

Christians always will have a conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil, and the Spirit will consistently be striving against the flesh. There are several other types of conflict in which the Christian finds himself obligated to address: heresy, moral issues, conflicts of individual consciences, issues of doctrinal interpretation, etc. Josh Howard has laid out the principles, very clearly giving us biblical advice about how to decide the issues that deserve our attention even in the face of conflict, how to avoid unnecessary engagement, the attitudes with which we should approach the various kinds of disagreements, and biblical encouragement to a deep sense of stewardship of the truth. We must choose our hills well and then defend them with full ardor. This book will help us all be better stewards of divine revelation as well as reflectors of Christ's compassion and resolution.

Dr. Tom Nettles

Senior Professor, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Author, *By His Grace and For His Glory*

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men” (Rom. 12:8). “Pursue peace with all men” (Heb. 12:14). But we are also commanded to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 3)—and the Christian experience is repeatedly pictured as warfare (Eph. 6:10–18; 2 Tim. 2:3–4). We seek peace, but we face relentless conflict. Therefore, every Christian must be skilled as both a peacemaker and a warrior. Fulfilling those two seemingly antithetical duties is a difficult balancing act. Josh Howard skillfully shows from Scripture why neither duty should ever eclipse the other, and he gives extremely helpful and practical advice on how to pursue both objectives simultaneously in a sanctified, Christlike manner. This is an important and timely guide for Christians, especially in this era of social media and supercharged public discourse.

Phil Johnson

Executive Director, Grace to You Ministries
Elder at Grace Community Church (Sun Valley, CA)

Conflict will always be a reality in a sin-cursed world, certainly from the unbelieving world but even from within the church. Yet Scripture is sufficient to navigate conflict. Josh Howard has provided a very helpful guide to applying the sufficient Word to the various kinds of conflict we might face, all with the goal of growing our own faith and bringing ultimate glory to God.

Dr. Scott Aniol
Executive Vice President and Editor-in-chief of G3 Ministries
Professor of Pastoral Theology, Grace Bible Theological Seminary

In the Christian life, we are promised to experience trouble along the journey. As Paul warned the elders of the church at Ephesus, sometimes such conflict comes from within (Acts 20). Still at other times, we face trials of persecution and the hatred of the world as Jesus promised his disciples (John 15:18–27). In the words of Solomon, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven” (Eccl. 3:1). It’s important to know how to respond during times of conflict, and Josh Howard approaches this topic through a sound theological grid balanced by helpful application.

Dr. Josh Buice
Pastor of Pray’s Mill Baptist Church
Founder and President of G3 Ministries

Josh is a wonderful brother, faithful pastor, and deep thinker. Josh is thoroughly exegetical in his examination of any topic, and this is no exception. I have been blessed to know Josh for many years now and am grateful for his insightfulness and charity. I am even more grateful that he saw fit to pen his thoughts concerning conflict. This is an important book written at a crucial time. It is not surprising that the church deals with conflict from within and conflict from without. However, these recent days have shown us we have difficulty navigating conflict in such a way as to stand our ground while glorifying God in our standing. In this book, Josh shows us how to see conflicts, fight amid conflict, and glorify God amid it.

Lawson Harlow
Pastor of Mercy Hill Church (Olive Branch, MS)

While most Christians work to avoid conflict, either between the church and the world or even the church and itself, most Christians are also woefully underprepared to handle it when it inevitably arises. I can heartily recommend Dr. Howard's work on this topic, not only because of the quality of the material but also because I know that the material stems from his passion to shepherd God's flock more faithfully. Dr. Howard's endeavor to train Christians in conflict resolution stems from his pastoral responsibility and not merely as an academic exercise. There clearly is a dearth of resources on this topic, and I believe that this particular primer for conflict and conflict resolution will be a valuable addition to any Christian's arsenal.

Sean Pasley
Missionary and Church Planter (Albertville, France)

Josh Howard is a dear friend, pastor, and writer who handles God's Word with the utmost integrity. His ability to write critically and pointedly provides clarity to Scripture and its application to the believer's life. The primer on conflict he has written is so needed at this time in our churches and culture.

Ben Hill
Discipleship Pastor of First Baptist Church (Texarkana, AR)

*A PRIMER FOR CONFLICT:
DRAWING A LINE IN THE SAND*

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Josh Howard

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Gratefully dedicated to the pastors and scholars
who have sharpened my own thinking and the
many discussions that led to this present work.

May God be glorified and His church strengthened.

“A dog barks when his master is attacked.
I would be a coward if I saw that God’s truth is attacked and
yet would remain silent.”

— John Calvin

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PREFACE

Christians must be prepared for conflict. Whether that conflict arises from within the church or from outside the church, it is vital that we think *biblically* about how to handle conflict. The chapters that follow will sketch out some of the ways we can biblically approach conflict, being particularly attentive to matters of *authority* in conflict. How do we determine which issues are worthy of conflict, and how do we engage in such conflict biblically? Though some examples and illustrations are included, every possible scenario and situation cannot be addressed herein—yet it is my hope that we may gain a working knowledge of the parameters of handling conflict properly. If this book encourages the reader to think more deeply in this regard, we may consider ourselves to be moving in the right direction.

SDG,
Josh Howard
Battle Creek, MI

FOREWORD

I wish I had read this book ten years ago when I was in “cage stage.” Since conversion, conflict has never been too far away, it seems. As Josh Howard explains in the pages that follow, conflict for the believer is inevitable. The gospel of Jesus Christ causes division as it demands every man and woman on the earth answer this question: What will you do with Jesus of Nazareth? It was the Lord Himself who said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34). The dogmatic teachings of our Lord claiming Himself as the only way to heaven would lead to conflict within households and between believers and the world.

