

## LOVING THOSE WHO DISAGREE WITH YOU

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ (Ephesians 4:15)

Many years ago, when I was teaching mathematics at The King's College in New York, I was asked to speak in their chapel service. I mentioned this to my colleague Bob, and I told Bob that I was thinking about speaking on a certain topic, but I spoke in chapel on a related topic about a year ago and I was worried about repeating myself.

Bob stared at me, wide-eyed with disbelief, and these were his exact words, which I remember verbatim even though they were spoken about 45 years ago: "Harold, if conceit were consumption, you'd be consumed."

But Bob wasn't finished with me yet. He was just getting warmed up.

He went on to ask: "Harold, what makes you think that anyone remembers anything you say 15 minutes after you say it?"

Bob took the wind out of my sails.

With that as background, I want to share with you this morning four words that I hope you will remember long after today, or at least until you leave Fellowship Café; words that I hope you, and I, will learn to use well every day into the future.

Those four words are "**I may be wrong.**"

As a brief aside, I could refer you to a few people who would say "Harold, it is easy for you to say 'I may be wrong,' because you are wrong about a lot of things." But that is another story for another day.

But the words "I may be wrong" are only half of my story today.

I am not suggesting that you should be wishy-washy about what you believe to be true. Not at all!

You should hold strongly to your beliefs, able and willing to state them with clarity and with deep conviction, at the same time that you are open to the possibility that you may be wrong.

That is a very rare combination: holding to your beliefs strongly; yet open to the possibility that you may be wrong about some of your strongest beliefs.

The Christian scholar Ian Barbour went so far as to call this rare combination a sign of "religious maturity." Quoting him directly: "*It is by no means easy to hold beliefs for which you would be*

*willing to die, and yet to remain open to new insights; but it is precisely such a combination of commitment and inquiry that constitutes religious maturity.”*

This combination of commitment and openness aspires to walk a middle way between two unacceptable extremes. At one unacceptable extreme, openness to the beliefs of others without commitment to your own beliefs too easily leads to sheer relativism: you have your beliefs, I have mine. One set of beliefs is as good as any other, so there is really no point in us talking. As a Christian, I cannot accept the extreme of relativism.

But as a Christian, I also reject the extreme other end of the spectrum, the all too common case where commitment without openness leads to fanaticism, even terrorism. As C. S. Lewis has observed, to which recent world events, like the ISIS movement in Iraq and today’s headlines from Gaza and the Ukraine, tragically testify, “Those who are readiest to die for a cause may easily become those who are readiest to kill for it”.

One of the most pressing needs in our world today is for all human beings to embrace, and hold in tension, both commitment and openness, speaking the truth, as we understand it, in love (as we are exhorted to do in our text for today).

The most significant challenge to this ideal is that it requires a healthy dose of **humility**, the conviction that as a finite, fallible human being, I do not fully understand Truth as God knows it. So, I may be wrong about some of my present beliefs and I can therefore learn from conversation with others who disagree with me.

So what I hope you remember, at least for another 15 minutes, is my exhortation to state your beliefs with clarity and deep conviction, while still being willing to say “I may be wrong.”

Let me now unpack this exhortation with a practical suggestion of three steps that you can take when engaging someone who disagrees with you, in any setting. What I will suggest could take place at your college or high school; or at your place of work, or in a Consistory meeting or congregational meeting at American Reformed Church, or around the coffee table at Hardees, or

in your home, discussing a difficult financial issue with your spouse, or sitting around the dinner table discussing options for a summer vacation, or having a conversation with your teenage son or daughter about the meaning of the word “curfew.”

The first step is applicable in those situations where you don’t know very well the person who disagrees with you. In such cases, **take the time to really get to know the person who disagrees with you.**

A friend of mine, a Christian scholar in psychology who is a nationally recognized expert in Holocaust and Genocide Studies once told me that when he spoke at academic conferences and his presentation was strongly criticized in the Q&A session after his talk, he used to retreat to his hotel room to pout and feel sorry for himself.

