

On Handling Disagreements

Among the works of the flesh are strife, outbursts of anger, dissensions and divisions (Gal 5:20). There seems to be a great deal of this in the world, and that should not surprise us. But there also seems to be much of this among those claiming to follow Christ. As in other matters, Christians have long wrestled with being too influenced by the world and conforming to the attitudes and practices of the age (cf. Rom 12:1-2). Our lights may become dim because we partake of the darkness far more than we ought.

For example, we see this on social media, which is, sadly, a toxic environment if we let ourselves get lost in its enticement. But this is bigger than social media. Disagreements quickly become divisive and anger-inducing, so the insults and derogatory insinuations begin. It's difficult, it seems, to find discussions over disagreements that are filled with grace, giving the benefit of any doubt, or believing the best intentions in others.

I've been guilty. I know it's hard to read something and get the full sense of what someone intends. We read what others say and hear it in our own inner voice, emphasize it as we think, and may well miss the point of what was meant. We don't want to be people who go out of our way to swerve around the point being made and miss it entirely!

We all make judgments about what others mean and how they mean it. We all have those "bad days" where we might quickly snap at others because we take something the wrong way, though they may have intended something different. It is in those times I have to remind myself that "this" is not the best time for me to say anything, for "a fool's anger is known at once" (Prov 12:16). It's hard to let an insult go and not respond in kind — or even respond at all (cf. Prov 26:4-5). Yet that kind of self control is exactly what we need, and it fits the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-24).

The anger known "at once" part should stand out to us. People might spend hours writing and rewriting, studying and working through an issue, carefully wording what they want to say only to be rebuffed in an instant by someone who was immediately triggered — someone who did not study and gave little thought before firing back. Social media platforms, especially, do not distinguish. In a moment we can make our thoughts known, for good or ill, and we must beware that we don't become the fool about whom Proverbs warns.

We need to remember that our words, written or spoken, have power to encourage or discourage. We can lift up or pull down. We can help or hurt. I know that not everything posted online or said in person is great, and sometimes we need another who can provide a gentle rebuke. May I offer some suggestions when thinking about entering a conversation with potential disagreement?

1. Give the benefit of the doubt, especially if something is said that can be taken in different ways. Assume the best first. Assume that the other means well and intends to do something beneficial to others. Be gracious and kind upfront. This alone can ward off misunderstandings and potential divisions.

2. If you disagree, sometimes (maybe most of the time) it's okay to just move on. We make judgments about the importance of the disagreement, but we don't need to comment on everything we may disagree with. We'd be most miserable if we did that, and it's not healthy mentally to spend all day arguing and responding instantly to heated fusses. Let us ask whether we are portraying the works of the flesh or the fruit of the Spirit. Let us seek to do what is edifying for others.

3. If we feel the need to respond in disagreement (making sure this is really necessary), think about going to someone privately first to ask about needed clarifications. I have been blessed by several who have done this with me, and this allowed me to make changes, clarify, and sometimes delete before it become a mess in the public arena. Think about how Priscilla and Aquila handled the situation with Apollos in Acts 18:24-28 when they took him aside to explain the way of God more accurately.

4. Watch the words because words are indeed meaningful. Insults and evil surmising do not fit the child of God. We expect this from the world. It ought not be so among us. We are family, not enemies.

5. The world is watching. They will see how we treat one another whether in person or on social media. They will know whether what we profess is real and meaningful to us. They will see whether we love one another or bicker so much that we despise each other. (See John 13:34-35 and 17:20-21 to see how important this is.)

"Bless and do not curse." By how we engage others, we can show the works of the flesh or the fruit of the Spirit. This matters eternally.

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