

Study Guide

The Peacemaking Pastor

A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict

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Prologue

The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict targets not only pastors, but also elders, deacons, church lay leaders, denominational and conference officials—all who help lead their churches in various ways. The assumption of the book is that conflict is a necessary factor of life that provides opportunities for the church to respond in a manner in keeping with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This study guide focuses on the implications of the subtitle. “Church conflicts” can be understood in two ways: conflicts that arise in the church between individuals, and conflicts that become church-wide divisions and threaten the entire community. *The Peacemaking Pastor* focuses on both to a certain extent, yet this study guide will center on the latter.

This study and discussion guide seeks to ask challenging application questions that will lead the thoughtful pastoral leader to conclusions about his or her own ministry as a peacemaking pastor, particularly in terms of group conflicts. Church leaders are encouraged to use the questions compiled here as a way to set clearly lit paths through the dark forest of church conflict. Of course, the best time to prepare for church conflict is before it surfaces. This guide can be a helpful devotional as careful leaders intentionally apply biblical principles to build a church “culture” ready for the assignment of conflict.

Our hope is that each church—whatever its theology, worship style, or history—may be ready to harvest for God’s glory every situation and grow in spiritual maturity in Christ.

There are two questions in each chapter that will remain constant:

What biblical principles does this chapter teach that will help you establish and cultivate a “culture of peace” in your church?

What practices do you need to change or implement in order to demonstrate your commitment to shepherding God’s people into valuing peaceful relationships?

Knowledge without application is meaningless! The meaning of Scripture is in its application. Use these questions to further challenge your ability to apply to your ministry what you learn as you study *The Peacemaking Pastor*.

Introduction

1. The introduction opens with a startling statement: “*Christ is the reason many enter the pastorate. Conflict is the reason many leave.*” From your own experiences in church life, how true do you think that statement is?
2. There is a pattern of failure by churches, Bible colleges, and seminaries to train pastors in the art of addressing church conflict (pages 9–10). To what extent did your own training as a church leader prepare you to respond biblically to conflict? How do you think pastoral training should be structured in order to address this apparent weakness in pastoral preparation?
3. The author argues that *mere* pragmatic approaches (right skills, right methods, etc.) fail to address the real issues that generate conflict (pages 11–12). Where have you seen *mere* pragmatic approaches fail or succeed?
4. Why does the “law-court model” of conflict resolution frequently fall short when addressing matters of church conflict (pages 12–13)?
5. Do you agree or disagree that the greatest hindrance to pastoral peacemaking is rooted in the following three assumptions?
 1. Peacemaking is only a tool rather than a “habit of being.”
 2. Peacemaking is merely corrective and not something constructive.
 3. Peacemaking is viewed through the lenses of various ideologies rather than the lens of Scripture.
6. Can recovering the foundational truths of orthodox Christian faith truly inform (reform) the goals and practices of peacemaking in the midst of church conflict? How?

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Chapter 1: Hope for a Heretic

1. With a bit of hyperbole, the author considers himself a “docetic heretic at heart” (pages 19–20). What does he mean by that?
2. Give examples from your own life where you are tempted to flee from the messy, time-consuming issues of people’s lives and conflicts.
3. How does fleeing from conflicts by hiding in favored ministry pursuits feed disorder and strife? What is your “out” to avoid shepherding people in conflict?
4. “When our words are disconnected from the hardships of life, from the conflicts of the heart and home, we become mere purveyors of knowledge, not pastors” (page 21). What do you need to do to become more connected with the hardships and conflicts of the people God has given you to shepherd?
5. How does 2 John connect “truth” and “love” in a manner that compels the church to either love one another or deny the truth of Christ? How should such “truth” motivate “love” among fighting Christians?
6. How should a true faith in and confession of Christ coming in the flesh radically shape our responses to conflicts in the church?

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Chapter 2: The Paths of Conflict

1. In your own experience, which of the four “most common occasions” in which church conflicts arise (divided allegiance, authority issues, boundary making and personal affairs) have proven most common (pages 30–35)? Why do you think

that is so? What might your answer tell you about how you have been doing ministry?

