

THE
PEACE-
MAKING
CHURCH

8 Biblical Keys to Resolve Conflict
and Preserve Unity

CURTIS HEFFELFINGER



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Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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This book is dedicated to the covenant members
of Orlando Grace Church.

Thank you for being eager to preserve
the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

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Foreword

Where two or three come together in Jesus's name . . . there will soon be conflict.

This fact is reflected throughout the New Testament epistles, most of which deal with some kind of conflict in the early church.

These same types of conflict have kept me busy for thirty-five years.

As a full-time peacemaker and mediator, I have been involved in thousands of conflicts involving Christians. Divorces, child custody disputes, lawsuits between Christians, forced pastoral exits, church splits, abuse of children, even fistfights on the church board . . . you name it, I've seen it.

But I've also seen something else: the redeeming power of the gospel of Christ.

In case after case, when nearly everyone had given up hope of reconciliation, God suddenly broke through. Hearts softened. People finally saw and grieved over their sins. Confession replaced confrontation. Forgiveness replaced fighting.

Some of these breakthroughs were so dramatic they moved seasoned attorneys to tears. One lawyer was so caught up in the spirit of reconciliation that he pulled out his personal checkbook and asked to pay part of the damages his client finally admitted he owed to the opposing party. In another case, an attorney pulled me aside and said, "There is a power in this room. I can feel it. What is it?"

I love those questions . . . the answer, of course, is "Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace!"

As wonderful as it is to see conflicts resolved and relationships restored, it is even better to see them prevented in the first place as people cultivate and practice the relational skills described in Scripture. This is why I love this book: it provides practical wisdom on how to resolve conflicts in the church, but even more importantly it shows how an entire congregation can cultivate character qualities and relational skills that will prevent most conflicts from starting in the first place.

I've known the author, Curt, for many years and have seen him grow as a peacemaker. Like me, Curt has made mistakes along the way . . . but he's learned from them, and he's passed those lessons on to the members of his church and to other pastors who have been inspired and instructed by his example. In this book, he is passing them on to you.

Better yet, Curt is a student of God's Word. As you'll see throughout this book, he is adept at identifying and applying Scripture in winsome and practical ways to the many types of tensions and conflicts that plague human relationships, especially in the church.

Most importantly, Curt loves the gospel of Christ and realizes that it provides the motive, the method, and the power for peacemaking. So in addition to describing a variety of wisdom principles and peacemaking skills, he consistently calls us to be inspired, guided, and empowered by Jesus and his example of sacrifice, redemption, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

So I encourage you, read on! Chapter by chapter, you will gain insights, feel conviction, be inspired, and learn how to weave God's peace-making principles and the gospel itself into your life and your church. In doing so, you will position yourself to claim one of the greatest promises in the Bible: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God!"

Ken Sande,
founder of Peacemaker Ministries and Relational Wisdom 360

Introduction

Feeling the Pains That Spoil Unity in Jesus’s Church— the Orlando Grace Story

Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.”

Nehemiah 2:17

The world isn’t looking at our tracts and rallies and telecasts and study manuals. It is looking at us and how we behave. When it fails to see the unity of Jesus’s followers—the church—it fails to see the validation that Christ is indeed the Son of the living God.

Charles Colson¹

Sad but true, churches can fight over the silliest—sometimes even absurd—things. Church consultant Thom Rainer drew such a conclusion in response to a Twitter survey gone viral. He listed twenty-five of his “favorite” issues from the avalanche of responses. Here’s a sample:

An argument over the appropriate length of the worship pastor’s beard.

A church dispute of whether or not to install restroom stall dividers in the women’s restroom.

An argument over the type of filing cabinet to purchase.

A fight over which picture of Jesus to put in the foyer.

An argument over the discovery that the church budget was off by \$0.10.

Two different churches reported fights over the type of coffee.

A disagreement over using the term “potluck” instead of “pot blessing.”

An argument over who had access to the copy machine.

An argument over whether to have gluten-free communion bread or not.

