

Peace-fakers, Peace-breakers, Peacemakers

A version of this article originally appeared in the Spring 2002 (Vol 3, No 2) issue of *Life Truths Family Bible Study*, a publication of *Lifeway Christian Resources* and is reprinted by permission.

by Ken Sande, President of Peacemaker Ministries

Differences over worship styles had plagued First Baptist Church for nearly two years. The issue had been debated for countless hours in leadership and congregational meetings, but it only served to deepen divisions and intensify emotions.

On the surface it seemed that the church was divided between the "traditional" camp and the "contemporary" camp. But if you listened carefully to the recurring discussions, you could group the congregation along much different lines.

Peace-breaking and Peace-faking Come Naturally

Many of the people in both music camps were responding to the conflict in an "attacking" or "peace-breaking" manner (see slippery slope diagram). They were absolutely sure that their respective views were correct, and they felt justified in doing whatever was necessary to force others to accept their positions. Although they were not deliberately trying to hurt others, their insensitivity, careless words, and judgmental attitudes had deeply wounded many people.

Others in the church could be grouped together as "escapers" or "peace-fakers." They disliked conflict and preferred to avoid controversy. Some simply denied that there was a conflict, while others stayed away from congregational meetings. When they could not avoid being drawn into a discussion about the disagreement, their standard plea was, "Can't we all just get along?" Eventually many of them simply fled from the church altogether.

Neither of these groups could restore peace in their troubled church. On the contrary, the church was being steadily robbed of its unity, joy, and gospel witness by the tensions, slander, denial, and loss of members.

Peacemakers Are Different

Fortunately, there is a third group of people whom God delights to use when conflict threatens the welfare and witness of his people. They are called peacemakers, and their ranks include spiritual giants like Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Abigail, Solomon, Daniel, Esther, Peter, Barnabas, and Paul. And at the head of this noble company stands the ultimate peacemaker, the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Peacemakers are distinguished from peace-breakers by their deep concern for relationships (Eph. 4:1-3) and "the wisdom that comes from heaven [which] is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17). These people know that many offenses and differences should be overlooked (see Prov. 19:11; Luke 9:51). They are willing to accept others and look out for others' interests even if their disagreement is over significant matters (see Rom. 15:5-7; Phil. 2:1-4).

Peacemakers are distinguished from peace-fakers by their willingness to candidly discuss conflicts that are too serious to overlook. This discussion may include confession and forgiveness, loving confrontation, respectful instruction or debate, and thoughtful negotiation (see Prov. 28:13; Eph. 4:32; Matt. 5:23-24; 18:15; John 3:1-21; 4:1-26; 2 Tim. 2:24-26; Dan. 1:1-16; Phil. 2:3-4). When differences cannot be resolved in private, peacemakers will not give up; instead, they will seek guidance from other believers and submit themselves to the counsel and discipline of the church (see Matt. 18:16-20; 1 Cor. 6:1-8; Acts 15:1-35).

Would you like to develop the skills of a peacemaker so that you can be used by God to promote true unity and reconciliation when conflict disrupts your church, your family, or your workplace? If so, there are seven steps you can take to become a more effective peacemaker.

1. Remember Who You Are in Christ

The most important requirement of peacemaking is to remember who you are in Christ. When the Colossians and Philippians were struggling with conflict, the Apostle Paul reminded them that they were "God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved" (Col. 3:12), and he repeatedly urged them to rejoice in the fact that their names "are in the book of life" (Phil. 4:2-4).

True peacemaking springs from the realization that God has forgiven all our sins and has made peace with us through the death and resurrection of his Son (see Matt. 18:21-35; 1 Pet. 3:18). The more we rejoice in God's forgiveness and his promise to continue his work in us, the more inspired we will be to do the "unnatural" work of dying to self, confessing sin, confronting in love, laying down rights, and forgiving deep hurts (see Luke 6:27-36; Rom. 5:8-11; Gal. 2:20).

2. Accept Others Just As Christ Accepted You

There are many issues that can cause conflict between Christians. Some of these issues involve significant moral wrongs or fundamental theological beliefs (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 5:1-5; Gal. 1:8-9; 2:11-21; Acts 15:1-35). But most conflicts in the church arise because people are easily offended or take rigid positions on minor theological differences or questions of personal conviction (see Phil. 4:2; 1 Cor. 3:1-4; 8:1-13).

Paul counters these immature tendencies by repeatedly urging us to treat each other as Jesus treats us. "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievance you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col 3:13; see also Eph. 4:32; Matt. 18:21-35). "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Rom. 15:7).

Although Christians continually fall short of God's holiness, Jesus loves and accepts us with amazing patience and perseverance. Peacemakers love and accept others the same way. This attitude not only helps to preserve the unity of the church but also shows that we are true followers of Christ (see John 13:34).

3. Learn to Respond to Conflict Biblically

Many Christians respond to conflict naturally, out of impulse or habit, often justifying their conduct with a select Bible verse. For example, peace-fakers love to quote Matthew 17:1, "Do not judge or you too will be judged." Peace-breakers live by Luke 17:3, "If your brother sins, rebuke him."

