

OpenTheo

Q&A#62 Thinking Well about our Disagreements

September 30, 2018



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Today's question asks about ways that we should think about our disagreements in the Church.

Within the video, I reference my video on the Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzN04Danjas>.

You can read the Oliver O'Donovan quotations I cite within the video here: <https://alastairadversaria.com/2014/04/28/the-value-of-arguing-without-changing-our-minds/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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My new Soundcloud account is here: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

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 Rosario Butterfield and Wesley Hill during the Revoice 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? 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 seen the difference.

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I think that's a very important point. I think that's a very important point. 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 agreements 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. 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.

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 or oppose 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.

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 strong 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 that position 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. 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.

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God bless and thank you very much for listening.