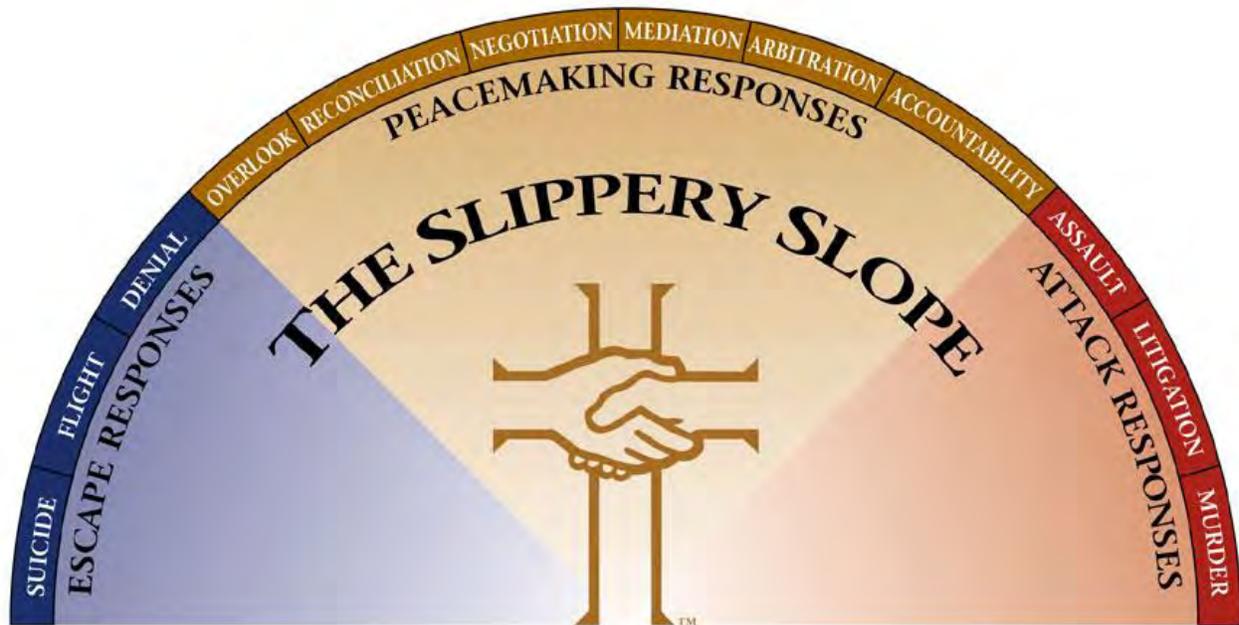


The Slippery Slope of Conflict



Staying on Top of Conflict

Conflict can make life very awkward. It often catches us off guard and leads us to say and do things we later regret. When someone offends us, we often react without thinking. Soon it is as if we are sliding down a slippery slope and things are going from bad to worse. As the illustration shows, this slippery slope can drop off in two directions.

Escape Responses

The three responses found on the left side of the slippery slope are commonly used by people who are more interested in avoiding or getting away from a conflict than resolving it.

Denial—One way to escape from a conflict is to pretend that no problem exists. 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 ending a friendship, quitting a job, filing for divorce, or leaving a church. Flight may be legitimate in extreme situations (see 1 Sam. 19:9-10), but in most cases it only postpones a proper solution to the problem (see Gen. 16:6-8).

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. Suicide is never a right way to deal with conflict (see Matt. 27:1-5).

Attack Responses

The three responses found on the right side of the slippery slope are often used by people who are more interested in winning a conflict 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 usually escalates conflict.

Litigation—Although some conflicts may legitimately be taken before a civil judge (see Acts 24:1-26:32; Rom. 13:15), 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 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 1 John 3:15; Matt. 5:21-22).

Peacemaking Responses

The Gospel Is the Key to Peace. A true peacemaker is guided, motivated, and empowered by the gospel, the good news that God has forgiven all our sins and made peace with us through the death and resurrection of his Son (Col. 1:19-20). Through Christ he has also enabled us to break the habit of escaping from conflict or attacking others, and he has empowered us to become peacemakers who can promote genuine justice and reconciliation (Col. 3:12-14).

The six responses found on the top portion of the slippery slope are directed at finding a just and mutually agreeable solution to a conflict. These responses may be divided into two categories: personal peacemaking responses and assisted responses:

Personal peacemaking responses are carried out in private between the parties themselves. Although it is appropriate for one or both parties to seek advice on how to implement these responses, they should normally try to resolve their differences one-on-one before asking others to intervene in the dispute.

Overlook an offense—Many disputes are so insignificant that they should be resolved by quietly and deliberately 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). If the parties cannot resolve a dispute through personal peacemaking, they should pursue one of the assisted responses. This will require that they seek help from other people in their church or community.

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 they have no authority to force you to accept a particular solution.

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 refuses to be reconciled and do what is right, Jesus commands his or her church leaders to formally intervene to hold him or her accountable to Scripture and to promote repentance, justice, and forgiveness: "If he refuses to listen [to others], tell it to the church" (Matt. 18:17).

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.

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