

Helping Spouses Move Toward Each Other in Conflict



by AARON SIRONI and LAUREN WHITMAN —————

In the Bible's final book, the apostle John is ushered into a vision of heaven and glimpses at an event: a feast in celebration of a marriage (Rev 19:6–9). The marriage, of course, is between Christ and his people. Purified and made ready through the cleansing of Jesus' own blood, the bride is prepared to enter eternal life with her faithful groom. It's a lovely vision and a lovely reality to look forward to. But even more than that, this vision of our future has deep relevance for our lives today.

In fact, the Bible's use of marital imagery and language to describe Christ's relationship with his bride, the church, invites us to examine the meaning of marriage here on earth. If God marries his people then it must mean something for our marriages, and Scripture bears this out. Where we might be tempted to see marriage as only a human institution, we instead find something far more glorious. Our marriages are signposts either pointing toward or away from the glory and nature of

Aaron Sironi (MS, LCPC) serves on the faculty and is the training supervisor for counseling at CCEF. Marriage counseling is a frequent topic in his writing and teaching.

Lauren Whitman (MA) is a counselor at CCEF and assistant editor for the Journal of Biblical Counseling. Her 31-day devotional book A Painful Past: Healing and Moving Forward will be released this fall.

God's relationship with his bride (Eph 5:32). The way we love and honor our spouses makes the love of Christ compelling, believable, and true.

What do we do with this revelation? One appropriate response is for spouses to ask how well their marriages reveal and reflect these spiritual realities. Do we make the mystery clearer and more inviting because the ways we live out our married lives reveal it? Consider the question from another angle. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to pray for the Father's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Likewise, we can ask if, in the daily trials, troubles, and frustrations of marriage, we bring the ways of heaven into our relationship. This is no easy task, especially in the area of conflict. Conflict is inevitable in every relationship, and it is uniquely difficult to bring heaven to earth when we are in the throes of one. What we are interested in, then, is how we can bring our conflicts under Christ's reign. We're headed toward the day John envisioned, and we want to be in step with where God is taking us.

Though we aspire to be in step, the reality is we misstep—instinctively, predictably, habitually. And so our first two articles on this subject describe how to help couples when they misstep in two common ways: when they *move away* from each other and when they *move against* each other in their conflicts.¹ In this third and final article of the series, we look at a positive, delightful, God-honoring vision for conflict. To cast that vision, we will describe how counselors can help couples learn how to *move toward* one another in humble, loving ways during an argument. We will show how spouses can do God's will on earth in such a way that their movements in conflict point to Christ's relationship with his people. We will pick back up with the couple from our first two articles, Jake and Allison, to demonstrate how a counselor can lead a couple through hard conversations. To begin, we'll explore how the Bible leads us to consider conflicts—and why it is so important for couples to grow in how they go about them.

1. Aaron Sironi and Lauren Whitman, "Helping a Spouse Who Withdraws during Conflict," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32:1 (2018): 10-32; and "Helping a Spouse Who Moves Against during Marital Conflict," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32:3 (2018): 12-34.

A Biblical Vision for Marital Conflict

Every conflict in the Bible is a story of suffering. Conflict *is* suffering. Judging by its history, it's easy to see why. Conflict emerged immediately after Adam and Eve sinned in the garden. Their sin tore them away from their God and each other. They plummeted themselves, and all of us who would come after them, into a cosmic war. Right away, God promised to fight back (Gen 3:14–15). He would contend with the enemy and our sin in order to restore peace and unity. He enlists himself into a war he didn't start, but one that he promised us he'd win. Not surprisingly then, we often see the Lord described as a warrior, and the Christian life described in battle terms.

We must commit
to move in conflict
like God does.
He is fighting *for*
something.

These events that unfold in the beginning pages of the Bible help us see that conflict is a form of suffering that God uses to accomplish his good purposes. The mantle we must take up is a commitment to move in conflict like God moves in conflict. He is fighting *for* something. He has taken up the right cause with the right tone. And God invites his people to imitate him, which means we must go about our relational conflicts in ways that serve his purposes. Listen to how Ephesians describes God's purposes and goals for his people.

With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to *bring unity* to all things in heaven and on earth *under Christ*.
(Eph 1:8–10)

When all of God's purposes have reached their fulfillment, the result will be *unity under Christ*. All conflict will end. Unity between God and his people, and unity between those people, will be the only way of life in the kingdom of God.

