

NEED FOR PEACE AND UNDERSTANDING:  
HOW TO LIVE OUTHOLINESS IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DISCOURSE

Gina Pottenger, Missionary

Personal Essay

*“Christians often say, ‘Why doesn’t God send revival?’ or ‘Why doesn’t God give us some fruit for our labors?’ Of course, I do not have any final answer for that question, but John 17 suggests one reason could be that unresolved interpersonal conflicts have destroyed the unity that God uses to bring blessing and revival.... This text suggests that one is necessary for the other.”*

–Duane Elmer, Cross-Cultural Conflict, p. 27

*Purpose*

This personal essay suggests that the Church of the Nazarene develop a more intentional focus on teaching our people about living holy lives through modern discourse, both private and public. It argues that we have lost the art and understanding of what it means to be people of peace and agents of reconciliation in a polarized world. At times, we contribute to divisions, hostility, and even hatred through ways we communicate that are more worldly than godly. The essay concludes that holiness teachings in this area should be modeled and taught at all levels and across the ministries of our church.

*Summary Analysis*

In a world seeking instant gratification, conditioned by the Internet and other modern conveniences, we are often tempted to respond impulsively immediately to concerns and events. In fact, many believers may feel pressure to be among the first to stake out positions on rapidly changing current events and controversial issues.

However, I argue that what we are now experiencing in Western or modern society is a high-speed train careening off the tracks. Western society has lost the art of civilized discourse. We no longer know how to:

- be quick to listen, with the intent to learn and understand, slow to speak, and slow to anger;
- ask questions with the humble attitude that we may not have all the information;
- assume the best about people who think differently from us, rather than assume the worst; dialogue about issues on their own merits rather than question or criticize the moral or spiritual character of anyone holding a different viewpoint;
- converse with the intent to be peacemakers and to speak truth in love.

Instead, contemporary Western society defaults to the reverse of these values in the majority of our national or global discussions on a range of topics.

The worst examples are on stark and painful display across platforms of social media and the Internet. While some may point fingers at such technologies themselves as the problem, I believe these platforms merely rip away the veil to reveal a much more alarming and deeply rooted problem – a problem of the heart.

Hateful language (including, but not limited to language that belittles, excludes, dehumanizes, or incites violence against others, or attacks their character/spirituality/morality rather than their position or arguments) on social media is, sadly, not limited to people who do not yet follow Christ. Evidence indicates that many in the church have not managed to rise above the slow death of civil discourse across wider society. Nor is uncivil discourse, and the need for peace and reconciliation, limited to North America. Various societies around the world are or have been literally at war, such as the Israelis and Palestinians. Or Israel and Lebanon. Or Russia and Ukraine. Some areas have ‘softer’ conflict rooted in history and culture, as between India and Pakistan.

How are God's people leading, teaching and equipping each other and people within these societies to be people of peace and reconciliation? How are we calling our members to a higher standard when these conflicts infect our churches?

To begin exploring answers to these questions, we remember that Christians are called to holiness in conversation, whether in person or online. When the church's voice merely echoes the world's voice, why would anyone be compelled to forsake old patterns and participate in God's work of making all things new?

#### *Call to action*

It is time for God's people to intentionally model and teach this from our local congregations, as well as our leadership.

We are called to be *living* witnesses, embodying the promised resurrection here and now by breathing new life into strongholds of death in modern society. This certainly includes what we have been seeing in society as the death of civil discourse (Galatians 5:22-23; 2 Corinthians 5:15-20).

As the saying goes, peace is not merely the absence of conflict. A married couple may go through life's routines together without addressing their deep hurts, anger or issues of neglect that eat away at the trust and love in the relationship. People and religious groups within one nation (such as in Rwanda or Lebanon) might live quietly together while hate smolders beneath the surface, just waiting to be ignited.

Peace should not be confused with passivity: others have understood this when they've used the term “waging peace.” Peacemaking is difficult, and may come with a cost.

In our increasingly secularized and divided societies, responsibility for teaching, leading and modeling what holiness of discourse looks like in everyday life must start with the Church. We need spiritual leaders to provide continuous and intentional teaching on what it means to engage in dialogue that is holy, respectful, loving and truthful. Such discourse should be our rule of life everywhere we are: in the local church, at home, at work, or among friends. Holiness must characterize not only how we discuss politics and current events, but how we talk about everything else in life on which we might disagree.

