

Responding to a 'Friendly Atheist' Who Isn't Too Happy With Me

Dear Hemant,

A colleague sent me a link to your recent blog where you interacted with my response to Dannika Nash's open letter to the church from her generation. I'm glad you read what we both had to say, and I'm glad you posted her very gracious response to me. I have reached out to her to continue our interaction, and I trust it will be constructive.

What I found most interesting—and certainly informative—was the way Dannika (and many others) read my response as opposed to how you read it (along with many of your readers). In your words, my whole response “was just dripping with condescension ... and phrases that were very holier-than-thou.” In contrast, Dannika wrote, “I appreciate Dr. Brown's contribution to the respectful dialogue that is beginning to finally surround this issue.”

If you'll look at the comments following my article on the *Charisma* site, you'll see that the vast majority of readers, including young people, found my tone to be gracious and respectful, which is exactly what I intended. In contrast, most readers commenting on your blog shared your perspective, some of them apparently adding their comments to the *Charisma* site as well, with comments like this: “This is one of the most vile, condescending, repugnant pieces of [mild expletive deleted] I have ever read.”

Isn't this fascinating? Two different sets of readers with two different worldviews and two different sets of presuppositions perceive the identical words in two totally different ways. This underscores how easy it is to misread or misunderstand

written communication. As far as my article was concerned, I absolutely intended it to be respectful and gracious, and there was no condescension in my heart when I wrote it.

As you mentioned in your edited comment, I addressed Dannika as “College Kid,” because that’s how she signed her letter, and I thought that was how she wanted to be represented. And in my response, I expressed my appreciation to her for sharing her thoughts and my genuine sorrow for the conflicts she had experienced in the church. I also told her that as a church leader, it hurt me to know she had heard “hateful preaching” in the past, and I recognized that she was speaking for millions of others. Why else would I devote a lengthy article to her letter?

I openly confessed to the mess my generation had made of marriage, even though she never brought that up in her open letter, and I closed my response with a proposal: “Let’s get some key folks from your generation and my generation together and spend a few days before God, worshipping Him, loving on Him, studying His Word, asking for His heart toward all people, and learning from each other.” Does this sound condescending?

It’s obvious that if you didn’t know me or my intent, you could take some of the article to be condescending, but I was genuinely reaching out to Dannika and her like-minded peers.

As for my phrases that were allegedly “very holier-than-thou,” how would you define that? Could it be that, based on your definition, any difference I would have with Dannika based on my understanding of Scripture would be defined as “holier-than-thou”?

You wrote, “I was so angry when I read Brown’s letter. What arrogance on his part to think that, because he was older, he was automatically wiser.” (I guess I wouldn’t have known that you were the “friendly atheist” if you hadn’t said so on your

blog!)

This too is fascinating, first because my article got you so angry, and second because in your view, I claimed to be “automatically wiser” because I was older.

Actually, I was countering the common viewpoint expressed in Dannika’s letter, namely, that the older generation needed to get with it and learn from the younger generation. In response I wrote, “To be totally candid with you, I always listen to young people and ask for their insights, and I’m sure that your generation cares a lot about fairness and justice and equality. But could it be that my generation is not totally ignorant about these things? Could there be a reason that one of the Ten Commandments says, ‘Honor your father and your mother’—or is that outmoded now too?”

Perhaps you overreacted to what I wrote? May I also ask if you, as a high school teacher, expect your students to show you a certain level of respect? And, all things being equal, are most people wiser when they are 40 years old and have had many more life experiences than they were when they were 20? To repeat what I wrote to Dannika (which is very different than what you wrote), “Is there no wisdom we can impart to you about marriage and family and gender?”

Finally, you said, “What gall to write about a little girl who testified before a state legislature in opposition of gay rights by saying, in part, ‘Which parent do I not need, my mom or my dad?’ (Apparently, no one thought to ask the little girl which dad or mom in a same-sex couple ought to be discarded.)”

Why was that “gall”? Dannika wrote her letter as a young person to the older generation, and I asked her to consider the words of a younger person speaking to all generations. What is so galling about that? (I mean that honestly, Hemant, not as a provocation.) As for your parenthetical comment, first, the 11 year-old girl wasn’t talking about discarding a

parent; she was talking about the importance of a mom and a dad. Second, yes, I'm convinced that, all things being equal, it would be better for a child to be raised by his or her mom and dad than to have two moms or two dads and be cut off from one of the biological parents.

All that being said, thanks again for posting Dannika's response, and thanks for your candor in the midst of our disagreements. Let's keep communicating. In fact, here's an open invitation to you, along with the 30-and-under crowd (especially the self-described "Nones" when it comes to religion) to call into my radio show next Wednesday, May 8, between 2-4 PM EST, and we can all listen, interact and learn.

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