

Don't Avoid What Matters: 5 Ways to Talk About Politics Peacefully

This year, in some households, political arguments have turned the holiday dinner table into a warzone. Friends, even relatives, have cut ties with people who don't share their political perspectives. Too often, flaring tempers quench the spirit of joy and brotherhood that should mark family gatherings.

The right way to respond isn't to refuse to discuss politics and religion. It's to talk about politics in a way that is worthy of Christians. These five steps can bring peace to meaningful discussions through the holidays and well beyond:

1. Before you speak, listen.

The great philosopher Mortimer J. Adler of the University of Chicago told William F. Buckley Jr. on *Firing Line* that listening to the other side is the necessary foundation of any discussion. That towering intellect undoubtedly knew that he echoed the apostle James, who said, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God" (James 1:19-20).

After listening, repeat an accurate summary of the other person's statement—and make sure you got it right by asking, "Do I understand you to say ... ?" If necessary, invite clarification. Any argument deserves to be met in its strongest form, not a flimsy strawman.

2. When you finally speak, proceed with humility.

Friends on the other side are merely repeating the best

conclusion they can make with the facts they have. We are all made of the same clay, and we need to have the humility to admit that, on issues not addressed by Scripture, we could well be wrong.

Therefore, we should remember that the apostle Paul wrote, "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you should answer everyone" (Col. 4:6).

3. Don't view the other person as an adversary.

Unless you are on a debate stage or arguing in front of impressionable company, your relationship with the other person is more valuable than winning an argument. This is especially true of family or old friends.

Begin by stating your respect for the person. Mention your shared goal to make the world a better place and touch on any other common ground you have. Instead of trying to land a humiliating knockout punch, see the other person as your partner on a mutual pursuit of the truth. As the Bible says, "Iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (Prov. 27:17).

4. Frame your conversation around their values.

Spouting off our opinions makes us feel good, but it does nothing to convince other people we're right. As you speak, try to consider how the other person is processing the discussion and address the other person's values. For instance, if he says he supports abortion because he believes in women's rights, you can respond by saying that abortion hurts women and that an estimated 200 million girls have been aborted just because of their sex.

If the other person says he's a socialist because people could only support capitalism out of greed, you could respond that you support the free market because it produces the greatest amount of wealth and the highest living standards for the

poor. When you speak to their values, you begin a dialogue that can lead to conversion.

5. Don't expect an instant conversion.

Our society makes it easy to hermetically seal ourselves off from opposing views. For instance, Pew found that 4 out of 10 Americans in both parties say they don't have a single friend who supported the opposing presidential candidate. That means your meeting may well be the first time the other person has ever encountered your worldview—especially if it is a Christian perspective.

Your conversation may only be intended to plant a seed. At the end, reaffirm your common ground, thank the person for agreeing to explore these issues together and express hope that the conversation will continue. As St. Paul wrote, “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘Vengeance is Mine. I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19).

Following these steps does not guarantee that your friends or family will respond in kind. But they might, and in time, they may share your goodwill and respect with other people. One day, you may be remembered as someone who helped: “Those from among you shall rebuild the old waste places; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you shall be called, the Repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of Paths in which to Dwell” (Isa. 58:12). {eoa}

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