

“When Christians Disagree...”

Text: “For as long as there is jealousy and bickering among you, are you not still behaving according to the standards of the world?” I Corinthians 3:3

**Rev. Richard M. Cromie, Ph.D., D.D.
Sharon Presbyterian Church
Charlotte NC
April 13, 2008**

“When Christians Disagree...” If there is anything more universally present in the Bible than the Love which God has for his children, it would be the disagreements which dominate the relationships of those children with one another. **“Why can’t my children get along?”** a friend asked me as his pastor some years ago, **“All I ever wanted was a happy family where we could all relax and enjoy each other!”** What happened?” I have been trying to formulate a decent answer ever since. Back then I replied, **“Take a quick look at the Scriptures and you will find the makings of an answer. God’s created children never did quite manage to live in peace and harmony all the way from Genesis to Revelation.**

For example: the first family-Adam and Eve had two sons and the boys competed with each other and were jealous. There was an intense what we call sibling rivalry between them. The one, Abel, found God’s favor for the offering he placed on the altar. His brother Cain was so angry that he was slighted; he took his brother out into the field and killed him. What a way to begin the human race!

Later Abraham had a spat with his wife over her childlessness. She had let him down. So she gave him her personal maid, Hagar, by which she had a child named Ishmael, which caused a raucous between the women. Then lovely, pleasant faithful little Sarah dealt so harshly with Hagar that she took Ishmael out into the wilderness where they might have perished but for an angel of the Lord.

The result of that initial quarrel takes on a violent presence in our generation. Christianity is descended from Abraham and Sarah, through King David and of course, following Jesus. But Ishmael, the other son of Abraham whom Sarah sent away, is the father of the Arab nations from which Muhammad and the Muslims’ religion descend. It could be an ironic twist of Biblical history that the present animosity and fear of a possible holy war around the Globe between Christian and Muslim nations could be a distant inheritance and by-product of the family strife between Sarah and Hagar. God does work in mysterious ways.

That is trifle scary but on it goes in the Bible. To summarize the historical Books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles could be as simple as saying that almost no one got along; brothers vied with each other for favor of their fathers, and plotted, maimed and murdered when they did not receive it. The prophets showed how God gave frequent chances for them to live at peace,

but they could never pull it off. The tug of self preservation prevailed time after time. They preferred to go at it on own – at best they aligned themselves with their kinsmen for the duration of a particular battle, but then they were off again into their own wee worlds. In the end God turned his back and they were carted off into the captivity of Babylon.

Over there, as exiles, a few remained faithful, like Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Some also sang the songs of their native land and longed to return home to Jerusalem. But most of them compromised their faith and morals and acclimated themselves to the new situation, causing some consternation among the faithful.

When they returned to Jerusalem and began to rebuild the walls and the Temple of their beloved city, they began to bicker and quarrel about how much was being asked of them, since they had so much else to do with their time and energy and money. It got so bad that the prophet Haggai screamed in their faces about whether they wanted to work for the Lord or not. “Is it fair for you to dwell in your own paneled houses”, he shouted, “while there is work to be done in the house of the Lord?”

You would hope that when you get to the New Testament things would get better. Many Christians still hold the opinion that the Old Testament is the book of judgment and dissension and strife, while the New Testament is the testimony of God’s Love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. It is. But then remember that the disciples of Jesus quarreled with each other about which one of them would be the greatest. And they did not remain loyal to the master even in the hour of his deepest need.

The Book of Acts tells of the wonderful expansion of the Christian Church, but there is dissension and discord and bickering and disputes among the Churches of St. Paul and in the Book of Revelation. Look at a few: In Galatia, they quarreled over legalism, with one foot in the love and freedom of Jesus Christ, but the other foot was stuck fast in the laws of Moses.

In the Book of James, (Can you believe it?) they were favoring those who were rich. When someone came to the Church Service dressed in fine Brooks Brothers or Armani clothing and gold rings and a fine new chariot, they were ushered to the best seats in the house: up front,

fifth row center. But when a poor man in shabby clothing tiptoed in the back door, he was told to stand quietly in the rear. Oh dear. But all are supposedly one in Christ Jesus.