A fight over whether or not to sing “Happy Birthday” each week.²

Sobering list, isn’t it? Whether over silly or serious matters, church fights warrant our asking some important questions of ourselves. Deidra Riggs proposes:

When I watch my brothers and sisters in the body of Christ argue with one another or hear of churches splitting up . . . I have to wonder what’s at stake. I wonder what it would take to set up a playdate of sorts so we could try and figure out what common ground might look like. I wonder what answers I might get if I started asking questions like, “What’s at stake for you here? Why are you arguing so loudly and calling people names? Why can’t we keep worshiping together? . . . What are we clinging to so tightly?”³

Our latest church storm—not our first, I’m afraid—rocked us like one of Florida’s infamous category-five hurricanes. It left us asking a lot of those questions and others like them. The painful details bear no repeating. With the help of Ken Sande at Peacemaker Ministries, we managed to keep our church version of the *Titanic* from sinking to the bottom.⁴ Long story short, in the providence of God, I went from serving as OGC’s worship leader to becoming its third lead pastor. I remember asking myself, *Have I lost my mind? Who in the world takes a church with so much wreckage and so troubled a track record? What made me or anyone else in leadership or the church believe that this time would yield different results?*

Admittedly for my own sake, but ultimately for the sake of Jesus’s name and the good of the church as well, I pondered these questions

and others like them. I searched for answers. I became obsessed with a personal mission. On my watch, however long it might last at OGC, I would do everything I could, with God's help, to see that our church never again suffered such division and despair. I pursued every bit of advanced training I could find on biblical peacemaking.⁵ I determined to master what the Bible said about not just how to resolve conflict to the glory of God when it happened but also how to safeguard the unity the God of peace gives his church through his Son, the Prince of Peace.

Now fifteen years into this journey, OGC enjoys, by God's grace and a great deal of informed effort on our part, a culture of peace. We have managed thus far to stay out of any more major troubled waters of conflict. We have seen the Lord weave into our DNA a passion for peace and a warrior-like preserving of the unity that makes us now a healthier-than-ever ministry. We have started moving from a Nehemiah-like "rebuilding the walls" season of recovery to a Jeremiah-like "blessing the city" form of gospel outreach. At age sixty-five, arguably in the fourth quarter of my pastoral ministry career and likely shepherding the last of my churches, I feel burdened and equipped to tell its unique peacemaking story for the good of Christ's church elsewhere.

A number of helpful resources aimed at equipping God's people for resolving church conflict line the bookshelf.⁶ Some truly extraordinary authors have contributed their insights to that end. When I teach on peacemaking at our local seminary, I tell the students every time that Ken Sande's book *The Peacemaker* is one of the top five resources in my pastoral toolkit. It comes into play whenever I do conflict coaching and mediation. But *The Peacemaking Church* comes at this gnarly problem of church conflict from a different, absolutely crucial direction. Conflict resolution books take aim at what to do after a meltdown. In other words, they approach things from a *reactive* stance. They are, by design, corrective in nature. And thank God for every single one of them. *The Peacemaking Church* will add a *proactive* approach to your church toolkit. What if the best fight your congregation ever experiences is the one you never get into in the first place? My goal for you and your church in the pages that follow is a fierce passion for excelling in preserving the treasured gift of unity.



God commands many things in his Word that a people gripped by the gospel must embrace in order to bring him glory in the church and in the world. Some of these receive priority attention in terms of requiring an all-in, do-our-best kind of commitment. In chapter 1 of this book, I make the case that peacemaking heads this list. It is absolutely imperative that you adopt this perspective if you are going to do your part in keeping your church out of unnecessary conflict. In part 1, Ephesians 4:1–6 forms the starting place for a perspective of excellence in preserving unity. Chapter 2 introduces the need to see ourselves in the right light as peacemakers. Then chapter 3 moves to making our approach with the right touch in navigating relational challenges. Chapter 4 finishes the all-important perspective with basing our thinking as peacemakers on the right doctrine.

