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John 17 used to be one of the more confounding chapters of the Bible to me. Why, of all the glorious and majestic things Jesus could have prayed about in this last, high-priestly prayer, why would he choose to pray about unity? There are such grand themes in the Bible, and in Jesus’s teaching in particular—atonement, election, the sovereignty of God, the coming kingdom. Why would Jesus give such a high dignity to unity, of all things? It seems so, well, ecumenical. Part of the problem, I suppose, is that the word “unity” has been hijacked by well-meaning but misguided philanthropists who would rejoice at nothing more than to see everyone who even nominally claims the name of Christ happily getting along and working together for the common good of humanity. In some ways, that’s a worthy goal, to be sure, and one that we will finally realize in heaven. The more time I have spent in the church, though, the more I am convinced that it is a goal that we will finally see only in heaven. Most of the initiatives that fly today under the banner of “unity” really do very little for the gospel and usually end up undermining its very meaning. What, then, does it ultimately mean for Christians to be united? Why is it so important, and in what context is it important? Does Jesus’s prayer in John 17 mean that we as Christians should exhaust ourselves in ecumenical dialogue sessions, or is there another context for unity that strikes even more profoundly to the heart of our Christian witness and God’s reputation in the world? I believe it is the latter. When Paul writes in Ephesians 4 that we are to “Make effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” he is not talking about ecumenism. He is talking about the corporate witness of the local church. When the local church is united and at peace within itself, God is glorified and the gospel is commended to the watching world. I assume that many of you who will read this review are pastors, elders, or leaders in the church, so I assume also that you are ruggedly aware that unity and peace in the local church is not something to be taken for granted. We do, after all, live in a sinful and fallen world, so conflict and discord will simply be a part of our lives, especially in churches. Christianity, though, is a robust and vital faith that takes human life head on. Hardships, disagreements, arguments, broken relationships, hurt feelings, apologies, forgiveness—all of these are part of life as a Christian and instruments in God’s hands to refine His people. “Be patient,” Paul wrote, “bearing with one another in love.” Why? “So that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.” Stylites never enjoyed that kind of refinement. So the question is this: If unity and peace are so vital to the witness of the church, yet their absence is so much a part of life, how do we then maintain them? Ken Sande, a lawyer and committed Christian and member of his church, presents in his book *The Peacemaker* an practical, up-to-date guidebook to the Bible’s teaching on conflict resolution in the church. If you have read Polity (CCR: 2001), you will appreciate this book as a modern supplement that builds practically on the theological foundations hammered out by those earlier authors. Part One of the book encourages us as Christians to look at the inevitable conflicts in our lives as opportunities to trust God, mature our faith in His provision, and ultimately glorify Him through our response. Part Two leads us to examine our own lives, teaches us to determine what offenses are really worth fighting over, and gives some sound and practical teaching on repentance. Part Three outlines Jesus’s teaching on conflict in Matthew 18, giving practical advice and examples on how one should approach a brother who has sinned, explaining how one should use the “two or three witnesses,” and clarifying the role of the church in disciplining an unrepentant offender. Part Four offers a well-balanced study on forgiveness, and exhorts Christians to “overcome evil with good.” There are also a number of appendices at the end that will be especially helpful for pastors. One of the best characteristics of Sande’s book is that it is distinctively and unapologetically Christian. The entire first half of the book, in fact, is an extended study of how conflict is uniquely handled in the Christian life. Sande writes on p. 25, “Most importantly, the Bible teaches that we should see conflict neither as an inconvenience nor as an occasion for selfish gain, but rather as an opportunity to demonstrate the presence and power of God.” That is a welcome emphasis, and quite a different one from what the world would tell us. Of course, one might often hear that conflict is an occasion for “self-actualization” or “self-realization.” Whatever may be the case with that, Sande’s is a distinctively Christian declaration that all conflict is fundamentally for the glory of God. He mentions several times that he has prayed for people who were in conflict, thus recognizing that it is not finally a conflict-resolution program but the power of God that is the catalyst to real reconciliation. Sande makes a strong case that the church is uniquely positioned to be a powerful agent for resolving conflict in a healthy way. The church, says Sande, is able to cut to the heart of a disagreement and create long-term, permanent solutions in a way that secular courts cannot. The impulse is too immediate in our society today to move straight to litigation when any conflict arises. “[But] litigation,” he writes, “usually increases tensions and often destroys relationships. In contrast, the church can actively encourage forgiveness and promote reconciliation, thus preserving valuable relationships. . . . The church can help people to identify root problems,” p.48. Where a judge is limited to awarding monetary damages, transferring property, and generally re-shuffling the surface, the church is able to address issues of sin, relationships, and personality. All in all, the church is much better equipped, if it would ever take up that divinely ordained mantle, to handle disputes, heal relational ruptures, and be in the process a shining testimony to the grace of God. It should be mentioned here as an aside that Sande has included some