

IF YOU BITE & DEVOUR
ONE ANOTHER

Galatians 5:15

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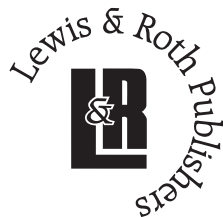
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IF YOU BITE & DEVOUR ONE ANOTHER

Galatians 5:15

Biblical Principles for Handling Conflict

Alexander Strauch



If You Bite & Devour One Another

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ABBREVIATIONS

1. Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Ezra	Ezra	Dan.	Daniel
Ex.	Exodus	Neh.	Nehemiah	Hos.	Hosea
Lev.	Leviticus	Est.	Esther	Joel	Joel
Num.	Numbers	Job	Job	Amos	Amos
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Ps.	Psalm(s)	Obad.	Obadiah
Josh.	Joshua	Prov.	Proverbs	Jonah	Jonah
Judg.	Judges	Eccl.	Ecclesiastes	Mic.	Micah
Ruth	Ruth	Song.	Song of Solomon	Nah.	Nahum
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Isa.	Isaiah	Hab.	Habakkuk
2 Sam.	2 Samuel	Jer.	Jeremiah	Zeph.	Zephaniah
1 Kings	1 Kings	Lam.	Lamentations	Hag.	Haggai
2 Kings	2 Kings	Ezek.	Ezekiel	Zech.	Zechariah
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles			Mal.	Malachi
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles				

2. New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	Phil.	Philippians	James	James
Mark	Mark	Col.	Colossians	1 Peter	1 Peter
Luke	Luke	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians	2 Peter	2 Peter
John	John	2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians	1 John	1 John
Acts	Acts of the Apostles	1 Tim.	1 Timothy	2 John	2 John
Rom.	Romans	2 Tim.	2 Timothy	3 John	3 John
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	Titus	Titus	Jude	Jude
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Philem.	Philemon	Rev.	The Revelation
Gal.	Galatians	Heb.	Hebrews		to John
Eph.	Ephesians				(Apocalypse)

ABBREVIATIONS

3. Books

BDAG	W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, and F.W. Danker, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</i> (3 rd ed.)
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BST	The Bible Speaks Today
ESV	English Standard Version
IVP	InterVarsity Press
NAC	New American Commentary
NCB	New Century Bible
NIBC	New International Bible Commentary on the New Testament
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
NTC	New Testament Commentary
PNTC	The Pillar New Testament Commentary
TDNT	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentary
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentary
UBS	United Bible Society (4 th ed.)
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WEC	Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

Introduction

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:2-3 (NIV)

The moment Adam and Eve sinned, the peace and unity of paradise was lost. Their sin immediately threw them into conflict—Adam blaming Eve and Eve blaming the serpent for their sinful actions. Their sin initiated the war of the sexes. Disunity rather than unity came to characterize the human race. Life in the world became life in a battlefield.

Human conflict is one of the dreadful consequences of sin entering the world. Because of sin, all human relationships are a struggle and are prone to conflict. We can trace the unrelenting plague of human conflict through the endless wars and divisions of human history, and sadly, church history as well. Throughout Scripture we see the ugly reality of sin displayed in cruel wars and fighting even among those who are called to be God's people:

- The first sin recorded after Adam and Eve were driven from the garden is that of Cain killing his brother Abel. Jealousy, out-of-control anger, selfish ambition, and pride drove Cain to hate and kill his brother (Gen. 4:8).
- While still in the womb, the twin brothers Jacob and Esau struggled for dominance (Gen. 25:22).
- Jealousy over their younger brother's favorite-son status with their father drove ten of Jacob's twelve sons to sell Joseph into slavery and to deceive their father into thinking that he was dead (Gen. 37:18-33).
- For years in the wilderness desert, the children of Israel relentlessly criticized and stubbornly resisted Moses' leadership. At one point Moses wanted to die because of their non-stop complaining (Num. 11:14-15).

