

Healthy Fighting or How to Disagree Constructively

By Dr. Dan Doriani

Scripture has several concepts that are essential instruction to constructive engagement when people disagree. First, no one knows everything. So, we learn when we listen to others. Second, disagreement is not a personal affront. It is the inevitable result of our limited knowledge, perspectives, experience, and sinful nature. Therefore, we should be open to correction and for healthy disagreement. James 1:19 says “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” Paul’s description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 also applies to communication. Because “love is patient,” it lets people finish their thoughts. It does not “boast;” it sets aside ego. Love does not “insist on its own way” – or proposals. It “rejoices with the truth” so it seeks the truth. Since love “bears all things... hopes all things,” it overlooks minor mistakes and takes the words of others in the best way. All of this applies to “healthy fighting.”

Learning from Jesus’ Disputes

In Matthew 12:1-8, we see Pharisees incorrectly but sincerely objecting to Jesus’ actions when they believe them to be immoral. Consider Matthew 12:1-8 and the way it informs healthy disagreement.

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.”

The Pharisees believed 1) that Jesus’ disciples were harvesting; 2) that it is sinful to harvest on the Sabbath; 3) that Jesus was responsible for the disciples’ behavior. Notice how Jesus replied fully, patiently, and candidly to a false accusation. He showed why they were wrong, using reasoning they could follow, if they were willing, in 12:3-8:

He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

Jesus fully answers the Pharisees’ objection because they truly believed his disciples broke God’s law. That leads to Principle 1: Identify the other party’s legitimate concerns and respond to them, even if you believe – as Jesus did – that they apply those concerns incorrectly.

Principle 2: Listen carefully, even if you are sure the other party is wrong, even if you have more knowledge or authority.

This doesn’t mean we’re not obligated to answer questions that frame a question incorrectly. It is good to say, “You’re raising an important issue, but there is another way to look at it.” Jesus often declined to answer questions; he redirected people to the best way to consider an issue (John 9:1-3, Matthew 15:1-6, 20:20-21).

Working on Problems Together

If a problem or strategic issue lands on the agenda of a leadership team, it's probably weighty or complicated. If there was a simple solution, the team wouldn't need to discuss it. Complex, long-standing problems resist easy resolution. Therefore, they engender disagreements, which healthy teams do not fear. We expect debate and make the most of it. Big discussions tend to have four elements:

Clarification -> Ideation -> Development -> Implementation

To *clarify* is to define the nature of the problem. To *ideate* is to formulate several possible strategies or solutions, without assessing them at once. To *develop a plan* a team must identify the best option, create a team, and assemble resources. Finally, the team implements the plan: They have the needed authority, resources and support. There is room to disagree in each phase.

A healthy team welcomes debate, even disagreement. They know it is *dangerous*, not helpful or productive, when everyone agrees or pretends to agree. The team is thankful, not defensive, during debates, even if people say, "You are wrong!" Proverbs 9:7-9 says:

7) *Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury.*

8) *Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you.*

9) *Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.*

Three times, the passage says scoffers and the wicked listen to no one. But the righteous love correction and instruction and grow through it. The wise say "God knows all things." They hold him in awe and listen to his agents. Fools are proud and imagine "I know everything" (Prov. 1:1-17, 12:15, 26:12).

Proverbs 9 leads to more principles for healthy disagreement:

Principle 3: If we hope for healthy disagreement, we must be open to correction.

Principle 4: Focus on the problem at hand. We attack problems, not people. An idea may be foolish but we never call people fools. We expect each other to try to grow in wisdom.

Principle 5: In healthy conflict, we aim to edify each other. Proverbs assumes correction is an act of love – as it should be. Ideally, we trust each other's motives. We all want to be wiser. Healthy disagreement is the fruit of trust. It also increases trust when we handle our differences responsibly. If the first six people on a team rapidly agree on every major point, the seventh may need to act as if the team has succumbed to collective insanity and attack every point that has a whiff of weakness. The goal isn't endless discussion. We must shift from reflection to action, but we also question a rapidly-formed consensus, if only to identify and shore up weak spots.

Principles for Healthy Disagreement

1. **Healthy teams hear all ideas**, regardless of the rank of the speaker, as we clarify, ideate, develop, and implement plans. When brainstorming, we listen and entertain every serious idea.
2. **Healthy teams focus on the problem at hand**. We revisit old mistakes only if they have direct bearing on a discussion.
3. **Healthy teams attack problems, not people**. A proposal may be foolish but we never call people fools. Healthy conflict promotes the group's common interests and goals. They don't litigate the status of members in the group. They think "If Lisa is in the room, she belongs in the room."
4. **Healthy conflict aims for trust among group members**. Since truth is the coin of the realm in relationships, members should be clear about their goals and agendas, so everyone knows why they take a debated position.
5. **Healthy conflict is group activity**. Every back-channel conversation seeks to improve group processes or functions. Teams don't form cabals that try to control outcomes.

Assumptions

- ❖ No one knows everything. All have blind spots, preferences.
- ❖ We are all looking for the best outcome.
- ❖ Abundance of counselors give wisdom.
- ❖ All for the good of the church.