

Why write about this?

One of the heartbreaks in my life has been seeing churches, and church groups, torn-apart by disagreement. All disunity is tragic but doctrinal disagreement is doubly sad because, instead of Christians turning to the Bible and either coming to agreement or settling for principled disagreement, matters often deteriorate and become vicious and destructive. All church leaders at some point will find themselves confronting error, a few will be called to do so in writing and in a very public way, but most of us will face unhelpful teaching finding its way into our churches. There are dangers attached to this – there is the obvious danger presented by the teaching itself but another less obvious danger is the way in which we may react.¹ Obviously some of the principles are widely applicable to how we handle varied disagreements with one another – although Nicole and Newton refer mainly to writing, the principles apply to all debate and disagreement.

Our duty and danger

We agree that it is our duty to contend earnestly for the faith and so, while seeking to be peacable, we must not fail to stand for God's truth. However this brings certain dangers and John Newton starts his letter: 'As you are likely to be involved in controversy, and your love of truth is joined with a natural warmth of temper, my friendship makes me solicitous on your behalf. You are of the strongest side; for truth is great and must prevail; ... I am not therefore anxious for the event (outcome) of the battle. But I would have you more than a conqueror, and to triumph, not only over your adversary, but

over yourself.' Later in the same letter he writes: 'we find but very few writers of controversy who have not been manifestly hurt by it. Either they grow in a sense of their own importance, or imbibe an angry contentious spirit, or they insensibly withdraw their attention from those things which are the food and immediate support of the life of faith, and spent their time and strength on matters which at most are but of a secondary value. This shows that, if the service is honourable, it is dangerous. What will it profit a man if he gains his cause, and silences his adversary, if at the same time he loses that humble, tender frame of spirit in which the Lord delights, and to which the promise of his presence is made!' So we face the dangers of arrogance, a quarrelsome spirit or decline in our spiritual lives – those are certainly dangers to be aware of and to avoid! Nicole has three basic and widely-applicable principles for engaging in controversy :

1. What do I owe the person who differs from me?

How many churches have had such fierce disagreements that if you overheard the disputes going on you would not know those involved were Christian brothers? As a basis for our attitude and actions, we owe fellow-Christians love (Romans 13:8) and we should treat them as we wish to be treated (Matthew 7: 12). This includes a duty of prayer for those we are in disagreement with. John Newton recommends that: 'before you put pen to paper against him, and during the whole time you are preparing your answer, you may commend him by earnest prayer to the Lord's teaching and blessing. This practise will have a direct tendency

to conciliate your heart to him and pity him; and such a disposition will have a good influence upon every page you write.’ If Jesus told us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5: 44-45) how much more should we be praying for those we regard as brothers and sisters who are being led astray.

This duty to love means *we should seek to understand what the person is saying* and so we listen carefully. If they say there are books, or speakers, that express better than they can what they want to say then we take time to read the book or to listen to tapes and do not try and trap them for using words less accurately than they might. We should try and understand their aims. Many discussions start wrongly because one side and/or the other are defensive and hostile but often we could find a point of contact and shared concern. When I read David Watson’s autobiography: *You are My God*, I was deeply moved by his honesty and desire for spiritual reality. I strongly disagree with some of his conclusions but I wish I felt his concerns more deeply – that is a point of contact. Roger Nicole summarises: ‘I would say that we owe to our opponents to deal with them in such a way that they may sense that we have a real interest in them as persons’. One very concrete piece of advice is that if when speaking of other people’s views (as we may do in sermons occasionally) we do so with the aim that anyone with that view listening would say: ‘That expresses my point of view perfectly’. I remember reading of John Thomas, a former minister of Sandfields, that when he explained the Baptist viewpoint he was thanked for the best exposition of the position a Baptist hearer had ever heard. John Thomas was a Paedo-Baptist!

This duty to love also means that we do not use offensive illustrations to make our point and to put other people down. We must always remember that we are to desire to win people to the truth and some of the put-downs ministers have administered to their church members make great stories but illustrate poor pastoring.

2. What can I learn from the person who differs from me?

Sometimes I may be wrong! There are fixed points in Christian theology, such as the deity of Christ and salvation by grace, on which the gospel depends but this doesn’t apply to everything. I’ve hotly debated some subjects, being a debater by nature, and later changed my mind completely. We can and should be convinced of the major points of belief but our understanding will – God willing – be growing throughout our lives. Gresham Machen, shortly before he died, thanked John Murray for convincing him that he had not placed sufficient emphasis on the active obedience of Christ. So the next point is that we may be right but failing to present the subject in Biblical proportion. A Calvinist should never sound like a fatalist but he can do so. We should be grateful if we are made aware that we are failing to do justice to all of God’s truth. *Then we should be aware of dangers and lack of clarity in what we may be heard to say.* We are liable to indignation and exasperation if we are misunderstood but Paul frequently responds to possible misunderstandings and supplies explanations. For example (Romans 6:1): ‘Shall we go on sinning that grace may abound?’ and Romans 9:6;14,19. Such considerations should make us

careful in what tone and words we express ourselves and make us willing to protect our position from misunderstanding and to be responsive to questions and reactions.

