

# Transforming Conflict

## *Some theological affirmations*

*by Ken Sehested*

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. —*Genesis 6:11*

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

But I say to you, Love your enemy. —*Matthew 5:43-44*

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. —*Romans 12:21*

### **Introduction**

Conflict transformation theory offers a new perspective for recognizing, analyzing and entering situations of conflict in redemptive ways.

Conflict transformation theory assumes much of the insights and skills of older mediation theories (conflict "management," conflict "resolution"). The principle distinctive mark of conflict transformation theory is its provision for taking seriously the issue of power in any given context of conflict.

Although there is nothing inherently Christian in conflict transformation theory (our Mennonite friends have been among the leading pioneers in this new thinking), I believe it is a very effective means of helping Christian understand the theological mandates of Scripture in ways that impact daily lives in both very personal and very public ways.

To begin the process of making organic connections between Christian faith and conflict transformation's perspective, let me offer a few summary convictions.

- God is more taken with the agony of the earth than with the ecstasy of heaven.
- The prophet Micah's famous trilogy—"do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God" (6:8)—is not a three-part statement but a statement that says the same thing in three different ways.
- The Spirit traffics in human affairs. The function of traditional themes of grace and mercy, of repentance and conversion, are not designed to get us into Heaven but to empower us to live lives characterized by forgiveness, the rejection of vengeance, leading toward healing and wholeness, redemption and liberation.
- The experience of grace is not a private possession entitling us to eternal life; rather, it is the equipping power whereby we become obedient to Christ and thereby agents of reconciliation and life in a world committed to violence and death.
- To echo the words of Henri Nouwen, life is not a possession to be guarded or a treasure to be hoarded but a gift to be given. In the words of Jesus, all who would lose their life for my sake will find it. And what

is the “sake” of Jesus other than those with whose fate he identified in Matthew 25: Inasmuch as you have done it (or failed to do it) to the least of these—the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner—you have done it (or failed to do it) to me.

□ The experience of grace, of God’s forgiveness, is the power which releases us from the power of sin—which is to say, from fear—and enables us to live as grace-filled, forgiving and fearless lives in a world governed by the logic of revenge. I believe that the capacity to forgive—which is to say, to live without resort to vengeance—is the only means by which the spiral of violence can be halted and the poison of sin can be extracted.

□ Which brings me to another summary statement: While spiritual transformation is always personal, it is never merely private.

□ The disarming of the heart and the disarming of the nations is one seamless thought in Scripture. Those who would separate this unitary way of thinking—whether you are a so-called conservative and want to emphasize piety or a so-called liberal and want to focus on politics—either way, you are corrupting biblical theology.

The purpose of the church is not to save souls for heaven, nor is it to do kind things in the world. The purpose of the church is to see the world differently. And that act of seeing has its own inherent logic which draws us into the world’s bruised and broken places—into the world’s pain and violence—to announce

- that all of creation is headed not for destruction but deliverance;
- that wolf and lamb will one day lie together
- that the bows of the mighty will be shattered and the poor will be lifted from the ash heap;
- that the hungry will be fed and the rich will be sent away empty-handed;
- that all will sit ‘neath their own vine and fig tree and none shall make them afraid;
- that one day every tear will be dried and death itself will be defeated;
- that one day even creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay.

The central message of the Bible is that God intends to redeem, to heal, to liberate not just humankind but all of creation. The defining characteristic of the Newer Testament’s portrayal of Jesus is his command to love enemies (though this element is also the most overlooked, most disregarded and underplayed theme in the church’s proclamation of the Gospel)

Pastorally speaking, attention to the theory and practice of conflict transformation not only returns the “doctrine” of loving enemies to its central place in Christian preaching but also provides practical, intelligent, creative and redemptive ways for us as believers to move beyond promoting peace to actually making peace. In other words: Learning to transform conflict is a synonym for Christian discipleship.

## CLARIFYING LANGUAGE AND DEFINING TERMS

### A. Questions for discussion

- What is peace?
- What is the opposite of peace?
- What are the different kinds of violence?
  - physical violence
  - structural violence
  - revolutionary violence
  - repressive violence

B. Other kinds (e.g. verbal violence): “The tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” (*James 3:6-7*)

C. Definition of conflict: Conflict is a disagreement between interdependent people; it is the perception of incompatible or mutually-exclusive need or goals.”

In simple language: “Conflict = difference + tension.”

D. Conflict is more than difference of opinion. You know you’ve moved from disagreement to conflict when certain biological processes are triggered: blood pressure rises, breathing accelerates, your adrenaline goes into overdrive.

E. To switch from biological to psychological categories: Disagreement becomes conflict when fear takes control. Biblically speaking, the opposite of faith, of love, is not doubt but fear.

