

**The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict,**  
**by Alfred Poirier. Baker, 2006.**

The first of my book selections is “The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict” by Alfred Poirier (Baker, 2006). The author starts with the confession that he did not always minister to his congregation as Christ did to his people when he was humanly among us. Pastors must be part of the people’s lives instead of being their professors. Jesus was the true peacemaker, and he made “every effort” (Rom 14:19; Eph 4:3; Hebr 12:4) by way of the cross. We are called to follow.

Poirier defines conflict as “a difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone’s goals or desires.”<sup>1</sup> Thus it is not necessarily a result of sin. Conflict commonly arises when there are divided allegiances like in Corinth, authority issues, different opinions and preferences, or personal affairs concerning family, marriage, friendship or business. *Clarity* and *confession* are important ways leading to peace.

The Slippery Slope diagram<sup>2</sup> (see below) provides an overview of the possible responses to conflict. The alternatives to escape or attack responses are introduced as:

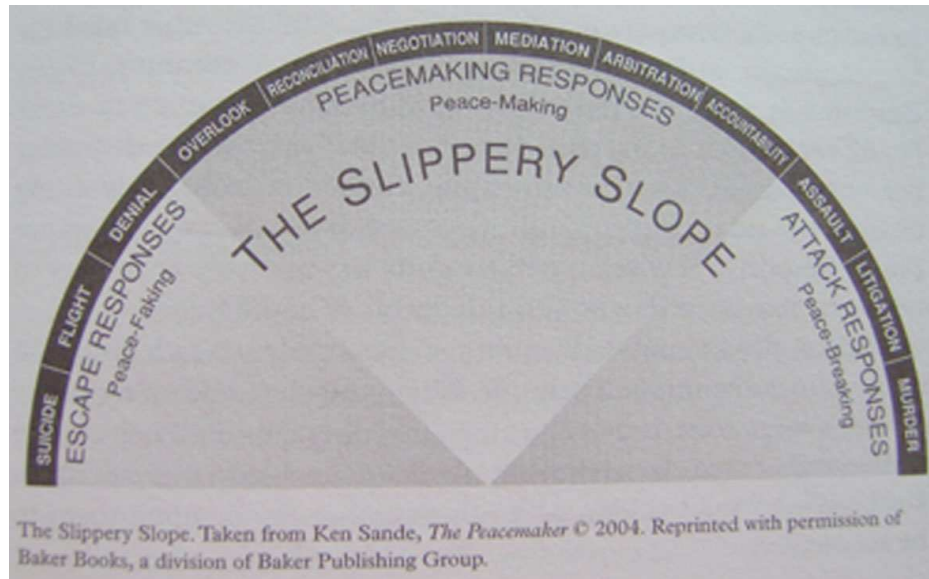
(1) Personal Peacemaking (Overlook, Reconciliation, Negotiation)

(2) Assisted Peacemaking (Mediation, Arbitration, Accountability)

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.



The conciliation responses move from more private to more public, the circle of confidentiality expands, and the costs increase. The focus should be *us*, not *me* or *you*.

The root of conflicts can be found in the heart of man – *my* desires. (Jam 4:1) Once the desires, even ‘good’ or ‘godly’ desires, become demands and expectations that we place prior to our (covenantal) relationships, they evolve into conflicts. They blind us to damn others (Jam 4:11-12) and distort reality (Numb 11). They become our idols and so we break relationship with others and with God. Only the gospel promise of grace (Jam 4:6) can heal us and restore our hearts and relationships. We must begin with God, and we come to him by way of repentance. (Jam 4:7-10)

The Triune God is a God of relationship and peace (1 Cor 14:33), and we are created in his image. Creation begins with the God of peace, and so eternal peace precedes conflict. At the final consummation, God will restore peace. (2 Pet 3:13) Until then, God ordains conflict (Gen 3:15) for our good (Hebr 12:7-14; Rom 5:3-4;

Jam 1:2-3) and therefore we can consecrate it. Besides, God purposes peace for his name's sake (Ex 34:5-7), and his glory is in peacemaking.

Since we belong to the family of God, conflicts are family matters. The theology of sonship is central for understanding the fatherly discipline. (Hebr 12:4-7) The son is called to imitate his heavenly Father of peace. (Mt 5:44-45.48) Paul in his epistles repeatedly exhorts the theme of peace in family language. In conflicts, we meet each other as family members and the fact that we have one Father "assures that our pursuit of peace as his children will not be in vain."<sup>3</sup> We should perceive the other person in conflict as brother or sister, and we should focus on our Father and not on ourselves.

