

CHARITABLE DISAGREEMENT IN A POLARIZED WORLD

10 Principles for Loving Engagement

Josh Nisley teaches literature and Composition I & II at Faith Builders Christian School and the Training Institute, respectively. In this article, Josh calls Christians to be salt and light, and to speak with truth and grace in places where the default tends toward outrage, pride, and ridicule. Hope and love build relationships, and in that space of relationship with others, we partner with God in His beautiful, miraculous work of reconciling the world to Himself.

We are living in a time of deep and often rancorous disagreement. At times, our only options seem to be to pick a side and wade in with both rhetorical fists swinging or to lament the hopelessness of the situation and disengage entirely.

Yet, neither of these responses are appropriate for Christians called to be ministers of reconciliation. Joining the fray will inevitably put us at odds with neighbors we are commanded to love. And while apathetic disengagement could feel like the most viable alternative, it misses the insights afforded by healthy debate. Disagreement itself is not a bad thing; in fact, we need to disagree and be disagreed with in order to gain a true perspective of reality.

In what follows, I suggest ten rules for charitable disagreement—principles and practices to keep healthy disagreement grounded in love.

1. Begin in hopeful trust. Assume the good faith of the other person until proven otherwise.

One of the casualties of our polarized world is trust. We find it increasingly difficult to believe in the good intentions of someone who disagrees with us.

Christians, however, are called to love, and love is the antithesis of suspicion and cynicism. Love “believes all things, hopes all things” (1 Cor. 13:7 ESV). That is, love hopes in the sincerity and good-heartedness of the one who disagrees with us. Love hopes all things,

and hope, as Alan Jacobs writes, “is the virtue by means of which suspicion can be overcome.”¹

Avoid statements like these:

- *You’re just saying that because you’re...*
- *I know your type. You probably believe...*
- *Only a _____ person could believe something like that.*

Charitable hope is ground zero for meaningful conversation. With hope rather than suspicion as the default setting, you not only open yourself to new ideas and perspectives; you open the possibility for relationship.

2. Seek true understanding by summarizing ideas and asking for clarification.

Nobody likes to be misunderstood, or worse, to have their words twisted to mean something they don’t believe. Our conversations should model the conversation of Christ—to seek, in the words of St. Francis, “not so much to be understood as to understand.”

A great way to understand the perspective of someone who disagrees with you is to summarize their ideas in your own words, making sure your summary represents their argument in the best possible light. If possible, have them agree with your summary before you respond to it. Although it’s tempting to mischaracterize the argument in order to make it easier to defeat, doing so disrespects the person and damages your credibility.

Here are templates for seeking understanding:

- *So what you’re saying is... Is that correct?*
- *Okay, as I’m understanding you, you believe that...*
- *When you say... what do you mean?*

Putting ideas into our own words is uncomfortable because it requires that we momentarily put aside our perspective and what we have to say, but it goes a long way in fostering healthy, productive debates. Perhaps counterintuitively, it also makes us more persuasive because it signals our commitment to the issue itself, not just to being right.

3. Respond to ideas, not labels. Don’t reject ideas simply because you associate them with certain movements or groups of people.

Marxism, Christian nationalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, CRT, anti-racism, fake news, conspiracy theory, cancel culture, wokeism: public discourse is full of labels, shibboleths, and buzzwords, many of which are weaponized and used to dismiss the concerns of those who see the world differently than us. Concerned about racism, poverty, and issues of justice? You’re probably a woke, CRT-loving Marxist. Concerned about the breakdown of the family and the degradation of traditional values? You’re probably a racist white supremacist who secretly wants a Christian theocracy.

In the context of such volatile reactions, it’s always easier to label and dismiss a person than it is to take the time to understand their concerns. The way of charity calls us to something better. Rather than using labels to categorize

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and dismiss, try to understand and respond to the ideas at the heart of an issue. Define terms. Unpack ideas. As much as possible, use fresh language that isn't freighted with all the negative connotations of buzzwords and jargon.

4. Acknowledge and identify common ground, shared goals, and mutual concerns.

When we take the time to understand an idea and the person behind it, we will likely find that we share more ground than we initially thought. It is increasingly difficult to imagine the possibility of common ground because we live in a culture that thinks of argument primarily as war—a zero-sum, take-no-prisoners battle for power. Followers of Christ, however, should be able to imagine argument in terms other than war. Argument grounded in love for God and neighbor can be constructive and productive.

Here are templates to acknowledge points of agreement and identify common ground.

- *I can see your point that...*
- *I agree with you that we should be concerned about...*
- *I sympathize with your experience...*
- *I understand that...*
- *X is a valid concern.*

In addition to demonstrating charity, this approach makes you more persuasive because it disarms your opponent's natural resistance to your words. I am always compelled to take an idea seriously if I know the person respects my perspective and shares my concerns. On the other hand, if I get the sense that I'm being ridiculed, I find myself much quicker to go on the defensive. We simply don't find condescension and condemnation persuasive.

5. Don't dismiss the entirety of a person's work because you disagree with part of it.

It's tempting to reject everything a person says when you disagree with one piece of it. Recognize that someone's take on one issue doesn't necessarily determine the validity of their other ideas. Also recognize that a person's ideas change over time. What they published 20 years ago might not be an accurate representation of their beliefs today.

