

Guidelines for Healthy Theological Discussion

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When I was asked to speak on the subject of guidelines for healthy theological discussion, the story of Michael Wyschogrod's meeting with Karl Barth came to mind. As a little background, Michael Wyschogrod is an Orthodox Jewish theologian who lives in New York City. Karl Barth was a Swiss Reformed theologian and one of the most influential Christian thinkers of the 20th century. Michael Wyschogrod writes of his meeting with Barth:

On a sunny morning in August 1966 I visited Barth in his modest home on the Bruderholzallee in Basel. He had been told that I was a "Jewish Barthian," and this amused him to no end. We spoke about various things and at one point he said: "You Jews have the promise but not the fulfillment; we Christians have both promise and fulfillment." Influenced by the banking atmosphere of Basel, I replied: "With human promises, one can have the promise but not the fulfillment. The one who promises can die, or change his mind, or not fulfill his promise for any number of reasons. But a promise of God is like money in the bank. If we have his promise, we have its fulfillment and if we do not have the fulfillment we do not have the promise." There was a period of silence and then he said, "You know, I never thought of it that way."¹

This is a very inspiring story to me because here one of the most distinguished Christian theologians of the 20th century says, "You know, I never thought of it that way." My hope for this symposium is that we would all leave here on Wednesday having said at least once, "You know, I never thought of it that way." The ability to say these words is a sign of healthy theological discussion.

This evening, with your permission, I would like to address the subject – guidelines for healthy theological discussion. In Part One, we will focus on the power of our words and the importance of using our tongues to impart life and not death. In Part II, we will discuss how we can move toward "thinking together" as leaders (and away from merely talking to each other *or at each other*) in theological discussion.

¹ Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations* (ed. R. Kendall Soulen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 211.

Part I. The Power of Our Words

In *Leviticus Rabbah*, the Midrash states:

One of the ancient rabbis sent his servant to the market with the general instruction, “Buy the best thing there that one can eat!” The servant returned with a tongue. Later, the rabbi asked him to go back to the market to buy the worst thing that one could eat. The servant again came back with a tongue. “What is with you?” asked the rabbi. “Here, I’ve asked you to buy both the best and the worst, and you come back with a couple of tongues.” “That’s true,” responded the servant. “After all, cannot a tongue be one of the best things in the world and an evil tongue be one of the worst?” (*Lev. Rab.* 33).

What is the biblical principle behind the servant’s perspective?

Proverbs 12:18 says, “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings מְרִפָּה (healing or health).”

Proverbs 18:21 puts it this way, “מָוֶת וְחַיִּים בְּיַד-לְשׁוֹן (Death and life are in the power of the tongue).”

In every theological discussion, there is the potential to speak words that build up and words that tear down. Contrary to the view of some, theological discussion cannot be academically partitioned off from spiritual life in the name of “symposium” or “Jewish debate.” We need to ask ourselves the question every time we open our mouths publicly (and privately), “Is there death or life in what I am about to say?” To underscore this point (and I am speaking especially to myself), I would like to pass on an observation that Rabbi Joseph Telushkin makes in his book *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*. In his Introduction, he writes:

Think about your own life: Unless you, or someone dear to you, have been the victim of terrible, physical violence, chances are the worst pains you have suffered in life have come from words used cruelly—from ego-destroying criticism, excessive anger, sarcasm, public and private humiliation, hurtful nicknames, betrayal of secrets, rumors and malicious gossip...We choose our clothes more carefully than we choose our words, though what we say *about* and *to* others can define them indelibly. That is why ethical speech—speaking fairly of others, honestly about others, and carefully to everyone—is so important. If we keep the power of words in the foreground of our consciousness, we will handle them as carefully as we would a loaded gun.²

² Joseph Telushkin, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well* (New York: Harper, 1996), xviii, 4-5.

At this symposium, some will give papers. Others will be moderators. Others will participate in the discussion times. All of us will talk at break times. This symposium is an extraordinary opportunity for dialogue that cuts across the spectrum of the broader Messianic Jewish community.

We share a lot in common, more than we realize. We can build something at the Borough Park Symposium that is of lasting value for the Lord, something we can leave for the next generation. Let's not blow it. Let's remember that words (*devarim*) are things. They can create, as in Genesis 1, or they can destroy as in Revelation 22. We need to be careful what we say and how we say it (not to be politically correct but to honor Yeshua who bought us at a price; we are not our own).

