

A NORMAL FAITH STUDY SERIES

THE DANGER OF BEING **RIGHT**



**How Limiting
Our Knowledge
Perpetuates
Conflicts in Our
Relationships.**

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1. HOW WE GOT HERE.

Our excessive data consumption has produced an unwanted side effect. It has spawned a generation of Know-It-Alls.

We are living in the digital information era. Data is beamed from satellites to cell towers, flows through optical fiber cables, and runs on hardlines and networks right to our homes, offices, cars, and just about every place else. News, entertainment, sports, classes, tutorials, shopping, emails, texts, documents, tweets, vlogs, blog posts, livestreams, podcasts, memes, opinions, analyses, reviews, and reactions are all available to anyone with a computer or smart device and an internet connection.

We love being children of the information generation. Only the truly brave or incredibly naïve would claim ignorance on topics that are trending or going viral. To utter “I haven’t heard anything about that” is to witness the raised eyebrows, widened eyes, and dropped chins of shocked onlookers. Even if we do not have the necessary equipment or skills to access the information for ourselves, we are forced to confront the unwarranted expectation that we should know someone who can. In the era of digital information, there is no excuse for not knowing.

Unfortunately, our excessive data consumption has produced an unwanted side effect. It has spawned a generation of Know-It-Alls. Logging countless hours on our preferred search engines, we “research” whatever topic has caught our attention or concern for the day, week, or season of life. Then, armed with the gathered facts, we use every opportunity – and create new ones – to unleash our newly acquired knowledge on an unsuspecting circle of family, friends, and followers.

There is a certain bravado knowledge gives us. We do not need to hope, wonder, or even guess – not when we possess the facts in pixelated characters on a screen. The confidence in what we know feels like a natural high. It gives us the boldness to draw conclusions, make evaluations, and offer criticisms and condemnations. We love the certainty of knowing the facts and take pride in our correctness.

However, our pursuit of knowledge is never without biases. Our desire to learn is often based on our personal needs, and that causes us to be selective in the information we pursue. All too often, we want to know more of what we already believe to be true – or at the very least, what we suspect to be true. And therein lies the danger.

2. BIASED LEARNING

Our motivations, coupled with the constraints of our filters, mean that how and what we learn can often be very restrictive endeavors.

Our motivations to learn often stem from our personal needs. If we are in school, our motivation is based on attaining a passing grade. If our conclusions are being disputed by others, we are motivated to counter our opponents' assertions. If we are facing difficult circumstances, we learn to overcome the challenges we face. These are all incentives to learn, but only to learn the things that better our situation. Sadly, these biases are only part of the problem.

Our ability to learn new things is also restricted by what we bring to the table. Our upbringing, religious beliefs, political ideologies, education, and life experiences are all powerful filters we use whenever we set our minds to learn. We utilize them when sifting through new information to determine if something is true, helpful, or necessary for us to know. In other words, we use what we already know to determine what new information can be trusted.

But our filters have their limitations. For example, consider our education level. Suppose we had only a high school diploma. In that case, graduate or doctoral-level content may be too complicated for us to understand. Similarly, our religious and political frameworks shape specific moral convictions and social positions that those with differing beliefs would not hold. Probably our most restrictive filter is that of our experiences. The challenges and traumas we face shape us in such profound ways that it is difficult to consider any proposition that contradicts what we have experienced. In sum, we routinely dismiss vast quantities of information because our motives, capabilities, beliefs, and experiences inhibit us from understanding or appreciating their value.

The biases of our motivations, coupled with the constraints of our filters, mean that how and what we learn can often be very restrictive endeavors. Far from an open investigation to discover the truth, we are frequently selective in the information we compile. We do this not because other content is unavailable or inaccessible, but because our prejudices and personal limitations influence and restrict our pursuit of knowledge.

3. WE HAVE OUR LIMITS

Believing we are right is not the same thing as being right. Our correctness can be like beauty in the eye of the beholder.

