

## Conflict Management and the Pursuit of Unity: An Exegetical Study of Philippians 2:2–4 and Its Implications for Church Conflict Resolution

**Fiolita Sohat<sup>1</sup>, Wolter Weol<sup>2</sup>, Priscila Feibe Rampengan<sup>3</sup>**

Institut Agama Kristen Negeri Manado

		<b>Abstract</b>
Received:	07 July 2025	<p><i>Conflict within church organizations is both inevitable and multifaceted, often shaped by doctrinal differences, leadership styles, personal ambition, and external political dynamics. While typically perceived as negative, conflict—when managed wisely—can serve as a catalyst for spiritual growth and communal renewal. This study aims to explore how the theological principles in Philippians 2:2–4 offer a biblical foundation for conflict resolution and the pursuit of unity in ecclesial contexts. Employing a qualitative descriptive method with an exegetical approach, the research integrates textual interpretation with conflict management theory to construct a holistic model of reconciliation. The exegetical analysis reveals that values such as mutual love, humility, being like-minded, and prioritizing the interests of others are central to Paul’s vision of church unity. These values not only offer spiritual guidance but also shape practical strategies for conflict transformation within church communities. The findings affirm that biblical principles, when embodied in leadership and practice, can reduce polarization, strengthen internal relationships, and empower the church as an agent of reconciliation in wider society.</i></p>
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(*) Corresponding Author:		<p><a href="mailto:fiolitasohat@gmail.com">fiolitasohat@gmail.com</a></p>
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### INTRODUCTION

Conflict, while often perceived negatively, inherently holds the potential to bring about positive transformation and deeper understanding among individuals and communities. When managed wisely, conflict can stimulate creativity, foster collaboration, and become a catalyst for institutional growth and renewal. It is not merely a symptom of dysfunction, but rather an inevitable aspect of social interaction—rooted in differences of interest, values, goals, or worldviews. As Stewart and Logan (1993, p. 342) argue, conflict should not always be seen as destructive; when approached constructively, it can yield rich experiences that enhance personal maturity and organizational effectiveness.

In the context of the church, conflict assumes both organizational and spiritual dimensions. It is not limited to doctrinal disagreements or administrative disputes, but often becomes a testing ground for faith and a medium for spiritual purification. The Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:19, indicates that divisions among believers serve to reveal the genuine commitment and maturity of faith. This perspective reorients the church's understanding of conflict—not as a threat

to unity, but as a divine opportunity for self-examination, spiritual formation, and communal reconciliation.

Recent studies have further illuminated the dual impact of conflict in ecclesial settings. On one hand, conflict can promote greater member participation, foster transparency in leadership, and invite critical reflection on church structures and ministries (Mahardika, Maryani, & Rizal, 2022). On the other hand, unresolved or poorly managed conflict often results in deep divisions, relational breakdowns, and erosion of trust. Gunawan (2020) warns that such mismanagement may lead to congregational schisms, reduced effectiveness in church programs, and declining social credibility. When church conflicts are entangled with political interests or personal ambitions, polarization among members becomes intensified, weakening the spiritual and communal fabric of the church.

In practice, many churches experience ongoing internal tensions that are left unaddressed due to a lack of biblical frameworks or conflict-sensitive leadership. These tensions manifest in poor communication, factionalism, and the marginalization of certain groups within the congregation. Moreover, conflict often spills into the church's public witness—diminishing its moral authority, weakening its prophetic voice, and reducing its capacity to function as a mediator of peace and justice in the wider society (Sutono et al., 2023). The church's strategic role in building harmonious relationships with local communities and governing bodies is thereby compromised.

At the root of these challenges lies a spiritual problem: the prevalence of selfish ambition, pride, and a deficit of Christlike love. Without humility, mutual care, and the willingness to prioritize the needs of others above self-interest, unity remains a fragile ideal rather than a lived reality. The failure to embody the values of self-emptying (*kenosis*) and communal harmony—as taught in the New Testament—hinders the church from becoming a reconciled and reconciling community.