The minister at Gaius was a good speaker but it turned out he was power hungry and not in tune with the ways of the Lord. At Thyatira most of the members were attached to a woman preacher who preached that God wanted them to succeed. She urged them to enjoy the pleasures of this present life. She told them that God wanted them to succeed and to enjoy even some peculiar forms of sexual practice. Meanwhile, over in Jerusalem the Church was giving priority in their relief fund payments to Christian widows who were formerly Jewish by background, and they reduced payments for the non-Jewish Gentile Christian widows in need.

There was dissension everywhere among God’s children. So it should not surprise us that those kinds of bickering continued down through the centuries up to the most modern of Churches, in SE Florida and in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and in Mecklenburg Country, North Carolina. And we bicker about the darndest things.

It reminds me of the story of the man who was marooned on a desert island in the South Seas for 14 years. Then one day, miraculously he was rescued by an Army Air Force unit who were developing some new maneuvers which required privacy. He was delirious with joy. But before he left the island with his rescuers, he treated them to a little tour around his island community. There was his little hut, his garden, his shed for wood and brush. He had constructed a store where he could go and purchase his own goods. And he had constructed a Church, with a little wooden cross above it. Someone asked about the building just to the left of the Church. It had a cross on it too. “Well”, he said, “that’s the church I used to go to. I quit it!”

To find our sermon and some principles to live by, drop back with me to Jacob and Esau and that part of Genesis 32. The story began with the birth of the twins boys back in Chapter 25. With the birth of those sons “Two Nations will be born, and two peoples shall be divided.” (Genesis 25:23) The infant Jacob was tugging at the heel of his now older brother when they

arrived. Father Isaac took a shine to Esau and the Bible says that Jacob was the favorite of his mother Rebekah. What a peculiar start for a family!

Later you recall when Isaac was growing old and going blind he bestowed his familial blessing on Jacob by accident, rather than on his first born Esau, a deception made possible by his mother's cunning. Esau was so angry he would kill his bother whenever he got the chance. Mama Rebekah saw to it that Jacob was whisked away to her brother, Uncle Laban, up in Paddan-aram. (That might say a lot right there.)

Jacob then married two sisters, Leah and Rachel, at the same time, and they had eleven children between them. They all prospered, especially since Jacob was successful in swindling his uncle Laban. But in time, as men can do, Jacob got restless and decided to move back home and to carry on the family tradition.

But there was Esau to contend with, who was waiting for him along the return route with 400 armed men at his side. Talk about brotherly disagreements. Jacob was scared to death. He conceived a way to deceive Esau with gifts of money and flocks and jewelry, and he set out to the south. When he came to the Jabbok river, at which point he sent his wives and family and flocks to the other side and he camped by himself that night at Penuel of the west bank of the Jabbok. And a strange thing happened to Jacob before morning came.

First, he prayed to God to rescue him and to protect him from the fury of Esau. "Deliver me O Lord, for I am afraid that Esau will come and kill us all." He was not especially accustomed to praying. Heretofore Jacob was a talented man who could make it by his own scheming.

It reminds me of the story of the man who got careless up in the currents of the Niagara River while he was fishing way above the falls. But he let his boat drift too far where the rush of water became so demanding he could not row against it, and his little row boat was being swirled down the river headed for the gigantic Niagara Falls. Of course he was scared to death. His prayer went like this: "O Lord, I haven't bothered you for twenty years, and if you get me out of this one, I promise not to bother you for twenty more." So say we all.

Anyway, before Jacob knew it a man came down that night and wrestled with him. He later learns that it was more than a man, an angel perhaps, a messenger from God. It was a tremendous, night-long struggle. When the first light of morning came, the mysterious combatant tried to leave, but Jacob, who had been wounded in the fray, held on for dear life. "Let me go," the presence said. "No," Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." Reluctantly the Messenger of God blessed him with a new name - "Israel", which means "God will persevere!" The name "Jacob" means in Hebrew "One who supplants." A new name for a new man. He was born-again that night.

