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Why Christians Disagree

June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012: First Presbyterian Church of Allegan

2 Timothy 3:10-17

Philemon (Entire Book)

<sup>1</sup> Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, <sup>2</sup> to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: <sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, <sup>5</sup> because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. <sup>6</sup> I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. <sup>7</sup> Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

<sup>8</sup> Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, <sup>9</sup> yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you for my son Onesimus,<sup>[a]</sup> who became my son while I was in chains.

<sup>11</sup> Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

<sup>12</sup> I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. <sup>13</sup> I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. <sup>14</sup> But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. <sup>15</sup> Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—<sup>16</sup> no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

<sup>17</sup> So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup> If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. <sup>20</sup> I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. <sup>21</sup> Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

<sup>22</sup> And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. <sup>23</sup> Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings.

<sup>24</sup> And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

<sup>25</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

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It is said that where two or three Christians are gathered together, that you will have at least four or five disagreements!

This is the human side of being a church. Good Christians who believe and who follow Christ with their whole heart will often completely disagree on many different theological questions. Many times with points of view that completely opposite each other! Among the list of controversial questions are many hot topics: Should Christians be involved in politics, what about homosexuality, birth control, or the ordination of women? Should God be referred to in the feminine, and how do we best help the poor? What about Heaven, Hell, Sin, dancing and drinking, how to serve communion, what music to play during worship, (and how loud it should be), whether to say “debts” or “trespasses” in the Lord’s prayer, and of course -- what color we should paint the trim around our antique restored church doors! The list of things that Christians disagree on is never ending.

And for as many people who are very staunchly entrenched in their theological positions, you can have others who are uncertain about what they believe on a given issue, and still even others whose theological positions on the issues have been changed over the years by their life

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experiences and theological study. It seems that the extent of the disagreements are never ending!

This summer, our sermon series will be about many of these topics that Christians disagree on. We will, respectfully and carefully, take a look at some of these issues that are being hotly discussed in today in the twenty first century. This summer, we will try our best to stand in someone else's shoes and perhaps see some issues from a perspective that perhaps we had never thought about before.

But before we launch directly into the issues, it may be good for us to pause a minute and to think about WHY Christians disagree so strongly about things, -- given that we are reading from the same Bible and are all living together in the same century. How is it that a person sitting in the pew in this church could have a completely different and opposite view than a Christian who goes to church down the street, or disagree with the Christian who is sitting right next to them or even from the pastor in the pulpit? How did we end up with such widely differing points of view when we all follow the same Christ?

Part of the answer to this puzzle of why Christians disagree so much with each other has to do with the most basic of things that Christianity

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holds dear. Our difference in perspective is in a great part based on our views of Scripture and how we interpret it.

Some of you may have seen the TV preacher Joel Osteen. Every time before he preaches, he leads his congregation of 47,000 people to declare together his patented declaration: *"This is my Bible. I am what it says I am. I have what it says I have. I do what it says I can do, I am about to receive the incorruptible, indestructible, ever-living seed of God, and I will never be the same. Never, never, never. I will never be the same. In Jesus' name. Amen."* And while this confession is a very powerful statement of the life changing power of the Bible, we know that there are still theological disagreements within that group of 47,000 people who are all chanting it together. They are not all of the same mind and of the same theological perspective.

In my opinion, the reason that people differ so much in their theological viewpoints has a great deal to do with how they view the Bible and how they read and understand the words that they find in it.

On the front of each of the bulletins today is a graphic which may be helpful in trying to understand the very different perspectives that people have about scripture. Let's begin with the vertical line. Imagine this as a

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continuum of belief of how scripture came to be. Some Christians believe that the Bible was literally dictated by God to humans. --That the authors were directly inspired by the Holy Spirit for each and every word which they wrote which then made it into the Bible. --There are some famous depictions of this theological position, in which God has a speaking trumpet or there is a shaft of light of words twisting themselves directly from the mouth of God into the ear of the Biblical author who is carefully writing each of the words down on the paper in front of him. On the other end of the perspective of how the Bible came to us, on the bottom of the graphic; you have people who believe that the Bible is a product of humans experience of God, and that the words that they wrote down, while inspired by the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and lives, the words were their own. Words that came out of their own contexts, their own perspectives and understandings of what was happening around them and in their own spiritual lives.

