

There's much to consider before offering an opinion

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Q. When am I supposed to offer my opinion? For example, I have a friend who conceived a child through in vitro fertilization. Am I supposed to tell her that was wrong?

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A. This is a really good question but also a somewhat complicated thing. So many factors go into figuring out when to speak and when to remain silent that I often find people will simply abdicate any responsibility and do nothing.

In fact, isn't there that oddly popular bumper sticker that simply states, "coexist"?

The implication is, "keep your thoughts to yourself and live your life." Essentially, "stay out of other people's business."

While that might be one way to live, it is not the Christian way to live. I recently heard someone point out this startlingly obvious fact: Christians are called not to tolerate others but to love others. While we will hopefully live in peace with all of those around us, we are called to do more than merely "coexist."

Love is more than tolerance. Love places demands on us.

We cannot stand idly by while others hurt themselves or others. Of course, in our pluralistic society, we ought not to impose our beliefs on others, but there is an incredible and significant difference between forcing one's beliefs on another and lovingly proposing the truth to them.

Older Christians had a name for this. It was one of the Spiritual Works of Mercy and was called "instructing the ignorant." A more palatable way of saying it is "leading another to the truth."

This is hard to hear for people who don't believe there is such a thing as truth, but it is convicting for those of us who know that reality is not merely a matter of opinion.

But we need to consider other factors as well, including context, responsibility and prudence.

Share the truth

This past spring, a ferry carrying almost 300 people sank off the coast of South Korea. Roughly 280 passengers lost their lives. After this tragedy occurred, it was discovered that almost all of those lives could have been saved.

Unfortunately, the captain of the ferry ignored the reality of the situation and directed all of the passengers to return to their rooms while he got himself and most of the crew off the ship.

This captain is currently being charged with murder. He had a responsibility to tell his passengers the truth, but he was apparently content with using the truth to save himself and not concerned enough to share it with those under his protection.

This story contains the elements we need to be attentive to. The captain had the truth and was in a position to share the truth. Even more, he had a responsibility to share the truth. He was the exact person whose job it was to tell the truth.

When we are faced with whether or not we ought to share the truth with someone, we have to weigh those same factors.

What is the context of this relationship?

That is a critical factor.

If I am not in a healthy and trusting relationship with this other person, then I need to consider that when discerning if I am the right person to share this information.

If I have never had a good relationship with my sister, then I might not be the right person to offer some “brotherly advice.” If I have never said more than two words to a co-worker, maybe the first real conversation we have shouldn’t be one where I point out their faults. And if I am looking at a situation “after the fact,” I don’t need to offer any free advice.

It is like when someone asks you what you think about their new tattoo. At this point, it is done. Nothing that you could say would be all that helpful. In the case of the woman who conceived the child through immoral means, this moment might not be the best to point out that procreation and the sexual act ought to be kept intact.

What’s your role?

There are at least two other factors to consider.

You can ask yourself, “Do I have a responsibility to tell them the truth in this situation?” What is your role?

The captain of the ferry was the person responsible for the safety of his passengers. A parent’s role is always to teach their children. A pastor’s role is always to lead those entrusted to his care to the truth.

What about your case? Is it your role to tell your friend the truth?

While you may not have the responsibility to weigh in on every single moral issue in this person’s life, if they invite you to share your opinion, then you now have the responsibility to tell them the truth. You have been given the open door. This usually comes after demonstrating that you are the kind of person who can be trusted to kindly and wisely offer advice.

Lastly, something that is of absolute importance is prudence.

Prudence is simply practical wisdom. A question you must ask yourself is, “Will what I want to share actually help this person?”

Whether it is immediately helpful or ultimately helpful, we must consider the final goal of the information we may be called to share. We are called to lead others closer to the truth and closer to God.

Will your offering this piece of information get them closer to God?

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