



Setting the Stage for Important Conversations

August 17, 2018—Vol. 12, No. 33

Hello faithful E-News readers. I've invited Dr. Brent Sleasman, President at Winebrenner Theological Seminary, to guest blog today. We live in a society that continues to suffer from increasing polarization. What passes for a discussion of the issues often results in two sides talking (or screaming) past one another. I'm grateful for Brent and the wisdom he offers in trying to help us move beyond the shouting matches and name calling so prevalent in our society to something more helpful, fruitful and Christ-honoring. Enjoy! — *Lance*

In the midst of a recent conversation, a church leader told me, "I hope you don't think I'm a caveman for saying this..." He then followed that statement with his perspective on what it means to be a leader in today's cultural climate that is struggling to treat all people with dignity and respect regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender. My best guess is that he is concerned about being called a "caveman" because of his thoughts on one particular item we were discussing. While not everyone may share his view, he was giving voice to an interpretation of Scripture held by many people around the world.



Dr. Brent Sleasman

It saddens me that he may not have many who can have an open and honest conversation without rushing to judgement, becoming easily offended, and resort to name calling for the position he shares. No, I do not think he is a "caveman" or someone who is "behind the times" in his thinking. Like many of us, he is struggling to respond appropriately to some contemporary issues—whether in his local church, his family, or the daily madness that takes place in our nation's political sphere. Looking back, what I greatly appreciate about our conversation is that he is willing to engage in a conversation that places biblical teaching as central to his understanding and is willing to listen and engage in the topic with someone else who shares his values, although we may differ in the conclusions drawn on the subject.

As opposed to providing a direct response to any one specific issue, my goal today is to create what I believe are some reasonable expectations that we should consider when attempting to have a conversation about important issues. At some point it seems as though we've lost the ability to talk with someone who may have a different opinion than our own.

One of the obstacles that prevents constructive and sustained conversation is the cultural fascination and assumption that the only good response to an issue is one that occurs immediately. A little over a year ago, I recall reading many comments in response to the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, VA, that suggested if I (as a Christian) remained silent on this issue then I can no longer call myself a Christian. Somehow, these voices confused an immediate reaction with the importance of the comment, whether immediate or months after the event.

The impulse for a "speedy delivery" of news is a recent occurrence. It was not until the first telegraph message sent in 1844 by Samuel Morse that significant amounts of information could travel faster than the person carrying the news. There is no biblical precedent or mandate that someone must have an immediate reaction to an issue. Although, there is definitely room for an immediate response—especially in a crisis—there is very little support for anyone to **demand** a response to an issue within a certain period in order for it to be valid.

I want to offer two observations as a way to overcome the obstacles we face in order to have meaningful conversations:

First, we need to be willing to invest **time**. When someone does choose to engage in a topic of significance—issues related to ethnicity and race, the events taking place at our nation's borders, political concerns, questions around the treatment of women—there needs to be a willingness to invest the time to talk about the issue. It seems as though people are becoming more concerned about the timeliness of the response and less concerned about the time it takes to discuss. I would rather wait a day, week, or even months to have a meaningful conversation with someone as opposed to reacting NOW with 280 words (yes, I'm talking about you Twitter users!). The way a conversation takes place—by phone, Facebook Messenger, or face to face—is less important than dedicating the time needed. Don't try to engage in "drive through" conversations in which you are placing your own convenience above the importance of the topic. I'm close to asking someone if they're at least willing to invest 10-15 minutes in a thoughtful conversation before even discussing the item. Anything less only gives someone the ability to share their opinion and move on without really engaging in productive conversation.

Second, we need to create the **space** for important discussion to take place. By "space" I'm not thinking about a physical location as much as the frame of mind that we need. One way that may be helpful is to think about this in terms of hospitality, but instead of inviting someone into our home, we are inviting him or her into a relationship. Here are a few items to consider when thinking about this space:

- Each person involved should possess the ability to have an equal impact upon the listeners
- You must be willing to put aside any preconceived notions of other people and ideas and evaluate each for its own merit
- All participants must be given opportunities to build internal relationships that come as by-products of working together toward a common understanding of important topics
- Finally, you need to take advantage of opportunities to speak up on behalf of an honest, truthful, and authentic manner

Ideally, you will be able to find at least one other person willing to give time to discuss important topics and be able to share a welcoming environment for conversation. Since you're reading this as part of your involvement in the CGGC I want to offer an additional starting point—as we come to better understand what it means to live within God's kingdom, there is a growing awareness that the Bible affects all areas of our life, not just what takes place on a Sunday morning in worship. The time we invest and the space we create will allow us to better interpret the Bible and apply it to all areas of our life. While the Bible is central to our discussions and decision-making, we need to recognize that the Bible needs interpretation. How we interpret Scripture—hermeneutics—is a key part of this discussion.

Perhaps Lance will extend an invitation to me for a future post in which we can think through how this applies to some contemporary issues. Until that time, I'm reminded frequently that God is bigger than our opinions and, ultimately, He does not need us to be His defender. God needs us to place ourselves in a position of humility that honors others and recognizes that we need to treat each other with dignity and respect as we seek His truth together.