The horizontal bar on the graph is how different Christians view how scripture has changed over time. Some Christians believe that the Bible is completely and factually inerrant and 100 percent true in everything that it says. Science facts, timelines, place names and even trivial details are

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considered 100 percent reliable and without error and are able to be applied to our lives today. But other Christians look at what they would consider contradictions in the text, and sections like the different endings of the book of Mark as evidence that there are a multitude of errors that have crept into the Bible over time. Christians with this point of view look at the text with a more skeptical eye and wonder how much of what they are reading is authentic.

The difficult thing to understand though, is that no matter where a person falls on this graph, no matter what their understanding of the role of scripture, if a person believes that Jesus is Lord of their life, they are a Christian, a Christ follower. Within the Presbyterian Church USA, there are people who are in many different places on this graph. There are Presbyterians who believe that the Bible was dictated by God and completely without error, and there are Presbyterians who believe that the Bible is full of errors that have come into it over time and that it was written as a product of human spiritual experience. And with these very different perspectives on our basic guidebook for our faith, it is no wonder that Christians can disagree so fundamentally on what they believe and on what is important. And they also can disagree on issues to such an extent that it

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can literally tear the church apart. This very thing happened to the church in the time of the Civil war over the issue of slavery.

Today's scripture may have taken some of you by surprise. It is very unusual to hear a sermon based on the book of Philemon. The story that we read today is a very brief glimpse into the life of an early Christian named Onesimus, a man who happened to be a slave. From what we gather from this text, another Christian, a dear friend of the Apostle Paul a dedicated Christian named Philemon, sent his slave Onesimus along with Paul on one of his missionary journeys. Paul was then imprisoned because of his preaching, and during Paul's imprisonment, the slave Onesimus became a believer in Christ. The book of Philemon is the letter that Paul sent along with the slave Onesimus, and encourages Philemon to "welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me". And that Philemon was to "have Onesimus back for good –no longer as a slave but better than a slave, as dear brother." The interesting thing about this particular text is that both the pro slavery Christians and the anti slavery Christians used this scripture as a basis for their arguments.

The Christians who viewed this scripture as being against slavery, inferred from the phrase that Onesimus was now better than a slave, but

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was a brother in Christ to mean that the letter was instructions for Philemon to set Onesimus free, and as such that slavery should be not be practiced by any Christians. The Christians who were arguing this principle were arguing that the Spirit of Christianity, and the experience of being free in Christ is incompatible with being owned by another person. These Christians tended to emphasize that the Bible was written as instructions from people's own spiritual experiences and that the Bible was not to be read as a literal instruction book.

But because the book of Philemon does not explicitly say for Philemon to release Onesimus from slavery, the book of Philemon was also used by pro slavery Christians to mean that while Onesimus was still to be a slave, that he should be treated like a Christian brother. The book of Philemon, in addition to all of the other scriptural references for slaves to be submissive to their masters were taken as instructions from God that slavery was a permissible and acceptable for Christians everywhere. The view that the Bible was an absolutely true and functioned as literal instructions from God was the most frequently held perspective from those who argued that slavery was allowed by God.

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Because of these very differing views of scripture and how it relates to Christian living, and because of the economic systems of the south depended on slavery, many Christian denominations were split over the issue of slavery. In 1837, a group of southerners who believed in the literal truth of the Bible, joined forces with similar minded northerners to kick the “New School” experientially based Presbyterians out of the denomination. In 1844, the Baptists split into two denominations and the Southern Baptist Convention was formed a year later in 1845. Some Methodist churches began splitting around the same time and a major break happened in that denomination in 1850. While the Lutheran church tried to hang together on this issue, they also split into northern and southern branches in the 1860’s. And while many of these denominations have now reunited in the last century, these basic fundamental differences over how Christians view scripture and how it is to be understood and applied to your life are still the very same reasons why Christians can have such widely ranging differences on issues today.

So in conclusion, this summer as we go through a list of issues that Christians disagree on today, it is very important to understand the place from which others may be standing and the framework of their faith from

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which their perspective is formed. A Christian who believes that the Bible is without error in any way, and that it came to humanity directly from the lips of God will view a verse with a completely different set of expectations than a Christian who believes that the Bible is a record of human experience and the result of human editing.

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