

**OVERCOMING**

# **DIVISION**

**WITH  
DISCUSSION**

# SUBTRACTION BY DIVISION

It was Jesus who acknowledged that “A house divided cannot stand”. It was in Jesus where unity is found. So why do so many churches struggle with division?

We live in divisive times. Entire industries are founded and kept afloat on the premise that people love to take sides. To win, to somehow assert our superiority over another gives us a sense of worth and accomplishment. God knows that’s a lie, but we keep buying it.

As the fabric of society shifts like a sheet slipping from the edge of a poorly made bed, we find our relationships, our institutions, and our churches tumbling to the ground in unkempt heaps.

As division streams into the church from the various tributaries - a 24-hour news cycle, partisan politics, and toxic social media interactions - church members become flooded with competing ideals leaving them gasping for breath, trying to stay afloat in a sea of contention.

And over so swiftly, beleaguered by battle and bewildered by betrayal, people begin leaving the church, which was intended to be the last bastion for unity in a divisive world.

The people in your church are exhausted from the divisiveness all around them. If the division can't be addressed in your church, people will give up and leave.

Fortunately, there is a way to talk about divisive issues so that your church can be strengthened instead of weakened. There is a way to avail the opportunity to dig deep and uncover some things that need to be addressed so that your church can emerge from the crucible refined and fit for ministry.

This guide has been created to help you cultivate healthy conversations around divisive issues so that your church can model to the world how to overcome the problems that plague it. The hope is that you can apply these principles in your personal ministry, among teams, and across various audiences in your church and community.

# CHECK YOUR MOTIVE

**A** big obstacle to finding resolution, answers, or agreeable outcomes in divisive or difficult issues is the presence of false motives.

Many people think they want to arrive at the “truth” or the best outcome, but most people lean into a need to affirm their own position so they can bolster their sense of security and self-esteem.

Even those with the best of intentions need to check their motives. Are you really listening to learn, or just waiting to fire back? Do you desire unity, or to be “right”?

If a divided group of people is seeking to win an argument rather than arrive at answers, or if the motive is to defend their position instead of listening to understand, then no amount of good tactics and tools will help them discover the truth.

Simply put, don't waste your time trying to have a meaningful conversation with people who have zero intention of opening their minds to the possibility of new ideas.

However, if everyone - or at least most of - the people at the table of discussion are truly seeking a holistic approach to discover God's will in any particular situation, you've got a good place to start.

# TRUST IS A MUST

Someone needs to repeat the old adage, “They don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” It’s worth repeating because we just don’t seem to get it.’

Every second over a billion posts, tweets, and status updates fill the feeds and lodge in the minds of people all over the world. Most of them have one thing in common: they make a declaration of truth before they’ve developed trust.

When the Bible tells us to speak the truth in love, we seem to forget the last two words. But to be effective in our communication, it must be established on a bedrock of love and trust.

The Moravians are credited with the saying that is most appropriate for the world we live in, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love.”

If we don’t share a common understanding of love and trust, we’ll never arrive at liberty or unity.

Trust drives out contention. Trust develops unity. Trust eliminates the threat of differing viewpoints. And trust opens our minds to receive the truth in a more meaningful way.

If you want to be effective in discussing or presenting topics that tend to be divisive, you must first establish a foundation of trust so that even if people disagree, they won’t be tempted to disavow.

#### Tips for Developing Trust:

- Don’t present a tough topic to an audience who doesn’t yet trust you.
- Let people know how and why you arrived at your conclusion.
- Know that a different point of view doesn’t indicate a different heart.
- Share personal experiences, but don’t frame your arguments on subjectivity.
- Affirm other points of view, even if you don’t agree with them.
- Affirm other people, especially when you disagree.
- Avoid the need to always be “right”.
- Make a point to express more love than truth.
- Seek to build up rather than prove wrong.
- Be willing to concede an argument if it means keeping a relationship.

Without trust, there is no reckoning with truth. With trust, there is receptivity to all that God might do in you and others.

**Trust is the requisite starting point of having a meaningful conversation that could lead to the discovery of truth.**

# LISTEN FIRST

One benefit of listening is that it helps establish trust. However, listening is not a pre-attack tactic. Meaning, you don't listen just to make people "feel" heard. You actually need to hear what they are saying and listen to understand. After all, trust needs to be genuine. You actually have to be trustworthy or else any trust placed in you is counterfeit and counterproductive.

Listening helps you connect with the humanity of someone on the other side of an issue.

Listening helps you learn and shape your own viewpoints. Listening helps you understand other viewpoints in light of your own. And, listening cultivates a genuine concern for both the listener and the one being listened to.

As people listen to one another, it unlocks our ability to grow, process, and arrive at better conclusions than we could by excluding outside voices.

### Tips to Help You Listen Better:

- Open your ears to voices outside your comfort zone.
- Wait to formulate responses until after you've listened, not while listening.
- Imagine the experience of the person you're listening to.
- Ask God to illuminate the stories you listen to.
- "Listen" by reading, watching, and hearing various stories.
- Compare what you hear against scripture for another objective viewpoint.
- Demonstrate your listening through physical gestures of acknowledgment.
- Remember you can offer affirmation without offering agreement.
- Listen with your heart as much as you listen with your mind.
- Ask questions to understand, not to prove a point.

