systematic knowledge and discussion about levels of conflict (eg levels 1-5) and levels of peace (eg levels 7-9) is itself a source of ongoing conflict amongst peacemaking professionals. For example, psychologists often accuse lawyers of achieving “shallow, short term easy settlements” which do not last. They take the money and run. Lawyers respond, “A partial settlement based around money is better than no settlement at all. At least we have helped to provide a breathing space to deal with the deeper problems.” Theologians sometimes tut-tut from the sidelines quoting aspirational deep peace verses (eg Ezekiel 12:10; Jeremiah 6:14), or recommend avoidance and piety until the Second Coming.

Having categorised the causes and levels of conflict, and the levels of peace or resolution *available*, the next step is to attempt to apply this systematic learning to a particular dispute. This is the notorious *diagnostic* question faced by doctors, architects, politicians, lawyers and all problem solvers (the new “priests and prophets”?) “What do you think is causing this problem?”

Once an educated hypothesis on causes has been developed, the next difficult question is - Which kinds of interventions are “appropriate” for each type of problem? What realistic level of “peace” (or harm) can each intervention achieve? When to resort to the allegedly “just war” as an intervention? When to do nothing? When to flee to the desert? At least do no harm?

One mark of a competent skilled helper is humility when trying to match a client’s problem with an “appropriate” service. The current avalanche of criticism of sloppy diagnosis by lawyers and doctors was echoed by Jeremiah in the sixth century BC. “From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practise deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace’, they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush.” (Jeremiah 6: 13-15; 8: 10-12)

(10) Conclusion – Wisdom and the Tolerance of Ambiguity

The challenge for all citizens, and especially for Christians, is to develop attitudes, knowledge and skills about conflict.

The **attitudes** include:

- tolerance of ambiguity to be both a peacemaker and a troublemaker
- to err on the side of peacemaking
- conviction that my life and behaviour are important to God, and can be helpful to unhelpful to others.
- Not to despair, and to do our best despite random destructiveness which will strike us or our neighbours in this life.

The **knowledge** includes:

- a basic systematic understanding of the meaning of conflict, its benefits and disadvantages, its causes and degrees of escalation, the range of interventions available, the diagnostic challenge of matching intervention to a particular conflict, and the levels of “success” or “peace” which may be achieved (pew).

The **skills** individually and within any community:

- to listen, be patient, laugh at oneself, be humble
- be slow to anger, quick to forgive
- use words winsomely (a la Proverbs and Jesus)
- be alert and ready to speak out graciously (a gracious and watching troublemaker?)

This combination of attitudes, knowledge and skill are part of the biblical concept of “wisdom” and “character”. There are no quick fixes.

For those of us who work full-time (beyond the “normal” daily spectrum of life conflicts) in the fields of conflict management, aggression and diplomacy, there lies heavy responsibility. These tasks and privileges require a lifetime of humility, reflective practice and systematic critique to give our best back to the Prince of Peace.

*Law School
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19 January 2001*

APPENDIX A

Illustrations of “Value” Conflicts in the Christian Church

Changing a Lightbulb - Denominational Alternatives

How many Catholics does it take to change a lightbulb?

None – they use candles.

How many Baptists does it take to change a lightbulb?

Who said anything about change?

How many charismatics does it take to change a lightbulb?

Only one – they’ve got their hands in the air already.

How many Calvinists does it take to change a lightbulb?

None. It is not for them to decide that the lightbulb needs changing. God has predestined when and if the light will go on.

How many neo-evangelists does it take to change a lightbulb?

None. They can’t tell the difference between light and darkness anyway.

How many Pentecostals does it take to change a lightbulb?

Ten – one to change the lightbulb and nine to pray against the spirit of darkness.

How many Televangelists does it take to change a lightbulb?

Only one, but if you want this valuable ministry which is bringing light to millions to continue, please mail your donation today. All who send donations of over \$20 will receive a small working replica of the lightbulb (batteries not included) as our special thankyou gift.

How many liberals does it take to change a lightbulb?

At least ten. They must first debate whether light bulbs even exist. Even if they decide in the affirmative they may still not change the lightbulb in order to avoid alienating those who prefer other forms of lighting.

How many fundamentalists does it take to change a lightbulb?

Only one. Any more would compromise the denominational standards of light. What is more, it is essential that the new bulb be exactly like the old one.

How many Anglicans does it take to change a lightbulb?

Ten. One to change the lightbulb and nine to sit around talking about how good the old bulb was.

How many campfire worship leaders does it take to change a lightbulb?

Only one, but soon all those around will warm up to its glowing.

How many Uniting Church members does it take to change a lightbulb?

The Assembly has chosen not to make a statement at this time either for or against the use of lightbulbs. However, if on your life’s journey you have found a lightbulb that works for you, then you are invited to compose a poem or choreograph a modern liturgical dance about your personal relationship to the lightbulb and present it at the annual Lightbulb service in which we will explore a number of traditions including incandescence, fluorescence, long-life and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to spiritual iridescence.

(Original source unknown)

APPENDIX B

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