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The Necessary Evil:
Conflict In The Church

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Conflict In the Church

The history of the church is a far reaching and interesting area of study. A good background in this subject of American Lutheranism is vital to the pastor's understanding of his synod and how it came to be. For this reason it is not only good for us to explore the facts of the historical events, but also to set out individually, to study one certain area in depth. These reasearch papers of our own choosing usually consist of the history of a certain church, or of a topic that has had special attention. This paper however, will not follow this format; but will rather seek to incorporate a number of different churches with one specific thing in common, a conflict in the church. In the pages that follow, this writer will be discussing churches from our synod which have had more serious problems; the reason they began and also, at the risk of becoming involved in pastoral theology, a brief discussion on problem solving and prevention for the future.

The first question we might ask ourselves is: how does a conflict begin in the church? There are many ways for problems to start, it may be something the pastor has done, or something he has not done, but was expected to do. Or, the conflict could have been started by a church member or members voicing their opinion about something and generally throwing their weight around. For example, 1 or 2 people may begin to question a major area of church doctrine, like the color of the hymnals, the height of the

grass on the church lawn, or why the church was not informed when 75 watt light bulbs were installed instead of the traditional 40 watt bulbs. The problem usual is not the hymnals, the grass or the light bulbs, but it is rather a question of authority. "What right has the pastor to make that kind of a decision." These "few" opposers are very vocal and feel their authority is being threatened when the pastor assumes his God-given responsibility. The problem can be further aggravated when these few have their way. The majority of the people remain silent and uninvolved. They might make the remark, "What is so important about that problem anyway, it is no big deal." While it is true that a conflict may appear to be a simple matter at first, there can be a real danger in letting that tiny spark grow into a raging fire, so much so that it hurts the pastor and the church he is serving. Several harmful things may result from the "bad press" given to a church because of a problem. First of all, the intentions of those opposers hurt the pastor as well as the church itself, because you cannot harm one without the other. Second, your mission outreach for the church will be retarded because word may get into the community that the church is having problems. In regards to the pastor himself, other members will lose respect for the pastor whether he is at fault or not simply because there was a problem. Conflicts will intensify, and in extreme cases, if the conflict is unresolved, it can lead to permanent damage in the congregation. Conflicts in the church are real problems, problems that affect us in many ways. With this background, let's go to a historic example

of a conflict and see the results it had.

Our first example took place in a large WELS church. The church was served by one pastor for over 25 years until 1981. Since it was a large congregation, much of the calling work with delinquent members and evangelism calls were simply not done because of the work over-load. In September of 1981 this church received its new pastor, the one with whom the conflicts occurred. This new pastor was a man out for a few years, and when he came to his new call, he could see many areas which needed improvement to get the church to reach its full potential. This pastor suggested some changes within the first year of his service, and the church council endorsed all of them. The council also decided to make these changes over a short period of time, rather than dragging them out. Complaints came from the members within the first year of these changes, although none of them came directly to the church council. Some people did hear the complaints and those concerned were privately told to wait a year and give things a chance to work out. The following is a list of the more significant changes that have upset the people of this congregation:

- 1) Allowing more time between Sunday services for Sunday school and Bible classes.
- 2) Creating a board of elders to serve a number of families each, in hopes of serving them better spiritually.
- 3) The acceptance of a new constitution and By-laws.
- 4) Establishing a faster procedure for distributing Holy Communion.

5) A mandate imposed on the pastor to give the benediction before communion to allow non-communers to leave.

6) The Pastor's concern about church related affairs being advertized outside of the church and used as fund raisers.

In 1983 a group went to the circuit pastor with a list of concerns and complaints about their pastor. Many meetings followed between the pastor of this church and the circuit pastor with no apparent accomplishments. These problems continued until 1985 when a petition was started that suggested the pastor be placed on a call list to another church. This petition was never formally presented to the church council, but was a sure sign of unrest among the people. Many in the congregation were divided between agreement and disagreement with the pastor. During this same year the matter came to a head and a meeting was held to discuss the issues. The next listing shows the concerns of the people in regards to the pastor and his behavior at their church: 1) Why can't we conduct fund raising like other WELS churches do? 2) Why isn't the pastor up front for the whole service when he expects us to stay for the entire communion service? 3) Why isn't the pastor following up on people who leave our church? 4) Why is there an executive few who run the church along with the pastor? 5) the statement before communion (on the part of the pastor), is offensive to those who are leaving. 6) The pastor made derogatory comments about teachers at Missouri Lutheran School. 7) The pastor makes too many decisions on his own. 8) The pastor does not keep appointments. 9) The pastor

marries some Catholics but not others. 10) Why was a Catholic soloist allowed to perform in our church? 11) The pastor has left church activities with his family instead of attending them. 12) The pastor acts too much like a politician.

During this time a second pastor was called to the church. He has helped to smooth matters over a little bit, but the problems are still there. It was decided to have an outsider come in to discuss the problems through a sermon on Sunday and an open forum for discussion. At the present time, I am not aware of this church's status, if things have been resolved or not.

