

Stimulating Faith by Way of Contradiction.

by Gaylord Noyce

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Theologian Charles Wood, in *The Formation of Christian Understanding* (Westminster, 1981), offers a provocative insight regarding the Bible's multiple perspectives. Far from presenting a mere problem of interpretation, he contends, the differing and even contradictory texts can lead us to a more vigorous, robust kind of faith.

"These disparate elements are not to be 'harmonized' into some innocuous consensus," he says. Their function is rather to stimulate more thorough reflection and more honest engagement, and thus to foster a clearer and more lively apprehension of the canonical witness and its implications.

Wood is on to something, as most good teachers will recognize. The goal of teachers is not to make clones of themselves, or robots who blindly follow in the footsteps and habits of their leaders. Rather, teachers aim to help people think and understand and grow. Few methods in teaching encourage thinking better than the encounter with contradiction.

Think, for example, of the teacher of American history who presents a class of seventh graders with two accounts of the battle of Gettysburg, one written in the North and one in the South. Or of two views of the American Revolution, one from the colonies and one from a loyalist in London, both of which are persuasive. Such an exercise captures the students' interest and prompts a quest for understanding more effectively than does the enforcement of one-dimensional "right answers" to be learned by rote.

I do a fair amount of teaching with case studies. A good case study comes out of an open-ended situation in which a decision is demanded but in which contradictory courses of action seem equally appealing, or in which moral pressures make contradictory claims.

The fundamentalist mind-set, of course, sees little but problems in the multiple sources and viewpoints we have from Genesis to Revelation. It feels a need to explain away the inconsistencies, the several perspectives, the different accounts. But what a richness there is in the contradictions – in those two different stories of creation, or those four portraits of Jesus, or in the divergent views on faith and works that we find in the book of James and the letters of Paul.

Try starting a class by reading Matthew's "Blessed are the poor in spirit," and then by reading Luke's "Blessed are the poor." What a difference, whichever Jesus said. Both sayings have a canonical function in the church, shaping part of our identity and purpose, and we won't throw out either one, even if scholarship moves us to think Jesus more likely said the one and not the other.

Or try matching Jesus' approval of Zaccheus's enthusiastic decision to give half his goods to the poor with Jesus' demand of the rich young ruler, "Sell all you have." Or put Luke's Jesus, who forbids all divorce, together with Matthew's, who allows it in the case of adultery.

We don't discard James or Jude or the Song of Solomon or Leviticus even if they don't of themselves present the kernel of the Christian gospel, or anything much like it. We have a richly textured tradition, and varied roots to our religious language, symbolism and reflection. Charles Wood cherishes these inconsistent elements in the Bible. "Their elimination from the canon might diminish its witness or its effectiveness in one way or another, even though they are in no way representative of the canon. There are some among these whose anomalous status may even be the clue to their canonical role: like the friends of Job they provoke to deeper consideration even though – or just because – their own proposals are unsatisfactory."

Though high schoolers and college students don't stage formal debates as much these days as they once did, the debate format is still a highly effective means of motivating and educating people. "Resolved: Nuclear power is not worth the risks to human life. Pro and con." "Resolved: Abortion, for the Christian, is never justified. Pro and Con."

Some years ago in a book on motivating human learning, Leon Festinger observed that we coast along with our routine patterns of thought without much serious reflection until the moment that we meet something strange, some surd, something that doesn't fit. Then we are forced to struggle and to expand our thinking with new insights. Most scientific revolutions, have come about like that. So does personal growth.

Festinger called his book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. I like the title because I sing, and the great moments in music are often those tense ones when dissonance hangs impatiently in the air, waiting for harmonic resolution. Music without its dissonances would too often be innocuous and insipid – as the Christian faith would be if we explained away its mysteries. Thank God for the gift of contradiction

Spiritual purification, Gandhi believed, would set the stage for building a better society. "The service of the distressed, the crippled and the helpless among living things constitutes worship of God," he wrote.

Gandhi's final school was his own heart. This would be his hardest conquest. Ever larger crowds cheered his talks. The British tried to break or buy him. Gandhi's response to the temptations of fame and power was to pray and to fast. "Not until we have reduced ourselves to nothingness can we conquer the evil in us," he said.

Gandhi stood at the crossroads of history — he redrew the map of the world — and yet he remained true to God and true to the victims of injustice. Through prayer, the reality of God became the ground of all his actions in the world. Through politics, the cause of social justice became the unavoidable task that God set before him as the consequence of his faith.

—Paul Fitzgerald, "For Gandhi, prayer preceded politics," National Catholic Reporter, March 13, 1998.

The great religious question of our time, of course, is how to believe in God after Auschwitz. Despite the horrible irony of it, I think that Auschwitz prepares us at last to truly believe in God.

Now we can no longer maintain the childish notion that God is the one who does good things for us, that God is supposed to act as a kind of super-shield delivering us from evil. On the contrary, the God of the Bible is the God who allows the most unimaginable things to happen, up to and including the crucifixion of Jesus.

Biblical people often experience God as the enemy. At the end, if only for a moment, Jesus seemed to feel that way. After Auschwitz, perhaps we do, too. But this is the very wall through which biblical faith pushes. God is not the enemy who causes evil. God is the mysterious friend who stands with us in its midst.

-James Carroll,
"What's God Got to Do With Evil?"
Questions of Faith (Philadelphia:
Trinity Press International, 1990), 18-19.

Those who dance are considered insane by those who cannot hear the music. - George Carlin

"A classic is something that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read."
—Mark Twain

BANFIELD

Almost one in three people wonder daily, "How can I find more meaning and purpose in my life?" Another 13 percent ask themselves this weekly and 10 percent do so yearly. Only 26 percent of those interviewed for a recent survey by Zogby International never wonder about this.
- Source: Ed Stetzer, North American Mission Board, S.B.C.

*He who has a why to live
can bear almost any how.*

"I am still learning"

— MICHELANGELO