

Managing the Conflict from Within: A Spiritual Model

Biblical Perspectives – May 2008

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Models of conflict management depict tension between two poles of concern: the concern for self and others. However, the interaction of Jesus with His followers demonstrates the presence of a superordinate concern, which may be absent from previous models: the concern for spirituality. The sense of culpability to align one's actions with God's will and commands describes this concern. The spiritual model of conflict management (SMCM) deciphers how Christians respond to conflict when others in the group may deem a Christian's behaviors as illogical. The SMCM presents the decision-making process of Christians when experiencing conflict from the inception of conflict, to the enactment, and finally to the period of reflective learning so that leaders can achieve productive group outcomes.

"The church, as a community of faith, is different from other social organizations. It is relationship-based. . . . Therefore, the church is more susceptible to interpersonal conflict than other social organizations" (Allen, 2005, p. 52). Complicating this matter is Christian leaders may view conflict as a destructive experience and grossly lack adequate training to manage conflict within groups (Grabill, 2005; Lippitt, 1982; Shawchuck, 2005). Therefore, Christians commonly respond to conflict by either avoiding or accommodating it (Sorenson, 1999).

The manner in which people respond to conflict can produce either beneficial or detrimental outcomes. The basis of determining whether an outcome is productive or destructive resides in the mind of the individual. This interpretive process provides a window to understand why groups have difficulty establishing and maintaining constructive and effective performance.

An unequivocal example of this interpretive process is the miraculous raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-57). Unlike the previously recorded miracles in John's gospel account, this supernatural event unequivocally declares Jesus' power over death and human frailty declaring that Jesus is the Son of God. Furthermore, this emotionally charged pericope concludes Jesus' public miracles and causes His

earthly ministry to shift from the stage of conflict to the stage of crisis (Tenney, 1987). The disciples interpreted Jesus' behavior leading up to the supernatural resurrection of Lazarus with contempt and disbelief. Moreover, John's gospel explains the goal of the religious leaders' transition subsequent to this ostensibly inexplicable event. "So from that day on they plotted to take His life" (11:53 NIV). So, why does this auspicious story cause such a broad spectrum of explicit emotions? The apparent confusion of how to interpret this profound pericope necessitates a brief review.

Examining Some Seemingly Irrational Behaviors of Jesus

John begins his miraculous account describing both the physical malady of Lazarus and the loving relationship between Lazarus and Jesus. Logically, Lazarus' illness provoked Mary and Martha, (who were the sisters of Lazarus and close friends of Jesus), to solicit Jesus to intervene. However, Jesus remained in Perea in spite of their pleadings. After tarrying for two more days, Jesus finally announced He would go to Judea to see Lazarus. However, the thought of returning to an area so close to Jerusalem evoked cynicism and fear in the disciples of Jesus because of the prior threats against Jesus. Why did the actions of Jesus cause so much confusion among His group of closest followers? The answer may reside in a faulty paradigm.

Humanity generally places emphasis on temporal concerns when experiencing conflict. When a group member exhibits behaviors outside of these parameters, confusion and aggression may result. On the one hand, Mary and Martha thought Jesus' behaviors seemed callous. Jesus did not care for the concerns of others, namely Lazarus and them. On the other hand, the disciples of Jesus thought Jesus' behaviors seemed rash. Jesus did not care for the concerns of His own well-being because His return to Bethany seemingly equated to certain death. Therefore, how does one make sense of Jesus' actions as He faced intragroup (i.e., within the group) conflict with His followers?

The responses of Jesus' followers align with the current descriptive models of managing conflict. Historically, conflict management researchers (Blake & Mouton, 1967; Follett, 1926/1940; Pruitt, 1983; Thomas, 1976) have collectively argued the generative processes involved in producing observable conflict management behavior center on two temporal poles of influence: the concern for self and the concern for others. The puzzling behaviors of Jesus subsequent to His learning of Lazarus' illness support the notion that these two internal concerns are insufficient to explain how Christians react when experiencing conflict.

Because the current explanations of the generative mechanisms for managing conflict are inadequate, the spiritual model of conflict management (SMCM) is offered, which interjects an additional generative mechanism, explaining how Christians manage conflict: the concern for spirituality. A concern for spirituality reveals why the behavior of Christians is ostensibly illogical to others who do not share the same qualitative and quantitative levels of concern. This mechanism reveals why Jesus did not allow His concern for self and His concern for others to serve as predictors of His subsequent behavior when faced with group conflict. Instead, Jesus relied on His concern for spirituality to guide His conflict management decision-making.

