Editorial: How should Christians treat others?

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Talk about your Law of Unintended Consequences: Our culture is growing increasingly combative. So, Christians' actions are fraught with evangelistic implications, demanding progressively peaceful responses.

Marv KnoxYou might not expect this to be the case. If atheists, agnostics and garden-variety unbelievers are demonstrating escalating levels of hostility, then maybe Christians get a pass for not sharing the gospel with them. "They're being mean to me, and I can't reach them, anyway," one Christian might say. "They criticize me, so I'm being persecuted, and I don't have to put up with it anymore," another might add.

We see this in our fellow sisters and brothers, don't we? The number of "nones"—who claim no religious identification—are growing steadily. And people who are antagonistic to Christianity, or faith in general, seem pushier than before. So, some Christians have developed an us vs. them attitude. Rather than lost souls in need of salvation, unbelievers are adversaries to be avoided and/or defeated in legislation.

But the more others oppose Christianity, the harder it is to separate evangelism from practically everything Christians say and do.

This isn't exactly new. If you are of a certain age—which is to say 19 to

92—you probably remember a preacher at youth camp insisting, "Your life is the only Bible some people ever will read." You also probably experienced the exact opposite, when Christian hypocrisy chased a wandering soul out the church door, never to return.

Escalating phenomenon

Still, this phenomenon seems to be escalating these days.

One reason is we are closer and more connected to each other than ever before. Practically everybody carries a worldwide connection device in their pocket or purse. Thanks to the Internet, and particularly all the forms of social media, we live in an intimate, interactive world. Everybody can comment on everything, and those comments don't go away as easily as they did when most communication was spoken—out loud—and done.

Also, our culture has devolved; it's coarser and more contentious. We've seen full-blown evidence of this in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaigns. But we experience it in our daily lives, as we read and watch the news, listen to discussions on radio and TV, stand by the watercooler and, sadly, sometimes hear conversations at church.

Here's the deal: In this context, the actions of Christians—particularly how we treat unbelievers and adherents of different faiths—matters more than ever. We sometimes lose this thought in the heat of strife, but the fate of souls often rides on how Christians behave toward the bodies walking around carrying those souls.

Reasons for concern

This has been on my mind lately, for myriad reasons. A couple will illustrate the point:

First, some readers have been angry about recent editorials contemplating

the intersection of homosexuals' civil rights and others' religious liberty. (In case you missed them, you can read "[The flaws in 'religious liberty' laws](#)" and "[A conversation about religious liberty laws and freedom](#).") Some have said I am "unwilling to take a stand against what is immoral" because I care what others think. Precisely. Too many Christians have told them they're rotten and lousy. I hope they hear Jesus loves them. Because, although what they think about you or me or Christians in general doesn't really matter, what they think about Jesus has eternal consequences. And unfortunately or fortunately, as the case may be, the only perspective they have on Jesus is how Christians treat them. So, what they think does matter. Forever.

Second, a fellow believer recently said the Christian's responsibility is to proclaim the Bible: If some hear and believe, that's wonderful. If others hear and do not believe, then that's their problem. This is wrong on so many levels, I hardly know where to begin. But let's start with this: In a scientific, multi-cultural, multi-religion world, the best way to validate the gospel is to embody Jesus' love for others and to make transforming initiatives—gracious, redemptive, overtly kind, gentle and friendly actions—that can open their hearts and minds to the gospel. Shouting damnation only drives them further from the truth embodied in Jesus.

Love and the gospel

Surely, some will counter that Jesus told fallen, broken people, "Go, and sin no more." But that always was the last thing he said, not the first. After he loved them and healed them physically and spiritually, he told them to turn, turn, turn. And don't you know that's what they already wanted to do—the perfect response to love?

Others may say Jesus told the disciples to "shake the dust off your feet" and move on. But dust-shaking was to happen after they met people's needs—"heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive

out the demons" (Matthew 10:8). It was to happen only after they sought a "person of peace" (Luke 10:6), not engaged in a contentious argument.

Years ago, I worked as a reporter for the old Baptist Home Mission Board. One of my jobs was identifying story ideas, and one of the best places I looked for them was in the monthly reports produced by missionaries across America. I quickly discovered the language missions and Christian social ministries departments produced the most baptisms in any given month or year. The reason was simple: Those missionaries met people at the point of their need. As they healed bodies, trained for jobs, mended marriages, taught English and generally showed people the depths of Jesus' love, they earned the right to tell them about the gospel.

So, yes, Christians ought to care what unbelievers think. And we should shape their thinking by loving them, not condemning them to hell.