- Saul, Israel’s first king, was a proud man. His insane jealousy over the success of David, a young military leader, led him to commit nearly every social sin condemned in God’s law. Instead of rejoicing that he had such a competent junior leader, Saul did all in his power to kill the competition (1 Sam. 15:12; 18:6-16).
- Late in King David’s reign, his son Absalom charmed the nation into abandoning their king. Absalom intended to kill his own godly father and usurp his God-given throne. Absalom’s lust for power and selfish ambition drove him to deceit and murder (2 Sam. 15).
- King Solomon’s sin of idolatry shattered Israel’s unity and divided the nation into two warring kingdoms—each with its own king, place of worship, and priesthood (1 Kings 12).
- The New Testament gives witness to the awful struggle between Israel’s religious leaders and Jesus the Messiah. Out of hate and jealousy over Christ’s exposure of their hypocritical, self-righteous behavior, Israel’s leaders “killed the Author of life” (Acts 3:15).
- During his earthly life, our Lord had to deal with selfish ambition among his disciples when they quarreled over who among them was the greatest and who would be enthroned at his side (Mark 9:34; 10:37). How would they ever work together in unity after their Master’s death?

Fast forward to today. How are Christians to work together in unity until Jesus comes again? The answer to this question is foundational to our understanding of how to deal with conflict according to biblical principles. Jesus taught the unique principles of humility, servanthood, forgiveness, and love, and he promised to send a helper to enable his disciples to live by his teaching. So at Pentecost, following Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, God sent the Holy Spirit down from heaven to indwell all believers. By the enabling power of the Holy Spirit and obedience to Jesus’ teachings, his disciples were able to work together in harmony as the first Christian leadership body. However, the coming of the Holy Spirit didn’t eliminate all fighting or controversy among

the Spirit-indwelt people of God. The churches of the New Testament period still experienced plenty of conflict. *As the inspired New Testament writers addressed these matters, they provided invaluable instruction on how Christian believers are to think, act, and treat one another when conflict arises.* By studying the Scripture, we can learn how God would have us live in harmony even when we disagree with one another.

It is helpful to keep in mind that there is nothing wrong with Christians disagreeing with one another or passionately defending our beliefs. This is how we learn, how we sharpen and correct our thinking, and how we help others to improve. The Holy Spirit often uses the emotional upheaval that accompanies disagreement and conflict to get our attention and drive us to make necessary changes in our families, churches, and personal lives. Conflict can help us to discover our character weaknesses, correct mistaken theological ideas, sharpen our beliefs, refine our plans, grow in wisdom and life experience, learn to trust God during difficult times, and deepen our prayer lives.

What is wrong is for believers to behave in an ungodly, unbiblical manner in the midst of their disagreements. Sadly, such behavior is not uncommon. I have talked to many people who have experienced an agonizing church split. Often what was most upsetting was not the disagreement but the nasty politics that accompanied it—the mean words expressed, the angry attitudes and childish behaviors, the awful displays of pride and selfishness, the backbiting, the minimizing of sin and outright disobedience to God’s Word, and the lack of forgiveness or interest in reconciliation.

So when I learned about a fifty-year-old church with a remarkable history of unity and peace, I wanted to know their secret. The church had made a number of difficult doctrinal and stylistic changes during its history. Most of its leaders had strong personalities and had taken decisive action. Yet the church had survived without tearing itself to pieces.

How had this church achieved such unity and made significant changes without a split? The answer of one of the leaders to this very question is key: *“We have always tried by the Holy Spirit’s help to think and to act according to biblical principles, especially during our most difficult periods of conflict.”*

This church had problems and disagreements like any other

church. The people had hurt and irritated one another plenty of times. They knew each other's annoying faults and weaknesses. But they also knew that Christ had called them to love one another fervently, to be humble servants, to submit one to another, to patiently bear with one another, to speak truthfully, to forgive and reconcile their differences, to have right attitudes toward one another, and to display the fruit of the Spirit at all times—especially during times of conflict.

The people of this church knew that “the works of the flesh”—pride, anger, jealousy, and selfish ambition—can destroy a church family and its leadership. They knew that there is a righteous way and a sinful way to treat one another when facing disagreement. They knew that God had provided guidance for handling conflict the right way. So they chose to become people of principle—to follow the specific biblical principles that instruct us in how to deal with conflict. This commitment to biblical attitudes and behaviors governed their responses to one another when conflict arose.

