

RESOLVING everyday CONFLICT

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and Kevin Johnson*



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INTRODUCTION

WELCOME!

Since you picked up this book, there's a good chance you're experiencing some conflict in your life. Welcome to the club!

Conflict is a normal part of life. As long as you live around other people, you're going to find your opinions and actions bumping up against someone else's. Sometimes you'll be able to simply back off and go your own way. But you have probably discovered that sometimes walking away doesn't work.

Many relationships are too important to walk away from. Some issues are too big to give in to. And some people just won't let go until they get everything they want. Add a variety of intense emotions to the mix, and conflict can get very messy and painful.

But it doesn't have to be that way. If you keep reading this book, you'll discover that conflict doesn't have to be painful or

destructive. As you learn God's ways of resolving conflict, you
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can approach conflict as an opportunity to make relationships closer and stronger, to find solutions that are fair for everyone, and—best of all—to please and honor God.

Please and honor God? I'll bet that isn't the first thing you think of when conflict strikes. Well, it wasn't for me either. For the first twenty-five years of my life, my chief goal in conflict was to please and honor myself and get what I wanted. God was not in the picture. As a result, when I encountered conflict, I either walked over others or simply gave up on difficult relationships.

But while I was working as an engineer in the medical field, Jesus came into my life in a personal and powerful way. He began to change me in ways that turned my priorities upside down. He also gave me new insights and skills for dealing with difficult people. As a result, I became a more productive employee and was promoted. My friends told me I was a lot easier to be around!

God continued to transform me into a peacemaker during law school and my early days as an attorney. In one conflict after another—some of which had been tied up in court for years—God was working through me to bring peace in seemingly impossible situations.

I found peacemaking to be so rewarding that I became a full-time Christian conciliator in 1982. Since then I have been privileged to see how God's peacemaking principles can be used to stop divorces, rebuild marriages, restore friendships, reunite churches, settle lawsuits, and even bring peace between warring tribes in Africa and Asia. Seriously!

keep reading this book. If you take these concepts seriously, your marriage, friendships, and job will never be the same. Instead of running away from conflict or being the one who always seems to make it worse, you can become the person others count on to bring understanding, justice, and reconciliation.

If you find the principles in this book helpful and want to dig deeper on specific peacemaking issues, read my book *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, which has been translated into eleven languages and is being used around the world to teach Christians how to resolve conflict. For more information on Peacemaker Ministries' resources, testimonies, training, or services, visit www.Peacemaker.net.

May God transform you more and more into a peacemaker and use you to bring peace into the lives of those around you.

Ken Sande

THE NATURE OF CONFLICT

What It Is and Where It Comes From

I travel often for work, and eating in restaurants can grow old. When I finally reach home, there's only one place I want to eat: our kitchen table. But while I'm away, Corlette's hands have been full managing our family, so when I get back, she loves to eat any place but home!

In the early days of our marriage, our differing desires on where to eat could lead to ridiculously intense conflict. When Corlette met me at the airport, I would hug the kids, kiss her cheek, and then quickly ask, "So what's for dinner?"

Sometimes she responded, "Ken, it's been a crazy day. I didn't have time to make anything. Can we just go out?" All too often my selfishness kicked in. With a deep sigh I replied, "Okay, if you really want to. But I wish you'd think of me once in a while. I've

been on the road for days, all alone in drab hotel rooms, eating out three times a day. I'd just love a home-cooked meal."

"Me think about someone else?!" Corlette might reply. "You didn't even ask what kind of day I've had. The kids have been impossible. I had to take Mom to the doctor. And the dog threw up all over the carpet. But all you're thinking about is my pulling together a big meal for you!"

Sometimes one of us realized we were sliding down a slippery slope and saw it was time to turn the conversation in a different direction. Other times, I'm ashamed to say, we headed further downhill before we realized how selfish we were acting.

