

Preaching to Heal Conflicted Congregational Communities

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Abstract: Preaching often creates conflict. It also can help heal conflict. Congregational communities experience mass conflict (disagreements that affect the entire congregation), group conflict (between two or more interest groups), individual conflicts (between two or more individuals but not involving groups), and marital conflict. While conflict resolution must involve pastoral care, counseling, intervention and mediation, the pulpit can powerfully pull people together. This paper outlines specific ways preaching can help heal conflicted congregational communities.

Introduction

Perhaps the best question regarding conflict was offered by that outstanding theologian from Los Angeles, Rodney King, who asked, “Can’t we all just get along?” Pastors and congregations across the country might respond, “Amen!” Yet, interestingly, the very people who decry conflict seem unable to break free from it. The people who identify themselves as followers of the Prince of Peace lack peace. Believers, who claim the fruit of the Holy Spirit, have trouble experiencing or expressing love, joy, and peace.

Consider the nature of the congregational community and its difficulties in resolving relational difficulties. How can people learn to forgive and be reconciled to one another? While pastors play many roles in leading God’s people, their position as preachers provides a strong base from which they can help heal conflicted congregations.

The Congregation as Community

God first referred to Israel as a congregation when He initiated the Passover. (Exodus 12:3) Previously, Israel was a family, then a group of tribes. Later it would become a nation, but its highest identity was as a congregation – a community of faith that came together to worship and serve the Lord.¹

For people gathered for such a holy purpose, believers often fail to fulfill their potential. Instead, their reputation is often one of fighting, backbiting, arguing, and other forms of conflict. James Hopewell noted: “Despite our aspirations, congregations are not timeless havens of congenial views or values. By congregating, human beings are implicated in plot, in a corporate historicity that links us to a specific past that thickens and unfolds a particular present, and that holds out a future open to transformation.”²

Part of the reason for congregational conflicts may lie in the fact that they are often more like a typical family. Paul Minear observed the images used to describe the church: God is our Father; we are His sons and daughters; the church is a household of faith. To become part of the Father’s family, we are adopted through being born again. As such, we are heirs with an inheritance as the children of God. We call one another “brother” or “sister.”³

Unfortunately, families fight. Some families are dysfunctional (as are some congregations), but family squabbles are also part of the normal functioning of groups of people who interact in close proximity, who are interdependent for their collective purpose, and who simply are people, with the same difficulties human beings have had since the beginning. The key to having a healthy family, or a healthy congregation, involves the nature, duration, and resolution of the conflict.

Gilbert Rendle observed: “The fact is that many local congregations, which once spoke openly about themselves as ‘family’ and now casually refer to themselves as communities, are likely to exhibit behavior that is a poor example of either family or community.”⁴ In support of this assessment, Alfred Poirier cited a study by the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, claiming that “75 percent of congregations reported some level of conflict in the past five years.”⁵

Forty years in vocational Christian work have taught me to expect conflict of various levels among Christian people. Still, I grieve over God’s people when they act ungodly. Instead of living in a way that glorifies their Father, many believers behave like three-year-olds fighting in the backyard sandbox. Rendle contended:

Many of our congregations are plagued with uncivil behavior. Some experience it daily. For others, it simmers beneath a polite surface waiting to break through with the slightest provocation. Where one would hope to find dialogue, there is instead competitive debate. Where one would hope to see an honest owning of feelings, there are instead anonymous communications. Where one would hope that leaders would deal with clear opinions and facts, there is instead rumor and hearsay.⁶

Fighting within the Christian family often results in what Ron Susek called a “wounded congregation.” Susek observed that such congregations are characterized by a strain on relationships and family ties, embarrassment over the social stigma of a besmirched reputation, grief and guilt over pain experienced, lost momentum, and children who reject the church altogether as a direct result of the congregation’s violation of biblical authority.⁷

Effects of Conflict

The pain a congregational community inflicts on itself includes several dimensions:

