

Question: I have a co-worker whom I feel takes advantage of me and oversteps my boundaries. As a Christian, is there a way to be assertive and kind at the same time?

Some Christians feel uneasy about being assertive in almost any situation. They may be shy or feel awkward or afraid of sounding and acting unkind. They may have the misconception that assertive behavior which seems to demand our rights over the rights of others is not Christ-like behavior. It may be seen as an excuse to blow up when we feel like it.

However, each of us has been created in “the image of God” (Genesis 1:27). Although that image has been marred by sin, Christians have had that image renewed by a life “in Christ” who has shown our value by purchasing us with his own shed blood and by giving us the Holy Spirit to dwell in us (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23). As such, we deserve the respect of our fellow human beings, especially from any fellow Christians. This is not because of anything we have done but because of who we are in Christ. Any failure to respect this image of God and presence of his Spirit shows a disrespect and ignorance of God.

There is nothing wrong with a Christ-like assertiveness. We should speak up in appropriate ways if not for ourselves then for the Lord who lives in us through his Spirit. The Bible teaches us to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Also, we are encouraged by the example of the early Christians in the book of Acts to speak and live with boldness (Acts 4:29; 28:31; 2 Corinthians 3:12) and by Paul’s admonition to Timothy that “the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7 NIV). One should surrender his rights to others only when it can be done as a free-will choice, not from being compelled. That is what Jesus had in mind when he said to go the extra mile or turn the other cheek. The first effort was compelled, but the second effort was a free choice to help or serve the other. By doing this, one can disarm the aggressor. But even in this, Jesus did not say we should go a third mile. There is a limit to which one should allow himself/herself to be taken advantage of without speaking up for our rights as children of God. As the apostle Paul said: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). Sadly, it is not always possible.

However, assertiveness should never be an excuse for a Christian becoming aggressive and abusive in dealing with another person. The fruit of the Spirit should always be evident in our lives: love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). We are also admonished: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. . . Do not take revenge . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:17-21).

One writer well said: “Assertiveness is a way of confronting the unpleasant or difficult without getting squashed or squashing others in the process. When you use assertiveness you can negotiate reasonable changes by stating directly what you think, feel and want. Assertiveness builds intimacy, solves interpersonal problems and increases honesty, requests and refusals in your relationships.”

How should we exercise Christian assertiveness? I would suggest the following: (1) pray for the wisdom of God and guidance of his Spirit. (2) speak up and confront problems as early as possible. (3) respect the other person by looking for or making an opportunity—depending on the situation—to talk with him/her privately. (4) choose your issues for confrontation carefully. Not every problem is worthy of the risk of harm that might come. (5) choose a time for confrontation when you know you can maintain calm and self-control no matter the other person’s reaction. (6) do not be timid. Look the person in the eye and speak with kindness. (7) listen carefully not only to the words but also to the heart of the person who responds. Ask questions to clarify your understanding of the other person. (8) do not allow this confrontation to end your working relationship if at all possible. Seek ways to enrich the relationship for the good of both of you.

[Send questions or comments to University Church of Christ, 801 N. 12th, Murray, KY 42071 or phone 270-753-1881. This article is reproduced on the web: univeristychurchmurray.com] 2014/12/05