Semănătorul (The Sower)

The Journal of Ministry

and Biblical Research

Volume 3, Number 1.

Articles published by the Faculty of Theology in Emanuel University of Oradea, and International Contributors, October 2022.

Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania

Adiaphora: A Christian response to a culture of tolerance, censorship, and ostracism[1]

Ovidiu Hanc[2]

ABSTRACT

The society in which we live is marked by various social upheavals despite the fact that one of the fundamental values is *tolerance*. The phenomenon of cancel culture, hate culture, censorship, and ostracism, is propagated by all modern means of communication and is apparently very difficult to combat or eradicate. The problem of differences of opinion and dogmatic and practical dissent can also be found in the first century church. The Apostle Paul stresses the need for doctrinal unity in fundamental beliefs, but in secondary matters he writes to the church in Rome to seek mutual acceptance and avoid mutual judgment. The problem of dissension in small things is called *adiaphora* and has to do with those matters in the area which are neither forbidden nor commanded.

The present paper seeks to examine the aspect of Christian acceptance in relation to secular tolerance and to highlight the paradigm that Paul proposes in seeking a solution to the alienation that can arise in a community due to differences of opinion. The Pauline paradigm is one worth considering as a social model in the context where conflicts of opinion arise.

KEY WORDS

Adiaphora, cancel culture, Christian acceptance, tolerance, disagreement.

INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest problems in life is how to live in harmony with someone who is totally different. Today's society heralds *tolerance* as a fundamental value, nevertheless the society is often characterised by various forms of hate culture and intolerance. The phenomenon of "cancel culture" is increasingly present and increasingly recognised. The expression "cancel culture" is a method of censoring and ostracising a person. "The term is shambolically applied to

[1] **Disclaimer**: This research was supported by the University of Oxford project 'New Horizons for Science and Religion in Central and Eastern Europe' funded by the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in the publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the view of the John Templeton Foundation.
[2] Dr Ovidiu Hanc BA MTh PhD (QUB, Belfast) Lector univ. dr. Emanuel University, Oradea. Email ovidiu. hanc@gmail.com

incidents both online and off that range from vigilante justice to hostile debate to stalking, intimidation and harassment."[3] Cancel culture is a social phenomenon that is facilitated mainly through social media, but the problem of criticism and ostracism has always existed in society.

This problem of relating to those who have different views was also present in the Christian society of the first century. In the case of Christians, there are things that can cause disputes over different interpretation of various teachings and dogmas. Disagreement over unimportant issues (issues that have no theological major implications) is called *adiaphora* ('things indifferent'), things that are neither forbidden nor commanded.[4] These are the things that are not important in the process of salvation. Paul writes about these things that are related to personal beliefs in Romans 14, things like food and special days.[5] The command Paul gives to the Romans about things that are not essential to faith[6] points to acceptance and unity in the Church. On the other hand, when we talk about the relationship between a Christian and a non-Christian, the way of relating to those outside the community of faith is based on the duty to present the Gospel of Christ and his righteousness (Romans 1.14-17).

The objectives of this paper are to examine how Paul encourages the Christian community to deal with disputes within a community. This can provide a model for how to relate in any community when dissension and divergent or even contradictory views arise. In order to do so, it is important to establish the boundaries between Christian acceptance and secular tolerance. What are the boundaries between tolerance and compromise? Should Christians seek unity with someone living in sin? In a context of pluralism and syncretism, how should Christians develop relationships without rejecting the person, but rejecting their sin? How should we present an objective and universal truth in a society that hates those who believe in absolutes? What are the limits of Christian freedom? What is the common ground when you disagree with your brother in faith?

---

[3] Ligaya Mishan, 'The Long and Tortured History of Cancel Culture', *The New York Times*, 3 December 2020, sec. T Magazine, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/t-magazine/cancel-culture-history.html.

[4] Lucy Winkett, '"Things Indifferent" or "Necessary for Salvation"?: Reading Scripture in an Age of Slogans and Tweets', *Modern Believing* 61, no. 4 (2020): 329; P. Toon, 'Adiaphora', in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 5; F. F Bruce, 'Freedom, Christian', in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 264.

