

Post Script: The Gospel's Prophetic Edge in the Current Culture Wars

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We've tackled the pesky issue of science and faith at the crossroads of creation and wrestled that sucker to the ground. We've held it for ten count and then some. We've exhausted our metaphor maker. Congratulations. In the process we've made a safer place for people who identify with mainstream science to access and live by the gospel. A newcomer with a science background came to me and said, "Ken, I'm not a Christian, but I'd like to become one. Can you help me?" An evolutionary biologist from University of Michigan came to church and said, "Thanks, this is so helpful." Many of you have been kind enough to say, "I knew there must be a way to read the Bible without dismissing science, but I'd never put it into words before. I feel better now, like the two halves of my brain are finally talking to each other." A few have said words to this effect with tears.

That's all well and good, and very much the point. But what's meant even more to me is the way those who disagree with my take on the topic have maintained their disagreement and their love at the same time. I received a lovely letter that read, "You've made me think, but you'll never convince me evolution's not a lame theory!" A grandmother who taught her kids that evolution was from the devil went back to them as adults who don't attend church, saying "I was way too dogmatic about that--there are other points of view." Can you imagine the impact on those adult kids? To have a mom with that humility?

Sometimes as a pastor, you use the pulpit to lead into new territory because we are, after all on pilgrimage, a sacred journey. But sometimes you need to catch the church doing it right and tell 'em what it is they're doing right and why and how much it matters to God.

"Regarding life together and getting along with each other, you don't need me to tell you what to do. You're God-taught in these matters. Just love one another! You're already good at it; your friends all over the province of Macedonia are the evidence." (1 Thess. 4:9-10)

What you've demonstrated--love in the face of disagreement--is fueled by the gospel, which is the rule of holy love. It's how we stay married, love our roommates, kids, co-workers, ourselves, even God. It may be the only way we can survive together on the planet now that we're a global village. It's certainly how we flesh out what it means to be the community of Jesus. It is, in other words, on the prophetic edge of the gospel for our time.

It's an election year and the political ads have reached new depths. It as if you can't get elected unless you're willing to abandon love and decency toward your opponent. Assume the worst of him as representative while you present the best of yourself as representative. Give no benefit of the doubt to your opponent. Pounce on even unintended slips. Do unto other before they do unto you. These are the rules of engagement in our current culture wars. They are the wrong rules! We're called to resist them and live by a different rule: the rule of love.

When we can disagree with each other without walking away from each other, we're bearing witness to love as the primary fruit of the gospel.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he unfolds the mysteries of the gospel in the first eleven chapters. In a world of karma (what goes around comes around) the only news that's really new is grace. Then chapters twelve through sixteen are about the rule of love applied in different ways. Love must be sincere. Love is for enemies too. Love for the day is near. Then the climax, chapter sixteen, where Paul sends his love to Priscilla, Aquila, Mary, Andronicus, Junias, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus, and Phylologus because love is more than a theology for him. It's intensely personal because God is.

Romans fourteen is devoted to love in the face of our disagreements with each other over debatable issues. The Eugene Peterson translation doesn't do justice to the issues themselves, which almost sound trivial in his rendering, but it captures the emotional tone of this chapter beautifully. *"Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with—even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently. For instance, a person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a different background, might assume he should only be a vegetarian and eat accordingly. But since both are guests at Christ's table, wouldn't it be terribly rude if they fell to criticizing what the other ate or didn't eat? God, after all, invited them both to the table. Do you have any business crossing people off the guest list or interfering with God's welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help. Or, say, one person thinks that some days should be set aside as holy and another thinks that each day is pretty much like any other. There are good reasons either way. So, each person is free to follow the convictions of conscience. What's important in all this is that if you keep a holy day, keep it for God's sake; if you eat meat, eat it to the glory of God and thank God for prime rib; if you're a vegetarian, eat vegetables to the glory of God and thank God for broccoli. None of us are permitted to insist on our own way in these matters. It's God we are answerable to—all the way from life to death and everything in between—not each other. That's why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death, and free us from the petty tyrannies of each other. So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister? I'd say it leaves you looking pretty silly—or worse. Eventually, we're all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God. Your critical and condescending ways aren't going to improve your position there one bit...Cultivate your own relationship with God, but don't impose it on others. You're fortunate if your behavior and your belief are coherent. But if you're not sure, if you notice that you are acting in ways inconsistent with what you believe—some days trying to impose your opinions on others, other days just trying to please them—then you know that you're out of line. If the way you live isn't consistent with what you believe, then it's wrong."* (selections from Romans 14, [The Message](#))

