

CREATING A CULTURE OF DIALOGUE IN THE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

This paper is motivated by two convictions: (i) we need to be better at doing dialogue in the church; (ii) what hinders us from excelling in this area is an unhelpful paradigm of ministry which frequently goes unrecognised and is hence rarely subjected to scrutiny.

In addition to these two convictions, I'm motivated to write by a host of experiences in which I've seen people close to me fail to do dialogue well. On more than one occasion, I've looked on in horror and disbelief as I've mis-handled disagreement with a degree of ineptitude that borders on the spectacular. Because the way we come to this topic will always be coloured by our own peculiar set of experiences, I hope that no-one will reading this paper will hear what I'm *not* saying. *Of course* there are doctrinal non-negotiables we should be contending for in church life. *Of course* we shouldn't succumb to the postmodern myth that all beliefs are equal. I don't pretend to make the attempt to address all the issues that arise from my basic thesis. For the sake of brevity, and in the spirit of the culture of dialogue that I'm advocating in this paper, I would rather that some questions were left open to stimulate further thought and inquiry.

My purpose is to explain my understanding of the importance of dialogue in church life with a particular focus on how we handle disagreement. This is a very practical matter, but as always, our practice of ministry in the church is shaped by our foundational presuppositions about the church. That is why I begin with abstract principles before moving on to the implications for our practice.

PART ONE: TWO-AND-HALF DIFFERENT MODELS OF CHURCH AND MINISTRY

Consider these different ways of thinking about church (borrowed from Dave Stroud at Christ Church, London):

Figure 1: Bounded set model

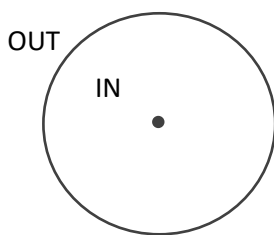


Figure 2: Centred set model

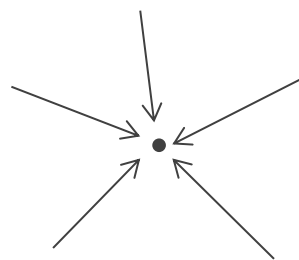
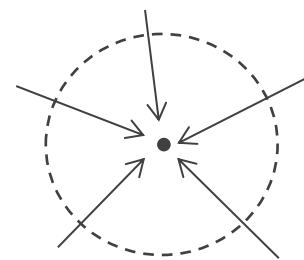


Figure 3: Bounded/centred set model



In the bounded set model (figure 1), the world is divided sharply into two categories. This paradigm leads to a binary outlook on the world, which in the church can apply at three different levels:

- i) The *individual* level: "There are those who agree with me (and are therefore correct, or orthodox in the specified way that counts) and those who don't (and are therefore incorrect, unorthodox, heretical, ignorant, stupid, confused or just plain evil)."
- ii) The *whole-church* or *congregational* level: "There are those who are In – part of us – and those who are Out, who have no part of us. Those who are In are 'sorted' (in the specified way that counts); those who are Out need sorting out so they can become just like us."

- iii) The *network* or *denominational* level: “We’re the true Church of Jesus Christ and everyone else either doesn’t see it, doesn’t get it, or is intentionally sinful.”

In the centred set model (figure 2), the central issue is not whether someone is “in” or “out”, but the trajectory they are on. In this model, everyone is on a journey, either towards Jesus or away from Jesus. When applied to church life, this model has to do with believers and seekers moving towards Jesus together. Where the bounded set model focuses on making converts, the centred set model focuses on making disciples. Rather than putting emphasis on a single “decision for Christ”, the centred set model recognises that someone’s journey is marked by many decisions. The church is a community of disciples that exists to help everyone take a next step.

Biblically, a strong case can be made for a hybrid of these two models (figure 3). There is a line of faith that we want people to cross and this is publicly celebrated at baptism. However, there remains an emphasis on the idea of *journey*, with both believers and seekers exploring the claims of Christ together.