Accordingly, this paper offers a streamlined view of conflict literature exposing the theoretical rational, which is suspected to be deficient to explain how Christians make decisions when responding to conflict. Next, a biblically based descriptive model, the SMCM, illuminates the decision-making process when Christians encounter and respond to conflict. Finally, implications of the model assist Christian leadership as they strive to construct groups that glorify God.

Current Literature Assertions and Omissions

Scholars attribute different shades of meaning to the word “conflict” resulting in the absence of a generally accepted operational definition (Thomas, 1992). However, most scholars emphasize how perceived differences between two or more parties produce conflict (Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Kale, 2003; Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Lippitt, 1982; Rahim, 2002). Thomas (1976) provides a model depicting the emergence of conflict in four phases: (a) frustration, (b) conceptualization, (c) behavior, and (d) outcome. The salient component of Thomas’ model is that the onset of conflict occurs when a party ostensibly frustrates the satisfaction of the other party. This frustration arises because of a difference in opinion, perspective, or value. This perceived difference produces conflict when a breach develops in the party’s threshold level of intensity (i.e., the level in which conflict causes discernable discomfort within the individual or group). This threshold level varies based on personal and situational contexts (Rahim). Accordingly, *conflict occurs when one or more parties perceive a difference producing a level of discomfort that influences subsequent behaviors.*

The focus of preceding models describing how people respond to conflict resulted in a consensus of five conflict management styles: (a) avoidance (i.e. neglect), (b) competition (i.e. domination), (c) sharing (i.e. compromise), (d) accommodation (i.e. appeasement), and (e) collaboration (i.e. integration). Scholars ubiquitously agree temporal interests guide which of these five approaches conflicting groups or members utilize. These interests center on self and others. The conflicting participants utilize their foresight to guide their behaviors (Bandura, 1986). Participants consider how their actions will influence the relationship with opposing participants and how their actions will influence what they want for themselves.

The salient feature absent from preceding conflict management models (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1964; Musser, 1982; Pruitt, 1983; Rahim, 2002; Thomas, 1976) is a party’s concern for spirituality, which predicates one’s perceived level of culpability to a higher power or being. “Spirituality reflects the presence of a relationship with a higher power or being that affects the way in which one operates in the world” (Fry, 2003, p. 705). Thus, *concern for spirituality means a sense of culpability to a supreme power or being resulting in actions that align with the supreme power or being’s mandates or will.* This definition implies spirituality integrates a perceived ethereal component into the decision-making process that is external to the participant.

The absence of the concern for spirituality is unequivocally evident when studying the decision-making processes of devout Christians within group contexts where members do not share the same level of spirituality. Devout Christians integrate and emulate a profound Christocentric lifestyle. The behaviors of these Christians may appear either as illogical or bizarre because of this

overlooked component utilized when determining an appropriate style of conflict management. The nonsensical appearance of such behavior contributes to the subsequent difficulties in managing the conflict because conflict management requires a level of intragroup agreement to achieve a given outcome. Frustration is common when members cannot equate behaviors to furthering group goals.

Researchers argue conflict managed improperly results in increased hostility, loss of energy, decline in morale, stifled cooperation, detrimental behavior, mistrust, poor decision making, and decreased productivity (Amason, Thompson, Hochwarter, & Harrison, 1995; Lippitt, 1982; Ohbuchi & Suzuki, 2003); as a result, people traditionally consider conflict an undesirable and unavoidable interpersonal dynamic to be eliminated (Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Ohbuchi & Suzuki; Shelton & Darling, 2004). In contrast, effective conflict management should result in productive verbal exchanges, improved problem solving, increased participation, organizational growth, improved relationships, innovation, and increased productivity (Amason, et al.; Lippitt; Shelton & Darling; Shockley-Zalabak 1984). Thus, the functionality of conflict management within groups requires careful scrutiny to extricate the beneficial outcomes while discarding the detrimental outcomes. Accordingly, a succinct definition of conflict management is pertinent to assist in achieving these ends.

