



Mural by Mark Dwyer, acrylics

On Earth as It Is in Heaven | BRUCE BOYD

In one of Mark Twain's last works, Captain Elias Stormfield dies and sets sail for heaven. The crusty mariner navigates his ship through space and with some difficulty eventually discovers his destination. When he arrives in paradise, Stormfield is repeatedly astonished to discover that many of his preconceptions about heaven are faulty.¹

Chances are good that those of us who reach heaven will also experience significant surprise. After all, the Bible gives us relatively few details about the afterlife. Paul asserts that no one knows or can even imagine what heaven will be like and he likens our current understanding of it to a highly distorted reflection in a mirror (1 Cor. 2:9,

12:12). One of our surprises upon our entry there may very well be that we have not left conflict behind.

Destructive Conflict

Conflict. The word carries heavy negative connotations for most. When we say that someone's words or actions are likely to cause conflict, we almost always assume that this result is undesirable. Most Christians automatically associate conflict with sin. This understanding is clearly spelled out by Robert D. Jones. In his book, *Pursuing Peace: A Christian Guide to Handling Our Conflicts*, Jones declares that all conflict is selfish and offensive to God and that it violates the Bible's teachings about love, unity, and harmony.²

Among Christians, Seventh-day Adventists are uniquely positioned to associate conflict with sin. The denomination frames its theological beliefs in a world-view known as The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan.³ This Bible-based worldview is further explained in the writings of a co-founder of the denomination, Ellen White. Her most important written work is known as *The Conflict of the Ages Series*, a five-volume set of over 3,600 pages which concludes with *The Great Controversy*. The last words of this epic describe the beautiful and peaceful resolution Christ will someday achieve:

The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love.⁴

Seventh-day Adventists who read this moving passage generally take for granted that all conflict will be eliminated with the termination of sin. But there is a misunderstanding here. The original form of conflict existed before sin and will continue to exist after sin.

Conflict Basics

When God created all things in an array of astonishing diversity, He designed humans, male and female, so that genetically no two of us are born with exactly the same abilities, interests, or thought processes. We were created to perceive, evaluate, and understand life situations differently from each other. Today, even identical twins are born with divergences.⁵ It seems that God's design was deliberately calculated to produce individuals who process information in varied ways and arrive at more than one thinking destination. Ellen White makes this point often. For instance: "There are distinctions in the formation of the flowers and in the fruits, but all derive their peculiar variance from God. All are the Lord's. So, it is God's design that even the best of men shall not all be of the same character."⁶

The Creator's carefully planned human multiplicity deliberately includes the rich opportunity for respectful disagreement and conflict. "Conflict is the state of rela-

tionship between two or more individuals who perceive an idea, situation, and or event differently."⁷

The creation of this world with its vast diversity was meant to add wonderful value to human relationships. God called it "very good" (Gen. 1:31). But not long after creation, humans embraced sinful selfishness and chose to mistrust and disobey their Creator (Gen. 3–4). This selfishness became tightly fastened to human diversity (Rom. 5:12), dominating human conflict and bending it almost irresistibly toward outcomes that damage, divide, and destroy people.

But, as stated above, conflict is the state of relationship between two or more individuals who perceive an idea, situation, and or event differently. It need not be selfish, sinful, or destructive. The diversity created by God before sin is the only thing needed for respectful conflict and this conflict is positive and desirable.

Conflict Levels

Speed Leas' model of conflict levels is informative in showing where conflict moves from being healthy and helpful to becoming selfish and destructive. Leas utilizes two basic factors to organize conflicts into five distinct levels. The first identifying factor is the objective of the participants; the second is their language.⁸

At Level I, the objective of conflict participants is to work together cooperatively with trust, in order to resolve a real disagreement. The communication language is respectful, direct, and clear, even though there may be flashes of anger in some instances. Conflict participants do not hide information from each other or try to slant it to their own advantage at this level.

At Level II, mutual trust has decreased, and the objective of conflict participants moves toward self-protection. The language of communication is guarded, and generalizations increase. Because respect is decreasing, cloaked insults and jokes with some sting may begin to appear.

At Level III, the objective of conflict participants is victory. "I am right, and you are wrong. I am fully good, and you are decidedly bad." The language becomes much more emotional, misleading, disrespectful, and attack-laden. People are beginning to form loosely into opposing groups.

At Level IV, the objective of conflict participants has become to punish, wound, or expel opponents. Factions now solidify and detach from each other. Respectful expressions are virtually non-existent. The language has

swung toward self-righteous appeals to grand principles like justice or unity and it tends to ignore specific issues.

At Level V, the objective of conflict participants is to destroy the enemy. Lethal language flows from an intense urge to eliminate opponents. Believers “at this level become fanatics. They won’t stop fighting because they feel it’s immoral to stop. They believe they are called by God to destroy the evil.”⁹

With this model it is helpful to note that participants in a conflict are frequently at different levels.