This study argues that addressing church conflict requires more than organizational policies or psychological tools. It necessitates a return to biblical principles that center on humility, love, and a shared pursuit of unity. The exhortation in Philippians 2:2–4 offers a powerful theological and ethical foundation for navigating relational tensions in church life. Paul's vision of unity is not grounded in uniformity, but in mutual submission and Christlike attitudes that affirm the dignity and value of every member.

Therefore, this research aims to conduct an exegetical analysis of Philippians 2:2–4, exploring its theological insights and practical implications for conflict resolution within church organizations. By doing so, the study seeks to contribute to the development of a biblically grounded model of conflict management that can foster genuine unity, restore relational harmony, and enhance the church's witness as a community of peace.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method. Qualitative research involves collecting data in a natural setting with the aim of interpreting phenomena, wherein the researcher serves as the primary instrument (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018, p. 7). Descriptive research seeks to portray current phenomena, events, or conditions by focusing on actual and relevant problems (Salim, 2019, p. 49).

The study adopts an exegetical approach, which entails the in-depth interpretation of biblical texts, with careful attention to historical context, original language, and theological meaning. Specifically, this approach is applied to Philippians 2:2–4, with the goal of uncovering biblical principles relevant to conflict management and the pursuit of unity within church organizations.

The research procedure begins with a literature review involving the biblical text (Philippians 2:2–4) and scholarly resources related to conflict management and institutional synergy. These data are analyzed qualitatively by integrating exegetical insights with relevant literature in order to construct a comprehensive understanding of biblical values and their implications for conflict resolution.

Data analysis is conducted descriptively, by explaining and interpreting the gathered information, then connecting it to conflict management theories and biblical principles derived from the exegetical study. The final outcome is expected to offer practical recommendations for managing conflict within church organizations in a way that is both effective and harmonious.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Nature of Conflict in Church Contexts**

Conflict is an inevitable reality within any human organization, including the church. Far from being inherently destructive, conflict—when rightly managed—can serve as a mechanism for transformation, deeper communication, and institutional growth (Stewart & Logan, 1993). In the context of church organizations, conflict often arises from differences in leadership styles, theological interpretations, ministry priorities, or personal interests. However, such differences can serve a positive purpose if addressed in a spiritually mature and biblically grounded manner.

As Mahardika, Maryani, and Rizal (2022) argue, conflict can contribute to greater participation, transparency, and accountability within church communities. It prompts reevaluation of systems, leadership effectiveness, and ministry structures. However, when mismanaged, conflict may lead to polarization, fragmentation, mistrust, and even the weakening of the church's public witness (Gunawan, 2020). Sutono et al. (2023) further emphasize that unresolved church conflict can damage the church's credibility and hinder its social function as an agent of peace and reconciliation.

Spiritual immaturity, selfish ambition, and the absence of love and humility often lie at the root of persistent church conflict. These issues are not merely organizational but theological and spiritual in nature. Thus, addressing

them requires more than technical strategies—it requires a biblical framework grounded in the character of Christ and the values of the Kingdom of God.

### **Exegetical Insights from Philippians 2:2–4**

The Apostle Paul’s exhortation in Philippians 2:2–4 provides profound theological and ethical principles for managing conflict and pursuing unity in the church. The passage reads:

“...then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” (NIV)

This pericope forms part of Paul’s broader appeal to the Philippians to live in a manner worthy of the gospel (Phil. 1:27). Paul is not simply calling for external harmony, but for a deep internal transformation rooted in the mindset of Christ. The key imperatives include:

- **Being like-minded** (τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε): This phrase emphasizes unity of purpose, not uniformity of opinion. It suggests a shared vision rooted in Christ.
- **Having the same love** (τὴν αὐτὴν ἀγάπην): A call to mutual, sacrificial love that reflects God’s love in Christ.
- **In humility** (ταπεινοφροσύνη): A radical countercultural virtue in Greco-Roman society, here redefined by Paul as a central ethic of the Christian life (cf. Volf, 1996).
- **Valuing others above yourselves**: This points to a kenotic (self-emptying) posture modeled by Christ in verses 5–11.

