

Lesson 7

Like Christians in the New Testament, we are faced today with difficult issues that, if not properly handled, can divide families, congregations and prevent people from accepting Christ.

Question for Discussion: How do we handle difficult issues while maintaining the purity of the Gospel?

Readings:

Chapters *from Letter to the American Church* by Eric Metaxas

- Speaking the Truth in Love, pages 87-94

The Great Evangelical Recession by John S. Dickerson, pages 133-140

Speaking the Truth in Love

When Pilate immortalized the question “What is truth?” he did so by asking it of the One who Himself was truth. The irony is so painful as to be piercing. But Pilate was doing what leading figures sometimes do: they say something far more profound than they can hope to realize, just as when Caiaphas asked, “Do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish?” It seems clear that these men “knew not what they said,” and had no idea that God was using them in their historic roles to prophetically speak truths of which they themselves were utterly and tragically unaware.

But Pilate’s infamous question comes to us. Do *we* know what truth is? Do we understand that truth and facts are not the same thing? Do we understand that truth is something so illimitably large and fathomless that it created the universe with a word, that it stands outside time and space, that it is a Person? Can we bear the answer to the question “What is truth?”

But somehow God—by taking on human form—asks us to bear it. He asks us to look to Jesus, who somehow in the lowly form of a man is yet God—to see the One who is Truth, to see Him as the standard bearer, and as the standard too. He is an image of truth itself, a battle flag for truth. His is the standard raised up amidst the choking smoke and deafening carnage of the battle between truth and lies. And we are to rally to that battle flag, to Jesus Himself.

So if Jesus Himself is Truth, then what? Then we know that statements of doctrine are not enough. Jesus is alive. Jesus is eternal and immortal. There is something far more to Truth than ideas. If Jesus really is Truth, then we know that truth inescapably partakes of love. The Bible tells us that God is love. So the One who is Truth is also the One who is Love, and it is not possible to separate them without degrading each of them—nor does God wish for us to try. Indeed, we must know that He is deeply grieved if we try to separate them in any way, which we often do. They are part of the very same thing, and by coming to us in human form God is making plain to us that our fallen human attempts to parse truth into something less than the Person of Jesus is to fall into the trap of reductionism. Just as we cannot contain the universe in a nutshell, neither can we reduce truth to syllogisms or even to creeds or confessions. God forbid.

So Truth is a Person. And God knows that unless we understand this, we have no idea what truth is. And unless we know that truth is inextricably intertwined with love, we also have no idea what truth is. Finally, unless we also know that love is inextricably intertwined with truth, we have no idea what love is. We always and ever stray from God in attempting to dissect truth or love in this way, and in so doing we must kill it every time. To follow the parallel, we crucify God every time. It is nothing less than sin to try to have our own fallen view of truth apart from love or love apart from truth. God demands that we deal with the whole, that we understand Truth and Love are

God Himself, who is a Person. Of course, there is profound mystery here, but God requires us sometimes to deal with mystery.

Our Enlightenment minds cannot abide mystery. We have drunk the rationalist Kool-Aid and have in God's own Church introduced the idea that His great and unfathomable mysteries can be reduced to creeds or statements of faith—as if we could reduce Him to that level, as if we could remake Him in our own image, as if we could have truth and love on our own syllogistic, bullet-point terms. After all, it's so much neater than having a relationship with a Person.

But that is what God asks of us. Truth and love are united in Him. To declare any truth in a way that steps away from God's love is to speak no truth at all, as well as to step away from the One who is Truth. But to claim we are being loving when we step away from the Truth of God is not to love at all, but only to fool ourselves into thinking we are being loving. It is also to step away from the One who is Love. And when we "love" in this fallen human way, we are not blessing those whom we claim to be "loving," but are in fact cursing them and damning them. There's no way around it. So not to speak an uncomfortable truth to someone who needs to hear it—and giving the excuse that we are loving them—is not to love them but to harm them.

