

Thinking Well About Our Disagreements

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 September 2018

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Welcome back. Today's question is, in thinking about recent controversy in the church over racism and sexuality, a question I have pondered off and on for a while has come back to me.

In these debates, we have presumably faithful Christians debating finer points of theology. Examples would be Rosara Butterfield and Wesley Hill during the re-voice conference hoopla on the topic of concupiscence, or the writers of the statement on social justice versus Malcolm Foley and Justin Hawkins on mere orthodoxy.

Now, it struck me in reading these respective articles that both sides both agreed about the central issue. That is, in the first case, that physical expression of homosexuality is unbiblical, and in the second case, that racism is bad and that Christians are called to do social justice type activities. So, to me, I would almost categorise the positions on both sides not so much as disagreements, but as different emphases of the same issue. Both are hitting the issue from a valid biblical framework. So, my question is, do you think that in a fallen world, God makes use of the different members of the body of Christ, who might fall to the left or right of an issue, to balance each other and push the church as a whole towards a more Christ-like and true theology?

[1 : 14] In the same way that Paul talks about different members of the body having varying gifts to contribute, do you think that a type of gift could be a God-given personality tendency towards the left or right that should be used in humility to balance the church body?

There's a lot that is going on within this question, and I think we need to tease apart some of it. I think, first of all, we do see a lot of differences between people that are blown out of proportion, where people aren't patient enough to break the actual difference down to size, and to see wherein actually the dispute lies, and how much people can find some sort of convergence, or, at the very least, to understand that they already have significant common ground, and that the differences that exist need not be threatening to either party.

That is the situation that I think we have in a number of debates, but that does not mean that the differences are not important, nor does it mean that one side is...

that both sides can be seen to be right, in some sense. There are some cases where people are just wrong, and we need to have these debates, first of all.

It's important that we don't just say, oh, we're all right in a certain way, and we can balance each other out. No, the way that we grow is by wrestling with these issues together, by arguing, by debating, by discussing, by exploring together, and that requires a certain set of virtues.

[2 : 49] It does require... One of the things that this question does, I think, bring out is a certain hopeful attitude towards our disagreements, and that is a good thing. Hope that our disagreements could be broken down to size, that it might be discovered that we are not, in fact, polar opposites, but that there is some agreement that can be found, and that agreement can be quite substantial.

That hopeful attitude toward debate, I think, is a very positive one. It should be a hopeful attitude towards the debate, not just a hopeful attitude that avoids the debate. It should be said, we're all agreed on the fundamental issue, that's okay.

There's a lot more going on in these debates than that. A lot of it involves how does this fundamental conviction on sexual ethics, or the issues of race and justice, how do those play out in practice?

And the differences in practice can be quite significant, and those differences should not just be brushed over and ignored. They are important. We need to get to the root of those differences, to understand why those differences exist, and the actual difference that they can make in practice, which can be considerable.

Also, as I've discussed in my video on the subject of the statement on social justice and the gospel, which I'll link below, many of the differences in that case are political.

[4 : 17] They're found in the way that that statement is positioned, and the way that it triggers certain responses. It's a sort of rallying flag, and it ends up mobilizing people in a very tribal way.

And that, I think, is an important part of what's going on there. It's not just we may agree in principle on the fundamental issues, but what that actually looks like in practice can vary considerably.

And when you have a document that functions very much as a challenge that has a tribal character to it, there are things taking place there that are, that tend to fracture the church rather than bring it together.

And so in cases of disagreement like that, we do need to get to the root of it, to understand that there are bad disagreements and not just good disagreements, to understand that though we may agree on paper, what that actually means in practice can actually not mean as much as it looks.

And so we need to actually flesh these things out to see do we actually have agreement, or is this just something that appears on paper? In a fine set of words, but in actual practice there is no love, there is no charity, there is no patience, and there is no hope.

[5 : 42] And that sense that the other side might have something we can learn from, there seems to be very little of that in some of these debates. And so we need to work towards that.

But we also need to recognise that at certain points the debate is over. There's not going to be progress made. We have understood each other, and the difference is substantial and can't just be overcome.

And in cases like that, we have to have the nerve to say, no, we're drawing the line here, and it's important to draw it. Now we can recognise we have agreement on these particular issues, but we need to say, this is a hard line, and we can't cross this.

That does not mean that people tend to draw those lines in the right place. They don't. So often in these debates, and these particular two debates being good examples, people have drawn the line carelessly.

They've not actually heard out the other side and understood what they're saying. They haven't actually scratched where they're itching, addressed their concerns. They haven't even tried to. Often they've just been throwing accusations without actually listening to what's being said and the concerns that are at play.

[7 : 00] And that, I think, is hugely important, that we overcome that attitude and that we work to hear each other out, to understand the concerns that other people are bringing to the table. That hopeful attitude is something that's well illustrated by two Oliver O'Donovan quotes that I want to read out.