[5] Gundry-Volf, Judith M, 'Conscience', in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 155.

[6] Douglas J. Moo, 'Romans', in *New Bible Commentary*, ed. Gordon J. Wenham et al. (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 1994), 1491.

The methodology we use is primarily analytical and descriptive of the historical context of the Church in Rome. Roman society in the first century was a pluralistic society based on polytheistic tolerance. The state religion was the cult of the emperor, but society was made up of a diversity of religious beliefs and philosophical ideas. When Christianity emerged from within Judaism, the problem was not that it was not accepted, but that Christians accepted no other way of salvation and worship than Jesus Christ. Religious exclusivism, as found in Judaism and Christianity, was unthinkable to the Roman religious mind. The conflict between Roman polytheism and Christian monotheism marked the history of Christianity by strong persecution. Roman polytheistic tolerance did not accept the exclusivism of Christian dogma. In this research the focus in on how Christian acceptance was understood and applied within the Christian community. In addition, it is important to analyse today's *tolerance* to see how we should apply the teachings of Scripture in a society that rejects the fundamental values and basic assumptions of Christianity.

CHRISTIAN ACCEPTANCE – ROMANS 14

The *weak* and the *strong*

In Romans 14, Paul deals with the subject of accepting one another despite our differences on certain issues. In Rome there were two different groups of Christians that Paul describes, namely the weak and the strong. Paul dealt with a similar subject in 1 Corinthians, when he answered questions about food offered to idols. The issues that are discussed here relate to food (vv. 2, 6, 21), special days (vv. 5-6 - probably feast days or even the Sabbath) and drinking wine (vv. 17, 21).[7]

Those portrayed as weak were Jewish converts and Gentile proselytes. In a Jewish context, matters of food and special days were about personal integrity. Some believers who received Christ found it difficult to regard some food as appropriate, so they began to question the spiritual integrity of those who regarded these matters as totally unimportant. The command Paul gives is not to make their beliefs the standard for others (v.19).

Those who considered themselves strong were those who considered salvation by grace alone and not by the Law. Those that were weak perceived the others as living against the Christian faith and compromising the teaching, while the strong ones viewed the weak in a judgmental manner through the freedom found

[7] It's not certain if this was a real issue Paul was addressing or just an example he gives to build his argument.

in Christ and began to ridicule them. The problem was judgement over small and unimportant things destroyed unity of the Body of Christ: the Church.

THE SEARCH FOR A COMMON GROUND

In the search for common ground of acceptance, we need to mention a few important aspects: First, the difference between Paul's emphasis on this topic and the tone he used in his letter to the Galatians is due to the fact that convictions on the disputed issues were not constrained to following the law as a means of salvation. Paul's response is that these issues are really irrelevant and that they pertain to personal convictions (Rom. 14:3, 5, 6, 14). He is one of the strong (Rom. 15:1) and believes that everyone lives to please the Lord. Paul does not discuss his reasons for holding one position or another. Personal motives are not the issue (Rom.14.6). Second, he asks the strong not to impose their freedom on the weak brother, and he asks the weak not to judge the strong. If reconciliation is not possible, then he asks the strong not to benefit from their freedom, because this makes the weak sin. Conduct that is not sinful can lead to sin. We somehow expect to hear Paul asking those that are weak to grow up and become mature in their faith, but this is not so. Paul is referring primarily to the strong to take the first step toward reconciliation. The strong are not to be cornered by the limits of personal ambition or the taboos of the week but are to be sensitive so that no one is compromised. (Rom. 14:15). Such conduct is based on the example Christ set.

