

An Open Letter on Writing Open Letters

In the comments following my recent open letter to Megyn Kelly, a reader on one website wrote an open letter to me, which was immediately followed by an open letter to him by another reader.

Is there any real point to all this, and do open letters bear any fruit?

These are good questions, which actually come up a lot.

I've also been asked if any of the people I've addressed in these open letters have actually read them, which is also a fair question.

So here are some answers.

First, as a general principle, I write an open letter to someone to whom I do not have direct access. If it's a fellow leader in the Church, my office will often try to reach out to them privately, and if we get no response (or if we get a negative response, saying they're not willing to interact), I write the open letter as I feel prompted to do so.

In the case of someone like Donald Trump or Megyn Kelly, where personal contact is virtually impossible without knowing someone in their respective camps, I'll just write the open letter.

But here's the bigger principle: Public statements and public actions merit public responses.

In other words, if a major politician, spiritual leader or media personality made an outlandish comment on national TV, it would not be necessary to contact them personally before addressing what they had to say. (This would be the rule

unless you had direct access to the individual in question, in which case it would be common courtesy to reach out privately first. When it comes to Christian leaders, whenever possible, for the sake of unity, we try to address things behind closed doors.)

This is really not rocket science.

For example, when President Obama came out openly in favor of same-sex “marriage” a few years ago, if you were a pastor, would you need to contact the president directly (good luck!) before addressing his comments from the pulpit? When your congregants are confused or disturbed by what he said, don’t you have a responsibility to address things publicly with biblical clarity?

Let’s also remember that an open letter is written for at least two reasons: The first goal is to address the person in question with the hope that he or she will read the letter and consider your points. The second goal is to address the issue in question with the hope that others will read the letter and consider your points.

With regard to the second goal, here are two relevant examples. My open letter to Joel Osteen was shared almost 400,000 times on one website alone, generating almost 2,000 comments there; my open letter to Bruce Springsteen was shared almost 220,000 times on another website alone, generating more than 5,000 comments there.

The issues are being discussed and debated!

As to whether those addressed actually read the open letters, on quite a few occasions the answer is definitely yes. In fact, in some cases, it has only been after an open letter was written that the leader (or his organization) reached out to me, declining any interaction before then. In other cases, it was after an open letter was written that leaders agreed to sit and talk privately when we reached out to them behind the

scenes.

Only God knows the actual impact of these letters, but yes, they are sometimes read by the people themselves (or by people close to them, who then contact us) and, thank God, they sometimes bear fruit in that person's life. And either way, whether read or unread by the intended recipient, the letters bring the issues to the forefront.

This is part of my own calling: to be a voice of moral sanity and spiritual clarity in the midst of a society in chaos and a church all-too-often in compromise.

That being said, the goal of every open letter is always to be constructive rather than destructive, to expose what is wrong in order to point to what is right, to tear down error for the purpose of building up truth. And in all cases, the motivation must be love, caring for the individual even more than the issue, although both the individual and the issue are important.

If we write out of frustration or fleshly anger—if we are reactionary rather than deliberate—we can do more harm than good.

And how do I feel when people post open letters to me online or address me in public videos or podcasts?

Personally, I feel wonderful, appreciative of the fact that they've taken the time to read (or listen to) what I've written (or said) plus then taken the additional time to respond, even if the responses are nasty. (Some of the really nasty ones are actually quite funny, although I hurt for the people involved.)

On a number of occasions, when I've written to the person who posted a somewhat-hostile open letter to me, thanking them for taking the time to do it, they responded with surprise, not expecting to hear from me or, if they did expect to hear from

me, expecting an angry response, which they did not get.

On other occasions, I've written privately to the person who posted the letter (or video), correcting errors in their post and encouraging them to correct them accordingly, then thanking them again for their efforts.

Either way, though, I welcome such open letters and videos and podcasts. What's good for the goose is also good for the gander.

In sum, then, when possible, we address things behind closed doors; when not possible, we address things openly.

In all cases, the goal is redemptive and instructive.