Special Millenium Section

Some Observations on Understanding and Managing the Conflict of Ideas in Christian Higher Education

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Introduction

Reading Richard Halberg's article, "Fostering Faculty and Administration Cooperation," in the Spring 1999 CBFA Newsletter caused this writer to reconsider the application of biblical principles, management theories, and personal observations to the understanding and management of conflict in Christian higher education. Some thoughts follow.

If one were asked to describe the "ideal" Christian college, one descriptor would likely be the presence of unity or the complete absence of conflict. After all, the members of the organization each possess the same Holy Spirit and nearly equivalent translations of the Bible. Should not these common sources of special revelation bring a group of earnest believers to consensus? This author's 20 years of experience inform him, however, that the "ideal" is not always the "real." Conflict, defined as a "sharp disagreement or collision of ideas" (Webster, 1976), may not be a constant companion, but remains no stranger.

In attempting to understand and then to manage conflict, several questions arise: Why does conflict exist or what are some of its causes in the Christian higher education environment? Is the presence of conflict necessarily unhealthy? If conflict is not completely undesirable, what level (how much) should be tolerated? What are some ways to manage conflict which may help to avoid damaging institutional and individual integrity and efficiency?

The purpose of this paper is to identify concepts that may serve as underpinnings for conflict resolution approaches and processes.

Some Causes of Conflict

Possible and actual causes of conflict in Christian higher education are probably too numerous to catalog exhaustively. However, we can highlight some recurring causes of conflict observed by this author over many years of experience.

1. Presence of Sin. Some authors place the blame for conflict almost exclusively at the feet of sin (Rush, 1983). In one sense, this is true. If human data were exhaustive in scope and the ensuing interpretation was distortion-free in analysis, no room would remain for disagreement. The Fall of man has rendered creation even more knowledge-challenged and decidedly biased. But it is very different, however, to identify the cause of conflict in general terms (i.e. the nature of a fallen universe) than to say it is always the result of committed sin in the life of another. To be sure, a great deal of conflict comes from transgressions, intentional and unintentional. In the book of Proverbs alone, conflict is blamed for hatred, gossip, anger, and pride (15:18; 16:28; 26:20; 28:25). Paul connects conflict with a number of sins, most prominently envy (II Corinthians 12:20; I Timothy 6:4). Self-centered attitudes and actions result in conflict and should remain an initial and recurring point of examination in identifying cause(s).

It is, however, an oversimplification to accuse disagreeing parties of de facto sin. In fact, it may be rather convenient and self-serving to use "the sin cause" as a method of holding one's critics at a safe distance. One variation on "the sin cause" theme is accusing a disagreeing party of the sin of division. This accusation assumes that: (a) division is always sin, and/or (b) disagreement always results in division.

2. Lack of Omniscience. When the prophet Hosea speaks for God, he flatly declares, "… I am God and not man …" (11:9). One of the many distinctions inherent in this declaration of difference is God's possession of infinite knowledge. In fact, at the crux of Satan's pitch to Eve, was the promise that she would "… be like God, knowing …" (Genesis 3:5). Disagreements will always be present among people, because, unlike God, no one knows it all. What if someone demonstrates an "omniscient" (unteachable) attitude, which is a function of pride? See cause number one.

A caveat may be appropriate at this juncture—namely, a realization of partial knowledge is not tantamount to a lack of conviction. Martin Luther would

have been a slave to absolute "intellectual honesty" if his "partial" knowledge had pressed him to the point of inaction. Adam and Eve could have pleaded innocence to sin because Satan's question, "Did God really say …" (Genesis 3:1), was simply a recognition of their inability to know the truth. In fact, an awareness of non-omniscience is not an appropriate excuse for failure to form convictions that may lead to conflict.

3. Revelation in Journey. Valuable Christian college faculty members are faculty members who are growing in knowledge and wisdom. Stated differently, a faculty member without natural curiosity is an institutional oxymoron (emphasis on the last derivative). A natural evolution of personal and professional growth will result from this pursuit of knowledge. Growth means change. Agreements and disagreements will result from these changes. The nature and extent of disagreement allowable is the focus of many discussions over academic freedom. These discussions are as relevant as they are healthy given the inevitability of changing viewpoints.

