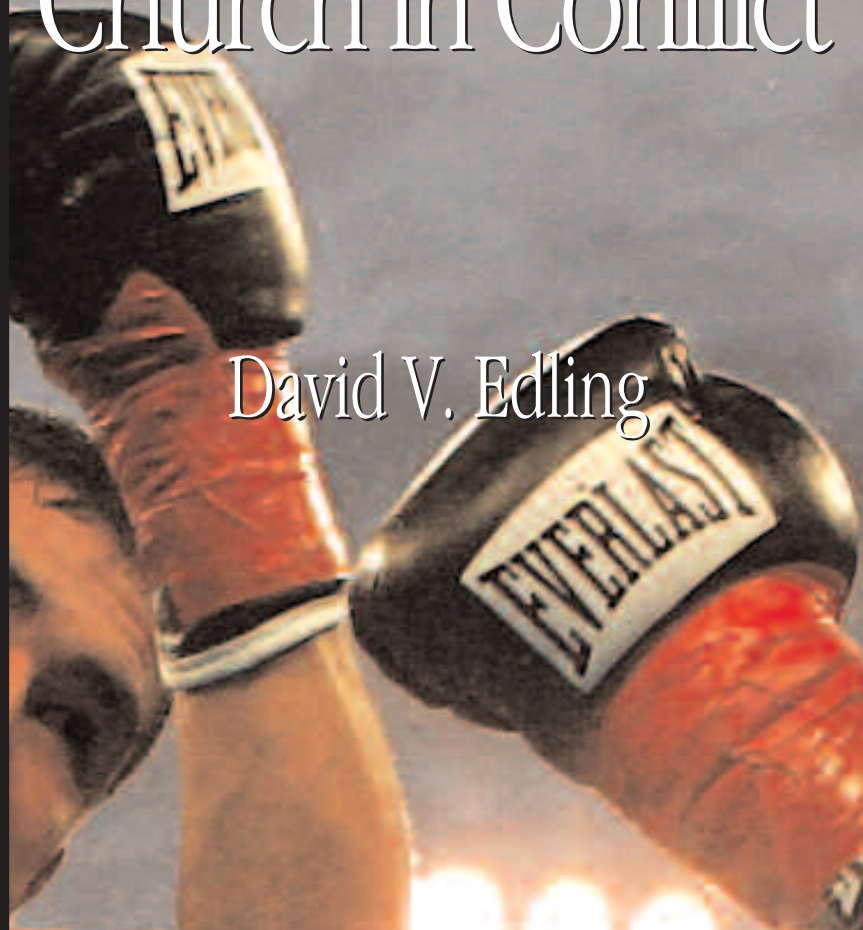


# Counseling the Church in Conflict

David V. Edling



David V. Edling holds an MAR (Theology) degree from Westminster Theological Seminary in California and a JD from California Western School of Law. He is a Senior Ministry Consultant for Peacemaker Ministries ([www.Peacemaker.net](http://www.Peacemaker.net)), an international ministry committed to equipping and assisting Christians and their churches to respond to conflict biblically.

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# Counseling the Church in Conflict

DAVID V. EDLING • PEACEMAKER MINISTRIES

Christian conciliators are frequently called upon to assist church leaders manage conflict in the local church. Most pastors have little training in conflict management and even less in the legal ramifications of conflict left unresolved. Once the threat of possible legal action looms, pastors and other church leaders can easily lose perspective on the shepherding responsibilities they continue to bear and face the temptation to resort to unbiblical responses to conflict (escape or attack). This paper seeks to address the counseling opportunity you may have to assist church leadership to not lose sight of their responsibilities and to steward conflict for the purposes of glorifying God, serving others, and growing in Christ-like character.