He asked God to deliver him from his brother Esau, but God was about to deliver him from himself! He was about to be transformed from his previously devious self into a man of God who would be forever after forthright and courageous. Praise the Lord! Our greatest battles are always with ourselves.

That's the way it always is, if you allow God to intervene in the way you live your life. At one level each of us is entangled in our ephemeral personal concerns; but at another level, we sense a master plan which God has prepared and now and then, we see ourselves fitting into it. It is not idle to say that God can work all things together for Good. That is exactly what he does, if we allow it, or only if we get out of the way.

Meanwhile, Jacob is a most unlikely candidate to assume the role of servant of the Lord. He was surely miscast in that part. Moses was not fitted for his part either. He stuttered; he had killed an Egyptian; he should have been on death-row. The Prophet Elijah was a scardy-cat, afraid of his own shadow. No matter what God did for him, he still cowered in fear for his own life. Jeremiah often lost his temper. Everyone God chose seems to have had some malady or another. There is no excuse for bowing out on God.

So, to continue the story, Jacob still has to go and meet Esau, who he still expects will wage war against him and his family and servants. Like the prodigal son in the New Testament parable he is rehearsing what he will say to his brother when he will finally get there. "I am not worthy to be called your son, make me a servant in the fields." But, as the Father rushed out to welcome his boy home, brother Esau rushed up to greet Jacob. He threw his arms around him and embraced him and kissed him and told him it was great to see him again.

All those years Jacob had lived in fear of what Esau would do to avenge himself, but his brother had already forgiven Jacob's misdeeds and had forgotten the long-ago vow to get even with Jacob. They went their separate ways thereafter, not out of anger but out of the predisposition each of them had for a different ways of life: one was a farmer; the other was a city boy. The only other time they met, I am grateful to the Author of Genesis included it, was that the brothers were together for their father's funeral up at Shechem.

The lesson of that story however is an important one to remember when Christians disagree. You cannot, you should not, and you must not assume that you know what the other person is thinking inside. Outward expressions of anger or mistrust or fear can bring along with them the worst sort of language and looks, but once the other one backs up and looks at it outside the pressure and stress of fear and anger, their whole opinion might have changed. We are seldom as tough or as brave in the morning as we were the night before.

Let me give you one example out of my own life. In one of the congregations I served there was a woman who was faithful to her Lord and her church. She was a good Christian. She came to worship every week and she served in this office or that. I would not have said that she and I were the best of friends but I was grateful that she was in our parish. But, when I left that Church eleven years later to take another Call, on my last Sunday she came sheepishly up to the center door to greet me. She seemed a bit shy and uncomfortable. Then she blurted out, "Dr. Cromie, I want to apologize to you for the way I have treated you for the past six years. I was offended when you ignored me one day as you walked by and greeted someone else.", she continued, "so I started going out another door so that I would not have to speak to you. I am sorry I was so rude and that I hurt my pastor's feelings." Oh dear I had no idea whatsoever that she had avoided me. I was totally unaware that there was any friction between us; and poor dear; she had been immensely troubled by it for three hundred and twelve Sundays in a row. We were at odds, but I did not even know it. God bless her.

Well, it is time, past time, some of you are probably saying, for us to nail it down to a memorable little sermon so that you have something concrete to take home about "When Christians Disagree..." Try this little paradigm to guide us in what to do, in six parts:

I. First, acknowledge that it is alright to have disagreements and conflict in our Christian homes, classes and Congregations. That can be a blessing in itself. Our preconception of a good little Christian, meek and mild and timid, who would never think of upsetting the apple cart, no matter how important the issue might be, is gone for good, or should be.

