

Change Your Mind

Thoughts for Interpretive Leaders

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I'm right. You're wrong. Any questions?

Fundamental Attribution Error and the law of Christ

by Jim Van Yperen

Things are never quite what they seem. We want to believe that what happens *is* exactly how we reason it. But this is almost never the case, and many a ruined friendship has sunk in these shoals.

Our assumption is that we view the world objectively, without bias. In reality, everything we see and think about comes through an interpretive filter constructed out of our past experience, assumptions and conclusions. This is how we explain the world around us. Explanation provides control and control, safety.

Your friend leaves your house, slamming the door behind him. Your brain kicks into gear searching for a reason why. He must be angry. You think about why and grab an explanation. You don't consider how your perspective is inadequate or flawed. You simply react on what you know, as if that is all there is to know. It seems obvious to you.

Social theorists have a name for this: *fundamental attribution error*. The word *fundamental* means that this behavior is very common and widespread. We all do it, a lot. The word *attribution* refers to the cognitive process of attributing cause to an

event or behavior. The word *error* tells us this reasoning is nearly always inadequate, and frequently wrong. Briefly stated, *fundamental attribution error* is the widespread problem of making wrong judgments. It means that you and I tend to overestimate the intentions of others while under-estimating our own responsibility. When *you* do something wrong, I believe that *you chose* to do it, perhaps even intended some harm. But when I do the same thing, I assume that circumstances left me no choice. "I did the best I could at the time." Thus, I attribute motive and intention to you, but see my own actions as situational.

So, when your friend slams the door you assume he was angry and *intended* to make a point. But, later, when you go out and the door swings closed with a bang, you think, "I need to fix that hinge." In other words, we tend to attribute personal intent for the actions of others while explaining and excusing the same action for ourselves.

How we explain what happens impacts the quality and depth of our relationships. If I believe that you said or did something intentionally, that is, I attribute your action as deliberate and personal, it is very

likely that I will take offense and respond accordingly, usually in a way that separates you from me. But if I attribute what you said or did to some outside event, some pressure or circumstance beyond your intent, (i.e., the wind blew the door shut) then I am not offended and our relationship is not affected.

Every relationship is unique. Every interaction is complex. The way I respond to any situation is only part of the story. Let's say, for example, that I am offended by something you say. At the same time I am judging you, you are picking up signals from me, and making judgments of your own about me. We are both making *fundamental attribution errors*. We are both moving away from each other.

Without a mutual commitment to non-judgmental communication, our relationship will not grow beyond the superficial. That's why the Apostle Paul links spiritual growth to the practice of open, grace-filled, "speaking the truth in love."¹

Which option best describes relationships in your church: *fundamental attribution error*, or speaking the truth in love?

The sad truth is, most of us can become righteously indignant about holding others accountable while we

are quite willing to minimize our own actions. We are quick to blame others while justifying ourselves.

For instance, imagine that you and I are leaders in a church. One day, you come to me to correct something I said in a sermon, or to point out a weakness you've noticed in my leadership. I'm surprised by this. I think you've crossed a line, and interpret your words as being judgmental or harsh. I react, "Who does he think he is?!" I take offense at your pride. I'm hurt by your lack of support. My hurt, I reason, justifies my "right" to tell other leaders about how proud and critical you are. In fact, it's my duty to warn them so they can be protected from being hurt by you also. Of course, when you hear what I said about you, you feel betrayed and hurt. "Who does Jim think he is?!" you think. Now, you believe you have the "right" to tell others why I cannot be trusted. This, in turn, gives me the "right" to widen the circle of who I speak to about you. I send some emails and talk behind your back. You call me a "gossip," and tell others, "Jim is controlling." I don't see it that way at all. I am merely speaking the truth.

We have seen this kind of vicious cycle go round and round until a whole church is divided into sides for and against two leaders. The fact is, however, no Christian ever has any "right" over the other. Our one duty is to love. Thus, when I talk about you and you talk about me, we are both speaking evil, resisting reconciliation, and feeding bitterness that keeps us blinded to our mutual pride, mutual self-deception and mutual separation.

Fundamental attribution error is one of the single greatest causes of church conflict. Here is just one example from a church we served:

Mike and Harry were unreconciled to each other. Both said they wanted to be reconciled, but when the time came for them to meet and talk (first personally, and later with the Deacons) Mike consistently broke every appointment. At first, Mike cited family circumstances that made it "impossible for me to meet." Later, Mike promised to meet but, after advice from relatives, he would only meet if two or three of his relatives were present "to protect me," he said. "You've hurt me." Mike said, "I don't trust you. I've been advised not to meet with you." Finally, Mike used the spiritual trump card, "After praying about this," Mike said, "God has told me not to meet with you."