The pastor calls. Right now he needs advice on what to do next. All of the church lay leaders are looking to him to guide them through the perilous waters of this destructive situation. People are talking about leaving the church. What do you say that will help this servant of God lead his church through this conflict? More importantly, what does the Bible say to this shepherd so that he may confidently teach from God's perspective and assure his flock that they will follow God's way in responding to this situation?<sup>1</sup>

Three passages of Scripture are particularly helpful, I believe, in counseling a pastor in church conflict situations. The requested counsel is, "What should I do next?" The Scriptures that answer that question, I believe, are: Job 38:1-7, Luke 12:13-21, and Acts 15:1-11. Respectively, these passages speak of perspective, discernment, and leadership.

<sup>1</sup>My scenario sets forth the pastor as the one seeking to play the role of peacemaker. Of course, many church conflicts involve the pastor as a party to the conflict. In such cases, the responsibility of peacemaker may fall to an elder, deacon, denominational leader, or other mature Christian.

## I. PERSPECTIVE: JOB 38:1-7

*Then the Lord answered Job out of the storm. He said: Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?*

*Job 38:1-7*

When God consents to Job's demand for a face-to-face meeting so that Job may "give free rein to [his] complaint" (Job 10:1), God points out something we all need to remember when faced with a difficult situation. God reminds Job that His perspective is bigger and fuller than ours. Notice in Job 38:1-7 what God does not do. He doesn't address the specifics of Job's complaint. Rather, he confronts Job with eternity. Job comes to query God with his "why" questions. God says, "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" God demands a paradigm shift of Job.

Conflict robs people of their perspective. In fact, churches in conflict are usually there because they have lost their perspective. As a counselor, one of your roles is to help pastors or other church leaders responding to conflict regain a biblical perspective. I have found one of the best ways to do that is to put the current conflict in the context of eternity, just as God put Job's complaint in perspective.

In my experience, the church that turns first to a study of the *biblical process* of conflict resolution rarely finds it necessary to deal with the many collateral conflicts generally associated with the tension caused by the core issue of the conflict. Significant material issues need to be answered, but the way those issues are resolved radically changes once people begin to deal biblically with each other in their personal relationships. The practical implication of this counseling step is to encourage the pastor not to focus on the core issue of the conflict directly (at least initially), but rather to focus on the *biblical process* of conflict resolution. This approach has two positive results: 1) it appropriately directs people involved to the issues of *how* conflict is to be dealt with, and 2) it provides the "breathing room" needed to step back from the conflict issue itself so that there is time to regain perspective. The *procedural* study, in other words, in effect deals *substantively* with the hearts of those in conflict. The advice I recommend, therefore, is to temporarily set aside the material issues of the conflict while God's Word is studied and taught, dealing with the *how* issues of the process of biblical conflict resolution.

## II. DISCERNMENT: LUKE 12:13-21

*Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." But God said to him 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.*

*Luke 12:13-21*

The insight that makes this encounter so fascinating is the way Jesus sees past the presenting issue (to divide the inheritance, an apparently reasonable request), to the real issue (a greedy heart). Conflict in the church is frequently stated in terms of a presenting issue: "I disagree with the theology of this church"; "the pastor's sermons don't address my concerns"; "the elders have neglected my spiritual care." The presenting issue often is merely a superficial smokescreen for the real cause of the conflict. Remarkably, pastors faced with conflict frequently choose to perpetuate the presenting issue instead of addressing the root cause of the problem. I believe this is so because the presenting issue *may seem* easier to deal with. What needs to happen, however, is that superficial escape responses to conflict must be overcome, and mining for the real issues embraced. What does Jesus do? As the parable unfolds, the layers of rationalization are exposed: "I have no place to store my crops"; "I'll build bigger barns" (false hope), "plenty of good things laid up for many years"; "take life easy" (denial), etc. Ultimately, the Lord exposes the real issue by saying possessions are given to you so that you can be rich toward God (i.e., Jesus shows how much deeper true reality is when viewed from His eternal perspective rather than the superficial worldview as seen through our selfish hearts. True discernment comes by being grafted into God's ultimate purposes).

