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When We Disagree

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When We Disagree

Abstract

"Face-to-face interpersonal communication is the richest form of communication."

Posting about healthy ways of communicating from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/when-we-disagree/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

When We Disagree

 [inallthings.org/when-we-disagree/](https://www.allthings.org/when-we-disagree/)

Charles Veenstra

Disagreement among people is common. Often it turns into outright conflict. I read many editorial columns on computer news pages. Sometimes these news organizations allow people to respond. Many times these comments are vicious—attacking the character of the columnist. After reading several comments, I usually come to the conclusion that reading them is a waste of time. I am convinced that the critics hide behind the anonymity of the computer screen to say things they would not say if they faced the other person. Sometimes we do that, too. This type of conflict is not healthy.

Not all criticism is hidden behind the screen as we have seen in recent campaigns and debates of those running for president. Personal attacks should have no place among those who would like to hold the highest office in the land. Communication is very powerful and it can hurt as well as heal when proper purposes and direction as God, in creation, intended for communication have been violated.

Perhaps even more devastating are those comments made behind the backs of those they criticize. This is gossip. Sadly, gossip is not foreign to Christians either.

Much can be said about gossip, but most of that will have to wait for another time. Here I want to indicate that gossip tends to focus on another person rather than the issue. Perhaps our apparent inability to separate the issue from the person is why we do not confront directly. We tend to identify ourselves with our positions on issues, and thus we feel personally attacked if someone attacks our issue. The result, of course, is defensiveness that becomes a real barrier to healthy communication. Let's carry this a step further: we may be afraid to confront because we cannot separate the issue from the person. Then our disagreement becomes a complaint that we voice to others rather than the person we need to confront. And that is gossip. Somehow we do not see conflict as having value. Many of my students report that they hate conflict but also that they do indeed gossip.

Notice that giving negative criticism is one of the *easiest* things to do. It is easier to attack than to defend. It is a way of keeping one's distance. If I can criticize something, then, of course, I don't have to support it. If I can criticize a group of people, I don't have to work with them. If I can speak negatively about a person's wrong lifestyle, for example, it becomes a way for me to stay away from that person and never help. If I can criticize from the outside, then I don't have to get to work on the inside.

The effects of this negative criticism on those being attacked may be much more serious than complainers realize. A government official can hardly function adequately if he must constantly defend himself against constant detractors. A businessperson who is criticized negatively may be pushed into an overly defensive position. A minister's effectiveness is weakened considerably if members of the congregation seek to pick apart every sermon. We all know of teachers who have simply quit the profession rather than put up with negative attacks.

Complaining becomes a lifestyle. Listen and you will hear certain people always complaining about something. Some appear to be angry throughout their lives. They are not attractive. They are not eagerly sought out by people. Of course some friends try to placate these complainers, but this goes on for only a while. Eventually the friends leave the complainers because trying to get them to see the positive side of life wears these friends out. Check to see how many close friends complainers seem to have.

It seems to me that purely negative complaining is unbiblical. Christ tells us that if we have difficulty with another person, we should go to that person *in love* to try to solve that problem. [Matthew 18](#) is very clear on this. Complaining provides little insight.

So how should we respond? We may *not* close our eyes to evil or keep quiet when we should speak out against wrongdoing. But our criticism must be *constructive*. Try the following suggestions.

1. We need to talk face-to-face with the person with whom we think we have a disagreement. At first, it may seem hard to do, but if we focus on the issue rather than the person, it gets much easier. In large organizations, email is the easiest way to communicate, but sometimes it is not the best way. It is not a good way to solve problems. The same can be said for texting. Face-to-face interpersonal communication is the richest form of communication. It allows us the give-and-take of working through an issue without attacking the person. We can see very quickly if the other person is becoming defensive and then we can assure the other that this is not a personal attack.
2. Ask questions for further information; not questions which accuse. It may very well be that our supposed disagreement is based on false information. Asking non-accusatory questions allows us to focus more clearly on the issue rather than the person.
3. Communicating face-to-face will kill gossip.
4. Tell the other person what you appreciate about his or her work. We will recognize the gifts of the person as well as the challenges the particular issue presents. That then moves one toward making constructive suggestions toward solving the problem.
5. When you do need to say something negative, go ahead; but never give only negative criticism. Follow up with constructive, positive help.

Please do not look to the presidential campaigns or talk radio for any help in resolving conflict. They thrive on conflict, but that conflict builds no one up. Look instead to [Ephesians 4:29](#): “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, *but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs*, that it may benefit those who listen.”¹ Speak the truth in love ([Eph. 4:15](#))

Footnotes

1. Emphasis mine ↩