

love and undying devotion. Your companionship filled her life with joy and delight and was a constant reminder to her of the love of God. With deepest gratitude to a wonderful brother, from Joe, John, Jenny, and Matt.”

Tears welled up in Frank’s eyes as Joe handed him the plaque. Before he could speak, Joe handed him an envelope.

“Frank,” he went on, “in appreciation for all you did for Mom, we want to give you this gift. It is an agreement we have all signed that gives you a life estate in the farmhouse. That means you will be able to stay there as long as you live. We found a buyer who is willing to purchase the rest of the farmland. Ownership of the house will eventually pass to our children. But as long as you want to live there, we want you to know that it is your home.”

As Frank clutched the envelope, the dam of emotions finally burst. Months of uncertainty and fear gave way to sobs of relief and gratitude. As Joe leaned over and hugged his brother for the first time in years, Joe’s teenage son leaned toward his sister and whispered, “Maybe there is a God after all, because there’s no way Dad would have done this on his own.”

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When someone mistreats or opposes us, our instinctive reaction is to justify ourselves and do everything we can to get our way. This selfish attitude usually leads to impulsive decisions that only make matters worse.

The gospel of Jesus Christ provides the way out of this downward spiral. When we remember what Jesus did for us on the cross, our blinding self-absorption can be replaced with a liberating desire to draw attention to the goodness and power of God. As Colossians 3:1–2 teaches, “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”

Focusing on God is the key to resolving conflict constructively. When we remember his mercy and draw on his strength, we invariably see things more clearly and respond to conflict more wisely. In doing so, we can find far better solutions to our problems. At the same time, we can show others that there really is a God and that he delights in helping us do things we could never do on our own.

## 1

## CONFLICT PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES

Well done, good and faithful servant!

Matthew 25:21

I love to backpack in Montana’s spectacular Beartooth Mountains. One year I ventured out in late spring with three friends. The streams were still swollen from melting snow. Ten miles into the mountains, we came to a stream where the bridge had been washed away. The water was deep and icy cold. There was one place where we might have been able to cross by leaping from rock to rock, but it would mean risking a fall into the rapids.

As we stood there trying to decide what to do, three different perspectives surfaced. One person saw the stream as a dangerous obstacle. Afraid that one of us might fall in and be swept away, he wanted to turn back and look for another trail. Another friend saw the stream as a means to show how tough he was. He wanted to wade straight across, even if that meant we would be wet and cold for a few hours. But two of us saw the stream as an interesting challenge. We studied the rocks leading to the other side and determined

where we would need additional footing. Finding a fallen tree in the woods, we laid it across the largest gap between the rocks.

At this point, our two friends began to cooperate with us. Working together, we managed to get one person over to the other bank. Then two of us stood on rocks in the middle of the stream, and the packs were passed to the other side. One by one, we jumped from rock to rock, receiving support from the person ahead. Before long, we were all on the far bank, perfectly dry and exhilarated by our accomplishment.

I have found that people look at conflict in much the same way that my friends and I viewed that stream. 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.

### The Slippery Slope of 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. Let's look at each of these responses in more detail.

### Escape Responses

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 church, because many Christians 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; 1 Sam. 2:22-25).

**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 churches. In most cases, running away only postpones a proper solution to a problem (see Gen. 16:6-8), so flight is usually a harmful way to deal with conflict. 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). If a family is involved in such a situation, however, every reasonable effort should still be made to find trustworthy assistance and come back to seek a lasting solution to the problem. (I will discuss this in more detail in chapter 9.)

**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. Tragically, however, suicide has become the third leading cause of death among adolescents in the United States, partly because so many children have never learned how to deal with conflict constructively.

### ***Attack Responses***

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 contest or a chance to assert their rights, to control others, or to take advantage of their situation. Attack responses are typically used by people who are strong and self-confident. But they may also be used by those who feel weak, fearful, insecure, or vulnerable. Whatever the motive, these responses are directed at bringing as much pressure to bear on opponents as is necessary to eliminate their opposition.

**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 conflicts worse.

**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 Acts 24:1–26:32; Rom. 13:1–5), lawsuits usually damage relationships and often fail to achieve complete justice. When Christians are involved on both sides, their witness can be severely damaged. This is why Christians are commanded to settle their differences within the church rather than in the civil

courts (1 Cor. 6:1–8). Therefore, it is important to make every effort to settle a dispute out of court whenever possible (Matt. 5:25–26; see appendix D for further discussion).

