

Voices: The art of amicable disagreements

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In *After You Believe*, N.T. Wright shares a story that may seem quite familiar to some of us. Note that I have embellished bits of Wright's story for the context of this article.

The story involves Jenny and Philip, leaders and active members of a Baptist church in Texas. Their church had been without a pastor for some time, but the pastor-search committee called the church to a special town hall meeting. The committee would share a report about bringing a candidate in view of a call. A problem, however, soon developed at the meeting. The congregation learned that night this pastor candidate had been divorced. Jenny and Philip's church never had worked through such a complex issue in a theologically reflective way, and a heated discussion ensued in the church meeting.

Jenny and Philip came at this issue from vastly different perspectives.

For instance, Jenny adamantly quoted Scripture and interpreted Jesus' teachings on divorce quite literally. She made a rational, biblically based argument for her viewpoint.

Yet Philip challenged Jenny because it seemed to him she was forgetting about grace. He talked about forgiveness and Jesus' famous parable of the Prodigal Son. Philip also presented a timely and biblically convicting argument.

Conversation degraded

However, the conversation soon degraded. Jenny called Philip a "dangerous

liberal relativist who doesn't agree with the Bible," and Philip called Jenny a "fundamentalist Pharisee." Soon, the congregation found themselves in a tremendous uproar.

Philip, Jenny and their church seem to have lost their focus on relationally responsible character formation that must occur in a maturing Christian's congregational life. When we neglect our Christian growth, we often find ourselves devolving either into Jenny's cold legalism or Philip's ungracious defense of grace.

Could it be that people like Jenny and Philip could disagree amicably while being focused both on biblical reflection and graceful living? Could their disagreement possibly serve as a catalyst to growth in their church and to improvement in their leadership ability?

Perhaps we can avoid the unnecessarily bitter conflict Jenny and Philip's church experience by recognizing three ways in which congregational disagreements may become unamicable.

First, disagreements become enflamed when church members talk "past one another." Talking past one another means disagreeable parties engage one another in a passive-aggressive way.

For example, notice the hot disagreement in our country regarding health care coverage. Former President Obama and President Trump have made recent speeches on the issue in which they never call each other by name but seem to have implied the other has major character flaws. (See CBS This Morning "Report on Health Care" by Major Garrett, May 8.)

Notice also that talking past one another usually includes a method of communicating to a wide audience. Whether through a church town hall or social media, unskilled partisans have a penchant for building fierce collations against the other rather than speaking directly and personally.

Second, unamicable disagreements often include labeling. Jesus, for instance, was labeled as a “drunkard and glutton” because he ministered to the undesirables of his day. T.B. Maston, a formative Christian ethicist for Baptists, would warn us to be careful of committing “libel by label.”

Once we attach names to a certain brood of people, we consequently set up an “us versus them” mentality that severely hampers communication. Tensions rise greatly once labeling is brought into the picture. We may do well at this point to examine the labels we use for those people with whom we disagree.

Third, reactions to misinformation can escalate tensions in an unamicable disagreement.

Jenny and Philip may have done well to listen completely to the other before their heated exchange in front of the church. Perhaps they could have examined the entire body of facts from the pastor-search committee together before launching into tirades. Also, how informative would it have been for Jenny and Philip to meet in person with the pastoral candidate, reserving any judgment on the candidate or the other until such a time as accurate and healthy theological reflection could take place?

Let us therefore further our witness in these times of unamicable disagreements among us. Our churches will grow when the world sees maturing Christians disagreeing but remaining fast and loving friends.

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