Once I publicly and needlessly embarrassed a friend of mine, what our sages call *halvanat panim* (turning someone's face white). I repented after my friend pointed out my sin but there was no way to nullify the soul-piercing impact of my words and the temporal damage done to our relationship. Once arrows are shot, they cannot be called off. May none of us commit the sin of *halvanat panim* at this symposium.

Having said this, most of the theological discussion that will take place over the next two days will not be in this hall. It will be in more private settings: at restaurants, in our hotel rooms, in the car, at the airport. In these one-on-one settings, when we are with trusted friends and no one else, let us commit ourselves not to speak words that are "derogatory or potentially harmful" to others,³ even if they are true, even if they are said discreetly. Let us also commit ourselves not to listen to such words. As the Talmud says, "Why do human fingers resemble pegs? So that if one hears something unseemly, one can plug one's fingers in one's ears" (*b. Ketubot* 5b). If we do this, our friends will understand. That is what being a good friend is all about.

Rabbi Telushkin reminds us:

In a dispute with someone, you have the right to state your case, express your opinion, explain why you think the other party is wrong, even make clear how passionately you feel about the subject at hand. But these are the only rights you have. You do not have a moral right to undercut your adversary's position by invalidating him or her personally.⁴

Let us remember the power of our words and ask the critical question, "Is there life or death in what I am about to say?" This brings us to—

³ Shimon Finkelman and Yitzchak Berkowitz, *Chafetz Chaim, A Lesson A Day: The Concepts and Laws of Proper Speech Arranged for Daily Study* (ArtScroll Series; Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1998), 50.

⁴ Telushkin, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*, 89.

Part II. “Thinking Together” in Theological Discussion

We have come from all over the world to talk about the **בְּשׂוּרָה** (the good news, the gospel) and how we should present it to our people. It is easy to think of the **בְּשׂוּרָה** as only a spoken message, but I would like to put forward for your consideration the possibility that **the spoken message of the בְּשׂוּרָה should be a natural extension of the crucified בְּשָׂרָה (flesh) that proclaims it and embodies it.**⁵ We testify to the truth of the gospel message by being men and women who live crucified and resurrected lives in Messiah. And we invalidate the gospel message when we do not.

We are to be imitators of Paul who said, “I have been crucified with Messiah; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Messiah who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh (**בְּשָׂרָה/σάρξ**) I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:19-20). Paul was a living expression of the gospel message that he proclaimed. And like Paul, we are called to be living expressions of the gospel message that we proclaim.

What are the implications of this for healthy theological discussion? If it is correct that **the spoken message of the בְּשׂוּרָה should be a natural extension of the crucified בְּשָׂרָה (flesh) that proclaims it and embodies it**, then it is the height of hypocrisy for us to talk about the gospel for two days and not seek to live out the gospel in our relationships with one another. Lord, help us to live out your **בְּשׂוּרָה** among us!

How do we live out the gospel practically in our symposium context? I would like to suggest that we do so by adopting a humble stance toward one another, seeing our relationship with each person here as one characterized by interdependence. We practically live out the gospel when we are “thinking together,” for this leads, as Paul puts it in Philippians 1:27, to “standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.”

What do I mean by “thinking together”? I would like to suggest a number of ways that we can conscientiously move in the direction of thinking together:

First, we can listen before speaking. We can try to fully understand the other person’s point of view.

Second, we can view ourselves as students, even if others think of us as teachers. Thinking together about the gospel and soteriology begins with the humble

⁵ The word for “messenger” in Hebrew is **בְּשָׂרָה**.

acknowledgement that we do not know everything about this subject. We all have a lot to learn and we can learn from each other. This is what interdependence is all about. Remember, one of the most renowned theologians of the 20th century could say, “You know, I never thought of it that way.”

