

How to Have a Redemptive Conversation over Political Differences

Countryside Bible Church – July 25, 2021

Introduction: Politics and the Gospel

We have a gospel that is political:

“The time is fulfilled, and the *kingdom* of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

Although governments often consider the gospel to be a threat, our political message is different for two reasons:

Time – “Your kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10)

We live between D-Day and V-Day (“already, not yet”).

Space – “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36)

We fight spiritual enemies with spiritual weapons:

“If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting...” (John 18:36).

“Our struggle is not against flesh and blood...” (Ephesians 6:12).

Therefore, we must adopt a different attitude and method than the world:

“The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:24-25).

Because of overlapping topics, a political conversation can become a gospel conversation:

Realms of Conversation: Politics/Economics → Culture/Morals → Spirituality/God → Personal Beliefs

Warning: Beware of talking of politics as if “This is Big!” Only God is big (Isaiah 8:12-13).

Robert Benne: Four Stances of Christians and Politics

Separationists

To Keep Politics Free of Dangerous Religion

To Keep Religion Free of Dangerous Politics

Problem: “It truncates religion and impoverishes politics” (29).

Fusionists

The Political Use of Religion

Religious and Ethnic/National Identity Fused

Straight-Line Thinking, *or* One-to-One Correspondence with Public Policy or Political Party

Critical Engagement: Moving from Core to Public Policy

Theological Essentials → Politically Relevant Principles → Conditioning Factors

Principles include: *Humans as Exalted but Fallen*

The Qualitative Distinction Between God’s Salvation and All Human Efforts

Christian Service

The Practical Engagement of Religion and Politics

The Ethics of Character

The Ethics of Conscience

Direct Modes: *The Church as Social Conscience*

The Church with Power

Summary

“Our argument is that all churches and their leaders ought to be far more circumspect in their efforts to affect the political realm through direct influence. There is certainly an obligation to carry on a prophetic ministry when that is strongly called for, but those cases are far fewer than is assumed by those churches. We have also suggested ways to be prophetic that do not assume that churches and their leaders have special competence in the realm of public policy, thus usurping the role of the Christian laity in that calling” (104).

“One could argue that the history of the West is one long lesson about the inadvisability of the church getting too directly involved in political power” (107).

“Secular authorities and agencies are the appropriate wielders of power in society. Churches are quintessentially themselves when they rely on the power of the Word, and on their example, not on worldly might” (110).

Source: Robert Benne, *Good and Bad Ways to Think about Religion and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

Practical Conclusion

If political engagement is for the laity and especially those called to politics,

and if there is not one-to-one correspondence between our beliefs and policy or party,

then we must allow room for the individual conscience, and seek to develop it in faith and discerning love.

Many of our redemptive conversations over politics may occur within the church, so let us start here.

Listening

“But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger, for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (James 1:19-20).

What is the difference between hearing and listening?

While some people can verbalize at 125 words per minute, most of us can think about four times that speed.

What are we doing with that extra time—walking alongside, darting ahead, or going on a side excursion?

We must learn to overcome our listening inertia. The extra time is a gift, but we must be a good steward.

We hear lots of sounds, but what are we purposing to ignore or to focus our attention?

How well do you listen?

Handout: “A Questionnaire for Executives”

Exercise in Listening

Determine to overcome your listening inertia.

Examine the facts for accuracy and the nonverbals for a message beyond the words.

Do not let prejudice block you from hearing what you may need to hear.

Fight distractions—anticipate where this is going—focus—make mental summaries.

Note examples and illustrations as “easily remembered reference points” (23).

Traps in Listening

1. Keeping the record straight – always correcting the speaker on details
2. Outguessing the speaker – not letting the speaker complete his own statement or thoughts
3. Conducting a cross-examination – too much fact-finding questions slows down a conversation

Cultivate the Skill of Reply

“The effective listener must learn the skill of a reply which indicates he is intensely interested in all that is being said...[and yet is] stimulating and facilitating the flow of speech and the expression of feelings and ideas” (58).

How?

The short reply is pithy and encourages people to continue to speak (“nondirective listening”).

The reflection reply “helps the speaker understand what he is really saying” (60):

1. Interrogative – “I think you mean something not obvious in your statement” (60).
2. Clarifying – “You mean thus and thus. Is this right?” (61).
Helpful when people have “ambivalent feelings” = “the uncomfortable state of mind in which we feel two ways about something” (61).
3. Repetitive – “reflect the last statement of the speaker” (62)
4. “Information Please” – “You’re not making it clear...Let’s try again” (62).

Ask a Question—but Do It Carefully

“Never...ask a question which can be answered by ‘yes’ or ‘no’ unless you have a follow-up query ready” (70).

“Ask a searching question, *then keep quiet*” (71).

“One thoughtful question is worth a dozen inquisitive ones” (71).

“Questions that come close to the other person’s true interest get the best answers” (72).

“Sometimes a long silence can be more rewarding than another question” (72).

“The quality of the answer depends on the quality of attention given by the questioner” (72).

“Questions must spring from honest inquiry”—not flattery or manipulation (72).

“Questions that deal with a person’s *feelings* are more provocative than those that deal with *facts*” (72).

Source: John Drakeford, *The Awesome Power of the Listening Ear* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1967).

Asking Good Questions

Entrust Ministries

Avoid yes/no questions.

Avoid leading questions.

Use plural nouns—e.g. “In what ways...?” or “For what reasons...?”

Greg Koukl – The Columbo Questions

Clarification: “What do you mean by that?”

Gain information and keep you out of the hot seat.

Burden of Proof: “Why do you believe that?” or “How do you know that?”

