

Introduction to Christian Ethics

Conflict, Faith, and Human Life

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Christian Ethics in Conflict

This book takes conflict as the context for Christian reflection on the good life. Conflict cannot be an occasion about which Christians make decisions only periodically, for conflict is an ever-present reality that Christians cannot avoid. We live in conflict. The dynamics of conflict are the stuff of daily life, the movement of history, the making and remaking of community, and the vibrancy of faith. To be is to be in conflict. Thus, the central question of this book is this: How do we live a good life in the midst of conflict? The task of this introductory chapter is to explain why the question matters, and to suggest a path for pursuing it using the resources and methods of Christian ethics.

TO BE IS TO BE IN CONFLICT

“To be is to be in conflict” seems a rather pessimistic statement, especially if one has a negative understanding of conflict (and there are certainly legitimate reasons to have a negative understanding of conflict). Violent conflict destroys life and livelihood. Ongoing interpersonal conflicts rupture relationship, erode trust, and debilitate us emotionally and psychologically. Conflict costs time, sleep, health, and material resources. To assert that we exist in conflict seems to trap us in a fundamentally anxious situation. This makes the assertion uncomfortable, but not necessarily untrue.

At its root, *conflict* means “to strike together,” the Latin *com* meaning “with” and *fligere* meaning “strike.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *conflict* in its noun form as “a state of opposition or hostilities,” a “fight or struggle,” “the clashing of opposed principles.” To be in conflict means that elements are in opposition with one another; they strike together. We might think of this in contrast to confluence, where different elements flow together more smoothly. Conflicting elements are in tension, in opposition with one another. The power of this concept is that it describes a relationship between different elements. *Comfligere* maintains the difference and the relationship. Because we exist as different elements (and of different elements) in relationship to others, our existence is one of conflict.

Conflict, in this way, is both natural and necessary. As parts of an ecosystem, we are organisms that are both different from and related to each other. Whether on the large scale of shifting tectonic plates or the small scale of worms and waste in compost, the world of which we are part is made and remade through conflict. We live as part of an ecosystem that undergoes constant change as elements strike together. To be is to be in conflict.

TO BE HUMAN IS TO BE IN CONFLICT

To this observation rooted in nature, we need to add a sociological description and a moral argument. Conflict plays a sociological function for human beings. More than a feature of our existence in the ecosystem, conflict plays an essential role in the formation and reformation of human communities. We may tend to fixate on the ways that violent conflict redraws national boundaries or changes the demographics of a society or fuels the emergence of social groups. However, as I will emphasize repeatedly in this book, not all forms of conflict are violent. Think of the way that, for good or ill, legislative jostling or conflict reshapes the policies that govern people’s lives and prompts the formation of organizations for advocacy or resistance. Think of the way that nonviolent social movements and actions, such as the 2017 Women’s March on Washington or civil rights sit-ins, protests, and marches past and present have used conflict to expose injustice, motivate negotiation, and force change. Every day, in small ways, conflict shapes human community. It affects the dynamics of friend groups, families, classrooms, work environments, and congregations. Conflict

is a catalyst for change, and if approached constructively, it can be a catalyst for positive change. This view of conflict reflects the latest in a lineage of approaches: conflict prevention, management, resolution, and now transformation.¹ Rather than beginning with the assumption that conflict can be prevented, this approach understands conflict to be a normal and unavoidable part of life. Rather than perceiving conflict as something to be managed and contained, conflict transformation intends to work constructively with conflict as a “catalyst for change.”² Rather than focusing only on a problem to be solved, this approach also tries to engage conflict in a way that begins something new and good.³

In everyday speech, we apply the term *conflict* to everything from interpersonal tension to international war. So it is crucial to understand that the literature and the practitioners of conflict transformation are not claiming that everything we associate with conflict is natural and necessary. Rather, they are calling for a more precise understanding of the term. They sharpen our focus to the place and moment in which perceptions, needs, desires, ideas, or convictions “strike together.” Striking together is part of living in an ecosystem that is changing and interrelated. Conflict is natural and necessary. How we respond to these moments and circumstances of conflict warrants moral assessment and action. In other words, though we cannot choose whether to be in conflict, we can choose how to respond to it.

Violence is one response to conflict, but violence and conflict are not the same thing. To be accurate here, I need to distinguish firmly between the two, and then blur the distinction a bit. We experience violent conflict (a physical fight, for example) and nonviolent conflict (a verbal disagreement), and we respond to conflict with violence (a retaliatory strike) or nonviolence (a sit-in). When we conflate conflict and violence, we lose sight of a vast range of human interaction and the possibilities that reside in it. This distinction between violence and conflict is crucial, because one can also respond to conflict nonviolently and use conflict nonviolently for purposes of social change. If we lose the distinction between violence and conflict, we obscure the rich tradition and ongoing efforts of nonviolent resisters to engage conflict constructively for purposes of social change. Nonviolent resistance is also one response to conflict, one approach to or use of conflict. Moreover, nonviolence shares the umbrella of conflict transformation with practices of mediation, restorative justice, and circle facilitation, because all of these actions rest on the assertion that conflict can be a catalyst for constructive change in relationships and communities.