While conflict with the world in light of the gospel is inevitable, conflict within the church is a common occurrence because where there are people, there will be problems. Even as redeemed saints, we still battle the flesh, and sin wages war against us. But are we to treat all conflict the same? How do we navigate the varying degrees of conflict? With the rising temperature of today’s world conflicts causing the church to feel the heat, how can we ensure we don’t eat each other alive—like the world does? We have our work cut out for us. Politics, social justice, abortion, primary doctrinal conflicts, secondary doctrinal conflicts, preferences, opinions, hurts, abuses, accusations, insecurities, and more have become the weapons of choice, for our adversary, Satan, knows he cannot steal our salvation, so he works overtime to divide us and

distract us from our mission and purpose here on earth. But we are not without help when navigating conflict of all kinds. The Spirit dwells within us (1 Cor. 6:19–20), fills us (Eph. 5:18), empowers us to walk by His way (Gal. 5:16), and bears fruit through our lives as we do (Gal. 5:22–23). He unifies us and enables us to love one another in the midst of healthy, sanctifying conflict.

In this book, Josh provides us with much-needed wisdom as we encounter conflict within the body of Christ. There is a great need for us to learn how to disagree agreeably and to know when to pull out the sword and when to lower it. This book helps us to approach conflict in a godly way, to remember the goal of conflict according to Scripture, and to use the right weapons in our warfare—namely, the sword of the Spirit. Many of us have no issue pulling out the sword to cut through dangerous doctrines and the world’s divergent views, but do we have the Spirit-filled surgical precision to treat conflict in the body of Christ in such a way as to not take each other’s limbs off? Love compels us to confront one another from time to time, but love also compels us to do it in such a way that Christ is pleased with the way we treat His body. This book will help you assess your motives, consider what hills to die on, discern when to address issues of secondary doctrinal difference, and learn how to function in your local church with those who may hold different views than you. As a local pastor, I found Josh’s wisdom on leaders, teachers, and church members especially helpful for gauging doctrinal unity and expectations within each sphere.

I appreciate the theological and practical way in which Josh guides us into conflict. He shows us how to apply the right amount of pressure to any given conflict based on the forcible clarity of Scripture on an issue. He also shows us how to take a

gentler approach, applying less pressure when Scripture leaves room for healthy difference. Doctrine must be defended, the gospel must be proclaimed, and the church must remain unified. What a task we have before us! The wisdom in this book reflects the words of James 3:13–18:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. 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. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Wisdom comes in two forms: earthly and heavenly. One is demonic; one is divine. When it comes to conflict, we need godly wisdom. Every day I pray with my children before school and remind them of the kind of friends God would have us choose. Proverbs 13:20 is our foundational verse: “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.” When it comes to conflict, relationships, doctrine, and our mandate to be faithful to Christ, speaking the truth in love and preserving the bond of peace requires a great deal of wisdom. In these pages, you’ll find a wise friend in Josh. Walk with him as he points you to Scripture. Instead of demonic, selfish, destructive conflict, I think you’ll find the wisdom from above pouring out on your life no matter what kind of conflict you face.

Thank you, Josh, for helping us as we endeavor to honor Christ, love the church, and be unwavering for the truth.

In Christ,
Costi W. Hinn
Teaching Pastor, Shepherd's House Bible Church
President, For the Gospel

CHAPTER 1

THE CONTOURS OF CONFLICT

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

—1 Timothy 6:12

In the pages that follow, I hope to sketch out what I will call a “primer for conflict.” This project is a challenge on many fronts, and even the word *conflict* may give the reader an initial sense of hesitancy. After all, does this focus mean that we *want* conflict? Further, do we want to give the impression that we *encourage* conflict? If our answer to those questions is no, then why dwell on the theme of conflict to the extent of working through a book dedicated to the subject? These are worthwhile questions I would like to briefly address in this opening chapter.

Regarding the general tone of this work, it is not written primarily for the academy of higher education—though I suppose that if there are any insights to be gleaned herein, they would be beneficial in academia as well. I hold great regard for the pursuit of higher education (particularly for theological

higher education) and have accordingly spent a great deal of my adult life in academic pursuits. There is a great need for every generation of the church to work through the doctrines of Scripture thoughtfully and carefully, and Christians have long benefited from robust scholarship in theology.¹

This book, however, is not a treatise on the historical progression of theological thought within the church—though there are certainly insights to be gained from those who have labored before us in such pursuits. We will not exhaustively compare all the relevant theological categories that bear upon the topic of conflict—though there is ample room for further exploring those dynamics as well. Further, this is not solely a practical application manual of devotional stock—though works focusing on practical application and devotional life certainly have their place.

What, then, *is* this work? Simply put, this book is written for Christians and for the churches of which they are a part. It is an effort to address some of the primary forces of conflict confronting the church, and, as such, it is an effort to walk through a robust biblical response to those challenges. We will identify the points at which we experience conflict as Christians, develop relevant examples of how Scripture frames those conflicting forces, and expound our biblically grounded responses to those conflicts. In that regard, you will find plenty of application within the following pages, yet we will not avoid doctrine and theology that determine our application. Theology belongs in the pew as well as the pulpit, and doctrine

1 By *doctrine* we refer to those things taught and held to be true (from Latin *doctrina* and Greek *didachē*), specifically regarding what is held to be true teaching within the church; see Paul R. Fries, “Doctrine,” in Donald K. McKim and David F. Wright, *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith* (Louisville: John Knox, 1992), 106; Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 289.

cannot be separated from the lived experience of those within the Christian church. What follows, then, is a primer (an introductory work of sorts) for encountering conflict in the Christian life and responding in a biblically grounded manner.

By way of definition, when we speak of *conflict* in this biblically focused sense, we refer to a serious, substantive disagreement between two or more parties—a disagreement that often springs from incompatible principles or convictions. By way of example, when there are conflicting testimonies in court, two parties are ostensibly bearing witness to the truth. Yet these opposing parties disagree on the nature and particulars of that truth. Conflict arises in response to these clashes—not in the form of a fistfight or yelling match (which would be rather undesirable *byproducts* of conflict) but as a concerted effort to contend for the truth when it is challenged and opposed.² The following pages represent an effort to walk through the biblical category of conflict, specifically concerning how we recognize and handle conflict in a biblical manner. The word *biblical* is not included here simply to sound pious or to provide a religious veneer. This work aims to be biblical in the sense that, above all else, Scripture drives our thoughts and conclusions in these matters. Indeed, being biblically grounded is the rule and guide for everything we will consider.

