

Healthy Debate

Session Starter #22

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Prayer

Based on Psalm 133

“How very good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity.” God of peace, despite our differences, may we be united in Christ and by our desire to serve well as his body in the world today. Guide our thoughts, words and actions. In the name of our saviour we pray. Amen.

Introduction

Every speaker addresses the moderator, and may not address any other member directly.

Book of Forms, 52

Scripture

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.

Acts 15:1-2 NRSV

A Brief Commentary

The hot-button item on this “Doctrine Committee’s” agenda was whether or not circumcision was a compulsory step on the road to salvation. “No small dissension and debate” resulted. Paul and Barnabas were then commissioned to take the subject up with the “higher court” in Jerusalem.

Reflection

It is intriguing to imagine the debate briefly described in Acts. Other translations describe it as “a fierce argument,” “a good deal of argument” and “a sharp dispute.” No doubt, great passion was expressed on every side of the issue. Maybe tempers flared and reasoned discussion turned into shouting matches.

Many of us have witnessed debates of every kind ranging from bored apathy to something more akin to the “no small dissension” of Acts where flushed faces and angry words mark deliberations.

It is important for sessions to engage in debate. Elders will usually unanimously agree on straightforward agenda issues, but the more complicated issues need, and deserve, to be discussed thoroughly. It can be helpful to hear a variety of perspectives that grow out of the varied knowledge and experience of the elders. After considering the input, the session can be more confident it has reached a God-honouring position.

Supposedly it was former U.S. president George W. Bush who said, “If we both agree, one of us isn’t necessary.” Depending on the context, this may or may not be true, but at least it serves as a reminder that expressing differing points of view can be helpful. Elders ought to be encouraged to share their opinion if it has not already been expressed by someone else.

The *Book of Forms* reference reminds us that, as Presbyterians, we strive to keep our debates orderly. Elders are encouraged to address the moderator rather than one another. I believe this is meant to keep the debate focused on the issues rather than on the personalities of the debaters. We ought, at every level of court discussion, to use respectful language so as to treat one another courteously as we strive to discern the mind of Christ together.

Discussion

1. Do our elders feel comfortable expressing differing points of view? If not, why is this? (Invite each elder to answer.)
2. How might our session encourage greater participation of elders in discussion?