

# DISAGREEING WELL

Matt 18:12-18

LF 01/07/18

## 1 INTRODUCTION

I have no visual aids this morning; Just stories which I hope will take us to the heart of where Jesus wants us to be.

### 1.1 Context

My title is “*Disagreeing Well*”, but from what I see in vv 15-17. I would call it “*Procedure for orderly confrontation.*” Speak privately: Go with witnesses: Involve the Church.

At first sight, the lost sheep story does not seem to fit with all this, but I had a reason for requesting it. It is because Matthew 18 is all about relationships. It starts with a question “Who will be greatest in your kingdom? It ends with forgiving. And in the middle there is joyfulness in rescue and restoration.

So in this context, I see the confrontation procedure, not as a cold judicial process, but as action born of caring concern. Notice that Jesus was realistic. He knew that sometimes it may fail. We have had our own sad times over that, and people have been hurt. But whatever happens, my reading of Verse 18 is this: **Heaven is watching. Heaven has confidence in our caring.**

I take issue with two words in the passage that Richard read. Some NIV versions have “*If your brother sins against you.*” In the most reliable manuscripts the words ‘against you’ are not there. This is not about redress for personal injury; it is about caring concern for a friend when you see things going wrong.

But I am getting the procedure wrong already. What have I just done?

*I should have taken my complaint about the misleading words privately to the NIV editor **before** I made a public protest in front of you - the church!*

So just to be clear on the procedure: Stage 1 is a discreet private approach. If that fails, Stage 2 is to involve one or two wise friends. And only as a last resort to we go to Stage 3 and call upon the judgement of the whole church community.

### 1.2 Academic

I have spent my working life in an academic community where criticism is the stuff of life. Research is challenged if the evidence is not assembled and analysed rigorously. Publications are scrutinised by referees who condemn any error without mercy.

Some people recoil from ‘Argument’ because to them that word means fight and anger. Not true! Argument is a thoughtfully organised attempt to demonstrate that your case is right. In academia, you can have the most vigorous argument because there is no personal animosity; no abuse. “You are wrong” is acceptable “You are stupid” is not.

### 1.3 Assertiveness

Let me digress for a moment. Has anyone ever been on an assertiveness course? I did once, and one of the things I learned is this:

If you want to achieve something, **say what you want quietly and simply**. Your opponent may lose his cool and yell all sorts of outrage stuff. Ignore it. Wait until he has finished, then say again what you want **quietly and simply**. Say it again, as many times as it takes. I tried this once when persuading our College Bursar to give my secretary the holiday to which she was entitled. It took three repeats. The bluster ran out of steam and he gave in - With no loss of friendship on either side.

I once overheard an administrator reprimanding her junior assistant over a mistake. She did not tell the girl how stupid she was; said nothing to undermine her confidence. She spoke gently and quietly. *“This is what you did. This is what went wrong because you did it that way. Next time I would like it done this way. Is that all right? Good!”*

## 2 AMANDA

Assertiveness was just a digression. What I want to do is to find a story illustrates perfectly, the way Jesus wanted things to be.

Amanda was one of a group of my five engineering students in Wadham from 1981 to 1984. During that time I made an unforgivable mistake. I had promised to set them a beginning of term test paper on a particular subject, but I had forgotten, and set them a different topic.

The Butler approached me at lunch and said, *“There are some students outside asking to see you. They look a bit upset.”* Going out I found Amanda, steely grey eyes blazing, and her four male companions standing rather sheepishly behind her.

*“Dr Wood”, she said “We take our work for you seriously. If you cannot take us equally seriously I don’t see any point in continuing, do you?”*

We spoke of this a week ago when I asked her permission to tell the story. Amanda said *“It was not my finest moment. Just youthful arrogance.”* But for me, in that unforgettable moment 36 years ago, Amanda was magnificent!

It was a shock. I could not think what I had done. She told me. I had ten seconds to decide how to respond. \*\*\*\*

*“You are right. It was my mistake and I am sorry. It is too late to set another paper for this afternoon. There is only one thing to do. I will cancel the test.”*

Amanda’s grey eyes softened. She smiled. She said *“Thank you”*

Nothing more was ever said, and from that moment Amanda and I were the best of friends in a new way. She has sent a Christmas card every year since she graduated. She is happily married to Warren, another of my engineering pupils and several times over the years she has said “*If you had not chosen us to come to Wadham, we would never have met*”

A year or so ago, Warren became Chief executive of Rolls Royce. And he still plays the organ on Sundays in their village church. I sometimes ask Amanda how he is coping with this incredibly stressful job. Her reply “*He is fine but if I see it getting too much for him, he is stopping*”.