As Christians, it is our responsibility to ground every area of our thinking in biblical truth.

All Scripture is breathed out by God [*theopneustos*] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

2 See John F. MacArthur, *The Truth War: Fighting for Certainty in an Age of Deception* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), chapters 2 and 5.

At times, Scripture is quite clear on a subject, perhaps giving a clear command to follow or a clear prohibition to obey. Such clarity does not necessarily mean these things are *easy* (otherwise, sin would be quite rare!), but they are at least *clear*. One may think of the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden: the prohibition against eating it was quite clear (Gen. 2:17), while obeying this clear command does not appear to have been particularly easy (Gen. 3:6).

At other times, Scripture seems less clear. (As an example, one might consider the clear and repeated prohibitions against murder compared to the rather vague and isolated mentions of the Nephilim.) This apparent lack of clarity does not mean that God's Word offers no guidance in that area, but it does mean we must study a bit harder and delve a bit deeper to expose the biblical truth. We are reminded that Scripture is sufficient for all of life, as "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence" (2 Peter 1:3).

We must also allow Scripture to be its own interpreter (something that is sometimes called the *analogia fidei*, the analogy/rule of faith). This means that clear and repeated passages may help us understand passages that are less clear or singular in their occurrence.³ There is an overall clarity or *perspicuity* to Scripture—it reveals truth with sufficient clarity that the child of God may grasp the Word of God by the work of the Spirit of God.⁴ Such clarity does not free us from our need for study, but it does give us incredible hope in our divinely aided capability to understand what we are studying.

3 See, for example, G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis And Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

4 See Martin Luther's *On the Bondage of the Will*, sec. IV.

Christians do not reason as those who are in the dark—we are given Scripture to illuminate our steps (Ps. 119:105), aided by the Spirit (John 16:13).

Even though we recognize that not all of Scripture is equally clear, we must acknowledge that all of Scripture is authoritative—which requires us to be diligent students of the whole Bible.⁵ Christians affirm that God’s Word is authoritative and sufficient in all areas it speaks to—and further, that it speaks to *all* of life. As Cornelius Van Til quite memorably observed, “The Bible is thought of as authoritative on everything of which it speaks. Moreover, it speaks of everything.”⁶ This is a powerful observation. Scripture is the very ground on which we stand, *the* truth by which *all* truth is known and measured. It is the ultimate standard, and it endures without equal. Scripture is not judged or verified by another standard; indeed, every other standard is judged and weighed according to Scripture.

In saying that Scripture is *sufficient*, we mean that it is competent, exhaustive, enough. The Bible is not an antiquated book that requires our enlightened contributions for it to be useful or adequate. Rather, Scripture tells the man and woman of God all that is needed to live a pleasing life before God (Ps. 19:7–14).⁷

The affirmations of the inerrancy, perspicuity, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture are important for the structure of this book. They are not simply disclaimers provided to establish my Christian orthodoxy. Such a claim would likely carry very little water since these terms are often used as a doctrinal shield in

5 See also Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 29,33.

6 Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2003), 19.

7 See also D. A. Carson, ed., *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

various Christian circles (as though affirming inerrancy in some form automatically justifies whatever fevered sentiments might follow). Instead, I make these affirmations to firmly establish why we will be seeking *biblical* guidance to answer the pressing question of how to handle conflict. Thus, there is a theological and presuppositional reason Scripture is our focus. Further, navigating conflict is a vital task for the Christian. As G. K. Chesterton is credited with observing, “Tolerance is the virtue of the man without convictions.”⁸ Christians should tolerate people, but they must not tolerate untruth. Thus, we must learn to address such conflict in a biblical manner.

Were this a more academic work, we might approach this as an exercise in systematic, canonical, or exegetical theology—building a doctrinal category from an examination of the whole testimony of Scripture. Instead, I hope there are some distinct similarities between the flow of this book and the normative teaching methods within the church itself. If the lessons and teachings of the local church aim to methodically expose, explain, and apply Scripture to the lives of Christians, the following chapters should be rather unremarkable in their approach—or, better yet, comfortingly familiar. However, my suspicion is that this biblically grounded reasoning is often absent from many of our pews and pulpits. Against such a trend, Christians are to earnestly seek out biblical guidance on matters of conflict and not merely import our own thoughts or ideas (subsequently trying to make them fit with our pre-existing suppositions). It is incumbent on Christians to be firmly grounded in the study of Scripture.

8 Though Chesterton may not have said these words, he likely would have agreed with them; see Dale Ahlquist, “Believing in Anything,” *Faith & Culture: The Journal of the Augustine Institute*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.faithandculture.com/home/2019/5/29-believing-in-anything>.

We Live in Dark Times

We are all a part of a very big story—one that God has written for His glory and is divinely orchestrating throughout history. Therefore, we may ask, *Where* is this story heading, and *how* do we view conflict within the context of that larger story? These questions are not meant to lead us toward dwelling on the worries of tomorrow, which are, after all, sufficient for tomorrow itself (Matt. 6:34). Nevertheless, we are to deal with conflict in our lives while maintaining a perspective that keeps the *End* (with a capital *E*) in sight—the End being that final day of judgment and vindication toward which we are all inexorably moving. Consideration of the End is not the product of a morbid fascination, nor is it the wild rantings of a man on a street corner waving signs that warn of impending doom (or, at least, not quite yet). On the contrary, reflecting on the End is a thoroughly biblical habit, as even a cursory reading of the New Testament should reveal (see Rom. 14:10–12; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Peter 3:10; Jude 1:6; Rev. 21:1).

