

## HOW TO DEAL WITH THOSE WHO DIFFER FROM US

### ***THE NECESSITY OF GODLY DISPUTATION (PART 1 OF 4)***

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#### **WHAT DO I OWE TO THE PERSON WHO DIFFERS FROM ME?**

**W**e are called upon by the Lord to contend earnestly for the faith (Jude 3). That does not necessarily involve being contentious; but it involves avoiding compromise, standing forth for what we believe, standing forth for the truth of God-without welching at any particular moment. Thus, we are bound to meet, at various points and various levels, people with whom we disagree. We disagree in some areas of Christian doctrine. We disagree as to some details of church administration. We disagree as to the way in which certain tasks of the church should be pursued. And, in fact, if we are careful to observe the principles that I would like to expound for you, I would suggest that they might be valuable also in disagreements that are not in the religious field. They also would apply to disagreements in politics or difficulties with people in your job or friction within the family or contentions between husband and wife or between parents and children. Who does not encounter from time to time people who are not in complete agreement; therefore it is good to seek to discover certain basic principles whereby we may relate to those who differ from us.

It seems strange that one should desire to speak at all about Polemic Theology since we are now in an age when folks are more interested in ecumenism and irenics than in polemics. Furthermore, Polemic Theology appears to have been often rather ineffective. Christians have not managed in many cases to win over their opponents. They have shown themselves to be ornery; they have bypassed some fairly important prescriptions of Scripture; and in the end, they have not convinced very many people. Sometimes they have not even managed to convince themselves! Under those circumstances, one perhaps might desire to bypass a subject like this altogether.

In order to approach this subject, there are three major questions that we must ask; and I would like to emphasize very strongly that, in my judgment, we need to ask them precisely in the right order: (1) What do I owe the person who differs from me? (2) What can I *learn* from the person who differs from me? (3) How can I *cope* with the person who differs from me?

Many people overlook the first two questions and jump right away to: "How can I cope with this? How can I bash this person right down into the ground in order to annihilate objections and differences?" Obviously, if we jump to the third

question from the start, it is not very likely that we will be very successful in winning over dissenters. First, I suggest that we need to face squarely the matter of our duties. *We have obligations to people who differ from us.* This does not involve agreeing with them. We have an obligation to the truth that has a priority over agreement with any particular person; if someone is not in the truth, we have no right to agree. We have no right even to minimize the importance of the difference; and therefore, we do not owe consent, and we do not owe indifference. But what we owe that person who differs from us, whoever that may be, is what we owe every human being – *we owe them to love them.* And we owe them to deal with them as we ourselves would like to be dealt with or treated. (Matthew 7:12)

And how then do we desire to be treated? Well, the first thing that we notice here is that we want people to know what we are saying or meaning. There is, therefore, an obligation if we are going to voice differences to make a serious effort to know the person with whom we differ. That person may have published books or articles. Then we have an obligation to be acquainted with those writings. It is not appropriate for us to voice sharp differences if we have neglected to read what is available. The person who differs from us should have evidence that we read carefully what has been written and that we have attempted to understand its meaning. In the case of an oral exchange where we don't have the writing, we owe the person who differs from us to listen carefully to what he or she says. Rather than preparing ourselves to pounce on that person the moment he or she stops talking, we should concentrate on apprehending precisely what the other person holds.

In this respect, I say that Dr. Cornelius Van Til has given us a splendid example. As you may know, he expressed very strong objections to the theology of Karl Barth. This was so strong that Barth claimed that Van Til simply did not understand him. It has been my privilege to be at Dr. Van Til's office and to see with my own eyes the bulky tomes of Barth's, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. (Incidentally, these volumes were the original German text, not an English translation). As I leafed through these, I bear witness that I did not see one page that was not constellated with underlining, double-underlining, marginal annotations, exclamation points, and question marks galore. So here is someone who certainly did not say, "I know Karl Barth well; I understand his stance; I don't need to read anymore of this; I can move on with what I have." Every one of the volumes, including the latest ones that were then in existence, gave evidence of very, very careful scrutiny. So when we intend to take issue with somebody, we need to do the job that is necessary to know that person so that we are not voicing our criticism in the absence of knowledge but that we are proceeding from the vantage point of real acquaintance.

Even that is not enough. Beyond what a person says or writes, we must *attempt to understand what a person means.* Now it is true that there are what are called "Freudian slips," that is there are people who do not express

themselves exactly the way it should be done; but in the process somehow they give an insight into a tendency that is there in them all along and which leads them to express themselves in an infelicitous but revealing manner. So it is appropriate, I suppose, to note this as a personal footnote, so to speak, in order possibly to make use of it at some time in the discussion. But if somebody fails to express him or herself accurately, there is no great point in pressing the very language that is used. We ought to try to understand what is the meaning that this language is intended to convey. In some cases, we may provide an opportunity for an opponent to speak more accurately.

