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HANDLING DIFFERENCES

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DIFFERENCES IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT*

Michael Griffiths

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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 *hairesikos*. 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 I 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.'

ESSENTIAL AND NON-ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES AND PRACTICES

Tony Lane

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to consider when to agree to differ, how to distinguish between essential and non-essential doctrines and practices. How should we handle differences? On what principles do we operate? Such questions are important, though we should not forget another factor which has been prominent in the history of church disputes. That is the factor of *personality*. The story is told of the jury that retired to reach its verdict. After a considerable lapse of time the foreman of the jury emerged, looking very frustrated, to place an order for eleven cups of coffee and one cup of tea, eleven ham sandwiches and one beef sandwich, eleven cream buns and one doughnut. In the actual church situation, personality may turn out to be as important a factor as the issues being discussed. But the purpose of this paper is more limited: to set out the principles by which we may distinguish between those doctrines and practices which are essential and those which are not.

DOCTRINES

How should we handle variations in doctrine? Now it is certainly true that *some* variations in doctrine are far from desirable. In the

New Testament we are urged to preserve the truth of the gospel. Paul warned Timothy of a time when people would turn away from sound doctrine and seek satisfaction for their itching ears. (2 Tim. 4:3f) Jude urges his readers to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. (Jude 3) Paul condemns anyone who brings another gospel. (Gal. 1:6–9) The truth of the gospel must be preserved. However, while there should be *unity* in doctrine this is not the same as *uniformity*. The trouble with moving only in one particular circle of Christians is that one can reach a false impression as to the uniformity of doctrine. In the same way, someone brought up in the north country who never travelled far might imagine that all civilised people eat black pudding or an untravelled Frenchman might regard the eating of snails as the proof of culture. But those of us who have travelled further abroad know that this is not the case. In fact it is supremely by *travel* that we learn (not just in our heads) that there are different ways of doing things. James Clavell's *Shogun*, which has been televised, is a brilliant description of the encounter between two cultures (seventeenth-century English and Japanese) showing how each instinctively regards the other as barbarian—and also showing how they each have good reasons for that judgement! Travel broadens the mind and frees us from provincial prejudice. The same is true of Christian doctrine, where there are three different types of travel that can help us.

First there is *travel through time*. Unfortunately we cannot climb into a time machine to go back to the past, but the study of history does allow us a considerable knowledge about and insight into the beliefs and practices of past ages. Earlier generations of Brethren were influenced by E. M. Broadbent's *The Pilgrim Church*, which claimed to trace a thin line of persecuted 'Brethren' groups throughout the length of Christian history, starting with the Montanists in the second century. It did not seem to worry the author that some of the groups which he cited were wildly heretical, holding to a Manichean dualism between two ultimate gods, one good and one evil. Indeed almost the only distinctive common feature of the groups that he cited is the fact that they were all at odds with the established church—so perhaps the moral to be drawn is simply that there are always some awkward people around! The fact is that we cannot point to a continuous tradition of

people who have seen things just the way that we do. (It should also be noted that it is no more possible for other denominations to show such a continuity. Even the Roman Catholic Church has ceased to claim to be 'always the same' and now talks more of a continuity within a process of development.) This is not of course to deny that there are major points of belief that have been held consistently over the ages—such as the basic beliefs outlined in the *Apostles' Creed*, say. But together with such continuity there has also been considerable variation in belief.

Second there is *travel round the world*. While we cannot literally travel back into the past we can travel to different countries. Even if we do not go in person we can still see other countries on the television and meet people from them. Such travel serves to reinforce the point about variations in doctrine. One example will suffice. In Britain today it is generally assumed that evangelicals will not believe the doctrine of baptismal regeneration—that all who are baptised (of whatever age) are automatically born again. Such a belief is perceived by most to be incompatible with an evangelical stance. Yet if one travels to Scandinavia one finds that the majority of evangelicals there do indeed hold to baptismal regeneration. This is because Scandinavia is strongly Lutheran and Luther maintained the doctrine of baptismal regeneration throughout his life. (How he squared it with justification by faith alone is another story!) It may come as a greater surprise to many to hear that John Wesley, one of the fathers of British evangelicalism who travelled all round the country telling his hearers that they must be born again, also held all his life that babies are born again in baptism. (Again, how he reconciled the two is another story.) In fact it is only in the last century, after the rise of the Oxford Movement, with its leanings towards Roman Catholic beliefs, that British evangelicals became radically opposed to the idea of baptismal regeneration. Thus again a journey through space and time shows us that what appears a uniform evangelical stance is not so uniform after all.

Finally there is another form of travel that demands neither a time machine nor an air ticket. We can, within our own locality, *travel from one group to another*. In order to encounter variations in belief we do not need to go to more theologically distant groups like Roman Catholics. If we were to confine ourselves to visiting

evangelical groups within a radius of a few miles of the London Bible College we would discover considerable variations. One group would believe in the autonomy of the local church; another would not. One would believe it was right to baptise infants; another would not. One group would be more strongly 'reformed' while another would be more strongly 'charismatic'. And so on.

Granted that we are forced to accept the fact of variations in beliefs, how do we react to them? What is our response when we come upon another group that does not see things quite as we do? We could adopt the attitude of Job's friends. Job characterised their attitude this way: 'You are the people and wisdom will die with you.' (Job 12:2) Is that how we see ourselves? We are the ones and if we die out the truth will vanish off the face of the earth. That would be one way to react, in a somewhat arrogant fashion. The opposite reaction is also possible: 'It doesn't really matter what you believe as long as your heart is in the right place.' This approach sounds very good because it appears 'loving' and avoids today's unforgivable sin: intolerance. But it is not satisfactory because doctrine certainly does matter. It does matter what people believe because if they really *do* believe it, it will affect what they do. If we have come to feel that doctrine does not matter it may be because we have become accustomed to believing things merely in our heads without them also affecting our lives. Doctrine does matter and it is wrong to treat differences in belief as irrelevant. But while doctrine matters, it does not follow that we all have to be 100% correct. Experience has taught me that while I may be 100% correct no one else seems quite able to make the grade! Correctness of belief is important—but it is just as important to live out what one believes. In fact, if we had to choose, it would be better to be 50% correct and to live it out than to be 100% correct and do nothing about it. It is tragic to see individuals and churches with a fanatical concern for precise orthodoxy but with a failure to put any of it into practice. Correct doctrine is no use without a practical concern for holiness of life, for serving one's neighbour, for spreading the gospel, etc.