The way our motives and filters influence how we learn means any knowledge we gain is limited and often skewed towards our preferences. Of course, this would not matter if we were always right about everything, but reality says otherwise. How often have we been guilty of misjudging others or circumstances because we did not know all the facts? Probably more times than any of us would care to admit.

It does not matter how much we think we know about any topic; we can never know everything. As I said earlier, there will always be some segment or level of information we are incapable of processing (or simply choose not to). The facts we take such pride in knowing do not always tell the whole truth because we are seldom committed to knowing the full story. We learn just enough to improve our circumstances, reconfirm what we already believe, or satisfy our curiosities. Maybe you have heard the adage "there are two sides to every story: my side and your side." The late movie producer Robert Evans elaborated by saying, "There are three sides to every story: your side, my side, and the truth. And no one is lying. Memories shared serve each differently."^[1] Evans hit on a sobering point: we all have biases in our stories that keep the whole truth from being known.

Believing we are right is not the same thing as being right. Our correctness can be described as beauty in the eye of the beholder – it is valued because it means something to us. Those who have different backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences from our own will have a just as powerful commitment to their correctness as we do. Failure to recognize this means we set ourselves up for perpetual conflicts in our conversations and relationships with others. When we classify all our ideas, beliefs, and positions as being right, we turn them into moral issues, and anything opposing them must be wrong. This mindset eliminates any possibility for discussion, debate, or compromise. Our conversations become a series of fights of right against wrong or good versus evil. When this happens, people can no longer have a difference of opinion. They are labeled as enemies of truth and justice, or worse, as threatening to destroy our communities or our country.

The irony here is that those on the other side feel the same way about us; we become the enemies of their correctness. This has led to a tragic breakdown of public discourse and is the real threat to the social fabric of our communities. This is the danger of being right.

4. KNOWLEDGE AND LOVE

Our knowledge is at its most effective when it is guided by love for others.

"We all possess knowledge. But knowledge puffs up while love builds up." 1 Corinthians 8:1

The Bible warns us that knowledge alone makes us feel larger. We might look big, but we are just full of air. However, knowledge coupled with love makes those we interact with strong. In 1 Corinthians 8, the Apostle Paul cautioned the Corinthian believers that without love, their knowledge would be turned from an instrument of construction to one of destruction (1 Corinthians 8:12). Their degree of spiritual knowledge that made their lives easier carried no guarantee it would work for everyone else. Paul wanted them to be mindful that every Christian was different. They may all have had the same Savior, but they came from different backgrounds and possessed varying degrees of spiritual maturity. What worked for one could not be guaranteed to work for all, but they would never see this if love were absent from their interactions with others. Love had the unique ability to move them beyond their own interests to include the betterment of others.

As with the Corinthians, so are we as Christians today. Our knowledge is most effective when it is guided by love for others. When our only concern is what we believe is right, our beliefs and positions become the priorities, and people are secondary. We end up idolizing our ideologies and dismissing anyone who thinks otherwise. There is no room for understanding and compassion, only a combative posture and a determination to prove that what we believe makes us better. There is nothing admirable about narrow-mindedness, about using knowledge to cultivate a self-righteous, arrogant, or disrespectful attitude.

The admonition of Jesus that we should "do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31) followed His teaching on the sacrifices that were necessary to show love to one's enemies (Luke 6:27-30). However, a point often missed in that command is that Christ was turning the tables on His disciples. He was asking His followers to put themselves in the place of the enemy. If they were someone else's enemy, how would they want to be treated? This willingness to identify with those who approach life from perspectives and positions contrary to our own becomes the necessary starting point to deal with the danger of being right.

5. THE WAY FORWARD

Here are five (5) suggestions on moving towards a resolution when our correctness brings us into conflict with others.

