

YOU'RE WRONG!!!! I CORINTHIANS 8:1-3

How should a Christian approach someone whom they believe to be wrong about substantive and emotionally charged issues? How should Christians handle disagreements or an argument over important matters? In other words, how should we disagree when we disagree?

This is not an idle question since we always have differences of opinions, often strong opinions. There are the controversial topics always sure to elicit disagreement and debate: church and state, local and national politics, civil rights and racial policy, pro-life and pro-choice, medical ethics (stem cell research, surrogate mothers, genetic engineering, etc.) human sexuality, Christianity and the plethora of other religions now making headway in our culture, fundamentalism and liberalism, Protestant and Catholic, not to mention the conflicts among Protestant denominations.

How are we to respond when our view of another is simply, "You're wrong!"?

The Apostle Paul frequently had to arbitrate conflicts within the church or advise Christians how to handle disagreements with non-Christians. In I Corinthians 8 the argument in the church was over eating meat offered to idols. Since this is generally not a problem for those of us who shop at Kroger, I'll bypass that particular subject. We do, however, need to consider two valuable, essential, and often overlooked Christian principles of conduct which Paul gives - principles that are often thrown to the wind when the argument becomes heated.

1 Corinthians 8:1-3

1 Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.

2 If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know;

3 but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.

In these three verses it is obvious that "knowledge" is crucial to Paul. He uses it or some form of the word seven times in three short verses. I agree with Paul: knowledge is a precious and most valuable asset. Even following college and post graduate studies, I have continued to read and study (principally the Bible), and am always on a quest to learn more: literature, theology, New Testament, writing, vocabulary, grammar, syntax. (I have given up on spelling. I have Connie and spell-checker.) I have even taken up amateur astronomy-not to be confused with astrology-and I love learning about the trackless heavens. (Did you know that the Milky Way galaxy contains more than 100 billion stars, is 90,000 light-years in diameter, and it is estimated that there are as many as a billion more known galaxies some over 100 times the size of the Milky Way?!!! I cannot wrap my mind around such expanse.)

While knowledge is exciting and valuable, knowledge alone is not a good thing. It can breed arrogance, a repugnant characteristic. No one likes the attitude of an arrogant know-it-all. Not only does standalone knowledge make us arrogant, as we have learned in our lifetime, it can be terribly dangerous and destructive. At the height of the Holocaust there were more PhDs per capita in Germany than any nation in the world. More recently we have had cause for concern over weapons of mass destruction created by some intelligently gifted people. The use of knowledge must be governed by higher values. A greater question than *can* we do it is *should* we do it?"

The first principle of conduct given by Paul to regulate our conduct is the greatest of all virtues: love. Really, love is the first, last, and always principle which should guide Christian conduct. Five chapters later in I Corinthians Paul would write that without love *all else is worthless*, and the greatest of all Christian attributes is love.

Agreeing with Paul, Peter sandwiches the value of knowledge between virtue and temperance (II Peter 1:5-6). Knowledge always needs to be regulated by love, virtue, and temperance. Then, the knowledge becomes a means of the edification (building up) and enhancement of others rather than an exhibition of one's intellectual prowess or a tool to destroy others. Love more than any other virtue engenders the good and wise use of knowledge. Love always edifies.

If love was the determining principle in the way we use knowledge, how much sadness would be prevented? How many bridges would be built rather than burned? How many relationships would become endearing rather than disruptive? How many marriages would be harmonious rather than discordant? How many business partners, organizations, denominations, and churches would remain united rather than divided?

If love was the primary regulating factor in your life, how would it effect you? Emotions like bitterness, vengeance, anger, hate, and resentment could not lodge in your heart. Feelings such as envy, jealousy, and covetousness would be replaced by love's ancillary virtues such as peace,

compassion, and understanding. Like Jesus, you could love and accept others even when you cannot accept their lifestyle, values, or views. Knowledge regulated by love causes us to respect people rather than attempting to manipulate them.

Be sure that love always directs your knowledge thereby edifying the people influenced by your life. This was the way of Jesus.

The second characteristic Paul expresses for dealing with disagreement is humility. Paul writes in verse 1 **“we know that we all have knowledge,”** and then adds, **“if anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know.”** Everyone has some knowledge, but the know-it-all is such an irritant because we know that no one knows it all. In fact, the arrogant know-it-all is really pitiable because he is not aware of how much he does not know. We don't know it all. We never will. There are facts and information we don't have or, having them, we can only assess them with imperfect knowledge. You and I are made of fallen and sinful stuff. “We see through a glass darkly” or as *The Message* translates I Corinthians 13:12, “We are squinting in a fog.”

Nowhere is the attitude of humility more important than in speaking about God. Consider the contrast between Him and us. He knows all; our knowledge is infinitesimal. He sees all; we see fragments. He knows all the past, present, and future on into eternity; we misinterpret the past, misunderstand the present, and are myopic on the future. He is omniscience; with all our vast knowledge, we are still ignorant. Yet, how dogmatic we can be especially when speaking of God!

Know the truth that God reveals; don't act as if you know more. Speak where God speaks; be silent where the Bible is silent. Separate cultural conditioning and religious tradition from biblical revelation-not an easy task. Remember that many dedicated, educated, intelligent, and gifted people disagree on many things theologically and ethically within the Christian community of faith. Allow for your own restricted understanding of the infinite God. Eugene Peterson translates verse 3, “sometimes humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds” (*The Message*).

So, the next time you are tempted to say (or even think) “you're wrong,” if there is an absence of love or any sense of arrogance in your thoughts or attitude, know that there are still need some things you need to learn even as you speak, at least more to learn about God.

It is not easy to be either loving or humble when we feel that we are right and another wrong on substantive and emotionally charged issues. From whence, you ask, does such love and humility come? Verse 3 gives a clue: **“but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.”** I would have expected Paul to write in the independent clause, “but if anyone loves God, he is loved by God” or “he knows God.” Not so Paul. Inspired, he writes “he is known by God.” What does it mean that the God who already knows everything (omniscience) knows us? The Hebrew background of the word “know” means more than intellectual comprehension. It carried the meaning of intimacy and an experience between the things known. If you are known by God, it means that God has intimate knowledge of and personal experience with you. Recent converts may say, “I found the Lord.” No, the Lord found you, knew you, and made Himself known to you. It is from interaction with this God of love that we come to know what it is to love. Here love finds us and, when we experience love, we will become loving. Because God “knows” us, we learn humility. How could it be otherwise? He who is holy and omniscient, the creator, sustainer, and Savior of the universe has condescended to “know” us. If we are not loving and tend to be arrogant, that needs to be a indication that we need to refresh our fellowship with the Holy One.

So, the next time you are about to disagree with someone and say (or even think), “you're wrong,” pause a moment. Remember two things:

1. The love of God is to be the supreme controlling factor as you disagree.
2. Only God has absolute knowledge. The rest of us are always “squinting in a fog.”

Therefore, it is both wise and virtuous to let humility characterize your attitude.

True knowledge of God teaches us love and humility. Let these be the regulating principles when you disagree on important matters. You will certainly be a more winsome witness for your Lord, and who knows, your demeanor may even help you win the debate.

Grace to you,
Steve

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