Effects on the Body: The congregation suffers multiple hurt whenever its members engage in conflict. From individual distress to corporate distrust, a wounded congregation loses, in part, its sense of community. Susek noted the theological nature of the effects of conflict on the church, including confusion about the nature of the church; fear from misunderstanding God’s apparent absence (“Why did God let this happen?”); insecurity (“loss of confidence in God and one another”); disappointment in the pastor and other leaders; anger; guilt (did we do something to deserve this); discouragement and despair—all leading to “collective paralysis.”⁸

Discouragement and despair can set in like gangrene. One church I helped was looking for a pastor. The two sides of an internal power struggle were so entrenched in their positions that no candidate could rally the 75% positive vote needed for election. One member of the pastor search committee cried as she asked: “Who would want to be our pastor?”

Effects on the Head – Churches need to understand that ultimately at stake is the reputation of Christ. If He is the Head of the Body, then the Body’s behavior reflects on Him. Jesus said, “By this shall all men know you are my disciples, that you love one for another.” (John 13:35) Conversely, when believers fight each other, the world has reason to doubt the relationship of the church and its Head, and may claim justification for rejecting Christ.

Effects on the Lost – Having arrived at a golf course by myself, I was placed with three other golfers whom I did not know. Trying to be a faithful witness, as we made our way around the course, I asked them about spiritual interests. When one of the players inquired about my church affiliation, he replied, “Oh, I know about you all. You fight all the time.” With little to say in defense of the church, I tried to focus the person’s attention on Christ, Whom no one can disparage. Unfortunately, the unchurched tie the reputation of the church closely to that of its Lord. A corollary effect of church conflict is the lack of church growth. Nobody likes being around a family that fights. The lost often stay that way because they see little to be gained from a conflicted congregation.

Causes of Conflict

Conflict resolution experts Speed Leas and Paul Kittlaus employ Tannenbaum and Schmidt’s groupings of causes for church conflict. They note that most people fight over facts, means, ends, or values.⁹ Who shot John? How did they shoot John? For what purpose was John shot? Was it a good or bad thing that someone shot John?

Poirier adds these problems among the genesis of conflict: “Divided allegiances, authority issues, boundary making, and personal affairs.”¹⁰

Susek contributes the following as common causes of conflict: “Culturally learned resistance to authority, rapid church growth, marketing Jesus (creating a mindset of wanting whatever helps market the church more effectively), freedom and form clash, systemic problems, culture clashing, wounded people, and the hidden agendas of multiple staff.” However, Susek wisely observed that the ultimate culprit is “the condition of the human heart,” which is fallen and sinful.¹¹

Types of Conflict

No single solution exists for conflict, because it manifests itself in so many ways:

Intrapersonal: Newton Maloney asserted that “conflicts exist inside people, not between them.”¹² James agreed: “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they

come from your desires that battle within you?” (James: 4:1) Because conflict is an internal matter, peace must also begin within individuals before it can occur between individuals.

Interpersonal: Problems occur between people in all walks of life; the church is no exception. Sometimes personalities by their nature conflict with one another, although the Creator intended them to complement each other. Some people are task oriented, while others enjoy relationships. Some individuals are outgoing and aggressive, while others are more relaxed and responsive. Instead of appreciating the differences and using them to complete the community, people can become annoyed with one another’s uniqueness.

Interpersonal conflict that involves only two or three people should rarely be addressed from the pulpit, especially if the minister is party to the problem. Only a coward attacks others from the seeming safety of the sacred desk. Scripture is clear that interpersonal conflict resolution begins with a personal approach between the parties involved. However, the pastor can teach, exhort, and rebuke as he preaches, preparing the way for resolution.

Marital: People who are attracted by the powerful emotion of love can be repelled by just as powerful emotions. When couples have problems, they rarely want other people at church to know about their difficulties, much less become involved in them. However, marital conflict often flows over into congregation as the husband and wife seek allies, supporters, and comfort.