Yet reflecting on the last things should not lead us to despair, inaction, or escapism. Keeping the End in mind should not lead us to bunker down in our prayer closet and wait out the apocalypse while hiding from the concerns of this life. Rather, it should give Christians a true sense of our place in this world and clarify the benefit of ordering our lives and passions accordingly. As Martin Luther is credited with observing, “There are two days in my calendar: This Day and That Day.” It occurs to me that many great men of faith regularly reflected on *that day*, and such a consistent habit of looking ahead created both a necessary peace and a necessary urgency in their lives. It also occurs to me that our modern culture has little time for such reflection—even, strikingly, within the church. Accordingly, a robust assessment of *that*

day has the benefit of directly shaping the way we view and handle conflict in *this day*.

By way of clarification, when we speak of the *End* or *that day*, we are speaking about the concept of *eschatology*. Eschatology may be simply defined as the study of the last things, derived from the Greek word *eschatos* (meaning “last” or “final”). Having offered this simple yet expansive definition, we should just as quickly maintain that eschatology concerns far more than just the things of the very End—it involves the sum total of the things that lead to that End. Eschatology clarifies the trajectory of the story that ultimately leads to the culmination of all things, including all the various events that transpire to bring about the story’s conclusion or consummation.⁹ In other words, the things that happen today are not unrelated to the things that occur at the end of the story—they are an integral part of it and weave together to bring about the finale, the conclusion, that which is yet to come. Again, when considering the various forms of conflict we encounter as Christians, we are mindful that these are not isolated or

9 See Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995), 1; Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 906; G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 130. Mathison observes, “Eschatology in a broader sense, however, concerns what Scripture teaches about God’s purposes in Christ for history. As such, eschatology does include a study of the consummation of God’s purposes at the end of history, but it also includes a study of the stages in the unfolding of those purposes. . . . If, for example, the first coming of Christ inaugurated the last days, then a study of biblical eschatology must include a study of Christ’s first advent as well as his second. It must also include a study of God’s preparation in history for the eschatological first advent of Christ. In other words, eschatology must involve a redemptive-historical study of the entire Bible.” Keith A. Mathison, *From Age to Age* (P&R, 2014), 2.

chance occurrences—they are part of a much larger saga that God has written.

Like any well-written novel or screenplay, there are no random occurrences in this narrative. This story is a divinely written story, which is to say it is a *perfectly* written story. It is not perfect in the sense that no bad things happen, as there are undoubtedly tragic and evil things in this world. But it is a perfect story insofar as God is in control of the events and trajectory (Isa. 44:6–8; 45:4–7; 46:9–11) and is ultimately framing those events for His glory (Ps. 72:19; cf. 1 Cor. 10:31) and for the good of those who are His children (Rom. 8:28). Since this story is a perfect story, we thereby know that everything that happens in our lives has profound meaning and value. There are no random occurrences, no accidents in the true sense of the word. Our lives are not capricious, and conflict is not insignificant. Even the evil things in this world have a divine purpose within this perfect story (Genesis 50; Isaiah 8; Acts 4). Even conflict has a divinely appointed purpose. In short, in this story, nothing is wasted.

Something New Yet Not Altogether New

When we consider the myriad concerns that recent years have brought to bear upon the Christian church, there are many seemingly new challenges. Some are not new in the sense that they are unprecedented, but they seem to bring more force to bear or carry more weight than they previously seemed to hold. The church has always experienced theological debates, cultural pressures, and uneven socio-political landscapes—those challenges are not new, yet Christians frequently seem unprepared to address them with any robust, biblically grounded response. I stress *biblically grounded*, as opposed to the quick and reflexive responses in which social media (among other things) has trained us (see James 1:19).

The contemporary church faces daunting challenges, to be sure (e.g., church and state relations, spheres of authority, and matters of conscience), though if they seem new, that is likely true only within the limited and subjective confines of our own experiences. Maybe they have not occurred within our lifetimes, nor even within the lifetimes of our parents or grandparents. For many of us, our sense of historical awareness is a bit narrow in this regard.

Yet we must recognize that something *truly* unprecedented lacks any precedent—it is a legitimately novel occurrence. We often ponder and weigh things against our own personal experiences according to the limitations of our direct fields of vision. Therefore, we tend to relegate any conflicting external realities to the periphery of our consideration. Or, to put it a bit differently, we consider that which is “out of sight” to be “out of mind.” Contemporary challenges are confronted without consideration of what has come before. Whether this is a conscious or subconscious malady is relatively unimportant, as it does not change the frequency of this tendency. What *is* important is that our experiences do not dictate reality—this must be insisted on as a genuinely universal epistemological claim. Conflict is not unprecedented, nor is the biblical guidance that guides our response.

This recognition that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9) may lead us to a more robust sense of biblical (and historical) awareness and give us a resultant bit of comfort. We do well to consider such biblical teachings as the reality that we serve an all-powerful God who possesses “the world and those who dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1–2). God has always held the power over life and death, with no first breath or final breath occurring outside His divine provenance (Deut. 32:39). Within the church, we often speak of God’s divine *sovereignty*

and *providence*—truths that no doubt help us better understand the challenges we face in everyday life.¹⁰

If our times of conflict are not necessarily unprecedented in either a historical or biblical sense (instead, perhaps, only from a personally *experiential* sense, if such a thing is even worth noting), how then ought the Christian respond to conflict? What might be the observable response of the church in a time of daunting challenges and ominous existential threats? What of the conflicts that arise even within our own circles and threaten our unity and fellowship (see Acts 20:29)?