However, it is also important and honest to complicate these distinctions a bit. The lines between violent and nonviolent resistance are blurry because there are so many different kinds of violence. Violence is both overt and hidden; it is physical, structural, and psychological; it is already experienced and persistently threatened. Regimes and persons alike can behave violently in any number of ways without manifesting physical harm. Nonviolent resisters also blur the distinction between violence and nonviolence when they advocate sanctions that restrict access to basic goods or when they utilize resistance tactics that involve self-harm, for example. Similarly, it is exceedingly difficult to separate conflict from the forms of emotional, psychological, and spiritual violence that are inevitably part of striking together. So it is crucial to recognize conflict as a natural dimension of life in a related and changing system, and it is equally crucial to avoid romanticizing conflict or relaxing too much with this acceptance of necessity. Striking together, no matter how natural it is, is fraught with danger, and those dangers are compounded by issues of power and proximity. The costs of conflict land heaviest on those who are least powerful and closest to the dispute. When we reflect on contexts of conflict from a distance or from a position of comfort, we need to be particularly mindful of this. This is one reason why I privilege the perspective of victims of violence.

A second important distinction is between conflict and sin. One could read the preceding description of human life as situated in conflict and conclude that this is another way to talk about our fallen state, or our historical moment in the interim, the “not yet” in the Christian story. However, conflict as understood here is not a consequence of the fall, but a consequence of being interrelated and changing. Conflict is a dimension of createdness, not a result of sin. Our natural and social circumstance makes conflict a part of life. Moreover, unlike sin, conflict contains possibilities for good. Conflict can be a catalyst for constructive change. Thus, it is inaccurate to conflate conflict and sin, because possibilities for positive transformation reside in the dynamics of conflict. Through discussion with practitioners and trainers in conflict transformation, I have learned that they usually begin their work with Christians by helping them to disentangle conflict from sin. Such disentangling takes some doing because most of the Christians that these writers, practitioners, and trainers encounter still intuitively perceive conflict as being contradictory to Christian living, which they think should be marked by patience, forgiveness, kindness, and charity. To “strike together” seems to be unchristian or an indication of sin

itself. Well-known peacebuilder John Paul Lederach writes, “During years of consulting, I have found this to be a common view of conflict in church circles. Conflict is sin. It shows that people are falling from the straight and narrow way. Working with and through conflict is essentially a matter of making sure people ‘get right with God.’”⁴ Lederach insists that being in conflict is not sinful. It is simply part of being created in relationship with the capacity for freedom and change.

Christian conflict transformation practitioners, like Lederach, regularly respond to this link between conflict and sin by providing a theological affirmation of conflict. In other words, conflict is not a consequence of fallenness, but of creation. As one practitioner-trainer told me, “For me, conflict is an ordinary and natural part of living. It’s a part of life, it’s a part of God’s creation.”⁵ We see this in manuals as well: “Conflict is a natural part of a creation that is relational and diverse, a creation in which we are free to make choices. God declares it good. We will always have conflict.”⁶ Lederach articulates this theology of conflict as being a natural part of God’s creation in a chapter aptly titled “In the Beginning . . . Was Conflict.” There he identifies key theological convictions that affirm conflict as inherent in God’s creation (that we are created in God’s image and given freedom, that God is present within each person, and that God values diversity).⁷ “By the very way we are created,” he concludes, “conflict will be a part of our ongoing human experience.”⁸ Conflict is a given. It is a natural and necessary part of God’s creation.

On this point, the practitioner-trainer explained that the task “is really about shaping an already existing, evolving process into something that might be life-giving and nourishing.”⁹ Conflict is happening. The moral dimension of conflict—that is, our assessment of it as good or bad—emerges in the active responses to it. Conflict *can be* incredibly destructive. It *can also be* a catalyst for constructive change in terms of interpersonal relationships or social justice movements. These destructive and constructive aspects of conflict arise as people act in response to the ontological realities of difference and friction. The things that we frequently attach to a conception of conflict—violence, separation, destruction, discomfort, or even constructive engagement and healthy change—are *activities*. They are not part of conflict essentially, which is simply what I defined earlier as a striking together; rather, they attach to conflict via our purposeful response to it. Sin enters as we fail to respond to conflict constructively. In chapter 4, I explore why conflict itself is not sinful, though we may respond to it in sinful ways.

