

Being in communion

Unity amid conflict in the church

Betty Pries

As a child, I was disturbed by the gap between the ideal church we learned about in Sunday school and the real church we experienced in our daily lives. I was about eight years old when I suggested to my parents that perhaps the answer lay in starting a reformed Mennonite church. My parents smiled and replied that if I did that, soon I would need a reformed reformed Mennonite church, and then before long I would need a reformed reformed reformed Mennonite church. And so began my first life lesson on human nature and its impact on human institutions.

That we have conflict in the church is not surprising, nor should it distress us. The Bible, after all, is in large measure a record of conflicts that occurred among people trying to understand how to lead holy lives. That being the case, the Bible must have something profound to say about the reality of conflict in our lives and, by extension, in our church organizations. As I have reflected on the nature of conflict, I have begun to name for myself five principles. I offer them as a starting point for theological reflection.

Conflict is not just inevitable, it is part of God's gift to us. This statement seems ironic, even untrue—especially considering how much conflict can hurt us. How can conflict be part of God's gift?

Let us consider the matter from another perspective. Most of us would readily agree with the following statements:

- Each of us has been created as a unique individual. If our uniqueness is God-given, then it must follow that God celebrates—even intends—our diversity.
- As much as our uniqueness is a gift, it also limits us. We excel in some areas, and we do not excel in others. As a result of our uniqueness, we cannot survive alone; we need one another. In this sense, our interdependence is also God-given. Herein lies the rub: we need those who differ from us.

- In all our human variety, we are created in the image of God. We all—even those with whom we are in conflict—bear the stamp of the Holy One.
- If the above statements are true, then it must follow that conflict is, at least to some degree, inherent in God’s design of creation.¹

In the Bible are plenty of examples of godly people trying to address conflict in the midst of diversity. Consider, for example, the book of Ephesians. Paul recognizes the tension among the various factions in the church. Instead of lamenting it, he reframes his readers’ perspectives by reminding them that together these Christians all form the body of Christ. Whether they agree or disagree with one another, they have no choice but to be in relationship with one another. In Christ, they are all shackled together.²

Business management theory has long acknowledged that a workplace without conflict is caught in a frozen state. Without

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disagreement, the creativity of employees goes untapped. Moreover, without disagreement, a company becomes blind to its weaknesses and is much more likely to fall into unhealthy behaviours.

These dynamics have biblical and theological parallels. In the Bible we observe a tremendous diversity of perspectives. Should women prophesy and lead in ministry, or should women be silent? Are we to give all we have to the poor or remember that the poor are always with us? Are we saved by works or by faith? Should we hold one another accountable for ungodly behaviour or shall we forgive seventy times seven times? One could argue that the Bible is a conversation between various perspectives. There is wisdom in our disagreements. It is in the engagement between perspectives that discernment takes place.

Consider the debate between those who would like the church to be more flexible in nonessential matters, more open, and those who would like the church to be clearer about its boundaries, more pure. One could argue that those who espouse greater openness are holding fast to biblical principles of hospitality. Those

who desire clarity in matters of boundaries, however, are adhering to biblical principles of holiness. Both holiness and hospitality are excellent values. Both are biblical values, and both are right.

Of course, they can also both be wrong. The problem is this: When we concern ourselves only with holiness, we become rigid and inward looking. We make an idol of our purity. When we concern ourselves only with hospitality, however, we lose our sense of who we are. We become so open to others that we lose the language of our own faith. Our attitudes and beliefs become ambiguous and, at worst, we no longer know why we are Christians or what holds us together.

Either holiness or hospitality can become a problem if we pay attention only to one dimension and exclude the other. Instead, we are invited to live in the tension that is created by holding both values—hospitality and holiness—together at the same time. It is no accident that in practice these values are more often held together not in one person but in a community that embodies dialogue between those inclined toward holiness and those who favor hospitality.

Conflict is God's gift to us because we need each other. We need the dynamism and discernment that comes from speaking with others whose thinking differs from our own. We need those whose uniqueness and limitations complement our own uniqueness and limitations. We need those who favour the other end of whatever theological spectrum we are considering; such interaction keeps us humble about the rightness of our own perspectives. In all of these ways, conflict is a gift to us.

