

## **What Do We Mean By “Civil Discourse”: A Biblical Model of Managing Disagreement**

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A few years ago I began thinking about the problem of interaction between groups that were passionately opposed to one another. I wondered what values allowed people to continue talking to one another, to continue working toward so resolution of differences, when they had a hard time even regarding one another as fully human. The situations I had in mind at the time were the Middle East, Northern Ireland, and the abortion controversy in this country.

I am not naïve enough to think that I was going to come up with a secret, undiscovered over the millennia of human existence, that would bring warring factions to the bargaining table or that would resolve violent moral conflict through conversation. On the other hand, I was also faced with the challenge of teaching the ethics of advocacy to my own students, and wondered about how that could be done in a way that focused attention on the individual's responsibility to exhibit certain qualities in discourse that allowed dialogue to be as constructive as possible. Or, as I tend to say, to exhibit qualities that allow argument to do its work, that work being to allow views to be aired, ideas to be tested on their merits, evidence discovered, and communities to develop a moral perspective.

I was drawn to an approach in ethics called the virtues approach, which I found appealing because it shifted focus

This talk's title includes the term “civil discourse,” which I chose intentionally over “civic discourse,” a term that can mean virtually the same thing. “Civil discourse,” however, suggests a possibility in meaning which “civic discourse” typically does not. That possibility is civility, an idea that I will try to develop a little later. But, because the term “discourse” itself can cause some confusion, I'd like to begin by defining it briefly.

I take “discourse” to mean talk—including conversation, dialogue, speech making and writing—on questions of moral significance. By “moral significance” I mean questions that affect the choices we make, individually and in groups. Discourse, then, is talk or communication about (1) our choices and (2) about the principles we embrace that influence those choices. Ultimately, discourse is talk about the way we are going to live our lives as individuals and in communities. So, understanding how discourse can be improved is important.

One more nuance should be added to our definition of “discourse,” for the term also tends to imply staking out and defending a position on an issue, and in this way entering into the larger arena of public discussion of that issue. That is, inherent in the very concept of discourse are both the presence of disagreement and the goal of persuasion. I take these two components to be a facts about our efforts to talk through important issues—(1) we usually run into disagreement,

and (2) we typically seek to persuade those with whom we disagree. It is precisely these elements which make it so vitally important that our discourse be civil discourse, that is, that our efforts to persuade those with whom we disagree be hemmed in by some sort of ethic of advocacy that keeps the discourse constructive and respectful. So, the heated debates we sometimes see on television political talk may be described as civic discourse, but not always as civil discourse in the sense I am using it.

### **A Biblical Model of Civil Discourse?**

Is there any warrant for talking about a biblically based model of civil discourse? Someone might say that a preference for civil discourse over any other kind is results from embracing the western liberal political tradition, not the biblical revelation. After all, when Christians proclaim the gospel they are proclaiming God’s truths. Therefore, discussion, conversation, dialogue, argument, or persuasion—whether respectful or not—are not really the means of bringing people to accept ultimate truth. When the word is proclaimed, people either respond, or they don’t. I don’t think this is precisely correct, and I would like to argue that a model of civil discourse can and should be developed from the Bible. And if such a model can be developed from the Bible, it ought to be especially relevant to Christians.

Reading through the Book of Acts recently, I was struck by Paul’s efforts to engage any number of people in dialogue about the claims of Christ. I felt I was watching a model of Christian civil discourse develop right there in the pages of Acts, and in quite a remarkable way. So, some of my comments later in this talk will reflect my efforts to draw out from Paul’s public debates several principles he seems to be employing as he speaks to people, notice, with whom he disagreed.

However, before I set out those principles of Pauline civil discourse, I want to establish a biblical framework for thinking about communicating through disagreement in the Bible more generally. Thinking about this topic of how disagreement is managed brought me to the realization that there are at least three biblical means of communicating about disagreement, if we understand the term “disagreement” rather broadly to mean two people in communication with one another on a topic who do not think the same way about that topic. And, in one of these models terms like “dialogue,” “conversation,” and even “civil discourse” simply do not describe the kind of talk engaged in. So, in an effort to put a biblical model of civil discourse into its proper context, I would like first to set out those three biblical approaches to communicating about disagreement. This means considering why people disagree.