Once we nail down the perspective of our priorities as preservers of unity in the church, part 2 of *The Peacemaking Church* warns about three deadly pitfalls that threaten a church's peace. The world, the flesh, and the devil war against us to jeopardize our oneness and tarnish our testimony in the eyes of the unbelieving community through disunity. The flesh wreaks its particular version of havoc when church members unleash sinful anger in response to offenses that they cannot overlook. Chapter 5 unpacks Jesus's candid warning in Matthew 5 about the risks involved with losing self-control and giving way to rage and his prescription for the peacemaking antidote we need to keep free from judgment for anger and its consequences—even the ultimate kind in hell.

Two other threats to unity are covered in chapters 6 and 7, namely litigating in the courts and judging in the church. Chapter 6 explores Paul's scathing rebuke in 1 Corinthians 6 over Christians taking other Christians to court rather than settling disputes where they belong—within the church. Chapter 7 tackles the challenge of dealing with an all-too-common hindrance to unity among God's people in Romans 14, answering this question: What should Christians do when they disagree over matters of conscience as opposed to clear black-and-white commands of Scripture?

Part 3 of *The Peacemaking Church* focuses on two overarching practices that go a long way to safeguarding unity in Jesus's church. These include an individual and a corporate dimension. For peace to prevail over time, much depends upon the kind of spirit maintained by individuals in the church. Chapter 8 unpacks Abraham's example of relational

magnanimity in Genesis 13. His spiritual generosity with his nephew Lot heads off a potential conflict before it ever happens. It represents an ideal template for doing the same in any relationship challenge we face. But in addition to individual responsibilities, corporate commitments come into play as well. Since so many conflicts occur between God's people and the servants he appoints over them as shepherds, chapter 9 deals with 1 Thessalonians 5 and the necessity for followers to esteem their leaders very highly in love. I will show you how to do that in some effective and practical ways.

Whether you are a leader or follower in your church, my aim for you in this book is the same. I want to help turn you into a heavyweight champion of unity in your fellowship. I desire to help you prize oneness for the treasured gift that it is by making its preservation in your church a number one priority. The epilogue concludes on a high note to that end. It comes at things from two angles. Corporately, it extols, from Psalm 133, the delight for God's people when they enjoy unity over a protracted period of time. That kind of blessing brings with it a degree of sweetness so unique that it is worthy of our enthusiastic praise when we gather together for corporate worship. Individually, it speaks, from Matthew 5:9, to the most enviable benefit of earning the title of a *peacemaker* when we act consistently as a peacemaker in the eyes of others.



Before proceeding any further, I have a confession to make. Buckle your seat belt for some major-league irony: days prior to submitting the manuscript for this book to the publisher I—yes I, an aspiring “expert” on this subject just introduced—nearly wrecked the OGC train for the third time in its history. That’s right. I shudder to think how perilously close I brought us to the precipice of another churchwide meltdown. Sad, but true. If not for the grace of God *and* the application of principles contained in these pages—I’m not overstating the case here—integrity would have necessitated my abandonment of this project. Here’s the deal.

Personally, I’ve never found pastoral ministry more challenging in my lifetime than at the present. I don’t know that I’ve ever felt less equipped to lead well. I admit all this in the interest of explaining the angst behind poor choices that nearly breached the gates and burned

the walls of our ministry yet another time. *Decline* is the best word to describe the situation as of late. Giving is down. Numbers are off. So many families have left our church recently—for good and not-so-good reasons—that I’ve joked (painfully) about installing a revolving door in the main entryway! As you can imagine, the circumstances have generated a fair amount of conversation within our leadership by way of evaluation. The air I breathe lately often seems heavy with the smog of criticism. It feels unbearable at times. Eventually I let it get to me.

A particular focal point of discussion/concern surrounded our worship and music ministry. Take my word for it. This area of church life—what to sing and play, how to sing and play, who gets to sing and play, when to sing and play—makes particularly fertile ground for sprouting the weeds of church conflict. Fellow pastors, keep your eyes on this baby. It will eat your lunch if you don’t watch out.

One fateful elder meeting, we drilled down in this area. Too many “exit interviews” dinged us for various reasons on this front. The consensus seemed plain. Something had to be done. “It’s time for a change,” as one brother put it. Let me make things perfectly clear: I consented. In spite of gnawing reservations within warning me to push back harder than I did, I ignored them and went with the flow. I and my associate pastor were tasked with breaking the news to the staff couple who had faithfully served in that capacity for years.