### **3 WHAT JESUS SAID**

#### **3.1 Gaining your brother**

I think you can tell how I love this amazingly assertive woman. She has taught me the depth of truth behind what Jesus says in our reading.

*“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.*

*But if he will not listen, take one or two others along,*

Yes I know. Amanda skipped stage 1 went straight to Stage two. She already had her witnesses with her. I wonder to whom they would have gone in Stage three if I had exploded in outrage at her impertinence, The Senior Tutor and the College Governing Body perhaps? The pattern is all there, and it is good whether in Church or out of Church.

But take note again of the outcome. This is what really matters.

*If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.*

I think that Amanda’s smile, her quiet “Thank you”, and the fact that our friendship has grown deeper over 36 years, is ample illustration of what Jesus intends. It is not just to gain grudging admission of wrong, it is to restore and build a relationship of love.

#### **1.2 Stage 2**

If matters should progress to Stage two, we have a ‘Conflict Resolution’ problem. And there is valuable professional training to be had in how to bring people together when they are no longer able to face each other. Myrna Coleman, who was once with us in Long Furlong, was trained in this. There was an occasion when I was brought into a dispute, and I took a hurried lesson from Myrna on how to bring people together and enable them to talk.

#### **1.3 Stage 3**

When we come to Stage 3 there is a puzzle in the text. In Jesus time “Church” as we know it did not exist and the word had no meaning. One might suspect that Matthew is interpreting what

Jesus said in the light of subsequent developments. But whatever the word used, we know that Jesus simply meant the community of disciples. We are not talking about excommunication. This is about a loving community coming together to pray and help if they possibly can. And there is grieving if someone turns his back and walks away.

#### **4 FOOT-WASHING**

There was an occasion when Jesus took water and a towel and knelt before his disciples to wash their feet. I have heard the most beautiful interpretation of this. When there is a fault observed, and a criticism to be offered, it can only be done if you regard your friend so highly that you can, in trust already earned, figuratively kneel before him or her and wash their feet.

Paul wrote at the beginning of Galatians chapter six

*Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you should restore him gently. Carry each other's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.*

I have puzzled over this. 'What is this 'Law of Christ' that speaks of 'Carrying each other burdens'? Slowly it occurred to me that the supreme purpose of Jesus life and death was to carry my sin, to take that burden in my place. And if I seek to lift the sin burden from my brother or sister, then I am in harmony with His supreme purpose.

#### **5 NOEL**

I have one last story and it is a story of failure. A long time ago I was Chair of Trustees for a small mission organisation, and the Director had been my friend for many years. Sadly, he became infatuated with his secretary and began making amorous advances to her. He was a married man. Rightly she refused him, with as much gentle courtesy as possible. But he persisted and she came to me in distress, offering, sacrificially, to resign and solve a problem that was none of her making, by removing herself.

The Trustees prayed and decided to offer the Director a period of rest and reflection, away from the office. And inevitably, I was the spokesman.

He took it badly. Humiliated and offended, he resigned in furious anger.

I persuaded him to come away. We found rooms in a country hotel and spent a day walking the hills while I listened, and felt his pain. Pain from years in a loveless marriage held together by rigid obedience to law, and by equally rigid self-controlled courtesy. A marriage imposed upon them within a Community Church that practiced 'Shepherding' - Where your life-decisions are monitored and laid out for you by your spiritual mentor, and you obey or leave the church.

After years, he cracked. It broke him. His respect and leadership in a Christian mission was gone. And all the time as I listened to his pain, I found myself wishing and wanting just one thing – If only I could take it all upon myself and set him free.

But only Jesus can do that.

It did not work. He never came back. The secretary moved on to new things. The years passed. There was divorce and remarriage. Of all the former trustees, mission supporters, friends, Judy and I were the only ones who attended his second wedding.

Were we right?

## **CONCLUSION**

It is time to conclude. We have thought about the proper way to manage confrontation if it has to happen (1) Privately (2) With witnesses if necessary and - (3) Only as a last resort bring in the judgement of the Church.

But the procedure is just a framework, like a skeleton that needs flesh to bring the bones alive. What brings the dry bones to life is the purpose that is paramount and never to be forgotten. Restoration, Reconciliation - The life, death and resurrection purpose of God in Jesus Christ. To carry our burden of sin upon himself and so to set us free.

### ***Galatians 6:1-2(NIV)***

*Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.*

*Restore him; **Restore him; Restore him***

*Carry each other's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.*