It's tempting to rush past listening into convincing. But there isn't a rush. If you want to truly arrive at holistic solutions to complex issues, and heal hurt caused by division or misunderstanding, you first have to have it all out on the table.

**Listening draws out all the components of an issue, lays them on the table of trust, and allows participants to get a clear understanding to form the basis for answers and solutions.**

# ASKING BEFORE ASSERTING

One of the reasons people rush to arguments is because many of us have spent time bolstering our own positions in our own minds. We feel like we have it all figured out, which causes us to skip over things that might help shape our opinions in a different direction, or on the other hand, strengthen our arguments to make them more effective. Either way, a greater understanding benefits everyone involved.

More input is not a threat to your position, it's an opportunity to make it more sound.

Listening is the first wave of gaining understanding. Asking is the proactive response to dig deeper around the issues that were raised by listening.

If listening helps paint a picture, asking good questions puts you into the middle of the scene, applying the picture to your own experiences. It's like the difference between looking at an object and handling it.

Asking questions can also get the person on the other side of an issue thinking in ways they haven't before. So, while listening is one-sided, asking starts the conversation that engages two or more parties in a conversation. At the same time, the question format eases into an issue in a way that is not combative or defensive.

## **Tips for Good Question Asking:**

- Ask more genuine questions than rhetorical ones.
- Ask questions you don't know the answers to.
- Explain the reasoning behind your questions.
- If a question is rhetorical, don't pretend it's not. But ask it anyway.
- Allow questions to be the beginning of what you know will become a discussion.
- Don't shy away from hard questions.
- Don't make questions harder or painful on purpose.
- In group settings, let multiple people answer questions.
- Don't feel a need to answer all questions - allow room for pondering.
- Make sure you get input from a variety of people, and not always the same people.

Unlike listening, asking questions can get more provocative. It's an opportunity to get past the surface; to uncover things that need to be addressed if you have any hope of resolving real issues. At the same time, the point of asking questions is not to check-mate someone in some sort of mental chess match.

**Good questions help all sides uncover the essence of the conversation so that there can be clarity even if not agreement.**

# STICK TO YOUR GUNS

In an attempt to start with love, establish trust, and listen well, many people get so caught up in the relational dynamic of a discussion that when the time comes to posit their position, they lose heart and back down. While grace is always the best way, love dictates the speaking of truth.

If you believe something to be true, stick with it.

Even if you want to acknowledge that you may be wrong, don't concede a point unless you actually believe it. All you'll do in backing down against your will is to offer a disingenuous response that will embitter you and beguile your counterpart.

How would it be possible for a group of people to ever arrive at consensus when they don't even know what views are held by people on the other side of argument, only because they didn't have the courage to express them?

If you've taken the time to build trust and listen well, you should feel free to talk about the hard parts of any issue. After all, won't everyone be better for it?

The Church has suffered at our unwillingness to talk through tough issues. To stay at the table, get past the surface, and contend in honoring, respectful conversations.

If everyone chooses to tuck tail and run then nobody will be sharpened and we'll all be left to find other sources that confirm our own biases instead of engaging in healthy dialogue.

## Tips for Standing Firm with Grace:

- Encourage everyone in your group or team to voice their opinions.
- Ask that people would listen to you as you have listened to them.
- Confirm your position with scripture, ensuring it stands up to the truth.
- State your convictions with a smile, indicating you aren't trying to contend, only to inform.
- Remind people they don't have to agree with you, but you can't deny your convictions.
- Explain how you arrived at these conclusions.
- Offer examples or real-world stories that show why your ideas hold merit.
- Connect the dots between your positions and a shared ideal outcome.
- Don't take the bait of strawman arguments or rabbit trails. Stick to the issues.
- Always allow room for your own error. You can hold a position that isn't perfected.

Don't be shamed into biting your tongue when you know you're speaking from the right heart. At the same time, don't rush to judgment. Your opinions are valid, but they are your own. You can hold your opinions without smashing those held by others.

**The goal of a discussion is to converse, not convert. You should feel good about holding to your values without the need to be threatened by others.**

# A LITTLE WIGGLE ROOM

In any given situation, not everyone will agree. In many instances, people will disagree with vehemence. There are a lot of issues that are needlessly divisive and where we actually share a lot of common ground. However, there are also a lot of issues that are fundamentally divided and sides must be taken. We should not lump all issues together with the naive assumption that if we just understood one another we'd arrive at an agreement. That's just not the case.

As we grow in understanding and grace, we can develop more common ground in agreeable areas and more respect in disagreements.

We need to be able to offer people on the other side of issues some wiggle room. Meaning, we don't have to nail down every point or define things in absolute terms.

If we can remember the foundation we established in love and trust, we can co-exist with people on all sides of most issues. And where we absolutely cannot agree to disagree, we should allow people a graceful way to withdraw or wiggle out of the conversation.

