

It is amazing the things that Christians believe are important enough to fight over. In his blog, a guy called Thom Rainer asked his readers what had caused fights or conflicts in their churches. Incredibly the responses included:

- Because the church budget was off 10 cents.
- Over whether a clock in the worship center should be removed.
- Over the appropriate length of the worship pastor's beard.
- Over the type of filing cabinet to purchase: black or brown; 2, 3, or 4 drawers.
- Over whether it was ok to use cranberry/grape juice instead of grape juice, normal or gluten-free bread for communion.
- Over the type of coffee – some people left because they didn't get their choice.
- Over whether the church should allow people to wear black t-shirts, since black is the colour of the devil.

It is sad to think that we as Christians could get pulled into these sorts of trivial and ridiculous arguments. How can we gather together to worship our Lord and Saviour and end up fighting over things that are so stupid?

And yet, fighting over worship is really nothing new. The very first conflict in the Bible happened just after a time of worship! However, here the issue at stake was something much more serious than beards, coffee or dress code. The issue went right to the very heart of worship!

Genesis 4:1-5: "Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man." ² Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. ³ In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. ⁴ But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering, ⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast."

1. The Gift of Family

Last week we saw that "Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living." Genesis 3:20 Despite her guilt and her brokenness, Adam knew that God would give Eve the amazing honour and privilege to bring life into this world. And this started to become a reality through the birth of this first baby boy.

a) A Gift of Love

Of course there was a natural biological aspect to this birth. "Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain." Genesis 4:1. This literally says that Adam knew his wife and it reminds us that we need to reject the way that this world that has reduced sex to simply a physical act. We need to remember that God designed it so that a man and woman could know each other at the deepest level of intimacy within the context of a committed marriage relationship.

b) A Gift from God

But Eve realized that this son was also a gift from God. She said, "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man." Genesis 4:1 This new human being was made in the image of God, to reflect the likeness of God and bring glory to God, because he was God's handiwork.

And this is true about all of us. Psalm 139:13-14 says:

"You created my inmost being;

you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;

your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

And so we who are parents need to remember that "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him." Psalm 127:3. Our children are gifts from God to us and so we should be continually thankful to God for them.

This was Jacob's attitude. When Esau asked about his family he answered, "They are the children God has graciously given your servant." Genesis 33:5

And this understanding should impact not only how we love and care for our kids, but also how seriously we take our responsibility to point them to their ultimate Father in heaven and "bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." Ephesians 6:4

But this understanding should also lead us as a church should stand for the value of each and every person. Even if we live in a world where abortion and euthanasia are increasingly accepted, we need to hold to the truth that no matter how small

or helpless they are, no matter what they can or cannot do, no matter what the circumstances of their conception or their perceived quality of life, every human being is a precious and valuable gift from God. And so all human life is sacred.

2. The Same But Different

But although we recognise that everyone is equally precious in God's sight, they're also different from each other. In a way, we're all the same, but also, all unique.

a) Different Jobs

And so when Abel, Cain's little brother was born, these first brothers followed different paths in life. "Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil." Genesis 4:2

Some people have tried to suggest that this is what was behind God's favouring of Abel as somehow being a shepherd is better than being a farmer or gardener. But I don't think that is true. Both of these men were in a sense fulfilling aspects of their God-given purpose:

- As a shepherd, Abel was obeying God's command to "Rule over... every living creature that moves on the ground." Genesis 1:28.
- And as a gardener, Cain was obeying God's command to Adam in the Garden of Eden to "Work it and take care of it." Genesis 2:15

b) Different Offerings

And both of these men brought offerings to God from the fruits of their labour. "Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. ⁴ But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock." Genesis 4:3-4

Both Cain and Abel had a consciousness of God, and his role in their lives. They knew that God deserved to be worshiped. They had some kind of understanding of the appropriateness of expressing gratitude and thankfulness to him.

And I think their different offerings could have both been honouring to God. The law given to the people of Israel though Moses would later include rules for both animal sacrifices and for grain offerings. God could have been honoured and worshipped with both.

In our world, people are often troubled by diversity. They get upset because other people look different, speak differently, like different things, relate in different ways.

And even as Christians we sometimes get offended because churches do things differently. There are so many arguments between traditional or contemporary music, organ or guitar, stand up or sit down, volume up or volume down, hands up or hands down!

But the Bible talks about a God who loves diversity. In the church, Paul writes: "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men." 1 Corinthians 12:4-6

So we are called to worship a God who doesn't require or want uniformity in his family. He is big enough to handle the diversity that he has created in his world.

So instead of fighting with others over what is best, we are called to worship and serve our Lord differently, using our different gifts and different abilities.

3. The Necessity of Faith

But that doesn't mean that all our differences are acceptable. That doesn't mean that we can come to God any way that we feel like, that with God anything goes.

Yes, we can honour and worship God through our God-given diversity of personality, language, culture, experience, understanding, abilities and gifts. But there are some things that are essential, immovable, unchangeable and indispensable if we are going to honour God with our lives. And it was one of those essentials that Cain and Abel's differences did matter to God.

Genesis 4:4-5: "The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering, ⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour." Abel's offering pleased God. He accepted it because he was honoured by it. But Cain's offering was not. It didn't please God, and it wasn't accepted.

a) A Bloodless Sacrifice

And there have been many suggestions as to why that was the case. Some have said that Cain's sacrifice wasn't accepted because it was only grain, vegetables or fruits and so it was not a blood sacrifice.

