

# The Slippery Slope of Conflict

## *Staying on Top of Conflict*



Harmful conflict is usually triggered by unmet desires. "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it" (James 4:1-2). Even good desires can evolve into controlling demands or idols that can lead us to judge others and then avoid or punish them until we get what we want (see Luke 10:38-42). This

progression often starts with minor differences, but before we know it we're sliding down a slippery slope of conflict that can drop off in two directions.

### **Escape Responses**

People tend to use escape responses when they are more interested in avoiding unpleasant people or situations than in resolving differences.

**Denial**—One way to escape from a conflict is to pretend that a problem does not exist. Another way is to refuse to do what should be done to resolve a conflict properly. These responses bring only temporary relief and usually make matters worse (see 1 Sam. 2:22-25).

**Flight**—Another way to escape from a conflict is to run away. This may take the form of pulling away from a relationship, quitting a job, filing for divorce, or changing churches. Flight may be legitimate in extreme circumstances (see 1 Sam. 19:9-10), but in most cases it only postpones a proper solution to a problem.

**Suicide**—When people lose all hope of resolving a conflict, they may seek to escape from the situation (or make a desperate cry for help) by attempting to take their own lives (see 1 Sam 31:4). Suicide is never a right way to deal with conflict.

### **Attack Responses**

People tend to use attack responses when they are more interested in controlling others and getting their way than in preserving a relationship.

**Assault**—Some people try to overcome an opponent by using various forms of force or intimidation, such as verbal attacks (including gossip and slander), physical violence, or efforts to damage a person financially or professionally (see Acts 6:8-15). Such conduct always makes conflict worse.

**Litigation**—Although some conflicts may legitimately be taken before a civil judge (see Acts 24:1-26:32; Rom. 13:1-5), lawsuits usually damage relationships, diminish our Christian witness, and often fail to achieve complete justice. This is why Christians are commanded to make every effort to settle their differences within the church rather than the civil courts (see Matt. 5:25-26; 1 Cor. 6:1-8).

**Murder**—In extreme cases, people may be so desperate to win a dispute that they will try to kill those who oppose them (see Acts 7:54-58). While most people would not actually kill someone,

we still stand guilty of murder in God's eyes when we harbor anger or contempt in our hearts toward others (see 1 John 3:15; Matt. 5:21-22).

## **The Gospel—The Key to Peace**

The key to changing the way we deal with conflict is the gospel—the good news that God made peace with us and between us by sending his Son to die for our sins and give us new life through his resurrection (Col. 1:19-20; Eph. 2:14-16). When we believe in Jesus, we receive forgiveness and are united with Christ and one another (Acts 10:43; Phil. 2:1-2). God then begins to transform us into the likeness of his Son, enabling us to break free from sinful escaping and attacking habits and mature into peacemakers who reflect the glory of God's reconciling love in the midst of conflict (2 Cor. 3:17-18; Col. 3:12-15).

## **Peacemaking Responses**

Peacemakers are people who breathe grace. Inspired by the gospel, they draw continually on the goodness and power of Jesus Christ, and then breathe out his love, mercy, forgiveness, and wisdom to dissipate anger, improve understanding, promote justice, and model repentance and reconciliation.

The six responses found on the top portion of the slippery slope may be divided into two categories: personal peacemaking responses and assisted peacemaking responses:

### **PERSONAL PEACEMAKING**

There are three biblical ways to resolve conflicts personally and privately, just between you and the other party.

**Overlook an Offense**—Many disputes are so insignificant that they should be resolved by quietly overlooking an offense. *"A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense"* (Prov. 19:11). Overlooking an offense is a form of forgiveness, and involves a deliberate decision not to talk about it, dwell on it, or let it grow into pent-up bitterness or anger.

**Reconciliation**—If an offense is too serious to overlook or has damaged our relationship, we need to resolve personal or relational issues through confession, loving correction, and forgiveness. *"[If] your brother has something against you ... go and be reconciled"* (Matt. 5:23-24). *"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently"* (Gal. 6:1; see Matt. 18:15). *"Forgive as the Lord forgave you"* (Col. 3:13).

**Negotiation**—Even if we successfully resolve *relational* issues, we may still need to work through *material* issues related to money, property, or other rights. This should be done through a cooperative bargaining process in which you and the other person seek to reach a settlement that satisfies the legitimate needs of each side. *"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others"* (Phil. 2:4).

### **ASSISTED PEACEMAKING**

When a dispute cannot be resolved personally, God calls us to seek assistance from other believers.

**Mediation**—If two people cannot reach an agreement in private, they should ask one or more objective outside people to meet with them to help them communicate more effectively and explore possible solutions. *"If he will not listen [to you], take one or two others along"* (Matt. 18:16). These mediators may ask questions and give advice, but the parties retain the responsibility of making the final decision on how to resolve their differences.

**Arbitration**—When you and an opponent cannot come to a voluntary agreement on a material issue, you may appoint one or more arbitrators to listen to your arguments and render a binding

decision to settle the issue. *"If you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church"* (1 Cor. 6:4).

**Accountability**—If a person who professes to be a Christian wanders from the Lord by refusing to be reconciled and do what is right, Jesus commands church leaders to lovingly intervene to hold him or her accountable to Scripture and to promote repentance, justice, and forgiveness: *"If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not ... go to look for the one that wandered off? ... If he refuses to listen ..., tell it to the church"* (Matt. 18:12,17).

As you can see, the escape responses only postpone a proper solution to a problem, and attack responses usually damage relationships and make conflicts worse. Therefore, you should generally try first to deal with conflict personally and privately by using one of the first three conciliation responses (overlooking, discussion, or negotiation). To learn how to carry out these steps in a biblically faithful manner, see The Four G's.

If repeated efforts at personal peacemaking do not resolve a matter, then you may need to pursue one of the other conciliation responses (mediation, arbitration, or accountability), which will require the assistance of other people in your church or community. For more information on these assisted responses, see Resolving Conflict through Christian Conciliation.