

LEADER CONVERSATION GUIDE

How to Talk About Politics (with Andy Stanley) – Episode 345

How to Talk About the Tough Stuff (Part 3)

“My responsibility as a pastor isn't to convince you that my view on things is correct. My responsibility is to disciple you to be a better follower of Jesus.”

In this episode, Tony sits down with Andy Stanley to discuss how pastors can navigate controversial topics regarding politics—especially as we enter an election season.

Interview with Andy Stanley

You've had some recent experiences teaching on tough, controversial topics in recent months. Yet it seems that the church is experiencing health and growth. How do you explain that?

- Even with all the drama of this past fall, we're on track to hit goals and numbers we set for the year. The other thing that's encouraging is that we did a survey of all the congregants of all of our Atlanta area churches, asking “How likely are you to invite an unchurched person?” Coming out of that, our Net Promoter Score was 83%, which is really high.
- We also saw that, across the board, 40% of people who have attended our church five times or less have not attended another church in the previous five years. And 40% of the people who've attended our church five times or more also had not attended church in the previous five years before coming to our church. That's a high percentage that speaks to our mission of being an outward-facing church and trying to engage unchurched people.

Why do you think some topics become *tough topics*?

- We all see things through what we think the Bible says, our own worldview, our own opinions and those we love, etc. And we all have a tendency to defend what's comfortable.
- When we as pastors, intentionally or unintentionally, bump into a cultural issue or a deeply held conviction, it gets very emotional very quickly. And I've learned that typically once you touch that emotion, people don't hear anything else you say for the rest of the message. And no matter how we qualify it or contextualize it, somebody gets offended.

- It's a minefield and it is worse than ever, I think. And yet every Sunday, we're all supposed to get up and point people to Jesus. This is just typical of what local church pastors are dealing with right now on both sides of every issue.

It feels like churches are more divided than ever. What's fueling this division within the church?

- Everything is so polarized. There's no middle... Because you can't make any money in the middle. You can't get a following in the middle. So all the voices are getting further and further, further extremes.
- Special interest groups are constantly attempting to use us, and they've conspired to convince us that the greatest threat to the church is outside of us. That's what we're supposed to believe: that the Democrats are coming to get us, the Republicans are coming to get us, etc.
- My opinion is that a Christian who is convinced that an ideology or a political party is the primary threat to Christianity? I think *those* Christians become a threat to Christianity—because they bought a lie that the primary threat to Christianity is something “out there.” I think Jesus was clear the primary threat to Christianity is not out there, it's in here.
- Part of our responsibility is not to address which side of the issue is the correct side, it's to address “How do we be the church when we're not agreeing and won't ever agree on the right approach to some of these issues?” Because there is a way forward, and I think ultimately that's where our messaging begins.

What happens in Christians when they become convinced the threat is “out there?”

- In general, if the threat is out there, I quit paying attention to what's in here—what's in my heart. Once the enemy is out there, the temptation or the tendency is to adopt the tone, posture, and approach of the enemy out there because an enemy needs to be destroyed.
- Jesus, interestingly enough, suggested that we make our enemies our friends, or at least treat them as such. In other words, the idea isn't to destroy an enemy, it's to win one.
- If we don't adopt the posture, tone, and approach of Jesus, we get divided from other Christians on both sides of every issue.

What's the *real* threat to Christians and the church?

- When Jesus prayed for the future church, he only had one prayer request: Father, I want them to be one, being one in purpose, in the same way that you and I are one in purpose.
- Then Jesus said, what's at stake? What's at stake, if we don't get this right, is that people won't recognize that the Son came from the Father for the world.
- It's mission critical that we are one in purpose. When a diverse group of Christians come together, who have not experienced the world the same way, who don't come together with the same opinions about cultural issues, and yet they can worship together and rally

around the Great Commission and rally around making disciples, it is a far more powerful representation of the kingdom of God.

- It's a far more powerful message because the rest of the world is so divided over these things, so when Christians who disagree can still love each other unconditionally and do that publicly, Jesus said, that is evidence that I came from the Father for the world.
- My responsibility as a pastor isn't to convince you that my view on these things is correct. My responsibility is to disciple you to be a better follower of Jesus.
- "The diversity of you men is part of the message and may be the strength of the message." And that's our responsibility in the local church today.

With that in mind, should pastors avoid teaching on secondary issues...especially when they know they will be divisive?

- For the sake of conversation, the primary issue as Jesus followers is making Jesus' name known to the world, representing him well, adopting his tone and posture/approach, loving each other the way that he loved us, and loving our enemies and praying for our enemy. All those things are primary.
- There's definitely a time to wade in on what we might consider a secondary issue, but when we do it, we have to contextualize it as a secondary issue.
- When I've waded into these issues, I have planned way ahead and I always invite people who are closer to these issues than me to weigh in on my outlines.
- The context is that we don't see it the same way, but we're called to love each other unconditionally. So when we walk away, we're not going to necessarily agree, but certainly we can move forward as a local church.
- If it's something that has begun to create division in a local congregation, that's dangerous, so sometimes we have to preempt the conversation and put it out there and say: You're already talking about it. Let's bring it into the church and create some context around it.

How can pastors differentiate between a sermon topic and a one-on-one topic that should be engaged in a mentoring/discipleship relationship?

- I think there are topics that are not Sunday morning platform topics, and it's not because we don't have an opinion or a conviction; it's because of sensitivity to the audience.
- To the pastors listening: You have permission to make that distinction about what you talk about with a microphone on.

How can pastors teach on tough topics while galvanizing the church to accomplish its mission?

- It's important to start these conversations by focusing on what we have in common as Christians.
- We just wrapped up a series on "Ecclesia" and I challenged my church to:
 - Pledge loyalty to King over country.
 - Don't allow a secondary issue to become your primary issue.

- Refuse to demonize anyone for any reason.

Do you have any final encouragement for pastors?

- Fear not. Don't fear the one who can destroy your body or your career or your reputation, but fear the one who controls your soul.
- We've all preached on Daniel in the lion's den. We've all preached on Paul being thrown into prison and Philippi and in Rome. We've all preached on Jesus marching to Jerusalem. These are our moments. The good news is we're not going to shed blood... just tears.
- So press on, be faithful. And if your spouse and kids love and respect you, that's enough. You got this.

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