



# POLITICALLY CORRECT

*Compiled by Roedolf Botha*

## Introduction

This trend report looks at political correctness. It specifically focuses on how the concept is used in the world today, as well as its effect on current communication in the different spheres of society, especially in the media and social media.

From the outset we want to ask – since the theme includes the word “political” and is therefore somewhat sensitive – that the reader reads this report with an open mind. This report does not in any way try to maintain a specific political position, nor do we promote it. If examples are given from a “leftist” or “right-winged” perspective, the aim is not political. Although each of us have biases, *eachurch* too, we try to give relevant examples within the limits of our own objectivity in this theme.

We will try to look at the implications of political correctness on the church of today and society in general, as well as some guidelines to enable the Jesus community to deal with this issue. Although the term “*political correctness*” has a long history, its motive and aim is currently given by Google as follows (Dictionary s.a: ad loc.)

*(Political correctness is) the avoidance of forms of expression or actions that are perceived to exclude, marginalise, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against.*

Key terms in this definition of political correctness are therefore “language”, “insult”, “exclusion” and “minority groups”. The most important of these four words is therefore “insult”, and specifically the avoidance thereof.

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Although the origin and original motive of political correctness was neutral, the term has gained a tone of controversy in recent years, as parties with widely diverse views now use it to “prove” their own arguments and cast their opponents in the role of villains. The result is that many people today feel that freedom of speech is undermined by this.

One example is Lyndsay Sheppard – a postgraduate student and assistant communications lecturer at the Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario. She was recently summoned and reprimanded by the management of the university after she played a Youtube video in her class in which two academics participated in a debate – the one debater being Jordan Peterson. Sheppard’s intention was to present two sides of a principle, after which a healthy discussion could take place. Unfortunately Peterson did not represent the political views of the university and the university considered him to be a proponent of right-wing politics (something Peterson himself denies). Sheppard was strongly warned to never include Peterson in any of her classroom material, since some students may find it offensive (Wikipedia Sheppard s.a: ad. loc.).

According to the university, Sheppard was politically incorrect. She, however, didn’t see it that way. She felt that she encouraged freedom of speech and helped students to learn to think critically.

How should we reflect on this controversial topic? How should we navigate the waters between sensitivity towards minority groups on the one hand, and freedom of speech and a focus on the truth on the other?

## A cursory glance at a world-wide trend

The term “political correctness” was in common use before the second half of the previous century (Wikipedia Political Correctness s.a: ad. loc.). In the first half of the 1900s the term was mostly used to refer to loyalty towards certain ideological dogmas. For example, the *New York Times* reported in 1934 that Nazi Germany only issued journalist permits to “pure Arians” who had “politically correct” views (Gibson 2016: ad. loc.). Since then the term has developed and evolved quite a bit. Some time later the term was used by Socialists to refer to the Communist Party, who viewed themselves as being politically correct in all respects at all times (Kohl 1992: ad. loc.).

In the 1970s, the *American New Left* began to use the term “politically correct” in today’s terms, especially when some anti-pornography movements attempted to define female sexuality (Willis 1992: 19). In the 1990s, the terms also found new meaning in academic circles, most notably with regards to what should be taught in universities. The use of the term on university campuses later became an important front on which the term is used even today in fights between different factions. So says Robert McFadden (1991: ad. loc.):

*“What has come to be called ‘political correctness’, a term that began to gain currency at the start of the academic year last fall, has spread in recent months and has become the focus of an angry national debate, mainly on campuses, but also in the larger arenas of American life.”*

## Current uses of the term

Today the term “politically correct” is mostly used in two ways:

The *first* form of political correctness is an attempt to use language in a healthy and sensitive way to try to avoid unnecessary pain and insult to minority groups. In this sense, certain words that were previously used for oppressed women, black people, minority sexual groups and religious groups are replaced with

terms that are “softer” and more respectful. The aim is to communicate in a way that will respect people’s dignity. Here are a number of international examples (Furness 2017: ad. loc.):

“Fireman” can be replaced with “firefighter” (to include women); “tramp” becomes “homeless person”; a “chairman” is a “chairperson”; “Blacks” are “African-Americans”; “forefathers” are called “ancestors”, et cetera.

In South Africa “prostitute” is replaced with “sex worker”; the “poor” become “economically marginalised”; “homosexuals” are now “gays”; “black people” are referred to as “people of colour”; “the man on the street” is “the average person”; and “man power” becomes “human resources” or simply “labour”, to name but a few.

There is also a *second* form of political correctness that involves certain political or ideological biases in the media. These biases allow hard realities to be hidden and certain truths to be suppressed through the use of “correct” terms and language. Some groups are advantaged by the choices of the media, while others are marginalised, depending on the biases of the specific media group. In this way, political correctness can be exploited by a group of people in order to avoid and suppress unpleasant critique so that transformation never takes place. (Examples: s.a ad. loc.).

