

The Dangers of Dialogue by Pastor Marty

We have all heard the story: Adam and Eve are minding their own business, strolling through the garden of Eden and chatting with the foxes, birds, rabbits, and chipmunks when a lizard-like creature suddenly strikes up a conversation. It went something like this:

Serpent: "Hey Adam, buddy! Eve, nice hairdo!

How's it going, peeps?"

Adam: "Eve, is he a friend of yours?"

Eve: "No, I don't think so. Oh, wait. Aren't you on that commercial for saving . . ."

Serpent: "No, no relation. I'm more of a progressive sort, anyway."

Eve: "Oh, okay. Sorry."

[I pause here to point out that nowhere does it indicate that our original Husband and Wife were surprised at a critter talking with them—hence my position that talking animals may not have been unusual for that time. There are other verses to support this idea, but I will leave finding them to you. Back to the story . . .]

Serpent: "Anyway, I noticed you've been avoiding the fruit from that one tree over there. What's the deal?"

Adam looks at the tree and then looks at Eve.

Eve: "Oh, God told us about that tree. It is deadly. We aren't even to go near it!"

Serpent: "Now, hold on! Let's discuss this logically and reasonably. We don't want to be close-minded or ignorant. I have been around the block a bit longer than you, so let me give you some advice. I even have a slideshow presentation here . . ."

Of course, the actual conversation went a little differently, but the result is humanity's history: they ate from the forbidden tree.

Let's discuss this logically and reasonably so we won't be ignorant or closed-minded.

The thing I want to point out in this month's newsletter is that the tree itself was not the origin of the temptation. The tree had been there before the serpent ever entered the picture, and the First Couple had apparently avoided it without incident up to that moment. The temptation came through man and woman entering into a conversation with the serpent. Of course, the responsibility for disobedience and sin still resided with Adam and Eve, but it was their yielding to the logic of the serpent's argument that led to the Fall. In other words, their *dialogue with darkness* opened up their minds to deception. Had they walked away when the serpent had first contradicted God's instruction to them, we might still be visiting the garden on holidays, talking with the animals, and getting a very nice tan without the hassle of mosquitos. Sometimes, conversation leads us into serious trouble.

Sometimes, conversation leads to trouble.

Of course, I am not suggesting that Christians don't have anything they can learn from people of other faiths, that theology cannot learn from other disciplines, or that one denomination should ever ignore the input of another; on the contrary, true humility requires that we recognize that we may not see as perfectly as we think we do. Being confident and certain of the essentials of absolute truth does not mean that we know everything there is to know about everything else. The fact that

Abraham tithed to Melchizedek and that Paul quoted Epimenide's poetry in his letter to Timothy support that there can be some godly truth outside of our congregational walls. Paul himself stated that God has revealed some things about Himself in the created world, suggesting that non-Christians can sometimes recognize something true about God. Of course, general revelation (that which may come through creation) can never override specific revelation (the truth that came through God's Word in Jesus); however, the Church as a whole contains more than enough believers with more than enough character flaws to obligate us to at least consider some constructive criticism from outside sources. Again, I am not talking about compromising on spiritual truth, the essentials of the faith, moral absolutes, or the primacy of Scripture; I am describing a humility that counters pride.

Humility recognizes that we have faults, and we do not know everything perfectly.

With all of that said, there is a danger that must be addressed when we get into some conversations with others. Proverbs indicates, "when there are many words, transgression is unavoidable" (10:19) and "do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will also be like him" (26:4). In the gospels, there were numerous times that Jesus did not get into debate with the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt 21:27), and He never once even opened His mouth when facing Herod (Luke 23:9). Those are just a few instances out of many where Scripture advises against being drawn into dialogue with evil. When Peter instructs us to be ready to answer for the hope we have, he

means witnessing about our faith—not debating morality, ethics, or absolutes with a world that wants us to compromise on truth.

Being "ready to answer" is not the same as being required to debate the essentials.

When I first became a Christian, my sister let me borrow a sermon tape on the three Hebrew children (Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah) who were thrown into the fiery furnace because they would not bow down to the golden image. They refused to compromise on what they believed, and God delivered them supernaturally, eventually leading to a great witness. The main point of the sermon was, "Whatever You Compromise to Get, You Will Ultimately Lose." This is a very real principle when it comes to spiritual truth. However, this is almost the entire point of discussion with the world—at least from their perspective. The world does not like the fact that Christianity presents truth and morality in terms of absolutes, and the Sermon on the Mount does not leave much room for negotiation. During the first few centuries of the Church, the Patristic Writers sometimes took years discussing *among themselves* the best words to use for representing what they believed because they knew that every word of their creed would affect their theology, which likewise would affect the life and practice of the Church. There was no compromise when it came to Gnosticism, Arianism, or any of the countless "isms" that tried to enter the congregation of the Saints. They knew that compromise would destroy the very thing they had to offer the world. Likewise, believers must recognize the dangers of compromise today.