**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 1 John 3:15; Matt. 5:21–22).

There are two ways that people move into the attack zone. Some resort to an attack response the minute they encounter a conflict. Others move into this zone after they have tried unsuccessfully to escape from a conflict. When they can no longer ignore, cover up, or run away from the problem, they go to the other extreme and attack those who oppose them.

### ***Peacemaking Responses***

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. Each of these responses will be discussed in detail in the following chapters, but for now we will do a brief overview.

The first three peacemaking responses may be referred to as “personal peacemaking,” because they may be carried out personally and privately, just between you and the other party. The vast majority of conflicts in life should and can be resolved in one of these ways.

**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; see also 12:16; 17:14; Col. 3:13; 1 Peter 4:8). 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 the 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; see Prov. 28:13). “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).

When a dispute cannot be resolved through one of the personal peacemaking responses, God calls us to use one of the next three peacemaking responses, referred to as “assisted peacemaking.” These responses require the involvement of other people from your church or Christian 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. In 1 Corinthians 6:1–8, Paul indicates that this is how Christians ought to resolve even their legal conflicts with one another: “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 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). Direct church involvement is often viewed negatively among Christians today, but when it is done as Jesus instructs—lovingly, redemp-

tively, and restoratively—it can be the key to saving relationships and bringing about justice and peace.

## 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 (clockwise), 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.

There are also some interesting contrasts between the various responses to conflict. First, there is a difference in focus. When I

resort to an escape response, I am generally focusing on “me.” I am looking for what is easy, convenient, or nonthreatening for myself. When I use an attack response, I am generally focusing on “you,” blaming you and expecting you to give in and solve the problem. When I use a peacemaking response, my focus is on “us.” I am aware of everyone’s interests in the dispute, especially God’s, and I am working toward mutual responsibility in solving a problem.

The issue of goals reveals a second difference between various responses. People who use escape responses are usually intent on “peace-faking,” or making things look good even when they are not. (This is especially common in the church, where people are often more concerned about the appearance of peace than the reality of peace.) Attack responses are used by people who are prone to “peace-breaking.” They are more than willing to sacrifice peace and unity to get what they want. Those who use the responses on the top of the slippery slope are committed to “peace-making” and will work long and hard to achieve true justice and genuine harmony with others.

Finally, there is a difference in results. When a person earnestly pursues the peacemaking responses to conflict, there is a greater likelihood that he or she will eventually see reconciliation. In contrast, both the escape and attack responses to conflict almost inevitably result in KYRG: *Kiss your relationship good-bye*.

The different responses to conflict and their associated dynamics were dramatically revealed in a family conflict I conciliated. I was asked to help seven adult brothers and sisters settle a dispute over whether they should keep their elderly mother in her home or place her in a retirement center. Five of the siblings were doing all they could to escape from the situation, either by pretending that the conflict did not exist or by refusing to meet with the others to talk about it. The other two attacked each other intensely and frequently, slandering one another to family and friends and fighting in court to obtain control through legal guardianship.

The first step in resolving the dispute was to help the family change the way they had been responding to the situation. The five siblings who had been trying to escape from the problem finally saw the benefits of mediation and agreed to meet together. The other two sisters grudgingly consented to mediation, but they continued

to attack each other during our meetings, accusing each other of improper motives and demanding opposing solutions. Our investment of time and energy was producing no results, and relationships were suffering further damage.

I finally asked to talk with the two sisters in private. Putting the guardianship issue aside for a moment, I asked them to take a look at how they were treating one another. As we examined their attitudes and behavior in the light of a few relevant Bible passages, the Lord began to work in their hearts. The real cause of the conflict finally came to the surface. Almost twenty years earlier, one sister had said something that deeply hurt the other. The offended sister brooded over the insult, and their relationship was steadily poisoned. Consequently, they opposed each other in everything, even if it involved their mother’s care.

As we continued to talk and pray, they began to deal with their feelings and actions in the light of the gospel. God softened their hearts and moved them to confess their sins and forgive each other. With tears in their eyes, they embraced each other for the first time in twenty years. They soon joined their brothers and sister and explained what had happened. Within five minutes, all seven children agreed that their mother would be happier in her own home, and in another fifteen minutes they negotiated a schedule for her care. As you can imagine, when they told her the news that evening, the reconciliation of her children brought her more joy than the decision about her living arrangement.