Many examples can be given (Hughes 2011 ad. loc.):

- A school in Seattle replaced the words “Easter eggs” with “spring spheres”, out of fear of offending non-Christen groups.
- The Board of the United Kingdom replaced the term “brain storming” with “thought showers”, out of respect for people who suffer from epilepsy.
- A recruitment agency in the UK was stunned when their advertisement for “reliable and hard-working” people was rejected because it could offend unreliable and lazy people.

Some schools in the USA may not use the term “Christmas tree” anymore, and instead use the term “holiday tree” in order to avoid offending non-Christians.

Many companies no longer refer to people who are very obese, because they say: *“Body structure is not important. Only how you feel about yourself is important. Everyone is individual, and all are beautiful”* (Examples s.a: ad. loc.).

Many people, from both politically left- and right-wing camps, feel that the uses of political correctness mentioned above are no longer helpful in society, because it limits freedom of speech, as well as realism (Peterson 2018: ad. loc.). If a recruitment agency can no longer use reliability and diligence as virtues to the advantage of society, then society itself is harmed. Surely everything (such as being severely obese) isn’t good. Negative aspects such as these should be addressed for the good of those who face possible heart attacks!

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In light of this, others warn that we should be critical of political correctness, because it can easily serve any ideology, whether good or bad (Ebersohn 2017: ad. loc.). In the service of an unhealthy ideology it can even play right into the hand of the oppressor. So, he claims, the Nazi party was also initially a minority group in Hitler’s time, which later became politically correct. This was also the case with the regime of Stalin, and in a lesser sense North Korea!

Political correctness also has a second negative side-effect: it has the ability to polarise society. For example, if someone doesn’t agree with a leftist view, that person is easily accused of being a racist or Nazi (Foley 2017: xiii). Or, if someone doesn’t agree with a more right-wing view, he is seen as a liberalist, Communist or accused of going against God or the Bible. This simply isn’t always true.

## The South African context

Political correctness is as important and alive in our own country as in any other in the world. It is increasingly difficult to publicly voice any opinion that doesn't correlate with the political correctness of the day. Ebersohn sums it up aptly (2017: ad. loc.):

*The truth of the matter is that what constitutes political correctness depends on the society you are talking about. In most modern Western countries it seems to be a sort of left-leaning socialism cum liberalism. Within this framework, unions are good, Trump is bad, "race" as a word is taboo, policemen who shoot someone are automatically guilty and homeless Syrians should be allowed to flood into Europe.*

*In South Africa, political correctness means falling in with a certain kind of thinking that has as its stated aim assisting all who were discriminated against by Apartheid, surely a noble cause. In this way of thinking, discriminating in favour of black people is upliftment, discriminating in favour of whites is racism, dismissed employees are automatically innocent of any wrong-doing, limiting the number of whites in the national cricket team is good, but insisting on one white in the national football team is only raised as a point of discussion by lunatics. I believe it is something that we will get over in due course.*

Cole puts it this way (2017: ad. loc.):

*Although political correctness can combat discrimination and exclusion, at times it can get in the way of the truth.*

Many people in South Africa have seemingly had enough of the bizarre use of political correctness, because it undermines progress. With newspapers proclaiming "To hell with political correctness in South Africa" (Burnett 2016: ad, loc.) and "Is it time to lose political correctness in South Africa?" (News24 s.a ad. loc), it is clear that many people have little patience left for what they call childish forms of political correctness.

### Impact on church leaders

Few powers today interact so powerfully with ministers and congregations as political correctness (Foley 2017: xiv). Ministers and pastors have never been so careful about what they say. Of course, this isn't always a bad thing.

In a politically correct world, the Christian faith can often be seen as the "main suspect", because we have very specific values and beliefs. We have clear views on issues such as the church, government, humanity, sexuality, God, being gay, other religions and non-believers. This means that our message will most likely clash with "modern thinking", and that we will be viewed as being politically incorrect (Foley 2017: xi-xii).

What often happens in reaction, is that many congregations are losing their integrity because they feel that some issues are "off limits". Many ministers feel that it is increasingly difficult to talk about Jesus as the risen Lord (because some scientists ridicule the Resurrection), or Jesus as the only path to God (because it is "discriminating") or even sexuality (because the transgender debate is so sensitive).



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## What can the church do?