Reverse the burden of proof.

Offer an Alternative View: “Have you considered that...?”

Indirectly exploit a weakness of a flaw in someone’s view.

Sources: Gregory Koukl, *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Christian Convictions*, updated and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective: 2009, 2019), *passim*. Stand to Reason (www.str.org).

Scott Klusendorf, *The Case for Life: Equipping Christians to Engage the Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 149-56.

Counsel for Redemptive Conversations over Political Differences

Avoid an All-or-Nothing Mentalities

Example: “All civilizations will perish; therefore, it is vain for Christians to engage in politics.”

Great Commission – Our job is missions under the authority of Christ (Matthew 28:18-20).

Ecclesiastes – “Vanity of vanities,” says the preacher, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

Vanity = lit. “breath,” i.e. temporary, needing to be repeated (e.g. Ecclesiastes 4:13-16 – political turnover)

Answer: “All physical bodies will perish; therefore, it is vain for Christians to visit the doctor.”

While everything is vain, Ecclesiastes does teach that some things are *better* than other things.

While everything is vain, our service is an acceptable sacrifice to God (Hebrews 13:16).

Models:

John R. W. Stott – Two Aims: Evangelism & Social Action

Gospel of Mark – One Aim: Evangelism (Mark 1:38) & One Interruption: Compassion (e.g. Mark 10:46-52)

Christians are redeemed to do good works to the glory of God (Titus 2:14; cf. Ephesians 2:8-10).

“He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands

what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need” (Ephesians 4:28).

“And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Hebrews 13:16).

Avoid All-or-Nothing Political Solutions

Example: “People will always sin; therefore, it is vain for Christians to engage in political solutions.”

If we cannot abolish abortion, then we should stop fighting it.

Politics has always been an art of compromise:

“Listen to the voice of the people...; however, you shall solemnly warn them...” (1 Samuel 8:7, 9).

John the Baptist warned: “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife” (Mark 6:18).

“Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives...” (Matthew 19:8).

God regulated the sin that He hated: “a certificate of divorce” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4; cf. Malachi 2:16).

Avoid All-or-Nothing Conversations

Example: “People have made up their minds; therefore, it is vain to engage in political conversations.”

Assessment: Where is this person?

Faith = knowledge + affirming willing

Unbelief: Ignorant Unbelief → Doubt → Decisional Unbelief

If God uses our conversation to move back to doubt, there is still hope (John 7:17).

If we discover that no amount of information is needed, then we leave our witness (John 9-10).

Some have the appearance of decisional unbelief, but good questions can show they are actually ignorant.

Source: Don Bierle, *Surprised by Faith: A Skeptic Discovers More to Life Than What We Can See, Touch, and Measure* (Chaska, MN: FaithSearch International, 2003): 92-99.

Find Common Ground

Acts 17 – The Altar to the Unknown God

|→ ←| vs. ↑_____↑

1 Corinthians 15 – Steps:

Common Ground → Evidence

Assume the Opponents’ Position → Contradiction

Analogy → Plausibility

Assertions → Explanation

Focus on Ideas, Not Evidence

Debating Strategy – few individuals are qualified to determine what courts must do (Proverbs 18:13, 17)

Ideas do not change over time.

Ask Questions Until the Door Opens – cf. Colossians 4:3

Listen closely and sincerely.

Wait until an open question is returned—even then be cautious.

Illus. Taming a wild animal to feed at your hand.

“Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity.

Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt,

so that you will know how you should respond to each person” (Colossians 4:5-6).

Model: Consultant – Lovingly allow them to think aloud in your presence without pressuring for your position.

Goal: Help them to see through to the logical and practical conclusion of their line of thinking.

How possible? Security

Safe Identity – nothing to prove, citizens of heaven

Safe Possessions – nothing to lose, co-heirs with Christ

A Questionnaire for Executives

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| 1. As people talk to you, do you find it difficult to keep your mind on the subject at hand, to keep from taking mental excursions away from the line of thought that is being conveyed? | Yes | No |
| 2. Do you listening primarily for facts, rather than ideas, when someone is speaking? | Yes | No |
| 3. Do certain words, phrases or ideas so prejudice you against a speaker that you cannot listen objectively to what is being said? | Yes | No |
| 4. When you are puzzled or annoyed by what someone says, do you try to get the questions straightened out immediately, either in your own mind or by interrupting the talker? | Yes | No |
| 5. If you feel it would take too much time and effort to understand something, do you go out of your way to avoid hearing about it? | Yes | No |
| 6. Do you deliberately turn your thoughts to other subjects when you believe a speaker will have nothing particularly interesting to say? | Yes | No |
| 7. Can you tell by a person's appearance and delivery that he won't have anything worthwhile to say? | Yes | No |
| 8. When somebody is talking to you, do you try to make him think you are paying attention when you are not? | Yes | No |
| 9. When you are listening to someone, are you easily distracted by outside sights and sounds? | Yes | No |
| 10. If you really want to remember what someone is saying, do you try to write down most of his discourse? | Yes | No |

If you answer "No" to all of these questions, then you are a good listener.

Source: Ralph G. Nichols and Leonard A. Stevens, *Are You Listening?* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957), 160-61, as found in John Drakeford, *The Awesome Power of the Listening Ear* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1967), 92-93.

While some speakers may verbalize at about 125 words a minute, most of us can think at about four times that speed. As the speaker presents his ideas we can easily move along and keep up with him. It is so simple that we have time on our hands so we can occasionally dart ahead or go on a side excursion. These side excursions are particularly damaging and lead to our downfall as listeners.

—John Drakeford