

Standing in the Breach: Conflict Transformation and the Practice of Preaching

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Abstract: *In an era of social and political polarization, the question of how to preach amid divided communities looms large. The field of conflict transformation, which emerged as a corrective to earlier conflict resolution and management models, offers new insight into how conflict might serve as a constructive catalyst for change. Conflict transformation provides perspectives and orientations to conflict that are useful to homiletics—but which also challenge assumptions about conflict that are present in the church and in the larger society. This essay introduces secular and Christian approaches to conflict transformation and analyzes some of their implications for preaching, including the claims that conflict is not sinful and could be a way in which God is acting in the world, that conflict transformation requires broad participation and not top-down solutions, and that restoration of right relationships can be more important to conflict transformation than coming to agreement.*

Just before Christmas in 2016, M. Craig Barnes penned a column titled “Why I worry about the pastors of politically divided churches.” In light of the political and social schisms laid bare by the 2016 election, Barnes wrote, “The pastor stands in the pulpit struggling to say something that’s both unifying and prophetic. It’s easy to gloss over the divisive issues of a congregation with a declaration about spiritual unity, and it’s easy to make a congregation afraid of the ‘them’ who are to blame for our problems. But it’s very difficult to preach to a divided ‘us.’”¹

Barnes’ column was one of many pieces on the challenges of preaching that were published following the election of Donald Trump. An Episcopal priest in Greensboro, NC, wrote a column for *Slate* about the tribulations of writing his first sermon after the election.² In his piece in the *Journal for Preachers*, “Renounce, Resist, Rejoice: Easter Preaching in the Age of Trump,” Michael Coffey began, “The task of preaching, at least in my lifetime, has never felt more challenging, profound, and necessary as it does now in the age of Trump.”³ At least three related books have also been published: O. Wesley Allen, Jr.’s *Preaching in the Era of Trump* and Frank A. Thomas’ *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, and Leah Schade’s *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red/Blue Divide*.⁴

¹ M. Craig Barnes, “Why I Worry about the Pastors of Politically Divided Churches,” *The Christian Century*, December 20, 2016, accessed February 4, 2017, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/why-i-worry-about-pastors-politically-divided-churches>.

² Bernard J. Owens, “Light of the World: Writing My First Sermon for the Age of Trump,” *Slate*, February 1, 2017, accessed February 4, 2017, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/faithbased/2017/02/an_episcopal_priest_on_writing_his_first_sermon_of_the_trump_presidency.html.

³ Michael Coffey, “Renounce, Resist, Rejoice: Easter Preaching in the Age of Trump,” *Journal for Preachers* 41, no. 3 (2018): 3–9.

⁴ O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *Preaching in the Era of Trump* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2017); Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018); Leah D. Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018). Allen more specifically addresses social division wrought by the 2016 election, while Thomas takes a broader view of prophetic and moral

The political and social polarization that has pushed dramatically to the center of life in the United States has not made things easy for pastors and preachers, especially those ministering to divided communities or who feel at odds with their congregations. But preaching in the midst of conflicted or divided communities—or preaching about controversial topics—has never been simple. The 2004 *Listening to Listeners* study of preaching found that “The vast majority of listeners...give strong authorization for preaching related to controversial issues and reveal a very strong desire for their pastors to preach more often about difficult matters of life and faith.”⁵ However, one of the study’s advisory board members, Lee Ramsey, acknowledged that many preachers “simply do not accept this [finding about preaching and conflict] as true.” Ramsey theorized that pastors reject the finding for reasons including a fear of conflict, an unwillingness to engage controversial concerns from the pulpit, and the desire to be liked.⁶ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale offers similar reasons preachers avoid or fear becoming “prophetic witnesses”⁷: fear of conflict, fear of dividing a congregation, fear of being disliked or rejected, and feelings of inadequacy in addressing prophetic concerns.⁸

Few homiletic resources urge preachers to eschew difficult topics in sermons; there seems to be general agreement that preachers have a responsibility to address pressing issues of the day in light of the gospel, divisive or not. Oddly, though, few homiletic resources directly assess the dynamics of conflict in relationship to preaching—or how unexamined beliefs about conflict may be connected to our preaching pitfalls.⁹

This essay proposes engaging *conflict transformation* as a resource for homiletics. Within the larger field of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, conflict transformation is a re-assessment of the values and assumptions we bring to conflict, and of the effects those assumptions have on conflict goals and outcomes. From a theological perspective, conflict transformation claims that Christian orientations to conflict are underdeveloped and in need of deeper reflection and understanding in order to be effective and faithful. Conflict transformation examines the nature of conflict itself, as well as how we respond to it practically, theologically, and homiletically. In this essay I give an overview of conflict transformation, highlighting specific insights from Christian scholars and practitioners, and suggest implications of these for preaching.

