

The Gospel Unashamed

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."

A Controversial Newsletter "The Printed Voice of Summit Theological Seminary"

~ All articles are written by Terry Carter unless otherwise stated ~

Vol. 35 No. 1

January 2022

Terry Carter, Editor



Our Professor's Perspective!

WHEN FOLLOWERS OF THE LORD DISAGREE

-- by Jerry Paul

We all have learned one of life's most obvious truths: People do not always see the same thing the same way. Attend any sporting event and you will quickly discover fans, players, coaches and even officials seeing the same play coming to different conclusions about what happened. Many times that disagreement focuses on the meaning and application of the rules. One group believes the rules allow a certain type of action while another group believes they do not. Sometimes, that results in very open and very vocal expressions against each other's beliefs and opinions. Unfortunately, this also happens between followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

THE LORD'S FOLLOWERS SOMETIMES DISAGREE

People within the body of Christ do not always see everything the same way. Yes, we are brothers/sisters in Christ, but our imperfections sometimes result in disagreements between us, including about spiritual matters.

It happened in New Testament times. Paul's epistles clearly indicate that Christians of his day sometimes had

differing opinions about what they considered to be important issues.

The Apostle found it necessary to address this problem with the church at Rome, and in so doing provided important guidelines for addressing disagreements between believers today. We of the 21st century would do well to remember these instructions given by the Apostle Paul in Romans 14.

We note immediately that Paul's instruction regarding these "**disputable matters**" in the body of Christ is not what we would expect.

He does not address the problematic issues. The Apostle does not announce who is right and who is wrong about the issues of conflict. Instead, he addresses the 'disputers' and the way they reacted toward one another. "**Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.**"

Then he describes the problem. "**One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables... One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike.**" (Rom. 14:1-2,5).

It is also interesting to note an important point about the two specific issues Paul calls "**disputable matters**" -- food and days. In fact, elsewhere the Apostle declared one side of the food issue to be right. "**But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do**

not eat, and no better if we do" (1 Cor. 8:8 NIV)

"...no food is unclean in itself" (Rom. 14:14b NIV).

In still another place he also declared one side of the day issue to be wrong when he stated that "**religious festival(s)... New Moon celebration(s) or... Sabbath days**" were all "**a shadow of things that were to come,**" adding, "**The reality...is found in Christ**" (Col. 2:16-17 NIV).

Notice, in spite of these very clear declarations of right and wrong, Paul still calls these "**disputable matters.**" How can this be? How can any issues holding positions already declared to be right or wrong by an Apostle also be called "**disputable matters**" by that very same Apostle? Here we are confronted with a very important fact regarding these statements by Paul. He does not describe these as "**disputable matters**" because of the two issues themselves—food/days. He calls these "**disputable matters**" because of the different levels of spiritual understanding in the believers that brought them to different conclusions, creating disagreements between them.

Why are there different spiritual levels among disciples of Christ? Several explanations and excuses could be given, but the most fundamental truth is that, unlike Christ, we do not have perfect

knowledge or perfect understanding of everything. We are at different stages of spiritual growth. Some are babes in Christ in their spiritual understanding. Some are children/teen-agers in Christ. Some are young adults in Christ. Some understand matters as mature adults in Christ.

As a result of these different spiritual levels, we will sometimes come to different conclusions...even about spiritual matters...and even when a right or wrong position has already been determined in the Word. It is inevitable. Our imperfections combined with our different spiritual levels will sometimes result in **“disputable matters”** even within the body of Christ among people who faithfully study God’s Word.

When that happens, our natural human tendency often leads us to become judgmental with the brother/sister in Christ who takes different positions from what we consider to be right or wrong. Paul addressed this problem directly. **“You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother?” (Rom. 14:10a NIV).**

“Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls” (Rom. 14:3-4a NIV).

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.” (Rom. 14:13a NIV).

“Someone else’s servant” (?). **“His own master”** (?). Yes, because . . .

ONLY JESUS CHRIST IS THE LORD

“There is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live” (1 Cor. 8:6 NIV).

“For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.... ‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee

will bow before me” (Rom. 14:9, 11 NIV).

Why will every knee bow to Jesus? Because He alone is the Lord...not me, not you, nor any other human being. Only Jesus! Therefore, as His committed followers, **“If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (Rom. 14:8b NIV)**

God never made me the owner nor put me in charge of you, your actions, or your opinions. He never made you the owner or put you in charge of me or any other brother/sister in the body of Christ. To the contrary, Paul made very clear that our attitude toward brothers/sisters in Christ is not to be one of superiority. Rather, Paul said, **“in humility consider others better than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3b NIV).**

Anytime we have an attitude or act in such a way that we are putting ourselves over someone else we need to be reminded of the foundational and fundamental truth: **Jesus is the Lord** of everything. Jesus is the Lord of the dead and the living. Jesus is the Lord over me. Jesus is the Lord of every believer around me. Jesus Christ alone is the perfect Lord, and both of us can be acknowledging this even when we are in disagreement on an issue.