I have experienced this in my own home. I have noticed that my wife sometimes says things like this: "You never empty the wastebasket." Now it has been noted that, on January 12, 1984, I did empty the wastebasket. Therefore, the word *never* is inappropriate! This tends to weaken the force of my wife's reproach. However, I've learned that I don't get anywhere by pressing this point. This kind of reaction is not providing dividends of joy and peace in my home. I've learned, therefore, to interpret that when my wife says "never" she means "rarely" or "not as often as should be." When she says "always," she means "frequently" or "more often than should be." Instead of quibbling as to the words *never* and *always*, I would do well to pay attention to what she finds objectionable. And indeed, I should be emptying the wastebasket. That is a regular part of a male role in the home, isn't it? Feminist or not feminist, a husband and father should empty the wastebasket; and therefore, if I fail to do this, even only once, there is good reason to complain. Nothing is gained by quibbling about how often this happens. I ought to recognize this and be more diligent with it.

Similarly, in dealing with those who differ, we ought not to quibble about language just in order to pounce on our opponent because he or she has not used accurate wording. It is more effective to seek to apprehend what is meant and then to relate ourselves to the person's meaning. If we don't do that, of course, there is no encounter because this person speaks at one level and we are taking the language at another level; and so the two do not meet, and the result is bound to be frustrating. So if we really want to meet, we might as well try to figure out the meaning rather than to quibble on wording.

Moreover, I would suggest that we owe to people who differ from us to *seek to understand their aims*. What is it that they are looking for? What is it that makes them tick? What is it that they are recoiling against? What are the experiences, perhaps tragic ones, which have steeled them into a particular stance? What are the things that they fear and the things that they yearn for? Is there not something that I fear as well or yearn for in the same way? Is there not a possibility here to find a point of contact at the very start rather than to move on with an entirely defensive or hostile mood?

As an example, it may be observed that in the fourth century Arius, and undoubtedly many of his supporters, were especially leery of modalism, a serious

error in the conception of the Trinity whereby the Godhead manifested Himself in three successive forms or modes as Father, Son and the Holy Spirit rather than to exist eternally as Three Who have interpersonal relations with each other. From Arius' vantage point, the orthodox doctrine of the full deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit did of necessity imply a modalistic view. It did not help that one of his very vocal opponents Marcellus of Ancyra did, in fact, border dangerously on modalism. Arguments designed to show the biblical and logical strengths of the doctrine of the Son's full deity or vice versa the weakness of Arius' subordinationism would not be likely to be effective unless the instinctive fear of an implied modalism were addressed and shown to be without solid foundation. With all due respect to the soundness, courage, and perseverance of those like Athanasius and Hilary who consistently resisted Arianism, one may yet wonder if a more effective method of dealing with this error might not have been to allay the fear that orthodoxy inevitably would lead to modalism.

In the controversy between Calvinism and Arminianism, it must be perceived that the fact that many Arminians (possibly almost all of them) conceive to affirm the complete sovereignty of God inevitably implies a rejection of any free will, power of decision, and even responsibility on the part of created rational beings, angelic or human. Their attachment to those features naturally leads them to oppose Calvinism as they understand it. It is imperative for the Calvinist controversialist to affirm and to prove that he or she does not, in fact, deny or reject these modalities of the actions and decisions of moral agents but that he or she undertakes to retain these – even though their logical relation to divine sovereignty remains shrouded in a mystery that transcends finite, human logic.

Similarly, the Calvinist should not glibly conclude that evangelical Arminians are abandoning the notion of divine sovereignty because they assert the freedom of the human will. It is plainly obvious that Arminians pray for the conversion of those yet unbelievers and that they desire to recognize the Lordship of God. The Arminian will do well to emphasize this in discussion with Calvinists so as to provide a clearer perception of the actual stance of both parties. It is remarkable that committed Calvinists can sing without reservation many of the hymns of Charles and John Wesley, and vice versa that most Arminians do not feel they need to object to those of Isaac Watts or Augustus Toplady.

In summary, I would say we owe our opponents to deal with them in such a way that they may sense that we have a real interest in them as persons, that we are not simply trying to win an argument or show how smart we are, but that we are deeply interested in them-and are eager to learn from them as well as to help them.

One method that I have found helpful in making sure that I have dealt fairly with a position that I could not espouse was to assume that a person

endorsing that view was present in my audience (or was reading what I had written). Then my aim was to represent the view faithfully and fully without mingling the criticism with factual statements; in fact, so faithfully and fully that an adherent to that position might comment, "This man certainly does understand our view!" It would be a special boon if one could say, "I never heard it stated better!" This then could earn me the right to criticize. But before I proceed to do this, it is only proper that I should have demonstrated that I have a correct understanding of the position I desire to evaluate.