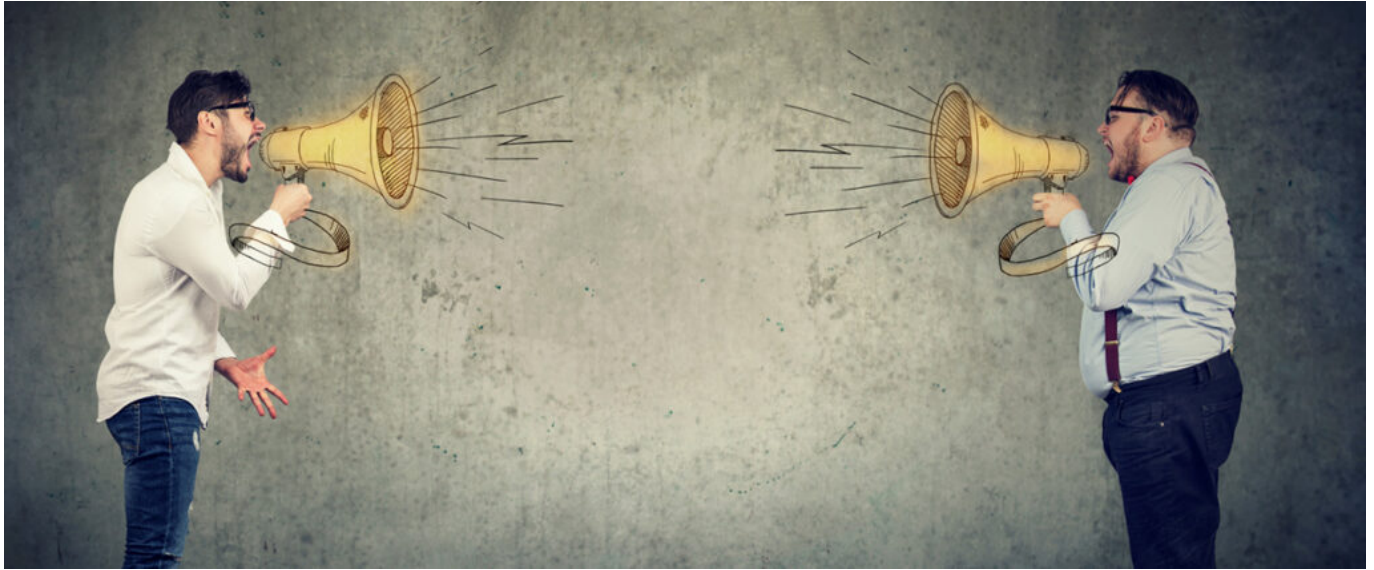


Your Truth, My Truth

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In 2014 the 'Oxford Students for Life' group organised an event on campus to debate the topic of abortion. In response, the Oxford feminist group staged a counter-protest to 'disrupt' the event because they objected that both views in the debate were to be presented and defended by males.

Their complaint was, *"It is absurd to think we should be listening to two cisgender men debate about what people with uteruses should be doing with their bodies. By only giving a platform to these men, OSFL [Oxford Students for Life] are participating in a culture where reproductive rights are limited and policed by people who will never experience needing an abortion."*^[1]

The challenge that they were raising is this: should men be allowed to have a voice on an issue that falls exclusively within the female domain?

Subjectifying the Truth

I raise this issue because it is part of a broader trend within contemporary society to subjectify truth. The question we need to wrestle with as the Church is, is our lived experience the most significant and authoritative way of arriving at the truth?

In public debates, it is not uncommon for members of a particular identity category, whether it be on the basis of gender, race, sexuality or religion, to silence other voices in the discussion by invoking their lived experience. This kind of thinking is creeping into the church as well. But how should we judge this kind of rationale according to the pattern of Scripture?

If we accept the rationale that lived experience gives someone the highest authority on a particular topic, a number of pertinent questions naturally follow on from that, such as:

- Do married people have the right to speak on singleness?
- Do white people have the right to speak on racism?
- Do childless people have the right to speak on parenting?
- Do heterosexual people have the right to speak on homosexuality?

