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Caught in the Middle: How to Talk about Homosexuality by Jonathan Inman



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Caught in the Middle: How to Talk about Homosexuality

We often find ourselves in awkward situations in which holding to a biblical view of homosexuality will be controversial. In the office, at school, at a party, at church, in conversations with family, friends or neighbors – talking about what you believe concerning homosexuality can be very difficult.

When talking with people who believe homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle option, suggesting that homosexuality is sinful can appear stupid and rude – if not homophobic, unloving and abusive. When dealing with people who think homosexuals are simply sick perverts, it can appear wishy-washy, compromising, liberal and unbiblical to suggest that God loves and forgives sinners who struggle with homosexuality, and that we should do the same.

Different people are tempted in different ways when placed in these situations. Many of us want to sidestep the issue and avoid an unpleasant incident, concerned that the gospel message will get lost or distorted in the conflict, or that people will get the wrong impression and no longer listen. Sometimes we just don't want to bother with the hassle. Others of us can get so frustrated with those who hold to and promote destructive falsehoods that we show little Christ-likeness as we set out to clearly indicate exactly how we think the persons with whom we are speaking are wrong.

The issue of homosexuality takes these rather common relational dynamics and amplifies them. Discussion of homosexuality evokes strong emotions and responses, especially when people disagree, and touches on fundamental convictions about right and wrong, love and justice, heaven and hell. The responsibility of Christians to be both prophets and peacemakers in the midst of heated debate requires us to turn again to the Scriptures for guidance as to how we should represent Christ in a fallen world.

Patiently Listen

“Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.” (James 1:19-20)

Don't just listen for opportunities to find fault or critique. Listen to understand how others feel and think. Listen for what matters to other people, what they value, what they fear. If you don't understand something, ask questions that encourage the person with whom you are speaking to explain better their position. When a factual claim is made, politely ask to have it substantiated with reference to a verifiable source.

You can learn a lot, and demonstrate the kind of respectful hearing you would like to receive. The more you understand an opposing viewpoint, the more you can gain from it. More often than not, folks that are strongly mistaken in one respect are especially perceptive in another. The more you affirm what is true in someone's perspective, the more you can sensitively and credibly address what is errant.

Listening is difficult. It takes discipline, humility and effort. In this era of sound bites and short attention spans, it can be hard to resist the temptation to speak out at the first opportunity. Listen first, and ask questions to make sure you understand what someone is saying. Let them know you are really listening to them, even though you may disagree. More often than not, the disagreements people have are more complicated than they could possibly work out in the normal course of polite conversation. Attentive listening can pave the way for more serious discussion at a later point. *“He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.” (Proverbs 16:32)*

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Carefully Discern

“Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly lest he be wise in his own conceit.”(Proverbs 26: 4-5)

Any deviation in thought, word or deed from God’s revealed will in the Scriptures is what the Bible calls “foolishness.” While we should be hesitant to label any person a fool, the Bible is not bashful about saying that some ideas and conduct are foolish and wrong. How we think and how we act matter. Foolishness is something to which we are all vulnerable. While someone may be foolishly espousing defiant falsehoods, it would be equally foolish to be provoked by them into carrying ourselves or thinking in an unwise fashion. Not every situation calls for the same response. It is possible to obey God by both speaking and refraining, depending on the circumstances. Making the right response requires discernment.

Sometimes we need to answer directly someone’s foolishness. At other times it may be appropriate to, as it were, to let their foolishness speak for itself. Sometimes people will want to oversimplify things into a “Have you stopped beating your wife?” kind of question – no matter how you answer you will concede their point. Sometimes people will be talking about love or justice, when really they are just defending licentiousness or prejudice. Sometimes people just want to know if you care about what is happening with them or someone they are close to. By listening and discerning, it is possible to speak to the real issues underlying people’s arguments, without being trapped by someone else’s foolishness. *“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” (Galatians 6:1)*

Foolishness is delusional, making the foolish person wise in their own estimation. As hard as it can be to admit that someone else with whom we disagree is right about something, we are all familiar with how hard it can be to admit when we are wrong, especially if others are watching. Do not be surprised that people will hold foolish convictions with loud impatience. We cannot always, by the power of our persuasive skills, “bring someone around” to a more biblical point of view. When discussing something as complex and controversial as homosexuality, we may not always have “the” answer that will end all argument. We can always provide an example in thought, word and deed that commends itself without argument.