So we see there are two ways in which someone can err. One is to speak so much "truth" with so little love that he is not actually speaking truth. We have seen and heard such persons, so obsessed with "truth" that whether they are actually communicating successfully seems immaterial to them. And actually, that's quite the case. They are obviously more concerned with justifying themselves, with proving they are uncompromising purveyors of "truth," than with actually purveying truth. They seem to believe they are earning points with whatever god they are serving by such behavior. They are not at all worried about pushing others away with what they are saying. Perhaps they even

delight in the idea. But if one is actually communicating—or wanting to communicate—one is naturally not insensitive to whether what one is saying is actually getting across to the person or people with whom one is speaking. That lies at the heart of what it means to speak and communicate.

The opposite of this is an equal problem: to show so much “love” that you are misrepresenting the real love of God, and are forsaking God’s truth in the process. You are so afraid of saying something that might push away the one to whom you are speaking that you cease to say anything at all controversial or potentially disagreeable.

Bonhoeffer witnessed this when he first came to the United States in 1930. His fellow students at Union Theological Seminary seemed less interested in what he saw as truth than in some larger truth they believed more important, as though truth had become the hopelessly outdated obsession of the “fundamentalists” of that time. Bonhoeffer was hardly an American fundamentalist, but neither could he make sense of how the “progressive” American Christians of his time could take the fundamentals of the faith so lightly. He saw in time that many of them could do so because they had already dismissed them; such doctrines as the Resurrection and the Atonement were no longer taken seriously.

Sometimes there’s nothing wrong with wishing to avoid controversy. We are hardly called to constant contentiousness. The Scriptures talk about being “at peace with all men” and about “becoming all things to all peoples” so that Christ can be made known. But at what point do our efforts in this direction begin to backfire? At what point does our obligation to speak truth give way to what the Bible calls “fear of man”? Proverbs 29:25 says, “The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe.”

So how has it happened that the secularists have so effectively caricatured Christians as “Bible-thumping moralists” that many

Christians have internalized these criticisms and no longer feel the freedom to speak? How many Christians—and Christian pastors and leaders—are paralyzed for fear that they might say something to drive away the person with whom they are speaking?

We are obliged to wonder: Where are all of the leading American pastors today on the issues of sexuality and transgender madness? Are they afraid to speak? Do they not know that God has appointed them to speak on these issues fearlessly—as though He really has defeated death on the Cross and has freed them to do His will and share His love, come what may?

The first pages of Genesis declare that God created us male and female in His image. Can anything be simpler? Not to aver this at a time when it is being madly challenged—to the detriment of millions of souls—is to be silent in the face of evil, and therefore to partake in evil. Everyone in the world knows that a rooster cannot lay an egg and that a man cannot have a womb—and cannot menstruate or give birth or lactate or be a mother. But who will say it? Who will help lead the way through the carnage of this ideological warfare? Who will hold up the battle standard—which is Jesus Himself—so that others can see and follow?

Young women dedicate their whole beings to athletic excellence, only to be roughly shoved aside in what ought to be their long-awaited moment of triumph by a man who, to the applause of a hopelessly confused and broken culture, claims suddenly to be a woman. A young man is confused about his sexuality, but he only hears one message: that he must seize and celebrate his same-sex attractions as a gift from God. Is your pastor talking about these things? Are you?



We must be honest and admit that much of the time we are not living out our faith but are at least partially enslaved to public opinion

over the truth. And this is the main reason we are silent when we should not be silent.

Do we fear that someone will think less of us if we say that we believe sex is made by God for men and women in lifelong marriage? Have we perhaps halfway been persuaded that this idea is outdated enough that it's worth keeping silent about? Are we afraid that someone in a sexual relationship will feel judged by us, and will see us as religious legalists rather than as loving and compassionate followers of Jesus? At what point does our silence encourage someone along in their sin and in their path away from God?

Are we afraid to say that abortion is morally wrong, and that under no circumstances must we equivocate on it? Would we have spoken against slavery in 1850? Would we have spoken against the monstrously antisemitic actions of the Nazis in 1933? Why do we believe we would have spoken then if we are silent now?