Constructive Conflict

When most people think of conflict, they are thinking exclusively about Levels II through V of Speed Leas’ model. However, Level I conflicts in this model can be generated solely by differences that are cooperative, unselfish, and untouched by anger. While Leas acknowledges that most people do not consider differences at Level I to be conflict, he maintains, nevertheless, that they are.¹⁰ “Friendly disagreements” is how most people think of them.

Examples of Level I conflicts in the Bible include the conflict between Jesus and John the Baptist over whether or not John should baptize Jesus (Matt. 3:13–15), the conflict between Elizabeth and her relatives and neighbors over what to name her newborn baby, John (Luke 1:57–66), and the conflict between the daughters of Zelophehad and Moses (along with the leaders of the tribe of Manasseh) over whether or not women without brothers would be allowed to inherit their father’s land (Num. 27:1–11 and 36:1–9).

Conflict-resolution literature commonly distinguishes between constructive, cooperative conflict and destructive, competitive conflict. In *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, Morton Deutsch recommends what he calls “constructive controversy” as opposed to what he labels “competitive debate.” In his chapter “Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict,” Deutsch describes constructive controversy as a positive process in which everyone wins and where “each party comes to deeper insights and enriched views. . . .”¹¹

In another chapter of the same work, David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, and Dean Tjosvold discuss constructive controversy more fully in the context of a cooperative interdependence. They determine that during this healthy conflict self-esteem is heightened, positive

feelings are increased, and friendships are strengthened.¹² Here, honest communication combined with “a positive climate of friendship and support not only leads to more productive decision making and greater learning, it disconfirms the myth that conflict inevitably leads to divisiveness and dislike.”¹³

A well-known Christian spokesperson on the benefits of healthy conflict is sociologist Parker J. Palmer.¹⁴ He separates what he calls “creative conflict” (cooperative conflict within caring, respectful learning communities) from destructive, competitive conflict. Palmer explains that, while a healthy learning community excludes one-up, one-down competition, it includes creative “conflict at its very heart, checking and correcting and enlarging the knowledge of individuals by drawing on the knowledge of the group.” He argues that loving community does not exclude conflict. “On the contrary, community is precisely

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that place where an arena for creative conflict is protected by the compassionate fabric of human caring itself.” He concludes that “there is no knowing,” no learning without creative conflict.¹⁵

While Ellen White observes that most human conflict results in damage and destruction, she strongly teaches that there are important benefits to be gained from healthy conflict. She appreciates the value of people offering divergent and even opposing perspectives on issues when it is done in an atmosphere of respect and good will.¹⁶ She sees this as part of God’s plan in a creation dominated by differences of His devising.

White frequently favors the term “unity in diversity” in referring to the positive, unifying effects of healthy differences (conflict) between divergent individuals who respect and care about each other. For example:

A life consecrated to the service of God will be developed and beautified in its individuality. No person can sink his individuality in that of another,

but we are all, as individuals, to be grafted into the one parent stock, and there is to be unity in diversity. The great Master Artist has not made two leaves of the same tree precisely alike; so His creative power does not give to all minds the same likeness. They are created to live through ceaseless ages, and there is to be complete unity, mind blending with mind; but no two are to be of the same mold.¹⁷

In *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, John Paul Lederach observes that without positive conflict “life would be a monotonously flat topography of sameness and our relationships would be woefully superficial.”¹⁸ In his work *People Skills*, Robert Bolton shows that genuine intimacy and true love are intertwined with positive conflict.¹⁹ And Ken Sande, founder of Peacemaker Ministries, teaches that positive conflict encourages good conversation, stimulates positive change, promotes creativity, and “generally makes life more interesting.”²⁰ He goes on to demonstrate that conflict, positive or negative, provides excellent opportunities for believers to realize three of the most important Christian objectives: to glorify God, to serve other people, and to grow to be more like Jesus.²¹ Perhaps Solomon is speaking

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about conflict opportunities where he observes, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Prov. 27:17, NIV).

Conflict on Earth

Christians need to understand that conflicts, positive or destructive, are doorways to spiritual opportunities. God specializes in bringing blessings out of every conflict situation to people who love and follow Him (Rom. 8:28). These blessings include wisdom, a deepening of

relationships, and a general growth in spiritual health and well-being.

