DIFFERENCES IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT*

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DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT ENVISAGE THAT CHRISTIANS WILL DIFFER FROM ONE ANOTHER?

I remember in the Brethren assembly in which my wife grew up I discovered that apparently scripture said that Christians should all be of one mind and all say the same thing. In other words there was only one permissible view, that of the dominant elder, and anyone who differed from it was out of order. So this raises the question of the church and what it is. Is a local church merely a community of the particularly like-minded? Even among those of us belonging to the same group of people holding particular distinctives, no two of us hold *identical* views. But all of us would say that our views are based on scripture and shaped by scripture. But our doctrinal positions are probably as individual as our fingerprints. Even within a denomination agreed on certain distinctives, in any one congregation there will still be a wide spectrum of views. So when we use phrases like the unity of the Spirit and the unity of the faith, does that therefore mean uniformity of view? Are there indications in scripture itself of the way God views our differences?

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The absence of any New Testament Leviticus suggests that God himself has not seen fit to spell out any detailed church order or constitution, even though many of us have sought to remedy this deficiency by compiling our own, written or unwritten.

Church governments and nomenclature have been a constant source of disagreement. Should church leaders be called *bishops* or *elders* or *presbyters* or *pastors* or what? Some of these problems arise from our determination to try and produce a single church order out of the New Testament. But if you study the New Testament, book by book, you find a wide cultural variety existed. When we went to Japan, we were committed to founding independent autonomous churches. But as soon as there were several congregations a presbytery came into existence; later we had a Bible college principal teaching 'pastors'; then we became episcopalian. In other words there seemed to be a cultural norm which was different from the orientation of the original missionaries. When you go through scripture you find differing cultural shapes. Jerusalem and Asia Minor churches certainly had elders, though the latter called them overseers as well. The Romans and the Thessalonians appear to have called them *prohistaminoi*, the Corinthians called them *kuberneseis* and the Hebrews called them *hegemonoi*. They all had leaders, but called them by different names: there was cultural variety and not uniformity.

So there is no Leviticus in the New Testament, and you will find a variety of patterns within the New Testament churches. Moreover, differing convictions on some matters can be contained within the Christian community in the New Testament. A particularly significant passage is Romans 14. What is so interesting to me there is that though the apostle possesses apostolic authority, he does not insist that all must accommodate to his view. Each man is to be fully persuaded in his own mind and each of us must give account of himself to God. I think that is significant because we live in a day when an emphasis on the authority of the local church (which had been sadly lacking) has sometimes now been taken to an extreme in pressing views upon people in the way Rome certainly once did. It is interesting that the apostle suggests that each one is to be fully persuaded in his *own* mind and will give account to God over differing views. Colossians 2:16 is similar—'Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink with regard to a religious

festival, a new moon or a sabbath day'. That suggests that some people were attempting to force a pattern upon others. What the apostle is saying is that you are not to let them do it.

So it does seem that differing convictions existed within the early church and that there was no attempt to bring them to complete uniformity. Each one was to be fully persuaded in his own mind, knowing that he was answerable to God alone. This was one of the things the Reformation was all about—the right of private judgement in the question of understanding scriptures.

Differences seem to be possible within the people of God according to the New Testament. But there are clearly limits to tolerance towards those who may preach a different gospel (Galatians) or who are enemies of the cross of Christ (Philippians). At the same time we notice that in Corinth there were manifestly muddled people who were denying the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor. 15:12–15)—illogically, because it appears that they had not realized that this view was inconsistent with belief in Christ's resurrection. In Galatia, they had failed to grasp justification by grace through faith.

There is little evidence in the New Testament that it ever occurred to the apostles that problems could be resolved by the simple expedient of hiving off to form separate congregations or following apostles, Peter and Paul. There was, in apostolic times, such a strong doctrine of the church, that division was never an acceptable solution. When you remember the strong things scripture says about those who destroy the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:17) we see the strength of this view. What you do find is wrong separation being rebuked (as when Peter and Barnabas withdrew from eating with Gentile converts in Antioch in order to maintain kosher food law). I never quite realized the enormity of this until we were studying Galatians together at the college and I got the students to present Galatians 2 as drama. To see this made me realize the enormity of the mistaken separation of the Jewish from the Gentile centres in the Galatian church. It really hit home.

