

Power and Conflict in a Business Setting

by Mark Lovatt

Authentic Christianity generates conflict. Conflict arises from engagement and challenge. If we are not experiencing conflict occasionally, the chances are we are not engaging as we should be. God has many resources for this, and we draw on those when we pray and act with and through him.



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The Christian and conflict

This week, I sat opposite a senior IT manager with an Investment Proposal Document on the table in front of us. To my right was the analyst who put the proposal together. She was picking at her fingers nervously. The proposal was not what I'd asked for. She knew it, the manager knew it, and I knew that what they were proposing was expensive, clunky and would cause problems further down the line. However, I felt at a disadvantage. For a start, I was by the far the youngest and most junior person in the room (although they didn't know that: rule No 1: Never Give Away Your Position). Second, I like to think of myself as a nice guy and don't like shouting at people; but third, I am a *Christian*.

This is a problem for me since I know that what I'm asking them to do will cause all sorts of problems for them, and these thoughts keep coming through my mind: 'Do you really need this doing?', 'They're busy people,

can't you help them out here?', and most deadly of all, 'Aren't you supposed to turn the other cheek, i.e. climb down?' This last one gets me because the Christian culture I'm in seems to be of the opinion that Christian men should never stand up for themselves, and to be all too ready to agree, avoid conflict and so effectively cave in to other peoples' demands. So, how do I deal with this? Should I be a nice guy and just roll over, and hope by God's grace all will be fine? Or should I stand my ground and fight for what I believe needs to be done?

I think this dilemma goes to the heart of what it means to be Christian in today's business world. I can't speak for others, but I think I became a Christian partly because deep down, I expected it to be a more comfortable life. God would be on my side; and yes, there'd be a few struggles on the way, but essentially life would be pretty good – 'living life to the full', as

one campaigner put it. This is a message that still goes out on the university campus, as talking to a friend of mine who runs a successful student ministry here in Nottingham confirmed recently. Jesus did in fact promise 'life, and to the full', but the message that this life he is offering comes with a healthy dose of conflict is not something you hear very often. The result is that I, and I'd suggest, a lot of my generation in our 20's and 30's, are entering the world (including the business world) unprepared for the degree of conflict we can (and should) expect. It comes from our being representatives of a very different kingdom from the powerful and determined forces prevalent in our culture today. Again, Jesus warns of this (John 15:18-26 particularly), but it's not 'good news', and we don't like to think of it, let alone tell our friends who are thinking about Christianity, that this actually forms an important part of the journey.

Spiritual warfare

So, what is this kingdom like, which we joined and became citizens (or rather subjects) of at some point? First, it is an impressive kingdom, hugely powerful, and is the definitive threat to the kingdom of the world where we live out most of our earthly lives. It is what contradicts the values and power-structures of the world, and states that what it says is not true: fulfilment does not lie in what it offers, and its promises are empty. This in turn means its demands on us are false, and we have no obligation to serve it: a direct threat to its power-base. Second, our kingdom is of right action and justice, as well as of goodness, community and loving kindness, and this has consequences on how we live out our lives. Third, it is a spiritual kingdom, where the parts of life

The Kingdom of God is a kingdom of justice; and justice is rarely achieved without some kind of a fight.

which are unseen – the emotional and the spiritual connections we have – count for more than the fancy toys and pretty things the world around us dangles in front of our eyes, so promising happiness and fulfilment. It stands in direct contradiction to much of the self-centred materialism which is presented to us as the key to our well-being, and as such is quickly identified as a threat when it appears. Most importantly for our discussion, though, is that the Kingdom of God is a kingdom of justice; and

justice is rarely achieved without some kind of a fight. Any lawyers amongst us can testify as to the nature of the justice system, which is essentially adversarial: each side has a champion (or team of champions) who come armed for the battle of tearing down the opponents' defences and winning the day. This is essentially the world we are in: partly material, but with the spiritual realm running through and diffused throughout it; and this realm has two sides which have been locked in battle since time began.

Prepare for conflict

Maybe this sounds a little over dramatic, since it is hard to reconcile this vision of spiritual warfare with the office I'll stroll into on Monday morning (or maybe it isn't – in some places the battle is all too visible). The

point, though, is that, as Christians, we rarely

appreciate the fact that conflict has been a part of the life of the Christian from the start, and it has only been quite recently that the idea of the normal Christian life as a peaceful unruffled existence has taken precedence. If we look at the times when Christians have made a powerful impact on the world, including business culture – the early Quakers, or the abolition of slavery – it is by challenging the existing hegemony, enduring the conflict arising (some of it severe) and winning through, that the change has come.