Because God's plan is to accomplish everlasting unity, couples must consider how their conflicts can lead them to greater unity, a unity that points forward to what God has planned. This begins with

a sober-minded realization that unity does not happen on its own. A husband and wife do not naturally draw closer and have less conflict as they go through life together. It's just the opposite: over time, a couple naturally drifts away from one another. And destructive conflict is a primary threat that creates distance and alienation in marriage.

To resist this threat, it helps to think of unity as an action verb. A couple must intentionally and purposefully enact unity in how they approach and behave toward each other in conflict. In our next section, we will take this big-picture goal and get specific. We will consider the behaviors, responses, and mindset that cultivate unity.

The Movements of Unity

How do we move toward one another in conflict? What are the habits of drawing near that we can helpfully express in the most challenging times? To answer these questions, we will draw from a passage in 1 Peter 3. In his letter, Peter writes to Christians who are suffering, and his goal is to grow and reinforce unity in the midst of the conflicts and hardships they're facing. Peter points to the fundamental qualities we're trying to cultivate for couples struggling through the hardships of marital conflict, so he has much to offer us. Notice these two verses especially:

...all of you be like-minded, understanding, showing brotherly love, tenderhearted and humble. Do not repay evil for evil or insult for insult, but to the contrary, bless, because to this you have been called in order that you may inherit blessing. (v.8–9)

While you may not necessarily present these verses to a couple in counseling, this passage frames the important movements in fostering marital unity amid conflict. Consider each phrase carefully.

Be like-minded. By nature, conflicts happen when people disagree or are “differently-minded.” There is no conflict when two people think alike. Yet even amid disagreement, it is not only possible to be like-minded, but it's the aim of conflict. This does not happen because a person conforms to the other's opinions, likeness, temperament, or personality. You may think that couples who are naturally more similar have an easier go of it. But a couple's conflict is not more constructive because they have a lot in common. The like-mindedness Peter points to is a

way of thinking, speaking, and moving in conflict. Russian author Leo Tolstoy captures this: “What counts in making a happy marriage is not so much how compatible you are but how you deal with incompatibility.” It’s this “how you deal with incompatibility” that constitutes the like-mindedness that Peter encourages.

The foundation of like-mindedness is sharing the same faith in Christ Jesus as risen Lord. This commitment profoundly joins a husband and wife, however different they may be. Christian couples share a common story of comfort and joy that comes from being united to the Messiah. They now love someone else more than they love each other. They are both servants in his kingdom. With a common identity and lordship, a couple shares a common *motivation* for unity. In spite of all of their differences, they now want to live in unity with one another. They have a sense that they should work together in a common direction and in common ways. The couple that chooses the reverence and fear of the Lord is united in the same motivation.

The couple that chooses the reverence and fear of the Lord is united in the same motivation.

But unity in and of itself cannot be the final goal. Surely Ananias and Sapphira were unified in their deceit and greed (Acts 5:1–11). Compare them with Priscilla and Aquila who unite in hospitality and gospel ministry. The best way to be like-minded is for both spouses to have the mind of Christ. What matters is that they fix their minds on Christ, his mind, and on his ways. Christian unity is found in bringing your thinking in line with the way Jesus thinks and how he moves. It’s found in being conscious of God—having a God-consciousness—and being mindful of his will in moments of strife. In the most severe conflict of all time, Christ did not take advantage of, or exploit, his rights as God (Phil 2:6). He abandoned them for the sake of the world and gave himself to us in love. This is the mind of Christ to which we tune our thoughts, emotions, and actions. This is the pattern of thinking that forms the heart of unity.

Be understanding. A couple’s like-mindedness prepares them to understand each other better. By focusing on the other’s experience, it is

amazing what happens. Their understanding of the other person grows. Before, there was ignorance. Before, they saw the other person in unfavorable or uncharitable ways. But now, a spouse starts to hear what's happening behind the scenes, and becomes curious to hear the "rest of the story." Conflict becomes an opportunity to put yourself in your spouse's shoes, to experience what he or she is feeling, and to appreciate the other's point of view. It sounds like, "Oh, that makes sense. I can see why you responded that way."

