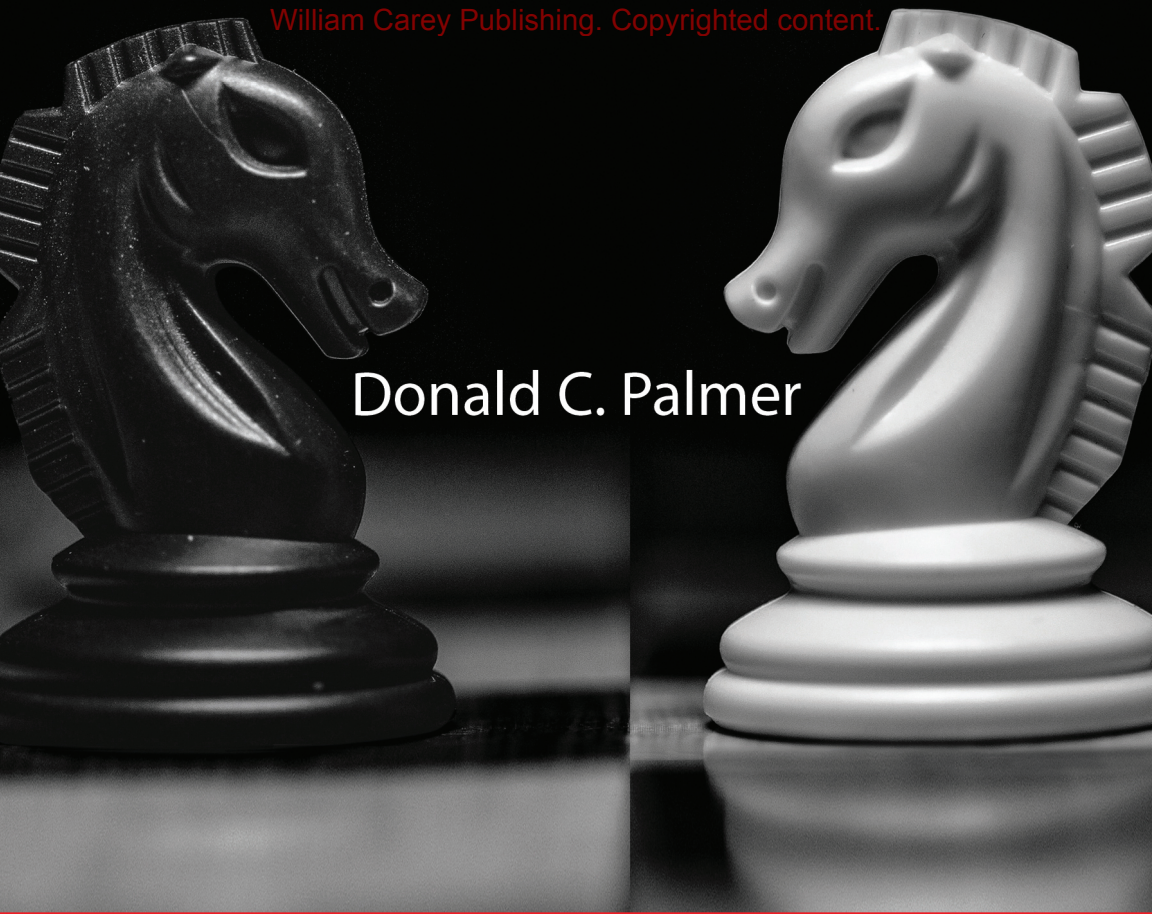
MANAGING CONFLICT CREATIVELY

A Guide for Missionaries & Christian Workers

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Donald C. Palmer

30-Year Anniversary Edition

Managing Conflict Creatively (30th Anniversary Edition):
A Guide for Missionaries & Christian Workers

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Section I: THE DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT



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There are more people on our planet than ever before, and the trend is for most of us to crowd into the major urban centers. This in itself creates the potential for greater conflicts between people. But along with this, changes are taking place so rapidly in our world that we are hard-pressed to keep up. Our fast-paced society and complex communication systems strain our coping abilities. Add to this the destructive tendencies that sin had introduced into the human race, and the result is a very volatile mixture of ingredients in human society. Out of this mixture misunderstandings, hostilities, and conflicts seem to multiply and sometimes explode.

The result of all this is that conflict is a growth industry in our day. It has existed since the beginning of human history, but its occurrence is now more frequent and its intensity greater. The increase in violence, lawsuits, and divorce in our country are all evidence of this. People once were taught to accept and submit to authority. Today we are taught to question and challenge the decisions and with authority of those over us. We were taught to "turn the other cheek" but today we are encouraged to assert and defend our perceived rights. We were taught to hide our feelings and emotions ad keep our composure at all times. Now it's considered far healthier to "let it all hang out."

Besides the changes, our societies—especially the cities—are increasingly heterogeneous. The average community, school, church, and organization is composed of people from many different backgrounds, cultures, religions, races, and value systems. All of these differing viewpoints and behavior increase the likelihood of misunderstandings that, in turn, lead to conflicts. Churches, mission agencies, and other Christian organizations certainly are not exempt from these influences and changes.

