

Book Review

Hope in the Face of Conflict: Making Peace with Others in the Way God Makes Peace With Us

Kenneth C. Newberger

(Three Sons Publishing, SDM, 2009) 392 pages

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Conflict resolution dominates a large segment of the publishing world, with applications in literally every field of study. Leadership training in areas as diverse as elementary education, nursing, the military, and ministry focus on the subject as a key element in improving working relationships, productivity, and emotional health in the workplace. And education received here is often translated to the home environment, as well. Understanding conflict dynamics and improving resolution skills together form one of the most necessary areas of training, and if not the least offered, then certainly the least mastered.

So, another book on the subject, particularly from a Christian perspective, is certainly welcome. Ken Newberger’s *Hope in the Face of Conflict* attempts to offer a new model of peacemaking, based on the author’s own 12-step process. He calls it the “Judeo-Christian Model of Peacemaking,” an ambitious title, indeed. The premise calls humans to follow the example of peace-making initiated by the Father in offering reconciliation to people. So far, so good. After all, who can argue with a detailed incarnation of “What would Jesus do?”

To his credit, Newberger offers a thorough treatment of the subject, with plentiful Scripture documentation and a variety of real-life stories for application. The book includes an impressively lengthy list of

works cited (though not some of the academic standards in the field), as well as a helpful subject index. Perhaps the strongest part of the book, Stage 7, teaching one how to make a genuine apology, stands alone as a transferable concept.

Unfortunately, Newberger’s model, in this writer’s opinion, is inherently flawed, due to his interpretation of Matthew 18. He contends that the principles of Matthew 18:15-17 apply only in cases of unrepentant sin and that the witness must be a first-hand witness to the offense.¹ He overlooks the fact that all conflict is not caused by sin, and simply disagrees with most conflict teaching, which agrees that verse 16 refers to an impartial person, not necessarily a witness. He addresses this in chapter 6 of the book, almost as an aside to the discussion. But his take on this passage influences his reach for an alternative resolution model.

The alternative, his Judeo-Christian model, is, ironically, complex in itself, while simultaneously adding to the complexity of any conflict resolution process. Newberger requires the use of a mediator from the outset (stages 1 and 2). He assumes that any private attempts to solve the conflict have been superficial and ineffective.² And while justifying the use of said mediator, the author never actually tells how to do the immersion process he advocates of the mediator.

The entire process stands solely on the work of a mediator, so much so that one entire stage (9) is called “Faith in the Mediator.” Perhaps the book would more honestly be sub-titled “The Use of Mediators in Peacemaking.” Mediation is a valid and useful part of conflict resolution, but it is also a secondary application. Newberger never makes this assertion; instead, he insists on the use of the mediator.

Stage 5, “Humanizing One Side to the Other,” presents another difficulty with the book. Personalization – making the conflict about the evil character of the other person – occurs frequently in conflict. Newberger’s attempt to deal with this malady seems overly-involved and could actually exacerbate the problem. He takes to task classic, helpful books on the subject,³ as violating the theology of the image of God. These authors would be appalled at such a claim, as that intent does not appear either explicitly or implicitly in either text.

One of the most problematic sections of the book is Stage 10 and Newberger’s dogmatic teaching on forgiveness. He insists that there can be no forgiveness without repentance. He supports the idea with scriptural distortion that makes it all the more dangerous. Besides the hurdle this represents for conflict not based in sin (e.g., a problem to solve, misperception, disagreements, miscommunication), it also complicates the resolution process for people who deal with offenses without benefit of the offender’s participation.

Thankfully, the author includes (in chapter 5) a list of alternative responses to conflict. His Judeo-Christian Model is just too involved to be practical in all but the most complex conflict scenarios. The book would be interesting and selectively helpful to an advanced student of conflict studies, but it is not recommended for a lay reader or as one’s sole introduction to the subject of conflict resolution.

¹ Newberger, Kenneth. “The Misapplication of Matthew 18.” http://www.resolvechurchconflict.com/church_discipline.htm.

² Newberger, Kenneth. *Hope in the Face of Conflict* (Three Sons Publishing, 2009), 65.

³ Newberger points to Marshall Shelley’s *Well-Intentioned Dragons* and Ken Haugk’s *Antagonists in the Church*.