The Emergence of Conflict Transformation

The field of conflict resolution began in the 1950s and 1960s as an approach to conflict rooted in processes of diplomacy, dialogue, and problem-solving that would end conflict and

preaching in light of racism, white supremacy, inequality, and other realities that led in part to Trump’s popularity. Schade is focused on churches that are divided socially and politically, especially over controversial justice issues.

⁵ Mary Alice Mulligan et al., *Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 92.

⁶ Ronald J. Allen and Mary Alice Mulligan, “Listening to Listeners: Five Years Later,” *Homiletic* 34, no. 2 (January 1, 2009): 8–9, note 6.

⁷ Tisdale describes prophetic preaching as “challenging the status quo” and “concerned with the evils and shortcomings of the present social order”; requiring the preacher to “name both what is not of God in the world (criticizing) and the new reality God will bring to pass in the future (energizing)”; and inciting courage in the hearers, empowering them to “work to change the social order.” Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13–19.

⁹ Stephen Farris noted that despite a wealth of publications about *church* conflict, he was aware of only one book on *preaching* in situations of conflict William Willimon’s *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987). Stephen C. Farris, “Preaching for a Church in Conflict,” in *The Folly of Preaching: Models and Methods*, ed. Michael Knowles (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 140–153.

restore relationships.¹⁰ Over the years, models of conflict “resolution” and “management” focused on the fundamental needs of the parties involved, and tended to prioritize control, containment and settlement of disputes. In recent decades, scholars and practitioners have criticized such models for their perceived lack of attention to power imbalances and structural injustices.¹¹ Among other things, these scholars argued, focusing on negotiating immediate needs left underlying systemic and relational patterns unaddressed.¹²

As a result of these and other concerns, a new approach, conflict *transformation*, began to develop.¹³ Conflict transformation scholars note that conflicts are not discrete, isolated events between parties but are embedded in relational systems, patterns of engagement, and social structures.¹⁴ As a corrective to previous models, transformational approaches more explicitly take into account contextual realities, with an eye toward addressing asymmetrical power imbalances and injustice. Conflict transformation is thus “a process of engaging with and transforming the relationships, interests, discourses, and, if necessary, the very constitution of society that supports the continuation of violent conflict.”¹⁵

Where earlier models understood conflict to be both intrinsically negative and preventable, conflict transformation scholars consider conflict a natural part of life in human society—an inevitable result of differences of culture, belief, and experience that in proximity produce tension.¹⁶ Conflict itself simply *is*; it is part of human existence. But our responses to it can be constructive or destructive.¹⁷ In this light, conflict need not be a force to be feared and controlled, but can be “a *positive force* to be embraced and harnessed for its potential to ‘open the door’ [to] genuinely meaningful outcomes and real closure, and—equally or more important—restoration of the parties’ sense of both strength and connection.”¹⁸ Conflict can be seen as a “necessary element in transformative human construction and reconstruction of social organization and realities,”¹⁹ and thus “a vital agent or catalyst for change.”²⁰ The ebb and flow of conflict can bring “life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships.”²¹

¹⁰ Diana Francis, *People, Peace and Power: Conflict Transformation in Action* (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2002), 6.

¹¹ Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict and Conflict Transformation,” in *Making Peace With Conflict: Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation*, ed. Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Lawrence Ressler (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 35.

¹² Ellen Ott Marshall, ed., “Introduction: Learning Through Conflict, Working for Transformation,” in *Conflict Transformation and Religion: Essays on Faith, Power, and Relationship* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 2.

¹³ I am indebted here to Ellen Ott Marshall’s synthesis (Ibid., 3–6.)

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵ Hugh Miall, “Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task,” in *Transforming Ethnopolitical Conflict: The Berghof Handbook*, ed. Alex Austin, Martina Fischer, and Norbert Ropers (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2004), 3–4, accessed April 4, 2017, http://edoc.vifapol.de/opus/volltexte/2013/4682/pdf/miall_handbook.pdf.

¹⁶ Thomas W. Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation: Creating a Culture of Justpeace* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 2010), 13.