### 1. **Teach our people that language is holy and that we should watch our words.**

John says that Jesus is the Logos of God. He is God's voice. He is God's language. God created the world through language and speech. Language is an agent of God. God wants to communicate, He wants to convince and speak life. This is why He talks to us! Even better: this is why He sent the Logos. We can only think and talk about God through the symbolism of language. Eugene Peterson says this is exactly why language itself is holy! With language we can either create or destroy. With language we speak life or death, says the writer of Proverbs.

Something like the so-called "k-word" that was used in the apartheid years and still live on on some people's lips today, is completely and utterly unacceptable. We should fight for minority groups and people who have been disadvantaged or victimised. We should protect and serve widows, the poor, the suppressed. And it should show in the way we speak.

### 2. **We may not partake in creating a "culture of victimhood"** (Foley 2017: 253).

Being easily angered is not a virtue. Paul says "...love isn't easily angered" (1 Cor 13:5). Being easily offended is not a spiritual or moral victory, but Biblically spoken rather the fruit of immaturity. Only spiritual babies constantly cry about everything and turn into emotional bleeders when they suffer minor scratches. Being sensitive about what we say and speaking in love is very important. However, we don't have the luxury of always telling people what they want to hear. We may not propagate a "culture of victimhood" in the name of justice. When we partake in a culture that constantly tells minority groups that they should raise their voices every time they don't get what they want, we are harming society. This attitude raises the "victim" to a privileged position while the other party is demonised as a suppressor. We can't stand for this with a clean conscience (Foley 2017: 153). We're doing no-one any favours by constantly supporting their view that they are victims. This is no way of creating freedom through language, it is simply a way of building new prisons. It is creating a boring, humourless society where everyone walks on eggshells to avoid offending anyone else.

Nietzsche is famous for his words: "*O save me from the unfortunate!*" His intention with these words was that once people see themselves as victims and take on a victimised identity, they eventually also become militant and self-entitled.

### 3. **Rather take responsibility for your own life.** Over-reacting is often a way in which we hide behind our "victim status". It becomes a way of avoiding responsibility. When we don't take responsibility for our circumstances and actions in life, and rather blame others, we also diminish our ability to change our destiny (Foley 2017: 254). It prevents self-knowledge, because you never question yourself or reflect on your life. Instead, you choose to blame others for everything.

### 4. **The Gospel is good news for the oppressed, but not always politically correct.**

We can only be politically correct if it serves truth and love. As freeing as the message of Jesus is, it is still important to realise that the confrontational and sin-exposing nature of the good news is exactly what brings about salvation. The sinner doesn't want to hear that he sins, and yet when he does hear and accept it, it brings freedom and peace beyond belief.

Jesus wasn't politically correct when He cleansed the temple (Luke 19:45-46). He wasn't politically correct when He told His followers to eat His flesh and drink His blood (Joh 6:55-56, 65-66). Neither was he politically correct when he called the Pharisees descendants of snakes (Mathew 23)! The reason was that Jesus was a prophet and that a prophet should expose the corruption and selfishness in his own culture. A prophet doesn't have the luxury of worrying about offending others. The church should continue Jesus' work in the same way. The prophets of the Old Testament also seldom had a popular message to deliver. A prophet's message is often not politically correct. How on earth will we maintain our prophetic voice while being politically correct at the same time?

This is why Paul says (1 Cor 1) that the cross of Jesus is an embarrassment to the Jews and nonsense to the Greeks. Our message won't always make sense to the world. We should be prepared to be unpopular. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't also be wise (Col 4:5). It also doesn't imply that we shouldn't act strategically. Jesus himself said that we should be as honest as doves and careful as snakes (Matthew 10). Indeed, we need an abundance of wisdom and care. But wisdom isn't always the same as political correctness. Our prophetic voice should be heard.

