

# The Art Of Tact And Diplomacy

by Staff

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*"A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a faithful ambassador brings health." —  
Proverbs 13:17*

One of the greatest statesmen in modern history could arguably be Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain during World War II. To war-torn England, he brought a formidable example of tenacity and resolve combined with an ability to motivate and promote confidence. Indeed, his approach to life and war were much-needed traits that inspired the English to regain their bearings when faced with the nightmarish situations early in the war.

His courage, decisiveness, political experience, and enormous vitality enabled him to lead his country through one of the most desperate struggles in British history. On May 10, 1940, the day Germany launched its surprise invasion of Holland and Belgium, King George VI asked Churchill to be prime minister. Churchill set the tone of his leadership in his first report to the House of Commons with these stirring words, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat."

It was only the first of his inspiring wartime speeches, which knit the country together and inspired people around the world. However, his leadership was especially effective during the Battle of Britain, which drew England into WWII. When the battles began, the Royal Air Force suffered heavy losses, but managed to turn back the powerful German Luftwaffe. Characteristically, Churchill put his words into action during the German bombing raids on London, spending as much time as possible with Britain's stricken citizens.

History reminds us favorably of Churchill's leadership and inspirational speeches to the English and the Allies, illustrating the impact of the right words spoken at a critical time. Yet, his words were not all that made him stand out. He also had the ability to *utilize his actions* in a fashion that was often just what was needed at the time; sometimes cautiously and other times forthrightly.

Of course, even Churchill had his human side, when his tact failed him. Once, he had a conversation with a woman who disliked him as much as he did her. When she felt compelled to tell him, "Mr. Churchill, if I were your wife, I would poison your coffee!" he replied, "Madam, if you were my wife, I would drink it." With his characteristic wit, he also was fully aware of his potential for speaking imprudently: "In the course of my life, I have often had to eat my words, and I must confess that I have always found it a wholesome diet."

## Diplomacy and Tact

Even with Churchill's carnal side as a factor, we can learn much from certain aspects of his life. From his "blood, sweat, and tears" speech in the House of Commons to his involvement in the lives of the everyday British, we see a man who "put his money where his mouth is" by striving to use just the right words for the proper circumstance and to support them with appropriate action. He tried to couple his words and actions, saying and doing the right thing at the right time.

This endeavor can be summarized by two key words: diplomacy and tact. *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines these two words as:

» *Diplomacy*: "a smoothness or skill in dealing with people."

» *Tact*: "the delicate perception of saying or doing the right thing; having a quick sense of what fits the given situation; thus avoiding offense."

Most of us are familiar with special individuals that most countries utilize in their relations with other nations, the diplomat. Typically, diplomats are seasoned individuals with a great deal of training in the fine art of smoothing over misunderstandings or misconceptions by one country of another. They are prized for their well-honed diplomatic skills as well as for having a firm grasp of how to deal tactfully with delicate issues that could start a war or bring about peace, depending on their skill.

One person whose job requires the use of these skills is an ambassador. This person is typically the chief representative of a nation in a foreign land. In many ways, he must embody these traits since he is the first-line contact of his home country or leader. His words and actions can affect the ongoing relationship between the two states.

An *ambassador* is "a messenger or a servant with a specific mission or task," who should have the above-mentioned traits. From this concept, along with scriptural references (II Corinthians 5:20; Ephesians 6:20), Herbert Armstrong named Ambassador College, an institution for educating people in the valuable virtues necessary for living a biblical way of life as "strangers and pilgrims" in a foreign land. Whether or not we realize it, each of us has had this education, be it through personally attending the college, hearing sermons at church given by its ministerial graduates, reading the publications, or watching the programs the church and college produced.

Most of us could never imagine ourselves in such a prominent role as a diplomat or ambassador. However, comparatively speaking, we should see these roles paling in scope to our own potential roles as regenerated sons of God. We have the vital responsibility *now* to grow in these attributes. We are currently learning this role one person and one circumstance at a time: how to say and do the right things at the right time, just as God Himself does. We will need these skills constantly in our future roles as rulers and leaders in God's Kingdom. Right now, we are students, and our world and all who touch it are our classroom.

### **Monitoring Our Words**

Proverbs 13:3 says, "He who guards his mouth preserves his life, but he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction." Proverbs 25:11 agrees, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver." Both scriptures give a basic standard for our speech. We must carefully consider what we say, tactfully and diplomatically using appropriate words—or not saying anything at all.

