

Hot-Button Discussions

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Introduction.

At some point or other, all of us come to the realization that not everyone has the same religious beliefs as we do. For me, that came when I was in about third grade, and I was talking to my friend Rob Boileau. He was talking about a church experience he'd had recently, during which he got a glob of ashes smeared on his forehead. He asked me if they did that where I went to church, and I told him yes, even though I had no idea what he was talking about.

Of course, as we get older, we realize that lying to avoid controversy is not an option, and so we inevitably end up in discussions with people who don't see eye to eye with us on everything. Sometimes, these conversations are forced upon us when someone asks us a question. At other times, we're simply around when a religious discussion begins, and it's up to us whether we want to give our take on the situation or not. Most of the time, we weren't heading into these discussions expecting to have them, we feel like we're put on the spot all of a sudden, and we're not sure what to say.

When we see these times as danger moments, our instincts don't lead us wrong. There is certainly risk in moments like those, but there is opportunity as well, especially when we're talking to someone we've been working on for a while. We can either boot the opportunity, or we can take some important strides to bringing another to the Lord. It all depends on our attitude and our actions. Thankfully, even though we may be alone when one of these touchy subjects comes up, we are not without help. First, we can pray for help and expect that God will answer our prayers. Second, though, we can turn to the word of God and see how Christians in the first century handled these delicate situations. If we follow the principles laid out in Scripture, we can be certain of how we should handle hot-button discussions.

Our Approach.

Naturally, what we say about controversial topics will vary from question to question, but one thing that should not vary is our approach. Before we even open our mouths, we must **REMEMBER THE OBJECTIVE**. Paul tells us what God's objective for us is in 1 Timothy 2:3-4. This is critically important because it shapes everything we say. If we are unloving and don't care about the other people in the conversation, our objective is to win the argument. We don't care whom we offend, what cheap tactics we have to resort to to score our points, because as long as those points are scored, we get what we came for. I know plenty of Christians who handle spiritual discussions exactly this way. They love to demonstrate their superior knowledge of Scripture by beating others over the head with it. It doesn't bother those Christians that people resent being treated like that. It doesn't bother them that none of the people they attack ever come to a single assembly. They got the other guy told, and they can check him off their evangelism list, and that's that.

Brethren, it's hard to imagine a method of dealing with the lost that would be more selfish, short-sighted, and destructive. When we get somebody told, we almost ensure that they will never obey the gospel. We sow the seed, but then we nuke the field. Instead, from the very beginning, our goal must not be to win the argument. Our goal must be to persuade. Our win is not when we make some debate point. Our win is when we win the outsider over to our way of thinking. That's a lot more difficult than scoring points, and it requires a very patient, gentle approach. From beginning to end, we must never forget that a soul is at stake, and we must never forget that God wants us to save it.

Even while we do this, though, we must not forget to **SET THE STANDARD**. There are all kinds of things that people base their moral philosophy on, from what their parents taught them to what they saw on Oprah last week. However, the only standard that we're interested in is the word of God. We must imitate the example of Jesus in Matthew 5:3-4. No matter what the controversy is, we must address it by answering "It is written".

That accomplishes several extremely important objectives. First, it sets the ground rules for the debate. The final authority on any spiritual matter is not what we have always believed. It is not what some clergyman in a fancy robe might say. The final authority is the pronouncement of almighty God in His inspired word. If someone will not accept the word as the standard, we have to settle that point before we move on to anything else. Otherwise, we're wasting our time. Second, our use of the word makes sure that we are saying what God wants us to say. May it never be that we keep a soul from Christ by repeating our own think-so's and prejudices! Instead, when we speak, we must speak as the oracles of God. Third, by relying on Scripture, we keep ourselves from looking foolish. None of us are infallible, and when we rely on our own reasoning, especially in the heat of a discussion, it's easy for us to say something that we'll regret 15 seconds later. By contrast, we will never look foolish when we return to the word again and again, and humbly rely on its inspired wisdom to make our point for us. People have been trying to find holes in the Bible for 2000 years, and they haven't succeeded yet. The word is the sword of the Spirit. Let's use it in our battles rather than fighting unarmed.

Third, we have to **MAKE OUR DEFENSE**. Once we've established that the word is the standard, we have to be able to use the word to present God's judgment on any matter. Peter discusses this defense in 1 Peter 3:15. There are

two points here to which we need to pay attention. First, we have to be ready. We can't be caught flat-footed when someone wants to discuss some spiritual topic. We have to prepare ourselves to the limits of our ability so that we can give God's answer whenever we are questioned. Second, we must speak with meekness and fear. This is not an opportunity for us to parade ourselves and show how well studied we are. It's a chance to glorify God.