And to some extent that makes sense. As we've seen in the previous chapter, the wages of sin against God is death. God said about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, ["When you eat of it you will surely die."](#) Genesis 2:17

And so the price of rescuing people from that penalty of sin is the death of a substitute. Hebrews 9:22: ["Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."](#)

Abel's sacrifice of a lamb from his flock pointed to this reality. Not that a lamb could pay for his sins, but that it pointed forward to Jesus, about whom John the Baptist would declare, ["The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"](#) John 1:29

b) A Poor Quality Offering

Others have said that Abel's sacrifice was better because of the quality of his offering. Abel brought the best part, ["fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock."](#) Genesis 4:4, whereas Cain just brought ["some of the fruits of the soil."](#) Genesis 4:3.

This makes some sense. The people of Israel were told to ["Bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the Lord your God."](#) Exodus 23:19 This showed that they believed both that God deserved nothing less than their best – but also that they were willing to give away the start of the harvest because they were trusting in God to provide all that they needed to live through the rest of the harvest.

But again and again Israel failed to do this. So Malachi challenged them, ["When you bring injured, crippled or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?"](#) Malachi 1:13

And we can apply this principle to many different aspect of our lives.

- Do we give God the best of ourselves in service to God, or just whatever energy, focus or strength we have left after doing everything else?
- Are we willing to give him time at the start of our day, to read his Word, spend time in prayer – or just the leftovers once we know that we've managed to do everything else?
- Are we willing to prioritise our financial giving to God's kingdom and his mission in this world, or do we give just whatever we have left after we've spent what we want on ourselves?
- Does our giving honour God, by showing that he is first in our lives, or do we seek to give him what really costs us nothing?

c) A Lack of Faith

But I think the real reason why Cain's offering was unacceptable is found in Hebrews 11:4: ["By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings."](#)

The vital difference between the offering of Cain and the offering of Abel was not so much to do with the kind of offerings they were, nor the quality of what was given. Rather it was all about the heart of the one presenting the offering.

Abel's offering was accepted because he offered it in faith. He was expressing his humble trust in God, his complete dependence on God and his gratitude for all that he had done.

That is why Abel was seen as righteous in God's sight because here at the beginning of the Bible, just as throughout it, what matters is faith in God! ["The righteous will live by faith."](#) Romans 1:17

And so Cain's offering was unacceptable to God although he was involved in religious activity, his heart wasn't right with God. He wasn't trusting in God, he hadn't put his complete dependence on him. He didn't have faith, and, ["Without faith it is impossible to please God."](#) Hebrews 11:6

4. Angry Not Repentant

This is why Cain responded as he did to God's disapproval. ["So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast."](#) Genesis 4:5

Faith would have responded to that situation with genuine sorrow, deep repentance, with a change of attitude and action. But instead, Cain responded with raging bitterness and self-centred pity.

Cain was not a man of faith. He didn't believe in God's fairness. He didn't believe in God's holiness. He didn't believe in God's goodness. And so he rebelled against God's judgement and envied Abel. And as we'll see next week, those attitudes took root in his heart and led him to commit a dreadful crime against God and against his brother.

All of this showed that God's honour and God's glory were never Cain's priority. He had offered his sacrifice for self-centred reasons. He didn't love and trust God.

5. Religious But Not Righteous

So Cain is a warning to us, that it is possible to be religious but not righteous. We can go through the motions of looking like we are worshipping God, but without bringing honour to God or having a saving faith in God!

a) Words Not Heart

This is the trap that the people of Israel fell into. Jesus challenged them by quoting from Isaiah: "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.'" Mark 7:6–7

It wasn't enough for them just to be involved in their religious practices. It wasn't enough for them to attend the ceremonies, be present at their festivals, go through their rituals and say the right things. It wasn't even enough for them to bring their sacrifices and pay their tithes.

All of that was in vain, it was a worthless act, a meaningless ritual, because it didn't express the reality of their hearts. It didn't come from a life centred on God by faith.

b) Ministry not Salvation

And when people do this, the consequences are terrifying. Speaking of the day of judgement, Jesus said, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" Matthew 7:22–23

It is possible to be intensely religious, to go through the motions of Christianity, to attend church, sing songs, say prayers, read our Bibles, even get involved in ministry – and yet remain separate from God, outside of his kingdom, lost and heading to a lost eternity – because we've not come into a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ!

Without faith in Christ we cannot please God, we cannot be part of his kingdom, we cannot worship him. If we haven't personally put our faith in Jesus, trusting in him and his sacrificial death on the cross then the Bible tells us that we are still lost. "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." John 3:18

If we are in that situation this morning, we need to learn from Cain's tragic error and repent and put our faith in Christ today!

c) Busy But Not Fruitful

But what about those of us who've put our faith in Jesus? We've accepted his death on the cross as payment for our sins and we've put our trust and dependence on Christ alone for our salvation. And so we stand righteous in God's sight.

But we need to still learn from Cain that it is possible to fall into the trap of going through the motions in our Christian lives. On the outside looking on, others may see us at church, at Bible study, involved in service. But if this is not a true expression of our faith in Christ and an outworking of our relationship with him, then it is empty, and useless, and fruitless.

Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." John 15:5 What matters most in our Christian lives is not what we do, or say, or look like – but whether we are dwelling in Christ, depending on him, learning from him, loving him!

Conclusions

So I pray that God will

- Save us all from walking in the way of Cain, of hypocrisy, play acting and meaningless religious activity.
- So that instead we will follow in the footsteps of Abel in putting God first, giving him our very best, in wholehearted

worship because we have put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ!

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