What caused such a great mess at one church? Certainly the motives of the pastor and his council seemed to be correct, but what about their methods of carrying out their work? The problem, according to one of the members at this church was, "These many rapid changes were probably our biggest mistake." The statement has often been made to me to make haste slowly. This advice is especially helpful when it comes to the work of the church where tradition is a great part of our heritage. This pastor, even with the support of his council acted much too quickly for the good of his people. It takes time to gain the confidence of someone, especially with a large group of people. Waiting a few years to amass great changes is the better part of wisdom. If there was something that had to be changed immediately, it should be explained not only to the church council, but it should also be brought to the voter's assembly and explained to them as well.

It is also apparent that "small insignificant" problems grew into a real crisis by the time something was finally done to stop the conflict. In this particular case the church council could have acted sooner. Even when the first stirrings were found among the members as negative feedback on the pastor's new plans, this would not have been too soon to have gone into action to prevent such a major crisis from happening. Instead these problems were allowed to continue and as they did they became bigger and bigger until harm was done to both the church and the pastor's reputation. At the very least, these problems should have been laid out in the open. This would have promoted openness and have avoided a lack of communication between the pastor and the people. In this case, conflicting viewpoints on small details resulted in a major crisis.

The next example of the necessary evil in the church also involves a large WELS church. Some of the circumstances are the same but the cause of the problem is much different. This conflict arises basically because of a certain person's psychological make-up. The writer will first explain the conflict and then the reason why it occurred and still occurs today.

In this church, there was one man Stan, a retired police officer. His mother was in the local nursing home, as was the mother of another member of the same church, Gilbert, a retired man also. Years before this conflict came to light, these two men questioned the frequency of the visits made by the new pastor. These men were concerned for the spiritual care of their mothers

and rightly so, but their sincere desires took a wrong turn and they ended up starting a conflict.

Sometime after this first incident, Gilbert fell off a ladder and hurt his back. He spent a week in the hospital and of course he expected to have some spiritual care. Gilbert was visited by the vicar twice during that week and also a few times while Gilbert was at home. But Gilbert expected more from the pastor. The previous pastor had visited the shut-ins every two weeks, and the hospital everyday. This incident gave more fuel to the problem of the pastor's visits, but nothing was officially done for quite some time. It was nearly two years later when Stan and Gilbert got together and were determined to do something about it. If one person had to push the other, Stan was the pusher. He had a reputation around the church for being the trouble maker. He started raising trouble and he and Gilbert wrote a letter to the church council, voicing their opinions of the pastor and his work. Stan came to the next council meeting and was permitted to hand out the letter so all could read it. The following is an excerpt from that letter.

"Many members have the impression that the pastor visits the hospital every day, I did too, but this is not true. In April 1984 I fell off a ladder and crushed two vertebra in my back and was hospitalized for four days. The pastor did not make one visit although he did send the vicar. In May 1984 I was hospitalized again for 8 days, this time pastor did stop once and the vicar stopped once. In all I was not to church for two months. Pastor made one call and the vicar made two while I was at home.

Guess my question is this, is this normal? Is it sufficient for the pastor to visit the sick and elderly only once in 2, 3, or 4 months? I think there is a lesson

here. We should keep in mind we are here to serve and make other people happy. Whether we build a house, sell a suit, do a service, spread the Word, keep house, and raise a family, we should not let the almighty dollar get in the way."

This letter came from a confused man, and several things are evident from this portion of the letter. The first and most striking from a Christian standpoint is the fact that neither of these men directly confronted the pastor with their grievances against him. They did not follow the directives of Matthew 18, to go to the individual first. The next mistake was in the facts which were used in the letter. These men had no way of knowing how the pastor handled visits with other members of the congregation. The only facts they had was their own experience. Another mistake was the length of time which was allowed to pass before something was done to correct the problem. And since nothing was done, the problem intensified and became harder to resolve.

Getting back to that council meeting, after the letter was read the pastor asked to be excused and he went down to his office. He returned with some date books, one for each of the years he had served the church. With these books he was able to go back to dates listed in the letter. On the basis of this information, the pastor was able to justify the actions he had made on the days listed. The records showed all the visits made during each day. The nursing homes were being visited each and every month by the pastor or the vicar. In reference to the times when Gilbert was in the hospital, the reason the pastor did not visit him and the vicar did, was because there were two other members in intensive care at a different hospital that the

the pastor was visiting everyday. And then there was the over-all question of laxity in visits by the pastor. This problem can be attributed to a misunderstanding of the pastor's work. The previous pastor had been there for 40 years, and it was his practice to visit the shut-ins and the sick at different intervals. For the shut-ins it was every two weeks, while the sick were visited everyday if they were seriously ill. It was no wonder that Stan and Gilbert who were long time members, felt cheated when the visits were less frequent. But as the new pastor pointed out, there was not enough time to make the visits any more frequent in such a large church, 1400 souls, and 35 shut-ins each month. The previous pastor had apparently neglected some of his other duties to get in all those visits each month. This side of the question brought up an entirely new area, that is the work of the pastor. The council members were amazed when the pastor said it was not uncommon for him to work 60-70 hours in a normal week. Many people don't know that the pastor works more than on Sunday morning. By the end of the meeting, no one agreed with any of the bad accusations made against the pastor. They all agreed the pastor was making the best use of his time.