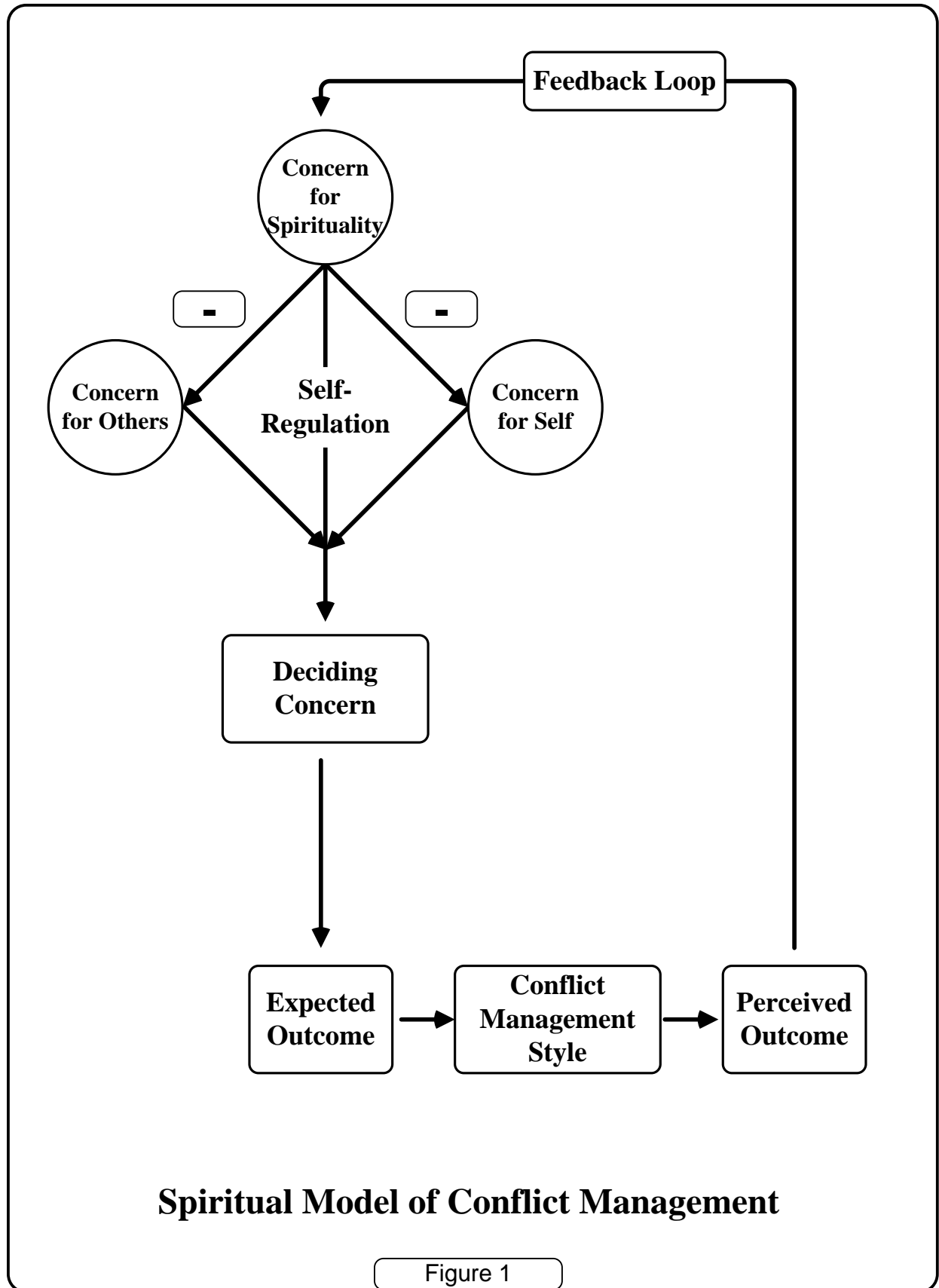
Conflict management is the process of maximizing the positive effects of conflict and minimizing the negative effects of conflict so that beneficial learning transpires. The paramount goal of managing conflict is not to eliminate it; rather, the goal is to accentuate its profitable dynamics (Klenke, 2003). To achieve this end, participants design strategies to promote open communication and understanding (Rahim, 2000). The issue of generating mutual understanding is the primary goal of the SMCM (Figure 1).

The Spiritual Model of Conflict Management (SMCM)

The entry point of the SMCM is the concern for spirituality. When an individual experiences discomfort associated with conflict, the individual may seek to resolve the conflict through self-regulation. The level of concern for spirituality determines how much concern an individual expresses for the temporal concerns of self and others. If the individual demonstrates a high level of concern for spirituality, then the concerns for self and others decrease. This assertion does not mean a person, who has a high concern for spirituality, does not care for personal wellbeing or the wellbeing of others; rather, any concerns for self and others align with the commands and will of a supreme being (i.e., God).