The first congregation I served as Assistant Minister was a tower of strength, a huge and prosperous Church which lumbered along. The Senior Pastor of many years, who in time became one of my dearest friends, insisted that there be absolute harmony all the time, on every decision. He bragged to fellow clergy that our Church Session was always unanimous. “We have had never had a single negative vote in all the time I have been moderator.” I wondered about it when I first arrived, but I was a rookie so I kept quiet, for a while.

I soon discovered however, that the outward verbal consensus was a sham. Inwardly the creativity and talent of the Church members was being stifled. The pastor and a few of the traditional power leaders directed how the church would operate, and no one was allowed to disagree. Soon I began to hear a lot of stories at lunch or on the way home from our meetings.

When I later moderated the Board of Deacons, I insisted on openness and honesty (except for the meetings when the Senior Pastor was present). We had some extensive and decisive arguments, but we advanced the cause of Christ. In fact the Board of Deacons grew to be so boisterous and unnerving I once in a while wished I had never set it free.

But, the deeper point is that a lack of conflict usually means that honest opinions and creative new ideas are being buried. Like, when I hear a married couple say they never have an argument, I wonder if truth is really circulating between the two, or have they settled into a one sided routine? Stifle honest opinions and differences, and before long, it turns into apathy. If you don’t care anymore, why bother?

Even the most energetic and devoted among us will not continue to beat our heads against the wall of conformity. When those new ideas are removed, the church or the organization or the marriage will settle in to doing the things that they have always done in the way they have always done them. They have a consensus, but they have no growing edge. Thank God when

there is open discussion; at least somebody cares about the future. First, acknowledge the right of disagreement.

2. Then secondly, before you get going to settle the disagreement, make sure you have the right argument to settle. Often we do not. I mean the expressed issue is sometimes not worth the trouble it would take to solve it. Sometimes families and clubs and churches divert themselves and go all out over some miniscule item, when everybody knows it is not the real issue. Some battles are not worth it, except to those who live to do battle. The Bible says that we should pick the concern which is critical to the furtherance of the family or the church. I often say in counseling, “Now this is not the real issue is it? What lies behind your arguments over who parks which car where?” It usually is a matter of control or dominance; or someone is digging in to maintain the past. Get to the heart of the real argument.

3. Third, you need to be sure that you pick the right battlefield. The words of our text from I Corinthians 3 are to the point: “As long as you are still jealous of and bickering with each other, you are still people of the world.” A Christian Church is not just another meeting place, as a married Christian couple is not just another couple trying to make it the world at large. We should not proceed as if we have not heard the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. In Corinthians, Paul inadvertently tells us about the disagreements of the Congregation. He told the Corinthians to correct their affairs and make themselves over to become a Church of Jesus Christ.

“You are not yet ready for responsibility yet.” St. Paul continued. Your standard should be the will of Christ. The battle field you so often choose, and the weapons you pick up are inappropriate to those who have been called out into this new place called the Church or the Christian home.

One of you says, ‘I belong to Paul.’ Another says ‘I belong to Apollos.’ Do we not all belong to Him? You harp on at the wrong problems. Are we not all God’s servants, working together? Are we not all one in Christ?” The obvious answer is yes.

You are not street fighting in some darkened alley. You have not entered one of those locked caged to fight to the death. You are a chosen person, called by Christ, to hammer out your differences as those who love each other and who love the Lord. A “controlled” setting where

both parties are on equal ground, with the issue defined and the boundaries agreed, is the ideal place for the settlement.

4. Fourthly, I adore the way Paul says it in Colossians **“You must wear the right clothes!”** In the third Chapter, verses 12-14, he pours out the secrets for reducing conflict among the brothers and sisters of the faith. He likens the process to changing our clothes, to take some articles off and put some others on. We are not supposed to solve our controversies with the techniques of the secular world. We are the church. We need to change our verbal clothing when we enter a church disagreement. The problem is that we wear our anger and our hurt on our sleeves. There are certain things you must take off, like gossip and hearsay and wrath and malice and slander and lying and all the rest. We must learn to listen to each other.

