

Reformation
& Revival



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 5, Number 4 • Fall 1996

It is the unhappy lot of any man who cares a fig for truth to be called on to engage in controversy. He may embrace it as a purse of gold or despise it as a putrefying sore, but he can no more escape it than he can escape the atmosphere or the common cold. In a fallen world, truth and controversy are bedfellows.

It is true: we cannot make progress by controversy alone. Real progress toward unity is the work of God. This is also true, however: We are unlikely to make progress without controversy. All Scripture bears this out, not least when it couples the sovereignty of God with the use of means in the highest interests of the soul. We do not simply hope for the day in which all will be absolutely in one accord. No, we seek *by means* to bring “every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5).

A man may spend valuable time bemoaning that fact, but what is needed is a way to come to terms with it as a godly man, a way to carry on controversy with a minimum amount of damage to his opponent and to the interested bystander and the maximum amount of good to the cause of God and truth.

But how to do it?—that’s the question. How shall we carry on the controversies that have been laid upon us by the providence of God? Let me propose a few rules for guidance in the minefield of vigorous controversy, especially among those who with us profess faith in our Lord Jesus.

Show Respect for the Persons with Whom You Differ

In an article titled, “The Scope and Center of Old Testament Theology and Hope,” Kenneth Barker lays down a number of points that are crucial to his theme. For example, as his fifth point he writes, “To say that the Old Testament is the testament of law but the New Testament is the testament of grace is a false dichotomy.” Both his stated subject and

this fifth point show that his interest is biblical and theological. The surprising thing, however, is his first point in this biblical and theological discussion. Here Barker writes:

Dispensational premillennialists and amillennial, covenant theologians of orthodox persuasion should treat each other more like brothers in Christ and less like adversaries or even heretics.¹

Clearly this plea by Barker is off the subject—or is it? The very fact that he thought it needed saying as a major point in a biblical and theological discussion is a sad commentary on the state of controversy among evangelicals in the late twentieth century.² If we respect the persons of even those who have committed capital crimes as they await execution because they are men made in the image of God,³ how much more must we respect the persons of those who oppose us from within the Christian camp? We are commanded to love those who belong to Christ. Can we then treat them with less than fullest consideration?

Give Your Opponent Accurate Definitions of Your Key Ideas

Nearly everyone has made the observation that controversy often is rooted in misunderstanding. This conviction grows with maturity as we experience how difficult the art of communication really is. To say what you mean and to hear what the other person means are often beyond our capacities. We are finite creatures; worse, we are sinful creatures. Both of these facts work against our making ourselves clear. Our finitude makes it difficult for us to clearly grasp our own ideas, so as to define them accurately. Our sinfulness adds to the difficulty by making us impatient with those who “pretend” not to understand us. Yet definition is vital. As Bishop J.C. Ryle wrote:

It may be laid down as a rule, with tolerable confidence, that the absence of accurate definitions is the very life of religious controversy. If men would only define with precision the theological terms which they use, many disputes would die.⁴

Can we doubt that he was right?

When in Doubt, Put an Orthodox Construction on Your Opponent's Words

With the best will in the world, this will not always be possible. The critical words here are “when in doubt.” Another widespread observation is as follows: if you think about what another has said, you may often realize that it is not objectionable after all. To put it another way, our first impressions of others’ language, like our first impression of others’ persons, is often inaccurate. Some examples may help.

Would you subscribe to the statement, “The Bible *contains* the word of God”? Evangelicals who might otherwise use that language have generally abandoned it. Why? Because to many who hear it, it asserts an old liberal thesis: the Bible contains the word of God along with a larger or smaller mixture of human error. Yet the statement is unobjectionable when understood in another way: the Bible contains the word of God without remainder. Those of us who believe in inerrancy could raise no reasonable objection to that.

