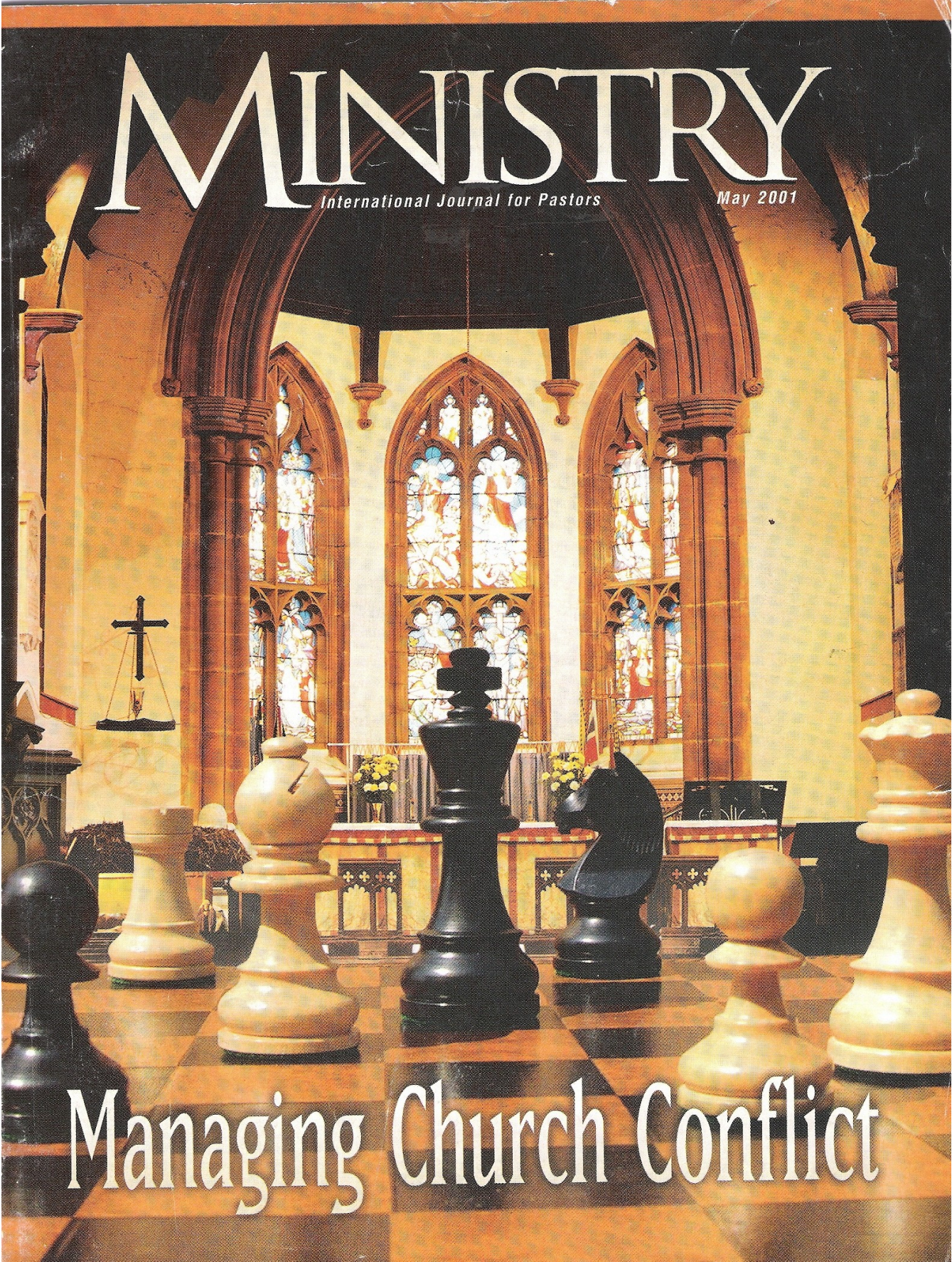


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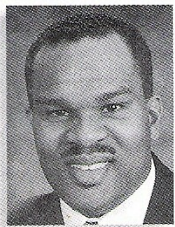


