

Charitable Discourse Resource Paper (How To Disagree)

Lightbearers resource papers are designed as a resource to Lightbearers staff as they interact with students and partners and are asked to provide wisdom on a variety of topics. These papers should be considered an internal resource providing clarity on a sound evangelical stance on particular issues.

Foundational to each paper is the perspective that the Gospel is primary recognizing that the Gospel impacts every corner of life (1 Corinthians 6:20); therefore, we aim to provide staff with direction that is Biblically sound and points them to view any issue through the lens of the Gospel.

What drives this particular paper? *The world in which students live and interact today is an increasingly hostile one given the intense and public anger that characterizes most observable conversation. This attitude has crept into not only the public sphere but also our personal sphere. Given the huge amount of student online activity, this attitude can manifest itself in angry, hateful behavior. One of the things that needs to be recaptured in our emotionally heightened context, is to treat each other as being made in the image of God. Students also need to learn how to triage which topics are important to defend. Hint: Those moments are more rare than one would assume.*

The Problem

While disagreements should be natural and charitable, it is clear our culture has developed painful hostility in our personal conversations. This hostility is most clearly seen in our verbal disagreements with others. When we disagree on any manner of ideas and practical topics, we have come to view the person with whom we disagree, as not only wrong or misguided, but as irrational, insane, or even evil. We take their viewpoint (which may truly be a poor or incorrect view)¹ and then interpret them as a whole person through the lens of their divergent view. It no longer comes down to the fact that one person simply disagrees with another, but that the person is evil, or still further, sub-human and worthless, due to their differing opinion. Sin has polluted our society and has caused us to turn disagreements into moral ills worthy of burning relational bridges and disregarding basic Christian charity to prove a point.

This is not to say that today's hot-button topics of disagreement (social justice, medical practices, politics, theology, etc.) are insignificant or worthy of persuasive conversation. These are significant issues that require careful thought. Nor does this mean that there are views which are legitimately abhorrent and worthy of rebuke. The issue lies not so much in the particular topic of disagreement, but rather in the manner with which we disagree. We as a culture are quickly losing the ability to see other human beings as being made in God's image and to treat each other accordingly; to treat each other as Jesus has ordered.² James states the problem clearly; "no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God."³ We cannot trust our own tongues to provide helpful discourse to those who either need to be persuaded otherwise or to simply hear a different opinion.

Now, it must be stated that this problem is not only an outward, verbal sin of the tongue, but it is an internal sin of the heart. It is not only an issue of actualized and open accusations, but it is a deeper issue of painting the whole person with the brush of assumption and hostility. Jesus says to the

¹ Views that are clearly anti-biblical/unchristian: homosexuality, abortion, Mormonism, etc. But, this could also include views that are not correct; nor evil. For example: Arminianism vs. Calvinism, voting for a Democrat vs. republican, social justice issues, Free Market vs. Social Economy, vaccines, etc.

² Matthew 5:44-48 ESV. Our Father mutually blesses the wicked and the righteous. We are called to do likewise, modeling the behavior of our perfect God.

³ James 3:8-9 ESV

Pharisees, “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”⁴ In cases of disagreement, assumptions, whether verbalized or not, are essentially premature judgments, condemning the one who makes them.

The Problem of Media

Now, it is clear that the combativeness of our culture’s conversations is exceptionable on its own. In this technological age however, there is an inflammatory agent which serves no little purpose in provoking the context—the media. Social media, news outlets, and other media outlets have supplied our culture with considerable ammunition of anger and disappointment when it comes to our disagreements. Specifically, proximity and anonymity are significant agents of today’s interpersonal bitterness. The media of our day has made weapons out of anonymous posting, electronic communication⁵, and decontextualization.

In other words, it is far easier to assume or judge when you sit behind the shield of a screen or a nameless comment. Even when you do not engage in online arguments, the heart can still be engaged in such judgements by observing the online interactions of others. Real people, real conversations, and in-person disagreements do not have the luxury of decontextualization and/or anonymity.