Various authors published in *Ministry* have written about the spiritual opportunities God offers in conflict situations. Dick Tibbits discusses “healthy” conflict in his article “A Crisis in the Congregation.” He advises that this conflict needs to be “embraced and valued for the new opportunities it can create.”²² In “Conflict can be Healthy for the Church,” David W. Hinds states, “If approached from a spiritual context, conflicting issues can strengthen the church and unify the body.”²³ H. Jack Morris agrees in “Managing Conflict in the Church.” He sees conflict between loving believers as an opportunity for growth and creative change resulting in a heightening of unity and a revitalizing of mission.²⁴

But the almost universal bias against all forms of conflict and nearly all conflict outcomes as “sinful” leaves most believers vulnerable to spirituality deformity. Little spiritual education is offered in this area and when it is offered, relatively few take advantage of it. Because most believers have not been taught or have neglected to learn how to relate positively to conflict, they generally avoid it.

Escape, the first response of most Christians to conflict, is usually especially unhelpful. Here believers prayerfully hope it will go away as they ignore, deny, or evade it. Countless conflicts that might be resolved with relative ease at lower levels are left to fester under the surface and turn relationships shallow and sour. Families, groups, churches, and other Christian organizations can become like archaeological tells with multiple layers of mostly buried, toxic conflicts.

When the escape mode appears untenable or undesirable, it is relatively easy for individuals, groups, or organizations to shift to the attack mode and camouflage it with “righteousness.” Attacks are made at various levels and in multiple ways. They might come as applications of silent treatment, cutting jokes, doses of gossip, unkind meeting exchanges, snide online posts, punishing lawsuits, and even relationship or career assassinations. In Christian circles, groupthink often kicks in during conflict situations as people conform in concert to attack or avoid.

It is dangerous fiction to assume that being Christian means that we will automatically be transformed into God-like, loving peacemakers. In Bible times and beyond, long-time followers of God have historically engaged in destructive conflicts, many of which have led to extremely

ugly places.²⁵ Simple observation of believers today, including Seventh-day Adventists, shows us that this pattern continues unabated.

Becoming adept at relating positively to conflict is not as simple as catching a cold. Christians experiencing difficult conflict commonly bemoan the situation and say things like: "I'm just trusting Jesus to bring things out according to his will." Leaders exhort, "If churches would just focus on evangelism they would forget about their conflicts." Most believers seem to think that their conflicts will melt away if they put in enough time and effort praying, studying their Bibles, going to church, and listening to sermons. But Christian members and leaders who spend long hours in devotions, evangelism, and church activities can be among the most problematic of conflict instigators.

Larry McSwain and William Treadwell find that destructive conflict happens "most often in congregations in which there is a deep commitment to the church."²⁶ Christians guard teachings and practices they consider precious. They are primed to attack others they believe to be a threat to these treasures, even when the perceived enemies have proven themselves to be genuine Christians.

Describing this situation, Kenneth Haugk observes that believers typically surround their valued beliefs and practices "with tripwires and alarms" resulting in what he calls "a curse" to relationships.²⁷ Writing about controversy in his own church family Keith Huttenlocker laments, "We were enlightened by no other book except the Bible, and tragically our interpretation of it made us no more than witch doctors in the science of conflict resolution."²⁸

In Jesus' famous model prayer, He asks that His Father's will "be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). It is God's will that His people reveal and demonstrate how caring conflict functions in a worldwide body of highly diverse believers being called to unity in Jesus. The Bible invites us to become dedicated reconcilers and peacemakers like Jesus was here on earth.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in

perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. (Col. 3:12–15, NIV).

Seventh-day Adventist planners and leaders could become more intentional and systematic in educating on the topic of conflict transformation. "Applied Sanctification" would be a good title for this education. The Bible is filled with information on this subject and many Bible stories provide powerful case studies on conflict. What might

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happen if a continually growing number of Seventh-day Adventists around the world were being intentionally coached in families, schools, and churches to take advantage of the vast number of available conflicts as opportunities to glorify God, serve other people, and grow to be more like Jesus?

Sincere love becomes crystal clear to onlookers during conflict situations. Hypocritical, pretentious "love" also becomes obvious in the selfish heat of controversy and its aftermath. The gospel surrounded by other great Bible truths has wonderful credibility where informed unselfish love dominates how Christians relate to conflict. On the other hand, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, wherever Christian malpractice makes a mess of conflict opportunities, any attempt to present the gospel and other truths, including the three angels' messages of Revelation 14, becomes little better than a gong show.

Conflict in Heaven

Some may think the assertion that there will be conflict in heaven is about as reasonable as believing Mark Twain's fine yarn about Captain Stormfield. However, just as dissonance in great music is essential for resolution to profound consonance, so positive conflict appears to be a component of God's revelation of genuine unity on earth and in heaven. Yes, this caring conflict which flows from

God-ordained diversity would seem to be an integral ingredient for an eternal life of learning, loving, and well-being. Perhaps Mark Twain had more insight into heaven than most of his readers would think.

