

Conflict Transformation  
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Gerry H. Keener  
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[gerryk@emm.org](mailto:gerryk@emm.org)

**Introduction**

This is an important subject in our world today. It is also a very large subject for which some universities now offer master's degrees. I also recognize that in this audience we likely have persons present who are at different places along the continuum of beginners to experts. So I will attempt to introduce the topic and suggest some resources for your further study and development as a peace maker.

First some **terminology and definitions**:

**Conflict Resolution** – The effort to resolve conflicts, so the conflict no longer exists. While this sounds good, it carries the danger of an attempt to get rid of conflict when people are raising important and legitimate issues. Quick solutions are proposed which often means a lot of good words but no real change. Conflicts happen for a reason, and resolution may just be another way to cover up what needs to change.

**Conflict Management** - involves using practical strategies to limit the negative aspects of conflict (particularly interpersonal conflict) and to increase the positive aspects of conflict by changing attitudes and behavior. The aim of conflict management is to enhance learning. It is not concerned with eliminating all conflict or avoiding conflict. This includes communication skills and skills in de-escalating conflict.

**Conflict Transformation**: views conflict as normal in human relationships, and it is a motor of change. Transformation provides an important vision. It focuses our view on the horizon toward which we journey... - building healthy relationships and communities, locally and globally. This goal requires a change in our way of thinking and relating.

To further develop this topic, I would like to suggest the following outline:

- A. **Biblical and Hermeneutical Basis for Peacemaking**
- B. **Spiritual Disciplines to Practice**
- C. **Developing Capacities for Conflict Transformation**

A. **Biblical and Hermeneutical Basis for Peacemaking**

Biblical revelation, and the example and teaching of Jesus provide the basis for the Christian commitment to Peacemaking and Conflict Transformation

1. First let's ask the question: **What is God like?**

a. **God is one** – The triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is perfect peace and wholeness in the Godhead. I am impressed with what we can learn about God from the Biblical creation story, especially when contrasted with other creation stories.

In the Babylonian creation story “Enuma Elish” the earth is created out of the split body of a dead female god killed in a battle among the gods. This creation story includes disagreements and threats of violence among the gods. There is trickery, violence and killing of one god by another in order to claim the position of ‘supreme dominion’ of Babylon. Defeated gods are subservient to the supreme god. Marduk eventually became the chief god...who we know from scripture and other evidence demanded human sacrifice.

In the Egyptian creation story there also is competition among the gods, violence and killing of one god by another in order to claim the kingship of Egypt.

(These are local, national gods confined to a particular geography)

**b. God is an orderly God:** In contrast to other creation accounts, the biblical accounts of creation are orderly and without violence. God in Genesis is an orderly God who creates order out of the chaos (“the deep”) with ease and without violence. God is a great God who creates easily without struggle and violence. God creates a good creation. It is important

to remember that creation was good before sin came into the world. God is also a secure God who delegates to humans the care of the creation. God gives humans the capacity to choose.

**c. God creates with the spoken word:** Genesis chapter 1 depicts God creating with the spoken word “**dabar.**” To speak a word for the Hebrews was like creating an entity that went out of the speaker’s mouth and into the one who received the word --- like a little missile that went into the other person or thing and exploded, doing its meaning. So God said (“dabar”) ‘let there be light’ and the word went out and “acted out” creating light!

This “dabar” concept is illustrated in Isaiah 55:11 “so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

The concept of “dabar” does violate our scientific physical understanding of how verbal communication happens. But the concept of “dabar” does capture the psychological dimensions. Adults can remember negative and positive words spoken “into them” when they were children and they cursed or blessed the child who believed the words that shaped their self-image and worldview. So human words can bless and curse, build up and tear down.

**d. God’s self description:**

Moses:

Listen to how God described Himself to Moses:

“The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin . . .” (Exodus 34:6-7).

**2. Second, let’s ask the question: “What does God expect of us?”**

The Prophets:

Micah 6:8 What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (as we walk with God, we take on his character)

Amos: 5: 21-24 Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

**3. Third, let’s ask the question: “Who is our example?”**

Jesus:

Jesus is our Example, our Model –Jesus is the highest revelation of God and who He is –

Zechariah's prophecy about the colt-riding Messiah is pivotal to understanding the kind of Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed.

Zechariah proclaims that the Messiah's kingdom is radically different for the King who rides the colt "...will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River (Euphrates) to the ends of the earth!" (Zechariah 9:10)

Jesus left his popular ministry in Galilee where there was a forcible effort by the Galileans to make him their political Messiah. Instead Jesus took the journey to Jerusalem where he met the cross. This is especially significant in an age when the drums of war continue to thunder around our world.