### **Three Sources of Disagreement**

Disagreement is a fact in our lives, and it is a fact in the Bible. But though we use the term disagreement to describe a failure to see things the same way, the sources of this failure vary. That is, not all disagreement is of the same type. So, why do people disagree in the Bible?

One type of disagreement arises from sin. In Corinth, for example, one or more members of the Christian community lived sinfully, creating disagreement between that church and Paul. In I Corinthians 5, Paul writes, “It is actually reported that there is immorality among you of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father’s wife.” Paul has to address this disagreement between him and the Corinthian believers. Disagreement can arise from sin.

Second, disagreement can arise from ignorance. In Mark’s gospel (chapter 9: 33-37) we read that the disciples were disagreeing about which of them was the greatest. Jesus “sat down and called the twelve and said to them, If anyone wishes to be first he shall be last of all, and servant of all. And taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, ‘Whoever receives one child like this in my name receives me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me but Him who sent Me.’” Disagreement can arise, as in this case, from ignorance. The disciples ignorantly disagreed about which of them was greatest because they were ignorant of Jesus’ views on such matters.

Third, disagreements can arise from what I will call a clash of worldviews. A worldview—by which I mean a set of assumption that order our understanding of our experience—that is erroneous in some central consideration will also be wrong in a host of related ways. For example, a worldview that excludes God altogether will also be wrong about the source of the created world, human responsibility toward God, and the possibility of a relationship with God. Such a flaw in a worldview will cause disagreement when it comes into contact with a worldview that is true on the point in question. For example, in Acts chapter 19 (vv. 8-10) Paul encounters the leaders of the synagogue at Ephesus, and various other people who embraced worldviews that were flawed in one way or another. Christ was not at the center of these worldviews, and so he was not viewed as the Messiah or redeemer of a fallen world. The worldview of the synagogue leaders apparently contained a false view not only of the Messiah to come, but also of the nature of the Kingdom of God. Luke writes in Acts that Paul “entered the synagogue (at Ephesus) and for three months spoke boldly, arguing and pleading about the kingdom of God; but when some were stubborn and disbelieved, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the Hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.” Disagreement can be rooted in a false worldview.

I’m sure that other means of categorizing disagreement would be possible from a reading of the Bible, but these three—disagreement rooted in sin, disagreement rooted in ignorance, and disagreement rooted in differing worldviews—may provide a useful way of thinking about how disagreement is addressed and resolved in the Bible. I also see three corresponding ways of addressing disagreement in the Bible that I will call: the prophetic, the didactic, and the dialogic. Each of these three means of addressing disagreement differs on several points from the others, and I would like to develop these differences briefly.

### **Three Ways of Addressing Disagreement**

First, as we already have seen, each method of addressing disagreement identifies a different source of disagreement. I will call this the problem of analysis. The problem of analysis answers the question, “What is causing the disagreement?” Second, each adapts differently to its audience. I will call this the process of adaptation. Adaptation requires answering the question, “Who are the members of my audience?” Third, each employs a different style of discourse. I will call this the program of address. To discover the right program of address it is necessary to answer the question, “What type of discourse does this source of disagreement and this kind of audience call for?” It is from the program of address that each of the three approaches gets its name—prophetic, didactic, and dialogic. Very briefly then, each method of addressing disagreement identifies a different source of disagreement, adapts differently to its audience, and appropriates a different style of discourse. I’d like to explore each of these methods in greater detail, and I will start with the prophetic approach.

## **The Prophetic**

The term “prophetic” when applied to biblical writing or speaking can have at least three different meanings. It can mean, “to foretell”, as in John seeing prophetically certain events associated with the end of time. It can mean, “to teach,” or as some writers put the distinction, “to tell forth.” This is what Paul means by the term when he names prophecy as a spiritual gift. Finally, “prophetic discourse” can mean a moral warning, which is how I am using the term.

The prophetic approach resolves the problem of analysis by identifying an entrenched immorality as the source of disagreement. For example, in his epistle, James identifies the greed and injustice of the rich as an entrenched immorality causing dissention and friction in the church (see chapter 2: 1-13). James decides that the problem of entrenched sin will not yield to either instruction or dialogue. Thus, he employs the prophetic approach to resolving this disagreement. He warns the rich in chapter 5: 1-6

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasures for the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have killed the righteous man; he does not resist you.