Or how about this statement, “Jesus Christ was a man.” Taken in a certain context this might mean, “Jesus Christ was a man and nothing more or less.” No Christian theologian could countenance such an understanding for a moment. Jesus Christ is the God-man, truly and fully human, yet truly and fully divine in the profoundest sense. In a context, however, that demanded a statement of the full humanity of

Christ, “Jesus Christ was a man,” is the proper assertion without any stated qualification whatever.

Never Attribute to Your Opponent More Than He Asserts

It is so easy, because we think we see where his statement is bound to take him, to decide that he has already come to these apparently logical conclusions. You know the kind of thing we say: “If he believes “A,” then he must believe “B” and “C” also.” But we must sternly discipline ourselves to avoid drawing conclusions about what our opponent *must* believe. This point has been put forcefully by Andrew Fuller, the nineteenth-century Baptist theologian:

[P]rinciples and their consequences are so suddenly associated in the mind, that when we hear a person avow the former, we can scarcely forbear immediately attributing to him the latter. If a principle be proposed to us *for acceptance*, it is right to weigh the consequences; but when forming our judgment of the person who holds it, we should attach nothing to him but what he perceives and avows.⁵

In my judgment, we have done an enormous amount of injustice to others by failing to keep this in mind.

It is far better to react as Jonathan Edwards did in writing about the book of a certain “Mr. W.”

[W]hen I take notice of these things in his book, my aim is not to beget in you an ill opinion of Mr. W as though he were as corrupt in his settled persuasion, as one would be ready to think . . . if it should be supposed, that he embraced all the *consequences* of what he here maintains. Men often do not see or allow the plain consequences of their own doctrines. And therefore, though I charge very pernicious consequences on some *things* he says, yet I do not charge *him* with embracing these consequences . . .⁶

Both logic and love dictate this kind of response from us.

Suspect a Man’s Judgment Before You Suspect His Sincerity

The reason for this is clear. To have unclear judgment is an intellectual problem to which no guilt necessarily attaches (though it may). But to distrust someone’s sincerity is to strike at the heart of his moral character. Yet nothing is more common in controversy than for opponents to disparage each other’s integrity. This is a sin against charity at the very least, unless the grounds upon which it is done are beyond question.

It is no small thing, of course, to throw doubt on a man’s ability to reason—it should never be done lightly. But that is often what honest controversy is about. Our errors of logic are frequent and “very pernicious,” to borrow Jonathan Edwards’s phrase in the quotation above. We do one another a loving service when we are able to point out such fallacies.

Be Ready to Believe That the Truth Is Larger Than You Have Understood It to Be

Like many men, I abounded in self-confidence when I was young. For me everything was, as we like to say, “black or white.” To admit that some areas might be *gray* seemed to be a betrayal of truth. After all, if “A” was true, then its opposite, “B,” was bound to be false, and that was that!

No, I have not abandoned the logic of the previous sentence; it is irrational to do so. Unlike some of my contemporaries I have no desire to defend irrationalism.

But I would like to defend modesty, not simply as a grace in itself but as a means of learning also.

Somewhere years ago I ran across the following statement: “You are more likely to be right in what you assert than in what you deny.” Statistically I don’t know whether the

author of that statement was right or wrong, but eventually it opened up a new world to my pinched powers of reason. It brought me to the conviction that heads this section. The truth on any subject is likely to be larger than I had imagined it could be.

The determination not to learn from others often accompanies the certainty that we are right. That is unfortunate; one might almost say insidious. Take the matter of the natures of the Lord Jesus. To say "Jesus is man," suggests to almost any biblically uninformed mind that Jesus is *not* God. Nor is that impulse entirely evil. To say "Tom Wells is man," leads to the same impulse. It is predicated on the idea, which proves to be false in one case only, that man and God are two entirely distinct categories. Man is one thing, a created thing, and God is another, the Creator, in fact.

This, of course, is just an illustration, though true in itself. I have chosen it because it is not likely to be denied by Christians, but the obvious supernatural quality of the person of Jesus Christ is unlike the kinds of truths that we are likely to find when keeping my maxim in mind. So let us take another example.

