

The Benefits of a Good Conversation

I (John) often think about all the people who have helped me grow in significant ways over the years. When they come to mind, I reflect on the many ways they gave me compassion, understanding, encouragement, and guidance. Not only that, but I am also thankful for these people's honesty, confrontations, and directness, which pretty much saved my life in many ways. I am the grateful recipient of the benefits of good confrontation.

For example, I remember years ago when I took on too many work responsibilities, and life started fraying at the fringes. I enjoyed all the things I was doing, and they were meaningful, so that's how I justified going too hard. An old friend, Carl, however, got my attention over lunch during that time when he said, "It's getting so that I don't know if I really know you anymore."

"What are you talking about? Of course you know me," I replied.

Carl proceeded to gently tick off several things he had been observing in me lately: self-preoccupation, a lack of emotional presence with others, distractedness, and unavailability.

I couldn't ignore his words, for I knew he wasn't bashing me. He really was concerned about my well-being. And his points truly resonated within me. That was a real turning point for me. I made some overdue adjustments in my work and relationships. Carl's confrontation may well have preserved me from some serious problems later.

We all need to know that the hard work of confrontation has a worthwhile payoff. In the rest of this book we will show the particulars of how to engage in a face-to-face conversation, and you will get examples, tips, and how-tos. But in this chapter we want you to see the seven benefits that come from “telling the truth,” and why God has designed things this way.

PRESERVING LOVE

Probably the most important benefit of a good confrontation is that it *preserves love* in a relationship. This may seem counterintuitive to you. You may think, *This doesn't make sense. When I confront someone, they will either get mad or leave the relationship.* This can and does happen. But confrontation was not designed to make someone angry or chase him or her away. In fact, it was designed to do the opposite.

The Latin term for confrontation means “to turn your face toward, to look at frontally.” It merely indicates that you are turning toward the relationship and the person. You are face-to-face, so to speak. In confrontation, people simply face the relationship and deal with an aspect of the connection that needs to be addressed. The intent is to make the relationship better, to deepen the intimacy, and to create more love and respect between two people.

That is why, to be an effective confronter, you need to understand that *confrontation works best when it serves love*. Boundary conversations are motivated and driven by love. They promote the purposes of love. They enhance a relationship, not end it.

How can confrontation preserve love? Basically by protecting the relationship from elements that would harm it. Love needs protection. It is like tending a garden. If you want your plants to survive and thrive, you need to do more than water and feed them. You also need to protect them from bad weather, insects, and disease.

In the same way, things like disconnection, defensiveness, control, immaturity, and selfishness have the power to infect an entire

relationship and contaminate it. Unchecked, they can harm or even end a connection.

When I was in graduate school, I waited tables at restaurants. At one point I moved to a different restaurant closer to home. Scott, a friend of mine and also a grad student, was working there as a senior waiter. In fact, he knew I was looking for another place, and he had told me about the position at his restaurant.

One night Scott asked me if we could talk. We sat down for a cup of coffee after work. When we had settled in, he leaned toward me and said, “Ever since you came to this restaurant, I’ve felt as if you were competing with me for the senior spot. I wanted to let you know that’s how it seems, and ask you what you think.”

I thought over what he had told me and said, “I think you’re right. I have been competing with you, and I haven’t even been aware of it. I’m really sorry, Scott.”

“No problem,” he said. “I just wanted to get this cleared up between us.”

I gave up competing with Scott and concentrated on doing my job. Scott’s early intervention helped prevent a huge tear in our relationship. We worked together for some time after that, and we have remained friends to this day. A good confrontation can preserve a relationship: “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (Prov. 27:6).