Personally Repent

“There were present at that season, some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, “Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, you shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”(Luke 13:1-5)

Before we can talk about someone else’s sin (be it homosexuality, false teaching, or hatred towards people different from ourselves), Jesus calls us to come clean about our own sin. It is easy for us to think that, because we have a right point to make, our motives in making that point are also right. What are you wanting to achieve when you answer someone? Do you want to win an argument? Do you want to assure yourself that you are not a coward by standing up for the Lord? Do you want someone to approve of you? Do you want to care about this person, or do you just want them to shut up? Do you trust God to accomplish his purposes despite what this person is saying or doing, or do you think you have to make it happen yourself? Are you trying to make a wrong world right, a messy world neat, a complex world simple, or are you trying to love and help people made in God’s image who live with you in a complicated and fallen world?

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Especially in heated discussion or debate, there are usually ample opportunity for everyone on every side to examine their motives and actions and come up short. It is always easier to see someone else's faults than it is to see our own. Only when we have experienced God's forgiveness of our sin can we responsibly recommend that grace to others. We need the kind of maturity that desires, not so much for people to be shown wrong, but for them to be loved and forgiven in the same way we have been loved and forgiven in Christ. Then we can speak the truth of the gospel with the compassion with which God has spoken that same truth to us.

"Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye: and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye." (Matthew 7:4-5)

Gently Instruct

"But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes. And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil who are taken captive by him at his will." (2 Timothy 2:23-26)

There is a difference between obedient witness and stupid arguments, between quarreling and kindness, between gentle instruction and resentful pontificating. While we often equate boldness with sternness, or instruction with insistence, the Bible calls us to be both wise and gentle. This means preparing ourselves, both our minds and our hearts, in advance. We should not assume that our beliefs and attitudes are always correct, but instead we should look to be instructed from God's Word ourselves before we presume to instruct others.

We need to take time on a regular basis both to learn from God's Word and to study the arguments made against it. We need to pray for God to conform us to the likeness of Christ whom we seek to serve, even as we talk with those who would deny him with their words or actions. Jesus said, *"Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves."* (Matthew 10:16)

We are called to gracious disagreement, humble opposition, gentle instruction. Speaking God's truth will inevitably create conflict. We need to make every effort to have that truth – and not our sinful attitudes and actions – be the cause of such conflict. Many times people will object so vehemently to the truth of the gospel that your gentle manner will speak louder than any words. We are not required to argue someone into repentance, or to be completely perfect in our attitudes, in order for God to accomplish his purposes.

It is God who leads people to repentance. Our responsibility is to be faithful to God and to his word, and to give him glory as he works out his will through us his earthen vessels. *"For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds; Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."* (2 Corinthians 10:4-5)

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Mercifully Pursue

“And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.” (Jude 22-23)

God calls us to be neither reclusive nor rude, but instead to move boldly into confusing, high stakes situations with the gospel of God’s mercy. We must bring the gospel of God’s grace where it is most needed: to the vocally anti-Christian pro-gay activist, or to the mild-mannered clergy who says the love of Jesus means affirming homosexuality as God’s gift; to the quietly confused and scared teenager, or to the frantic parent; to the silently shattered spouse, or to the respectable and bigoted conservative. All of these people need God’s mercy in Christ. Mercy is more than giving people your opinion in a conversation – it means practically caring for them as opportunity allows, with your time, attention, compassion and assistance.

Showing mercy does not mean turning a blind eye to sin. On the contrary, it means taking sin very seriously, and seeking to help people immersed in its consequences. This doesn’t mean being pushy with your help when it is not welcome. It does mean being patiently and persistently available to help those who live in a fallen world. Sometimes just being willing to talk without arguing can be the most merciful thing you can do. Sometimes saying what you believe in a way that doesn’t require a person to agree or disagree can create space in which they can think about what they believe without feeling under pressure to have an answer.

Sometimes showing mercy means building relationships with people you might not want to be close to; sometimes it may mean setting or respecting boundaries in relationships despite what people think. Mercy may be the last thing you want to show someone that you see as perpetrating harmful sin against themselves or others. Yet this is how God has revealed His mercy to us, and this is how He has called us to represent Him to others.

Some people don’t want to hear about God’s righteousness; others don’t want to hear about His mercy. Others are caught in the middle, thinking they have to choose between Christ and compassion, truth and love. It takes courage and humility, patience and persistence to listen, discern, repent, instruct and pursue as we should. To be Christ-like requires us to be more than we are, to look to and depend upon Him who can make us like Himself.

“Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power: That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and ye in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12)

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