2. Worldly “party spirit” is clearly condemned in Scripture (1 Cor. 1:10–13), yet many pastors and other church leaders frequently seek notoriety and the limelight in order to build a following around which a church is allegedly formed. Why is this pattern a serious cultural dynamic that is frequently the source of the church’s worst conflicts?
3. Christ’s authority is exercised on earth through his gifts of pastors and church leaders (Eph.4:11–12). How can you ensure that you are truly in submission to Christ’s authority within the governance structure of your church? How might this authority be abused? How might biblical teaching on this truth help minimize church conflict?
4. “Hyphenated Christians”—believers who judge the orthodoxy of other believers on the basis of a good preference rather than an essential precept—abound in the church today. They are frequently at the center of church conflicts because they have “judged” others. How do “desires” progress to “judging?” Why must church members be taught this dangerous dynamic if they are to be peacemakers rather than peace-breakers?
5. How do pastors and elders and other church leaders frequently dismiss their own sinful words and actions in order to promote a favored agenda (i.e., what favored rationale is frequently employed)? Why is it so difficult for leaders to name their sins? Can church leaders honestly expect church members to rise to greater spiritual sensitivity (confession of sin, expansive forgiveness, etc.) than that being modeled by their leaders?

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Chapter 3: The Heart of Conflict

1. James asks: “What causes fights and quarrels among you?” (James 4:1) How do you think most people in your church would answer this question? How do you typically answer this question when you are in conflict? (pages 51–53)

2. James provides a pattern of the dynamic of conflict:

Desires @Demand @Disappointment @Damn (pages 53–59).

Where have you seen this dynamic in your own life? In the conflicts you've experienced or witnessed in your church?

3. “Good goods make bad gods” (page 57). Identify some of the usual and frequent “goods” (worship style, preferences for certain church programs, etc.) that have become demanding and damning desires in the church?
4. “Good goods make bad gods.” When “good desires” take control, how can church leaders best open the eyes of their members to the true dynamic of their hearts?
5. What does the author mean by saying that most evangelicals miss the gospel? In what ways can we reduce the gospel to something insufficient and irrelevant to our conflicts (pages 60–63)?
6. The author contends that biblical peacemaking requires more than telling people to stop sinning (fighting) (pages 60–66). Rather, peacemaking necessitates preaching the gospel promises to the parties in conflict. How do the gospel promises help change the way we treat our brothers and sisters in conflict?
7. On page 66, the way we walk (right foot, then left foot) pictures the process of transformation that James applies to helping people change the ways they sinfully act in conflict. Why do you think coupling promises and commandments facilitates true change in the way people resolve their conflicts?

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Chapter 4: God's Glory in Conflict

1. Why do you think many church leaders view conflict and the necessity of peacemaking as a detriment to the practice of ministry instead of a fundamental characteristic of the pastoral ministry itself? (pages 71–72)
2. How can our belief in the Trinity as expressing God as a God of peace strengthen our churches’ belief in peacemaking as a vital part of ministry? (pages 73–74)

3. Paul sees conflict as “the crucible for changing lives” (page 77). What do church leaders need to do to convince people that God can use “conflict” as a good to change lives?
4. Pages 78–80 lay out much evidence that God purposes peace and is himself a peacemaking God. What might make many people in most churches believe otherwise? What evidence would you present to them to disprove that belief?
5. Exodus 32–34 is one of the richest resources for spelling out how thoroughly God is a reconciling God. Which aspects of this story resonate most with you in making this point (pages 81–87)?
6. Do you believe that “peacemaking is the embodiment of pastoral ministry even as Christ is the embodiment (incarnation) of the God of peace” (page 87)? Why or why not?

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Chapter 5: Peacemaking in the Family of God

1. “Biblical peacemaking will only become firmly rooted in the church when we recover the meaning and practice of the church as the family of God” (page 91). In what ways has the modern church lost the sense of being “the family of God”?
2. Jesus connects peacemaking with being “sons of God” (page 92). How is peacemaking the defining characteristic of our sonship (see Matt. 5:9, 44–45)? How does this make the biblical teaching of sonship critical to the health of the church?
3. Why does familial language dominate in “conflict passages” such as Matthew 5:23–25 and 18:15–35; and 1 Corinthians 6:1–8 (pages 103–9)?
4. Church leaders are required to “not to be violent but gentle, not quarrelsome” (1 Tim. 3:3). What practices do you have in place in your church to train and ensure that leaders recognize and practice gentle leadership?