Never-Ending Conflict

Aren't you tired of all the fighting? From our homes to our neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and churches, conflict surrounds us. As a lawyer and full-time Christian mediator, I have seen thousands of conflicts up close. I have witnessed divorce and custody battles, neighborhood feuds, personal injury actions, contract disputes, and church splits. As a former engineer and now as a ministry leader, I know how quickly a workplace can become poisoned by disagreements. As a husband and father, I understand the day-to-day frustrations families face at home.

Because I live in the same world you do, I know that chances are, you've experienced conflict recently as well. Perhaps you're experiencing the anguish of an unreconciled relationship right now.

I want to give you another way of handling conflict that you can use the rest of your life. Even though conflict is present in every part of life, I have seen peace come even to the most hopeless situations. I have watched people learn to work through

the most severe differences, turning frustration into opportunity. They overcome division and enjoy harmony. Their anger gives way to love, mercy, forgiveness, strength, and wisdom. How do these amazing changes happen? Through a special kind of *peacemaking*. This peacemaking is applying the gospel and God's principles for problem solving to everyday life.

In the Bible, God gives us a powerful way to respond to conflict. Our natural approach to conflict is to focus on what an opponent did to us. Yet if we try to resolve conflict by focusing only on what someone else did wrong, we never reach a real solution.

God's approach begins with us understanding the gospel—everything Jesus Christ accomplished for us on the cross. Through the gospel, God treats us with extraordinary, unearned kindness. And his gracious response to us gives us power to respond to others in an entirely new way. Once we understand how the good news of Jesus empowers real reconciliation, we can begin to learn and apply God's practical steps to peacemaking. These steps aren't difficult to discover. They're clearly taught by Jesus and others in the Bible. God explains why conflicts happen and how we should deal with them.

Peacemaking is applying the gospel and God's principles for problem solving to everyday life.

Peacemaking comes naturally to no one. It always goes against our normal human impulses. But the more we draw on God's power, and the more we wrestle with and obey what God teaches, the more effectively we can work out disagreements with others.

What Is Conflict?

Conflict happens when you are at odds with another person over what you think, want, or do. Conflict can involve everything from small disagreements to major disputes, and it can result in not only hurt feelings, but also damaged property.

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. The conflicts you experience don't happen in a vacuum. They don't appear from nowhere. If you live in the Western world, you are most likely bombarded all day long by messages that are 100 percent about self. Life is all about me. My wants, my wishes, my desires, and my needs are much more important than anything you value. If you're a parent, you know that children absorb this message all day long. They hear, "I have the right to whatever I want. I have the right to have it my way. I deserve it." If this idea sinks in—the idea that I deserve whatever I want, whenever I want it—I'm going to get mad when I don't get it. And if I'm not getting what I want, I might start punishing others for it. That's where conflict starts. I fight because I'm not getting what I want. James 4:1–2 points out the source of conflict when it 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."

Christians and Conflict

As Christians we can't escape conflict. Maybe you have picked up the idea that being a good person will help you steer clear of major clashes. If you try hard to do right, then people won't disrespect or mistreat you. Or perhaps you have been taught that if you do clash with others, turning to God for help will effortlessly make everything better. Life as a Christian doesn't work that way. We can't easily escape conflict, because we are all products of our own misguided desires. We are all part of the problem, and the problem is part of all of us. Even if we attempted to withdraw into a cozy cocoon, conflict would come with us.

Conflict happens among Christians because our sinful self gladly cooperates with messages that say "I can have whatever I want." We won't fight it because we like it. Our sinful nature never objects to the smallest outside encouragement to live for self. We find ourselves thinking "Yeah, it really is all about me. Maybe my needs are supreme. Maybe I should have what I want, and my needs are what I should be worrying about. I can't worry about what other people want. That's their problem." Like everyone else, we are prone to develop the total self-absorption that is the root of conflict.

Think and talk: Where are you seeing conflict in your life right now? What part does selfishness play in that dispute?