Those perpetuating conflict in the church will frequently do so by presenting an issue that makes them look more spiritual and righteous. In our scenario, the pastor needs counsel and encouragement to search below the surface of the presenting issue. Confronting merely the presenting issue, even with a proper biblical process, will not bring real peace nor ultimately resolve the conflict. A careful explanation of this dynamic to the pastor will help with his vital task of wise discernment as he seeks to flush out the true causes of conflict and the actual issues.

### III. LEADERSHIP: ACTS 15:1-11

*“Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.” The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”* Acts 15:1-11

This conflict, precipitated by those teaching false doctrine, gives us an excellent model to follow when conflict strikes the church. The elements of conflict response in this passage are:

1. involvement of other mature believers (15:2b),
2. unrelenting focus on the positive even in light of the conflict (15:3-4),
3. clear identification of the issues in question (15:5-6),
4. careful and thorough discussion (15:7), and
5. the exercise of *authoritative* leadership, based on God’s truth (15:7-11).

The first four elements outline a process of responding to church conflict. This wise process, contained in Scripture, is reflected in Peacemaker<sup>®</sup> Ministries fundamental methodology for responding to conflict biblically. The fifth element, the exercise of godly leadership, is the crucial element *beyond the process*. Leadership determines not only the way the conflict is handled, but also, in many cases, its outcome. Acts 15:7 says that it was after “much discussion” (affirming data gathering and broad participation in the expression of ideas), that Peter got up and exercised leadership. He got up and spoke the truth of God’s grace. Church conflict is not resolved without the exercise of godly

leadership. It's not accidental that Scripture refers to Christians as sheep needing a shepherd. Jay Adams, in his book *Shepherding God's Flock* (P&R Publishing, 1980), points out that "shepherds lead." The pastor facing conflict in his church needs affirmation to walk in the various leadership roles God has called him to in the church. Dr. Adams states (Id. at page 325):

Shepherdly leadership, then, is responsible participant exemplary leadership that involves:

- (1) *Planning* (i.e., the setting of goals and of objectives for the progress of the flock as it seeks to honor God in all of its activities and endeavors; determining where the green grass grows and the still waters lie, and how to discover and guide the sheep into the paths of righteousness that lead there).
- (2) *Organization* (i.e., flocking; bring sheep together as a flock, or congregation, teaching and helping them to live, learn, love, and labor together for Jesus Christ).
- (3) [*Leading*]<sup>2</sup> (i.e., the authoritative instruction in and application of the Word of God to the individual and corporate activities of the sheep; management).

Other elements either may be distinguished from or subsumed under these, but shepherdly leadership at least always involves these three."

We see Peter particularly bringing application of the Word of God (*authoritative leadership*) to the material issue of the conflict in Acts 15:7-11. Similarly, James, the half-brother of Jesus, does the same thing a few verses later when he quotes to Amos 9:11-12 (Acts 15:13-21). The point is pastors must be capable of and willing to exercise confident, godly leadership in times of conflict. Anxiety and fears about the unknown, particularly secular legal actions, undermine a pastor's confidence to faithfully proclaim truth. I would counsel this pastor in such a way to restore in his mind the necessity of biblical leadership as a crucial element in responding to his church's conflict. It was that element, after all, that led to the first church council's decision; a decision, if not made, that could have led to a doctrine of salvation by works rather than grace!

#### IV. GROUP DYNAMICS, POLITY, AND OTHER GOVERNANCE ISSUES IN THE CONFLICTED CHURCH

In order to appropriately counsel the church in conflict, it is important to understand some basic principles of group behavior and church polity. Hundreds of books and articles address group dynamics and behavior. There are a variety of opinions out there. The church is a unique organization, however, that does not easily fit into most of the secular

<sup>2</sup>Adams uses the term "Rule," however, pastors or other church leaders struggling with issues of authoritarianism verses godly authoritative leadership may misunderstand that term. I prefer, therefore, "Leading" and hope to convey the idea of servanthood through the model of humility even as God's Word is taught with authority.

