

HOW TO DEAL WITH THOSE WHO DIFFER FROM US

THE NECESSITY OF GODLY DISPUTATION (PART 2 OF 4)

by Dr. Roger R. Nicole, Ph.D.

WHAT CAN I LEARN FROM THOSE WHO DIFFER FROM ME?

In the last section, we discussed the answer to the question, "What do I owe the person who differs from me?" It is very important throughout that one should remain keenly aware of such obligation, for otherwise any discussion is doomed to remain unproductive. The truth that I believe I have grasped must be presented in a spirit of love and winsomeness. To do otherwise is to dispute truth itself, for it is more naturally allied to love than to hostility or sarcasm (Ephesians 4:15). These may, in fact, reflect a certain insecurity that is not warranted when one is really under the sway of truth. It may well be that God's servant may be moved to righteous indignation in the presence of those "who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Romans 1:18). This explains the outbursts of the Old Testament prophets, of our Lord in His denunciation of the Pharisees and of the apostles in dealing with various heresies and hypocrisies in the early church. These severe judgments were ordinarily aimed at warning members of the flock rather than winning over some people who had distanced themselves from the truth of God to a point which left no room for hope of recovery (Psalm 139:19-22; Isaiah 5:8-25; Daniel 5:26-30; Matthew 12:30-32; Acts 7:51-53; Galatians 5:12; Revelation 22:15). But when dealing with those we have a desire to influence for the good, it is imperative to remain outgoing and gracious.

When we are sure that our *outward* approach is proper, we need secondly to safeguard the *inward* benefits of courtesy. We need to ask the question, "What can I *learn* from those who differ from me?" It is not censurable selfishness to seek to gain maximum benefits from any situation that we encounter. It is truly a pity if we fail to take advantage of opportunities to learn and develop what almost any controversy affords us.

Could I be Wrong?

The first thing that I should be prepared to learn is that I am wrong and the other person is right. Obviously, this does not apply to certain basic truths of the faith like the deity of Christ or salvation by grace. The whole structure of the Christian faith is at stake here and it would be instability rather than broad-mindedness to allow doctrines of this level to be eroded by doubts. Yet, apart from issues where God has spoken so that doubt and hesitancy are not

permissible¹, there are numerous areas where we are temperamentally inclined to be very assertive and yet can quite possibly be in error. When we are unwilling to acknowledge our fallibility, we reveal that we are more interested in winning a discussion and safeguarding our reputation than in the discovery and triumph of truth. A person who corrects our misapprehensions is truly our helper rather than our adversary, and we should be grateful for this service rather than resentful of the correction. As far as our reputation is concerned, we should seek to be known for an unflinching attachment to the truth and not pretend to a kind of infallibility that we are ready to criticize when Roman Catholics claim it for their popes!

Our reputation will be better served if we show ourselves ready to be corrected when in error rather than if we keep obstinately to our viewpoint when the evidence shows it to be wrong. I should welcome the correction. I should respond, "I was mistaken in this; I am glad that you straightened me out. Thank you for your help." People who are unwilling to acknowledge their mistakes, by contrast, may be called stubborn and lose their credibility.²

What are the Facts?

In the second place we may learn from one who differs that our presentations, while correct as far as it goes, fails to embody the truth in its entirety on the subject in view. Although what we assert is true, there are elements of truth that, in our own clumsy way, we have overlooked. For instance, we may be so concerned to assert the deity of Christ that we may appear to leave no room for his humanity. As a Calvinist, I may so stress the sovereignty of God that the reality of human decision may appear to be ruled out. Here again, I should feel grateful rather than resentful. The adversative situation may well force me to give better attention to the fullness of revelation and preclude an innate one-sidedness which results in a caricature that does disservice to truth no less than the actual error may do. Many of the mainline elements of Christianity are thus, "two-railed," if I may express myself in a metaphor. Unity, yet threeness, in God, immanence yet transcendence, sovereignty of God and yet reality of rational decision, body and soul, deity and humanity of the Mediator, justification and sanctification, divine inspiration of Scripture and human authorship, individual and corporate responsibility. One could multiply the examples. When one of the factors is overlooked, one is doing no better than the railroad operator who would attempt to run an ordinary train with only one rail (I do not speak here of monorails!) The person who differs from me may render me great service by compelling me to present the truth in its completeness and thus avoid pitfalls created by under-emphasis, over emphasis and omissions. Thus my account will be "full-orbed" rather than "half-baked!"