Looking at these two-and-a-half models, which understanding of church you adopt will have implications for pretty much everything that goes on in church life, from the language used in corporate gatherings, to the way you preach, to the songs that you sing. Here, I want to draw out the particular differences between the bounded-set and centred-set models by focusing on the following:

- i) Monologue vs dialogue
- ii) Homogeneity vs diversity
- iii) Simplicity vs complexity

1. MONOLOGUE VS DIALOGUE

Bounded-set thinking will always result in monologue: “*We’ve got the answers; you’re in ignorance. We’re going to talk to you and dispel your ignorance so you can see things as we see them.*” Centred-set thinking, by contrast, encourages dialogue.

A few months ago, I was chatting to someone who attended a Sunday meeting at my church for the first time. This woman told me, “I loved the service but I have a lot of questions.” I noticed she was seeking reassurance that she was welcome among us, even if she doesn’t (yet) believe what we believe. So I said to her: “Church is a great place for your questions!”

Do we really believe that? Does your church feel comfortable with encouraging questions and creating contexts where people can work things through? There are at least two reasons why I think it’s important to create a culture of dialogue in the church:

- i) *For mission*

Our society is increasingly post-modern and post-Christian. Post-modern means that people hate anything that smacks of arrogance. We need to earn people’s trust by engaging with them. And that means dialogue.

Post-Christian means that people are typically starting their journey towards Jesus from a “long way back.” Frequently they know nothing about the Christian faith. Actually, it’s often worse than that, because people often have loads of misconceptions that need dismantling before they’re even ready to give the gospel a hearing. People need to be given time and opportunity to process, and that means they need to be invited into dialogue.

- ii) *For discipleship*

If you believe, as I do, that when Jesus said, “Go into the world and make disciples” (Matthew 28:19) he really meant it, then every local church should be a community of disciples where people are on an adventure of discovery together. All that learning, exploring and working things through can only happen where there’s dialogue.

2. HOMOGENEITY VS DIVERSITY

In the bounded-set model you’re going to have a church that is very homogenous. People are there because they accept the party line, and if they don’t accept the party-line, then one of three things is going to happen:

- i) *Open warfare*: There’s a power struggle in the church.
- ii) *People leave*, either because they are directly encouraged to do so, or the culture of the community is such that no deviation from the party line is tolerated.¹
- iii) *Differences are swept under the carpet*. People daren’t open their mouths to say what they *really* think. The church becomes a sort of mini North Korea, where everyone is expected to hold to the party line, whether or not it sits comfortably with their conscience. In this situation there’s certainly a remarkable degree of unity, but that unity comes at the expense of authenticity.

I’m drawn to an alternative vision of how we deal with our disagreements that’s expressed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. Speaking of the church’s identity as a sign to the world of peace and reconciliation, Welby says:

It doesn’t mean we all agree, it is that we find ways of disagreeing. We need to understand reconciliation within the Church as the transformation of destructive conflict, not unanimity. It doesn’t mean we all agree, it is that we find ways of disagreeing, perhaps very passionately but loving each other deeply at the same time, gracefully and deeply committed to each other.²

I find Archbishop Welby’s vision compelling, not least because the Anglican communion that he oversees has seen more than its fair share of internal disagreement over the past decade. What Welby is articulating is an understanding of the Church in which there is unity in diversity. We often talk about this in relation to gifts (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12) or race and culture (e.g. Ephesians 2 & 3), but surely the principle of unity in diversity also has implications for the opinions we hold?

Let me put it this way: is it possible to disagree passionately with a fellow believer in Christ, yet remain deeply committed to them in heart?

I think it is. Admittedly, the past two thousand years shows that the Church does not have a particularly good track record in this regard, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t invest ourselves in building church communities where people are at all different stages and hold to a variety of different perspectives. So, let’s disagree, debate and argue, and give permission to people to do this openly and honestly, while remaining absolutely committed to unity as a fundamental biblical imperative.

3. SIMPLICITY VS COMPLEXITY

Over the years I have noticed how my theological views have changed. As a young man (and a fairly hot-headed one at that), I tended not to differentiate between issues of primary and secondary

¹ This is exceedingly common. If you disagree, you leave and do your own thing: start your own church, or movement, or organisation, or ministry. It’s because of the pervasiveness of bounded-set thinking in the Church that the Protestant Church is as fragmented as it is, and the evangelical wing of the church is marred by tribalism.