Over lunch that following Sunday, we met in my home. I laid out the situation and braced for the backlash I innately knew would follow (I’m not making this whole story up—it really went down this way). Looking back, that critical moment of decision forced upon this couple determined whether we deserved the label “peacemaking church” or not. All I can say is thank God my dear brother and sister put into practice everything this pastor had taught them over the years (their words) and saved the day. They responded magnificently out of regard for the glory of God and the unity of our church. Additionally, they offered some excellent observations as to why the new direction proposed might well prove problematic. More importantly, they pointed out significant leadership/management failures on our part from both a biblical viewpoint and standard business practices. In the end, they asked for a meeting with our elders at the earliest possible convenience to share their hurt and express their concerns. We eagerly granted that request.

As you can imagine, I did some pretty heavy-lifting soul-searching in the meantime. Peacemaking principles, I'm relieved to say, served my own heart well throughout those five agonizing days between meetings. I pleaded with the Lord to take no prisoners in showing me the logs in my own eye (Matt. 7:3–5) contributing to this conflict that—trust me on this assessment—threatened to tear our church apart at the seams. To say the least, I did not like the ugliness revealed.

We had erred on a number of levels. The rebuke in love was deserved. I can't begin to describe the distress I felt at handling the situation so poorly. But something on a deeper heart level disturbed me even more. Why the mismanagement and failure in due process? I can only speak for myself—my main point in sharing this story. For my part, I realized I had panicked. I let a heart idol of needing my church to thrive trump staff loyalty and due process. In my desperation to stop the bleeding and some way—any way—reverse the trend, I managed to put a trusted coworker on the altar of sacrifice. It nearly cost me a treasured friendship. Sometimes the sinfulness of my own heart, graciously revealed by God's doing, makes me shudder in revulsion. But it also drives me to repent and drink again from the fountain of lavish gospel grace.

Our meeting opened that night with my wounded friends reading carefully prepared, measured statements. They spoke the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). We listened to their admonitions and concerns. After they finished, I took the lead on behalf of our elders. I started with, "I botched this," and I finished with, "Will you forgive me?" I wept through most of my "seven A's of confession."⁷ I described my failure to lead well, named my heart idol, and owned responsibility as point man for making such a mess. Before I knew it, our chief musician crossed the room and embraced me, saying, "That's the man I know. I forgive you." I wept even harder—tears of joyful relief. We pressed the pause button on our music issues that night. We continue to work on the problem, thankfully with our relationships restored and the church's peace protected. Wow, talk about a close one! We dodged a major bullet with the Lord's help.

I share all that to one end: church unity can be a terribly fragile thing. Even a church and pastor with a self-confessed core value of peacemaking can come dangerously close to losing the battle on the unity front. It takes pastors and people alike committed with bulldog tenacity to

nothing short of a do-your-best guarding of church peace. You cannot err in making it too high a priority.

G. K. Chesterton once quipped, “If anything is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.”⁸ He said that in reference to a defense of hobbies, amateur interests, and various not-so-important pursuits. I am certain he would have considered preserving unity in the church just the opposite—something very much worth doing excellently. Just how well worth doing it is deserves a chapter all its own.

1

Our Best and Nothing Less

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Hebrews 12:14

Our first and chief concern as Christians should be to guard and to preserve this precious, wondrous unity of the Spirit. . . . If we believe in God, we must ever feel that our first duty is to guard this unity, to preserve it at all costs, to strain every nerve and be diligent in endeavouring to keep it and manifest it.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones¹

Most of us do not just bump into greatness every day. I will never forget one of the rare times I literally did. It happened on a Saturday afternoon at the Norfolk airport. Late for a flight, I hurried into the check-in line. In my haste, I nearly bounced off the 6'7" figure waiting his turn in front of me. As he did a 180 to see who had gotten too close for comfort, I immediately began to beg forgiveness for my clumsiness. But I stopped mid-apology when it dawned on me that I was having a close encounter of the celebrity kind. "Hey, Dr. J!," I said. That's right. I stood face-to-face—or face-to-chest, I should say—with *the* Julius

Erving, NBA legend and Hall of Famer, otherwise known in basketball lore as “The Doctor.”