RESOLVING ALIENATION

Healthy confrontations not only preserve relationships, but also bring disconnected people together. Think about someone in your life with whom you have an unspoken conflict or issue. Maybe he isn’t emotionally available to you. Maybe she is critical of you. Maybe he expects you to solve his problems for him. Whatever the case, when an existing conflict is not brought into the relationship, it hurts the relationship. It disconnects and alienates you from the other person. *The extent to which two people in a relationship can*

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Relationships are designed by God to be whole, and the more parts of you—such as strengths, weaknesses, vulnerabilities, passions, desires, and failures—that are connected to the parts of the other person, the greater the closeness, depth, and meaning of the relationship. Paul made this appeal to the hearts of the people at Corinth: “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also” (2 Cor. 6:11–13).

Our hearts are to be open to each other. Where there is some unspoken, unaddressed, and unresolved area of conflict, our hearts can become closed. Many times in my marriage, my insensitivity or my not being there for Barbi has caused her to withdraw emotionally. The alienation I felt was painful. I wanted all of her to be with me, and part of her wasn’t there. For example, a few years back I made a financial decision without consulting Barbi. At the time, I thought it wasn’t important enough, but when I did tell her, she felt out of the loop, and she was hurt. For a time there was distance between us while she worked through her feelings about this.

Nothing is more miserable than to be in a relationship with someone, yet disconnected from her at the same time. It doesn’t feel right, because it isn’t right. God did not design us for disconnected relationships. It wasn’t a lot of fun when either Barbi or I would bring up a problem, but at least we were talking. We would work it out the best way we could; but most important, the alienation was gone.

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I cannot overstate the importance of this issue. It is at the heart of the way God designed relationship. Relationships are fundamentally about love, because God's relationship with us is fundamentally about love: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God" (1 John 4:7).

Two people meeting to have the talk is a first step toward ending alienation. *A boundary conversation is, in and of itself, a connection.* The two are bringing their differences to the light of relationship and seeing what can be done. This might not be pleasant, but it is far better than a relationship that is a living death, where feelings of hurt, anger, conflicted love, and sadness never go away. Not talking about strong feelings doesn't make them go away; in fact, they become more pronounced in our attempts to live as though they don't exist. The two people in this kind of relationship try to get along by skirting issues, their emotions, and ultimately their deep love for each other, and they end up with a shell of a relationship. But when the timing is right and when both people's hearts are in the right place, the shell can again be filled with love, joy, and fulfillment.

Often a couple will remark on how connected they feel after even a poorly done confrontation. Though they may have said some things wrong or handled things badly, they were still able to sense the presence of the other person, and presence was preferable to the polite absence they had been feeling.

EMPOWERING

Confrontation also brings empowerment, the ability to make choices and changes in your relationship. God created all of us to be change agents for each other. We have a responsibility to influence the people in our lives to be the best possible people they can be: "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up" (1 Thess. 5:11).

When we encounter a long-lasting difficulty in a relationship, especially if we don't have the skills to confront, we feel helpless about seeing any change. We see the problem, we don't like what it's doing to the connection, but we don't know how to broach the issue or do anything about it.

This sense of helplessness often translates into resignation and passivity. We give up inside and accept that things will never change. You often see people who have been in a bad marriage for a long time take this stance: *He [or she] will never change, so I'll just have to live with it.*

While most would agree that we can't *make* someone change, it is also true that we can do much to *promote* change. When we learn to confront lovingly, directly, and effectively, we are often pleased in the change not only in our relationship but also in ourselves. We feel a sense of power that we can make changes and we have choices. We were designed to both connect and act. Confrontation puts the "act" into the connection.

I saw a man transform into another person after confronting his controlling father. Though he was in his forties, he had never been able to stand up to his dad. Finally, after a lot of work and preparation, he had a very appropriate and healthy confrontation with his father. He was direct, uncondemning, and caring. Dad didn't handle it well. He was defensive and critical, but the son was ready for that. Within days, I saw this depressed, burdened, stoop-shouldered man begin standing taller, becoming more creative and energetic, and reaching out to others. The conversation helped him own and integrate his personal power.

