

Protagonist Corner

Resolving Church Conflicts and Controversies

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When I fly, I never quite resist the temptation to leaf through the airline's free, in-flight magazine. Recently, I have been noticing glossy, multipaged ads for seminars on corporate productivity and success. The claim of one consultant in particular stands out: "in business, you don't get what you deserve, but what you negotiate."

It seems an apt description of mainline denominations. We may or may not be getting what we "deserve," but "negotiation" is clearly the order of the day, as we work our way through rancorous debates on controversial issues. We are increasingly aware that the diversity in our midst is not only cause for joy. Deep differences threaten to divide us.

These differences relate not only to questions of morality and ethics. *Theological* diversity and disagreement characterize our life together. Fundamental matters of conviction and conscience are at stake.

Ironically, we cannot even agree on *how* to try to resolve church conflicts and controversies. Some emphasize dialogue, confident that a win/win situation can emerge. If only we engaged in loving, respectful conversation, we would discover that our different perspectives complement rather than contradict each other. Others emphasize "Christian truth." They believe that scripture and tradition set forth a standard by which we test and correct each other's perspectives.

Still others call for something of both, a dialogue that begins with confessional truth, welcomes development and modification, and opens itself to new insights and experiences. The church is "reformed, always reforming." The recent Presbyterian General Assembly, in response to the Re-imagining controversy, affirmed "the growth that can occur in the church when Presbyterians engage one another and other Christians in serious theological reflection, acknowledging the history and commitments of our Reformed tradition."

Yet, not even this kind of theological reflection can guarantee that church conflicts and controversies will find resolution. We may well continue to experience discomfort, even pain, as we discover how different we are, particularly in regard to issues of biblical authority and interpretation, church and culture, and ethical decision making. Our challenge is more than "negotiation." We stand before the question of whether "life together" is possible or not.

A church that experiences theological diversity and disagreement is subject to three temptations. The first is the danger of fragmenting into voluntary associations of the like-minded. More than once, I have heard of people visiting a Presbyterian congregation only to be told that they might really be more at home in another. It is understandable that Presbyterians gather in "evangelical," "More Light," "conservative," and "liberal" congregations. But Paul insists that we are members of one body (I Cor. 12:12). There cannot be one church for ears, another for eyes, and yet another for more respectable or less respectable parts.

A second temptation is silence. Congregations can avoid coming to terms with theological diversity and disagreement by avoiding discussion of the deepest and most urgent matters of Christian faith and practice. But this strategy is problematic. It often succeeds only in repressing differences until they come to a point of explosion. Nor does it reflect Paul's vision of a church in which we "speak the truth . . . for we are members of one another" (Eph. 4:25).

Third, in a church that experiences theological diversity and disagreement, people are tempted to beat up on each other. Angry denunciations and accusations replace thoughtful, reasoned debate. Each side works to get out the vote. But polity cannot resolve matters of conscience and conviction. No matter which way the vote goes, fundamental differences will remain. We still have the hard work of building up the entire body (Eph. 4:15).

It is by God's grace that we have possibilities for living together, despite our differences. In a time of theological diversity and disagreement, it is all the more important that the deepest streams of the faith nourish us. Worship, preaching, the sacraments, the arts, and the example of "saints" of deep piety and wisdom can contribute to a renewal of faith, allowing us to approach our differences out of God's grace rather than out of our need for resolution. Disagreement will remain, but we can put it into God's hands and get on to the good that God has given us to do. As David Edwards notes:

The truth that emerges out of the argumentative history of theology is that disagreements are both inevitable and comparatively unimportant. The heart of Christianity is an experience through which God's reality is apprehended personally . . . in the power of God the Spirit, of God's love embodied in Jesus, through whom God is near as Father and every human being is near as neighbour.¹

God may use a time of diversity and disagreement to call us to the "ministry of bearing." In Christ, we have the experience of needing each other, despite our differences. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

God took [us] upon Himself and [we] weighted Him to the ground, but God remained with [us]...[Christians] must suffer their brethren, but, what is more important, now that the law of Christ has been fulfilled, they *can* bear with their brethren.²

Finally, as the recent General Assembly argued: "theology matters." We need to study the scriptures and the tradition, to talk to each other, and to learn to *think* about what we believe. Only then can we know where we differ and why, and where we are of one mind and why.

Perhaps our problem is not too much conflict and controversy, but too little — or at least too little channeled into vigorous, sustained disputation. On difficult issues of faith and practice, we need more than consensus statements that blunt the intensity of our differences. We need to hear and promote the best arguments on each side, confident that the Holy Spirit is at work in the whole people of God, and that they can recognize God's truth, as it emerges out of debate. "For thus it pleases God to use the

dissensions that arise in the Church to the glory of his name, to illustrate the truth, and in order that those who are in the right might be manifest” (Second Helvetic Confession).

NOTES

¹ David L. Edwards, *The Futures of Christianity* (Wilton, CN: Morehouse-Barlow, 1987), 393-394

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1954), 100-101