group dynamic studies available. Understanding the particular church and its culture is important if you are going to be a helpful and competent counselor. When I write of the exercise of godly authoritative leadership in the church, I recognize that the expression of that leadership will vary from church to church depending on its polity (i.e., form of church government), and its culture. Ideally, the three areas of counsel I have outlined—perspective, discernment, and leadership—could be implemented by the pastor and church leadership in a way that immediately responds to the conflict. Frequently, because of a church’s polity, that simply does not happen. As a conciliator counseling the church in conflict, one additional piece of information you will need in order to help the pastor answer the question of what to do next is that of knowing the church’s polity and how that polity defines the culture of the church. Whether or not the pastor will be able to apply your counsel may hinge on your sensitivity to the structure of government to which he must appeal.

There are three fundamental forms of polity—prelacy, independency and presbyterian. Another term for prelacy, indicating a hierarchical form of government, is “episcopal” (not to be confused with the Episcopal church, however this form of government is practiced within Anglican and Episcopal churches). Congregationalism is a form of independency, and, for purposes of this discussion will be used to describe that form of polity. Presbyterianism, as a form of polity, extends beyond Presbyterian churches per se, and should not be confined simply by its name to churches of Presbyterian denominations.

*Episcopal* polity forms have a government administered by a distinct category of church officers known as a priesthood, and final decision-making authority is found outside the local church. (The Roman Catholic Church is “episcopal” in form of government, however, is typically called “hierarchical” in the Catholic church.) The Episcopal Church system is the main Protestant group utilizing this form of church government. The most exhaustive treatment of a defense for the validity of this form of polity is found in the writings of Richard Hooker, a sixteenth-century Anglican priest. His major work, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, was published in 1593. Like most Anglicans, Mr. Hooker finds authority in the “three-legged stool” of Scripture, Reason, and Tradition, thus distinguishing them from the authority given church tradition by Roman Catholics, and the authority given Holy Scripture by other Protestant groups. Authority, within Hooker’s way of thinking, is found in how the three sources are linked dynamically so that no one leg is superior to the other. Scripture, as an Anglican aphorism states, contains all things necessary for salvation, but not all things in Scripture are necessary for salvation. Therefore, depending on what kind of question you are asking, Reason and/or Tradition may be more authoritative. In Hooker, one discerns the appropriate source of authority (Scripture, Reason, or Tradition) for a particular issue by discovering what kind

of thing you are dealing with, its appropriate end, and an effective means to an end. Depending on the matter you are dealing with, Tradition and Reason may have authority that exceeds that of Scripture. With regard to hierarchical polity, for example, Tradition and Reason surface as the basis for its authority. The episcopal system is not found in the New Testament but it is argued that it is a natural outgrowth of the development of the church begun in the New Testament period. After the second century, the Bishop came to be the chief official of the church, supplanting the authority of the elders. The Reformation challenged the validity of the episcopal form and continues to be a significant barrier between groups within the Protestant faith.

*Presbyterian* polity recognizes the right of the local congregation to elect elders to a session (the local governing body of elders), the pastor or minister being one of the elders with equal stature and authority with the other elders. The session corporately has governing authority over the local church; however, members of the session are also members of a regional “presbytery”, which has authority over several churches in a region. Furthermore, some of the members of a Presbytery are members of the “general assembly” which has authority over all of the churches in a nation or large region. The validity for such a system of regional government in the church is arguably found in the New Testament, particularly Acts 15, where representatives from Antioch met together with the elders and apostles in Jerusalem to seek God’s wisdom on a matter (see previous discussion). The presbyterian form of polity has many adherents among evangelical Christians today. Presbyterian churches and most churches holding to a “Reformed” theology practice this form of government. Churches belonging to a particular “denomination” or “association”, however, may not recognize the spiritual authority of anyone outside the local church; therefore, care must be exercised in not labeling a particular denominational church as practicing “presbyterian” polity. For example, while an independent church may elect elders and be a part of a “denomination” with an appearance of authority, in fact, no real spiritual authority beyond advisory is actually exercised by denominational officials (e.g., Southern Baptist Convention, Conservative Baptist Association, etc.).

