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Debate or Dialogue 6/10/2012 First Presbyterian Church of Allegan

Eph. 4: 1-16, As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit —just as you were called to one hope when you were called — ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it^[a] says: “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.”^[b] ⁹ (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions^[c]?) ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) ¹¹ It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹² to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

James 3 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ² We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. ³ When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴ Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵ Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶ The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, ⁸ but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. ¹¹ Can both fresh water and salt^[a] water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

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¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

The year was 1935, and Wiley college, located east of Dallas Texas; had earned a reputation for having a stellar debate team. Wiley is a rather small school. With a primarily African American student body, and only about 600 students; it lagged behind many larger schools in a lot of areas. But not in debate. Since 1925, Wiley had won a streak of debate competitions against the bigger historic black schools such as Tuskegee, Fisk and Howard. The man behind the debate team was a controversial professor named Melvin Tolson. Tolson himself was a superb debater and orator. Before a debate, it is said that he would write out full speeches, including gestures as rebuttals to any objections to the argument that he would make on a given topic. ---Tolson taught the debate team members how to do the same, and they would practice for hours with a student upon

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the platform being doggedly harassed by their professor who would take the opposing view in every argument.

But in 1935, something new happened. With racial tensions increasing in the south, an invitation came to Wiley participate in a debate against white schools. This had never happened before. Wiley College was invited to the championship debate competition being held at the home of the National Debate Champions, The University of Southern California. With great trepidation, the team got into a car and drove west to California. Along the way, they encountered plenty of discrimination and had several harrowing experiences of intimidation. The debate itself was turned into a media event. Before a crowd of 11,000; the supposedly intellectually inferior all black Wiley College debate team out argued and outscored the much larger, much wealthier, and much more arrogant Caucasian team of the University of Southern California. The Wiley team had demonstrated their point that intelligence and debate skills were not racial characteristics. They had beaten the reigning white debate champions in the United States. –But even though they won, the Wiley College debate team was not allowed to claim this win as a victory. As a black school, they were not considered to truly be a member of the national debate society. The

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interracial debate was written off as merely an exhibition that was done for fun and not for the championship title. Their win over the white school made not a single bit of difference. They were not recognized as equals. It would be after World War II that black schools would finally be admitted to the elite debate society.

The very same thing happens a lot in churches. Debates don't change things. --You could have one group or another group argue their point, and prove their argument using the best evidence from modern scholarship or common, knowledge. They can give you every reason that something is the right and correct and the most just and the best thing for the church to do. And those that oppose them may even agree that the point was rightly proven and that the evidence is overwhelmingly against their own point of view. But while all of the arguing and debating may get someone to grudgingly change their mind. --- It will never ever touch their hearts. And without engaging their hearts, there will be no progress forward in the kingdom of Christ.

One of my most influential mentors in Ministry is the Rev. Dennis Benson. Dennis, a now retired Presbyterian minister, had a ministry of television and radio programs that began in the 1960's and went through

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the 1980's. He tells a story about the day that he interviewed the hated American Atheist, Madalyn Murray O'Hair.

For those of you who don't know the name, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, this is her story. She was born in 1919 in Pittsburg Pennsylvania and was actually baptized as an infant in the Presbyterian Church. The family moved to Ohio where she graduated from High School and then got married in 1941. World War II separated the couple. Madalyn enlisted in the Women's Army Corps while her husband enlisted in the Marines. While she was posted in Italy, Madalyn fell in love with another soldier named William Murray and soon found herself pregnant. While Madalyn divorced her husband and longed to marry her lover, William Murray was a staunch Catholic and he completely refused to divorce his wife. His religion forbade divorce, even though he loved Madalyn and wanted to be with her and his child he would not give their relationship the legitimacy that Madalyn asked for. --It is thought by many that it was these circumstances that sowed the seeds of Madalyn's complete hatred toward religion. She blamed religion for ruining her life. After the war, she and her son returned to the states where Madalyn first completed a bachelors degree from Ashland University and then a Jurist law degree from South Texas before settling in Baltimore.