We should remember that controversy, in God's providence, leads to clearer understanding of the truth.

Historically the clear understanding of the truth by the church has advanced as the church deals with the problem of false teaching. The doctrine of the person of Christ was clarified in the early centuries of the church in debate with those who denied Christ's deity, or his real humanity. The doctrine of salvation was clarified by the Reformation church in reaction to Medieval Catholicism and in ongoing debate with the Roman Catholic Church.

Personally I've had to work my way through many theological subjects because I've been confronted with teaching that I am unhappy about. So in our discussions we proceed on the basis that we are grateful for the opportunity to explore further some area of the Bible's teaching.

3. How can I cope with the person who differs from me?

This involves protecting our own position and constructively explaining it. Our resources are:

The Bible. We must use it reverently and carefully, which means we have a responsibility to interpret God's Holy Word correctly and that we must seek to rightly understand, not explain away, texts that seem to disagree with our position. Nothing makes me more suspicious of a writer than apparent misuse of scripture and nothing makes me more confident about a writer than a willingness to face up to parts

of scripture that appear to be against their viewpoint.

Logical reasoning. There may be logical results from a person's viewpoint that can be pointed out – although here we must be careful to distinguish between what someone is saying and what we believe is the logical result of their position. For example most of us who do not accept that the gift of prophecy is for today believe that there are damaging implications for the doctrine of the sufficiency of scripture. We may say so but must in fairness accept that Wayne Grudem, who does accept prophecy for today, accepts the sufficiency of scripture and seeks to safeguard what he teaches from such implications.

Appeals to history and statements of faith.

This doesn't mean that historical arguments or even agreed statements of faith can finally settle a matter. What they often do is to indicate clearly what the issues are and then enable those issues to be resolved in the light of scripture – they mean we don't always need to reinvent the wheel because often what is at stake in a discussion, and the crucial texts involved, have already been laid out for us.

Getting our attitude right. John Newton makes it very clear that our manner as well as our matter is very important in our dealing with disagreements. We must be concerned as to our readers. **Firstly**, there will be those who disagree with us: 'If you write with a desire to be an instrument of correcting mistakes, you will of course be cautious of laying stumbling-blocks in the way of the blind, or of using any expressions that may exasperate their passions, confirm them in their prejudices, and thereby make their conviction, humanly speaking,

more impracticable.’ **Secondly**, there are those as yet unconvinced: ‘There will likewise be many who pay too little regard to religion, to have any settled system of their own These are very incompetent judges of doctrines; but they can form a tolerable judgement of a writer’s spirit. They know that meekness, humility, and love, are the characteristics of a Christian temper:from us, who profess these principles, they always expect such dispositions as correspond with the precepts of the Gospel. They are quick-sighted to discern when we deviate from such a spirit, and avail themselves of it to justify their contempt of our arguments. ... If we can satisfy them that we act upon these motives (we wish well to their souls, and contend only for the truth’s sake), our point is half gained; they will be more disposed to consider calmly what we offer: and if they should still dissent from our opinions, they will be constrained to approve our intentions.’ **Thirdly**, there are those who agree with us who will see what is going on: ‘You may be instrumental to their edification, if the law of kindness as well as truth regulates your pen, otherwise you will do them harm. ... I hope your performance will savour of a spirit of true humility, and be a means of promoting it in others.’

Summarising our concerns

We can all see the dangers accompanying false teaching and it would be wrong not to feel a duty to respond to it. Are we as aware of the dangers that accompany our response to false teaching? This is particularly relevant with the current controversy over Steve Chalke’s views on the atonement. Already we have Joel Edwards counter-accusing others, in our constituency of churches, of being concerned to exclude Steve rather than to win him over. I am not impressed with the Evangelical Alliance’s handling of the situation because books already in print delineate clearly the doctrinal positions involved and further discussions will simply involve restating known positions. However we need to be very careful about our approach at such a time because countless great and godly men have marred their testimony by the way they have (mis)handled theological controversy. Historically, theological controversy has been marked by abusive language towards fellow believers and the dishonest distortion of their arguments. Writers have failed to live by Christ’s golden rule (Matthew 7: 12): ‘do to others what you would have them do to you.’ No wonder that John Newton wrote: ‘we find but very few writers of controversy who have not been manifestly hurt by it.’ Let’s try to avoid being in that number!

1. See Roger Nicole, *Standing Forth* (Fearn Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2002), pp9-26 and John Newton’s, *Works*, vol.1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth), pp.268ff.