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We Evangelicals ought to face fairly and squarely the uncomfortable truth that we are not good at disagreeing with one another.

This weakness has a long pedigree and a bewildering mixture of proper and improper attitudes, which underlie it. We, like those who have gone before us, recognise the importance of the truth about God and his purposes, as revealed in the Bible. We recognise the pressure on us from a world in rebellion against God: a pressure to qualify, marginalise, adjust or ignore that truth. Precisely because this is the truth about God for us, we cannot pretend to be emotionally distant from the message we proclaim. It is good news and any distortion of the message robs us of that good news.

Yet mixed with such concerns too often we find several less savoury perspectives: our commitment to self-protection or self-promotion; our envy of others; a propensity to transform a debate about an issue into an attack upon a person; and a preoccupation with victory rather than the truth.

In a sinful world it is almost impossible to disentangle such mixed motives. Repentance and forgiveness are constant features of the Christian life. Our expressions of righteous anger are never wholly righteous. For this and other reasons, some have argued that we ought to avoid all debate and disagreement, especially over theology or issues of biblical interpretation. We ought to concentrate upon our 'unity in the Spirit' and recognise disagreement as failure. To some, alternative points of view ought not to be voiced, arguments should not be pursued, and we ought not to challenge others to defend their point of view from the Scriptures. But is this really what it means to be faithful in the Last Days? Is this really genuine Christian discipleship?

The Need for Argument

The biblical perspective on argument is not exclusively negative. To be sure, we must acknowledge the strong denunciation of unnecessary quarrelling which is found repeatedly in the New Testament (1 Cor 3:3; 2 Cor 12:20; 1 Tim 6:3-5; 2 Tim 2:14, 23-24; Tit 3:9-11). A quarrelsome, pugnacious character is at odds with the example of Christ (Jn 13:15; 1 Jn 4:10-11) and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:19-26). It is also at odds with Jesus' instruction to his disciples that they "love one another" (Jn 13:34-35) and "serve one another" (Mk 10:42-45; Jn 13:12-17). However, Jesus himself clearly did not see his service of his disciples as incompatible with challenge (Mk 4:40) or his love for them as incompatible with rebuke (Mk 8:33). The same Paul who spoke of love, gentleness and peace as fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, opposed Peter to his face in Galatians 2.

There is clearly a place for "contending for the faith" in the Christian life (Jude 3). Just as truth matters and the truth about God matters most of all, so error is dangerous and error about God is most dangerous of all. There is no instance in the Old Testament or the New where a denial of the truth is treated with anything but the utmost seriousness. Nor ought this to surprise us. If we genuinely believe that God is gracious towards us, that he is committed to the welfare of his people, then to refuse his will and to abandon his pattern for Christian living can bring us nothing

but harm.

Our Christian understanding of the character of God and the nature of the Scripture as the Word 'breathed-out' by him makes it important for us to apply ourselves and encourage our brothers and sisters to apply themselves to the serious business of testing everything by that Word (1 Thess 5:21; 1 Jn 4:1). In this context there is surely nothing wrong with argument in and of itself. Argument is not necessarily the same as quarrelling. Rather, it can and should be a genuine wrestling together with the truth, a calling of one another back to the Scriptures, and helping of one another to face the issues and to justify our opinions. When used in this way it is one of the most profound acts of love and service. We have nothing to fear from rigorous thinking with its honest exploration of the alternatives and their implications. In this context it is well to remember that "perfect love casts out fear" (1 Jn 4:18).

The Dangers of Argument

This is not to say that the kind of godly argument I have described is free from danger. However, if we are honest with ourselves we should quickly realise that the danger arises more from our sinful distortion of argument than from the practice of argument itself.