We may confess that the church has often responded to these conflicts with a feeble or unsteady response. Such an observation is not meant to cast stones at fellow believers or judge the decisions of other churches. However, a feeble response to a serious threat is neither wise nor biblical, as the following pages will discuss in more detail. When a toddler's first few steps in this life are unsteady and weak, we work to help the child firmly establish his steps for future growth. We are neither judging the toddler's future nor attacking his character—in fact, the whole process is really quite adorable! Still, we see that his steps are in need of strengthening (or correction), and we therefore endeavor to help him secure a firm footing. We may sympathize with this toddler as he is facing something experientially unprecedented (walking) and is reacting in a way that a lack of precedent will produce (wobbling steps). It is here that we may hope that he is aided by those older than him who have experienced walking before, so that true growth may occur.

10 For example, see J. I. Packer, *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008); John Piper, *Providence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

I would humbly suggest that while these wobbly steps may be quite adorable in the toddler, they should be quite concerning within the church. The toddler is quite right to be walking with such caution and uncertainty. His steps are dangerous without the aid of someone to help him along. He is new to walking, and little can legitimately be expected of him. He is, and is aptly called, a toddler. The church, however, is not a toddler who is unprepared or lacks precedent—indeed, the church is immanently equipped for the conflict we face in this world (Eph. 1:3; 6:10–13). *Unequipped* and *unprepared* are not synonymous in this regard. Christians are equipped for conflict, and we would do well to firmly root ourselves in the biblical response to these sources of conflict so that we may respond in a commendable manner.

The presence of conflict should not surprise the Christian, whether in its content or in the ferocity with which it confronts the church. After all, we have been told to expect troubles in this life (John 16:33). Christians have been given instructions (1 Peter 3:15; 2 Thess. 2:15) and warnings (2 Tim. 4:3–4; Eph. 5:11), and we have been prepared for the conflicts ahead of us. Suppose we experience a sense of disorientation and panic in the face of conflict. That may indicate that we have neglected our preparation for the challenges that are quite natural in this world.

To Battle!

Christians face many sources of conflict in our day, and fresh challenges seem to present themselves on a daily basis. This regular (and rapid) occurrence of potential conflicts can easily result in both mental and spiritual strain. The twenty-four-hour news cycle and global dissemination of news have certainly not helped this sense of pressure. A quick perusal of the news feed on any given day could provide one with plenty of

cause for consternation—high-profile stories of apostasy from Christian artists and leaders, disagreements over doctrine spilling out of the seminary and into social media, governmental mandates regulating the life and practice of the church. The examples could continue for quite some time.

In the face of such looming conflicts that arise both from *within* and *outside* the church house walls (so to speak), it may be tempting to step back and remove oneself from the conflict altogether. After all, one might argue, is not *love* more important than *dogma*? Is not *unity* more important than *theology*? Is not *peace* more important than *principle*? The answer of many Christians to these questions (and the false dichotomies they present) often seems to be a resounding *yes*. When doctrinal issues arise, many answer with an appeal for “no creed but Christ,” a sentiment that may be quite heartfelt but is certainly misguided. Evangelical and Protestant leaders regularly make appeals to “widen the tent” or “keep the main thing the main thing” to include more perspectives within the same fellowship, carrying the unstated implication that doctrine is superfluous or unnecessary. Those with this outlook seem to have decided that dialogue trumps doctrinal debate and fellowship trumps fighting, and this conclusion has led them to abandon doctrinal distinctions altogether in the name of unity. However, these are conclusions that the New Testament writers would have found quite puzzling (see Jude 3, 23).

Certainly, none of us should be engaged in “foolish controversies” (Titus 3:9). There *are* such conflicts we should endeavor to avoid (2 Tim. 2:23–24). Yet how do we determine which conflicts are foolish, and how do we approach the ones that seem to involve serious matters of light and darkness, salvation and damnation? We may consider words attributed to Martin Luther: “If I profess with loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except that little point which

the world and the Devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.” Though the citation to Luther is likely apocryphal (not his actual words, but rather a loose paraphrase), the sentiment of this statement certainly still rings true.¹¹ We cannot simply fight the fights we choose to fight nor the fights we feel particularly passionate about. As good soldiers, we must fight the fights we are *called* to fight. The conclusion is quite powerful: our love for Christ compels us to fight for our King’s truth wherever that battle rages.

We may consider some biblical examples here to help mold our thinking in this regard. In Jude’s epistle, we are reminded that we must be faithful to engage in the conflicts that challenge us, even when those situations do not align with our previous plans and priorities. Consider that though Jude longed to write his “beloved” (*agapētoi*) with encouraging words about their “common salvation,” he instead “found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Jude’s original intention in writing this powerful letter was not to engage in doctrinal conflict, but he was compelled to engage in the battle that confronted him at that time.

Another example comes in Paul’s first letter to Timothy. In that letter, Paul extends these firm words of encouragement and instruction to his friend and disciple: “This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies

11 See Justin Taylor, “Six of My Favorite Quotes Luther Never Actually Said,” TGC Blog, Feb 20, 2014, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/5-quotes-that-luther-didnt-actually-say>. See also Denny Burk, “The Apocryphal Martin Luther,” A Commentary on Theology, Politics, and Culture, Oct 5, 2009, <https://www.dennyburk.com/the-apocryphal-martin-luther>.

previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare” (1 Tim. 1:18). The faithful Christian life is one of spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare is not toxic masculinity or misguided triumphalism; it is simply the consistent setting of biblical Christianity. The call of the gospel is a call to the spiritual battlefield—Paul accordingly uses the same word for warfare (*strateia*) both here and in 2 Corinthians 10:4, giving a strong indication of fierce combat being waged. Paul lauds the power of the gospel and encourages Christian unity, humility, and faithfulness, yet his letter includes these fierce words of militaristic warfare in its introduction. Paul again echoes that sentiment toward the end of his letter, reminding Timothy to “fight the good fight of the faith” (1 Tim. 6:12). The faithful Christian life is one that appropriately yet unflinchingly engages in the conflict with which it is presented.