## Managing Church Conflict

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# Courage: A learned skill

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I could feel the hair begin to rise on the back of my neck. I stiffened every muscle as his six foot, six inch, 280-pound frame loomed over me. I expected him to swing violently at me as he grimaced and mumbled threateningly under his breath. Yet, as I stood facing his nervous wife, I still felt confident that my tactful chastisement of her was in perfect order, regardless of what he might do to me. After all, she had spoken disrespectfully to an elder during a church business meeting and I thought it was my place, as pastor, to tell her so. Apparently her husband (himself an elder) did not agree.

Thankfully, I don't have one of these episodes every day! But this experience underscores a truth I've discovered about the indispensable human quality known as courage: It can be a learned skill.

## Grace under pressure

Ernest Hemingway once defined courage as "grace under pressure." Somehow I didn't feel so "forceful" that Saturday evening in the church foyer facing this behemoth of a man. When I say that courage is a learned skill, I mean that it can be acquired through various life experiences. Coming to this realization was a defining moment in my life. For years I struggled with a fearful spirit, afraid to face anything that made me feel threatened. This fear had had a paralyzing effect on me and I often wondered if I would ever be free from it.

Pastoral ministry, oddly enough, has taught me how to better handle threatening situations. Facing conflict in ministry is inevitable, whether it be between someone else and me or when I am mediating conflict between others. Although fierce conflict is never pleasant to deal with, I have learned that it must not be feared either. This is not to say that I am now so tough-minded that nothing scares me, but I have come to recognize that perhaps the greatest thing to be feared in conflict is fear itself.

How does one muster the strength, or courage, to face conflict in life or to make tough decisions? Three principles can help to deal more effectively with these difficult matters: Remember that God is all powerful, reinforce your confidence from a divine perspective, and resolve to face the difficult matter.

## Remember that God is all-powerful

"Have no fear of sudden disaster" says Solomon "or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared" (Prov. 3:25, 26, NIV). Sometimes when we are facing a difficult situation, such as a disrespectful church member, an unruly child, an abusive spouse, or an intimidating neighbor or co-worker, we have the tendency to feel as if we have no control over the matter. We may then feel afraid and powerless. This, in turn breeds frustration and anger in us. I have found that whatever the nature of the matter that leaves us feeling powerless, it is comforting to know deep down that God is in control. The scripture declares confidently that "[He] will keep your foot from being snared."

Martin Luther King, Jr., in his book *Stride Toward Freedom*, chronicles the major events that shaped the infamous Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. In the chapter, "The Violence of Desperate Men," King shares feelings of fear he experienced as a result of threats made against his life as a leader of that movement. He writes, "One night toward the end of January [1955], I settled into bed late, after a strenuous day. Coretta had already fallen asleep and just as I was about to doze off, the telephone rang. An angry voice said, 'Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you; before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.' I hung up, but I couldn't

sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point.

"I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. 'I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.'

"At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."

The words of Sir Winston Churchill ring true indeed: "Courage is the first of human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees all others."

It is also true that when someone crosses the boundary between respecting and disrespecting me, then that boundary must be defended, unless I willingly abandon it. I firmly believe that boundaries in relationships sometimes have to be defended because what's at stake is something absolutely foundational to any relationship; namely, respect. Divine wisdom, however, teaches me when it is prudent either to defend the boundary or relinquish it. And yes, there are times when I should relinquish it. Just ask any couple married over thirty years.

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How can I relinquish the right to defend myself without feeling powerless? I can if I have the assurance and therefore the security of knowing that God is all-powerful and that He is in control of every possible situation or dilemma that can confront the human experience—my experience. “In all your ways acknowledge him” said Solomon, “and he will make your paths straight” (Prov. 3:6, NIV).

