

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).