

'HOW DO WE DEAL WITH DISAGREEMENT?'

THE CHRISTIAN TEXTS

1. ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM, ONE GOD AND FATHER OF ALL

Dealing with disagreement amongst the early Christians was not simply a matter of developing an organizational strategy for achieving efficient outcomes so as to allow people to get along. It was a fundamental aspect of their witnessing to the truth of and their unity in God revealed as one and undivided. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul made this clear:

'I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.'
(Ephesians 4:1ff)

This unity - their common life - amongst the early Christians was, in fact, one of the compelling reasons why it initially proved to be an attractive 'way' to others:

'All who believed were together and had all things in common ... Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.' (Acts 2:43-47)

2. THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

This strong conviction that they were called to witness to the unity of God in and through their own unity led the early Christians to stress the virtues, the 'life', which would promote and deepen such unity. This 'life' was understood to be the life of Christ, life 'in Christ':

'Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection Live in harmony with one another ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil ... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all ...' (Romans 12:9ff)

'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which you were indeed called in the one body.'
(Colossians 3:12ff)

3. FORGIVENESS – FUNDAMENTAL IN DEALING WITH DISAGREEMENTS

The one virtue above all, apart from love, which Christians were called to practice ceaselessly so as to maintain unity or to deal with disagreement was that of forgiveness:

'Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times? Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.' (Matthew 18:21-22)

4. COMPLEMENTARY VIRTUES ALSO REQUIRED

A forgiving heart is one of the core instructions of Jesus to his community of disciples. But it was never going to be enough given the strong belief that sin was still alive and active even in the most enthusiastic and dedicated of disciples. Besides forgiveness the practice of other virtues was required in order to dispel disagreements:

'And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil but always seek to do good to one another and to all' (1 Thessalonians 5:14-15)

5. CHURCH CHARISMS/MINISTRIES FOR DEALING WITH DISAGREEMENTS

When more than usually difficult disagreements did arise amongst community members peace was restored through the ministry of recognised leaders understood to have personally received 'gifts of the Spirit' or charisms so that order could be maintained in the community:

'The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of 'Bishop' (episkopoi) desires a noble task ... Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued ...' (1 Timothy 3:1, 8)

'If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed.' (1 Timothy 4:6)

The foundation of those leadership ministries was the ministry of Jesus Christ himself:

'According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.' (1 Corinthians 3:10-11)

6. A STRATEGY FOR DEALING WITH (MAJOR) DISAGREEMENTS

A specific concrete strategy for dealing with disagreements – in brief, an internal decision after due process - can be detected in the Scriptures (was it too idealistic, too rigorous?):

'When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints? ...Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to decide between one believer and another, but a believer goes to court against a believer – and before unbelievers at that? (1 Corinthians 6:1,5)

'Avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions and quarrels about the law for they are unprofitable and worthless. After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned.' (Titus 3:9-11)