It is of utmost significance that our love does not stop growing in a compassionate knowledge of the other (Phil 1:9). People tend to focus

Christian conflict fights against assumptions and presumptions.

on love as an affection and a compelling emotion. But love, like unity, is enacted. It grows in knowledge and understanding of the other person. If a couple is stagnant in seeking to understand and sympathize with each other, it can be lethal to marriage. Spouses are in trouble when they are

stuck in their own patterns of how they see and think about one another. They are shut up within the echo chamber of their own minds and only let in information or opinions that reflect and reinforce what they already think. In pride, they truly believe they have the other person figured out, so they stop asking, "Am I hearing you right? Do I understand you?"

But Christian conflict fights against assumptions and presumptions. To love another is to believe, *I have so much to learn. I must always be a student of my spouse's thoughts, fears, desires, and experiences.* When a spouse fixes his or her mind on understanding and inhabiting the other person's world, it is often the turning point in conflict. To be understanding is to nurture the desire to understand, remember, and pursue the best for the other person. Even so, for full reconciliation, both spouses should have opportunities to share and be understood by one another. It's essential for spouses to transparently share their hearts and concerns in order to generate compassion and sympathy from the other. Unity includes seeking to win the understanding of the other spouse.

Show brotherly love. When we read Peter's call to brotherly love we typically hear, "play nice with each other." Or we emphasize the last word—*love*. With either emphasis, we may quickly dismiss his

exhortation because we've heard it so many times. However, when Peter uses *brotherly*, he points us to a significant truth: there is a kinship bond between believing spouses, which is key to marital unity. Before they are husband and wife, they are brother and sister—children of the same God and Father. They have been born again and are adopted into God's family as siblings. And God intends his children to bless one another, as we'll see later in the passage.

This is not a minimization of the unique bond marriage creates as compared to the bond with a fellow believer at church. It's a recognition that within the unique bond of marriage, there lies a deeper and eternal reality: spouses are both united in the greater bond to their heavenly Father as co-heirs and adopted children. Couples will find it more fruitful to view and treat one other as brother and sister rather than trying to resolve conflict within the categories of male and female. Trying to make sense of conflict by reasoning, "Oh, he's a man, and he needs . . ." or, "She's a woman and so she wants . . ." is not the direction Peter moves. To see my spouse as "This is my brother" or "This is my sister," and "we are loved by our Father whom we will both together worship in eternity," puts us in a different mindset.² Sitcoms and popular books capitalize on cultural male and female differences, but these characterizations often widen the gap of alienation between spouses. In conflict, there are already many barriers that threaten to divide us. Peter says, "Male and female are not to be a barrier to unity in God's family. We are siblings." The habits and movements of unity are equally needed for both spouses because we are all adopted children of God.

One way to encourage brotherly love in conflict is to help couples cultivate the habit of praying with and for one another.³ We come to

2. Peter's exhortation here is in the context of 2:16 where he refers to *all* believers, male and female, as "slaves of God" and is similar to Paul's frequent encouragement to view one another as fellow servants of the same master (Philippians 1:1), fellow disciples of the same Lord, and partners in the gospel (Philippians 4:3). Above all else, we are to understand ourselves as obedient servants to God our Master. We will all appear before the judgment seat of God (Isaiah 45:23; Romans 14:10; Philippians 2:10).

3. For how to facilitate couples praying together in a marriage counseling session, see Aaron Sironi, "Prayer in Marriage Counseling" in an online version of the 2018 *CCEF Now* magazine, pages 20-22. https://www.ccef.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/CCEF_NOW_2018.pdf.

our Father as brother and sister in Christ *first*, then as husband and wife. This shared vulnerability and need that is expressed in prayer, even before the conflict is fully resolved, is often a turning point in conflict. Prayer restores us to perspective, humility, and tenderheartedness as dear, beloved children (Eph 5:1).

Be tenderhearted. Tenderness toward your spouse might be the first feeling that evaporates when anger escalates in a conflict. Not only are you tempted to take a hardened, unfavorable view of your spouse,

The best way to stay soft-hearted toward your spouse is to stay rooted in how God has loved you.

but you also harden yourself in self-protection, which makes it impossible for your spouse to access your heart. And so we will think of tenderness in these two ways—compassion in how you’re viewing your spouse and vulnerability and transparency to reveal your own heart. Let’s look at each.

First, the best way to stay soft-hearted toward your spouse is to stay rooted in how God has loved you. This leads directly to imitating God’s love with a soft heart. “Be kind to one another, *tenderhearted*, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph 4:32). Knowing us to our depths, seeing us at our worst, his heart toward us is compassionate (Ps 103:13–14). Tenderheartedness is one of the purest ways to imitate our Father. To stay motivated to be gracious, to be willing to overlook, to forgive, and to remain soft, we must be of the conviction that *this is how God treats me in Jesus*.

