

10 STEPS TO ENGAGING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES



ED STETZER | MISSION GROUP

In the era of social media, we get immediate response from millions on any and every controversy that drops in the news cycle. Much of what I see from Christians isn't thought through very well.

One of the ways I believe God has called and equipped me for cultural engagement is in responding to controversy, policy, and the news in a gracious and winsome way. If you follow my blog at Christianity Today, The Exchange, you'll see dozens and dozens of pieces I've written in response to the difficult issues of our day. I do much of the same on Facebook and Twitter.

How can we respond Christianly to the next controversy? To the next pastor who falls or Hollywood mogul or actor or politician accused of harassment?

I've created this simple checklist to help you navigate the world of instant information and create a thoughtful response instead of a knee-jerk reaction. I hope it's helpful for you.

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1. Determine what the actual issue is

Often a media source or a Facebook friend will skew the news toward a desired end. We are called to handle issues of truth and morality better.

Spend time doing a little research. Try to find out from various sources if what you are hearing or reading is accurate. Once you know what you are hearing is accurate, you can go deeper.

2. Consider yourself before others

Do not judge, so that you won't be judged. For you will be judged by the same standard with which you judge others, and you will be measured by the same measure you use. Why do you look at the splinter in your brother's eye but don't notice the beam of wood in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the splinter out of your eye,' and look, there's a beam of wood in your own eye? Hypocrite! First take the beam of wood out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother's eye.

Matthew 7:1-5 CSB

Ask yourself, “Am I speaking from a place of hypocrisy or can I speak with moral authority? Or am I guilty of the same things?”

Check yourself. Sometimes we need to shut our mouths and receive the news as a way to check ourselves, our own sin, our own tendencies to be like the one who is caught in their sin. When we know ourselves, we can speak the truth in love about the culture and to the culture.

3. There but for the grace of God go I

Make sure whatever your response that you realize that it's God's grace that keeps you from making the same headline, falling, being fired, and losing your integrity in whatever your sphere of influence.

Put yourself in the position of those who have gone there and realize you could go there, but for the grace of God.

4. Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger

My dear brothers and sisters, understand this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger

James 1:19 CSB

Immediate response isn't always the wisest action. That's counterintuitive in a social media age. James says our mouths can set a forest on fire, so let's keep the sparks from the dry tinder until we know what we are saying.

The glut of angry, judgmental responses to just about everything is growing old. Righteous anger is good, but let's make sure it's righteous before it comes out as commentary.

5. Pray about it

We know this should be our first response, but it rarely is.

Prayer slows us down, puts us in the position of humility, tempers our reactionary anger, and gives us space to consider God's Word so that when we speak it comes from biblical, spirit-driven influence.

6. Season your words with salt

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person.

Colossians 4:6 CSB

Salt is a flavoring and a preservative. When you respond, use words and write with a tone that desires to preserve what is good and righteous.

How often does your tone, your words, your demeanor distract from what's most important as a redeemed person in a sinful world?

Season your words with salt. Your testimony and responses to controversies will be easier to hear.

7. Consider the Pharisees

Often our quickest, knee-jerk reactions are there to show our own righteousness and condemnation of others. Sounds like the Pharisees to me.

What if we communicated about controversies with grace and love? What if we responded in a way that created more light than heat? What if we determined not only to be right, but to be relational so we are actually heard and influential? That's our calling.

8. Be reasonable & rational

Should go without saying, but inconsistent arguments are just bad arguments.

Think it through. This is why it's good to be slow to speak. Ask yourself the hard questions about your position to poke holes and see if there are weaknesses.

Sometimes you can admit weaknesses in your response and still speak to an issue, looking for helpful groupthink. Others like to be involved and it shows generosity on your part.

Filter your responses with good old fashioned logic and make sure your arguments are tight before you speak.

9. Be ready to accept criticism with grace

As hard as you try, you will respond at times with thoughts that still need sharpening...even from non-Christian people.

Accept correction when it's right. Apologize quickly when you misspeak, speak insensitively, or are just flat out wrong. There is great power in admitting your mistakes. Showing you need grace will help your position. It can help increase your influence when people know you are humble and willing to change.

10. Bring glory to God

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or the church of God, just as I also try to please everyone in everything, not seeking my own benefit, but the benefit of many, so that they may be saved.

1 Corinthians 10:31-33 CSB

Does your response reveal the beauty of God? Does it help the Church? Does it lead people toward Jesus or away from your religiosity? Does it magnify the truth? Does it light up a dark world?

Whatever your response, seek to reflect the glory of God.