

Making Sense of Controversy in the Lord's Church

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A person would have to be like the proverbial ostrich with his head in the sand to be unaware of conflicting views among the Lord's people these days. Even mature Christians sometimes disagree on important issues in areas of worship, leadership, marriage, the roles of men and women, salvation, and fellowship. Wherever men and women seek God, you can expect disagreements to soon follow.

In some respects, this has always been true. If you spend much time reading books and articles by members of the church of Christ over the years, you will soon see that there have been some areas of disagreement among supposedly sincere and well-meaning believers. Such division has never been ideal, neither then nor now. It is important to acknowledge that the tensions existing among us are *our* doing and not the Lord's (Psa. 145:17).

Of course, those who love the Lord don't like this reality. We hate division among Christians. No one likes feelings of tension. It is a never-ending challenge to safely navigate through the

issues and controversies that place the kingdom of God in such strain.

Jesus prayed for unity among Christians in John 17:6-26. If He prayed for unity, then unity should be our goal. We should go out of our way to find unity—although never at the expense of the Savior’s own words and teaching. (How else do we explain the New Testament’s insistence that God’s people have no fellowship with those who do not hold fast to the truth? cf. Matt. 7:15-20; Rom.16:17-18; 2 John 7-11; etc.)

It has long seemed odd to me that we can understand Jesus’ insistence that we love one another (on this point there is universal agreement), but fail to appreciate His insistence that everything He taught *matters* (John 15:9-14; Luke 9:26). The same Lord insists on both *unity* and *fidelity to Scripture*—they are never in conflict (John 18:37).

It is my hope that the reader will consider a few thoughts from this humble writer regarding the stresses existing among churches of Christ today. It is my prayer you will find them helpful as you seek to make sense of these matters in your own mind.

First, disagreement about what God has said (and what God would have us to do and not do) have been around since Satan tempted Adam and Eve.

Satan is an instigator of disharmony. He wants nothing more than to see us divide over what God has said or not said. We should always be on guard against him (1 Pet. 5:7). Furthermore, having already alluded to the fact that controversy among brethren is something the church has long had to cope with from the beginning, some have forgotten this. It is not the case that the first century church did its work in a pristine environment of flawless doctrinal harmony. Even as the apostles and early Christians were involved in the greatest evangelistic enterprise the world has ever known, they still encountered soul-jeopardizing questions and controversies. They had to learn to discern the Lord’s will in such matters (as they received His revelations; Acts 15:6-29; 1 John 2:20, 26-27). And then they had to apply inspired truth and principles to the issues they encountered.

Are we to imagine that the church today, unlike our first century brethren, should be exempt from controversy? History demonstrates that this expectation is just that—imagination. Even Jesus was embroiled in controversy. He gave every indication that His followers would have to endure the same experience. Dissensions and disagreements are not necessarily an indication that we are missing the Lord’s ideal for His church. It may be indicative that some are holding fast to the truth while others are teaching and living in

opposition. Therefore, not *all* news of controversy or division is entirely negative.

Second, our disagreements are grossly exaggerated by the armchair critics among us.

Like many of you, I too have heard what is being said about us: Since churches of Christ are a divided fellowship, how can they purport to hold up the banner of religious truth and unity to the rest of the world? Some even make the accusation that we are even *more* divided than our denominational neighbors. It is sad to my heart that these accusations sometimes seem loudest among some in the church itself. One gets the uncomfortable feeling that certain spokesmen delight in these inside jabs.

I have long been suspicious of the motives of these critics. They seem to be motivated by the idea that unity is to be sought at the expense of truth. Jesus told us that unity is to be sought on the basis of truth (John 17:13-21). The alternative is to have unity on the basis of falsehood or opinion, which everyone knows is an impossibility. Surely this is not what the Lord—who is the embodiment of truth (John 14:6)—desires.

Adding to this: Does anyone see the glaring contradiction in arguing that churches of Christ are more divided than other churches? Denominationalism *is* division; that is its nature. It is self-defeating to argue that those who are in the throes of religious division are in a better position, and enjoy greater unity, than those who are striving to be Christ's true church. Furthermore, anyone who believes that denominational churches and groups do not experience division and splintering on issues involving the traditions and opinions of human beings, church politics, and doctrinal minutia is simply naïve about the goings-on of Christendom as it has existed throughout history.

Third, disagreements are often a sign that we are trying to get things right.

Stay with me a bit more. While it is not always the case, controversy in churches of Christ is often the result of the desire of our brethren to navigate the straits of Biblical interpretation. On the whole this is a positive development.

I was reared in a denominational church where Bible authority was an issue of concern, but only on the most basic level. My experience may or may not be typical. Since that time, I have had numerous Bible discussions and spiritual conversations with people across the

theological spectrum. I became a Christian according to the manner described under the New Covenant because I saw in the hearts of God's people a desire to discern the Lord's will for salvation, and worship, and other issues. Churches of Christ are a people who are asking the right questions: "What is God's will on this matter? What does the Bible teach on this question?" Sometimes these questions do not get asked among our religious neighbors. I am always thrilled when I meet people from other churches, and they want to know the answers to these questions.

To those who seem to be so critical of the Lord's church, I want to say, "At least we're asking the right questions. At least we're serious about trying to figure out what the Bible teaches. At least we have not abandoned the core idea that truth is real and objective, and is waiting to be discovered and obeyed."

Surely the Lord is pleased when people love the truth, and love Him. The best people I know on this earth are members of the Lord's church. If controversy is an indication that we are not getting it right (which I am not ready to concede), at least we are *trying* to getting it right.

Fourth, working out our disagreements and finding the truth together are noble goals (instead of just sweeping them under the rug and pretending they don't exist).

I want to challenge the notion that we should not give ourselves to a discussion of issues and controversies; that we should get on with "the more important business of saving the world." Why can't we do both? Why is one more important than the other?

If baptism has become a point of controversy among us, and if baptism is necessary to salvation (and therefore is essential to evangelistic work), then is it not imperative that we confront and discuss issues relative to baptism? Doctrinal clarity strengthens us in our evangelistic task.

Further, once the lost are saved, what do we teach them relative to morality, marriage, worship, church organization, etc.? Each of these topics lead to numerous questions that have proven to be controversial. To ignore controversy in these matters will result in having nothing to teach new converts concerning God's will for their lives.

The apostles and New Testament writers dealt with these issues because it was vital for the early church go onto maturity. It is unrealistic to think that maturity can result today without dealing with questions and matters involving controversy.

Here is a better idea: Let's deal with division and controversy in the church from a position of maturity. We have the capacity to do this. Let's study the Bible more than we are doing. Let's deal with one another from a position of love and good intentions. Let's handle all matters of controversy with a desire to understand God's will. Let's be people who want to be taught of the Lord (1 Pet. 2:2). And when it's time to make a stand against error, let us do so from a position of confidence—that we have done all we can do to investigate and discern the will of the Lord (Eph. 5:8-17).