

WHAT TO DO WHEN A CHANGE IN THE CONVERSATION
CATCHES YOU BY UNPLEASANT SURPRISE

Handling Thorny Issues

Golfers know the dangers of their home course. Send an approach into the wrong bunker at the fifth and you'll be fortunate to keep your next shot on the green. Set yourself up for a mid-iron from the left side on a windy day at the twelfth and you won't be able to keep the ball short of the flag, leaving a frightful downhill putt. If you're going to post a happy score, you never want to be faced with too many difficulties—those you can predict and those you cannot.

Leaders of small groups, like the many Links Fellowships in clubs around the world, can also find themselves in a tangle when it comes to uncomfortable conversations. Likely you've asked yourself a question much like this: "How am I going to move us past this controversy and back to place of common understanding?"

If you spend time reading material about how Christian community might best be done, you are sure to have run across the expression, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity." Speaking of unity, there's a bit of disagreement about who first gave us this guiding principle, but plenty of pastors and teachers have quoted it since (500 years or more). It's a marvelous idea—until you ask a friend in the faith what the essentials are. The apostle Paul, we know, cited the death, resurrection, and subsequent appearances of Jesus as "matters of first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3-8), but Paul would certainly have included more things than that in his circle of essentials. The pastor John Piper speaks of such circles when he says that the farther we get from the cross, the less important things are. But still we are left to wonder when


we have crossed into the circle of non-essentials.

So what do we do as leaders when unresolvable questions and sticky controversies come our way, especially right in the middle of a meeting where we least expect it? In order to offer some coaching in this regard, we'll turn to the Scriptures, then offer a four-step framework for avoiding painful outcomes to thorny discussion problems.

Conversational quicksand

Some controversies are never worth it. In advising Titus, one of his pastoral protégés, Paul wrote: "But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless" (Titus 3:9). Paul had so little time for such interruptions that he told Titus to warn a divisive person once and twice, but after that to "have nothing to do with him."

Paul knew, as you do, that some people like to argue for argument's sake. The chief reason this bothered the apostle was not because he considered his own time too valuable; rather, he considered God's time too valuable. He would talk day and night with earnest seekers, teaching and training them from the Scriptures. But others wanted to go down roads that led nowhere when it came to someone's faith. You've heard such questions: *Did Adam have a bellybutton? Where did Cain's wife come from? What household chores can we do before we're working on the Sabbath? Do I tithe off my gross or my net?* In and of themselves, these may be helpful questions for some people (and inquiries about points of the law can lead to the bigger question of how much law grace has erased). But if the asking and answering of these questions chews



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up time talking about Jesus and how we live for him, Paul said, "No thanks!"

We might call such topics conversational quicksand. Our mouths may keep talking, but our feet are going nowhere. And unless someone pulls us out of the trap, we'll never leave off talking about incidentals. When someone wants to tell you why "every good Christian" should be voting for their favorite candidate, don't step in alongside this person, no matter how adamant they are. Instead, draw their eyes—and every other eye in the room—back to the benevolent King, Jesus. He is the one every Christian should follow!

Speaking of candidates, we should probably restate something we have said before: Links Fellowships are meant to be different. They are to be places where the gospel—and the giver of the gospel—is emphasized to the exclusion of what is commonly spoken of in our culture. When a Fellowship drifts into political discussions, whether taken from the headlines or the club newsletter, that difference disappears. Members might as well turn right into the bar rather than left into the room where your Fellowship meets.

Muddy waters

For all that, there are some mat-

ters that have a place in discussion among believers. We still must be careful here. Getting stuck in the mud isn't as dangerous as quicksand, but it's tough on conversation and relationships when we're caught in an uncomfortable spot.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote about how to handle certain disagreements among believers. In a nutshell, these have to do with how our faith is practiced. For instance, while we all agree that believers are to gather for worship and mutual edification, just when is this to be done? Some say Saturday, some say Sunday, and some say a mid-week service (like the weekly fellowships on the tours) serves the purpose. And yes, a few people are very adamant in their doctrines and opinions.

