



"No Offence, but . . ."

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According to Wikipedia, 'political correctness' is a term used to describe "language, policies, or measures that are intended to avoid offence or disadvantage to members of particular groups in society." The increasing influence of the social justice movement in recent

years has ushered in new vocabulary to wage war on inequality, discrimination, and oppression. Words and concepts like 'cancel culture', 'de-platforming', 'safe spaces', 'trigger warnings', 'hate speech' and 'microaggressions' are all predicated on the eradication of offences against anyone because of legally defined 'protected characteristics.

However, well-intentioned attempts to address legitimate problems can foster a culture of fear in which people are often wary of saying the wrong thing. This is especially the case in the current culture, where it is all too easy to take offence when none is intended. The fear of offending can lead to the kind of hyper-vigilance that causes us to disengage from others and avoid the uncomfortable conversations that growth and connection necessitate.

An awareness of how our words affect others is crucial to cultivating empathy and compassion. However, the fact that our words may cause emotional discomfort does not negate our responsibility to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Jesus' rebuke of Peter (Matthew 16:23) probably cut the disciple to the core. Jesus would have been well aware that His words would hurt Peter's feelings. Yet, what was more important was alerting Peter to the influence he was allowing the Enemy to have over him. Ultimately, Peter was able to handle the rebuff because of the context of love in which it was given.

The greatest barriers to resolving conflict are often the negative motives we attribute to those with whom we disagree. Proverbs 18:19 states, "A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city". When we allow resentment and bitterness to grow in our hearts, the intensity of our emotions create obstacles to the exercise of forgiveness and reconciliation. Subjective concepts like microaggressions and hate speech have the tendency to shift the focus of offence from intent to impact. Our feelings become the basis by which we judge others' intentions.



We jeopardise our relationships when our perception unquestioningly becomes our reality - when we elevate sensitivity over truth. We must exercise extreme caution when judging the motives of others. Jesus instructs us that we will know people by their 'fruits' (Matthew 7:20). However, this assumes that we can exercise sound judgement. In the end analysis, only God knows the 'counsels of the heart'. In the absence of clear evidence, we risk bearing false witness by assuming ulterior motives. Where doubt exists, we increase the opportunity for connection when we give others the benefit of the doubt.

Author Brené Brown poses a challenging question: "What if we assumed that, at any given moment, others are doing the best they can with what they have?" Obviously, this is often not the case, and we should not be naïve. However, the more we make generous assumptions about the motives of others, the more likely we are to cultivate healthy relations with them. Attributing microaggressions and bad intentions can lead to a tendency to look for the worst in others.

BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

Ellen White states a principle based on 2 Corinthians 3:18 that, “by beholding we become changed.” It is a principle supported by the evidence of neuroscience and psychology that we tend to see that for which we look. In many cases, ‘perception is projection.’ According to John Wesley, “People who wish to be offended will always find some occasion for taking offence.” If we look for offence, we will find offence. Conversely, if we look for the good, we may well find the good.

Marriage expert, John Gottman, identifies the concept of 'marital drift' as a major cause of divorce. He asserts that at the beginning of a marriage, couples tend to be focused on what is positive in their relationship. However, as time passes, focus gradually shifts toward what's wrong with the relationship to the point that they begin to ascribe negative motivations to even innocent interactions. They may even rewrite history to spin loving deeds into 'bad acts' when viewed through the distorted lens of their current negative perspective.

The antidote to marital drift is to intentionally shift our focus from what is negative in our relationship to what is positive. This principle applies in all of our relationships. Steven Covey taught that between what happens to us (stimulus) and what we do about it (response), there is the freedom to choose. The choices we make either diminish us or strengthen us - build up or break down. We cannot control how others choose to relate to us, but we are in control of our response. Offence is not so much given, as it is taken.

**ACCENTUATE
THE POSITIVE.
ELIMINATE
THE NEGATIVE.**

Solomon said, "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses" (Proverbs 10:12 NASB, see also 17:9, 19:10). Nursing real or imaginary grievences will eventually rip the heart out of our relationships in the absence of a willingness to extend to others the grace God has extended to us. The greatest offence ever perpetrated is the offence of the Cross. Yet Paul, informs us that, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:19-21). Therefore, "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:31-32).