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Endnotes

1. Mark Twain, *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1909). This is the last work published by Mark Twain before his death in 1910.
2. Robert D. Jones is an associate professor for Biblical counseling at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Robert D. Jones, *Pursuing Peace: A Christian Guide to Handling Our Conflicts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 35. See also Larry L. McSwain and William C. Treadwell, Jr. *Conflict Ministry in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1981), 21.
3. Fundamental Belief 8 states, "All humanity is now involved in a great controversy between Christ and Satan regarding the character of God, His law, and His sovereignty over the universe. This conflict originated in heaven when a created being, endowed with freedom of choice, in self-exaltation became Satan, God's adversary, and led into rebellion a portion of the angels. He introduced the spirit of rebellion into this world when he led Adam and Eve into sin. . . ." The Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 19th ed., (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2016), 167.
4. Ellen White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1950), 678.
5. An example of research in this area is Carl E. G. Bruder. "Phenotypically Concordant and Discordant Monozygotic Twins Display Different DNA Copy-Number-Variation Profiles," *The American Journal of Human Genetics*, Vol. 82, Issue 3 (March 3, 2008): 763–771.
6. Ellen White, *Manuscript Releases* (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981, 1987, 1990), 18:4. See also "Ellen G. White Comments," *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1970), 5:1143, 6:1083; *Selected Messages*, 1:21–22; *Mind, Character, and Personality* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1977), 2:423–426.
7. Conflict is defined in various ways by lexicographers, scholars, and practitioners. This definition of conflict, with its focus on differences, is similar to well-known conflict definitions such as "Conflict is simply any situation in which one person's concerns are different from those of another person" from *Conflict Workshop Facilitator's Guide for the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (Palo Alto, CA: CPP Inc., 1996), or "Conflict is a difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone's goals or desires" from Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 29. This is my conflict definition from "Development, Implementation, and Evaluation of a Seminar on Positive Resolution of Substantive and Interpersonal Conflict in the Hazelton, British Columbia Seventh-day Adventist Church" (DMin project report, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 1995), 3.
8. Speed Leas has spent over forty years as an Alban Institute senior consultant to churches and synagogues. During that time, he has dealt with numerous religious controversies and divisions and has acquired an inter-

- national reputation as an expert on conflict resolution. Speed Leas, *Moving Your Church Through Conflict* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1985), 20–25.
9. Speed Leas, "How Bad is the Conflict?", *Leadership: A Practical Journal for Church Leaders*, 10, no. 1 (Winter, 1989): 16.
 10. *Ibid.*; *Moving Your Church Through Conflict*, 20.
 11. Morton Deutsch, "Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict," in *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed., Morton Deutsch, Peter T. Coleman, and Eric C. Marcus, eds. (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2014), 10.
 12. David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson and Dean Tjosvold, "Constructive Controversy: The Value of Intellectual Opposition," *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution*: 84–90.
 13. *Ibid.*, 90.
 14. Parker J. Palmer is the Founder and Senior Partner Emeritus of the Center for Courage & Renewal which oversees the "Courage to Teach" program for K–12 educators across North America. He is a distinguished member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).
 15. Parker J. Palmer, "Community, Conflict, and Ways of Knowing," in *Learning from Change: Landmarks in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education from Change Magazine*, Deborah DeZure, ed. (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2000), 204–205.
 16. Ellen White, *Mind, Character, and Personality* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1977), 2:424; *The Publishing Ministry* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1983), 100; *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), 9:259; *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1913), 531; *Manuscript Releases*, 15:149–150.
 17. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, 2:426. See also "Ellen G. White Comments," *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 5:1143, 6:1088; *Our High Calling* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1961), 169; *Sons and Daughters of God* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1955), 286; "Lessons from the Sending Out of the Spies," *The General Conference Bulletin*, March 30, 1903; *Manuscript Releases*, 9:26, 18:4.
 18. John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003), 18.
 19. Robert Bolton, *People Skills* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 207.
 20. Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker*, 30.
 21. *Ibid.*, 31–37.
 22. Dick Tibbitts, "The Crisis in the Congregation," *Ministry* (September 1996): 2.
 23. David W. Hinds, "Conflict Can Be Healthy for the Church," *Ministry* (September 2002): 2.
 24. H. Jack Morris, "Managing Conflict in the Church," *Ministry* (May 2001): 2.
 25. For example, Cain and Able in Gen. 3; Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in Gen. 16 and 21; David and Uriah in 2 Sam. 11; Rehoboam and the Israelites in 1 Kings 12; Jesus and the synagogue attenders of Nazareth in Luke 4; Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15; Paul, Peter, and James in Gal. 2.
 26. Larry L. McSwain and William C. Treadwell, Jr., *Conflict Ministry in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1981), 36.
 27. Kenneth C. Haugk, *Antagonists in the Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 40.
 28. Keith Huttenlocker, *Conflict and Caring* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 14.