

Can We Disagree?

by M. Wayne Benson, 3-20-14

The Word of God places great value on unity in the body of Christ. We are admonished to be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Eph 4:3) And those who deliberately or carelessly cause division are to be "marked." (Rom 16:17) Yet, we find evidence in scripture of instances where differences were aired or opinions were challenged producing fruitful or unified results. Paul at one point withstood Peter face-to-face contending for the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles. The counsel of Jerusalem aired their differences before they concluded that to force Jewish rites on Gentiles was not the intent of the new covenant. They sometimes debated and prayed until it "seemed good to them and the Holy Spirit." (Acts 15:28)

The point is that disagreement in the body of Christ is not always malicious or destructive. Sometimes it is actually a progressive step toward maturity or greater unity. However, when we feel threatened by an alternate opinion, it may cloud our discernment between division in the body and difference of opinion.

The fact is, the greater the level of our power as a leader, the more important yet less likely it becomes that we will hear the voice of someone wise and courageous enough to honestly disagree with us face-to-face. In my years as a pastor, I discovered the value of the other opinion or alternate idea...albeit sometimes the hard way. I recall losing a vote on a proposal in a congregational meeting because I failed to listen to a trusted friend.

The strongest and most effective leaders learn that theirs is not the only opinion that counts for something, and their ideas, as creative as they might be, could actually be improved with collaboration. Giving credence to a better idea is sometimes the best evidence of wisdom. And when we are wrong and don't know it, it just makes everyone else who does smarter than you.

Galileo once contradicted Aristotle asserting that a heavier object does not drop faster than a lighter object. He embraced this discovery of the "law of falling bodies" at great risk to his reputation in the established scientific community of his day. Yet, his theory was right and it stands as a basic law of physics today. Both men are counted equally great today in the halls of historical scientific discovery. Galileo actually built upon Aristotle's knowledge. And the synergy between them produced a wealth of understanding about the laws of the universe.

Let me encourage you as a leader to embrace healthy discussion and be slow to write off alternative opinions. I'm not advocating that we abandon the irrevocable laws of God. We need not debate the efficacy of the Ten Commandments. But we might be wise to gather wiser men or women around us. It would strengthen, not weaken the team, to empower them with the leverage of respect for their opinion.

During my years as a pastor, college president, or CEO of a counseling center, I endeavored to surround myself with people who were "better" at things than I. And during the hiring process, in addition to my talk about my value for loyalty, faithfulness and flexibility, I would always talk about the value of healthy communication. How that excluded such things as gossip and unproductive complaining. But I always contrasted that with the importance of healthy, solution-oriented communication. I would usually say, "I need someone who can sit across the table from me and say, 'I respectfully disagree with you about that.'" But I also needed someone who would offer their own solution or idea. And someone with whom I could freely disagree or even correct and know they wouldn't walk out of my office devastated or in a tirade.

John the Baptist's disciples at one point were in a quandary about whom to follow. And they began to question - so did John. John's response was full of wisdom and fostered in the revelation of the Messiah. He simply said, "I must decrease, He must increase." We may need to learn the greatness of the humility of a John the Baptist. And, in honor, "prefer one another."