

Handling Doctrinal Differences”

The remarks in this booklet are directed towards individuals who are “consecrated,” those who have made a personal commitment to the Lord. Depending upon circumstances, there can be mitigating factors for those who are *not* consecrated, are contemplating consecration or are in the process of becoming consecrated, as well as for those who are newly consecrated.

This subject can be divided into 5 areas of consideration—all of which are related and dependent of one another. They are:

- **Attitude**
- **Preference Versus Principle**
- **Controversy and Contention**
- **Separation**
- **Prayer**

Attitude

First and perhaps the most influential factor, for good or for bad, are the attitudes with which we address our doctrinal differences.

How we say something frequently is a barometer of the attitudes we harbor—this can be as important as *what* we say—making allowance that we have varying temperaments and understanding that there are times, though not often, when “hard” things need to be said in a “hard” way. It is interesting to note that the prophets, the apostles—particularly Paul, and our Lord, had much to say that was anything but “sweet-sounding.” They, of course, were better equipped than we to handle such matters. Generally, we should be gentle in disposition, but on those specific occasions that warrant it, we should be **bold** in no uncertain terms.

Our general demeanor is also important. If any of us, either as individuals or as collective groups of the body of Christ, see that we are adopting the idea that we have the “whole truth and nothing but the truth,” we should be extremely cautious. Remember the warning in Revelation 3:17-18:

“Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; ...knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: ...”

This type of attitude can be a sign that we are no longer *teachable*. To be teachable is an important quality—particularly when discussing doctrinal differences. If the adversarial parties are not interested in the “truth” of the matter or the “correct” course of action—and are only interested in defending their own positions, there isn’t much hope of resolving those differences. Knowing the difference between “hearing” and “listening” is also important. When a talk is given or when others comment in a study, are we “hearing” a string of words or are we “listening” to the lesson?

We should be sensitive to the fact that the LORD uses various agents to *teach* us—and sometimes those whom we least expect.

Remember:

Ps. 8:2: Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength...

Consider Balaam’s lesson in being made teachable—from the mouth of an ass no less (Num. 22)! I think we can all empathize with Balaam; being taught a lesson is not always a comfortable experience, albeit it should be a treasured experience.

Prov. 27:6: Faithful are the wounds of a friend....

Oh, if we could only be like the prophet Job or David (the “beloved” of God) to discipline ourselves to be better listeners. To “listen twice before speaking once.”

Job 6:24: Teach me, and I will hold my tongue: and cause me to understand wherein I have erred.

Ps. 25:5: Lead me in thy truth, and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day.

James 1:19: Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to wrath: [KJV/NIV]

Sometimes we can miss valuable lessons because we may have tunnel-vision, pre-occupations, or downright narrow-mindedness. We have an example of

this during Jesus' ministry. Shortly after one of the occasions when Jesus miraculously fed the multitude, our Lord charged his disciples saying:

Mark 8:15: ...Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod.

Mark 8:16: ... reasoned among themselves, saying, It is because we have no bread.

Our Lord, rebuked them saying:

Mark 8:17–18,21: ...Why reason ye, because ye have no bread? perceive ye not yet, neither understand? have ye your heart yet hardened? Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember?...And he said unto them, How is it that ye do not understand?

The disciples, because of their narrow scope of thinking, had missed the Master's instruction concerning the leaven of the Pharisees.

Brethren, we also can miss valuable lessons because of our tunnel-vision, pre-occupations, narrow-mindedness, or looking at the incidentals while missing the big picture.

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There is another side to the coin—one that has very sobering prophetic implications for our day.

2Tim. 4:3: For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;...

Here we have the opposite extreme—an attitude that exhibits too much liberality. We find those who prefer a comfortable message, one that satisfies their own wants, rather than receive what is needful.

To find a balance between the two extremes of narrow-mindedness and liberality we need to analyze carefully what we hear, and follow the example of the Bereans of old.

Acts 17:11: These were more noble...in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

At the onset we alluded to “prophetic implications” along these lines.

Gal. 1:8: But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.

