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Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict

Reviewed by Leroy Goertzen

Van Yperen, Jim. Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict. Chicago: Moody Press, 2002. 264 pp. \$12.99.

Making Peace is the fruit of author Jim Van Yperen's study and experience in church-conflict reconciliation. As the founder and executive director of Metanoia Ministries, a ministry dedicated to helping evangelical churches experience reconciliation in the midst of debilitating conflict, Van Yperen "collects the lessons and experiences of more than ten year's work in church-conflict reconciliation" (13) and fashions them into a well-organized and superbly illustrated book aptly subtitled, "A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict."

Though Van Yperen strongly suggests that *Making Peace* is a "why" book rather than a "how to" book (14), evidencing his strong distaste for "stock methods or remedies" (250), it is most assuredly both. Anything less would have been a disappointment considering the author's personal experience in this largely unexplored terrain of the church's interrelationship landscape.

Van Yperen has organized his discussion into three primary interconnected subjects extrapolated through thirteen chapters, an Epilogue and an Appendix. In Part 1 of *Making Peace* the author "explores the root causes of conflict and theological basis for the church as the instrument of reconciliation..." (14). Foundational to this discussion are two guiding principles: 1) "church conflict is always theological, never merely interpersonal" (24), and 2) "all church conflict is always about leadership, character, and community" (24). Thus, chapter one is devoted to exposing the cultural, structural, spiritual and theological forces that are systemic to the more superficial symptoms of interpersonal and church conflict (46). Chapter two supports the author's conten-

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tion that the theological issues involved in conflict drive all others. Thus, he develops a theology of reconciliation that seeks to balance God's holiness, truth and sovereignty ("right-handed" approach) with His mercy, creativity and love ("left-handed" approach). The goal, however, is not theology for theology's sake, but to arrive at a clearer understanding of who and what the church is as a redeemed community that has been reconciled to God from sin's death grip through the cross. "The church is the realm where forgiven saints live into the Gospel. The church forms our character into Christ's image" (62). Ultimately, as the author shows, church conflict is about character. "To redeem character we must be a community of faith being saved and sanctified together in mutual submission under Word and Spirit" (63).

Biblical leadership is pivotal to overseeing church conflict, which must first understand that conflict is not about power or control but is God-purposed (92) providing an inevitable, necessary opportunity to accomplish redemption (107). Unfortunately, leaders tend to respond to conflict either passively, evasively, defensively or aggressively (chs 5-8) – all of which fall short of the biblical peacemaking principles (90). The reason they are inadequate conflict responses, obvious theological problems aside, is that they "exchange biblical truth and love for self-truth and self-love" (163). As a result, they instigate and perpetuate counterfeit forms of peace (ch 9) that offer law and cheap grace thereby robbing the cross of its power.

Standing against these unfruitful responses to conflict is the goal of living in a redemptive community (Part 3) where transformation of character brought about by the Gospel demands that sinners submit unconditionally to God's Lordship (ch 10). Submission to Lordship is facilitated by honest confession and genuine repentance (chs 11-12) – everything must be brought under the Light (178). This will require confrontation best done in the context of the church community (200-02). As sin is exposed through genuine confession, forgiveness is the church's best and only biblical response (237), thereby reflecting the character and example of Jesus (239-41). But reconciliation is more than "living together in the light of our confession and forgiveness. Reconciliation is a commitment to transformation" (245). Such a commitment is marked by discipline and restitution which work to fully restore the sinner to fellowship by reconstituting his character (ch 13) by the ministry of the Word, the Spirit and the Body. Peace has been made! "Peace is the fruit of God's Spirit formed in biblical community. Making peace is the result of God's people being claimed by and putting into practice

the Gospel story" (256).

In *Making Peace* Van Yperen proposes that the reader will learn "why churches become unhealthy and how God wants to heal them so they may become thriving communities of faith" (13). Van Yperen accomplishes his objective using a well-organized text as extrapolated in the three paragraphs above. The movement from "Church conflict is neither isolated nor uncommon" (23) to "Here are seven calls to practice repentance in the church" (256) is virtually seamless. Every step facilitates a progression that is logical: theologically, emotionally and methodologically. Unfortunately, the chapter and "Part" titles belie this superb development.

The author eschews any notion that his book be characterized as a "how to" book" (14). Fortunately for us, in this he completely fails as time and again, through his personal experience stories, exercises (ex. 151-52) and timely principles (ex. Principles for Discipline and Restitution, 247-49) the reader is tutored into being a peacemaking practitioner.