My intent through this book is to explore God's way of handling conflict so that other congregations may also experience peace and unity. This study will draw out from Scripture key principles for handling conflict *with special emphasis on biblical attitudes and behaviors*. Some of these principles are direct statements regarding conflict (Matt. 18:15-17). Other principles are derived from general instructions concerning proper Christian behavior that become even more important when Christians are in conflict.

All Christian believers need to know and practice these biblical principles because we all face controversies and relational disagreements. Church leaders especially need to understand the biblical principles for dealing with conflict because leaders greatly influence how conflict is managed in a local church. Leaders at any level can make matters worse when they mismanage conflict. Leaders can also achieve peaceful solutions and just reconciliation when they manage conflict constructively. Churches would help themselves significantly by teaching Christian people how to behave biblically when conflict strikes and by holding one another accountable for sinful behaviors and attitudes. Faithful adherence to biblical principles is the best policy when it comes to preventing damaged relationships and discrediting the witness of the gospel.

My aim for this book is to provide a better understanding of what the Bible teaches about conflict and to help believers learn how to respond to conflict according to biblical principles. In order not to present an overwhelming amount of information, the book focuses strictly on the presentation and exposition of scriptural passages that address conflict in the New Testament churches. It does not deal with practical principles of mediation or arbitration because there are many excellent resources that deal with these subjects. The manageable size and easy-to-remember outline of this book make it a helpful resource for anyone who is dealing with conflict and for church leaders who are teaching God's truth about handling conflict. The first three chapters lay down the foundational biblical principles:

1. Act in the Spirit
2. Act in Love
3. Act in Humility

The remaining seven chapters deal with specific principles for handling conflict:

4. Control the Anger
5. Control the Tongue
6. Control the Criticism
7. Pursue Reconciliation
8. Pursue Peace
9. Face False Teachers
10. Face Controversy

It is imperative that church leaders teach these principles and that all believers practice them. If, when conflict flares, we would simply stop for a moment to reconsider the instruction in God's Word and to seek the Holy Spirit's guidance, we would avoid many of the destructive behaviors that characterize our conflicts. We would prevent unnecessary breaches of fellowship.

One evangelist who had started a number of churches over a forty-year period told me that every one of them eventually folded because of sinful infighting among believers. No deliberate effort had

been made to teach the new churches and their leaders how to deal with conflict according to biblical principles. In contrast, a missionary who served elsewhere told me how he and other missionaries worked together to achieve unity among themselves and their organizations. As a result, they saw greater fruit in the gospel.

The country in which this second group of missionaries worked had seen much division among previous missionaries and missions organizations. They wanted to avoid this regrettable situation, so they decided to study why previous Christian missions had failed. They discovered that years of sinful infighting and mistrust between the different missionaries and mission organizations had held back the Lord's blessing and the advancement of the gospel message.

To start afresh, this new group of missionaries drew up a document outlining biblical principles for dealing with conflicts that might arise between them. The document included a pledge to speak the truth to one another and never to slander or backbite. They promised to not gossip about one another and agreed to represent each other's beliefs accurately. They decided to follow scriptural instructions and confront one another about known problems. They committed themselves to pray for one another and to love one another despite their differences. This approach proved tremendously successful.

My heartfelt desire and prayer is that this book will raise fresh awareness among individual believers and churches regarding the importance of teaching, learning, and practicing Christ-honoring principles for handling conflict.

*Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers
dwell in unity.*
Psalm 133:1

If you would like to use this book for individual or group study, a free study guide is provided online at www.lewisandroth.org. You can also find other important supplementary materials in the "online resources" section of the website.

1

Act in the Spirit

But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

Galatians 5:15

Chapel Hill Church, a large, Bible-believing church, invited an evangelist for a week of special messages. At the end of the week, the evangelist challenged the congregation to develop a deeper devotion to Christ and to be more committed to sharing the gospel. Then—without showiness, coercion, or endless appeals—he invited people to come to the front of the auditorium and kneel with him in prayer. His messages had touched many people’s hearts and they responded to his invitation.

But this church was not accustomed to altar calls, and as the meeting ended a prominent church member expressed to all within earshot his disagreement with the evangelist’s altar call. His loud, angry words and facial expressions shocked those around him. He accused the evangelist of unscriptural practices and emotional manipulation. He even threatened to leave the church if the leadership did not deal immediately with the situation.

