

# Commentary: Four practical ways to engage opponents with grace

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Let's start with some good news.

The late Alex Trebek's TV wardrobe was [donated](#) to men who are homeless or leaving jail. When an H-E-B grocery store near Austin, [lost power](#) in the recent winter storm and was unable to check out customers, employees let them take their goods home for free. A delivery driver's vehicle got [stuck](#) in a client's driveway when the storm began, so the couple took her into their home for five days.

Have you seen any of these stories headlined in recent days?

## Bad news and “negativity bias”

In other news, [cancel culture](#) has come for a Hyatt Regency hotel in Orlando, Fla. The hotel [hosted](#) the Conservative Political Action Conference last weekend. Former President Donald Trump spoke, as did a number of other Republican and conservative figures. As a result, critics called online for the hotel to be boycotted.

Cancel culture is also coming for Dr. Seuss on claims of racist stereotypes in his books. A school district in Virginia is just [one example](#). And rioters [vandalized](#) several buildings in downtown Portland, Ore., over the weekend, protesting the Biden administration's immigration policy and the federal agency Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Unfortunately, such bad news is much easier to find in the news than good

news.

“Negativity bias” is the [psychological phrase](#) for our collective hunger to hear and remember bad news. Part of this is schadenfreude, the pleasure we derive from another person’s misfortune. However, studies indicate we are also conditioned to avoid danger and thus respond more quickly to bad news that threatens us.

This means we often look for the negative and overlook the positive. As a result, we can make things worse than they are. Our fears become self-fulfilling prophecies, and we miss much of the good that surrounds us each day.

## Hiding from a king in a cave

In a previous article, I [mentioned](#) the importance of supporting religious freedom while speaking the truth in love with LGBTQ persons and their advocates. Toward the close of the article, I stated my plan to suggest specific ways we can do both.

For foundational guidance, we turn to Psalm 57, David’s prayer when he was hiding from King Saul in a wilderness cave (probably 1 Samuel 22:1, but possibly 1 Samuel 24:3). Here we find four principles that apply when we face opposition to our faith. Each of them calls us to focus on the good in the midst of the bad.

### **One: Trust God’s presence.**

David begins his prayer: “Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by” (v. 1). He knows the Lord is sheltering him in the face of mortal peril, even though he cannot see his “wings” at the time.

## **Two: Trust God's purpose.**

David continues: "I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me" (v. 2). Note: It is God, not David, who "fulfills" this purpose. The darkness of the tunnel does not contradict the sovereignty of the engineer driving the train.

## **Three: Trust God's power.**

David testifies: "He *will* send from heaven and save me; he *will* put to shame him who tramples on me" (v. 3, my emphasis). He knows the King of the universe is more powerful than the king of Israel.

## **Four: Trust God's providence.**

David admits: "My soul is in the midst of lions; I lie down amid fiery beasts" (v. 4). Yet he can pray: "Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!" (v. 5). He knows God knows his challenges and will bring his glory "over all the earth," including the threat he faces.

# **Four steps to the spring of the Spirit**

With this backdrop, how can we respond redemptively to those who advocate for causes that threaten our religious freedom and attack our beliefs?

In [\*Crisis in America: A Christian Response\*](#), Pastor Garland Hunt offers practical wisdom for this moment in our nation's history. I would summarize his suggestions for facing opposition in four steps:

- Perception: What is God saying to us through this event?
- Personal accountability: Is there wrongdoing I must admit and change?
- Prayer: How can I intercede for those affected and for God to act for their best?

- Persuasion: What changes are needed? How can I help people make them?

Because God is sovereign in every “cave” of life, we can trust his presence, purpose, power and providence. Therefore, we can look for his hand in the challenges we face.

Before we can ask others to change, however, we must ask God what changes we need to make (1 Peter 4:17). Then we can pray for God to work in the minds and hearts of our opponents (Matthew 5:44). Only then can we be effective catalysts for change in our broken culture.

I’ll close with a lesson from the winter storm we recently suffered in Texas. My home in Dallas was blanketed with more snow than I ever have seen in our city. However, when the temperature finally climbed above freezing and the sun came out, the snow began to melt. Not so quickly that you could watch it happen, but slowly over time.

In a day or two, the snow had melted in the sunlight. However, it persisted far longer in the shade.

If we do our job as the “light of the world” (Matthew 5:14), we will make an eternal difference in our winter-gripped world. We may not see the spiritual snow melt today, but the spring of the Spirit is coming.

This is the promise and the invitation of God.

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