



The Complex Art of Christian Kindness: Building Bridges

By Skyline

GOSPEL FARE

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How can disciples remain kind without compromising truth? By asking sincere questions and turning toward others.

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Christian discipleship must navigate the seemingly dichotomous relationship between the commands always to be “kind” to one another ([Ephesians 4:32](#)), while simultaneously “standing” for Christ in all times, things, and places ([Mosiah 18:9](#)). When in situations of conflicting standards or beliefs this means implementing the social savvy of “disagreeing” without being “disagreeable” ([Oaks, 2014](#)). For successful conflict resolution, one or all of the parties must achieve a clarity of understanding. When

motivated by goodwill, questions act like bridges for differing perspectives to pass from conflict to understanding.

Christianity will always be “offensive” (Kierkegaard, [pg. 139](#)). With perfection unattainable in this life, a relationship with Christ’s Gospel will always expose needed improvements, “for all have sinned” ([Romans 3:23](#)). And, since the Christian endeavour is foundationally social ([John 15:12](#)), this is why personal righteous behavior can be offensive to others. Even when implementing strictly personal behavior, disciples simply trying to live and preach the Gospel will expose others’ shortcomings and likely their associated insecurities ([Matthew 5:11-13](#)). In addition, disciples will inevitably, continually encounter conflicting perspectives about what the “right” thing to do is—even amongst other believers ([Mark 9:33-34](#)).

For these and so many other reasons, disciples of Christ will unavoidably encounter conflict and require conflict management skills. When handled with love, such moments will distinguish the disciple of Christ, for “by this shall men know ye are my disciples” ([John 13:34-35](#)).

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With God as “no respecter of persons” this pattern of behaviour must permeate not only events and discussions surrounding organized religion, but all social interactions with all people ([Acts 10:34](#)). This is a high bar, which to effectively implement would require perfection: only Christ’s atonement reconciles mankind with God, and only His Gospel will unite the Earth in peace ([Ezra Taft Benson](#)). But in the meantime—especially considering all the conflict our discipleship is likely to stir up—how do we make and keep friends who do not agree with our beliefs or standards?

[The Skyline Institute](#)—hosts of [TheFamilyProclamation.org](#)—shares a playful yet impactful message as part of the *Peacemaking Series* regarding the powerful—though too frequently overlooked—functionality of sincere question asking, and its necessity when managing conflicts arising from differing perspectives:

Taking the time to understand someone else’s perspective doesn’t require compromising personal standards. Latter-day Saint missionaries live extremely

conservative lifestyles and solely devote their time to preaching the Gospel, yet they foster eternally impactful relationships with individuals living completely opposite lifestyles. *Preach My Gospel* teaches all modern missionaries that the first conversational step in building a relationship of trust is to “ask inspired questions” (*PMG*, Ch. 10). Conveniently, the manual includes principles and examples for both “*inspired*” and “*ineffective*” questions. Naturally, the manual then follows with as effective a step: to *listen*.

Sometimes the struggle with conflict management principles is that they come across as too obvious and thereby people ignore them (see *Intellectualization*). But the reality is that conflict management breaks down when the obvious steps of symbiotic relationships aren’t followed. John and Julie Gottman became leaders in the field of conflict management through studying the most microcosmic, intimate, and voluntary of interpersonal relationships: Marriage. The longevity and thoroughness of their findings have produced theories effective in their applicability to any relationship. Among their work, they illustrate the four most *destructive* habits in a relationship and their “*antidotes*.” Among the antidotes is the simple act of “*turning toward*” your partner. Additionally, they call a “bid” any action motivated by an internal intent to solicit a “positive connection” (*Gottman*). “Bids” are both initiated and received by both sides of the relationship. Successful, healthy relationships turn toward bids.

Christ admonishes His followers to both initiate and receive bids; “love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you ... pray for them which despitefully use ... and persecute you” (*Matthew 5:44*), persuade “by kindness ... and without guile” (*D&C 121:41-42*), and “forgive ... seventy times seven” (*Matthew 18:21-22*). Observe the commandment to “agree with thine adversary quickly, whilst thou art in the way with him” (*Matthew 5:25*). Notice the footnote for “Agree” clarifying an alternative Greek translation: “Quickly have kind thoughts for, or be well disposed toward.” This is a specific commandment from Christ to adopt a mentality when entering into conflicts—to foster goodwill toward the other party. Remember the example of Christ, one who was unimpeachably kind and “went about doing good” (*Acts 10:38*) yet unflinchingly committed to His commandments, covenants, and doctrine.

A structure for effective debate-oriented conversations systemized by mathematical psychologist Anatol Rapoport, “Rapoport’s Rules for Dialogue and Criticism” incorporates some of these principles taught by Christ. While true discipleship would

not require adopting this specific system, it serves as a valuable example of grounded behaviors incorporating the principles Christ taught. The system--originally published by Rapaport in *Fights, Games, and Debates* (1960)--as summarized by Daniel C. Dennett (pg. 25):

1. You should attempt to re-express your target's position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your target says, "Thanks, I wish I'd thought of putting it that way."
2. You should list any points of agreement (especially if they are not matters of general or widespread agreement).
3. You should mention anything you have learned from your target.
4. Only then are you permitted to say so much as a word of rebuttal or criticism.

Consider practicing this with someone while debating something trivial you don't understand, like a favorite food, recent movie, or hobby. Remember, we're not just practicing the system, we're practicing *the intent* to establish a positive connection and ask questions motivated by sincere curiosity.

Anecdotally, the majority of conflicts I've engaged in were rooted in *mis*-understanding; *missed* chances to create understanding. The majority of times there was no actual disagreement; we just needed to take the time to talk and listen--realizing we already agreed. In some cases the empathy of mutual understanding resolved the relationship issues. In my fiercest disagreements I could have prioritized the more important "weightier matters" both sides agreed on ([Matthew 23:23](#)). And, in situations where interests truly conflicted, the clarity established the foundation for decision-making that led to no regrets.

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Next time you find yourself spinning wheels in a conversation with both sides talking past each other, pause, [take a deep breath](#), and search for a question motivated by sincere curiosity and the desire for a positive connection. God will guide you in your efforts ([D&C 6:14-15](#)).

The Peacemaking Series

You can view the rest of the videos in the Peacemaking Series [HERE](#) on YouTube. Each month, an article is released to accompany each video of the series. To view the rest of the articles in this series and other articles written by The Skyline Institute published by Public Square Magazine, visit our author page [HERE](#). The Skyline Institute curates and performs original research to complement the prophetic teachings found in The Family Proclamation. You can view this research on [TheFamilyProclamation.org](https://thefamilypromclamation.org) and follow our accounts on social media.

About the author

Skyline

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