¹⁷ Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 30–31.

¹⁸ Robert A. Baruch Bush and Joseph P. Folger, *Promise of Mediation: The Transformative Approach to Conflict* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2005), 256.

¹⁹ John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 17.

²⁰ Miall, “Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task,” 4.

²¹ John Paul Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation: Clear Articulation of the Guiding Principles by a Pioneer in the Field* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003), 14.

While conflict transformation doesn't sideline resolution of the presenting conflict, it emphasizes relational connection as an intrinsic part of lasting solutions and social change.²² Practitioners note, for example, that settlements negotiated externally by third parties are less likely to create durable peace because the groups directly involved have little buy-in and there is no mechanism by which to speak truthfully about wrongdoing or to work toward healed relationships.²³ For systemic and structural change to take hold, participants across various levels of society, from high-level leaders to grassroots activists, need access to the process and its outcomes. Isolated, high-level negotiating processes, along with lack of attention to middle and bottom-up expertise and involvement, leave parties in conflict without sustainable agreements.²⁴ Conflict transformation, by contrast, emphasizes multilayered processes that work toward positive change in the relationships among all who are affected.

Christian Perspectives on Conflict Transformation

Christians who work in conflict transformation have put these theories into conversation with the life of the church. Paralleling the secular belief that conflict is always negative, Christian scholars note that one of the primary *theological* barriers to conflict transformation is the presumption that conflict is sinful. "There tends to be a common and rather strong perspective within Christian circles that conflict represents the presence of sin," says Mennonite scholar John Paul Lederach.²⁵ One reason for this perspective is that conflict is often difficult and painful. "Conflict...is rarely neat and nice or full of warm, fuzzy feelings. There is much about conflict that is just plain messy, chaotic, and anxiety-filled," writes Carolyn Schrock-Shenk. "Often the presence of these reactions has led us to believe conflict is negative precisely because it gives rise to such feelings."²⁶ Rather than acknowledging these feelings as normal and focusing on responding to them in positive ways, we have "determined that their existence means God is neither present nor pleased when there is conflict."²⁷ Christian conflict transformation scholars reject this negative theological interpretation of conflict, saying:

God created this world with no two snowflakes alike and no two human beings alike. Everyone is unique. God adds to this incredible world of difference the freedom to make choices. Then God puts us all into relationship with one another. We are all interconnected, interdependent. What arises naturally from this reality? Yes, conflict! It is part of the created order which God declares "very good...."²⁸

Not only is conflict imbedded in a diverse creation, claim scholars, but *constructive* conflict can be a way God is active in the world. Opposition to injustice, oppression, and evil always involves conflict, and conflict can be a source of energy to change patterns, structures,

²² Stephen W. Littlejohn and Kathy Domenici, *Communication, Conflict, and the Management of Difference* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2007), 243–244.

²³ Francis, *People, Peace and Power*, 39–40.

²⁴ John Paul Lederach, "Journey from Resolution to Transformative Peacebuilding," in *From the Ground Up: Mennonite Contributions to International Peacebuilding*, ed. Cynthia Sampson and John Paul Lederach (Oxford University Press, 2000), 52.

²⁵ John Paul Lederach, *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2014), 67.

²⁶ Schrock-Shenk, "Introducing Conflict," 33.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 33–34.

²⁸ Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 14.

and people toward right relations and *shalom*.²⁹ Conflict also has the potential to open us to new truth and understanding: “We can begin to understand conflict settings as holy ground, as places where God is present in powerful ways, as opportunities to gain new insight and understanding. Imagine how different our conflicts would be if we could move from an ‘Oh dear, how terrible’ to ‘What is God trying to say to us?’”³⁰ Dealing with conflict can bring out and develop spiritual gifts, such as vulnerability, openness, compassion, and humility. It can even foster experiences of the presence and participation of God: “Conflict can help me understand, like nothing else, my dependence upon something beyond myself, and my interdependence with others—in short, my need for assistance from God and neighbor. . . . The more I work with conflict the more I am aware that this is where God is most fully present.”³¹

