

The Sermon - In 10 Sentences or Less
It's Up to You (Week 1) - How can we as Christians disagree, and yet stay together?:



1) This was the only question submitted by two people independent of one another - that's a pretty clear indication that the Holy Spirit was wanting us to talk about this together.

2) We disagree because it's inherently, indivisibly, and universally human: in fact, for St. Paul it is the single most definitive feature of humanity, and more specifically humanity at its worst, living independent from God (Galatians 5.19-21).

3) Modern neurology has confirmed St. Paul's theology: our brains are keenly aware of energy conservation, which means we're unconsciously inclined to disengage from those with whom we disagree, to dig our heels in and not change our mind (the backfire effect), and only to seek information that already confirms what we believe (confirmation bias).

4) Moreover, a conversation is never really only about the topic on the table: in every disagreement, you're in discussion with the person's past experience of the topic, good or bad, and how the subject is related to their core identity as a person, i.e., whether or not it's crucial to the "identity groups" they call home.

5) But, digging deeper and in a different direction, we disagree so that we can discern and obtain the truth together, in fact this is our best guess as to why an individual person's reason and logic are so fallible, and yet a diverse group's is so much more reliable (Agnes Callard, a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago calls this the "adversarial division of epistemological labor" in the human species.)

6) The Proverbs in the Old Testament would say that this way: wisdom is always a team sport, and can only be attained in collaboration with others, never alone, and most often when we heed the voices telling us what we don't already see or understand (Prov. 12.15, 13.10, and 18.17, among others).

7) So if we are hard-wired to disagree so much and so often, the real issue becomes, "Will we make the choice and do the hard work to disagree well?"

8) A first step to disagreeing well is not to engage with those who aren't willing to do the same, or not to expect irenic, constructive outcomes when disagreement turns into a spat or argument.

9) Here are a few more concrete tips for disagreeing well: a) start by listening and reiterating what's being said by the other party, and don't move ahead until both persons can do this, b) once that's been done, move on to identifying common ground and the strengths of the other person's perspective, and c) use receptive, positive language intentionally, e.g., say "thank you" and signal your own uncertainty about parts of your own perspective (both of which are proven to steer a conversation toward a positive outcome).

10) This week's question is directly relevant to KirkWood, and both its present and future: KW is a "big tent" church full of Christians and seekers from many different backgrounds, and our commitment to disagreeing well together safeguards that key piece of who we are.

B. Quotes Worth Considering

1) Ian Leslie, journalist specializing in psychology, on confirmation bias:

"Humans have an instinctive aversion to the possibility of being wrong. Armed with a hypothesis, we bend reality around it, clinging to our opinions even in the face of evidence to the contrary. If I believe that the world is going to hell in a handcart, I'll notice only bad news and screen out the good...Intelligence is no protection from confirmation bias, nor is knowledge. In fact, clever and knowledgeable individuals have been shown to be more prone to it, since they're better at finding reasons to support what they already believe, and more confident in their own mistaken views."

2) Dr. Francesca Gino, behavioral scientist at Harvard, on the power of humility or hedging when in a disagreement:

"In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, our society conveys the message that we should be strong and confident — that we should grab what we want and express our views in a direct, forceful way. By contrast, being tentative, faltering, or uncertain earns us the reputation of being weak and indecisive. Assertiveness is prized, while humility is shameful. But we have this wrong. Indicating some uncertainty about our claims, or hedging, signals receptiveness, and helps the person with whom we're dialoging be more receptive too."

3) Rev. Dr. Clay Stauffer, a Disciples of Christ minister), writing for The Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy, about how the church disagreeing well is essential to our mission in 2022:

"The church should be a spiritual center where important issues are analyzed and discussed through the lens of the gospel. This includes complex topics like health care, immigration, poverty, racism, and war...What if the church became a place where we were committed to having honest, respectful conversations about these issues that truly matter, where well-meaning people disagree? The goal is not to change somebody else's mind but to build relationships, and to foster real community and mutual respect..."

4) Dr. Christena Cleveland, a leading Christian sociologist and founder of The Center for Justice and Renewal, writing about how our new identity in Christ should unite us:

"To embrace our identity in this new common family called church, we must engage in the difficult process of lessening our grip on the identities that we have idolized and clung to far too long, things like politics, vocation, class, race, and culture. In many ways, this process will jar our souls, wrenching us from the safe homogenous existence we so easily seek. At first, it will feel painfully unnatural because we have lived outside of our shared identity in Christ for so long. Intentional unity will feel wrong to us initially, enough so that the best of us will want to quit...However, never forget – not only is Jesus serious about crossing impossible boundaries to pursue us, but He's also equally serious about His followers crossing the same boundaries in order to be the church together. He has led the way; we follow in His footsteps."

C) A Prayer for the Week

Weave the prayer that concluded the sermon yesterday into your own devotional life several times this week, and may it be our prayer not just for our lives, but for the whole of KirkWood too:

"Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me plant love. Where there is injury let me plant pardon. Where there is doubt, let me plant faith. Where there is despair, let me plant hope. Where there is darkness, let me plant light. And where there is sadness, let me plant joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood, as to understand, and to be loved, as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life, amen."

- St. Francis of Assisi (1200s C.E.)

D) Resources on Disagreeing Well

1) A very simple, memorable technique to use when you disagree with someone - the 3 As:

[Disagreeing without being disagreeable – the 3As technique](#)

2) Two articles on how to navigate and facilitate disagreements in groups, which are chocked full of tips that you can use in interpersonal disagreements too:

[Disagreement Doesn't Have to Be Divisive \(hbr.org\)](#)

[The Three Reasons People Disagree \(& What To Do About It\)](#)

3) Why listening is so important in disagreements, and how to do it well:

[How to Have Less Disagreeable Disagreements](#)

4) Dive into the work of Dr. Christena Cleveland, whose book, "Disunity in Christ," may be the single best and well-researched resource in the last 10 years on the topic of disagreements among Christians:

- A short 3 min. video from Dr. Cleveland about the topic:

 - ['Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart' by Christena Cleveland](#)

- A longer sermon from Dr. Cleveland on the topic:

 - [Christena Cleveland - "The Joy of Unity in the Body of Christ"](#)

- A book summary of "Disunity in Christ":

 - [Disunity in Christ | Reflections & Notes](#)