I belong to a small, doctrinally precise movement within Reformed circles. *We have the truth.* The preceding sentence is written only partially tongue-in-cheek; it is our honest conviction. More than that, when looked at as a system, this truth sets us apart from most evangelicals. It has some hard edges and sharp corners that are not acceptable to the evangelical culture. Nevertheless we are not prepared to give them up.

This would seem to mean that other evangelicals need us desperately, given the divergence of our views, but we do not have much need of them. We're right; they're wrong.

This analysis, however, runs into a serious problem with Scripture. The problem is not that they're right and we're wrong. Even if that were true (which, of course, it can't be!)

that would only put the shoe on the other foot, not really changing the situation, but only changing the players. No, the problem is much bigger than that.

The problem is this: The Scripture teaches that every Christian needs every other Christian, and it is not right to minimize and marginalize that need. We need one another because that is the way the Holy Spirit has "constructed" the body of Christ. Paul is adamant about this.

But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary . . . (1 Cor. 12:20-22).

In the quotation above I have simply sampled what Paul has to say on this subject, but I selected enough to show two vital truths. First, every Christian needs every other; second, effort to confine that need to relatively unimportant matters is impossible.⁷

Let us see if we can make this concrete by trying to lay out two opposite positions on the spectrum of genuine faith in Christ. For the sake of illustration we will put my own position, Calvinistic Baptist, over against the Pentecostal position. Since we vary on a large number of issues, it is easy for me to see how they need people of my persuasion, but it is hard to see what we need from them. (And they, no doubt, have the same problem!) What shall we do?

There is one easy solution. I can write them off by saying they are not Christians. (You may have noticed that I begged an important question in the last paragraph when I spoke of "genuine faith in Christ." How do I know that their faith is "genuine?") I have friends who have taken this path.⁸

But there is another possibility, the possibility that they have things to teach me or comfort to give me or rebuke to

bring to me that I cannot yet envision. In other words, the truth connected with faith in Jesus Christ may be larger and more wonderful than I (and they) have ever imagined. To try to illustrate what "I have never imagined" is, of course, beyond me. I must be content to see how this works out in the providence of God, and I feel certain that it will.

Some Conclusions

First, some conclusions that we must not draw:

1) We must not conclude that in order to be ethical in conducting controversy we have to recognize men as Christians when they fail the biblical tests of Christianity. As Donald Carson has written (applying to our contemporary scene a truth earlier espoused by J. Gresham Machen),

At some point one must face the fact that the kinds of disavowals and denials one finds in many branches of classic liberalism, and repeated by the major proponents of religious pluralism, are much deeper even than the chasms between, say, Russian Orthodoxy and American Pentecostalism, or between Roman Catholicism and classic evangelicalism; we are dealing with "different religions," in the strongest sense of that expression.⁹

2) We must not conclude that it is wrong to press the points on which we feel confident. To adopt this position would be to paralyze all discussion. It would stop us from loving others and seeking their good by correcting them where they need correction. And incidentally, but viciously, if others adopted the same position toward us we would lose the help their criticism offers. As Andrew Fuller has written,

If we wish to know the truth, we must read those who think differently from us, who, whether they be impartial towards us or not, will be much more likely to detect our faults than

we are to detect them ourselves.¹⁰

On the contrary we must contend for what we hold to be truth.

[T]o proceed with a healthy doubt about one's own moral rightness only means treating one's opponents with respect and granting the possibility of error. It does not mean refraining from action. The legal scholar Michael Perry, himself a Roman Catholic, has put the point nicely: "Although we must resist infallibilism . . . at any given moment our convictions are what they are."¹¹

If we do not act on such convictions, how will truth make its way in this world?

3) Closely related to the two previous points, we must not conclude that it is wrong to vigorously denounce critical error. The example of our Lord Jesus and the apostles shows this plainly. Though they spoke by inspiration and we do not, yet passionate regard for truth will move us to speak and write with a zeal commensurate with the importance of the error with which we are dealing *after* we have exhausted all avenues that might show that we have misunderstood what has been said. We must never forget: some errors are damning.