The controversies in the early Roman church are remote to us: eating of meat, dietary laws, Sabbath, and holy day observance. These are not the controversies of our day. But in their day, they were as intense as any that might work us into a lather. Take the issue of the dietary laws or the keeping of Kosher. What set the people of YHWH apart from every other people was not morality per se (other people cultures had moral codes which

overlapped a great deal with the ten commands,) but holiness. The Hebrew word, "holy" does not mean righteous. It means, "set apart."

All people are answerable to God for their obedience to the moral law (what Roman Catholics call "natural law") but the people of Israel were uniquely answerable to God for being holy. "You shall be holy as I am holy!" And the law of clean and unclean, including kosher, is what set the people of Israel apart as holy. It was intimate, having to do with what they allowed into their bodies. It was social, having to do with who they could share table fellowship with. It was daily, a mark they put on themselves every time they raised hand to mouth. And it was integral--deeply connected to many things beyond food.

The Messianic Jews of Rome were a minority group within a harassed minority religion imbedded in the capital city of the most powerful pagan empire of all time. Their very identity as a people was at stake, at risk, in danger and doubt. Within their burgeoning Messianic movement, the key leaders kept kosher, including the twelve based in Jerusalem. The early church was engaged in a fierce controversy over whether the Gentile converts had to keep kosher. And Paul, incendiary Paul, comes along and says, "All foods are clean! Please pass the pork rinds!" The good guys, those with the longest standing loyalty to YHWH, were apoplectic, because Paul was messing with the very heart of their relationship with YHWH: the issue of holiness. Their controversies were every bit as intense as ours.

While Christianity is based on the understanding that God can be known because he has made himself known, Christianity doesn't offer certainty in all matters. When it comes to many things--healing, sanctification, community, and knowledge--we live in the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of the kingdom. We know, and what we know we must bet our lives on, but we know in part.

The Rule of Love recognizes the existence of debatable issues. *"Accept him whose faith is weak without passing judgment on disputable matters"* (Romans 14:1.) Disputable or debatable matters can be issues of import, not just side shows. They are often issues that stir deep passions. Faithful people have honest disagreements over debatable issues. The trick is this: which ones are debatable is itself debatable. There's no approved list of debatable issues. Paul gives us examples, not a definition. Thanks a lot.

As I've grown older, my understanding of debatable issues has shifted. My experience may not be paradigmatic but the general trends might be familiar to you. In your twenties we're still grabbing hold of our lifelong truths, having discerned what we don't believe in our teens, perhaps. In our thirties, having taken hold of these truths, we see what it's like to grip things a little too tightly.

At least for me, the thirties were years when I made some of my biggest mistakes, mainly owing to my cockiness, my overconfidence regarding the truths I'd taken hold of. But then along come the forties to beat you up and see whether you'll harden or soften. Then the blessed fifties arrive. I find myself in my fifties holding to a smaller circle of truths more deeply and to a wider circle more loosely. Look at the latest interview with Billy Graham. He's turning into a real softie too.

Debatable issues, as frustrating as they are, serve some useful functions. They test our trust in God. When the way forward is unclear, the only way forward is trust. Debatable issues

test our humility. We have to admit our confidence may be misplaced. But most of all, they test our love. It's easy to maintain love with a group of the like minded. But that doesn't signify the kingdom. It's got no prophetic edge to it.

It's essential we accept this as part of the spiritual life. On this side of eternity, there will always be debatable issues. Our goal is not to find a God with whom we have no disagreements. Having found such a one, be sure that you've laid hold of an idol. Our goal is not to find a church with whom we have no disagreements. Cults are the answer to that longing. Our goal is not to find a lasting relationship in which we have no disagreements. A series of short term and disposable relationships is the only way to find that.

Paul says, "*make up your mind*" not to judge (see Romans 14:13.) Once we settle this it helps us relax. It helps us to keep our eye on ball, which is love.

