

Handling Conflict Biblically

Glorify God in Conflict

Adapted from The Peacemaker by Ken Sande, Chapters 1-3¹

Conflict Provides Opportunities

- **The Slippery Slope of Conflict**

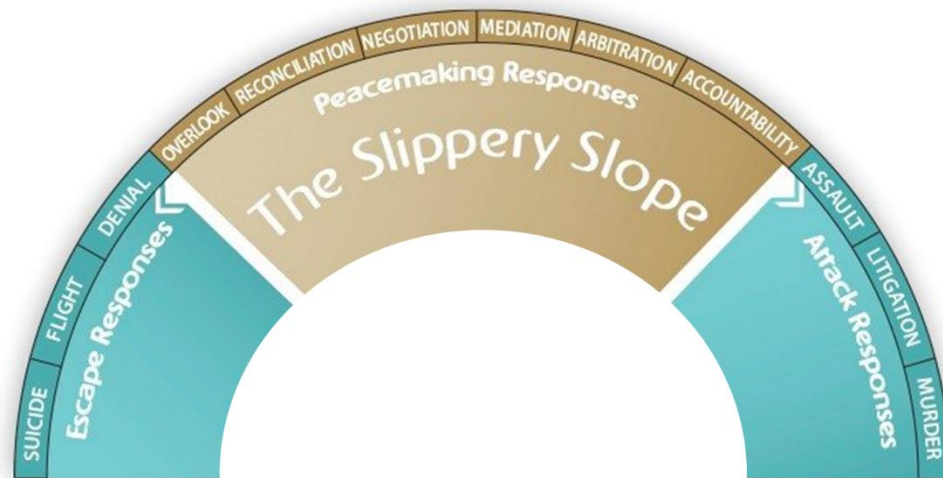
- For some, interpersonal conflict is a hazard to be avoided, and for others, it's an obstacle to be conquered regardless of consequences.
- However, a better attitude in conflict resolution is to see it as an opportunity to solve problems in a way that honors God and benefits the parties involved.
- It's this perspective that allows us to reframe our approach to conflict resolution.
- There are three basic ways people react to conflict:
 - **Escape Responses.** This category of responses is used when people are interested in avoiding a conflict rather than addressing and resolving it. This is used by people who think that all conflict is wrong and/or dangerous, or who have incorrect views on the nature of unity and thus don't want to risk damaging relationships.
 - **Denial** – To pretend that conflict doesn't exist or refuse to do what needs to be done to address it. This may bring temporary "relief", but it usually makes the situation worse. (Genesis 16:1-6)
 - **Flight** – To run away from the conflict, like ending a friendship, quitting a job, leaving a church, or filing for divorce. This usually just postpones the solution to the problem and doesn't address the underlying heart issues.
 - **Note:** There may be times when withdrawing from a confusing and/or emotional situation temporarily is warranted or when fleeing from threatening circumstances is wise (like abuse).
 - **Suicide** – When people lose hope of resolving a conflict, they may seek escape by attempting to take their own lives (see 1 Samuel 31:4). This is never the right way to deal with conflict.
 - **Attack Responses.** This category of responses is used by people who desire to win the conflict rather than preserving the relationship. The conflict is viewed as a contest or opportunity to exert control, and are often employed by those

¹ Sande, Ken. 2004. *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*. Baker Books.

who are strong-willed and/or self-confident. However, they can also be used by people who are insecure and vulnerable as a way to assert pressure and dominance. Whatever the motivation, the goal is “eliminating” the opposition.