(Blaming God has a long tradition, going all the way back to Adam, "*the woman you gave me brought me the fruit.*"²)

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Let's look closely at what Mike is saying. Note how every rationale he gives attributes outside circumstances for his behavior. In each instance, Mike claims, "I am not responsible." Circumstances, feelings, advice and even prayer were all reasons why Jesus' command, "*go and be reconciled,*" did not apply to Mike. When the Deacons challenged Mike on this, he simply said, "I'm only following the advice of others," (with the Holy Spirit being one of the others.) Mike never said that he did not want to be reconciled, he knew he could not say that. He just made no effort to be reconciled.

After many months of cancelled meetings, Harry decided to write a personal letter to Mike asking forgiveness for where he had sinned against Mike, expressing hope that

they could still meet to be reconciled one day. Mike's terse response back came indirectly, by email and through a relative, saying that Harry's apology was "not sincere," and his letter was "manipulative." Mike neither recognized nor offered forgiveness for Harry's confession.

Correcting the error

If *fundamental attribution error* is as common as social theorists say it is and as damaging as our church experience seems to demonstrate, what do we do to correct this dysfunction and respond redemptively?

Jesus offers three simple words in the greatest sermon ever given: "love," "stop," and "go."

Love

For Jesus, the first act is always love. Jesus spent a lot of time talking to people who thought themselves righteous, people who were quick to find fault in others. Here is what Jesus told them:

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. . . But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."*³

Jesus says that our response should be to love, do good to, bless, pray for, and give to anyone, even those who wrong us. *“No matter what anyone says about you, or does to you,”* Jesus teaches, *“Be merciful as your Father is merciful.”* Indeed, that standard is to, *“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”*

For Jesus, love is unconditional. Our love toward others is never based upon what they do or don't do for us. Our response is always love, regardless of how the other person responds. The Apostle Paul builds upon the teaching and example of Jesus, saying, *“do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.”*⁴

This goes against our sense of fairness, of course, so our mind quickly looks for a loop-hole.¹

“What about Jesus driving the money-changers out of the temple?” we ask. But the Jesus Story will not allow the escape we seek. It is justice God desires, not fairness. To be sure, Jesus said and did hard things. But Jesus never said or did anything *in response* to what others said or did against him.

In fact, the Jesus Story is radical in its subordination. Consider, for example, the events of the Upper Room. Jesus gathers with his disciples for what would be his last meal. His first act is to demonstrate *“the full extent of his love”* by getting up from the table, kneeling beside each disciple and washing their feet. He serves -- renders the service of a slave to -- the very people who would soon abandon him. More than this, he washes the feet of his betrayer.

Imagine! Think of the person with whom you have had conflict, the person you feel certain has spoken or done things against you. Imagine

kneeling right now and washing that person's feet. Could you do that with humility and integrity? That is love. Indeed, this is the posture Jesus takes during the entire ordeal of his crucifixion. He remains silent in front of his accusers and submits to the brutal suffering of the cross. He pleads for the cup of wrath to be removed, but submits to his Father's will. This is no ordinary, sentimental love, no going through the motions, or keeping up appearances. This is gut-wrenching, self-emptying love.

This is our Story. This is the standard of love we are called to; the picture we need to think of first when our mind leaps to judge and our lips want to condemn what others have done. The Jesus Way never seeks vindication; never defends; never plays the victim. The Way of Jesus is the way of unconditional love.

*“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*⁶

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Jesus' love for us is not tied to who we are, what we do or what we deserve. His is a generous, self-sacrificing love that, while we are “still sinners,” (in the midst of our pride and rebellion), Jesus cries out on our behalf, *“Father forgive them.”* Instead of condemning our sin, Jesus becomes sin for us “that we might become the righteousness of God.”⁷ Jesus puts to death our need to be right or defended. His death makes possible the gift of love and forgiveness *that you can give others.*

The key to loving others is accepting God's forgiveness. Indeed, as Jesus says, *“He who has been forgiven little loves little.”*⁸ Could it be that your desire to blame others is, in the end, not about others at all, but is revealing your own deep need to accept God's unconditional love and forgiveness? What does the measure of your forgiveness toward others say about the measure of your love?

The radical nature of our Story is unconditional love. It is the example Jesus gives us, the pathway he lays out for his followers when we are mistreated or unfairly attacked. It is the way of the cross, what Amy Carmichael calls, “Calvary love.”