Third, the effect of disagreement influences not only those in the church, but also those who are not saved, and for this reason everyone must seek righteousness and peace and joy (v.17). Fourth, the reason for Paul's argument is the work of Christ for both Jew and Gentile, weak and strong, male and female, and the result must be the glory of God. The essence of unity is found in Christ, who came to die for all. Paul's goal was mutual respect and acceptance of one another. Jaquette noted that Paul's view of life and death is secondary to honouring and living with Christ. "But because all Christians exist in relation to Christ and thus are oriented towards one another the decisions of their conscience are not the sole litigants in matters of conduct related to the αδιάφορα."[8] The main point of the argument is not to let anyone create hindrances for a brother. Christian freedom is limited to the personal conviction of the weakest believer, so unity within the Church must be built at the cost of personal freedom.

In analysing this argument it is important to ask whether the concept of Christian tolerance should be defined on the basis of this text. This call for acceptance can very easily be taken as an argument for tolerance, but the difference between

[8] James L. Jaquette, 'Life and Death, Adiaphora, and Paul's Rhetorical Strategies', *Novum Testamentum* 38, no. 1 (1996): 22.

Christian acceptance and secular tolerance is made by the salvation found in Christ. Christianity seeks peace, understanding and respect, but not at the price of theological compromise. D. A. Carson rightly pointed out that the undeniable aspects such as the resurrection of Christ represents the essential, bedrock elements of the Christian faith that are not to be negotiated. Carson outlines ten extremely valid criteria that define disputable theological issues.[9] It is absolutely vital to distinguish between the fundamental and secondary elements of the Christian faith, otherwise it is impossible to develop a biblical practice of mutual acceptance.

FROM TOLERANCE TO CENSORSHIP

Since the postmodern period, one of the core values of society today is tolerance. Postmodernism is a movement based on relativism and pluralism.[10] It gives great importance to social entities and subjectivity within the local community. There is no objective, absolute truth, but local truths. Belief in absolute truth makes one guilty of intolerance and arrogance. Truth is a product of local society, and something is true if it is true for the individual or a community. Not just specific beliefs, but our understanding of truth itself is rooted in community.[11] Thus, *truth* is not discovered but constructed, therefore it is subjective, relative, and situational. Since postmodern epistemology holds that truth does not exist, any attempt to discover it is futile. Moreover, the claim to know the truth is seen today as arrogant and dangerous because it will end in a wrong attitude towards others. Truth is described as persuasive and normative.

In order to avoid conflict between communities, the greatest virtue must be tolerance. In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Alan Bloom writes: "The point is not to correct wrongs and be truly right; rather, it is not to believe you are right at all."[12] In such a setting, Christians are seen as chauvinistic because of their belief in the Bible as the Word of God – an absolute truth.

The rejection of metanarratives is essential to postmodernism because the rejection of universal truth is the cornerstone of its ideology. Metanarrative implies that there is a universal truth that defines the world. As far as the text of any writing is concerned, it is the reader who gives meaning to the text, not the

---

[9] Donald A Carson, 'On Disputable Matters', *Themelios* 40, no. 3 (2015): 384.
[10] Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1994), 13.
[11] Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 14.
[12] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 25.

text itself. Narratives are about interpretation, not truth. The social narrative has no legitimacy beyond the community.

The philosophical problem with postmodernism's tolerance is that it is built against the law of non-contradiction. Truth is exclusivist par excellence. Two different ideas can exist, but two opposing ideas cannot coexist. In the labyrinth of tolerance, assertions are against the law of non-contradiction. Two contradictory facts cannot both be true. Both can be wrong, but only one can be true.

Another problem of postmodern philosophy is not only dogmatic, but also ethical. Without truth we cannot have morality, and without morality we cannot have justice. Truth and justice cannot exist without each other. In the name of tolerance we should destroy all courts of law, because all judgement is built on a moral basis and on universal truth.

SOCIAL VALUES

To provide an answer to the conflicts that can arise between 'truths', the solution that emerges is pluralism and relativism. Postmodern consciousness presupposes a radical kind of relativism and pluralism. Nowadays, tolerance is no longer about having one belief system and respecting those who have another but is the mixing of all beliefs. Common ground is not only desirable, but also mandatory. Tolerance is often confused with respect, but the two attitudes are different because one can tolerate a person but not respect them.

