
Agree to Disagree?

**an article from the Cathedral Times
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler**

"Well, I suppose we must just agree to disagree." You've certainly heard those words as often as I have. I began to hear that phrase the instant I learned how to hold an opinion. I quickly discovered that when I held an opinion, on just about any topic, there was someone around willing to dispute it. After some sound exchanges, the two of us would depart each other with that kind of remark: "we'll just agree to disagree."

When I was in college, I became known as a defender, and apologist, for the orthodox Christian faith. What a role that was! While almost every college student loves a late night philosophical argument, the discussions we had about Christianity in 1970's California were especially vigorous. I enjoyed those times. I considered that God was calling me to be a witness. I even offered classes to other Christians on "How to Explain and Defend Your Faith."

I took some heat in those days. It surprised me that many non-Christians were genuinely and personally offended that I was a Christian. With public ridicule and scorn, they considered the entire Christian enterprise morally and intellectually wrong. They were viscerally angry about it. To this day, I do not know what kept them arguing. For me, it was Christian duty to keep arguing the faith; but I do not know what motivated them. We certainly never "agreed to disagree." We didn't agree on anything. In fact, there was nothing except "the college experience" that held us together.

Today, however, in many of our households and families --and in many of our churches-- we do hear that phrase, on a regular basis. "Well, let's just agree to disagree." It serves as a polite way to end the conversation. So be it. But I do not think it is quite accurate, because I do not think any of us ever likes to disagree. To disagree is usually something we would rather not do. When I leave a discussion or conflict, I am not really "agreeing to disagree."

Instead, what most of us really do is "agree to hold on to each other." That is certainly the case in families. In a family disagreement, we may say we agree to disagree, but what we are implicitly saying is that we agree to stay together. We agree to stay in relationship. This argument, this difference of opinion, whatever it is, is not strong enough to divide us.

The "best disagreements" are precisely between people who are in relationship with each other. It is because they take each other so seriously that they are willing to continue the conversation. For instance, it is not much for me to disagree with someone across the country, because I do not have to be in daily relationship with that person. If I am arguing, however, with my wife -with someone to whom I have committed my life- then that conversation/argument is going to continue. We are not merely "agreeing to disagree." We are actually agreeing to hold on to each other.

To hold on to each other means continuing to be willing to engage one another. It means to take one another seriously enough to continue the conversation. It means acknowledging that there is something that holds together, which is deeper than whatever we are arguing about.

Christians, and the churches which contain us, have always had things to disagree about. I wish that were not the case, but it is an historical fact. Sometimes, I think it is a miracle that the Christian Church continues to exist at all. But it does. Like I often said in my apologetics classes, the continuation of the Church itself may be one of the strongest proofs for the existence of God!

The Spirit of God, in Jesus is that "something deeper" which holds us together. The Spirit of God, in Jesus Christ, manages

to hold folks together whom I would never be able to hold together. Finally, the Spirit of God, in Jesus Christ, always seems to reconcile folks so that neither of two parties "wins." Rather it is God who "wins." That's what I am praying for now in the Episcopal Church. That is what I pray for when I know that marital relationships are in trouble. I do not want one side or another to "win." I want us to stay together so that God can win.

On occasion, God gives me a glimpse of what it will be like one day in the kingdom of God. One such occasion was this past Sunday, when this Cathedral was packed with folks for "Rally Day," the beginning of our Fall programs together. What a glorious morning that was! Thank you! Some of us in the household of God are in various sorts of disagreement. But when we cling together --when we pray, worship, and serve together-- an amazing thing happens: God wins, and the kingdom of God is that much closer.

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