



Class 1. Conflict Provides Opportunities

- Why does God bring Conflict into our lives?
- How we address Conflict helps to define us as a Christian
- To some, conflict is a hazard that threatens to sweep them off their feet and leave them bruised and hurting.
- To others, it is an obstacle that they should conquer quickly and firmly, regardless of the consequences.
- But some people have learned that conflict is an opportunity to solve common problems in a way that honors God and offers benefits to those involved.
- As you will see, the latter view can transform the way you respond to conflict.
- There are three basic ways that people respond to conflict. These responses may be arranged on a curve that resembles a hill. On the left slope of the hill we find the escape responses to conflict. On the right side are the attack responses. And in the center we find the peacemaking responses.
- Imagine that this hill is covered with ice. If you go too far to the left or the right, you can lose your footing and slide down the slope. Similarly, when you experience conflict, it is easy to become defensive or antagonistic. Both responses make matters worse and can lead to more extreme reactions.

If you want to stay on top of this slippery slope, you need to do two things. First, ask God to help you resist the natural inclination to escape or attack when faced with conflict. Second, ask him to help you develop the ability to live out the gospel by using the peacemaking response that is best suited to resolving a particular conflict.

- The three responses found on the left side of the slippery slope are called the escape responses. People tend to use these responses when they are more interested in avoiding a conflict than in resolving it. This attitude is common within the Ecclesia, because many Brethren believe that all conflict is wrong or dangerous.

- Thinking that Christians should always agree, or fearing that conflict will inevitably damage relationships, these people usually do one of three things to escape from conflict.



- Denial. One way to escape from a conflict is to pretend that it does not exist. Or, if we cannot deny that the problem exists, we simply refuse to do what should be done to resolve a conflict properly. These responses bring only temporary relief and usually make matters worse (see Gen. 16:1-6).

- Flight. Another way to escape from a conflict is to run away. This may include leaving the house, ending a friendship, quitting a job, filing for divorce, or changing Ecclesias. In most cases, running away only postpones a proper solution to a problem (see Gen. 16:6-8).

Of course, there may be times when it is appropriate to respectfully withdraw from a confusing or emotional situation temporarily to calm down, organize your thoughts, and pray. Flight may also be a legitimate response in seriously threatening circumstances, such as cases of physical or sexual abuse (see 1 Sam. 19:9-10).

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

- The three responses found on the right side of the slippery slope are called the attack responses. These responses are used by people who are more interested in winning a conflict than in preserving a relationship. This attitude is seen in people who view conflict as a chance to assert their rights, to control others, or to take advantage of their situation.

- 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).

- Litigation. Another way to force people to bend to our will is to take them to court. Although some conflicts may legitimately be taken before a civil judge (see Rom. 13:1-5), lawsuits usually damage relationships and often fail to achieve complete justice.

- Christians are commanded to settle their differences within the church rather than in the civil courts (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 Christians would not actually kill someone, we should never forget that we stand guilty of murder in God's eyes when we harbor anger or contempt in our hearts toward others (see Matt. 5:21-22).

- Peacemaking Responses - What we will discuss in this class is the six responses found on the top portion of the slippery slope are called the peacemaking responses. These responses are commanded by God, empowered by the gospel, and directed toward finding just and mutually agreeable solutions to conflict.

- Interesting Trends on the Slope

- The slippery slope reveals several interesting trends about our responses to conflict. As we move from the left side of the slope to the right, our responses tend to go from being private to being public. When we fail to resolve a matter through a private response, more people must get involved as we look to mediation, arbitration, church accountability, or even litigation to settle a dispute.

- Moving from left to right on the curve also involves a move from voluntary to forced solutions. In all the responses on the left side of the curve, the parties decide on their own solution. From arbitration on, others impose a result. This is usually less palatable to everyone involved.

- The extreme responses to conflict also result in greater losses. Every response to conflict costs you something; you must give up one thing to gain another.

- Personal peacemaking responses generally produce the most "profitable" exchange; the benefits of your solution are usually worth the time and energy you invest to reach an agreement, especially from a spiritual standpoint.

- The further you move away from the personal peacemaking zone in either direction, the greater your costs will be, whether in time, money, effort, relationships, or a clear conscience.