Corporate: Because the church is organized, people experience conflict between organizational groups. Affecting the basic fabric of the church ministry, corporate conflict often revolves around the personalities and agendas of staff or lay leaders. Task issues quickly become personality focused, intensifying the tension.

The Role of the Pastor

The pastor is shepherd, preacher, administrator, counselor, prophet, priest and much more. Dealing with conflict, pastors can be mediators, moderators, counselors, and spiritual coaches. Unfortunately, some pastors are so afraid of conflict that they avoid it, ignore it, and even polish up the resume so they can run away from it. They believe they are called to preach and to offer comfort and care, but dislike anything that even resembles problems. Poirier challenges the pastor: “Do you see peacemaking as a fundamental character of the pastoral calling? Or do you view the conflicts ... as amoral intrusions, keeping you from the important moral matters of preaching the gospel? Do you find yourself grumbling about conflicts in the church as annoying detours keeping you from your ‘real calling?’”¹³

Pastors cannot pick and choose their ministries to a congregation. They cannot immerse themselves in those activities that they enjoy, while ignoring the more difficult, messy tasks of ministry. Richard Baxter echoed the voice of Jesus to unwilling shepherds:

“Did I die for them, and wilt not thou look after them? Were they worth my blood and are they not worth thy labor? Did I come down from heaven to earth, to seek and to save that which was lost; and wilt thou not go to the next door, or street, or village to seek them? ... Have I done and suffered so much for their salvation; and was I willing to make thee a co-worker with me, and wilt thou refuse that little that lieth upon thy hands?”¹⁴

God not only has reconciled us to Himself through the blood of His Son, He has given us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:19-20) No one can have a shepherd's heart without accepting this ministry of bringing peace to God's people. The basis of reconciliation is not merely finding mutual goals, accomplishing compromise, or helping people to like one another. The only ground for reconciliation is that which reconciles us to God – the blood of Jesus Christ. (Col. 1:19-20)

APPROACHES:

Personalization – To use the pulpit effectively in peacemaking, the pastor must be incarnational. Whether in the pulpit or out in the parish, the preacher begins with his own relationship with the Prince of Peace as displayed in his personality and behavior. As Paul wrote to his son in the ministry: “The bishop (pastor) must ... given to hospitality, ... no striker, ... but patient, not a brawler.” (1 Tim. 3:2-3) A man of God must flee the lusts and nature of the flesh while pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. (1 Tim 6:11) The only fight he engages is the fight of faith. (1 Tim. 6:12) The pastor's goal is not merely to live in peace, avoid stress, and grow the church, but (as Ken Sande noted) to glorify God. (1 Cor. 10:31)

Additionally, the pastor must relate incarnationally to all parties, bringing them together to Christ. He realizes: “I'm not the issue, but I can be the channel of Christ's love.” During intervention with several conflicted churches as an intentional interim pastor, I found that I could relate to people on all sides of various issues, providing a bridge for them to rediscover one another. One key is not playing favorites, but standing against error on all sides—a dangerous, but often necessary precipice.

Prophetic Preaching – Sometimes, the preacher must use bold statements to get the attention of a conflicted congregation. While serving as intentional interim pastor of a deeply divided church, I discovered that part of the problem lay in a barrage of blogs certain members were firing at others over the Internet. After two weeks of building foundational relationships, I addressed the issue directly from the pulpit and declared, “The blogging ends now.” Applause broke out across the audience in affirmation and agreement. The prophet of God must speak boldly against sin in any form, especially when that sin harms the Bride of Christ.

At the same time shepherds must beware of personal attacks. The previous pastor may have been the source of current conflict, but it is improper to remind the people: “Elvis has left the building.” Instead, preachers can teach/preach biblical injunctions regarding conflict resolution and Christian behavior.

Beware of siding with one group against the other. A staff minister at one conflicted church used the pulpit to draw a line in the sand. He brought twelve leaders of the church onto the stage, had them link arms, and then held up a rock while challenging anyone from the congregation to throw the rocks of accusation against this formidable group. His action was bold, but counterproductive to conflict resolution.