The first is from his *Self, World and Time, Ethics as Theology*, Volume 1 of that series. And it reads, If my opponent forces me to think hard, I shall understand better what social and historical conditions have made the death penalty appear reasonable to past generations.

And I shall have to ask if those conditions could ever recur. I shall come to see that my view of the matter is part and parcel of a wider philosophy of penal justice and governmental responsibility.

And I shall be forced to elucidate that philosophy more fully and to test its capacity to shed illumination on other questions too. None of this could I have gained from talking to those who agreed with me.

What it amounts to is that if at the end of the argument I still say I disapprove of the death penalty, I know much better than before what I mean by it. That's a very important statement.

[8 : 33] I think it helps us to understand where we can find fruitfulness in our disagreements. How we can often find that our disagreements lead to a greater understanding of where we're coming from, what the issues at stake are.

In the issues, for instance, surrounding the Revoice Conference and the spiritual friendship movement, a lot of the problems, I believe, are caused by the different perspectives that people are coming from, the different vantage points that people are coming from and the different avenues of approach to the issue.

And so for some, it's approached in a very autobiographical manner. It's approached as a way of wrestling through personal struggles, seeking for fellowship with others who are experiencing similar struggles, and also in a way that is trying to find some sense of how they fit within the bigger picture of Christian sexual ethics.

Now, the concerns that come from the critics of the spiritual friendship group often, I think, mistake where people are coming from, or at least do not take seriously enough the differences of approach and recognise the possibility of actually addressing some of the concerns of people they deem opponents, and yet at the same time, in addressing their concerns, correcting some of the errors and the problems.

And so those coming at these issues often are looking for a sense of a way to speak about their experience and a way to talk through that experience, to have a framework within which to understand what's taking place in their lives, how they can fit into God's purposes, and give them some sense of community and some sense of fellow travellers on the way.

[10:30] And what they're having is not so much, they're not putting forward a final statement of commitments, but there's a variety of different positions in conversation with a loose connection with their commitment to upholding historic biblical sexual ethics.

And so they're clear on that particular point, but there are a lot of different ways of approaching the issue within the movement. And it's important to recognise that variety because many people have approached the spiritual friendship re-voice crowd as if their primary concern was to put forward a theological viewpoint that is very heavily weighted rather than to wrestle through personal experiences, develop a language that's appropriate to them, and be able to talk about what they're experiencing and wrestling with while living faithfully within the context of Christian sexual ethics. And also to create frameworks within which they can live in a healthy and a fulfilled manner rather than being those who are diminished and stifled and stunted by the struggles that they experience. And that is, those are very valid sets of concerns. Unfortunately, often what's been given in response is a very strong series of oppositions to theological statements that are being made without fully appreciating the concerns that drive the movement and recognising that you can address those theological concerns more adequately if you actually scratch where that movement is itching.

If you recognise the concerns that drive it, if you recognise the fundamental things that make that movement tick, what it's about, its primary point is not to reconsider the whole framework of Christian sexual ethics.

[12:31] The primary point is to give people a way of working through their experience, to make sense of it, to find a place for themselves within the life of the church and then to move forward.

But often that's not being provided for. There's just been a strong no and it's left people unable to go forward. And that makes it very difficult for people to accept the criticisms because they don't see any concern for where they're coming from.

They don't even see a recognition of the specific shape of their experience. And that makes it very hard to get the message across that there are problems here, that there are theological and other issues that need to be addressed.

But those issues can be addressed without rejecting everything that drives that movement, without dismissing the people who are within it and recognising that they are orthodox in intent and that there is a lot of room for hopeful disagreement, for talking these issues through in a way that will hopefully lead to greater understanding and clarity on both sides.

I believe that is truly possible but I would like to see people push towards that rather than just give the no response to the movement.

[13:51] There's a lot more to be said and I think that there are people within that movement who are more problematic than others but there are some who are very clearly faithful Christians who want to find an adequate vocabulary for what they're experiencing and also want to find frameworks within which they can live faithfully and that's a conversation that other Christians can be part of and other Christians can work through those things too.

And so I think that sort of hopeful disagreement is a good thing. Another quotation from Oliver O'Donovan this time from *A Conversation Waiting to Begin*. Disagreements are no more unnegotiable natural forces than deliveries of the mistaken conscience are.

They are openings for those who share a common faith to explore and resolve important tensions within the context of communion. This kind of proposal is of course easy to mishear.

It can be taken to mean that parties to disagreements must be less than wholly convinced of their position ready to make room for possible accommodation when really serious issues are at stake and talk of a state by which the church stands or falls begin to rumble like thunder.