Differences of belief on what have been called 'secondary matters' certainly seem to have existed in the New Testament churches, and are expected to exist, and they were told how to cope with them.

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW DIFFERENCES?

This may seem a strange question to ask, but it is noteworthy that many of the differences that have divided Christians would not have been issues at all if scripture had been just a little bit clearer and more explicit. The issue of water baptism could be settled by a couple more references to the quantity of water required or the age qualifications for baptism. Yet the Holy Spirit, the author of scripture, has not chosen to give us more. Paul himself makes the point that we have no word from the Lord on certain matters (1 Cor. 7:12, 25). Issues like abortion and suicide are mentioned, but not specifically legislated against. Has the Lord deliberately allowed us the possibility of differing from one another and if so why? Is it an opportunity of developing discernment or of displaying love?

I find 1 Corinthians 11:19 very helpful in this regard. In verse 18 Paul is speaking about the divisions which exist among the Corinthians and he hears that when they come together as a church there are divisions among them—'No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you has God's approval' or, as one of the other versions puts it, 'so that those who are genuine may be made manifest'. Differences certainly reveal our 'genuineness' through the way in which we handle them. If we lose our tempers, or circulate misleading information about the people with whom we differ, we reveal something about the genuineness of our faith. Differences give the opportunity to manifest and develop the fruit of the Spirit rather than the works of the flesh. It is significant that the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 includes patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control, all of which are crucial qualities relating to differences and controversy. The opportunity to develop that fruit is surely not in situations where everything is 'sweetness and light' but in situations where it is not, where there are differences and where people disagree with each other. There the Holy Spirit is manifest when patience and kindness and gentleness and self-control are shown. Look then at the contrasting characteristics which are described as being the works of the flesh.

You will notice that sexual sins and occult sins are followed by specifically 'church' sins. First come sexual immorality, impurity

and debauchery; then idolatry and witchcraft; finally we have the 'divisive sins'—hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy. These are relevant to the way in which we cope with our differences. Do we display these 'works of the flesh' or the 'fruit of the Spirit' in controversy? Differences then, provide us with the opportunity to manifest God's love, Christ's gentleness, the Spirit's fruit and Christian maturity. One reason why the Lord allows differences is in order that we may show our genuineness.

1 Corinthians 3 is about the divisions in Corinth. They are regarded as pathological. The Corinthians are displaying immaturity in their divisions, their carnality and worldliness are infantile. Even though one of these factions associated themselves with Paul's own emphases, he refuses to identify them as correct. The whole factional attitude of being puffed up in favour of one against another is wrong. Twice he says, 'All things are yours.' This is very important. We are not to be so foolish as to shut ourselves up to the views of one human teacher. 'All things are yours' surely means that your spiritual life will be enriched by all the teachers that Christ gives to his church. Or as it says in Ephesians 3:18, it is 'with all saints' that we will gain a greater understanding of the dimensions of grace, of its length and breadth and height and depth. To follow one human leader, teacher or authority figure is folly.

What is still worse is to shut others up within the narrow confines of our own personal, limited perception of spiritual truth. One local church does not have all the answers. We need the variety of riches given by God to the universal church in every age. However much we appreciate the riches of Puritan theology, for example, we are foolish to confine ourselves to a seventeenth-century apprehension of truth, and however much we enjoy the liberty of some charismatic house gatherings today we are foolish to impoverish ourselves by thinking that we twentieth-century people were the first people ever to be taught by the Spirit. We can learn from Paul *and* Cephas *and* Apollos, not just from one of them. You see God's wisdom in giving us letters not only from Paul but also from Peter and James and Jude and John as well. Paul's point is that Christ is not divided and that all these teachers belong to Christ.

Controversy often clarifies issues by focusing attention upon

them. Thirty years ago 1 Corinthians 14 was not really very much looked at outside of Pentecostal and Brethren circles. I am quite sure that Christians in general know 1 Corinthians 12–14 much better now, whereas thirty years ago many denominational people would never have thought about them. There is a sense in which differences and controversy may enrich our understanding of scripture.

ARE DIFFERENCES SINFUL?