“Hello,” he replied, smiling warmly. I proceeded to tell him what a huge fan I was. Now, those of you with admiration for other pro-ball greats and affinity for their teams, please indulge me for a bit. Born and raised in southeast Pennsylvania, I waited a long time for the 76ers to win an NBA title. So when my team finally broke through with a four-game sweep of the perennial champion LA Lakers in the 1982–83 season, I couldn’t have been more thrilled. Now, I know the good doctor didn’t do it all by himself. A gifted cast of teammates contributed to the success of that memorable season. But few basketball aficionados would dispute that Julius Erving led the way to the only Larry O’Brien trophy in Philadelphia history. I wanted Dr. J to know just how grateful I was to him for making that possible. I scored his autograph (for my sons, of course), and off we went to the gate. I could hardly believe what had just happened.

No doubt about it, I credit Julius Erving for his extraordinary contribution to my team’s place in the NBA record books. But the man commands my admiration and that of many others for another reason, a more compelling one, at least in terms of what I do for a living. They called Julius Erving “Dr. J,” or “The Doctor,” for good reason. Any basketball lover from that generation knows why. All you had to do was watch him “operate” on the court. From his patented finger-roll touch to his soaring flight from the top of the key to throwing down a thunderous dunk, Number 6 made folks gasp with awe by the way he performed round-ball surgery on his opponents. Whether history’s best or not (I too have heard of Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, LeBron James, and Steph Curry, just to name a few), Dr. J belongs in the category of all-time greats who did it better than most and belong to a league apart from the rest.

Now, nobody cares in the least how well I do or do not perform on a basketball court. That’s a good thing. I have never been much of an athlete. But every member of my church cares greatly about how I do in the pulpit as their lead pastor. My job description in that role at Orlando Grace Church includes a number of responsibilities, but none more important than preaching God’s Word every Sunday. It matters greatly to me that I approach my vocation as a teacher of the Bible for God’s people with something of the devotion and excellence exhibited by the likes of an All-Star athlete in his vocation.

Furthermore, I really don't have any choice in the matter. I've got to go hard after excellence in my realm for multiple reasons. The apostle Paul spelled out the most obvious of those in 2 Timothy 2:15. Speaking to his young pastoral protégé serving the church at Ephesus, he urged: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." *Do your best.* Here's how this pastor feels the weight of those words every time he reads them:

Hold nothing back. Give your all. Study hard. Wrestle with the text. Spend the time. Labor super well. Pay the price in blood, sweat, and tears during sermon prep to ensure you get the meaning spot-on. Be the best you can be at this preaching thing. After all, ultimately it's God's "Well done, good and faithful servant" approval you seek to receive more than anything else. Or it should be. No way you want to cut corners here as a pastor, that's for sure. Shame on you if you do!

Bible verses like these can keep preachers like me awake at night. We wonder if we are coming anywhere close to what God requires, given a bar set so high. My fellow pastors reading this will likely identify. But what does that have to do with everyone else hanging in there with me thus far?

Here's my point. God's Word tells not just pastors but all believers many things we must *do* for Jesus in light of who we *are* in Jesus. But, as with pastors in their unique role, the Bible charges *all* believers with a select list of responsibilities subject to a "be the best we can be, give our all, go all-out" kind of devotion. We don't want to be ashamed in the least about these crucial matters. One of those responsibilities in particular for every church-going follower of Jesus gets a lot of Bible press. I'm talking about peacemaking. The Scriptures make this very clear in numerous places. Perhaps Ephesians 4:1–6 says it most thoroughly:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Camp out with me for a moment on that word *eager* in verse 3. Paul argues that a life gripped by the gospel of Jesus will, among other things, demonstrate itself in an eagerness for keeping the peace in the body of Christ. The word for *eager* in the original text is the same word translated “do your best” in 2 Timothy 2:15. It shows up again in 2 Peter 1:5–7, translated a bit differently but conveying a similar idea, included in a list of highly desirable virtues in a believer’s life:

For this very reason, *make every effort* to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. (emphasis added)

Be eager. Do your best. Make every effort. These are multiple ways of saying virtually the same thing. They all capture the verb’s urgency regardless of the subject under consideration. The Greek word comes from a root that means to run or make haste, to hurry about something. It communicates the idea of speed, urgency, energy—a vigorous pursuit of something. Theologian Markus Barth nailed it with his assessment of this word, so important to each of these contexts:

It is hardly possible to render exactly the urgency contained in the underlying Greek verb. Not only haste and passion, but a full effort of the whole man is meant, involving his will, sentiment, reason, physical strength, and total attitude. The imperative mood of the participle found in the Greek text excludes passivity, quietism, a wait-and-see attitude, or a diligence tempered by all deliberate speed. Yours is the initiative! Do it now! Mean it! *You* are to do it! I mean it!—Such are the overtones in verse 3.²

Paul commands that this is the way we should regard the call to peacemaking for unity’s sake in the body of Christ. Allow me to pile on the emphasis with a few more imperatives in the New Testament.

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. (Heb. 12:14)

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Rom. 12:18)

So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding,
(Rom. 14:19)

How can we possibly miss the point? Nothing less than our very best will suffice when it comes to safeguarding unity in Jesus's church as far as it depends upon us.

Let me ask you a question: What's something you want very much to do well? I mean, you really, really, really desire to excel in it. When it comes to that particular skill or interest, it matters to you that you do your very best—you give it all you've got—particularly in the church. Do you have the gift of teaching? I'll bet you work very hard at your study and lesson prep for the good of your students. Do you play or sing on the church's music team? No doubt you give lots of time to rehearsal in getting ready for the worship services. What about nursery care, greeting, hospitality, small group leading, and all sorts of other important tasks it takes to make churches function to the glory of God and the joy of their people? I can scarcely imagine that most servants do not care a great deal about doing a consistently good, if not first-rate, job, whatever their assignment for Jesus. Or at least they should!

So, here's the deal. Do you think that way in terms of your role as a peacemaker in your church? Do you consider the call to guard the unity and peace of your body of believers as something you take so seriously that it gets your absolute best in terms of prayer, energy, strategy, and overall commitment? How far up your ladder of church concerns do you rank preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? If I correctly understand the Bible's gist of things on this subject, you will want to bump this to the top of the list immediately, if it doesn't already enjoy an A-Priority standing in your estimation. If you are going to be eager about anything in your church, let it be this.

I love to hunt. I used to live in north/central Idaho, and I still own a five-acre bit of paradise at the base of the Clearwater Mountains. I travel back there whenever I can for some R&R. There are few things I look forward to more than the opening of white-tailed deer and elk season every October. Each evening just before dusk, my good friend Dick and I grab our rifles and walk the hills behind our little town. We are men on a mission. We comb those woods and stalk the fields. We've got one aim in mind—to locate the biggest rack we can, bag it, and tag it. (My apologies to Bambi lovers everywhere.) I can't tell you

how eager I am to do that every fall. I think about it year round. And that's precisely the kind of zeal that should characterize our pursuit of peace in the church.



Before closing this chapter with a view to where we go from here, I want to pay tribute to quite possibly the best peacemaker I've ever known, my wife Nancy. She and I were married for nearly forty-two years, and she went home to Jesus in May 2016 after an eighteen-month battle with ovarian cancer. Nan took Ephesians 4:1–3 seriously in the church and in our marriage. She eagerly preserved the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. She embraced the blessedness Jesus promised in Matthew 5:9. She decidedly deserved the label “child of God.”

In the context of our marriage especially, Nancy excelled in ten practical qualities of a peacemaker that apply to any context. Here's a ten-point reality checklist by which to measure your own commitment as a prize peacemaker.

One, she loved Jesus more than she loved me (Matt. 10:37–39). From the day of her conversion, Nan counted the costs of discipleship. The Lord was first in her affections. She knew it was not wise to pursue her soul's satisfaction in me. God never made any spouse or other human being fit for a task only he can accomplish (Ps. 37:4).