The big picture – who we are and who God is – shines above the practice of peacemaking that starts with confession (Jam 5:16) and forgiveness (Mt 18:21-35).

Confession may be guided by the **Seven A's**:

1. *Address Everyone Involved* (God, others in-/directly involved)
2. *Avoid If, But and Maybe* (qualifiers, confession stoppers)
3. *Admit Specifically* ("Sorry about *what?*")
4. *Accept the Consequences* (God's call to sanctification)
5. *Alter Your Behaviour* (commitment to action)
6. *Ask Forgiveness* ("Will you please forgive me?")
7. *Allow Time* (for the offended party to forgive)

Most importantly, confession must begin with *me*. (Ps 139:23-24; Mt 7:4-5)

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 99.

Forgiveness may be granted simply by **overlook** of an offense that is not serious. (Prov 12:16; 19:11) Questions may be helpful to grade the offense as serious or not: (1) Who sinned? (2) Against whom? (3) What is the nature (motivation, action) of the offense? (4) What were the circumstances (time and place)? (5) Is the offense a persistent sin? (6) Is the offense hindering my relationship?

Biblical confession and forgiveness is not superficial but understands the seriousness of sin. (Mt 5:21-22; 18:6-7) Neither is it an individual affair but takes place within a covenant relationship of brothers. (Mt 5:23-24; Lk 17:3; Mt 18:5) Forgiveness is a gift and promise from God. (Jer 31:34; Numb 6:24-26) Moreover, forgiveness is a process, and the four key promises are:<sup>4</sup>

- I will not think about this incident.
- I will not bring it up and use it against you.
- I will not talk to others about this incident.
- I will not allow this incident to stand between us and hinder our personal relationship.

Forgiveness is implemented first in the heart and then in the act of **reconciliation**.

The substantial issues – apart from the personal, heart issues in conflict – may be addressed by way of biblical **negotiation**, based on the principle that we should

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 154.

look out to the interests of others. (Mt 7:12; 22:39; 1 Cor 13:4-5; Phil 2:3-4; Mi 6:8)

Poirier teaches the five steps of PAUSE:

P – Prepare

A – Affirm Relationships

U – Understand Interests

S – Search for Creative Solutions

E – Evaluate Options objectively and reasonably

If the conflict parties still cannot agree, assisted peacemaking may provide help.

**Mediation** is not a tool but a way of being, following the great models of Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul in his mediation letters. We are called to be peacemakers. The mediator merely assists the process, and his goals are *process* satisfaction (1 Cor 14:40), *personal* satisfaction (Mt 7:12; Jam 2:1) and *product* satisfaction (Prov 28:5).

**Arbitration** is a divine mandate given to the church. (1 Cor 6:1-8) Here the arbitrator has the authority to make a binding decision on the matter. **Accountability** or church discipline is another church mandate. (Mt 18:15-20) Christ has given the church leaders the keys of the kingdom for stewardship, the authority to admit or exclude. Exercised in humility and within the context of family, such discipline is for God's honor, the church's purity and the sinner's restoration. In sum, discipline as well as peacemaking concerns all church members and all aspects of church life.

**Undermining the Gospel, by Ronnie W. Rogers. Pleasant Word, 2004.**

The second chosen book is “Undermining the Gospel” by Ronnie W. Rogers (Pleasant Word, 2004). The book as a whole makes a long and thorough pleading for church discipline and then provides practical help for application.

Rogers introduces church discipline as being “interconnected with every aspect of church life” and “essential for the church to be the church.”<sup>5</sup> He ranks the level of **church discipline** (cf. Mt 18:15-20) after **parental discipline** (cf. Eph 6:1-4; Prov 13:24; 22:15; 29:15.17; Ex 21:15; Lev 20:9), **self-discipline** (cf. 1 Tim 4:7; 1 Cor 9:24-27; Prov 8:33; 15:32), **governmental discipline** (cf. Rom 13:1-7), and before **divine discipline** (cf. Hebr 12:5-8; Rev 20:14-15). If the church fails, God himself will discipline the individual and also the whole church. (Rev 2-3) If the wayward still resists, he will die prematurely. (cf. 1 Cor 11:30; 1 Jn 5:16)

The author points out that discipline is beneficial and not harmful as commonly perceived in the present society. He says that all levels of discipline are necessary for self-protection and spiritual growth of the church. True discipline, in contrast to abuse, is based on love, not hate. It may lead to salvation in case that the disciplined chooses repentance and faith in God. Liberty – from sin – is the end of biblical discipline.