Jesus summarized the law into two commands. First, love God with every resource (Matthew 22:37). Second, love others in the same capacity as one loves self (Matthew 22:38). Therefore, the concern for self and others is biblical; however, these concerns flow from a principal concern for God. Thus, the concerns for self and others are of value when they express love toward God and further His purposes. An increased concern for spirituality decreases an individual's "naturalistic" concerns for self and others. In short, behaviors that seemingly express concern for self and others derive from the individual's obedience to God's will, not because of narcissism or empathy for others, which arguably

is the implication of prior models. Instead, “service” functions as the conative force, which rightly communicates the individual’s *agapē* or



unconditional love for God. *Agapē* love creates the desire to selflessly serve rather than adhering to societal contrived behavioral standards of appropriate conduct (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, & Danker, 1979). Accordingly, there is a negative relationship between concern for spirituality and concerns for self and others (Figure 1).

For the Christian, the concern for spirituality, which is a Christ-centered concern, serves as the chief component within one's self-regulatory system. Thus, the more emphasis a Christian places on the concern for spirituality, the less concern the Christian places on the concerns for self and others. Self-regulation includes the roles of social and internalized sanctions (Bandura, 1986). The role of social sanctions explicates the *naturalistic* concerns for self and others. As Christians mature, the concern for social sanctions decreases because of an increased concern for internalized sanctions, which generate from the concern for spirituality.

The outcome from the self-regulatory process is the *deciding concern* of the individual, *which is a blend of the concerns for spirituality, self, and others*. The more devout a Christian is, the greater the concern for spirituality comprises the deciding concern. The deciding concern reveals the values of the individual and explicates the intensity of conflicts within groups. As value diversity increases, the intensity of the conflict within groups increases (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). Therefore, as value diversity increases, group productivity and member satisfaction decrease (Jehn, 1994; Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997; Jehn et al., 1999). These observations reveal the importance of leaders assembling groups with individuals who share similar concerns for spirituality. In the case of Lazarus, the followers of Jesus did not share similar concerns for spirituality. As a result, group members struggled supporting the leadership of Jesus. Dissenting remarks, disappointment, and fear describe the behaviors and attitudes of the followers of Jesus as they struggled to justify Jesus' initial refusal to visit Lazarus while he was dying and Jesus' later consent to visit Lazarus with the imminent threat to personal safety.

The aforementioned behaviors of Jesus reveal His deciding concern, which predicates His choice in conflict management style. Jesus' choice of conflict management style appears competitive or selfish when He makes His decision not to visit Lazarus. However, Jesus later seems to concede, thus, accommodating the requests of Mary and Martha. One could argue Jesus' collective behaviors were utterly confusing because He could not make up his mind on what course of action to take. The account of John assists the reader to make sense of Jesus' apparent bizarre behavior when Jesus comments on Lazarus' condition, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it" (John 11:4 NIV). The guiding factor was Jesus had a deep concern for spirituality, which His followers did not share. In affect, Jesus' style of conflict management was "obedience."

The tension between self and others serves as the basis for all five styles of conflict management (Thomas, 1976). The choice of conflict management points to which pole or blend of the two poles an individual decides upon when experiencing conflict. In the case of Jesus, He did not

choose a competitive, accommodative, avoidant, compromising, or collaborative style. His concerns were not self and others. His concern was spirituality. *The result is a conflict management style of obedience.* This style does not exist as one of the five styles of conflict management because the rationale for the decision resides external to the individual. The individual internalizes the principles of God; however, these principles are not temporal; rather, they are eternal. This process explains why Christians of differing denominations can experience heated conflict when discussing their perceived proper application of theology. They have different levels of concern for spirituality. They perceive they are acting in obedience rather than competing, accommodating, avoiding, compromising, or collaborating.

As the Christian decides how to respond to the conflict in a manner that is obedient, thus, aligning with one's deciding concern, the individual presupposes what "the expected outcome" will be because of the selected behavior (Figure 1). Bandura (1986) explains this process as forethought, which assists in behavioral selection. The individual uses forethought to finalize the selection of appropriate behavior to the conflict (i.e., style of conflict management). The response may appear as one of the five styles of conflict management; however, the Christian perceives the action simply as obedience because the points of reference are not self or others; rather, the point of reference is God.