Pastoral Preaching – As undershepherds, pastors can use the pastoral pulpit to guide and encourage people to return to that Great Shepherd of the Sheep. We must remind them who and whose they are. Rendel remarked: “...congregations seem to have defaulted to the standards and the behaviors of the culture rather than claimed and followed the standards and behaviors of their own faith.”¹⁵ Pastors must bring churches back out of the world and into the realm of the Kingdom in which they are responsible to glorify the Lord.

Principles for Preaching that Heals

Determine Your Goal: In his vital work *The Peacemaker*, Ken Sande quotes Justice Antonin Scalia in asking whether one’s goal is vindication, vengeance, or peace.¹⁶ Sande urges believers to follow Christ’s command to “love one another” as He had loved them. (John 13:34). If our goal is to express Christ’s love even, as we have experienced Christ’s love, we will not seek personal gain but will desire the best for others. Preachers can help congregants consider their agendas within a conflict in light of God’s love. Texts such as 1 Corinthians 13 easily come to mind for this purpose.

Lead People to Pray: Paul promised the Philippians that “the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds...” (Phil. 4:7) How is that possible? The previous verse puts the promise within the context of not being anxious about anything, but praying about everything. (Phil. 4:6) By preaching about prayer and leading people to pray, we can help congregants bring their heartaches to the cross. As they find inner peace, they can better seek inter-relational peace.

Build on Congregational Strengths: Preachers may employ numerous motivational appeals while preaching to heal their congregations. In his insightful book *Firestorm*, Ron Susek points to four “pillars of strength” that the pastor must balance in his ministry. The reconciling pastor can also use these four emphases in preaching to help heal a hurting congregation:

“*Truth*: Presenting Christ in *concept* and *communication* (teaching what and whom we believe).

Relationship: Presenting Christ in *companionship* (building bonds of trust). Rendle advocates helping congregation create a covenant (ground rules of behavior and cooperation). Pastor can use pulpit to remind people of their covenant relationships with God and one another.

Integrity: Presenting Christ in *character and conduct* (practical holiness).

Mission: Presenting Christ in *conquest* (vision – purpose with a plan).”¹⁷

Correct Aberrant Theology: The pulpit, like few other venues, offers the opportunity to help a congregation to develop a biblical theology that is foundational to its life and ministry. People in conflict have a disrupted doctrinal base. Their pain has caused them to doubt many of the fundamental facts of their fellowship. Susek advises pastors to use their pulpit ministry to “build an adequate theology that brings perspective and answers to many questions.”¹⁸

Learn to “Live Loved:” In a telephone interview, Dallas Demmitt related how in his advancing years he was learning to “live loved.” Well known for his lessons about discovery listening,¹⁹ Demmitt has been helping people discover how to be loved in order to love. Preach on the love Christ has for the congregation and you may help the congregation learn both to love Christ and one another.

Encourage Communication: Most conflict escalates when communication shuts down. When people feel they are no longer being heard or no longer care what the other parties think, they close the channels that make reconciliation possible. From the pulpit, pastors can model and encourage open, honest communication. At the same time, they can remind members that godly communication exhibits love. (Eph. 4:15) Share the wisdom of God’s Word applied to healing communication: “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.” (Prov. 15:1) Other helpful texts include Proverbs 10:1; 13:3; James 1:19; 3:5-10; and 4: 11.

Find Forgiveness: When the Apostle Paul wanted members of the Colossian church to forgive one another, he reminded them that God, for Christ’s sake, had forgiven them. Only by finding forgiveness can we forgive others. One reason is that we cannot receive forgiveness until we admit to having sinned. Withholding forgiveness of others often is the result of focusing on their wrong-doing, while disregarding our own. People who have confronted their own sin are more likely to be kind and compassionate about others’ sin. Forgiven people have experienced God’s grace and tend to share His grace more freely. Preach about sin, but also preach about grace and forgiveness. Sometimes, preachers may find occasion to be confessional (within proper limits) so others might join in their experience of God’s grace.