“Love your enemies” does not assume a prior reconciliation. As much as we need those who differ from us, conflict can be destructive. When conflict breaks away from the goal of wholeness, its deep divisions tear into our souls, causing tremendous grief. Conflict can do more than hurt our feelings—it can destroy us mentally and physically. Furthermore, the deeper our descent into conflict has been, the bleaker the journey out appears. In this deep cavern of pain, our enemies are fantastically unlovable; and yet, biblically we are commanded to love these enemies—while they are still our adversaries. The Bible assumes that we will follow this command even while our enemies are unlovable (Matt. 5:43-48).

It may seem obvious to Christians familiar with this command that loving one's enemies does not assume a prior reconciliation. But to practice loving enemies is challenging. What does it mean to love our enemies? It entails praying for them, speaking the truth in love, seeking what is for their best. But when we have been deeply hurt? Being faithful to this command is sometimes an act of sheer determination and will: we love our enemies perhaps not yet with our hearts but already with our minds, because we have been commanded to do so. All the while, we pray that God will melt our hearts.³

Our energies are best focused on changing ourselves, not others. This change happens in response to God's invitation to us to become whole.

Since I began my work as a mediator, I have been fascinated by the story of Jacob and Esau's reconciliation (Gen. 32:3–33:17).

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What is particularly interesting to me is that sandwiched in the middle of this story is the account of Jacob wrestling with God. I propose that an authentic meeting between Jacob and Esau was possible only because of this night of wrestling.

Two things happen during Jacob's night of wrestling that are key to his reconciliation with Esau. First, in his struggle with the angel, Jacob demands a blessing from him. Interesting, isn't it? Jacob is about to meet Esau, the brother from whom he stole a blessing many years ago. Now, only hours before meeting his brother again, he knows he cannot hang on to that stolen blessing any longer. If he is to have a blessing, it must be an honest one.

The second key event is that before giving him the blessing, the angel asks Jacob, "What is your name?" And in the moment of saying his name, Jacob must admit to himself and to the wrestler that he is Jacob, the deceiver. Only on making this acknowledgment—only when Jacob faces the reality of who he is and has become—does the wrestler give Jacob his blessing. And with this blessing comes a miracle: Jacob is changed. The angel gives Jacob a new name, a new identity. Now he will no longer be Jacob, the deceiver, but Israel, the one who strives with God.

Often when we are in conflict, we spend our energies thinking about how the other person should change their thinking, their behaviour. Jacob could have focused his energies on all the ways that Esau should change. Instead Jacob took the more important journey. He focused on all the ways he himself needed to be changed and healed. And because he entered this struggle, an authentic reconciliation between the two brothers became possible.

One could argue that in the case of Jacob and Esau, Jacob is the offender and Esau the victim. Jacob is, after all, the one who stole the birthright. Therefore, it is logical that Jacob should be the one to change. According to Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf, however, one of Jesus' most radical acts was to call also on those who were victimized to repent of their sins. Let us be clear: Victims are not being asked to repent of their victimization. Instead, Jesus is asking all of us, victims included, to repent of the large and small ways we have harboured hatred in our hearts.⁴

There is a cycle to conflict that is particularly evident in the lives of nations and families. Those who have been victims, if they move into positions of power, often mimic the behaviour of their offenders and in so doing become offenders themselves. But when becoming whole is the work of all people—those who have been wounded and those who have wounded others—both changed relationships and changed communities become real possibilities. The cycle of conflict is stopped, and lasting change can take place.

God stands with those who are broken and calls for justice.

Over the centuries, the Christian church has placed particular emphasis on the sinner and on the cross as the place of redemption. In this process, the voice of those who have been sinned against has often been neglected. Those who have tried to recover this voice often turn to the prophets. They see God as defender of the poor, the widow, and the orphan. In the New Testament, Jesus takes up the torch of the prophets when he identifies himself as one who has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19).

The cross, therefore, must be understood as more than a personal invitation to repentance. If Jesus has been anointed to

bring good news to the poor, and if this anointed one is killed by the same powers that oppress the poor, than surely the cross is a cry against injustice. The cross establishes an affinity between Jesus and the wounded, the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed. But the cross is not the end of the story. There is, after all, a resurrection—Jesus' victory over the powers, for the sake of these same wounded people. Now the cross takes on new meaning. The cross is not only a place where those who are broken and wounded are invited to bring their sorrow; the cross is also a place of hope, a place where the wounded may see the possibility of new life dawning.

