



Beverly Heights
Presbyterian
Church

scattered seeds.

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

MAY 2022

CAN WE TALK?

DIS AGREE MENT

as a spiritual discipline

By Kyle Bennett

Kyle Bennett has been a college professor and a pastor. Later this month, he becomes the principal of our evolving church school, as it expands beyond preschool and kindergarten classes to include up to fifth graders starting in the fall (more on that in the June edition).

Kyle is also the author of **Practices of Love: Spiritual Disciplines for the Life of the World**, which explores the subject of spiritual disciplines and how they can enrich relationships with those around us.

Here, and on the pages which follow, he addresses a related subject: how can we, as Christians, engage in more civil and charitable disagreement?

Even in a church environment, that isn't easily achieved.

I discovered as much last August, in a meeting when preschool parents were told they would decide if their child needed to wear face coverings during class. While most parents were delighted to hear the news, one mom felt all children had to be masked. Our exchange about the science ended with me carelessly saying, "You're wrong."

She left the meeting and removed her child from the program. I wrote her a message of apology, but the damage was done.

Is this sort of unpleasant disagreement inevitable in a fallen, sinful world? Or can we do better? Kyle offers faith-full answers and advice.

■ Tom O'Boyle, SDG



Why talk?

Thinking Christianly about dialogue in a broken world.

The grin was killing me. It masqueraded like it was innocent, but felt completely criminal. He acted interested and asked questions, but a layer of antagonism was at work. He waited for me to respond.

I don't recall what we were discussing. It didn't matter. I could tell he was hermetically sealed inside his own position. He wouldn't budge. Neither would I.

"You want another beer?" was how we ended the night.

Vaccines, face coverings or transgender children's books. Curmudgeonly congregants, Unitarian Universalists or deadbeat dads. Why talk about anything with a self-centered, broken sinner?

Because we are commanded to proclaim the good news. We are called to preach the gospel. We are advised to have an answer for the hope that is in us. We have to talk. We have to share. We have to proclaim the Truth.

You can't be a Christian and not care about truth claims. You can't follow Jesus and be indifferent to other Ways to Life. He is Truth, and as His disciples we are called to let the world know. But how? How shall we then share?

St. Francis of Assisi favored a proclamation without words: "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian, favored indirect communication with pseudonyms. Our Lord and Master used parables.

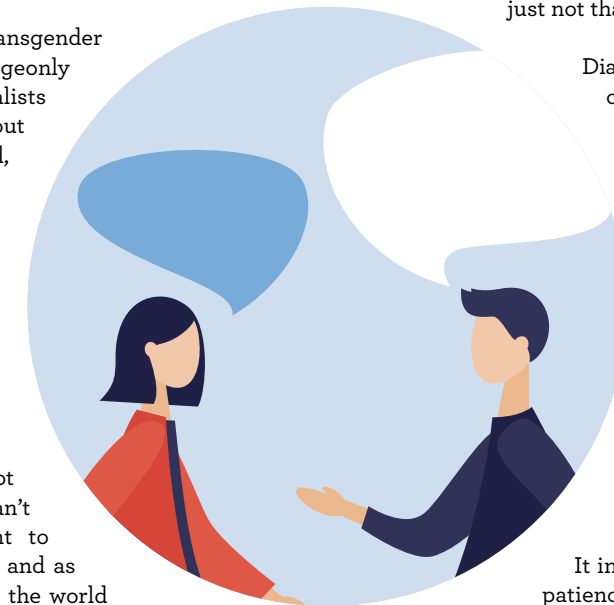
There are many ways to have a conversation about Truth. Each have different approaches that require different expectations and skillsets. A conversation is not a chastisement. A dialogue is not a debate. Inquiring is not persuading.

Being a parent has taught me that we assume a lot about how to relate and interact with each other. We assume we know

how to dialogue. It's just talking. We assume we know how to disagree. It's as easy as saying "no." Children do that.

These are activities that people don't naturally do well. There is an art to them and many people don't know how to do them. They have to be taught and trained.

Perhaps the reason we can't have civil and charitable conversations is because we don't know how. We blame it on sin but maybe it's just plain ignorance. Maybe we're just not that good at dialogue.



Dialogue is a conversation. And conversation seems easy. We know how to gossip and critique the sermon. We know how to state facts and assert our positions. But that's only one side of it. That's a monologue. A dialogue is different.

