



## Resolving Everyday Conflict

By Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson

**What Is Conflict?** Conflict happens when you are at odds with another person over what you think, want, or do. Conflict begins when you don't get what you want.

### Christians and Conflict

- As Christians we can't escape conflict.
- Conflict happens among Christians because our sinful self gladly cooperates with messages that say "I can have whatever I want." There might be low-level conflict, behavior like gossip, slander, backbiting, criticism, undermining, etc.

**Causes of Conflict.** Conflict isn't always bad. Conflict, handled well, became beneficial.

- **God-given diversity.** Many differences aren't about right or wrong; they are simply the result of God-designed personal preferences.
- **Simple misunderstandings.** Conflicts arise when we think we have spoken and made ourselves clear—or we have listened and understood correctly—yet we jump to faulty conclusions. We tend to take offense and assume the worst. God wants us to assume the best until we actually know otherwise.
- **Sinful attitudes and desires that lead to sinful words and actions.** We have natural differences—but our sinful nature is really what makes conflict so destructive. Our sinful desires fuel conflict.
- **The sinful root of conflict is really idolatry.** Our hearts become controlled by...something we want or love, ...We have made the thing we desire into an object of worship.

### The Good News about Conflict

- Jesus said that our response to conflict can prove we are his followers.

### Overcoming Conflict

- Unresolved conflict brings tragic results. Peace is worth our greatest effort.

### The Gospel Makes Peace Possible

- The gospel is God's power for peacemaking. Because he forgives me, I can forgive. Because he loves me, I can love and live in harmony with others.

### Conflict Is an Opportunity

- Peacemakers see conflict as an opportunity to solve problems in a way that not only benefits everyone involved but also honors God.
- There are three basic ways people respond to conflict. 1. Escape, 2. Attack, or 3. Make peace.

#### 1. Escape Responses

- Usually peacefaking, trying to make things look good even when they aren't.

- Denial, pretending it doesn't exist.
- Flight, or running away.

## **2. Attack Responses:**

- Used when people are more interested in winning a conflict than in preserving a relationship.
- People enter the attack zone 2 ways: 1. The instant they encounter conflict. 2. After they try unsuccessfully to escape conflict.
- Assault (Physical force, damage others financially or professionally, bully through manipulation and intimidation, verbal assaults, including insults and other vicious words, sometimes veiled in humor or sarcasm. Excusing yourself by saying "I didn't mean it" or "I was just joking" doesn't make words any less destructive.
- Litigation

## **3. Peacemaking:** Practical peacemaking involves asking four important questions:

### **G1: Go Higher. How can I focus on God in this situation?**

- How could I glorify God in this situation? How could you please and honor God in this situation?
- As long as we leave God out of our situation, we can expect to stay stuck in conflict.
- Before conflict gets any hotter, we need to recognize God's presence and ask, "Where is God in this?" "What is God doing in this situation?" "What answers does he have for this conflict?"
- What Are You Really Living For? If you don't glorify God when you're involved in a conflict, you inevitably show that someone or something else rules your heart. If you don't focus on God, you unavoidably focus on yourself and your own will, or on other people and the threat of their wills. Put another way, your actions show either that you have a big God or that you have a big self and big problems.

### **Three Ways You Can Glorify God**

- Trust God.
- Obey God.
- Imitate God.

### **Is This Worth Fighting Over?**

- Glorifying God opens up a surprising option. It gives you a choice to overlook an offense, showing the same patient mercy God shows you. Instead of jumping in to address the wrongdoing, you can choose to overlook it.

### **Overlooking Isn't Giving Up**

- Overlooking isn't just another way to avoid conflict. Overlooking isn't peacefaking—avoiding confrontation, staying silent for the moment but filing away the offense to use against someone later. That's actually a form of denial, which usually leads to a bitterness that eventually explodes in anger. When you overlook another person's faults, you deliberately decide not to brood over an offense. You stop replaying the situation in your mind. You quit talking about it. You choose to let it go. Overlooking means you choose to fully forgive a person without any further discussion or action.
- Overlooking is in sharp contrast to a life of constantly correcting others in the name of peace. Constantly correcting others likely causes damage, while overlooking helps relationships. Instead of calling each other to account for every fault, we can overlook smaller offenses. Doing this creates an atmosphere of grace, where we can let go of some hurts and move on with life.

### **When You Should—and Shouldn't—Let It Go**

- Overlooking isn't the right choice when a wrong is damaging your relationship with a person; is hurting other people; is hurting the offender; is significantly dishonoring God.
- Pause and think objectively about the issues we face...most of our conflicts simply aren't worth a fight.