Having analyzed the source of disagreement as entrenched immorality, how does James adapt to his audience, and what sort of discourse does he employ?

James seems to assume that you don’t conduct a dialogue with people who are given over to a vice; they will only defend their involvement in the sin in response to an invitation to dialogue, and they will ignore instruction. When a sin has become habitual, then reason itself is employed to justifying the sin. So, reasoning doesn’t work as a method of resolving the disagreement. Nor were the rich seeking truth, and thus they would not have responded to instruction or to argument.

So, James adapts to his audience, in this part of his letter the rich, by warning them as sinners lost in moral error. He points out to them both the nature and the consequences of their sin. Finally, his method of address, his style of discourse, is one I will call proclamation. Proclamation is unidirectional, and does not invite either question or counter-argument. The only question prophetic proclamation recognizes is “What must I do to be saved?” this question being evidence of repentance from the sin causing the disagreement.

So, with the prophetic model the problem of analysis finds the source of disagreement in entrenched immorality. The process of adaptation is guided by a view of the audience as sinners. Finally, the program of address is proclamation inviting no response but repentance. I don't find in the prophetic approach much help as regards a model of civil discourse, though I do think that it is at times the only appropriate method of resolving a disagreement. In order to employ it, however, one must be fully convinced that no other approach is suggested. If either of the other two approaches can be employed, they should be, for the prophetic approach is really an approach of last resort.

### **The Didactic**

The didactic or teaching model identifies ignorance or misunderstanding as the source of disagreement. The teacher analyses the problem of disagreement as rooted in simple uninstructed ignorance. Even the learned can be ignorant on some points in the Bible. For example, Jesus has to instruct the learned rabbi Nicodemus that spiritual transformation was necessary to entering a relationship with God, something Nicodemus was ignorant of.

Resolving the problem of analysis by identifying ignorance as the source of disagreement, the teacher using the didactic approach adapts to the audience, not as sinners in need of a warning, but as students or disciples in need of instruction. The disciples sit at Jesus' feet and learn, and their ignorance is slowly resolved into understanding. Paul instructs the members of the many churches he visits, and disciples are made from converts. A teacher/pupil relationship provides the human context for the didactic approach. The student does not justify his ignorance through arguments, or at least should not. This leaves reason open to developing understanding and eventually wisdom toward the living of a fuller life.

In his letters Paul often resolves disagreement by the didactic approach. The Corinthians, for example, disagreed about whether it was right to eat meat that came from animals sacrificed to idols. In I Corinthians 8 and 10 Paul has to teach the Corinthians that eating such meat is not a sin, but that protecting another's conscience is important. This is a rather subtle point that requires some careful teaching. Paul speaks to the Corinthians didactically, that is, as a teacher. Though he teaches with authority, but clearly is not demanding repentance. But at the same time he is not inviting the Corinthian believers into a debate with him about the matter of meat offered to idols. Rather, he is cultivating discernment and spiritual maturity through teaching.

Paul writes in chapter 8, “Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.” I think Paul means that disagreement

had arisen over the issue because of the professed knowledge of some of these believers on this matter. Later Paul continues, “Food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”

In sum, the didactic approach finds the source of disagreement in ignorance or misunderstanding. Adapting to an audience of disciples or learners, the program of address in the didactic approach is not proclamation, as in the prophetic approach, but instruction.

### **The Dialogic**

Third, the dialogic approach resolves the problem of analysis by identifying the source of disagreement among people as rooted in an erroneous worldview. If you don’t like the term “erroneous worldview,” then “bad theology” would convey the same idea. Dialogue is employed in the Bible as a means of resolving disagreement when a worldview needs to be adjusted—or theology improved—through argument.

The Greeks of first-century Athens were confirmed idol worshippers as a result of cultural inheritance. In Acts 17 (16-17) we read that “While Paul was waiting ... at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there.”

Paul, seeing the city “filled with idols,” is deeply troubled. And yet he does not approach the Athenians as James approaches the rich—as a prophet warning sinners—though he may have considered taking this tack. Paul rejects the prophetic approach to resolving his theological disagreement with the Athenians. He does not address them as inveterate sinners, even though he considered idol worship a sin. Idol worship was wrong, and as a component in a worldview it undoubtedly led to other wrong practices.