4. Scarcity of Resources. Since the Christian college budget never meters unlimited resources,

scarcity dictates tough allocation choices. The classic macroeconomic trade-off labeled "guns and butter" may be renamed for higher education as "books and bleachers." Disagreeing parties each believe their desired program(s) is(are) a legitimate advancement of the Kingdom. Whether the desired options are a matter of right vs. wrong or just shades of utility could fill the pages of a different study. Nevertheless, when the budgetary pie is finally sliced to the satisfaction of all, the millennial kingdom can be officially declared underway.

5. Differences in Style and Function. Closely related to resource scarcity is a difference in style and function. Style is the way a person instinctively relates to the organization. It is analogous to spiritual gifts within the church. Adizes identifies four types of styles which may be present and may result in conflict (Adizes, 1983). Summarized, a person may focus on other workers (relation), the work itself (production), innovation (creation), administrative issues (organization), or some combination of these four basic approaches. Conflict is possible, for example, when a people-oriented style clashes with the

values of an administrative style in a given situation—policies and procedures conflict with perceived needs. In a larger sense, organizations are constantly faced with decisions which call for a balance between individual and corporate well-being (i.e., people vs. policy). Corporations that predominately opt for the individual will eventually lose their group identity. However, automatically defaulting for policy will create a cold, fortress mentality with increasing loyalties from a decreasing constituency. These examples are a miniscule fraction of the numerous opportunities for conflict which are available from a number of style combinations interrelating.

Function is similar to style, but is more work-related. Functions tend to be departmentally-based and tend to develop a rather predictable

mindset over time. The presence of functional differences is inherent in the processes of delegation and specialization, both of which will increase with organizational growth.

One example of functional (departmental) focus could be illustrated by asking, "What is the anticipated response of a person in the advancement office to new ideas as compared with the response of an employee in accounting?" This generalization (hopefully not a stereotype) illustrates how different functions express different values and viewpoints. When prolonged thought is given to the significant differences present in functional areas, one wonders why conflict is ever absent.

At the risk of oversimplifying, some primary functional differences in Christian higher education may be summarized as follows:

Type of Department:	Primary Function:	Functional Values:
Academic	Teaching	Contemplating/Analyzing
Athletic	Winning	Competing/Exercising
Administrative	Organizing	Strategizing/Streamlining
Advancement	Marketing	Selling/Competing
Accounting	Balancing	Budgeting/Controlling
Facilities	Supporting	Satisfying/Maintaining
Student Life	Nurturing	Counseling/Confronting

Identifying these differences in primary function is not to say that an administrator never counsels or a coach never contemplates. People are not neatly compartmentalized in daily endeavors. It is also not assuming that each function fails to glorify God or to advance His Kingdom. The differences do focus, however, on the primary functional orientation (or specialization) the college worker maintains in the community. These differences may provide fertile soil for conflict, especially when the scarce resources of finance, time, and energy must be rationed. For example, how a particular department views the best use of money or student time may differ from another department given functional orientation. Performance expectations will probably differ widely as well.

6. Confusion in Scalar Chain. One basic managerial principle identified by Henri Fayol is "unity of command" (Montana, 1987). Simply stated, unity of command occurs when each worker receives direction from one supervisor within an established chain of command. As this principle relates to the scalar chain, it specifies that each employee should be responsible

to only one supervisor, thus "promoting clarity in communication and assuring minimum conflict." If an administrator from one functional area offers direction to an employee from a different functional area, conflict is more likely to occur according to this principle.

Tolerance Levels for Conflict

It is hardly debatable that, this side of heaven, conflict is a part of life. But to admit this is not necessarily to accept or to condone it. For example, sin remains in the world, but is not welcomed by believers.

On the other hand, because of the fallen state of this world, is it possible for "non-sinful conflict" to exist and to even promote organizational health? Many respond in the affirmative. Queried differently, "Does an optimal level of conflict exist for promoting organizational well being?"