Unfortunately, conflict invades Christian relationships just as it does every other human relationship. Conflict happens among us in many ways. There might be loud disagreements, even public spats. Or there might be low-level conflict, behavior

like gossip, slander, backbiting, criticism, undermining, etc. When our ministry staff asks churches if they experience conflict, they sometimes say, “Absolutely not. No conflict here.” We ask, “Any gossip?” They say, “Lots of gossip.” We ask, “How about backbiting?” They nod. Soon people start to get the point. People fight over worship styles, building design, curriculum, and everything else. Christians face conflict like everyone else. Even if we see our own brokenness and dysfunction, we don’t know how to fix it.

Causes of Conflict

While many conflicts bring disastrous results, conflict isn’t always bad. Even the most mature of Christians experience conflict and can come out better for it. In the New Testament account of the early Christian church, we read that conflict erupted because some people complained that they were being shortchanged in the distribution of food (Acts 6). The apostles responded promptly and wisely, calling a meeting to encourage discussion and develop a solution. The result was that the congregation selected seven trusted men to oversee the distribution of food. Verses 5 and 7 tell us, “This proposal pleased the whole group. . . . So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” Conflict, handled well, became beneficial.

The Bible teaches that some conflicts come from God-given diversity. Each of us is like a different part of the human body, an analogy Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 12:12–31. We each have an important role to play; we each bring different perspectives and gifts to life. This God-given diversity leads to natural differences.

Since God created us as unique individuals, we all have varying

opinions, convictions, desires, perspectives, and priorities. If we handle differences well, they stimulate dialogue, creativity, and change. They keep life interesting. Many of our differences aren't about right or wrong; they are simply the result of these God-designed personal preferences.

What God desires is unity, not uniformity. Instead of avoiding all conflicts or demanding that others always agree with us, we can celebrate the variety of God's creation and learn to accept and work with people who simply see things differently than we do. Unity means we are of one purpose, one mind, one heart. Uniformity means we are clones of each other, with everyone looking, thinking, and acting the same.

Other conflicts result from simple misunderstandings. There isn't a person on earth who communicates perfectly, whether speaking or listening. Countless 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. Our prejudices and impatience all feed our misunderstandings. Unfortunately, as fallen humans we tend to take offense and assume the worst. God wants us to assume the best until we actually know otherwise.

Although much conflict is the natural result of God-given diversity and simple misunderstandings, *many conflicts are the result of sinful attitudes and desires that lead to sinful words and actions.*

All of us say and do self-motivated, self-centered, sinful things—and those things all trigger conflict. Think again about James 4:1–2: “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't

something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight." This verse provides crucial insights we will look at in greater detail in chapter 5. But for now we should be aware of three important facts:

- People are different and want different things. *That's often the SPARK of conflict.*
- Differences get worse when sinful selfishness and pride drive our reactions. *That's the GASOLINE of conflict.*
- Destruction results when we fail to respond properly and allow our sinful desires to continue driving our words and actions. *That's the FIRE of conflict.*

The problem isn't where we start, but where we end up. The issue isn't that we're different; it's what we do with our disagreements. Seldom do we choose to lay down our rights and humbly work through our difficulties with others. Instead we say, "We're different. I'm right. I've got to win."

spark gasoline fire

We have natural differences—but our sinful nature is really what makes conflict so destructive. This is where the biblical peacemaking process stands apart from almost all methods of secular conflict resolution. While those methods talk about resolving differences, they completely miss the sinful cravings that are the gasoline that turns conflict explosive. Secular conflict resolution tells you that personal differences are something

you can simply talk through. It misses the biblical insight that

sinful desires often trigger differences that can only be resolved by a change of heart.