It is misleading to say that conflicts strengthen our relationships. More accurately, any process we engage in to resolve our conflicts strengthens our relationships. These resolutions are only possible when both sides acknowledge everyone involved has the right to be heard and helped. This means allowing ourselves to see the pain the conflict has caused on both sides. This willingness to identify with one another at the point of our pain allows for common ground in a conflict. Here are my suggestions on how we can move forward towards a resolution the next time our commitment to what we believe is right brings us into conflict with others.

1. Those on the other side are people, too. This fact is seemingly ignored as we witness the dismissive and often disrespectful ways we treat those who disagree with our positions. Of course, it is easier to be disparaging in our criticisms when we do not have to see someone in person. However, I suspect even if we did, what we would not say with our mouths would be felt in our hearts. Let us remember that not even God withholds blessings from those who want nothing to do with Him (Matthew 5:45). If our Heavenly Father is so inclined, who are we to demean those who may reject or oppose our beliefs?

2. What we don't know can hurt us. We must accept that we cannot know everything about an individual, situation, or topic. Instead of instinctively regurgitating hand-me-down talking points at the first sign of a confrontation, we must take time to listen to the whole challenge. There may be something we did not consider because we never had to think about the argument from that perspective. This does not make us gullible or pushovers. It is a humble gesture of good faith to those on the other side when we can acknowledge them and their right to be heard and helped.

3. Stop with the "It's a slippery slope" trope. Whenever someone uses this metaphor, it is often a precursor to inaction. Listening to others who disagree with us is not the same thing as condoning their actions or accepting their beliefs. Whether someone is an atheist or a Christian, pain is pain, and our willingness to show compassion to those in need is as biblical as Jesus Himself. But we can never know how to best impact the lives of others if we do not give them the chance to speak and ourselves the time to listen. Who knows? There may be room for a compassionate compromise along the way.

4. There is a difference between what is right and what is best. Are there some things that are morally right? Certainly. However, can all our beliefs and positions be classified that way? Of course not. Often, what we believe is the right course of action may simply be the best option that fits our unique circumstances. Others who are confronted with the same choice may make different decisions based on their circumstances. They are not wrong or evil for doing what was in their best interests, considering where and who they are. We need to dial back on the sanctimony and be more discerning.

5. Diversity of thought and action are essential to our growth. Our differences contribute to the beautiful human tapestry that is our community. God has ordained this diversity in His creation, not as some entertaining spectacle, but as a means of provoking us to look beyond ourselves. Diversity is a constant reminder that there is more to this world than what we bring to it. Even in His spiritual design of the Church, God provided diversity in our spiritual giftedness to bring unity as we build up one another (1 Corinthians 12:4-7). Diversity is not something for us to be afraid of; it is intended to challenge us to think differently and inspire us to act differently. When others introduce perspectives contrary to ours, instead of showing resistance, maybe we can ask ourselves, “What is there for me to learn in this?”

Does all of this mean we can or should agree with everyone on everything all the time? No. However, we must have the willingness, love, and humility that leads us to engage in the types of robust debates that can move us to have respectful dialogues, and ultimately, find solutions, or at the very least, make compassionate compromises.

6. BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

It is the knowledge we bring to our conversations, and how we choose to use it, that perpetuates conflict.

"Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God." Matthew 5:9

More than ever before, peace seems like an otherworldly commodity. We are fed a constant diet of conflict, served up compliments of the digital information era. If it is not one country trying to gain the upper hand over another, it is a world leader denouncing the other, partisan politicians vilifying one another, scientists refuting the claims of other scientists, economists debunking the policies of other economists, religious leaders rebuking one another, civil unrest, injustice, and protests. Then there are the ubiquitous social media users and trolls calling out and canceling celebrities, public figures, and the unfortunate souls who happened to word their posts the wrong way. It is no wonder the peacemakers are called children of God because this world seems to excel at producing the opposite.

