

when Christians disagree

Laurence Crutchlow asks why we disagree and suggests some solutions

They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company...'
(Acts 15:39).

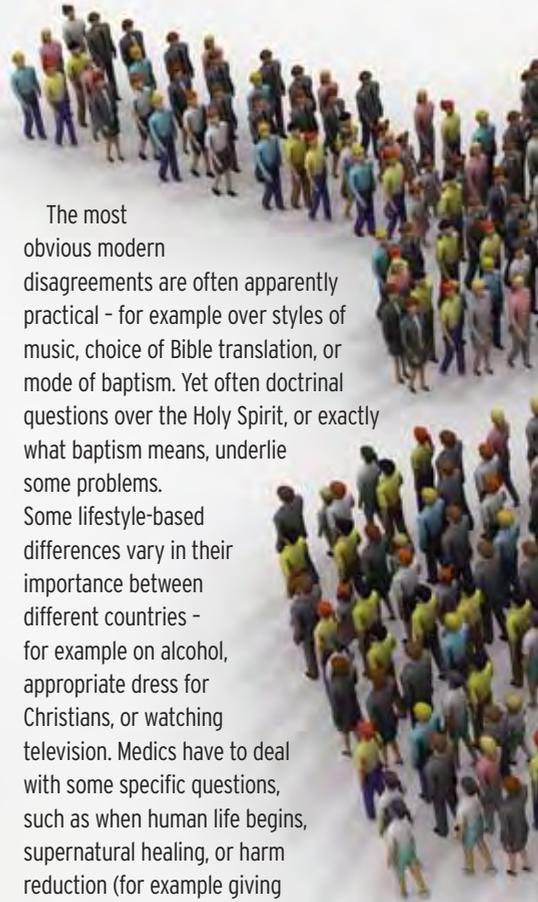
Disagreement is common. We're used to seeing politicians wag their fingers across the despatch box, or to hearing differing opinions about how best to treat a patient. But sometimes we assume that none of this will happen in the Christian world. After all, we have so much in common, don't we?

So we might expect the quote from Acts at the top to refer to those who persecuted the early Church, or to new believers. Does it surprise you to learn that the protagonists are Paul and Barnabas? Yes, the same Paul who wrote 13 New Testament books. The same Barnabas who taught with Paul at Antioch, where the term 'Christian' first arose (Acts 11:19-30).

Paul and Barnabas were not alone. Other famous disagreements in the New Testament include that between Paul and Peter over Gentiles following Jewish customs (Galatians 2:11-21), within the Corinthian church over who followed which leader (1 Corinthians 3), and that between Euodia and Syntyche in Philippi (Philippians 4:2).

today's disagreements

Has anything changed? After all, there have been nearly 2,000 years of church history to resolve disputes. Yet there seem to be more Christian denominations than ever.¹ Topics raised at a seminar on this subject at CMF's 2012 National Student Conference included women bishops, shopping on Sundays, homosexuality, and rituals in church, along with medical questions such as contraception.



The most obvious modern disagreements are often apparently practical - for example over styles of music, choice of Bible translation, or mode of baptism. Yet often doctrinal questions over the Holy Spirit, or exactly what baptism means, underlie some problems.

Some lifestyle-based differences vary in their importance between different countries - for example on alcohol, appropriate dress for Christians, or watching television. Medics have to deal with some specific questions, such as when human life begins, supernatural healing, or harm reduction (for example giving methadone to heroin addicts), and not everyone agrees on the answers.

why do Christians disagree?

Sometimes we don't agree on the basis for Christian truth and knowledge. If the Bible is not seen as the supreme authority in matters of faith and conduct, differences are inevitable. We'll consider this first, and then turn to trickier questions over why Christians who do accept the Bible, as the ultimate authority, still disagree.



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do we believe the Bible?

A detailed defence of why we should trust the Bible as God's word is beyond the scope of this article² - but, in short, we believe the Bible to be true because Jesus believed it to be, and gave his authority to it. We can be confident that the copies we have are faithful to the originals,³ and that the words of Jesus were faithfully recorded (John 14:26).

