

About Conversations with People We Disagree With

Not surprisingly, General Assembly is much on my mind and I have been on a kick reading about how to have conversations with people we disagree with. Olli-Pekka Vainio in *Disagreeing Virtuously: Religious Conflict in Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Eerdmans, 2017) quotes the Oxford scholar Nigel Biggar:

“The way churches conduct their own internal controversies is a vital test of their own integrity, a vital part of their witness to the rest of the world, and a vital part of their contribution to its [the world’s] wellbeing.”

Biggar goes on to argue that controversies are: “major opportunities for the Christian churches to become what they should be, to embody what they believe, to bear theological witness in the manner of their being, and to offer a salutary and hopeful example to the rest of the world.”

I come to the end of quotes like that nodding my head in agreement and saying to myself what does that look like in my behaviour, in my practice of being part of the church community. Fortunately Biggar answers that question in detail. (Biggar uses “she” and “he” to distinguish between the subject and the other.)

“The Christian will regard the other as a fellow creature who also stands in relationship to God, but whose relationship is immediate, inimitable, and different from her own. She will recognize that the other’s vocation is uniquely the other’s. She will cede the other space, acknowledging his difference. She will approach him as a potential prophet, as one who might yet mediate a true word of God. In this theological sense, therefore she will respect the other as equal – and yet not the same. She will not assume that he has nothing worth saying. She will not presume to know what the other thinks before she has first bothered to inquire and listen. She will not stereotype or caricature him. She will not assimilate him into some ideal type, for example, “liberal,” or “modernist” or “conservative” or “fundamentalist.” Instead, she will listen to his particular, complex, idiosyncratic, and unpredictable views, which refuse easy accommodation in any prefabricated box. She will respect the other by taking him as he actually comes.”

An interesting exercise is replacing the words “the Christian” and “she” with “I” – and replacing “the other” and “he” with “they/them/theirs” (as fits grammatically). Understanding that “they/them” are our opponents, those we are in conflict with.

I will leave it at that.

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