Upon hearing the angry man’s accusations, some people jumped to defend the evangelist. They saw that God had used the evangelist to revive their spiritually dry church and supported his challenge to greater evangelism. They accused those who opposed the altar call of being narrow-minded traditionalists who always resisted change. They also accused them of being insensitive to the Holy Spirit’s leading and of not caring for the lost.

Other people sided with the angry complainer, claiming that the evangelist was preaching a gospel of easy-believism. They made slanderous remarks about the evangelist’s motives and character and labeled anyone who agreed with him as “liberal.” They also attacked the church leaders, saying that they lacked spiritual discernment. They went so far as to ask the church leadership to resign, claiming that they

had “sinned” against the church by inviting a wolf in sheep’s clothing to preach.

Soon gossip and rumors lit up the phone lines. Past grievances against one another were rekindled, and hurtful accusations flew in every direction. Angry, inflammatory speech became the mode of communication. Misinformation, fear, suspicion, and distrust abounded. Friends and family members were recruited to choose sides. The church leadership communicated poorly with the congregation and the anger and hatred escalated.

Within a year, Chapel Hill Church split into two separate groups. Each group claimed to be defending God’s truth. There was no desire on the part of either group to seek reconciliation. They were happy to be done with one another.

Although the name Chapel Hill Church and this account are both fictional, the behavior attributed to this church is not. The description of the fight at Chapel Hill Church is not an exaggeration. It reflects the attitudes and behaviors seen in countless other church fights and splits.

Regardless of our theological view of altar calls, we should be able to agree that the behavior of these Christian believers showed total disregard for nearly every biblical command concerning Christian conduct and speech. They behaved like people who knew nothing of the gospel and the Holy Spirit. They acted more like spoiled, ill-mannered children than mature, Spirit-indwelt believers.

Seeing the disastrous effects of such conflicts should compel us to ask, “How are Bible-believing Christians who are indwelt by God’s Spirit and in possession of the guidance of God’s Word to handle their disagreements?” No group of people should be as well equipped to handle conflict as Bible-believing Christians. The Bible provides detailed instructions for handling conflict constructively. Christ provides the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to obey God’s Word and to control our sinful passions.

The theme of this chapter is foundational to the rest of the book: *When conflict arises, our attitudes and behaviors should reflect our new life in Christ given by the Holy Spirit who lives within us. We are to display the fruit of the Spirit and not the works of the flesh. We are to walk in step with the Spirit’s leading. We are to be Spirit-controlled and*

not flesh-controlled or out of control. Let us examine this foundational principle as it is expressed in Galatians 5:13-26; 1 Corinthians 3:1-4; and James 3:13-18. These three passages of Scripture form the bedrock upon which much of this book rests. The next two chapters address love and humility, two preeminent fruits of the Spirit.

1. WHEN FACING CONFLICT, DO NOT DISPLAY “THE WORKS OF THE FLESH”

Much of the contentious infighting and unnecessary divisions that plague many churches today result from believers acting according to the flesh and not walking by the Spirit. This was true of some of the New Testament churches as well. Recognizing the potential harm of such behavior, Paul, the apostle, addressed the problem in his letters to the churches of Galatia and Corinth.

When conflict arises, our attitudes and behaviors should reflect our new life in Christ given by the Holy Spirit who lives within us.



a. Sinful Conflict in the Churches of Galatia

Serious discord over the role of the Mosaic Law in regard to salvation and Christian living threatened the life and unity of the newly planted churches of Galatia.¹ So Paul, one of the founders of these churches, warned the new believers:

But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. (Gal. 5:15)

Their conduct, writes one commentator, was “more fitting to wild animals than to brothers in Christ.”² If these new Christian believers did not stop fighting, no one would survive the carnage.

After Paul warns of the potential for mutual destruction within

¹Acts 13:13-14:27.

²R. A. Cole, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 157.

the believing community, he identifies the cause as “the works of the flesh”:³

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, *enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy*, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. (Galatians 5:19-21; italics added)

The eight social sins italicized above describe sinful attitudes and behaviors displayed among the Galatian believers. It is likely that you have seen many of these behaviors displayed in your own church experience. As you consider these eight “works of the flesh,” know this: The Holy Spirit is absolutely opposed to each of them.⁴ Verse 17 states, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other.” The Holy Spirit does not lead believers to commit these social sins: to bite and devour one another or to provoke one another to fits of anger or bitter jealousy.