The bottom-line is that we need to be careful of any tendency toward narrow-mindedness and conversely be careful that we do not draw hasty conclusions or choose to accept or adopt an idea because we find it pleasing to the ears. As Paul described:

Eph. 4:14: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine...

If we are of the proper mind and spirit and we search the Scriptures, then we may be reasonably confident that the LORD will bless our diligent inquiry.

Matt. 7:7: Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you:

How well or how quickly we will be privileged to understand “the truth” will be influenced by our attitudes.

Preference Versus Principle

As human beings, we have emotional passions, which are of an “intellectual” nature—upholding a position or cause—especially if it is **our** position or cause. *“Passion without reason is blind—reason without passion is dead.”*

Our doctrinal beliefs are influenced by various emotional factors. There are a number of issues that can stir up an emotional response of one sort or another, and what might be a sensitive issue to one may be of little or no consequence to another. There is, however, very clear instruction that all these issues are of importance:

2Tim. 3:16: All scripture [is] given by inspiration of God, [and] is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

In discussing “preference versus principle” our remarks are often from our “intellect,” along the lines of what we *believe* is right or wrong, rather than what we *feel* is right or wrong.

We all have and exercise the power of choice; one might say that it is a God-given attribute of sentient beings. But choosing is all too often a very difficult task—not only in matters concerning principle, where we might expect some difficulty, but also in matters concerning preference. In fact, one might argue that matters of preference are more challenging than those of principle.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty is deciding what constitutes preference versus what constitutes principle. And stepping up to a higher level—determining what would God’s will be in the matter is a great challenge.

We need to exercise these choices by our understanding of Scripture as well as conscience. One of the more practical forums for this determination is the “dreaded” church business meeting. It is here that one can exercise individual choice—deciding in effect what is principle, or yielding to another’s preference—this choice being exercised with the so-called power of the “vote.” It is the place where the true fiber of an individual can be exposed—where we can take our best shots at one another!

We’re bending the tone of our remarks to the extreme—not all business meetings are competitive encounters. And, while we take the liberty of making light of it—it is one of the more serious meetings in which we are engaged. It is a practical example of Paul’s illustration of our individual contributions as members of the collective body.

In a business meeting and in our daily walk with the Lord, we are to be exercised by conscience. But, we need to recognize that our individual conscience is not fully or perfectly developed.

Remember the familiar example of eating meat offered unto idols:

1 Cor. 8:8: But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse.

In contrast to:

1 Cor. 8:9: But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak.

Or, a more radical example of conscience:

1Tim. 4:2: Speaking lies in hypocrisy; have[ing] their conscience seared with a hot iron;

In considering matters of **preference** we may make a mistake in judgment or choice without disastrous results—albeit we should recognize that the LORD is a careful observer; He sees when we give preference to another, or on the contrary, prefer ourselves and our own selfish interests.

Rom. 12:10: ...in honour preferr[ing] one another

In the realm of doctrine, however, we find that a so-called “imaginary line” must be drawn. If we were too magnanimous in our disposition of those with whom we fellowship, we might find ourselves disapproved of God, even as were the Corinthians when they shunned their responsibility under the false guise of “love” and failed to disfellowship a sinner from their midst. Paul used no uncertain terms when he reprimanded them:

1Cor. 5:13: ...Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

This of course was a matter of a grievous moral sin—not all circumstances are as blatant. Consider the circumstances described by Paul:

2Thes. 3:10–11,14: For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies.... And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.

In matters such as these we cannot go by our “feelings” any more than Israel did when they disobeyed the LORD’s injunctions. Consider, the LORD’s displeasure with Israel and particularly with Saul:

1Sam. 15:2–3,9–11,23: Thus saith the LORD of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel...Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.... But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them: ...Then came the word of the LORD unto Samuel, saying, It repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king: for he is turned back from following me, and hath not

performed my commandments.... For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry... Because thou (Saul) hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king.

How much more pleasing to the LORD must have been the counsel of Shechaniah and Ezra:

Ezra 10:1–3,5,12: Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore. And Shechaniah...said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing. Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. ... Then arose Ezra, and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they should do according to this word. And they sware.... Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do.