The Prophet Ezekiel elaborates that this King who enters Jerusalem from the east is the radiant glory of God; he will enter the temple and cleanse it forever of its sinfulness. (Ezekiel 43) That is exactly what the Messiah did. He is the one who is the radiant glory of God; he entered the temple and cleansed it of all corruption with his army of singing children. He also foretold that the temple of stone would be no more, for the new temple he is building are the people of God — the church.

Hermeneutical principle - Interpret the Bible from a Christological center.

When we are discerning what to do in any circumstance, we need to ask ourselves – What is the character of God and Jesus, and follow Him.

## B. Spiritual Disciplines to Practice

### 1. The way of Love:

#### **An Overview of the Violence and Love Theme in Bible:**

- From unlimited shalom peace in the garden (Gen 1 & 2)
- to unlimited revenge (Lamech – Gen 4 killed a man for wounding him)
- to limited revenge (Moses – eye for eye and tooth for tooth)
- to limited love (love neighbor, hate enemy)
- to unlimited love (love your enemies, Matthew 5:43-48 and, love one

another as I have loved you, John 15:12).

Look at **Matthew 5:43-48**.

Love others without making any distinctions, even love enemies as God does.

- Do good to those who hate you
- Bless those who curse you (GHK story of 5%er in Harlem)
- Pray for those who abuse you. (Mt. 5:43-48)

These are all active, not passive, responses. It is more than not responding in kind. It is doing the opposite good to the evil person. Jesus teaches further in Matthew, “But I say to you, do not resist an evil doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” (5:39-41) The next paragraph in Matthew asks kingdom members to “love as God loves, indiscriminately!”

Turning the other cheek is not a passive response. Hitting the cheek with the back of the hand was done to insult and humiliate an inferior more than to injure them. A right-handed person would strike the other on the right cheek. Turn the other cheek and the person would have to use the left hand in order to hit with the back of the hand. The left hand was used for unclean tasks. To strike with it would humiliate one’s self. To hit with the fist would be treating the person as an equal. Far from passive, Jesus called for his followers to assertively take charge of situations and put the ball back in the offender’s court. (Wink)

The coat/cloak example is similar. If a person sues you to take your outer garment, take off your inner garment as well. This called for stripping down in the courtroom which would make the one suing flee because to see another person’s nakedness was a great shame. The powerless debtor has brought shame on the suing creditor and turned the tables. Jesus tells his followers to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Mt 10:16).

Laws limited Roman soldiers in what they could demand from oppressed Palestinian citizens. They could only force them to carry their pack a mile. More than that brought punishment.

So Jesus says for the Jew to carry the pack a mile and then keep on going! The soldier is now on the defensive pleading with the Jew to stop and drop

the pack! Now who is in charge?

Jesus calls his followers to creatively take charge of their responses to violence, domination, and humiliation. To respond in kind is to become what you are against. Jesus calls for creative love that helps offenders discover what they are doing. (Ghandi – created ways to make visible the violence of the offender.) Passivity can actually contribute to the dominating violent person's behavior. It tends to re-enforce one's self view of inferiority and the offender's superiority. Only the creative loving response breaks the cycle of dominating violence and opens up the possibility of the enemy changing.

## 2. The way of Suffering Servanthood

After Jesus asked the disciples about who he was, he told them “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23). Jesus told them to follow him, his decisions, teachings, and loving service to others, which would lead to suffering. The “cross” in this passage and cross-bearing is often spiritualized to mean where God's will and our wills cross, or some human illness or inconvenience that Paul refers to as a thorn in the flesh (II Cor. 12:7)

Jesus refers to a cross before he was ever killed on one! What did he mean? The Romans crucified political revolutionaries in public to make a public example of them. Jesus was killed on a cross because he set up an alternative political and religious revolutionary kingdom that demanded first allegiance with himself as the king. Jesus paid the price for his political and religious nonconformity! Jesus could see it coming. Challenge the people and powers in control and be nonviolent and the result will be suffering. That didn't take any divine insight. A Christianity with the kind of Jesus revealed in the gospels as first allegiance is still a political/ social threat that will likely result in suffering.

The people, including the disciples, didn't see the suffering coming because they didn't understand the nature of the kingdom and thought Jesus would establish the kingdom with superhuman violence. Combine setting up an alternative kingdom of nonviolence with first allegiance to God and the result will be suffering. Jesus says if you would follow him, you must be willing to pay the price of being out of step with the worldly kingdom

society and its values. As Jesus says in Matthew 5, don't be surprised when you are persecuted!