Now the question arises, why? What is the real source of the problem with this conflict? Gilbert's letter and his approach to the problem certainly did not help the situation, but he was mainly misunderstanding the circumstances. The real source of trouble, was Stan. His reputation had given him away as a trouble maker among the members. It is unfortunate but true that some

people are inflicted with psychological problems, and it is the opinion of this writer that this was the case with this particular conflict. Stan was a trouble maker because of his psychological make-up. It was Stan who started fires under people like Gilbert who otherwise would have kept the problem to himself.

I am not a psychology expert and I do not claim to be one with the analysis I am making with this case. I feel that Stan was plagued by paranoid reactions to his situations in life.

"The paranoid rationalizes his own thinking and believes that those who oppose him, or differ with him are wrong. A person suffering from paranoia does not usually exhibit any other abnormal psychological symptoms. He may appear to react normally in all of his activities except in the area of his delusions."¹ A person like Stan can be a real thorn in the flesh for the pastor because they are not satisfied when one problem is resolved, they simply find another one to cause trouble. This problem with the certain members and the first example cited are in no way unique occurrences. Such problems happen in every church at some time or another, to varying degrees.

Some similarities can be seen from these two examples of conflict. The first is: conflict hurts the church, its members, and also the pastor; secondly: the problem most often stems from a lack of communication or of information from the pastor to the people, or from people to pastor.; and thirdly; the potential exists in each church for some conflict to arise.

In reasearching the results that conflict can have on a church I read an interesting statement where the author disagrees that conflict is always bad, he writes, "I disagree that conflict is always bad! Until I learned this truth I was fearfully restricted as a manager. My view was only negative. But what freedom is ours when conflict is accepted as a way of growth and maturity. It can be a learning process when faced objectively."²

I agree in part with this remark. It would certainly be the ideal to have a congregation think in terms of conflict as something good and beneficial, but unfortunately it does not always work out that way. Much can be learned through problems but that statement pertains better to the management business or to interpersonal relationships, instead of with the church as a whole. Conflict will have more negative aspects than positives ones on the church, because we are not simply making a business deal but we are dealing with the eternal well-being of people. Someone may become upset and leave the church, or worse yet, leave the faith for the most insignificant things. In contrast with another article I read, this author said conflict is nothing but negative. "Conflict is always destructive and never constructive. Tensions of life most often move us away from the will of God. Conflict in the church is generated by satan and is used to undermine the authority of the pastor and the mission of the church itself."³ The best conflict is no conflict at all. Living in a sinful world however, we can always except problems and conflicts among sinful people.

There are many things a pastor can do to try and prevent major conflicts from coming about. One of them is careful instruction of the young people and the adults. Perhaps one area specifically lends itself to us here with instruction in brotherly or sisterly admonition according to Matthew 18. One important thing for a pastor to remember is to make haste slowly, never make moves in haste that are going to affect people in the church. If you take your time and gain the congregation's confidence, they will back your changes when you do need to make them. In the case of prolonged problems, church councils should be instructed to take the necessary actions and nip problems in the bud.

At the risk of getting involved in pastoral theology, what happens when a conflict does exist? There are basically four steps involved in solving a church dispute. Number 1, identify the problem. Is it a doctrinal, a personality conflict, a policy difference, or a discipline problem. Step 2, have the right attitude about the situation. More often than not it is an attitude or way of thinking which causes Christians to hurl themselves eagerly into a conflict. When people place their personal opinions above their desire for oneness in the church, there is a problem. That right attitude comes from the Bible, to have love, patience and humility in dealing with fellow believers. The 3rd step is to follow the Biblical pattern for solving the problem. Various parts of Scripture like Matthew chapter 18 apply for different situations. These Biblical examples will help us solve or avoid a church conflict. The final step is for a Christ-like follow-up. Even when something has been

resolved, things are not back to normal. The people involved may be left hurt or feel alienated. They need compassion and love to be healed and restored. Following these steps will help in reestablishing church unity.⁴

A final note is in order for the pastor who goes through such an experience, because the pastor is the one most affected by what goes on in the church. When we undergo such problems, the word peace is the key term. Too often pastors can be tempted to take the entire problem on their own shoulders and to try and solve it themselves. Scripture assures us that God will never tempt us beyond what we can bear. Today's problems may threaten to consume us, but God's peace comes through for the believer. He will never leave us nor forsake us and he is in control even in the most desperate situations. In dealing with conflict, the peace God gives to us does not produce an absence of conflict, but it instead gives us the ability to cope with it.

Conflict in the church always has been and always will be a part of our sinful lives here on this earth, because conflict in the church is, a necessary evil.

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- 2 Williams, Denny Your Church, Conflicts and Solutions
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- 3 Cranor, Walter BCTN Magazine vol. 5 no. 4
- 4 De Haan, Martin R. II How Do You Settle A
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Due to the confidential nature of the other materials used for this paper, I am not at liberty to reveal them in a bibliography. The resources I used were obtained through personal experiences, written documents, and personal interviews from the actual people involved in these cases.