To the natural mind both of these accounts are not easily accepted—they are “foreign to our thinking.” So that we aren’t left in dismay the LORD reminds us:

Isa. 55:9: For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

The admonition is that we try to better understand the mind of God—to perceive the higher lessons, motivations, and principles—and to recognize, based upon Scripture, where preference ends and principle begins.

In the realm of doctrine, in the more traditional sense of teaching, we find ourselves confronted with similar challenges. Doctrine is the basis of our faith; it is important and not to be trifled with:

1Tim. 4:13: Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.

Sounds simple—if only it were so!

Remember the Apostle Paul’s sober warning:

Gal. 1:8: But though...an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.

Again, from a prophetic viewpoint, it may well be that the Adversary himself, as an “angel of light” (2Cor. 11:14) will be permitted to assume the guise of Jesus Christ coming in the “clouds”—but, at a more insidious level he can lie in wait to deceive any one of us if we are not adequately familiar with the LORD’s Word. Even Scripture, craftily used, can be used to undermine truth.

If someone suggests that a commonly held interpretation of Scripture is wrong:

First, be alert: do not be ready to adopt new ideas quickly—skepticism has its place.

Second, study: don't overlook the valuable resources you have in your midst, i.e., elders and brethren. Look for feedback, not just from those with whom you feel comfortable or agree, but more importantly from those who are well-studied.

Third, scrutinize what is offered as a replacement.

Finally, pray.

A discourse, a tract, or a booklet alone should not be the basis for changing one’s beliefs. Nor should we give such attendance to what an esteemed pastor, elder, or teacher has said that we neglect to consult the Bible. Our faith should be built upon the foundation of God’s Word, so that each may be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within (1Pet. 3:15).

There are two other practical aspects related to the issue of doctrinal teachings:

One concerns our perceived requirements for profitable *fellowship* with others. And the other is our perceived requirements for profitable *service* by others—service in a public capacity such as elder, deacon, visiting speaker, counselor, representative, or other capacity along such lines.

The single most influential factor that defines what those perceived requirements are can be summed up by what we call the “Confidence Factor.” If we believe a person is doctrinally or morally unsound it is probable that we will limit our fellowship with that individual and obviously make little or no allowance for service by him. On the other hand, if we have a high level of

confidence in that person we would be more likely to cooperate with such an individual or extend opportunities of one sort or another.

We each draw a “line.” We make a decision based primarily on this **confidence** or **no-confidence** factor. There are, of course, other decision-making influences, which may include family, church, or organizational ties; language, racial, economic, or social barriers; past experiences; or what we’ll simply call “bad chemistry,” i.e., personality mismatches.

These choices may be for good or for bad. Sometimes we are in the right for limiting fellowship or service as evidenced by Paul’s admonition to the Romans:

Rom. 16:17,18: Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.

At times, we may make a decision to limit our fellowship or service, and this may be a wrong choice. So then, how do we walk the fine line—not losing out on blessings—while not placing ourselves unduly in jeopardy from “false” doctrine?

Presumably we each need to define, to our own satisfaction, which doctrines are of **higher** importance and which doctrines are of **lesser** importance. In doing so we need to be careful that we don’t make “mountains out of molehills” or another extreme—watch for the small fish, while we let the proverbial “whale go by.”

As mentioned earlier, we are invariably influenced by others, particularly teachers or elders. Some teachers or elders may take too great a role in tending the flock. Stated another way, there is no question that the teachers have a responsibility to “shepherd” their churches or Bible study and, to some extent, the brotherhood at large. It is also true that there is a valid concern by these ministers that erroneous teaching has a cost—not only for the hearer; but even more so, for the teacher, as plainly stated by our Lord in Matthew 5:19.