Second, to be tenderhearted means you recognize that conflict is a time to confide your tender longings, concerns, anxieties, and insecurities. This demands great intentionality and strength. It requires a willingness to lay down your “weapons” and be vulnerable. It communicates that you care, and are willing to take risks for the good of the marriage. When we fail to be tenderhearted, it communicates self-protection and a lack of investment in the relationship.

Be humble. All that Peter has espoused so far requires humility, but he gives it its own mention, and understandably so. In a conflict, the opposites of humility rear their ugly heads: self-righteousness, superiority,

selfish ambition, and defensiveness. Each of these obstructs unity and is undergirded by conceit.

In C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, he depicts hell as a place where everyone is always bickering, muttering under their breath about how terribly everyone else is behaving, and how it's always someone else's fault. Each character indignantly moves farther and farther away from everyone else until they're millions of miles apart. At a remarkable juncture in the novel, the narrator overhears a "Bright Spirit" speaking to his sister who, at the moment, refuses to move toward heaven. The brother, in all kindness, reasons with his sister to see the ways in which she has not grieved well the death of her son. In reality, she loved her son more than she loved God and her remaining family. Defensively, she responds,

"Oh, of course. I'm wrong. Everything I say or do is wrong, according to you."

"But of course!" said the Spirit, shining with love and mirth so that my eyes were dazzled. "That's what we all find when we reach this country [heaven]. We've all been wrong! That's the great joke. There's no need to go on pretending one was right! After that we begin living."⁴

According to Lewis, new life begins when we freely admit that we have been wrong. Jesus' righteousness on our behalf frees us to be honest about ourselves—our sins, weaknesses, and shortcomings. We're already exposed before God, and he has not counted our sins against us. Spouses learning the ways of heaven must loosen the grip on their own righteousness and superiority in marriage. Jesus covers our sin—and this makes it both safe and necessary to be honest about the ways we fail.

The best conflict is when both spouses speak candidly and yet hold loosely to their own perception and innocence in the matter. The most mature couples exemplify this type of humility when they deal with a problem. You'll hear a tentativeness as they put their complaint into words.

"I may be overly sensitive here, but..."

"I know I can be hard to live with, but..."

"I don't think I even knew why I was grumpy, but..."

4. C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York, NY: Harper One), 102.

Even their most delicate conversations are seasoned with humble acknowledgment and healthy self-doubt. The apostle Paul says it this way, “Don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought to think” (Rom 11:25; 12:3). When this humility covers a conflict, it fosters unity.

When Peter includes humility as an essential quality of unity, he’s not simply adding this as a fruit of the Spirit that fits nicely on his list. Humility is at the center of Peter’s mind when he thinks of Jesus Christ, the lowly suffering servant. Jesus suffered unjustly (Isa 53; 1 Peter 2:18–25). In fact, by his unjust suffering he rescued us from our sin. Now, as we suffer an injustice (or even a perceived one), our response increasingly is motivated by and modeled on Christ’s reaction when he suffered severe injustice.⁵ We desire to walk in his footsteps and follow his example. It’s in beholding and embodying this divine humility that we are able to transform conflict and build cohesion. And to our amazement, it becomes the means God uses in our lives and marriages to transform, subvert, and redeem destructive and sinful patterns.

In conflict, therefore, how we deal with a perceived injustice has everything to do with how we experience and behold Christ’s unjust suffering on our behalf. When we bear up under our own unjust suffering without sinning in response, God looks upon us with special favor and grace. Humility suffers and keeps on doing good even though it may not have done anything to provoke or deserve mistreatment.

It is also powerful to consider Peter’s counsel in light of his personal story. When Peter encourages us to humility, his own humility is on display. He doesn’t speak from success but from the sorrow and humiliation of personal failure. All four Gospels tell the story of Peter’s failure. The drama of Peter’s violent retaliation (striking the servant of the high priest) and cowardly deceit (his denial of knowing Christ three times) are recorded in the founding documents of the Christian faith for all time. At the very moments Peter retaliates, deceives, and denies, he witnesses Jesus respond to these same conflicts in very different ways. The contrast is stark. Peter fights violence with his own violence. Jesus suffers violence meekly and silently. Three times Peter denies knowing and following Christ. Three times Jesus entrusts himself to his Father at Gethsemane.

