

<http://www.dailypress.com/features/religion/dp-09472sy0oct29,0,1237161.story>

Real discussion can help bridge misunderstanding

October 29 2005

We don't understand each other. Whether the questions are political, scientific, moral, or religious, we're spending less time talking with each other and more time talking past each other. We're becoming so polarized, so unlike in our values and assumptions, we can hardly get going on the conversation.

For example, at the Norfolk headquarters of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), it's morally impossible to think of eating meat. One of their founder's famous statements is, "There is no rational basis for saying that a human being has special rights. A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy. They're all mammals ..."

For the majority of us, that's outrageous. It's also incomprehensible - from both directions. PETA supporters can't imagine how it is that many of us really enjoy our hamburgers and chicken; the rest of us are astonished that they could make moral equals of rats and boys. In a controversy like this, neither side has much basis for understanding the other.

We rarely listen enough to understand each other. Discussion is reduced to sloganeering. We've lost hope that those with whom we differ will listen to an extended explanation, so we resort to sound bites rather than reasoning. The same happens in all of our major controversies: abortion, embryonic stem cell research, homosexual rights, and more.

My purpose here is not to state my position on these issues, but to think about the way we conduct our dialogue. Clearly it's not working. We don't understand each other.

This can be traced to a loss of consensus on the basics. As a Christian, that loss seems more than tragic to me. You have to go back a generation or more to find a time when Americans agreed on a Judeo-Christian perspective: that humans are created in the image of God, that there are objective moral standards, that we are to discover those standards rather than inventing our own. Agreement was never complete, but even if someone did not hold to Judeo-Christian values, you could count on them at least knowing what they were and where they came from.

That's no longer the case. I'm corresponding with an atheist who said, "Theists [Christians, Jews, Muslims] are committed to the view that we should not attempt to find a cure for cancer, because God allows people to suffer with cancer for a very good moral reason." He was referring to the character development that suffering produces, according to most religions.

This of course is a completely wrong conclusion. As we've traded messages, though, I've realized that no short answer could be sufficient, because the world in which he lives apparently includes none of the background that would make a quick explanation possible. I have to back up to very basic questions like "Who is God? How can we know if He is good? And what does 'good' really mean?" (It remains to be seen whether my correspondent will stick with this discussion. So far we're tracking together, and I give him credit for listening.)

Christians who want to communicate with our culture must realize how much background we have to fill in. In Britain this year, Steve Legg is distributing a 30-minute film to explain the Christmas story. He said, "When I heard about the boy asking why Jesus Christ was named after a swear word that really hit me...We are not trying to ram religion down people's throats, but at a time when political correctness is so prevalent, it is important to ensure a basic level of teaching continues."

Christians also gain from listening well. As one who writes often about the Intelligent Design/Evolution debate, I read as much from the evolutionist side as I do from the Intelligent Design side. Though I stand with Intelligent Design, I consider it my responsibility to understand the evolution side before I answer; otherwise my views would

be glib, thoughtless, without value - just as many are in this debate, and in others. If I were to seriously engage in a discussion with PETA, even though I can't imagine ever agreeing with their conclusions, I ought to at least inquire into how they got there, to try to understand their thinking.

Christian readers may ask, "Why bother studying what we believe is wrong?" There are three major reasons. One is because we're asking those who do not know our beliefs to take the time to understand us. They'll show us that respect much more readily if we show them the same.

Another reason is one that missionaries know well: in order to communicate effectively, you must understand the culture you're with. You must know its beliefs, values, and myths, as well as its language. Effective missionaries never cease this kind of learning.

Finally, there's a lot we can learn about people, about the world, and even about God through taking the time to listen. The Bible is our sole authority for truth, but we can still benefit from the perspective we gain from others. Every person created in God's image has something to offer us.

We don't understand each other. The polarization of our culture is far gone; it may take a real work of God to overcome it. We can at least help the process by taking time to explain ourselves clearly and listen to others patiently.

Tom Gilson is the U.S. director of planning for Campus Crusade for Christ. He can be contacted through his web log at www.thinkingchristian.net.

Copyright © 2005, [Daily Press](#)