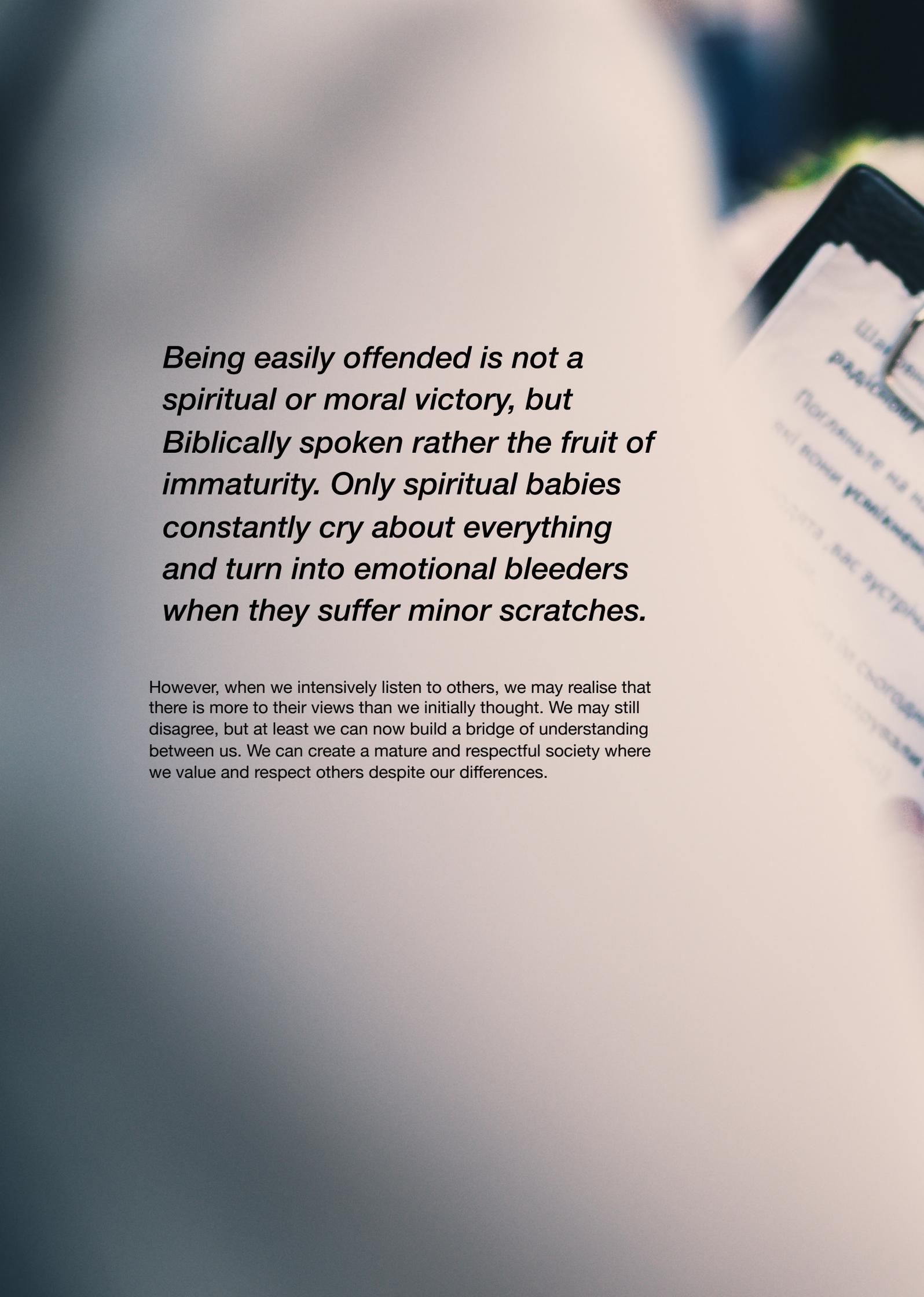
5. **In an individualistic world the faithful should remind each other that God's voice is at the core of everything and not our individual voices.** Another central message of the Bible is that the individual isn't the core; only God is. Communication isn't primarily about what sounds good, comfortable or safe for us as Western individuals or what doesn't. It is always about what God wants us to understand, whether it offends us, or not! Sometimes we need a Nathan – like David of old – to tell us, “You are guilty”, whether we want to hear it, or not. In contrast, a “victim culture” that is overly sensitive for insults will focus all the attention on itself (Foley 2017: 254). The status of victim is actually a coveted one in many political circles and the position of oppressor is vilified to such an extent that some talk about “competitive victimhood” (Foley 2017: 254).

6. **Teach our people to discriminate between sentiment and love.** There is a huge and important difference between sentiment and love. Sentiment always tells a person what he or she wants to hear. Sentiment wants the other person to feel good. It isn't love. Love is too interested in the truth and wellbeing of the other person. Love therefore says what it says in the interest of the other person's growth and progress. This is how Eugene Peterson interprets Philippians 1:10:

*Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gushing.*

Love is honest and intelligent and therefore values the other person so much that it will always choose the truth. The content of our words should not be determined by whether the other person will feel offended, but by what the other person needs to hear in order to grow.

7. **Make space for nuance and stop polarising.** It is very easy to think that someone else's views are stupid or discriminatory if you don't listen properly. If we think in this way, we will always see those who disagree with us as the enemy. In this way we make caricatures of all opponents and their opinions, and we polarise our opinions even further.



***Being easily offended is not a spiritual or moral victory, but Biblically spoken rather the fruit of immaturity. Only spiritual babies constantly cry about everything and turn into emotional bleeders when they suffer minor scratches.***

However, when we intensively listen to others, we may realise that there is more to their views than we initially thought. We may still disagree, but at least we can now build a bridge of understanding between us. We can create a mature and respectful society where we value and respect others despite our differences.



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