But then he radically changed his response to criticism. After his session, he would seek out his most vocal critic and invite him out to dinner that night. Over a good meal, they would simply get to know one another on a personal level, trading outlandish war stories about campus politics at their respective schools and even exchanging soccer coaching tips for their daughters.

By discovering that they had some of the same joys, fears and challenges in life, they started building a relationship of mutual trust, which opened the door for **the second step of engagement: uncovering the reasons for your disagreements about certain issues.**

Everyone has reasons for what they believe, which includes you and the person who disagrees with you (even a recalcitrant teenage son or daughter). Therefore, it is important to get those reasons out on the table at the very beginning of a conversation. You can do this by simply asking, **“Why do you believe that?”**

Hopefully you will not receive the shallow answer that “I read it on the internet,” or “I heard it on radio or TV,” since whatever you believe about most any issue, however outrageous it may prove to be, you can find lots of support for it on carefully selected internet sites, or carefully selected radio stations or TV channels.

You need to dig deeper than that, especially in settings where you are engaging a person whose background differs widely from yours. Her beliefs will be informed by the particular faith tradition in which she was raised, whether that is a religious faith tradition or a secular faith tradition. Her beliefs will also be informed by her personal biography, the experiences she has had in life. Her beliefs may also be informed by her gender and her socio-economic-status. These elements of what scholars call her “particularities” or her “social location” provide some of the reasons for her beliefs. And the same is true for you. And you need to uncover those reasons or your conversation will hit a dead end.

To uncover the reasons for the other person’s beliefs, whether someone in your own home, or a relative stranger, the key is to **listen well**; not being quick to talk. By your listening well, the other person will see that you are really interested in understanding their reasons for the position they are taking; you really want to understand their point of view; trying your best to empathetically “put yourself in their shoes.”

When the other person sees that you understand their reasons for the position they are taking, then it is time for you to start talking, sharing your beliefs and the reasons you have for your beliefs. When your respective reasons for your differing beliefs are out on the table, then you have laid the groundwork needed to navigate **the third step of engagement: uncovering some common ground and illuminating remaining differences sufficient to be the basis for ongoing conversations.**

The three-step process I have just shared with you is my ideal for engaging someone who disagrees with me. But, of course that ideal is totally counter-cultural in our day and age. In our world of texts and tweets and other forms of instant communication, who is willing to take the significant amount of time needed for taking these three steps, not to mention the follow-up conversations? It is much easier to simply hurl grenades at those with whom we disagree, resorting to name-calling and demonization, as the political pundits on Talk Radio and Cable TV news are constantly doing. I have never heard any political pundit say “I may be wrong.” But,

whether you think this strategy is feasible in our day and age, it is still the right thing to do, the Christian thing to do.

Let me briefly explain why I believe this strategy is the “Christian thing to do.” I am not simply calling all of us to be “nice guys and gals,” although that wouldn’t hurt. Nor am I simply echoing Rodney King, who was beaten by a white crowd during the riots in the Watts section of Los Angeles in 1991, and later asked, “Why can’t we all get along?”

No, the strategy I am proposing for engagement with those with whom I disagree is a deep expression of what I believe it means to love a person who disagrees with me, to which Jesus calls me as one who aspires to be his follower. In brief, to get to know someone well enough to create a safe, welcoming space for that person to express their beliefs and their reasons for holding to those beliefs, and then having respectful conversations in an attempt to uncover our agreements and illuminate our disagreements is, for me, a deep expression of love for that person. So, the strategy I have suggested this morning for engaging those who disagree with me is not peripheral to my Christian faith; it is a center-piece of my Christian faith; it is my understanding of how I should love those who disagree with me.

### ***I HAVE SEEN IT WORK WITH MY OWN EYES***

Lest you think that everything I have said to you this morning is pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by thinking, let me share with you an example where I have seen this loving strategy work marvelously; an example that will illustrate both the enormous amount of time needed to carry out this strategy and the good results that can emerge.