Matt. 5:19 Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall **teach** men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven:

Their responsibility is one of *general supervision, not one of dominion*. They should not be spoon-feeding the flock from the “cradle to the grave but rather lead them and watch them grow with self-study, just as a parent would not control or direct every action of a child. The thought is that both the student of the Word and the child are to grow and mature throughout their development. Consider Paul’s assessment:

Heb. 5:13–14: For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

The operative phrases in this Scripture are: “reason of use” and “senses exercised.” Beyond the basics, none of us can be equipped to give an answer for the hope within us if we have been completely sheltered from other doctrinal viewpoints. In our Lord’s day, the synagogue was a place where there was open debate of Scripture—today, Bible study groups need to make similar allowance for debate. This means individually and collectively we need to be careful not to establish **doctrinal creeds** which limit our exposure to other viewpoints, which perchance may turn out to be more sound than our own.

Moreover, those whom we expect to teach us, must of necessity be in the same “race” for the High-Calling as we, and they must manifest a sincere consecration of sacrifice *and* be familiar with Scripture. They must study doctrine from the standpoint of character but also doctrine which deals with the “meatier” issues that Paul alludes to in Hebrews 5:13–14, including prophesy, chronology, etc.

In contrast to being over-sheltered by some teachers for fear of having one of their sheep exposed to an “untruth,” there is an equally dangerous situation where liberty gives way to license. In such an environment teachers or elders will fail to “rightly divide the word of truth” and either give poor counsel or no counsel, and they will fail to properly shepherd the flock where a real and present danger exists.

Each of us, whether we face up to it or not, is constrained by our environment. We are products of our environment to some degree, from one generation to the next. If our grandfather believed such and such and our father believed such and such, are we not likely to believe the same? Likewise, if our teachers’

teachers or elders' elders believed such and such are not they likely to believe the same?

We need to make the truth our own. We should not fear a new or different thought, nor should we embrace every new thought that comes down the pike. We each bear personal responsibility for our doctrinal convictions. Taking another's word for it because of our respect or admiration toward them would be as the "house built upon the sand." On the other hand, if we take the Scriptures and actively make them shape and crystallize **our** conscience and beliefs, then we may be likened unto the wise man in Matt. 7:24...which built his house upon a rock.

This does not imply that we should make open debate a routine part of our meetings or fellowship, or bring into doubt everything we've been taught, or leave our study arrangement to go somewhere where doctrine takes a "back seat." On the contrary, we should **value** doctrine—we should place importance upon it to the extent of its frequency in Scripture and the importance placed upon it by our Lord and the Apostles, or as pertains to our generation and time period in which we are living. Take note that teachers and elders are *not* included in this list.

Isa. 28:9: Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts.

We will not be able to grow spiritually if we stay too close to our spiritual mothers—our teachers or elders or those whom we hold in esteem. Our faith is not one that is just character development, love, and the Christian graces. It is one that should be determined and incited to know the mind of God, His principles, His precepts, His plans. Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4).

Beyond the basics no one can be equipped to give an answer of the hope within if we have been completely sheltered from other doctrinal viewpoints. Therefore we need to determine what is a basic or a minimum expected doctrinal understanding. It is important for each of us to make a determination of some sort, because the degree of fellowship or the opportunities of service we might extend to others is directly affected by this answer.

God's Word provides direction in this matter.

Heb. 5:13–14: For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Heb. 6:1–3: Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit.

Paul is specifically contrasting those who are unskillful—spiritual “babes” with those who are “of full age”—spiritual adults. He groups these six doctrines among those that are foundational doctrines, i.e., basic doctrine. This does not mean there aren’t other foundational doctrines, but Paul is discussing what he considers “basic material.”

When we speak of spiritual “babes,” or those who are spiritually “immature,” there are at least 2 points that need to be made. First, immaturity in and of itself is not bad—each one of us was spiritually immature when we began walking in the “narrow way.” Paul’s admonition and that of God’s Word in general, is that we should be making progress toward the finish line rather than hanging around the starting line. Secondly, when we speak of doctrinal maturity, we are referring to general doctrinal maturity. Each of us, irrespective of age or longevity of consecration, is no doubt still wanting in development along certain lines. We will always have specific areas in which we are lacking.

