

A Sermon on Engaging Theological Conflict

This is a sermon I preached at the 2019 Ancient Evangelical Future Conference at Trinity School for Ministry.

Luke 20:27-21:4



This morning's lectionary reading from Luke's gospel consists of a number of stories about conflict between Jesus and different opponents. Each one of these could be the subject of a sermon in itself. In Cyril of Alexandria's *Commentary on Luke*, Cyril preaches three different sermons on what for us this morning is a single reading. I don't have time to preach three sermons, but I don't intend to focus on only one of the conflicts in which Jesus is involved in this passage either. Instead, I want to focus on the issue of conflict itself. Each one of the conflicts in which Jesus is engaged is essentially about a theological disagreement, and I am going to suggest that in this morning's lectionary reading, Jesus provides an ideal example of how to deal with theological disagreement. We live in a culture that does not handle conflict very well, but, more to the point, this is a theological conference in which Christians of different theological traditions are gathered, so there are certainly issues of theological disagreement among us. Yet, this is also

an ecumenical conference, in which, despite not agreeing on everything, we presumably believe that we agree enough on some things that we can meet together both to engage in mutually beneficial discussion and to worship. So how does Jesus address theological conflict in these stories?

In the first conflict story, Jesus encounters some Sadducees, a Jewish group who disagreed with the Pharisees in that they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Jesus' Sadducee opponents engage in a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. They try to discredit the notion of resurrection by showing that if taken to its logical extreme, resurrection would lead to absurd results. They tell the story of a woman whose husband dies. Under the principle of levirate marriage, found in Deuteronomy 25, the brother of a man who had died was obligated to marry his brother's widow in order that the man would not have died without heirs, but also as a form of financial security for the widow. The central plot of the book of Ruth in the Old Testament revolves around this practice. As the Sadducees tell the story, the woman marries the surviving brother, but he dies as well. The widow keeps marrying brothers, all of whom die, and then finally she dies. This leads to a question with all of the sophistication of a social media debate: If there is a resurrection, out of the seven brothers, whose wife would the woman be?

So how does Jesus address the conflict? First, Jesus does not simply dismiss the concerns of his opponents; rather, by getting to the heart of the problem, he finds a way to transcend the issue of disagreement. The problem with the Sadducees is that their imagination is too limited, and their focus is too narrow. They cannot imagine a world in which Levirate marriage is not practiced. Jesus responds to their concern by pointing out that after the resurrection, there will be no more death, and thus no more need for sexual reproduction to continue to replace the population of those who have died. After the resurrection, Jesus says, marriage

will no longer exist, and so the objection has no basis.

Jesus then transcends the issue of disagreement by making clear that the Sadducees have focused on the wrong concern. Resurrection is not about the survival of social institutions like marriage, but about the nature of God. What kind of God is the God of the Bible? The God of the Bible is the God of life, and he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If there is no resurrection, then Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are no more, and God's purposes will have been defeated. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. So Jesus' first prescription for dealing with theological conflict is not to get distracted with superficial concerns, but rather to focus on the one thing that is most important. What is God doing? What are his purposes? Why does this matter?

Following the conflict with the Sadducees, Jesus raises the stakes by himself addressing a question to his hearers. Jesus quotes a passage from Psalm 110: "The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." The context of the question presumes three things: first, the Old Testament belief that the Messiah would be a descendant of David who would reestablish David's kingdom; second, the traditional notion that David is the author of this Psalm; third, the notion that, in the Psalm, the reference to "my Lord" is a reference to the coming Messiah. Jesus asks the question: if David refers to the Messiah as "my Lord," how is this Messiah also David's son, since, presumably king David would be greater than any one of his descendants? The point is not that Jesus is not the promised Messiah, the "Son of David." All early Christians affirmed that! At the beginning of Luke's gospel in which this conflict story appears, the angel Gabriel appears to the virgin Mary, and announces about Jesus: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no

end" (Luke 1:32-33). So the question is not about whether Jesus is the Messiah or is the Son of David. Rather, as Cyril of Alexandria says in his commentary, the point is that "Christ the Savior of all is at once both the Son and the Lord of David."

This leads to Jesus' second principle for dealing with theological conflict. The basic disagreement between Jesus and his opponents concerned identity. Who was this Jewish carpenter from Nazareth? Certainly neither the Sadducees nor the Pharisees believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Son of David. But the question by which Jesus ups the ante makes clear that the stakes are even higher. Jesus is not only the Son of David, but also the Lord of David. As Cyril says in his commentary, that Jesus is both David's Son and David's Lord means that Jesus is both the Word of God, of one substance with the Father, and that he is perfect man who has become like us in flesh and form like.

