

How to Fight Right



by PAUL DAVID TRIPP

You will never have a relationship with another person that is free of conflict. You will always find yourself in moments of disagreement, even in the best of relationships.

Some reasons for this are built into creation. God has made each person different from every other. Just look around at human noses and see how God has never made two the same! More significantly, the way God has hardwired us means that we won't always view life in exactly the same way as the person next to us.

Other reasons we won't always agree arise from God's providence. He has written different stories for each of us. You didn't grow up in the exact location I did. You weren't raised in the same family that I was. You won't always experience things the way I do, or value the things that I do. So we won't always see eye to eye in a given situation. In any particular moment, we are looking at life from different angles or viewpoints. A man looks at life from a different angle than a woman. A boss looks at work from a different angle than an employee. An older person looks at aging differently than someone in their youth.

Finally, we tend to disagree because we are sinners. Sadly, our sinfulness turns honest differences into poisonous arguments. We tend to want our own way. I love myself and have a wonderful plan for my life, and I want you to follow my plan as well. But you think you are right and want me to follow your plan instead.

For both good reasons and bad, you will never experience a difference-free relationship. This means that the unity that most of us say we want will not be the result of sameness. Rather, unity will result from doing the right things when we

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disagree. Our compatibilities may draw us together, but true unity is built at the intersection of differences.

Because this is true, how you react when differences arise is the most important communication issue in any relationship. People who build real and loving unity do not fight to *be* right, they fight for *what* is right. This is an important distinction. If I am always fighting to *be* right, then I don't really care what *is* right. Instead, what I really care about is being in control. So, I will say what I need to say (in whatever way I need to say it) in order to win the argument and get my way. I don't really care if I hurt you with my words. I don't really care that God placed you in my life to help me see and learn something new. No, I am satisfied with our communication when I win and I get my way.

The Bible offers a completely different path.

Principles of How to Fight Right

Knowing that we will have conflict, God calls us to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). The biblical model is always honesty (truth) in the context of caring relationship (love). Both truth and love matter. Whenever I am willing to speak hatefully to you, I step outside of God's way of communicating and destroy unity rather than build it. Whenever I am willing to compromise honesty, and I try to fool you into thinking we are unified, I create an illusion of unity that will soon blow up in our faces. Instead, God calls us to an amazing balance of truth and love. Truth not spoken in love ceases to be the truth. It is bent and twisted by other human emotions. Love without truth ceases to be love. It is ruled by fear, personal comfort, and sentimentality. In times of disagreement and difference, you must be committed to both love and truth.

Let's consider what all this means and looks like practically, in life lived. I will give nine principles for approaching disagreements constructively.

First, it means loving the other person enough to ***take time to prepare for the conversation*** you need to have. Laziness in preparation tempts both of you to say words shaped more by the emotion of the moment than by a loving commitment to communicate things that you have clearly thought through.

Second, in order to speak the truth in love, ***always be willing to listen***. Good communication is not just about how well you say what you want to say, but also how clearly you hear the perspectives of the other. Remember, it is not an accident that God has placed this person in your life. This person has been placed there for your good.

Third, ***approach these conversations as opportunities to learn*** (not only as opportunities to have input.) The best communicators are people who are excited with the thought that this conversation may help them to learn something they have never known before.

Fourth, as you are speaking, ***look for ways to serve***. Does she need encouragement? Has he been hurt or discouraged? Does she feel alone or misunderstood? Have past problems between you robbed him of hope? There is often an opportunity to comfort, encourage, and strengthen another person even as you are working through a disagreement.

Fifth, ***avoid personal attacks*** at all cost. It is not wrong to be passionate about what you believe is right. It is wrong when your passion descends into sweeping generalizations, demeaning criticism, name calling, threats, or ultimatums. You cannot let yourself view the other person as the enemy. There is only one Enemy. The Adversary wants you to give him room to divide and discourage both of you.

Sixth, ***ask for forgiveness***—from God, from each other—every time your attitude gets out of line. You will fail. God is merciful. He will help you.

Seventh, ***remember that unity is a process, not an event***. We often get ourselves in trouble because we try to reach agreement too quickly. It is not necessary to reach complete agreement in one sitting. What is important is that you have both spoken the truth in love. Honesty with constructive intent trusts that God will grow and deepen the love, respect, and unity between the two of you.

Eighth, ***don't lose heart when the process is slow***. You and the other person may have a history of landing on the opposite sides of any issue. The further apart you are, the more work you will need to do to work toward unity. You need to build a lifestyle where there is plenty of time for the necessary work of loving, careful, and patient conversation.

Ninth, ***there will be times when you need outside help***. God never means for our relationships to be lived in isolation. He has placed our relationships within the larger circle of the body of Christ with its many resources. A biblically wise and mature counselor can help you through troubles that you may not have been able to navigate on your own.

Truth Spoken in Love

Disagreements will always be with us. They are a natural part of relationships. We are different from each other, and sinners who want our own way. Knowing our weaknesses, God has given us instruction and his help on what to do when conflict comes. By speaking the truth in love—fighting for what is right—peace is possible, though it may not come quickly. After all, the goal is not victory, but unity—godly unity. Such unity reflects the glory of God himself. It is what Jesus had in mind when he instructed his disciples to love one another and prayed to the Father that we may be one (John 17:11).