The new emphasis on pluralism is not individual but communal. In order for this idea to work, the epistemological paradigm had to shift from universal truth based on logic to subjective interpretation of truth. The biggest problem from this point of view is not being wrong but being intolerant. For tolerance, intolerance is not tolerated. If tolerance is the core value, then the greatest evil is intolerance. Jürgen Habermas, a strong critic of the philosophical postmodernism argued convincingly that postmodernism contradicts itself through self-reference.[13] Habermas is correct not only in his reasoning by stating that postmodernism is an illicit aestheticization of knowledge and public discourse.[14] Postmodernism has not been universally well received within sociology. From a social point of view, tolerance has turned out to be rather utopian. When tolerance moves beyond mutual respect towards relativism,

[13] Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1990).
[14] Kenneth H. Tucker, 'Aesthetics, Play, and Cultural Memory: Giddens and Habermas on the Postmodern Challenge', *Sociological Theory* 11, no. 2 (1993): 194–211.

tolerance becomes intolerant. Relativism becomes the Trojan horse for the concept of tolerance.

From a Cristian point of view, today's tolerance represents the first step towards ethical relativism and sin. Secular tolerance is compatible with Christian acceptance, but Christian acceptance is not compatible with secular tolerance. The difference is made by sin. The Christian acceptance Paul speaks of in Romans is something totally different from today's tolerance. The problem facing the believer today in the context of modern tolerance is that the proclamation of Christian beliefs tends to become something that can no longer be accepted. Christian beliefs in their essence are perceived as intolerant on the basis that they proclaim an absolute truth. Thus, proclaiming religious truths is dangerous. Pluralism today is understood not in terms of the tolerance of other's view but in terms of duty to render other's view as equal in value. The outcome of this pluralism is relativism

The result of this pluralism is relativism, and any deviation from this relativism must be censored. In this way, tolerance turns into censorship, starting from mutual acceptance. The problem with this transition from mutual acceptance to relativism is the sacrifice of truth. It is as if we were forced to accept that one plus two equals four, simply because anyone who claims that the result is three is exclusivist and expresses an arrogance of knowledge.

A PRACTICAL APPROACH

The end product of today's tolerance is not changing things that are wrong, but trying to eliminate right/wrong categories. People are thus unable to know the truth. Tolerance thus becomes the virtue of those who no longer believe in truth but only in mutual acceptance.

Christianity believes that truth is not created by a society and is not bound to a particular culture. The truthfulness of Christian truth from the point of view of tolerance is arrogance. However, to affirm something that is true is not the hallmark of arrogance, but of honesty. A person who proclaims a truth may be arrogant, but this does not undermine the value of the truth declared. From a Christian point of view, arrogance is a sin, and truth must be affirmed in love. The goal of Christians should be to present the message of salvation found in Christ. Paul exhorts the Christians in Rome to try to live in peace (Rom. 12:18), so from the point of view of tolerance, peace and mutual respect is a fundamental good ground for the Christian mandate.

RELATIONSHIP WITHIN THE CHURCH: ACCEPTANCE

Paul's call for unity within the church should be based on unity on big issues. When we speak of adiaphora, both the weak and the strong should seek acceptance, and when this is not possible, the strong should limit their freedom. Believers need to accept those who hold a different view on various secondary beliefs. A Christian might have prejudices about the whole Christian freedom to which others are completely committed.[15] When talking about differences between Christian groups, the approach should be based on loving people; building relationships based on similar values/dogmas and respect based on different ideas.

RELATIONSHIP OUTSIDE THE CHURCH: RESPECT VS. OSTRACISM

When there is a disagreement with someone outside the Christian church, the process of reconciliation must start from mutual respect. The approach of the Christian believer must be based first and foremost on loving people (individual relational approach); a strong apologetic strategy and a wise missiological strategy (lovingly towards people and hatefully towards sin).

In reality, the whole philosophical system of today's tolerance is aimed at protecting sin. Because of this, it is difficult to relate to someone who hides this under the umbrella of tolerance. The real outcome of tolerance is the protection of sin. Today's tolerance is an artifact to get rid of the problems of the soul called sin. In spite of this, the truth of the Gospel is really the only solution for peace (Rom. 14:17), a truth that has the power to change people (Romans 15:18-19).

