

Agreeing & Disagreeing in Love - In Thought

Various verses - reader's theater

Years ago, I heard a well known business consultant, who worked with Fortune 500 companies and with non-profits, share this story. He was asked by a Pentecostal group to help them work through a major issue. Here is how he began. He started by asking the leaders in the room, "How many of you believe that the Holy Spirit talks directly with you?" All hands went up in the air. The next question was, "Than why are you in conflict?"

We all know how simple matters can turn into conflict. A simple misunderstanding, difference of opinion stirs uneasy feelings between two parties. People, who assume different motives or purposes or processes, find themselves grouchy at each other. Sometimes simply being different causes tension. Then, instead of addressing the issue directly, we go to other sympathetic persons to express our feelings. We hope to receive confirmation that the other party is wrong. The third party, not knowing the complete details or sequence of events, often unhelpfully & unwisely reinforces the negative feelings.

So we have this sheet, titled Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love, outlines approaches to conflict that help us live out our calling to be Christian peace makers. I encourage you to study these guidelines including the information and scriptures. The use of these steps can help us manage ourselves and give us tools to help the people around us find healing, resolution and peace in difficult situations. They can help us be good witnesses in our daily lives.

Jesus instructed us to love our enemies - probably because they live next door to us, or are a family member who hurt us, or a fellow church member, or someone at work. The Bible guides us to seek reconciliation & unity when we disagree. Conflict can be an arena for God's revelation. So let's commit to these steps when we face conflict. But notice, it all starts with how we think. You may have noticed that the guidelines are in three separate sections, in thought, in action and in life.

How we think about conflict sets up the results we experience and hopefully we can act in love.

Think of the **childhood messages** we received about conflict - verbal, by example and from your own experiences. How do they influence our thinking, emotions and actions today?

Think about your **experiences** with conflict. How have they affected your thinking and emotions and responses today about conflict?

The point of mentioning our conflict experiences and the childhood messages we received, is that agreeing and disagreeing in love starts in our heads and our emotions. It starts in our thought life. Can we see that how we think about conflict often sets up another conflict? Can we see how what we learned as a child and our experiences with disagreements affect our responses today?

As humans we tend to fight, freeze or flee. Some of this is how we are created. Some of this is learned. My suspicion is most people tend to avoid conflict. Christians see ourselves as being called to a higher standard where no feathers are ruffled and disagreements cannot be a part of Christ's body of believers. Our focus on community and peace often discourages us from being vocal about our ideas, rights and needs for the sake of the common good. So when we do disturb the peace, we are breaking an unspoken community value.

As people are likely to do, to release our feelings, we find others to talk to. Sometimes this helps us get perspective. But sometimes we look for people who over sympathize with us and don't challenge us. Some even feed our fears. And if we do talk with the person upsetting us, we find we have weak skills. So let's reflect on our thinking patterns to manage ourselves better.

In our thought life, we need to **acknowledge together that conflict is a normal part of our life in the church and anywhere else.** The apostle Paul assumed that people were passionate about different things. This passion can sometimes cause conflict. So the Holy Scripture emphasizes three points that tie in with our thought life and accepting conflict as normal.

First, whatever we believe, we need to own it for ourselves. We are to publically clearly share what we believe. We are expected to study the matter and then come to some conclusions - while keeping an open mind. We aren't to waffle in our opinions - but I believe we are to be open to have our minds changed! We are not to be lukewarm.

Second, we are not to judge others. Judgment is for God alone. This is where our thought life often gets off track. We begin to put others down. We begin to think our ideas and consequently we, are better than others. It's so easy for our minds to get warped with judging others. It's easy to defend those close to us and become judgmental. It's why these guidelines start with our thinking patterns.

Third, being in the kingdom of God has more to do with righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit than most of the things we end up arguing about. Our calling is to please God and glorify Jesus. So the attitude of pleasing God by making every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification, mutual learning and building up each other, is crucial. This is more important than most of the issues we argue about.

We are at an unfamiliar point in the life of this church. And churches in Canada face unfamiliar challenges. How we bring in people who are different than us and maintain the right fellowship is an ongoing tension. As the Holy Spirit works on our thinking and habit patterns around conflict, we will find our way forward with vision, healing, joy & hope. We are privileged to live Christ's love for each other and for those we meet for God's glory!

Another attitude to cultivate is we can **affirm that God walks with us in conflict and we can work through to growth**. Aren't you glad we aren't all a bunch of Dan Grabers? Aren't you glad you are you? God expects us to disagree! It's how he made us. Otherwise you would all be redundant! Or I would. So as we allow God to walk with us when we share ideas, opinions, debate, disagree, and argue, this helps our thought life. It helps our spiritual maturity

develop in marvelous ways. Our fruits of the Spirit get exercised and grow.

