

The Enns and Outs of Controversy

Rhett Dodson

April 7, 2008

The top news story in the theological world last week was the suspension of Dr. Peter Enns from his position as Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Hermeneutics at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Enns's suspension comes at the end of two years of controversy over his book *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*. Enns's purpose is to engage an evangelical doctrine of Scripture with implications from the themes of modern biblical scholarship over the past century and a half. I read *Inspiration and Incarnation* shortly after it was published in 2005 and have tried to follow some of the reviews, journal articles, and debates that have resulted from it. In my opinion, Enns's solutions for the problem of the Old Testament create problems for a robust doctrine of inerrancy. Adopting terms such as *myth* and ideas such as a Second Temple hermeneutic raise more questions than they answer. Peter Enns is not a liberal. But I'm concerned that, as Rick Phillips has observed, the ideas Enns has adopted lead to liberalism in the end.

This week's commentary is by no means an attempt to review or refute Enns's book. Don Carson, Paul Helm, and Greg Beale have done that at length and have done it well. This week I want to step back and look at the subject of controversy itself, in particular controversy between evangelical Christians. Enns was not the only person to go through theological conflict in 2006-2007. I saw a fair bit of it myself. It's never pleasant. No one likes to clash with a brother or sister in Christ. While at the end of the day there is always a victor, and to the victor go the spoils, everyone bears his or her share of wounds from such a battle. The question to ask, however, is not "How few scars can I escape with?" but "How should I conduct myself when facing a theological opponent who is also a fellow Christian?"

I'm not suggesting that the following guidelines were or were not followed by those involved in the Enns case. Nor for a moment would I pretend to be a perfect practitioner of these principles myself. But they are biblical guidelines, the ideal for which we should strive. These truths apply to seminary classrooms, local church gatherings, meetings of presbyteries, and conversations over cups of coffee at your kitchen table.

In a theological disagreement, remember first and foremost that you represent Jesus Christ. Of course everyone involved in the discussion will professes this, but the debate-altering impact this truth should have is often quickly forgotten. Jesus Christ is the way, the *truth*, and the life (John 14:6). As a follower of Jesus, we represent the truth. Truth is what we are after. To listen to one side of an argument without attempting to discover what the other side actually believes is unfair. To attribute to an opponent something he or she doesn't believe is dishonest. To manipulate facts or to attempt to create emotional bias is reprehensible.

Next, try to achieve mutual understanding no matter how long it takes or how much effort it involves. Study your opponent's position until you can state it in such a way that he responds, "I couldn't have said it better myself." We are quicker to judge our brothers and sisters than we are to understand them. Ask questions. Gently probe the answers you receive. Tease out implications. Ask, "So are you saying then...?" We are seeking truth, and the way to find truth is to walk the path of godly wisdom. This wisdom is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17).

Thirdly, speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). In a debate we too often quickly divide into sides, become entrenched in our own opinions, and only stick our heads above the trench line to take potshots at those on the other side. And we call ourselves the church of Christ. Only as we speak the truth from a loving heart and listen with a loving ear can we achieve mutual understanding. By all means have your convictions, but do not let your convictions sour your spirit by a

lack of prayer so that what was once a firm and godly confidence spills over as invective.

Finally, be humble. On the field of theological conflict, humility is usually the first casualty on both sides. In a disagreement over doctrine, each side should be seeking the grace to understand the positions being debated and the grace to stand for the position that most closely reflects the truth of the Bible. We need grace to perceive and grace to contend without being contentious. And if it's grace we need, of this we can be sure: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). Correct theology is never an excuse for arrogance. This is true even when debating a Jehovah's Witness over the deity of Christ. How did you arrive at the truth? Were you born with more spiritual intelligence than others? Do you have a God-gene that makes you more capable of understanding theological concepts? Or did God humble himself to speak to you in Scripture and give you the Holy Spirit to open your mind and heart to embrace the truth? I think we both know the answer. We have nothing we did not receive from Christ's gracious hand (1 Cor. 4:7).

It's sad when Christians disagree, and sadder yet when they feel they must separate. We can't all agree on everything; we can't all be right. But as evangelical Christians, we are gospel-people. Let us rally around the essential issues of our faith. And while doctrinal distinctives may determine which denomination we join, and doctrinal deviations may determine who teaches in our seminaries, let us remember we never have cause to look down upon or push from our hearts a brother or sister in Christ.