Paul also warns that conceit (or pride) is at the root of many of these base, sinful behaviors:

Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. (Gal. 5:26)

Conceit led some of the Galatians to arrogantly provoke others into angry, theological debates in order to prove their superior knowledge. In other cases, conceit led believers to envy those who threatened their self-importance. So instead of “through love [serving] one another” as brothers and sisters in Christ (Gal. 5:13), the Galatians were provoking and envying one another.

Paul’s catalog of social vices stands as an objective check to our behavior. So the next time you are involved in conflict, stop and think.

³The term *flesh* here describes the weak, fallen human condition apart from the life of God and subject to the power of sin. See special note on the word *flesh* in the Appendix.

⁴You can find a detailed explanation of each of the works of the flesh in the “online resources” section of www.lewisandroth.org.

You know you are yielding to “the desires of the flesh” if any of the above sinful vices are displayed in your behavior or attitude.

When the brother in our opening story about Chapel Hill Church spewed out angry accusations against the evangelist, for example, he obviously was yielding to “the desires of the flesh” rather than to the Spirit’s leading. When other believers started to divide into contending factions and to feel hostility toward one another, they were displaying rivalry and enmity. These sinful works of the flesh showed clearly that they were not yielding to “the desires of the Spirit.”

b. Sinful Conflict in the Church at Corinth

Christians in the church at Corinth also exhibited the sinful “works of the flesh” and experienced disruptive conflict. In fact, “there was not another church founded by Paul, as far as we know, that was so plagued by sin and division.”⁵ The Corinthian believers had the Holy Spirit, yet in behavior and attitude were like people who are devoid of the Spirit. David Garland comments that they acted “no differently from the rest of Corinthian society.”⁶ In other words, they were a worldly minded group of Christians.

In his letter to this strife-torn church, Paul puts his finger on the problem:

. . . you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?
(1 Cor. 3:3-4)

Although the Corinthians prided themselves on their spirituality and knowledge, their quarrels, jealousies, and factiousness proved that they were not walking by the Spirit. They possessed abundant gifts of the Spirit but lacked the graces of the Spirit. Their manner of life was inconsistent with that of people who profess to walk by the Spirit and represent the truths of the gospel.

⁵Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 464.

⁶David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 110.



Works of the Flesh

Enmity

Quarreling

Strife

Jealousy

Jealousy

Anger

Fits of Anger

Hostility

Rivalries

Slander

Dissensions

Gossip

Divisions

Conceit

Envy

Disorder

(Galatians 5:19-21)

(2 Corinthians 12:20)



So in 2 Corinthians 12:20, Paul lists eight sins of discord among the Corinthians that, if continued, would require severe apostolic discipline: “quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.” This list of eight social sins is similar to the list in Galatians 5:19-21. All these social sins are evidence of “the works of the flesh” that result in much conflict. There could be no hope for unity in the church at Corinth until believers acknowledged and repented of their fleshly, unChristlike conduct.

2. WHEN FACING CONFLICT, DISPLAY “THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT”

God has always wanted his people to live in a way that would demonstrate his holy character to the unbelieving world. As people who are born of God’s Spirit, each believer is a “new creation” in Christ (Gal. 6:15) who is to handle conflict in a radically different way from that of the flesh-driven world.⁷ *The one thing Christian believers are not to do when engaged in conflict is to revert back to our old, pre-conversion, flesh-driven ways of behavior.*⁸

a. Walk by the Spirit

The Christian life begins the moment a person receives the Holy Spirit of God and experiences a profound, radical life transformation. The difference between the old life before conversion and the new life after conversion is analogous to the difference between death and life or between living in light and living in utter darkness.⁹ This new life is to be continued by means of faith in God’s Word and dependence on the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

Paul assumes that his Galatian readers have believed the gospel and have been born again by the Spirit. However, he reproves them for not living consistently by the Spirit’s power and direction. Many of them

⁷Lev. 18:1-5; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1; James 1:27; 4:4.

⁸Eph. 2:1-2; 4:17-29; 5:3-17; Col. 3:7; 1 Peter 1:14; 4:3-4.

