

Resolving Controversy

Joe Slater

Controversy arises from strange sources. In Acts 15, some believing Pharisees came from Judea to Antioch and raised a fuss. Why? Because Paul and Barnabas had not compelled their Gentile converts to be circumcised and observe the Law of Moses! The bulk of chapter 15 tells how the early church handled that controversy, and illustrates how we can handle controversies constructively when they arise in the church today.

First, **they did not try to avoid controversy by ignoring false teaching.** The believing Pharisees were simply wrong in trying to bind the Mosaic Law upon Christians, particularly converts from a Gentile background. Immediately Paul and Barnabas “*had no small dissension*” with them (Acts 15:2). Our modern tendency is to tip-toe around false teaching in the futile hope that it will just go away. The apostles and other early Christians, by contrast, nipped it in the bud.

Second, **they went to the source of the problem.** The trouble-makers had come from Judea; Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem, capital of Judea, to deal with the issue. They brought Titus, a Gentile convert, with them as a test case. Why stir up a hornet’s nest all over the world when you can trace the problem to its source and deal with it there?

Next, **they calmly heard all sides of the debate.** Paul and Barnabas presented their report (15:4); the believing Pharisees also had their say (15:5). Even when people are dreadfully mistaken, as the Pharisees were, we should afford them the common courtesy of a fair hearing. To do otherwise only breeds resentment and fans the flames of controversy.

Finally, **they appealed to Scripture and sound reasoning to settle the matter.** With compelling logic, Peter pointed out that by becoming Christians, the Jews had admitted that they could not be saved by Mosaic Law-keeping (15:10, 11). If Jews couldn’t be saved by the Law, why bind it on Gentiles? Then James reinforced Peter’s argument, pointing out that God had planned all along to include Gentiles in His kingdom as indicated in the Scriptures (15:13-18, quoting Amos 9:11, 12). Scripture and sound reasoning – what a fantastic combination!

Satan will see to it that controversies arise in the church. We can handle them properly by nipping false teaching in the bud, going to the source of the problem, giving everyone the opportunity to be heard, and appealing to Scripture and sound reasoning for a resolution.

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Two Essential Questions

Another month gone that will never return. It cannot be undone, for good or bad, for joy or sadness.

We hope to have another month ahead. We'll make plans to use it, possibly. We ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will do this or that" (see James 4). But we'll actually live it a day at a time, from moment to moment.

Things will happen to cause changes in plans. We can wring our hands and cry tears of frustration. Or we can adjust and adapt and see in the changes possibilities and opportunities.

Plans consist of intentions to use time and resources, hopefully, in a positive and constructive way, for maximum benefit.

For a Christian, plans ought to reflect the spiritual priority of the two greatest commandments (see Matthew 22). So one ought to be constantly asking oneself:

- * How can I use my time and resources to love God?
- * How can I use my time and resources to love my neighbor?

Victor Hugo wrote, "Love is the only future God offers." Shouldn't the Christian plan to make the future revolve around love?

-- J. Randal Matheny (via Bulletin Gold)

ARE YOU A LIGHTHOUSE?

"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

Before radar and global positioning satellites, lighthouses were positioned to guide sailors past dangers to safe haven. Lighthouses go back to ancient times. Being a lighthouse keeper was a very responsible position and it required a trustworthy man to serve as one.

In the darkness, light serves as a guide and also reveals reality. Even during the day, we live in a world of darkness. The vast majority stumble about in darkness, not seeing the reality of God and sin.

Jesus tells us that those who follow Him are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). We serve to point out the dangers of unbelief in God and disobedience to God. We also serve as guides to leading people to God.

Jesus says that if our light is hidden, it serves no purpose. If the lighthouse keepers had covered their lights, lives would have perished. We must be active in this dark world. People need to see that God is real and is shown to be what He is through our behavior and words. People need to learn that God is loving and that He cares. But they also must learn that God has standards that will not be put aside.

-- Ed Wittlif (Denver, CO)