Before we rush with the best of intentions to some form of social advocacy, justice, or acts of mercy, we should care about the people involved enough to engage with critical thinking, tolerance, humility, and a listening heart that can recognize and embrace diverse approaches and solutions. This is part of what it means to speak the truth in love.

Some specific teaching and modeling points should include:

1. Critical thinking
2. Biblical tolerance
3. Listening
4. Exploring *all* diversity
5. Discipleship
6. Courage
7. Forgiveness and grace

I will elaborate on what I mean by these points.

### *Critical thinking*

Believers are called to be truth-seekers and truth-tellers. We are commanded to love God with all our hearts, *minds*, souls and strength. Our God-given intellect allows us the ability to undertake the necessary hard work and slow process of sifting fact from falsehood; of weighing the merits of ideas and positions; of understanding the difference between facts and opinions; of investigating news and sources of news more thoroughly and critically; and resisting the temptation to take the easy path of accepting reports or rumors at face value.

Critical thinking recognizes that those with agendas can hide certain facts while putting forth others in order to (unintentionally or willfully) misinterpret data to paint a distorted picture. Critical thinking helps us to recognize that everything may not be what it seems and bears closer examination before drawing conclusions. Critical thinking protects us from vulnerability to manipulation by forces in society that would use us to achieve ends we may not embrace or power they should not have.

When we are not careful to avoid aligning ourselves too closely with those who do not share biblical values (politicians, political parties, lobbying groups, community organizations, etc.), we run the risk of being manipulated by these forces. This can lead to a loss of trust and confidence in the church and its leadership.

Christians, especially those whose roles or participation in Christian communities may involve less direct contact with the rest of society, may at times be in danger of naively placing trust in those who are not trustworthy (Matt. 10:16).

Some of the many benefits of critical thinking can directly impact our relationship with Christ and our life together as His people. For example, learning how to avoid bolstering our position in a disagreement by “proof-texting” isolated biblical passages. Critical thinking also teaches us that we do not need to choose between reaping the benefits of daily scripture study and prayer and using our God-given intellect. With knowledge of the Scriptures, combined with awareness of Christian tradition, and everyday experience as growing Christians, we can more wisely consider and respond to the complex and difficult issues of our world.

### *Tolerance*

In some quarters, tolerance means that all ideas and lifestyles must be accepted and enthusiastically supported. They must not be questioned. This includes perspectives and values that directly contradict one’s own religious beliefs and basic worldview. In the name of a ‘tolerant’ society, many are expected to forsake or remain silent about their convictions. They

may even feel compelled to cooperate in what they believe are the immoral actions of others, merely to make the others feel more comfortable.

However, Christians may understand tolerance as closer to its original definition: “a fair, objective, and permissive attitude toward opinions, beliefs, and practices that differ from one's own” (Random House Unabridged Dictionary). In the Body of Christ, a wide variety of opinions on political issues can be tolerated as biblical and compassionate.

For instance, it is possible to accept that Nazarenes could support one candidate over another in the 2016 U.S. presidential election without necessarily acting against Christian faith and moral principle. Suppose one Nazarene weighed the two viable candidates in that election and decided that, to be true to her passionate concern for creation care, she must vote for Hillary Clinton. Suppose that another Nazarene was primarily concerned for the unborn and hoped that Donald Trump would pass legislation favorable to pro-life values. Suppose again (because there are often many more sides to an issue than merely two!) that a third Nazarene viewed both candidates as so abhorrent to her faith and values that she could not in good conscience vote at all. And yet all three bring a legitimate and fair perspective to the voting process that does not exclude any of them from fellowship with the Church or with Christ.

Consider an even more recent example: Suppose that one Nazarene believes that separating children from illegal immigrant parents at the U.S.-Mexico border is dangerous to families and children, so the policy must be ended. Perhaps another Nazarene is concerned that many adults are bringing children across the border to traffic them, requiring the U.S. government to temporarily remove children from adult custody until it can be definitely ascertained which children are safe in the care of those adults with whom they arrived. Both positions can be considered just and compassionate, and yet lean toward opposing solutions.