Although we often assume it is just 'liberal' theologians

who don't believe the Bible, we need to ask ourselves whether we really use it as 'the supreme authority in matters of faith and conduct',⁴ or whether we quietly discard it when it says something difficult.

we believe the Bible but we still disagree

There are three main reasons why people who trust in the Bible still disagree - we'll briefly consider each.

knowing what the Bible says

The Bible contains 66 books, written by 40 authors over a period of 1,400 years. There are numerous genres of writing, some of which are rarely seen today (notably apocalyptic writing),⁵ and a lot of words (774,747 - though it depends on language and version of course!).⁶ So it is not surprising that we don't always know exactly what it says without doing some research.

One common reason for not knowing what the Bible says is that we haven't read it! In the same seminar at CMF National Student Conference, less than a third of participants had read every book of the Bible once, and only a handful had read through it all more than once. Let's at least ensure before confidently saying 'The Bible says ...' that we have read

it all. Four chapters a day is enough to read the Old Testament once and New Testament twice over a year. Free plans to help you are available from the CMF Office,⁷ or as part of many Bible apps for smartphones.⁸

authorities outside Scripture

These fall into three categories - church teaching and tradition, reason, and personal experience. All may be helpful in themselves, but are not infallible. If any of these are placed above Scripture as an authority, conflict may ensue.

Church teaching covers everything from ancient texts like the Apostle's Creed, through to

modern local and national Church leaders. It also includes Christian books, CMF literature, and discussions with friends and family. Of course the Holy Spirit can use all these sources to help us better understand God's word. But people can of course be wrong - even Peter had to be corrected by Paul (Galatians 2:11). So all teaching needs to be checked against Scripture. In this digital age we need to be particularly careful of teaching posted online where we may have little or no knowledge of who is teaching us.

Reason is of course important. God's new covenant will be written on our hearts,⁹ and we need to use reason if weighing teaching or prophecy. But as fallen creatures, our conscience can be blunted, and our reasoning may be fallible. 'I have an inner peace about this' can actually mean 'I do this wrong thing so often it no longer bothers me' (cf 1 Timothy 4:2). We can be manipulated - 'I feel convicted of' may mean 'someone keeps telling me I shouldn't ...'. Scripture is again the only yardstick - and reasoning that has come from God will not contradict it.

Personal experience encompasses prophecy and 'words of knowledge'. Such things were common enough in the New Testament. Whether or not these things operate today (and if so how) is itself a frequent matter of disagreement between Christians! However we answer such questions, true prophecy will exalt Christ (1 John 4:1-3), edify the church (1 Corinthians 14:4), and be accompanied by a godly life (Matthew 7:15-20). It must be tested against Scripture (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). Anything claiming to be 'from the Lord' that contradicts Scripture is wrong.

Interpreting the Bible

Usually the subject of whole terms at

theological colleges rather than a single paragraph, this is complex!¹⁰ In short, the Bible is authoritative as originally

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given, rather than in one particular translation. Not every action is affirmed - the fact that David was a great leader does not mean that we should follow his example of adultery with Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11). The Bible is not exhaustive. Though it tells us what we need to know for our salvation, it won't answer every question we have. Historical and textual context is vital. Not all commands are for everyone at all times. This is most obvious with the sacrificial laws in Leviticus - but similar mistakes can be made with the New Testament, particularly with Acts (about which I've previously written in *Nucleus*).¹¹ Disagreement is common when interpretation of certain passages is disputed - as is common in debates over women's ministry. In such cases, studying the passages concerned together will at least help us to understand the others' position, even if our opinion doesn't change.

how do we deal with disagreements?

Assuming some disagreement to be inevitable, how can we continue to worship and witness together when there are problems? There is no easy answer, but the following approaches will help.

listen, listen, listen

Do we actually know what the disagreement is? Labels used to describe people's positions often don't help. Some immediately assume that anyone who doesn't agree with their interpretation of the Bible therefore doesn't respect the Bible's authority, and term them 'liberal' - often offending them, and closing off discussion. Not all words mean the same thing to everyone. 'Creationist' may simply mean someone who believes God created the world, but increasingly it is used to define someone who holds to a literal 'six-day' reading of Genesis 1. We need to ask questions, and genuinely listen to the answers, before going further. At least some disagreements will turn out to be misunderstandings.

