



Sunday Morning, April 12, 1964
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural Reference: John 16:33

I grew up believing implicitly that conflict and Christianity were absolute antitheses. In my mind the two were mutually exclusive--if one were a Christian, he would be delivered from all conflict; or, on the other hand, if there were conflict, this cast some doubt of the validity of one's Christian experience. The person who was held up to me as a working ideal of Christian piety was the man who "never said a critical word about anyone," who "if he could not say something good about a person, said nothing at all," and who lived in perfect harmony with everybody under all circumstances.

With this kind of background, you can imagine my surprise when I began to read seriously the Book from whence this ideal supposedly came. I think it is accurate to say that I found there the opposite of my cherished tradition. From the opening scene in the Garden of Eden to the closing word about the Battle of Armageddon, the Bible is a record of unceasing conflict. The characters who walk its pages are not passive saints who through their religion were able to live in total tranquility. On the contrary, they are embattled participants in a life-and-death warfare, having to struggle at every point in the fulfillment of their existence. Life is conflict, according to the Scripture; there is no place or time without it.

This assertion about the universality of conflict can be illustrated from any section of the Scripture, but for the sake of time, let us go straight to the center of the stage and look at the Main Character of the Bible. All of this revelation purports to climax in Jesus Christ; He is anticipated, depicted, and reflected upon as God's highest manifestation of what human life is to be like. Therefore, we can look with special interest on what His experience teaches about this subject of conflict. It is simply this: Jesus was never free from it for one single moment of His earthly life. He experienced conflict in His home, for His parents and brothers and sisters did not understand what He had to be. He had conflicts within Himself, trying to decide what He should do with His life--should He turn stones to bread; should He be an exhibitionist; should He sell out to Rome, or what? He experienced conflict in His work, both with those on the outside--the Pharisees who tried to block His every move, and with those on the inside--His disciples who were so slow to understand. Then, too, He even encountered conflict in His relationship with His Heavenly Father. He literally "sweat blood" at this point, wanting to push away the very cup of destiny that God wanted Him to drink. Yes, here was the most religious Person who ever lived, God's only begotten Son in human form, and He was not delivered from conflict. He experienced it with increasing intensity every moment of His life.

Nor was this One a passive and innocuous Individual dedicated to peace at any price. It cannot be honestly said of Jesus what was said of my ideal; namely, that "He never spoke a critical word about anybody," or that "if He could not find

something good to say about someone He did not say anything at all." At times His eyes flashed and His tongue lashed. He spoke of King Herod as "a cunning fox." He described the hypocritical Pharisees as "a brood of vipers" and as "whitewashed tombstones." He had to tell Simon Peter to his face that he was the incarnation of Satan himself when this disciple tried to deflect Him from His purpose (Matthew 16:23). At times this Jesus whom we have sentimentalized as "meek and mild" spoke very harshly. And at times He acted in the most provocative of fashions. When He ate with sinners or healed on the Sabbath or openly cleansed the temple of its unholy profit mongers, He was deliberately creating tension. He acted out His own words: "I have come not to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). You see, His purpose was obviously not to pacify the world but to purify it, and things being as they are, this could only be done through conflict.

Therefore, in the presence of the Christ of history, I was forced to relinquish my time-honored tradition about Christianity and conflict. In fact, my whole outlook on this matter underwent a profound reorientation. I came to see that the choice I had as a Christian was not between conflict and no conflict; rather, it was a choice of how I would handle the conflict that was inevitably present! This change of attitude was a real breakthrough for me, and I want to underline its importance for you. The Bible teaches that conflict is as much a part of our lives as the food we eat and the air we breathe. Jesus said unequivocally: "In this world ye shall have tribulation" (John 16:33). If we will accept the fact that conflict and tension are basic conditions of our humanity, and let go the illusion that they can be escaped or avoided, then we are liberated to deal with things as they are. No normal person should prostrate himself over the question of whether or not he should ever eat. This choice is not really ours to make if we want to go on living. Eating is a basic necessity of physical life. Once this is accepted, a man is free to face the really pertinent questions: How should I eat? What should I eat? In what ways can I best deal with this inevitability? This morning this is one of the main points I want to make for you: conflict cannot be eliminated, avoided, or escaped, not even in the Christian religion. It is part of the "givenness" of our existence, and must be accepted as such, just as one must accept the fact that he has to eat and breathe. When this is done, then our attitude toward conflict assumes a different form. We stop beating our heads against the wall of impossibility, and begin to ask the meaningful question: "How can I deal with that which I cannot escape? If conflict cannot be removed from life, how can it be redeemed within life?" To this, the really crucial issue, I want us to turn now. I think there are at least three alternatives open to a person.