If we approach conflict in a biblical manner, it rarely suits our own wishes and proclivities (and if it does, we should probably examine our motivations). We do not pick and choose the content and tone of the conflict that will arise; we are simply called to fight the good fight. We may also consider that in the biblical examples we have mentioned, the sources of conflict arose from *within* the church as well as from *outside* it. Handling conflict from outside the church is challenging enough, while handling conflict that arises from within the church is surely even more daunting. It is daunting because most Christians find it difficult to engage in conflict with another who claims the name of Christ. Yet we are reminded that precisely *because* we profess Christ, we do not and cannot run from the battles that confront His people. Christians are called to “love one another” (John 13:34), yet we are also called to “contend for the faith” (Jude 1:3), to “wage the good warfare” (1 Tim. 1:18), and to “fight the good fight” (1 Tim. 6:12). Daunting though the challenge may be, we must faithfully

engage conflicts even when we would not choose such battles on our own.

The Christian walk is not a walk of weakness but of strength. The church would do well to remember that Christians are called to be strong—strong in the strength and might of the Lord, no less (Eph. 6:10). Contrary to many modern portrayals, strength is not a negative trait to be avoided and suppressed but a laudable virtue to be nurtured and practiced (in its proper context and practice, of course). Christians are called to exhibit godly strength and equip themselves for battle against the evil forces in “this present darkness” (Eph. 6:11–12). Far from the attitude of avoiding conflict as a default mentality, Christians are called to nothing less than spiritual warfare—marching not with the staggering steps of a toddler but the strong strides of a soldier prepared for battle.

Scripture likewise assures us that though this conflict is ultimately spiritual in nature, the battle is real and the dangers are palpable. Just because something entails a spiritual reality does not mean it lacks a material manifestation in this world—the work of the cross was most certainly a spiritual battle, while the wood and nails of the crucifixion were quite real physical manifestations of that battle. In other words, recognizing the spiritual quality of Christian conflict is not to dismiss it to a spiritual realm that has no bearing on our lives in this world. If Christians find themselves lacking proper armor for this warfare, unsure of the battle plan, and unfamiliar with the terrain, it is quite possible that they have forgotten the admonitions of Scripture to “be able to stand” (Eph. 6:11). Adequate preparation for conflict is an act of obedience and a responsible measure for Christian living. When these principles are properly applied, preparation for conflict may even be understood as worship.¹²

12 For further, see G K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008).

Christians are called to “take up the whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:13) and, accordingly, to “keep alert with all perseverance” (Eph. 6:18). The task of the Christian is to be prepared for conflict and to persevere with all the strength that God has given them. Christians do not stand on their own. God has prepared Christians for the conflict; therefore, they must persevere through it. How, then, do Christians fight a spiritual battle? Subsequent chapters will develop this concept in greater depth, but a few general admonitions come to mind. To engage in spiritual conflict, Christians are called to faithfully, watchfully, and thankfully continue in ongoing prayer to God (Col. 4:2). Christians do not simply *endure* conflict but are called to have hope and rejoice *during* times of conflict, patiently enduring tribulation in ongoing prayer and worship (Rom. 12:12). Christians are commanded to rely on the life-giving, death-conquering, righteousness-imputing Spirit of God who dwells within them, not on their own strength or competence (Rom. 8:9–11). Christians fight battles knowing that nothing—in all of creation—can separate them from the love of God in Christ (Rom. 8:38–39). In short, Christians are called to fight spiritual battles bravely, unto the glory of God.

This Is Not About Your Shared Fence

It should be apparent by this point that when we speak of conflict in this work, we are talking about something much bigger than minor squabbles and petty disagreements among Christians. Biblical conflict is not an excuse to quarrel about minutia with your pastor nor to insist that others hold your every doctrinal conviction lest they incur the charge of heresy. Biblical conflict, in other words, does not lead you to put on boxing gloves with the intent to harm when you enter the church doors. Christians are not hammers, and every point of potential conflict is not a nail. When we speak of conflict, we are

speaking of the manifestation of *spiritual* conflict—something inherently powerful, consequential, and meaningful. These conflicts often involve things that seem quite this-worldly. Yet we recognize that they represent deeper realities that exist behind and through those events.

In keeping with this perspective, we see that even the minor conflicts we encounter often indicate much larger conflicts that lie beneath the surface. In war, each small bullet that flies through the air is a part of a more significant battle, so to speak. Similarly, minor conflicts are frequently indicative of much larger currents. In our effort to avoid needless confrontation, we often fail to see the larger import of seemingly minor doctrines. What we are considering is less about managing the shared fence with your neighbor (the minor disputes of this life), and more about how to relate to your neighbor in times of overt spiritual conflict.

This study, then, is meant to be a guide for biblically discerning which conflicts are worthy of engaging and how we go about this business of conflict. I suspect that finding battles that one could potentially fight will not be difficult at all for many Christians. I would, in fact, wager to say that these battles have a way of finding us out, whether we seek them or not (see John 16:33; 2 Tim. 3:12). Yet it is not identifying *potential* battles that is our object of consideration; our concern is discerning *which* battles are worth fighting, how to fight them, and what victory should look like in the aftermath.

Admittedly, a study on Christian conflict is quite a broad category to engage. We could easily occupy ourselves in addressing any singular area of conflict at length rather than tackling such an expansive topic. Of necessity, this current approach will survey the lay of the land at quite a high altitude while only occasionally making forays into the hills and valleys of

particular conflicts. Many books have been written on conflict in various forms: conflict in marriage, conflict within the family, and conflict in Christian ministry.¹³ This work seeks to address the general biblical category of conflict because there are inevitable areas in which these topics overlap and intersect with one another, and a biblically informed overarching approach is vital. Christians in recent years have been confronted with conflicts from within and outside the church that have taken many forms and carried many nuances. But these are rarely isolated occurrences—they entail many different spheres of authority, and a robust biblical answer seems to be in order.

