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# Can We Talk?

## The Church's Witness in the Ethics and Practice of Dialogue

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It is obvious to all observers that our society is deeply divided over a number of key issues. Christians, though sharing a common faith, are also participants in our polarized society. They can often find themselves in a tense dialectical relationship between their faith convictions and the disparate views in the social and political reality they inhabit. Even as they confess the Creed and share in the communion of the Eucharist, they harbor different perspectives on matters such as racism, sexuality, immigration, health care, police reform, true patriotism, climate change, and more.

A contributing and complicating factor in our polarized context is the elusive nature of truth in public discourse, due in no small part to the flood of partisan accounts in the media. But the media simply trades on what they know their audience is thinking and feeling. When truth is compromised by self-serving bias or obscured by conflicting narratives of reality, trust in one another is compromised along with it. People with different outlooks from one's own come to be seen as untrustworthy fellow citizens, even bad people. The absence of trust frustrates or impedes the prospects of discovering a vision of the common good that can offer a measure of unity, even with disagreements over how to implement it.

One would have thought that the need for unified response to the Covid-19 pandemic would have at least generated a measure of public mutuality. However, despite the constant appeal to "being in this together," the pandemic has exposed divisions and disparities and was politicized in typically divisive ways. Even science, that supposed bastion of empirical truth, found its claims about the virus and its spread regarded with suspicion and mistrust by many.

In his book, *Why We're Polarized*, Ezra Klein reports on a study by political scientists testing the idea that, if people listened to the other side, they would find they had more in common than they thought. Liberals were exposed to conservative commentary and conservatives to liberal commentary over a period of time. Unsurprisingly, the result was that each became even more deeply convinced that their own views were right and the other side's wrong.<sup>1</sup> I say the result was not surprising because there was no

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1. Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020), 158-160.

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dialogue involved, no interchange. Finding a sense of the common good requires more than that. "The common good is a discovery, a find. It emerges from a process of listening, conversation, and building relationships and trust."<sup>2</sup>

My proposal is to envision conversations that can happen in congregations or other groups of shared Christian faith that engage the problem of truth and its limits in the face of disparate accounts inside and outside the church regarding the divisive issues of our day that impinge upon our sense of the common good. Specifically, I am proposing a pattern and discipline of dialogue that I believe can lead to greater understanding and appreciation of one another and why we see things as we do. As Martin Marty has observed in his discussion of the science-theology conversation, dialogue properly initiated can take participants beyond argument, isolation, and enmity to a greater level of mutual trust.<sup>3</sup>

As debate grew heated during the constitutional convention in Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin wrote these words to the delegates: "Declarations of a fixed opinion, and of a determined resolution never to change it, neither enlighten nor convince us. Positiveness and warmth on one side begets their like on the other."<sup>4</sup>

At a time in which it seems people who differ cannot even

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2. Tex Sample, *Working Class Rage: A Field Guide to White Anger and Pain* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 159.

3. Martin Marty, *Building Cultures of Trust* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 164.

4. Quoted in Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 449.

talk to one another, it is vitally important for the people of the Christian community to provide an example of engagement with one another that is a genuine expression of the ethics of the neighbor love Jesus enjoined. Dialogue properly understood and practiced embodies respect for the essential dignity of one's dialogue partner; that person or those people are also created in God's image and loved by God. The equal regard for the other that is required is justice at work and entails honesty in sharing one's views. I am maintaining that respectful and constructive dialogue among people of faith confronting conflictual issues is in itself an important expression of what it means to be a public church. Sharing the experience of dialogue with the public and with other faith communities can have a leavening effect on public and interfaith conversation. Participants in the dialogue can individually bring a new consciousness into their discourse with others in their communities.