### **Reinforce your confidence from a divine perspective**

The confidence to make courageous decisions is not self-generated. Rather, it is Spirit-generated. “The Lord will be your confidence,” says Proverbs 3:26 (NIV). “Holy boldness” comes from God. When Jeremiah as a young man was called to be a prophet, his initial response was full of trepidation: “‘Ah, Sovereign Lord,’ I said, ‘I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.’ But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, ‘I am only a child.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you’” (Jer. 1:6, 7, NIV). Jeremiah’s courage was buoyed up by God’s omnipotence. Taking God’s assurance into his heart gave him confidence. He knew he was being backed by God Himself.

This is what gave David the strength of heart to face Goliath. This is what enabled Elijah to set his face

news of Jesus Christ throughout the Greco-Roman Empire. And this is what gave Jesus Himself the resolve to utter those selfless words in Gethsemane, “‘Yet not as I will, but as you will’” (Matt. 26:39, NIV). Our confidence must be rooted in a divine perspective. There is simply no greater strength upon which we may rely.

### **Resolve to face the difficult matter**

Whatever your dilemma, it needs to be faced squarely, and this calls for a bold, courageous response from you. Resolve to face it. Perhaps that which confronts you is not something in the pastorate itself. Maybe your challenge is a major family conflict or a life-threatening illness. Resolve to face it. We simply cannot run indefinitely from some things in life. Fear, unchecked, can be such a paralyzing agent. Facing and surviving a daunting situation steels our courage more than anything else can.

But how can people who know that they struggle with a fearful spirit (and sometimes fail), speak and act with conviction and courage? Courage and confidence is gained through small victories. The small, less spectacular victories lead to greater ones. “A good character,” Joel Hawes wrote, “is, in all cases, the fruit of personal exertion. It is not

In essence, learning the skill of courage is a form of character development. It is an acquired skill forged upon the anvil of experience. There will be successes, and there will be failures, but we must keep moving forward. Courage can be learned, and when it is learned it must be applied. Life experiences will dictate so. What we gain from exercising courage, however, is a greater sense of well-being and authentic confidence.

Displaying courage is not about dominating another person, issue, event, or experience simply for the sake of overpowering them. The world has had its share of military minions, business barons, political pontificates, and downright foolhardy fellows who, being filled to the brim with pride and arrogance, sought to elevate their own persons or positions at the expense of annihilating themselves or others—figuratively and literally. This is based in selfishness and arrogance. On the other hand, true courage seeks to deal with the fear (an internal element) that can prevent one from dealing effectively with the difficult matters challenging us. It is an active rather than reactive agent. It seeks to master self and not others. True courage values people above things and understands that people can be influenced. It places God at the center of the universe and not the overwhelming issue, experience, or person—even one’s self.

What of the elder who bristled when I confronted his wife? He never apologized for the incident, and although our relationship thereafter was somewhat tenuous, he and his wife surprisingly showed up at a farewell party given by the church in honor of my service. They greeted me with firm handshakes, warm hugs, and genuine well-wishes. I was thoroughly shocked. I have thought about that occasion many times since then. I can’t help wondering if their respect for me had deepened because I exercised a little skill that I had learned along the way. ■

## **B**UT HOW CAN A PERSON, WHO KNOWS THEY ACTUALLY STRUGGLE WITH A FEARFUL SPIRIT (AND SOMETIMES FAIL), SPEAK AND ACT WITH CONVICTION AND COURAGE?

like a flint amid the jeering of Baal’s pretentious prophets. This is what gave unswerving determination to three Hebrew boys to defy Nebuchadnezzar’s decree to pay homage to a statue, even if it meant death in a furnace. This is what ignited the apostles’ zeal to spread the good

inherited from parents; it is not created by external advantages; it is no necessary appendage of birth, wealth, talents, or station; it is the result of one’s own endeavors—the fruit and reward of good principles manifested in a course of virtuous and honorable action.”