Every so often, there are some who call for an end to the hostilities – especially on social media. Regrettably, their solutions can often be condensed down to a single cliché: "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." To be quite honest, I have never seen that work. Silence can never be a substitute for peace. Asking people to be quiet when they feel passionate about something is like trying to plug a broken water main with plastic bags. You made an effort, but it was doomed to failure from the start.

Since we are all part of the problem, how we move forward must begin at a more personal and fundamental level. It is the knowledge we bring to our conversations and relationships, and how we choose to use it, that perpetuates conflict. Therefore, we must first assume responsibility for our part if there is to be the hope of something better. Radio journalist and author Celeste Headlee framed it like this: "In conversation as in life, you can't control what someone else does or says; you can only control yourself. But sometimes, that's enough."^[2]

Peacemakers are a blessing because their endeavors are always bilateral. There is no such thing as a one-sided conflict, and those who strive for peace seek the betterment of both sides – even if one side is not their own. Peacemakers are community builders, whether that community is found in the bond of their familial relationships, those who live in their neighborhoods, worship in their churches, work with them, or share their digital spaces. They are willing to make the sacrifices necessary to move both sides towards solutions rather than continual conflicts.

7. CONCLUSION – WE MUST BE BETTER

In 1935, the late British author and journalist Rebecca West wrote, "There is no such thing as conversation. It is an illusion. There are intersecting monologues, that is all."^[3] Her words may be several decades old, but they perfectly describe much of our public discourse. Whether it is the talking heads on television, political or social commentators on cable, or social media users online, we seem no longer capable of listening to one another. All we care to talk about is what we know.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, we all fantasized about how the internet would bring our world closer together. Our current reality is not what many of us had in mind. What it did was bring together people who believed the same things. It gave them digital platforms to recycle and redistribute the same groupthink with those who thought like them. It has metastasized to the point where most feel little obligation to expose themselves to any type of diversity of thought or objective reflection, given all the content that reinforces their confidence in their correctness. They stream and follow those who think like them, act like them, and in many cases, look like them.

We have so saturated ourselves in our own opinions that we can no longer envision the world functioning correctly unless it adheres to our principles. Religion, politics, race, justice, equality, and the environment are vital systems in any civilized society. They must be examined at the highest levels of our governments and academia, in our churches and corporate areas, and in our most cherished and intimate spaces, such as our living rooms and bedrooms. Yet, in today's world, these systems are considered too toxic for dialogue. They bear this categorization, not because they are inherently problematic, but due to the visceral and polarizing reactions they provoke in those who cannot see beyond their own vested interests.

We must be better than that. We must do better than that. There is nothing more meaningful than the people who matter most to us: our family, friends, and peers. They bring wholeness and security to our existence. Many of us could not have survived much of our lives had they not been there for us. It is this treasure of healthy human relationships that we must nurture, protect, and promote. To invest oneself in the lives of others is to invest in humanity itself. It is the essence of what it means to be part of a community. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it best:

"We must all learn to live together as brothers, or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured."^[4]

ENDNOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

ENDNOTES:

[1] Robert Evans, *The Kid Stays in the Picture* (Documentary) Highway Films. 2002.

[2] Celeste Headlee, *We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter* (New York: Harper Collins 2017), 42.

[3] Rebecca West, *The Harsh Voice: Four Short Novels*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. 1956 (Reprint of 1935 edition), p.63.

<https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/02/04/conversation/#note-8126-7>

[4] <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-10>.

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In **THE DANGER OF BEING RIGHT**, Terrence E. C. Jones cautions us to recognize this flaw in our learning and shows us how to be peacemakers who are community builders. Whether those communities are found in our homes, workplaces, churches, neighborhoods, or our digital spaces, we must make the sacrifices necessary to move both sides towards solutions rather than continual conflicts.

NORMALFAITH.ORG is dedicated to the belief that a vibrant Christian experience is not one that waits to present only the good in life. It is about embracing all that we are - our successes, our failures, and the journeys in between, all for God's glory. That is the normal life of faith we want to celebrate.

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