

Addressing Ping Pong Conflict

Written by Steve Marr

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Most of us have encountered conflict that takes the form of back-and-forth communication. These conflicts can drain our energy and time. We need to manage them in a way that honors the Lord, uses the time effectively and communicates information professionally.

A key to managing these situations is to understand when to stop communication. I often use the phrase, “we need to agree to disagree agreeably.” When I understand that we may never come to a point of agreement, we both need to move on by respecting the differences.

A while ago a person took exception to an article I'd written. I received a fairly lengthy e-mail explaining their position. Normally I delete such e-mails without responding, but in this case I felt there was a ministry opportunity so I decided to respond. Unfortunately it generated a longer e-mail which I decided to delete. After a day or two I got a follow-up from the person asking if I received the e-mail. When I responded that I had, the person generated another e-mail asking if I was going to respond to their points. My short answer was “no.” I think I received two more follow-ups that I chose to ignore. The situation became clear that further engagement was a waste of time.

I was in a meeting one time where I felt personally attacked. I chose to respond briefly to each of the points my “opponent” raised. However, the person used my response as an opportunity to rail on me and several others. Then, the person asked if I intended to respond to his complaints. “I have already said what I have to say,” I explained. Then, even though the group was not a Christian gathering, I quoted the Lord's when he instructed, “All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No;' anything beyond this comes from the evil one.” (Matthew 5:37, NIV) I sat down and remained quiet. I believed that the person was more interested in doing battle than solving issues. I chose to stop playing the game.

As Christians we are called to be peacemakers in every circumstance. We can easily get wrapped up in the desire to battle or prove we were right. When we do, we fail to become peacemakers and become belligerents in conflict. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9, NIV)

When I reach points of conflict, my tactic is to ask the question, “Can we disagree agreeably?” If the answer becomes no, I generally stop debating, remain silent and cease playing a ping pong game of volleying words back and forth. If we hold the perspective that we need to be right all the time, energy and time will elude us. My personal tendency is to engage in battle until I've won. However, I have come to recognize that this is not the godly path that makes it possible to become a peacemaker. If I cannot become a peacemaker, I remove myself from the conflict as much as possible.

Be clear that I am not advocating walking away from legitimate debate over important issues in circumstances where there is understandable disagreement over the correct path. While these discussions may become intense, they are not argumentative for just the sake of engaging in

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conflict.

We must pick our battles carefully and know when to back off and when to go forward. When we do, we will conserve our business time and avoid the energy drain that endless conflict will produce.

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