Our sinful desires fuel conflict in ways we probably haven't paused to understand. When we want something but can't get it, our unmet desire can work itself deeper and deeper into our hearts. Our desire becomes a demand, something we sin to obtain or sin if we can't obtain. Our hearts become controlled by our craving, ruled by something we want or love, something we serve or trust, something we depend on for comfort. What has actually happened is this: We have made the thing we desire into an object of worship. We have elevated our desire into a false god, what the Bible calls an idol. Not an idol of wood, stone, or metal, but a desire or craving that controls our lives.

The sinful root of conflict is really idolatry. As Christians, we know we should want what God wants, but when we allow an idol to control our hearts, we only want what *we* want. The one cure for idolatry is to look to God himself, returning him to his rightful first place in our lives and deciding we want his will for us above any other desire.

Think and talk: When in your life have you seen a desire grow into an idol?

The world around us doesn't help us put God at that rightful first place in our lives. Notice that while we are in conflict, the messages we hear pump on more and more gasoline. They echo back to us what our sinful nature is already saying: "You deserve it." "Stand up for yourself." "Don't get mad; get even." "Call 1-800-LAWYERS." It's tough to stand up to these messages. As

sinful selves tell us we have the right to do what we want, and hardly anyone will tell us to look out for someone else. No one ever says to look out for number two; it's always, "Look out for number one." The resulting conflagration can set aflame every part of life, causing every kind of conflict and pain.

The Good News about Conflict

Jesus said that our response to conflict can prove we are his followers. Not long before his death, Jesus told his closest followers, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Right before soldiers arrested Jesus and took him away to the cross, he prayed for believers in all times and places, pleading, "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23). Jesus is predicting that the world will never know any real harmony apart from him. The world will be conflicted, just as we see it in homes, schools, offices, or neighborhoods. Yet our love as believers will prove to the world that we are Christians. Not only that, but our love for each other points to God himself. People who witness our love see his love.

The good news is that conflict doesn't need to ruin our lives. The grand theme of the Bible is reconciliation. We only have to read about four pages into the Bible—approximately five hundred words—before we see mankind leap into sin and experience separation from God and each other. Yet the whole of the rest of Scripture discloses God's incredible plan to bring back to himself a human race that willfully walked away from him.

God and human beings, and horizontal, bringing peace between individual people and groups. That's the amazing hope of the gospel. So there is no reason why Christians can't experience complete relational health with each other—and to the extent it depends on them, with non-Christians (Romans 12:18). We don't have to suffer with broken relationships. We don't have to live the way the world does.

Think and talk: How much hope do you have that God can empower you to resolve conflicts? Why do you have that expectation?

Overcoming Conflict

Unresolved conflict brings tragic results. When people lock horns at home or work, with friends, or in a courtroom, relationships are often severely damaged. Conflict robs us of time, energy, money, and opportunities. When we pause and realize the destructive nature of conflict, we discover how desirable peace really is.

Corlette and I found that our conflict over where to eat was a symptom of the selfish desires that sometimes ruled our hearts and spilled over into our marriage. As God convicted us of our sin, we confessed that we let selfish desires control our hearts, and we determined to find our complete fulfillment in him alone. We also asked God to reprogram our hearts so that we found more joy in pleasing him and serving the other person than we did in getting our own way. Little by little, God changed our hearts and gave us power to love in ways we thought were impossible.

loving others, and practicing the peacemaking skills presented in the Bible, but with each step we are finding more delight in both God and each other.

Think and talk: What bad results have you seen from conflict? What good results could you enjoy by working toward peace?

Peace is worth our greatest effort. The Bible tells us that we should “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). The Greek word in this verse that is translated “make every effort” means to strive eagerly . . . earnestly . . . diligently. It’s a word that a trainer of gladiators might have used when he sent men to fight to the death in the Coliseum: “Make every effort to stay alive today!” Peace is worth that life-and-death effort. If we want to enter into all the peace God has for us, we have to give it our all.

As you learn God’s design for true peacemaking throughout the rest of this book, may you find the peace we all so intensely desire.