

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

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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

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