Besides all this, openness to a soteriological truth is found in a relationship based on love. The paradigm of Paul's response to the church in Rome, where there were differences, is that the knowledge of truth should determine the believer to live a loving and truthful life. The Gospel is the only way an individual can be transformed, a change that will impact the community.

When we speak of *adiaphora*, a Christian must seek unity and if the truth of salvation is not in danger he must limit even his freedom to build a Christ-like brotherly love. When we speak of tolerance, the Christian must build wise relationship, must have a strong apologetic and missiological strategy to proclaim the universal truth of salvation. Diluting Christian truth in the pot of syncretistic tolerance in order to have unity is not an option.

[15] James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38b (Dallas: Word, 2002), 803.

CONCLUSION

Disagreement about small things is what we call adiaphora, things that are neither forbidden nor commanded. When Paul writes to the Romans about these, he is asking for acceptance and unity in the Church. The objective of this article was to draw the line between Christian acceptance and secular tolerance. What is the common ground when you disagree with your brother in faith? What is the common ground when you disagree with a tolerant postmodernist?

First century Roman society was a pluralistic society based on tolerance and bears many similarities to postmodern society. In Romans 14, Paul deals with the subject of accepting the other despite differences on some issues. The problem was judgement over small and unimportant things that destroyed unity around the main thing: salvation.

The main thrust of the argument is not to let anyone create obstacles for a brother. Christian freedom is limited to the personal conviction of the weakest believer, so unity within the Church must be built at the cost of personal freedom.

Christianity seeks peace, understanding and respect, but not at any price. Today's tolerance seeks peace, understanding and respect, even if the price is truth itself. The rejection of Christian dogma is not based on demonstrating its falsity, but on its claims to be true. The social unrest of recent decades has shown that postmodern tolerance has not delivered what it promised. Rather, movements such as cancel culture, hate culture, woke culture, etc. attest to the fact that political, social, and philosophical solutions have not been able to resolve the alienation that exists in any community.

When we speak of *adiaphora*, a Christian must seek unity and, if the truth of salvation is not at stake, must limit even his freedom in order to build a Christ-like brotherly love.

When we speak of postmodern tolerance, the Christian must build a wise relationship, a strong apologetic and a sensitive missiological strategy with postmodern man in order to proclaim the universal truth of salvation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012.

Bruce, F. F. ‘Freedom, Christian’. In *New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

Carson, Donald A. ‘On Disputable Matters’. *Themelios* 40, no. 3 (2015): 383–88.

Dunn, James D. G. *Romans 9-16*. Word Biblical Commentary 38b. Dallas: Word, 2002.

Edward Veith, Jr., Gene. *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1994.

Grenz, Stanley J. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996.

Gundry-Volf, Judith M. ‘Conscience’. In *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993.

Habermas, Jurgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Translated by Frederick G. Lawrence. Reprint edition. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1990.

Jaquette, James L. ‘Life and Death, Adiaphora, and Paul’s Rhetorical Strategies’. *Novum Testamentum* 38, no. 1 (1996): 30–54.

Mishan, Ligaya. ‘The Long and Tortured History of Cancel Culture’. *The New York Times*, 3 December 2020, sec. T Magazine. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/t-magazine/cancel-culture-history.html.

Moo, Douglas J. ‘Romans’. In *New Bible Commentary*, edited by Gordon J. Wenham, J. Alec Motyer, D. A. Carson, and R. T. France. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 1994.

Toon, P. ‘Adiaphora’. In *New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

Tucker, Kenneth H. ‘Aesthetics, Play, and Cultural Memory: Giddens and Habermas on the Postmodern Challenge’. *Sociological Theory* 11, no. 2 (1993): 194–211.

Winkett, Lucy. ‘“Things Indifferent” or “Necessary for Salvation”?: Reading Scripture in an Age of Slogans and Tweets’. *Modern Believing* 61, no. 4 (2020): 326–34.