It seems that if people, even enemies, would sit down face to face and talk to one another, the anger, harsh judgements would dissipate. Maybe no agreement would be reached but the goal is not to agree. The goal is to see the other person as one who bears God’s image, as God’s crown of creation and to treat them as such. So, the problem is not so much in the media itself as it is in the opportunity provided by media platforms to communicate through screens and telephones.

The Bible, Human Experience and The Imago Dei

The gospel dictates all of human experience including our interpersonal communication. How the heart responds to experience and communication is dictated by whether the person has been changed by the gospel. The heart change which the Holy Spirit accomplishes in salvation is characterized by a life that is more consistently displaying God’s personhood.

As God’s image bearers, people are more simple and yet more complex than one may realize. Jeremy Pierre is helpful in explaining how cognitive, emotional, volitional people function as God’s image bearers. He says, “No one should treat people as merely rational beings in need of instruction, nor as merely emotional beings in need of healing, nor as merely—decision makers who need the right motivation.”⁶ He goes on to encourage his readers, “the question we are asking is not, *What is the heart?*” That is, to evaluate a person based on the functions of their cognition, emotion and will. He says the question is rather, “*How is the heart described as functioning to dynamically reflect its Creator?*” The claim is that we should evaluate a person based on how Scripture evaluates them. He explains, “What people are doing as they experience life is reflecting the spiritual personhood of God as physical beings. Humans are theomorphic—formed as beings whose every thought, desire, and choice is designed to show the physical world the personhood of God.”⁷

⁴ Matthew 12:34b-37 ESV

⁵ As opposed to in-person communication, the proximity of conversation changes from feet to miles when one communicates through a television, cell phone or computer.

⁶ Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 12.

⁷ Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*, 14.

Jesus teaches the crowds a similar theme, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”⁸ Jesus teaches that our behavior is connected to our representation of God. And not only is our representation of God at stake, but we belittle the divine image in others when we treat them with contempt and label them with presumptuous judgments. Again, it is helpful to quote James here, “no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.” Like Jesus, James teaches us to interact with others with the image of God in mind. This is not only a problem for Cain who was guilty of the first destruction of the divine image. This is a problem for all of us who with our words and our hearts reject that image in others.

Applying the Bible Supernaturally

Now, as Christians, we have been given an entirely new nature. We are not composed of the same one-dimensional character in which we lived before. Now, as Spirit-indwelt beings, our cognition, emotions and volition function two-dimensionally to paint a far better image of the God who made us and dwells inside us. The Spirit empowers us to speak and think more clearly than we could have prior to our conversion. More importantly, He empowers us to spiritually apply the wisdom of Scripture to our physical, human experience. Thus, being biblically literate and doctrinally sound is essential to displaying the image of your Creator. This is what James means when he writes, “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”⁹ Kevin Vanhoozer says it this way, “Theological competence is ultimately a matter of being able to make judgments that display the mind of Christ.”¹⁰ The goal in argumentative discussion is not to agree but for one image bearer to treat the other person as another image bearer, to be mindful of that divine image that they share.

We are warned in Scripture not to make these judgments whether with our hearts or with our mouths. Later in his letter, James writes, “The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy.”¹¹ James describes one who by speaking evil against his fellow believer, has usurped God as the final arbiter of justice. They not only neglect God’s likeness in another, but their hearts drift into self-idolatry. This is no different than the first sin by Adam and Eve. Where they believe the serpent’s lie, “Did God really say?”¹² Now the fallacious, subconscious question in this context is, “Is God really just?”

Q&A:

What about disagreements related to abortion, homosexuality, transgenderism, etc.? Am I to simply treat others with respect to the point that they don’t understand the wickedness of sin? In these scenarios, although it is difficult to not reach a mutual conclusion, you cannot make it seem as though sin is ok. You cannot lead a person to believe that their sin is justified or even approved of. To do this would be to condemn them to Hell in the nicest way possible. They must recognize their need before a holy God. They must come to terms with the gospel of Christ. However, that does not mean that belittlement, insults, and frustration are acceptable in conversations with a person who approves of heinous sin. They are still an image bearer, as are

⁸ Matthew 5:46-48 ESV

⁹ James 3:17 ESV

¹⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Cononical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 2.