To endure the conflict and for it to reach a successful outcome takes some preparation and a degree of resource if the people involved are not to lose heart and give up. Essential to this is the expectation that to be a Christian is to incite conflict, and we should start getting ready for this at the first opportunity. I would suggest that the reason we don't tend to suffer much persecution in this country (although it is coming), is that we are not prepared for the trouble and clash of cultures which standing up for the gospel really entails. We avoid it where possible, or deal with it uncertainly when it becomes unavoidable. Sometimes we engage without the due preparation needed and so are prone to defeat. This means that there are likely to be battles in our area that we are avoiding, which we can in fact win; and this is to our shame, and also debilitating. It is when we start to win that we begin to make a difference in our organisations, and see a change in business culture; and this is a fight we can win and which will make a huge difference to God's world. As Craig Lucas points out in his article in *FIBQ*, Winter 04/05, Western business practices exert a huge influence globally and therefore carry much responsibility for the level of justice which can be found in the culture – both in the West and overseas. When businesses get it right, they set the scene for much of the political and social landscape, so we have a great deal of power at our disposal to make a difference.

Business power for reform

I work for a very large utility company. Last year they published their corporate values, the standards of business that our group right across Europe and the US are expected to adhere to. It's hard to be sure, but I suspect a strong Christian involvement at senior level in their formulation: integrity, openness, trust, courage and social responsibility. One has to be a little sceptical about such things, but what a difference such an organisation can make in some cultures where corruption and intimidation are the current ways



Our Values

Integrity

We act honestly, ethically and legally in every thing we do. We honor our commitments and take personal responsibility for our actions.

We value one another's insight and cooperation.

Openness

We are open to new ideas and change.

We are open and candid with one another and promote knowledge sharing freely across all barriers and boundaries.

We respond in a timely and thorough manner to every request or inquiry from our colleagues.

Trust and Mutual Respect

We treat everyone with fairness and dignity.

We trust our colleagues and are trustworthy in all that we do.

Courage

We have the courage to act on our convictions.

We sacrifice individual self-interest when necessary to preserve these values.

We do what we think is right, not what is deemed expedient.

We find constructive ways to share our views and promote positive interaction on all issues.

Social Responsibility

We are responsible to our colleagues, suppliers, the environment and the communities where we live and work.

We seek to improve lives everywhere we operate, aiming for a healthy, safe and sustainable environment.

We consider the needs of the present generation and also anticipate the needs of future generations.

■■■ E.ON UK plc Statement of Values



of doing business. To refuse to engage unless these values are adhered to, even with some inevitable 'flexibility', is a strong foundation put in place for those of us (Christian or not) committed to these standards to build on. Note this though: putting the standards into practice will not occur without a battle, including perhaps with the Board of Directors who actually put them in place. Some of our operations are in ex-Eastern Bloc and Russian countries where the Mafia have a strong presence. Acting with integrity and courage in these countries is to risk more than a little personal hostility; and would the Board really support a Project Manager whose integrity and courage is putting a multi-million pound investment at risk of failure by refusing to pay off the local gangsters? One would hope so, but it will be likely to involve a struggle. If that manager is successful though, the criminal organisation is weakened, and it may pave the way for reformation in other areas.

Gentle Jesus?

So, business can be powerful for reform, and when we as Christians come prepared ready to act with courage and integrity, then we can

begin to shape our businesses and, through that, our culture and beyond. The key to all this though is being ready to act as Christians, including the conflict that is likely to bring. I would say

Jesus was the representative of the invading Kingdom of God

many of us find this hard: Christians tend to be highly relational people, sensitive to criticism and hostility, and by nature reluctant to take an aggressive stance or initiate trouble. If it seems unnatural for us to do this, is it actually correct then? Are Christians not called to be like 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'? If we look at the life of Jesus though, we quickly see the truth. When we read through the gospels, we find that Jesus, if anything, provoked trouble at every opportunity: healing on the Sabbath, publicly taking God's role of forgiving sin, even driving out the money changers from the temple. This sits uneasily with our child's view of Jesus as the placid figure dressed in white standing on a green field with his hands outstretched. Jesus was the representative of the invading Kingdom of God and, understanding this role, he used his opportunities to provoke and challenged the authorities of his time. He was recognised – correctly – as a powerful threat, and they responded accordingly. Note this though: Jesus won, as the account of the first Easter morning shows, and the world has never been the same since. Note this too: this is the life we are called to. So how do we do it?

