

# Cain and Abel: The Bible's First Level 5 Conflict

By Dr. Bill Long

In the mid 1970s two researchers, Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann, identified what they called five levels of personal or organizational conflict. The highest level (Level 5) has been variously described but the two-word phrase that best captures it is "intractable situation." There seems no way out. Blowup, or worse, is the likely outcome.

The familiar story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4) not only describes a Level 5 conflict but gives us insight into an important dynamic regarding how conflict rises to that level. The story is well-known. Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel. The former tilled the ground; the latter was a keeper of sheep. After some time, each son brought an offering to God chosen from his area of specialty. God looked favorably upon Abel's offering but not so on Cain's. No reason is given for God's differential treatment, even though there has been no lack of suggestions as to why Abel's sacrifice might have been acceptable. But the Bible gives no reason.

Only Cain's reaction is given. In vivid but succinct language, the story says, "He was very angry and his face fell" (Gen 4:5). God asks him about this and then says, in a difficult to translate but crucial verse, "If you do well, you will be lifted up. If you don't do well, sin crouches at the door. Its desire is for you, but you shall be able to rule over it" (Gen 4:7).

Three brief points about conflict emerge from this story. First, and sometimes most painful, is that conflict often arises from the fact of unequal treatment in the world. And—to make it personal--sometimes we are the recipients of that inequality. No reason is given for the rejection of Cain's sacrifice. No reason is often given for differential treatment in our world. It just is. There are certainly other reasons why conflict arises, but perceived unequal treatment is a big one.

Second, conflict arises in how one reacts to this unequal treatment. Cain's reaction is not unexpected. In King James language, he "was very wroth, and his countenance fell." Unjust treatment evokes an immediate reaction from us: "Not fair!" We bristle, we viscerally respond with anger, with altered facial features, with a desire to avenge the unfairness.

But, third, the "mini-Gospel" in the Cain and Abel story is in Gen 4:7. Conflict arises through unequal treatment; we have our gut reaction to this injustice, but then we have to make another decision. How will we react on a longer term to the fact of injustice? God's word to Cain is that if you do well, you will be lifted up (probably referring to the face, which had "fallen"), but if not, then sin will get its mastery over you. The point is that that our reaction to this unequal treatment is crucial for dealing with conflict. Can we learn to "master" it or to "rule over" it? When our face falls and we desire revenge, then we might say that conflict has the "upper hand" in our life. We can get the upper hand, even when we have been dealt the "bad hand" in life.

It is as if God is saying, "Inequality is a fact of life. Get used to it. You can let your face fall and your anger rise. But you need not. Sin desires to eat you up. But you need not let it do so. You can master it. You really can." But how, really, do you do that? How do you get the upper hand with conflict, especially when you have been treated unjustly? The story gives no answer—we must look to other Biblical passages for help. The Good News, though, is that the final word when we receive disparate treatment doesn't have to be a fallen face and a fierce anger. We, too, can "master it."