Norma Cook Everist's PhD dissertation, *The Paradox of Pluralism: A Sociological, Ethical, Ecclesiological Perspective of the Church's Vocation in the Public World*,<sup>5</sup> provides a fitting point of contact for my efforts in this article. Everist delved deeply into the diversity in church and society and the polarizing effects that had arisen out of that diversity. Among the responses to this diversity, she calls pluralism, is alienation. Fear of the other turns people into enemies who remain estranged from one another.<sup>6</sup> This phenomenon she noted over thirty years ago remains an important historical backdrop to the deep division we now experience. Add to this her further observation that "Racism, classism, and sexism continue to plague pluralism in faith communities."<sup>7</sup> (This remains true in faith communities of today with the addition of a few more isms.) She sees the churches' ability to positively engage pluralism—faithful to their respective identities—and their ability to dialogue and cooperate in the public arena as a potentially positive influence on civil religion and its need to engage diversity in society.<sup>8</sup> In her 2002 book on parish education, Everist has carried forward many of these themes of her dissertation as an essential ingredient in parish education and the church's vocation in public life.<sup>9</sup>

Although my proposal here is focused on a particular practice in a society whose conflictual dynamics have evolved somewhat since she wrote in 1988 and even since her book of 2002, I believe we share an ongoing concern for the church's vocation as a public church. I share her belief that the way in which the churches deal

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with sources of social division within their own communities is central to their witness for the common good.

"The engagement of religious communities in the construction of values, virtues, and practices of civil society is a moral task as much as it is a public one."<sup>10</sup> One way for churches to engage in this moral task is to exemplify and advocate for a dialogue in civil society that can be a path to the discovery of common virtues and values and the practices that sustain them.

### Discovery Not Debate

The following is a definition of dialogue with which I am operating in this discussion.

Dialogue is an interpersonal process of communication between two or more equal parties with strong commitments and divergent perspectives on given issues, for the purpose of mutual enlightenment and transformation.

This definition comes from an unpublished essay by my late friend, James Nash, titled, "The Character and Conditions of Dialogue: A Realist's Aspirations."<sup>11</sup>

Describing the purpose of dialogue as "mutual enlightenment and transformation" fits my contention that dialogue is a way of discovery not a debate. Debate is about winning one's point. Debate dominates public discourse on controversial matters. The rhetoric often distorts reality. There is no neutral arbiter of the truthfulness of claims. For the most part debate has deepened our sense of division.

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5. Norma Cook Everist, *The Paradox of Pluralism: A Sociological, Ethical, Ecclesiological Perspective of the Church's Vocation in the Public World*, PhD dissertation, Iliff School of Theology and the University of Denver, Denver Colorado, May, 1988.

6. Everist, *The Paradox of Pluralism*, 165-167.

7. Everist, *The Paradox of Pluralism*, 263.

8. Everist, *The Paradox of Pluralism*, 247.

9. Norma Cook Everist, *The Church as Learning Community: A Comprehensive Guide to Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), see particularly Chapter 8, "Connecting the Learning Community with Vocation in the Public World" and Chapter 9, "Parish Education in a Pluralistic World."

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10. James Cochrane, "On Religion and Theology in a Civil Society," *Theology in Dialogue: Essays in Honor of John W. deGruchy*, eds. Lyn Holness and Ralf Wüstenberg (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2002), 128.

11. James Nash was Director for the Churches' Center for Public Policy in Washington, D.C., as well as an instructor at Boston University. His writings on environmental ethics remain important. He arranged a number of dialogues in his career, including one between ethicists and representatives of the chlorine industry in which I was privileged to participate. Insights from this essay have helped shape my proposal in this article.

*Mutual enlightenment* signals equals engaged in a quest for the discovery of possible common ground, of better understanding of each other's views, and of new insights that can transform the discussion moving forward. Dialogue may lead to the discovery that the participants share common values and hopes even though they have different perspectives on the issues involved. In this scenario the different views may not be resolved, but mutual respect is enhanced and the demonization of the "other" is precluded. No one should expect or desire that everyone thinks alike in all our wondrous diversity; sustaining diversity of outlook (a principle of dialogue) is mutually enlightening and enriching, and, if we are to enjoy the values of community and justice, we need to be able to talk to each other without rancor.<sup>12</sup>

Dialogue should not be confused with the process of negotiating a compromise or reaching an agreement though either of these may emerge in the process, depending on the sort of issue under discussion. Dialogue is its own reward when honestly and respectfully pursued. I think that contention is evident in certain of the responses to the ELCA Churchwide study on the church and homosexuality (2003-2005).

The issue before the church in that study was whether to bless same sex unions (same sex marriage was not yet legal) and whether to receive individuals in committed same sex unions into the official ministries of the church. The church was deeply divided on these questions and there was widespread fear that doing a study and talking openly about the matter would lead to further division. Along with fearing change, people also harbored and promoted false information about homosexual practices and the validity of reorientation therapy. Hurtful stereotypes were common. People of opposing views often felt they could no longer be together in the church or even talk to one another. Clearly, similar traits are evident in the public discussion of today's divisive issues.