If someone in 1975 or 1985 or 1995 or 2005 spoke about sexuality from a biblical viewpoint, and did so in love, the outcry against them would have been minimal. It was the time to speak. And of course it was vital that our words be seasoned with compassion. But it is because of what we earlier described as the "Spiral of Silence" that it is so difficult to speak now. Shall we arrest the downward spiral, or will we go along with it until we can say nothing about anything? Are we not already very close to that? Will we repent of our role in bringing things to this pass?

Again, we may take Bonhoeffer as our model. In his book *Ethics*, which he saw as his magnum opus and which he worked on near the end of his life, he touches on the touchy subject of abortion.

Destruction of the embryo in the mother's womb is a violation of the right to live which God has bestowed upon this nascent life. To raise the question whether we are here

concerned already with a human being or not is merely to confuse the issue. The simple fact is that God certainly intended to create a human being and that this nascent human being has been deliberately deprived of his life. And this is nothing but murder.¹

But Bonhoeffer was not some cold-hearted activist. He was a pastor and a man of God. He saw that there was more to the story, and says so:

A great many different motives may lead to an action of this kind; indeed in cases where it is an act of despair, performed in circumstances of extreme human or economic destitution and misery, the guilt may often lie rather with the community than with the individual. Precisely in this connection money may conceal many a wanton deed, while the poor man's more reluctant lapse may far more easily be disclosed.²

So Bonhoeffer spoke the truth about abortion, but did so with compassion and love. But he did not allow his compassion and his love to silence him on the facts. To be clear about the fact that love and truth are unavoidably connected, he ends his rumination with the following:

All these considerations must no doubt have a quite decisive influence on our personal and pastoral attitude towards the

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 174.

² Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 472.

person concerned, but they cannot in any way alter the fact of murder.³

Chapter Eleven

Will we model our public witness on Bonhoeffer in this way? By God's grace, let us do so.

Be Ye Not Political

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

—ROMANS 13:1-7

If any of the four errors we are discussing could most easily be pushed to the fore in the Germany of the 1930s, it is the idea that Christians ought not to be political. In our own day it is a similarly central error, one that we hear again and again. Of course, there is some truth in every lie, and so we happily acknowledge the truth that we Christians mustn't be overtly political, to the point where we put

³ Ibid.

A. W. Tozer summarized well the second half of our journey:

It will cost something to walk slow in the parade of the ages, while excited men of time rush about confusing motion with progress. But it will pay in the long run, and the true Christian is not much interested in anything short of that.⁴

8

Good

How to Conduct Ourselves in a Hostile Host Culture

Live such *good* lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your *good* deeds and glorify God. . . . For it is God's will that by doing *good* you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.

1 Peter 2:12, 15

Steph B. knows bad people. And she knows good people, too. Steph knows how it feels to be bought and sold, to be beaten and raped. When she was a teenager, Steph's pimp prostituted her in Phoenix, Arizona, selling her body to anyone who wanted to use it. Like many sexually exploited children, Steph had no way, physically or emotionally, of escaping the slavery of sexual trafficking.

Statistically, Steph was on course to die by age thirty from drug overdose, STD-related illness, or murder (prostitutes have the highest murder rate in the United States, due to paid rapes gone too far).

“I never even saw myself making it past age eighteen,” she says. That’s when she was rescued, at age eighteen. Steph says this of the Christian counselor who walked alongside her in her recovery from the bondage of sex trafficking:

She has brought light into the darkest places of my heart by loving me unconditionally. For seven or eight months she just loved me and invested in me, and never pushed me spiritually. It was through that love that I received from her that I’ve really been a lot more accepting of the church. Even a year ago I was really anti-church. Now I’m not a Christian, but I’m a lot more accepting of it and open to it. That’s because she showed me love and was very conscious of my own needs and my own spiritual abuse.¹

Some of Steph’s abusers claimed to be Christians, so her spiritual wounds are deep and legitimate. Despite those wounds, Steph now knows evangelicals can be good people. She knows this because her counselor and friend, Celestia Tracy, has been so undeniably good. Celestia and her husband, Dr. Steve Tracy, sacrificed themselves to show relentless love to Steph. Their team at Mending the Soul Ministries restores victims of sex trafficking. Together, they have trained hundreds of counselors and mentors to show God’s goodness to abuse victims, through sensitive and informed biblical counseling.

