When Dialogue is NOT our Hope

by Joseph Phelps

I hesitate to discuss the limitations of dialogue because of the danger that people will use them as escape hatches whenever the work becomes too demanding or too threatening. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that there are occasions when dialogue is not the appropriate action for people of faith. There are times to talk, and times to be silent. We cannot dialogue when:

Either side refuses to talk.

To continue to pursue dialogue in the face of an absolute rejection by the other side may be a counter-productive strategy.

There may be, however, a few folks on the other side who are willing to be in dialogue; you may be able to ask them to convey your positions to those on the extreme edges of their side—it may well be that persons on both extremes will only be able to dialogue with others on their particular side of the Divide but who are closer to the middle of the spectrum, instead of dialoguing with persons from the other side.

When the conversation is co-opted by persons in power.

This happens when dialogue is used by a group that is being oppressive with their power as a way to appease the group with the grievance. In this case, dialogue is no longer a genuine exchange, but simply a way to neutralize the cry to be heard by those without power. In this scenario, dialogue is converted from a tool for mutual understanding and transformation, into a salve to soothe the feelings of the grieved ones by giving them the illusion of being heard and taken seriously. This perversion of dialogue will eventually be exposed, as the offended party comes to recognize that, indeed, this “talk is cheap.”

When dialogue is being substituted for the work of counseling.

Disputes can be the result of something more complex than a misunderstanding or even competing world views.

When an issue of justice is involved.

This is the most complex reason for halting dialogue. Some conflicts are more than a difference of perspectives. As Martin Luther King reminded us, sometimes there are reasons “why we can’t wait.” People of God cannot be content to engage in dialogue with perpetrators of evil and injustice. We must be hesitant and cautious to place such strong labels on an individual or group, but sometimes we must.

There are times when action must take precedence over talk, when conflict should be pursued in place of a false peace. This is what Jeremiah (6:14) accused the prophets of Jerusalem of doing: “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” A dialogue between Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus company which tried to force her to give up her seat in the 1950’s was not in order (MCS Training Manual, p 134). Clearly, the time for talking had passed. An act of resistance, a shifting of sentiment, and a redefinition of power was necessary before honest dialogue could resume.

Jesus reminded us that there would be issues worth (non-violently) fighting over: “Do you suppose that I am here to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather dissension” (Luke 12: 51). His stance for justice and true holiness put Him in constant conflict with those who preferred the status quo. The conflict exposed the need for radical change. To have quelled the conflict through dialogue would have been to neglect the work for which He was sent. (Could this be why Jesus stood silent before Pilate when asked, “What is truth?”?) Jesus had real enemies; his command for us to love our enemies acknowledges their reality and requires a tough love that stands up to them, and through transforming initiatives, turns them into friends.

Thus for Jesus, there needed to be a transforming fight. Having said this,

There are times when action must take precedence over talk, when conflict should be pursued in place of a false peace. This is what Jeremiah (6:14) accused the prophets of Jerusalem of doing: “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.”

let us also remember that Jesus’ form of fighting differed from the tactics of the world. And, despite their vast differences, Jesus kept talking with His adversaries throughout His ministry. He never gave up. •