

Dealing with conflict in church and home

Doing some biblical theology

Tracing the theme of interpersonal conflict¹ through the whole Bible

1. Fall → Enmity between the man and the woman and between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman (1 John 3)
2. OT twin themes of war (usually between God's people and the nations opposed to God's people, though sometimes civil war) & persecution (of the prophets and the godly remnant by the ungodly and false prophets)
3. Conflict in the Gospels, especially between Jesus and the Jewish authorities
4. Cross – the greater Abel, greater Joshua, greater Samson, greater David
5. Church – dealing with twin challenges of persecution (from without) and division (from within)
6. Vindication – final defeat of the enemies of God's people and the end of all conflict

This is not to attempt a full Bible overview but just to say that this is a huge theme in the Bible very worthy of exploration.

Conflict in Genesis

A number of scholars have noticed that conflict an important theme in Genesis.² Not as important as the idea of seed or covenant or blessing/curse but certainly a very significant secondary theme. In the early chapters we have a brother killing a brother. At the end of the book we have a brother forgiving and being reconciled to his brothers. And in between we have a whole load of conflict, and one more surprising reconciliation.

Cain & Abel (Gen 4)

Lamech and a young man (Gen 4)

shepherds of Abram and Lot (Gen. 13–14)

Sarai/h and Hagar/Ishmael (Gen. 16, 21)

shepherds of Isaac and Gerar (Gen. 26)

Jacob, Rachel and Leah (Gen. 30)

Jacob and Esau (Gen. 27, 32–33)

Jacob and Laban (Gen. 31)

Dinah's brothers and Shechem (Gen. 34, 49)

Potiphar and Joseph (Gen. 39)

Pharaoh and his servants (Gen 40)

Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 37–50)

There are a number of things we learn here about conflict.

Admittedly we have to be careful when handling narrative – we don't want to be moralising the text (do what the good people do, avoid what the bad people do) nor going into man-centred therapy mode (how does this speak to my felt needs?). We need to be aware of the bigger picture – how Genesis is setting up the whole of salvation history and the search for the Seed. But we mustn't miss the resources OT narrative has for us in relation to 'how to do life'. Genesis is Torah – instruction. It is rich enough to be teaching a number of things at the same time. And particularly with a theme like conflict, we are engaging with a big theme in the book of Genesis which connects into a big theme in the whole Bible. So it is not twisting the text to unpack what it says to this issue, knowing that this investigation will inevitably take us back to the wider salvation history narrative and to Jesus.

¹ We are thinking here of negative interpersonal conflict. We accept that there might be such a thing as good and even necessary conflict in the sense of creative tension and constructive adversarial debate. But what we're talking about in this session is negative conflict – break down of relationship, enmity, discord.

² [Matthew Schlimm, 'From fratricide to forgiveness: The ethics of anger in Genesis', *Tyndale Bulletin* 61.1 \(2010\) pp 157-159.](#)

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It is good to go to the NT passages on conflict (many of which are referenced below) but there can be some real advantages of spending time in the OT:

- The OT is generally hugely neglected in personal Bible reading and in church preaching³
- Narratives, in particular, work on us in quite a different way to straightforward teaching. We are drawn into the story. We feel the emotions, the tensions, the surprises. It helps us see things differently.

So a number of things that we learn from Genesis:

1. Conflict is very common (because it stems from the Fall and curses) – so don't be surprised, expectation management – it will be in your home, your team, your church, your neighbourhood
2. There are different dynamics of conflict depending on who it is between:
 - a. In the world – between unbelievers – e.g. Lamech (Gen 4) and Pharaoh (Gen 40) – here conflict is vengeful, disproportionate, capricious
 - b. Among God's people – here there is the possibility of reconciliation, though often the reality is that does not happen
 - c. Between world and God's people – here the resolution is war (Gen 34) or more often separation (e.g. Gen 26)
3. Conflict is ugly, painful and often drawn out – especially within the family – this is something that the narratives really impress on us and we feel as we follow them through – it stems from the Fall and it feels and looks horrible – we need to recognise the effect it will have on us as we're in it or attempting to deal with it
4. Powerful, dangerous emotions are involved – anger is not always wrong but it is very powerful – people get killed
5. 'Not so among you' (Mark 10:43) – Lamech (Gen 4) shows us what conflict is like among those who do not know God (you touch me and I'll smash you 77 times harder) and Jesus is likely alluding to this when he tells Peter that in the church there should be 77 times forgiveness (Matt 18:22)
6. Distancing versus distancing-followed-by-reconciliation – several times in Genesis there is separation between two parties in conflict – twice (Jacob-Esau and Joseph-brothers) there is separation followed (some considerable time later) by reconciliation – is that telling us something about the role of physical separation in conflict and conflict resolution?
7. Reconciliation is possible and beautiful – the stories of Jacob-Esau and Joseph-brothers give us great hope – these were deadly conflicts – and the way the narrative tells of these reconciliations brings out not only the fact of it but the goodness and beauty of it that makes us long for it (cf. Psalm 133)
8. Through conflict to something better – the narratives show how conflict changes both parties – there is profound character development in Jacob, Esau, Joseph and his brothers – and how the end state is actually much better than the initial pre-conflict state
9. Calling on the name of the LORD – the contrast between the line of Cain and the line of Seth in Genesis 4 highlights the vengeance of Cain's descendants and the prayerfulness of Seth's – perhaps a subtle indication of the way calling out to the Lord changes the dynamics of interpersonal conflict
10. Deception – this is key in the conflicts of Jacob-Esau and Joseph-brothers
11. Seeing the face of God – There is a sandwich structure in Genesis 32-33: a) Jacob-Esau (Gen. 32:1-21), Jacob-God (Gen. 32:22-33), Jacob-Esau (Gen. 33:1-20). What connects these stories is Jacob struggling with God and man (cf. Gen. 32:28), Jacob embraced by God and man, humbling before God and man, reconciliation with God and man.⁴ The story is brilliantly told with huge build up of tension released in the most unexpected reconciliation. A connection is clearly being drawn between "I saw God face to face" (32:30) and "like seeing the face of God" (33:10). For Jacob, seeing Esau is like seeing God. It seems that Jesus was consciously using this material from Genesis 33 when he told his parable to show what the God who welcomes sinners is like – Luke 15:20//Gen 32:4. And it was very appropriate that he used this story because it is, in a sense, already a parable albeit a living one. Esau receiving Jacob shows what God is like: "For to see your face is like seeing the face of God" (Gen. 33:10).⁵ So

³ <https://www.e-n.org.uk/2019/07/features/the-preaching-pop-charts/>.

⁴ Another strong theme in these chapters is blessing, which connects with the theme of blessing running through Gen. 12-50 and with the idea of reconciliation as blessing elsewhere in Scripture (Psalm 133).

⁵ If we find it strange that someone like Esau, the Edomite, the one who was ultimately outside the covenant, is presented as an representation of what God is like we should note that: a) all humanity has the image of God and sometimes displays

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Genesis seems to be teaching something profound about the relationship between vertical reconciliation and horizontal reconciliation.

12. Acknowledgement of God's sovereign story authorship – "If you watch the stories God is weaving in your life, you... will begin to see the patterns. You'll become a poet, sensitive" (Paul E. Miller, *A Praying Life*) – Miller particularly points out how Joseph is able to reconcile with his brothers because he sees that God has been writing the whole story (Gen 50:20), complete with poetry of coats used as evidence.
13. 'What is this you have done?' – a phrase used 8 times in Genesis, usually met with evasion of responsibility but in the last occurrence (Gen 44:15) it is met with confession and leads to reconciliation⁶
14. Am I my brother's keeper? – Genesis is building up an answer to this question: Yes. It is interesting that in the NT one of the most common ways of speaking of fellow Christian is 'brothers'.

What are the main reasons for putting off difficult conversations?

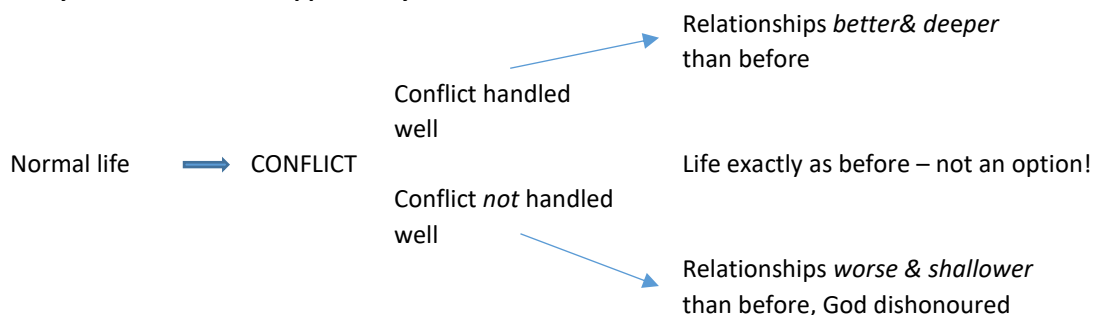
A survey of 500 managers asked them why they put off conversations – these were the reasons they gave

- | | |
|---|-----|
| • Didn't want to create a bad atmosphere | 29% |
| • To avoid confrontation | 18% |
| • Didn't know how to say it | 16% |
| • Worried about the reprisals | 11% |
| • Thought it might make the situation worse | 11% |
| • Didn't want to upset someone | 8% |
| • Lack of time | 7% |

Did the issue:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| • Resolve itself? | 4% |
| • Get worse? | 43% |
| • Stay the same? | 49% |
| • Someone else tackled it | 4% |