### A Biblical View of Conflict

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 defi-

dition 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). Instead of avoiding all conflicts or demanding that others always agree with us, we should rejoice in the diversity of God's creation and learn to accept and work with people who simply see things differently than we do (see Rom. 15:7; cf. 14:1–13).

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. This perspective may seem naive and impractical at first glance, especially to someone who is presently embroiled in a dispute. As you will see, however, this view can inspire remarkably practical responses to conflict. These responses are described in detail later in this book, but an overview now will be helpful.

## Glorify God

Conflict always provides an opportunity to glorify God, that is, to bring him praise and honor by showing who he is, what he is like, and what he is doing. The best way to glorify God in the midst of conflict is to depend on and draw attention to his grace, that is, the undeserved love, mercy, forgiveness, strength, and wisdom he gives to us through Jesus Christ. You can do this in several ways.

First, *you can trust God*. Instead of relying on your own ideas and abilities as you respond to people who oppose you, ask God to give you grace to depend on him and follow his ways, even if they are completely opposite to what you feel like doing (Prov. 3:5–7).

Above all, hold on tightly to the liberating promises of the gospel. Trust that Jesus has forgiven your sins, and confess them freely. Believe that he is using the pressures of conflict to help you to grow, and cooperate with him. Depend on his assurance that he is always watching over you, and stop fearing what others might do to you. Know that he delights to display his sanctifying power in your life, and attempt to do things that you could never accomplish in your own strength, such as forgiving someone who has hurt you deeply. As you trust the Lord in these “unnatural” ways, people will have the opportunity to see that God is real and praise him for his work in your life (see Acts 16:22–31).

Second, *you can obey God*. One of the most powerful ways to glorify God is to do what he commands (Matt. 5:16; John 17:4; Phil. 1:9–10). As Jesus said, “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (John 15:8). Obeying God’s commands without compromise honors him by showing that his ways are absolutely good, wise, and dependable. Our obedience also demonstrates that he is worthy of our deepest love and devotion. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command. . . . Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. . . . If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. . . . He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. . . . the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me” (John 14:15–31; cf. 1 John 5:3 and 2 John 5–6). This repetition makes a life-changing point: If you want to honor Jesus and show that he is worthy to be loved more than anything in the world, learn his ways and obey his commands.

Third, *you can imitate God*. When the believers in Ephesus were struggling with conflict, the apostle Paul gave them this timeless advice: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:1–2; see 1 John 2:6). As Paul knew, imitating Jesus in the midst of conflict is the surest path to restoring peace and unity with those who oppose us (see Eph. 4:1–3). More importantly, when we live out the gospel in our lives and mirror Jesus’ humility, mercy, forgiveness, and loving correction, we surprise the world and give concrete evidence of the Lord’s presence and power in our lives (see Phil. 1:9–11; 1 Peter 2:12).

Fourth, *you can acknowledge God*. As God gives you grace to respond to conflict in unusual and effective ways, other people will often take notice and wonder how you do it. If you are silent, they may give you credit for the remarkable things you have done, which would rob God of his glory. Instead, use these special opportunities to breathe grace to other people by telling them that it is God who has been working in you to do things you could never do on your own (Phil. 2:13; 1 Peter 3:14–16). Then go on to share the gospel, telling them of Jesus’ love for them, his saving work on the cross, and his offer to forgive their sins and free them from the attitudes and actions that lead to conflict. You may have their attention only for a moment. Make the most of it by pointing straight at Jesus and giving him all the glory.

Every time you encounter a conflict, you will inevitably show what you really think of God. If you want to show that you love him “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37), then ask him to help you trust, obey, imitate, and acknowledge him, especially when it is difficult to do so. This behavior honors God and shows others how worthy he is of your devotion and praise.

This principle was powerfully illustrated in the apostle Peter’s life. Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, he warned Peter that he would be executed for his faith. In John 21:19 we are told that “Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.” How would Peter glorify God by dying? He would show that God is so excellent and trustworthy and his ways are so perfect that it is better to die than to turn away from him or disobey his commands (cf. Dan. 3:1–30; 6:1–28; Acts 5:17–42; 6:8–7:60). Peter was willing to pay the highest price possible, his very life, to show how much he loved and trusted God.