Dialogue is an exchange of truth claims that is ongoing. We share convictions and conclusions. We discuss assumptions, weigh evidence, and think through things. Learning is involved. Claims are challenged. Views are refined.

It involves giving and taking. It requires patience and prudence. You have to discern which points are tactful and which are trivial. Proving others wrong isn't the goal. Assertion isn't the last word. Not everyone likes dialogue.

If we're really concerned about dialoguing with others who don't share our values or views, we have to ask ourselves: do we know how to dialogue well? If we do, are we more invested in having civil and charitable conversations or being right?

Perhaps it's time to take a step back and think: what's our purpose? To make Christians or to convince people we're right? Over time, the conversation-stoppers don't easily offend. "You're wrong" no longer hurts so much.

Why still talk?

Thinking Christianly about disagreement in a hostile culture.

If you want to dialogue with someone, you have to practice patience and prudence. If you want to disagree with them and be able to say “you’re wrong” without getting abruptly canceled, you have to understand them.

My philosophy professor at Geneva College, Dr. Byron Bitar, was a disagreeer *par excellence*. As a young buck, I watched him disagree with students and texts alike with committed charity and convicted civility.

“If you don’t know anything about American football,” he shouted in class one day, “then you’re just a damn fool!” That may sound harsh and offensive, but it wasn’t. He knew his audience. He understood where we were coming from. We understood it, too.

Dr. Bitar created a real “safe space” – one that allowed difficult conversations and encouraged them. Students like myself (and Pastor Nate, another of his former students) admired and appreciated it. It was refreshing.

I learned a lot from Dr. Bitar about disagreement. He made it pleasant. The ensuing years of friendship, marriage and parenting have only built on that foundational wisdom and framework.

How could he speak the truth with such fervor? How could he disregard fragility with such audacity? How could he disagree with such ease?

Disagreement often involves heat, passion and bite. That can make us feel uncomfortable. That can leave a bad aftertaste. That can make us avoid dialogue. That can make us turn and walk away from a parent meeting.

I think we have disagreement all wrong. It isn’t a bad thing. It isn’t something to be avoided. It doesn’t have to be divisive. Disagreement – the kind Jesus championed – can lead to significant growth and intimacy. I’ve seen it in my own life.

Part of this has to do with our misunderstanding of disagreement. We think it’s a heated conversation we have to abandon. It always ends on bad terms. It always ends in “agree to disagree.”

In the past, it involved much more. It was marked by an understanding of divergence. To use cartographic metaphors: it

“DISAGREEMENT IS AS MUCH ART AS DIALOGUE.”

used to be saying “here,” pointing on a map to where the road split. Now it’s saying “no” to any destination we don’t like.

Like agreement, disagreement hinges on understanding, of terms, reasoning, judgments and conclusions:

“By *American football*, I mean ...”

“The players don’t need to be *that* athletic to play *American football*.”

“Canadian football players are far more agile than their counterparts.”

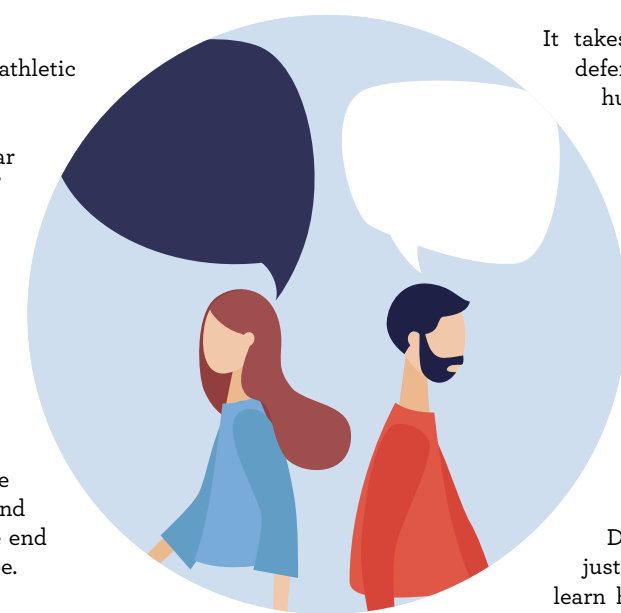
“But Canadians aren’t Americans.”

Disagreement is as much art as dialogue. You have to listen carefully and follow lines of reasoning. You have to ask clarifying questions and (try to) see it from their perspective. You have to discern and determine where the two of you part ways. And you may have to accept that at the end of the discussion, you may not agree.

