

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Agreeable disagreement

Christians often turn up on opposite sides of important issues, with each group citing scripture as evidence that their viewpoint is right. This isn't surprising, because scripture contains many contradictions and few specific rules. The problems come when disagreeing Christians accuse each other of not being Christian. Then the world ignores both groups and the church's internal squabbles keep it from accomplishing God's work.



The Bible doesn't give all-purpose rules

It's no wonder that we don't all come to the same conclusions when we try to apply the Bible's contents to current issues, because the Bible doesn't furnish specific, all-purpose rules. Instead, the Bible describes God's self-revelation to many different people in many settings over centuries. The Bible reveals God's laws, like the command to love, and shows us some ways in which they apply, but it doesn't tell us how they will apply in every possible setting. Thus when we try to figure out how to apply them to a particular set of circumstances, we often come to different conclusions.

Each group may see something important

When Christians disagree, each group is often focusing on a different aspect of the issue and a different part of the Bible's message. When the U.S. sends military forces into another country, some Christians say we are arrogantly usurping another nation's sovereignty and mistreating its people, but other Christians say we are following Jesus' command to rescue people who are being mistreated. Some



Feed my sheep ...
Repent and believe ...
Make disciples ...
Cure the sick ...
Love your neighbor ...

Christians say the church should focus mainly on personal evangelism and right belief, while others

(continued on page 2)

People who disagree scare us

In his book *The Myth of Certainty: Trusting God, Asking Questions, Taking Risks* (Zondervan, 1992), Daniel Taylor says that many people find what he calls "reflective Christians" frightening because these Christians often disagree with the majority. They ask unsettling questions, probe standardized answers, go through periods of strained belief or unbelief, act angry or disillusioned (sometimes even toward God!), and generally refuse to behave in the accepted ways.

By calling attention to a variety of possible viewpoints these Christians threaten our assumptions about reality and truth. This feels like a threat to our essential security, so we tend to react by defending the status quo. In doing so we may claim to be defending reason, or God, or an abstract system, Taylor points out, but we are actually defending mainly our "fragile sense of security and self-respect."

Our defense—violence and rigidity

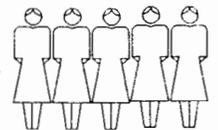
To defend ourselves, Taylor observes, we often use rigidity and violence. The rigidity, he points out, comes from trying to achieve stability (and thus security) through paralysis. If nothing changes, we think, everything will be all right.



In the church, the violence is usually expressed through words and attitudes. We direct fierce verbal put-downs at the church members who disagree with us. Trying to pressure them back into the pack, we try to make them feel crazy, sinful, or stupid. If we're in positions of authority, we remind them of the power we can use against them if they oppose us.

We confuse unity with uniformity

Taylor says we're confusing the Christian principle of unity with an inappropriate human insistence on uniformity. We're insisting that all believers come to God in the same way and use the same words for describing how they experience God. But the larger body of believers, Taylor reminds us, occasionally needs to weigh itself in light of the views of the minority. Otherwise, he points out, we miss "the fresh expression, the creative application, the revitalizing animation that keeps God's truth from ossifying in our timid hands."



"How much does the church lose of the gifts and enthusiasm of its members," Dennis Taylor asks, "because it creates an atmosphere where honesty and risk are not welcomed?" He thinks we lose a lot. So do I.

(Agreeable disagreement, continued from page 1)

give higher priority to feeding the hungry and healing the sick. On issues like these, Christians on each side may be making valid points.

Before taking a stand on an issue, therefore, we need to clarify our views by considering all sides seriously in light of the Bible's whole message. ❖

There have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine.

—1 Cor. 11:19

Discerning God's will

These steps can help in discerning God's will about an issue on which Christians disagree.

- With an open mind and heart, ask God for insight.
- Focus on the content of the viewpoint you disagree with, not just on the people who advocate it. Remember, God has often spoken through unconventional and unlikeable people.
- Make opportunities for hearing varied viewpoints on the issue and discussing them.



- Listen to the people who disagree with you, and notice their feelings. Don't do all the talking.
- Ask yourself, "How would I feel about this issue if my experience had been the same as my opponents'?"

- Look for parts of the Bible's message that support *your opponents' view*.
- After informing yourself about the issue, say what you think and feel, and why.
- Remember that what seems like painful conflict to one person can be helpful discussion for another.
- Don't needlessly alienate the people in your group who disagree with the majority, by adopting an official position. Instead, encourage members to express their positions individually and to act on them, perhaps with others who have similar views.
- Assume that your opponents are Christians if they claim to be. Don't insist on their seeing God's will exactly as you do. ❖



We need to hear many views

Occasionally a *Connections* reader complains about my having quoted an author whose beliefs the reader disagrees with. The reader doesn't necessarily disagree with the *statement* I've quoted. He/she simply feels that Christians should avoid *authors* who have any mistaken beliefs. Evidently the reader worries about Christians being led astray by false ideas and thinks that people who are wrong about some things can't be right about anything.

Even a blind hog finds some acorns



I don't feel that way. I often find accurate and well-stated observations by authors who say other things I disagree with, and I don't see any reason for not making use of those observations. I agree with an east-Texas saying my father used to quote, "Even a blind hog finds an acorn now and then." 🌰

A clergywoman friend recently said something similar about the comments that pastors get from church members. "Even when I disagree with 97% of what a certain person says," she told me, "I know that the other 3% may be a valid observation that I need to hear. So I don't feel that I can afford to dismiss that person's views automatically."

Eat the fish, lay the bones aside

When Christians say they read only the authors they agree with, I think about what the renowned Christian author Douglas Steere once told a group I was in. He said he read a wide variety of books, not just books he agreed with. Even when he disagreed with most of a book's contents, Steere said, he usually found *something* helpful in it. "I use the same rule for reading as for eating fish," he told us. "Eat the fish, and lay the bones aside."