“He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.” (Rom. 14:6 NIV)

Here Paul delivers an astounding truth which some find difficult to accept. It is possible for two brothers in Christ to hold opposite positions regarding an issue and both can be honoring and giving thanks to God in doing it - - even when one of them holds a position that is right and one of them holds a position that is wrong. When that happens, Paul says neither one of them is to judge the other because . . . **“To his own**

master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand” (Rom. 14:4b NIV).

“The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.” (Rom. 14:3 NIV).

Believe it or not — you and I, brothers and sisters in Christ, can **both** honor God, praise God, and thank God together, even in our imperfections...even when we disagree...even when one of us is right in our belief and the other is wrong. Furthermore, because of God’s grace He will make **both** of us stand and **both** of us will still be accepted by Him.

RESPONSIBILITIES IN DISAGREEMENT

Paul does not diminish the importance of the issue of disagreement, nor does he allow us to simply shrug our shoulders and walk away. He clearly points out that as brothers/sisters in Christ we have responsibilities to fulfill, even in our disagreement.

WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO GOD

Paul instructs us, **“Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food...” (Rom. 14:20a NIV)**

We need to recognize... the way we handle disagreements can build the Church up in a wonderful way. **But....** because of our imperfections, the way we handle disagreements can also destroy the Church in a terrible way.

Unfortunately, there are some in the Church who carry out their work in a way that is destructive to the work of God and the Lord’s Church. Some are so focused on their own ideas, their own opinions, their own methods, their own egos, that the destruction of the Church is almost inevitable. The traveling evangelist who said to this writer, **“If I haven’t stirred up trouble in the Church**

before I leave, I know I haven't done my job in preaching the gospel," obviously violated Paul's very clear instructions.

Brothers/sisters, take a long and careful look at your attitudes and your methods in handling the disagreements about spiritual matters because you have a responsibility before God to work toward the strengthening of His Church.

Paul plainly told the Corinthian Christians that God does not look kindly on people in the Church who destroy His work or His temple. **"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 (1 Cor. 3:16-17 NIV).**

Understanding the full meaning of this text should lead us to take very seriously everything we say and do in the church of Jesus Christ. None of our opinions or our ideas about what should be done or how it should be done in the church, even when we may be right, are so important that we carelessly destroy God's church so we can be the one who 'comes out on top.' We have a responsibility to God to strengthen His work, **not** undermine it and destroy it with our own self-will or arrogance.

WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO OTHERS IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

Paul cautions us, **"If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died" (Rom. 14:15 NIV).**

Rather, he says, **"Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way" (Rom. 14:13b NIV)**

There is something much more serious than having a brother/sister

disagree with you or argue against you, even when you are right. That is, holding your conviction in such a way that instead of leading that brother/sister closer to Christ you cause them to fall. Jesus said, **"It would be better for (you) to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around (your) neck than for (you) to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves" (Luke 17:2 NIV).**

Nothing causes people to stumble more or destroys the effective witness of the Church and of the Name of Jesus in our strife-filled world than for brothers and sisters-in-Christ to be at war with one another. Real life situations demonstrate this unfortunate fact. One lady, active in the Church her entire life, asked this writer about a new church, **"What caused the split that created this church? Isn't that the way new churches get started?"**

In another community a man attending a congregational meeting walked out declaring, **"Those people really do hate each other."**

A former atheist who had become a follower of Jesus later wrote: **"Today I quit being a Christian. It's simply impossible for me to 'belong' to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group."**

Unfortunately, these internal conflicts are often executed under the battle cry of standing up for the Truth when it is not Truth at all that is being defended, but some **"disputable matter"** or someone's opinion that they have labeled 'truth'.

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

Perhaps Paul was thinking of our Lord's Beatitude (**Matt. 5:9**) when he wrote, **"Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace..."(Rom. 14:19a NIV).**

Before we sound off and 'put down' some brother-in-Christ who has a view about something that is different from ours (even in understanding

spiritual things) we need to pause, take a deep breath, and ask ourselves, "How can I handle this in such a way that it leads to, promotes, and cultivates peace in God's family?"

