

Divisive Attitudes

By Pastor Alan Utting

'Schisms (a break in fellowship) do not originate in a love of truth, which is a source of courtesy and gentleness, but rather in an inordinate desire for supremacy.'

Benedict de Spinoza

Most people prefer peace to conflict, but unresolved disputes often damage relationships. In these days issues like politics and racism amongst other things fuel division leading to fear and pride. If a divisive spirit is present, responding with love and kindness both in attitude and action is essential.

Bible Perspective

In the NIV translation of the New Testament the word 'love' appears 551 times. That shows the importance of having loving attitudes towards others. For example, here are a few references:

'May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me' (John 17:23).

'Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love' (Ephesians 4:2).

'Instead, be kind to each other, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you' (Ephesians 4:32).

'Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you' (2 Corinthians 13:11).

Observations

1. Anger, though sometimes barely concealed, is frequently shown by both sides. It's possible to excuse our anger by calling it 'righteous anger'. That however is seldom the case.
2. If you can express your views clearly, do so humbly, not pridefully. Don't use your gift of words as a weapon to control others, as this can make people feel bullied or cause them to withdraw.
3. When I think of issues debated today, I'm reminded of 'Gnosticism' a heresy which infiltrated the early church. This word 'gnosticism' is derived from the word 'knowledge' which in this heresy presented itself in several forms. Part of their belief was that if people were 'spiritual' or 'superior' then they could obtain this 'secret knowledge' and find important answers to subjects like salvation. This attitude created an elitist group, where this knowledge was not available to all. In time this heresy was rightly stamped out in the church.

I notice some people today also talk about their 'secret knowledge' which they have acquired from special people and if we only listen to them, then we will find

the whole truth. However, their attitude treats people as if they are ignorant although in fact they may have a wider base of knowledge to draw upon and be closer to the truth.

4. Through the internet anyone can generally find a person (or many people) to support their arguments. The danger however is when media giants use algorithms, a powerful tool where it picks up on your searches which then feeds you the information you want to hear, but unfortunately filters out information you should hear, but don't. Some personalities with heightened emotions, like to see things in black and white terms only, although we need to acknowledge that we do not always know the whole truth and that some issues are complex.
5. Scientific research show most people initially respond emotionally to a given situation, rather than also looking at it rationally. However, over time their perspective may change as they see the larger picture and are more objective.
6. There are people who want to be noticed due to poor self-esteem. To have people follow their ideas makes them feel important. That is unhelpful.
7. Some people are simply on a 'crusade' regardless of its significance. It provides them with life's purpose. I had a friend in Sydney who met some attractive young homeless women in his work lunch break. As he got to know them, he discovered that they were indeed very needy, and he had the means to impart his faith and set them upon a new pathway. Even though he was cautioned about spending so much time with them he ignored this advice and eventually died from a drug overdose. People on a crusade can lose perspective and alienate people.

Useful guidelines:

1. Be kind and respect people even if you disagree with them.
1. Gather as much information as you can to determine your position even if your decision may not align with the majority opinion. Individuals often possess valid justifications for the perspectives they adopt.
2. Don't be afraid to ask for advice about a subject. Many want help on a particular topic and others are willing to give their thoughts on it.
3. Have a fast from social media, it is refreshing for your mind and spirit and may avoid arguments!
4. Refuse to be manipulated and controlled by others.
5. Walk humbly before God and people and be open to ideas that may be contrary to yours. Apologise when your attitudes are not always healthy.
6. A useful approach in talking to others on sensitive issues is to seek to discern a person's spirit. If they are insincere, divisive, controlling and out for a battle, then I'm not interested in dialoguing with them. For years I corresponded with a friend in a leadership position in the USA. At one stage my wife and I even visited him. Our friendship unfortunately came to an end when he sent me an article he agreed with, which stated that the writer hoped the current President would 'burn in hell!' I wanted nothing to do with that attitude which is strongly against Biblical teaching of love. Discernment is essential. Choose your company. A friend of mine wrote, 'The true state of our spiritual maturity is shown more in the way we disagree with a person than in the way we agree.' Good advice.
7. Keep Jesus the 'Prince of peace' (Isaiah 9:6) at the centre of your life. This is best achieved through prayer and worship, acknowledging that He is sovereign and ultimately in control of world affairs.

Conclusion

I find it so enriching and a privilege to relax with friends of different political persuasions and other confronting issues. Even though we may disagree with people, creating a spirit of goodwill does go a long way to overcome a spirit of division. Each one of us can do our part to honour the injunction to 'strive to live at peace with all people'.

Prayer of Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
 where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 where there is injury, pardon;
 where there is doubt, faith;
 where there is despair, hope;
 where there is darkness, light;
 where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
 to be consoled as to console,
 to be understood as to understand,
 to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Resources

Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*

Floyd McClung, *The Father Heart of God*

Philip Yancy, *What's so amazing about Grace?*