



Godly Disagreement in an Age of Slander

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One of my favorite books published by William Carey Library is the 1977 release of *The Night Cometh: Two Wealthy Evangelicals Face the Nation*. It was written by Rebecca Winter (now Lewis) and tells the fascinating story of Lewis and Arthur Tappan, evangelical millionaires of early nineteenth-century America who were tremendous social reformers.

Those interested in the theme of this issue of *MF* would do well to read this short book. Not only will you be amazed by these two men and their associates, you will also learn a lot about how sincere believers should disagree. Christian and mission history bursts with disagreement, dissension and difficulty that occur when believers come to different conclusions on an issue. While the focus is usually on what the disagreement is, or why it exists in the first place, little is said about the all-important how disagreements should be handled. The Tappan brothers have something to say to us in 2011 about the way we engage each other with relation to the legitimacy of “Jesus movements.”

One of the Tappans’ biggest reform issues was abolition. Yet they had very serious disagreements with, you guessed it, other abolitionists. On the one hand, they had a problem with William Lloyd Garrison, a popular abolitionist of the time. Though they worked hand-in-hand at first, divisions rose when Garrison became increasingly denunciatory and accusatory toward slave-holders. The Tappans did not feel this approach was best, and they ended their close working relationship with Garrison. On the other hand, they also had a problem with the great revivalist/reformer Charles Grandison Finney, also an abolitionist. Finney was as fearful of the Tappans’ approach

as the Tappans were of Garrison. Finney was convinced that conversion to Christ must happen first before any headway toward abolition could be realized. The Tappans in turn considered Finney a traitor to the abolitionist cause because he refused to pray for abolition in public.

What we are experiencing today in the back-and-forth, at times vitriolic, dialogue between those who favor highly contextualized “insider” or Jesus movements and those who do not is nothing new. Yet what I find most gratifying is how these men of long ago, men of great zeal, opinion and conviction, dealt with others in the same cause whose opinions and convictions they could not tolerate. Please allow me to quote extensively from the book to give you a feel for the high level of appreciation, respect and honor they displayed toward those with whom they disagreed.

In 1870, after the Civil War and nearly forty years after they had first met, Garrison wrote to Lewis Tappan: ‘Be assured, I shall always very gratefully remember your early friendship, your generous hospitality, your courageous and whole-souled espousal of the Anti-Slavery cause, in the midst of trials serenely met and nobly endured. Whatever may have been the unhappy causes which, at a later period, led to our estrangement, or at least to our different methods of acting for the deliverance of the oppressed, nothing shall blind me to the fact that, during the long protracted struggle, no one evinced greater zeal, persistency, and disinterestedness [unselfishness] in resting the immediate and total abolition of slavery than yourself’... (73) Lewis later affirms in his journal, ‘Differing from brother Finney as I do on the slavery question, I love him for his many excellent qualities.’ In the midst of this conflict Arthur continued to support Oberlin (the college Finney founded), and later Lewis encouraged and aided Finney in the writing and publication of his autobiography... (74)

In 1842 he (Lewis) wrote to his orthodox brother John, after some conflict over anti-slavery procedures: ‘... let us watch over our hearts, and pray much that they may be sanctified, and that all our faculties of mind and body may be consecrated to the Lord. So far as we can, let us think alike and act alike, but where we do not do this let us not slander one another nor advise one another, and most of all do not let us misrepresent the gospel of our divine Lord. If we have not his spirit we are none of his.’ (72)

While I’m not privy to all the correspondence that transpires between proponents and opponents of insider thinking (public or private), I would be surprised if the above sentiments are often expressed. Unfortunately, what the Tappans had with those with whom they disagreed is something often missing in present-day missiological divides: relationship. Instead, we are writing articles like I’m doing right now. We are focused on principles, not people; positions, not relationships. And we are the poorer for it.

In his book, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Edwin Friedman writes, “The differences in any system, whether it is a marriage or a legislature, rarely determine the nature or the intensity of the differing. Whether one is baking a cake or examining an institutional mix, the interaction of ingredients is almost always a function of the temperature and pressure of the environment. When troubled couples, for example, make a breakthrough, often the issues that they differed over have not gone away, but the two sides have become less reactive to the differences” (39). How we disagree affects the “environment.” Perhaps if we relate more, we will react less and both come to a greater understanding of God’s purposes. ¶