If we entertain any notion for compromise, we probably have already lost the debate.

Many years ago, I watched a movie that I wished I had not watched: *The Storm of the Century*. As a good policy, I avidly avoid horror movies and anything by Stephen King; however, in this case, I did not know either of those facts before I had gotten involved in the movie. (I do like suspense, so when I get hooked, I want to find out what happens at the end). Near the end of the movie, the villain—who happens to be the demon “Legion” from the gospels—explains that he will kill all the children in the town unless the people agree to give him one of them as a new apprentice. After he leaves the room to allow the people to discuss his ultimatum, the mayor stands up and asks if he can really do what he says. It is at this point that the sheriff, the one person in the room who recognizes the danger, stands up and objects, explaining that just discussing whether he can do what he says means that Legion has already won; in other words, once evil has been identified, the only viable option is to resist it—no matter the consequences. Once the people began to discuss whether he could follow through with the threat, the only option was to compromise for the least destructive result.

Compromise with evil always means losing.

The United States has an official policy that it will not negotiate with terrorists. The reason is clear: once you begin to do so, there is no limit to the threats that will continue to rise. In the same way, the early Church knew that it was better to die a martyr than to give in even a small amount to those who wanted the Christians to revise their beliefs and practices.

Had the three Hebrew children actually taken the time to discuss whether bowing to the idol was an aspect of civil obedience that could be allowed as long as they recognized the truth in their hearts, they would have already lost—and probably become toast. In the book *Perelandra*, C. S. Lewis describes a confrontation with the devil. At one point, Ransom realizes that true evil cannot be reasoned with or debated; it must be confronted, resisted, and fought with every means possible. Towards the end of the book, Ransom does not even respond when the Un-Man asks for a minute to speak to him; he smashes it with a rock before pushing it over the cliff into a river of lava. Evil cannot be placated or debated; it must be resisted.

Evil cannot be placated or debated; it must be wholeheartedly resisted and fought.

When two people have a disagreement or conflict today, discussing it and attempting to resolve things is the optimal approach, and this is even the case within the Church. The main crux of the issue is to first identify and clarify any areas where there may have been misunderstanding or miscommunication, to second apologize and repent of any type of inappropriate or unintended harm, and to third consider and incorporate new ways to proceed in the future to minimize additional conflicts. However, it is important to recognize that even in that situation, there are absolutes that cannot be negotiated, such as abuse, neglect, and manipulation because they undermine any relationship. In the same way, the Church must differentiate between those discussions that involve clarifying what we believe from those that are intended to find the “least common

denominator” for minimizing the stumbling block of the cross. Although there are many points where Christians can work together with those from other paradigms on the things we commonly agree are important, we must be very clear about the absolutes that are not open for discussion or compromise.

To hold our faith with conviction and integrity means the absolutes are absolute.

Although this discussion is not about the satan, it is important to remember that he not only deceived an unfallen Man and Woman into willfully disobedience and sinning against God but also convinced a large portion of angels to follow him in rebellion against the holy, righteous, and all-powerful Creator of the universe—the same One that they had all stood before and seen face to face! If our adversary is so skilled at communication and influence that he could draw away unfallen creatures, we should be very wary of voluntarily getting into conversations with him. When Jesus faced the tempter in the wilderness, His response each time was Scripture, stating the absolute truth without compromise; there was no debate, discussion, or consideration. The One who was most qualified and able to debate the devil did not do so; He simply resisted him and then continued on with His primary mission. Although we certainly do not want to identify every opponent or dissenting voice as that of the devil, we do need to recognize that some voices are demonically prompted. The state of many denominations in the Church today, both approving unbiblical positions and affirming pluralistic theologies, reveals that dialogue with evil can sometimes lead to accepting evil.

Sometimes, the appropriate response to a question is Scripture, plain and simple.

However, as with any topic, there are qualifications. Although Jesus often did not yield when asked argumentative questions, He did answer honest ones, such as when the Sadducees asked about marriage and the resurrection (Matt 22:23-33). When a question is asked openly and honestly with a clear intention to understand the truth, those conversations are usually beneficial. However, there are other questions that are asked for the purpose of making Christianity less exclusive in terms of redemption, less absolute in matters of morality, and less offensive in practical convictions; those conversations are intended to lead the Church into compromise, and doing so will only pollute and weaken the very message that brings hope and healing to a broken and fallen world. The very practice of entering into discussion creates vulnerability. If we desire to bring truth to those who need it, we must learn to not be misled or distracted from the essentials. On the one hand, true godly humility requires that we recognize that we can learn from anybody; on the other hand, godly wisdom instructs us to be careful and cautious with those to whom we give our attention. When Jesus said that we needed to be “wise as serpents but innocent as doves,” He may very well have been describing this same principle: have the humility to listen to correction even from unbelievers but be aware of the spirit behind the words. We need to learn from others—even about things of God—but when it comes to the absolutes, there is great danger in dialogue with darkness.