Two, she chose not to allow me to control her joy quotient (1 Thess. 5:16–18). She had to learn this over time, but she got there. In conflict she came to distinguish the difference between what was about me and what was about her. And when it was about me—and it often was—she released and rested in Jesus. Only one Person should have control over a believer's emotional condition. His name is the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23).

Three, she perfected the art of asking me questions (Prov. 20:5). Nancy got me big-time on this. She knew if she outright challenged something I thought, said, or did, I could easily get defensive (again, that's on me). She consistently helped draw out my heart with strategic questions that facilitated conversation toward oneness. In so doing she kept respect for me high while still making her point. I loved this about her! She engaged my heart; she didn't stomp all over it. (See chapter 5 on anger for more on this important peacemaking skill.)

Four, she refused worrisome nagging, choosing rather to wait on God for change in me (Prov. 21:19). It's not that Nancy wouldn't say hard things to me. I assure you, she knew how to shoot straight with me (see number six below). But once she made her case, she let things rest—asking the Lord to do in my heart what only he could do (Isa. 40:27–31).

Five, she didn't do what I call peacebreaking (Prov. 15:18). Some will question my memory on this. It is true just the same. Nan lost her cool with me only one time in all our years together. Only once! Isn't that remarkable? And as I recall, I definitely deserved it. Outbursts of anger crush oneness. We simply refused to go there by God's grace.

Six, she also didn't do what I call peacefaking (Eph. 4:25–27). Sorry to say, I specialized in stuffing my anger and punishing Nan with the cold shoulder treatment. (More on that in chapter 5 as well.) Thankfully, I got better about this over time, but Nan never struggled with fear of conflict issues like I did. She consistently told it like it was in love.

Seven, she overlooked my sin—a lot (Prov. 19:11). Nan outright forgave me for my offenses over and over again without saying a word. *She was not easily offended*. This matters so much to both marital oneness and church oneness. (More on this crucial virtue in chapter 3.)

Eight, she consistently forgave me for my sins (Eph. 4:32). Nancy lived out the gospel of grace by showing her foremost-of-sinners husband (1 Tim. 1:15) forgiving grace. She practiced the four promises of forgiveness—especially never using the past as a weapon against me.³ Good grief, I was a fortunate man! If you only knew.

Nine, she embraced assisted peacemaking with me when necessary (Matt. 18:15–18; Phil. 4:2–3).⁴ We visited a fair number of Christian counselors over the years. We could barely afford the cost for counseling. But the way we saw it, we couldn't afford *not* to get with a trained professional. Somehow the Lord always provided, and we never regretted the investment. If we got stuck with maintaining oneness, we got help restoring oneness.

Ten, she never wavered on her covenant commitments (Matt. 5:37). Her yes was yes and her no was no. On December 21, 1974, then-Nancy Masologites spoke vows to me, Curtis Heffelfinger. She promised to love and to cherish, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, until death did us part. Death did part us in 2016, but Nancy's legacy lives on in so many ways—including in my aim to

be a better peacemaking man and pastor for the rest of my days on the planet.

That's my aim for every reader who picks up and stays with *The Peacemaking Church*. I want to help make you a better peacemaking person whatever the context. So, what more does that look like? A thorough unpacking of Paul's line of thinking in Ephesians 4:1–6 makes an essential starting place. It reveals three priorities believers must embrace to earn a superior rating in the “resolving conflict” and “preserving unity” categories of church life:

Priority #1: Seeing ourselves as peacemakers in the right light.

Priority #2: Shaping our approach as peacemakers with the right touch.

Priority #3: Basing our thinking as peacemakers on the right doctrine.

Packaged together, these three priorities, lived out by the majority of folks in any given congregation, leaders and followers alike, will go a long way to helping them stay out of troublesome and often excruciatingly painful conflict. Remember what I said in the introduction? The best church fight is the one your church never gets into in the first place. It all starts with the way we grasp our identity as peacemakers, Paul's first concern in the fourth chapter of his letter to the church at Ephesus.