5. Matthew 26:47–27:56; Mark 14:43–15:41; Luke 22:47–23:49; John 18–19:37

Peter deceives and loses his integrity to save himself from harm. Jesus speaks the truth at the cost of his life.

Like Peter, we feel the sorrow of failure in conflict. We too have retaliated, avoided, and denied. We stand in solidarity with Peter in need of Christ's forgiveness and grace. And it's here, through failure, that humility deepens and learns the most. Even as we fail, we look again and again at Jesus and watch him respond in humility when falsely accused, reviled, and suffering.

Do not repay evil for evil or insult for insult. Peter's instruction here is what

not to do. In short, he says: do not retaliate when someone moves against or away from you. Peter reflects on Jesus' example—what he saw and heard Jesus *not* do from the time he was arrested until the crucifixion. Specifically, Jesus does not verbally attack or threaten (move against) and he does not lie or deceive (move away). Peter understands how people vilify one another as conflict shifts into threats and insults. The way for a couple to break free from this is not to retaliate when attacked or avoided. When there's no retaliation, it gives the attacking or withdrawing spouse pause. The cycle of conflict starts to deteriorate when a spouse patiently and gently bears the other's sin.⁶

How do we understand this phenomenon biblically? Remember and ponder the reality that Christ's unjust and undeserved suffering accomplished God's redemption of the world. When we suffer in conflict without retaliation and by entrusting ourselves and our marriage to God, we share in Christ's suffering and leave room for him to do his work in our spouse's heart and mind. Jesus' movements for our sake, his suffering of many injustices, gives us a model to follow. He showed us the pathway of peace, deliverance, and of accomplishing God's purposes for conflict.

The best conflict is when both spouses speak candidly and yet hold loosely to their own perception and innocence in the matter.

6. Scripture offers many winsome ways to relate amid conflict and there are, of course, times when spouses must confront sin in each other and speak hard truths in love (Matthew 18:15; Ephesians 4:15).

Bless, because to this you have been called in order that you may inherit blessing. Not to retaliate or hide is a good first step, but Peter calls believers to go further. We must actually bless the other spouse in conflict. When we hear “bless,” our minds may lose traction because of its use in Christian vernacular. But to bless is very concrete. To bless is to take note of another’s needs and respond by meeting them. In a parallel passage, Paul makes the same exhortation, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” Immediately he describes what blessing

We bless our spouses when we wrestle with our hearts until we are convinced that we must pursue the other spouse’s good and well-being.

looks like: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.... If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink” (Rom 12:15; 20). To give this kind of blessing in conflict means that we hear the desires, fears, doubts, and insecurities and take action. It is a Christlike and beautiful question to ask, “Honey, what do you need from me right now?” Or, “How can I help?”

We bless our spouses when we wrestle with our hearts until we are convinced that we must pursue the other spouse’s good and well-being. Because God sought our good, we are willing and able, through the Spirit’s power, to pursue our spouse’s good. Blessing a spouse embodies the type of care that communicates, “I desire your good more than being right, asserting my rights, retaliating, or winning this argument.” This mindset moves from escalating or avoiding conflict to actually using it as a means to bless our spouses and to accomplish genuine restoration. This requires a growing love of Christ and an active entrusting of ourselves into God’s care. It is “to this you have been called.” We increasingly live for God and less for ourselves.

Next, Peter quotes from Psalm 34 to support the points he has just made, and the passage he chooses is also relevant to marital conflict. To paraphrase: as we stop our tongues from evil, as we keep our lips from speaking deceit to our spouses, as we do good, as we doggedly pursue biblical peace, then we will be a blessing to our spouses. And, in God’s economy, that means we too will be blessed, regardless of how our

spouse responds. To be clear, this does not mean that we will no longer suffer unfairly in conflict.⁷ These inner qualities are not gimmicks that automatically produce relational fulfillment and happiness. The blessings we receive are that God's very eyes will be on us and his ears will be open to our prayers in a special way (1 Peter 3:12). Even on this side of glory, we will love our lives because our lives will be full of "good days" (1 Peter 3:10).

In our next and final section, we will head into the counseling room to see how a counselor can encourage Peter's movements when a couple is in conflict.