Third, we can adopt a holistic approach to truth. A holistic approach to truth avoids one-sided statements and concerns itself with the whole, including limitations and factors that affect implementation. As Klyne Snodgrass writes in his book *Between Two Truths*:

Truth is like a flower with deep roots. To enjoy it very long, we must take it all. If we take only the top part, it will wither in our hands...Holistic thinking will cause us to look for tensions. *When we know that a statement is true, we ought to ask what its limitations are, what other statements need to be made to prevent misunderstanding or extremism, and how circumstances might affect the implementation of the statement* (Italics mine).⁶

Fourth, we can choose not to rehearse old thoughts and feelings. Thinking together involves *thinking* and not simply rehearsing what we have long believed and taught. In theological discussions, we can fall into the habit of playing old tape recordings back and forth to each other. We may be talking but not really thinking. William Isaacs, in his book *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, writes:

What is true thinking? To think truly is to say things that may surprise us—things we have not said before—that are not in our memory...To think is also to listen to our own automatic reactions and gain perspective on them. It is to ask, Now, why did I do that?...What we usually call thinking is often merely the reporting or acting out of patterns already in our memory. Like a prerecorded tape, these thoughts (and feelings) are instantly ready for playback...True thinking moves more slowly, more gently than this...Thinking has a freshness to it, like a flow of water softly moving through the mind, and requires space. The fruit of thinking is sometimes a seemingly simple, quiet idea that stands out among a crowd of passing thoughts. It arrives unannounced.⁷

Here is a good question to ask yourself: “How much of my ‘thinking’ comes from memory and is an automatic response? How much is based on original thinking about the present circumstances?”

Fifth, we can contribute questions. One of the best ways to stimulate thinking together is to ask questions. Rather than making statements, we can raise questions that spark all parties in the conversation to think more deeply. For example, one of the

⁶ Klyne Snodgrass, *Between Two Truths: Living with Biblical Tensions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 180-84.

⁷ William Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life* (New York: Currency, 1999), 59-60.

important questions we can ask in a group is, “Whose perspective are we disregarding or not paying proper attention to in this discussion?”

Sixth, we can acknowledge our vulnerability. We are sometimes tempted to emphasize the strength of our position and the weakness of the other’s position while deep down knowing that there is weakness in our own position. We do not acknowledge our own position’s weakness because we do not want the other party to exploit it. “Thinking together” involves each party in the conversation being willing to express the strengths, weaknesses and underlying presuppositions of their own case. This involves a measure of trust. We should avoid withholding information relevant to the discussion. When each party can honestly articulate the potential vulnerability and imbalance in his or her own position, the situation is ripe for new and creative ideas to be generated through thinking together.

Seventh, we can follow the disturbance. When our listening is being colored by a disturbance (perhaps something the other person has said that rubs us the wrong way or a negative memory), it is helpful to follow the disturbance and ask why we are bothered. This often leads to true thinking. By considering the source of the disturbance—whether it is in us, from them, or both—and why it irritates us, we become more keenly aware of what the person is actually saying. We may also recognize a tendency in us to respond to the disturbance by listening in a selective way – we may find ourselves instinctively sifting what they have said for evidence that we are right and they are wrong. Sometimes reframing helps. We can choose to see the person who disturbs us as a protector of important values within our movement rather than a nuisance. Following the disturbance may lead us to see our own inconsistency—we may realize that we have the same problem as the person whose words disturb us.

Eighth, we can avoid abstraction wars. Abstract points often elicit abstract counterpoints. Thinking together requires resisting the temptation to speak or write in generalizations. This means thinking about what we want to say before we say it. It means asking the question, “Is this too abstract? What is my real point?”

Ninth, we can view each other as team members. “Thinking together” in our symposium context involves viewing the other parties in the conversation as teammates. We are working together for the Lord. We are all part of the body of Messiah with Yeshua as the head. God has designed us to complement each other with our different gifts and perspectives. We fit together and need each other. Let me say that again, “We need each other.” When we think by ourselves, and find little to no value in the contributions of others, we fragment the team. When we think together, we contribute to the unity of the team, and this pleases the Lord.

These are all suggested guidelines for healthy theological discussion at the symposium.

In a nutshell, remember the power of words. Ask yourself the critical question, “Is there life or death in what I am about to say?” Live out the **בְּשׂוֹרָה** (the gospel) you proclaim in the way you relate to other members of the symposium. Adopt a humble stance characterized by interdependence. Move in the direction of “thinking together.” And be like Karl Barth in your willingness to step back and say, “You know, I never thought of it that way.”