

### ***Conflict in Creation***

#### **How to Handle Conflict in a Christian Way – IV**

July 31, 2016

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup> The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.*

*<sup>3</sup> And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. <sup>4</sup> And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup> God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.*

*<sup>6</sup> And God said, “Let there be an expanse<sup>1</sup> in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” <sup>7</sup> And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. <sup>8</sup> And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.*

*<sup>9</sup> And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. <sup>10</sup> God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.*

*<sup>11</sup> And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.” And it was so. <sup>12</sup> The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. <sup>13</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.*

*<sup>14</sup> And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, <sup>15</sup> and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. <sup>16</sup> And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. <sup>17</sup> And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, <sup>18</sup> to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. <sup>19</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.*

*<sup>20</sup> And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” <sup>21</sup> So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. <sup>22</sup> And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” <sup>23</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.*

*<sup>24</sup> And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so. <sup>25</sup> And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.*

*<sup>26</sup> Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”*

*<sup>27</sup> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them... <sup>31</sup> And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Genesis 1:1-27, 31 (ESV)*

This morning we are continuing our series looking at conflict. From our Scripture this morning we find that right at the very beginning of time, the very beginning of creation, there was conflict: Light and darkness; day and night; the water in the air separated from the water on land; water on earth and dry land; many, many kinds of vegetation – producing all kinds of different things; sun and moon; millions and millions of stars; birds, sea creatures, - *beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind.* God made all of this and “saw that it was good.” But God wasn’t done yet:

*<sup>26</sup> Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion [over all else we created]” <sup>27</sup> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

Right from the very beginning of time, that which began with the creation of the world, we see that God is a God of diversity. And it tells us that God created man in his own image – “male and female he created them.”

So, my first questions this morning is, “is conflict good or bad?” You see, all this that we read about at the very beginning took place before sin ever entered the picture. What if we redefined our definition of conflict to not only a negative definition but also a positive definition? A positive definition might be something like this: “when two or more opposing persons or forces give rise to dynamic action which can produce positive results and/or positive change.”

Differences and distinctions permeate the creation account. God values diversity. How much does he value diversity? Well, think about this – seven billion people inhabit planet earth, and yet not one of the seven billion is exactly like any other. Even fraternal twins, for all their similarities, have distinctions and unique features.

In his book “Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians,” John Paul Lederach points out that in the creation account we find three creation commitments by God:

1. God is present within each of us.
2. God values diversity and distinctiveness.
3. God gives us godlike freedom.

In creating human beings, God was committed to giving us freedom of choice. Unfortunately it is that “godlike freedom” that has gotten us into trouble. There is a huge difference between “godlike freedom” and being God. And that image of God which is in all of us has been marred by sin, both our own and that which we inherited from Adam and Eve. Due to the sinful nature that lies in all of us, we all try to become gods onto ourselves. So, within the freedom God has given us he also has given us some boundaries. Those boundaries are for our own good, not God’s. God is already good. For Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden those boundaries were represented by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil:

*<sup>16</sup> And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, <sup>17</sup> but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”*  
Genesis 2:16-17 (ESV)

As I prepared for my message this morning I came the realization that there are actually two types of conflict. On your outline this morning I have referred to them as Type I conflict and Type II conflict. Type I conflict is the conflict caused by being outside of God’s creative order. Type II conflict is the conflict within God’s creative order – a result of all the diversity that God created us with. It’s very important that we try and distinguish between the two. While conflict within God’s creative order can cause us to sin as a response to the conflict – conflict outside of God’s creative order is sin, is caused by our sin and usually causes us to sin more.

Much of the conflict that we are experiencing today in this nation is due to the fact that many in America are living outside of God’s creative order.

The Bible tells us that men and women, male and female, are both created in the image of God. In that way we are equal – no greater and no less in the eyes of God. But we were also created to be distinct from one another. We were created to compliment one another, not be the same.

God’s creative order, way back at the very beginning of time is that marriage be between a man and a woman for life. God’s creative order was/is that children would be raised with two loving parents – one male, and one female – that which represents the diversity and distinctiveness in his creation.

That has been the norm throughout almost all of history, in almost every culture, even those that have denied the existence of God. Yes, there have been variations from that throughout history as well, even recorded in the Bible.

But it's very important that we also remember that not everything in the Bible is prescriptive (meaning how God has prescribed us to live within his creative order). Many passages are descriptive, just describing how sinful human beings have decided to live. Polygamy, men with many wives as described in the Bible would fall in the descriptive category, not God's prescribed order.

We need to be careful when we read the Bible, from Genesis 3 on the Bible does not endorse everything it reports. Before the fall we have God declaring that his divine intention is that marriage be between a husband and wife. That was affirmed by Jesus in his teaching:

*Jesus said, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,<sup>5</sup> and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?<sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."*  
Matthew 19:4-6 (ESV)

It's the same with the taking of another human life. Before the fall described in Genesis 3, all creation was good, highly valued by God, especially human beings. Do you really believe that a loving God, within his creative order, wants us taking another human beings life? But sin entered the picture, and then we have Cain slaying Abel, the first murder, the first taking of another human life. And then we read about all the taking of human life throughout history and throughout the Bible story, but that was not God's divine will from the beginning. Just like Jesus telling us what God's creative order for marriage is, Jesus tells us what his creative order for human life is.

God's creative order for marriage, that which was taken for granted throughout almost all of history, including and especially American history, until the last ten to twenty years, has now been turned upside down. How rapidly has it changed? Well, it was only 20 years ago, in 1996, that President Bill Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act, recognizing marriage as that between a man and a woman. Yes, that was Democrat Bill Clinton, husband of current presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. I say that not espousing either of this year's presidential candidates, there is a lot in both presidential candidates character and platforms that is not in God's creative order. I say it only to help us recognize how much has changed in this country over the past twenty years. And then we wonder why there is so much conflict.

