

Pastor Phil's E-note

Irritation or Influence?

How can we be convictional and truthful without being irritating and turning people off?

- *Carefully study the prophets of old.*
- *Know what we are talking about.*
- *Be humble, civil, and respectful.*
- *Even so, some won't be won over.*

I have observed that we love to listen to those who agree with us. We usually gravitate to those that say what we want to hear (*2 Timothy 4:3*). It's human nature, that most folks don't like direct confrontation, even if it is the truth that will set them free (*John 8:32*).

But some persist in confronting others about their wayward ways; and, instead of influencing others to change, they irritate them and turn them off. Some preachers have a prophetic ministry they are proud of; they drive away those who disagree, while only attracting like-minded people. And those attracted become an ever shrinking pool of people. That's why a small "Baptist" church in Topeka, Kansas will forever remain the size it is and eventually die, hopefully. It's leader and his preachments are not intended to influence culture toward the way of God, but instead to irritate and hurt everyone around them. He preaches hate and judgment. No one in their right mind wants to join them.

But what we don't do enough of is to actually influence people to change, to give them good reasons to embrace what we so fervently believe and feel.

The political debate in this country has turned sour. Name calling, questioning of motives at every turn, and a host of other not so pleasant tactics are used to marginalize enemies while galvanizing friends. We feel good when applauded by those who agree, not so good when criticized by those who don't. Most everyone is entrenched in their position and they will not be moved, no matter what the facts are. We are stuck with little or no movement on the issues. We have our minds made up and we don't want to be confused with the facts.

What is our aim as a church? As believers? Is it to proudly, even arrogantly shout out our position, or is it to actually influence people to consider making our position theirs? By the way I have framed the question, you know what answer I will give. My intentions are to lead people to adopt the Scriptural view on things. But the way I do that is crucial, because I am not interested in driving people away; I am interested in drawing people into a conversation that could change their life. You can be right on the issues, but wrong in the attitude and lose what you are trying to accomplish.

We can hold our positions and be proud and arrogant about it, or be humble and respectful. When we present our positions as we are right



*"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears."
(2 Timothy 4:3)*

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1697 Shadowlawn Drive
Naples, FL 34112

Phone: (239) 774-1282

E-mail: enbc_office@eastnaplesbaptist.org

East Naples Baptist Church
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and you are wrong, all we have accomplished is to irritate and alienate. I heard of a situation in a Christian school where a teacher taught that no pets will be in heaven. Well, this upset the children and they went home and told their mothers. One mother, an unbeliever, was upset as well; she was upset that her children were upset. They left the school over the incident. Long story short; for this family to come to Christ is now made doubly difficult over an issue that served to only irritate an unsaved family. (Incidentally, I don't think Scripture gives a definitive answer on this and does it really make any difference anyway?)



"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."
(John 8:32)

How can we be convictional and truthful without being irritating and turning people off?

- **Carefully study the prophets of old.** Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. With brokenness and humility he shared God's message. He identified with the people even as he pointed out their failings. John the Baptist was the same. While he was strong in his positions, he touched a nerve that caused people to come out to the wilderness to listen and respond. Jesus met a woman at the well. Instead of confronting her directly about specific sins, he led her to see the root of all sin—broken relationship with our maker. She needed to know real love before she would abandon the fraudulent love she had known. In each case, the motive was genuine love, not supremacy of position or arrogance of opinion.
- **Know what you are taking about.** We spout off things we have heard and quote so-called facts without ever checking primary sources. Frankly, we are too lazy to do our own research. We repeat things we hear, or forward an email with no thought as to the content without stopping for one second to think—Is this true? This is simply electronic gossip. Then we sit in judgment of others with our supposed "information." I wasn't in debate in high school, but from what I understand, you must research both sides of an issue and be able to take either the affirmative or negative on the question. In other words, you need to know what you are talking about and what they are talking about. Until you take seriously the other side of the issue, and show basic respect and honor even though disagreeing, you aren't ready to tell the truth to someone else. Once again, keep in mind the goal. Are you trying to win someone over to your way of thinking, or will you just irritate them and turn them off to the real issues?
- **Be humble, civil, and respectful.** Listen, hear them out, agree where you can. Present to them what you understand their position to be. *Caring Enough to Confront* by David Augsburger talks about how to communicate effectively. He suggests the following: Respectfully repeat back what someone says with; *I understand you to have said...* and then say what you understood them to have said. If they tell you that's not what they said, repeat the process until you understand what they are saying. You aren't necessarily agreeing; you are simply trying to understand. This process says you care about what they are saying and you have an open mind.
- **Even so, some won't be won over.** Jesus didn't win everybody. If they are not won over, I don't want it to be because they are irritated with me, but because they have honestly and thoroughly considered Jesus Christ and decided not to follow Him.

Are you irritating those around you, or influencing them? Think about it.

Your friend and pastor, Phil

(Thanks to *Unleashing the Word*, by Adam Hamilton, Abingdon Press, 2003, p. 119-123, for shaping some of my ideas for this article.)