There is a variety of possible answers to this question. From our discussion so far we could say that differences are not sinful, but divisions are. Differences are the inevitable result of human fallibility and ignorance. In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul appears to be picking up one of the slogans of the Corinthians. (It is interesting that jargon is something characteristic of a group. You recognize that people hold views similar to yours by the fact that they use similar jargon. They talk about *body life* or they talk about *grace* and they say it in a particular way which immediately shows through this use of language that they belong to the 'in-group'. This is a feature of all sub-cultures.)

In Corinth, among the 'in-group' words was *knowledge* and so Paul says, about food sacrificed to idols, we know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up but love builds up. (1 Cor. 8:1–2) The thought that we share a particular view which makes us more enlightened than other poor benighted people who differ from us, suggests the sort of 'knowledge' which puffs up, whereas love builds up, edifies. 'The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.' (1 Cor. 8:2) Many of us at some time or another study a passage and come to certain convictions that later we have to reconsider. We may have taught them dogmatically from the pulpit but subsequently we may need to reconsider in the light of further discussion, in the light of other scriptures, or something that somebody else draws our attention to, or the light the Holy Spirit gives on the word. There is a danger that we over-emphasize perspicuity. 'Scripture is clear,' we say, by which we usually mean, 'It is clear to me.' It may not necessarily be equally clear to others—this is one of the problems of theological differ-

ences. We think that we know; but scripture says if you think you know, be cautious. 'For we know in part and we prophesy in part.' (1 Cor. 13:9) The doctrine of the partial nature of our understanding and of our prophecy is very important indeed. Differences appear to be the inevitable consequence of our partial knowledge of the truth and therefore are not sinful. But the way in which we handle differences may or may not be sinful. Scripture has a great deal to say about the manner in which we handle differences.

> The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you. (Jas. 3:17–4:1)
> Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments because you know they produce quarrels and the Lord's servant must not quarrel, instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. (2 Tim. 2:23)

It would seem that this reference to the Lord's servant reminds us of the servant of the Lord who does not strive or cry, who does not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax and who comes meek and lowly, riding on an ass. The danger so often in controversy and differences is that we come on a war horse with our visors down and our lances pointed. No wonder the other chap looks to his weapons. We should notice that it is a condition of leadership for elders that they are not strikers and not quarrelsome, *amachos*—and that is the opposite of being pugnacious and trigger-happy, looking for a theological fight. (These are words that should be engraved over the desk of all religious journalists. I remember a sweet, saintly man whom I respected greatly as a teacher; but when he became editor of the church paper, writing about the Church of Scotland, his pen was dipped in vitriol.) Scripture rules out pugnacious, trigger-happy people as being unfitted for leadership. We should take that very seriously. 'Avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law because they are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once and then warn him a second time, after that have nothing to do with him'. (Tit. 3:9, 10) Such a man is *hairetikos*. E. K. Simpson (who never used a short word where he could find a long one) in his

commentary calls this man 'the opinionative propagandist who promotes dissension by his pertinacity'. Paul's discipline for such persons is relatively lenient; we are to admonish a couple of times and then avoid them. That is a relatively vague word, certainly short of excommunication. It could mean merely 'ignore' or 'leave out of account'.

I remember in Switzerland going for a walk after lunch with a brother who talked to me for thirty minutes. I finally turned to him and said, 'Do you realize that in thirty minutes you haven't said one positive thing? Do you only want to be known as the man who is against the charismatic movement? Is the only thing you have to say negative, destructive, anti?' As far as I was concerned, I was warning him for the first time, because it seemed to me that he was entirely negative. Scripture of course has much stronger things to say. In 1 Corinthians 3:16–17 Paul is writing to a church with factions, moral sins and doctrinal errors and he says, 'Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him, for God's temple is sacred and you are that temple.' In other words, to have differences is not sinful but to be divisive can be sinful and bring down serious judgement from the Lord. That is why some of us remain in 'mixed denominations'. They recognize that the Corinthian church was very mixed, doctrinally and morally and in all sorts of other ways. They do not think that we could lightly divide from others. If they are driven out, that is one thing, but they would feel it wrong to leave their denominations.