The rest of Paul's sentence tells us how to do that. **"Do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (Rom. 14:19b NIV).**

Our responsibility is not to knock down, straighten out, or straighten up our brother/sister-in-Christ. Our responsibility is to edify them -- build them up. Elsewhere the Apostle gives instructive guidance that helps accomplish this. **"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen (Eph. 4:29 NIV).**

Paul instructed Timothy that he was to avoid **"foolish and stupid arguments... because... they produce quarrels." (2 Tim 2:23 NIV).**

Instead of quarreling about words that ruin those who listen, Paul told Timothy to gently instruct even those who oppose him **"Keep reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen." (2 Tim. 2:14 NIV).**

A POWERFUL MOTIVATOR

Surprisingly, Paul's conversion experience reveals a powerful motivator for doing everything we can to build up our brothers/sisters-in-Christ... the Church.

When the Lord confronted Saul (Paul) on the road to Damascus He asked a question: **"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4 NIV).**

Paul might have responded, **"What do you mean, 'persecute You'? I'm not persecuting You. I persecute Jewish people who talk about You**

and live for You. I persecute this thing called 'the Church' but I don't persecute You."

And Jesus might have then responded to Saul, "*Listen, Saul, and listen closely. Now that I'm no longer down there the Church is My body in the world. So, when you persecute the Church, when you persecute a believer, you are persecuting Me.*"

In the same way the Lord might say to us, "Look at that brother/sister-in-Christ with whom you have a disagreement. Look at that brother/sister who thinks differently than you about a disputable matter. Look at that brother/sister whose opinion on a matter is different than yours. When you stand in judgment over them, when you put them down, when you tell them off, you are standing in judgment over **Me**...you are putting **Me** down...you are telling **Me** off, because that brother/sister is part of **My** body and whatever you do to them you are doing to **Me** and **My** body."

A FINAL POWERFUL MOTIVATOR

If knowing that our action is not just against a brother/sister-in-Christ but also an action against the Lord Himself does not help us in handling disagreements in the Body, perhaps we need to remember one more very important truth found in **Romans 14**.

"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. It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'" So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:10-12 NIV).

We need to remember our personal accountability to God. And because we are accountable to God, we need to . . .

BE CERTAIN ABOUT WHAT WE BELIEVE

Even when ***"One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers***

every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind (Rom. 14:5 NIV).

We should not believe something because it is what we have always been taught or because our favorite preacher says, "This is the way it is."

Rather, we should be certain our beliefs are, in fact... our beliefs. In addition, we should know the whys and the wherefores of what we believe. Let us make sure our faith and our convictions are indeed, our own.

In this certainty, also be sure to be like the Apostle Paul who said, ***"I know whom I have believed"*** (2 Tim. 1:12b NIV).

If we only know the 'what' of our beliefs but leave out the 'Who', we will turn what we believe into rules and regulations for everyone else to follow. That will lead into those ***"stupid and foolish arguments"*** and the ***"godless chatter"*** which Paul warned against.

If we ignore the Apostle's example and instruction, we may become more concerned about getting people to agree with what we believe than in maintaining unity within the body of Christ.

LIVE A LIFE THAT IS CONSISTENT WITH WHAT I BELIEVE

Recognizing our accountability to God should also make us open to Paul's guidance about the relationship of our convictions with our lifestyle. ***"But if people have doubts about whether they should eat something, they shouldn't eat it. They would be condemned for not acting in faith before God. If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning."*** (Rom. 14:23 NLT).

Sometimes we get so focused on making sure our brothers/sisters-in-Christ live according to our beliefs that we forget to make sure our own life is consistent with what we believe. In such a moment we

should ask ourselves, "Is my whole life in step with the position I am taking regarding this matter?"

Nothing is more challenging in life than being consistent, especially in the realm of our spiritual convictions and practices.

Before 'taking on' the brother/sister with whom we disagree it is wise to step back and look at ourselves. Are the beliefs we defend consistently lived out in our daily lives?

ABOVE ALL, FOCUS ON PLEASING GOD

In the final analysis there is only one thing that makes a difference about everything; what does God think?

You may get every person you ever meet to accept every opinion you have, to agree with every issue you put before them, but if, in the final analysis, you aren't pleasing to God then all your so-called 'success' is really a complete failure.

So, brother/sister, be sure you spend more energy and more time focusing on pleasing God than you do in straightening out everyone around you who does not measure up to what you think they ought to be and believe.

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, (not of "disputable matters") but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men" (Rom. 14:17-18 NIV).



Jerry Paul is former President of Great Lakes Christian College and current professor at Summit Theological Seminary.