

Why ARE we so contentious?

The other day, a friend sent me a link about Anne Rice, a popular American novelist who some years ago announced with a considerable fanfare of publicity that after careful consideration of the evidence she had decided to give up Christianity.

“For those who care, and I understand if you don't: Today I quit being a Christian . . . It's simply impossible for me to 'belong' to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else.” (1)

I think what she actually means is that she's giving up on the church—from what she says here and elsewhere, her faith in Christ is undimmed. But the point remains.

My first reaction to this kind of thing is a slight chortle of, “Well, what do you expect? After all, it is the Pharisee Church, isn't it!”

But then, I look inside myself, and I see that I'm just as bad. Quarrelsome. Disputatious. Hostile. And the worst of it is, it's really only in church that I'm like that. Take me out of church into a secular environment, talking about ordinary day-to-day secular things and suddenly I'm really quite a placid, tolerant sort of person. But in church . . .

I know it's completely wrong, and I shouldn't be doing it. I know in my head that my first calling is to live out the gospel, myself, in my attitudes and relationships, rather than going around criticizing others and pointing out where I think their beliefs, attitudes and behaviour fall short. I know it's all absolutely wrong, and yet

So, when I encounter another Christian my first and often overwhelming urge is frequently to size up their beliefs, actively looking for points of disagreement and things to attack. And regularly I encounter others doing just the same thing back to me.

So, why do we do it? it? And particularly, why do I do it?

A few possible reasons come to mind.

1. I don't really WANT to live the Christian life. I much prefer to do things that leave me afterwards with a sense of achievement or satisfaction – that's what stimulates my pleasure centre.(2) But in the Christian life I'm called to do things because they're right, rather than because they give me a sense of achievement, so there's resistance on my part.

2. So, instead, I PROJECT. Instead of doing it myself, I start trying to make others do it. It's more comfortable that way. It opens the way for the sense of achievement that can come from modifying other people's behaviour, and in turn gives me pleasure. I can feel I'm doing something useful, acting as God's messenger, but without the pain.

3. This comes back to the old battle between doctrine and morality—the split between head and heart. We gravitate to the head and get satisfaction from doctrinal bickering. But true morality always call the heart into play.

4. Finally there's that old and universal insecurity that leads us to prefer certainties over

uncertainties. Trusting in a God who I can't see, hear, touch, or smell can be difficult. (Not difficult actually, but just insecure.) So I start looking for doctrinal certainties—it's more comfortable that way and makes me feel more secure in myself. But it also opens the door for disputation, since my doctrinal certainties have an alarming habit of differing from other people's doctrinal certainties.

Jesus had little interest in doctrinal certainties. He avoided doctrinal disputes as far as he could. For Jesus it was all about, "Do unto others as you would have others do to you." I'm not looking for others to start picking my beliefs and practices to bits, so I shouldn't be doing it to others. It's as simple as that, the true core of Christian behaviour, the simplest—and the most difficult—thing in the world.

(1) <http://www.coffeehousetheology.com/anne-rice-leaves-the-church/>

(2) 11th January 1011 What Makes Us Human?