### **Tips for Giving People Wiggle Room:**

- Affirm people's experience and perspective, even if not their point.
- Don't gloat.
- Back off instead of going for the jugular.
- Avoid the urge to gang up in group settings.
- Advocate for alternate viewpoints.
- Acknowledge that not every point can be answered.
- Remember how it felt when you lost an argument.
- Remember what best helped you to change your mind.

If people don't receive what you're reflecting, that doesn't mean you get to treat them with contempt. It means you love them even more.

**The goal of our existence is to reflect Christ, not win arguments.**



# EXPAND THE TIMELINE

One of the biggest issues people have in resolving conflict or wading through tough conversations is our desire for immediate gratification. The thought of lingering tension is almost too much to bear, so we opt for a “one-and-done” approach. We think that if we can’t arrive at a consensus in this meeting, or in this singular conversation, it’s hopeless.

Rather than allow God to move in our hearts and minds over a period of time, we rush the transformative process of debate to the point of abdicating our duty to see it through.

The outcome of rushing through tough issues is often an awkward tension that threatens both relationships and the discovery of truth.

It’s incumbent upon God’s people to be willing to take as long as necessary to allow conversations and discussions - and even disagreements - to unfold over whatever period of time is needed to allow God to enlighten everyone involved.

After all, our struggle is not against flesh and blood. We are aiming for spiritual transformation and the renewal of our minds. Our goal is to have the mind of Christ, not the mind of our preferred political party or social agenda.

#### Tips to Expand the Timeline:

- Agree to table the issue and schedule a follow-up meeting to continue the conversation.
- Affirm one another as people before ending a heated conversation.
- Acknowledge that your disagreement is subordinate to your relationship.
- Don’t let your only meetings be discussions about disagreements. Be social!
- Take time to exchange the resources that helped each person shape their opinions.
- Remind each other that you don’t have to agree to have fun together.
- Know that your common ground is greater than your discord.
- Remember that many contemporaries in history were strengthened by ongoing debate.

When you can become comfortable with uncomfortable conversations you set yourself and others up for an expanded timeline to think through things in a holistic way.

**An expanded timeline provides room for emotions to cool, information to pool, and for God to speak to each individual as He guides us into all truth.**

# DON'T PLAY GOD

It's the Holy Spirit's job to change hearts and minds as He "guides us into all truth." As believers are simply representatives of that truth. We are fallible. No single person will have all the right opinions.

Our job is to help people, not perfect them. We can't redeem or reconcile people to Christ, we can only help show them the way.

You can't change someone's heart or mind. Only God can do that. All you can do is love first, and represent the truth - and good news - of the Gospel of Christ.

Release yourself from the obligation to convince everyone to agree with you. Instead, take on the opportunity to model what it looks like to approach tough issues with conviction and grace.

# IN ALL THINGS, LOVE

Imagine a Church where our primary desire was not to be “right”, but to be loving. Imagine if the greatest command God gave us was to love, not condemn.

Imagine how much more common ground we would find if we entered conversations with the goal of honoring God instead of winning an argument.

Most people reading this already know the importance of loving above all else. But sometimes a reminder is needed. When faced with the temptation to take sides and battle opponents, we have to remember that our enemy is not people. Our enemy is the father of lies. We defeat him only when we love well and pursue God above our need to be right.

And finally, remember that it's not all on you to solve every problem. God is only asking you to play your part in the unique way he's asked you to play it. Don't cave to the pressure to look, act, speak, or even post a certain way. Your job is hard, but it's ultimately God's. So just keep doing your best, trusting that He will see you through. And remember, we've got your back.

# Choosing the Right Ministry Partner

## **The know-how you need from experts you trust.**

ACS Technologies is the original pioneer of Church Management Software (ChMS). We are firmly dedicated to serving local churches all over North America by providing the best-in-class ministry software and service solutions that help you fulfill Christ's mission for your Church.

## **Tools and support to strengthen churches.**

We build great software, but we don't stop there. We have a "service first" approach that truly sets us apart. With hundreds of dedicated support and consulting personnel, your staff can reach our team 24/7. We're in your corner to help you with the ministry challenges you face every day.

## **Ideas and solutions powered by integrity.**

Integrity is real for us, and it means consistently being faithful stewards by doing the right thing for church success. We have earned the trust of pastors, church staff, congregants, our employees, and colleagues for over 40 years.

## **A plan to meet your needs and move your ministry.**


We're not just interested in satisfied customers. We see ourselves as your real ministry partner and will work with you to make disciples that will last for an eternity. We're excited to talk about your goals, create a plan together, and set you up with the software, service, and resources you need.

## **We believe in YOU!**

ACS Technologies believes in the local church. Over 75% of our team has experience serving in their local churches. We know firsthand that serving the Church means serving people, and we take seriously our commitment to helping ministries like yours achieve their God-given mandate - to make disciples in their communities, states, and across the world.

## Let's Talk

We know the challenges of switching or implementing new technology and how that can be intimidating. But we also know the unbelievable changes that have happened within churches that have partnered with us for their ministry needs. Let's connect and see how we can assist you in the greatest thing you do - grow God's Kingdom.

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