

Conflict, Harm, and Biblical Narratives

Ted Lewis 2018

The Bible quite plainly reveals that **human conflict** is part of the world we live in. It also shows how God does not avoid conflict but enters into it as a way to bring about something new. Creation comes out of chaos; liberation out of bondage; resurrection out of crucifixion; strength out of weakness. This pattern of redemption shows that the conflict setting is not something to wish away, but rather something to *go through* as a way for a greater good to come into being.

This **redemptive realm** is where the Spirit of God wants to be active. In the familiar verse from Matthew 18 -- "Where two or three are gathered, there I am in your midst" -- we need to recognize that the context of this verse is people gathering to resolve conflicts and hurts. This is precisely where the pattern of new life out of death takes place in the setting of human relationships. We can be comforted that God is intensely in our midst during these times. It shouldn't surprise us that the next passage in Matthew 18 is all about forgiving others "from the heart."

Often, human conflicts are intensified when harm is done and harm is experienced. Sometimes, harm can even happen as a result of efforts to resolve things. Almost always, **harms disconnect people** from each other. This separation is a natural result of the mistrust resulting from harm, since we are hardwired to protect ourselves from further harm. The real question, then, is "What does it take for people to become reconnected again?" There is no easy answer, but a couple things are clear: trust has to be rebuilt for people to drop their shields, and love will find a way.

The Bible portrays God as 'going the distance' and 'crossing the divide' to provide some bridgework between God and humanity. But this wasn't easy. It involved great risk and vulnerability. Fortunately, it was worth the risk! We now know the whole story and how it turns out. This can be called **the Grand Story** which has all of the elements of a conflict resolution process. Many stories throughout the Bible have the same elements, and the more we learn to read the Bible through a "relational lens" we will begin to recognize how they all reflect the same basic pattern.

The next page provides a number of **biblical narratives** that deal with themes of conflict and harm, and align with the Grand Story of God's redemption.

Can you locate your story in the midst of one of these Bible stories?

Biblical Narratives That Illuminate Ways to Resolve Conflicts and Harms

Older Testament:

1. Hagar in the Wilderness: Inner Healing With God (Genesis 16 and 21)
2. Isaac and Abimelech: Disputes Over Water Rights (Genesis 26)*
3. Jacob the Grasper: Reconciling with Laban and Esau (Genesis 31-33)*
4. Joseph and his Brothers: Healing the Family Pain (Genesis 42-45)*
5. Moses the Mediator: Addressing Factionalism (Numbers 11-14)
6. Tribal Tensions: How to Resolve a Misunderstanding (Joshua 22)
7. Abigail and David: How to Avert Escalating Violence (1 Samuel 25)

Newer Testament:

1. Clashes in the Book of Acts: The Gentile Dispute (Acts 11 and 15)*
2. Philemon and Onesimus: A Positive Pathway to Peace (Philemon)*
3. Corinthian Discipline: Regret and Remorse (2 Corinthians 2 and 7)
4. Paul and Barnabas: A Very Sharp Contention (Acts 15:36-41)
5. Euodia and Syntyche: Agreeing with the Mind of Christ (Philippians)
6. The Adulterous Woman: Exclusion and Embrace (John 8:1-11)
7. Agreeing Together: The Power of Forgiveness (Matthew 18)

*5 part series on these narratives are available from Ted Lewis

Overarching Theme Verse:

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Romans 12:21