5. God says reconciliation with a brother or sister takes precedence over worship (Matt. 5:23–24). Why do you think this is so? How can we instill this truth into the lives of the people in our churches?
6. How can recovering the riches of the biblical teaching about sonship reshape people’s perceptions of the “other” person with whom they are in conflict (pages 109–10)?
7. “The Christian church lacks credibility in its witness to Christ when it displays to the world its impotence in resolving conflict” (page 111). Do you agree or disagree? If you agree, what will you do to prepare your church members for resolving conflicts peacefully?

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Chapter 6: Confessing Our Sins to Another

1. For a confession of sin to be genuine, what two elements must be present (page 113)? If both elements are not part of a confession, what will likely be the result?
2. When confronting congregational (group) conflict, the difference between “regret as a result of fear of man” and “repentance as a fruit of fearing God” is often the key to genuine peace and the church’s return to unity. Why do you think that is so?
3. “The people in conflict whom you counsel will be blind to the ways they may have contributed to, been the occasion for, or exacerbated a conflict” (page 118). When helping a person understand the effects of their blindness, what two key steps must be remembered?
4. “People in conflict have little room in their thoughts for God (page 120).” How is this condition exacerbated when the conflict is between *groups* within the church?
5. What do you think is the best way to help people in conflict turn their thoughts godward? How did Paul do this when counseling the Philippian church in the midst of a conflict (pages 119–23)?

6. Do you believe reorienting people to see conflict as an assignment and not an accident can effectively move people to a new way of responding (page 122)? Why or why not?
7. Teaching your congregation the “7 A’s of Confession” can set a uniform level of expectation within the church for meaningful reconciliation. When and how might these principles be taught or even incorporated in one’s Sunday worship liturgy?

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Chapter 7: Granting True Forgiveness

1. While “overlooking an offense” is biblically wise in certain situations (Prov. 19:11), congregational conflicts often erupt when one person’s sin is overlooked and another person’s of similar magnitude is not. How can church leaders guard themselves against “selective enforcement”—or worse, outright favoritism—in dealing with people’s sins (pages 135–39)?
2. Forgiveness is often misunderstood by church members as indulging the wicked or condoning the offender by minimizing the nature of their offense (pages 141–42). How does Christ himself counsel us against drawing such a false conclusion about true forgiveness (pages 145–47)?
3. We often try to motivate people to forgive one another because it will heal their pain and help them get on in life (pages 143–44). How does this actually short-circuit true forgiveness (pages 147–51)?
4. When Peter asks how often he must forgive his brother, how does Jesus’s parable about “the unmerciful servant” and “the forgiving master” reorient Peter’s vision of forgiveness and provide the greatest motivation to forgive (page 151)?
5. What promises does God make to us when he forgives us? How can we use these when we counsel people to forgive (pages 152–54)?
6. The author distinguishes between disposition and transactional forgiveness (pages 155–57). Do you agree with this distinction? How might it be abused? How can it be profitably used?

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Chapter 8: Looking Out for the Interests of Others

1. “Conflicts are about persons before they are about problems” (page 159). How can you convince the members of your church that this is the mindset from which all conflicts must initially be approached? What kind of spiritual culture would you need in your church for people to believe this?
2. Philippians 2:3–4 is a radical concept for a culture that prioritizes “self” above community. How have you seen “self-interest” instead of “looking out for the interests of others” generate conflict in churches? In what ways are self-interests often disguised?
3. What is the real difference between the three styles of negotiation: competitive, cooperative, and biblical (pages 161–64)?
4. How have you’ve seen a lack of preparation prior to negotiation lead to a breakdown in communication, if not an exacerbation of conflict (pages 165–67)?
5. How do church leaders help people in conflict affirm their relationship? When the “other” looks like an enemy, how can we help affirm their relationship realistically (pages 168–69)?
6. Most people get stuck in a vortex of conflict because they fail to understand the other party’s interests (pages 169–73). Where have you seen parties in dispute come to agreement because they were enabled to appreciate the interests of others? How can church leaders help disputing parties see the interests of others?
7. How does the average church member voice their grievance or disagreement with church leaders? How might teaching our people to make a respectful appeal improve relations in the church (pages 176–78)? Does your own church have a grievance policy that includes making a respectful appeal? What steps might you adopt to incorporate such a policy or to improve an existing policy?

