

How should Christians disagree in a Christian way?

Diversity is one of the great strengths and pleasures of the Christian community. Evangelicals are committed to the concept of absolute truth, which is encapsulated in the Living God and his Word. However, our interpretation and understanding of some of that truth differs over time and across different cultures.

Jesus in his great prayer in John 17 indicates that his passion and goal was that his followers should be united. United not just so we should get on well together but especially that 'the world may believe' (John 17:21) and 'to let the world know' (John 17:23).

It follows therefore that we must expect to disagree sometimes, but we must be careful how we disagree.

Key Biblical principles

1 Act in the Spirit

When conflict arises, our attitudes and behaviours should reflect our new life in Christ given by the Holy Spirit who lives within us. We must be Spirit controlled and not out of control.

Key verses: Galatians 5:15, 5:26, 1 Corinthians 3:3-4, James 3:14-17, 2 Timothy 2:24-26

2 Act in Love

Believers are to be known not only for their uncompromising stand on the truth of Scripture but also for their unswerving love for one another – even when they disagree. Love lowers the temperature of most conflicts by refusing to engage in retaliation.

Key verses: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, Matthew 5:39, 1 Peter 3:9, 1 Peter 4:8.

3 Act in Humility

When Christ's attitude of humble servanthood permeates a Christian community, it can weather any storm.

Key verses: Philippians 2:3-6,8, Philippians 2:2, Romans 12:3, Galatians 6:3, 1 Peter 5:5,

Basic assumptions within the Body of Christ

- 1 Don't assume you will disagree with another Christian, but don't be surprised if you do.
- 2 If you do disagree, don't assume the other person is wrong.
- 3 Because you disagree over something, don't assume you will disagree over a lot of other things.
- 4 Put a charitable construction on issues where Christians think there is doubt or vagueness, even if you believe it is perfectly clear.
- 5 Do not ridicule another person with whom you disagree. Do not malign people publically.
- 6 Try to de-personalise the issue. Help the disagreement to become an academic issue rather than personal (one Christian against another). To make this happen you will probably need to involve others on both sides.
- 7 Respect those who strongly disagree with you, but for a variety of reasons do not want to engage. Again, this is where the Body of Christ can help.

Common politeness and courtesy

1 Listen

Develop the skill of listening well. Listen carefully to what the other person has to say without interrupting. If you disagree, make sure you can express back to the person their argument in terms they can agree with. If you can't do this face to face, express their argument in a document and ask them to agree the contents.

Don't go by hearsay. Make sure you have read and understood what the other person has written on the subject.

2 Don't jump to assumptions about what people think

If someone believes something, do not assume they do not believe what you regard as the opposite. Don't draw conclusions from what people do not say. Ask whether what you are assuming they believe, they are actually denying.

3 Make sure you are disagreeing about the right things

Many people disagree over small issues, because they have very different views on bigger issues. There is little point in trying to come to agreement when there is an unidentified elephant in the room! Try to identify the key point of disagreement rather than practical out-workings. Many people disagree about relating or working with Muslims because they have a different understanding of the origins, nature and character of Islam.

4 Many of the issues that Christians disagree about are very complicated.

There may be different ways of understanding a verse from scripture or the balance of scriptural passages. There may be different cultural assumptions and understanding. In these complex issues, where many Christians feel there could be a variety of right understandings, it is important to consider the motivation of the person with whom you disagree. Appreciate the right motivation even if you disagree with the conclusions.

5 If disagreement remains, so must respect

There will be times when we have to agree to differ. On these occasions, maintaining respect is very important. (2 Thessalonians 3:15) The person we disagree with –

- Must not be attacked personally
- Should be affirmed as a Christian
- Should not have their ministry denigrated
- Should not have their resources and sources of income sabotaged

6 Careful about Communication

If you write something about someone's ideas, let them see what you have written first. You may have the right to share your own opinions, but you do not have the right to circulate as fact, information that was not intended to be understood as you have done. Be very careful about writing anything on an email or on a website. Things you write can be forwarded on with additional comments to thousands of people who can easily pick up the wrong idea. Sadly, sometimes this has been done deliberately.

7 Pursue Peace

"Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." (Romans 14:19) The verses that encourage peace include: Mark 9:50, Romans 12:18, 2 Corinthians 13:11, 1 Thessalonians 5:13, Hebrews 12:14, 1 Peter 3:11, 2 Timothy 2:22 and Colossians 3:15.

Summary

However much we disagree with someone's beliefs, opinion, ministry or practice, as far as the individual is concerned there is no place for arrogance, impatience, a judgmental spirit, self-superiority, ridicule, contempt of others or lack of compassion.

Recommended book: 'If you bite and devour one another' by Alexander Strauch (Authentic)

"When men have laboured as much in the improvement of the principle of forbearance as they have done to subdue other men to their opinions, religion will have another appearance in the World." John Owen Vol 13 p. 95 (1991 Banner of Truth publication)

This paper was produced following a meeting of the Global Connections Muslim World Forum in October 2012 and is based on the discussion and various documents that were recommended on that occasion.