Another general item to bear in mind that falls on the borderline of preference and principle is where we choose to attend studies or go to Bible conventions. Even if doctrinal differences exist we should choose to go **where we believe we can best grow and mature** in the knowledge of God’s Word—this is not always where we might feel the most comfortable or where we believe we can get along with everyone the best.

Controversy and Contention

Nearly 2,000 years ago, Paul took Peter to task regarding circumcision:

Gal. 2:11,14: But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed...I saw that they walked not uprightly

according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?

Still again, Paul took an entire ecclesia (called-out class) to task over the matter of judgment:

1Cor. 6:1–3,5: Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life?...I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?

Inevitably there will be controversies and contentions. Again, this may be for better or for worse. Controversy within bounds can be healthy; it can stimulate growth. If we take exception to something done or taught, it becomes incumbent upon us to go to the Scriptures to seek out a “thus saith the LORD.” Again, we need to be careful that we do not make “mountains out of molehills.” We also need to be sure whether the issue is even a matter of Scriptural concern.

Whether a brother wears a necktie to a Bible study is not quite the same as whether a sister wears a head covering. And, how important this particular matter is viewed by brethren obviously varies greatly. Again, our focus is not which point of view is correct, but rather to suggest that there are some things, like neckties, which are not specifically addressed by Scripture; and there are some things, like head-coverings, which are.

This does not mean that if we can't find a Scripture addressing a particular issue we are to forget the matter all together. On the contrary, the mature Christian should be able to extrapolate and reason upon some issues that are not specifically dealt with in Scripture. This is the point of “precept upon precept, here a little, there a little...” (Isa. 28:10,13). Caution must be exercised also when discussing the use of resources outside the Bible. It is difficult to “rightly divide the word of truth”—it is even more difficult to rightly divide secular or ecclesiastical information. What we might be led to believe is historical fact can frequently reflect the “news” reporter’s personal bias or his own misinformation. Scholars in the sciences or social spheres, for

example, are rarely presenting evidence or giving counsel from a “consecrated” viewpoint. Further, ecclesiastical information including commentaries, study guides, books on family counseling, and so forth are biased to orthodox theology and thinking. Some of these **can** have a profitable place in our personal study, but ultimately the Bible is the **final** authority!

John 6:63: It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.

Where there is controversy there generally needs to be tolerance. This does not mean that we tolerate a situation that is clearly unscriptural. It does mean, however, that we need an environment conducive to free and clear communication. We need a clear understanding of the problem if we hope to find a resolution.

Controversies generally are best handled in a private forum—individual to individual or within the Bible study group. Where there is scriptural admonition or a matter that obviously needs to be addressed on a broader scale, only then should it be taken into a “public” forum among other brethren.

Here again is that imaginary line—where controversy can lead to contention.

Titus 3:9–11: But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain. A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.

Separation

If contention becomes disruptive to an individual’s or a study group’s spiritual growth, then there are only two alternatives—and they both fall under the area of **separation**. . . .either one *removes* the source of contention as in Titus chapter 3, or one *leaves* and looks for so-called “greener pastures.”

Such a separation may be a clear situation of right versus wrong, or it may be a choice of better versus inferior. Whether both the “high road” and the “low road” eventually meet is something only time will tell, and it is to be left in the LORD’s hands.

Prayer

The final and perhaps most important consideration is **prayer**. This is a subject unto itself. It cannot be emphasized enough that prayer is an essential prerequisite—particularly when dealing with issues of controversy. If we neglect to seek the Lord’s will to preside over our deliberations, then we can expect nothing more than one another’s will to be the dominant influence.

Conclusion

Attitudes are paramount to our ability to learn to disagree with one another. Ideally speaking, we should have the desire to be in agreement. In the Book of Amos we have the familiar expression:

Amos 3:3: Can two walk together, except they be agreed?

Common sense would indicate that this is not to be understood in an exact sense but rather in a general sense.

Furthermore, studying to “rightly divide the word of truth” to see where preference ends and principle begins can better equip us for handling doctrinal differences.

Finally, how we conduct ourselves in situations of controversy and contention is a part of our growth process as new creatures—without a struggle inside the chrysalis the butterfly will never learn to fly.