Glorifying God will benefit *you* as well, especially when you are involved in a conflict. Many disputes begin or grow worse because one or both sides give in to their emotions and say or do things they later regret. When you focus on trusting, obeying, imitating, and acknowledging God, you will be less inclined to stumble in these ways. As Psalm 37:31 says, “The law of his God is in his heart; his feet do not slip.”



The other benefit of a God-centered approach to conflict resolution is that it makes you less dependent on results. Even if others refuse to respond positively to your efforts to make peace, you can find comfort in the knowledge that God is pleased with your obedience. That knowledge can help you to persevere in difficult situations.

It is important to realize that if you do not glorify God when you are involved in a conflict, you will inevitably glorify someone or something else. By your actions you will show either that you have a big God or that you have a big self and big problems. To put it another way, if you do not focus on God, you will inevitably focus on yourself and your will, or on other people and the threat of their wills.

One of the best ways to keep your focus on the Lord is to continually ask yourself these questions: How can I please and honor God in this situation? In particular, how can I bring praise to Jesus by showing that he has saved me and is changing me? Seeking to please and honor God is a powerful compass for life, especially when we are faced with difficult challenges. Jesus himself was guided by these goals. He said, "I seek not to please myself but him who sent me" (John 5:30). "The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him" (John 8:29). "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (John 17:4). King David showed the same desire when he wrote: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Ps. 19:14).

When displaying the riches of God's love and pleasing him is more important than holding onto worldly things and pleasing yourself, it becomes increasingly natural to respond to conflict graciously, wisely, and with self-control. This approach brings glory to God and sets the stage for effective peacemaking.

### Serve Others

As Paul reminded the Corinthians, conflict also provides an opportunity to serve others. This sounds absurd from a worldly perspective, because the world says, "Look out for Number One."

But Jesus says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27–28). Clearly, we are *not* released from the command to love our neighbor as ourselves, even when that neighbor is hating, cursing, and mistreating us. Instead of reacting harshly or seeking revenge, God calls us to be merciful to those who offend us, just as he is merciful to us (Luke 6:36). We cannot serve others this way in our own strength. We must continually breathe in God's grace (through the study of his Word, prayer, worship, and Christian fellowship) and then breathe out his love, mercy, forgiveness, and wisdom to others through our words and actions. You can do this in several ways.

In some situations, God may use you to help an opponent understand his interests and find better solutions to his problems than he would have developed alone (Phil. 2:3–4). If you follow the principles of negotiation described in chapter 11, you can often develop creative ways to satisfy both your needs and the needs of your opponent. Instead of allowing a conflict to pit you against each other, you can learn to work together against a common problem.

In other cases, the Lord may give you an opportunity to carry your opponent's burdens by providing for his or her spiritual, emotional, or material needs (Gal. 6:2, 9–10). It may be that your conflict has little to do with actual differences between the two of you and much to do with other problems in your opponent's life. When people lash out at you, it is sometimes symptomatic of other frustrations. (This behavior is particularly common in families and close friendships.) Instead of reacting defensively, try to discern ways that you can help others deal with those problems. This does not mean you should take on their responsibilities. Rather, you should help them lift those burdens that are beyond their abilities. Such behavior brings glory to God and may soften an opponent's heart and open the way for reconciliation (see Rom. 12:20).

The Lord may also use you to help others learn where they have been wrong and need to change (Gal. 6:1–2). As we will see later, this will usually involve private correction. If that does not work, God may involve others in the church to help bring about needed repentance and change.



Conflict also provides opportunities to encourage others to trust in Jesus Christ. When you are involved in a conflict, your opponent and various bystanders will be observing you closely. If you behave in a worldly way, you will give nonbelievers yet another excuse for mocking Christians and rejecting Christ. On the other hand, if you display God's love and respond with unnatural humility, wisdom, and self-control, those who are watching you may wonder where you found the power to behave like that, which may open the door to introducing them to Christ (1 Peter 3:15–16).