Karl Barth (1958) underscores that such humility and unity are not natural human achievements but fruits of divine grace operating within the Christian community. They require active submission to Christ’s lordship and a constant reshaping of communal life by the gospel.

### **Implications for Conflict Management in Church Organizations**

The principles found in Philippians 2:2–4 offer a foundation for biblical conflict management in church settings. Rather than resorting to authoritarian control or avoidance, church leaders are called to cultivate:

1. **Christ-centered leadership**: Rooted in humility, service, and the interests of others.
2. **Communal discernment**: Encouraging open dialogue grounded in shared love and mutual respect.
3. **Spiritual formation**: Conflict is approached not only as a problem to be solved, but as a means of discipleship and sanctification.

This framework stands in contrast to many modern conflict management models that prioritize efficiency or institutional survival. Instead, a Pauline model calls for the church to embody the cruciform life of Christ (Hick, 2004), where reconciliation, self-giving love, and servant leadership become normative.

Moreover, from a practical perspective, this biblical approach aligns with sociological findings on healthy group dynamics. For instance, Allport (1950)

suggests that religious communities who internalize their beliefs (intrinsic religiosity) are more likely to engage in inclusive and reconciliatory behavior. This reinforces the necessity of spiritual depth and theological clarity in navigating church conflict.

**Toward a Practical Model of Reconciliation**

Based on the exegetical and theoretical insights above, this study proposes a practical model for church conflict management that includes the following elements:

PRINCIPLE	APPLICATION IN CHURCH CONFLICT RESOLUTION
<b>Shared Vision (Phil 2:2)</b>	Establishing common theological and missional ground
<b>Agape Love (Phil 2:2)</b>	Prioritizing relationships over ego or institutional control
<b>Kenotic Humility (Phil 2:3)</b>	Encouraging leaders to relinquish control and embrace servant leadership
<b>Mutual Interest (Phil 2:4)</b>	Promoting collective decision-making and inclusive communication

This model aligns with both biblical theology and contemporary organizational ethics, offering a holistic path toward healing, unity, and communal strength. The Apostle Paul’s exhortation in Philippians 2:2–4 remains a timeless guide for managing conflict in church life. By grounding conflict resolution in humility, love, and mutual concern, churches can move beyond polarization toward genuine unity. This study affirms that effective conflict management is not merely strategic—it is deeply spiritual. The church, as the body of Christ, must be shaped by the mind of Christ, especially in moments of tension and division. When theological convictions are lived out through kenotic leadership and communal love, conflict becomes not a threat to unity but a pathway toward deeper faith, reconciliation, and collective growth.

**CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study affirm that conflict within church organizations is an unavoidable phenomenon. However, when addressed through a biblically grounded and spiritually informed approach, such conflict can be transformed into an opportunity for spiritual growth and communal strengthening. The exegetical analysis of Philippians 2:2–4 reveals that theological values such as being like-minded, deep mutual love, humility, and prioritizing the interests of others are foundational principles for managing conflict in the life of the church.

These values are not only spiritually significant but also have tangible implications for shaping an inclusive, participatory, and solidaristic church community. By embodying these Christ-centered virtues, congregations are better

equipped to navigate tensions, foster reconciliation, and cultivate a culture of mutual respect and unity. Furthermore, the integration of biblical principles with insights from conflict management theory produces a holistic model that addresses both the internal dynamics of church relationships and their external engagement with broader society. This integrative model has the capacity to reduce polarization, strengthen inter-member relationships, and build constructive partnerships with external stakeholders, including governmental institutions.

A church that implements this spiritually grounded approach will be more effective in fulfilling its role as a reconciling agent and a bearer of peace amid complex social dynamics. Consequently, conflict management rooted in biblical spirituality not only safeguards the internal stability of the church but also expands its contribution to building a just, harmonious, and ethically grounded society.

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