Enacting Unity in the Counseling Room

Imagine that Jake and Allison have been coming to marriage counseling for a couple of months. In earlier sessions, the counselor helped them identify their typical conflict pattern. Jake has taken ownership for his withdrawing. He has grown in both understanding the instinctive moves he makes and has also shown remorse for how this impacts Allison. Similarly, Allison has taken responsibility for her aggressive behaviors in conflict. She has been working on revealing her thoughts and emotions more softly when they're in a fight, instead of attacking Jake with hostility.

There is a joint understanding that the counselor and the couple share as they've talked many times about what happens between Jake and Allison and why it happens. They have started to move toward one another, taking responsibility for what each does in conflict and the impact it has on the other. In this session, Jake and Allison come in and want to talk about an unresolved conversation between them. They both agree that they have made significant progress and this recent conflict was qualitatively better than past arguments. But nonetheless, they got stuck and they need help to resolve it. As we go through the transcript, there will be notes in brackets that describe the counselor's methods and

7. Here we emphasize suffering like Christ with the goal of enacting peace and unity. But Scripture also makes clear that fleeing dangers, such as the risk of domestic violence, is wise (Proverbs 22:3, Acts 9:23–25). This article does not focus on abusive marriage dynamics. If you are in need of resources on this topic, see Darby Strickland, "Counseling in the Brambles: How to Help Oppressive Marriages," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 30:3 (2016): 24–46; and Justin and Lindsey Holcomb, *Is It My Fault?: Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014).

how the counselor leads them through the conversation in a way that is faithful to the exhortations and commendations of 1 Peter 3.

Jake and Allison fill the counselor in on the situation: their adult daughter is pregnant but there have been some complications that put her in the high-risk category. This has been upsetting and stressful for everyone. The other night Allison had just gotten off a phone call with her daughter in which she heard more news about the uncertainties regarding the pregnancy. Allison was upset and crying after she hung up. Jake was upset, too, but outwardly quiet. He physically moved toward Allison to reassure her with a hug, which Allison told the counselor she appreciated. Jake then tried to comfort Allison by saying what he intended to be encouraging words. Allison began to get frustrated with Jake and the conversation unraveled from there. Old wounds from their history resurfaced, and now they need help untangling what happened between them and reworking the exchange.

Counselor: I'm so thankful to get this picture you described of the two of you holding each other in fear and grief after Allison got off the phone. What a joy to know that you were seeking to cling to each other in the midst of such a scary situation.

[The counselor self-discloses delight as a way to encourage the couple and validate their growth—especially Jake's growth in drawing physically close to Allison in a moment of mutual sadness and uncertainty.]

Jake: Yeah, I was really trying. Part of me wanted to run out of the room when I saw how upset Allison was. I didn't know what to do but I didn't want to leave her there alone. The whole thing was overwhelming and my mind went blank.

Counselor: This was really hard. But you didn't run out. You stayed. You comforted your wife with a hug.

[The counselor highlights the redemptive movements Jake made here as he sought to lovingly comfort Allison. Couples need to acknowledge and celebrate the good in the conflict, even when it isn't perfect. This builds trust between them and is substantially different than finding silver linings or putting on rose-colored glasses.]

Jake: Yeah, but then it all went downhill when I opened my mouth.

Counselor: Right. You were trying to comfort Allison by saying things like, “It’s going to be all right”?

[The counselor is now going to slow down the discussion of what happened and talk about each movement from the point things started to go wrong between them. To summarize: Jake doesn’t actually believe that everything will be just fine. He is anxious himself and taking the news seriously. He doesn’t want to frighten and unsettle Allison further, but Allison’s anxiety heightens his own sense of fear. Really, what he’s clumsily communicating is, “I’m scared too, but let’s not assume the worst before we know what will happen.” But to Allison, it feels like Jake minimizes the risks and abandons her in her fear when he makes these comments. She longs to know that he’s standing with her and not weary of her emotions.]

Jake: Yes, and here I’m feeling proud of myself for saying something. I know it hurts her when I disappear and I was really trying to be there for her. But she got mad. Why does she always have to get so mad?

[The counselor ignores his rhetorical question.]

Counselor: You were moving toward her, right...and even trying to speak words that would comfort her?

Allison (interrupting): How does he know everything is going to be all right? I get that he was trying to comfort me, and I appreciate that. I really do. But it just made me mad because even though he didn’t withdraw, it felt all too familiar. It doesn’t help me at all when he minimizes things. It’s so irritating.