Why would anyone want to disagree (or agree) with someone? Why would anyone want to understand someone if it takes this much labor and effort? It’s so much easier to ignore people and carry on our way to the Promised Land.

Because disagreement, properly practiced, builds character. That is to say, it propagates and nurtures virtue, which is a good thing for believers. And because disagreement, when done rightly, builds up a city, which is to seek its welfare.

Disagreement builds character through four virtues: patience, humility, courage and honesty. It cultivates patience in listening; humility in inquiring; confession in sharing; and honesty in examining. Each of these virtues are consistent with the teaching and character of our Creator and Redeemer.



It takes patience to listen to someone defend their viewpoint. It takes humility to treat valid points with respect. It takes courage to own up to weak points. It takes honesty to say you don’t know or admit when you think you’re wrong.

When we disagree well, we build up the city. Not just a city around us, but the city coming to us. We love our neighbor when we entertain and engage their views with respect. We introduce to them an alternative way of interacting.

Disagreement, like dialogue, doesn’t just happen. It’s honed. We have to learn how to critique others, not cancel them. We have to resist division and demonize less. We have to see others as companions, not combatants.

We are constantly being habituated to view others as rivals and their positions as competition. It’s breeding hostility, in which countering and canceling are the norm. In a culture like this, the most hospitable thing we can do is properly disagree.

How to talk better.

Everyday practices to foster Christian dialogue.

Have you heard of the “10,000 Hour Rule”? It suggests if you spend 10,000 hours on an activity, you will most likely get good at it. Time plus energy develop necessary skills. It’s a different spin on the old adage: “Practice makes perfect.”

My son, Miles, had his first baseball game last weekend. He struck out twice and hit a grounder to first base. On the way home, he complained about his batting. I used this as an opportunity to stress the importance of practice.

“Swinging a two-inch in diameter bat to strike a three-inch in diameter ball doesn’t come naturally,” I told him. “Great batters spend a lot of time swinging at sliders and curveballs. It requires dedication and discipline.”

Excellent teachers spend a lot of time and energy going over material and giving lessons. Great writers do it with writing. Skilled disagreeers do it with disagreeing. Excelling at these crafts doesn’t come naturally. We have to hone them.

But to hone something, we have to carve out time and space. We have to make room in our lives. This is true of both dialogue and disagreement. We can’t expect to excel at these crafts without practice.

I host a monthly meeting with a few neighbors. We talk about anything and everything. Our main focus is on refining each other’s skill in dialoguing and disagreeing. We know we have to practice these crafts in order to get good at them.

In order for genuine dialogue and disagreement to occur – for minds and hearts to meet – we have to be people who care more about the Truth than ourselves. And we have to care more about the other person than “winning” the argument.

We also have to be people who admit when we’re wrong. As Christians, confession should drip from our lips. After all, we practice it every Sunday. Yet we should be practicing it every day. To us, “I’m sorry, I was wrong,” should become a mantra.

“WE HAVE TO BE PEOPLE WHO CARE MORE ABOUT THE TRUTH THAN OURSELVES.”

To dialogue and disagree well, we have to get into the habit of asking clarifying questions.

“Just so we’re clear, are you saying ...?”

“What do you mean by that word?” Good dialoguers are good detectives.

To dialogue and disagree well, we also have to get into the habit of taking time to think. The thing about thinking is you have to stop to do it. We need to listen carefully and then take time to ponder what’s said. Don’t be afraid of the silence.

No one can be *entirely* wrong. So, when judging and critiquing the values and views of others, look for what they got right and draw attention to it. Building on what you share in common will make clearer where the two of you diverge.

Care about the truth. Admit when you’re wrong. Ask clarifying questions. Take time to think. Look for what they got right. All of these practices are important for dialogue and disagreement.

But I want to return to something I said above because I think it’s the most important practice we can cultivate. We have to create space for dialogue and disagreement or it’s not going to happen. Public spaces in which it can occur are dwindling.