Often we will hear a person express her powerlessness in this way: "I've tried everything and nothing works with him, so I'm giving up." However, when we investigate further, we find that "trying everything" is often "trying the wrong things." She may have tried

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to confront, and either she was ignored or the conflict escalated. She did not know the best way to confront. When that person learns the tools she needs and employs them effectively, she will most likely gain a sense that she can be an agent of change in her relationship.

SOLVING A PROBLEM

Learning to have that conversation helps you solve problems. This seems obvious, but it's an important benefit of confrontation. Boundary conversations are geared toward addressing and resolving an issue that is keeping two people apart or is hurtful to someone. When things work well, a problem is solved and you can move on in the relationship. This can apply to all sorts of relational problems: your date's sexual advances, your wife's fiscal irresponsibility, or your boss's unrealistic demands.

The world just works this way. When you expose problems to the light of your relationship, it is far more likely that things will improve than when you ignore or deny them. Problems don't tend to go away by themselves over time. They often get worse. And that is the converse principle here: *What is ignored tends not to be solved.*

Alcoholics Anonymous has a great definition of how we change: *We change when the pain of remaining the same is greater than the pain of changing.* Confrontation can help solve a problem; avoiding confrontation can make a problem worse.

Part of the uniqueness of a boundary conversation is that it has a focus and an agenda. It is not generalized dissatisfaction with a person; rather, it points out some specific issue that is driving two people apart. People who confront well make a clear request for change from the other person: spend time with me, stop getting so angry, take responsibility for your addiction, and so on. The emphasis is not on renovating the entire person—which can be overwhelming—but on solving a specific problem.

A friend of mine has a son in high school. She knew her son was becoming more estranged and distant from her than was normal for a kid that age. She didn't know how to approach him. Then, by accident, she read an email he had written to a friend in which he had said some negative things about his relationship with her. She was upset.

My friend went to her son and told him what she had read. It was very difficult for both of them at first, but as it worked out, they both reached a greater awareness of the problems between them, and it gave them the focus and incentive to begin working on them. They are still in the process, but they are both good people, and I think their prospects for solving this relationship problem are high.

BUILDING GROWTH

Healthy confrontations help people grow emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. When you bring a problem to someone, something will probably change. Maybe you were wrong, and you will change. Or maybe the other person will change because of the conversation you had with him. But things will not stay the same. One or both of you gets stretched and helped to become a better person.

Good boundary conversations help us grow by making us aware of what we are doing and how our behavior affects others. This is often a springboard into looking at patterns and issues within ourselves that are a rich source of personal change and improvement.

You deliver the ingredients of growth to the people in your life. Part of the reason you are with whomever you are with is to provide those ingredients for those people. As the Bible says, you are an administrator of God's grace: "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10).

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Your confrontation may be the wakeup call someone needed. It may affirm something she knew in the back of her mind, but was afraid to admit. It may bring relief to someone who has been hiding a problem.

In fact, without caring confrontation, there is little real growth. When a relationship has love but no truth, it either keeps the people too comfortable or even makes them more immature. Often, for example, a mother who has an out-of-control teen will try to be positive and encouraging all the time, hoping her child will get better. What is more likely to happen is that while the teen does benefit from the love, he gets further out of control since no one is confronting him, establishing firm rules, or enforcing consequences. Kids, especially, grow when they experience truth as well as love.

CLARIFYING REALITY

Good confrontations also help people to see the other person for who they really are. Often, when you are afraid to tell the truth to someone, you avoid or withdraw from them. The lack of real, face-to-face confrontation increases the distortions in your mind about the negative qualities of that person. The distortions grow when they are not modified and corrected by reality. You perceive that person as more dangerous, out of control, and powerful than he or she really is. It then becomes a vicious circle: You were afraid to confront anyway, and the more you avoid the talk, the scarier the person becomes, which increases your avoidance.