Of course, we cannot always know how our words will affect someone, whether through ignorance, misunderstandings, past history, or any number of reasons. Nevertheless, we can gauge what we say by our intentions, the tone of our voice, the meanings and double meanings of our word choices, and other methods within our control.

Every person and every situation we face are different. Our words and actions must be tailored to fit each one; a one-size-fits-all approach will likely end in a "diplomatic disaster." We have to remember that, in personal relations as much as in physics, for every action there is a reaction.

People often take our words at face value because they do not know our particular twists on them. We must choose our words to fit the situation or the personality of the person or group to which we are speaking. Some people may like the example of Churchill's response to the spiteful woman, but another person might take great offense at such a direct or blunt approach.

It is probably good to remember the adage, "Truthfulness and honesty may make a man respectable, but diplomacy and tactfulness makes him respected." Another says, "The secret to a man's success resides in his insight into the moods of people and his tact in dealing with them." Unfortunately for many of us, we fail to gauge our own moods. Our words usually mirror who or what we are inside. A momentary bad time for us can bring out the worst in us. However, if we can learn to monitor our words carefully when we are not in an emotional state or a bad situation, we will have a better handle on our words and attitudes when things deteriorate.

Proverbs 15:1-4, 7 gives a good synopsis of the right way to monitor our words:

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, but the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness. The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good. A wholesome tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit. . . . The lips of the wise disperse knowledge, but the heart of the fool does not do so.

### **Winning Through Action**

Proverbs 13:17 discloses that our actions will bring either good or bad consequences: "A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a faithful ambassador brings health." *Ambassador* translates the Hebrew word *tsiyar*, which has a broad range of meanings, from "a hinge or pivot" to "pains" to "a messenger or envoy." The last definition is obviously what the writer intends, as we can see in two additional Bible translations of verse 17:

» NIV: "A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a trustworthy envoy brings healing."

» *The Living Bible*: "An unreliable messenger can cause a lot of trouble. Reliable communication permits progress."

A major problem in today's world is most people expect great tolerance for themselves but fail to forbear with others. We should certainly not tolerate sin, but who among us would not want someone to help us overcome our most glaring sins?

How much more could we gain with our words and actions if mercy and forgiveness were the foundation of our relationships instead of criticism and judgmentalism? How many of us expect this from God, because He has promised it, but forget our corresponding responsibility, as seen in the model prayer in Matthew 6:12: "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors"?

The apostle Paul shows us that, in order to understand (or, in his words, to win) someone, we have to become a servant to all. In the vernacular, we must walk a mile in their shoes, to see life from their perspective.

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (I Corinthians 9:19-27)

While we know that our words are important, our actions or reactions to a person are just as critical. As Paul understood, we may not totally comprehend where we stand on common ground with someone, but we have to place that person and his needs before ourselves. We must understand that everyone is not just like us. Even people in God's church have different backgrounds, different trials, different likes and dislikes, and different perspectives on just about everything, regardless of position or station in life.

This is where it becomes tough: trying always to say the right words and exhibit the right approaches, striving to win a person through our actions and knowing that he may not respond in kind. Yet, God gives us a recipe for ongoing success in I Peter 3:8-11:

Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. For "He who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking guile. Let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it."

No one has the ability to say just the right thing or to act toward another in just the right way every time. We know that relationships and interpersonal actions require at least two to be involved, and when one of them is not God, the possibility for misunderstandings and offenses are very real, for one or both parties. However, we need to realize that we are diplomats or ambassadors "in training," representing the government of God just as a nation's diplomat does today, only from a spiritual perspective and with every person and in every circumstance we face each day.

Since we are all human, we might be wise to remember these two quotations as we strive to grow in diplomacy and tactfulness:

» "Diplomacy is thinking twice before saying nothing."

» "It is not whether your words or actions are tough or gentle; it is the spirit behind your actions and words that announces your inner state."

As converted people, however, we have a great deal of assistance that aids in squelching our natural or Satan-inspired words and actions. Jesus promises us a Helper to inspire and guide our actions and words (John 16:7-14). What a benefit this gift is, for God's Spirit is the essence of true diplomacy and tact! If we make use of this help, one day our reputation for speaking and acting in right measure will overshadow the pale, human efforts of even the best of this world's statesmen.