We cannot choose whether to be in conflict, nor can we choose whether conflict affects the human communities in which we live; however, we can choose how to respond to conflict and what kind of change to bring about. How we respond to conflict is a moral matter. Conflict is a natural and necessary element of life. But our responses to conflict are weighted with moral considerations involving power, accountability, values, and beliefs. There is not one single response to conflict because conflict is highly contextual. There are myriad kinds of conflict, and people are positioned in conflict with various degrees of power and various kinds of responses. Conflicts range from interpersonal to international; they can be between couples or between countries. Conflicts may be violent, intense, and brief, or they may persist as a low-intensity “hum” that lasts for years. The nature of conflicts varies tremendously; so do our proximity to them and the extent of our power in the midst of them. One conflict may be a peripheral issue for someone who has the choice of whether or not to engage it, while that same conflict may be truly a matter of life or death for someone else. The same issue that one person opts to address with a postcard or phone call actually determines the future of an undocumented immigrant, a patient’s access to affordable medicine, or the length of a soldier’s deployment. Even within an interpersonal relationship, there can be a conflict that is perceived as a minor policy change for one person and causes deep personal harm to someone else. Consider, for example, the way that two colleagues might respond to their employer’s family leave policy if it assumes a narrow definition of family. The worker who is a straight, married woman accessing maternity leave might well argue that the narrow definition fails to address the needs of nontraditional households. She sees it as unfortunate but does not feel its effects directly. For the gay man in a lifelong partnership contemplating adoption, a narrow policy is one more personal attack on the value of his family and his deep hopes for it. These contextual differences underscore the importance of conflict as a site for moral reflection. Because we are related to one another in a variety of ways, we are already in conflict, and we must respond. Disengagement is not an option. Moreover, given the differences in proximity to and impact of the conflict, our responses must be particularly accountable to those who will carry their weight.

The assertion that to be human is to be in conflict is thus also a moral argument. This is more than an ecological or sociological description;

it is also a normative claim. By normative claim, I mean that “To be human is to be in conflict” is an assertion about the way we *should* live, not only a description of the way we *do* live. As indicated above, the dynamic of conflict inherently reflects difference and relationship. To strike together, we must be different and somehow interacting. These claims relate to a view of human beings as autonomous *and* interrelated, different from one another *and* accountable to one another. In moral reflection, there are times when we emphasize autonomy over relationality, such as when we assert individual rights. At other times, we place greater weight on relationality—when, for instance, we speak of the common good. However, we are *both* autonomous *and* related.

Advancing the moral value of conflict is one way of affirming relationship *and* respecting autonomy. One of the pitfalls of relationality is that we obscure differences or downplay division in order to maintain the relationship. We say, “peace, peace when there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14). Autonomy can be a corrective to this effort at “peacekeeping” because it recognizes others rather than silencing them and because it respects the agency of others rather than denying their power. On the other hand, one of the pitfalls of autonomy is that we tolerate differences without seriously engaging them or feeling accountable to them. Under the guise of autonomy, we act independently (we do our own thing) despite its impact on others. Under the guise of autonomy, we live and let live. That separate living keeps us from being accountable to others, and it keeps us from challenging others. Conflict engagement is a practice of respect rooted in notions of relationship and accountability.

There are many reasons that people deny the presence of conflict, but one underlying reason is power. “There is no conflict here” is one way that those in power maintain the status quo and deny voice to others. When we acknowledge relatedness and take that seriously, we can no longer reframe a conflict as “her issue” or “their problem.” When we respect the personhood and agency of others, we listen when they disrupt the peace, and we realize and acknowledge that peace never really existed. We also practice relatedness and respect when we challenge “the appalling silence,”¹⁰ the counsel of “not yet,” the feigned ignorance, or the outright denial from those who claim no connection to the issue that burdens, offends, and threatens us. These normative claims about conflict are not only attached to a view of human beings as independent and related, but also to values and beliefs rooted in the Christian tradition.

TO BE CHRISTIAN IS TO BE IN CONFLICT

Christ calls his followers into conflict with their most intimate relations, with cultural practices, with religious and political authorities, with their own inclinations, desires, and prejudices, and ultimately with the principalities and powers of life. Christians interpret and respond to these teachings differently, of course. Some focus on a calling to subordinate personal desires or partial allegiances in order to live according to the will of God. They often understand themselves to be in conflict with progressive forces in culture as they try to maintain faithfulness and obedience to God's law in a changing world. They may, therefore, choose to withdraw from the world in order to follow God's law and Christ's teachings in ways they deem to be more complete. Others emphasize Christ's solidarity with those on the margins and call Christians to resist the subjugation and exclusion of the vulnerable. For these folks, God's law and Christ's teachings call them into the midst of social struggle and political conflict as they work for social justice and liberation. Some Christians live in intentional communities where they practice a way of living in the world that bears witness to an alternative, kingdom vision. Whether they follow a personal piety at odds with contemporary culture, a political ideology that challenges systems of domination and power, or a way of living that offers an alternative to consumerism and materialism, there are Christians whose discipleship places them in conflict with other individuals and other social practices.

