



News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

**FEATUERS**  
produced by Baptist Press

460 James Robertson Parkway  
Nashville, Tennessee 37219  
Telephone (615) 244-2355  
W. C. Fields, Director  
Jim Newton, Assistant Director

Oct b r 29, 1969

PROBLEMS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE  
(another in a series)

MONOLOGUE OR DIALOGUE

by T. B. Maston  
Retired Professor of Christian Ethics  
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

389

Many problems arise in the area of human relations because of a failure of people to communicate with one another. A major factor contributing to this failure is the inability or the refusal of some people to enter into dialogue.

The latter is one reason for many conflicts that arise between parents and children, teachers and pupils, employers and employees, pastors and people. Also, the clashes between those of different cultures and colors stem to a considerable degree from a failure to carry on real dialogue. Martin Luther King Jr., in his famous Letter from the Birmingham Jail said: "Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue."

The failure to participate in dialogue is primarily but not exclusively the responsibility of the individual or group with the advantage of age, prestige, or power. There is always the possibility of a two-way monologue. Two people or even two groups may seemingly but not really be speaking to one another.

As the younger or less powerful individual or group matures there will be more necessity for dialogue. At least, there will be insistence on an answer to the questions that are asked. Parents of teenage children become acutely aware of this insistence. But the same thing is true of other individuals and groups. For example, the Negro or the black man in recent years has insisted as never before on real dialogue.

The demand by the teenager, the college student, the employee, the Negro for dialogue may sound at times like a monologue. If it does, one possible reason is the refusal of the parent, the teacher, the administrator, the white man to enter into dialogue. The more the latter refuses to hear, the louder the former will speak.

Many people prefer monologue to dialogue because the latter is much more difficult. Dialogue means that one's position may be challenged. It is usually much easier to state a position than to defend it. Some feel threatened when they are asked to defend their position. When this happens usually their reaction will be emotional rather than intelligent.

Also, to carry on effective dialogue one must be able to listen attentively and to analyze objectively the position of the other person or group. This is hard to do. We need to know, however, that effective communication depends as much on ability to listen as on ability to speak clearly and concisely.

Many problems in our churches and in our denomination stem to a considerable degree from the fact that we tend to speak in monologue rather than dialogue. This is not only true of the preacher in the pulpit but also of the teacher in the classroom and of the denominational leader. There is not enough opportunity for people generally to ask questions, to have a chance to talk back, or to state an opposing viewpoint. Unfortunately, too many of us in church-related vocations are not competent in the use of dialogue.

Dialogue is particularly important in a democracy. There is no real democracy without it. Also, the maturing of people in a democracy will be determined, to a considerable degree, by their participation through dialogue in the life and work of the democracy.



October 29, 1969

PROBLEMS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE  
(another in a series)

DEMOCRACY AND DICTATORSHIP

by T. B. Maston  
Retired Professor of Christian Ethics  
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

400

There is always a possibility that a dictatorship will arise out of a democracy. One factor in this possibility or danger is the presence in the democracy of some people with an inflated opinion of their capacity to lead or rule. Their desire for power may be purely selfish. Or, they may seek a place of power to enable them to achieve what they consider to be best for the people.

Another reason why a dictatorship may evolve from a democracy is the unwillingness of many people to accept the responsibilities of decision making and self-government in general. They will surrender the liberties that a democracy provides in order to avoid the responsibilities that those liberties entail.

Both of the above factors may be at work in a religious as well as in a political democracy. For example, members of a church may permit or even insist that the pastor, the staff, the deacons, or the committees make decisions. When they do this they are providing the basis for the rise of a dictatorship, individual or group.

When recommendations are automatically approved, the democratic process, preserved in form but not in substance, is being used to destroy democracy itself. This is particularly true if questions and discussions are frowned upon and if those who disagree are considered uncooperative if not actually heretical.

The larger the church the greater is the danger ordinarily that this attitude will develop and predominate.

If democracy is lost in a church, a major factor will be the fact that most church members have abdicated their responsibility. A vacuum is created, and vacuums do not remain unoccupied very long.

There are usually individuals or small groups that are ready to move in as people in general move out. This means, among other things, that in any church that has a pastor, a deacon, or someone else who is a dictator the church must share the responsibility for the rise of the dictatorship. This is just as true of dictatorship by a group as by an individual.

Some who become dictators, and many people in general, fail to make a proper distinction between dictatorship and positive leadership. One can exercise the latter without being a dictator. The line of distinction between the two may be rather fine or narrow, but it is a very important distinction.

A pastor, for example, cannot provide the leadership that a church needs unless he is positive in his leadership, but at the same time he should not be a dictator. He should know the direction in which he believes the Lord wants the church to move. He also should know and suggest ways to attain the goals he has for the church, but he should never seek to force his ideas on the church. He should involve others in refining and defining goals and strategies. When he does this he is strengthening democracy in the church.

If he is a positive leader rather than a real or potential dictator, he will not be offended if some member or members of the church disagree with him. He will not consider such a difference an affront to his leadership.

Let all of us in any place of leadership such as pastors, deacons, and teachers carefully walk the narrow dividing line between positive leadership and dictatorship. Our ability to do so will be an important factor in determining the effectiveness of our leadership and the preservation of democracy. This is just as true in the denomination as it is in the local church.