



Being Christ's Ambassador in the Office

Conflict within and without

by Michelle Korvemaker

Jesus came to reconcile us to God (1 Pet. 3:18) and we are called to be His ambassadors here on earth, so we must become skillful at peacemaking rather than giving in to the natural propensity that humans have towards war-making¹.

When I used to dream about being a physician, I never imagined that I would have to face the difficult interpersonal conflict situations that have come. Currently, I work as a locum physician. I wonder sometimes whether I encounter interpersonal conflict more often because I don't have a long-term relationship with the

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patients that I see. However, when I speak with physicians who have a practice, they also report interpersonal conflicts with their patients.

Consider the following snapshots of life in Dr. S's practice. **Scene 1:** It has been a long week. Dr. S is tired, following a busy "on call" shift a couple days earlier, from which she hasn't recovered. The day is fully booked with patients. She arrives 10 minutes early to get through lab reports, prior to seeing the first patient. The problem is that there is a patient in the waiting room already—a patient who does not have an appointment but expects to be seen immediately. Irritation wells up inside of Dr. S. She knows that she is called to serve the patients in her practice. She knows that she is Christ's ambassador. At this moment, she feels nothing of the compassion of Christ for this person. She agrees to see the patient but she was

unsuccessful in hiding her irritation at the disruption in her schedule. The patient was unhappy with the visit because she didn't feel that Dr. S was concerned enough about her medical emergency, which was nothing more than a musculoskeletal headache.

We flash to **another scene:** This time, Dr. S is on top of her game. She's been having a great day and good interactions with everyone. A worried mother has brought in her daughter who has had a fever on and off for the last five days. The daughter sits demurely on the examining table in no apparent distress. Dr. S starts to take the history. The mother states that the fever has been present for five days. Dr. S asks what temperature readings the

Two people fighting are like two closed books which are banging together.



mother has obtained. The mother becomes angry stating that she knows when her child has a fever and how dare Dr. S ask her for numbers. Dr. S remains calm, apologizes for upsetting the mother with her question, and moves on to other parts of the interview. Dr. S leaves the room to have a throat swab processed. On returning, the mother apologizes for her outburst stating that their family had received bad news that day and she wasn't herself. Dr. S accepts her apology; however, she wonders whether she could have asked her question differently to avoid the conflict.

Interpersonal conflict is unfortunately a part of everyone's life—whether or not one is a Christ-follower.

As physicians, we are caring for people who are not well and some who “think” that they are not well. As Christians, we are called to be ambassadors for Christ. (2 Cor. 5:20) We are called to live at peace with all men, as far as it depends on us. (Rom 12:18) We are to seek the good of those around us. (Philip. 2:4) Melding our faith with practice offers a unique opportunity and method for being Christ's ambassadors in our culture. We also acknowledge our responsibility to God in how we conduct ourselves in practice.

Generally, the Bible speaks about the source of interpersonal conflict as being within each of us. James 4:1-2 says “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.” In the first scene, Dr. S was easily sent into a bad mood because her agenda for the day had been upset, and

thus a bad interaction with a patient. However, Dr. S is responsible for teaching her patients how to access medical services appropriately. She could have chosen to redirect the patient to a local walk-in clinic or emergency department, if she truly was not able to see the patient. As many physicians, Dr. S gave into a desire to please the patient and attempted to avoid conflict. However, she stepped into conflict because she couldn't meet the expectations of the patient. In the second scene, the mother was dealing with a problem in her life and reacted negatively to a question from the physician. The conflict wasn't something that the physician could have avoided. Thankfully, Dr. S was in a good state of mind and was able to respond with grace in the situation.

These scenes demonstrate that the difficult interactions that we have in the office are a result of the passions which war within ourselves, sometimes to the patients and sometimes both. In the Journal of Biblical Counseling, Dr. David Powlison wrote an article called “Getting to the Heart of Conflict: Anger, Part 3”¹. In this article, he illustrates how two people

Food for Thought

- ~ Coincidences are when God chooses to remain anonymous.
- ~ Don't put a question mark where God put a period.

- ~ Some minds are like concrete—thoroughly mixed up and permanently set.
- ~ Forbidden fruit creates jams.

- ~ We are called to be witnesses, not lawyers or judges.
- ~ It seems society is more preoccupied with ingesting

fighting are like two closed books which are banging together. Inside each book, if they were to be opened, one would find the answers to why they are fighting. In the physician-patient interaction, we may not discover why the patient responded negatively. We are responsible, however, to open our own book and look at why we ourselves are fighting.

Some of the reasons that physicians experience difficult interactions include—lack of sleep, an onerous call schedule, booking too many patients, financial pressures (often self-induced), a need to be liked and appreciated, the desire to please, the desire to be in control, pride, etc. There are also external pressures which may include—family conflicts/illness, church conflicts, caring for a child with a developmental disorder, caring for elderly parents, lawsuits, working in an underserved area, etc. Many patients are also facing similar stressful situations. Some patients may be so miserable (real or imagined), from their illness, that they are not able to be peaceful in interactions with anyone. Unfortunately, some patients have preconceived notions about what physicians are like, generally because they have suffered under the hands

of someone who has mistreated them in the past.

Ultimately, however, when we get into a conflict with anyone, each party is looking out for themselves. When we want something too much, we sin in order to get it. Interpersonal conflict easily arises. God calls us to respond with grace to the stress that occurs in our lives and in our practices. We are to be like Jesus, as His ambassadors. As such, we need to be humble and meek in our interactions with people. God gives grace to the humble. (1 Pet. 5: 5) We are called to use the godly wisdom which is described in James 3:17-18:



“...the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere...”

In our day-to-day interactions with patients, Christian physicians need to be drawing on God's grace and love to be able to complete their calling in

a way that honours God. We need to be remembering God's sovereignty and remember, as someone has said, that every appointment is a “divine appointment”. It is important that we strive to order our lives so that we get the amount of sleep we need to be able to function well. We may need to book less patients. We may need to take the day off after having been on call. We need to ensure that we don't become enslaved to our practice or the financial blessings which come from this calling. We need to abide in Christ daily, in order to bear fruit for Him, in our practices and in our personal lives. (John 15:5)

While interpersonal conflict is not usually pleasant, it is an occasion to demonstrate God's grace and mercy. It is an occasion to grow and to become more Christ-like. It is possible to demonstrate Christ's character, as we strive to be peaceable and to reconcile on this interpersonal level. Perhaps dealing with the present conflict in a godly way will open up an opportunity to help that particular patient to be reconciled with God through Jesus Christ. We need to be daily relying on our God for strength to do the task that He calls us to. (Isa. 40:31) *f*

1. Powlison, D. Getting to the Heart of Conflict: Anger, Part 3. Journal of Biblical Counseling 1997; 16(1) 32-42

dietary fiber, than with instilling moral fiber.

~ If you must let your mind go blank, please turn off the sound!

~ Some rise from a sermon greatly strengthened, others wake from it delightfully refreshed.