How we answer these questions reflects our understanding of where Godly wisdom comes from. It

is true that life experience *can* add to a person's wisdom, but this is not a guarantee, "*Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning.*" – Ecclesiastes 4:13 (NIV)

It is possible (even common) to grow older but not wiser. This is because wisdom is only learned when our hearts are postured in a reverent fear toward the Lord, and we have a habit of putting God's Word into practice.

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Is There *Any* Value in Lived-Experience?

Yes, there can be. If I have been consistently applying the Word of God to my life over many years, then the experience that I have gained and the 'peaceful fruit of righteousness' evident in my life can be a wonderful testimony to the truth of God's Word.

As we have wrestled with our flesh and consistently chosen to honour God and 'sow to the Spirit' in a particular area of our lives (e.g. singleness), we do grow in spiritual authority on that topic. We are also able to empathise with others who are having similar struggles. But even then, my life is simply a testimony to the truthfulness of Scripture; it is not my many years of experience that make my words true.

But the opposite can also prove to be true as well. As we have wrestled with our flesh and consistently *compromised* in a particular area of our lives, maybe we have not stewarded our hearts very well; we may have grown despondent, frustrated and allowed a 'bitter root' to spring up in our lives. In this case, our lived experience may have caused us to despise God's wisdom and to have grown resentful of it. In this case, although we may have all the experience in the world, we have disqualified ourselves from counselling others on this topic.

An Objective Measuring Stick

Scripture tells us, "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.*" – Proverbs 3:5-6 (NIV)

So often, 'my own understanding' has been shaped by my life experience, but that is not necessarily a good thing! We need an objective measuring stick to guide us in how we think and feel, and that measuring stick is the Word of God. Moreover, we find that many of the authors in Scripture regularly taught on topics in which they had no experience. Here are some examples:

Paul:

- spoke about marriage and parenting (Ephesians 5 & 6)
- addressed married women (Ephesians 5)
- addressed issues of racism (Galatians 3:28; Romans 3)

And he addressed all these topics as a single, Jewish male.

Peter:

- spoke to women married to unbelieving men and talked about true beauty (1 Peter 3)
- spoke to slaves and how they were to honour their masters (1 Peter 2:18)

And he spoke on these things as a married, free male.

The sobering question to ask in our current social climate is, would these men still be allowed to speak on these topics in Church today? Or would they be disregarded for their lack of lived experience?

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The Truth of Scripture

I feel this is an incredibly important truth to grasp – the ultimate measure of all truth is Scripture, not my experience. This should bring about humility and cause us to re-evaluate how we think and act consistently. It should also cause us to invite others to speak into our lives if they become aware of an area where I am not living according to God's Word.

The challenging thing is that God will often use people we feel are 'unqualified' to speak truth into our lives. He does this to test whether we are humble enough to receive His Word, whatever source it may come from.

A great example of this is the story of Namaan, who was the commander of the army of the king of Aram. Namaan had an incurable case of leprosy. God chose to use a young Israelite slave girl in his household to make him aware of the prophet Elisha, who resided in Samaria (the land of his enemy). When Namaan went to consult the prophet, we read that, *'Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."'* – 2 Kings 5:10 (NIV)

What an indignity! The prophet didn't even receive him personally! God was deliberately testing Namaan's heart. Initially, Namaan failed the test of humility. He said, *'... "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.'* – 2 Kings 5:11 – 12 (NIV)

After some time, Namaan's servants convinced him to humble himself and immerse himself in the Jordan river, and he was instantly healed!

What is significant about this story is that the people God used were not the focus; they were merely the instruments used of the Lord to bring about Namaan's healing. The lesson to be learned here is consistently taught throughout Scripture, *"God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise!"* – 1 Corinthians 1:27 (NIV)

True Wisdom and Authority

As the Church then, we dare not make lived experience the measure of all truth. If we do this, we will leave ourselves wide-open to being deceived because we are unconsciously denigrating the authority of God's Word and replacing it with the wisdom of man.

We are all accountable to the Word of God; therefore, we would do well to focus more on the 'message' of God and less on the 'messenger' God uses to speak His truth. True wisdom and authority lie in the wisdom of God, not in the experience of man.

References:

[1] <http://blog.practicaethics.ox.ac.uk/2014/11/should-men-be-allowed-to-discuss-abortion/>