Urging the search for resolution can seem like an invitation to capitulate, to concede essential points before beginning. It can seem as though scripture is deemed to be inconclusive and ambiguous so that either side is free to concede the possible right of the other's interpretation. [15:25] It can seem as though what is needed is an indefinite irresolution about everything important in which there is no need for and no possibility of a decisive closure.

But that is all the trick of the light. None of this is implied in the search for agreement. The only thing I concede in committing myself to such a process is that if I could discuss the matter through with an opponent, sincerely committed to the church's authorities, scripture chief among them, the Holy Spirit would open up perspectives that are not immediately apparent, and that patient and scrupulous pursuit of these could lead at least to giving the problem a different shape, a shape I presume will be compatible with, though not precisely identical to, the views I now hold, but which may also be compatible with some of the views my opponent now holds, even if I cannot yet see how.

I do not have to think I may be mistaken about the cardinal points of which I am convinced. The only thing I have to think, and this surely is not difficult on such a subject, is that there are things still to be learned by one who is determined to be taught by scripture how to read the age in which we live. That is a very important quote, I think. It helps us to see how we can enter into these discussions in a way that's hopeful, patient, charitable, and come out of it understanding so much more about our own positions, about the positions of those we disagree with, and about the disagreements that exist between us, that those disagreements can be knocked down to size considerably and become much less threatening as a result.

I think often what we are seeing within the church are disagreements that are caused in part by ecclesial bodies and imaginative frameworks that are not yet capacious enough to hold together dimensions of the truth.

[17:27] And that, I think, is important to recognise. This possibility that there may be truth on both sides, but neither of us has a framework that is capacious or welcoming enough to hold them together.

And that holding of these things together is part of the truth that we can both pursue from our different vantage points. That requires a certain degree of openness, an openness to move beyond our current positions, not to just reject the things, the knowledge and the truth that we have come to, but to move from that into something deeper and greater, something that may actually include opposing view, seemingly opposing viewpoints and their concerns, and may be able to take them on board without rejecting those things that we now know to be the truth.

And so that attitude towards debate and disagreement, I think, will hold us in good stead. It enables us to have the disagreements, not just to say, oh, we're just balancing each other out, but to say that there is something to be hoped for as we argue and as we debate.

Now, do you think, do I think that God has intended things this way? In some respects, there are different concerns, different vantage points that God has created within the body of Christ that force us to see issues from different vantage points so we do get perspective on it.

That, I think, is very important. And when you just have one type of vantage point being expressed, one personality, there are things that are missed. On the other hand, these differences are often substantial.

[19:11] They're not ones that can be broken down. There is often the truth is at stake and we should recognise that rather than presuming that these things are differences that we can always find there's some balance to be found, that it is about balance, more than about truth.

Often the truth is at stake and although we can enter these things with hope that we can resolve the issues, there are times to close the discussion, to say that there is a line here that can't be crossed. Now people tend to do that prematurely but that doesn't mean that it should not be done. We need to have clear lines. And those lines are things that we can also take into certain of these discussions.

We can say this is a clear line for us and it seems in this particular respect that you've crossed this line. Could you clarify what you mean by these statements and give people the chance to explain themselves and often you'll find that they do not in fact cross the line.

There are more complicated things going on. things that are I also think that there are times in history where God separates groups not in order that one group might be right and the other wrong but because the two groups can't maintain the truth or one group can't maintain the truth by itself.

[20 : 36] What would happen if it were just one group is that the truth would be, part of the truth would be suppressed for the sake of another part. And so there are occasions, I don't think this is something that we should presume is happening all the time, but there are occasions when I think the differences that we have are of that character.

There are other differences that are differences between things that could actually complement each other very well. Different forms of church, different denominations, often emphasise certain aspects or dimensions of the church's life and there is no reason why some of these need to be mutually exclusive.

They can be brought together to complement each other. Likewise, there are often doctrines that are put at odds with each other, for instance on something like the atonement, when both can be accepted as correct.

We don't have to have one or the other. Both perspectives and a number of perspectives on an issue like that can be valid. And in these cases, we learn through the conversation, we learn through the disagreement and it enables us to come to a deeper appreciation of the truth that can be something that moves us all beyond our current positions, that lowers some of the boundaries between us and enables us to find fellowship across our otherwise things that would divide us. that means that we should be those who approach these debates with hope. But hope does not mean that we don't actually have to wrestle through it and see if there is something to be found at the other end.

[22 : 18] Because often there isn't something to be found at the other end. Often there will just be a clearer sense of we very much disagree on this issue and this disagreement is substantial.

And those debates, there's a responsible point where we have to say we've reached the conclusion. And people tend to do that prematurely because they do not have these traits of patience and charity and long suffering and hope when they're talking with others.

But even if we did have those, there would be times where we should draw the line. We should also recognise that many of these disagreements are caused by fractious people.