Finally, serving others in the midst of conflict is a powerful way to teach and encourage others by your example. Whenever you are in conflict, there will often be many more people watching you than you realize. If you succumb to sinful emotions and lash out at your enemies, others will feel justified in doing the same. But if you respond to those who wrong you with love and self-control, many people could be inspired by your example (see 1 Cor. 4:12–13, 16; 1 Tim. 4:12; Titus 2:7). This is particularly important if you are a parent or grandparent. Your children constantly observe how you handle conflict. If you are defensive, critical, unreasonable, and impulsive, they are likely to develop the same behavior. But if you breathe grace, your children will be encouraged to imitate you. What they learn about peacemaking from you may have a profound impact on the way they handle conflict at school, in the workplace, and in their own marriages.<sup>1</sup>

### Grow to Be like Christ

Most conflicts also provide an opportunity to grow to be more like Jesus. As Paul urged in his letter to the Corinthians, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Paul elaborated on this opportunity when he wrote to the Christians in Rome: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined *to be conformed to the likeness of his Son*, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom. 8:28–29, emphasis added; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18).

God's highest purpose for you is not to make you comfortable, wealthy, or happy. If you have put your faith in him, he has some-

thing far more wonderful in mind—he plans to conform you to the likeness of his Son! He began to change you the day you put your trust in him, and he will continue this process throughout your life. Conflict is one of the many tools that God will use to help you develop a more Christ-like character. To begin with, he may use conflict to remind you of your weaknesses and to encourage you to depend more on him (2 Cor. 12:7–10). The more you rely on his grace, wisdom, and power, the more you will be imitating the Lord Jesus (Luke 22:41–44).

God may also use conflict to expose sinful attitudes and habits in your life. Conflict is especially effective in breaking down appearances and revealing stubborn pride, a bitter and unforgiving heart, or a critical tongue. When you are squeezed through controversy and these sinful characteristics are brought to the surface, you will have an opportunity to recognize their existence and ask for God's help in overcoming them (Ps. 119:67).

There is more to being like Jesus than simply recognizing weaknesses and confessing sin, however. To grow, you must also draw on his grace and practice new attitudes and habits. Just as athletes develop their muscles and skills through strenuous training, you will see greater growth when you repeatedly think and behave properly in response to challenging circumstances. For example, when people provoke and frustrate you, practice love and forgiveness. When they fail to act promptly, develop patience. When you are tempted to give up on someone, exercise faithfulness. Conflict provides a rich mixture of such trials, each of which can strengthen and refine your character. As Charles Swindoll points out, “If you listen to the voices around you, you'll search for a substitute—an escape route. You'll miss the fact that each one of those problems is a God-appointed instructor ready to stretch you and challenge you and deepen your walk with him. Growth and wisdom await you at the solution of each one, the pain and mess notwithstanding.”<sup>2</sup>

God uses conflict to stretch and challenge you in carefully tailored ways. This process is sometimes referred to as the “ABC of spiritual growth”: Adversity Builds Character. As you worry less about *going* through conflict and focus more on *growing* through conflict, you will enhance that process and experience the incomparable blessing of being conformed to the likeness of Christ.

## The Four G's of Peacemaking

The three opportunities of conflict give rise to four basic principles for peacemaking. The first three principles correspond one-on-one to the three opportunities (in a slightly different order), while the fourth principle encompasses all three opportunities. The four principles may be summarized in four basic questions, which we consider thoroughly in subsequent chapters:

*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 this conflict?

*Go and be reconciled:* How can I demonstrate the forgiveness of God and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict?

I have used these four principles in hundreds of conflicts over the past two decades, and I have yet to encounter a situation in which they did not provide practical and effective guidance. Whether I was facing a defiant five-year-old, a split congregation, or an attorney demanding a million dollars, the Four G's have always given me a reliable track on which to run as we pursued peace.

## Stewarding Conflict

Seeing conflict as an opportunity leads to an amazingly effective approach to managing conflict, which I refer to as "stewarding." This approach gives the phrase *conflict management* a unique emphasis. When Jesus talked about managing something, he was usually referring to a servant who had been entrusted by his master with certain resources and responsibilities (e.g., Luke 12:42). The Bible calls such a person a steward. A steward is not supposed to manage things for his own pleasure, convenience, or benefit. Instead, he is expected to follow his master's instructions and look out for his master's interests, even if they conflict with his own personal desires or convenience (John 12:24–26).

The concept of stewardship is especially relevant to peacemaking. Whenever you are involved in a conflict, God has given you a management opportunity. He has empowered you through the gospel and entrusted you with abilities and spiritual resources. His Word clearly explains how he wants you to manage the situation. The more faithfully you draw on his grace and follow his instructions, the more likely you are to see a constructive solution and genuine reconciliation. Faithful stewarding will also leave you with a clear conscience before God, regardless of the actions of those opposing you.