Let me add some positive conclusions:

1) Given the importance of controversy we must not avoid it out of cowardice. No one likes to lose friends or be scorned unnecessarily, but there is only one person who commands our absolute allegiance: God, as He has revealed Himself in His written and personal Word. Faithfulness to Him has always occasioned controversy and it always will.

2) Controversy is to be done as gently and compassionately as is consistent with zeal for the truth. In the words of J.I. Packer:

There are good and bad ways of fulfilling the ministry of criticism among Christians. This ministry is important, for all who seek truth and wisdom take up from time to time with wrong ideas and need correction. But discussion and debate ordinarily achieve more than gestures of denunciation. To think of sustained denunciation as the essence of faithful witness . . . is very wrong. Denouncing error has its place, but since it easily appears arrogant and generates much unfruitful unhappiness, anyone who feels drawn to it should take a lot of advice before yielding to the urge.¹²

Donald Carson has made the same point in speaking of Francis Schaeffer.

One of the reasons for Francis Schaeffer's influence was his ability to present his analysis of the culture with a tear in his eye. Whether or not one agrees at every point with his analysis, and regardless of how severe his judgments were, one could not responsibly doubt his compassion, his genuine love for men and women. Too many of his would-be successors simply sound like angry people. Our times call for Christian leaders who will articulate the truth boldly, courageously, humbly, knowledgeably, in a contemporary fashion—and with profound compassion. One cannot imagine how the kind of gospel set forth in the Bible could be effectively communicated in any other way. . . . [We] serve the One who, on seeing large crowds, "had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34; cf. Matt. 9:36).¹³

If these words describe accurately, as they do, the gentleness and compassion that we must use toward those who do not know our Savior, how much more must we adopt such attitudes toward brothers and sisters in Christ?

I found the following admonition strikingly set out as poetry.

Controversy in religion is a hateful thing.
It is hard enough to fight the devil,
the world, and the flesh,
without private differences in our own camp—
But there is one thing
which is even worse than controversy,
and that is false doctrine tolerated,
allowed, and permitted without
protest or molestation . . .
Three things there are which men
never ought to trifle with:
a little poison,
a little false doctrine,
and a little sin.¹⁴

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Endnotes

- 1 The Article appears in Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 293-328. The quotations above are taken respectively from pp. 295 and 294.
- 2 This is not in the least to deny that real progress has been made over the centuries in the conduct of controversy. We shake our heads over the tone of argument in the writings of many of the men of the past whom we highly value on other grounds.
- 3 See the interesting illustration of General George Washington and Major Andre cited by Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological* (London:

- Banner of Truth, 1967), 1:285-86.
- 4 J. C. Ryle, *Knots Untied* (London: Jas. Clarke & Co., 31st ed., 1954).
 - 5 *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* (London: Henry Bohn, 1859), 317. The italics are in the original.
 - 6 *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:529. The italics are in the original.
 - 7 I am unpersuaded by efforts to confine this truth to members within a single local church, as some have tried to do. It seems clear to me that Paul's words in 12:12-13 show that he has the universal church in view.
 - 8 It is clear to me that some parts of the tradition that Pentecostalism represents have, in fact, veered too far from the truth to be considered Christian. (Perhaps they would return the compliment.) But the illustration does not require that every Pentecostal and every Calvinistic Baptist be a true believer. It would be just as true even if both sides proved to be mainly unbelieving.
 - 9 D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 360. This comment is part of a chapter titled "On Drawing Lines When Drawing Lines Is Rude." The entire chapter is worthy of study. Among other things see the discussion of the book, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, 358-60.
 - 10 Op. cit., 841.
 - 11 Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 76.
 - 12 This is taken from an article titled "Packer the Picketed Pariah" in *Christianity Today*, 37:1:11.
 - 13 D. A. Carson, op. cit., 439-40.
 - 14 The words are taken from an unidentified work of J. C. Ryle. I found them in the magazine, *Reformed Theonomy*, 1:2:4.