- “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” –*1 John 4:18*
- “God has not given us a spirit of fear but the spirit of power, love and a sound mind.” –*2 Tim. 1:7*
- “You have not been given a spirit of fear as slaves but have been made children of God.” –*Romans 8:15*
- “Fear not . . . be still [stand firm] . . . and see the deliverance of the Lord” (*Ex. 14:13-14*) was God’s instructions to the people of Israel when they were caught between the Red Sea and the pursuing Egyptian army intent on returning them to captivity. (This “fear not” has been referred to as the “nonviolent war-cry of the people of God.”)

F. Fear arises when we sense a breach of security, a compromise of personal or communal safety:

- physical harm
- loss of possessions
- humiliation
- disrespect
- loss of “face”
- loss of control
- guilt

Be clear about this: I am not saying that Christians never experience fear. (As one person has said, “Courage is fear that has said its prayers.”) Fear, like hunger and pain, play useful and necessary roles. It’s when fear takes control that we are motivated to commit violence.

# *Transforming Conflict: Seven General Principles*

*Ken Sehested*

**ONE:** Conflict is normal and is present in every part of our personal and public lives. It is S.O.P. (standard operating procedure).

\*Name some of the conflicts you have had in recent memory.

\*Role-play: emotional responses to conflict

**TWO:** We need not fear conflict.

Question: Why is it that people who are committed to traditional Christian values like humility, meekness and forgiveness are often the weakest at approaching/admitting conflict?

**THREE:** Everybody can be active in the work of transforming conflict. You don't have to be a rocket scientist or a saint. There are skills you can learn (e.g., communication, listening, negotiation, etc.). And you can develop analytical tools to understand conflict.

Two examples:

1) Peacekeeping / Peacemaking / Peacebuilding

2) Three elements to every conflict:

a. The "who" in a conflict. (Those directly involved as well as those whose lives are affected by a given conflict.)

b. The "what" of conflict. (specific issues)

c. The "how" of a conflict. (The process of decision-making.)

In any given conflict you need to examine all three elements.

\*The conflict "resolution" model of mediation theory focuses on "issues" and thus on the need to resolve problems, to wrap things up as quickly as possible.

\*The conflict "management" model focuses heavily on the "process" of mediating conflict and tends to believe that conflict follows predetermined patterns which can be predicted, controlled and manipulated.

\*The conflict "transformation" model begins with and focuses heavily on the people involved and their relationship with each other.

**FOUR:** Traditional responses to conflict: fight or flight. But there is a third way, which Jesus taught. (Simulation: "turn the other cheek" in Matt. 5: 38-41)

**FIVE:** Conflict transformation theory takes seriously the power relations that exist between conflicting parties and thus posits a range of redemptive responses, from the traditional third-party, neutral mediator (on one end of the spectrum) to advocacy and "taking sides" (on the other end).

Question: Do you think all conflicts can be resolved? Why?

Question: Can Christians help transform conflict if they "take sides"?

**SIX:** Conflict is an opportunity to deepen relationships. Usually when you confront conflict, the response is "Oh, how terrible—I'm out'a here!" or "I'm gonna whip this guy's ...." Instead of that, our response should be, "What is God trying to say to us?"

**SEVEN:** Conflict is the occasion where we actually grow in faith. Just as our body's muscles grow when they are exercised and put to the test, so is our faith. Therefore, the more "mundane" conflicts we face—within our own families, congregations and neighborhoods—should be viewed and training ground for the larger, more public conflicts we encounter.

## *For further study*

Conflict transformation theory and practice

- *Making Peace With Conflict: Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation*, edited by Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Lawrence Ressler, Herald Press
- *Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual: Foundations for Constructive Conflict Transformation*, ed. Jim Stutzman & Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, Mennonite Conciliation Service

Bible study

- *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace*, Glen Stassen, Westminster/John Knox
- A trilogy of books by Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers*, *Unmasking the Powers* and *Engaging the Powers*, Fortress Press

Nonviolence in practice

- *Christian Peacemaking: From Heritage to Hope*, Daniel L. Buttry, Judson Press

Conflict in local congregations

- *More Light, Less Heat: How Dialogue Can Transform Christian Conflicts Into Growth*, Joseph Phelps, Jossey-Bass Pub.

## *Blessed Are Those*

*One:* Blessed are those who are willing to enter into the process of being healed,

*All:* For they will become healers.

*One:* Blessed are those who recognize their own inner violence,

*All:* For they will come to know nonviolence.

*One:* Blessed are those who can forgive themselves,

*All:* For they will become forgivers.

*One:* Blessed are those who are willing to let go of selfishness and self-centeredness,

*All:* For they will become a healing presence.

*One:* Blessed are those who listen with compassion,

*All:* For they will become compassionate.

*One:* Blessed are those who are willing to enter into conflict,

*All:* For they will find transformation.

*One:* Blessed are those who know their interdependence with all of creation,

*All:* For they will become unifiers.

*One:* Blessed are those who live a contemplative life,

*All:* For they will find God in all things.

*One:* Blessed are those who strive to live these beatitudes,

*All:* For they will be reconcilers.