*If I belittle those I'm called to serve, talk of their weak points in context perhaps with what I think of as my strong points; if I adopt a superior attitude, forgetting, “Who made thee to differ? And what has thou that thou has not received?” then I know nothing of Calvary love . . . If I can write an unkind letter, speak an unkind word, think an unkind thought without grief and shame, then I know nothing of Calvary love.*⁹

Stop

The second instruction Jesus offers in his Sermon on the Mount follows naturally from the first. To love someone is to “keep no record of wrong.”¹⁰ So, Jesus tells us to, “Stop judging others.”

We cannot love and pray and do good for another if we are constantly judging their intent, or attributing motive for their every word or deed. In fact, according to Scripture, judging another human being is *never* the role of an individual. It is always the work of God *through the church*. It is never the role of an individual simply because no one person can

ever know the truth completely, let alone see into the heart of another. Indeed, Scripture reminds us that the human heart is desperately wicked,¹¹ self-absorbed and self-deceived. It is easy to see the wickedness in others! But, of course, this only reveals our own deception. Jesus says it this way, “Don’t be self-serving. Take the log out of your own eye before removing the speck in our brother’s eye.”

How you think about others has impact on how others will think about you. “People will treat you as you treat them,” Jesus says. “Whatever measure you use in judging others, it will be used to measure how you are judged.”¹² The command to stop judging relates directly to the first and greatest command to “start loving.” Treat others as you would have them treat you. Here, it simply means giving people the “benefit of the doubt.”

The greatest fear most leaders have is losing their reputation and respect. Ironically, the leader who seeks to keep one’s status by blaming others and defending oneself may win the argument but will always lose trust.

Trust is proportional to the ability of a leader to take responsibility, to humbly admit wrong and to demonstrate a commitment to change regardless of what other people do. We cannot blame others for the character our response reveals. *Fundamental attribution error* causes us to look at the wrong things, by focusing on the wrong person. Jesus says, in affect, “look in the mirror.” How can you judge others when you cannot even see yourself truthfully? Your judgment is biased. This is why judgment and discipline is always reserved for the church where various perspectives may be gathered and tested for spiritual discernment.

Trust is directly proportional to the ability of a leader to take personal responsibility, humbly admit wrong and to demonstrate a commitment to change regardless of what other people do.

Go

The third word in Jesus instruction is to “go,” to *go be reconciled*.

Jesus tells us to go immediately, personally and privately whenever we are made aware of a problem between ourselves and another. There are two ways this may happen.

First, when the Holy Spirit convicts us that *we have wronged* someone else, we are to go.

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”¹³

Second, when we witness a brother or sister sinning, we are to go.

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”¹⁴

If you are the sinner, you are to go. If you are the one sinned against, you are to go. In other words, there is never a situation when a believer can refuse to be reconciled. There is no instance where you can decide not to go. Jesus does not say, “If the person is nice, go,” or, “If you are emotionally strong, or not too hurt, go,” or “Ask your friends to pray about whether you should go or not, and if they agree, then go.”

Go means go.

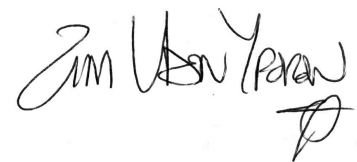
The thrust of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels, and Paul’s instructions in his

letters is to address the issue in the most immediate and personal way and, get this, *for the good of the sinner*.¹⁵

Yes, that is what Scripture teaches. Confession and confrontation are not steps given to punish the sinner and vindicate the one sinned against. Reconciliation is always to be done for the restoration of the sinner, in a way that the sinner may “listen” and be gently restored. It is never about you being right or proving the other wrong. There are no sides.

Think about what this means! Suddenly, your hurt is not an excuse. In fact, your hurt is not even relevant. Jesus is telling you to do the exact opposite of *fundamental attribution error*. Instead of focusing on yourself as a victim and the other as your antagonist, you are to intentionally care for the welfare of the other.

Speaking the truth in love is not a way to exercise your rights. It is God’s way to fulfill the law of Christ—to love, stop and go.



ENDNOTES:

1. Ephesians 4:15
2. Genesis 3:12
3. Matthew 6: 43; Luke 6:27-36
4. Philippians 2:3
5. Mark Twain once said, “It is not the things I don’t understand in the Bible that bother me, it is the things I do.”
6. John 13:34-35
7. 2Corinthians 5: 21
8. Luke 7:47b
9. Amy Carmichael, “Calvary Love,” from *IF*, by Dohnavur Fellowship. Fort Washington, PA; Christian Literature Crusade
10. 1Corinthians 13:5
11. Jeremiah 17:9
12. Matthew 7:1-2 (NLT)
13. Matthew 5:23-24
14. Matthew 18:15
15. Galatians 6:1-3; Romans 12:14-21