The Romans crucified political revolutionaries in public to make a public example of them. Jesus was killed on a cross by the Romans because he set up a historical, political and religious revolutionary kingdom that demanded first allegiance to himself as the king. That was a challenge to the power of the Roman Caesar and to any government today! The threat had to be dealt with.

<b>Kingdom of God Values</b>	<b>Kingdom of this World Values</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Where Jesus is Lord – rules</li> <li>2. Good news, bias for the poor and powerless</li> <li>3. Revolutionary jubilee kingdom</li> <li>4. Shalom justice and peace</li> <li>5. Breaks barriers, heals broken relationships and is</li> <li>6. open to all</li> <li>7. Restores the purpose and proper place of law and institutions</li> <li>8. Deliverance, forgiveness, and gratitude</li> <li>9. Serving and healing with compassion</li> <li>10. Servant leadership style</li> <li>11. Love, enemy love, nonviolent confrontation of evil</li> <li>12. Righteousness beyond the natural and normal Mt. 5:43-48</li> <li>13. Can't be stopped Mt 16:18</li> <li>14. Faithfulness, honesty, and integrity. Mt 5,6,7</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Where humans rule</li> <li>2. The strong dominate the weak</li> <li>3. Old cycles of debt and bondage</li> <li>4. War, strife, and injustice</li> <li>5. Supports barriers, breaks relationships, and is</li> <li>6. exclusive</li> <li>7. Law and institutions rule out of place</li> <li>8. Bondage, condemnation, and bitterness</li> <li>9. Controlling and hurting with anger</li> <li>10. Dominating leadership style</li> <li>11. Hatred, retribution, violence, revenge</li> <li>12. Barely civil</li> <li>13. Fallible and failing</li> <li>14. Unfaithfulness, deceit, and corruption</li> </ol>

3. Grace -

4. Mercy - Forgiveness – without forgiveness the wounded party remains in bondage to the hurt.

### C. Developing Capacities for Conflict Transformation

Key Principle in conflict Transformation

#### The Lenses of Conflict Transformation:

In everyday settings we often experience conflict as a disruption in the natural flow of our relationships. We notice or feel that something is not right. Suddenly we find ourselves more attentive to things we had taken for granted. The relationship becomes complicated, not as easy and smooth as it once was. If some one asks what the conflict is about, we can explain something like a map of the peaks and valleys of our conflict. The peaks are what we see as challenges in the conflict, often emphasizing the most recent one, which we may identify as the primary issue. The valleys represent failures, the inability to negotiate adequate solutions. The whole picture of our relational patterns, something like a mountain range, often seems vague and distant. It is difficult to see the mountain range when climbing a specific peak.

This ‘topographical’ conflict map illustrates our tendency to view conflict by focusing on the immediate “presenting” problems. We give our energy to reducing anxiety and pain by looking for a solution to the presenting problems without seeing the bigger map of the conflict itself.

To see the bigger map of the conflict, we need a set of lenses through which we view social conflict. We might think of this as a set of specialized eyeglasses. (I wear bifocals – one lens to see things near at hand and one to see things at a distance. Some people have tri-focals, to see things in the mid range like a computer screen. John Paul Lederach suggests it requires three lenses to create a map of the whole:

- 1. First: a lens to see the immediate situation**
- 2. Second: a lens to see beyond the presenting problem toward the deeper patterns of relationship, including the context in which the conflict finds expression.**
- 3. Third: we need a conceptual framework that holds these perspectives together, one that permits us to connect the presenting problems with the deeper relational patterns.**

Slide:

The lenses of conflict transformation show

- the immediate situation (content)
- underlying patterns and context (context)
- a conceptual framework (structure of relationships)

Let me give an example (p.11) Growing up in a family of 7 children, our family sometimes had lively arguments over household chores, like doing the dishes. We seemed to have some good fights that seemed to come out of nowhere over something very mundane. The conflict focused on something concrete and specific: that pile of dirty dishes. However, the energy evoked suggests something far deeper is at play. In fact, at stake is much more than who will do the dishes. We are negotiating the nature and quality of our relationship, our expectations of each other, our interpretations of our identity as individuals and as a family, our sense of self-worth and care for each other, and the nature of power and decision-making in our relationship.

conflict transformation Frameworks address

- content
- context
- structure of relationships

## **Capacities to Develop**

Developing our Capacities: - Five practices: (read Conflict Transformation by John Paul Lederach, Pp 48 – 60 for more detail.)