[Allison is growing impatient and speaking to the counselor instead of speaking to her husband who is right beside her. She’s losing her tenderheartedness. The counselor decides it’s important to give her a chance to share her heart or she’ll be unable to hear Jake.]

Counselor: What were those old, familiar fears and doubts that surfaced when Jake said, “It’s going to be all right?”

[The counselor draws Allison out, inviting her to share more of her inner heart and experience without moving against Jake with more painful frustration and bitterness.]

Allison: Like I’m too much! Did he pull away from me in the past because I’m too much? And is his comfort now just a way to make

himself feel better? He doesn't really care. He doesn't want to be with me. He just wants me to be happy with him.

[Allison's self-disclosure is helpful. It is a sign of insight and vulnerability that she first went to "I'm too much" instead of starting with blame and cynicism. Her anger can make him feel like she is disgusted by him, so it's good for him to hear these vulnerable insecurities that she struggles with. But the counselor also must acknowledge her doubt and distrust.]

Counselor: So, when Jake says, "It's going to be all right," you're wondering, "Am I just too over-the-top for Jake? Am I overdoing it with how I'm reacting and he's trying to shut it down?" Then it's tempting for you to believe that Jake really doesn't care. Is that when you get hard and angry?

[The counselor must emphasize Allison's vulnerable fears even as her doubts and distrust are acknowledged as a common go-to place for her.]

Allison: Right.

Jake: Wow.

Allison: What?

Jake: That's not what happened, Allison. You got mad at me. You didn't say anything about feeling "too much" for me.

[Because Jake says this gently and without anger, the counselor does not interrupt and wants to see where they take this. This is Jake's attempt to say, "If only you'd opened the door to these tenderhearted fears, I would've known how to be with you."]

Allison: (staying in the frustration) Yes, I struggle with anger at you. This has been a long road for us. But it's not just anger, Jake. You know that! We've talked about that here. It always feels like rejection when you withdraw. It feels like you want to get away from me. I want to believe you really do care about me—and aren't totally irritated when I'm upset, but your responses make it hard.

Jake: I do care. But your anger is just so hard for me.

[The counselor feels relief that Allison ends on this note instead of deepening her accusation that Jake really doesn't care. Her moving back and forth between her fears that she is too much and her growing trust in Jake's care shows humility. She is processing and wrestling with her fears and doubts. There is quiet for ten seconds. The mood is calm but somber between them.]

Counselor: Allison, you're asking Jake to understand that there was a lot going on inside you in that moment—more than the anger that he feels from you. There's anger for feeling abandoned in the past, fear in the moment because your emotions can even catch you off guard, and this all connects with your more tender insecurities...like maybe who you are as a person is just overwhelming? (Allison nods). Jake, can you hear Allison here?

[By asking Jake this question, it is an implicit way to encourage him to be humble as he recognizes how his past withdrawal has provoked Allison's anger and even now tempts her to distrust his present-day attempts to care for her. Allison's inner world is complex, and we want Jake to understand the layers that are there. If this collaborative conversation helps him understand, it's more likely he'll bear it in mind when there's a similar situation in the future.]

Even though it was painful for Jake to know Allison was wrestling with anger toward him because of the past, if he is able to hear it from her without getting defensive this will show his growing humility and ownership over how he contributes to their struggles. From there, they can resolve the tension from the other night as Allison seeks Jake's forgiveness for lashing out at him. They can consider ways Allison could put tender, vulnerable feelings to words and speak kindly when anger rises up. Jake can share how he is impacted by Allison's anger, what insecurities it arouses in his heart, and Allison can speak to those. Jake can apologize for how he verbally minimizes Allison's concerns and provokes her fears.

Because the situation with their daughter will continue, the counselor asks them each to describe what kind of comfort they'd desire and be blessed by from one other. Love seeks to be knowledgeable and effective (Phil 1:9). The counselor also asks them to collaborate on what it looks like for them to serve their daughter and son-in-law through this trial. In these ways, the counselor helps them to think as a team, to decide together what unity looks like in their present circumstances, and to envision how like-mindedness expresses itself when they are struggling.

At the end of the session, the counselor will pull together all of what they have been doing and saying into a summary as a way to send them off prepared for future difficult moments.