The Bible provides a detailed description of the character traits needed to manage conflict productively. Many of these qualities will be discussed later in this book, but a few of them deserve immediate attention. If you want to be an effective steward, you need to be:

*Motivated.* As we have seen, the gospel provides enormous motivation to respond to conflict constructively. As you continually remember and rejoice in all that the Lord has done for you, you will be inspired to overcome selfish, shortsighted attitudes and give yourself wholeheartedly to serving and honoring your Master.

*Informed.* As a steward, you also need to understand your Master's will (see Luke 12:47). This is not difficult, because God has written out his instructions for you. Through the Bible he provides clear and reliable guidance on how he wants you to deal with every aspect of life. The Bible is not merely a collection of religious rituals and commendable ideals. In addition to showing us how to know God personally, it provides detailed and practical instructions on how to deal with the problems that arise in daily living (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Understanding God's Word is an essential ingredient of wisdom, which is the ability to apply God's truth to life's complexities. Having wisdom does not mean that you understand all of God's ways; it means that you respond to life God's way (Deut. 29:29). The better you know the Bible, the wiser you will be and the more effectively you will deal with conflict.<sup>3</sup>

*Strengthened.* You are not alone when you are stewarding conflict: "For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him" (2 Chron. 16:9a; cf. 1 Cor. 10:13). God provides this strength to all Christians through the Holy Spirit, who plays an essential role in peacemaking. In ad-

dition to helping you understand God's will (1 Cor. 2:9–15), the Spirit will provide you with the spiritual gifts, grace, and strength you need to respond to conflict in a way that will bring honor to Christ and build up his church (Gal. 5:22–23; Eph. 3:16–21; 2 Tim. 1:7; 1 Peter 4:10–11). This help is available to you on request, which is why prayer is emphasized throughout this book.<sup>4</sup>

*Dependent.* At times, conflict can push you beyond your limits. You may have a difficult time understanding how to respond to a particular situation, or you may become so weary that you lose your determination to do what you know is right. When this happens, turn to the church and seek out spiritually mature Christians who will encourage you, give you biblically sound advice, and support your efforts to be faithful to God (Prov. 12:15; 15:22; 1 Thess. 5:10–11; Heb. 10:24–25). You won't be helped by people who are likely to tell you what they think you want to hear (2 Tim. 4:3). Therefore, be sure you turn to people who will love you enough to be honest with you. As you depend on godly advisers and submit to the counsel of the church, you can resolve many conflicts that would otherwise defeat you.

*Faithful.* Perhaps the most important characteristic of a steward is faithfulness: "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2). Faithfulness is not a matter of results; it is a matter of dependent obedience. God knows that you cannot control other people, so he will not hold you responsible for the ultimate outcome of a conflict (Rom. 12:18). What he will look at is whether you sought his strength and guidance, remembered the freedom and power you have through the gospel, and obeyed his commands and wisely used the resources he has given you. If you have depended on him and done your best to resolve a conflict in a loving and biblical manner, no matter how the situation turns out, you will have earned that marvelous commendation: "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matt. 25:21a).

### Summary and Application

Conflict provides opportunities to glorify God, to serve others, and to grow to be like Christ. These opportunities, which are sometimes described as being faithful to God, being merciful to

others, and acting justly ourselves, are commended throughout Scripture. In Micah 6:8 we are told, "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." In the same way, Jesus teaches us to pay attention to "the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Matt. 23:23). As you live out the gospel and make the Lord's priorities your priorities, you can turn every conflict into a stepping-stone to a closer relationship with God and a more fulfilling and fruitful Christian life.

If you are presently 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 . . ."
11. Go on record with the Lord by writing a prayer based on the principles taught in this chapter.

## 2

## LIVE AT PEACE

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Romans 12:18

**G**od delights to make his children instruments of peace and reconciliation in the midst of conflict. We will carry out this challenging responsibility more effectively if we understand why peace is so important to our heavenly Father.

### The Three Dimensions of Peace

God loves peace. From Genesis to Revelation, he communicates a deep desire to bless his people with peace and to use them to bring peace to others. Consider these recurring themes:

1. Peace is part of God's character, for he is frequently referred to as "the God of peace" (see Rom. 15:33; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 4:9; Heb. 13:20; cf. Judg. 6:24).