Proverbs 27:17 states, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." This observation does not say whether the sharpening is inherently good or bad, which leads one to believe it can be either. In other words, going to prison may make one a better

criminal or going to church may make one a better Christian; iron will sharpen iron.
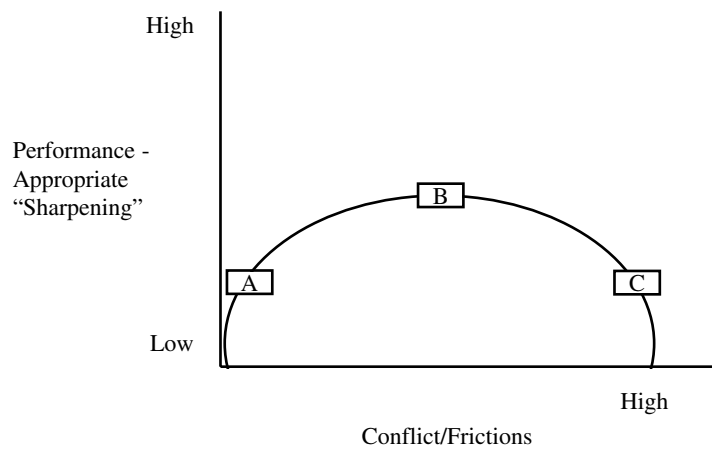
The prophet Isaiah (44:12) describes the sharpening process in greater detail. Hot coals, hammers, and strong arms are tools in a rather arduous labor that yields a very useful result. Conflict (i.e. heat, pounding, toil) serves a wonderful purpose as friction hones to sharpness that which it encounters and helps realize otherwise dormant potential.

Conversely, some researchers believe that the absence of conflict may result in a phenomena coined "Groupthink" (Janis & Mann, 1977). Group-think occurs when a group is so focused on unity and unifying relationships that errors in judgment go unchallenged. Enjoying the aura of a positive group disposition may shroud hard truths that need exposure. More than one prophet, when facing a leader who wanted only positive feedback, discovered why the phrase "shoot the messenger" evolved. However, good decision-making, according to Janis and Mann, is more likely to occur when an "open minded exposure to challenging information" is present. If properly understood and

applied, the frictions of conflict within an organization can shape that organization into greater viability. Conflict which is not properly managed, however, can be destructive.

It is "not the presence of conflict that causes chaos and disaster, but the harmful and ineffective way it is managed … when conflicts are skillfully managed, they are of value" (Gangel & Canine, 1992).

An adaptation of one theory of appropriate conflict levels (Griffin, 1996) to the biblical concept of "sharpening" may be visualized as on the next page:

High

Performance - Appropriate "Sharpening"

B

A   C

Low

High

Conflict/Frictions

If this description is valid, conflict represented between point A and point B generates a helpful environment. This amount of conflict is considered healthy because it stimulates creativity, thoughtfulness, innovation, refinement, and thoroughness, the product of ideas being constructively challenged. However, between point B and point C, conflict has become destructive, causing hostility, division, defensiveness, and general inefficiency. The organization is now being harmed, and performance diminishes.

How quickly an organization moves from A/B to B/C may depend upon a number of variables, such as the maturity of those in conflict and upon how "fundamental" the debated issue is thought to be by those in disagreement.

Managing Conflict: Quick Cures

Since conflict is not inherently pleasant and becomes increasingly unpleasant as it intensifies, seeking quick remedies is always a temptation. Unfortunately, quick remedies often result in even greater future problems. Some examples of quick cures follow.

1. Resource Expansion. The expansion of resources is seen as a quick resolution for many conflicts. Unfortunately, it is also an impossible one in most cases. Nevertheless, the development department becomes the ultimate tiebreaker by being tasked with raising greater gift income to satisfy competing ends. That this approach places the school at greater financial risk is barely debatable. But, interestingly enough, simply adding resources may also hold the necessary resolution at arm's length. Throwing money at a problem is often a poor substitute for creative problem solving. Some research indicates that organizations with large financial resources who solve problems through increased funding are more likely to fail (Hawken, 1987).

