

Danville news Column
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"A Model for Conflict"
April 2, 2010
Word Count: 750

The question occasionally arises whether or not husbands and wives should be allowed to serve in church leadership positions simultaneously. Is that too much authority vested in one family? My flippant reply also tends to be my candid one: "Well, I've rarely known a husband and wife to agree on anything, so sure, why not?"

Churches are curious, paradoxical gatherings. The healthiest congregations represent a mixed bag of opinions, views, experiences. The saddest are places of conformity and stifled disagreement.

During the last presidential election, one of our members was invited to greet Vice-president Cheney at a rally by singing the national anthem. At that precise moment, another member of our church was being arrested for protesting Bush's policies. Next Sunday they worshipped a pew apart. Both love God and country.

Sometimes we forget that there is no single sanctioned Christian political or social viewpoint and that the person worshipping beside you may very well hold widely opposing opinions.

This became dramatized last week during Bible Study. Several participants began voicing distaste for Obama's administration, alleging that our government is turning socialistic. Someone else contested that view, asking whose administration do they think caused our huge debt? Tempers warmed. Bible study opened into an object lesson, for the text studied recounted how the leaders of certain synagogues were frightened and offended by Apostle Paul's new message. What could have been a spiritual 'win-win,' benefiting all, devolved into 'win-lose.' Their contempt for Paul gave them ready justification to start hurling stones until they hoped him dead. How quickly love of God or country can become corrupted into agenda driven madness.

A resource we use for divided and battling churches sketches out five levels of conflict. The first two levels

are the ordinary: 1) PROBLEM SOLVING and 2) DISAGREEMENT, where reason and fact prevail. The tipping point is 3) CONTEST, where information starts getting distorted, personal attacks escalate, issues get mixed up with personalities, where what matters is my side winning. Next comes 4) FIGHT-FLIGHT, with camps solidified, opponents treated as enemies and villains, the possibility of inner change rejected, ultimately petrifying into 5) INTRACTABLE, with its murderous symptoms: disrespectful rhetoric, vindictive ridicule, absence of civility, obsession, no emotional control. If I'm going to lose, I'm damn sure pulling you down with me.

Look around your pews. There are good Christians who heartily support the recent health care legislation, just as there are good Christians who think it perilous and foolhardy. There are those in our churches who opposed ever getting into the Iraq war, citing how the White House falsified reports. Other members believe the invasion of Iraq justified, necessary, and a demonstration of American greatness. There are those in our churches who believe America has much to apologize for throughout this world, and that such humility serves us better than hubris; and there are those who argue that despite our flaws we bow to no man and can hold up our heads with integrity. In every church there sit in our pews women who chose to exercise their right for an abortion; and there are those who vehemently oppose this as a violation of life's sanctity. There are those in our churches who view Glenn Beck an absolute loon for urging Christians to exit any church that advocates social justice, defending how social justice was for the prophets an accurate barometer of a people's faithfulness; and there are those who applaud Beck for having the guts to expose these as code words for nefarious intent.

So, anybody who assumes there is one Christian viewpoint addressing today's political and social issues ought to seriously reconsider. There is no one true Christian party-line, except for the party-line occasioned by today, Good Friday. This dread day, above all other days, warns Christians of what evil results whenever prideful self-righteousness combines with power.

Christ was killed on the cross not by bad men but by good men convinced they were doing good, protecting their faith, doing what was honorable, right, and necessary. They

thought they were using their power and position for justified ends. That's who killed and who still kills Jesus.

If we cannot raise our level of discussion to one of mutual respect, debating issues, collaborating to solve serious problems, setting aside party interest, God help our consciences. If we cannot avoid hateful and intractable derision, emotionalism, sanctimony, toxic prejudice, and rejection of reason, God help our country. If we can't model loving one another at Bible study, God help our churches.