Christians also experience the dynamic of conflict as they live into the calling of Christ over a lifetime. The life of faith (or the process of sanctification in my Wesleyan tradition) is also an experience of conflict. We struggle to live faithfully in a changing world. Sometimes the conflicts are internal as we struggle through a discernment process or wrestle with a tension between competing commitments. Sometimes the conflicts are interpersonal as we interact with people whose perspectives differ or whose actions offend and/or threaten people we love and things we care about. And, to be fair, sometimes we are the ones who threaten and offend. Sometimes the conflicts are between groups of Christians who interpret the texts and teachings of their faith differently and reach different conclusions about contemporary issues.

Here again, I assert a normative claim. Clearly, Christian history and contemporary Christian churches are filled with conflict. "To be Christian is to be in conflict" is, in this sense, simply a description of the way things have been and continue to be. But I also suggest that this

is the way things *should* be. Christians should be in conflict with one another because the Christian faith is a dynamic, historical development. Christians should be part of the contestations involved in shaping this living tradition. Ethicist Douglas Ottati writes that standing in a living tradition means “participat[ing] in a dynamic process of interpretation—one that moves between received heritage and the realities and challenges of the present world in order to express a continuing and vital orientation or identity.”¹¹ To be a Christian is to locate oneself in a historical tradition that has developed and is developing through interactions of difference. To be a Christian is to be in conflict. While we tend to emphasize a Christian’s conflict with “the world” in a sectarian sense, we must recognize that conflict is an integral part of the historical and ongoing development of the faith tradition itself.

Our ecosystem, our societies, and our faith traditions are intrinsically places of conflict, places where the elements or participants are related and different. Moreover, all of these places are under development, and conflict is a catalyst for change. How we respond and how we participate are moral matters. Thus, the central question of ethics as approached in this book is this: *How do we live a good life in the midst of conflict?* My response to the question—and the way that I approach it—reflects a certain understanding of Christian ethics. Not surprisingly, I understand Christian ethics to be a study of conflict.

TO STUDY CHRISTIAN ETHICS IS TO STUDY CONFLICT

Christian ethics is the study of morals and practices guided by the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus. This object of study is dynamic, varied, and ongoing. Indeed, the object of study in this field is not so much a thing as a process. Christian ethics studies the ways in which people in particular places and historical moments understand their faith tradition to relate to the world unfolding around them, with its scientific discoveries, its cultural shifts, its political movements, and its ecological changes, not to mention its violence, beauty, pain, joy, sorrow, and resilience. This process is full of contingencies, moments in which the slightest variable makes a great difference.

Consider the tidy sentence above about being guided by the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus. How do we understand those? How do I? How do you? How did our great-grandparents? How does someone in Bolivia? Or Baltimore? Or Berlin? We are immediately faced with

different approaches to Scripture, for starters. One helpful resource for organizing different approaches to Scripture comes from an essay written by James M. Gustafson over thirty years ago.¹² Some believers, Gustafson explained, approach Hebrew and Christian Scriptures for instructions on behavior; they turn to Scripture to reveal morality to them. Yet they understand morality to be conveyed in different ways: as law, as ideal, as analogy, and as part of reflective discourse. Each of these four approaches also has variables within it. For example, in the Scripture-as-law approach, believers identify different content as the law. For some, it is the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments, Exod. 20:1–17); for others, it is the so-called hard sayings of Jesus (such as Mark 10:21: “Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor”); still others point to the dual love commandment as the law (to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself, Mark 12:30–31). Others point to the imperatives that Jesus communicates in the form of a story or blessing (such as “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Matt. 5:9). Are those laws too?¹³

Another variable in Christian approaches to Scripture concerns matters of application. Consider, for example, those who understand biblical morality to be conveyed in the form of ideals for behavior.¹⁴ Does Jesus’ teaching to give up all and follow him apply to every Christian, in the same way, to the same degree? Did Jesus actually think we could achieve this? Or are we called to do our best and confess the rest? Is this an ideal that I should strive for so that my behavior is a little less awful than it might be otherwise?