There are strong disagreements among Christian biologists and other Christian scholars over the question of “how” God created all that is. The main disagreement is between those called “young-earth creationists” who believe that God created all that is very recently (within the last 10,000 years) and “evolutionary creationists” who believe that God created over billions of years using evolutionary means.

Past debates between these two camps have been downright nasty. A Christian biologist who believes that God created through evolutionary means told me about the nasty comments about him that were posted on his denomination's web site; comments of "people with Jesus – and hatred for fellow Christians – constantly on their lips." What a tragic contradiction: talking about Jesus and hatred for fellow Christians in the same breath.

But there is a para-church organization in Grand Rapids (MI), The Colossian Forum (TCF) that has provided a loving alternative to this nastiness. Given the purpose of TCF to "Create hospitable space for Christians to discuss contentious issues that divide us," TCF has orchestrated a series of small-group forums that have brought together 6-8 scientists and biblical scholars who represented these two differing views on "how" God created. I attended three of these forums in my role as a TCF Senior Fellow

During these forums, we read scripture together, prayed together, and got to know one another quite well through meals together and informal activities (e.g., a hike by the Pacific Ocean near San Diego when we met at Point Loma Nazarene University). And in that context of getting to know one another we got beyond the all too common view that the "really good Christians," the "really committed Christians" are those who hold to a particular view on "how" God created (namely, "my view"). We were able to talk respectfully about significant disagreements regarding this contentious issue, building on the firm foundation of mutual understanding and trust that emerged from our devotional and informal times together.

The climax to our time together in San Diego last summer was when, in our closing session, we each prayed for the person seated on our right, whatever his/her views on "how" God created, thanking God for that person and praying for specific needs that we got to know about during our few days together. The person on my right had recently lost his teaching position and was struggling to keep food on the table. I prayed that God would graciously provide for his needs, and it made no difference that we disagreed about "how" God created the universe. This time of prayer with Christians having strong disagreements was an unforgettable experience that had a powerful impact on me.

What was accomplished by means of these face-to-face forums (which, by the way, are continuing)? As far as I can tell, none of the participants radically changed their beliefs about “how” God created. But the following all-important “common-ground” was uncovered: participants came to the realization that the scholars holding to “that other view” were not inferior Christians who denied the authority of Scripture. Rather they were equally committed Christians who interpreted certain biblical passages differently. For example, one young-earth creationist at these forums changed his view that a particular evolutionary creationist at these forums was a “dirty, rotten compromiser” and has apologized to that other scholar and has committed himself to apologize to all those to whom he portrayed the other scholar as a “dirty, rotten compromiser.”

As a result of these initial small-group forums, a foundation of mutual trust and understanding has been established that will be the basis for ongoing conversations that still need to sort through some remaining big disagreements as to exactly “how” God created.

This extended example is taken from the world of academia in which I have spent my career. But I believe that my suggestions for ways to “love those who disagree with you” can apply to everyone of you as you navigate disagreements with others you work with, or with your spouse or children at home, or at your school, or at American Reformed Church, or around the coffee table at Hardees.

In summary, If you don’t know the other person well, then take the time to get to know him/her personally. If you already know that person well or have taken the time to get to know a stranger well, then focus first on being a good listener; creating a safe, welcoming space for that person to express the reasons for her point of view, which will lay the foundation needed for you to uncover common ground and to talk respectfully about your remaining disagreements. And as you talk about your disagreements, don’t hesitate to say “this is what I believe, but I may be wrong.” My experience suggests that this admission of your finitude and fallibility can totally disarm someone who has come to the table looking for a fight, thereby paving the way for you to deal respectfully with your disagreements and even learn from one another.

Engaging those who disagree with you in this loving way is a concrete expression of obedience to the admonition in Ephesians 4: 15 to “speak the truth in love.”

As a book-end to this text from Ephesians, let me close with a related text from 1 Peter 3: 15 (NIV)

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you for a reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

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