The Tracys are two among thousands of evangelicals who actively go into the dark places of United States culture—injecting God’s redemption into human tragedy. This is, according to the New Testament, how we respond to an aggressive and hostile host culture—by taking God’s goodness straight into the darkness.

As segments of the United States culture grow hostile and hateful toward Bible-believing Christians, we must take care to be proactive, as Christ was. If we’re not intentional, we will be reactive, falling into defensive or oppositional positions. History has taught us that such reactionism to the culture only isolates us and minimizes our impact for Christ.

How does God tell us to respond when the culture turns hostile toward us? He tells us to actively live such “good” lives among the pagans that those who hate us cannot deny we are busy doing a lot of “good” (see 1 Peter 2:12, 15).

The United States is sprinting into the 21st century, and we evangelicals find ourselves surrounded by various new and strange tribes of Americans. Though the majority of these tribes speak English, many of them are radically foreign to us in their beliefs, assumptions, values, morality, and use of language. Increasingly, these tribes hate and antagonize us.

When we send missionaries to foreign tribes in Africa or New Guinea, we don’t expect those tribes to immediately embrace evangelical values. We understand the missionary must first demonstrate love, show God’s goodness, build relationships, learn the language, and invest in individuals and leaders. We expect that the missionary will be misunderstood and likely hated or suspected.

Successful evangelicals will learn to take the same biblical approach to the foreign tribes now growing in the United States. For too long we have expected United States nonbelievers to behave and believe like Christians. When they have acted like pagans, we have at times attacked them for being precisely who they are apart from Christ. This has brought us into distracting conflict with a number of United States tribes, including the broad tribe of Americans who self-identify as homosexual.

As documented in chapter 2 (Hated), evangelicals are on a crash course with the homosexual people group—due to tectonic shifts in cultural assumptions and values. We have also fed this conflict with evangelical reactionism, oppositionalism, and at times, outright prejudice. It is a fact that evangelicals are viewed in the broader United States culture as hateful and bigoted toward homosexuals. *How tragic that we are seen as hating the very people God commands us to love.* So how would God have you and me show His goodness to this tribe? How would God have you and me show His goodness to the gay men and women in each of our lives?

First, we should prepare ourselves, knowing that we *will* be misunderstood and slandered by people from other tribes in the United States. Christopher Yuan is a formerly gay, HIV-positive evangelical professor and speaker. In 2011 the Yale Christian Fellowship and Yale Students for Christ invited Yuan to speak to them. Their intent was to learn how to be more sensitive to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students on their campus.

Unfortunately, when word of Yuan's visit traveled around campus, the Christian groups' motives were overlooked in a firestorm of conflict. The Christian groups and Yuan himself were accused of hatred and bigotry—before they could even explain their motives or message.

The *Yale Daily News* documented the uproar in a story titled “Controversial Minister Draws Outcry.” Reader comments under the story included “To Mr. Yuan: Do you believe homosexual men should be killed, as the Bible commands? See Leviticus 20:13.”³²

When the Christian groups published a sensitive letter titled “Why We Invited Christopher Yuan,” comments under the letter included “Being a friendly bigot doesn't undo the bigotry” and “They were abhorrent people, but they have a right to a speech. . . . Mind you, I'm offended by this wahoo w[a]ndering around selling his ex-gay stuff.”³³

These comments demonstrate the cultural divide between some thought tribes at Yale and well-meaning evangelicals. Here's another insightful comment:

No matter how many times you use the word “love,” when you proclaim the LGBTQ community sinful, and when you openly call for them to spend their entire lives celibate rather than engaging in the search for love and family that makes us human, you are still doing grave harm to that community. Invoking “God's love” is not a get-out-of-jail-free card. As you said, you are not perfect. A truly loving God would be disappointed in Yuan and his message.⁴

Yuan's topic is inescapably controversial, but he is sensitive in his delivery. Given his history as a homosexual, he exercises caution. Nonetheless, the Yale student who coordinates reservations in the hall where Yuan was scheduled to speak canceled his reservation. She told the *Yale Daily News* she did so because Yuan brings a message “of bigotry and hatred.”³⁵

There's a tragic irony that Yale was founded in 1701 as a seminary for Bible study and that many Yale students would now forbid a speaker to explain a biblical interpretation of a contemporary issue. Conversely, Yale now holds an annual Sex Week on campus, complete with live demonstrations of sex toys.