Paul chose to see the Athenian’s idol worship as demonstrating their estrangement from God through false belief, an erroneous worldview, or bad theology. The Athenians adhered to an erroneous worldview that came to them from their ancestors; it was theirs by cultural inheritance rather than as a result of entrenched immorality. Perhaps because of this fact Paul analyzed the problem in Athens as bad theology rather than defiance of a divine command of which the Athenians were aware. Thus, their idol worship has a different quality from that of the Israelites’ idol worship in the time of Ezekiel. The earlier Israelite idol worship was a matter of entrenched immorality and defiance of divine revelation. Athenian idol worship resulted from a misaligned view of the world, one that needed patient correcting through dialogue, persuasion, and argument. The Athenians needed a correction in their cosmic compass before education through the didactic approach could set them directly on course with Jesus Christ.

Similarly, the Jews and devout Gentiles of Ephesus, with whom Paul is said to have spent two years arguing in the Hall of Tyrannus after spending three months arguing in the synagogue, failed initially to understand that Jesus was the Messiah promised in the scriptures. Perhaps their

misunderstanding of the prophecies, and thus their disagreement with Paul, was rooted in an erroneous worldview or a false belief of some kind. I think something in the Ephesian view of God and his relationship to the world of human affairs had misled them in such a way that it took a great deal of argument to correct their understanding. Otherwise it would have been clear to them who Jesus was after simple instruction. The point of Paul's argument in the synagogue and the public hall was precisely this—that he might prove to them from the scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.

The Ephesian worldview had to be corrected through an extraordinarily long series of arguments, the result of which, Paul hoped, would be persuasion to the view that at the center of the natural and supernatural order of things stands the recently crucified but now risen rabbi known as Jesus of Nazareth. In the same way I think that bad teaching, bad theology, or bad tradition has misled some Christian sects and cults into misreading the scriptures. The right way to resolve this disagreement is through dialogue and argument, not through prophetic proclamation or didactic instruction.

In the dialogic approach, then, the problem of analysis reveals that a skewed worldview or bad theology is at the heart of a disagreement. As a result, the speaker adapts to the audience as an advocate arguing with other advocates committed to an opposed view of things. The goal is not repentance, but persuasion and eventually agreement. The program of address is argument and counter-argument, that is, dialogue.

Which of these three approaches is to be employed in what settings? This is an issue of discernment, and requires some careful analysis of each situation we enter. But, asking questions such as: What is the problem causing disagreement? What kind of audience is this? and, What form of address is called for at this point? can help.

### **Civil Discourse in Acts**

As I have already noted, the prophetic model is not a model of civil discourse, nor is it intended to be. This model is employed in special situations in which a sin has overtaken an individual, a community, or a portion of the church.

However, both the didactic and especially the dialogic models do have something to teach us about civil discourse.

All other things being equal, the didactic and dialogic approaches are the ones most often appropriate for managing disagreement within the community of believers and between believers and those who are not Christians. I want to focus on Paul's actions in Ephesus and Athens to develop some aspects of civil discourse that I think arise especially from the dialogic approach.

Paul, as was his tendency, went to the synagogue in Ephesus in order that he might employ his privilege of speaking as a visiting rabbi. Paul would state a position regarding Jesus' place as promised Messiah, and would then argue with his listeners from the evidence of the Scriptures in an effort to convince them that this reading of the scriptures was the correct one. Advocacy has

been defined by one theorist as the art of adjusting ideas to people, and people to ideas. Paul sought to do this as he argued with the Ephesians. He sought to modify and correct their worldview in a radical way, affecting their reading of virtually every passage in their scriptures and their living of virtually every aspect of their lives.

What can we say Paul's approach to civil discourse? I want to point out a few of the qualities I think Paul exhibits in his discourses and debates in Acts which I call the virtues of ethical advocacy. These five qualities allow civil discourse to develop constructively.

### **Courage**

First, Paul demonstrated courage. Courage in civil discourse is the willingness to absorb the risk of advocating an unpopular point of view. Anyone who questions Paul's courage as an advocate should read straight through Acts. On more than one occasion Paul risked his life to proclaim his message, and on several occasions suffered severe physical abuse as a result of his courage in advocating the message that Jesus is the promised Messiah. One quality of civil discourse exhibited by Paul in Acts is the willingness on the part of advocates to state their position openly, even when this means that it may bring them opposition.