## **G2: Get Real. How can I own my part of this conflict?**

- In conflict we naturally focus on what the other person did to us. But that won't solve the problem.
- *"First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."*
- Jesus warns us against correcting others too quickly or aiming criticism in the wrong direction. Before we talk to others about their faults, we need to make sure we have faced up to ours.

### **Owning Your Part of a Conflict**

- Two kinds of faults. 1. thoughts and feelings, 2. outward actions.
1. We might have an overly sensitive attitude that allows us to be offended too easily by others' behavior.
  2. We may have contributed to the conflict through our own sinful behavior. What we have done or not done in a situation might have made a conflict worse.
- Ask God to help you see your sin. Pray the words of Psalm 139:23–24: *"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."*
  - Once we have begun to understand our part of a conflict, our job is to take real responsibility for what we have done wrong.
  - Even if I'm only 2 percent responsible for a conflict, I'm 100 percent responsible for my 2 percent.
  - Confessing your fault to the person you offended is the way you fully own your part of a conflict.

### **The Toxic Bad Confessions**

- There's a problem with most of our confessions. We naturally make weak and evasive apologies.

### **The Seven A's of a Good Confession**

- Ask God to help you humbly—and thoroughly—admit your wrongs.
  1. *Address everyone involved.* The general rule? Your confession should reach as far as your offense.
  2. *Avoid "if," "but," and "maybe."*
  3. *Admit specifically.*
  4. *Acknowledge the hurt.*
  5. *Accept the consequences.*
  6. *Alter your behavior.*
  7. *Ask for forgiveness (and allow time).*

## **G3: Gently Engage. How can I help others own their contribution to this conflict?**

- There are times when you need to address others' shortcomings. *"If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently"* (Galatians 6:1).
- Jesus says... *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you"* (Matthew 18:15).
- James writes, *"Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins"* (James 5:20).
- The Bible...doesn't give license to go hunting for faults to correct...anyone eager to go and show others their sin probably isn't the right person for the job.
- Many of us feel reluctant to confront others' sin under any circumstances. We might fall back on Matthew 7:1, *"Do not judge, or you too will be judged,"* concluding that the Bible forbids us to pass

judgment on how others live. But we can be sure that Jesus isn't banning personal correction in that verse, because in the next breath he talks about the log and the speck, pointing out the necessity of admitting our part of a conflict before we address the role of others.

- We...have a responsibility to encourage fellow believers to be faithful to God's commands, living in ways that reflect the gospel, doing for others as God has done for us.
- Those two insights can help you decide whether an offense is too serious to overlook—that is, whether you need to step in to help. First, keep the picture of being “caught” in mind. If a sin doesn't appear to be damaging relationships or doing someone serious harm, it might simply be best to overlook a sin and pray that God will show that person his need for change. On the other hand, if a sin appears to be dragging your friend under, don't delay in offering help. Second, remember the goal of “restore.” Has a person's sin significantly hurt him and reduced his usefulness, like a large hole decreases the usefulness of a fishing net? If so, there may be a need for “mending,” which can happen through a gracious conversation.
- Going to another person to address sin can be one of the toughest things we ever do. It can call for enormous courage.

### **When Someone Has Something Against You**

- When someone has something against you, God wants you to take the first step in seeking peace—even if you believe you haven't done anything wrong.
- Matthew 5:23–24: *“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”*

### **When Someone Has Wronged You**

- God also wants you to go to others when you believe their sins are too serious to overlook. This is why Jesus said, *“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him”* (Luke 17:3).
- A few simple tests [to] know whether it's time...to go and compassionately show others their sin.
  - I need to go when a conflict damages my relationship with someone.
  - I need to go when a conflict is hurting others.
  - I need to go when a conflict is hurting the offender.
  - I need to go when a conflict is significantly dishonoring God.

### **Go Person to Person on Your Own**

- Getting face to face is the best way to go to others.
- Good listening is particularly important as you go. Don't point out someone's sin without giving them a chance to explain things. Making time and space to listen shows that you realize you don't have all the answers, and it tells others you value their thoughts and opinions.
- Even if you can't agree with everything you hear, your willingness to listen demonstrates respect and shows that you are trying to understand their perspective.
- *“Know this, my beloved brothers [and sisters]: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger”* (James 1:19).
- Before you go, carefully plan what you want to say...prepare notes.
- Engaging others is more than simply confronting them with their wrongs.

### **Going with Others**

- *“But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses’ ”* (Matthew 18:16).
- Try to keep the circle of people involved in a conflict as small as possible for as long as possible.
- If going with others doesn't resolve a conflict, there are still options remaining.

- *“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matthew 18:16–17).*

#### **G4: Get Together. How can I give forgiveness and help reach a reasonable solution?**

- As Christians, we can’t afford to overlook the direct relationship between God’s forgiveness and our forgiveness. The Bible says, *“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32)*
- Christians are the most forgiven people in the world. Therefore, we should be the most forgiving people in the world.