The first way of dealing with it is to do nothing at all in the face of conflict. Now perhaps you feel I am contradicting myself here. I have just finished saying that conflict is an inevitable part of life that cannot be avoided, and I still stand by this assertion about our human situation. However, some people will not accept this basic fact, and this becomes their way of handling the matter. It does not solve the problem, mind you, far from it--but it is one way of handling the problem.

Have you not known certain "Pollyanna types" who steadfastly shut their eyes to the obvious? They will not admit to themselves or others that conflicting opposites exist, and thus build a dream world of their own that has no rootage in reality. They whistle hopefully to themselves "Wishing can make it so," and delude themselves that by "positive thinking" and "looking only on the bright side" all conflict will go away.

This approach can only lead to the destruction of everything that a person is supposed to be. God has endowed us with a marvelous range of capacities that we might respond to His real creation. When we steadfastly refuse to employ them for this purpose, and instead create our own little world of fantasy, we have missed the whole point of our existence. I heard once of a man who did not want to hear anything over his radio but pleasant and inspiring news. So he set out to rework the mechanism in order to attain this end. Of course, he found that it could not be done, and that in trying to do so he had destroyed the radio for picking up any news. Now this is what happens when we start tampering with the receiving apparatus that God has given to us--by ignoring parts of reality, seeing only what we want to see and blocking out all the rest, we end up like that radio--incapable of our Original Intention.

Our Lord Himself warned of this very thing when He said: "Woe unto you if all men speak well of you" (Luke 6:26). Now these words may be a bit shocking to our modern times, for we tend to be so "other directed" that the possibility of universal approval sounds wonderful to us. Just think how nice it would be if everyone liked us! But such a condition ignores the nature of our real world, where all things and all men are not alike. It implies that one has forfeited his very personhood. For example, if Adolph Hitler or Mahatma Gandhi both spoke well of you, there can be but one conclusion--you are a hypocrite, a nonentity; you stand for nothing. The convictions around which these men built their lives are logically exclusive. You cannot order the violent extinction of a whole race of people and be a non-violent pacifist at the same time. And if one dedicates his life to having all men speak well of him, as if no conflict exists, this negates his individuality or reason for being. If my body is pulled in opposite directions at the same time, it will be destroyed. And this is exactly what happens to the person who attempts to deal with conflict by ignoring it. The act of shutting one's eyes does not put out the sun!

A second alternative is to deal with conflict indirectly. This is a better approach than the first, for at least one acknowledges the problem. But here, because of the pain and suffering involved, one does not move toward the root of the conflict. Rather, he expresses it in another direction or "takes it out" on someone else. We are all familiar with this particular practice. Let us say a man has a conflict at the office, but he is afraid to express it there; so he comes home and unleashes his frustration on his wife and family. Or, here is a conflict that develops between a parent and a child, and instead of coming right out with it, the child suppresses his feelings and goes into "a slow burn." This resentment smolders within until it finally erupts, sometimes in the strangest of ways. Many times a young unwed mother will confess that the whole affair in which she has become involved is a way of striking back at a parent. The hostility could not be expressed directly, so this form of indirect humiliation is employed.