The spoken Word

Let us look a little closer at Jesus' life and how he acted. If you do a Bible study of his actions, we find something particularly useful for those of us in the business world: most of the conflict he engaged in was spoken. This makes sense, since he was and is the Word of God; but when we read the gospels, we find that his mode of attack was primarily verbal. He challenged the authorities, gave

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new teachings, healed the sick, forgave sins and drove out demons – all by speaking. Sometimes his words were accompanied by actions, such as the breaking of bread to feed the 5000 or touching people to heal them, but the primary focus of his power was in his spoken word. To some extent this reflected his ontological status – his true being – as the Son of God, and surely this gave him the authority he needed to do these things successfully. However, it was an authority he passed onto his followers, and which he clearly intended them to use (e.g. John 20: 22-23). This 'being-who-he-is' may have been the foundation of his authority, but surely his effectiveness came from his 'being-in-that-place' as the herald and representative of the Kingdom of God. This is something we share: as people in business, some of us with positions of great authority, we

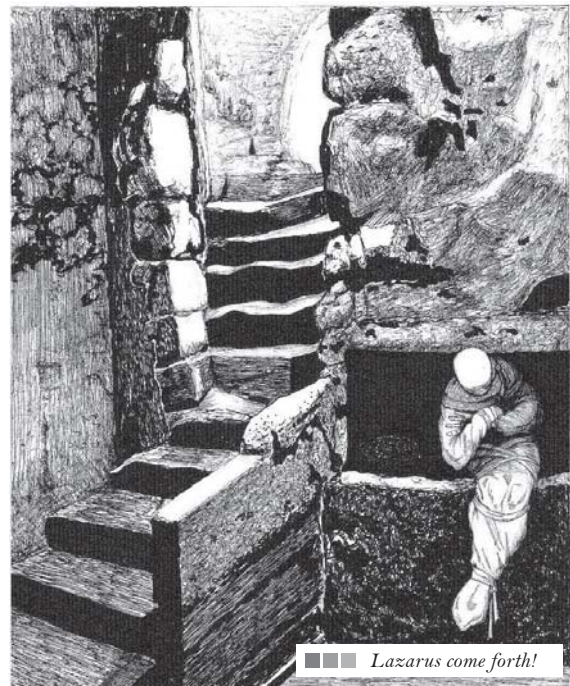
are also being-in-the-right-place as the physical presence and representatives of the Kingdom of God. Our being-there is the basis from which we speak out and into the situation which requires that presence, and as we do so we bring the power and presence of the kingdom into the world, and so change it.

This model of spoken power is useful for us since there are few areas of business where forceful physical intervention is even acceptable, let alone the respected way of doing things. For most of us, the

battles are indeed verbal, and a matter of having the courage to speak out and challenge (or side with those challenging), rather than take the easier route of doing things in the accepted way and keeping quiet. Sometimes the words we use are written rather than spoken: a business case, financial report, presentation or letter. Witness the destructive power of a badly worded email, or the impact of a letter from the Inland Revenue. These words are often the means by which change occurs, with memos or reports having the power to turn an entire organisation on its axis. We are currently working on a report

regarding a new form of technology which could change the way the entire industry operates over the next 20 years. If the report comes out in favour of the technology, it is likely to get implemented by our company, initially changing the lives of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, then millions of people in a small way. The Board report used to make the decision will be a maximum of 20 pages long. If we then consider the impact the gospels have made across the centuries, we see the power of the Word, beginning with Jesus, is hugely powerful.

Jesus' most powerful work, though, was not by written but by spoken word. In perhaps the most dramatic episode of his ministry prior to the Cross, Jesus speaks to a corpse in a rock tomb, and by this power alone



■■■ Lazarus come forth!

brings him back to life. If we ever doubted the power of the spoken word to change things, this surely must remind us of what is possible. From personal experience, there is something distinctive about being addressed directly by someone in authority, which has a greater impact than the same words written down. Hearing the Managing Director's voice on the phone after he has asked for me by name is different from receiving a general letter or e-mail from him. Maybe there is something here we can put to use in our own dealings with people.

Not to seek conflict

We now know that the Christian life should (and does) involve conflict, and Jesus' primary way of engaging with the people and culture of his time was through speaking out of his true nature and status as the representative of the Kingdom of God. How can we apply this in practice? Here it is important to remember that being a Christian is about engagement and bringing change, with conflict as an inevitable by-product of this, and not to seek or enjoy conflict for its own sake. There is a difference between doing stupid things and that resulting in problems and upsetting people, versus bringing the Kingdom of God and that sparking persecution in response. The recent report that a Christian website published the home addresses of BBC executives, with resultant criticism in the press, might be an example of the former. As Christians, the end does not justify the means since, if you are

acting according to God's purposes, the operations of what we are doing must conform to his holy and loving power.