Every Conflict Offers an Opportunity

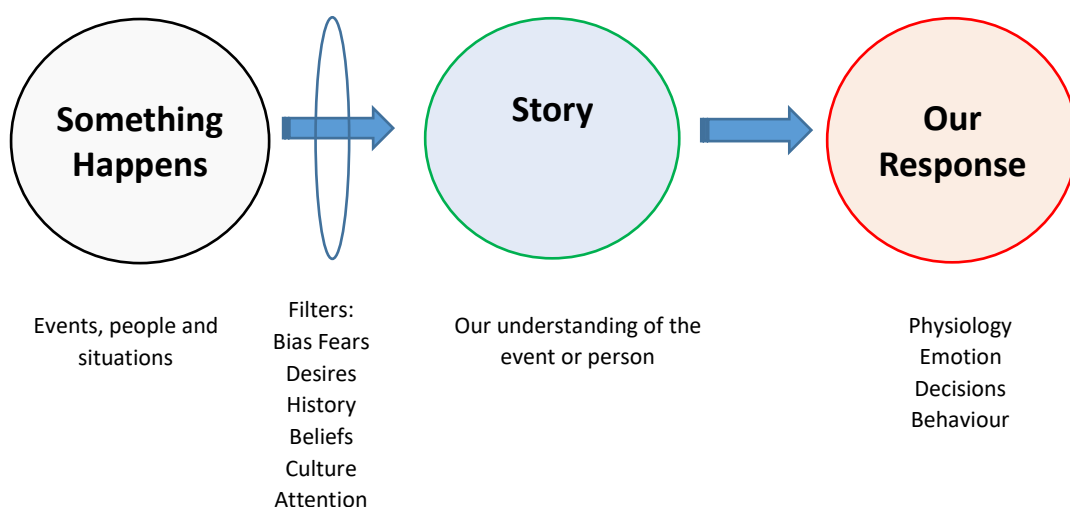


beautiful flashes of that image, b) Jesus, in another parable, again uses an OT incident (2 Chron 28) to provide the imagery to describe himself as the Good Samaritan – the ultimate unexpected outsider.

⁶ Alex Lee and Geoffrey Harper, 'Dodging the Question?', Tyndale Bulletin 70.2 (2019) pp 161-183.

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As creatures we never experience unfiltered reality



Tool #1: Deal with yourself – through the gospel

Basic Problem: me at the centre

- James 4:1; Gal. 2:20; Phil 2:1-4; Luke 6:41-42
- Empathy and prayer – get out of yourself and see from their perspective and God’s perspective (Luther – live your life in God and in your neighbour)

The first conversation to have is with yourself:

- What emotions are you experiencing?
- What is the issue? Why is it bothering you?
- What is your purpose in having the conversation?
- What is your own part in the conflict? How have you sinned in similar ways at other times?
- Are you remembering your own sinfulness and how you have been forgiven?

Tool #2: Active listening

- Listen with curiosity and care; not judgment; learn new categories (rather than seeking to force them into your categories)
- Ask open-ended questions
 - “Tell me more...”
 - “Help me understand...”
- Reflect back to make sure you have understood

Tool #3: “Yes, AND...”

- Not ‘Yes but’
- Multiple perspectives
- “I hear what you are saying and I want to add...”

Tool #4: Use “I” Messages

- Sentences that start with “you” sound accusatory and blaming and will likely result in defensiveness
- Start your sentences with “I heard you say” or “I felt” or “What I was trying to say was...” (not “I think you were...” – which is a ‘you’ accusation in disguise)

Tool #5: Own Your Own Stuff

Focus on personal accountability, not blame

Expressing personal accountability = accepting responsibility for my own actions and non-actions

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Even if it is only 10% you – we are happy to risk the other person not owning their 90% and going away thinking it was all you

Tool #6: Apologise well

1. Address everyone involved
2. Avoid “if”, “but”, and “maybe” (don’t make excuses or try to justify your actions)
3. Admit specifically (both attitudes and actions)
4. Apologise (express sorrow for the way you affected someone)
5. Accept the consequences
6. Alter your behaviour (commit to change - Eph. 4:22-32)
7. Ask for forgiveness

Tool #7 Mediators

Esther 5-10; 1 Sam 25; Phil 4:2-3

- What are the advantages of using a mediator?
- What are the disadvantages of using a mediator?
- What are some real life situations in which a mediator would be more effective at resolving a problem than a direct, confrontational approach?
- Build relation with both, represent the other well, listen for heart issues
- Remind both parties of the Cross
- Accept your limitations – you can’t see hearts or change hearts – only God can do that
- Pray, pray, pray

Some key resources

[‘Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most’ Douglas Stone](#)

[‘The hope of Biblical peacemaking as a response to the challenge of conflict’, *The briefing* Nov 2010](#)

[‘Cracks are Serious’ Peter Mead – Colossians 3](#)

[Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*](#)