Doctrine is important, but we must not simply identify doctrine or theology with the truth itself. Doctrine should be seen as a description of the truth. Doctrine is *about* the truth, a description of the truth rather than the truth itself. But surely this is being pedantic about a word and making over-subtle semantic distinctions? No. If

we think of doctrine as a description of the truth then it opens up the way for us to acknowledge that there may be more than one description, each of which partially conveys the truth. Consider the surviving portraits of Henry VIII. None of the portraits is Henry himself—they are simply descriptions or representations of him. Each of them, assuming that they are faithful portraits, succeeds in bringing out facets of his character. It would be silly to ask which is the 'right' picture. If we want to know what he was like we will be wise to heed all of the reliable portraits, not just one. Again, suppose you were to apply for a job and three different people write references for you. If they know you well and write good and honest references, there will be three different accounts of you, each conveying part of the truth about you. They will be complementary even if they are not as complimentary as you might wish! As with the portraits, they are different, complementary, partial accounts of the truth. As with the portraits, it is certainly possible for there to be error or deception, but the mere fact of there being differences does not prove that there is error. There can be different, complementary accounts of the truth, each partially true.

That is all very well with portraiture and reference writing, you might respond, but it is a different matter when we come to divine truth. But is it? Why do we have *four* gospels? We have four *different* gospels. If Matthew was only saying the same thing as Luke, then we would not need Matthew as well. Each of the four gospels shows us *part* of the truth about Jesus. If one gospel could show it all, we would not have needed four. Thus the New Testament canonises the principle of diversity—not the principle of error or contradiction, but the value of a number of different accounts which complement one another and each contain a part of the truth. This same principle continues in the church. Each individual Christian sees the Christian faith from a slightly different angle. We may be compared to a vast crowd standing before the Houses of Parliament, say. We will all see it from a slightly different angle. One will see a part of the building that another cannot see. And so on. We each have different perspectives on the Christian faith. Of course, where we are concerned, there is also the factor of error. Some of our differences arise because some of us (or maybe all of us!) have got it wrong. But by no means all differences arise from error. There is also the factor of partial understandings

and different perspectives. This is why the one-man ministry is wrong. No one person can portray the whole of Christian truth. If a congregation are taught or led by one man only they will suffer from a partial, one-sided approach.

To recap, some differences do arise from error. But diversity in itself should not embarrass us. In fact, diversity is healthy. If I wanted to know as much as possible about the architecture of the Houses of Parliament I would want as many different photographs as possible. I would want photographs from a wide range of angles, not many photographs from the same one angle. If I was thinking of employing someone I would be unwise to rely on just one reference. So also with Christian truth. Diversity can help us to see more of its fulness, just as the four gospels can help us to see more of Christ than any *one* could give. The four evangelists were inspired by the Holy Spirit, and yet it took four of them to present the account of Christ. If no one of them could do the job on his own, how much less is it possible for any 'uninspired' post-biblical writer. In the past many tended to think that Christian truth was fully presented in the systematic theology of this or that writer. If this were the case, then it seems a strange oversight on the part of God not to have chosen that writer to write the New Testament on his own, thus removing the embarrassing diversity. But that is not God's way. The New Testament shows us truth in diversity—four gospels, Paul versus James, etc.

Paul describes the church as 'the pillar and foundation of the truth'. (1 Tim. 3:15) This is an important point. The truth is entrusted to and proclaimed by the whole church—not just one individual or one congregation or one denomination or one generation or one part of the world. The truth is entrusted to the 'catholic church' embracing all generations, all parts of the world and all denominations. This is not to deny that some groups are plainly heretical and are undermining the truth. It is not to deny that *all* theological traditions contain some error and that some contain serious errors. But it is to deny that the truth is found in one part only of the church. We are evangelicals because we believe that this tradition is basically right and preserves many important aspects of the gospel which have been ignored or even suppressed in other traditions. But this by no means excludes the possibility (if not the certainty) that some of these other traditions have

maintained aspects of the gospel which we have neglected. We must not be so preoccupied with pointing out the errors of others that we are no longer interested or able to learn from their truth.

But how do we handle contradictions, where one side or the other (or both) is in error? Do we need to divide every time there is a disagreement? This is what evangelicals have at times tended to do and at this point we should acknowledge that the Catholic tradition has taken the New Testament teaching on the unity of the church far more seriously than we have. In handling differences and contradictions we need to consider the importance of the point at issue. Some doctrines are vital and non-negotiable. If someone argues that Jesus is not God we don't welcome this as another fruitful element of diversity. If, on the other hand, there is a difference over the understanding of the millennium this is no ground for breaking off fellowship or dividing the church. But why is the deity of Christ important in a way that the millennium is not? Surely both doctrines are concerned with biblical truth. Am I not simply displaying my own personal view of which doctrines are important? No.

In the *first* place, it is clear that the person of Christ is central to the teaching of scripture, while the millennium is not. This is seen both from the paucity of reference to the latter and from the central role of Christ in Christian faith, aside from statistical counts of the number of references. These principles give us a helpful guide to the relative importance of different doctrines, but there is still plenty of room for different estimates regarding the importance of particular doctrines. So it is fortunate that we have a *second* way to settle this matter. The New Testament writers themselves identify certain doctrines as particularly important. In 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 Paul identifies the cross and resurrection of Christ. In Galatians 1:6–9 he identifies the gospel of salvation by grace rather than law. In 1 John 4:2–3 and 2 John 9 the person of Christ is identified. It has been noted that there is a common core to the summaries of gospel preaching in Acts. And so on. The New Testament itself encourages us to think in terms of a central core of basic and fundamental truths and helps us in the selection of these truths. The early creeds of the church, culminating in the *Apostles' Creed* and the *Nicene Creed* were primarily attempts at this.