Finally, when we're in the midst of these spiritual discussions, we must always **BE UNASHAMED**. We must embrace the attitude of Paul in Romans 1:16. Sadly, many Christians are ashamed of the gospel, and it shows in their defense of it. I can't help but think back to the time several years ago when a preacher for an institutional church of Christ was shot by his wife. Nancy Grace got some other preacher on her show to talk to him about what churches of Christ believe. She started asking him about whether it was true that we don't allow women preachers, and he wouldn't answer the question. He squirmed and dodged all over the place until finally she pinned him down and made him admit it. What a disgusting exhibition that was! He made it look like he had to apologize for the word of God, like it was something to be embarrassed about. Brethren, there are probably things in all of our lives that we're ashamed of, but the Scripture should never, ever appear on that list! If there is anything that we can be proud of, if there is anything that we can hold our heads high about, it is the gospel. Let's uphold it and defend it without flinching.

Common Questions.

For the remainder of our lesson this morning, let's look at some Scriptural answers to common questions in the spiritual arena. The first of these common questions or topics is whether there are in fact many different paths to God, many different ways to please Him. This is a popular belief in our country, and it probably arises because our nation is so religiously tolerant. When so many different faiths are accepted in the modern-day United States, it leads many people to believe that God also accepts them. This is what leads them to say things like, "It doesn't matter what church you go to or whether you go to church at all, as long as you try to be a good person and do what's right." That's a very attractive philosophy, but it contradicts the words of Jesus. Look with me at John 14:6. The truth is that there is only one path to heaven, and it is the path of believing in and obeying Jesus. According to this verse, no other religion, no other system of belief can work. No matter how sincerely people follow them, they can lead only to destruction.

Likewise, we must turn to the Bible for the truth about God's view of homosexuality. Over the past 50 years, our society has become increasingly tolerant of homosexual practices, and this tolerance has seeped into the religious realm as well. Some denominations have gone so far as to appoint homosexual clergy. Now, certainly, people have the right to make whatever moral decisions they want to. That's why we have free will. However, they also need to be aware that those actions have consequences. Paul describes the consequences of a whole list of sins in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. His point is quite clear. If we practice any of these things, we won't be going to heaven, and two different versions of homosexuality appear on the list. That doesn't mean that it's any worse to be a homosexual than to be a fornicator or a drunkard or an extortioner. There's nothing in this text to indicate that any of these sins face a severer punishment than any other. However, there's also nothing in this text to give any credence to the idea that God accepts homosexuality. The choice is plain: accept homosexuality and reject the word, or accept the word and reject homosexuality.

Another controversial topic is one that I alluded to earlier, the idea that women have the right to teach and exercise authority over men in a religious setting. In much of the so-called Christian world, there's no question about this. Many mainline denominations actually have more female clergy members than male. As with many other things, this is the result of societal influence. Our country believes that men and women are equal, which they are, and that because they're equal, one sex should not be excluded from anything that the other does. I don't have a problem with that until it runs afoul of the word of God, which it does in 1 Timothy 2:11-12. Once again, this is a very clear, almost blunt, passage. In fact, it's so clear that most people don't even try to weasel with it. They just dismiss Paul as a woman-hater, or possibly 1 Timothy as not written by Paul. Now, let's be logical about this. Either the Bible is the word of God, or it isn't. If it isn't, it is the handiwork of liars, and we should follow none of it, at which point there's no reason to have gospel preachers of any sort, either male or female. On the other hand, if it is the word of God, then God expects us to obey it, and we must follow all of it. If we follow the truth, then we cannot have women in positions of religious authority.

Finally, we turn to the subject of instrumental music. This is the thing that most obviously sets our assemblies apart from other religious gatherings, and if people know anything about churches of Christ at all, they know that our worship services involve only a capella singing. That makes instrumental music a very common wedge issue in our discussions with others. This is another place where the Bible speaks clearly and plainly. Consider Colossians 3:16. Here, we are given the command to sing, and through our song, to teach and admonish one another and give thanks to God. We are not given the command to use musical instruments, either here or anywhere else in the New Testament. We are not shown any instances of the early church using musical instruments. There is nothing in Scripture that leads us to believe that musical instruments were used. This is not because God overlooked their existence. This is because God wanted us to sing, and to sing only. If we do anything else, we are not remaining true to His word.