

Response to John Roth's "How to Disagree Well"

Disagreement within the Church is nothing new. About a month ago ([ThTheol #708](#)) we reprinted a five-minute election speech by the Rev. Dr. S. John Roth, who currently serves as bishop of the ELCA's Central/Southern Illinois Synod. In his speech, Roth discussed what it means to "disagree well." This week we return to that theme.

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In today's Thursday Theology, Steve picks up where Bishop Roth left off, fleshing out the bones of what it means to disagree well, and getting to the heart of what this means for the Church in particular. We trust that you will find much to mull over as you read Steve's response to Bishop Roth. And, as always, we welcome you to send in your own responses if you have them.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Conflict always has been and always will be a part of life in human organizations. The proliferation of conflict management strategies in the world of business management is a testimony to this reality. Organizations are hungry for processes that will help them manage their conflict constructively. A healthy organization that welcomes diversity and creativity will inevitably have disagreement and conflict. The question is not whether there will or will not be conflict. The question is HOW to manage conflict that inevitably arises, so that the organization can get better. It must learn to “disagree well.”

The Church is not immune from such conflict. From the pages of the New Testament to the Protestant Reformation, from the denominational battles of American Christianity to the church fights that split congregations, conflict is a constant in the church. For the Church too the question is HOW to manage conflict. It too must learn to “disagree well.”

Bishop John Roth’s speech leading up to his election as Bishop of the Central/Southern Illinois Synod of the ELCA, entitled “How To Disagree Well” (Thursday Theology #708), also reflects this reality. He recounts how conflict has been a part of his church life from the beginning of his ministry to his current post as Bishop. He laments the conflict because through those conflicts the church has not dealt with conflict effectively. It has not learned how to “disagree well.” As a result, “the fracturing continues.” Denominations continue to divide and mission suffers.

What does it mean to “disagree well?” The answer to that question ought to help an organization deal with its disagreements constructively so that it does not suffer the debilitating division that erodes its bottom line, wastes its resources, and inhibits its ability to carry out its mission.

What does this mean for the church? Some could interpret Bishop Roth's answer as nothing more than attempt to manage organizational conflict in order to protect the institutional bottom line from the corrosive effects of conflict and failing to "disagree well."

Unfortunately Bishop Roth's speech was limited to the confining restrictions of ELCA election procedure. He only had five minutes to make his point. However, in this short speech there is something quite amazing at work. The church can be and often is quite different from the secular world of business organizations when it comes to dealing with conflict.

"In, with, and under" the organizational side of the church and God's "left-handed" management of this all-too-human organization, God's "right-handed" redemption through Christ and His Spirit is also at work. The Church does not simply manage conflict but works to make Christ and His benefits known. That is evident in Bishop Roth's speech and his understanding of what it means to "disagree well." In the Church, to "disagree well" may only be a way to manage its conflict so as to protect its bottom line; however, to "disagree well" can also be the result of Christ's redeeming presence. God's "right-handed" management of the Church through Christ in the power of His Spirit can transform the survival impulses of church organization into the very means by which the Holy Spirit can connect people to Christ and His redemption.

That is not readily obvious in Bishop Roth's remarks. The three characteristics of disagreeing well cited by Bishop Roth are true for any healthy organization, church or otherwise:

1. Fairness
2. Intellectual integrity
3. Honest humility.

There is nothing uniquely “Christian” or even “churchly” when it comes to “disagreeing well.” The manager at the neighborhood McDonald’s, the foreman of the local plumbers’ union or president of the community’s school board will seek to deal with disagreement like this. However, “hidden” in Bishop Roth’s remarks there is evidence of a theologian of the cross at work, distinguishing Law and Gospel and “crossing” God’s action through Christ and His Gospel with God’s management of a bureaucratic human organization through the Law.

Through the application of the Crossings Law/Gospel hermeneutic to Bishop Roth’s remarks that will become evident. Those familiar with the Crossings Community have seen this hermeneutic applied to the interpretation of Scripture in the Weekly Lectionary studies (a.k.a., Sabbatheology) of Crossings. They are available (fifteen years’ worth!) at www.crossings.org. The hermeneutic helps us to see God at work in the Scriptures ambidextrously through Law and Gospel. Here it will be applied not to Scripture but to Bishop Roth’s speech. In the process Christ will be magnified and His benefits offered.

Godly Disagreement

Diagnosis: “Disagreeing Badly”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – Bad Behavior

The first symptom of conflict and disagreement is bad behavior by one or both of the conflicting parties. They do not treat each other fairly or justly. They may not even realize it. They bend the rules, break the Commandments, and righteously engage in all kinds of treachery because they are certain that God is on their side. With righteous indignation, they vilify and misrepresent their opponents in order “burn them in effigy.” Regardless of how inaccurate the characterization of their opponents might be, they are sure of their rightness. Even

though their opponent might insist that he has been misrepresented, the “other person [cannot recognize] that position as genuinely his/her position.” Accusations fly. No one listens to the other.

Religious wars are the worst sort of wars. They litter the landscape with “broken body parts” and mangled reputations. “All is fair in love and war.” Who cares about following the rules when all that matters is winning?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Bad Faith

Their bad behavior betrays their bad faith. Their bad behavior is a kind of “Freudian slip” that reveals the secret of which they themselves might not be aware. They dare not admit it but they have little confidence in their own position. They are unwilling and unable to honestly listen to the criticism of their opponents and or consider the possibility that their critics might be right. They cannot “acknowledge where [their] own position is most vulnerable and where a contrasting position can make valid points.”

