

THE
ART OF
DISAGREEING

HOW TO
KEEP CALM
AND STAY
FRIENDS
IN HARD
CONVERSATIONS

GAVIN
ORTLUND

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The Art of Disagreeing
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Published by:
The Good Book Company



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Published in association with the literacy agency of Wolgemuth & Wilson.

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Cover design by Faceout Studio | Design and art direction by André Parker

ISBN: 9781802541403 | JOB-007978 | Printed in Turkey

For Abigail

The universe would be incomplete without her.

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INTRODUCTION

Why Disagreement Is Difficult

I read recently that political disagreements are making Thanksgiving dinners shorter.¹ When those in attendance supported different political parties, the meals were 30 to 50 minutes briefer.² What a poignant reflection on modern society. We can't even be around each other as much!

Perhaps there are other factors involved in our shrinking Thanksgiving meals. Even so, I suspect most of us recognize that in the modern world, we are losing the ability to disagree well. Whether it's about politics or religion or the culture wars or more trivial things, it's hard to deny the temperature has dramatically risen.

1 I use this illustration at the risk of offending my non-American readers right out of the gate—just substitute another holiday meal to relate better to the point!

2 M. Keith Chen and Ryne Rohla, “The Effect of Partisanship and Political Advertising on Close Family Ties,” www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aag1433?mod=article_inline (accessed May 29, 2024). Thanks to Sam Allberry for drawing my attention to this article.

Increasingly the assumption seems to be that people on the other side are not simply wrong but *evil*. Or, at the very least, we feel that we must “win” on each point of disagreement, lest evil prevail. Social media and cable news are polarizing us, and it’s not good.

Many of us can probably relate to this phenomenon at a personal level. We have lost friendships because of heated disagreements. We have coworkers we steer clear of in the parking lot or fellow church members we avoid after the service. We have family members with whom we cannot speak about certain subjects—or perhaps we cannot speak to them at all.

If that is you, this book is not here to scold or inhibit you. I hope that by the time you finish it, you will feel empowered and hopeful—like you have been given “a second wind” for how to approach disagreements in your life. I hope it reduces guilt and pressure, and gives you a sense of freedom and confidence to move forward.

The Art of Healthy Disagreement

The first step is to recognize that disagreement *itself* is not the problem.

Years ago I recall the late pastor and author Tim Keller interacting with critical responses to one of his books. Instead of noting areas of disagreement, he had a section in his responses called “intriguing.”³ What a wonderful way to categorize our disagreements!

3 Timothy Keller, *Shaped by the Gospel: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Zondervan, 2016), p. 94-98.

Without disagreement, life would be boring. Disagreement is where we discover opportunities for learning, freshness, new beginnings. Someone once said that you get married for your similarities, but you stay married for your differences.

The Inklings (the literary group to which C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien belonged) often had disagreements. According to George Watson, Lewis *valued* them—so much so that he prolonged them:

*“He did not even share the views of friends like Tolkien in matters concerning literature or religion, or not always ... but then agreement would have spoiled the game, and Lewis in debate tried to keep disagreement going for as long as he reasonably could, and sometimes longer. If I were ever to be asked what I learned from him, that would be my reply: the art of disagreement.”*⁴

I like that little line: “agreement would have spoiled the game.” I picture Lewis there at the pub. Discussion has revealed a deeper difference of literary taste or judgment. Tolkien or Dyson won’t budge. The dialogue is joyfully elevated. Lewis presses in deeper, a twinkle in his eye. The game is on!

Handled well, our disagreements can be both enjoyable and productive. They can deepen our relationships rather than destroy them—and can deepen us along the way.

4 George Watson, “The Art of Disagreement: C.S. Lewis (1898-1963),” *The Hudson Review* 48.2 (1995), p. 239.

The problem is that today, both in the broader culture and in the church, we are *not* handling disagreement well.

Part of the reason is surely the climate of increased outrage we inhabit. Cancel culture is everywhere. On social media, for example, the vices that make for unhealthy disagreement are not only tolerated but *rewarded*. Whether we realize it or not, the algorithms are playing off of envy, anger, and narcissism. Even those who steer clear of social media live in a world that is increasingly shaped by it.

But the problem goes deeper than the current climate. Disagreement is by its nature *always* challenging because doing it well requires a combination of different virtues.