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith chapter 1

² Leviticus 19:17 establishes the role of rebuke in the covenant community. Psalm 141:5 gives the ideal, but normative emotional response to that rebuke. And in Luke 17:3, Jesus makes it clear that rebuke has a critical role in repentance among the new people of God.

What are the Dangers?

I may learn from those who differ from me that I have not sufficiently perceived certain dangers to which my view is exposed and against which I need to be especially on guard. I may find out notably that there are certain weighty objections to which I had not given sufficient attention heretofore. Here again, I must be grateful for a signal service rendered by the objector. Instead of being irked by the opposition, I should rise to the challenge of presenting my view with appropriate safeguards and in such a way as to anticipate objections that are likely to arise.

For example, consider how the Westminster divines were led to express the doctrine of divine decrees (WCF III.1).

God from all eternity did, by the most wise and Holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

The three clauses following "yet so as thereby" are specifically designed to ward off misunderstanding and to meet objections commonly raised by Arminians or Arminianizing divines. The peculiar wisdom of setting up these safeguards in the first article of that chapter is the fruit of the bitter experiences made in more than half a century of controversy issuing in rich balanced and nuanced expression of truth in the Westminster standards.

In France, certain barriers placed on bridges, terraces or quays are called "*garde-fous*", that is to say "safeguards for the crazy." They provide a fence to prevent those who are careless from falling off the edge. Those who disagree with us provide us with an opportunity to ascertain areas of danger in our view and to build "*garde-fous*" there. It would be a pity if we failed to take advantage of such an opportunity.

What about Ambiguities?

We may learn from those who object that we are not communicating as we should and that they have not rightly understood what we wanted to say. In this we can be benefited also, for the whole purpose of speaking (or writing) is to communicate. If we don't communicate, we might as well remain silent. And if we don't manage to communicate properly what we think, we have to learn to speak better. If ambiguities remain, and it is apparent from the way in which the other person reacts that ambiguities do remain, then we are challenged to make a presentation that is clearer, more complete, more wholesome, and one that will communicate better.

We have Biblical precedents for this. The apostle Paul, for instance, anticipated objections that arise from misunderstanding of his doctrine. In Romans 6:1 he writes, "What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!" This objection provides a launching pad to articulate more fully his thoughts so that readers will not be permitted to wander away, but will gain a proper understanding of the truth. There are many other examples of this approach in the Pauline writings (Romans 3:3; 6:15, 19; 7:7, 13; Galatians 2:17, 19 etc.). Even our Lord took pains to rephrase or amplify some of His statements that the hearer had not rightly understood at first (Matthew 13:18-23; 37-43; John 11:12-14).

The effort made to clarify our thoughts for others will often result in clarifying them for ourselves. We may thus secure a firmer hold upon the truth, a better grasp of its implications, and a more effective way to articulate and illustrate it. These are boons for which we may be grateful to those who differ from us.

When we give due attention to what we owe those who differ and what we can learn from them, we may be less inclined to proceed in a hostile manner. Our hand will not so readily contract into a boxing fist, but will be extended as an instrument of friendship and help; our feet will not be used to stomp another, but will bring us closer to those who stand afar; our tongue will not lash out in bitterness and sarcasm, but will speak words of wisdom, grace and healing.³

³ Proverbs 10:20, 21; 13:14; 15:1; 24; 26; 25:11; James 3