

Right or Wrong? Hostile communications

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No matter the topic—from social issues to carpet colors in church—only the shrillest, most extreme voices seem to be heard. How can we find common ground for reasonable, reconciling conversations, especially in our congregations?

Hostile communication dates back to the Garden of Eden. While this form of mistreating one another is not new, people have almost perfected it in the 21st century. Although it is not the only cause, a major contributor has been the rise of social media. For instance, Facebook and Twitter, two of the myriad forms of social media, have given a new stage to people's ability to make their views known. With much practice, people gained new courage and determination to speak their minds. Usually, people do not give much thought to whether or not these views are offensive.

Vocal escalation

In addition, in today's social climate, almost everything is offensive to someone or another. With so much offense to spread around, if one wants to be heard above the crowd, that person must be louder and more extreme than all the rest. So, we get used to yelling and screaming and doing whatever it takes to be heard, and thus to get our way.

Unfortunately, the church is not immune to this societal defect. People cannot, or at least are not willing to, separate the way they communicate in church from the way they communicate in public.

One key to addressing this issue is to remind/instruct the congregation that things *should be* different in church and among the church members, as

opposed to the larger public. There are different guidelines for believers than for society in general.

The New Testament directly addresses these guidelines. James 1:26 and 3:5-9 are clear about the dangers of letting our tongues be out of control. The Apostle Paul repeatedly (2 Corinthians 10:1, Galatians 5:23, Philippians 4:5, Colossians 3:12, 1 Timothy 6:11) emphasizes the need for using the meekness and gentleness of Christ as the basis for how we communicate.

In all of the New Testament, a loud voice is only used for crying out to God, with one notable exception. In Luke 23, it was with loud shouts the crowd demanded Jesus be crucified. It would seem unnecessary to emphasize the lesson to be learned there.

It's the attitude

Significantly, the problem usually has more to do with attitude than mere speech. The overwhelming desire to have things done our way, only as we like it, is such a negative part of our current condition. It also is the definition of the anti-gospel. The gospel is about loving others and sacrificing ourselves for their good. Humility and meekness are characteristics of a Christ-like mind. Demanding one's own way represents selfishness rather than the Christian standard of selflessness.

People need training in those characteristics. Sermons, Bible studies and just simple good conversations need to be used to facilitate an education in these basic elements.

Your question provides the foundation. How can we find common ground? We need to be reminded of the greatest common ground in our lives—we are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Let's start there.

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If you have a comment about this column or wish to ask a question for a future column, contact Bill Tillman, consulting ethicist for "Right or Wrong?" at btillman150@gmail.com.