

DISCOVERING OUR “THEOLOGIES OF CONFLICT”

Adapted from:

[Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide](#) (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019)

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Introduction: This exercise is designed to help us think about our “theologies of conflict.” Briefly, a theology of conflict is what we believe about the relationship between God and human conflict. For instance, if the assumption is that God does not approve of conflict, we may be reticent to engage any controversy at all. Alternatively, if we believe that God works in and through human conflict in order to manifest God’s will, we may be more willing to enter into dialogue about a difficult issue. **Having some understanding of our own – and our congregation’s – theologies of conflict is important because it has both implicit and explicit ramifications for dialogue.**

Instructions: You can answer these questions individually and then discuss them as a group or discuss the questions together. Everyone should answer the first two and the last two questions. Assign the other questions to individuals, or pairs, or smaller break-out groups. There are no “correct” answers, and you can mark more than one. At the end, everyone should discuss the last two questions to determine what you learned from this exercise. The questions can be used for adult learning forums, youth groups, sermon prep, Bible studies, etc. Consider discussing one question each month over the course of the year with your church council, board, or leadership group.

1. **When you consider the word *conflict*, how do each of these words describe the way people think about this term?** (Explain or give examples.)
 - A. Tension
 - B. Disagreement
 - C. Intense anger (possibly leading to violence)
 - D. Creativity
 - E. Other words?

2. **What are stories from the Bible about God and human conflict? What do they reveal?** (Explain or give examples.)
 - A. God disapproves and/or punishes human conflict because it is an indication of sin.
 - B. God recognizes that conflict is a natural part of human interactions.
 - C. God uses conflict in constructive ways to bring about transformation.
 - D. It all depends on how we *interpret* scripture that determines what we believe about God and conflict.
 - E. Other.

3. **What is God’s role in human conflict? How does God function?** (Provide examples from Scripture, and/or history, and/or your own church.)
 - A. God stays out of human conflict entirely, allowing us to experience the consequences of our actions.
 - B. God is only concerned about “spiritual” conflict and not everyday conflict between people and/or groups.
 - C. God favors or fights on behalf of a particular group or person.
 - D. God functions as mediator/facilitator, helping us process our conflict but not necessarily choosing a side.
 - E. Other.

4. **How does God regard *power differentials* when it comes to conflict?** (Provide examples from Scripture, and/or history, and/or your own church as you answer these questions.)
 - A. God favors the one with strength and power.
 - B. God favors the one in the weaker position who is more vulnerable.
 - C. God seeks to rebalance power.
 - D. Other.

5. **Is it possible to be in conflict in the church and yet remain connected in the Body of Christ?** *(Provide examples from Scripture, and/or history, and/or your own church.)*
- A. No. Conflict threatens our unity as a church.
 - B. Yes. Conflict can be worked through and even resolved.
 - C. It depends on how we maintain connection to God when we are conflicted.
 - D. Other.
6. **What does Jesus model for us about how to handle conflict?** *(Provide examples from Scripture, and/or history, and/or your own church.)*
- A. Jesus avoids conflict.
 - B. Jesus engages those who are in conflict with him.
 - C. Jesus finds alternative ways to deal with conflict.
 - D. Jesus uses conflict to help people grow in their faith.
 - E. Other.
7. **What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the midst of our conflict?** *(Provide examples from Scripture, and/or history, and/or your own church.)*
- A. The presence of conflict indicates an absence of the Holy Spirit.
 - B. During conflict, the Holy Spirit works with us only under certain conditions.
 - C. The Holy Spirit is working in and among us in the midst of the messiness.
 - D. Other.
8. **How can our theological tradition help us navigate tension in relationships?**
- A. Our theological tradition stresses the church being in unity, so we must also strive for unity.
 - B. There is creative tension within our theological tradition, so we can appreciate and work with creative tension within human conflict.
 - C. Our theological tradition is filled with harmful conflict, so it's not an ideal resource for us to navigate tensions.
 - D. We have a theological tradition??
 - E. Other.
9. **How are humans invited to be in conflict with God?**
- A. Not at all – we are to accept what God says and never question it, otherwise we demonstrate a lack of faith.
 - B. We are allowed to ask questions, but never be angry with God.
 - C. God wants all of us in the relationship, so God wants us to talk to God even when we disagree or are upset with God.
 - D. Other.
10. **What does human conflict reveal about the nature or character of God? Of Jesus? Of the Holy Spirit?**
11. **What have we learned about our church's "theology of conflict" that could be helpful right now or in the future? Do we share similar ideas, or do we have different theologies of conflict, perhaps depending on the circumstances? How might this discussion about our theologies of conflict help us better understand and relate to those around us who do not share the same theology of conflict that we do?**