Some doctrines are fundamental in a way that others are not. But

even with those that are fundamental, it does not follow that everyone has to view them identically. Take the example of the person of Christ, a fundamental doctrine. It is important to acknowledge that he is the eternal Word made flesh, fully and truly God and man. But how can these points be held together? There will be different ways in which people attempt to do this and there is room for differences, as long as the basic truths are not undermined. An attitude of humility is important here. We can and should be clear and firm in our affirmation of, for example, the deity of Christ. But we need also to acknowledge that we do not know all of the answers and that our understanding of who he is is feeble and limited. In our understanding and presentation of Christian doctrine it is vital to maintain the balance between authority and conviction on the one side and humility on the other. We need to stand firm on those matters which are clear and important while not pretending that we know all the answers. An arrogant overconfidence which does not acknowledge any remaining element of mystery will serve only to discredit our genuinely Bible-based convictions.

How then should we handle differences? It is good that there are broad-based evangelical bodies such as Scripture Union, UCCF and London Bible College which aim to allow for differences within a framework of agreement on basics. The isolation of basics in this way has a good New Testament warrant, as we have seen. (Whether or not the right doctrines are chosen as basic is of course another matter, which would lead us astray at this point.) However, it is one thing to allow such differences in a 'para-church' organisation; it is another thing to do so in a local church. Scripture Union or the London Bible College can remain neutral on the issue of infant baptism; a local church is deprived of that luxury. But while there may need to be limitations on the diversity of a local church, there is still much room for diversity. Indeed it is not just a case of tolerating diversity but rather of welcoming it as healthy. President Lyndon Johnson once said that where two people think exactly the same, only one of them has thought. If, as we often say, 'two heads are better than one', it is precisely because of the diversity between them. Monochrome congregations are not healthy. If there is a polarisation between 'charismatic' and 'non-charismatic' churches, the result will be the impoverishment of both. It may be

uncomfortable for two different groups to live together, it may well cause problems, but it is better than to allow them each to go to their own extreme in isolation. In the early church an easy way to avoid problems would have been to have allowed the development of parallel Jewish and Gentile churches. It would have accorded with the 'homogeneous unit principle' being urged by some. But Paul regarded it as totally unacceptable, as indeed a denial of the gospel as set out in Ephesians 3:2-6. (Incidentally, how often does the content of this passage ever figure in evangelical presentations of the gospel?) In our handling of differences we need to be more aware of the *sinfulness* of church divisions and to strive as far as is possible to embrace diversity within an acceptance of basic Christian truth. If this had been done in the past there would be far fewer denominations and far less 'cranky' Christian groups.

CHURCH PRACTICES

In considering our attitude to variations in practice it is important to distinguish between scriptural and non-scriptural practices. First of all, *scriptural practices*. Some elements of church practice are clearly laid down for us in scripture and are not optional. The two obvious examples are the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. There can be no justification for abolishing these when we are so clearly taught in scripture to observe them. But while this example may be straightforward, there remain three areas in which differences will emerge.

First, which practices are laid down in scripture? It is obvious to all but a tiny minority that baptism and the Lord's Supper are to be regularly observed in the church while this is not true of a literal ritual of foot-washing. But what of the mode of baptism? Does the New Testament specify whether it should be by total immersion or by sprinkling or does it leave us free in such a matter? Regarding the ministry, does the New Testament lay down one pattern to be followed for all time (be that episcopal, presbyterian or whatever) or does it show us how the early church adopted a variety of different patterns of ministry according to changing circumstances?

Second, those who agree that a certain practice is laid down may still differ in their approach to it. If the New Testament tells us to

baptise, does it tell us to baptise mature believers only or also their infant children? If the New Testament tells us that the church should have deacons, what should their role be?

Third, were some New Testament practices intended for that time only? Should we expect to encounter apostles today? Were gifts like speaking in tongues and prophecy for the apostolic age alone? Is the New Testament teaching on the role of women related to the particular social conditions of that time and therefore in need of modification for today? So even with those practices set out in scripture there is scope for disagreement.

How do we handle such differences? Differences of practice are less serious than differences in doctrine in that we find them less of a bar to fellowship. But, ironically, they can also be more of a bar to church unity. A congregation may remain neutral in the Calvinist-Arminian debate, but it must decide whether to baptise infants or not. There are three general observations to be made at this point. First that some variety of practice within a church can be healthy. Second that Christians should be willing to belong to churches where they do not necessarily agree with all the practices. But, third, we should not therefore assume that the question of practices is unimportant. The practices of the church affect the way in which it visibly manifests itself. They can undermine the gospel just as much as unsound doctrine. Archaic practices can proclaim that the Christian message is irrelevant and outmoded. Tyrannical church government proclaims a tyrannical God. And so on.

What of *non-scriptural practices*? Is the church allowed to introduce practices which are not laid down in scripture? At the Reformation there was disagreement over this question. Luther took the line that the church is free to do anything as long as it is not *contrary* to scripture. He included in this, practices like infant baptism, the wearing of vestments by the clergy and the use of a liturgy. Where scripture was silent the church is free. This approach was criticised within the Reformed Calvinist tradition and some took this to the extent that the church may do nothing that is not positively commanded in scripture. Therefore we may not use music in worship, sing hymns or found Bible colleges—let alone have Christian Brethren Research Fellowships—because none of these is ordained in scripture. How rigidly this principle was applied varied according to whether or not one was permitted to

turn to the Old Testament for help—to justify music in worship or church buildings, say. Today most Christians would recognise that this approach is too legalistic and restrictive. It involves treating the New Testament as a code of canon law, which it is not. On the one hand, the New Testament lays down a few broad general principles and then leaves us to work it out for ourselves in the freedom of the gospel and with the guidance of the Spirit. On the other hand, the New Testament leaves many questions unanswered and therefore, by implication, open for us to make up our own minds. We are not told how many services to have on a Sunday or when to hold them—or even where. It is too restrictive to forbid the church to do anything not specifically laid down in scripture, though this freedom should be used with caution. The issue of infant baptism clearly involves important theological principles and any defence of it needs to appeal to more than ecclesiastical freedom. Even issues like clerical garb involve theological principles (the relation between ‘clergy’ and ‘laity’) and such principles need to be considered in the exercise of our Christian freedom.

