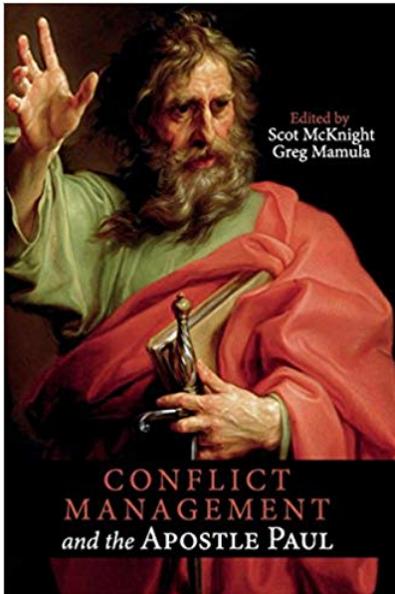


RBL 04/2020



Scot McKnight and Greg Mamula, eds.

***Conflict Management and the Apostle Paul***

Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018. Pp. viii + 171. Paper.  
\$25.00. ISBN 9781532650666.

Adam White  
Alphacrucis College

In *Conflict Management and the Apostle Paul*, McKnight and Mamula present a series of essays that explore various examples of conflict within Paul's life and letters. The essays emerged from a Doctor's of Ministry course, a week-long intensive held at Northern Seminary. The contributors (two per essay) are (with a few exceptions) senior ministers and lay ministers from a variety of denominations across North America and Canada. Each essay seeks to integrate modern conflict-management theories with close examination of the Pauline texts, interspersed with real-life and fictional examples from their own ministries. It is also their purpose to show Paul as a real-life pastor, someone dealing with various and complex issues of conflict and not always getting it right.

The first chapter introduces two modern conflict-management theories from the Harvard Negotiation Project; it also looks at other key studies that focus on church conflict management. This is a helpful introduction and overview to some of the main works on the topic; the various theories explored in the chapter serve as the basis for comparison and contrast throughout the subsequent essays.

The book then presents nine essays, each one focused on a particular text from Acts or Paul's letters that deals with issues of conflict that he faced. Each study offers a relatively detailed exegesis of the passage, often in light of the various management theories

presented at the start, followed by an application of the derived principles to modern church settings. In most of the essays, real-life and fictional anecdotes are also incorporated by way of illustration. These illustrations are helpful in thinking through the implications of the chapter, moving it out of the realms of theory to practice, and reminding the reader that the messiness we face in modern church was not unlike Paul's own experience.

The first study looks at the falling out between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36–41. The authors consider the different personality styles and backgrounds of the two men and how this may have impacted their view on John Mark's decision to abandon the mission. In the end, the men decide to "agree to disagree," demonstrating that healthy separation and going separate ways is not always a negative outcome in conflict. The second study looks at the situation in Philemon and the tension that has been created on account of Onesimus's running away. Paul must navigate the legal ramifications of a runaway slave—which ultimately put Philemon in the right if he should choose to punish Onesimus—and the new reality of the Christian community that called for a higher view of the relationship as that of family. The authors highlight (among other strategies) the way in which Paul opens the issue to the church for arbitration, which challenges many modern practices of keeping issues private and thus enabling abuse. The third study looks at the conflict at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–33) over gentiles and whether they required circumcision. The authors use this example to highlight the keys of "crucial conversation" in conflict management.

The next four studies, perhaps not surprisingly, focus on Corinthians. Study four looks at the conflict over eating in 1 Cor 8–11 and Rom 14–15. The authors draw on Paul's example as well as numerous examples from their own ministry contexts to show that, at times, it is wiser to pause a focus on mission in order to meet the needs of the weaker members. It is sometimes better, in other words, to let the tail wag the dog. Study five looks at the conflict over leaders in 1 Cor 1–3. The authors suggest that the preference over one or the other leader can often be a difference of opinion as to the best way to live out the gospel, leading to different loyalties to different leaders. They are often well-intentioned, but when it devolves into conflict, the focus must be brought back to the crucified Christ. Study six looks at the conflict over the offering in 2 Cor 8–9. The issue here is not so much about the offering itself; rather, the concern is over the trustworthiness of Paul personally. The authors draw attention to Paul's humility and openness, as well as his understanding of the cultural dynamics that are affecting the Corinthians in his attempt to restore their trust. Study seven looks at the divisions occurring at the Lord's table in 1 Cor 11:17–33. In one of the longer studies of the book, the authors present a detailed description of the ancient meal in relation to the

Corinthians' behavior, as well as extensive discussion from their own ministries outlining various strategies toward attaining unity.

The final two studies look at conflicts with regard to different mission and false teaching. Study eight looks at the two different missions of Paul and Peter in Gal 2:1–10. The authors highlight the need for understanding that different missions or departments within a church can have different foci. They note that, though these different missions can seem to be in conflict with one another, one should recognize that each is valid and that each person has a unique call. The final study looks at issues of false teaching in Colossians and the Pastoral Epistles. The authors explore the various pastoral approaches that Paul took, from correcting the teaching while still keeping the members in the fold to confronting and rebuking false teachers.

The book is written by pastors for pastors. The studies do not attempt to offer new insights into the passages they discuss; rather, they draw on recent Pauline scholarship to bring insight to the field of conflict-management theory. Nevertheless, the authors demonstrate solid understanding of their texts and (with one or two exceptions) present rigorous engagement with key, modern scholarship. Debated issues such as the unity of 2 Corinthians and authorship of the disputed epistles are—in my view, correctly—glossed over and the traditional position on each taken (though, it would have been interesting to explore the implications if the Pastorals were read as works of a later generation). Moreover, each study, with its particular application, is grounded in thorough exegesis. This ensures that, as much as is possible from our limited vantage point, Paul is able to speak to the modern church on his own terms. All in all, it makes for a collection of very useful strategies for the modern pastor seeking to build ministry on a solid, biblical foundation.

A few points of critique relate to the book's intent as a tool for ministry. First, each study could use a clear statement up front as to the specific parameters of the conflict to which it is addressed. While it is clear through reading the chapter, the headings and introduction could be clearer as to the specifics of the issue, making it more of a handbook for individual issues. Second, in line with the first issue, something of a bullet-point summary could be given at the end of each study that outlines the key take-away points for the reader/minister. These two features would also make it more useful as a resource for teaching these skills to other leaders within a church. Third, such a collection would have benefited from a more diverse range of contributors. The contributors all come from ministries in North America and Canada, which naturally limits the scope of perspective and types of issues addressed. Obviously, the study emerged from a group of students at a particular seminary, thus negating these intercontinental contributions, but it does perhaps hinder the book slightly. Fourth, the book does not have an overall

conclusion. This is only a minor point, but it does create an abrupt ending. I think it could benefit from general reflection on how the ancient and modern worlds have been brought together and what Paul still has to say to the modern minister, as well as the value the study brings to modern discussions of conflict management.

These minor points aside, *Conflict Management and the Apostle Paul* is a very good resource for pastors and lay leaders. It will also serve students very well as an example of how to both study scripture and apply it to ministry situations. I am already thinking about how to incorporate it into my own courses.