Preaching Conflict Transformation

Across multiple frameworks and situations from workplace mediation to international warfare, conflict transformation advocates claim that conflict is normal and inevitable, that conflict holds constructive possibilities for change, that conflict is embedded in systems and contexts, and that key to conflict’s transformation is the restoration of just and whole relationships among those involved. These convictions emerged as correctives and challenges to existing values and practices in the larger field of conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Similar assessment is needed throughout the church. “In the absence of intentional learning, we [in the church] have picked up society’s ‘fight, flee or sue’ responses to conflict,” writes Schrock-Shenk. “We have seldom been taught how to be proactive in conflict and to understand that conflict transformation is a deeply spiritual task that demands commitment, discipline, new skills, much practice, and constant vigilance from each of us.”³² Putting conflict transformation into conversation with homiletics prompts rethinking and reimagining about the values and objectives we bring to preaching in situations of conflict. Three assertions from conflict transformation have particular implications for homiletical (and possibly ecclesial) approaches to conflict: 1) that conflict itself is not intrinsically sinful or destructive (but that our response to it matters); 2) that effective and lasting peacebuilding requires broad participation in its creation and implementation; and 3) that the quality of relationships, not settlement or resolution *per se*, should be prioritized in conflict interaction.

1. “Be angry, but do not sin...” (Ephesians 4:26)

Of all of the challenges conflict transformation poses to church norms, the idea that conflict could be a *good* thing—or at the very least is not always bad—might be the most difficult for us in the church to swallow. In his book *Reconcile*, Lederach composed a mostly tongue-in-cheek list of “unspoken commandments” for churches in conflict. It includes items like “Thou shalt be nice,” “Thou shalt not listen to thine enemy but shalt prepare thy defense while the enemy is still speaking,” and “Speak not with contentious folk who disagree with thee ... [but] seek out and talk to others about them.”³³ The list pokes fun at church behavior, but

²⁹ Ibid. Marshall notes that practitioners are not claiming that everything we tend to *associate* with conflict—such as violence and war—is natural and necessary; they are saying that conflict itself is unavoidable, and “how we respond to these moments and circumstances of conflict warrants moral assessment and action” (Ellen Ott Marshall, “Conflict, God and Constructive Change: Exploring Prominent Christian Convictions in the Work of Conflict Transformation,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 61, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 2–3.).

³⁰ Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 34.

³¹ Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 17.

³² Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 34.

³³ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 144–145.

Lederach's larger concern is that "Too often we adjust our theology to match what we actually do," rather than the reverse.³⁴ Christian conflict transformation theorists and practitioners press the church and its leaders to ask more deliberately what we believe about conflict, and what is driving that belief. Ellen Ott Marshall writes, "For Christians involved in this work, theology informs *and is informed by* the study and practice of conflict transformation," including "critical examination of theological convictions that discourage Christians from addressing conflict."³⁵

For preachers who are considering how to address conflict situations, the idea that conflict might be something other than destructive or sinful provides a catalyst for more fully considering what we believe about the purpose and potential of conflict in a diverse world. Perhaps in our unexamined impulse to bring tensions to a close, we offer simplistic views of beatific unity in Christ without seriously considering power dynamics or historical oppression that have caused rents in ecclesial fabric. Maybe our dislike of conflict and the assumption that it results from sin has led to silencing or avoiding situations that needed to be named or changed.

Ephesians 4:26 suggests that anger is not the same as sin—and that some things are worth being angry about. How we deal with our anger and how we respond when there is brokenness between us are deep matters of faith. Lederach writes that signs of sin entering conflict appear "...when we want to be God, when we assume superiority, when we oppress, when we try to lord it over others, when we refuse to listen, when we discount and exclude others, when we hold back deep feelings, when we avoid, when we hate, and when we project blame with no self-reflection."³⁶ Most preachers would easily agree that hate, exclusion, and oppression have no place in a sermon. But it might be harder to accept the idea that it is sin to avoid or to hold back deep feelings, or to assert certain kinds of authority in conflict. Can we let go of our earnest desires—and temptations—to provide answers, to say just the right thing, to render a holy verdict, to sound wise and "prophetic"? As Schrock-Shenk writes, "The measure for whether a response is constructive is not whether conflict lessens. Rather, the criteria are whether the response moves the situation toward more justice *and* the people involved toward right and equal relationships."³⁷ Could we endeavor in our sermons to model the open, collaborative, and constructive responses to conflict that we want to see throughout the life of the church?