Renew Repentance: Discounting sin does not aid reconciliation, but rather hinders it. Without genuine contrition over wrong-doing, people leave little ground for belief in their desire for resolution. Preachers cannot succeed at reducing tension by minimizing the sins of either party in a conflict. Instead, the pastor must hold out the Scriptures that relate to specific issues at hand and then depend on the Holy Spirit to do what only He can do – convict hearers of sin, righteousness, and judgment. (John 16:8) When people truly confront the reality of personal sin, they have only two choices – to repent and return to God or to try to flee His presence. Reconciling pastors proclaim the value of repentance toward God and one another.

Develop Believers’ Identity as Christ’s disciples: Pastors can use numerous biblical passages to help their listeners rediscover their true identity as disciples of Jesus. Preaching on John 13:35, we can help Christians remember that the community does not

recognize them as Christians simply because they are members of a church. Only by their mutual love can they claim to be the sons of God. (see Mat. 5:9)

Make Peacemakers: Poirier noted that Paul's letters are "peacemaking letters"²⁰ and that "God purposes peace."²¹ Help people grow as disciples of the Prince of Peace by learning to make peace with one another. Peace with others is not possible unless one is at peace with God and with one's self. Sande observed: "Internal peace is a by-product of righteousness."²² (Rom. 5:1-2; Is.32:17) As believers become disciples, walking with Christ, they desire greater expression of His righteousness within their lives, naturally leading to repentance, confession, restitution, and reconciliation – first with God and then with others. Help them discover their roles and responsibility in peacemaking: "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." (Rom. 14:19)

Offer a Common Direction: Dr. Fred Wood advised me: "Sometimes the people need the tonic of a great task." Sometimes, focusing on the problems is not the most effective route to reconciliation. Instead, preachers can help people discover what they have in common. On what can they agree? While mediating a church conflict in Florida, I challenged the people to find a common direction. What five priorities would God have them pursue for the coming twelve months? As they worked through that question, based on the biblical foundations offered from the pulpit each Sunday, they eventually arrived at a point where they could declare a truce. As they then pursued their mutual goals, they rediscovered the joy of God's service and eventually reconciled for His glory.

Practical Suggestions

- ◆ Pray. Insure that the message originates from God, not the preacher's frustration.
- ◆ Consider the people as well as passage. Think about how you present the Truth to the flesh and blood personalities in your pews.
- ◆ Love people. Demonstrate your genuine care between Sundays as well as during the sermon.
- ◆ Focus on bringing people first to Christ. As they draw close to Him, they will get closer to each other.
- ◆ Recognize there are times to go through the front door and times for the side door. Inductive preaching with an authoritative conclusion often can accomplish what confrontation cannot. (I do not advocate the weak approach of Craddock and cannot accept his position that preachers speak "as one without authority." However, by using the inductive method of presenting authoritative truth, as Peter did at Pentecost, preachers can bring their people along the same path of discovery that they have walked, arriving at the "aha" moment of biblical application in the conclusion.)
- ◆ Preach expositively. The Word of God, not the word of a man, is the only tool powerful enough to break through the emotional barriers of a conflicted congregation. "Preach the Word!"
- ◆ Use warm worship to soften people's hearts. Remember that most worship wars can be avoided if all people are allowed to worship in the music and style most appealing to

them and to God. Also, teach people that worship involves much more than music, but prayer, preaching, giving, serving and other expressions.