The second principle of dealing with theological conflict is then the principle of christocentricity. As human, Jesus is one particular human being among others, but as God become human, his identity is uniquely universal; as the Word of God, the Second person of the Trinity through whom God created everything that exists, Jesus' identity alone is capable of providing the answer to every question, and encompassing all reality. So the second principle of dealing with theological conflict is that it is in the person of Jesus Christ as God become human that all theological conflicts necessarily find their resolution. If the first principle of theological conflict is to address the question, "What is God doing?" the second is to ask the question, "What is God doing in Christ?"

Finally, we look to the third way that Jesus addressed conflict. In any given conflict, there are inevitably at least two parties in disagreement. In the conflict stories this morning, the conflicting parties include the Sadducees and the Pharisees, two groups who were not only in conflict with

Jesus, but also with each other, but also the group surrounding Jesus, his disciples. Conflicts are not only disagreements about ideas, but conflicts between groups. And group conflict contributes inevitably to group identity, as each group comes more and more to identity itself not only by what it is but also in opposition to those whom it is not – the other group. Partisan conflicts are not a new thing. We see the same problem in 1 Corinthians when Paul addresses feuding Christians, some of whom said “I follow Paul,” others claimed to follow Apollos or Cephas, and some, the most high-minded presumably, claimed that they followed Christ (1 Cor. 1:12).

At the end of Luke 20, and the beginning of Luke 21, we find two parallel stories. In the first, Jesus speaks to his disciples, one group, and warns them about another group, the “scribes” or “teachers of the law.” Characteristically, this latter group loves the trappings of religious status. They “have the best seats in the synagogues,” they have “places of honor at banquets.” At the same time, however, that this group makes a show of lengthy prayers, they also “devour widows’ houses” (Luke 20: 46-47).

Then follows the story in which one of these widows appears, and she puts the gift of two small copper coins into the temple treasury. Jesus praises this widow, who is clearly being contrasted with those he had criticized. In contrast to those who receive honor at banquets, her small gift is more than that of all the wealthy who gave to the temple because “she out of all her poverty has put in all she had to live on” (Luke 21:3-4).

Significantly, in Jesus’s conflict with the “scribes” against whom he had just warned his disciples, he did not engage in what we now call “group-identity politics.” In a conflict with those who really were Jesus’ enemies, he did not use the conflict as a means of buttressing the identity of his own group, the disciples. Jesus did not encourage his disciples to

find their identity as a group in that they were *not* Sadducees or Pharisees or scribes of the law. Rather, Jesus praises a poor widow, a marginalized outsider, who is not a Sadducee, not a Pharisee or a scribe, but she is also not one of the disciples of Jesus. She is not a member of any of the groups involved in the conflict at all.

This leads to the third way in which Jesus addresses conflict, that concerning group identity. If the nature of groups is to preserve their own power, and in cases of conflict to buttress their identity by contrasting themselves with others, Jesus identifies the nature of the church, the group he calls to be his disciples, in a very different way, the way exemplified by the poor widow with the two copper coins. The characteristic mark of the disciple of Jesus is not holding on to power, but renouncing it. In Mark 9:35, Jesus responds to the question some of his disciples ask him about which of them is the greatest: "If anyone would be first of all, he must be last of all and servant of all." Again, the characteristic attitude of Jesus' disciples toward those who are outsiders to their community, is not to be competition, but mission. Jesus points to his own example, and finally to the cross, to explain what it means to be a member of the community of his disciples: "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:44-45).

We then conclude with the third principle that Jesus brings to theological conflict, that concerning group identity. Christians are as prone to group-identity conflicts as anyone else. We identify ourselves by denominations – Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic, Orthodox, Baptist, Methodist – or by churchmanship – Evangelical, Catholic, charismatic. Even attempts toward ecumenism can become just one more group-identity label: "I'm an Evangelical Catholic" or a "Catholic Evangelical" can mean that I am not one of those benighted Protestants who does not understand anything before the Reformation.

But if we are going to take seriously the pattern of Jesus, this is not allowed. For followers of Jesus, any corporate identity that is not oriented toward service and mission has missed the point. That does not mean that there will be no conflicts, no disagreements between Christians. But it does mean that our conflicts must be handled differently. If the first principle of addressing theological conflict and disagreement is theocentricity, "What is the nature of God, and what is God doing here?," and the second is christocentricity, "What is God doing in Christ?," then the third must be ecclesiological, "How can we who are members of the church – even the divided church – serve another, and how will we find our identity not simply in mission to ourselves, but to those who are outside the church?" Anglican Archbishop William Temple is known for the statement, "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members." We may have heard that so many times that it has become hackneyed, but it is nonetheless true.

These then are three ways in which Jesus' own example sheds light on how to address conflict, including theological conflict between Christians. Simply as principles, they will not resolve any of our disagreements; after all, those who disagreed with Jesus crucified him. But they do provide guidance as to how we should go about disagreeing with one another. And to the extent that we follow Jesus' example, who knows what the results might be?