One notices that people who divide once, very frequently divide again. The Korean Presbyterian church, which then stood four square on scripture, was one church until 1946 and then it started splitting. The group broke in two and from time to time they came together again and split again and now these groups split further among themselves. There may, of course, be sociological reasons for church divisions. We live in an alienated society where people have a hunger to belong to the small group and we enjoy belonging to subcultural groups. There is nothing necessarily wrong in that, but we find ambition and vainglory are referred to frequently in relation to these sorts of differences. 'Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and

purpose, do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only on your own interests but also to the interest of others, your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.' (Phil. 2:2–4 and following)

The trouble is that the little man with the big Bible, who is often not well spoken of (probably not spoken of at all) by those who are 'without', finds in the church the opportunity for compensation by becoming a big frog in a small pool. I think that our strong emphasis in recent years on the importance of the local church and its authority, has been right, but it leaves a loophole for this kind of person. We need to recover the doctrine of the universal church and care not only for our own local fellowship but the whole community which is called by Christ's name.

We have our 'pattern churches', where one congregation in a town or a city has grown and has been manifestly blessed of God. What we have not yet solved is what other churches in the city should do in that situation. What does it feel like if you don't belong to the church whose name we all know in Guildford, or the church whose name we all know in York?

What does scripture say to us about the doctrine of the universal church in relation to that? Ought we not to care for every body of people within a city that truly bears Christ's name? Even if they do not belong to our particular congregation under our particular teachers? I remember being at a conference with a group of Brethren missionaries and saying to them as they were talking about their strategy for the next ten years, 'You must make up your mind about other Christians; are they Christians or not? Are their churches, churches or not?' There is absolutely no point in going to start missionary work in Korea to plant Brethren assemblies in a country where 15% or more of the population are professing believers adhering to the Westminster Confession. They may be a little misguided from our point of view because they differ from us, but are they Christians? Are their churches, churches? We have all got to do a great deal of thinking about the doctrine of the universal church. Otherwise we find ourselves in a situation of competition with each other, instead of seeing ourselves as all belonging to the Lord. We can be sinful if we have the wrong attitudes to our differences.

WHAT POSITIVE ATTITUDES TO DIFFERENCES ARE THERE IN SCRIPTURE?

As much as lies in you live peaceably with all men (Rom. 12:18).

Maintaining the unity of the Spirit, which we are commanded to do, need not mean uniformity nor need it mean compromise.

Scripture is fundamental. Suppose you find yourself talking with somebody who has no foundation in scripture, someone whose only authority is his experience or what he feels God in some vague way has said to him? With such a person you have no way of knowing if what this brother is talking about is the same as what another brother is saying. When you meet together over scripture, even if you do not agree with each other, even if you only agree to disagree, at least you can see that there is some foundation in what he is saying in the word of God. (I used to be able to argue the paedobaptist position and covenant theology in such a way that people thought that I held them. You can make a case for them.) I think that between us as brothers there are areas where we need to say, 'That is one way of looking at it; I do not see it that way myself.' When we have scripture as our foundation, it is not one man's experience, one man's feelings, against another.

Compromise does not really help—what has been described as tying two dogs together by their tails. That is not a kind of unity that really works. But we can agree to disagree and respect our brother's integrity. I think many of us are sceptical about superficial church unions which are based upon compromise and papering over differences. But at the same time, it seems to me that we can agree to differ with one another and to live peaceably with all men. Dear old George Ingram had three questions he used to ask everybody: 'Are you born again? Do you know the fulness of the Spirit? Are you going to the foreign mission field?' I can remember a most glorious evening of fellowship together and a wonderful sense of unity. I did not agree with his doctrine of the baptism of the Spirit at all, but it did not matter. We loved each other in the Lord, we loved the Lord, and although we disagreed with one another there was a sense of oneness in him together. That is the positive attitude of living peaceably with all men.

