

## The Slippery Slope

*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 allow matters to grow 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.

**Litigation**—Some conflicts may legitimately be taken before a civil judge for a decision (see Rom. 13:1-5). However, lawsuits usually damage relationships and often fail to achieve complete justice. Therefore, Christians are commanded to make every effort to settle matters out of court whenever possible (see Matt. 5:25-26; 1 Cor. 6:1-8).

**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.

**Murder**—Some people may be so desperate to win a dispute that they will try to kill those who oppose them (see Acts 7:54-58). Even if we do not attack someone physically, we are guilty of murder in God's eyes when we harbor anger or contempt in our hearts toward others (see Matt. 5:21-22).

## Conciliation Responses

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**—"A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense" (Prov. 19:11). Many disputes can be resolved properly by quietly overlooking an offense and forgiving the person who has wronged you (see Prov. 12:16; 17:14; 1 Pet. 4:8).

**Discussion**—"If your brother has something against you ... go and be reconciled" (Matt. 5:23-24). "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you" (Matt. 18:15). **Personal** wrongs that are too serious to overlook should be resolved through confession or loving confrontation, which opens the way for forgiveness and reconciliation (see Prov. 28:13; Gal. 6:1-3).

**Negotiation**—"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3-4). **Substantive** issues related to money, property, and other rights should be resolved by negotiating solutions that meet the interests of all those involved (see Dan. 1:1-16; Matt. 7:12).

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 he will not listen [to you], take one or two others along" (Matt. 18:16). When people are unable to resolve a dispute in private, Jesus says they should ask one or more other people to meet with them to help them communicate more effectively and explore possible solutions. In this process mediators give advice, but they have no power to impose solutions.

**Arbitration**—"If you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church" (1 Cor. 6:1-8). When the parties cannot come to a voluntary agreement on a substantive issue, they may appoint arbitrators to listen to their arguments and render a binding decision.

**Church discipline**—"If he refuses to listen to [others], tell it to the church" (Matt. 18:17-20). If a person who professes to be a Christian refuses to be reconciled and do what is right, his or her church leaders should formally intervene to promote justice, repentance, forgiveness, and restoration.

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).

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 church discipline), which will require the assistance of other people in your church or community.

© 2002 by Peacemaker® Ministries. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission.



PEACEMAKER  
MINISTRIES

1537 Avenue D, Suite 352  
Billings, MT 59102  
406-256-1583

[www.HisPeace.org](http://www.HisPeace.org)  
[mail@HisPeace.org](mailto:mail@HisPeace.org)