I see two approaches in understanding Jesus' character. There comes a point in our thought process where a decision must be made on how to maturely handle a situation. We need to look at the matter at hand and decide how important it truly is. If we get uptight and fearful, we should deal with the situation and relationship. If the conflict is minor and personal in nature, if the injury is small, then we must be willing to ask for forgiveness and forgive and forget.

We must take in Christ's character of forgiveness, forthrightness and diffuse the situation. Whether through public acknowledgement of forgiveness or a personal mental peace with the other, we must be willing to forgive, allowing for human mistakes and weaknesses. We are called to carry no grudges, no memory of wrong doing. This is the ultimate nature of God revealed through Jesus.

But if the conflict is major and we cannot find peace with it through forgiveness, we need to be willing to speak the truth in love to work toward growth together in Christ. We must be willing to resolve the issue head on, with an open mind, a humble spirit, open to learn & with the intent of seeking a unified satisfactory solution. This is an opportunity to confess sins and pray with each other. Then healing & unity occurs. We need to think - I want God involved in this conflict, not so that I win, but so the kingdom of God wins.

The Holy Spirit wants to help us love one another, just as Christ accepted us, in order to bring praise to God. Jesus is our model in how we think and live. Paul understood that fellowship among followers of Jesus does not rely on complete agreement on many issues. But it all starts with what's going on in our thought life. It starts with acknowledging that conflict is a normal part of our life - even in church. And it continues with being open to let God walk with us. It requires a humble commitment to mature and learn.

This is a great practical way to affirm the hope we have in Jesus Christ. If religion, if faith

doesn't work in daily life, why bother? But when our attitudes affirm God walks with us, we improve our conflict skills, our hope grows, and we have a great story to tell others about God with us.

Then, third, we admit our needs and commit ourselves to pray for a mutually satisfactory solution. Real prayer isn't - God fix him or her the way I think they should be fixed. It's ok to pray a prayer like this because it exposes our inner attitude. Many psalms ask God to embarrass or destroy the people they mention. That's normal human emotion and reaction. But a follower of Jesus goes another step. The step to life for all involved. The step to growth. The step to a mutually satisfactory godly life giving solution.

A better prayer helps us examine ourselves, to reflect on the situation at hand, to listen to God's voice about our own strengths and weaknesses, to own our part in the conflict, to learn and especially to humble ourselves. A better prayer helps us to look at our own thought life, fears, our attitudes, and our motives in a situation.

In a mediation session where the combatants had done a pretty good job of understanding each other's views, I asked if anyone had anything to confess. The response was, what was there to confess? After some silence, I asked, "Are you telling me there is no ego and pride in this room?" There obviously was because each side wanted to fix the other and not fix themselves. There wasn't even the mutual recognition that they had hurt each other.

I guess their prayer focus was not focused on God's will or glory. Or humbling of oneself. Broken relationships within God's church are much more expensive than lack of finances. Money is easy to find, compared to the self work we need to do to maintain and repair Christlike relationships.

Jesus commands unity. Lack of unity is a big big sin. Paul says, "May the God who gives you endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may

glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."

As we spend time on this, agreeing & disagreeing in love, let's work on our thought life by exposing ourselves to the Holy Spirit during our daily prayer time. Conflict isn't resolved by - you do your thing and I'll do mine. It's how can we love and support each other in our ministries and life. It's seeking out God's will for us together. It's building God's Kingdom - together.

One would think that being in a democracy we would have learned how to agree and disagree in love more than most parts of the world with other kinds of governance. To often followers of Jesus are known for their fights and splits. For example, there are more than 50 different groups that came out of the Anabaptist moment in Lancaster county Pennsylvania alone. What about Saskatchewan?

In contrast to our culture today, a Christian strength is to not fight for our rights. The Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 6, verses 1-8 says, "It's better to be wronged or defrauded than for Christians to go to court against each other."

So we need to do better. We can keep working on developing and growing these three attitudes. They set the foundation for our action and our lives. Let's acknowledge that conflict is a normal part of our church life when passionate people live and work together. Let's us also acknowledge that God walks with us in conflict and can help us work to unity and maturity if we are open to his leading. Let's admit our needs and commit ourselves to prayer for a mutually satisfying solution - for the glory of the kingdom of God.

Furthermore, may our solutions be ones that honor Jesus in how we come to decisions, how we treat each other, as we agree on the best solutions, not just a compromise to keep people happy.