What of *local variations* in practices? As with doctrine, those who do not travel may have a false picture of uniformity in practice. As one travels through time, round the world and from group to group, one discovers a considerable diversity in the way that churches are run and organized. They all have some form of leadership and ministry, but this takes a wide variety of forms. They all, apart from a few odd groups, observe baptism and the Lord’s Supper, but in many different ways. Now it does not follow that all of these ways are equally valid or necessarily valid at all. But experience shows that churches of many different kinds are blessed by the Lord—with a growth in numbers, in Christian holiness and maturity and in influence upon society. This indicates that we should be thinking not so much of a normative blue-print to be followed by all but rather of a few basic principles which can be applied in a variety of ways. There are four points to watch in the application of biblical principles.

First, we must make sure that the application of these principles really is relevant and appropriate to our present situation and not just a legalistic adherence to a pattern that might have been relevant fifty years ago. This point is especially important in our modern world where the pace of change is so fast. It is also important in that

our society is orientated towards the future and impatient of past traditions. Once upon a time it was considered good to adhere to venerable ancient tradition—but not in our contemporary society. The church should therefore beware of an unthinking conservatism that is opposed to all change. We must be free to adapt. To take a trivial example, if thirty years ago those unbelievers who attended church did so in the evening, it made sense then to have an evangelistic service in the evening. If today (as is true in our area) they come in the morning, that is the time to reach out to them. A few years ago our church changed its pattern so that the main morning service was a family service, designed so as not to make the outsider uncomfortable. The *immediate* result was that twenty or thirty new people started coming regularly. It is true that structures cannot of themselves create growth. But it is equally true that bad structures can of themselves prevent growth, as was the case with us.

Second, if we are to avoid an unthinking conservatism opposed to all change, we must also beware of the opposite danger. There are many churches today in which 'old' and 'traditional' are automatically words of condemnation while 'new' and 'change' are automatically words of approval. We must not be carried away by the spirit of the age to the extent of abandoning all that is good from the past, jettisoning the riches of our tradition. Christian freedom towards such traditional practices means being free to change them—and to keep them if that is appropriate. Either way, we must make sure that biblical principles are being applied in a way that is appropriate to our present situation.

Third, these practical matters have to be decided by the church. There has been too much of an unbiblical individualism in western Christianity as a whole and among the Brethren in particular. When it comes to practical decisions the church must decide (by whatever procedures the church makes its decisions) and the individual should then accept this, even if he is not happy with the decision. There are too many prima-donnas in the church, who leave the moment they do not like something. Such an attitude is proud, arrogant and unchristian. But to say that, is not to justify heavy-handed methods of leadership in which decisions are made by a small group without any reference to the views of the rest.

Fourth, an obvious point: each church makes its decisions in the light of its own circumstances. Other churches are free to make

their own decisions and each one should respect the freedom of the other.

CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

What of Christian freedom in the area of individual behaviour? Each Christian group has its own shibboleths, though not necessarily the same as each other. A true story will illustrate this. Some years ago I spent a holiday with a friend on the Isle of Lewis. When we arrived at Stornaway we called on the Free Presbyterian minister. Now the Scottish Free Presbyterians (not to be confused with the Free Church of Scotland, the 'Wee Frees') are very strict in all sorts of ways. Any attendance at a theatre or cinema is prohibited. You cannot shave on Sundays and be a member. Before we called on the minister I warned my friend and told him to be careful about what he said. When we arrived there were two other ministers there who happened to be passing through. We were invited in and almost the first thing that happened was that one of them offered us a cigarette! My friend told me afterwards how disorientated he was. He had been warned how strict these people were and the first thing that happened was that they broke one of the taboos of British evangelicalism. What was taboo among us was unquestioned among them, while many of their taboos seem bizarre to us. Travel shows us that many of our taboos are local rather than universal and thus encourages us to reconsider them—though in this instance it did not lessen my dislike of smoking!

What are the principles to be applied in this matter? Where a practice is condemned in scripture (such as adultery) there is no problem. But what of other matters where scripture is silent? This was a major issue for the Reformers who faced Roman Catholic taboos such as the prohibition of eating meat on Friday. Luther and Calvin both taught much the same on this matter and their teaching is still relevant today. They taught that we are not bound by human traditions or regulations. Our Christian freedom means that we are not in bondage to them. But Christian freedom does not mean that we abandon all constraints. It is to be seen as a middle path between legalism and licence. We have freedom—but this is to be tempered by love. Christian freedom means that we *may* do certain things, not that we *must* do them. It should not be used in such a way as to

make a weaker brother fall. This is the message of Paul in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. If our use of our freedom puts a brother in danger of sinning we are not to exercise it.

This is a familiar principle, but it needs to be used with caution. There are those who use it in such a way that we are all of us bound to give in all the time to the scruples of the weakest brother to be found—thus bringing us back into a bondage worse than that from which we have been freed. We need to remember that there are legalists as well as weaker brothers. The weaker brother is the one who (in Paul's time) was in danger of sinning against his conscience by eating meat offered to an idol. Paul would not eat such meat if it would make a weaker brother stumble. The result was *not* that he became a 'total abstainer' but that he abstained in certain circumstances. (1 Cor. 10:25-30) If anyone came to Paul and demanded that he should become a 'total abstainer', then this person was not a 'weaker brother' but a legalist who was trying to bring others into bondage. Paul strenuously resisted legalists. (Gal. 2; Col. 2) This distinction comes out again in Paul's attitude to circumcision. He circumcised Timothy. (Acts 16:3) This was to enable Timothy to exercise an effective ministry among Jews. But in Galatians we read of a different situation. Judaizing legalists were insisting that Titus should be circumcised, and Paul resisted them in the name of Christian freedom (2:3-5).