8. Are you now dealing with or have dealt with a “difficult person” who just didn’t seem to get it (page 179–81)? What frustrated you the most about them? What sinful desires or responses did you adopt in relating to them? How can Paul’s call for us “not to be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” revolutionize the way we love those who are hard to love?

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Chapter 9: Pastor as Mediator

1. In what sense is Jesus our mediator in every dispute (page 185)?
2. The apostle Paul describes the Christian ministry as a message and ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:16–18). What is the relationship of that message concerning being reconciled to God (vertical reconciliation) and being reconciled to one another (horizontal reconciliation)?
3. On page 188 the author contends that “pastoring is peacemaking.” Do you agree or disagree? In what sense can all the various tasks of church leadership (preaching, teaching, counseling, evangelizing, administration, discipleship, missions, etc.) simply express different ways of practicing peacemaking?
4. Do you agree that many of Paul’s epistles were the counsel of a mediator (page 189)? Why or why not? How could the pattern of Paul’s counsel assist your own responses to congregational conflict?
5. Conflict causes blindness. How would you use 1 Corinthians to help your congregation see their own blind spots when conflicts develop (pages 190–98)?
6. “Mediators mediate the gospel” (page 192). What do you think the author means? How ought the gospel inform the process of mediation between conflicted parties?

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Chapter 10: Mediation and Arbitration

1. Read pages 201–2. Do you think the author has unrealistic expectations in his attempt to solicit another pastor’s help in resolving this business conflict? Why or why not?
2. In pages 206–9 the author argues that Matthew 18:16 envisions a ministry of mediation. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your reasoning.
3. Mediation is defined in this book as assisting parties in dispute to reach a mutually agreed upon settlement (page 210). How does that word “assist” relieve the mediator of unwarranted self-expectations?
4. Page 211 lists three goals for the mediator. Why is each goal necessary for successful mediation? Which goal does the mediator have the greatest control over? Least control over? How does that knowledge shape what a mediator is called to do?
5. The apostle Paul expects church members to take their conflicts (marriage, family, business, etc.) to the church for a decision rather than to a civil court (pages 215–17). What objections to Paul’s counsel in 1 Cor. 6:1–8 might you expect Bible-believing Christians to raise? How might you as a church leader answer their objections?
6. In a church-wide conflict, how would you practically use mediation/arbitration? What role should elders (church officers) play when responding to church conflict (see 1 Peter 5:1–3)?
7. Is resolving conflicts between your members so that they don’t use the civil courts a part of your church’s ministry? If not, how might you help move your church in that direction? What steps could your church take in order to become a forum for the resolution of all conflicts affecting church members?

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Chapter 11: Church Discipline Principles

1. R. C. Sproul says that “nurture includes church discipline” (page 220). Do you agree? What kinds of associations do people in your church make when they hear “church discipline”?
2. On page 226 objections to exercising church discipline are offered by a professor of systematic theology. Do you think these arguments are persuasive? Why? If not, how might you answer them?
3. In the brief history of church discipline (pages 223–27), John Calvin is said to have considered church discipline as a means of securing the “safety” of the church (pages 224–25). What biblical grounds might there be for this understanding? In what ways does the faithful practice of biblical discipline preserve the church?
4. In the author’s reflection of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, he considers many texts concerning discipleship whereby he concludes that to be a disciple is to be under discipline (pages 227–32)? Do you agree? Disagree? How might church leaders strengthen this connection between “discipleship” and “discipline” in the minds of their members?
5. How do people in your church understand the nature of the authority of church leaders? Why is understanding the authority of “the keys of the kingdom of heaven to bind or loose” (Matt. 16:18–19) necessary to a biblical understanding the practice of church discipline (pages 236–39)? Why do you think Jesus initiated this authority as part of how he would build his church?
6. If every person were allowed to do whatever they pleased in your church, what would be the result? How do your structures of church government relate to your theology of church discipline? How can a solid, biblical relationship between the two help prevent church conflicts?
7. On page 242 the author asserts: “This discipline is formally and properly an exercise of the keys of Christ’s kingdom. It is a matter of stewardship.” In what sense is exercising discipline in the church a matter of stewardship? How can this concept of “stewardship” help church leaders wisely and gently do the hard work of discipline?