2. "The members of the body that seem weaker are indispensable..." (1 Corinthians 12:22)

The interconnectedness of the body of Christ that Paul describes, where all are members one of another, correlates to a major premise of conflict transformation: conflict situations are not isolated incidents but are interconnected with systems and structures across all levels of society. They are not easily resolved with "imposed" solutions from the top down or from the outside in; they require engagement with the context and norms of the situation, and must empower the people themselves to have a voice in solutions. As Diana Francis puts it, "To work for conflict transformation at any level... involves ensuring that those who have been the subjects of structures of domination discover and develop the power to participate in what affects them."³⁸

Peacebuilder Ron Kraybill distinguishes between models of *arbitration*, in which a third party listens to both sides and pronounces a solution, and *mediation*, in which a facilitator helps the parties themselves express to each other the nature of their conflict and make decisions about

³⁴ Ibid., 146.

³⁵ Marshall, "Conflict, God and Constructive Change," 3.

³⁶ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 67–68.

³⁷ Schrock-Shenk, "Introducing Conflict," 31. Emphasis mine.

³⁸ Francis, *People, Peace and Power*, 8.

how to proceed.³⁹ Kraybill acknowledges that arbitration has its place, but contends that truly transformative mediation empowers the people involved, encouraging them to take responsibility, fostering in them a greater sense of investment, and reducing their dependence on others—all of which are “more likely to resolve the specific conflict since both parties have a say in the solution.”⁴⁰ Using a slightly different frame, Lederach delineates *nonviolent advocacy*, in which advocates argue for one side for the purpose of justice, and *mediation*, in which the mediator stays connected to both sides *also* for the purpose of justice. At issue is ensuring that the needs and interests of those affected by conflict are legitimated and articulated (which often happens through advocacy), in order to restructure relationships toward increased equality, justice, and mutually acceptable solutions (often through mediation).⁴¹ These activities “overlap, complement, and, more importantly, are mutually supportive and dependent.”⁴² *Both* are needed in the transformation of conflict, and *both* are aimed at bringing all necessary voices to the table. In different ways, Kraybill and Lederach affirm each of these roles while making strong cases for the long-term benefits and durable change that emerges from conflict transformation approaches.

As preachers assess how to address conflict in a sermon, they might discern between the roles of *advocate* (articulating needs and interests of one side, most often those who are unheard, forgotten, or powerless), *arbitrator* (pronouncing a verdict as a third party), or *mediator* (working to restructure relationships by empowering the parties toward conflict transformation). In so doing, preachers need to consider how they understand their relationship to the congregation. Literature on prophetic preaching in particular seems to set the preacher *over against* the congregation by framing how to preach *to* a divided America, how to preach prophetically *to* hearers, how to prepare a dangerous sermon *for* the people. But the *Listening to Listeners* study showed that in situations of controversy, listeners were not generally interested in getting “answers” from the pulpit. Instead, they showed a “longing for an authentic word from preachers who are willing to risk and join with others in the difficult task of understanding God’s way amid life’s challenges and crises.”⁴³

Conflict transformation offers preachers a way to think about their role in new ways. In conflict transformation, the attention is not on the mediator but is focused on the parties in conflict as the primary problem-solvers—and problem *describers*. “Transformative mediators concentrate on empowering parties to define issues and decide settlement terms for themselves, and on helping parties to better understand one another’s perspectives,” write Robert Bush and Joseph Folger.⁴⁴ Conflict transformation reflects the conviction that parties *themselves* have the capacity and desire to move toward constructive interaction and to find solutions together. Further, the experience of greater clarity, confidence, openness and understanding on their own terms is “likely to have more meaning and significance for parties than outcomes generated by mediator directiveness, however well-meant.”⁴⁵ Understood in this way, conflict transformation

³⁹ Ronald S. Kraybill, *Peace Skills: A Manual for Community Mediators* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 26.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 26–27.

⁴¹ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 14–15.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴³ Mulligan et al., *Believing in Preaching*, 91–92. Rather than telling them what to think, parishioners hoped preachers would help them learn how “to think through issues” with the eyes of faith (*Ibid.*, 98.). In fact, listeners “rarely express a desire to hear their pastor or preacher represent a particular viewpoint when speaking about controversial or challenging issues” (*Ibid.*, 97.).