2. Head in the Sand. Acting like the problem doesn't exist through meaningless calls for unity or attempts at subordinating the situation will only prolong the difficulty and may even foster problem growth. Administration is not the proper vocation for those who wish to avoid conflict.

3. Smoothing It Out. Another superficial approach with little potential for remedy treats the disagreeing parties like children on a playground who need to "shake hands and make up." Granted, this may be an appropriate temporary action for "cooling off" if the conflict has become heated or personal in nature, but it will not resolve the core difference(s). A thoughtful process is required.

4. Freezing Them Out. When a person with a disagreement is seen as a threat to the institution, that individual may be systematically excluded from meaningful contribution. After a time, the person either accepts the exile or formalizes it by moving to another school. This method has some severe problems when measured by Scripture. The Bible teaches believers to "love one another," to "admonish one another," to "accept one another," to "honor one another," and to "be of the same mind with one another," just to cite a few commands. Freezing a fellow laborer out doesn't square with these passages. Being forthright and loving (i.e. "speaking the truth in love") does square with the Scriptures (Ephesians 4:15).

5. Moving Them On. A resignation or a termination of employment may be the logical, loving solution to a significant conflict. Given the "one anothers" listed earlier, however, it should not be the first solution.

It is important for leaders to keep people who are willing to disagree within the sphere of influence. In fact, not allowing

these individuals within that sphere causes one to wonder why they are not present. Is the leader too insecure to tolerate them? What is the leader so anxious to hide from critical minds? Are all of the leader's ideas so good that modification through conflict only diminishes their quality? Is the leader capable of only working with people who are like the leader or who will always agree with the leader? If so, why do we need more than one of the leader?

If a "parting of the ways" that results from conflict is necessary, it should be as a last resort due to insurmountable, substantive differences.

Managing Conflict: Better Cures

1. Leadership That Accepts Counsel. One is hard pressed to discover a "one size fits all" method for decision-making in the Bible. The book of Proverbs does, however, place a great deal of emphasis upon taking counsel (15:22). By taking counsel, leadership is not abdicating leadership nor diminishing the quality of the decision (both significant problems with a purely democratic model of governance). Leadership is saying, by taking counsel, that knowledge and

wisdom are also resident in others, even in those who may disagree. Good counsel will open new options and explore existing ones. Ultimately, the best ideas may be a synthesis of options; effective problem solving is rarely an either/or proposition.

2. Followership That Accepts Authority. Although Romans 13 applies most directly to civil government, Paul's general statement in verse one, "... For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God," includes employers and/or supervisors also.

The implication is clear; unless expected by authority to disobey God, an employee is required to submit to one in institutional authority. Many biblical examples to the principle of obeying God rather than men are well-known—Daniel in the lions' den, the three Jewish men in the Babylonian furnace, and the apostles preaching the gospel, just to name a few. Hopefully, the consequences of disobeying a college supervisor will not be as dire!

Key relationships are commonly two-sided (husband/wife, parent/child, etc.), and the Bible wonderfully balances the responsibilities of both participants. Generally, if

leadership is loving, thoughtful, and understanding while followership is submissive and patient, a great deal of conflict will be resolved, leading to the welfare of the organization and glorifying God.

3. Mission That Defines Existence. Organizations exist because purposes can more effectively be achieved through homeostasis. For the amalgamation of the parts to achieve more than the parts can achieve individually, unity of purpose or a unifying mission is critical. Without this mission, the various functions (i.e. finance, academics, athletics, etc.), devolve into departmental tribes. Each tribe assumes its own viewpoints, language, heroes, and values.

If different functions are to be unified for institutional effectiveness (the essence of delegation), a strong sense of overall mission in general and an individual's mission in particular must be present. This identification with an established mission begins with hiring and orientation and continues with able leadership revisiting purpose(s) with subordinates.