The study guide, *Journey Together Faithfully*, asked that the study in congregations and in other groups be done according to the principles of dialogue put forward in the guide.<sup>13</sup> The thousands of responses from the many who did the study revealed that opinion remained divided over the key issues. But what was most impressive to me was the fact that nearly 62% of participants said that they now understood one another better and had learned something. They were joined by 23% who felt they already understood the views of others.<sup>14</sup> This

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12. In her book, *Church Conflict; From Contention to Collaboration* (Nashville, Abingdon 2004), 27, Norma Cook Everist lists some features of destructive conflict within congregations that exemplify what we experience in much of our society: voices are silenced and people avoid one another, an atmosphere of strained civility, resentments are harbored, creative energy has been replaced by acrimonious rancor, rumors foster suspicion and shunning one another.

13. *Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2003), 5-6.

14. Rebecca Sims, Kenneth W. Inskip, Daniel Taylor, *Responses to the ELCA Studies of Sexuality, Journey Together Faithfully, Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk about Human Sexuality*

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development and affirmation of *mutual enlightenment* is a goal of dialogue. The results of the study dialogue helped change the tenor of the churchwide discussion moving forward, a testimony to the *transformative* potential of dialogue. The experience of the participants showed that we can talk and emerge from the conversation better for it.

The dialogue about the church and homosexuality at the beginning of our century had an urgency in the life of the church that the churches may not feel about current matters of public debate. However, people's faith life and public life is deeply and unavoidably entangled despite efforts to keep religion in the private sphere. Therefore, I believe that churches can and should also have dialogues about the issues bedeviling our polarized society, both for the sake of their own members and as a witness to its ministry of reconciliation in the public sphere. At a time when a public media and some religious institutions foster a culture of deep division, churches exemplifying respectful dialogue could be truly counter-cultural! The church can be as we often say not *of* the world but *in* the world and *for* the world.

## The Way of Love and the Way of Dialogue

*Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

—Colossians 3:14

From the vantage point of the Christian faith, true dialogue can and should embody in its rules and practice principles, virtues, and values we associate with agape in its self-giving acceptance of all and its drive toward reconciliation and unity.<sup>15</sup>

## Justice

For dialogue to succeed it is necessary that all participants recognize one another as equals or peers, regardless of any differences that

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(Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: Research and Evaluation, January 22, 2007), 3, 9. The report is available in the archives of the ELCA.

15. See my discussion of *agape* and its values, virtues and general rules in James M. Childs Jr., *Ethics in the Community of Promise: Faith, Formation, and Decision*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

might otherwise distinguish them from each other. Considering the other person or group as representative of a class or ethnic group with certain characteristics that automatically undermine their credibility is fatal. People will speak from their experience to be sure but as individuals not stereotypes. Only in this way can dialogue express love's quest for the egalitarian justice that is a promise of God's ultimate reign (Gal 3:28-29). A key to this mutual respect is careful listening to one another. "Listen as much or more than you talk. Genuine listening is not a passive activity, but an active, demanding one. Listen not only for the content of what is said. Observe carefully the emotion, body language, and other clues about how people are feeling... Give the other a full hearing and full consideration."<sup>16</sup>

Ideally, careful listening should enable participants to state the others' views as clearly as the others do. Attaining this goal of equal respect and true understanding also means that we "Let people speak for themselves and do not presume to speak for others or know what others believe or think."<sup>17</sup> Those whom we disagree with have fears as we do. Deep down we are all desperate for peace in our lives and a future in which to hope. We honor and respect each other's fears and hopes by being ready to listen to each other in a spirit of openness and mutuality.