Contrary to what we sometimes think, the problems of conflict are not solved by such indirection. In fact, I would say the opposite is true. By this means, the problem is actually increased, for the original source is left untouched while new wounds are opened by our "taking it out" on someone else. For example, if I had a compound fracture of my leg, we would all agree that something should be done. And at that moment at least, it would be less painful to put a cast on my arm rather than to handle and set that injured limb. But what would be the ultimate outcome of such an approach? My leg left unattended would get worse, and the healthy arm immobilized in a cast would be weakened. In the end everything would be worse and nothing would be solved. And so it is with the fractured relationships between people. If it is

the leg that is broken, the place to work is on the leg. It will be more painful, of course, ten thousand times so. But that is the root of the problem.

How I wish we could learn this about conflict! There is so much talking behind backs and indirect hostility going around. I sometimes fear that our genteel Southern culture has led to great unhealthiness between people. We go to such great lengths to avoid direct conflict that we weaken the whole social fabric. There is deep human wisdom in the Biblical injunction: "If you come to the altar, and remember your brother has ought against you, leave your gift on the altar and go thy way and first be reconciled to your brother" (Matthew 5:24). Going to anyone else and grousing about it will only widen the circle of poison. If the conflict is between two people, the solution lies between them and not in involving others. I have more fear of the man who says one thing to my face and another thing behind my back than any other type of controversialist. He may think he is suppressing conflict; the truth is that he is multiplying it.

The third alternative before us is to meet conflict openly and deal with it redemptively. Now notice carefully that I purposely added that second phrase as a Christian, for I would be the first to admit that open conflict in itself can be quite dangerous. If done out of selfish reasons alone and with no regard for the welfare of the other parties, open conflict can be sheer destruction. It is out of fear for this kind of conflict that the whole approach of directness has been frowned upon.

But this morning, I want to emphasize that there is a type of open conflict that need not be like this at all. Here is where the Christian faith is of such relevant help. When Jesus said: "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33), I think He was talking about this very thing. He possesses the secret for being victorious in the midst of conflict. If you will observe His example carefully, there were two realities that always guided Him through controversy. One was a concern for truth and righteousness; the other was an unfailing love for people, even His adversaries. At no point was Jesus contentious about a purely selfish concern. His struggles were in the interest of establishing what was right and true for all men. And at no time was He purely destructive in His attitude toward His opponents. He did not want them to be annihilated; He wanted them to be redeemed. He had opposed the Pharisees at many points out of a genuine concern for the Kingdom of God, and largely because of this, He was crucified at their hands. But at the very end, He did not rail out in bitterness. Rather, from the cross He prayed for their forgiveness in hopes of their future redemption.

These are the two "tracks," so to speak, along which Christ moved in dealing with controversy--a concern for truth and a concern for love. And this is what we are to do. The Christian is called on to examine his motives, to ask what lies behind his involvement in conflict; and the Christian is called on to examine his attitudes, lest he desires the destruction and not the redemption of his adversaries.

Whether open conflict is creative or chaotic depends on the questions of why it is done and how it is done, on the motivation and the method. But with truth and love as the guiding lights as they were for Jesus Christ, even though painful and distasteful, good can come from conflict and many basic tensions of life can be resolved.

Therefore, I bring you this word from Christ about what I take to be a universal problem. I would have you to recognize first of all that life is conflict--there is

no escaping it, even in Christianity. Therefore, the crucial issue becomes: not how can I run from it, but how should I deal with it? Will I arbitrarily ignore conflict, and thus be destroyed by it? Will I deal with conflict indirectly, and thus add to the size of the problem? Will I engage in open conflict solely in terms of self-interest and in oblivion of others? Or will I, illumined by truth and love, look on conflict as a God-given opportunity to develop myself and redeem my brother?

It can be the latter, believe me. I would say to you this morning that I have learned much more in conflict than in tranquility. Next to a loyal companion, an honest opponent may be a man's best friend. The water in a stream is deepened when it encounters an obstacle, and so what we believe and who we are as persons can be clarified and enriched by means of honest confrontation. Let us never forget that in God's merciful providence we are made perfect--not through softness, but through suffering. And what is this suffering except conflict put to creative use?

Therefore, accept conflict for what it is. Engage in it for what it can do. And above all, follow the One who said: "In the world ye shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

My friends, with Him, in truth, through love, so can you. Conflict can be creative!