


10-1-2004

## Book Review: Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict by Jim Van Yperen

D. Bruce Seymour  
*Biola University*

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### Recommended Citation

Seymour, D. B. (2004). Book Review: Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict by Jim Van Yperen. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 15(3), 110-114. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/jascg/vol15/iss3/11>

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### **Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict**

**Reviewed by D. Bruce Seymour**

*Van Yperen, Jim. Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict. Chicago: Moody, 2002. 264 pp. \$12.99.*

*Making Peace* is a book about church conflict written by the founder and director of Metanoia Ministries, Jim Van Yperen. In the preface of his book, *Leaders on Leadership*, George Barna introduced Jim Van Yperen with these words:

A marketing strategist and creative communications consultant, Jim has worked with a wide variety of churches, parachurch ministries and nonprofit organizations in the areas of vision development, strategic planning, communications, resource development and conflict resolution. Among his most recent efforts have been serving several churches as Intentional Interim Pastor (Barna 1997).

When *Making Peace* was written, Van Yperen had served for ten years in the field of conflict resolution, had conducted in-depth assessments for more than two dozen churches, had personally served as Intentional Interim Pastor for five deeply conflicted churches and had led seminars across the nation on conflict resolution for pastors and lay leaders. I attended one of these seminars at the Moody Pastor's Conference in May 2000.

In *Making Peace*, Van Yperen shares his understanding of why churches become conflicted and how God wants to "heal them so they may become thriving communities of faith" (13). He describes *Making Peace* as "a 'why' book, not a 'how-to' book" (14) with two fundamental points: first, that church conflict is always theological, and second, that all church conflict is always about leadership, character, and community (24).

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Fall 2004

Van Yperen develops the book in three parts. Part One covers the theological and ecclesiological foundations undergirding his understanding of church conflict and its resolution. In this part he discusses the root causes of conflict, (cultural issues, structural issues, spiritual issues and theological issues) concluding that the most serious problem is a theological misunderstanding of the nature of the church.

In Part Two, Van Yperen introduces his premise that all church conflict is about leadership. "How leaders respond to conflict determines if, when, and how the conflict is reconciled" (14). He begins by suggesting, "Human conflict is surely a consequence of sin. But not all conflict is sin" (92) and, citing James 4:1-10 concludes that conflict comes from "need-based, self-absorbed attitudes and actions" (93). Van Yperen wraps up his definition of conflict saying it is an opportunity to "work out our salvation according to God's redemptive plan" (107). The rest of Part Two is an extended description of the major ways that leaders respond to conflict. Van Yperen describes passive responders, evasive responders, defensive responders, and aggressive responders. He explains the negative effect that each of these responses has on truth and relationships and concludes with suggestions for change.

Part Three shifts from what is wrong to a discussion of how to do things right. For Van Yperen that is a commitment to transformation, "being redemptive" (178-180). Being redemptive involves submission to the lordship of Christ and speaking the truth in love. Van Yperen traces an ideal progression: examination leads to confrontation of sin, which leads to confession, forgiveness and ultimately reconciliation and healing. The book concludes with a seven-fold call to repentance much like a closing prayer.

The book had some obvious strengths. The section on the root causes and how the surrounding culture has permeated the church was effective. His term, "cultural syncretism" (28) was a useful way to describe how the church has begun to act like the world. When sinful perspectives enter the church, the conflict that characterizes the world is not far behind.

Another strength was Van Yperen's emphasis that church conflict is seldom simple. Most conflict is the manifestation of some very complex relational issues. Van Yperen stressed that an attempt must be made to understand the whole "system dynamic," (37) the interplay of attitudes and beliefs that influence decisions and behavior. This attempt to understand the system will make the proposed solutions more effective (37). He properly observes, "most church conflict is not about personal foren-

sic sin, but about systemic ethical failure" (63).

Van Yperen's review of biblical ecclesiology was helpful. He wrote passionately about how God wants the church to be a community of "called-out, called-together people" (73). He properly stressed the need for holiness and order. He fervently believes that church leaders should model that holiness in personal, obvious ways. "A Spirit-led church must have Spirit-formed leadership . . . Leaders are servants who embody God's vision, define current reality, set and keep boundaries, nurture community, and feed the flock" (78).

Ironically, one of the strengths of the book, the illustrations, was also a weakness. The irony is that although the illustrations clarified the point being made, most were so "over the top" that they weakened the point. Ken, the passive responder was *totally* ineffective and *never* saw the error of his ways (115ff). Greg the evasive responder could not *ever* tell the truth (121ff). Joe, the church boss who wore down and wore out eight different pastors (221ff) *immediately* made a complete turnaround after *one* confrontation. Cindy stood up and interrupted the sermon itself (235ff) and was still restored almost immediately. These extreme examples, although probably genuine, were not as helpful as more ordinary ones might have been. The extreme examples were so much "larger than life" that they tinged the associated discussion with unreality.