Hedgehogs and Rhinos

In social psychology, there is a theory about two contrasting ways in which people deal with disagreement. Essentially, about half of human beings act like rhinoceroses: the other half, like hedgehogs. Rhinos are aggressive, charging when threatened. Hedgehogs are more defensive, using their prickles as a shield. One book puts it like this:

“Just as animals respond differently to attack, so people react differently when hurt and angry. There are two major patterns of behaviour, and ... it would appear that the population is split roughly fifty-fifty. Half of the population are like the rhino: when they are angry, they let you know it. The other half of

the population are like the hedgehog: when they feel angry, they hide their feelings.”⁵

Whether you adopt this exact framework or not, it draws attention to an important fact: when it comes to challenging conversations or relationships, we all have different temptations. So disagreement will challenge all of us in different ways.

If you are a rhino, healthy disagreement will be difficult because it requires more restraint than you would naturally be inclined to show. You may have moments when you *feel* like “charging,” and it might even feel like the *right* thing to do—but you actually need to tap the brakes. (Often we realize this only afterwards, once the temperature has cooled!)

But if you’re a hedgehog, healthy disagreement will be difficult because it requires more boldness than you would naturally be inclined to show. You may have moments when you *feel* like hiding, but you actually need to embrace the vulnerability of leaning forward into the disagreement. Where you would normally pull back, you have to *speak up*. This can be scary! It rubs against our natural preference for harmonious relationships.

To make matters worse, hedgehogs and rhinos will often be tempted to look down on each other while ignoring their own weakness. The opposing flaws will be obvious to us, while our own will seem small or invisible. A rhino might look at a hedgehog and say, “Why doesn’t

5 Nicky and Sila Lee, *The Marriage Book: How to Build a Lasting Relationship* (Alpha International, 2000), p. 158.

he speak up more? I know he agrees, but he lacks the courage to say so!” Conversely, a hedgehog might look at a rhino and say, “Why is she so argumentative? She turns *everything* into a fight!” Both might be (partly) right. This is one way that outrage about disagreement can contribute to *further* disagreement and outrage, without us realizing it.

The truth is that we *all* have some work to do. Healthy disagreement will draw all of us beyond our natural strengths. It will require stretching into new (often uncomfortable) territory.

For this reason, the ability to engage in healthy disagreement is a good general test of maturity. If you want to see how much self-awareness someone has, just watch how they respond to a good old-fashioned disagreement.

But Why Is Disagreement So Annoying?

Many of us love the idea of healthy disagreement in principle. The trouble is that in the heat of the moment we tend to get agitated and either go into rhino-like attack mode or hedgehog-like retreat mode. Why is disagreement so difficult, so *annoying*? Why does it create such an unpleasant feeling of cognitive dissonance?

Jonathan Haidt has written a fantastic book that helps us understand our disagreements. One of his insights is that we are, by nature, wired to be intensely loyal to a tribe: “People are *groupish*. We love to join teams, clubs,

leagues, and fraternities.”⁶ Furthermore, he points out that most of our disagreements actually stem from gut intuition, not rational reflection.

The result of this is that human psychology is not well suited to conduct disagreement in a calm, rational, dispassionate way. Rather, we are profoundly shaped by social and emotional factors. We will often *feel* disagreements as a kind of threat to our broader identity. They trigger reactions deep down inside us, many of which we may not even be aware of.

For example, have you ever been in disagreement and found yourself having a thought like this: “Why in the world do they think *that*? What is *wrong* with them?!”

There is a reason why that feeling arises. It’s part of your psychology. That feeling exists for a purpose. It’s not all bad.

But we have to be reflective about what is going on inside us during our disagreements. This can help us to approach disagreements more carefully and more proactively.

And learning to have healthier disagreement is crucial because the stakes are very high.

Unhealthy Disagreement Discredits the Gospel

Western culture is increasingly polarized and polarizing, and if this trend doesn’t stop or at least slow down, the consequences may be severe. Some

6 Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Vintage, 2012), p. 221.

even warn that in the United States our disagreements are growing so extreme that secession is a viable possibility.⁷ More personally, most of us can recognize the role that unhealthy disagreement has played in our relationships—sometimes with the people who are closest to us.

The need to learn the art of disagreeing well is an especially poignant challenge for those of us who are followers of Christ, because failure in this area often discredits our witness to the gospel. In John 13, Jesus taught that it is our *love* (not our gifts or resources) that will ultimately gain the notice of the world: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Four chapters later, in his famous high-priestly prayer, he prayed for our unity with a view to how this impacts the surrounding world: “... that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (17:21).

The simple lesson is this: how we Christians treat each other matters. The world is watching. When we conduct disagreements without love and without appreciation of our broader unity, we become a hindrance to the gospel. We put a stumbling block before the watching world. That is the challenge. Yet, at the very same time, our disagreements present us with an opportunity. If we can learn how to love each other amid our differences, our very disagreements can commend the reality of Christ to those around us.

