

Tips for Healthy Dialogue on Controversial Topics

how to love and listen well while honoring your personal convictions



This handout offers practical tips to help you engage in healthy dialogue, even when people have different opinions. The first step is engaging in a healthy process to discern your own personal opinion.

Steps to Discern Personal Opinions

- 1. Humble yourself and ask the Holy Spirit for help:** The ultimate goal is to align your heart with God's on an issue. There is a need for great humility, because people lack God's perfect wisdom and understanding. It is important to start this process from a place of humility, recognizing that all people have blind spots (places they can't see clearly).
- 2. Explore what Scripture says:** Scripture is a believer's compass and guides all discernment and decision-making. Start by studying Scripture to understand all that it says about a topic. Do not simply cling to one verse; look at all stories and verses related to the issue in their socio-historical context. Study the meaning of words in their original text, namely Greek (New Testament) and Hebrew (Old Testament). This more vigorous study of Scripture is what is required to really understand God's heart on an issue.
- 3. Practically educate yourself about a topic:** It is important to be educated on a topic before forming an opinion. Education involves learning about recent events, historical events, laws, research, etc. This will take some time and requires that you find reputable sources for your information.
- 4. Explore various perspectives:** Do not simply educate yourself using sources that support one side. Explore the issue from various vantage points, even if you do not agree with them. This can involve reading books and articles written from various perspectives, research that draws various conclusions, and talking to people who have different opinions.
- 5. Maintain a soft and teachable heart:** Throughout the process it is necessary to maintain a soft, teachable heart, so you are able to hear the Holy Spirit as He speaks and informs the process. Also remember that beliefs and convictions can change over time as God continues to speak into a situation and bring greater clarity.

*“Everyone
should be quick
to listen, slow
to speak and
slow to become
angry”
(James 1:19)*

Ingredients for Healthy Dialogue

- ✓ **Listen to understand the other person's perspective.** Use active listening skills to really understand the other person's perspective, rather than focusing on what you will say to change their mind.
- ✓ **Use grace-filled words.** Pause before you respond and consider if the words you are about to use extend love and grace to the other person.
- ✓ **Humble yourself and ask the Holy Spirit for help.** Remember that you do not have God's perfect wisdom and likely have blind spots in how you perceive the topic. Be careful not to condemn or judge the other person.
- ✓ **Treat the other person with respect.** Disagreeing with another person does not justify disrespectful or unkind treatment.
- ✓ **Remember that Jesus died for the other person.** The other person has infinite value to God regardless of their opinion. He died for them, just as He died for you.
- ✓ **Take responsibility and ask for forgiveness.** If you use unkind words, an angry or demeaning tone, gossip, or do anything that may harm the person in any way, take responsibility and ask for forgiveness.
- ✓ **Extend grace to the other person.** If the other person offends you, honestly share how you feel and be quick to extend grace.
- ✓ **Take a break if you are upset.** If you are feeling upset or overwhelmed, let the other person know and take a break from the conversation.
- ✓ **Use "I" statements.** Make sure to use "I" statements to honestly share your perspective and anything you need from the other person.
- ✓ **Share honestly.** It takes courage to honestly share your perspective with another person.

Things to Avoid

Criticism: Making negative statements that attack another person's personality or character.



Contempt: Assuming a position of moral superiority over another person and attacking the other person's sense of self, character, or worth.



Defensiveness: Protecting yourself by blaming the other person or minimizing the significance of the situation.



Stonewalling
Withdrawing from the interaction, shutting down, or simply not responding.

