

# Disagreeing Well



by KRISTIN SILVA

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How do you disagree well? Disagreement is commonplace, so this question is always relevant. The world is fractured by political, religious, ideological, and personal disagreements. These disagreements can turn into conflicts, fights, hostility, division—even war. But behind the negative way disagreements usually play out is a positive creational foundation. Before disagreement becomes conflict, it starts out as *difference*. Different opinions. Different likes. Different leanings. Different tastes. Different lenses with which to view the world. Different cultures, backgrounds, aptitudes, loves, goals, concerns, comforts. These differences are the points at which disagreements arise. To faithfully navigate them, we need a robust understanding of difference—and how God intends difference to function in his creation and in his people.

## **Difference Is Good but Sin Corrupts**

Difference started with God, so our first task is to understand difference biblically. Let's think about the ways the Lord created difference to function constructively, and set categories that help us discern good difference from bad. To begin, what makes difference good?

The story of difference begins in the Lord himself. He has variety within unity; he is three distinct (different!) persons united in one. When the Lord

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created a world that reflects his own splendor, he made it full of variety and difference. He delights in variation—he created a multitude of species and kinds, an array of colors and textures. And to finish his creation he crowned it with his own image—male and female. Different and yet united, God commanded them to multiply variety through offspring.

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## To live well amidst differences, we must value the goodness of variety because it images God.

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The theme of variety within unity is found throughout all of Scripture. One place it surfaces dramatically is how God makes nations, tribes, tongues, and peoples who are different from each other. These differences have the potential to glorify God in a kaleidoscope of diverse ways. Similarly, variety within unity surfaces prominently when Paul describes the gifts within the body of Christ. He begins this teaching with a Trinitarian formula. “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone” (1 Cor 12:4–5). The different gifts reflect God’s variety.

Indeed, differences display the splendor of the Lord. To live well amidst differences, we must value the goodness of variety because it images God. But that is not always how we respond. Because of our sinfulness, we are often tempted to see otherness, or difference, as intrinsically bad. This temptation can be subtle. Have you ever been frustrated with someone because he is not like you? Or avoided someone at church because she seems strange to you? If so, your frustration or your avoidance is identifying differences as a problem. In both of these situations, we fail to see the goodness of the variety the Lord created to image himself.

Other times we don’t view differences as good or bad, but as neutral. Maybe that sounds like this:

“You hold your opinion and I hold mine.”

“Let’s agree to disagree.”

“Live and let live.”

In other words, difference just *is* and the goal is simply to respect that. Without a Godward trajectory, this may be the best place you can land—but it falls woefully short of God’s design for us to learn and value good differences.

As we’ve seen, God’s design for otherness or difference is deeply good. Fallen people just don’t see it that way. And to this reality we must add that difference itself has been corrupted. When Satan brought sin into the world, it entangled and warped what God created. Due to the fall, difference no longer images God alone, so it is no longer all good. Variety has become tainted by sin. There are evil differences—true wrongs, false perspectives, counterfeit saviors. Sin impacts our interactions with difference in three ways.

First, we are tempted to make the categories of difference too simple—as if a difference is either good or bad. But sin makes it more complex than that. For example, take Lamech’s poem in Genesis 4. God gave poets gifts and strengths in communication. And yet people can hijack the medium of poetry and use it to harm rather than bless. This is how Lamech used the form.

“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;  
 you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:  
 I have killed a man for wounding me,  
 a young man for striking me.  
 If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold,  
 then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold.” (Gen 4:23–24)

This poem is a piece of artwork. It’s linguistically stunning, but it doesn’t take a Hebrew scholar to hear the wickedness of Lamech’s heart expressed in artistic form. It’s an example of a creative ability—a beautiful source of variety—twisted to display the image of the enemy.

Second, sin tempts us to discern the right or wrong of difference by self-centered standards. So while good difference images its Creator in its splendor and variety, sin tempts us to value difference according to our own likeness. If a difference is only good if it aligns with my preferences and tastes, then I’m living in the warp of sin.

Finally, because of sin, difference has the potential to divide. In Adam’s family, the farmer killed the shepherd (Gen 4:1–16). In Isaac’s family, two brothers—who will become the nations of Israel and Edom—are set against

each other (Gen 25:19–34). This plays out over and over in Scripture when people and people groups erect “dividing walls of hostility” (Eph 2:14).

I grew up in the late 80s when rap and hip hop music entered the Christian music scene. It was a music form that reflected a good difference—rhythms and spoken word blended with music. But the secular version was widely associated with violent, immoral lyrics. It was a modern version of Lamech’s poem. The temptation for many Christians was to only see the gnarl and not to notice or appreciate the skill, artistry, and uniqueness of a new form of music that could be used in a worshipful way.

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## Division is the way of fracture. But what is the way of Christ uniting us, making variety and difference beautiful again?

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This example demonstrates all three of the effects that sin brings to this equation.

1. Rather than being able to discern the good and appreciate the adornment of creation, people were tempted to only associate this music with sin.
2. Since this music was new and foreign to them, people judged the goodness of the difference based on their own inclinations. But just because someone doesn’t lean toward a certain type of music, it doesn’t make the difference bad.
3. The music had the propensity to divide. “I don’t associate with people who listen to *that* kind of music.” Making assumptions about the kinds of people who listen to rap separates people.

Though no one is required to enjoy this type of music, to not see its beauty in variety, to proclaim it as simply bad, and to allow it to separate people is sin on top of sin. This is not disagreeing well.

However, not disagreeing well is not limited to smaller matters like taste in music. We experience disagreements at all levels of human experience—between friends, families, ethnic groups, even countries. We’ve seen that

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