² Interview for the *Traveller’s Tales* show, Premier Christian radio, 31st March 2013.

importance, or to acknowledge degrees of certainty and uncertainty in the knowledge that I held. As a result I tended to hold all my convictions with equal, fiery intensity.

As time has gone by, my experience of thinking, reading, studying, discussing and debating has made me both more sure and less sure. Some of the convictions I hold now I'm more clear on than ever before, but there are convictions that I once had which I am now ambivalent about. In other words, I am at once both more conservative and more liberal than I used to be.

What I've come to terms with is that my old binary outlook which tended to see the world in black and white (the ideological equivalent, if you like, of the bounded set model) just doesn't cut it. Many issues simply aren't black and white, but nor are they grey. God has created a world of glorious technicolour, and that means I've learned to find space for ambiguity, uncertainty and nuance in my theological outlook on the world.

I've noticed that many of us evangelical charismatics find it exceedingly difficult to allow for complexity. Our evangelicalism causes us to say "The Bible says..." and that means we're not always particularly strong on the subtleties of careful biblical interpretation ("The Bible doesn't need to be interpreted; it simply needs to be read!"). Our charismatic convictions cause us to say "God told me..." which can lead to all kinds of problems (have you ever tried to disagree with someone who's convinced that they've heard directly from God?).

In other words, evangelical charismatics tend to trade in black-and-white certainties. The problem with black-and-white certainties is that they tend to become ensrined as ideologies, and the fundamental problem with ideologies (in the words of American novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson) is that they attempt to apply a straight-edge ruler to a fractal universe.³

We live in a world that is wonderfully, gloriously complex. Creating a culture of dialogue is a result of waking up to the fact, and being at ease with degrees of uncertainty, ambiguity and doubt.

PART 2: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

1. HUMILITY AND TEACHABILITY

David Brooks writes that "Wisdom starts with epistemological modesty. The world is immeasurably complex and the private stock of reason is small."⁴ The problem is that epistemological modesty does not come naturally to us. We have a tendency to think far too highly of our personal opinions, perspectives and preferences, and often struggle to come to terms with the particular blind spots that cloud our judgement.

John Burke writes that "creating a culture of dialogue means letting everyone know it's okay to be in process."⁵ That includes those of us who are leaders. We have much to learn, and the only way our own viewpoints can be checked, scrutinised and challenged is if we open ourselves up to the perspectives of others. As Tom Wright puts it: "True wisdom is both bold and humble. It is never afraid to say what it thinks it has seen but always covets other angles of vision."⁶

For me personally, this means consciously enlarging my circle of friends and acquaintances to create opportunities to engage with people who see things differently to me, and intentionally diversifying my reading. Some of the most significant sparring partners in my life are people who I've never met, but whose ideas and ways of looking at the world I've still been able to encounter through the books that they've written.

³ *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, p. 49.

⁴ *The Road to Character*

⁵ *No Perfect People Allowed*, p. 56.

⁶ *Surprised by Scripture*, p. 159.

2. TRUST

Why is it that, by and large, churches are filled with monologue rather than dialogue? Those of us who carry leadership responsibility would do well to reflect on whether the reason why so many of us find creating a culture of dialogue difficult is because it directly challenges our innate, twisted desire to control. We would do well to heed John Burke's challenge:

Culture creation that allows dialogue requires immense trust in God. It requires letting go of the need to fix, change, or control others' beliefs or actions. It requires trusting that God's Spirit can work behind the scenes in people's hearts as we create a culture where they are free to question, doubt, and explore faith at their own pace. This shifts the burden to changing people back where it belongs – with God alone.⁷

3. VOICING REAL QUESTIONS

Helping every person take a next step entails taking people's questions seriously. This means providing contexts in which those questions can be "brought into the open" and addressed. Tim Keller offers the following advice to preachers who want to become more effective at serving people in the room who aren't yet followers of Jesus:

Directly address and welcome them. Talk regularly to "those of you who aren't sure you believe this, or who aren't sure just what you believe." Give them many asides, even expressing the language of their hearts. Articulate their objections to Christian living and belief better than they can do it themselves. Express sincere sympathy for their difficulties, even when challenging them severely for their selfishness and unbelief. Admonish with tears (literally or figuratively). Always grant whatever degree of merit their objections have. It is extremely important that the unbeliever feel you understand them.⁸

4. ENCOURAGE "CONTEND AND TRANSCEND"

Alan Hirsch uses this phrase which originally comes from Richard Pascale.⁹ "Contend" refers to disagreement, debate and dialogue. "Transcend" means that people collectively agree that what unites them is more significant than anything which threatens to divide. There is clear, stated agreement among Christian brothers and sisters to remain committed to one another in familial love.

Building a culture of dialogue in the church begins with leaders modelling this. As an elder who serves in a leadership team, I love it when the whole eldership team immediately agrees on this or that matter. I am also learning to love it when we don't.

I've observed that it can be helpful to tell the church when the elders don't agree. Sometimes – and, note, I'm not advocating this in all situations – it makes the church feel more secure. Now the church knows that the leadership doesn't simply consist of a primary leader with his "Yes men."

Encouraging contend and transcend should go beyond leaders' meetings. When a significant, contentious or difficult matter is brought to the church, we should make a point of encouraging questions and providing opportunities for divergent opinions to be expressed to the leadership. Church members should be given significant time to process significant changes and told how they can make their voices heard.

⁷ *No Perfect People Allowed*, p. 54.

⁸ *Evangelistic Worship*, p. 8.

⁹ *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 175.

5. TEACHING DIFFICULT OR CONTENTIOUS AREAS

I am like anyone else: I have heartfelt convictions about a plethora of secondary issues.¹⁰ But I'm not called to preach my opinions and fill the world with people who agree with me. I'm called to preach Christ and Him crucified and give people the tools to engage with God's Word for themselves.

So, how should we teach difficult or contentious areas? Let's consider two different categories of issues:

i) Secondary issues on which it is necessary for a church to have a position or policy (e.g. "what we believe about who can preach in this church")

In such cases, the church leaders should teach their conviction, but ensure that people hear the message that they have permission to disagree with the leaders (and that humble disagreement with the leaders does not preclude them from church membership or serving in the church).

ii) Secondary issues on which it's not necessary for a church to have a position or policy (e.g. "what we should believe about creation and evolution")

In these cases, leaders should be especially careful to distinguish between "my personal convictions" (or even "our personal convictions") and "the position of this church." A range of views should be presented, the differences between them clearly articulated, and people encouraged to work things through for themselves.

Where our week-by-week preaching is concerned, if there's a part of the Bible that affords more than one interpretation among members of the scholarly evangelical community, and that issue has implications for how one understands the passage or doctrine as a whole, I consider it the duty of the preacher to pause in the message and acknowledge the existence of multiple views before expressing the rationale for the preacher's own view. That is far preferable to the preacher riding roughshod over areas of significant disagreement and pressing his or her own opinion on the congregation, because it misses out on a significant opportunity to model how to handle the Bible well.

6. REMEMBER THERE IS A TIME TO CHALLENGE

Recall that the hybrid model we looked at earlier includes a line. It really exists. When Jesus came, he challenged the Pharisaic, bounded-set thinking of his day. But the same Jesus also warned: "If you're not for me, then you're against me."¹¹ In the final analysis, you're either a sheep, or a goat.¹² Nothing matters more than how people respond to Jesus. Consequently, there is a time for dialogue and a time for challenge. Wisdom means knowing the difference.

Andrew Sampson, November 2015

¹⁰ This section raises the question: How do we differentiate between what's primary and what's secondary? This is a difficult area, but for what it's worth, I'm inclined to take the Nicene Creed and Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith as my starting points for identifying what's primary.

¹¹ Matthew 12:30; Luke 11:23.

¹² Matthew 25:31ff.