

Sydney College of Divinity
Graduation Address

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At the University of Sydney we are currently implementing a bold new strategic plan. Rather unusually a part of that plan concerns our culture and the values that we hope it demonstrates; courage and creativity; respect and integrity; inclusion and diversity; and openness and engagement.

In discussing our values for the strategy one question attracted considerable attention. That was the question of how to live out the value of respect in contexts of intense, even passionate disagreement. We all know how to hold in respect those whose opinions we admire, or whose worldviews we share. But what does it mean to respect those with whom we are in profound dispute, those whose values and choice are antithetical to our own? In short, what does it mean to ‘disagree well’?

Disagreeing, as you will have learned in your studies, is, of course, key to the academic enterprise. Academics are professionally disagreeable, and teach their students to be as well. Much academic writing runs something along the lines of: ‘You have heard that x and y and z are true, but verily I say to you that x and y and z are all rubbish and that my idea is much better, and probably worthy of a Nobel Prize, or at least a place in the best journal and many citations and a promotion to a professorship.’ This practice of disagreement tends to run to the collective life of the institution as well. At any given point the place is alive with ideas passionately advanced about how it might be better run, very few of them compatible with each other. Academics know how to disagree.

But disagreeing well, rather than just disagreeing, was thought in our consultations to be something regarding which the University community had some room for improvement. And we are not alone. We live, after all, in a country in which the average political leader seems to survive just long enough for newscasters to learn to pronounce their names; and the most recent elections have been showcases of poor debate and polarization. Of course Australia is not unique. In 2016 the Brexit campaign and the American Presidential election seemed to reveal disparate political communities barely able even to hear one another, far less to engage with one another in the kind of meaningful debate that could be classified as ‘disagreeing well’. In this context, many of our staff thought that the University community had a particular responsibility to lift its game, a particular responsibility to model disagreement for the community more generally.

And it is into this issue, I would suggest, that St Paul speaks with profound and challenging clarity in the passage that was read from the second half of Romans 12. “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” The assumption here seems to be that conflict, disagreement, will come. But the Christian is ‘if it is possible... to live at peace with everyone.’ Living at peace does not mean

that the Christian will simply agree with the values and standards and goals of the world around them. On the contrary, the opening verses of Chapter 12 underscore a distinction between the mind that is in conformity with the world and the mind that is being transformed by the Holy Spirit. It is not merely that the Christian will sometimes disagree with the world; her whole cast of mind will be in radical contradiction, transformed to be different, to that of the world around her. But she is to ‘live at peace with everyone’.

It is important to recognize the scope of this command; Christians find it hard enough to live at peace with one another, to disagree well in the church. The history of the church is one of division over disagreement; the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell suggests that there are currently 41,000 Christian dominations; not bad for a faith whose scriptures are full of commands to unity and whose Lord prayed that ‘they may be all one’. But this command to live peaceably in Romans is perhaps more challenging still. Paul calls the Romans to live at peace with everyone, not just other members of the church, and to do so even in the context of radical disagreement flowing from a fundamentally different cast of mind. If the church could really model that behavior – ‘if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone’ – how challenging a witness to the power of the gospel in our lives that would be! How powerful a witness it would be in a community that does not disagree well, that knows consensus and division, but finds respectful difference very difficult to achieve!

I had the great privilege of thinking through what disagreeing well might look like in writing the discussion paper that we took to staff consultation as a part of the development of our culture strategy. In that paper I suggest six characteristics demanded of those who would disagree well. The list is not terribly creative but it covers the usual attributes. I wrote;

- In contexts of disagreement [the] value of respect needs to involve at least:
- An empathetic willingness to listen carefully and be open to the opinions of others
 - A recognition of the particular expertise and experience of individual participants to a dispute
 - A recognition of the particular responsibilities within the organization of any individual participant in the conversation
 - A choice of language commensurate with the goal of increasing levels of communication and understanding
 - An orientation towards finding common ground with the other
 - A desire to identify with some precision those points on which difference exists, rather than to create an ‘enemy’ of the other.

That’s a good start, and we would do well to remember those epistemic virtues. Moreover, the spirit of those virtues is reflected throughout the commands of Romans 12; they are not ‘to think of [themselves] more highly than [they] ought’, to ‘honour

one another above [themselves]’, not to be proud or conceited. These sound like the attributes of people who would disagree well.

Up until this point it all seems rather neat. I can turn this disagreeing well thing into a worthy, if slightly dull, graduation address. On this your graduation, I would encourage you to use the intellectual skills that you have acquired, skills in critical thinking, in weighing evidence, in mounting an argument, in testing hypotheses, in effective oral and written communication. I would encourage you to go out in to the world to model the epistemic virtues that I outlined, to listen to the commands of Romans 12, and to take leadership roles in the church and society in which your show what it means to live peaceably and to disagree well. And all that is important. I genuinely do think that the church, and the world, could be changed if we knew better how to live ‘at peace with everyone’. It is an important message.

The only problem was that just as I began to write that worthy graduation address, I remembered that this same Paul who wrote the letter to the Romans was the author of the letter to the Philippians in which he calls his interlocutors ‘dogs’; and of course Jesus calls the Pharisees ‘whited sepulchres’; and he drove the merchants and the money-changers from the temple and overturned their tables. That doesn't sound like disagreeing well. If a complaint were brought against St Paul and Jesus under the University Code of Conduct, I am not sure that they would escape criticism. The problem is that living at peace with everyone sounds suspiciously like being nice, and I doubt that anyone who saw Jesus cleansing the temple would have reached for that adjective. Moreover, right in the middle of Romans 12 Paul says ‘Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.’ ‘Zealous’ and ‘nice’ are rarely words that go together.

So how do we really make sense of living peaceably, and what does it tell us about disagreeing? Well I think the answer to that question comes in the powerful parallel between verse 9 and verse 21. ‘Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.’ I am to live at peace with everyone; but my highest commitment must be to their good. My commitment to their good is precisely why I am to seek to live at peace with them, but sometimes seeking their highest good may mean that peace is simply unachievable. The Christian must humbly display the epistemic values, but the Christian must also be willing to speak out, sometimes stridently, against evil, and to seek the good of the city in which she finds herself. That will sometimes demand that the Christian takes a clear and unequivocal stand, even when doing so may cause offence, and even when it may make living at peace with our community more difficult.

Of course, the key to this is love. The epistemic virtues are in fact love, respect for the other, in disagreement. But ‘love must be sincere’ and love will also not let me stand by when what is demanded is the prophetic word or action. Only the transformed mind, the fruit of the body that has been offered to God, will know when love

demands that we prioritise living at peace with everyone, and when love demands that we risk that peace for the sake of taking a stand against evil.

This, I think, will be the dilemma of the church as our society grows further away from its Christian roots and as there are more and more issues over which the values of the church and the values of our society are at odds. We are to disagree well, we are to live in peace with all; but we are not to lack zeal and to hate what is evil. And the church needs leaders equally marked by zeal and a peaceable spirit. As you graduate from the Sydney College of Divinity and inevitably, whether paid or unpaid, take leadership roles in your churches, I pray that God would give you wisdom to know when to listen and when to take an uncompromising stand; how both patiently to argue and to hate what is evil. If the world can see us do that – disagree well, but stand for truth; live at peace, but hate evil – then the church will stand in good stead and the world will see the power of the body offered to God and the transformed mind, the power of the gospel in our lives.

Congratulations on your graduation. May all you have learned equip you for a life of leadership and service. And may you, and the church, never be lacking in zeal, but as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Amen.