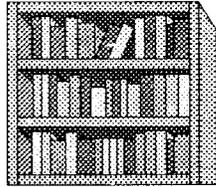


I don't want to miss any acorns by failing to search. I don't want to miss any fish because of being afraid of finding a bone. So I don't want to refuse to hear someone's view just because opponents say it's worthless. I'd rather decide for myself, and I don't think that's too big a risk to take. In fact, if my present beliefs won't survive exposure to new ideas and opposing beliefs, I need that very exposure to help me find more substantial ones.

Time and experience can bring change

Something that feels a little prickly at first or looks a little different from the rest of the fish, causing me to think it is a bone, quite often turns out to be fish when I re-examine it later.

Sometimes a book that I've originally disliked, or a statement that I disagreed with when I first heard it, looks totally different to me after some time has gone by. Maybe I've grown in the meantime, and I've had new experiences. I'm at a different point in the journey of life and faith.



"How could I have ever thought that book was not interesting?", I now wonder, or "How could I have failed to appreciate what that person was saying?" I'm very glad that I only shelved it rather than discarding it.

Being upset isn't necessarily bad

I don't think being upset by a new idea (as a reader wrote that she was by my October comments about updating our religious language) is necessarily bad. Most ideas that contradict our present beliefs or criticize our present behavior are upsetting at first, merely because they present new alternatives that we must consider.

After all, the people of ancient Israel found the pronouncements of Isaiah, Amos, and Jeremiah upsetting. The Pharisees found Jesus' teaching upsetting. The Roman Catholic Church found Martin Luther upsetting. The 18th-century Church of England found John Wesley's tactics upsetting.

Just being new doesn't mean that an idea or method is worthwhile, of course, but the test of its validity isn't whether or not we find it upsetting. Any new discovery is likely to be upsetting, because it makes us revise beliefs that we hadn't previously thought of questioning. When western Europeans discovered the Americas, they had to give up their belief that the world



was flat. When Einstein described relativity, scientists had to stop believing that Newton's laws of motion applied in all circumstances. When people realized that women were as intelligent and as

Unity, liberty, charity

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, spoke often about the need for Christians to emphasize the beliefs they shared instead of focusing on their differences.

Here's how Wesley stated his position on matters of belief: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity." Describing the early Methodist societies, Wesley said, "As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think."

*think
and
let think*

What are the essentials?

The hard part of following this policy, of course, is agreeing on what the "root of Christianity" is, and distinguishing the essentials from the non-essentials. But it's deceptively easy to think that our personal preferences are the essentials. We too often assume that the way we prefer to take communion, the clothes we consider appropriate for worship, the Bible translation we like best, and the lifestyle we're used to are essential parts of being a Christian. They're not.

*we all are
ignorant
and
mistaken*

Wesley sometimes tried to impose his methods on everyone, in spite of what he said. In his better moments, however, Wesley evidently recognized that being charitable included recognizing that no one was perfect. "To be ignorant of many things and to be mistaken in some," he said, "is the necessary condition of humanity."

What's hardest is remembering that we ourselves are ignorant of many things and mistaken about some. We tend to think that only the people who disagree with us are ignorant and mistaken!

Give me your hand

We Christians can't afford to waste time or energy attacking the Christians who disagree with us. We need to be ministering to the world instead. To our fellow Christians we must say as John Wesley did (paraphrasing 2 Kings 10:15), "If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand." Then hand in hand we can respond to God's call.



According to the Gospels, even Jesus apparently didn't spend much time attacking false teachers or people who misquoted him. One Gospel shows him merely saying, "Whoever is not against us is for us," when his disciples told him that someone was falsely claiming to be one of his followers (Mark 9:40).



Should we be any less charitable to the people who disagree with us?

capable as men, laws that kept women from voting had to be changed. Most steps like these are upsetting at first, but they're essential for growth.

I am doing a new thing ... do you not perceive it?
—Isaiah 42:19

We Christians can't afford to reject prickly new ideas too hastily. Some of them may be nutritious food that God is offering us. They may be part of God's "new thing."

God has often spoken through people who opposed the conventional wisdom of their day, even

when it was the wisdom of the church. And God has often spoken through people that others considered mistaken and unattractive. So whatever our viewpoint on current controversial issues may be, God could be speaking through the people who disagree with us. Ignoring them is dangerous. ❖

Next month . . .

Do this in remembrance of me



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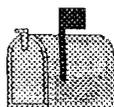
When Christians disagree

A new connection

Welcome to United Methodists in the Wisconsin Annual Conference! With this issue 1300 of them begin receiving *Connections* with their monthly conference newsletter.



Maybe you'd like to arrange to send *Connections* regularly to the members of your conference, district, or congregation. I could mail *Connections* direct to each person on your list if you provided the list and \$5 per person per year to cover the cost. However, if you have access to copying, folding, and labeling equipment (and especially if you have a non-profit-organization bulk-mail permit and can include *Connections* with something else you already mail), you can send *Connections* much less expensively by doing it locally. (The Wisconsin Conference is doing the 1300 for only \$40 per month.) I could send you each issue by first-class mail, camera-ready, and you could get the necessary copies made and mailed. You might contribute the necessary funds personally or get others to join you in contributing smaller amounts. Or you might arrange for a grant to cover the cost, as the Wisconsin group did.



Some *Connections* readers are already copying each issue when they receive it, and distributing the copies to friends or colleagues or to a relatively small group such as a Sunday School class. But if you want to send *Connections* to a large list, and you don't want to have to wait and use your copy as the original after it comes at the snail's pace of bulk mail, we can work out a better way. Let me know if you're interested.