Useful Texts

Nearly every scriptural pericope has potential for preaching to heal conflicted congregations. Some of the most obvious texts include the following:

- ◆ Psalms 34:14: Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.
- ◆ Psalms 133:1-3: Behold, how good and how pleasant *it is* for brethren to dwell together in unity! *It is* like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, *even* Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, *and as the dew* that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, *even* life for evermore.
- ◆ Prov 12:20: Deceit *is* in the heart of them that imagine evil: but to the counselors of peace *is* joy.
- ◆ Matt 5:9: Blessed *are* the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.
- ◆ Mark 9:50: Salt *is* good: but if the salt has lost his saltness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another.
- ◆ Romans 12:18: If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.
- ◆ Romans 14:17-19: For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serves Christ *is* acceptable to God, and approved of men. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.
- ◆ 1 Cor. 14:33: For God is not *the author* of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.
- ◆ 2 Cor 13:11: Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.
- ◆ Gal 5:22-26: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another.
- ◆ Eph. 4: 1-3: I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
- ◆ Heb 12:14-15: Follow peace with all *men*, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble *you*, and thereby many be defiled.

Sample Sermon Outline

Healing the Hurts of Life

John 11: 1-46

ETS: Jesus cared about Martha and Mary's pain. He was willing and able to heal their pain by raising Lazarus and giving them faith in Himself.

Proposition: Jesus cares about us and wants to heal our pain through faith in Him.

Objective: To lead the people to bring their pain to Jesus and allow Him to heal them.

Introduction: Remember your first bike ride? Maybe you got a skinned knee and asked mother to "kiss it and make it well." Wouldn't it be great if all the hurts of life could be healed with a mother's kiss? Let's face it. Life hurts. Most people occasionally experience such severe personal pain that they think they are unique, that "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen."

Background: John 11:10-18

I. Pain is a universal experience vv. 19-20

Some pain is physical, the result of injury or illness. Some pain is emotional, imposed by friends and foes alike, or rising from our own fears or frustrations. Yet whether the hurt is real or imagined, it still hurts and is usually associated with some kind of loss.

- A. Different in kind (physical, emotional)
- B. Different in degree (pain threshold)
- C. Some pain is open (striking out)
- D. Some pain is hidden (callusing the heart)

II. People react to pain differently vv. 21, 32b

Death. Divorce. Disease. Disasters. They are all alike. They cause loss and loss produces grief and grief can lead the best of us to question God, raising our faces and fists toward heaven asking, "Why?" Do we really think that having some rationale for loss will make the pain any less? Hurting people are seldom rational. We really want someone to blame. Hurting people sometimes tend to hurt other people, striking a physical form since the real source of pain is often an untouchable phantom. If God is supposed to be in charge of the universe, why did He let this happen? If He is good and powerful, how could He not prevent something like this to happen?

- A. Withdrawal ("Where do you go when you hurt deeply?")
- B. Aggression (Striking out at others)
- C. Questioning the goodness of God ("Lord, if you had been here our brother would not have died.")
- D. Overcompensation (Do more, be more, win more: "How do you express your pain?")

III. Jesus understands your pain. vv. 23, 33-35

God does understand our pain, whether we are ready to believe that or not. What sickness have we suffered that could equal the pain of the scourge? What injury can we experience that approaches the wounds of the cross?

- A. Rejection (“He came to His own, and His own received Him not.”)
- B. Betrayal (He was betrayed with a kiss.)
- C. Shame (The shame of the cross – Heb. 12:2)

IV. You must want to be healed. vv. 24-27, 28-32a

God also wants to do something about our pain. Jesus not only wept with Mary and Martha, He took the next step. Unfortunately, some people prefer pain to healing.

- A. Pity Parties
- B. Excuses (You don’t understand)
- C. Rather endure pain than forgive

After all, faith is a risk. We risk that nothing will happen and our faith will be shattered like a china cup falling to the kitchen floor. We risk further loss -- the loss of trust, the loss of what little we had left. Too many people are not willing to take that great a gamble, so they choose to disbelieve the supernatural, to deny the spiritual. Ironically, they find it less painful simply to have no God than to have One Who allows such hurt into their lives.