The contingencies of approaching Scripture as analogy are particularly fascinating because of the power one wields in crafting the analogy.¹⁵ Which biblical story does one choose to match with which historical circumstance? Which biblical characters does one choose to match up with whom in history? Clearly, this is a place where we can easily spot the instrumental use of Scripture, though of course this temptation accompanies every approach. At a panel discussion I attended after September 11, 2001, a person in the audience presented the panelists with an analogy. “It’s like the terrorists are Goliath and we [meaning the United States] are David,” he said. One of the panelists responded, “Well, what if we are Goliath and the terrorists are David? That is certainly the way they see it.” Gustafson describes this as the problem of control: When we approach Scripture analogically, what controls the process? What determines our selection of a particular passage and our arrangement of the characters?

Gustafson refers to reflective discourse as the “loosest” of the four kinds of revealed morality, and indeed it is.¹⁶ In this approach, Scripture is one source among many that the individual uses in a process of discernment. The content of Scripture continues to weigh heavily in one’s moral reflection, but it does not necessarily outweigh insights from experience, teachings embedded in a living tradition, or arguments rooted in other sources of knowledge. Here again, the issue of control surfaces prominently: Which moral source (Scripture, tradition, experience, or reason, to use the Wesleyan quadrilateral as an example) holds the most weight?¹⁷

Gustafson’s categories help us to make sense of some of the differences among Christians. One of the reasons why people sharing one faith tradition hold such disparate views on social issues, for example, is that they approach Scripture differently. When we consider that approaches to Scripture are just one variable in Christian ethics (though certainly a particularly weighty one), we become increasingly aware of the potential for multiplicity within Christian ethics. It is not just that Christians *do* think differently about any number of things; it is that Christians *can* think differently about any number of things—and still be Christians. I want to be very careful about this important point. I am not arguing that all Christian perspectives are equally valid. Rather, I am arguing that there is contingency in Christian ethics. The process of moral discernment for an individual Christian is filled with variables: one’s focus on one Scripture passage and not another; one’s appreciation for one interpretation of Scripture or theology and not another; one’s formation in legalistic communities versus utopian communities; one’s level of attachment to a particular tradition and that tradition’s notions of authority; one’s informal education about the relationship between Scripture and other sources of knowledge; one’s social location; the influence of one Sunday school teacher, one religious studies professor, one really great sermon, one really horrible sermon; the impact of a current event and the way in which religious leaders do and do not respond to it. These variables—and many others—ensure a multiplicity of Christian views.

This variety alone is fascinating, but even more so is the process through which varieties emerge. It is a process of interaction. We see interaction between text and context, between interpretations and selections, between sources of authority and views of authority, between conceptions of an ideal and perceptions of historical necessity, between desire and obligation, between particular concerns and

global commitments, between familiar ways and new ideas. And we see interactions between individual and community, between individuals, between communities, within individuals (navigating multiple allegiances or convictions in tension), and within communities (navigating differences differently). The dynamic and unfolding process of Christian ethics (and Christian faith more generally) naturally involves various kinds of interaction. And because each interacting element has its own boundaries and properties (whether it is a person, conviction, emotion, interpretation, or institution), there is a moment of striking together. The nature of this striking together varies, of course. But the fundamental nature of interaction—an ongoing, dynamic process of striking together—is constitutive of Christian ethics. Thus, to study Christian ethics is to study conflict.

Once again, this is more than a descriptive claim. To study Christian ethics should be the study of conflict. It should involve a full consideration of the differences and disagreements within this living tradition. This is one difference between Christian ethics and Christian morals. Though we tend to use these phrases interchangeably, Christian ethics is the study of Christian morality, the beliefs and values espoused and enacted by Christians. Christian morals is a more fixed category because it assumes that there is indeed a set of beliefs, values, and practices that reflect right belief (orthodoxy), while other assertions are heretical or at least questionable. Studying Christian morals, then, is studying orthodoxy, the right doctrine, the right view on moral issues. Studying Christian ethics involves studying the variety itself, analyzing it, and then engaging in careful discernment, debate, and argumentation. Christian ethics should involve more than assent to right doctrine; Christian ethics should involve contestation and conflict. More than the study of conflict, it involves *participation* in conflict as well.

TO DO CHRISTIAN ETHICS IS TO PARTICIPATE IN CONFLICT

My approach to this debate over orthodoxy and variety reflects the influence of a nineteenth-century German Protestant named Ernst Troeltsch. Troeltsch argued that Christianity is a historical development, one that reflects the dynamic interaction between faith and history. Troeltsch argued that Christians take up their core convictions—the kingdom of God, for example—differently in different sociohistorical contexts.

These convictions are not ahistorical kernels traveling untouched through space and time. Rather, they are interpreted and reinterpreted in light of changing historical circumstances by Christians in living communities over time. Troeltsch's colleague Adolf von Harnack shared Troeltsch's historical sensibility but argued that one ought to be able to sift through all of the accruals of meaning to identify the essence of the faith.¹⁸ For Harnack, there has to be some red thread that captures the essence of the Christian faith, and one should be able to trace that red thread through history.¹⁹ Yet Troeltsch raised concerns about such efforts to strip away everything that does not align with the essence of the faith. What happens to all of the developments in the faith declared inessential? What criteria does one use to distinguish between the essential and the nonessential elements of the faith?