Another weakness was a subtle "right-hand" bias. Van Yperen introduced this figure of speech early in the book (39) and returned to it often. "Right-handed" leaders emphasize truth and mind (49f). "Left-handed" leaders emphasize love and method. Clearly this book emphasized truth and mind over feelings or method. His stated purpose was to write, "a 'why' book, not a 'how-to' book" (14). Van Yperen made a sincere effort to be balanced but he was so "right-handed" that he seemed genuinely unable to enter into the way a "left-handed" person might attempt to manage conflict. The book would have been strengthened if some genuine "left-handed" perspectives were included (perhaps from someone at the Alban Institute or the Mennonite Peace Institute).

This "right-handed" approach had a major effect on the suggested solutions to conflicted situations. Often the suggested solutions seemed a bit simplistic. In the discussion on response styles, passive responders were told to learn boldness (118). Evasive responders were to simply confess and "face each of your conflicts directly" (134). Defensive responders were told to never defend themselves (151). Aggressive responders were to own their own feelings, hold their tongues and resist retaliation, i.e.

stop being aggressive (159f). Perhaps this is good advice but if these behaviors are as deep-seated as they appear to be, it is probably unrealistic to expect that simply pointing out the “correct” behavior will enable the person to change.

A small but persistent irritation was the way Van Yperen used word studies. He consistently made what D. A. Carson in his book, *Exegetical Fallacies* called a “root fallacy” error (Carson 1984, 26). A root fallacy error is when an exegete attempts to make a point based on how a word is put together. Carson illustrates why this usually results in linguistic nonsense by quoting Louw’s discussion of  $\text{uJphre}^{\text{th}}\beta$ , usually explained as “under-rower.” Louw wrote, “to derive the meaning of  $\text{uJphre}^{\text{th}}\beta$  from  $\text{uJpo}$  and  $\text{e}^{\text{re}}^{\text{th}}\beta$  is no more intrinsically realistic than deriving the meaning of ‘butterfly’ from ‘butter’ and ‘fly,’ or the meaning of ‘pineapple’ from ‘pine’ and ‘apple’” (Louw 1982, 27). Carson observes, “Even those of us who have never been to Hawaii recognize that pineapples are not a special kind of apple that grows on pines” (Carson 1984, 28). Van Yperen repeatedly makes this root fallacy error. In making a point about the need for integrity in the church Van Yperen writes, “The English word for *integrity* comes from the word *integer*, referring to a ‘whole number,’ a ‘complete entity,’ or something ‘undivided.’ In the church, integrity means being undivided in your relationship to God, yourself, and others” (43). Perhaps it could be demonstrated that *integrity* comes from the word *integer* but using that derivation to say anything about the church is poor exegesis. Van Yperen does this over and over in both English and Greek (64, 65, 66, 68, 113, 173, 185, 186, 200, 203, 228, 229). Such an obvious error weakens the book.

Van Yperen’s entire approach was also weakened by his premise that it was possible to write a helpful “why” book without including the “how-to.” He seemed to believe that if the “why” was understood the “how-to” would be obvious. It is not. Application is seldom obvious so although his insights were helpful, most readers would not know how to apply the insights and thus would not be helped. The story of Joe the church boss (221-226) is a moving story, his repentance is a wonderful answer to prayer and his public confession was a wonderful start on repentance but it left the reader with a cluster of application questions. How could the church truly forget all he had done? How did the church learn to follow a different leader? Who was going to help Joe with the next temptation? Who held Joe and the Church accountable for their new relationship and how was that done? Dr. Sunukjian would emphatically affirm that it is the communicator’s responsibility to not only articulate the truth but

also help the listener/reader apply the truth.

In spite of these weaknesses the book is recommended for anyone involved in church leadership. It is a good reminder that leadership is a critical factor in any conflict. It was a convicting reminder that sin in a leader's life is a corporate problem (198). It was a powerful challenge to personal holiness (210) with the encouragement that my godly example helps keep the church "system" healthy and makes conflict more unlikely.

Reviewer

Seymour, D. Bruce. D. Bruce Seymour is a pastor in New Jersey. He received a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary in 1984 and has served two other churches, in Wisconsin and Missouri. Currently in the in the D.Min program at Talbot Seminary, he is married to Connie and blessed with three children and two grandchildren.