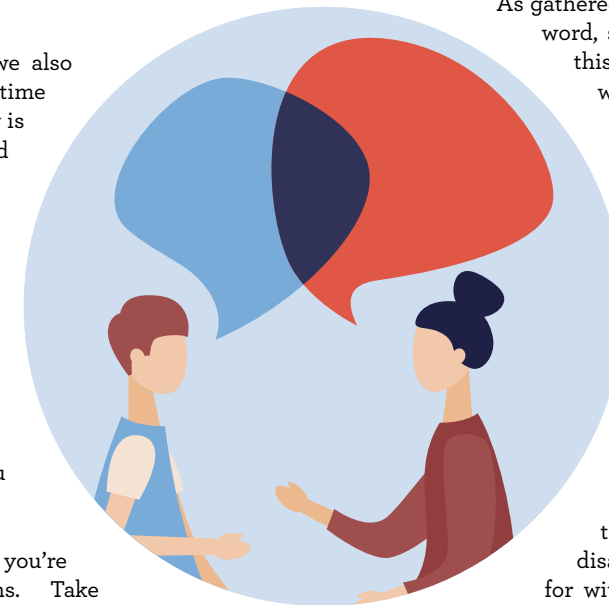
One of the ways the church can be on mission in our broken world and hostile culture is to create space in which dialogue and disagreement can be practiced. To create “safe spaces” in which difficult conversations are had and community is built.

As gathered, we can do this through the written word, such as the weekly *Gathered Seeds*, this publication and *O’bservations*. But we can also do it through the spoken word, such as with a sermon series, Christian Ed classes, symposia and occasional public forums.

As scattered, we can do this through monthly “disagreement” meetings in our home, Bible studies, teacher dinners, conversations with our neighbors, suggestions for a group at work, and blogs and publications.

The church has the opportunity to be boot camp for dialogue and disagreement; summer conditioning for witnessing and defending; scrimmage for engaging with PCUSA Presbyterians and Unitarian Universalists; and a place for the world to peek.

Why talk? Because He spoke and the world is looking. Why still talk? Because He said so and the culture needs it. How can we talk better? By following Him and being the light, salt and leaven that brightens, flavors and builds up others.



Disagreeing without being disagreeable

Pastor Nate has a plaque in his office that makes me smile every time I see it. It reads, “I’m not arguing with you ... I’m simply explaining why I’m right!”

If only we could explain our differing points of view without arguing.

Arguing is the act of “giving reasons or citing evidence in support of an idea, action, or theory, typically with the aim of persuading others to share one’s view.” Such is the most benign understanding of this common form of human interaction.

Closer to our all-too-common personal experience defines arguing as “to exchange or express diverging or opposite views, typically in a heated or angry way.” And there’s the rub – “typically in a heated way.”

There’s nothing wrong with disagreeing with people and arguing is not bad in itself. The problem arises when we disagree disagreeably and that goes to the matter of what we say and how we say it.

When I disagree with someone strongly, I may call forth every possible claim I can muster to persuade the one with whom I am speaking (notice I didn’t say “opponent”).

The problem comes in the expression of my disagreement. How do I argue? Is my expression unkind or unfair? Is it for the sole purpose of winning the argument?

Some people disagree with a smile on their face. They love the interaction, the give and take and, for the most part, their disagreement, though strongly held, is not worth going to war over. The result is a friendly exchange which will, in most cases, strengthen the interpersonal relationship between those who disagree.

Others disagree as if they are in a court of law, making their closing arguments before the jury and calling forth every tidbit of available evidence. These exchanges of disagreement can be tense and uncomfortable at times, particularly when the opposite party possesses superior (or what he/she thinks is superior) logic and verbal skills.

The third expression of disagreement manifests a tone and a choice of words that make no account of the impact they will have when received. In these cases, the expression of disagreement is the power behind the argument and not the truth or the logic.

The goal is to win and if that makes someone feel badly, that’s the danger one faces in disagreeing.

How are we to argue and disagree as followers of Jesus Christ and brothers and sisters of one another?

The Apostle Paul addresses this very issue in his letter to the Ephesians. It suggests at least 10 questions that can serve as a guide to what we say and how we say it when disagreeing without being disagreeable (the “it” which follows refers to what one is saying):

1. Is it loving? (4.15)

2. Is it true? (4.25)

3. Is it said in anger? (4.26)

4. Will it give the Evil One an opportunity? (4.26)

5. Will it build someone up or tear them down? (4.29)

6. Is this the right place and the right time? (4.29)

7. Will this impart grace? (4.29)

8. Is it free of bitterness, clamor, slander, malice? (4.31)

9. Is it kind? (4.32)

10. Is it tenderhearted and/or forgiving? (4.32)

What say you? Do you agree?

Rick Wolling is pastor emeritus of Beverly Heights Church.