In a context where the issues are genuinely debatable, tolerance is not reflected in statements such as, “No follower of Jesus should support this immoral policy. We renounce this evil in the name of Jesus.” Someone wrote this in response to other deeply concerned Christians who support minors being temporarily and humanely separated from adults at the U.S./Mexico border to ensure they are not being kidnapped or trafficked. The writer of the statement stands in for God as judge of their fellow believers. He has not acknowledged the compassion and concern that motivates their brothers' and sisters' advocacy for certain political positions that may be different from his own.

This kind of exclusivity and intolerance is wrong. Biblical tolerance means living peacefully side by side with others who are different or have different perspectives, without surrendering our own.

The cost of Christian intolerance may be profound. Intolerance hardens the soil where safe, trusting relationships may otherwise flourish. Being able to safely share our perspectives and experiences with each other often leads to deeper intimacy and trust – the bedrock for sharing the gospel with those who do not yet know Jesus. It is also the soil required for encouraging and walking together as believers in discipleship and spiritual maturity.

As people of peace and agents of reconciliation, it is necessary for us to be able to open ourselves to the reality that others can hold opposing viewpoints and not be evil or lack compassion or concern for justice. In fact, those who prefer different solutions to problems can

be as concerned about justice, compassion and the well being of others as we are. Civil discourse can only thrive in such conditions.

### *Listening*

Listening is an art, and a discipline. When we find ourselves in conflict with others, our fallen natures lead us to sink back into a posture of defense. We often listen only to find loopholes in the other's position, or take that time while another is speaking to formulate our next statement in the debate. We would rather bolster our own position than listen to or compromise with someone else. True listening is a skill that we must develop, and requires us to temporarily set aside our own perspective, check our defensive nature, and restrain our desire to "win" so that we can instead adopt an attitude of humility enabling us to seek true understanding of "the other."

We must strive to not only hear words, but to engage in the hard work of understanding what they truly mean, seeing the world from others' eyes with our empathy and compassion. We learn to ask questions not as veiled criticism or to find fault with another, but to elicit deeper understanding and enrich our own perspective – just as we would wish others to do for us. (Matthew 22:39) Listening is not just hearing words someone says, but striving to understand their heart.

Listening does not require that we compromise our own beliefs, but simply understand those of others before we insist on making our own views understood.

### *Exploring All Diversity*

While some in the world may affirm the value of "diversity" as a mask to disguise its darker sibling, "tribalism," God's people affirm true diversity's richness and depth that stretches to include many more things than skin color or sexual organs. God's people can recognize that diversity encompasses not only race and ethnicity, gender, and so on, but also the diverse tapestry of ideas, perspectives, opinions, theology, and worldview.

When we take the risk of intentionally inviting relationship with those who hold opinions different from our own, we are enriched in our understanding of each other, as well as of God and His world. Genuine, loving relationships among people who disagree with us may broaden and deepen our own views, and challenge us to be able to better frame and articulate our own ideas by testing them in respectful dialogue with the different ideas and experiences of others.

We recognize that sometimes Christians may be isolated in "echo chambers" – situations at home, work, or even in church where we are among only those who share our perspectives and worldview. We must resist the temptation to assume that all believers naturally think exactly like the ones we know. We must resist the temptation to make broad statements with the implied assumption that everyone will agree, or must agree. We must resist the temptation to make statements that do not genuinely invite feedback or response, giving the impression that additional perspectives and further information is not needed or welcome.

### *Discipleship*

Those most at risk of underdeveloped skill in civil discourse are those who are learning and developing communication skills mainly through digital platforms, where the norms of dialogue and debate (if one can characterize them as such) often, lamentably, hold little in common with a holy life – and often occur without the context of personal relationship.

More mature believers can take the opportunity to mentor and disciple others in the skills of listening with the intent to learn and understand, to develop critical thinking, and to seek and communicate truth and love. The truth is that we all have room to grow and learn throughout our lives about how to love others as we love ourselves. Discipleship is not only for the young, and does not end when we grow older. A “mature believer” is not necessarily an “older believer” (I Timothy 4.12).

The great risk is that failing to disciple today means future generations of the church will lack the ability to lead and challenge society in civil discourse, effectively sidelining God’s people from influencing and challenging the culture in this area. At worst, we will continue to be part of the problem.

