

The greatest of these is being right

By [Thomas R. Steagald](#)

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When it comes to fierce theological debate—excommunicating, eternity-in-the-balance doctrinal warfare—neither the ecumenical councils nor those unpleasant doings in Geneva have anything on my local Hardee's.

Almost every morning, over coffee and biscuits, there is a relentless battle for the orthodox high ground. Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans and two stripes of Presbyterians don their traditional (if somewhat fading) denominational colors to joust back and forth. Mostly it is good-natured name-calling and one-upsmanship, but now and then someone aims for the throat.

The most contentious issues relate to baptism (when and how), the nature of biblical inspiration and authority, the limits of the atonement, the origin of the species (and sometimes even, sadly, of ethnicity), the veneration of the saint (there is only one) and the surpassing value of pilgrimage to the saint's nearby shrine ("Have you been to the Billy Graham Library?").

One man almost always "wins" the arguments—which is to say that he outlasts the others. Long after everyone's lost interest, he hacks away with loud justifications for his every position, quoting chapter and verse from his "sword of the Spirit" (the King James Bible).

This same fellow, by all accounts, is one of the meanest and chintziest guys around. He demeans the poor, hates all Democrats and persons of color and recently led a successful move to ouster his church's pastor.

"He would rather be right than nice," said a member of our congregation.

While I'm not sure being a Christian equates with "nice," the point is well-taken. Although Paul maintains that while faith, hope and love abide, "the greatest of these is love," I believe that many Protestants have decided that the greatest of these is actually faith—as in "orthodoxy" of one sort or another—and that little else matters,

least of all incarnation.

S.T. Kimbrough [suggests](#) that evangelism is increasingly difficult not because our pluralism, consumerism or attention span makes us resistant, but because we fail to incarnate the love we preach. We can't persuade others that we are people of peace because there is so much strife and contention among us—and we are often more eager to be right, or to win, than to be loving. We offer forensic invitations to discipleship—come think like us—instead of a mutually transforming hospitality: come be with us; let's learn together.

I think of all this as I reflect on today's lessons, especially Jonah's "second" call to preach in Ninevah. Why does the word have to come to Jonah twice before he obeys? The Ninevites hear only once before they repent.

One answer is the abiding irony that we people of God—even God's representatives—are often reluctant to live into the word we've received. In spite of Paul's counsel, we hold onto the present form of this world. We do not leave our boats as the Zebedees did but instead try to get Jesus to come aboard and make us more successful in our existing work. Though God obviously loves our enemies, we do not—like Jonah, we often resent God's grace. We are left to wonder, as the light of Epiphany grows brighter, why it is that as God's people we are often left in the shadows.