If mission has not been adequately defined, it may begin with attempts at organizational

definition within all sectors of the organization. W. Edwards Deming (1986) presents some excellent questions "to help a team start" in his work, *Out Of Crisis*. Answering these may stimulate thought toward mission. A warning: anyone expecting this process to yield a sense of mission overnight will be sorely disappointed. A lack of intentional organizational direction is not a sin that can be atoned for quickly.

4. Doctrine Which Separates Religions. In a day when the worst label a person may be given is "intolerant," doctrinal distinctives will probably be replaced by short, ambiguous phrases, which allow for as much inclusion as possible. A fuller doctrinal statement, however, possesses some advantages. First, it more clearly reflects the position of the college, offering prospective constituents an honest evaluative tool. Second, the more detailed a doctrinal statement is, the more likely that the adherents (internal and external constituents) will be unified, unless they rally around intentional inclusion. Third, those holding a distinctive position are more likely to hold a differentiated market niche and therefore experience strong

constituent loyalty. Fourth, adherents to the distinctives will believe a direct work of God was done to bring new constituents (especially if they are faculty, administrators, or donors with impressive relative stature) to the school when so many qualifiers were present. Fifth, a strongly-held doctrinal statement will give the constituents the courage to temporarily "fail" (temporarily vs. eternally). The willingness to experience martyrdom is vital to the spiritual health of the Christian organization, according to John Pilkey, professor of literature at The Master's College. Without the willingness to experience martyrdom, whether it is individual or institutional, the enterprise will lose its edge and soon become focused on its own survival rather than the advancement of the Kingdom. In short, works will replace faith.

Some challenges, however, may accompany a rather detailed doctrinal position. Or, stated economically, a rather exhaustive doctrinal position has opportunity costs. One cost is related to the intellectual/spiritual journey of faculty and staff. The more defined the doctrinal position, the more likely someone may be to develop a differing position. When this occurs, the immediate

questions may be, "Is this difference reconcilable or is it even significant?" The second half of the question already begins to suggest that some portions of the doctrinal statement are more critical to the college than others are. Matters of eschatology (i.e. timing for the rapture, certain applications of cyclical vs. linear exegesis, etc.) may be examples of such issues. Nevertheless, those in authority are faced with the prospect of communicating which doctrines are non-negotiable and which doctrines have some flexibility. If latitude is available, how will that latitude be codified without changing the distinctive nature of the school? At the heart of the struggle is a desire for individual welfare (priesthood) which conflicts with corporate welfare (oversight).

A second opportunity cost may be pressure to adjust the doctrinal position due to stagnation in growth or actual shrinkage in size. If the parameters are too narrow to sustain growth and this is accompanied by a strong growth orientation on the part of leadership, "something's gotta give." The "something" may include changing to new methodologies that are doctrinally

allowable, the resignation of aggressive leadership, a "softening" of doctrinal distinctives, or an adjustment in leadership's attitude. If every part of the doctrinal position is seen as a necessary belief for the "people of the God," movement toward a "remnant identity" will be a significant part of the adjusted attitude.

5. Atmosphere Which Communicates Understanding. "I may not agree with you, but I love you in Christ." These are not meant to be empty words that summarize an impasse, but rather an attitude which bathes an entire process. This author has spent considerable years attempting to resolve conflicts in the Christian college environment. Commonly, if a person was unable to take issue with the resolution itself (product), a complaint was lodged concerning "how" the resolution was reached (process). Although this smacks of sour grapes, it doesn't excuse those in the Christian community from resolving conflicts in an orderly way (I Corinthians 14:40), in a gracious way (Colossians 4:6), in a loving way (Colossians 3:12-14), and in a humble way (Philippians 2:3-8). Any resolution process, no matter how comprehensive or clever,

will cause damage to the precious souls of people if its letter ignores the proper Spirit.

Closing Remarks

It's probably fitting for this paper to generate more questions than it answers. That may be a fundamental difference between a professor and a preacher, the former being more comfortable with process. The questions can be especially valuable if they stimulate godly exploration that results in effective resolution models.

While creation continues to "groan" under the weight of fallenness (Romans 8:20-23), conflict will be a measure of life's portion. How it is managed will be a measure of life's stewardship.

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