Agreement on these principles will lessen, but not remove, differences in this area. We may all agree that we are not in bondage to human traditions but we would all agree that there are moral principles which need to be applied. The freedom of which Paul and the Reformers spoke applies easily to *ritual* matters, but not so easily to those which are argued on *moral* grounds. Let us consider some examples. The Bible nowhere explicitly condemns the taking of heroin, but in the light of the results of heroin taking there is little dispute that it is to be excluded on Christian moral grounds. What then of alcohol, which can also be addictive? All Christians would agree on the need for restraint but what of total abstinence? There is a case to be made for this, but surely the Christian cannot regard it as obligatory since the Bible repeatedly approves the moderate use of wine and Christ himself both turned water into wine and ordained its use in the Lord's Supper. Was he morally misguided? What of smoking then? The verdict of modern

medicine is that the moderate use of alcohol can actually be beneficial but that all smoking is harmful. The conclusion must be that the Christian is advised not to smoke—especially because of the encouragement to the young to adopt a practice that is so addictive. But this conclusion is not the same as making the issue an evangelical taboo. The Bible explicitly condemns gluttony and there are many evangelical Christians who are very proud of not smoking but yet blatantly overeat—with the appropriate consequences both for their figures and for their health! There is always the danger of a selective morality that condemns some faults and condones others.

In ethics, as in theology, diversity is not necessarily bad. With alcohol there is a role for the Christian teetotaler who recognises the right of others to drink, but bears witness to the fact that one can live a happy fulfilled life without alcohol. Equally there is room for the moderate drinker who answers the abuse of alcohol, not with abstinence, but with a demonstration of the correct use of it. This bears witness to the goodness of God's creation. Again, it is right that most Christians should marry to show that marriage is a good gift of God and to set a pattern of Christian family life. There is also a place for those like Paul who voluntarily renounce this right in order to devote themselves more fully to the extension of God's kingdom. They bear witness to the fact that it is possible to lead a happy and fulfilled life without being married. We have here the principle of different and complementary vocations. Neither bears witness to every aspect of the truth. It is important for the sake of the church that there should be some who opt for the way of abstinence—as long as they do not try to impose it on others. This principle of the variety of vocations can also be applied to the issue of warfare. The mainstream Christian position is to allow Christians to fight in certain circumstances. For the church as a whole to adopt a pacifist position would be ethically irresponsible. And yet it is also important that there be Christian pacifists. They bear witness to a side of God's truth, found especially in the Sermon on the Mount, which would otherwise be lost. The history of the church illustrates some of the unpleasant results that can ensue when there is no pacifist contribution to the Christian stance. No one person can both be a pacifist and a non-pacifist, but it is important that the church should contain both.

CONCLUSIONS

First, we should all have a 'catholic' rather than a sectarian spirit. We should recognise legitimate variety and also our own fallibility. We should recognise this in practice, not just in theory. We should realise that the Brethren represent only one small part of Christendom, and that we are not the people and truth will not die with us.

Second, we should not swing to the opposite extreme. There are some churches which are ashamed of their Brethren background and seem determined to disown it. But while the Brethren tradition may not be infallible and while it may be just one part of the wider Christian tradition, it is not therefore to be despised. Whatever their weaknesses, the Brethren bore witness to the New Testament concepts of the diversity of gifts and a shared leadership at a time when these truths had been largely forgotten. It is ironical that just as the mainstream churches are coming to see the evils of the one-man ministry and are coming to take on board elements of the Brethren tradition, so many progressive Brethren churches are becoming ashamed of their heritage. I am not for a moment suggesting an uncritical adherence to Brethren tradition. But to reform a tradition is not to abandon it.

Finally, the principle of Richard Baxter sums it all up nicely: 'In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity'.

DON'T DIVIDE OVER DEBATABLE ISSUES

Victor Jack

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We are living at a time of increasing tension in many churches because of the differing opinions Christians hold on such subjects as the baptism of the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, signs and wonders, styles of worship, forms of church government, the role of women etc. We could add to these areas of controversy, matters of Christian behaviour such as drinking, smoking and dancing which have so often led to unhappy disputes and divisions. Sadly these issues have become areas of dry scrub land into which the devil loves to throw a match and start a blazing fire which leaves destruction in its wake and many people feeling hurt and wounded.

Historically we have not been good at handling our differences on secondary issues that are not fundamental to our faith. It is therefore appropriate in our present climate to take a closer look at the principles Paul lays down for Christians to live in peace and harmony when faced with other Christians who have different convictions on some of these debatable issues. The differences that divided the Christians in the church at Rome may not be the same as those that confront us today; the areas of dispute may change but the principles are changeless.

It will be a great test of our spiritual maturity if we can learn to live in harmony with those with whom we disagree on matters not essential to our unity. It is important that we grasp the teaching Paul gives to the Christians in Rome.

THE PROBLEMS PAUL DISCUSSES

He refers to them as 'disputable matters'. (Rom 14:1) It will help us to define what they are not before coming to a conclusion as to what they are.

He is not referring to the truth of the gospel

This is not in dispute. Paul was absolutely clear in defining the fundamental facts of our salvation; they are definite and not up for debate. Paul was quite intolerant of any distortion of the gospel and made no allowance for compromise. His words to the Christians in Galatia are unequivocal and without ambiguity: 'Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you let him be eternally condemned.' (Gal 1:7-9)

He is not discussing clear commands concerning Christian behaviour

In Romans 13:8-14 Paul urges the Christians to 'put aside the deeds of darkness' and to 'behave decently' rather than thinking about 'how to gratify the deeds of the sinful nature.' Paul leaves them and us in no doubt as to what the deeds of darkness are. They include 'adultery, murder, stealing and coveting' (v 9) and 'orgies, drunkenness, sexual immorality, debauchery, dissension and jealousy' (v 13). These are obviously sinful and cannot be referred to as 'disputable matters'. Scripture leaves us in no doubt about those things which are wrong before God and grieve the Holy Spirit.