- **Assault** – This involves overcoming an opponent through the use of force or intimidation, such as verbal attacks (gossip, slander, etc.), violence, and/or efforts to damage someone financially or professionally (Acts 6:8-15).
 - **Litigation** – This is the process of forcing people to do our will through the court system. Although some conflicts may legitimately be brought before a civil judge (Acts 24:1-26, Romans 13:1-5), lawsuits usually damage relationships and fail to achieve complete justice. Furthermore, when both parties are Christians, their witness is severely damaged (see 1 Corinthians 6:1-8).
 - **Murder** – Sometimes people are so desperate to win a conflict that they resort to killing those who oppose them (Acts 7:54-58). While most Christians may never fall into this trap, we must remember Jesus’s teaching that harboring anger and resentment is akin to murder in one’s heart (1 John 3:15; Matthew 5:21-22).
- **Peacemaking Responses.**
- **Overlook the Offense.** Many disputes and disagreements are so insignificant that they can be resolved by deliberately overlooking them (Proverbs 19:11, 12:16, 17:14; Colossians 3:13; 1 Peter 4:8).
 - **Reconciliation.** If an offense cannot be overlooked or has damaged a relationship in some way, we need to resolve personal or relational issues through confession, correction, and forgiveness (Matthew 5:23-24; Proverbs 28:13; Galatians 6:1; Matthew 18:15; Colossians 3:13).
 - **Negotiation.** Even if we resolve an issue *relationally*, we still may need to work through material issues related to money, property, and other rights. Through negotiation, both parties agree on a settlement that satisfies the needs of both parties (Philippians 2:4).
 - **Mediation.** A form of assisted peacemaking, mediation involves asking one or more objective people to assist in communicating effectively and exploring options for resolution (Matthew 18:16).
 - **Arbitration.** A form of assisted peacemaking, arbitration involves the appointment of an arbitrator to listen to both parties’ arguments and render a binding decision (see 1 Corinthians 6:1-8).
 - **Accountability (Church Discipline).** A form of assisted peacemaking, this step involves church leadership and the church body as a whole intervening to hold those who refuse reconciliation accountable to Scripture and to promote repentance, justice, and forgiveness (see Matthew 18:17). This is done lovingly, redemptively, and restoratively.
- These responses are arranged graphically on a curve to demonstrate the further one gets away from personal peacemaking, the more difficult peacemaking becomes and the more likely we are to slip into progressively sinful responses.

- To avoid this tendency, we must (1) ask God for help to resist our inclination to escape or attack when we're faced with conflict, and (2) ask God to help us develop an ability to live out the gospel by using peacemaking responses best suited to particular conflicts.



- **Trends on the Slope**
 - Moving from left to right, responses move from **private to public**.
 - Moving from left to right, solutions move from **voluntary to forced**.
 - The **more extreme** the responses, the **greater the losses** for all.
 - Every response to conflict costs you something!
 - **Personal** paths to peace generally produce the most profitable exchange.
 - The further from personal peacemaking, the greater the costs in time, money, effort, relationships, or a clear conscience.
- **Parallels on the Slope**
 - Both extremes result in death.
 - Assault and flight both avoid dealing with the underlying causes of conflict.
 - Litigation is professionally assisted denial and attack; in the legal system, your attorney's goal is to make you appear faultless and your opponent as entirely responsible; this distortion usually devastates relationships.
- **Contrasts on the Slope**
 - **Difference in Focus:** Escape responses focus on "me", attack responses focus on "you". True peacemaking focuses on "us", including God!
 - **Difference in Goals:** Escape responses are "peace-faking", and attack responses are "peace-breaking".
 - **Difference in Results:** Escape and attack responses result in broken relationships, peacemaking responses result in restored relationships.

- **A Biblical View of Conflict: The Lens of Opportunity**

- Many problems associated with escape and attack responses can be prevented if conflict is approached in a biblical way.
- Scripture explains why conflicts occur and how to deal with them.
- **Conflict Defined:** *a difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone's goals or desires.*
 - This definition covers a wide range of conflict types:
 - Variations and disagreements in taste (where to go out to dinner)
 - Hostile arguments
 - Lawsuits
 - Church splits
- **Some Causes of Conflict**
 - Misunderstandings resulting from poor communication. (See Joshua 22:1-34).
 - Differences in values, goals, gifts, callings, priorities, expectations, interests, and/or opinions (Acts 15:39; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31).
 - Competition over limited resources in families, churches, and businesses (Genesis 13:1-12).
 - Sinful attitudes and habits that lead to sinful words and actions (James 4:1-2).
- **Conflict on a Spectrum**
 - Not all conflict is bad; Scripture includes some examples that show how some differences are natural and beneficial. God has created each of us with unique personalities, and we each have different opinions, convictions, desires, perspectives, and priorities that are not inherently right or wrong. Instead, they are a product of God-given diversity. (1 Corinthians 12:21-31).
 - When handled properly, disagreements in these areas can stimulate productive dialogue, encourage creativity, and promote helpful change.
 - We should seek *unity*, not *uniformity* (see Ephesians 4:1-13).