Levels of disagreement

Some disagreements matter less than others. Disputes over whether a Christian should play rugby on a Sunday are very different from questions over whether Jesus physically rose from the dead. I would suggest four 'categories' of disagreement, with an example of each:

1. A different gospel - a really fundamental departure from orthodox Bible teaching that puts faith at risk. Paul and Peter's disagreement over Jewish customs in Galatians 2 falls into this category. A modern example might be that of David Jenkins, formerly Bishop of Durham, who famously questioned the physical nature of the resurrection. Many groups like CMF or UCCF have a 'doctrinal basis' that outlines what they believe to avoid falling into this category.
2. 'Brother or sister, you're wrong' - issues where there is a disagreement over something important, but there is no question of 'a different gospel'. Many of the issues addressed in 1 Corinthians fall into this category. Today this would encompass issues where there are clear answers in Scripture, such as sexual conduct - even though we acknowledge that sometimes believers don't agree on what the answers are. The overall rights and wrongs of many medical issues fall into this category; Scripture is clear about the value of life, for example.
3. Issues where disagreements are expected and conscience is important - the discussion in Romans 14 over meat sacrificed to idols illustrates this. The actual issue didn't appear to matter too much, but the response to it was vital. An issue that might seem irrelevant to us may be deeply sensitive for other believers, and we need to respect sensibilities in these situations. Modern examples are drinking alcohol, or exact amounts of financial giving. Medically, practical responses often fall into this category - for example most CMF members would say that abortion is wrong in principle, but may disagree over exactly how

involved a Christian doctor can be in the abortion process.

4. Issues that really don't matter very much - the Bible is not exhaustive. Some issues are just not worth bothering about. This might be 'idle curiosity' issues, such as life on other planets, or simple matters like 'which topping do I order on my pizza?' Yet we've all met people who do appear to try to 'spiritualise' these things. If Scripture is genuinely silent on the matter, then disagreements are likely.

common hazards

Using categories helps us sort out what is important and what is not. But we often get categories wrong. 'Hard-liners' tend to push issues up a category, whilst others may push issues down a category. Paul suggests a relatively small number of things should be in category one:

'For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.' (1 Corinthians 15:3-5)

We need to avoid making disputes over clearly secondary issues into 'different gospels'. In medical ethics, a more common problem is assuming that all issues are in category three - 'matters of disagreement'. Although you can't look up cloning or euthanasia in a concordance, the Bible has much to say about the value of human life. So often the underlying rights and

Want to know more?

CMF held a day conference on this topic in Oxford in November 2011. Links to recordings can be found at www.cmf.org.uk/media

wrongs of these issues are in the second category, even if practical details may be in the third.

grace and future hope

Not all disputes will go away! Even if we've listened, looked at Scripture together and realised that maybe the dispute isn't as important as we thought, it may still be there. We need to be gracious to one another. Paul tells Timothy to be kind and gentle in his handling of a very serious dispute (2 Timothy 2:14-26). How much more then, must we display these characteristics when dealing with disagreements between believers who have so much in common.

I often wonder if some of the questions over which I see disagreement will be answered in heaven. Some of them might be of course, but I've increasingly come to see that whether or not I get a perfect answer will pale into insignificance when I see God dwelling with us, and he himself being the light of heaven (Revelation 21:3,23). It is in this context of a future together in God's presence that disagreements between Christians here on earth must ultimately be seen. ■

1. Bunn A. Heroes and Heretics 7. *Nucleus* 2012; Spring:36
2. For a fuller treatment see cmf.Ji/yfXSQF
3. For a fuller treatment see cmf.Ji/zjW0e9
4. CMF membership basis
5. Much of Daniel, Revelation and parts of Ezekiel bit.ly/qJ4DWh
7. cmf.Ji/x8tZjo
8. Blackwood C. The YouVersion Bible App. *Nucleus* 2011; Summer:13
9. Jeremiah 31:31-34
10. For a fuller treatment see cmf.Ji/A7VMy7
11. cmf.Ji/yAMUnj