

Forbearance: A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church

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Goal: "I hope this book offers a constructive way of dealing with disagreement with both integrity and grace, one that may not reflect any one voice from Christian tradition but does faithfully represent the potential of our tradition."

What is Forbearance? "The active commitment to maintain Christian community through disagreement, as an extension of virtue and as reflection of the unity of Christ that binds the church together."

Why use this antiquated word? "The unusualness of the word is part of my attraction to it, because in its very utterance it represents the distinctiveness of Christian practice in the divisiveness of contemporary Christian culture."

"Forbearance also means 'bearing for or with,' which suggests not just voluntary restraint but actively carrying something or someone for a time. It implies patience, mutual respect, the extension of time, a certain latitude, and perhaps some affection that motivates a person to carry the burden of disagreement. In this sense, forbearance is less a momentary cease-fire than active extension of concern to one another."

What is the biblical use? In the Greek "*anecho*" is used in **Ephesians** 4:1-3.

I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another (*anecho*) in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

In **Colossians**, the author similarly commends forbearance as a practice worthy of the calling to which Christians are called.

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another (*anecho*) and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Col. 3:12-14)

Forbearance is not a recipe for dissolving difference, it is a virtuous means by which to maintain community even in the face of disagreement.

In **Romans**, Paul uses references to God's practice of forbearance to indict our own aptness to judge those with whom we disagree.

You say, "We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth." Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance (*anecho*) and patience? (Rom. 2:2-4a)

"The concept of forbearance, then, captures the foundational act of divine grace on which all of Christian belief is built!"

What does Forbearance require of us?

Humility – “Humility is a biblical virtue (1 Pet.5:5b-6), and it is an essential component to the practice of forbearance. Humble acknowledgment of the shortcomings in our perspectives ought to give us pause before we conclude that those with whom we disagree are not only wrong but irredeemable. It should incline us to habitual self-criticism, as well as make us eager to test, refine, and enlarge our perspectives by hearing other voices, both around us and from different times and places.”

Patience and Hope – “The virtue of patience, then, offers Christians an opportunity to model the character of God.” “When we exhibit patience to fellow Christians, even when we think they are wrong, we witness to the beautiful persistence of God, and we contribute to the cultivation of a church that reflects that godly character. In our unwillingness to give up on them, we proclaim God’s unwillingness to give up on us.”

“Our trust in God as the guarantor of the future, then, gives us hope, and hope in the reliability of God underwrites our practice of patience.”

“One important way to exhibit patience in the life of the church (and beyond) is through taking the time to listen to one another.”

Faithfulness – “I do not think that ‘faith’ is best understood as an executive summary of what Christians should believe, a doctrinally specific measure of conformity with what it should mean to be a ‘true’ Christian. Instead, I approach faith as I think the Bible does, as a virtue, the habit of trusting and relying on God, and by extension of this trust in God, the practice of trusting other Christians as well. The virtue of faithfulness also includes a commitment to being trustworthy ourselves. To be faithful, then, describes the character of our relationships, not the specific content of our creed.”

Truth in Love – “The secret to maintaining a commitment to truth while practicing forbearance is to allow the latter to shape the former.” “The non-negotiable truth Jesus preserved and defended with his life and his death on the cross was the pervasive love of God. That love was the orthodoxy that disciples, then and now, must affirm in order to identify with Jesus.”

Justice – “(Forbearance) does not require us to give up the good fight for what we know in our hearts and minds is right and true. It does not ask us to temper our energy, reduce our urgency of our cause, or avoid tension and conflict at all costs. What forbearance does ask is that we engage the other in church and society in a certain way, in a way consistent with Christian virtue and the art of Christian friendship.”

Just Forbearance, but not just forbearance - “Forbearance does not ask us to lessen our commitment to conviction. Instead it reshapes our zeal so that, armed with the grace of Christ, we pursue what we believe to be right with equal dedication to the maintenance of community, even with those with whom we painfully disagree.”

What difference can forbearance make? “I think there is a deep affinity between the ideals of a virtuous life lived in ecclesial community (forbearance) and the definition of a virtuous public life (civility). Because of these connections, I think the modeling of forbearance is perhaps the best gift the church can give to a political culture that is desperate to learn how to navigate its own differences in healthier ways. A church that excels at forbearance is admirably equipped to extend those gifts to the project of civility.”