- **Opportunity 1: Glorify God in Conflict**

- Conflict should be seen as an opportunity to glorify God, bringing him praise and honor for showing who he is, what he is like, and what he is doing, drawing attention to his grace through Jesus Christ.
- In conflict, below are action steps you must *choose* to take:
 - **Trust God.** Instead of relying on your own ideas and strength, ask God to give you grace to depend on him and follow his ways, even if those steps are contrary to your desires (Proverbs 3:5-6). Hold tightly to the gospel!
 - **Obey God.** One of the most powerful ways to glorify God is committing to obey his commandments (John 15:8; John 14:14-31).
 - **Imitate God.** Imitating Jesus in the midst of conflict is the surest path to restoring peace and unity (Ephesians 4:1-3; Ephesians 5:1-2). This imitation not only benefits our relationship with God and others and increases our witness in the

world as others see God's presence and power in our lives (Philippians 1:9-11; 1 Peter 2:12).

- **Acknowledge God.** Other people will take note of how you respond to conflict differently than the world. These are special opportunities afforded to you to speak of the grace of God that's been working in and through you to accomplish things you could never do on your own (Philippians 2:13; 1 Peter 3:14-16)!

- **Benefits of a God-Centered Approach:**

- When you focus on trusting, obeying, imitating, and acknowledging God, you will be less inclined to stumble into sins that result from giving in to emotion.
 - **Psalm 37:31** *The law of his God is in his heart; his steps do not slip.*
- It makes you less dependent on results. Even if other refuse to respond positively to your efforts toward peacemaking, you can be comforted knowing God is pleased by your faithfulness and obedience.

- **Caution:** If you do not glorify God in conflict, you will glorify someone or something else. Your actions will show if you have a big God or a big *self* and big *problems*. A lack of focus on God's will sets your focus on your will, and how others may be frustrating it.

- **Ask yourself:** "How can I please and honor God in this situation? How can I bring praise to Jesus by showing that he has saved me and is changing me?"
- When displaying the riches of God's love and pleasing him is more important than holding onto worldly things and pleasing yourself, you more naturally respond graciously, wisely, and with self-control.

- **Opportunity 2: Serve Others**

- Conflict provides an opportunity for you to serve others.
- God may use you to help an opponent understand his interests and find better solutions to his problems.
- God may grant you an opportunity to carry your opponent's burdens by providing for their needs (Galatians 6:2, 9-10), especially if the conflict has little to do with actual differences and more to do with problems in your opponent's life. When people lash out in anger, it's usually a symptom of an underlying problem or need. What if we reacted with grace and sought to help alleviate that problem?
- God may use you to help others see their faults so that they can repent and change.
- God may use you to

- **Opportunity 3: Grow to Be like Christ**

- Conflict provides an opportunity to grow in maturity.
- Conflict may be used by God to remind you of your weaknesses and to encourage dependence on him (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).
- God may use conflict to expose sinful attitudes and habits.
- God may use conflict to stretch and challenge you in ways you haven't been before.

- **The Four “G’s” of Peacemaking:**
 - **Glorify God:** How can I please and honor God in this situation?
 - **Get the Log Out of Your Own Eye:** How can I show Jesus’ work in me by taking responsibility for my contribution to this conflict?
 - **Gently Restore:** How can I lovingly serve others by helping them take responsibility for their contribution to the conflict?
 - **Go and Be Reconciled:** How can I demonstrate the forgiveness of God and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict?

Questions for Personal Application

Think of a conflict (past or present) and summarize the dispute as you perceive it. Then, ask yourself the following questions:

- What steps have you taken to resolve it?
- Which response(s) to conflict on the “slippery slope” diagram have you used to resolve this dispute? How has your response made the situation better or worse?
- What have been your goals as you’ve tried to resolve this dispute?
- From this point on (or in future conflicts), how could you glorify God better? How could you bring praise to Jesus by showing he’s changed you and is saving you?
- How could you serve others through this conflict?
- How could you grow in maturity through this conflict?
- What have you been relying on for guidance in this situation: your feelings and/or personal opinions, or the careful study and application of God’s Word?
- What are you struggling with most at this time (or at the time of the conflict)? Was it your opponent’s attacks, controlling your tongue, fear of the future, lack of support from others, etc.?
- How could you use God-given resources to deal with these struggles?
- If God were to evaluate this conflict after it is over, how would you hope He’d complete the following sentences?
 - “I’m pleased that you did not.....”
 - “I’m pleased that you.....”
- After thinking through these questions, what could you pray to God in response?