The confidence an individual perceives in the accurate predication of outcomes is a result of personal self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to produce a particular outcome (Bandura, 1977). Within the context of the SMCM, high levels of self-efficacy reveal confidence in one's proper assessment of concern for spirituality to produce an efficacious deciding concern.

Subsequent to the enactment (i.e., conflict management style), the individual compares what the expected outcome is to the perceived outcome. The difficulty of this process is personal beliefs dictate the variances of personal perception (Weick, 1979). In other words, one cannot perceive what one does not espouse as a possible solution. This process entertains the notion of sense-making. The individual is capable of interpreting stimuli to the extent of the individual's depth and breadth of viable solutions. Thus, the cognitive complication of the individual is paramount because the mental framework of the individual serves as a filter permitting and prohibiting various stimuli to affect the individual's assessment of a given enactment. These dynamics unequivocally communicate the need for assistance to properly interpret the efficaciousness of an individual's enactment. Feedback provides the individual with this additional assistance to arrive at a proper interpretation of selected behavior.

Personal feedback entails two key components: critical self-reflection and prayer. These two components of feedback enable the Christian to properly reject or to embrace the social sanctions of the group by utilizing the "white space" or inactive time (Rummler & Brache, 1991) within an individual's daily activities so that learning transpires in the midst of apparent chaos and busyness (Confessore, Confessore, & Greenberg, 1996; Vaill, 1996). Critical self-reflection involves an aspect of self-directed learning as the individual breaks from the group and critically assesses prior behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes (Brookfield, 1986).

This intentional act of detaching from others is important because interacting with groups creates the presence of two selves: the ideal self and the ought self (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006). The basis of the ideal self is the individual's perception of who the individual should be. In contrast, the basis for the ought self is others' perceptions of who the individual should be. The individual is wise to pursue fulfilling the ideal self rather than the ought self because conflict within the individual surfaces when the individual seeks to fulfill the ought self in instances when the ought self is different from the ideal self (Boyatzis & Akrivou). In other words, the individual experiences an identity crisis because the individual wishes to satisfy the expectations of others who have differing viewpoints of who the individual should be. This crisis reveals the importance of critical self-reflection so that the individual can recalibrate personal behaviors, attitudes, and thoughts to align with the concern for spirituality.

Working in conjunction with critical self-reflection is prayer. Because the Christian desires to emphasize the concern for spirituality, the Christian seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit to assess one's prior enactments. Jesus routinely sought solitude to spend time in prayer (Mark 14:32; Luke 6:12; 9:28; 11:1). Prayer allows for a season of purposeful exchange between the Christian and God. Seasons of prayer empower the Christian to remain faithful to personal convictions and beliefs. Metaphorically, prayer enables Christians to realign their compass so that it points toward the concern for spirituality. Thus, both critical self-reflection and prayer work in tandem to provide the individual efficacious feedback to instruct the individual in future encounters with conflict.

The Implications of the Spiritual Model of Conflict Management (SMCM)

The SMCM offers three clear implications for managing conflict within groups. First, the SMCM explains the missing component from prior descriptive models of conflict management. The SMCM incorporates the concern for spirituality, which explicates why Christians experience conflict in groups espousing significant value diversity. Jesus unequivocally asserts that His followers must seek *first* the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33), which denotes the importance of the concern for spirituality. However, the concern for spirituality is not indigenous to humans. Instead, the concern for self and others prevails as Jesus' rebuke to Peter illustrates "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:23 NIV). Accordingly, Jesus declares to His followers to be fearful of the punishment from God rather than from others because God's punishment is eternal (Matthew 10:28).

Second, the SMCM encourages leaders to construct groups with members who share similar concerns for spirituality to avert the emergence of unprofitable conflict. As Jesus and His disciples were traveling to Jerusalem, they did not receive support from people in a small town. Therefore, James and John asked permission to pray for fire to come down from heaven to consume the seemingly callous populace. However, Jesus rebuked His followers because they had focused their attention on a concern for self (i.e., they felt personal rejection) rather than on a concern for spirituality (Luke 9:51-56). Luke follows this pericope with an account of an individual, whom Jesus solicited to follow Him. The man requested to first bury his father. The reply of Jesus initially seems harsh. "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:60

NIV). However, Jesus considered the concern for God far superior to any concerns for self and others. Luke reiterates this principle when another man wishes to say goodbye to his family before joining Jesus. Jesus' poignant reply speaks to the resolute posture of Christians to maintain one focus, the concern for spirituality. "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62 NIV). These excerpts are samples of the numerous events throughout the gospels depicting unhealthy conflict emerging from within groups of differing concerns for spirituality. Some additional notable examples include but are not limited to the following passages (Matthew 19:16-24; 21:23-26; 26:56-74; Mark 10:35-45; Luke 9:57-58).

