

# Church Conflict 101

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Ray Ortlund

“He sits in ambush in the villages; in hiding places he murders the innocent” (Ps. 10:8).

I have heard it said by a Christian leader, “In every conflict there is always wrong on both sides.” Really? In *every* conflict? *Always* wrong on both sides? That sounds plausible in this world of universal sin. But it is wrong—and dangerously so. Covered by this slogan, real wrongs can lie undisturbed, unchallenged, unrelieved, which helps no one and further injures everyone involved. And verses like Psalm 10:8 end up making no sense, because no one is innocent.

Does the Bible teach us always to see wrong on both sides in every conflict? For example, what about Cain and Abel? Or Saul and David? Or Ahab and Naboth? The Pharisees and Jesus? The whole world and the apostles? The New Testament offers this insight:

We should love one another. We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous. (1 John 3:11-12)

How did Abel contribute to that conflict between brothers? He behaved in a righteous manner. In other words, his crime was his godliness. And Cain’s guilty conscience looked at his wholehearted brother Abel and felt so exposed that he became consumed with one murderous thought: *Down with him!* But it didn’t have to go that way. Cain could have said to his brother, “Abel, your life seems to be working. Mine isn’t. You seem happy in the Lord. I am frustrated with him. And I can’t figure out what the problem is. Would you help me?” But his pride couldn’t go there. So he destroyed “the evidence against him”—his own brother.

It would be better to say, “In every conflict there are always *sinner*s on both sides. But whether there is *wrong* on both sides is the very question that demands a careful, thorough, responsible answer. Is there sin on both sides contributing to this conflict? Or could there be *godliness* on one side contributing to this conflict?” The Bible leads us into these categories of consideration, and they are profound.

This deeper line of questioning is not far-fetched, not applicable only in rare cases. In Matthew 23:34-35, our Lord says,

Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to

the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

Two things stand out here. One, Jesus himself sends faithful messengers into this world and into his church. And his faithful servants are destined to suffer violence. Two, his citation of Abel in Genesis 4 and Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24 is like saying, “From cover to cover in the Old Testament story,” since 2 Chronicles is the final book in the Hebrew Bible. In other words, Jesus saw righteous suffering as the plot-line of the Old Testament. Faithful voices being misunderstood and misjudged and opposed and even killed—this is not, to Jesus, a minor sidebar in the biblical account of reality. It is central. This insight helped Jesus understand himself and his opponents in his own day. And he foresaw this same story continuing into Christian history.

So a glib slogan like, “Well, there’s enough guilt here to go around!”—as if that settled anything—might sound humble. But it inadvertently protects predatory church people. Such a statement is moral socialism. As in economic socialism, if everyone owns it, no one really owns it. And then bad people walk away from their successful injustice with a smirk on their faces, strengthened to repeat their opposition to the gospel and to Christ himself.

Here is why I am writing this. My observation through the years has been that, after the Christ-honoring joys of the Christmas season, Satan—he is very real—rises with renewed malice and cunning to regain lost ground. January can be a hard month for faithful pastors. So my appeal to all church leaders is that you will not be caught off-guard. Expect false accusations to surface, inconsolable hysteria, church crazy in various forms, targeting your pastor. He is both imperfect and faithful simultaneously. His imperfections are obvious to all because of his visibility in your church. (Just think if *you* were up there every Sunday!) And some people will point to your faithful pastor’s imperfections and freak out. But their grievances are not the real issue. Something else is going on. And if you don’t dig down beneath the surface appearances, if you don’t stand up for your pastor but cave to that evil something else, you will join in the evil by presiding over the demolition of a faithful man’s credibility. And how can your church’s credibility then survive?

So the question for all church leaders is this: Where will you take your stand in the biblical story that you are, in fact, a part of? Whose side are you really on? Will you, by a lack of clarity and courage, risk the “Woe!” of Jesus in Matthew 23:29 landing on you? Or will you gently insist upon the full exposure of every accusation and stand by your faithful pastor and preserve the divine blessing on your church that is coming under attack?

If you will stand faithfully, your church will get through this drama and surge forward in 2020. The Lord will faithfully see to it.