These are not just college students expressing distaste for Bible-believing Christianity. These are the Ivy League men and women aimed at positions of prominence in making and enforcing the laws and values of United States culture. The tone during the conflict over Yuan's visit was not a tone of fairness or intellectual curiosity, but of outright hate toward a man who was gay and is HIV-positive. Why the hate? Because he is now an evangelical and now sensitively holds a biblical view about sexuality.

Each of us will encounter this same sort of hate in the coming years and decades. Many of the tribespeople who antagonize evangelicals believe—in their worldview—they are doing the loving thing for the persecuted people of their day, by putting evangelical “bigots” in their place.

Such unfair accusations can roll our human defensiveness. It's instinctive to protect ourselves, stand up for our rights, and demand fair or reasonable treatment. But we didn't typically see Jesus do this when he was misunderstood.

So how do we silence unfair accusations hurled against us? Let's start with Scripture. Living in a pagan and hypersexual culture may be new and frightening to us, but it was the norm for New Testament churches. Homosexuality and hypersexuality were nothing new to New Testament cultures or Christians. Time and again, God repeats His strategy: Live “good” lives *among* pagans.

Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing. . . . Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? . . .

Do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

1 Peter 3:9–17

Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do *whatever* is good. . . . I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be *careful to devote themselves to doing what is good*. . . . Our people must learn to *devote themselves to doing what is good*.

Titus 3:1, 8, 14

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:21

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people.

Galatians 6:9–10

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

2 Corinthians 9:8

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

Hebrews 10:24

For it is by grace you have been saved. . . . For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:8, 10

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.

1 Timothy 6:18

"In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

Matthew 5:16

How do we silence unfair accusations hurled against us? Answer: by our good deeds (1 Peter 2:15). Unfortunately, we have hidden most of our good deeds under the bushel. I speak of the old children's song, "Hide it under a bushel? No!"

Jesus said that our "good deeds" will praise our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16), but not if we hide our good deeds under a bowl, or bushel. It has not been our intent, but so many of our good

deeds take place within the bushels of our churches, or they take place on other continents. Many of the "pagans" living on our same streets in the United States don't ever see our good deeds. Instead, they see our absence, or worse, our defensive reactions to the changing United States culture. They see our antagonism against their tribe, against *them*. We give the impression of insecurity, self-protectiveness, and hate on the outside, even as we secretly conduct good deeds in the safety and shade of the bushel.

On accident, we have huddled under the bushel. We have hidden the light of the world from some of the tribes that most need that light—tribes in the United States of America. And within the United States, we have told some of these people groups that they are evil and should work harder to be more righteous in their own strength. We have claimed to love them from a distance, but we have failed to show them directly and personally that we are selfless, loving, and good. We vocally oppose them in mass media. We are absent in their personal lives, and then we claim with our words that we love them unconditionally.

Resurrecting God's mandate for good living among the pagans does not require a particular political position. But it requires that regardless of political conviction or doctrinal system, we re-elevate the goodness of our lives lived out "among" the pagans in our local communities—no matter what tribe those pagans belong to. That's what God repeatedly commands Christ's followers to do. That's His public relations plan.

Meeting the Lost Where They Are, It's What Christ Did

Remember Steph—the young woman who was enslaved in prostitution? God used an undeniably good evangelical to help draw Steph out of dark slavery. That goodness can't be claimed from a distance. It has to be demonstrated in person. Steph put it this way:

How important it is to go into these dark places, because that's where the victims are comfortable. People are building pretty shelters and places that look really good, so the victims will come out of these dark places and come into this warm embrace. The idea is