The Power of Productive Dialogue

The first-century church had a problem: More and more Gentiles kept falling in love with Jesus and wanting to be part of the community.

However, a church group stemming from the pharisaical tradition believed Gentiles needed to be circumcised first.

On the other hand, Paul and Barnabas (those working among the Gentiles) argued that Gentiles did not need a mark on the body to be fully included. For Paul, it was enough for Gentiles to confess Jesus as the Messiah.

Because of this conflict, the apostles and elders called a council in Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 15.

Church leaders listened carefully as Paul and Barnabas recalled the movement of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles. The narrative of the Spirit’s working was powerful.

However, some traditionalists with a pharisaical background (Acts 15:5) believed these stories were simply not enough.

They argued for a faith based on the letter of the law and maintained Gentiles needed to be circumcised before entering Christian fellowship. The early church thus found itself at a dangerous crossroads.

After listening to the stories and counter arguments from the traditionalists, “the apostles and elders met together to consider this matter.”
The Greek word translated “met together” in the New Revised Standard is sunago, meaning to “bring together, come together, entertain or to receive with hospitality.”

The first-century church understood the importance of “coming together in hospitality” to discuss critical issues.

If first-century Christians stopped talking to each other with respect, humility and love, they knew their growing movement would quickly dwindle. They needed dialogue and a framework for moving forward.

After hearing also from church leaders Peter and James, those gathered in Jerusalem decided to include Gentiles without mandating circumcision.

This paramount moment in the life of the first-century church is an ideal example of how to have difficult conversations over critical matters.

While outcomes have differed over the last 2,000 years, the church has been at their best when we have dialogued with respect, humility and love.

Throughout the three decades of EthicsDaily, we have attempted to be a safe environment for difficult and critical conversations.

We do not pretend to be the truth-bearers for the entire church. We do feel we have an obligation to engage critical issues using the best biblical scholarship – and then render some conclusions based on that process.

However, we also acknowledge and respect different perspectives. We understand we are part of a large and diverse Christian community where well-
intentioned disciples are on their own journeys.

Therefore, we encourage sojourners who disagree with our conclusions and viewpoints to be contributing columnists. We still believe that including those with whom we disagree is a powerful witness – and a better if more difficult way.

While most of us exist in echo chambers, including me, EthicsDaily wants to hear different opinions.

We have a record of publishing columns with oppositional viewpoints, trusting in the process of productive dialogue and learning from each other. We do not guarantee all columns will be published. Still, we are pretty gracious.

Recently, we have tackled topics that some find controversial. Personally, I have drawn conclusions that might leave some friends and colleagues scratching their heads.

However, I hope those conclusions do not become barriers to productive conversations.

I do not pretend to have all the answers but work hard at searching for truth through rigorous study and open dialogue.

In other words, I know I possess the potential to be wrong, so I am always willing to learn from others.

With all of this said, I want to let our readers and viewers know we appreciate those willing to put their convictions out for publication. It’s not an easy decision, and we respect it.
We must never give up on the power of dialogue and communication. If we stop talking to each other, how can we be Jesus to each other?

In conclusion, let’s embrace Elie Wiesel’s wise words from 2012: “I still believe in man in spite of man. I believe in language even though it has been wounded, deformed and perverted by the enemies of mankind. And I continue to cling to words because it is up to us to transform them into instruments of comprehension rather than contempt. It is up to us to choose whether we wish to use them to curse or to heal, to wound or to console.”