He is debating differing Christian convictions on secondary issues

There are many matters of personal behaviour where scripture is not specific, so called 'grey areas' where the Bible does not give clear-cut rules. Paul wants everyone to have their own convictions (Rom 14:5) but he wants no-one to indulge in disputes and arguments over secondary issues which, regretfully, have become all too common in many of our fellowships.

Two issues in particular were causing problems in the church at Rome, and Paul addresses himself to them in chapter 14.

Questions of personal behaviour—special diets (verse 2)

‘One man’s faith allows him to eat everything but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.’ The question of meat was a problem that vexed the early church. The eating habits of the Jews were vastly different from those of the Gentiles, and many of the Jewish Christians brought all their past scruples about food into the church. For them the blood of all animals was prohibited as was the flesh of certain animals that did not chew the cud or have a cloven hoof. Animals regarded as clean had to be slaughtered in a certain way. All of this made it extremely difficult for an orthodox Jew to share a meal with a Gentile Christian who did not subscribe to his particular customs.

An added problem was the question of meat bought in the market place that had previously been offered to idols in pagan temples. To some it was only meat and was there to be purchased, eaten and enjoyed. To others it was polluted, and rather than be contaminated and injure their conscience they became vegetarians.

We face similar problems today over issues such as alcohol. There is no clear prohibition in the Bible—only drunkenness is condemned. The Psalmist even speaks of ‘wine to make glad the heart of men.’ In matters where scripture is neither dogmatic nor clear we need to be careful or we will fall into the trap of making minor issues major points for controversy.

Questions of church observance—special days (verse 5)

‘One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike.’ The reference could be to the sabbath or to the ceremonial days in Leviticus or other days of great national celebration because of God’s intervention in their history. Some, like Paul, regarded every day alike as ‘holy to the Lord’ while others considered some days as special and more sacred. We know too that the Jews made a tyranny of the sabbath, surrounding it with a jungle of rules and regulations.

We face similar difficulties today over Sunday observance. While some would want to legislate about patterns of behaviour others feel

the day is a gift from God and to be freely enjoyed. There is always the danger of worshipping the day rather than God himself who is the lord of all our days.

All of us are affected by our national, ecclesiastical and cultural backgrounds. The homes and types of churches as well as the countries we have been brought up in colour our thinking and shape our traditions. In areas where scripture is silent, tradition has become very vocal turning certain customs into dogmas and obsessions.

What do we do when we find ourselves in a church fellowship with Christians whose convictions are different from ours on some of the issues facing the church on matters not absolutely essential to our salvation in Christ? Do we try to thrash things out until we've brow-beaten our fellow Christian into our way of thinking? Do we divide and start another fellowship with a different emphasis? Paul's counsel is quite different.

THE PEOPLE PAUL DESCRIBES

He puts Christians into two different categories which he calls the 'strong' and the 'weak'. 'Accept him whose faith is weak.' (14:1) 'We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak.' (15:1)

It's a surprise to discover that the 'weak' brother is the one with the most scruples, who has a very tender conscience and abstains from this and that questionable practice. He is 'weak' not so much in believing faith as in the faith which affects his behaviour. He is very conscious of traditional rules and regulations and finds a certain security in observing them. (We tend to think that the man who won't do this or go there is the strong man.)

The 'strong' man is the man who is liberated from traditions and taboos; his 'faith allows him to eat everything'. (14:2) He is completely free from attempting to earn God's favour by doing certain things and abstaining from others. He is secure in his relationship with God and is no longer unduly influenced by man-made regulations. He finds his freedom in pleasing God rather than being influenced by the opinions of men.

The thrust, though, of the whole passage before us is that the

'strong' Christian must consider his 'weaker' brother and not ride rough-shod over his feelings.

THE PRINCIPLES PAUL DELIVERS

Paul was completely liberated as a Christian and enjoyed his freedom to the full. He adapted to the Jewish and Gentile ways of life quite happily depending on who he was with. As someone has put it, 'so completely free was he from spiritual bondage that he was not even in bondage to his freedom'. He knew some Christians were not as emancipated as he was, so he pleads with his readers that they be treated gently.

Accept one another

'Accept him whose faith is weak.' (14:1) 'Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.' (15:7) We are to warmly welcome the person with whom we may disagree on secondary issues. The welcome is to be unconditional, 'just as Christ accepted you' and without prejudice, 'without passing judgment on disputable matters'. (14:1) We are to accept our brother because 'God has accepted him'. (14:3) Charles Hodge stated: 'If God has not made it a barrier to communion with Him, we dare not make it a barrier to fellowship with us'. To refuse to open our hearts to all God's people is to reject those that he has welcomed. How cold and critical we can be towards those who do not dot our ecclesiastical 'i's or cross our traditional 't's. R. C. Chapman used to encourage his people with the words: 'learn to see the face of Christ in those with whom you differ'.

Avoid despising and judging one another

The 'strong' must not despise the 'weak' (verse 3a)

'The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not.' The liberated Christian must avoid the temptation of despising and ridiculing his narrower brother. It is all too easy to regard his views as dated and spiritually immature. No one remains unwounded when what he considers precious and important is

laughed at. It is cruel and insensitive to make a joke of what another man regards as sacred. We will not win our brother in this way; he will only withdraw still further into his entrenched position. We must respect him and welcome him, always remembering to take into account his background.

The 'weak' must not judge the 'strong' (verse 3b)

'The man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does.' While the liberated Christian tends to despise his narrower brother, the stricter brother tends to judge his more emancipated brother. He adopts the attitude, 'I don't do it, so you shouldn't either.' How true are the words of James Denney: 'It is easy to lapse from scrupulousness over one's own conduct into Pharisaism about that of others.'