In his own work, Troeltsch adopts another approach.²⁰ Rather than paring down to the essence, he offers a comprehensive view of Christianity that perceives variation as a quintessential part of the Christian faith and not as mere residue around its essence. His work examines the ways that Christians interpret faith claims anew in the midst of changing circumstances.²¹ At the end of his two-volume work *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, Troeltsch describes the interaction between the ideals of faith (primarily the kingdom of God) and the world in terms of *kompromiss* ("compromise" or "ongoing interaction"). He writes, "The history of the Christian Ethos becomes the story of a constantly renewed search for this compromise, and of fresh opposition to this spirit of compromise."²² Troeltsch's approach helps us to see that the Christian faith is a dynamic and living tradition and that Christians remain active in their faith by working with the interaction between the core convictions and their changing historical circumstances. This work of interaction is not a heretical or prideful practice, but a faithful one. Indeed, this very interaction between faith and history keeps the tradition alive.

Troeltsch's description also makes it clear that we cannot describe, analyze, and critique Christian ethics without becoming a part of the dynamic interactions that continue to shape it. To study Christian ethics is also to do Christian ethics. To study the interactions, frame them, describe them, and analyze them is also to impact them by participating in their historical development. We cannot describe something without affecting it in some way, if only in the way it is received and perceived by those who hear our telling of it. This was actually one of Troeltsch's concerns about Harnack's "red thread"—namely, that directing people's attention to one place is an implicit criticism of everything else.

Contemporary scholars in the field of Christian ethics powerfully address the ethics of vantage point and of listening. Feminist ethicists, for example, share a fundamental commitment to resisting subjugation of persons. This commitment drives keen analysis of power dynamics and the development of forms of scholarship that listen to those who have been silenced or kept on the margins. Feminist ethicist Karen Lebacqz, for example, writes powerfully of the differences between the view from above and the view from below in the context of theories of justice:

Because this logic comes from the birds, and the fish have not been heard, we are only now beginning to understand the limitations of what we have taken to be the inexorable laws of logic and the tools of traditional ethics. *What is logic to the birds is death to the fish.* To those swimming in oceans of sexism and usury or other injustices, the logic of the oppressor often seems like a “frozen” logic, a life-denying logic.²³

The commitment to consider the view of the fish has been developed methodologically through the concept of epistemological privilege, meaning that one grants authority to those who have firsthand experience with the problems under discussion. Epistemological privilege means that we recognize the knowledge and wisdom of someone living on the streets when we are thinking about the issue of homelessness, for example. Rather than speaking and writing *about* the situation of others from a place of distant theory, we grant authority and privilege to their own voices and experience. Epistemological privilege also demands that scholars not only listen to these voices of experience, but that they remain accountable to them. For example, if I am developing an argument about how my church should respond to homelessness in the surrounding neighborhood, my proposal should be assessed by those who live on the streets, especially if I claim that my proposal would be somehow “good for them.”

Kelly Brown Douglas is a womanist ethicist whose work reflects the commitment and the complexities of epistemological privilege. As a womanist, she attends to the tridimensional oppression of race, class, and gender and focuses her work on the experiences of black women. In her essay “Twenty Years a Womanist,” Douglas affirms her methodological commitment to recognize the epistemological privilege of “everyday black women” and explains the ways in which that essential commitment complicates her work as a scholar. First, taking seriously

the wisdom of black women challenges traditional, academic notions of knowledge and reveals the complicating dimensions of true “discursive power” (the power to speak and be heard). This methodological commitment also means that the scholar must “name [her] own relative points of privilege” and remain accountable to the women in the pews. Douglas writes, “It is not only from these women that we must learn, but it is also to these women that we are most accountable.”²⁴

Douglas makes explicit the scholar’s interaction with her subject of study and works intentionally to interact with her subjects as subjects, recognizing their privilege and remaining accountable to them. Christian ethicists who adopt a more traditional mode may not listen to the “fish” in Lebacqz’s analogy, but they still have a viewpoint and some sites of accountability that shape their approach and the work itself. Scholarship is never a neutral activity. If this is true for the descriptive dimensions of Christian ethics, it is even more true for the prescriptive dimensions. In the prescriptive or normative dimensions, Christian ethicists advance an argument, make a recommendation, or commend one thread of the tradition or one interpretation of Scripture or one application of a conviction or one way of being church over others. They are actively participating in the interaction, not only indirectly impacting it through description, framing, and retelling. Here we see most explicitly that Christian ethicists participate in conflict. This is true for Christian ethicists across the political and theological spectrum. All are involved in the interactions through description and prescription. We are all participating in conflict. Now, we certainly participate in different ways, with various levels of intensity, and with different levels of risk and cost, but the basic dynamics of our work are similar. With our descriptive and prescriptive work (scholarship, teaching, and actions), we participate in conflict.