⁷ David French, *Divided We Fall: America's Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation* (St. Martins, 2020).

The stakes really are that high. How we disagree affects eternal souls. No wonder that Paul addressed a disagreement among early Christians that had led to a strained relationship by urging the two people involved to “agree in the Lord” (Philippians 4:2). To how many Christians today would Paul have to give the same appeal?

I remember hearing about a football team in which the wide receivers and the running backs were having a disagreement. The wide receivers thought the team were running the ball too much. The running backs thought they were passing too much. The disagreement turned into rivalry, then pranks, and then sabotaging one another. Trust fell apart, and the team lost games as a result.

This is a tragic illustration of what too often happens in the church. When our disagreements go sour, it impedes our larger mission. The gospel itself is affected. I especially grieve at the testimonies I hear from younger people of how lovelessness in the church has complicated their perception of Christianity.

Imagine a better scenario. Picture a large family gathered around the table at Thanksgiving. The meal is over. Chairs are pushed back, and conversation naturally turns to a topic of deep-seated disagreement. Yet the discussion proceeds without painful anxiety or personal acrimony. Points are argued vigorously but without shouting or disdain. There is a feeling of freedom—even at times a kind of joy. When all is said and done, the disagreements remain—but so do the friendships.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to be a part of more conversations like this? Wouldn't our world be a better place if we could do this better? How do we get there?

The Plan and a Model

In the first two chapters of this book, we consider kindness and courage. These two virtues lay a foundation for healthy disagreement. Both are needed: kindness without courage is too flimsy; courage without kindness is too brash. Only by *combining* courage and kindness can we arrive at healthy disagreement.

Then we get more practical. Chapter 3 covers listening: the more receptive part of disagreement. Chapter 4 covers persuasion: the more proactive part of disagreement. My hope is that these chapters provide you with an array of strategies for how difficult conversations can actually move forward—for how to make real progress when you feel stuck in a disagreement.

Obviously there is much else to say. But my hope is that this little book will help healthy disagreement feel a little less intimidating for you—a little more intelligible, more manageable. I hope you finish it feeling “I can do this! This can work.”

Two suggestions as you read: first, think right now of a disagreement that you are currently navigating in your life. As you work through the following chapters, keep bearing it in mind and see what you can learn to approach that situation better. Second, remember to focus more on what *you* can learn and not what *others*

need to learn. (Disregarding this is a temptation for all of us!)

Here's a final image before we dive in. One of my favorite stories in Scripture is the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7. I don't know why, but the courage of martyrs often makes me emotional. I can hardly talk about them without getting choked up. More on that in chapter 2.

Stephen provides us with a model of courage. He stands his ground against an angry mob. He is blunt in his speech: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51). Now, let's be clear: these bracing words are not a model for everyday, run-of-the-mill conversations! Stephen was facing an exceptionally hostile crowd, and the very gospel was at stake. Yet Stephen's unwillingness to back down is inspiring. To disagree well, we must be willing to stand our ground as well—even if it costs us our lives.

At the same time, Stephen is not retaliatory or vindictive. He does not return stone for stone. Note his final words: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:60). These words provide a window into Stephen's heart. *Even while being murdered*, he has no malice. He stands his ground against those attacking him, but he also prays for them. Though it's an extreme example, this gives us a model for how to approach disagreements in our lives. We, too, are called to love and pray for our fiercest enemies.

How does Stephen do this? I believe the answer is that he keeps his eyes on Jesus: "He, full of the Holy Spirit,

gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (v 55).

Just imagine it! Stephen is surrounded by a raging, vicious mob. Stones are being hurled at him. But Stephen is not looking at the stones. He lifts his gaze beyond his circumstances to see Christ in his heavenly glory.

Friends, this is our great need as well. We cannot manufacture within ourselves the blend of virtues needed for healthy disagreement. But when we look to Jesus, his kindness and courage flow into us, enabling us to speak the truth courageously but to do so with love in our hearts.

Whatever kinds of disagreements you are facing, I pray this book would ultimately direct you to Christ. There is nothing so beautiful as the character of Jesus. He is the most courageous person who ever lived, as well as the most compassionate. To encounter him is enthralling. He pours his love and grace into our hearts, empowering us to face seemingly impossible situations.

Jesus, teach us how to disagree with your courage and your compassion flowing through our hearts!

Discussion Questions

1. Is disagreement getting worse in modern society?
If so, what do you think is causing that?
2. Have you ever witnessed disagreement to be destructive in your life or the life of someone you know? What was the result?
3. In your own experience, what has made the difference between productive disagreements and unhealthy disagreements?