V. You must remove the barriers – attitudes vv. 26, 37-40

For Martha, the stone represented the barrier between the pain of grief and the deeper pain of a dead brother. She objected to smelling the stench of his decaying body. She feared the sight would be more than she could endure.

For Jesus, the stone represented no barrier to healing. He could easily heal Lazarus without having the door to the grave opened. But what of Lazarus. A common human fear is to awaken inside a casket, having been buried alive by mistake. Jesus would not be so cruel as to bring Lazarus back to life in the darkness of the tomb.

Too, Jesus wanted Martha to exercise her faith. He wanted her to believe before there were facts to aid belief. All of the people present would soon see Lazarus walk out; Jesus wanted Martha to know the joy of belief while her brother was still in the tomb.

If we want our hurts to be healed, we must remove the stones blocking the way. For one, it may be anger or bitterness. For some, the pain itself prevents the touch of healing as we jerk away from the balm that would take away the pain. For another, the barrier is unbelief or the stubborn refusal to admit the existence of a power greater than ourselves. We cling to the illusion of control, willing to suffer rather than give up our self-sufficiency.

- A. Anger, scapegoating
- B. Guilt
- C. Sin – confession, repentance
- D. Surrender of will (You cannot have Burger King healing – your way)

VI. Healing is not superficial vv. 41-44

Jesus wants not only to heal us from the hurts in our lives, He wants to loose us from the grave clothes of doubt that keep us from living His abundant life. While we would prefer never to have the pain in the first place, we really can only choose either to deal with pain on our own or to allow the Healer to touch us at the point of our pain. He may remove its source or relieve its result. He may release you from the pain or strengthen you to endure it.

- Lazarus was made whole.
- “Loose him, let him go!”

Conclusion: God want to really heal you, to loose you of your decaying grave clothes that bind up your heart and soul and prevent wholeness. Is the stone that blocks your healing too heavy for you to move? Allow Him and He’ll even do that for you. No stone could keep Him from the grave of His friend, any more than could a rock block His own grave. Stones cannot keep Him from one who needs healing.

Invitation: More gentle than a mother’s kiss, the touch of the Healer awaits our willingness and our faith. He who came to heal broken hearts and bind up wounded spirits stands just outside, ready to do in us what we could never do for ourselves. Will you let God do what only He can do?

Footnotes:

¹According to Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, the Hebrew word in Exodus 12 is [hdu](#) (‘edah), translated *synagogue* in the Septuagint. The only time *congregation* is used in the New Testament is as a translation of [sunagwgh](#) (sunagoge). (Acts 13:43)

²James Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), quoted by Gary Dorsey in *Congregation* (New York: Penguin Press, 1995), 13.

³Paul S. Minear quoted by Alfred Poirier. *The Peace Making Pastor*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 103.

⁴Gilbert R. Rendle, *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations* (The Alban Institute: 1999), vii.

⁵Alfred Poirier. *The Peace Making Pastor*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 9.

⁶Gilbert R. Rendle, vii.

⁷Ron Susek, *Firestorm: Preventing and Overcoming Church Conflicts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 184-185.

⁸Susek, 219-223.

⁹Speed Leas and Paul Kittlaus. *Church Fights: Managing Conflict in the Local Church*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 32-33. Reference is to Warren Schmidt and Robert Tannenbaum, “The Management of Differences,” in *Leadership and Organization* (McGraw Hill, 1961), 101-118.

¹⁰Poirier, 30.

¹¹Susek, 90-105.

¹²H. Newton Maloney, *Win-Win Relationships* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 1.

¹³ Poirier, 72.

¹⁴Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (London: Epworth Press, 1955) original 1636, 121-122.

¹⁵Rendel, 19.

¹⁶Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 47.

¹⁷Susek, 70.

¹⁸Susek, 223.

¹⁹Dallas and Nancy Demmitt, *Can You Hear Me Now?* (Cook Communications, 2003).

²⁰Poirier, 78.

²¹Poirier, 172

²²Sande, 39.