To resolve such differences, Paul appealed to the principle of deference. We are to defer to those whose consciences bother them most when things are not done "right." We may be equally convinced that this matter is incidental, but we are not to cause others to violate their conscience, even in the name of freedom: "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister" (Romans 14:13).

In leading a Links Fellowship, you need to be able to discern the import of a matter, sometimes quickly. Is this a critical doctrinal issue that challenges the deity or work of Christ? Or is this a matter of practice, such as whether to shop at a certain "anti-Christian" retailer, when it's OK to have a drink or make a golf bet with friends, or whether to mow the lawn on Sundays? When comments fall into the latter category, thank the person for letting you know how he or she feels about the matter. Remind the group that

not everyone will agree on how exactly to practice their faith in certain situations, but that we are to “make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14:19). Then move the conversation forward, while allowing room for individual conversation after the meeting.

Four-part plan

What we have just done is begin to establish a plan for dealing with thorny issues. It’s not always easy to predict when someone will suddenly make a strong statement about gay marriage or break into an arcane monologue about the “obvious” meaning of Daniel’s prophecies. But when this happens, a four-step strategy might be very helpful.

Prefer. Begin by listening well. This does not mean you should allow someone to go on and on, but it never hurts to know where someone is coming from. In fact, one of the more common mistakes a teacher or facilitator can make is to assume that everyone in the room is on the same page. Of course, anyone in the discussion can make this same mistake and those who disagree may express sharp disagreement or remain quiet but never come back. If your Fellowship is to be known as a safe place for tire-kickers and honest inquirers, you have to be careful to keep your stronger personalities from offering sweeping statements or issuing harsh rebuttals. Few people are experts on controversial issues; they have learned to argue their opinions from sound bites. On the other hand, true listeners demonstrate humility and keep the conversation open.

Defer. The second step invites

that further conversation. You might say, “I wasn’t planning for our group to discuss this today, because it’s always hard to know where everyone is coming from on a topic like this. But I would really like to sit and talk with you more about this in a smaller setting. Let me talk to you afterward about that.” By pushing the conversation to another time, you immediately defuse a potentially volatile situation. You also allow the person to decide whether he or she truly wants to talk about the matter.

Refer. If you and one or two people agree to go further with the topic in a personal setting, this next step allows you to “call in some experts.” As we already noted, people base their ideas on a single book, movie, or article, or on the voice of a favorite TV commentator. Usually this means they have found someone to agree with them, and that is as far as they have gone. They (and maybe you) have not been exposed to much from the other side. In this step, you allow each person to identify one or two resources and you agree to read, watch, or listen to them before you sit down together. The big advantage here is that your later conversation can center around these resources and opinions rather than falling into a me-versus-you scenario.

Confer. Finally, you sit down and confer with one another. The setting should be comfortable for both of you. Depending on the circumstances, spouses or key friends might be included. Mr. Rogers sang a song that said, “It all works out if you talk and you listen.” This doesn’t mean you’ll come away agreeing with one an-

other. But it does mean you will understand one another’s point of view more fully. More importantly, if you are a Fellowship leader, you may find that your friend has been satisfied that he or she will be heard as needed and won’t bring up the topic during Fellowship meetings again. If you also continue to believe that your friend is in the wrong, keep praying. If a heart change is to take place, it will come by the work of the Holy Spirit.

A few final thoughts

Before a competitive round of golf, professionals often go through the course hole by hole in their mind. They do this to lay out a game plan, according to hole locations, weather patterns, and the shape with which they prefer to hit their shots. And yet they cannot script what will happen. It is how they respond to the unexpected that often makes the difference between a winning score and one that causes them to fall back in the field.

We might think we can plan out a small group lesson, anticipate a few common questions, say our prayers, and smoothly glide through the hour. This is often true. But other people can’t be scripted, and we can never be sure what comments or dissensions will arise in our conversations. In surprising situations, keep in mind that we are called to kindness. Even when our disagreements are strong and we feel the need to present our case forcefully, we never want to fully close the door on earnest opinions and honest questions. With kindness, we can often prefer and defer, and in maintaining the other’s dignity before the group, we will get the chance to refer and confer. 🙏