



Christ-Centered Conflict Resolution

A GUIDE FOR
TURBULENT TIMES

Tony Merida





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To the members of Imago Dei Church,
a joyful community of believers on mission together.

You are a joy to pastor.
I dedicate this book to you.

Acknowledgments



I'm thrilled once again to partner with my good friends at B&H. I was very honored when Devin Maddox and Ashley Gorman reached out to me with the request to write something on this particular subject, and I pray that this biblical guide on conflict resolution will help to cultivate Christ-centered peace in many people's relationships.

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Finally, I'm thankful for the members of Imago Dei Church, a joyful community of believers on mission together. You are a joy to pastor. I dedicate this book to you.

“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely. And may your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Thess. 5:23)

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Introduction



As the 2020 Coronavirus sweeps through the globe, we currently have nine people (and two dogs) living in our house during the “stay at home” order. That’s me, my wife, five kids, one house guest, and one nephew around the dinner table each night (the dogs are under the table). So when I was asked to write a book on conflict resolution, my first thought was, *Write one? I need one!*

The goal of having peaceful relationships requires biblical wisdom, prayer, and a heart filled with adoration for Jesus Christ, who has shown us reconciling love.

I hope this little book can help provide you with gospel truth and holy motivations for maintaining peace in your relationships, whether they be in your home, your neighborhood, your ministry, or otherwise. I hope that it will encourage you to seek

the Spirit's help; and that it will help captivate your heart with the loveliness of the Prince of Peace, who has given us the power and pattern for how to love others.

Pastoral

Numerous Christian books on conflict resolution exist, but many are quite long and are very step-oriented. I'm not opposed to long books or to books with a lot of steps (in fact, I have benefited greatly from some of them!), but my goal here is simply to focus your attention on the grace of Jesus, as revealed in Scripture, and to apply key biblical texts to your situation.

I'm a pastor, not a professional counselor, and so I'm not delving into certain aspects of conflict resolution; nor am I treating extreme cases of abuse and law-breaking. Some issues are beyond the scope of this little book. I'm writing as if you're in my church and you're coming to me because your wife or husband or roommate or friend or coworker or kids or neighbors are driving you bananas—perhaps because you're spending more time than normal together, or perhaps because some other trial is testing your relationship. I want to give you some important passages to consider and apply.

I'm also writing with a burden that Christians be known for peace and compassion in this current hostile and tribal context in which we live. I'm writing because our faith is not a doctrine-only faith, but a doctrine-embodied faith, lived out in

healthy relationships. It's truly remarkable how many passages in the New Testament speak about relationships. I told someone recently that if we invited the apostle John to preach at our church, he very well may preach something as basic as "love one another." We need to recover an emphasis on loving relationships, especially among certain groups that sadly are known for infighting, maneuvering, gossiping, and alienating people. I would love to see a reconciliation movement among Christians!

Christ-Centered

I suppose some of you picked up this book because of the "conflict resolution" part of the title, but please don't overlook the "Christ-centered" part of the title. I affirm the idea that when superior affection for Christ dominates a person's heart, it will affect one's entire life, including one's relationships.

The importance of a person's affections is not hard to illustrate because we see human beings living out of their loves/desires/affections all the time. The parent says to sixteen-year-old Rico, "Hey son, please take a shower." But he's not interested. "Rico, would you use some deodorant, please?" He's not into that either. "Hey Rico, how about some cologne? Just a little dab would do you well." Nah. "Rico, would you want to wash my car?" Forget about that idea too. Or, "Rico, you should get a job." No thanks, he would rather play video games or scroll through his social media feeds. But, remarkably, all of this changes when

something miraculous happens: Rico gets a girlfriend! When he gets a new love, then you don't have to tell him to take a shower, get a job, or wash the car—he wants to. Once Rico's affections are engaged, his behavior follows. And likewise, when a person cultivates deep affections for Jesus, everything changes—use of money, time, internet browsing, and how one treats others.

When a person *wants* to honor Jesus deeply, then he will take Jesus' Word seriously, and “go and be reconciled” with his brother or sister (Matt. 5:24); when a person *treasures* the forgiveness of Jesus, she will seek to forgive “as the Lord has forgiven you” (Col. 3:13); when a person's *heart* is melted by the gentleness of Jesus, then his natural impulse will be to “gently restore” a wayward friend (Gal. 6:1; 1 Cor. 4:21; 2 Tim. 2:25).

I don't want to be simplistic and tell you that “all you need is Jesus,” but I am saying that only Jesus gives us the motive, example, and power we need to “pursue peace with everyone” (Heb. 12:14). So while many conflict-resolution matters are worth our attention, Jesus must stay in the forefront of our thinking. After all, becoming like him is the goal of every Christian, including the way he makes peace with others.

To talk about the skills of conflict resolution but not focus on the heart will ultimately be a disappointing endeavor—especially in the long run. Alfred Poirier puts it like this: “Unresolved conflicts between Christians have less to do with people being

skillful than with them being sinful.”¹ Skills are important, but we must deal with our hearts if we are to experience peace.

Conflict as Opportunity

Though there are many ways conflict arises, I cannot help but acknowledge the particular context of COVID-19, given that my family and my church are living through it at present. When this global health crisis hit, it caused a mixed reaction in relationships. Added time together has helped some marriages and families. But others found it more difficult, as the reports of domestic abuse and divorce filing skyrocketed.² I’m afraid we have only seen the beginning of many relational problems connected to this experience.