quotes on this topic from an article by Justice Antonin Scalia from the Christian Legal Society. It is fascinating to see a Justice of the Supreme Court calling on the church to do the job it was given by Christ and thus to take back that burden (and that authority, frankly) from the secular courts. Chapter 10 is an interesting one that will spark much thought about forgiveness. I remember having a conversation just recently about whether forgiveness was conditioned on repentance. “If not at a loss for words, I was at least at a loss for a concise answer. There are certainly passages in the Bible that tell us to forgive unconditionally, that ask God to “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Then again, there is Luke 17:3, which says, “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.” If he repents, forgive him. I am sure that any number of arguments could be made to mitigate the conditionality of this statement, including the fact that this is not speaking about a personal offense, or that this passage isn’t teaching about what to do when the offender doesn’t repent. Notwithstanding these arguments, though, and they are certainly worth discussing, I do not think one can escape the conclusion that throughout the Bible, forgiveness of all kinds, both God’s and ours, is spoken of in some sense as conditioned on the offender’s repentance. Sande offers the suggestion that we should “approach forgiveness as a two-stage process.” The first stage he terms “positional forgiveness;” the second is called “transactional forgiveness.” Positional forgiveness is “a decision . . . not [to] dwell on the hurtful incident or seek vengeance or retribution in thought, word, or action. Instead, you will keep yourself in a “position of forgiveness” in which you pray for the other person and are ready to pursue complete reconciliation as soon as he or she repents.” (See Joseph Baker’s discussion of this on pages 251-253 of Polity.) Transactional forgiveness, on the other hand, is a commitment not to bring up the offense again or use it against the person, not to talk about the incident to other people, and not to allow the incident to hinder your personal relationship with the offender. Until the person repents, it would actually be inappropriate, Sande says, to offer transactional forgiveness, since it may be necessary to confront the offender with his sin. I am sure that this two-fold conception of forgiveness is not the end of the conversation, nor should it be. To consider well the nature of forgiveness would be a noble pursuit for Christian minds. On the whole, though, I believe Sande’s idea goes far toward faithfully taking into consideration both those passages that demand forgiveness in all situations and those that seem to be conditioned on repentance. I am also glad to see, in the wake of some literature that has called for a sentimental and really unrealistic forgiveness, that Sande has in a very authentic way taught that forgiveness is neither a feeling, nor forgetting, nor excusing, nor a total remission of consequences, but a considered decision not to allow an event to wreck a personal relationship. It is, in my opinion, a healthy and balanced treatment of the subject. I would raise two minor points about a couple of particular, isolated statements in the book. The first is on page 18, in Sande’s discussion of “escape responses” to conflict. Under “flight,” Sande mentions “changing churches” as one of several unhealthy responses to conflict. He says in the next sentence, “Flight may be a legitimate response in extreme circumstances when it is impossible to resolve the conflict in a constructive manner. In most cases, however, running away only postpones a proper solution to a problem.” I think Sande is generally correct in that statement, though I would want to maintain that “extreme circumstances” may come about more often than Sande’s statement might convey. For any individual member of a church, it is imperative for the health of both himself and the church as a whole that he be able to trust the leadership of the church. It happens often that personalities and sin so conspire as to make it impossible to restore fully a trust that has been broken, whether legitimately or not. In some of those cases, it is no bad thing, I think, for a church member to leave his church and seek out another one where that distrust is not so deeply rooted. Sande leaves that category open with his statement about “extreme circumstances,” but I think it is worth bringing once again to the attention of pastors as a legitimate category, though we should never lightly take into our fellowship people who have left another church for these kinds of reasons. I am also in some slight disagreement with Sande’s statement on page 109 that “Since a heart sin takes place only in your thoughts, it does not directly affect others and needs to be confessed only to God.” He is talking most directly here about confessing that sin to the person who is the object of it, and in that sense, I am in agreement with him. Sins of the heart, whether jealousy or envy or lust or any number of others, should not normally be confessed to the one who is the human object of the sin. Nevertheless, I think it is good practice to confess sins of that kind not only to God, but also to a trusted third-party, a pastor or elder or another friend. The human heart is a complicated, tangled knot of sinfulness, and confessing to another person, even about private heart sins, can be invaluable in pulling back the cover from those sins, tracing them to their roots, and taking positive steps toward destroying them. Those are two very minor points, and should not be taken in any way to undercut the usefulness of Sande’s book. The Peacemaker will be immediately fruitful in any church, and in the life of any Christian who reads it. The appendices, which include the Peacemaker’s pledge, an explanation of conflict resolution strategies, essays on questions about restitution and when it is appropriate to go to court, and contact information for Christian conciliation organizations, will also be extremely useful to the pastor. Sande has given the church a helpful guide on how the church can better bear out her testimony to the life-changing power of her Savior.

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