If you want to become a peacemaker, you need to study God's Word and learn how to faithfully obey all that it teaches about resolving conflict, both the actions that come naturally to you and those that require self-control and submission to God. These teachings may be organized into four core principles, which are sometimes referred to as the Four G's of Peacemaking:

- **Glorify God:** How can I please and honor God through conflict?
- **Get the log out of your own eye:** How have I contributed to this conflict and what do I need to do to resolve it?
- **Go and show your brother his fault:** How can I help others to understand how they have contributed to this conflict?
- **Go and be reconciled:** How can I demonstrate forgiveness and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict?

For a detailed discussion of these principles, I encourage you to read my book, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Baker Books, Updated ed. 2003).

4. Go to the Heart

One of the most important things the Bible teaches about peacemaking is that we need to face up to the root cause of conflict. This root cause is described in James 4:1: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from the desires that battle within you?" Some of the desires that fuel conflict are obviously sinful, such as greed, lust, or revenge. In many cases, however, conflict is fueled by good desires that we have elevated to sinful demands, such as a longing to be loved in a certain way, a craving for peace and quiet, a demand to see a certain project succeed, or an insistence that everyone worship in a certain way.

Whenever we become excessively preoccupied with something, even a good thing, it can turn into a functional god or idol -- something we must have in order to be satisfied, content, or secure. The more these desires rule our hearts, the more likely we are to say and do things that lead to conflict (see James 4:2-4).

Therefore, whenever conflict arises, a peacemaker will ask, "Where am I focusing my attention and energy?" "What do I need to have in order to be satisfied and content?" "In what am I placing my trust?" If the answer to any of these questions is something other than God, an idol has been exposed. When that happens, a peacemaker will renounce that desire as being sinful, ask for God's forgiveness, and then strive, with God's help, to seek joy, fulfillment, and satisfaction in him alone (see Psalm 37:4).

5. Practice What You Have Learned

The fifth requirement for becoming a peacemaker is to faithfully practice what God is teaching you about resolving conflict. When you encounter a dispute, approach it as a divinely arranged "homework assignment." If your natural tendency is to escape from conflict, you should consciously avoid both denial and flight, and make a special effort to resolve the matter through discussion or negotiation. If your tendency is to go on the attack, you should ask God to help you overlook minor offenses, control your tongue, and look out for the interests of others.

Do not be discouraged by mistakes. When you realize you have fallen off the "slippery slope," confess your errors and ask God to help you keep growing. As the Apostle Paul teaches, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me -- put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (Phil. 4:9).

6. Teach, Counsel, and Serve Others

If you want to learn even more about peacemaking, look for opportunities to teach and assist others in resolving conflict (see Philemon 6). Starting at home, you could use Peacemaker Ministries' Young Peacemaker materials to teach peacemaking to your children or the children in your church or neighborhood. If you see a friend in a conflict, prayerfully consider how God might use you as a coach or mediator to help him understand and obey what the Bible says about peacemaking. Even a small piece of sound biblical advice is often very valuable to someone who wants to handle a conflict constructively. As Scripture promises, "Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:18).

To further enhance your ability to be a peacemaker, you could attend or listen to the Peacemaker Seminar or enroll in Peacemaker Ministries' training. This program is designed to equip Christians to carry out conflict counseling and mediation with confidence and skill (see Eph. 4:12-13; 1 Pet. 4:10). It includes an audiotape course and a live 2 day practicum where skills are developed in realistic role plays.

Trained reconcilers can relieve church leaders from having to deal with much of the conflict that occurs in the average congregation. Many churches are also finding that this training can be used beyond their own congregations. Once they have an experienced group of reconcilers available, they are able to make peacemaking services available to people in their community.

These "church-based reconciliation ministries" provide an excellent way to demonstrate the gospel of peace to those who are looking for assistance with their conflicts.

7. Do the Unexpected

God's plan for saving the world takes everyone by surprise. What we deserve is judgment and wrath. Instead, he sent his Son to die in our place.

Peacemakers behave in similarly surprising ways. Instead of focusing on others' wrongs, peacemakers confess their own sins (Matt. 7:5). Instead of shrinking away from stronger opponents, they lovingly confront them (Matt. 18:15). And instead of forcing their preferences on those who disagree with them, they listen to others and earnestly look out for their interests (Phil. 2:3-4).

For example, a peacemaker who loves traditional music might approach his pastor and say, "I think we need more praise choruses." When the puzzled pastor asks why, the peacemaker might say, "Oh, I love traditional hymns; they take me to the very throne of God. But my friend Joe draws close to God through choruses, and I'm concerned that we may not be doing enough of those for him."

But look out! This could lead to a whole new kind of conflict. Joe may become a peacemaker, too, and he might insist that the church should sing more hymns for Bob's sake. Think of the message this would send to the watching world: people contending for the chance to lay down their preferences and rights so that others will be blessed! Such conduct would be a delightful surprise in today's conflicted world. To God it would be the sweet aroma of peacemaking.

Ken Sande is an attorney, the author of *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Baker Books, Updated Ed. 2003), *Peacemaking for Families* (Tyndale, 2002), and president of Peacemaker Ministries (www.Peacemaker.net), an international ministry committed to equipping and assisting Christians and their churches to respond to conflict biblically.