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Chapter 12: Church Discipline Practices

1. Why must humility be the foundation from which church discipline is practiced (pages 244–46)? How is humility demonstrated in your church?
2. Jesus stresses the seriousness of sin as preface to his call for us to exercise discipline (page 247). How serious is sin taken in the modern church? Your church? How can leaders develop Jesus’s robust hatred of sin while equally developing Jesus’s robust compassion for the sinner? What difficulties await us in keeping both in balance?
3. What warnings in Ezekiel 34 challenge you as a leader called to shepherd God’s people (page 249–50)?
4. “Restoration is burdensome” (page 250). How have you have found this true? What things are most difficult for you as a leader in restoring wandering sheep? How can church leadership teams support one another in the hard task of caring of the sheep?
5. “Church discipline is family discipline” (page 251). When the “family” is divided, what wisdom must church leaders demonstrate when exercising their authority to discipline?
6. “If love is expressed in discipline (Hebrews 12), then we can see that our failure to discipline our members is a failure to love, or as Scripture more boldly states, a sign of hate” (page 253). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? What boundaries on love have you established in your ministry? Are they consistent with the boundaries of Scripture?
7. How should the promises of God to set sinners free from sin inform and shape the practices of church discipline (page 256)? Are you more prone to motivate the wayward by threat or promise? What challenges do leaders face in holding out both promise and threat? What do leaders need to know as to the usefulness and limits of each?
8. Abuse of pastoral authority (or elder or deacon authority) frequently is at the center of congregational conflict. What checks and balances over the authority of pastors, elders, deacons, and other leaders exist in your church to hold leaders accountable? Are these measures being followed?

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Chapter 13: Toward Becoming a Peacemaking Church

1. Discuss Oswald Chambers’s warning that the greatest competitor to devotion to Jesus is “service for him” (pages 266–67). Do you agree or disagree? If you agree, why do you think that is the case? If church leaders are to be more than kitchen-pastors, how can we become once more enthralled by the gospel of a resurrecting God?
2. Page 268 says that as peacemaking pastors we need not only know God but that he is a resurrecting God. How so? How does knowing that God is a resurrecting God help and motivate us as church leaders to the hard work of reconciliation?
3. “God does not want programs or projects; he want people, which is why he so often scraps our pet projects” (page 268). Most churches “do ministry” around programs believing this is the best way to attract and serve people. What challenges to that model have been brought to your attention through the study of this book?
4. The author contends that the very ordinary means of grace (preaching/teaching of the Word, sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, prayer, etc.) can be used to build a culture of peace in our churches? How does this challenge your thoughts of changing your church’s culture? In what way can you as a church leader begin to incorporate the message of reconciliation into your ministry tasks?
5. The author encourages pastors to use the words of Matthew 5:23–24 before communion (Lord’s Supper) as words of institution (pages 276–77). He calls this “guarding the table.” Are you familiar with this concept? What do you think of his suggestion? What might our people think?
6. Page 281 speaks of covenant membership. What meaning do members place on their membership vows at your church? Do those vows include a promise to “make every effort” to build and maintain the peace, purity, and unity of the church and to respect the authority and discipline of their elders? Are member vows and their importance carefully taught in new member classes?

7. On the bottom of page 278 there are several questions concerning the assessment of leaders and their readiness to be peacemakers. How could you modify these questions to assess all of your church's members as they confront congregational conflict? In what ways might this be helpful?

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Afterword

The study of biblical peacemaking in the church can be captured by one word: *CHANGE*. “People change when biblical truth becomes more loud and vivid than previous life experience” (David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003). Yet change is a threatening concept for many people. Pastors and other church leaders must be masters of how people change if they are going to be true shepherds. The best work we presently know on this topic is *How People Change* by Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp (Winston-Salem, NC: Punch Press, 2006). We encourage a careful study of this book as you begin to implement cultural changes in your church.

Resources from Peacemaker Ministries

Biblically rooted and gospel-rich resources for promoting a culture of peace in your church are available through Peacemaker Ministries™ (www.peacemaker.net). In particular, see their *Peacemaking Church*™ materials, which provide a comprehensive approach to implementing a culture of peace in your church. There are materials for pastors, small groups, and peacemaking teams.

Check out their video below:

http://www.peacemaker.net/site/c.aqKFLTOBIpH/b.2837365/k.65C1/The_Peacemaking_Church.htm

Resources from Baker Publishing

Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004).

Tara Barthel and Judy Dabler, *Peacemaking Women: Biblical Hope for Resolving Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005).