⁹*Death and Life*: Rom. 6:13; 1 John 3:14; 5:12. *Light and Darkness*: Eph. 5:8; 1 Peter 2:9.

were trying to live the Christian life in their own strength by following the Old Testament laws of Moses rather than living by the power of the Spirit. Therefore, his response to the interpersonal conflicts and erroneous views of Christian living among the Galatian believers was to tell them to “walk by the Spirit,” that is, to be “led by” or “live by” the Spirit:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. . . . But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. . . . If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. (Gal. 5:16, 18, 25)

This passage is one of the most significant passages in the New Testament for instruction on how to live the Christian life. It is, as one theologian says, “theological dynamite.”¹⁰ Walking by the Spirit requires an active, step-by-step, daily effort to live the Christian life by means of the presence and enabling power of the Holy Spirit. *Nothing but the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is sufficient to enable believers to resist the desires of the flesh and to live the Christlike life.*

b. Display Christlike Character by the Fruit of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit seeks to form Christlike character qualities in the life of every individual Christian and every local church body. These Christlike qualities promote right attitudes, godly conduct, and healthy human relationships—the very qualities the strife-torn congregations in Galatia desperately needed. Paul’s nine descriptions of “the fruit of the Spirit” form a composite picture of Christlike character and conduct: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:22-23). We know that we are walking by the Spirit when we see “the fruit of the Spirit” displayed in our daily conduct and inner attitudes.¹¹

One commentator writes that this fruit is “nothing less than the practical reproduction of the character (and therefore the conduct) of Christ

¹⁰George T. Montague, *The Holy Spirit: Growth of a Biblical Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 200.

¹¹You can find a detailed explanation of each of the fruits of the Spirit in the “online resources” section of www.lewisandroth.org.

in [the] lives of his people.”¹² “The fruit of the Spirit,” then, provides an objective guide to our attitudes and behavior when dealing with conflict. So we should always ask ourselves: “Am I displaying Christlike character and the life of the Spirit when I deal with disagreement or someone who opposes me?” Hopefully we should be able to answer: “Yes!” “It is tragic,” states Donald Guthrie, “that church life has often been wrecked through failure to observe the responsibilities of walking in the Spirit.”¹³

Nothing but the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is sufficient to enable believers to resist the desires of the flesh and to live the Christlike life.



When caught in a storm of conflict, one fruit of the Spirit that is especially needed to navigate safely through the storm is “self-control” (Gal. 5:23). *Lack of self-control is a major problem during conflict, but the Holy Spirit provides power over the fleshly excesses generated by the passions of anger, jealousy, hatred, and the spirit of revenge.* Christian believers who control their emotions and thinking by the

power of the Spirit are best able to handle conflict constructively and bring about a just resolution. They are Christians who don’t bite and devour their brothers and sisters in Christ.

In contrast, when people act according to the flesh, they are out-of-control emotionally. They do not display the fruit of the Spirit and have the potential to do terrible damage to other people and to the name of Christ. Such was the case at Chapel Hill Church. Outsiders would never know that the Spirit of the living Christ dwelt in the hearts of the people there. The people at Chapel Hill Church did not walk in a manner worthy of the gospel, nor did they appear to be new creations in Christ. Instead, anger, pride, revenge, and slander characterized the believers at Chapel Hill Church. It was only a matter of time before they would all be “consumed by one another.”

3. WHEN FACING CONFLICT, DISPLAY “THE WISDOM FROM ABOVE”

James, our Lord’s half-brother, gives sound advice regarding conflict

¹²F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 257.

¹³Donald Guthrie, *Galatians*, NCB (London: Oliphants, 1969), 142.



Fruit of the Spirit

Wisdom From Above

Love

Pure

Joy

Peaceable

Peace

Gentle

Patience

Open to Reason

Kindness

Full of Mercy

Goodness

Full of Good Fruits

Faithfulness

Impartial

Gentleness

Sincere

Self-Control

(Galatians 5:22-23)

(James 3:17)



among Christian believers. He writes about two kinds of wisdom that are particularly important to recognize when dealing with conflict:

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. (James 3:14-17)

First there is “the wisdom from above,” which is from God’s Spirit. It produces purity of heart and mind, sweet reasonableness, graciousness, mercy, sincerity, and peace (James 3:17). Then there is the wisdom from below, which “is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.” It produces uncontrolled speech, bitter jealousy,¹⁴ selfish ambition, unbridled passions, strife, pride, “disorder and every vile practice” (James 3:2-4:6).