⁴⁴ Bush and Folger, *The Promise of Mediation*, 35.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 70–72. It is important to note that the conversational preaching models I describe do not imagine the preacher simply facilitating the process for others, but as a participant in the conversation and interpretation. Still, emphasis on the empowerment and capacity of the parties involved seems worthy of consideration, and echoes homiletical inductive methods.

aligns with some conversational approaches to preaching, not only because such approaches emphasize the inclusion of multiple voices, but because they “share a commitment to empower a genuine sense of shared responsibility for the preaching and worship of the church among those gathered.”⁴⁶ For example, Lucy Rose has critiqued models of preaching that distance the preacher from the congregation, instead claiming from her experience of connection and solidarity that “the preacher and the congregation are not separate entities but a community of faith.”⁴⁷ She rejects the idea that the preacher has a message for the hearer in the pew to receive, and sees the pastor and congregation as interdependent and joining in common discipleship.⁴⁸ John McClure emphasizes collaborative pastoral leadership that empowers congregations, and proposes a related preaching method in which the actual conversations of the congregation become the substance of the sermon.⁴⁹ These conversational approaches are not simply means to a sermon end or hospitable orientations to communal congregational faith development. Proponents argue that these are the ways in which the community members—including the preacher—*together* come to know and hear the Word of God. For Rose and McClure (and others), it is within and through the community that the Word of God is *revealed*—not descending from on high, but emerging between and among the members of community *in their interactions with each other*.

These parallels between conflict transformation and conversational preaching can be interpreted in different ways. An initial assessment might see conversational approaches to preaching as providing helpful *methods* for dealing with conflict situations in congregations or for attending to controversial issues in ways that allow for the voices of the congregation to be heard. But a more challenging possibility also exists: might the critiques conversational preaching makes about homiletics, and the critiques conflict transformation makes within conflict theory, be signs that comparable problems of power and authority plague both fields and require greater attention and reevaluation?

3. “*First be reconciled to your brother or sister...*” (Matthew 5:24)

One of conflict transformation’s most significant shifts from the rest of the conflict field is its focus on constructive interaction and relationship between parties *as a goal*. Marshall writes, “Resolution of particular issues may indeed be part of the process, but transformation pushes for ‘deep-rooted, enduring, positive change in individuals, relationships, and the structures of the human community.’”⁵⁰ As conflict escalates, it generates a sense of weakness and incapacity among those involved, and parties become more self-protective, suspicious, hostile, and closed. “With or without the achievement of agreement,” Bush and Folger write, “the help parties most want, in all types of conflict, involves helping them end the vicious circle of disempowerment, disconnection, and demonization—alienation from both self and other.”⁵¹ In the end, the deep

⁴⁶ David J. Lose, “Preaching as Conversation,” in *Under the Oak Tree: The Church as Community of Conversation in a Conflicted and Pluralistic World*, ed. Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 72.

⁴⁷ Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 89.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁹ John S. McClure, *Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 50.

⁵⁰ Marshall, “Introduction: Learning Through Conflict, Working for Transformation,” 5. Marshall quotes Kraybill, *Peace Skills*, 5.

⁵¹ Bush and Folger, *The Promise of Mediation*, 52–53.

desire of those in conflict is to reestablish positive interaction and to feel competent and connected again; this is what conflict transformation seeks to achieve.

Christian conflict transformation theorists and practitioners offer theological backing to this perspective. Schrock-Shenk points to intrinsic human interconnectedness, noting, “We were created to be connected, both with God and with each other. We fear losing that connection when conflict bursts into our lives.”⁵² While conflict can lead to pain, violence, and disconnection, she continues, *constructive* conflict “can bring surprising new growth and intimacy and understanding to our relationships.”⁵³ Porter suggests that working through conflict is a way to know God better, as well. He asks, “What if we believed that the ‘enemy’ was an opportunity to see ourselves, our world, and even our God in new ways? This belief would significantly change the way we approach conflict.”⁵⁴ Participants in conflict transformation have experienced deep spiritual and relational growth that occurs through the cultivation of vulnerability, humility, compassion, and honesty needed to truly engage those on the “other side.” Some describe conflict as opening holy ground or a holy path, creating an opportunity for revelation, encounter, and transformation with God and other people. In other words, as conflict transformation focuses on the rebuilding of the relationship between the parties—including the restoration of their sense of strength and empowerment—it carries with it other outcomes that feel transformational and even revelatory beyond the conflict situation itself.