6. Choose your battles carefully.

Be selective and wise about the conversations you engage.

We live in a culture that feeds on controversy. News and social media platforms are constantly competing for and profiting from our attention. It is in their best interests to keep us hooked on a never-ending cycle of outrage and controversy.

Before engaging in the latest dispute with your "hot take," ask yourself:

- *Is the emotional energy I am about to*

expend worth it?

- *What good could come out of this?*
- *Why do I want to respond? Am I doing it to serve the interest of others? Or am I doing it simply to "stir the pot" or to signal my virtue?*
- *Do I have the authority, credibility, or character to speak to the issue?*

As a rule of thumb, we probably shouldn't be taking strong positions on an issue if we aren't working to address it in our daily life, immediate context, or neighborhood.

7. Prioritize personal interactions over public ones, face-to-face over virtual.

The relative anonymity of online interactions encourages us to say things to people we would never dream of saying to their face (if we'd talk to them in the first place). Even when we know the person in real life, we feel emboldened online because we are responding to a disembodied idea of the person, separated by distance, time, and the nuances of vocal inflections and body language. The rules of common courtesy that govern real-world interactions get lost in the virtual world of snarky memes and push-button reactions.

If you find yourself in a heated public exchange, consider inviting the person to continue the conversation privately through direct messaging or a phone call. Better yet, go out for coffee if you live in the same area. Taking the conversation offline not only lowers the stakes but demonstrates that you truly care about the issue and the person behind it.

8. "Give it five minutes."

This gem from Alan Jacobs applies particularly to online platforms, which reward the snarky retort, the scathing comeback. We are especially quick to enter what Jacobs calls "Refutation Mode"² when someone threatens our deeply-held beliefs. We feel a sudden stirring in our stomach, an uptick in our heart rate, and a burning need to drop a payload of truth bombs into the conversation. Righteous indignation, we call it.

Although we like to legitimize our anger as "righteous passion" or "holy zeal" (perhaps even "prophetic"), the Bible gives very little room for the expression of anger, righteous or unrighteous. On the contrary, James admonishes us to "be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" precisely because "the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:19-20).

The Notes app on my phone is home to several snark-riddled takedowns that never made it online because I decided to wait a bit between writing and publishing. I have never regretted not posting something I wrote in the heat of a moment. I can't say the same for other words I have posted.

9. Don't answer a fool according to his folly.

The book of Proverbs, from which this rule is taken, has a lot to say about arguing with fools.

Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. (Prov. 26:4)

If a wise man has an argument with a fool, the fool only rages and laughs, and there is no quiet. (Prov. 29:9)

Some conversations are simply not worth having. Be careful not to get drawn into worthless arguments with someone who has no interest in truth and wisdom. Don't be baited by inflammatory comments whose sole purpose is to provoke. Ask yourself: Is this conversation worth having? If it is, both you and your conversation partner will be edified, and you will take the time to define terms and clarify ideas.

When we engage the arguments of fools, we usually end up accepting their terms and, in the end, becoming like them: raging, laughing, and noisy.

10. Unplug from "outrage culture."

If we're honest, most of us like feeling indignant at times. Outrage boils the blood and gives us that sweet sense of moral superiority.

Vicarious outrage is also highly profitable. It is the financial engine of talk radio, much of the 24-hour news cycle, and countless internet commentators, bloggers, and podcasters.

Outrage culture is corrosive to the soul because it feeds on our desire to humiliate our cultural enemies. The Bible calls it scoffing and frequently associates it with pride, ignorance, and foolishness (Prov. 21:24, Prov. 1:22, Prov. 14:6).

Rooted as it is in pride, outrage-as-entertainment is contrary to charitable disagreement. Whenever we laugh along with professional scoffers, vicariously enjoying their smug ridicule and savoring their rhetorical assaults, we identify ourselves with them and start becoming like them. As Jeffrey Bilbro reminds us in his recent book on engaging the news, "What we attend to determines to whom we belong."³

Conclusion

Charitable disagreement is based on the premise that knowledge and love are inseparable. Paul makes the audacious claim in 1 Corinthians 13 that we are nothing without love, even if we have "prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge" (1 Cor. 13:2). Elsewhere in Scripture, he admonishes us to "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15) and to let our "speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt" (Col. 4:6). This connection between truth and love is essential. Love without truth isn't love. Truth without love isn't truth.

As followers of Jesus, our conversations should embody both. If you win the argument but fail to love the person, you have lost far more than just the argument.

Ultimately, charity speaks out of confidence in future reality. We can risk loving our enemies—even our ideological enemies—because we know that truth will prevail in the end. Our knowledge now is only a partial knowledge, a seeing "through a glass, darkly" that we hold to in anticipation of a perfect knowledge. We will never lose by seeking to understand and

engaging in love because our hope is not ultimately in proving someone else wrong but in the final salvation and victory of Jesus, who is truth and love incarnate. This is our assurance: not the certainty of impenetrable argument, still less making our enemies look like fools, but God in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19).



Josh Nisley

Resources

¹Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 89.

²Alan Jacobs, *How to Think: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Profile Books, 2017), 18-19.

³Jeffrey Bilbro, *Reading the Times: A Literary and Theological Inquiry into the News* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 119.

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