### *Humility, openness, and trust*

As James Nash put it in his paper, those who suffer from certitude have reason to fear dialogue. Dialogue opens the possibility that one's views may be faulty and in need of change, that truth can be obscured by one's cherished opinions. Rigid certitude runs the risk of arrogance. Framed theologically, the affliction of certitude, or exclusionary absolutism, evokes for me Luther's indictment of the theology of glory, which Douglas John Hall has observed, "confuses and distorts because it presents divine revelation in a straightforward, undialectical, and authoritarian manner that silences doubt—silences therefore, real humanity."<sup>18</sup> By contrast Luther's theology of the cross tells the truth about our fallen humanity. It entails a posture of humility, open to its own limitations and gratefully dependent upon the grace of God

The life of love, then, is marked by humility, a recognition that we are all finite and flawed human beings who live in an ambiguous and complex world; we need each other's insights and experience. This means an openness to the other, a true "being with" that signals empathy. Certitude, by contrast, tends toward a judgmentalism that alienates the other while protecting the self by binding oneself to the likeminded.<sup>19</sup> This sort of tribalistic

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impulse is at the heart of much contemporary polarization. Love seeks the reunion of the separated; it embraces the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18).

Openness to the other in the practice of dialogue can foster trust. If we are to build cultures of trust, Martin Marty observes that, "Openness is necessary because trust always involves risk, and the one who trusts or is to be trusted has to be open to risk."<sup>20</sup> In the openness of dialogue we entrust ourselves to the other, risking the exposure of our own views to contrary or competing perspectives that we might find disturbing and even threatening. One cannot love without the risk of entrusting ourselves to the other. And how far can one trust those who will not take that risk?

### *Values versus Ideology*

The problem of rigid certitude lends itself to ideology. An ideology is a concept that refers to a system of ideas, often political and/or economic, whose adherents claim is the superior way of social and political organization. Ideologies we know are 'isms': socialism, capitalism, but also Nazism, Stalinism, racism, and anti-Semitism. Adherents to an ideology can seek to overwhelm and dominate to the exclusion of other alternatives. Ideologues brook no challenges to their views; they are not given to dialogue. It seems fair to say that a good deal of the polarization we are experiencing today is a clash of ideologies that make conversation outside of weather, sports, and entertainment too fraught to invite.

Christians will be found in different political parties, will be advocates for social causes, and will and should vote their conscience in elections. However, the Christian faith is not married to any political ideology or political party agenda. Instead, Christian faith and discipleship is wedded to certain values that we associate theologically with the promise of God's Reign and generally with the common good.

The resurrection promise of the triumph of life and the example of Jesus' works of healing commit us to the values of life, health, and wholeness of body, mind, and spirit (Matt 11:4-5).

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Matt 7:2-5.

20. Marty, *Building Cultures of Trust*, 22.

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16. *Journey Together Faithfully*, 6.

17. *Journey Together Faithfully*, 6.

18. Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 20.

19. See the discussion of this phenomenon from a psychological perspective in Earl D. Bland, "On Specks and Planks: Psychotherapy, Spiritual Formation and Moral Judgment," in *Psychology and Spiritual Formation in Dialogue*, eds. Thomas R. Crisp, Steven L. Porter, and Gregg A. Temelshof (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2019), 147-148. The title of Bland's chapter reflects Jesus' rebuke in

We champion the value of justice as radical equality among all (Col 3:11) and for the whole creation (Col 1:20; Rom 8:21). With justice there is also peace through God's reconciling new creation in Christ and the call to be peacemakers (Matt 5:9). Freedom from sin underscores the freedom from all forms of bondage, be that addiction, disease, poverty, or captivity under oppression (Luke 4:17-21). Finally, God's forgiving love drives toward unification, community, and unity among all and with God anticipating that day when God will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28).

If the dialogue can focus on these shared values, a productive discussion may be possible as to how they may be honored in our various approaches to the complex and contentious issues of the day (e.g., racism, health care, climate change, immigration reform) in concern for the common good. We recognize in our "not yet" world that there will be uncertainty and imperfection in what any of us can see or do, but dialogue helps us find each other in that halting journey.

### *Truth-telling and Promise-keeping*

For a dialogue to bear fruit it is essential that each participant state their thoughts and feelings honestly. "Even passionate conversation can be civil and constructive."<sup>21</sup> Participants need to speak for themselves. This is not always as easy as it seems since in matters of public debate our views are often shaped by media commentary, political affiliation, or the experiences of a given community. Therefore, it is also necessary to be honest about the influences that have contributed to one's position. While argument about the reliability of these sources is possible, the aim of dialogue is not to adjudicate that question but to seek a better understanding of one another. Since the media, in particular, reflects and feeds the divisions among us, to speak for oneself, to take personal ownership of your views is at the heart of truth-telling.