Behind both their attitudes lies the ugly spirit of censoriousness that Jesus so clearly condemned: 'Do not judge, or you will be judged, for in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.' (Matt 7:1, 2) Our judgemental attitudes will, like a boomerang, recoil on our own heads. How quick we are to jump to hasty conclusions and sit in judgement on our brother's actions. Too many fellowships are unnecessarily torn in two by those with the broader views being contemptuous of those with the narrower views, and those with the stricter views acting in condemnation towards those who are more liberal in their outlook.

'Who are you to judge someone else's servant?' (v 4) The word Paul uses describes a domestic servant. Who am I to find fault with the household servant in another man's home? It is not my prerogative. 'To his own master he stands or falls', because he is under his master's jurisdiction and not mine. 'And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.' If he is honestly and sincerely living out his principles as he sees them, then God will accept him, because the standards of approval are set by the Lord and not by me.

'You then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat . . . each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.' (14:10-13) Only God is able to make an accurate and final assessment in these

matters. He alone knows the desires and motives and circumstances that shape a person's life and decisions. When I stand before God, I will not have to answer for my brother's convictions but I will have to give an account of my critical and censorious spirit. I may feel he is wrong, but my judgemental attitude towards him may well be the greater sin in God's sight.

Let us seek to remove both contempt and condemnation from our hearts and leave the final verdict to God when it comes to debatable matters on secondary issues.

'Be fully convinced in your own mind' (verse 5)

Paul encourages every Christian to think things through for himself and to come to his own conclusions. At the end of the day our actions should not be dictated by customs or traditions but by God-given convictions which are the result of study, thought and prayer. We should not do certain things and behave in a certain way just because it is the accepted thing to do but because we have determined to know the mind of Christ and the will of God. There is a mindlessness about many of our attitudes which is dangerous because it can lead us in two different directions.

Broadmindedness can lead to licence

We can be so broadminded that there is no depth left in our thinking. We can be more influenced by current social trends than the teaching of scripture. As a result we are without deep biblical convictions, which can cause our standards of behaviour to deteriorate.

Narrowmindedness can lead to legalism

We can end up with such a narrow mind that we are no longer open to the opinions of others. Our actions are determined by the pressure and ethos of the group to which we belong. This can lead to making rules about certain acceptable forms of behaviour that will either include or exclude people from the fellowship.

Have your own convictions! Paul nowhere suggests that we should have a woolly tolerance about everything with convictions about nothing. 'Be fully convinced in your mind', but at the same time respect those who come to a different conclusion from your own.

Let your liberty be controlled by the Lordship of Christ (verses 6–9)

Six times in this section Paul emphasises the phrase ‘to the Lord’. We need to acknowledge Christ’s right to rule in every part of our lives. Often we will need to kneel and pray, ‘Lord, what do you want me to do?’ The whole direction of our lives must be ‘to the Lord’, which means we must constantly hold in balance our liberty and his lordship, allowing the former to be controlled by the latter.

It is important to notice that both the ‘weak’ and the ‘strong’ brother are seeking to please the Lord. ‘He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord . . . and he who abstains does so to the Lord.’ (v 6) Each person is seeking to honour the Lord in their actions even though they go in different directions; their real desire is to please him in everything.

Let your liberty be controlled by love (verses 13–16)

Our attitude towards fellow Christians who have different convictions from ours, is to be marked by consideration and not by condemnation. Paul uses some strong expressions in these verses to highlight the spiritual attitude we are to adopt to our fellow Christian. ‘Stop passing judgment on one another. Instead make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.’ (v 13) ‘Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.’ (v 15) We are encouraged to use our critical faculties, not in a negative way to judge and condemn, but in a positive way to look for opportunities to avoid causing our brother to stumble.

We are called to live under two laws, the law of liberty and the law of love, both of which, again, must be held in balance. I am free to do certain things but at times I will surrender my freedom out of love to my brother. My life must be guided by the overriding principle of love, which will mean that I will think less of my rights and more of my responsibility to my brother.’ If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love.’ (v 15) The application of the law of love does not mean that I cease to be free, but it does mean that I will be saved from using my freedom for my own selfish ends. ‘You brothers were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather serve one another in love.’ (Gal. 5:13)

Paul counsels us to remember 'Christ died for your brother' which is a compelling reason for loving him. It also highlights the supreme sacrifice Christ was willing to make for him in comparison to the small sacrifice I am being asked to make for him. This lifts everything on to a higher plane.

Get your priorities right (verses 17–21)

'For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.' (v 17) Whenever we get drawn into disputes about secondary matters we need to ask the question, 'What really matters?' So much time and energy is dissipated on relatively unimportant issues and the only one who makes any mileage out of these controversies is the enemy who seeks to destroy the work of God.

Major on 'righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (verse 17) 'Righteousness' speaks of being right with God. 'Peace' speaks of being in a right relationship with others. 'Joy in the Holy Spirit' is only experienced when there is nothing in my life to grieve him. The quality of our churches would be transformed if we concentrated on these things rather than the trivial matters we so often argue about.

Concentrate on 'what leads to peace and mutual edification' (verse 19) 'Let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.' We ought to avoid at all costs unnecessary strife and bitterness over those things that are not fundamental to our faith. 'Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.' (2 Tim 2:23)

We will, as Paul says, need to 'make every effort', if we are to major on what 'leads to peace and mutual edification'. It won't be easy or be a natural disposition within us. As Paul wrote in an earlier chapter, 'if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone'. (Rom 12:18) We must take the initiative to reach our estranged brother with whom we may have been at odds, and seek to build him up in his faith in an atmosphere of peace.

Determine not to destroy God's work over secondary issues (verse 20) 'Do not destroy God's work for the sake of food.' How many different words we could insert in that sentence in place of the word

'food'. How many fellowships have been divided and then destroyed not on doctrinal and fundamental issues but on debatable and sometimes trivial matters. Let us be careful not to make an issue of something God's word is not clear on. How tragic to be involved in helping the devil to destroy the work of God.