Such self-righteous insecurity betrays an even deeper malady. The very faith in the God they so zealously defend is cracking and crumbling. If they had the faith they claim to have, they would also have the patience to listen to another without always having to be on the attack. Afraid that their opponents might not be the danger they have portrayed them to be, they create caricatures and stereotypes of their opponents. The more uncertain they are of their faith, the more vigorously they misrepresent their opponents. Such “intellectual dishonesty” betrays their deep spiritual dishonesty. Despite their protests to the contrary, they do not trust God. Haunted by their bad faith, they can do no other.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Bad Fate

The stakes are high. Such bad faith leads to a bad fate. Self-righteous arrogance prevents the “honest humility” that is necessary to disagree well. “I [cannot] acknowledge that as a fallen, flawed human being I myself may be wrong.” We refuse to face that fact that we are sinners dependent on God’s grace. Such stubborn hard-headedness and hard-heartedness puts us in a very untenable position: under the judgment of God. “Unless we learn how to disagree well, we will all end up losing.” The “we” Bishop Roth refers to is certainly more than our denomination. Failing to disagree well, failing to play fair, and failing to trust the promise of God in Christ will surely continue to jeopardize our organizational health. Numbers, members, and money will continue to dwindle. However, the danger is even greater. For such unfaithfulness we all face losing eternally as God hands us over to the deadly fate we have called down upon ourselves.

The conflict that afflicts churches is not merely between people. It is between people and God. This conflict we can never win. It can only end in our losing. No one ever wants to face that fate. The more we refuse to face our plight, the more God reminds us that there is no escape. THAT is living dangerously.
Prognosis: “Disagreeing Well”

Step 1: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – God’s Disagreement

For as much as Bishop Roth’s prescription sounds like the usual conflict management that goes on in secular institutions, it is not. It is based on that fact that “God has reconciled us—all of us—to God’s self through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19).” The divine/human conflict was bound to make us all losers. However, God has resolved the conflict in Christ. Unlike the conflict resolution processes that institutional managers use to mask the real conflict that

rages beneath the surface, God in Christ has ended the conflict. Resolution of the divine/human conflict in Christ is the basis for all conflict resolution in the church.

God is determined that His grace and mercy will have the last word. Therefore, God in Christ chooses to disagree with His own judgment and reconciles Himself to us through Christ and His cross. Roth acknowledges that reality. "As sinners dependent upon God's grace," hard-headed and hard-hearted sinners are forgiven. "We sinners are reconciled to God and to one another by God's grace through Christ Jesus—a gift, purely a gift."

Any reconciliation, managing of conflict, or learning to disagree well begins here. No amount a conflict-management strategizing, focus-group deliberating, congregational surveying, or annual voters' meeting will be able to end to this fundamental conflict. The harder we try, the more we fail. God is the only one who can only resolve the conflict from which we can never seem to escape. The conflict is resolved in Christ and can only be received as a gift from Him.

The offer of that gift is the glue that holds the church together. Without the proclamation of Christ, the fundamental problem remains. No conflict-resolution process or learning "how to disagree well" can ever deliver us from this dilemma. Only God can. The good news is that God has and continues to do so through the Word and Sacrament ministry of the Church.

Step 2: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – We Agree...

"Hope is strong" for Bishop Roth. That is a statement of his faith and trust in the reconciliation God has achieved in Christ. That faith is shared by many in the church he currently serves. Despite that church's never ending battle with its own sin and unfaith and God's judgment, there are many who share Roth's faith in the Gospel: "We all came together in the ELCA

for good reason: we were joyfully united by our trust that we sinners are reconciled to God and to one another by God's grace through Christ..."

When Christ is proclaimed and His comfort is offered, faith happens. Christ is "enjoyed." The uncertainty is resolved. The insecurity is ended. We are at peace. We now take the time and have the patience to work at disagreeing well.

Step 3: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – To Disagree Well

When sinners can count on Christ, it is possible in the midst of disagreement to have "honest humility." We can do what previously without Christ was impossible. We "acknowledge that as a fallen, flawed human being [we] may be wrong." In repentance and faith we agree with God's assessment of us. We do not have to defend ourselves and always be right. Because our righteousness is in Christ, we can disagree with our opponents with "intellectual integrity." We can patiently "recognize and acknowledge where [our] own position is most vulnerable and where a contrasting position makes valid points" because our being right lies in Christ and not in ourselves.

A new reality begins to exist. It is not so much a skill to be developed as it is a gift to be enjoyed. Connected to Christ, confident in the grace of God, we find ourselves disagreeing well. We reflect the three characteristics of disagreeing well that Roth describes in his speech.

Unafraid, we GET TO listen patiently to those with whom we disagree. We can behave better and play more fairly. There is no need to caricature and distort the position of our opponents. We "can state the position of the person [we] are disputing with accurately enough that the other person recognizes that position as genuinely his/her position."

The church may find itself looking a lot like the healthy organization idealized by the secular world's conflict-resolution experts. Even when the church is connected to Christ, disagreements will not disappear. Until our last day we will remain conflicted as sinners and saints. However, now, because Christ is in the mix, we may find ourselves "disagreeing well." Those who disagree are no longer so interested in winning as they are in serving the cause of Christ and the mission of His Church. That may mean they are wrong. That may mean swallowing their pride. That may mean suffering and sacrifice. That may mean asking for forgiveness. That may mean turning the other cheek and loving those who wanted you removed from the church. That may even mean suffering through some bureaucratic conflict-resolution process imposed by church leaders. But in the end, it is all worth it. With Christ and His benefits at the center, we can learn to disagree well.

In the Thursday Theology pipeline—

February 16: Peter Keyel on "Football Theology"