

## **Humility, Grace Among Tools for Resolving Conflicts**

*By Trisha Taylor*

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In March, I attended a workshop made up of Baptist denominational leaders and secular professionals. During lunch, as we exchanged pleasantries and unwrapped our plastic tableware, one of the participants, a young and thoroughly secular financial analyst, raised her fork and asked, "So, why are church people always fighting?"

As you can imagine, we were deeply uncomfortable. She seemed oblivious to the provocative nature of her question. Seated around the table were a half-dozen Southern Baptist ministers representing at least as many points of view. We were fundamentalist and moderate, male and female, traditional and emergent. Her sincere but offhanded question hung in the air.

The easy answer to her question would go something like this: "We fight because there are people who don't agree with us, who need to be set straight. We who are right must defend the truth against those who are wrong. Besides, we're not really fighting; we're just correcting the error in our midst."

There is a more complex answer, though. We fight when we lack the emotional maturity to navigate the anxiety that our differences create in us. We may lack the ability to tolerate and appreciate the ways that others differ from us. We may lack the ability to express calmly and firmly what we believe in the face of opposition. We may lack empathy, the capacity to see something from someone else's point of view. We may lack the maturity to stay lovingly connected to a person with whom we disagree.

When I was a teenager with strongly held opinions and typical teenaged arrogance, my parents taught me to preface my passionately delivered speeches with the phrases, "In my opinion . . ." or "I could be wrong, but . . ." or "The way I see it . . ." At the time, I thought their requirement that was unreasonable. After all, I knew I wasn't wrong and I didn't think there was another reasonable way to see things. But this way of communicating gradually changed my heart, as I'm sure my parents hoped it would, and I realized that humility—an important Christian virtue, after all—means entertaining the possibility that my opinion could be incomplete or uninformed or even (gulp) wrong.

But what if I know for a fact that I'm not wrong? Humility still demands that I take some time to listen—really listen—to the person with whom I disagree, listening for her point of view, listening for her feelings, listening to her heart. Of course, most of the time, I lack the maturity to really listen to understand another person. Instead, I listen impatiently, waiting for my turn to refute what I am hearing. Or, I listen to gather ammunition to use against my opponent.

But listening to another person is a gift of grace. I believe that it is the truest practice of the second commandment—that we love our neighbor as ourselves. After all, I already know what I think, what I feel, what I want. To love my neighbor means that I am willing to spend time and energy exploring what he thinks, what he feels, what he wants. Defensiveness gives way to empathy, a practical expression of love.

We may fear that empathy will make us weak, that we will lose the resolve to be assertive. Actually, once we have listened well, we have earned the right to express our own opinions. Paul reminded us to “speak the truth in love” and once we have nailed down the “love” part, we are free to speak the truth as we see it. Of course, we have deeply held convictions as well as personal preferences and we must learn to assertively communicate our opinions as part of a healthy approach to conflict.

As we express our own point of view, we remember that it is just that: our own point of view. So we may say, “I see that differently. What I think is . . .” or “May I tell you how I see this?” We may even concede part of the argument by saying, “I agree with this part of what you are saying. Where I differ is . . .” We may even say, “I believe that the Bible teaches . . .” or “I believe that this is God’s will,” but we are careful never to use our spiritual convictions, however deeply held, to coerce others into doing things our way.

So, I thought about all of this as I left the lunch meeting in March and I developed a little fantasy that makes me smile. In my mind, I replay the scene. All of us, denominational and secular leaders, are sitting down to lunch when the woman, the financial analyst, asks thoughtfully, “So, why are church people so loving?” Well, I can dream, can’t I?

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