Keep your convictions on controversial issues private (verse 22a)

'So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.' This is an important statement when considered in the context of disputes over secondary matters. There are times when we don't need to air our views or brandish our liberty. Often a dignified silence is more helpful than unnecessarily upsetting others who have a different viewpoint from us. Don't deliberately provoke others over controversial issues; it isn't worth it. Some seem to take a distorted delight in needling others. Have your own convictions, yes, but at times it will be best to keep them private. The wise preacher in Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is 'a time to speak and a time to be silent'. (Eccl 3:7) If our speaking is going to be helpful, then let us speak, but if we sense our contribution to the debate is going to engender further misunderstanding and hostility then it is best to remain silent.

Keep a clear conscience in everything (verses 20b-23)

The principle in these verses could be summed up in the words, 'If in doubt, don't.'

The '*strong*' brother is advised 'not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall'. If there is a possibility that by flaunting his freedom before a weaker brother the more liberated Christian might lead him away from Christ, then he ought to forgo his freedom and consider his fellow Christian. Paul is quite clear: 'All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.' (v 20b) It would be on his conscience if his actions tripped up another Christian.

The '*weak*' brother is counselled not to change his convictions if it will offend his conscience. 'Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith, and everything that does not come from faith is sin.' (vv 22b-23)

He must only reject his previous scruples under the pressure of personal conviction. He must not change his position because he feels in the minority, or fears he may court ridicule. He must not be influenced by the fact that many others are free to do what he abstains from. If there is still a question mark in his mind he must hold to his present ideals until God shows him differently. If he is in doubt and acts without conviction his conscience which is very tender will feel condemned.

Follow the example of Christ (15:1-4)

True to style, Paul concludes by pointing to the example of Christ. Three things stand out in this paragraph.

'Even Christ did not please Himself' (verse 3)

What an amazing sentence! If anyone had the right to do as he pleased then it was the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet he voluntarily chose to please God and serve others. He was totally free from the taboos and conventions of men and yet equally concerned to bear with the weaknesses of others. He put the will of God first, the needs of others next and his own personal interests last. If he had done otherwise and lived to please himself he would not have given himself to death on a cross—his final and supreme act of self-sacrifice. The whole direction of our lives is to be to God and for others. This is the way of freedom. Christ is our example and inspiration.

We ought 'not to please ourselves' (verse 1)

Instead, we 'ought to bear with the failings of the weak'. (v 1) When Paul speaks of bearing with the failings of the weak, he uses the same word that is used of Christ bearing his cross (*bastazein*) which suggests that we too are called to the path of sacrifice, to surrender our freedom when necessary and to face the cost involved. This cuts right across the desire of our old nature which says, 'you please yourself and don't worry about anybody else'. Paul takes this further in the next phrase and encourages positive action on behalf of our brother.

We 'should please our neighbour for his good, to build him up' (verse 2)

Our actions towards him are to be influenced, not by what he wants but by what we know will be for his ultimate good, which is further

explained by the phrase 'to build him up'. To flaunt our freedom and ignore his sensitive conscience might hurt and hinder him as a Christian, in which case Satan has scored another victory through our selfishness and thoughtlessness. To sacrifice our freedom in order to strengthen and encourage another 'weaker' Christian is the way of blessing and progress. If we ridicule and condemn him for his narrow and limited views we will destroy any possibility of fellowship with him. If, on the other hand, we actively choose to surround him with love and concern, and major on the things that will build him up, we shall not only please him but also edify him.

Aim for unity and the glory of God (15:5-6)

'May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' This surely is our ultimate objective in every fellowship: to enjoy the unity Jesus prayed and died for, and to bring glory to God in everything. Jesus prayed, 'may they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me.' (John 17:23) How God is dishonoured and the Spirit of God grieved by our petty differences and unnecessary divisions. The increasing fragmentation of the church creates confusion amongst Christians and unbelief amongst those outside the church. As Thomas Manton, one of Cromwell's chaplains put it, 'divisions in the church create atheism in the world'.

God will give the 'endurance and encouragement' we need as we 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Eph 4:3). It will require on our part, the need to be 'completely humble and gentle; and to be patient, bearing with one another in love'. (Eph 4:2) If we are to be 'likeminded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose' then we must ensure for our part that we 'do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain deceit, but in humility consider others better than [ourselves].' (Phil 2:2-3)

This does not mean that there will not be differences of opinion amongst us as Christians, nor does it mean that we will not engage in earnest and vigorous debate. It does mean, however, that if we work through and work out the principles Paul enumerates in this passage then we will have solved the problem of Christians living

together where their convictions vary on issues that are not essential to our faith.

We must never forget that the Christ who unites us as members of his body is far greater than all of the secondary differences that threaten to divide us. Our unity is to be found in Christ, not in theological debate in disputable matters of Christian behaviour.

In the midst of all our controversies let us remember and take to heart the motto of Richard Baxter, the Puritan divine, 'in necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity'.

PARTNERSHIP: WHAT DOES IT OFFER?

A Growing Range of Publications

These include: *Christian Brethren Review*; *Occasional Papers*; *Newletters*; *Booklets*. A series of booklets is planned to provide brief treatments of topical issues for general readers.

Seminars in London and Elsewhere

London seminars are held twice a year. Recent topics include prayer (1986), worship (1985), pastoral care (1984) and world mission (1983). A seminar programme normally includes addresses, discussion of case studies in small groups, an open forum and an epilogue.

Regional seminars have been held in Bournemouth, Bristol, Cardiff, Bangor, Birmingham, Martlesham and Northampton. Seminars are planned for other locations. Enquiries are invited from anyone interested in the possibility of arranging a local seminar.

Tape recordings are available of most of the addresses given at seminars.

Surveys

A survey of church growth was undertaken in 1978. An analysis of the results was published by Paternoster Press under the title '*The Brethren Today—A Factual Survey*' (ed. G. Brown and B. Mills).

A survey of resident full-time workers in local churches was conducted in 1984 in preparation for a consultation held in 1985 and the publication of *Servants of God* (Christian Brethren Review No. 37).

Projects

Among the projects already in operation or in preparation are the following: Student ministry; World mission study/action group; Inter-church contacts; International contacts; Information and resource services; Training courses.