When we experience heated disagreements with fellow Christians, we should use James 3 to guide our conduct and speech because it directly addresses controlling the fiery tongue and defines proper Christian conduct. Without such wisdom, we are at great risk to “bite and devour one another.”

In one church, for example, some people jumped to their feet to high-five one another, hoot, and rejoice immediately after the congregation narrowly and contentiously voted to fire the pastor. They didn’t seem to care that the pastor’s children stood nearby, looking on as people celebrated the ousting of their father from his position. What impact do you think such behavior had on their view of Christian people and life in the church?

How does God view such behavior? We only have to read James 3:15 to learn that such behavior reflects the wisdom from below and “is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.” Such behavior produces “disorder and

¹⁴Take note that jealousy (or envy) is prominent in all the vice lists. Jealousy is a major cause of conflict between Christians and especially between churches and ministers of the gospel (Phil. 1:15; Rom. 13:13; Gal. 5:20, 21, 26; 1 Cor. 3:3; 2 Cor. 12:20; James 3:14, 16). Love, however, “does not envy” (1 Cor. 13:4).

every vile practice” within the church family. The winners may have won their election and ousted the pastor, but at the judgment seat of Christ, God will have the last word on their “success.”¹⁵

4. LEARNING TO HANDLE DISAGREEMENT AS A SPIRIT-CONTROLLED CHRISTIAN

Conflict presents one of the toughest challenges to walking by the Spirit. If only we would recognize that every conflict is a test as to whether or not we will display Christlike character, the wisdom from above, and the reality of the gospel in our lives.¹⁶ If only the believers who ousted their pastor had recognized the test and sought to conform their attitudes to the wisdom from above. If only the believers at Chapel Hill Church had recognized the test and been as concerned about their sinful attitudes and conduct as they were about altar calls. Incredibly, believers in both cases were willing to act sinfully and unbiblically in order to “win” or prove themselves “right.” They did not seem to care that they were grieving the Holy Spirit of God by acting according to “the works of the flesh,” which the New Testament clearly denounces.

In many church disputes, believers fight for so-called truths that are not explicitly revealed in Scripture while egregiously violating the clear and repeated teaching of Scripture on godly conduct and attitudes. This chapter began, for example, with the story of the brother who made an angry outburst after an evangelist’s altar call. He, and the members and leaders of Chapel Hill Church, displayed “the works of the flesh” rather than “the fruit of the Spirit” as they dealt with the issue. What could they have done differently to keep in step with the Spirit and the instructions of our Lord Jesus Christ?

a. Pray

As soon as the man realized that he was emotionally upset, he should have asked his heavenly Father for wisdom and self-control. If he had

¹⁵1 Cor. 3:12-17; 2 Cor. 5:10.

¹⁶Deut. 13:3; 1 Cor. 11:19.

prayed “in the Spirit,”¹⁷ the Holy Spirit would have brought to mind specific scriptural passages—ones he had read many times—about how a Spirit-led believer thinks and acts when emotionally upset. In fact, all the members of Chapel Hill Church needed to pray for the Spirit’s guidance before taking action.

Prayer is essential to walking by the Spirit. Through prayer, the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin and moves us to confess and amend our ways. The sinful attitudes and behaviors of people on both sides indicate that they did not sincerely trust God’s instructions or the Spirit’s power. Rather, the angry man and the other members of the church took matters into their own hands, ultimately letting their flesh dictate their behavior.

b. Check Our Attitudes and Conduct

God does not lead his people to “bite and devour one another” like wild animals. As well-taught Christians, the angry brother and other members of Chapel Hill should have *checked their attitudes and conduct by the rule of God’s Word which the Spirit always uses to direct the Lord’s people*. They should have recognized that they were yielding to “the desires of the flesh” and displaying “the works of the flesh” and the wisdom from below. They should have recognized that anger was rising up and vying for control and that they must exercise extra caution in order to prevent uncontrolled anger from becoming a golden opportunity for the devil to do his destructive work (Eph. 4:27).