1. Develop a capacity to see presenting issues as a window
  - a. The key to this practice requires these disciplines:
    - i. The ability to look and see beyond the presenting issues;
    - ii. An empathy that allows one to understand the situation of another (person or group) but not be drawn into their anxieties and fears; and
    - iii. A capacity to create avenues of response that take seriously the presenting issues but are not driven by the need for quick solutions.

This requires us to differentiate between content of a conflict and its context. When we use presenting issues as a window we approach conflict with two lenses. One brings into focus the substance of the

- content, and the other seeks to see in and through the content, to the nature of the context and relational patterns.
2. Develop a capacity to integrate multiple time frames
    - a. create strategies that integrate short-term responses with long-term strategic change processes
  3. Develop the capacity to pose the energies of conflict as dilemmas
    - a. I tend to link two ideas with the phrase “and at the same time.” This reflects my effort to shift my thinking from an either/or position to a both/and frame of reference. This is what I would call the art and discipline of posing conflicts as dilemmas.
    - b. The ability to position situations as dilemmas, the capacity to live with apparent contradictions and paradoxes, lies at the heart of transformation. Dilemmas imply complexity.
  4. Develop a capacity to make complexity a friend, not a foe
    - a. The key to this practice is to, first, trust the capacity of people and systems to generate options for change and moving forward. Second, we pursue the ideas that hold the greatest promise for constructive change. Third, we must not rigidly lock into one idea or avenue.
  5. Develop a capacity to hear and engage the voices of identity
    - a. The most essential thing to listen for are the voices of identity within the loud voice of the conflictive environment. The issues of identity are often at the root of conflicts. Thus the capacity to understand and respect the role of identity is essential to understanding the center of conflict.

### **Concluding remarks:**

We have talked about a number of aspects today to conflict transformation. As noted in my opening, this is only an introduction to the topic. I want to emphasize that: while we integrate the strengths of conflict resolution and conflict management into conflict transformation, we need to understand that “The narrowness of resolution approaches may solve problems but miss the greater potential for change.

## **Illustration: Strategies for dealing with injustice:**

### **Gbowee story:**

2011 Nobel Peace Prize, Leymah Gbowee along with two other women from Liberia

Leading mass women's movement

One night in the spring of 2002, Gbowee awoke from a dream where God had told her, "Gather the women and pray for peace!" Gbowee and her allies, including both Christian and Muslim women began by "going to the mosques on Friday at noon after prayers, to the markets on Saturday morning, to two churches every Sunday." Their message was read: "We are tired! We are tired of our children being killed! We are tired of being raped! Women, wake up – you have a voice in the peace process!" By that summer she was recognized as the spokeswoman and inspirational leader of a mass women's peace movement, that started with local women praying and singing in a fish market. They prayed for peace, and eventually held daily [nonviolent](#) demonstrations and sit-ins in defiance of orders from tyrannical President Charles Taylor.

They staged protests that included the threat of [a curse](#) and a [sex strike](#). Eventually the women were in a position to present their case to President Charles Taylor:

We are tired of war. We are tired of running. We are tired of begging for bulgur wheat. We are tired of our children being raped. We are now taking this stand, to secure the future of our children. Because we believe, as custodians of society, tomorrow our children will ask us, "Mama, what was your role during the crisis?"

They extracted a promise from President [Charles Taylor](#) to attend peace talks in [Ghana](#) to negotiate with the rebels.

When the talks dragged from early June through late July, with no progress made and violence continuing in Liberia, Gbowee led dozens of women, eventually swelling to a couple of hundred, inside the hotel. They then "dropped down, in front of the glass door that was the main entrance to the meeting room."<sup>[47]</sup> They held signs that said: "Butchers and murderers of the Liberian people -- STOP!"<sup>[47]</sup> Gbowee passed a message to the lead mediator, General Abubakar (a former president of Nigeria), that the women

would interlock their arms and remain seated in the hallway, holding the delegates "hostage" until a peace agreement was reached. Abubakar, who proved to be sympathetic to the women, announced with some amusement: "The peace hall has been seized by General Leymah and her troops." When the men tried to leave the hall, Leymah and her allies threatened to rip their clothes off: "In Africa, it's a terrible curse to see a married or elderly woman deliberately bare herself."<sup>[48]</sup> With Abubakar's support, the women remained sitting outside the negotiating room during the following days, ensuring that the "atmosphere at the peace talks changed from circuslike to somber."<sup>[49]</sup>

The Liberian war ended officially weeks later, with the signing of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement on August 18, 2003.<sup>[50][51]</sup> "But what we [women] did marked the beginning of the end."<sup>[49]</sup>