We can make this complicated but it boils down to a couple simple commands. (And I return now to the NIV translation)

First, accept those with whom you disagree: "*Accept him whose faith is weak.....for God has accepted him.*" (Romans 14: 1,3)

This is not an arms length acceptance or a polite tolerance. This word means, "receive, take, hold" as in "to have and to hold for better for worse" in the marriage vows. Accept him who is accepted by God.

That's pretty plain. But it begs a question: who is it God accepts? The religious culture wars feed on quick judgments about who God accepts and who he doesn't. So Paul speaks to this next...

Make no unauthorized judgments: "*Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.*" (Romans 14: 4)

There was plenty of Bible on the side of those who said, "If you don't keep kosher, you don't belong. You're not accepted." There's no doubt Paul had to say, "don't judge" because judgments were being made and they were being backed up with the Sacred Scriptures.

Paul asserts this with great force: "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand." The judgmental spirit masks as concern for the erring. He's in danger! I'm warning her out of love! But Paul is saying, "Back off! Your sister is not answerable to you! Your brother is answerable to another." The point is not whether you're right or not; it's whether you're authorized or not; unless you are your brother's Lord you are not authorized. Your brother is answerable to another and that other is able to make him stand! Don't trust your brother to get it right. Trust God's power to make him stand! What a completely different spirit than the nervous, fearful, pessimistic spirit which moves us to judge each other.

There are dangers of course with this approach. There are wolves in sheep's clothing to be avoided. There is need to discern what we accept from others as true. But we don't do that by declaring anathemas on those who count themselves as His. The great insult to Jesus isn't treating as a brother someone who is not. The great insult to Jesus is rejecting as a brother someone who turns out to be one!

We think the safe, the conservative, the orthodox thing is to draw the circle small. "When in doubt count 'em out, then they won't be able to pollute our purity." But the greater offense is excluding someone he is including.

I want to sharpen this point, because it's the prophetic edge of the gospel in our day. Our world is under what St. Paul would call the "powers and principalities." He doesn't define them but we might think of the powers and principalities as supra-personal, supra-natural, more-than-the-sum-of-their-parts powers, phantoms projected from below over the human race, who want to destroy us. One of these is religious zeal leading to murderous intent. It's swept over us like the dark riders of the apocalypse. Ten years ago, it was barely on our radar screen. Now it's one of our greatest fears.

How do we defeat that power? We defeat it by diving into the heart of the gospel. It's more important to love than to be right. It's better to be both, but it's more important to love. In our attempts to be right, we can't sacrifice love because God is love. Violence against love is violence against God. It's an attempt at deicide.

Somehow we've got to get good again at loving our enemies! We practice by loving the people we disagree with.

This evolution debate provides us with great practice. The evolution-faith tension in America is as close to the historical epicenter of the current culture war as you're going to get, second only to the civil war. It splits us down the middle just like every wedge issue measured in every culture war poll. It's a common ancestor to our Red State-Blue State divide, the radio-talk-show-cable-TV insult fest we find ourselves in.

"Yes, but who started it?" we may ask like kids in the schoolyard. It's true that the first grenades were lobbed from the evolution side. "A number of recent historians of the reception of Darwinism seem largely agreed that, in the early decades after *Origin of Species*, the 'warfare' framework for understanding the relationship of Christianity to Darwinism was developed and promoted primarily by ardent opponents of Christianity" (George Marsden, [Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism](#) p. 139)

In the time of Darwin (the nineteenth century) the major first responders in the Christian world to his breakthrough work, [Origin of Species](#) were taken aback by the mechanism of natural selection that he uncovered as an explanation for the diversity of life, but they remained open minded, looking for ways to integrate his insights into the truth of the Bible. Asa Gray, a believing botanist at Harvard, and B.B. Warfield, a very conservative biblical scholar both accepted Darwin's findings as compatible with faith. Charles Darwin himself was careful not to frame evolution as opposed to faith.

But Darwin's primary popularizer (and if we are historic figures like Darwin we don't get to pick our popularizers,) Thomas Huxley (known as "Darwin's Bulldog,") profiled evolution as a replacement for faith in God. Huxley held religion in contempt. It was Huxley who coined the term, "agnostic." He had a religious agenda.

