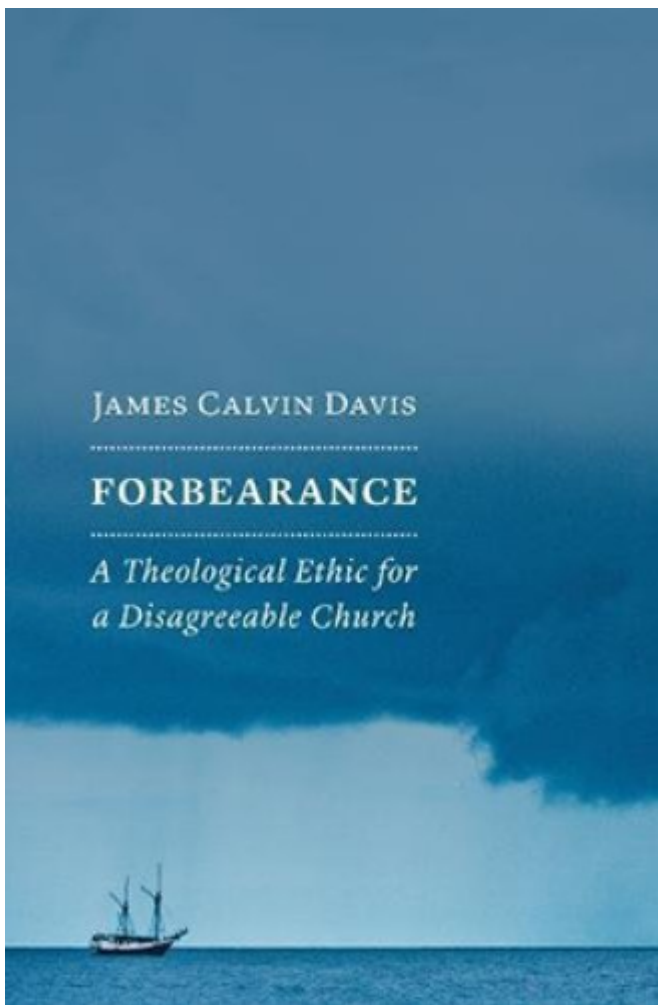


Is forbearance amid disagreement a Christian virtue?

We should forbear one another—not to ensure church unity, but because God forbears us.

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [February 14, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Forbearance

A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church

By James Calvin Davis
Eerdmans

Putting up with one another during theological disagreements requires the practice of forbearance—an antique sounding word that James Calvin Davis thinks bears dusting off and restoring to its rightful place among the Christian virtues. He combines lucid exploration of the difficulties of forbearance with a passionate plea for the patient practice of it.

Davis obviously loves the church. He flatters his readers by assuming that we share his love and are committed to being the church with one another no matter what. I'm not convinced that Davis's commitment to the unity and peace of the church is so widespread.

My denomination is locked in an unproductive fight over same-sex marriage and ordination that threatens to unravel our connection. Davis has helped me see how our theological arguments could be more fruitful if all sides began with a pledge "to listen, to attempt to hear, to understand and be patient, to persevere as the church as we argue, forbearing one another, even as Christ forbears us." But my experience in a feuding church family leads me to believe that one reason church altercations are so divisive is because we love our positions on issues more than we love the body of Christ.

Although he roots forbearance in his love of the church, Davis doesn't provide much theological rationale for why we ought to try so hard to put up with one another to ensure the church's unity. With the exception of a good section on Christ and friendship, Davis presents forbearance as a mostly human moral performance that doesn't rely on help from divine agency. Our allegiance to God, he believes, should translate clearly and discernibly into "a moral universe" of "loving God in neighbor-love and stranger-love." Davis says that the "objective of theology is to understand ourselves in the most expansive context possible." I would argue, more specifically, that it's a Christian claim that we should cultivate forbearance—and its corresponding virtues of patience, humility, and actively embracing love—because that's truly the way God is.

Davis describes Jesus as a helpful "interpretive lens" and praises Jesus' "legacy." But the essentialist Jesus he describes is too detached from the narratives of Christian faith to provide much help with the heavy lifting required to forbear one another.

Although *Forbearance* tries to be fair to conservative Christians, the book's sympathies and motivations are essentially liberal. Davis admits that liberals demonstrate rigid orthodoxies and exclusivism just as conservatives do. But the truth to which he is committed seems determinedly vague and without much christological content. In theological disputes, he urges us, we should remember that "God is more than what we can discern" and appeal to "that greatness—call it mystery, otherness, inscrutability, or Something More." I can't imagine such vagueness being much help in arguments between self-designated progressive and conservative Christians.

Davis has a fine discussion of the ways in which an appeal to forbearance can be misused. He asks: "Does the practice of forbearance undermine the church's commitment to the preservation of God's truth?" However, he then calls commitment to the truth a "Protestant principle," a claim that he should perhaps run past his Catholic friends. Catholics are equally committed to the truth, though in a more ecclesial, doctrinal, hierarchical way than Davis. I fear that in the interest of potential agreement, Davis has flattened out and depersonalized Christian truth, thereby failing to do justice to the deep disagreements Christians have over what is true and what is not.

Davis's invocation of Martin Luther King's forbearance is well done. King's example could have provided the opportunity for a more nuanced reflection on how power inequalities affect theological disputes. Factors like class, gender, and race can determine how your charitable forbearance might leave me to languish in (and benefit from) my sinful separations from you. When I urge you to forbear me in my disagreements with you, it makes a big difference if I have power and you don't.

I appreciate the book's honest admission that the call for forbearance can be a retreat from social justice. Although justice is a noble aspiration, Davis is convinced that we'll never achieve justice by refusing to engage, argue, and stay in conversation with one another in the church. I wish he had also included a more extended discussion of those times when forbearance should end and other virtues, like accountability and correction, should set limits on patience, humility, and friendship.

The concluding statement by Nancy Jakiela and Albert Zaccor, which was adopted by Davis's home congregation, is a perfect ending to the book. It exemplifies that there are churches committed to "the conviction and the practice of forbearance." Our disagreements would end more faithfully and constructively if every denomination

and congregation began its arguments by reading this book.