- There are also three noteworthy parallels between the two sides of the slippery slope.
- Both extremes of the spectrum result in death, either through suicide or murder, which are terrible problems in our culture.
- Similarly, assault and flight often come together in classic "fight or flight" behavior, both sides of which avoid dealing with the underlying causes of the conflict.
- Finally, litigation is often nothing more than professionally assisted denial and attack. When you enter the legal adversarial system, your attorney is expected to make you look faultless and paint your opponent as the one who is entirely responsible for the problem. This distortion of reality usually takes a devastating toll on relationships.
- Many of the problems associated with the escape and attack responses to conflict can be prevented if you learn to look at and respond to conflict in a biblical way.
- In his Word, God has explained why conflicts occur and how we should deal with them. The more we understand and obey what he teaches, the more effective we will be in resolving disagreements with other people.
- The following are a few of the basic principles behind a biblical view of conflict.
- Let's begin our discussion by defining conflict as a difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone's goals or desires. This definition is broad enough to include innocuous variations in taste, such as one spouse wanting to vacation in the mountains while the other prefers the waterfront, as well as hostile arguments, such as fights, quarrels, lawsuits, or church divisions.
- There are four primary causes of conflict.
- Some disputes arise because of misunderstandings resulting from poor communication (see Josh. 22:10-34).
- Differences in values, goals, gifts, calling, priorities, expectations, interests, or opinions can also lead to conflict (see Acts 15:39; 1 Cor. 12:12-31).
- Competition over limited resources, such as time or money, is a frequent source of disputes in families, churches, and businesses (see Gen. 13:1-12).
- And, as we will see below, many conflicts are caused or aggravated by sinful attitudes and habits that lead to sinful words and actions (see James 4:1-2).
- Conflict is not necessarily bad, however. In fact, the Bible teaches that some differences are natural and beneficial. Since God has created us as unique individuals, human beings will often have different opinions, convictions, desires, perspectives, and

priorities. Many of these differences are not inherently right or wrong; they are simply the result of God-given diversity and personal preferences (see 1 Cor. 12:21-31).

- When handled properly, disagreements in these areas can stimulate productive dialogue, encourage creativity, promote helpful change, and generally make life more interesting.

- Therefore, although we should seek unity in our relationships, we should not demand uniformity (see Eph. 4:1-13).

- Not all conflict is neutral or beneficial, however. The Bible teaches that many disagreements are the direct result of sinful attitudes and behavior. As James 4:1-2 tells us, "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. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. . . ."

- When a conflict is the result of sinful desires or actions that are too serious to be overlooked, we need to avoid the temptation to escape or attack. Instead, we need to pursue one of the peacemaking responses to conflict, which can help us get to the root cause of the conflict and restore genuine peace.

- Most importantly, the Bible teaches that we should see conflict neither as an inconvenience nor as an occasion to force our will on others, but rather as an opportunity to demonstrate the love and power of God in our lives.

- This is what Paul told the Christians in Corinth when religious, legal, and dietary disputes threatened to divide their church: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1

- This passage presents a radical view of conflict: It encourages us to look at conflict as an opportunity to glorify God, serve others, and grow to be like Christ.

- The Four G's of Peacemaking:

- 1). Glorify God: How can I please and honor God in this situation?

- 2). 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?

- 3). Gently restore: How can I lovingly serve others by helping them take responsibility for their contribution to this conflict?

4). Go and be reconciled: How can I demonstrate the forgiveness of God and encourage a reasonable solution?

- Summary and Application:

- Conflict provides opportunities to glorify God, to serve others, and to grow to be like Christ.

- The next time you get involved in a conflict, these questions will help you apply the principles presented in this chapter to your situation:

1. Briefly summarize your dispute as you perceive it, placing events in chronological order as much as possible. In particular, describe what you have done to resolve the dispute.
2. Which response to conflict (from the slippery slope diagram) have you been using to resolve this dispute? How has your response made the situation better or worse?
3. What have been your primary goals as you've tried to resolve this dispute?
4. From this point on, how could you glorify God through this conflict? Specifically, how could you please and honor God in this situation and bring praise to Jesus by showing that he has saved you and is changing you?
5. How could you serve others through this conflict?
6. How could you grow to be more like Christ through this conflict?
7. What have you been relying on for guidance in this situation: your feelings and personal opinions about what is right or the careful study and application of what is taught in the Bible? What will you rely on in the future?
8. What are you struggling with most at this time (e.g., your opponent's attacks, controlling your tongue, fear of what is going to happen, lack of support from others)?
9. How could you use the resources God has provided (the Bible, the Holy Spirit, or other Christians) to deal with these struggles?
10. If God were to evaluate this conflict after it is over, how would you like him to complete these sentences: "I am pleased that you did not ..." "I am pleased that you ..."