#### **What Forgiveness Isn’t**

- Forgiveness isn’t a feeling. It’s an act of the will. Forgiveness involves a series of decisions, the first of which is to admit that we are unable to forgive and ask God to change our hearts.
- Forgiveness isn’t forgetting. Forgetting is a passive process, letting a matter fade from memory merely with the passing of time. Forgiving is an active process involving a conscious choice and a deliberate course of action.
- Forgiveness isn’t a matter of whether we forget, but of how we remember.
- Forgiveness isn’t excusing. Excusing says, “That’s okay,” and implies, “What you did wasn’t really wrong,” or “You couldn’t help it.” Forgiveness is the opposite of excusing. Forgiveness says, “We both know that what you did was wrong. It was without excuse. But since God has forgiven me, I forgive you.” Because forgiveness deals honestly with sin, it brings a freedom that no amount of excusing could ever hope to provide.

#### **What Forgiveness Is**

- Forgiveness is a radical decision not to hold an offense against the offender.
- Forgiveness can be costly. When someone sins, they create a debt someone has to pay. Most of this debt is owed to God. In his great mercy, he sent his Son to pay that debt on the cross for all who would trust in him. But if someone sins against you, part of their debt is also owed to you.
- Forgiveness ...has two components—a heart component and a “transactional” or relational component.
- The heart component is releasing the offense to God. It’s an attitude or disposition between you and God that doesn’t depend on the other person’s repentance. You choose not to dwell on the hurtful incident or seek vengeance or retribution in thought, word, or action.
- The transactional component of forgiveness happens between you and your offender. Unless you are dealing with a minor sin that can be overlooked, granting forgiveness is conditional on the repentance of the other person. Once that person confesses, you can extend forgiveness, releasing him or her from the offense and enjoying a fully restored relationship. Taking this step isn’t appropriate until the offender has acknowledged wrongdoing. Until then, you may need to talk with the offender about his sin or seek the involvement of others to resolve the matter. Once the other person repents, you can close the matter forever, the same way God forgives you.

#### **The Four Promises of Forgiveness**

- “I promise I won’t dwell on this incident.”
- “I promise I won’t bring up this incident and use it against you.”
- “I promise I won’t talk to others about this incident.”
- “I promise I won’t allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.”

#### **Can You Ever Mention the Sin Again?**

- The commitment to not bring up the offense shouldn't prevent you from dealing honestly with someone's recurring pattern of sin.

### **What About Consequences for Sin?**

- While forgiveness brings reconciliation to a relationship, it doesn't always release people from the real-world consequences of sin.

### **You Can't Do It Alone**

- As you seek to live out the fourth G of peacemaking, "Get Together," remember above all else that true forgiveness depends on God's grace.

## **Overcome Evil with Good**

### **When Peace Doesn't Come Easily**

- Peacemaking doesn't always turn out the way we want it to.
- When we can't resolve conflict, we face an enormous temptation to take matters into our own hands.

### **Pray for Your Enemies**

- When we stall in our attempts to resolve a conflict, the first thing we can do is to pray again.

### **Guard Your Heart and Your Tongue**

- As conflict lingers, it's crucial to guard our hearts.
- The state of your heart is usually reflected in the words coming from your mouth.

### **Seek Godly Advice**

- We need support from people who encourage us and give us biblically sound counsel.

### **Keep Doing Right**

- Continu[e] to do right even when it seems that an opponent will never cooperate.

### **Recognize Your Limits**

- *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone"* (Romans 12:18).
- Remember that you can't force others to do good.
- God defines success in terms of faithful obedience to his commands.
- God asks, "Were you faithful to my ways?" The Lord controls the ultimate outcome of all you do. Therefore, he knows that even your best efforts won't always accomplish the results you want. This is why he doesn't hold you accountable for specific results. Instead, he asks for only one thing—obedience to what he shows you to do.
- If you have made every effort to be reconciled to someone, you have fulfilled your duty. You are a success in God's eyes. Let him take it from there.
- Part of recognizing your limits is rejecting the temptation to take revenge on someone who continues to do wrong. God is responsible for doing justice and punishing people who don't repent. Proverbs 20:22 is helpful: *"Do not say, 'I'll pay you back for this wrong!' Wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you."*
- God's results will always be better than anything you could bring about on your own.

### **The Ultimate Weapon—Deliberate, Focused Love**

- When conflict rages on, there is a final tactic to pursue that many think is crazy. We can continue to love our enemy.
- Discern their deepest needs and do everything you can to meet those needs.
- Deliberate, focused love has an irresistible power.