Counselor: Again, I'm just so encouraged by how the Lord is working. I know it feels like you are climbing out of a pit, but you're starting to see that you both certainly can be different in hard times outside of the counseling room. I see how you're both really trying and growing. And even today, the conversation bore fruit as you listened to each other, and lovingly considered what the other was saying. That's good.

This situation with your daughter is really, really tough. Let's pray together that as you live in it that you'll do so in a way where you experience each other's friendship and unity, and that, together, you will pour out your hearts to the Lord, pursuing what faith and trust looks like. It's going to be hard and it's going to be challenging. This is your daughter and grandchild. It's scary.

Jake, let's pray together that when overwhelming moments come, you stay engaged. Draw physically and verbally near to Allison. Remember what she said today about the ways she would like to be comforted by you and ask the Lord to help you follow through there.

Allison, you've got this insecurity, this fear that who you are is too much. For you, your battle is to trust that the Lord loves and delights in how he made you—and that Jake loves and delights in you. Yes, Jake can get intimidated when emotions run high, and that's an issue he is working on. Let's pray that you stay kind, gentle, and tenderhearted when these insecurities rise up in you. And you can comfort Jake in the ways he identified as well.

For both of you, this verse from 1 Peter 3:8–9 came to mind as I watched how you interacted today. Commit it to memory and prayerfully keep it before you. Peter says, be like-minded, understanding, showing brotherly love, tenderhearted, and humble. Do not repay evil for evil or insult for insult, but to the contrary, bless. God has given you to each other to be a blessing, to be a help, and to share your hearts and your very lives with one another. You'll bless each other as you respond to each other with understanding, humility, tenderheartedness. These are attributes of Christ himself, and he helps you live them out. To close our time, let's pray that he'll help in these ways. Will you pray for each other? That God would help you express his ways to each other and help you grow in the places you most need it. Let's go together to our Father.

This dialogue illustrates how counselors and pastors can serve as a redemptive third person in the room to steer, guide, and facilitate a conversation that is both restorative and honoring to the Lord.

Complete Unity

Unity is a biblical priority. It has eternal significance. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have always been united to one another in love, mission, and purpose. And one day all things will be united under Christ. Because this profound unity is God's intention, we find Jesus praying for it just moments before his arrest in Gethsemane. Facing down the cross, unity is on his heart and mind. It's remarkable. He prays for all believers—for you, for us, for the whole church. He's facing down the cross, and *we* are on his heart and mind. If you've ever wondered how Jesus is praying for you, this is how it sounds.

I pray also for those who will believe in me, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:21–23)

Jesus reveals the mission and purpose of unity: when believers live in unity, we reveal God's love.

For this very same reason, Christian couples are called to grow in unity. Their relationship has the mission and purpose of revealing God's love—his tenderhearted, compassionate, humble love. To fulfill this calling, we have seen what is needed, and considered these requirements in the context of conflict because it presents a unique opportunity to enact unity. God's Word emboldens husbands and wives to consider one another as more important than their own selves. Each is free to attend to the other person so much so that the deepest and greatest concern is for the other and his or her well-being, instead of a concern for self-interest.

As a couple enacts unity, they cultivate a deep friendship. At the end of a conflict they emerge side by side, not embittered, defeated,

and moving further and further apart. Neither has come out on top of the other; neither has the upper hand. There is no winner and no loser. To borrow Matthew 18 language, what they have “gained” by moving toward each other is...each other. The reward at the end of their suffering is friendship. Conflict was a true threat, but they have overcome it together and have gained one another’s hearts. Evil has not conquered them (Rom 12:21). They have conquered it, and conflict has served to

Unity is a biblical priority.

cultivate their oneness rather than weaken it. They press forward with resolve and determination to approach the next conflict in a similar manner—in wisdom, knowledge, and fruitfulness. This is wis-

dom because they know who their real enemy is—and it’s not each other. This is knowledge because they believe what God has revealed—and they have joined him on the way to unity. This is fruitfulness because they are submitted to the Spirit—and he provides real help as a couple depends on him.

May we manifest his love repeatedly, continually, and without ceasing until every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord. May we persevere in faithfulness until we see our Jesus face to face. And may Jesus hasten the day! On that day his bride feasts with him at the celebration that is beyond all other celebrations. On that day we fathom with fresh clarity and fresh awe the fullness of his love. On that day unity is complete.

The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

Copyright © 2020 CCEF

All rights reserved.

For permission to copy or distribute JBC articles, please go
to: ccef.org/copyright-permissions.