So, COVID-19 pandemic or not, I’m glad you picked up this little book, as it’s likely that you are either in a conflict or seeking to help someone in a conflict. If it’s the former, then I want to encourage you. It’s very easy to fight or to flee in a conflict. It’s easy to avoid the awkward conversations that you need to have, or to lose your mind over a relational conflict in a marriage, in neighborhood feuds, in parenting, or in a church. It’s easy to

¹ Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 12.

² For one among many examples, see: Kaelan Deese, “Divorces skyrocket in China amid lockdown.” Article available at <https://thehill.com/homenews/news/490564-divorces-skyrocket-in-china-amid-lockdown>. Accessed May 1, 2020.

avoid seeking help from a trusted friend, pastor, or counselor, and just fume or hold a grudge instead. But if you will pursue forgiveness and reconciliation in your relationships, you will grow personally, you will help others grow, and you will be doing something that not only glorifies God, but powerfully embodies his great gospel to those who need to see it with their own eyes.

Ken Sande defines conflict as “a difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone’s goals or desires.”³ It may be impossible for you to see right now, but your conflict might be a wonderful *opportunity* to demonstrate Christ’s grace, to put on vivid display what he’s like and what he’s done for us all. Making peace like Jesus does is not easy. It requires the Holy Spirit’s enabling power. It requires us living out the fruit of the Spirit and not fulfilling the desires of the flesh. But it’s worth it.

I Feel You, Parents

All five of my kids are adopted. We have a biological sibling group from Ukraine (three girls and one boy) and a son from Ethiopia. We’ve had our Ukrainian children for eleven years and our Ethiopian son for ten years.

All that to say, it didn’t take me long to realize my need for help with pursuing peace. For the first few months, the Ukrainians spoke no English but could speak to each other. As

³ Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 29.

you can imagine, we had a little Cold War happening every night! They had been through a lot (as all orphans have), and there were many highs and lows early on. I remember grabbing Corlette Sande's book *The Young Peacemaker*, and working through one of the graphics inside of it. There was a spectrum, with two extremes on either side that we were trying to avoid. The left side was ESCAPE, and it included expressions of escape like "run away," "blame game," and "deny." The right side was ATTACK, and its expressions looked like "put-downs," "gossip," and "fight." The sweet spot was the middle, called WORK IT OUT, which offered a few ideas: "overlook" a minor offense, "talk" it out, or "get help" from a trusted adult who can mediate for you.⁴

All five kids now range from ages fifteen to twenty, and working through that graphic wasn't a silver bullet (maybe that's a bad analogy for a book on conflict!), but it did plant some seeds that I hope will continue to bear fruit.

Trying to be a faithful husband, parent, and pastor, all while speaking and writing and teaching, hasn't been easy. And the same is true for my wife. She wears just as many hats as me, and thorns spring up in her work, parenting, and relationship with me all of the time. Our house has known conflicts—we have blurted out the hurtful things, snapped too quickly at our

⁴ This graphic can be found at <https://rw360.org/the-young-peacemaker/>, and it is originally found in Corlette Sande, *The Young Peacemaker*, 2nd edition (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 1997).

children, broken up the children's fights with threats, employed the cold shoulder, manipulated to get what we want, and so on. But we have also known Christ's peace—we've repented for our fleshly responses to one another, dug deep to get to the root of our frustrations, learned to appreciate each other's differences, dealt with issues directly instead of letting them simmer or drag on, and often asked forgiveness from our children when we get it wrong. Through the trials and the storms, God has been faithful. He is with us. And he is with you, Christian.

Hope for the Hurting

Jesus Christ has a miraculous ability to take an absolute mess and turn it into an amazing message. In the gospel, he shows his reconciling grace to broken people and restores them. He will not break the bruised reed, as Isaiah says (Isa. 42:3). He restores the wounded so that they can be fruitful and can flourish. The Savior is gentle, and he provides rest for the weary. I pray that as you read this book, you will experience the peace and love of Jesus in a deep way, so that it will overflow into people in your life. I pray that the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6; Mic. 5:5) will make you a peacemaker for the good of your relationships and to the glory of God.

Have you ever noticed that even for Christians, conflict is everywhere?

Though we all want unity and harmony in our relationships, peace seems so hard to come by. Whether it's a hot-tempered spouse, rebellious child, passive-aggressive friend, meddling neighbor, difficult church member, withdrawn roommate, angry social media comment, or otherwise, conflict always finds us, and often, we let it overtake us.

In this short, biblical, and practical book, pastor and author Tony Merida shows us that it doesn't have to be this way. Merida not only paints a stunning picture of Christ our Peacemaker, he also shows us how to stop wishing for peace and *go make it*. In these pages, Tony will help you:

- Discover where conflicts come from
- Realize conflicts don't have to define you, scare you, or undo you
- Understand the pattern and power of Christ as the ultimate Peacemaker
- Tap into the Spirit's supernatural ability to change you in the midst of your conflicts
- Learn how to overcome evil with good
- Anticipate conflicts and resolve them in biblical, Christ-centered ways
- Stop letting your relationships simmer in a place of division, anger, or strife

Stop waiting for peace to "hopefully" come to your doorstep. Instead, in the power and strength God provides, become a person who can *make* the peace you so deeply desire, and watch your relationships transform.



TONY MERIDA is pastor for Preaching and Vision of Imago Dei Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. He's also the dean of Grimké Seminary and director for Theological Training for Acts 29. Tony has written several books including *The Christ-Centered Expositor* and multiple volumes in the Christ-Centered Exposition commentary series. He's happily married to Kimberly, and they have five children.

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