It is tempting at this point to courageously sound the note of a battle cry and wave a triumphant flag in the air as we charge headlong into the fray, but a brief word of caution is also in order. If we whip ourselves into a frenzy, helmet tightly secured and sword in hand, and charge out the front door, we run the risk of unleashing our aggression on an unfortunate family member returning from the store with grocery bags in hand. Or, to put it more succinctly, we must be careful where we swing our swords. As John Calvin is credited with observing, “Doctrine without zeal is . . . like a sword in the hand of a madman.”¹⁴ Scripture (and doctrine, by extension) is indeed a sword (Heb. 4:12), but we must be vigilant *when* and *how* we swing its blade.

13 Examples include Michael Hare, *When Church Conflict Happens: A Proven Process for Resolving Unhealthy Disagreements and Embracing Healthy Ones* (Chicago: Moody, 2019); Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006).

14 Full quotation: “Doctrine without zeal is either like a sword in the hand of a madman, or else it lieth still as cold and without use, or else it serveth for vain and wicked boasting.” John Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles, vol. 2* (Bellingham: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 201.

Nothing in our vigilance negates or abrogates our responsibility to carefully weigh our words, to seek truth with caution, and to be “slow to anger” (Prov. 14:29, 19:11; James 1:9), especially toward those who claim the name of Christ. That is not to ignore conflict, particularly concerning the sort of conflict that persistently threatens the church. There is a time to recognize false doctrine and those who propagate it, just as there is a time to use hard words of reproof and rebuke, and those times may be close at hand on several fronts. As we have observed, conflict has a way of finding us out. Yet it is incumbent on Christians that we are careful not to inadvertently cut down a bystander or friend in our zeal. The catastrophe of friendly fire is a danger within the church as well as on the battlefield.

Rightly responding to the conflicts we encounter does not mean we will be exempted from suffering—in fact, the opposite often seems to be the case. God’s people are well-acquainted with well-being and calamity alike, and we should note that God claims sovereign control over both (Isa. 45:7). Living lives that entail suffering is not merely the plight of the Old Testament believer, as if it were something archaic and relegated to a bygone era. On the contrary, Christians today are called to live and thrive amid the trials and hardships of this world (James 1:2–3). Indeed, the history of the Christian church has typically been one of hardship and persecution during times of conflict (see 2 Tim. 3:12). As those who follow the crucified and risen Christ, we should expect to encounter conflict and suffering as we follow in Christ’s footsteps.

Christians are called to battle, and we should not faint when the battle is fierce. Further, we should beware of the impulse of many Christians to immediately claim insight into situations in which precious little substantive investigation has been done—a tendency on which Scripture is certainly not

silent (Ex. 23:1; Deut. 19:15; 1 Tim. 5:19). Christians should be thoughtful in our words and slow to accuse others. This caution does not mean we remain silent indefinitely, but we should not let incendiary words escape unguarded from our mouths without exercising biblical restraint (see James 3:6). Tempting as it might be, we cannot blame these reactionary tendencies exclusively on the advent of smartphones. Still, whatever warnings James may have made about the tongue seem greatly exacerbated by the advent of social media (cf. James 1:9). Our words often fly quite quickly as we react to various pressures around us, and those words can never return to us once they have flown (see Matt. 12:36; Eph. 4:29; Col. 4:6; James 1:26).

If we are acting carefully and prudently, how should we react to the specter of conflict that confronts us? As Christians, we should weigh any accusation against biblical standards of truth—not blindly reacting from our emotions nor immediately trusting media feeds or news headlines but thoughtfully weighing the Scripture against any given matter. We live in a time of brief soundbites, hastily pronounced opinions, and groundless convictions, all of which are quite dangerous to the concept of objective truth. Accusations do not establish truth, and subjective feelings of having been wronged do not *necessarily* mean that a wrong has been committed. Such concerns must be duly and thoughtfully investigated while holding to the standard of truth. Truth is worth defending, and it is by no means uncaring to insist on establishing truth in any situation. Indeed, it must be defended and stood for despite any level of protest.

Accordingly, I am not questioning the wisdom or prudence of wielding our swords, though I do maintain that we must be responsible swordsmen. The sword of Scripture is a good and proper thing—it is our *use* of this sword that is of concern. The

reaction to this can run in two directions. On the one hand, many Christians seem embarrassed that they even have a sword and will go to great lengths to hide it—insisting that its scabbard is made for decorative purposes alone, like some archaic reminder of a primitive faith. As a result, their sword gathers quite a bit of rust and decay in its secluded hiding place, and the Christian is quite horrified when they find themselves unarmed on the battlefield (all their good intentions notwithstanding). On the other hand, other Christians are altogether delighted to have a sword, and they entertain very little regard for proper swordplay, rules of engagement, or even what the delineation of a battle is. As a result, they go about swinging wildly at everything that catches their attention and ultimately do themselves (and any others foolish enough to be close to them) grave harm in their reckless pursuit. To a hammer, everything may resemble a nail; and to a foolhardy swordsman, everything may resemble an enemy worth fighting to the death. This is merely a word of caution at the outset of our discussion that, as we wield the sword of truth in conflict, we must be *competent* swordsmen (2 Tim. 2:15).