Christian theorists frequently turn to language of *reconciliation* as theological grounding. “Reconciliation is about the transformation of people and their relationships,” writes Lederach. “It means change, moving from isolation, distance, pain and fear toward restoration, understanding, and growth. As shown often in the Bible story, the basic purpose of God acting in history is reconciliation.”⁵⁵ Homiletician Richard Lischer also sees reconciliation as the *missio Dei*: “The mystery of God, captured in a message about what God has done, is now entrusted to us. And what God has done, on both a macro- and a microcosmic scale, is reconciliation.”⁵⁶ For Lischer, that reconciliation is the focus of God’s action and purpose means that it should also be the impulse of preaching. His blunt question, then, is also the question around which this essay has been dancing: “How can our sermons participate in God’s big plan? How can they rightfully become instruments of reconciliation?”⁵⁷ This is not a typical question for homileticians, who more frequently discuss the theology of proclamation or persuasion, the dynamics of heralding the Word of God, or the importance of giving testimony. Yet Lischer’s question is especially significant when we find ourselves at a loss preaching to congregations in crisis and conflict. We can ask, *how can sermons rightly become instruments of reconciliation?* But conflict transformation asks in response: *What do proclamation, persuasion, heralding, and giving one-sided testimony do to and for people in conflict? Are they able to bring about reconciliation and transformation?* Precisely these kinds of concerns led to the emergence of conflict transformation within the field of peacebuilding.

In answering his own question, Lischer critiques the argumentative rhetorical tradition of which preaching is heir, and points somewhat unenthusiastically to alternative models (narrative, inductive, and even conversational preaching).⁵⁸ But for Lischer, it is not the form of the sermon

⁵² Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 27.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 17.

⁵⁵ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 104.

⁵⁶ Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*, The Lyman Beecher lectures in preaching (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 133.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 134.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 154–155, 158.

but the preacher's "constancy of vision" for reconciliation with enemies that matters most.⁵⁹ This constancy of vision is other-oriented, continually seeking to understand and embrace the other and to keep doors open for an unknown future together.⁶⁰ The idea that our orientation to conflict matters is also a conviction of conflict transformation practitioners. Schrock-Shenk states that our capacity to work through conflict constructively has much to do with our attitude. "How we view and feel about the self, the other, conflict, truth and even God often determines how we work with conflict," she writes.⁶¹ More profoundly, Lederach argues that the moral imagination needed to truly transcend conflict "bursts forth as part of a life journey that cares about the nature and quality of our relationships and communities and about how we move from relationships defined by division and fear toward those characterized by respect and love."⁶² "Solutions" to conflict are not a matter of resigned settlement or tacit agreement, but are about transforming the quality of the relationship and *even the people themselves* so that their *desire for* and *commitment to* right, just, and loving relationship is itself a hoped-for outcome.

In *The Promise of Mediation: The Transformative Approach to Conflict*, Robert Bush and Joseph Folger called on their colleagues to assess the values that underlie mediation practices for conflict. "An understanding of one's goal for the process—one's purpose for interacting with disputing parties—is essential for understanding what a mediator can and should do during a mediation session," they wrote, because "purpose drives practice."⁶³ Conflict transformation is the result of scholars across the field seeking to clarify the values and goals of their work, and to make corrections where values, goals, and practices have been misaligned or at cross purposes.

The purpose and practice of preaching has long been debated, and there is not a single, uniform answer to the question of what preaching should be and do. But for preachers who seek to preach amid conflict, Lischer's question, *How can sermons rightly become instruments of reconciliation?* is given new import in conversation with conflict transformation. As Lischer notes, "Preachers have a lot to learn about reconciliation from people who practice it on the ground."⁶⁴ At a minimum, conflict transformation suggests that many of the theological and practical assumptions we bring to conflict need re-examination. Our homiletical models and methods and even our beliefs about what preaching does and should do might actually work *against* true transformation of conflict, even if reconciliation is our aim. Lischer writes that "In the end, the preacher strives to make the language of the sermon true to its subject by deploying words in such a way that they are consistent with the ministry of reconciliation."⁶⁵ But "deploying words"—if done by only one voice, or from the belief that conflict is a problem to be remedied, or without interaction of the parties, or with an unexamined desire to skip ahead to resolution—may be from the get-go inconsistent with a ministry of transformative reconciliation. Conflict transformation pushes homiletics to examine again how our purposes drive our practice, and whether or not our preaching amid conflict accomplishes what we say we want it to.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 158–159.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 160.

⁶¹ Schrock-Shenk, "Introducing Conflict," 28–29.

⁶² Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 176.

⁶³ Bush and Folger, *The Promise of Mediation*, 119.

⁶⁴ Lischer, *The End of Words*, 151.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 158.