

## Dealing with those who differ from us

The scribes were a group of biblical scholars within the one of the strictest sects of Judaism, the separatist Pharisaic party. They were discovering, more and more, just how different Jesus was from themselves. Here was a man who intentionally touched lepers, thus making himself ritually unclean. No pharisee would do that. He pronounced the forgiveness of sins. The pharisees saw this as blasphemy. Jesus ate with tax-collectors and sinners. The pharisees would witness to sinners but they would never sit down, eat, drink and have a good time with them as Jesus did. The Pharisees were very conservative about the traditions of their fathers. Jesus was a liberal. He often ignored accepted customs. The Pharisees ~~were strict Sabbatharians. They~~ did nothing on the Lord's Day but worship, study the Law of God and pray. Jesus was a liberal ~~in his keeping of the Sabbath. He not only worshipped but took walks with~~ his friends and healed people on the Lord's Day. Jesus was different. The Pharisees had never met someone like him.

So how do you deal with someone so different? How do you deal with a liberal? How do you deal with people who think differently, behave differently, do things you feel are sinful? How do you deal with people whom you feel are down right blasphemous? If we differ with others, and feel that it's our duty to enter into a controversy with them, how should we conduct ourselves? I believe that we can derive some guidelines from our Gospel lesson as to how to deal with people who differ from us and in the process come to know Christ better.

### *1. Begin with what you believe in common.*

The pharisees wouldn't admit it, but they actually had a lot in common with Jesus. They both believed in the authority of Scripture. Both Jesus and the pharisees believed in the reality of demon possession. The pharisees actually had in their ranks men who practiced exorcism. But the

pharisees couldn't believe that anyone outside their group could cast out demons without being in league with Satan.

When I was growing up I shared a lot of these kinds of attitudes towards those who were different from my group of people. Raised in a very conservative independent protestant church I can remember hearing people say that the pope was the antiChrist and that Roman Catholics practiced dispicable things. The Charismatic movement, I was taught, was inspired by Satan. Back in the fifties the liberal churches were packed and the small independent churches were often struggling. The reason for this, I was taught, was because the liberals preach what the people want to hear while we preach the Word of God.

Today I hear similar things. We preachers some-times get together and ~~talk about the popularity of tv evangelists and the growth of pentecostal~~ and independent churches. We have a tendency to attribute their success to evil motives and manipulative practices. And in our own Presbyterian denomination conservatives can see only evil in the liberals and the liberals see little good in conservatives.

But when we refuse to see the Holy Spirit working in the lives and ministries of those with whom we disagree we set in motion a process which, if followed consistently, increasingly cuts us off from recognizing truth anywhere. When the pharisees saw the popularity and effectiveness of the ministry of Jesus they accused of him of evil motives. How could anyone so different from them be good. The path they took in dealing with Jesus led them eventually to crucify Jesus. Let us, then, look for areas in which the Holy Spirit is working in the lives of those who differ from us.

*2. Look carefully at what those who differ from us are opposing.*

Those who differ from us theologically or politically may be opposed to something that is lacking or wrong in our own lives. Oliver Cromwell used

to say, "Think that you may be wrong." In other words, don't be so dogmatic and defensive about your beliefs and opinions that you refuse to see any error in yourself.

The scribes rejected Jesus because they failed to see what it was he was opposing. They heard only his heretical anti-traditional teachings. They saw that his disciples didn't wash their hands before meals-- they didn't carefully try to understand that Jesus was opposing what all the OT prophets opposed; i.e., the emphasis on externals. The scribes rejected Jesus because they saw that Jesus broke the Sabbath, as they interpreted it, by healing people on the Lord's Day. They failed to look carefully at why Jesus broke the sabbath. Jesus was opposed to rules and regulations that keep us from doing what is good and right.

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~~Today there is a world of difference between capitalism and~~ communism. We recognize that Soviet style communism has not worked as well as Western styled democracy. But our differences with communism may keep us from seeing what has given rise to communism throughout the world. Modern Marxist communism was originally espoused by Karl Marx as a result of the injustices he saw in 19th century England. He saw five and six year old Children working 14 hours a day in coal mines for little pay. He saw men and women treated simply as living tools; used as animals to enrich the owners of mines and factories. He saw the moral degeneracy caused by the rise of capitalism. Inadequate health and safety standards, no regard for safety or the welfare of workers. The worker was powerless. Charles Dickens describes it so well in his novel, "Hard Times". Communism arose and took root in Russia in opposition to these same terrible injustices often perpetrated with the blessings of the church.

When we fail to realize this we may ignore injustice and oppression in the world. In our opposition to the evil of Marxist/Leninism we may fail

to see the injustice and oppression that kindles so much revolution and terrorism. Like the Pharisees of old we may reject Christ and his way with the poor and oppressed people of the world because we refuse to see that what communists, at their best, are opposed to is what Christ is opposed to.

*3. Speak personally to the person with whom you disagree rather than about him or her with your friends.*

The scribes talked *about* Jesus behind his back. They didn't talk *to* him. They came down from Jerusalem to check out this man's orthodoxy but they didn't actually sit down and talk about their differences. They prejudged him unlike Nicodemus whom the Gospel of John says came to Jesus at night for the express purpose of talking to Jesus about his ministry.

If we disagree with someone to such an extent that we have to express it, go to the person. Talk with them. Don't get together with your friends and talk about the person. Talk to him or her.

Let me summarize those three points for you because I believe they can help us all deal with differences in our families, in the church, in the nation and world.

*1. Begin with what you hold in common. Don't let your differences blind you to areas of agreement and cooperation.*

*2. Consider that those who differ from you may actually be apposed to something that is lacking or wrong in yourself.*

*3. Don't talk about those who differ from you, but talk to them.*

We all have a tendency to attribute to ourselves and our own group the best of motives and to see the worst of motives operating in those with whom we disagree. We compare the best in the Republican party with the

worst in the democratic party. We compare the best in capitalism with the worst in socialism. We compare the best in protestantism with the worst in Roman Catholicism.

Those kinds of attitudes lead us to reject whatever good there is in others; leads us to refuse to see how the Holy Spirit is at work outside our familiar circles. Those kinds of attitudes lead eventually to bloodshed in Northern Ireland and Palestine and to the arms race between Russia and the United States. When we refuse to see the Holy Spirit of God working in the lives of others, but, instead, criticise, condemn, and malign them we're in grave spiritual danger no matter how orthodox we are; no matter how high a view of Scripture we have; no matter how evangelistic we are. We're pursuing attitudes that led to the crucifixion of Christ. We're

~~pursuing a path that leads eventually to blindness and death. Let us,~~

therefore, come to the table of the Lord, confessing our sins in this area, <sup>as usual - summary, etc.</sup>

<sup>if we confess...</sup> and desiring to live in love with God and our neighbor, seeing in others, not their worst but their best, looking for signs of the presence of the Spirit in their lives that may, we pray, enrich our own lives and lead us all to Christ.

Let us pray: O God, from whom all good proceeds: Grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right, and by your merciful guiding may do them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(Sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor, Knox Presbyterian Church, Kenmore, NY, on the Second Sunday after Pentecost, 9 June 1985. Scripture: Mark 3:20-35)