When people learn to confront the right way, reality comes back into the picture, and they see themselves and the other person in a much clearer light. They realize that they themselves are grownups with choices and freedom and that the other person is just another person. It takes the power out of the fear of the other person's responses.

A man I was counseling described his wife as a rageaholic, fire-breathing dragon. He talked about how intense her anger was and

how out-of-control she was. I suggested he bring her to our next meeting so we could work on the marriage. He looked uncertain, but he brought her along the next week.

When his wife entered my office, I thought I was looking at the wrong woman. She was petite and soft-spoken — no scales and wings to be found. This wasn't to say that she didn't have an anger problem. He was right about that, and we did deal with it. But the more honest he became and the less he avoided confrontation, the less he saw her as a terrifying dragon. Good confrontations bring reality into the picture.

AVOIDING BEING PART OF THE PROBLEM

An old saying from the 1960s goes something like this: *If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.* There is a lot of truth to this in relationships. Not only are there clear benefits to having that talk, but there is also a responsibility to confront. Even though you may be in a relationship with a person who has a severe problem or behavior, you may be helping the problem continue and hindering the solution.

When modern psychiatric and psychological researchers began studying addictions, they realized that most of the time, the addict does not live in a vacuum. Instead, he lives in a system of relationships, some of which serve to enable his behavior; that is, someone unwittingly tries to keep the addict from the consequences and effects of his addiction. In an attempt to help, the enabler instead rescues the addict from the discomfort that would drive him to face and solve his problem. As the enabling person becomes aware of this and allows the addict to feel his pain, good things begin to happen.

For thousands of years the Bible has named these realities. For example, see what God says about dealing with a rageaholic: "A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty; if you rescue him, you will

have to do it again” (Prov. 19:19). Many people have experienced the frustration of finding the problem coming back the day after the rescue.

The Bible teaches that we have a duty to warn each other, that we are part of God’s means of helping one another stay in the path of growth. It goes further than that, however. Not only should we warn each other, but if we avoid doing so, we must bear some responsibility for this as well:

“When I say to a wicked man, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself” (Ezek. 3:18–19).

Sobering words, but profoundly clear. When you confront a person the right way, she always has a choice, and she may ignore your warning. Sad as that might be, you will still know that you have done what you could and that you have not participated in that person’s self-destruction.

Sometimes all it takes is a little nudge. As a youth, I was a Boy Scout. Scouting was a big part of my life, and Troop 4 was a very active troop, with lots of camping and activities. During the later years of my scouting experience, I was in my teens and getting close to earning my Eagle rank. As a teen, however, I was also experimenting with becoming an individual, which involved some rebellious attitudes. During one weekend campout, when we were putting up our tents, I used some pretty rough language to make my buddies laugh. It was the wrong time to do this, as our scoutmaster, Mr. DeKeyser — whom we called “DK” — was walking by.

DK pulled me aside, looked at me, and quietly said, “You’re too close. Don’t mess up.”

That was all it took.

DK's six words were enough. I knew what he meant. He knew I knew. No more was needed. He never brought it up again. From then on, I curbed my tongue—as much as a teenager can anyway—and stayed pretty much on track until I got the Eagle.

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Now, this wasn't about me being on drugs, being violent, or ditching school. My language wasn't a huge thing as problems go, but at the same time, it's very possible that eventually it could have been, had not DK said those six words to me. He helped me become aware of what I was doing and its possible effects. And he did it right: He was on my side, he was direct and noncondemning, and he let it go to see how I would handle it. I have always been grateful to DK for the little nudge of correction that helped keep me on the right path.

OUR OTHER MOTIVES

As you have read these benefits of confrontation, we hope you are more motivated than ever to learn the skills. At the same time, be aware of any darker motives you may feel about confronting someone, such as wanting to fix or change the person, or to punish and get revenge. Let those motives go, and stay on the higher road.

In the next section we will deal with the specific elements of all good confrontations.