Huxley has his modern disciples. Richard Dawkins is the "Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science" at Oxford. His academic chair is about translating science to the masses. He thinks science is for smart people; faith in God, for dummies. He thinks religion is toxic. He has compared religion to a computer virus.

If you find a Christian book critical of evolution (throw a stone in a Christian bookstore and you'll likely hit one), go to the index, and I guarantee it will quote Richard Dawkins more than any other evolutionary biologist. Of course, if I wanted to write a book critical of Christianity, I wouldn't quote Mother Therese. I'd look for the worst representatives, not the best. That's how you play the culture war game. And Christians, I am afraid, have gotten good at this sport.

What if we decided our mission is not to win the culture wars? Our mission is to play by a different set of rules, the rule of love. Our mission is to listen to our opponents as we would want them to listen to us. Our mission is to find the good in what they're saying and respectfully disagree with the bad. Our mission isn't to defeat our enemies, our mission is to love them. God's mission is to make of his enemies, friends, or none of us would be here.

I've read a little Richard Dawkins and I haven't sprouted any horns. He's a talented science writer who also has a religious axe to grind. But even his religious diatribes are worth listening to. (I find people who are atheists often come up with great religious insights, partly because an atheist is so busy pushing off of God, they sometimes make pretty good contact.)

Richard Dawkins, for example, says religion works like a computer virus. Asked why we humans continue to believe in God, Dawkins offered this explanation: "The child mind is, for good Darwinian reasons, susceptible to infection the same way a computer is. In order to be useful, a computer has to be programmable, to obey whatever it's told to do. That automatically makes it vulnerable to computer viruses, which are programs that say, 'Spread me, copy me, pass me on.' Once a viral program gets started, there is nothing to stop it." (salon.com interview)

As a believer, that's insulting. But if you take the time to turn the other cheek, you might just realize what a great analogy this is for the gospel. The first computer viruses, I'm told, were developed by software engineers to work their way into software programs in need of repair. The virus had to be compatible with the software in need of repair, so the software would receive it and ingest it, so to speak, allowing repair from within to proceed through the virus.

This is how the gospel works! The gospel is written in the language of our lives--our beautiful, broken, good and evil lives--so we recognize the humanity of the gospel and let it into our insides, including our inner secret sin chambers, our secret grief chambers, our

secret longings, hopes and dreams and nightmare chambers, and there it begins to do its transformation from within...and like Dawkins says of the computer virus, it wants to keep on transforming us--our relationships, our way of being in the world, our social structures, everything. It will take as much ground as we give it: "'Spread me, copy me, pass me on.' Once a viral program gets started, there is nothing to stop it." Never spoke a truer word, Dr. Dawkins.

What if we called a one year moratorium on all our attempts to get a more faith friendly science curriculum installed, and instead, put all that time and energy into an "adopt a public school science teacher" program? We don't roll over and go away. We roll over and serve.

Public school teachers spend hundreds of their own dollars on their classes because budgets are tight. It's got to be worse for science teachers who need supplies for experiments. So we give those science teachers that money. (They don't have to give us receipts, either, because they have enough paperwork.) Public school budgets are cutting down on custodial service, so we offer to come in once a week to clean the classrooms. Public school teachers struggle with morale; parents today are quick to criticize Shawn's teacher when Shawn is not doing well in school, so we organize a letter writing campaign to thank all the science teachers for their hard work. We drop off Dove dark chocolate bars in the teachers lounge. This might not get us a more faith friendly science curriculum, but what would it do to open the heart of our culture to the rule of love, to the power of the gospel? Which is more important to us?

Steve Barger on our board said something I can't get out of my skull. Steve said, "Given what people in Ann Arbor expect from Christians these days, our motto should be: *Vineyard: Working Hard Not to Meet Your Expectations!*"

When I launched this series, I expected a few angry emails a week. O me of little faith! I haven't gotten a single angry email from a member of this church. Questions, of course. "What about this?" of course. "I beg to differ," of course. But not a single, "Ken I'm worried for your soul!"

Thanks for not meeting my expectations. The fact that you haven't is a sign of the kingdom in our midst. And it bodes well for our future usefulness.