Thinking About the End

Stories typically have an overarching point or message—in other words, the story is moving somewhere. A good narrative entails progression and development—there is a reason for what is happening along the way. And for any given story, there is a right and a wrong way to *read* that story. For example, if one reads the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and comes to the conclusion that Sauron is the hero of the story, they have read the story quite wrongly. This is not to say the story is so abundantly clear that it is impossible to misinterpret or misunderstand—one could conceivably read the narrative quite wrongly in any number of ways. One might maintain that

Sauron is representative of the disenfranchised non-human groups that reside outside the bounds of mainstream society in Middle Earth. One may envision Sauron as an intrepid trailblazer leading a grassroots liberation movement intended to inspire orcs to pursue their self-empowerment in a shifting agrarian society. One may even go far afield from the primary characters and speak of the Ents for quite an extended time, effectively forgetting about Sauron altogether. So it is quite possible to be wrong in some very entertaining ways (though it is decidedly less entertaining when these dynamics are applied to doctrinal issues).¹⁵

We need not belabor this point. Most who have encountered the *Lord of the Rings* books have concluded that Tolkien did, in fact, have a story to tell and that Sauron is the antagonist of the saga. Authors have an intentional point behind their writing, and it is the task of the reader to uncover the author's meaning behind their story (something commonly referred to as authorial intent).¹⁶ This may sound quite pedantic and unnecessary to point out. It is clear, you may insist, that Tolkien meant to tell his story in a certain way and surely ridiculous to suggest otherwise. If someone concluded the Tolkien trilogy while wiping tears of grief from their eyes for the defeat of the orcs, lamenting that Sauron's plans were tragically foiled by the meddlesome hobbits, this would surely be cause to assume that they have wildly misread the story (or that other more serious issues are at play).

15 I must credit this observation to Dr. Thorvald Madsen, who, during a discussion about Rudolf Bultmann, observed that the scholar in question was surely quite wrong but that he was wrong in some very fascinating ways.

16 See E.D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge, Landmarks in Christian Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2009).

In a similar vein, when we approach Scripture (or, may I say, when we are *confronted* by Scripture), we should leave that story with a certain conviction about its intention and direction. When we read what Scripture says about the things of the End and all the things that lead to that End, we should gain a certain perspective on how to think about the End. That conviction, that perspective, that conclusion, is an expression of worship. There are related themes to worship in Scripture, such as peace, hope, joy, faith, and confidence, and these are undoubtedly suitable responses as well. Yet some responses are quite incompatible with truly grasping the story of Scripture, such as fear, anxiety, anger, distrust, or hopelessness. If we walk away from Scripture with those responses, we may be sure that we are reading the story quite *wrong*.

It is my contention that a robust and thorough understanding of Scripture will lead us to recognize that Christ truly has triumphed over the evil rulers and authorities of this age (Col. 2:15). So great is the extent of Christ's victory, He has conquered Satan himself (John 12:31; Luke 10:18–19) and defeated the power of death through His own death and resurrection (Heb. 2:14). This biblical description of the End is certainly hopeful—rather than the warning cry of fear, it is a resounding cry of victory. A reading of Scripture that fails to grasp this triumphant hope may well caution us that we are not truly grasping the biblical story we are a part of. This conclusion is indelibly tied to the central unifying theme of *authority*: Christ holds all authority, delineates and appoints all lesser authorities, and speaks authoritatively through the words of Scripture. Conflicts that subsequently arise (whether from within or outside) must be weighed against the authority of Scripture, as every earthly authority submits to the sovereign authority of God.

Accordingly, the following pages will walk through the biblical category of conflict while keeping these related themes in mind. We encounter conflict with the recognition that we live in dark times, times that the writers of the New Testament variously described as the “last days” (Heb. 1:2) or “last hour” (1 John 2:18). We are called to new challenges and conflicts in these last days—new in regard to our own experience but not new in the sense of having no precedent. As we have noted, Scripture is sufficient to speak to these challenges, and few conflicts are genuinely unprecedented in any true sense.

Conflict should therefore be no surprise to the Christian. We recognize that we are inherently called to conflict as Christians, as our Christian walk is often described using the language of battle and warfare. The task of the Christian, then, is not to weigh *whether* we engage in conflict but *how* we are to engage in conflict in a manner that honors God. Likewise, Christians engage in these conflicts mindful that no conflict is random or meaningless, rather recognizing that they are integral parts of a story of cosmic significance. This is a story divinely authored, one that ends in victory, gives hope to those involved, and proclaims the glory of God. This must be our conviction and impetus as we weigh the Christian response to conflict in this age.

In keeping with the aims we have just described, the following chapters will work through various areas of conflict that the Christian may encounter. Chapter 2 will discuss the dynamics of conflict that arise from within our own camp as Christians. How are we to be discerning, careful, and shrewd toward those in our own circles while still maintaining a constructive attitude of fellowship and unity?

Chapter 3 discusses conflicts that arise from outside the church. The discussion of authority in this world and how the

Christian is to relate to those authorities is essential in considering external conflicts. This chapter will also discuss how Christians are to speak boldly and prophetically to a culture and society that makes no pretense of following God, a situation of growing consequence for Christians in the West.

Chapter 4 discusses necessary conflict. What hills are worth dying on, and how do we identify the battlefields we are to occupy? Are all doctrinal conflicts worthy of the same level of intensity and zeal, and how do we make such determinations? This challenge of discernment provides Christians with an excellent opportunity to weigh the issues of primary importance (those things foundational to our faith) alongside doctrines that should carry less weight.

Chapter 5 follows with a discussion of principled conflict, examining the manner in which Christians engage in conflict. How do we approach those who hold doctrinal views that differ from our own? The principles from which we operate are the ground on which we stand, and these principles form the tone and content of our responses. Further, this chapter discusses some of the consequences of engaging in conflict along with some practical encouragement for how to not only survive conflict but to thrive in the midst of it.

Reflection Questions for Chapter 1

- What do you think of when you hear the word *conflict*? What about when you hear such phrases as *church conflict*, *doctrinal conflict*, or *Christian conflict*? Why do you think you hear those words in such a way?
- How does this chapter define conflict? Why is it important to have a doctrinal category for conflict?
- Why is it so important for us to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture?
- What is eschatology, and how can it help us understand the biblical category of conflict?
- Do you think most Christians consider themselves involved in battle? How does a battle mindset impact the way we approach areas of conflict?
- Christians are called to properly engage in conflict where the battle rages. What areas of the faith do you find difficult to defend? What areas do you feel particularly passionate about? Why do you think that is?
- How does it encourage the Christian to consider that conflict is a manifestation of the spiritual battle Christ has won? How may we be encouraged in the conflicts of this life, knowing that we follow a victorious Christ?