The cross, of course, continues to be a place where those who have sinned come face to face with what they have done. The sinner is invited to repent, to be changed, and to act justly. But notice what a fascinating meeting ground the cross has now become. At the foot of the cross, the wounded and the sinner meet, sometimes in the same person. An exchange of power occurs, and together with the resurrection, the cross becomes for both a place of healing and a word of hope.

God's grace and forgiveness is available to all. Throughout the Bible, we see evidence of God's grace and forgiveness, made

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available to all. We are, of course, invited to participate in this grace and forgiveness, offering to one another what we have been given by God. But what comes first: grace and forgiveness, or holding another accountable for sinful behaviour? In this case, the Bible refuses to answer the question.

Consider the classic text on church discipline in Matthew 18, for example. Here the exhortation to hold one another accountable stands cheek by jowl with the exhortation to forgive one another seventy times seven times. We are to hold one another

accountable, and we are to forgive. These two commandments are not considered opposites. They can coexist; they can occur in the same place and at the same time.

Let us assume for a moment that we have succeeded both in holding others accountable and in forgiving them. Let us assume

further that these people who hurt us have sincerely apologized and taken responsibility for their part in the trouble between us. Let us also assume that we have acknowledged and repented for whatever we ourselves may have contributed to this situation. Now what? Where do we go from here?

Miroslav Volf suggests that to move forward with those who have hurt us, we must engage in a form of “holy forgetting.” Yes, we want to remember the lessons we have learned; however, to live in peace with one another, we must allow ourselves and the others to be restored to full personhood. This restoration is only possible when the offence no longer claims center stage in our consciousness. After watching generation after generation of Serbs and Croats go to battle to redress the wrongs done to their ancestors, Volf knows this truth in his bones. Somehow the cycle of vengeance and hurt must end.⁵

Unity amid conflict in the church

With these theological principles in mind, let us consider the question, what does it mean to be in communion with one another—to claim the unity of the church—amid conflict and division? Or to put it another way, what does it mean to be the body of Christ when our differences are tearing us apart?

- In Christ, we are shackled one to the other. Like it or not, we are stuck with one another—even if those with whom we are in conflict leave our church. Let us take seriously the idea that Spirit-filled discernment happens in the spaces where we see things differently from one another.
- God has made each of us unique, so let us speak from our unique perspectives. God has made each of us to be limited, so let us offer our perspectives humbly.
- Let us love one another at all times, even when we disagree.
- Let us each think seriously about how we can behave in a more Christ-like manner in this situation. Let us each apologize for those times when we fail to live up to this vision. Let us forgive and be gracious to one another.

Years ago, Mennonite elders spoke with each member of their congregation before communion was to be celebrated, in order to ensure that all were at peace with God and with one another. If a relationship was broken, those involved would be encouraged to

resolve the matter between them so that an authentic communion could be observed. What would it be like if we took the ritual of communion this seriously today? What would our faith communities be like if before every communion we went from home to home ensuring that we were at peace with one another—even if we still disagreed? In Christ, we are one body. Let us celebrate this union with humility and in a spirit of forgiveness and grace.

Notes

¹ Caroline A. Westerhoff, “Conflict: The Birthing of the New,” in *Conflict Management in Congregations*, ed. David B. Lott ([Bethesda, MD]: Alban Institute, 2001), 54–61.

² Tom Yoder Neufeld, “Walking in the Chain-Gang of Peace: Eph 4:1-3, 17–5:2” (presentation, Mennonite Church Canada Ministers’ Conference, St. Catherines, ON, 9 July 2003).

³ At the time of this writing, it has been a few weeks since the horrific murder of several Amish schoolgirls in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Almost immediately, the Amish community sent words of forgiveness to the family of the killer. This gracious act was no doubt difficult. It was also a potent example of a community taking seriously the forgiveness commandment.

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 113–19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 131–40.

About the author

Betty Pries lives in Waterloo, Ontario, with her husband, Paul Fieguth, and their children, Anya, Thomas, and Stefan. She is a mediator with Associates Resourcing the Church (ARC). When she tells people that she works with churches in conflict, she almost invariably gets one of two reactions: “No way—churches have conflict?” or “Wow, that must be challenging.” Immediately she knows whether the person with whom she is speaking attends church.