We are to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

There can be no compromise with error and we must not pretend that false prophets, wolves in sheep's clothing, are no more than very woolly sheep. You generally find that people whose theology has no room for error find there is no truth either. Where there are people to whom nobody is heterodox, where everybody just has 'insights', there is no orthodoxy either. We have been discussing differences between Christians who worship Christ as Lord, people who take their doctrine from scripture (that is what unites us as evangelicals even though we may want to make some distinctions). But towards error with respect to major articles of faith we have to be polemical as well as eirenical. If a man does not believe in the forgiveness of sins and does not believe in the resurrection of the body he is denying cardinal tenets of the faith. If he does not believe that Christ came down from heaven, if he does not believe that Jesus is Lord and that he rose from the dead and that the tomb is empty, then we have got to be polemical. There is no compromise here. We must contend earnestly for the faith in such matters and controversy is a necessary part of Christian duty. The naturally peaceful person tends to neglect it, the naturally militant, to delight in it overmuch. There used to be a scurrilous rag known as *The Sword of the Lord.* That paper used to love getting hold of somebody and tearing him in strips because he did not happen to fit in with all the views of the group it represented. There is a danger of a fleshly attitude towards controversy. We have to avoid error on the one hand and lack of love on the other. Notice that Jesus and the apostles engaged in controversy to safeguard the word of God against modifications by human traditions, (see the powerful passage in Mark 7), or to defend justification by faith (in Galatians), or the doctrine of the person of Christ (in John's first epistle), or against divisiveness (in 1 Corinthians). Controversy is there too.

We should evidence the meekness and gentleness of Christ

Where there are differences, or even where there is controversy over error, we should evidence the meekness and gentleness of Christ. We want to be like him, to imitate him in his gentleness (2 Cor.

10:1). The danger of polemical attitudes is of manifesting the work of the flesh rather than the fruit of the Spirit.

We should avoid divisions if at all possible

That does not mean that all unity is necessarily scriptural nor that all separateness automatically stands condemned. We cannot condemn all past divisions of the church as sinful (eg the 2,000 godly ministers expelled from the Anglican church in 1662 by the Five Mile Act and the Clarendon Code). But a careful look at church history does not impress us with the end results of division and certainly does not prove that the group which divides off necessarily remains better in the long run than the group from which it separated itself. One of my greatest anxieties at the moment is that the same divisive tendencies that were active among the Sectaries, as they were called, of the seventeenth century, are being repeated today. The Quakers are an outstanding example of a group of that period who abandoned scripture for the 'voice of the Spirit' and you can see where it led them. The more exclusive Brethren in recent church history were quite convinced that they alone had the truth and that only people who abandoned the ruined church, as they saw it, and joined them, were obedient and scriptural Christians. Those who attempt to follow the same route today in the so called 'Restoration Churches' should take note and learn from the longer and wider experience of the universal church. We should avoid divisions if at all possible.

We shall freely admit when we have been wrong

At the Council of Jerusalem, James, Peter and Barnabas who had all taken the opposite side to Paul in Antioch now agreed together (Gal. 2:11, 12, 13 with Acts 15:7, 12, 13). Later in Acts 15:39 Paul and Barnabas had a '*paroxysmos*' between them over whether the work or the worker (John Mark) was more important. Later Paul changed his mind (2 Tim. 4:11) about Mark's usefulness. It is a true mark of spirituality when as a result of discussion and experience Christians can admit they have been mistaken in beliefs and attitudes.

We should seek the ultimate purpose and goal

In Ephesians 4:3 we read of the unity of the Spirit which we are to maintain and the unity in the faith which appears to be the goal towards which we are moving. It is very helpful to look into the future as scripture gives it, to realize that in heaven there will be one flock and one shepherd. (John 10:6) Our divisions are only temporary. One day we shall all have to sit down together and all worship together. Scripture seems to expect one fold and that we shall all arrive at the unity of the faith. But can it be God's purpose that we experience increasing division and splintering until—hey presto—the last trump sounds and down go all the walls of partition that we have created between ourselves? Or are we rather to anticipate that, as we approach closer to the last day and to that consummation, we shall see ourselves moving more closely towards the unity of the faith? If this is so, it behoves us to be very careful and cautious in our controversies. Our divisions and separations are not permanent, they are only temporary, and if we want to sit down happily tomorrow in heaven then why not start today? Scripture tells us to exert ourselves to maintain the unity of the faith. I think this was the passion in the heart of Dr. Lloyd Jones when, in the course of an address that became famous, he said: 'Don't we always feel the call to come together, not occasionally but always? It's a grief to me that I spend so little of my time with some of my brethren; I want to spend the whole of my time with them. I'm a believer in ecumenicity, evangelical ecumenicity. To me the tragedy is that we are divided.'