Some Christian ethicists also participate in conflict beyond their scholarship through practices and actions related to the subjects they pursue academically. We might think of this in terms of a double-axis. The *x*-axis depicts the spectrum of moral reflection and debate on a topic; the *y*-axis depicts the range of activities related to it (from charitable work to advocacy, for example).²⁵ Christian ethicists participate in conflict through moral debate and argumentation and also through engagement in political acts and spiritual practices related to the subject of debate. The praxis—the ongoing interplay of action and reflection, of practice and theory, of activity and argumentation—is a praxis of conflict. To do Christian ethics is to participate in conflict.

The phrase “to do Christian ethics” is a relatively new development in the way Christian ethicists speak about our work. Those of us who use this phrase do so in order to draw attention to methodology, to describe and prompt critical reflection on approaches employed as Christians live out their faith through argument and action, as well as spiritual practices. This phrase is also used to emphasize that Christian ethics is more than a field of study and scholarship. Christian ethics must be enacted; it must be “done.” For people who are frustrated with forms of Christian ethics that are somehow disconnected from practices and actions on the ground, this language of “doing Christian ethics” is powerful and important. For Christians who could not conceive of their faith as solely an academic enterprise in the first place, “doing Christian ethics” may seem an unnecessary restatement of “being a Christian.”

Either way, it is important to underscore that Christian ethics is more than a field of study; it is also an arena of practice and a way of life. The central question of ethics—how to live a good life—is not just something to debate or reflect upon in the abstract. It involves embodied knowledge, conversation with others, serious engagement with multiple sources of knowledge, shared actions and mutual dialogue, participation in the life of a faith community, and involvement in the institutions of society. All of this takes place in contexts of conflict and involves conflict. Thus, the question again surfaces: How do we live a good life in the midst of conflict?

HOW DO WE LIVE A GOOD LIFE AMIDST CONFLICT?

The central question of this book is how to live a good life amidst conflict. As I hope the introduction has made plain, this is not an exercise in situational ethics. The question is not, If and when we experience conflict, how should we respond? The question emerges from an ontological reality—that is, one related to being—not an occasion: Given that we exist in ongoing conflict, how then are we to live well?

This introductory chapter has offered the first of several responses to this question and has identified others that are addressed in subsequent chapters. First, it is helpful to see conflict itself as part of the Christian story and the ongoing effort to live faithfully in a changing world. This response reflects a certain approach to Christian ethics, which I will explain in chapter 2. I understand the Christian faith

to be a historical development, and I take active participation in this living tradition very seriously. As someone formed in the Wesleyan tradition, I draw on Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in a process of moral discernment. All of these sources enter into each chapter, though I emphasize them differently. Chapters 3 and 5 work more fully with reason and tradition, while chapter 4 focuses on Scripture. Experience informs every chapter fully, because I cannot step out of my own social location and also because I intentionally attend to the experiences of others.

Chapter 2 orients the reader to the methodologies and contexts present in this text. One could approach the question of living a good life in conflict in a myriad of ways, so it is important to explain the approach this book takes and why. The first part of the chapter situates this book in the tradition of Christian social ethics and emphasizes its constructive approach. In other words, this is a book that takes the interaction between context and faith very seriously. It is important to me that faith informs our behavior in the world, but also that we think carefully and critically about faith in light of lived experiences in history. Chapter 2 also names the norms, approaches, and sources of authority (some of the building blocks in ethics) that inform the content of this book. All of these things occur above ground, as it were. The reader can see what norms and sources are utilized, and I will explain them as we go. But there are also convictions that inform this book and constitute methodological factors in play beneath the surface. Christian ethicists have different views about how transparent we should be about the convictions that inform the ethical positions we articulate. My view is that we cannot be self-critical of convictions that we do not bring into the light. Thus, the second part of chapter 2 describes the confessional context from which I write as someone formed in the Methodist tradition. The assertion that conflict can be a site of constructive change is, for me, also an expression of faith informed by grace and responsibility.