To tell the truth, along with what has been said about mutual respect, openness, and humility is part of the promise we make to each other when we agree to be in dialogue. These attitudes and practices are the conditions of the covenant we enter into with dialogue partners. They are the building blocks of a safe space in which to talk and in which trust can develop. Ethicist Joseph Allen has made promising a central theme of his understanding of Christian ethics by taking the biblical concept of covenant as his model for all trustworthy relationships. The covenants we make with each other should reflect the covenant God has made with humankind with the promises and expectations that call for trust and mutual faithfulness.<sup>22</sup>

Truth and trust seem like the priceless pearls of our present time. For those who faithfully engage in honest dialogue there is at least a chance that they might glimpse their luster.

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### **Some concluding thoughts**

It is important to note, I think, that this proposal to model dialogue as a contribution of the church to civil discourse in a time of polarization is not a substitute for advocacy on the part of the church and/or the participants in the dialogue. Dialogue should support advocacy by bringing greater clarity to complex issues.

Dialogue can help participants find a common language in pursuit of greater clarity and in the discovery of possible common ground. We are shaped by the personal, familial, and cultural stories we have lived. If we can recognize that, we can work on how to talk to each other by trying to appreciate each other's context. Martin Marty emphasizes the importance of this quest for a common language in the science-theology dialogue.<sup>23</sup> Tex Sample has written of how important it is to understand that working-class Americans are far more likely to frame issues of public concern in terms of impact on family and family values than on the rhetoric and ideological language of public influencers.<sup>24</sup> In today's heightened awareness of racism we are being faced with the need to understand how centuries of racist oppression have shaped how the oppressed see reality and the language by which they express it. Heretofore, they have had to adapt to the manners and discourse of the white majority. Now their discourse, their vision of reality, must be better understood and appreciated if dialogue is to be possible.

The work of bridging cultural differences in quest of a common language for discussion of the issue at hand is part of the mutual enlightenment goal of dialogue, an educational goal. These comments by Norma Cook Everist on educational method and the importance of listening to others fit here:

We need to listen to many voices in this diverse world. Often voices of celebrities dominate... Or we allow some authoritarian voices to dominate our decision making, curtailing individual imagination and activity. We need to listen to voices from the underside, see faces usually hidden, expanding our sources of authority.<sup>25</sup>

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23. Marty, *Building Cultures of Trust*, 166. My own experience as a member of a years-long dialogue with between ethicists and the chlorine chemistry industry on environmental policy bears out Marty's point.

24. Sample, *Working Class Rage*, 98.

25. Everist, *Church as Learning Community*, 111.

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21. *Journey Together Faithfully*, 6.

22. Joseph Allen, *Love and Conflict* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1984), 32-39.

Finding and training effective leaders, carefully drawing the issue for discussion, and finding willing participants open to the discipline of dialogue is hard work and we must be realistic about the prospects of my proposal here and of dialogue in general. So, with respect to the transformative goal, James Nash concludes:

Dialogue is not a panacea for human relational problems, but it is still a powerful tool for dealing with our differences. The transforming power of dialogue cannot be released, however, so long as we have romantic illusions about the problems and prospects of the process. Only a hefty dose of realism can prepare us to respond creatively to the difficulties and to take seriously the disciplines of dialogue for the enrichment of human relations. Awakened by that realism, we have good reasons for hoping that dialogue can contribute to a better future;<sup>26</sup>

In the interplay of law and gospel, the church brings that same blend of realism and hope to the task. Furthermore, the church is well-schooled in dialogue, the dialogue of moral deliberation, for example. As each new development of modern life raises new and vexing ethical questions, the church is driven to discover how the resources of faith throughout the centuries speak to this matter in this time. While some questions of faith and life might be settled among us, we are also aware of the uncertainties and ambiguities of a world not yet what God will have it be. Thus, Christians do not close their minds in absolute certitude. Our one certainty in all matters is the assurance of God with us. Therefore, in the freedom of the gospel and with the help of the Spirit we can answer the call to engage the divisive issues of our world; we can talk. Maybe if we do, others will too.

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26. James Nash, "The Character and Conditions of Dialogue: A Realist's Aspirations." (an unpublished essay).