They needed to renounce all gossip and slander against the evangelist and inflammatory accusations against one another. These behaviors could not be justified by the excuse that they were fighting for the truth because their behavior contradicted the truth. They had lost all balanced perspective on what is most important. Altar calls are not inherently sinful; what *is* sinful is giving free reign to unrestrained anger and hostility toward others. Everyone involved needed to wait until their emotions subsided and their minds cleared so that they could address the issue with Spirit-directed wisdom, patience, gentleness, reasonableness, and self-control.

¹⁷Rom. 8:26-27; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 6:18; Jude 20.

c. Act in Love

Love would have moved the man to think first of the spiritual welfare of the people around him rather than his personal desire to make known his opinion and vent his anger. A loving, Christlike attitude would have said: “I don’t personally agree with altar calls, but I know that this evangelist preaches Christ crucified to many lost people. For that I thank God. I will get down on my knees and pray that the Spirit will use him to see many more people come to Christ.”¹⁸

Putting the welfare of others first is what it means to walk in love by the power of the Spirit. Instead, the believers of Chapel Hill Church did not act in love toward one another. They did not bear “with one another in love” (Eph. 4:2). They had knowledge of love (of which they were very proud!) but violated every New Testament principle of love.

d. Seek the Counsel of Spirit-filled Believers

Before the man condemned all altar calls, he should have sought the counsel of the church leaders. Scripture states that the Holy Spirit sets “overseers” in the flock to shepherd “the church of God” (Acts 20:28). The man did not consult with the church shepherds to express his concerns or to ask for their guidance. In fact, the church leaders should have invited people to talk with them if they had questions or had heard rumors that needed to be addressed.

Seeking counsel from other Spirit-filled believers is one way of being led by the Spirit. The people needed their leaders to remind them of proper Christian attitudes and behavior during stressful times of disagreement. They needed their leaders to warn them about the divisive sins of gossip and slander. It is unfortunate that the church leaders failed to quickly acknowledge the problem and to present to the congregation a clear, constructive course of action (see Acts 6:1-3).

¹⁸This attitude emulates Paul’s example: “The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice” (Phil. 1:17-18).

e. Treat Others with Kindness and Gentleness

The man who had a problem with the evangelist didn't seem to know the appropriate attitudes or manner by which to handle controversy among his fellow believers. Yet 2 Timothy 2:24-26 is quite clear:

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

Although the above passage applies directly to dealing with false teachers and their followers, it also serves as a guide for how we should treat fellow believers with whom we have doctrinal disagreement.

When the time was right, the man could have approached the evangelist and, without making accusations or attacking his motives, gently asked about his reasons for altar calls. He may have learned something from the evangelist; on the other hand, he may also have helped the evangelist. Perhaps both of them would have learned more of what it means to walk in a manner "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27).

f. Be Humble

After evaluating his behavior and seeing the chaos he caused in the church, the man needed to humble himself and repent of his angry outburst. He had chosen the wrong time and place to speak out. He had slandered and questioned the motives of a fellow servant of the Lord, which he had no right to do. He needed to recognize his sin and repent, and he needed to apologize to the people who had heard his angry accusations.

When sinful infighting broke out, the leaders of the church should have called for prayer, fasting, and repentance in order to restore an attitude of humility and love. They should not have tried to deal with the problem until self-serving, sinful attitudes were first amended.

With an attitude of Spirit-controlled humility, the disagreement over altar calls could have been handled civilly and constructively. Instead, believers chose to bite and devour one another and make a first-class display of “the works of the flesh.”

How will we respond to conflict as individual believers and within our church families? Will we display the beautiful fruit of the Holy Spirit, or will we display the ugliness of the flesh? Every conflict reveals whether we practice what we preach, whether we are doers of the Word or hearers only (James 1:22). Every conflict reveals the genuineness of our Christian life (1 Cor. 11:19). Jesus said, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (John 13:17) and we each are accountable to him.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.
Galatians 5:25-26

Key Principles to Remember

1. When facing conflict, display “the fruit of the Spirit,” not “the works of the flesh.” Be Spirit controlled, not out of control.
2. Be as concerned about your attitude and behavior as about the issue of disagreement.
3. Do not “bite and devour one another.”