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<sup>5</sup> Ronnie W. Rogers, *Undermining the Gospel* (Enumclaw: Pleasant Word, 2004), 17 and 20.

Rogers describes the five reasons for discipline in more detail: (1) redemption; (2) correction; (3) protection; (4) purification; (5) justice. God's desire for the redemption of man is the starting point. (cf. Gal 3:24) Preaching is one of the main means for educational, corrective discipline that leads to redemption. (cf. 2 Cor 10:5) Protective discipline ensures the order of the society (or church) by protection from aggressors. God loves the offender, but he loves the offended, too. Discipline holds man responsible for his harmful actions since he is self-determined, and not a robot "other-determined" from outside, e.g. through biological evolution or environment. By way of discipline the church maintains corporate purity and holiness. For those who reject all discipline, justice will be done on the judgment day.

The author defines church discipline "as the personal or corporate actions of the local church concerning one of her members that preserve her holiness, testimony, and doctrinal purity, with the purpose of maintaining a conducive atmosphere for following Christ and experiencing His presence and power."<sup>6</sup> Though such discipline is part of the Great Commission, it is not commonly practiced in the church today.

Rogers argues against the opposing theological arguments by way of exegesis (cf. Mt 7:1; Mt 13:24-30; Jn 4:6-45; 8:1-11) and lectures on holiness (cf. 1 Pet 1:14-16), self-love or 'narcissism' (cf. Mt 16:24f.), the true, fatherly love of God that

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 89.

includes discipline (cf. Hebr 12:6; Rev 3:19), the pervasiveness of sin in all places and churches and the importance of biblical preaching. He then discusses the practical issues of abuse, fear, perfectionism, mainstream society, numerical church growth, the difficulty of church discipline, and communal and church peculiarities. Rogers shows that all kinds of theological or practical arguments do not excuse the lack of church discipline. Churches have to obey Christ, no matter the cost.

Rogers next argues in more detail with the practical and theological reasons that he introduced before (e.g. protection, the Great Commission, God's final judgment, liberty from sin, redemption). The four requirements for biblical church discipline are: (1) attitude of **grief** for the wayward (cf. 1 Cor 5:2); (2) **humility** of the church (cf. 1 Cor 10:12; Gal 6:1-5); (3) brotherly **love** for the wayward (cf. 2 Thess 3:15); (4) the *attitude* of **forgiveness** distinct from the *act* of forgiveness that requires the proper response of the offender (cf. Eph 4:32). For leadership, the restored must first demonstrate trustworthiness. Man is accountable for his actions.

Chapter 8 again lectures on holiness and then continues with an exegesis of Matthew 18:15-20, together with practical recommendations. The four steps for the discipline process are private reproof, semiprivate reproof, public reproof, and public removal, which in average takes about 6 months. Outside the church, the wayward is removed from the protection afforded to those in fellowship. (1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20)



“God will go to great measures to protect his church.”<sup>7</sup> (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor 11:27-30)

Chapter 9 concentrates on the problem of concrete sin in the church that requires discipline. “People who are candidates for discipline are the ones who persist in their sin, refusing counsel and admonishment.”<sup>8</sup> Rogers distinguishes the hypocrites from the weak and highlights four areas that require discipline: (1) **immorality** (cf. 1 Cor 5:1-13); (2) **heresy** (cf. 1 Tim 1:18-20); (3) **discord** (cf. Rom 16:17-18; Prov 6:16-19; Jude 12); (4) **disorder** (cf. 2 Thess 3:6, 10-15). The deciding factor for excommunication is the unconfessedness and unrepentedness of sin, not the sin itself. The described people will appear in every church. (Acts 20:29; Jude 4)

Rogers ends his book with practical considerations. He mentions factual realities like the condition of the church, lays some emphasis on prayer and preaching and finally provides a kind of manual for those who want to get started. Most importantly the church needs a holistic approach to church discipline that includes everyone and everything in the church. Its nature and requirements must be taught, understood and kept in mind. After all, the benefits of church discipline will reach into eternity.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 312.

**Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life, by Penny Edgell Becker. Cambridge University Press, 1999.**

The third book is titled “Congregations in Conflict – Cultural Models of Local Religious Life”, written by Penny Edgell Becker (Cambridge University Press, 1999). The book is a comparative study of 23 congregations, written from the perspective of social science with special focus on the dynamics of conflict.

The author explains why she has chosen the four congregational models *house of worship, family, community* and *leader* as the interpretative framework of her studies. The models are characterized by their core tasks ‘religious reproduction’, ‘community life’ and ‘public witness’. They are related to size, polity and ideology (conservative vs. liberal), but not determined by them. What is important for this study, the models “are related to conflict because they constitute and are constituted by factors that shape conflict in groups – the nature of the ties between members, the norms of commitment, and the structure of authority.”<sup>9</sup>

Becker identified two ‘house of worship’, six ‘family’, six ‘community’, five ‘leader’ and four ‘mixed’ churches. Interestingly, conflicts within one of these local religious cultures (‘within-frame conflict’) are less serious than conflicts in ‘mixed’ or transitional congregations (‘between-frame conflict’). Moreover, in general terms,

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<sup>9</sup> Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict – Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 49.

“conflict flows out of caring and commitment, and lack of conflict can signal a more limited form of communal engagement.”<sup>10</sup> The ‘**house of worship**’ churches report such lack of conflict that is largely based on apathy in regard to participation and involvement. Members of both churches attend for individualistic religious reasons but not for fellowship or activism. Not all members are satisfied, but most attempts for change end up in frustration.

**Family** congregations, in contrast, stress on fellowship instead of individualism. Their members can hardly stay uninvolved but belong to one another and share each other’s lives. In result, conflicts are likely to be understood in personal terms and often result in schism. This explains the tendency to suppress or avoid conflicts. Members do not debate about social issues. Instead, “most of the conflict revolves around control of things that have become valued in their own right by lay members who have great feelings of ownership of the congregation.”<sup>11</sup> Examples are the church building perceived as ‘home’ and the liturgical tradition. Becker describes a “traditional approach to authority, where a history of doing things a certain way becomes a moral imperative to continue to do them in the same way.”<sup>12</sup> People who want change are quickly labelled as ‘troublemakers’. New pastors come into a pre-

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 93f.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 96f.

existing group facing difficulties to become part of the church as family. Newcomers are welcomed 'one on one' but generally perceived as a 'mixed blessing' in fear of change and loss of control. In general, the focus is more inward, not outward.

**Community** congregations focus on inclusiveness. Everyone is welcomed, and everyone has a voice. They have a wide range of membership with people from all races and with different socioeconomic backgrounds. To address and meet all the member's needs, issues of all kinds are put on the agenda. Many serve as a trigger for conflict, e.g. discussion over inclusive language or policies towards homosexuals. Unlike in family congregations, the conflicts are understood as moral and not personal. The decision-making process is done with an inclusive attitude that is valued higher than the outcome itself. The pastor's authority serves for mediation but not decision. The community values democracy, tolerance, diversity and participation. Intimacy is fostered through the organization of age- and interest-based fellowship groups.

**Leader** congregations stress more on "public religion" than on intimacy. They enjoy status, reputation and visibility in the community that gives them a public voice. Their pastors are widely known and respected as the spokespersons of the church. Leader congregations have some impact on local politics, and they actively pursue compassionate outreach as one of their goals. Their focus is outward, even beyond the local level and with strong support of global missions. Priority is not given to the

members' needs. The congregation is not a 'social service agency', one rabbi said.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to the community model, they value preserving doctrine and tradition. Their decision-making process is open and inclusive but always goal-oriented. Compromise is not an option at least where fundamental doctrine is at stake. Pastors are given authority on ritual and doctrinal issues, and they serve as the stewards of tradition, e.g. on such issues as the woman's role in the church or infant baptism. Those conflicts are serious and may lead to factions leaving the church, but often the pastor's standing and the loyalty of the members hold the people.

Conflicts in transitional or **mixed** congregations are more severe. They do not fit a certain model but go through a shift from one culture to the other, usually caused by gradual transition in membership. In their struggle for identity, two opposing leadership groups argue against each other reaching an adversarial win-lose situation. They struggle over power, core tasks and priorities, and often the defeated leave.

In general, Becker shows that most conflicts are not – as commonly expected – over conservative vs. liberal religion but largely over privatized vs. public religion. The four models frame the dynamics of conflicts as expressed in social action and group processes. Especially the position of the pastor can make a difference.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 138.