Van Yperen approaches his subject as an expert, relying on more than ten years' work in church-conflict reconciliation as the founder and director of Metanoia Ministries – a work he briefly describes in the introduction – giving the reader reason to believe a credible discussion will ensue. Frankly, due to the nature of this subject, any discussion lacking extensive hands-on experience in the field would have been virtually a "no-read" for me. The "real" stories Van Yperen shares are virtually the highlight of the book – no offense intended. As the author suggests in his introduction, every pastor knows about conflict from personal experience – sometimes too painfully so – but to visualize effective and biblical reconciliation as depicted by the illustrative stories is invigorating as much as it is instructive and entertaining.

Making Peace is an excellent work, due predominantly to the author's ability to capture the essence of the issues germane to church conflict. He poignantly unmasks the four systemic issues that facilitate conflict (28-45). His discussion of cultural syncretism (28-29), which attempts to harmonize secular values such as Western individualism and consumerism, should be read as a wake-up call to all churches flirting with "doing" church in a way that is culturally sensitive and relevant. Van Yperen asks,

"Are we gathering in community to practice and prove a way of life together, or are we privatizing faith into self-help answers that breed a kind of spiritual attention deficit disorder? Where is reverent waiting, corporate intercession, and public confession in the contemporary church?" (29)

Good questions! Guilty as presumed!

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The author's ability to bring metaphor to his central ideas is powerful. Using the phrases, "right-handed" and "left-handed" to describe leader's two primary approaches to church conflict is enlightening (39-40, 49-54). Likewise, his use (coining?) of the term "cruciformed" (71) to describe a people who are formed and transformed by the cross is memorable. Additionally, the author's use of "frank" language that shoots from the hip should certainly appeal to pastors struggling with this grueling subject. In discussing the five steps the sinner should follow in making a public confession Van Yperen comments, "After this, the sinner should sit down and shut up" (235). I recall commenting out loud when I read this; "Amen!"

On a more substantive note, the author's discussion of the four primary conflict response styles in Part 2 is unusually enlightening and demonstrates an intuitive understanding of the human psyche. His ability to bring to the light the underlying deceptions, rationalizations and stereotypical behaviors and attitudes concretizes and objectifies each of the conflict responses in such a way that the reader should be able to identify them fairly easily, either in him, or in those he works with. For example, in his discussion of evasive responders his analysis suggests this:

... you will do almost anything to escape conflict or avoid "enemy fire." You will run away from sin and shirk responsibility for your mistakes. You will lie to yourself and others that you have been hurt when someone has sinned against you. You will divert an accusation or minimize the damage of your sin against someone else. You will avoid confrontation at all costs (125).

There is nothing vague about this description! I can see it. I can put names to it – even my own!

Making Peace has much to commend and little to criticize, especially in its overall content. However, several shortcomings should be noted. Interaction with other scholarly or professional works is limited, giving the book a "case study" feel, leaving the uninitiated reader constantly wondering how this approach stands up under the test of scrupulous study and research. Additionally, there are numerous cases where it appears that the author overstates his case. For example, in order to demonstrate the need for spiritual formation in the church he seems to implicate the church growth movement and modern leadership as being "performance" oriented (72). Well, maybe not! Likewise, in his discussion of defensive responders he states that "a leader should never defend (himself)" (151). It seems, however, that

much of Paul's argument in 2 Corinthians revolves around his defense of his ministry and character. And is it really true that Christians are never called "to agree to disagree"? (171) Paul and Barnabas' difference of opinion does not appear to receive a damning interpretation by Luke. Rancor is sure to follow his incrimination that multiple services based on worship style is merely seeking the false peace of "détente" (173). That seems a bit prejudicial and subjective.

There are few books regarding church polity I would read twice – but this is one of them. Its usefulness is only matched by its immediate accessibility. It provides a clear, replicable pattern for applying church discipline in any situation. It likewise offers a solid, easily understandable theology upon which to build a reconciliation ministry – one that can be studied by a church governing board. The guidelines and principles laid down for confrontation (217), how to lead a confrontation (218-220), how to make a public confession (234-235), how to render discipline (247-249), how to practice repentance (257-259), and how to form a safe place group (261-264) are invaluable tools for doing the work of the ministry.

Making Peace belongs on the "must reading" list of every pastor or professional ministry leader. It should be required reading for all students entering any ministry vocation, whether at a Master's or a Bachelor's level. Since conflict is inevitable (102), perhaps even necessary (104), *Making Peace* is the one resource no ministry leader can afford to overlook.

Reviewer

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