



Disagreement: Three Steps toward Relationship Conservation

By Skyline

DIALOGUE

September 26, 2025

What saves relationships so they can endure disputes? Separating issues, practicing repair, and meeting deeper needs renew peace.

This is the 9th article in our Peacemaking Series. To read the previous article: [You Don't Need to Feel Forgiving to Forgive](#)

Even small disputes can feel like an attack on the heart of a relationship. Words are twisted, intentions misread, trust frays, and bonds weaken under the weight of tension. Yet through gospel principles, even the most serious conflicts can be healed by separating the conflict from the person, practicing repair attempts, and addressing the deeper needs that fuel disagreement.

This article accompanies a short animated video from the *Peacemaking* series created by the Skyline Research Institute. In partnership with *Public Square Magazine*, each installment in the series pairs one of the short, playful videos with a companion essay, bringing together conflict resolution theory, research, and scriptural principles to provide practical tools for building stronger families, communities, and societies. None of this is to suggest that abusive cycles of domestic violence need to or should be repaired.

The accompanying video for this article portrays a symbolic “relationship heart” under attack by a crocodile, requiring expert conservation efforts to prevent its destruction. The image captures a simple truth: conflicts, if mishandled, threaten the very life of a relationship. Yet with deliberate and principled intervention, even serious disagreements can be transformed into opportunities for healing.

Conflict as a Multidimensional Phenomenon

Conflict does not emerge solely from sin. Competing desires, misunderstandings, cultural pressures, resource constraints, stress, and personality differences all play roles in producing tension. While the [spirit of contention is not of Christ](#), contention is an attitude toward conflict, not the conflict itself. So while sin may intensify these pressures, it does not account for their entirety. This recognition matters because it opens space for understanding conflict as a natural, even necessary, dimension of human relationships, rather than an aberration to be eliminated altogether.

Scholars distinguish between **task conflict** and **relationship conflict**. Learning to distinguish the two can help people in a conflict find the appropriate resolution. Task conflict refers to disagreements about ideas, procedures, or goals, while [relationship conflict involves perceived incompatibilities](#) in values, personalities, or status. Too often, task conflict is mistaken for a relationship conflict. Task conflict requires situational creative problem-solving. Relationship conflict requires significant effort and attention. Task conflict has sometimes been considered useful for stimulating innovation, but in practice, its benefits depend heavily on trust, communication, and context. When handled poorly, even task conflict can grow into a relationship conflict.

Repair Attempts as Relational Lifelines

The research of John Gottman underscores why some relationships survive conflict (task or relationship) while others disintegrate. According to Gottman, repair attempts consist of “any statement or action ... that **prevents negativity from escalating out of control.**” These may include humor, affection, a soft word, or an acknowledgment of responsibility. Crucially, repair attempts are less about eliminating conflict than about ensuring that conflict does not overwhelm the bond itself.

Gottman’s longitudinal studies reveal that successful relationships maintain **an approximate 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions.** This balance enables trust and affection to cushion moments of disagreement. Where positive expressions abound, repair attempts gain traction; where negativity dominates, repair attempts fail to take hold.

From this perspective, repairing a relationship requires deliberate cultivation of gratitude, appreciation, and forgiveness, ensuring that conflict remains a temporary disruption rather than a permanent rupture.

Separating the Person from the Problem

Theologically, separating the individual from the conflict echoes one popular translation of St. Augustine’s appeal to “**separate the sin from the sinner.**” But remember, conflict does not emerge solely from sin. This distinction affirms that identity transcends wrongdoing, allowing space for compassion alongside accountability.

President Spencer W. Kimball further suggested that sinful behavior springs from deeper “unmet needs.” Recognizing this perspective reframes conflict: even destructive words or actions may signal pain, fear, or longing that deserve attention rather than dismissal.

President Russell M. Nelson has similarly urged believers “to end conflicts in their lives,” pointing toward deliberate choices to interrupt cycles of contention. The Family: A Proclamation to the World reinforces this ethic by affirming that “successful marriages and families are

Bringing together conflict resolution theory, research, and scriptural principles to provide practical tools for building stronger families,

established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities.” Faith and repentance thus become relational as well as personal spiritual practices, enabling bonds to endure through moments of strain.

communities, and societies.

Scripture amplifies these teachings. “*A soft answer turneth away wrath*” (Proverbs 15:1) highlights the power of repair attempts. Christ’s counsel to “*agree with thine adversary quickly*” (Matthew 5:25) affirms the urgency of reconciliation. And the Lord’s commandment, “*be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine*” (Doctrine and Covenants 38:27), emphasizes the divine importance of unity.

Three Conservation Steps

The metaphor of “relationship conservation” highlights the need for careful, intentional action when bonds come under threat. These three steps help provide a structured approach.

Step One: Separate the Relationship from the Conflict

When disagreements emerge, the first task is to distinguish the conflict from the relationship itself. Emotions associated with the issue must not be allowed to contaminate perceptions of the person. In academic terms, task disagreement should not become relationship conflict. In theological terms, sin should not obscure divine worth.

Illustration: A sharp dispute over household chores does not mean affection has diminished; the issue is the task, not the person. “*Sorry, I don’t mean to attack you—I’m just talking about the dishes.*”

Step Two: Resuscitate the Relationship

Before addressing the substance of the disagreement, the bond itself requires renewal. Expressions of gratitude, acknowledgment of shared values, or gestures of affection resuscitate the relationship and create space for constructive dialogue. Gottman’s framework identifies such repair attempts as the decisive factor in whether conflict

erodes or strengthens the bond. Within Christian practice, such moments parallel repentance and forgiveness, where humility and grace interrupt cycles of accusation.

Illustration: In the middle of an argument, a sincere “thank you for how much you do” can revive goodwill and open the way for resolution. *“I know we’re both frustrated right now, but seriously, thank you for everything you’re doing—I feel grateful for you. You’re such a hard worker.”*

Step Three: Address the Deeper Need

Finally, conflict resolution requires attention to underlying needs. A sharp exchange over scheduling may conceal a longing for recognition; frustration about money may mask deeper fear or insecurity. Kimball’s insight that sin reflects unmet need underscores this principle: resolution demands not only solving the surface issue but also addressing the emotional or spiritual heart.

Illustration: Anger over finances may reflect a deeper desire for security; meeting that need restores peace beyond the numbers. *“I hear you about the finances. I can see why you feel that way. What can we do to help you feel more secure?”*

Conserving the Heart of Relationships

Conflict in relationships is inevitable; destruction is not. When conflict emerges, whether from sin, misunderstanding, or competing needs, deliberate conservation measures can preserve the relational heart. Separating the relationship from the conflict prevents task conflicts from turning into relationship conflicts. Resuscitating the relationship through repair attempts interrupts cycles of negativity and reinforces the relational bond. Addressing deeper needs transforms conflict into an avenue for growth and intimacy.

The crocodile may attack, but the heart can be saved; relationships need not fall victim to disagreement. Instead, they may emerge stronger—evidence that even in the face of contention, peace remains possible.

About the author

Skyline

Skyline Research proudly hosts TheFamilyProclamation.org, a website dedicated to advancing the principles of The Family: A Proclamation to the World.