

The Will of God And Questionable Issues

Types of Questionable Issues

As we look at the general scene of Christendom today, we see that there are many things over which God's people are divided. There are some things over which we must divide. We are told to divide ourselves from those who hold, teach and practice false doctrine (Rom.16:17). On the other hand, there are things over which we are instructed to *not* divide. These issues are issues concerning which we have no clear Biblical instruction. Thus, we call these issues questionable issues.

As we consider these questionable issues, we find that there are three basic types of questionable issues. Those types are: Things commanded or prohibited under the law, Things associated with idolatrous worship, and Things that have been established by traditions of man.

Things Commanded or Prohibited Under The Law

The first questionable issues we shall look at are the things that are either commanded or prohibited under the law.

Rom 14:1-3

14:1 Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.

2 For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs.

3 Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him.

KJV

1 Tim 4:1-3

4:1 Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;

2 Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron;

3 Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.

KJV

Lev 11:1-8

11:1 And the LORD spake unto Moses and to Aaron, saying unto them,

2 Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, These are the beasts which ye shall eat among all the beasts that are on the earth.

3 Whatsoever parteth the hoof, and is clovenfooted, and cheweth the cud, among the beasts, that shall ye eat.

4 Nevertheless these shall ye not eat of them that chew the cud, or of them that divide the hoof: as the camel, because he cheweth the cud, but divideth not the hoof; he is unclean unto you.

5 And the coney, because he cheweth the cud, but divideth not the hoof; he is unclean unto you.

6 And the hare, because he cheweth the cud, but divideth not the hoof; he is unclean unto you.

7 And the swine, though he divide the hoof, and be clovenfooted, yet he cheweth not the cud; he is unclean to you.

8 Of their flesh shall ye not eat, and their carcase shall ye not touch; they are unclean to you.

KJV

The above issues are issues concerning which the law had spoken. Today, we are not under the law, but under grace (See Rom.6:14). While the moral law is established by the gospel (See Rom.3:24-31), Jesus has fulfilled the ceremonial law (Col.2:16,17). This means that we are not to be judged concerning the things that were commanded or prohibited under the ceremonial law. (See Col.2:16) Yet, these things have a tendency to divide, at times.

These sorts of divisions are sometimes the result of people who are weak and have weak consciences (See Rom.14:1,2,14;1Cor.8:1-13). These people may sometimes be contentious about the things that trouble their weak conscience. The issues are issues that they feel will hinder them and their standing with God. They also feel that these things aren't right for *anyone* to do. For this reason, they abstain from eating certain things. These issues can become the cause of great division if not approached wisely, and Biblically. It is fine for a person to have these convictions for himself, if he pleases. It is when one attempts to impose these convictions upon others that the issue becomes divisive.

At other times, these divisions are the work of those who are not truly the Lord's servants (1Tim.4:1-5). These issues are used to divide the work of God. Satan loves to see God's people biting and devouring one another (Gal.5:13-17). When issues such as this are preached and taught as being commands of God, that teaching is heresy. So says the scripture (1Tim.4:1-5). Let us be careful that we not add anything to God's word. *Prov 30:6 Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar.*

KJV. It is a grave thing to put words into the mouth of God. To say that God has spoken when he has not spoken is heresy. Thus, we walk a fine line when we begin to make rules and regulations concerning conduct and seek to apply these rules to the lives of others. We must be careful as we handle God's word.

Things Associated With Idolatry

The next thing we notice as being a questionable issue is, that which is associated with idolatry.

1 Cor 8:1-13

8:1 Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.

2 And if any man think that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.

3 But if any man love God, the same is known of him.

4 As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one.

5 For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,)

6 But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.

7 Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.

8 But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse.

9 But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak.

10 For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols;

11 And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?

12 But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.

13 Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.

KJV

1 Cor 10:23-33

23 All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.

24 Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth.

25 Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no question for conscience sake:

26 For the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof.

27 If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake.

28 But if any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake: for the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof:

29 Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other: for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?

30 For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks?

31 Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.

32 Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God:

33 Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.

KJV

Of all the things that are questionable, this writer supposes that this is the one he would understand the most as being divisive. It is not a wise thing to confuse people by partaking of things which are associated with idolatry.