Drop those other procedures off at the door of the church; the way in the old west, Cowboys were made to drop off their rifles and pistols off in the narthex. **“If you are in Christ, you must strip off the old self with its self-centered ways and put on something new.”**

The same principles also work with disagreements in marriage and families and among friends and fellow workers. When good people do not agree, they must drop their former wraps off and put on new ones, like a compassionate heart and humility and gentleness and patience; they must bear one another and forgive one another, as the Lord forgives us. **“Above all” he writes, put on the garment of Love, the perfect bond”, the greatest attribute of all. A love which bears and hopes and believes and endures all things, a love which never ever ends.**

“Whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks through him to God the father of us all.” Then once you have the right clothing, you can be sure to play by the right rules. A friend taught me years ago that one way to play fair is to change places with the other one, state his or her argument to the other’s satisfaction, then listen while the other states your side of the question. And listen well.

5. Fifthly, **expect the right thing to happen.** That was the problem with Jacob as he returned to meet his brother. He expected the worst. He worried all night about what would happen to him. I often return to an old little poem I learned in college. I have never forgotten it:

**Some of your hurts you have cured,
And the sharpest you still have survived.
But what torments of grief you endured,
From evils that never arrived.**

In the world around us people, especially those we have offended often chide that they do not get mad, they just get even. Well, getting-even in church disagreements is not the goal. It does not mean winning the argument. It is clear in the New Testament that our goal is rather to win the brother or the sister, not win the point. To prove that we are right might be the worst thing for the cause of Christ. I do not often hear compassionate people listening to each other in the church. Both parties must be attached to reconciliation, or at least to a common agreement about the matter. Expect the right thing to happen.

6. Sixth, ask for the right help, if and when you need it. Some arguments cannot be resolved by the principals involved. Often the issues are too inflammatory and emotional. They need an objective outsider to help you look into the concern and make suggestions. Again I liken it to marriage and divorce. It is not the sign of failure for a couple, or a family, to ask for help in evaluating where things are, how they got there and what to do next. Someone trained in conflict can arbitrate the difference.

In the 4th chapter of Philippians, after Paul has set forth his mightiest theologies and warmest greetings. All of a sudden he tells Euodia and Syntyche to settle their argument. You have to keep reading to get the point Paul is making. He advised the women to bring it out into the open and to settle their argument themselves. Inner grudges are a burden to carry around, and they are heavy. Even at risk of upsetting someone, it is God's wish that it be matter be opened up and solved by the parties involved.

Paul went on to advise, however, that if the two women could not solve the dilemma by and for themselves, then someone else there should intervene and help them to solve it, "For they are good women who have labored side by side with me in the work of the Gospel and I would not want them to lose them in this present difficulty." It is no shame to ask for help when the disagreement is beyond the reach of those involved in the fracas.

7. Seventh and last, speaking of asking for help, the last Biblical exhortation to Christians who disagree with each other, is to pray the right prayer. Jacob had his difficulties, but he knew when and what and where and how to pray for help. “Deliver me please O Lord for I am afraid and I cannot go forward without your help. “Pray without ceasing” returns as timely advice time and again. When in Ephesians Paul encouraged them to put on the whole armor of God, after the shield of faith and the breastplate of righteousness, he told them they should hold it all together in prayer. “Pray at all times in the spirit, with all prayer and supplication.” Let your requests be made known to God.

The right prayer would not be to win the argument, nor for the other side to see your point of view, not to pray that they would become more reasonable. The perfect prayer, as Jesus taught his disciples, begins with praise of God and the furtherance of his kingdom on earth, then to change ourselves, to forgive others as God has forgiven us. The right prayer would ask for a resolution of the disagreement which would be pleasing to the Lord, and not necessarily to either, or even both of those with differing opinions. Strife comes when we are out of touch with Christ, when we prefer to fight to the death and win the battle.

James, the brother of our Lord, summarized it all with his final little comprehensive piece of advice in James 1:19: (Are you listening?) “Christians, be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry; your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Love one another, as God in Christ has first loved you, for now and forever more. Amen.