### *Courage*

Many may believe that courage is speaking out. But equally, courage may require remaining silent for a time.

Courageous holiness leadership may, at times, choose to apply brakes to the pace of discourse to give adequate time for prayerful discernment, thoughtful reflection, and due diligence in terms of investigation and research. Because such an approach in an emotionally charged and reactionary environment can be seen as silent condoning or a lack of compassion, boldness and courage may be needed to take such a tack and bear the accompanying cost (James 1:19).

Being courageous may sometimes require waiting until the heat of emotion has cooled, in order to draw on calmness, objectivity, compassion and mutual understanding before speaking truth in love and humility. The wisdom of waiting can be helpful in personal relationships where there is strife, in challenging a decision made in the workplace, among congregations experiencing discord, or speaking out against things we object to in wider society.

In polarized societies where many flee to their “troop” encampment, dig an ideological trench and hunker down for battle, being people of peace may require us to refuse to take sides, no matter how much we want to (Joshua 5:13-14). Being agents of reconciliation may require us to coax others from their trenches to tables of fellowship where the risk of dialogue and listening brings the rich reward of understanding, unconditional love and seeing the other as more like us than we thought.

Peacemaking involves building bridges, not burning them down.

### *Forgiveness and Grace*

Being holy does not mean being absolutely perfect and free of all flaw and infirmity in this life. We may hurt one another in word and deed, in action and omission. Grace and forgiveness are required for engaging in truly civil discourse. We must not only forgive others who hurt us in the hard work of communication and relationship, but must be ready at all times to humbly acknowledge we ourselves will need forgiveness. Extending grace means that when we are unsure of another person’s motives or heart, without being naïve or gullible we try to assume the best until we know more. This is not contradictory to the principle of critical thinking.

On a personal note of testimony, during the 2016 U.S. presidential election season, and during the initial Brexit vote in the U.K., comments made by some Christian friends and contacts on social media or in person, about voters who held opposing views or beliefs, were shocking and hurtful to me. I experienced depression, discouragement and deep disappointment in the way

Christian people discuss these difficult topics, and describe one another – often without talking or listening to one another.

With the exception of carefully and respectfully confronting one preacher for a politically-laced sermon that caused deep hurt, I was not sure how to deal with the hurt except to withdraw for a time from social media, many social gatherings and some church involvement to avoid further hurt and provide space and time for healing.

As a result, I felt isolated and alone. It took many months to work through this at the feet of Jesus, in order to come to a place of forgiveness and grace. Such hurt never needed to occur. However, the hard (but not instantaneous) work of forgiveness is necessary, and extending grace to each other in the midst of hurt and misunderstanding is critical for fellowship to be sustained and to grow. Sharing about my hurt and concern with the preacher (without making accusations or assuming wrong motives), who listened carefully, then responded with humility and apology, deepened our mutual understanding, love and respect. I felt heard and loved. The relationship is stronger than before.

In another situation, I found myself in a heated discussion with a friend about the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Although I had not sought out the debate, when I realized my friend was becoming upset, I quickly drew the discussion to a close. Later, I was concerned that I may have contributed to the emotion by something I said, so I returned to my friend and apologized. My friend responded by saying that in fact, he felt he was the one who needed to apologize, and he did so wholeheartedly. This response brought a lot of healing to my heart that not only strengthened our friendship, it gave me the strength I needed to begin re-engaging with others whom I had been avoiding so that I did not have to have similar conversations with them.

In both situations, I personally experienced the joy-filled rewards of what it means to participate in peacemaking and reconciliation.

### *Conclusion*

To be the church, and to be holy, most often requires being counter-cultural, subverting social norms and expectations by carving a new path. This is more true now than ever where civil discourse is concerned. It means that we lead the culture, rather than follow.

It means that we do our research, question what we hear before we draw conclusions, and sometimes take times of silence to listen and learn before we speak.

God's people today are in need of modeling, teaching, leadership and the lived out truth of these principles at all levels.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, I strive every day to practically live out biblical teachings on holiness of heart and mind in all aspects of my life. I cling more than ever to the hope promised to us by Jesus Christ that when we give Him Lordship, and cooperate with the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit engages in the continuous work of cleansing us from our sinful nature and enabling us to live victorious lives, empowering us to be people of peace and agents of reconciliation every day, wherever we are.