Third, the SMCM elucidates that Christians approach conflict from the posture of obedience to God. Whether their behaviors appear to exhibit any one or more of the five styles of conflict management are inconsequential. The concern for spirituality predicates the act of obedience, which supersedes appearance. Furthermore, the SMCM illustrates how the Christian adjusts future behaviors, attitudes, and thoughts by maintaining a posture exuding obedience to God rather than appeasing self or others. Critical self-reflection and prayer serve to facilitate a careful assessment of one's proper concern for spirituality. Jesus shares the parable of the wise and foolish builders to illustrate this principle (Matthew 7:24-27). Being continuously mindful and active in practicing the words of God is the point of the parable. Such approaches provide the Christian with a solid foundation for every life endeavor. However, those who neglect a constant concern for spirituality can expect to experience significant hardships.

Summary

Current conflict management scholars offer descriptive models of managing conflict that emphasize the dual concerns for self and others. These two temporal concerns alone are inadequate to explicate how Christians decide to respond to conflicts. This inadequacy is apparent in the pericope of the death and subsequent resurrection of Lazarus. The behaviors of Jesus baffled His followers because He did not demonstrate a clear concern for the wellbeing of either self or others. Instead, Jesus' concern was to fulfill the will of God the Father. This sense of culpability to align one's actions with a supreme being describes the function of the concern for spirituality. Including the concern for spirituality as the key factor in a Christian's self-regulatory processes for deciding how to respond to conflict provides clarity to an otherwise disjointed decision-making process.

The SMCM depicts how Christians respond to conflict. The internal decision-making processes focus on a concern for spirituality; however, the concern for self and others, which are natural to humanity, can taint the purity of the Christian's concern for spirituality producing a blended deciding concern. Next, it is proposed the Christian uses forethought to predict what will occur based on one's actions. One's forethought influences how one implements the decided concern. The choice of conflict management style may appear as one of the five classic expressions of conflict management; however, the Christian perceives the enactment as obedience to God's will and commands. Thus, the actual style becomes secondary to the primary objective of demonstrating proper concern for spirituality. Once the enactment occurs, the Christian evaluates the results of the enactment. In

general, the Christian can only perceive the value of the outcome from the limitations of the Christian's personal mental filters. However, prayer and critical self-reflection arm the Christian with two additional resources to improve future behavior and decision-making skills so that the concern for spirituality improves.

The implications of this biblically based model of conflict management are three-fold. First, the SMCM directs attention to a missing component of the conflict management decision-making process, the concern for spirituality. Accounting for this missing concern assists leaders and other group members in understanding why a given member's behavior may appear illogical or bizarre. The concern for spirituality places the onus of concern on something both external to the member and eternal. Second, the concern for spirituality illuminates the need for leaders to construct groups with shared levels of concern for spirituality. This shared concern accounts for the personal values of each member. Unlike many other forms of intragroup diversity, value diversity produces detrimental outcomes. Leaders are wise when composing groups to carefully account for the level of spirituality to ensure the group demonstrates a homogenous perspective if the leader desires the group to achieve high levels of performance and member satisfaction. Third, the SMCM explains how the five styles of conflict management are subservient to the Christian's commitment to fully satisfying the concern for spirituality through acts of obedience. Thus, all five styles of conflict management have value but only as they assist the Christian in rightly addressing the concern for spirituality.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to provide the framework for groups to understand why the behaviors of their members may occasionally appear illogical or bizarre. The SMCM is a biblically based model, which assists in this endeavor. However, the SMCM is not an end; rather, it is a beginning. More research is necessary to explore each of the components of the model in detail. Furthermore, the construction and testing of a valid instrument to measure concern for spirituality is necessary to test the theoretical assumptions of the SMCM. The SMCM provides a firm foundation for more poignant research and study to assist leaders in managing conflict occurring within their groups so that group performance and member satisfaction can further the Kingdom of God.

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