As we study the Bible itself, we find that the history of the people of God is largely a history of conflict. The New Testament reminds us that the early Christians and churches faced continual conflicts just as we do today. And church history clearly demonstrates that throughout its existence, the church has faced conflicts with enemies from the outside as well as internal

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conflicts between church leaders and believers. Churches today are certainly no exception. Nor are mission agencies and majority world churches.

Our missionaries seem to face even greater possibilities of conflict. As cross-cultural workers, they face the challenge of bridging cultural barriers and differences that can greatly increase the potential for misunderstanding and conflict. Missionaries must also maintain a number of different relationships whose interests and demands may vary greatly. They must seek to work in harmony with their sending churches, their mission agency, field leadership, fellow missionaries, and national churches and leaders—all at the same time. This is no small task! One of the main reasons why so many missionaries return home is the inability to resolve internal and interpersonal conflicts on the field.

All of this makes it essential that we understand conflict and how to manage it successfully. If we do not understand the dynamics taking place in conflict, we will tend simply to be 'reactors' to whatever is happening in this process. However, if we learn to understand conflict and how to work with others managing it, we can turn it into a process for problem-solving, positive change, new goals, and relationship building. Our field leaders, missionaries, and churches need and deserve this.

In this first section we will seek to answer these questions about conflict:

- What is conflict?
- Is conflict normal and inevitable?
- Is conflict always sinful?
- What causes conflict?
- What issues need to be dealt with in conflict?
- Who is affected by conflict?
- What is the potential in conflict?

I. DEFINITION OF CONFLICT

"Conflict is a situation in which two or more human beings desire goals which they perceive as being attainable by one or the other but not by both." (Stagner, p. 136).

"Conflict occurs anytime there is a disturbance in the equilibrium and security of a protective environment." (Perry, "Church Conflict Management," p. 1).

"Conflict arises when the actions of one party threaten the values, goals, or behaviors of another party." (Shawchuck, p. 35).

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"Conflict is two or more objects aggressively trying to occupy the same space at the same time…two persons each trying to have his 'own way' regarding an important decision…" (Ibid., p. 35).

Group Question	From these definitions, what are some of the key ingredients in conflict?

II. THE INEVITABILITY OF CONFLICT

A. God's People Have Experienced It Throughout History

1. *Conflict began with man's disobedience and fall in Genesis 3.* It will not end until the restoration of all things in eternity (Rev. 21 & 22). In the meantime, we live in a world where conflict affects every dimension of our lives. This is why it is so important for us to understand the dynamics of conflict, and how to mange it effectively. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Mt. 5:9). As Christian leaders one of our callings is to be peacemakers in the midst of conflict.

2. *Great men of God have experienced conflict.* Men like Job, Abraham, Moses, David and Jonah in the Old Testament and Peter, James, Paul, and Barnabas in the New Testament, all experienced conflict. In fact, the calling of God in their lives actually increased the amount of conflict the experienced. Sometimes the experienced conflict over issues, sometimes with other people, and sometimes with God Himself!

3. *Jesus experienced conflict and even initiated it.* When He cleansed the temple (Mt. 21:12-16), confronted the Pharisees (Mt. 23), and corrected the disciples (Mt. 8:26, Lk. 24:25-26), He was engaging in conflict. A reading of the gospels provides abundant evidence that Jesus was very confrontational when the occasion demanded it.

4. *Satan seeks to take advantage of Christians in conflict.* He does this by causing us to become discouraged and withdraw, to become angry and fight, to become stubborn and selfish so that we insist on our own way, or to become divisive and go our separate ways (not all division, however, is bad). We need to be aware of these strategies of Satan (Eph 6:11,12). When a Christian or church is active ad growing, conflict often increases because Satan then increases his opposition.

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5. *God sometimes permits conflict within His will.* He does this to test us and to cause us to grow (1 Cor. 11:18-19) as well as to force us to discover new and better ways of doing things (Acts 6:1-7). Sometimes we can see His purpose in allowing conflict and sometimes we cannot. But we do know that God is sovereign and that He can turn the most difficult situations into something for His glory and purpose.

B. Conflict Does Not Have To Be Bad

1. *In this life all of us will experience conflict.* Every Christian, missionary and church experiences conflict. In part, this is because in spite of our best intentions, things go wrong in churches and between missionaries. All of us are very imperfect and we live in an imperfect world. Murphy's law is part of this imperfect life: "If anything can go wrong, it will."

   Conflict also comes because none of us lives isolated from other persons. In our relationships we are involved in all kinds of actions decisions, and changes that may threaten or confuse others. If these fears and misunderstandings are not cleared up quickly, tension will mount, and conflict will develop.

2. *We have to overcome the belief that all conflict is sin and therefore to be avoided.* As Christians we have a tendency either to pretend a conflict does not exist or to attribute it to a lack of spirituality. Neither of these is a realistic or helpful response to a group because it prevents growth, change, and new directions. It is not only impossible, but also undesirable, to eliminate all conflict in the church or on the mission field.

3. *Conflict itself is not sinful.* Most conflict in itself is neither good nor bad, right nor wrong. Often, it is caused by honest differences of opinion and by changes and decisions that affect people's relationships and status. Some of these will lead to conflict, but without sin. Others result not only in conflict, but also in sin.

   It is the way we react to sin that may be sinful. When disagreements and differences result in gossiping, attacking, and hurting other people, then sin has entered the conflict. The important issue is: what is our reaction and behavior in conflict? How do we deal with it?

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