People who like to stir up disagreements and oppositions. And it's not primarily the issue that is the issue.

It's the tribalism that is driving everything. And so it may appear that we can find agreement about the issue. But we need to recognise that there is a spirit of division at work.

[23 : 27] That if it were not this issue, it would be another issue. And that attitude is not going to be solved just by recognising, well, there's a, in principle, we can agree on this theologically.

There are substantive issues there. But those issues are issues of people's attitude, people's disposition to their brothers and sisters in Christ. It's a lack of love.

It's a lack of charity and patience and hope in each other. And where that is lacking, any particular excuse can be taken. If it's not that particular theological issue, it will be another.

In light of that, I think we should be discerning of the people that are participating in these debates too. Because that's often where the problem lies. it's not primarily in the inability of people of goodwill to find agreement or some sort of convergence on issues.

Rather, it's recognising that people are not debating these things in good faith. They're not having this conversation in good faith. Rather, they're wanting to cast out a certain group or a certain person without actually going through things carefully enough.

[24 : 49] And so, moving towards a more Christ-like and true theology is not something that's just a matter of balancing out two sides. It requires conversations.

And it requires an attitude towards each other of love. Now, that breaking of our disagreements down to size also serves the truth in a number of other ways.

So, we talk a lot about the unity of the church. The unity of the church is seen in part in our if you have a unity of witnesses on the things that are important.

We often focus upon the things we disagree on, but there are many things we agree on that are very important. And making clear our disagreements can strengthen our witness.

Because if we can find agreement on these issues and clearly state that we are agreed on these important issues, our witness starts to support each other. And so, the witness of another group is no longer something that is opposed to ours.

[25 : 54] Rather, we recognise that in this respect we are in agreement with each other. And our witness is strengthened on both sides as a result of that. Whereas if we take the fact that we have

disagreements on such and such issues to be a means, a cause, just to have this complete posture of opposition to other sides, what we end up with is our witness against everyone else's.

And that just weakens the witness of the gospel more generally. Because what you have is you have to, in that case, you have a situation where people are asked to believe the gospel witness purely on the basis of the witness of one particular tribe, one particular sectarian group, rather than recognising that we share a common witness on certain issues across many different groups. And the differences that we do have are important, but they do not stand in the way of this fundamental witness, these fundamental areas of agreement. And so I'd argue that it's important to take seriously the creeds, for instance, and the way that the creeds stake out some common ground.

Now there are ways in which the creeds speak to and weigh into our disagreements. But we should appeal to that common ground. We should, to the extent that we can, emphasise and make clear this common foundation.

Even if we believe that this group is fundamentally flawed or in the wrong, just stating that I think can be helpful for strengthening the witness that we have.

[27 : 36] Because we're showing that we're not resting our witness upon sectarianism, upon an appeal to our voice against all others. Rather we are appealing to a truth that we recognise that others are witnessing to as well.

Even in very flawed ways, they are witnessing to that truth. So that is not quite the same thing as balancing out, but it's a matter of breaking those disagreements down to size.

And talking about valid biblical frameworks, again, often that's begging the question within these debates. There are people who will say that they disagree with, are opposed to racism on paper, but can be very much practising racism in their day-to-day life, or justifying, or in some sense underwriting it.

And so we do need to work these things out in practice. In the same way saying that you uphold Christian sexual ethics is not the same thing as actually practising them.

And so these debates really matter, and we should not just presume that since we have an agreement on paper on some issues, that we both have a valid biblical framework.

[28 : 48] But yet we do need to move towards the position where we can say this framework that this group is working from is valid in this and that respect, and be willing to give weight to those places where they are right.

And appealing to those things, we can actually have a lot more persuasive power. That persuasive power is often found in making weaker arguments. We think that making strong arguments is often the best thing to do, but a stronger argument often puts people in the position of digging in their heels.

You're saying that since you disagree on this, you're rejecting scripture. But that's probably not what they're doing. They're probably resisting scripture in some respect, not rejecting it outright, but there's something in them that's sticking, and they're trying to avoid the witness of scripture.

But there are many people who find themselves in that position at some point in their lives, and then move from that. And partly, I think it's important that we need to rhetorically temper our arguments. So we recognise when people are in that position and appeal to their conscience, say that they have good instincts here and there, their intent is good, they're trying to help people to live faithfully, for instance, but they're failing in this, that, and the other respect.

[30 : 19] And if they were playing to their best instincts, they would actually be doing things differently. And appealing to people's best instincts, rather than just saying that they are rejecting the truth outright, that I think is often important in these cases.

Now that needs to be discerned. There are occasions where people are rejecting the truth outright, but breaking those differences down to size, again, can be a way of making progress. I've said an awful lot about this, and I hope that some of it is of help.

If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account.

The links for both of those are below. Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow. God bless, and thank you very much for listening.