*Independent* churches practice multiple forms of congregational polity. Some have a single elder (the pastor) and a board of elected deacons who serve under his authority (the form most commonly found in Baptist churches), while others will have an elected elder board on which the pastor serves as one of many (a form found in many independent Bible churches). Others elect various boards with distinct responsibilities in the congregation (e.g., Board of Trustees responsible for corporate matters, Board of Elders responsible for spiritual matters, etc.), a form typically found among Lutheran churches. An extreme form of congregationalism is a pure democracy where *everything* must come to a congregational meeting for decision. Congregationalism, whatever its form, recognizes the con-

gregation as the final authority. Even in churches with elders, local bylaws and policy statements spell out what decisions must be brought to the entire congregation for a vote. Matthew 18:17 and 1 Corinthians 5:4 are frequently cited for support of the principle that the congregation itself is the final authority (at least for major decisions like excommunication). Many churches with a congregational polity face growing pressures to become pure democracies as members bring worldly notions of individualism into the church. Others adopt a corporate model from the business world that places authority in the hands of a governing board, which in turn hires the pastor for the exercise of authority through him as a CEO. (There is no biblical basis for such a model of governance in the church.) In a true congregational independency, every church is independent from every other with internal decision making authority divided between the officers and the members. As stated by Dr. Wardlaw in *Congregational Independency* (Glasgow, 1848), “the government [of a church following congregational polity] in all its parts is to be administered in the presence, and with the *authoritative consensus*, of the church collectively considered.” In other words, the act of the elders (or other leaders) is null and void without the act of the members consenting with it.

As the above brief discussion of the three forms of polity indicates, how conflict will be responded to may significantly be affected by the formal governmental structure of the church. The pastor or other church leader receiving your counsel will need to be sensitive to that structure in order to respond in a way that won't simply incite more divisiveness. Another complicating factor, particularly in independent churches, is that while a system of church governance may have been formally adopted and stands as part of the bylaws, actual practice may have evolved and now deviates substantially from the governing documents of the church. As you counsel the church in conflict, one avenue of your investigation must be into the practices of polity. While theologian Wayne Grudem (*Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994) may state, “Christians have lived comfortably and ministered very effectively within several different kinds of systems, and there are many evangelicals within each of the systems mentioned,” it has been my experience that issues surrounding the polity and practice of governance in a church are a major source of conflict and/or its perpetuation.

## V. FINAL THOUGHTS

Dr. Jay Adams states, “The counselor must remember that until the biblical instruction has been given *in an applicatory manner* the task is incomplete. Until he and the counselee have understood not only what the Bible means, but also what it means in terms of the counselee's situation, the counselor's instruction is inadequate” (Id., Adams at page 285). Counseling the church in conflict is a difficult task because the conflict may be defined and perceived in different ways by multiple parties. Applying the instruction of

the Bible in an applicatory manner to each party may mean unraveling multiple conflicts through multiple assessments. The tangled web of group conflict in many church conflict situations presents one of the most challenging peacemaking environments imaginable. Understanding that complexity, the sinful man's inability to perceive rightly, the rationalization of a presenting surface issue, the church's culture defined by its polity, and the need to take seriously the call of the anxious pastor lacking confidence, will help you answer the call to counsel. I hope your counsel will include the elements of *perspective*, *discernment*, and *leadership* as you explain what to do next. If not, at the very least, remember that it will be the authority of God's Word that will be persuasive, not your human wisdom alone. Model your reliance on Scripture to an anxious pastor so that he too will look to the real source of true wisdom.

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STEVE HENDERSON, PASTOR · STEVE@MUNICHURCH.DE · WWW.MUNICHURCH.DE

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