Chapter 3 begins with a description of the ways in which the *imago Dei* enters into contexts of conflict to affirm bodies under attack, to resist attack itself, and to guide the behavior of resisters. The resources informing this chapter include denominational and ecumenical statements responding to violence and injustice, as well as the teaching and behavior of individual Christian actors in some contemporary social movements. The statements and documents provide examples for studying the connection between the image of God, dignity, and human rights, and the Christian actors demonstrate the ways in which

this theological conviction both inspires and sets parameters around resistance. By focusing on the ways that this theological doctrine informs principles for behavior, the chapter also offers a study of deontology. Rooting this study in contemporary struggles for human rights and social justice provides particularly fertile ground for considering the importance of universal principles for ethics and the challenges to universality posed by context and power. This chapter also explores the way that contexts of violence shed new light on the meaning of the *imago Dei*. As an example, I consider John Wesley's understanding of the *imago Dei* in light of recent literature on moral injury. By bringing these resources together, we can see that the *imago Dei* speaks not only about our created nature but also about the persons we become over time. In the end, we have an example of deontology that also teaches us about the interaction between principles and context and about the process of becoming as well as an affirmation of being. In contexts of ongoing conflict, we have the *imago Dei* to affirm us and to call us to remain accountable to the other. We live a good life by reflecting and responding to the image of God even in the midst of intense conflict.

Chapter 4 puts a central claim of this book to the test of Scripture. At the heart of conflict transformation is the assertion that conflict can be a site for constructive change. This assertion also distinguishes conflict from sin. However, this distinction is not too apparent in Scripture. Quite the contrary, in fact. There are many passages throughout Scripture that discourage participation in conflict as a threat to community and a sign of selfishness, foolhardiness, and intention to divide. The first part of this chapter examines some of those passages (in Galatians, James, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus) to argue that the criticism of conflict stems primarily from a concern about division. Thus, the goal of unity drives the identification of conflict as a vice. The second part of the chapter turns to a second set of texts, including two practical teachings from Matthew, two conflict stories recorded in Mark and Matthew, and one parable from Luke. In this collection of writings, we do not find a tidy answer to the question of conflict and sin, but we do find reason to challenge the assumptions that conflict always reflects disorder and breeds division. In addition to this example of the use of Scripture in ethical discernment related to conflict, chapter 4 also introduces virtue ethics through discussion of conflict behaviors, the purposes that orient them, and the processes they disrupt.

Chapter 5 turns to teleology through a study of reconciliation. It begins with discussion of the meaning of reconciliation in writings on

violence and within the work of conflict transformation. It explores one dominant approach to reconciliation, which understands it through the narrative of atonement and then maps a process for human reconciliation that mirrors the self-giving act of God for humanity, which remains unworthy. This study helps us to see the connections between the conception of the telos and the ways we construe the relationship between here and there. Debates over the relationship between justice and reconciliation readily bring some concerns to the fore. The remainder of the chapter examines restorative conceptions of justice that provide an alternative purpose and path for reconciliation. The final move in the chapter is to consider the multiplicity of narratives that enter into the work of conflict transformation and to call for more open-ended conceptions of the process of moving from violent conflict to nonviolent conflict.

Chapter 6 turns to contexts of interpersonal conflict and to the “mundane” work of equipping people to engage those contexts constructively. This work entails self-assessment, conflict analysis, and mediation. I draw on feminist ethical methodology to argue that these low-profile and often private settings are also worthy of ethical reflection and, indeed, are sites of justice. This chapter also makes connections between self- and conflict-analysis, on the one hand, and H. Richard Niebuhr’s approach to ethics as responsibility and discernment of the fitting response, on the other. Tools for analysis offer us a way to explore Niebuhr’s fundamental question for ethics: What’s going on? This chapter also brings in the feminist ethical methodology of care and explores mediation as a place where the ethics of care unfolds. The interaction between these ethical methods (responsibility and care) and the tools of interpersonal conflict work also provide space to think more critically about power and about fear. As recent work in unconscious bias teaches us, we are constantly being formed to fear. I suggest that we cannot think fully about responsibility and about care without attending to the misperceptions and misinterpretations that fear so regularly causes. The final part of this chapter is written to moral agents like me who occupy positions of relative privilege and are not under threat of direct attack because of identity. For us, living a good life in contexts of ongoing conflict requires that we respond to need rather than react to fear. I explore this point with a meditation on the garden of Gethsemane and the things we are tempted to do in our fear.

The seventh and final chapter responds to the question of how we live a good life in the midst of ongoing conflict with four assertions.

First, we live a good life in the midst of ongoing conflict by taking responsibility for the impact of our actions on others. Second, we live a good life in the midst of ongoing conflict by refusing to be afraid. Third, we live a good life in the midst of ongoing conflict by maintaining an awareness of relatedness. Fourth, we live a good life in the midst of ongoing conflict by discerning possibility. These proposals relate to the principles, virtues, and goals discussed in the rest of the book and place them into conversation with a variety of sources. The foundation for this proposal, and the framing mechanism for the final chapter, is a prayer that closes the baptism liturgy in the Episcopal Church. The prayer captures essential features of a good life in the midst of ongoing conflict: “an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.”²⁶