

Navigating Hard Topics

Freedom of Conscience and the Value of Spiritual Oversight

As a Baptist church, we value the independence of each church and the priesthood of each believer. We don't control the conscience or actions of any person, but this doesn't mean we want each person to "do whatever is right in their own eyes" (Judges 17:6; Proverbs 21:2).

Church members hold varying viewpoints on hard topics, and we can respect one another. At the same time, we believe God's Word speaks to these issues, even if the topic at hand isn't directly mentioned in Scripture.

When approaching hard questions (especially those not mentioned directly in the Bible), the following are good sources of wisdom:

1. God's Word

2. God's Spirit

3. God's People

Pathway to Wisdom

1. God's Word (counters the Lies of the Devil)

- a. *Passages* - What Bible passages speak directly, or indirectly, to the topic at hand?
- b. *Principles/Patterns* - What general principles in a section of Scripture or theological patterns throughout the Bible apply to this topic?
- c. *Common Grace* - Psalm 19 reminds us that God speaks through His Word/Law (special revelation), but also through His World (what we might call general revelation or common grace). What can we learn from the world around us to approach the topic?

2. God's Spirit (counters the Lies of the Flesh)

- a. *Look Up - Worship - Prayer and Praise*
 - i. Prayer - Have I spent time in prayer (individually and with others) about this action/decision? Am I listening to God?
 - ii. Praise - Can I give glory and thanks to God for this action/decision?
- b. *Look In - Discipleship/Formation - Encourage and Equip*
 - i. Spirit versus Flesh (Galatians 5:19-26) - What kind of person am I becoming as a result of engaging in this action/behavior? How is this forming/shaping me?
 - ii. How will this action/decision impact my relationships?
- c. *Look Out - Missions - Give and Go*
 - i. How does this topic/decision impact my ability to proclaim and display Jesus to my neighbors and to the nations?
 - ii. Does this topic/decision potentially hinder me from being able to "give and go"?

3. God's People (counters the Lies of the World)

- a. *Historically* - Has the Church historically faced this issue (or one similar to it)? What can we learn from history?
- b. *Globally* - Is the Church facing an issue like this somewhere around the world? What can we learn from believers who are different from us?
- c. *Locally* - What are my spiritual leaders and friends telling me about this issue? How can I learn from the people God has placed around me?

Issues to Consider when Addressing Controversial Issues (such as the use of substances)

● **Biblical Theology**

- *The Goodness of Creation; the Impact of the Fall; and the Use and Misuse of Creation*
 - Genesis 1-3 - Run every issue through the Creation/Fall/Redemption pattern
- *Role of Government* - What role does government play in regulating substances and guiding the actions of its constituents?
 - To what extent should a government regulate actions/behaviors of constituents?
 - The *general* attitude of any Christian should be submission to earthly governments (Mark 12:13-17; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17; 1 Timothy 2:1-4); however, there are clearly times when Christians must obey God, rather than man (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29).
 - We can participate in government, seeking policies that promote the flourishing of life and the wisdom of God, while humbly recognizing that earthly politics can never replace our ultimate devotion to Jesus as Savior and Lord.
- *Honoring the Lord with our Bodies* - What I put into my body and what I do to and with my body – and to and with others – are key parts of living the Christian life.
 - 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; 10:31
- *Role of External Substances in Creation* - Should we use mind-altering substances? Are we becoming addicted to or misusing a particular substance or part of creation?
 - Ephesians 5:18
 - 1 Timothy 4:4-5; 5:23
 - Proverbs 23:29-35
- *The Use of the Mind/Brain* - How does Biblical meditation differ from other activities or from the effects of things we might eat or drink?
 - Psalm 1:1-3; Joshua 1:8
 - Romans 12:1-2; Colossians 3:1-2

● **The Science and Data**

- What can we learn from science and research about the impact of X? (X = a substance or a controversial topic/question – not “X” as in the new name for Twitter!)
- Remember = “All truth is God’s truth.” Also = data can be biased and misused.

● **The Politics**

- Are there any indications that X is being used by politicians to push other policies?
- How does X relate to other areas of government or to other similar situations in life?

● **The Potential Benefits**

- We need to listen humbly and respectfully to those on the other side of an issue.
- Where can we recognize the value of an opposing viewpoint?
- How might X prove helpful to someone, even if we disagree with a particular policy?

● **The Practical, Ethical Questions**

- What are the key pastoral and ethical questions that we need to answer?
- What are helpful resources to research X? Test these against Scripture. Gain the discernment and perspective of other believers. Grow in wisdom and knowledge.