Some modern Christian debate seems to have adopted the **worst of** parliamentary practice. One of the most obvious examples is the tendency to attack the person rather than the argument. Here it is hoped that by undermining the person presenting the argument, the argument itself will be discredited. In the most extreme cases this is nothing more than a refusal to engage in the argument itself. It is a popular tactic because it so often works—all the more so when the portrait is embellished just a little. Nevertheless, it is in the end a dishonest tactic, and one which is fundamentally opposed to the goal of Christian argument: an understanding of the truth which glorifies God and edifies my brothers and sisters.

Sometimes the straightforward personal attack would be too obvious. Instead, we avoid the argument itself by the manufacture of a subtext, which we anticipate will 'sway the voters': "My dear brother says this, but behind the 'this' lies 'that', which we all agree is dangerously false." A variation on this approach is the appeal to some frightening consequences which, while they don't quite follow from the argument, so occupy the attention of the audience that they will never quite realise the argument itself has not been addressed. A recent example of this tactic is the suggestion that the argument for rejection of the new Prayer Book for Australia because of its sustained compromise of reformation theology is in reality a call for schism with terrible consequences for evangelical congregations in other parts of Australia.

If the modern parliamentary model is inappropriate, so too is another, which on occasion is found in Christian circles. We might call it **the military approach** to argument. Its goal is the total annihilation of the 'enemy' and it might be characterised by the slogan 'Take no prisoners!'. Here the goal is to win the argument at all costs, with little or no concern for the spiritual or emotional state of those proposing another point of view. It abandons persuasion in favour of mental, emotional, and sometimes even a kind of physical coercion. For example, in some dioceses in the Anglican Communion it is now impossible to be ordained unless you are prepared to declare that you have no objection to the ordination of practicing Homosexuals.

Human sinfulness is extraordinarily ingenious. There are many other ways in which we can distort the important task of understanding and helping others to understand God's truth. However, the underlying reality is often the same. Too many Christian debates demonstrate a serious failure to actually engage with one another and test our views by the words of Scripture, and precisely for that reason they constitute a failure to genuinely **love one another**. Genuine Christian unity can rarely survive in such a climate for long.

Suggestions for Arguing in a Godly Way

We must not avoid our responsibility to come under the Word of God and encourage our brothers and sisters to do likewise. However, in the face of our persistent sinfulness, argument and debate often get out of hand. This dilemma increases the stress under which many modern discussions, particularly on contentious issues, are taking place. Is it possible to isolate some principles which might help us deal with our differences in a godly way?

The following seven suggestions come from various sources. They are not the entire answer, nor do they guarantee godly discussion of Christian faith and practice, but they are a beginning. I am convinced we are in a much healthier position if we all recognise our vulnerability in this area and consciously seek to avoid the attitudes and approaches, which forget that we live our lives in the presence of God and in fellowship with one another.

i. Pray for those with whom you disagree

This, which you might expect to be the most obvious of approaches to differences amongst Christians, is sadly one of the most neglected. The emotions generated by our disagreements make it extraordinarily difficult for us to pray for the welfare of those who oppose us. Too often we do not want them to prosper but simply to surrender. However, if Jesus could pray for those who crucified him (Lk 23:34), and if Jesus bids us to pray even for "those who persecute us" (Lk 6:28), ought not prayer to be our natural reaction when we find ourselves in disagreement with a brother or sister?

This kind of prayer can actually change the way we approach the disagreement itself. It is a lot harder to attack or ignore a person when you are praying for their welfare. In practice such a contradiction creates a tension few of us can live with, and so we either stop praying for them or stop attacking them. If, then, we are committed to genuine prayer for those with whom we find ourselves disagreeing, we must treat them differently.

ii. Ask questions – don't work from your assumptions about the alternative viewpoint:

Too often our discussions are operating at the level of assumption rather than knowledge. We respond to what we assume the other person believes rather than what they have actually said or written. In the worst examples, both sides sit in their bunkers throwing grenades at straw men who don't really exist. How many times have people attacked an evangelicalism that is concerned only with the head and not the heart? I am yet to find just one living example of an evangelical who endorses such a reductionist view of life and faith.