### **Honesty**

I will define honesty as a determined commitment to telling the truth, regardless of the consequences for your position or the reception of your message by an audience. Honesty, of course, implies not lying to your audience. But it also includes presenting the best interpretation of the available evidence, determining not to alter the essential content of your message in order to achieve persuasion, and of not employing a method to convince your audience that would not convince you. Paul was honest before his audiences in his determined effort to arrive at the best interpretation of the evidence they had before them—the actual life of Christ and the Messianic prophecies in the scriptures they possessed.

I might add that there are times that Paul is quite a cagey and clever advocate, as when he sets the Sadducees against the Pharisees in stating that the reason he was being questioned by the Sanhedrin was that he was proclaiming the resurrection from the dead. The resulting altercation allowed Paul to move toward his audience with Caesar, which was his ultimate goal. While this was true, it was also not the central component of his message. So, I will leave it to you to decide how judiciously applied cleverness comports with an advocate's honesty.

### **Cooperation**

Cooperation is a willingness to work with your audience, or even with an opponent, to arrive at the best understanding possible of the issues before you. When I use the term cooperation in this context, I do not mean simply going along with an opponent, or agreeing to hear another's views without stating your own, or modifying your own so as not to offend. I do not mean just being

polite. What I mean is a willingness to engage the dialogic process and operate with another in it so that dialogue can have the effect it is supposed to have—allowing people who disagree to come closer to a mutual understanding of the truth.

Cooperation means such actions as answering objections to your position, pointing up problems in an opponent's case, and avoiding intentionally confusing wording or intentionally ambiguous claims. Attacking a straw man or a weakened form of your opponent's argument, underdescribing your own position so as to create a false impression of what you are advocating, ridiculing an opponent when ridicule is not called for—each of these tactics demonstrates an unwillingness to cooperate in the process of dialogue. I sometimes point out to my students that negatively phrased sentences take three times as long for most people to understand than do positively phrased ones. So, the statement, "I am not unwilling to cooperate unless the provisions of the agreement are unclear to everyone involved," is harder to understand than is "I will cooperate as long as the terms of the provision are clear to everyone involved." So, if you wish to confuse a discussion of an issue, focus on negatively phrased statements.

### **Respect for Persons**

The most difficult situations for entering dialogue arise when we can't seem to muster much respect for the people with whom we are in disagreement. But the very fact that we are entering dialogue demonstrates that we value the capacity of other people to reason. We know that they can both offer and hear reasons and arguments. As Christians we need to value people because they are created in the image of God. As advocates we can value them also for their capacity to offer us their reasons and hear our reasons. We have to attempt not to dismiss people as worthless because of a view they hold or some other fact about them. Paul loathed the Athenians' proclivity toward idol worship, but he managed to show enough respect for them as reasoning people that he presented them an argument rather than dismissing them as beyond hope of change.

Even when the prophetic model is being used, even when the source of disagreement is entrenched immorality, it should still be possible to hold some degree of regard for others. Love and forgiveness are the rules in Christian interactions, even when we have strenuously to disagree with someone. Jonah was successful as a prophet, but God pleaded with him to actually care for the Ninevites. Jesus understood that Israel had often killed the prophets God had sent them, and yet he wept over the city and said that he would gladly have gathered them to himself as a hen gathers her chicks. God had to point out to Jonah that he cared more for the small tree that offered him some shade than he did for the people of Nineveh.

### **Regard for Contexts**

Paul also practiced what I call regard for contexts. What this means is that he sought to create and to preserve the locations in which dialogue could take place. He recognized that the synagogue was a place where dialogue was permitted regarding certain questions of biblical interpretation. He also created a context for dialogue when one was denied to him. Being asked

to leave the synagogue where he had carried on a three month's long dialogue, he rented a hall nearby where he continued for two years to argue that Jesus was the Messiah. A context for dialogue can be a relationship as well, and I believe we are under a biblical mandate to seek to maintain relationships in which dialogue is taking place.

Each of the virtues I have described is important to dialogue, and, I think, teaching, taking place and accomplishing what they are intended to accomplish—bringing teacher, advocate, and student closer to the truth. Courage, honesty, cooperation, respect for persons and regard for contexts are each a necessary condition of resolving disagreements that arise from ignorance and clashing worldviews. Seeking to practice these virtues will, I think, make us better advocates and teachers, and will help to create stronger communities.

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