While change may be good, change is not always good!

Here are some recent statistics (2014):

- Today in America, fewer than half (46%) of all children are living in a house with parents of a husband and wife in their first marriage. That's a change from 73% in 1960 and 61% in 1980.
- Today in America 41% of children are born outside of marriage.
- Today in America, 1 in 4 children (that which represents more than 17 million children) are being raised without a father. Of those 17 million children who live in a home without a father present, 80% live below the poverty level.

Again, then we wonder why there is so much conflict, violence, and identity issues? There is no foundation. As long as we want to remain outside of God's creative order, there will always be conflict, and most of it will go unresolved.

It all speaks to the big choice that God gives each of us, that which stretches all the way back to early Old Testament times, found in the Book of Deuteronomy:

*“For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off... <sup>14</sup> But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.*

*<sup>15</sup> “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. <sup>16</sup> If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you... <sup>17</sup> But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup> I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. ..<sup>19</sup> I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, <sup>20</sup> loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life...”*

Deuteronomy 30:11-20 (ESV)

And the words of God through Joshua:

*But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, ...as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”*

Joshua 24:15 (NIV)

That's the first type of conflict and when dealing with conflict that is the first thing we need to discern – is it conflict caused by walking or living outside of God's creative order, purpose or will for our lives? If that is the case then we need to repent, turn from it, and turn back to God, be reconciled to God. We need to be reconciled to God before we can truly be reconciled to one another. The Bible tells us that Jesus came full of grace and truth. That is conflict! The perfect Jesus could hold those two together perfectly. We, as sinful human beings have proven that we cannot hold them together perfectly and more often than not we haven't just missed the mark by a little, but often by a lot, often swaying far from one extreme to the other throughout the different generations of human history.

But there is also the second type of conflict and that is the conflict that exists for us even when we are in God's creative order and to that type of conflict there can be both a positive side and/or a negative side.

Each human being has been, throughout all of history, and is today, created in the image of God, with the capacity to think, feel and act. And each was and is created as a unique individual with the freedom to choose. And all of that was built into creation before the fall.

Think about what it would be like if we were not created that way. How about comparing ourselves as a community with a community or a colony of ants? In many ways we're alike – we work hard, we live in community, we are pragmatic, we want to get things done and from the outside we look pretty similar, especially in rural middle America, but it's also true in most communities around the world.

But there are some important differences – we think and feel while ants act by instinct. We have choices and dreams. While most of us look the same on the outside, we are rather diverse on the inside. Each of us is a unique person with a heart, soul and mind, and a godlikeness. Our lives are much more dynamic and rich than that of ants. Thank God! Oh, there is one other difference. Within their colony, ants rarely fight. Entomologists say ants might fight a little, but they certainly do not experience conflict like humans do.

Or if you were to set up a perfect world – one in which there was no conflict – how would you do that? Would you make everyone the same? To do that we would need to be like robots. You would need to take away our human ability to think, to feel, to create. There would be no conflict, but it would also be a pretty boring place. It would also take away the possibility of whether to choose God or not. To choose life or death.

To achieve such a condition where there was no conflict, you would need to wipe out diversity, individuality, imagination and choice, all which seem to go against a creative God. It says that on the sixth day, God looked over this creation and said, “it is very good.” The very elements that make human experience rich and dynamic are the elements that make conflict inevitable.”

Built into God’s original plan before the fall, humankind was conceived in such a way that made differences and conflict normal and inevitable. Adam and Eve were assigned the task of naming all the animals and plants, feeding themselves, filling the earth, and being fruitful and multiplying. Can you imagine that they went about their tasks without any disagreement and argument? Both were created in the image of God. Each was an individual, and each had freedom. Can you really imagine that they never argued or disagreed?

The Genesis story sets the stage for conflict as a natural part of our relationships because of who we are, as God created us to be. Despite what many think, including many Christians, Type II conflict in itself is not sin. But sin may enter into the situation depending on how we approach the conflict, how we deal with it, and especially how we treat each other when responding to it.

Cutting ties and walking away from a relationship abruptly may be just as violent as staying and fighting physically. That doesn’t mean that there might not be a time to distance ourselves or to end the relationship as it is, or has been, but it should not be done easily and it should not be done as a result of our fight or flight response.

John Paul Lederach says that the amount of sin present in each of our relationships is a meter of the quality of our relationships. He writes:

“The signs of sin entering conflict appear when we want to be God, when we assume superiority, when we oppress, when we try to lord it over others, when we refuse to listen, when we discount and exclude others, when we hold back deep feelings, when we avoid, when we hate, and when we project blame with no self-reflection.”

John Paul Lederach, *Reconcile*

A Christian understanding of conflict is built on the three basic creation commitments of God:

1. God is present in each of us – that even though we have all been marred by sin, there is still at least a little bit of God in all of us.

2. God values diversity – and his ultimate goal is unity amidst that diversity. But not unity at all costs. Unity in the midst of His creative order.
3. God is committed to giving us freedom. How committed to giving us freedom? Freedom to choose life or death, both here on earth and in the life to come.

It is those three elements which make our lives rich, interesting and exciting. They are the same elements that make conflict a natural part of our relationships. The question is what are we going to do with that conflict? Are we going to use it for good – to display the godlike character and qualities that are supposed to be present in believers of Jesus Christ and brought out through the Holy Spirit – those which lead to life? Or are we going to use the conflict to display the sin which lies in each of us – that which leads to death and destruction?

Next week we start getting down to the nitty-gritty, the practical, as Jesus teaches us how we should respond when someone sins, especially against us.