Rather, those who take the Bible seriously recognise the importance of a whole-life response to God, and they recognise too that the transformation of our minds is a vital part of that response (Rom 12:1-2). Unfortunately there are many other examples. How many times have evangelicals

been accused of worshipping the Bible rather than God himself? Or ignoring the Spirit? Or endorsing the abuse, exploitation or marginalisation of women? At best these are impressions which are quickly corrected by honest dialogue with the people concerned; at worst they are caricatures which deliberately distort the truth and prevent genuine engagement with very significant issues.

The answer to this problem is simple: we need to ask questions and listen for the answers. Instead of putting words into the mouths of our opponents, we should interact with what they actually say and write. Where we are unsure of what they really believe, or where there appears to be more that has been left unsaid, we need to get into the practice of asking rather than assuming. It is easy to win an argument against a straw man, but is it really worth the effort?

iii. [As far and for as long as possible, attribute godly motives to the other person:](#)

It is all too easy to cast ourselves in the role of the hero and our opponent as the villain. We are the ones who are trying to remain true to God's Word while those who disagree with us are trying to undermine that Word, distort it, or ignore it. Sometimes, sadly, that is the case. But is it always the case, and are we right to assume that it is the case in this instance? The depravity of the human heart is a reality we cannot ignore, but perhaps we should seek another starting point when we find we disagree with one another.

Instead of assuming the worst, or embracing some kind of conspiracy theory, surely it is right to attribute to those who disagree with us the same desire for truth and godliness we claim for ourselves. If we really are dealing with a brother or sister in Christ, isn't that just what we would expect? Of course, there may come a time when the evidence against such an assessment is overwhelming and we recognise a deliberate attempt to oppose the teaching of Scripture on this subject. That is a different matter. Nevertheless, it is hard to view the situation objectively when this is the working hypothesis with which we begin our discussion.

iv. [Try to sympathise with the other person:](#)

A different picture often emerges when we take the time to understand where our opponent is coming from. If we take the time to explore their concerns we can often find much common ground. We might even be able to suggest other more helpful ways of meeting those same concerns. Again, asking questions and listening are the keys here. Many evangelists have employed a similar approach for years. Confronted with a student who boldly declares she does not believe in God, they respond by asking just what kind of God she doesn't believe in. Time and again the picture of God is a distorted one, a caricature which can quickly be shown to be far removed from the God who has met with us in Christ. Where an aggressive counter-attack would almost inevitably fail, the willingness to spend the time to listen and understand sometimes proves much more fruitful.

v. [Aim at clarity as well as agreement:](#)

A quick glance at church history will show how many debates and disagreements have been prolonged or distorted by different understandings of the words being used. When one group of Christians in the early church heard the other talking about the three persons of the Godhead, they understood them to be talking about three gods and rightly rejected that view. When the

second group heard the first talking about the one essence of God, they understood them to be advocating the view that God is a simple entity who just shows himself in different ways at different times (sometimes as the Father, at other times as the Son, and at still other times as the Spirit). They in their turn rightly rejected this 'modalism'. However, when time was taken to understand what each side really meant by their words, the debate was well on the way to being resolved.

When we find ourselves in disagreement with other Christians, we would do well to spend some time anticipating how our own words might be misunderstood. If we really are seeking to help one another understand the truth, then we will not want the process complicated by confusion over terms. If we want people to engage with our ideas, clarity is essential.

1. What is the real issue?
2. What do we each really mean?

vi. [Seek the truth, not a party victory:](#)

The aim of Christian argument is an understanding of the truth, which glorifies God and edifies my brothers and sisters. That is not the same thing as my victory in this argument, or the victory of those with whom I most clearly identify in theological or ecclesiastical terms. The truth, God's truth revealed in the Bible, may well critique my theological or ecclesiastical standpoint. I might be wrong; we might be wrong. Rejoicing in the truth (1 Cor 13:6) might sometimes be a rather painful process, as we let go of cherished error. However, unless we are prepared to put the truth before party loyalty, the sad reality is that we will almost inevitably compromise the truth at one point or another.