¹¹ James 4:11-12 ESV

¹² Genesis 3:1 NIV

you. God requires that we treat each other as such while still leading them to repentance and faith in Christ.

Is there no place for “hot” disagreements or angry confrontation? What if someone is teaching others poorly and leading them astray? On one hand, the Bible states that those who teach wrongly and lead others into sin will be judged harshly.¹³ In circumstances where this is the case, then greater rebuke is warranted, as we see Jesus doing with Jewish leadership. On the other hand, our “heresy” meter can be tuned a little too finely. Accusing someone of wrong teaching or being a cause for stumbling is not warranted for disagreements over minor theological points, worship practices or some political leanings. One should exercise caution and discernment before making mountains out of molehills. One should also call out teaching for selfish gain when it occurs.

Do we see conflicts and disagreements happening in Scripture? Or can a Christian handle an argument poorly? Good Christians disagree all the time! Just look at the Calvinism vs. Arminianism debate (which is also unfortunately full of accusation and assumption)! We even see that apostles are not safe from these kinds of arguments. We see in passages such as Acts 15:39, Colossians 4:10, and 2 Timothy 4:11 that on their first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas separated because of a significant disagreement over another potential worker. Namely, the author of the first gospel Mark. But they were reconciled in the end after going their separate ways. There are many other instances like this elsewhere in Scripture.¹⁴

What is motivating you to have this conversation? Sometimes, our own agenda in the conversation can interfere with caring well for another soul. It may be appropriate to evaluate your own heart in the matter. Is it more important for you, in the moment, to win an argument? To prove yourself right and the other wrong? To shame the other into thinking differently? Or are you concerned for their soul and persuading them to a more consistently Christian understanding? Many times, listening well and responding appropriately can be a more effective mode of persuasion than arguing. It may also be helpful to evaluate, if there are other topics you’re losing an audience on because of your handling of this conversation?

How do you handle a conversation when someone isn’t charitable to you? The principle held out in Romans 12:19-21 applies here, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” As believers, we are not meant to return evil for having evil done to us but to turn away wrath by speaking the truth in love.

What topics are actually hills to die on? Is there a time to lose a friendship over a disagreement? There are certainly times where God calls His people to follow Him at the cost of abandoning their earthly relationships (see Matthew 10:37). In times of disagreement, those moments need to be handled carefully. The ability to triage which hills are worth dying on comes with wisdom and maturity. Even if a topic is something worth rebuking over, it does not necessarily mean that it is worth losing a friendship over. A disgruntled friend may yet be won to Christ or to a more biblical worldview by the graciousness of your own conduct.

¹³ James 3:1 and Luke 17:2

¹⁴ Paul opposes Peter [Galatians 2:11-14], Jesus’ disciples argue [Mark 9:34; Luke 9:46], The Corinthians quarrel [1 Corinthians 1:11-12], The Corinthians lawyer up [1 Corinthians 6:1-8].

Is there a better opportunity or context to have this conversation? When having difficult conversations, it is essential to discern the appropriate context in which to have the conversation. Don't let the heightened emotional context drive the timing of the conversation. It's ok to ask if you could talk about it at a later time. Ask yourself, is it appropriate to have this conversation with or apart from your whole house? In public or private? On or off social media (it is almost *always* preferable to have these conversations *off* of social media)?

Other Helpful Resources & Scripture

Relationships by Timothy Lane and Paul Tripp

Unoffendable by Brant Hansen

How People Change by Timothy Lane and Paul Tripp

The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life by Jeremy Pierre

Matthew 5:21-26; Matthew 5:38-48; Romans 12:16-21; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Proverbs 16:2; Proverbs 16:7

Bibliography

Pierre, Jeremy. *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience*. Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Cononical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.