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But it wasn't until 1960 that Madalyn achieved notoriety for her hatred toward religion and its place in American society. She sued the Baltimore Public Schools System, asserting that it was unconstitutional for her son William to be required to participate in Bible reading in a public school. The case was widely covered in the media and the result was that in 1963, the supreme court banned the reading of the Bible in Public Schools. With such a major legal decision in her favor, and because of her very vocal belittling of Christianity, and through her founding of an organization called *American Atheists*, Madalyn achieved the dubious distinction of being named, "The most hated woman in America." --Christians sent her death threats in the mail, they strangled and killed her son's kitten, and they broke windows as they threw stones and bricks at her Baltimore home. When Madalyn was recognized in public, she was pushed down stairs, pinched, harassed and cursed. All of these actions of hatred just strengthened Madalyn's resolve to strip away every demonstration of Christian culture in the public sphere in America. As the debate continued, it was covered by both the public and the Christian media.

Rev. Dennis Benson had a small budget television program that broadcast from Hershey Pennsylvania to about nine local pbs stations.

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Never afraid to think big, Benson invited Madalyn Murray O'Hair to come into his tiny studio for an interview. As is often true in low budget places, on the day of the interview there were some technical difficulties and Dennis was left sitting across a tiny table from the brilliant and infamous atheist. Uncertain of how to kill time, Dennis looked her in the eye and said, "Tell me about your early life." For the next two hours, between interview takes and when waiting for the technicians, O'Hair blasted Dennis with a blazing criticism of the hypocrisy of the church and the evils done to her by church people. And Dennis found himself more than once, being truly sad about the terrible treatment that Madalyn had been subjected to -- despite all of the things that she had done and said in order to destroy religion in America.

As the interviewing finally ended for the day, just as she was leaving, Rev. Dennis Benson gave Madalyn Murray O'Hair a hug. Madalyn shook her head. "I hate Christians" she admitted, "But you're not so bad."

Things did not end well for Madalyn Murray O Hair. Her organization of *American Atheists* dwindled in size until in the 1990's it consisted of herself, her son and her granddaughter. This trio and a handful of support staff continued on in their mission to remove religion from America. But in

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1995, something terrible happened. The trio disappeared. David Roland Walters, a disgruntled employee of the organization, had coerced another employee to help him and then he kidnapped Madalyn Murray O Hair, her son and her granddaughter. After successfully getting the remaining staff to send them \$500,000 in gold coins, David Roland Walters murdered all three of the O'Hairs and then buried them in a remote spot on a Texas ranch.

In January 2001, six years after he did it, Walters turned himself in and then led the police to the site where he buried the bodies. Walters was tried and was found guilty of kidnapping, robbery and murder. He was sentenced to 20 years in jail and ordered to make financial restitution. But none of that ever happened. Walters died in prison of lung cancer in 2003.

After her death, many people spoke of Madalyn Murray O'Hair as one of the most hate filled and evil people that they had ever met. There were many people who when they heard about how she died, mumbled that she finally got what she deserved. ---But that sort of attitude would not have done anything to win over the broken and hard and very bitter heart of this woman. What did work, what had made a slight crack in the hard crusted armor of this famous atheist was a willingness to simply listen to her story

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and to her point of view and to respond to her with simple kindness and love.

This is the power of dialogue. A dialogue involves two people or two groups stopping their agenda of trying to change the other person's beliefs through argument or through threatening behavior. It involves actively listening to the other person in order to understand WHY they think and WHY they believe and WHY they act the way that they do.

Engaging in dialogue involves acting like a Christian even when you fundamentally and completely disagree with the point of view and the perspective and the life choices made by the person that you disagree with. Because being a Christian is not about having the "correct" theological position, it is not about being able to state what it is that you believe in a convincing theological argument. What being a Christian is really all about is how well you DEMONSTRATE that you LOVE GOD and OTHERS as WELL as YOURSELF. ---And this is especially true in how you treat those who you view as your political and theological and philosophical enemies. For if we can show the love of God to those who hate us, to those we fundamentally disagree with; it is then that we are showing that

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we actually GET what it is that being a Christian is really all about. So be it.

Amen!!

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