We are not very good at disentangling our allegiances in this area. Many of our groups arose out of a concern to expound and defend the truth. Some have a long and cherished history of outspokenness for Christ and his gospel. Others are the product of more recent calls to return to God's priorities and God's message for the world. We fight for our institutions precisely for this reason: they have been, and still can be, wonderful platforms for the proclamation of the truth. Nevertheless, a subtle shift can happen in a very short period of time. The group we joined because of our own commitment to the truth of the gospel becomes itself a focus of commitment, and before we even know it the two have merged in our minds: the truth is now identified with what is perceived to be the interests of our group or institution.

It will always be necessary to call on one another to repent of this ungodliness. These last years of the twentieth century are a perfect time to embrace again two attitudes which we should never have abandoned. The first is a profound humility, which acknowledges our personal and corporate fallibility. We do not know everything and we so often make mistakes in what we think we do know. What is more, we can make mistakes together.

The second attitude is a firm determination to test everything, our ideas, our practices, our institutions, and even our understanding of Scripture, by Scripture itself. This determination requires a renewed confidence that God has not only declared his mind, but effectively declared his mind. The Bible is not a veiled communication, an obscure message patient of multiple

interpretations. Nor has God been thwarted in his desire to communicate to us effectively by the human language in which he chooses to do so. He who became truly human without ceasing to be God in order to effectively redeem, is able to speak genuinely human words which never cease to be divine in order to effectively reveal. We cannot afford the cost of a relativism which declares every interpretation acceptable. We need to tremble before God's Word (Isa 66:2) and let that truth relativise our other allegiances.

vii. Remember that, even in discussion, the Christian method is persuasion not coercion:

In some of the most direct New Testament teaching on our subject, the Apostle Paul tells Timothy "Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity." (1 Tim 5:1-2). Clearly, coercion is an inappropriate method of Christian ministry. It is also ineffective. You cannot bully people into the kingdom of God, nor can you by bullying them bring about the genuine repentance which lies at the heart of godly behaviour. Yet whilst we might never think of using physical coercion when faced with disagreement, it is possible to rely on more subtle forms of mental or emotional bullying. Is that not precisely what we are doing when we attack the person rather than the argument, when we seek to censor dissenting opinion, or when we appeal to our official position or qualifications? In contrast, love motivates us to use persuasion rather than coercion. Our concern will be to win our brother or sister, not vanquish them or expose them. We will want to leave the way open for further discussion, not retreat to our bunkers. Perhaps we Christians need to rehabilitate the word 'courtesy'.

Conclusion

Today, amongst evangelical Christians, we face a number of issues on which there is serious disagreement. However, instead of being overcome by the very real possibilities of self-destruction, it is possible to see things in a much more constructive light. We have a series of unique opportunities to love and serve one another, to exercise patience as we vigorously debate the issues and call one another back to Holy Scripture. We have new and exciting opportunities to learn as well as to stand for the truth.

In all of this we need to remember the big picture. Absorbed by the details and emotion of debate, we need constant reminders of the enormity of the cross, the value of our brothers and sisters in God's eyes, and the certainty of a coming day of judgement. Perhaps above all, we need to be reminded of the critical importance of evangelism as the world around us lurches further and further into paganism.

Most of us have to admit failure in the area of handling disagreements. I cannot write an article like this without being ashamed at my own monumental failures in this area. However, recognition of our past and present failures must not be the final word. A change is needed; for unless we repent, the damage to each other and to our witness in the world could be incalculable. There is, after all, still much we can learn from our history. So let's state the truth, discuss the truth, and stand firm for the truth. And let's do it in a godly way.