Perhaps the starting point for us is to recognise and value conflict as something essentially positive, provided it results in significant change. I suspect that, as already discussed, we struggle with doing things which initiate trouble due to the impact it has on our relationships, at least in the short term. In my experience, though, relationships which matter have occasional conflicts, since the very depth that they have generates tensions which need release and sometimes change. There is something very satisfying about dealing with a problem successfully with someone you love; despite the trauma of the process, it can be a life giving, renewing process. I was at my family's home recently when my sister and mother (who run a business together) had a contretemps which briefly threatened the peace of the household. Bringing them together, allowing both sides to air their views and blow off steam, resulted in some long-standing issues being resolved and, in the end, a deeper and healthier family bond. Conflict when managed well can be a good thing. I also suspect that too many of our church relationships fall into the 'niceness' trap, with its easy superficiality, and therefore never develop,

remaining shallow and unsatisfying. A little more engagement and challenge, despite the inevitable conflict, would be a good thing here.

Move in the will of God

Once we understand the role of conflict and accept its importance, what approach can we take in a business environment? Again our foundation comes from the fact that we are the Kingdom of God

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in this place, and that it is our true nature to stand slightly apart from, and be a challenge to, the world in which we move. The role of the challenger then becomes, not a matter of being different, of standing apart from the crowd, but of acting with integrity according to our true status. Fortunately, with that status comes other kinds of power, particularly when we actively bring God into a situation through the dialogue (or monologue, so it sometimes seems, if I'm honest!) of prayer. When we move in the will of God and act as his agent in the situation, the resources which God has at his disposal come into play, and it becomes subject to his will – whatever that may be. From this comes the marvellous coincidence - the chance meeting in the corridor, the being in the right place at the right time; sometimes even the event and

redemption of catastrophe. Our human qualities also come into play to facilitate or assist the activities of God in the situation. So, having the courage to act or speak with truth and integrity opens channels for God to work, just as God opens events in which our courageous actions truly make a difference.

Conflict and hurt

One final factor to consider: change involving conflict seems to be a process rather than an event. Often the process revolves

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around an event: the angry phone call, the forceful email, the meeting when voices are raised. However, this is just one (main) stage in a series which is likely to have started some time previously, and will need managing through further stages to bring about its successful completion. Often following the event of conflict we feel bruised and deflated, especially if the outcome is not yet clear and/or further conflict is necessary. It is often this feeling that we remember from the process and which holds us back from initiating it again.

However, if we understand that this is only one step on the way and that the reward is still to come, and then concentrate on enjoying that reward when it does come, then in fact it

becomes a positive experience. Often I catch myself after a bruising session feeling low and depressed, and if I allow this to be my focus, rather than the goal I am working towards, then I feel negative about the challenge I've made and am less likely to enjoy the reward when it arrives. Keeping the focus on the end result keeps the whole thing in perspective, and at the end enables me to enjoy what I've done rather than get lost in the upsetting part of it.

Furthermore, one of the pleasures of the business world as opposed to, say, the voluntary sector, is that being a bit of a fighter is seen as a good thing, worthy of respect and valuable for the health of the organisation. No-one likes a bully, but equally no one has much respect for a pushover. My experience is that, even if people disagree with you, they respect your strength and courage if you're prepared to speak out, and will also expect you to stand firm once you have made your decision clear.

Conclusion

In conclusion then, we can sum up what we've covered as follows.

Authentic Christianity generates conflict. Jesus knew this, and told us to expect it to.

Conflict arises from engagement and challenge. If we are not

experiencing conflict occasionally, the chances are we are not engaging as we should be.

First and foremost, Christianity is something we are, from which arises what we do. Being a Christian is the basis of acting as a Christian.

God has many resources for this, and we draw on those when we pray and act with and through him.

Finally, conflict is a process, and we need to keep our eye on the end result if we are not to lose heart. Incidentally, not all end results are worth the battle, and this helps to keep us from engaging fruitlessly.

I've found these points useful, and been able to engage (successfully) in our business operations through them, and in fact learned to enjoy the fight. There are plenty of challenges out there, and any tools we can use for those battles have to be a good thing.

We started with the meeting with my IT manager. The result of that meeting was that we found a way forward, and I got what I wanted. Also, at the end of the meeting he asked if I'd consider working for him. The battle was worth it. ■

*Mark Lovatt holds a PhD in Theology from Nottingham University, and currently works as a Regulation Analyst for E.ON UK plc in Nottingham. His thesis, *Confronting the Will-to-Power: A Reconsideration of the Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr* is published by Paternoster Press.*