The problem in the days of the early church was, that people were often converted from idolatry. Being new converts, their consciences were often weak. Often people would go to the market and buy meat there that had been used in the worship of idols. Although a person could do that and it not be a sin, many of the weaker brethren felt it was wrong. Their consciences were weak and they could not bear the idea of a Christian eating something that had been offered in sacrifice to idols. They felt it was approving of idolatry. Paul stated that, for the child of God who had knowledge, this was no problem, because an idol is nothing (See 1Cor.8:1-6). Paul stated, however, that there were those who were conscious that the meat had been offered in sacrifice to idols, and were thus grieved by it. These things could very well have caused much division in the churches. It would be very much like an art loving Baptist putting a Madonna/Child statue in their front yard. Immediately there would be some who would be offended due to the fact that they felt the person who did that was committing Mariolatry. It is easily seen that this could be a large problem. While we shall wait until later to examine how we should respond to issues such as this, let us at least remember the exhortation to “*abstain from all appearance of evil.*” (1Thess.5:22)

Human Traditions

Finally, we see that another thing that is questionable and causes division is human tradition.

Matt 15:7-9

7 Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying,

8 This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me.

*9 But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.
KJV*

Matt 23:16-23

16 Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor!

17 Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold?

18 And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty.

19 Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?

20 Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon.

21 And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein.

22 And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon.

*23 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.
KJV*

1 Tim 4:1-3

4:1 Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;

2 Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron;

3 Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.

KJV

The Jewish people, and especially the Pharisees, had many traditions. These traditions were often elevated to the level of law and were considered binding. Jesus stated that there were some who “*sit in Moses’ seat.*” (Mt.23:2) This meant that they sought to make rules, regulations, and laws by which the conduct of the people would be governed. They made rules that, in their minds, were as important as the Ten Commandments. Yet these rules were the traditions of men. An example of these sorts of rules follows. *Mark 7:5-13*

5 Then the Pharisees and scribes asked him, Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashen hands?

6 He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

7 Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

8 For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do.

9 And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.

10 For Moses said, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death:

11 But ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; he shall be free.

12 And ye suffer him no more to do ought for his father or his mother;

13 Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye.

KJV

It is obvious from reading this that the tradition of man had actually been established as being not only as important as the commands of God, but as being *more important* than the commands of God.

Today, we have some of the same sorts of problems in churches. Some would make rules and regulations about whether or not it is right to attend sporting events such as baseball games, football games, or basketball games. Others make rules that say that churches cannot build buildings in which to have meals and times of fellowship. The list could go on and on. The real issue is that these things are not mentioned in the scriptures. Many people seek to take the tradition that has been around for years and make it into a law. When we do so we make a grave mistake, because we have no right to infringe upon the liberty of our brethren.

One of the greatest dangers of this defense of human traditions that we see is the fact that it tends to divide good people. It tends to cause bitterness, anger, and wrath between brethren. Sometimes life long friendships are severely damaged because of these things. Another danger is that we transgress our own doctrine of the sufficiency and primacy of scripture as our only rule of faith and practice. Why? There are two reasons for this. If scripture is used in defense of the tradition, it is carelessly used and taken out of context. We also see that scripture is seldom used to defend the tradition. This is very sad. We should be people of the Word, instead of people of tradition. Another grave danger is the fact that many of our good young people are leaving churches that are sound in doctrine and going into other denominations where they have a little more freedom. I suppose the greatest of all dangers is the fact that people see such divisions among God's people and, for one reason or another, decide that Christianity is not for them. How sad that our actions and beliefs often hinder people and cause them to reject Christ. The offense of the cross is great. Let us not add to it by being offensive in word and deed. Let us not elevate human tradition above the word of God.

The Will of God And Questionable Issues

Part Two

We previously discussed the will of God and questionable issues and sought to clarify what these issues were. It will now be our attempt to examine some of the responses we can expect our weaker brethren to have when faced with these sorts of issues. There are two basic responses that the weaker brethren will have when faced with issues that are what we call "questionable issues."

The Rejection And Exclusion of The Brethren

The first of these two types of responses is the response of rejecting and excluding the brethren who exercise their liberty

concerning questionable issues. Paul's statements to the Roman church leads us to understand that the people were rejecting, despising and excluding their brethren because of these issues. *"Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him."* (Rom.14:3) *"But why dost thou judge thy brother? for why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ."* (Rom.14:10) While we cannot go so far as to affirm that the differing factions actually formally withdrew fellowship from one another, we can at least see that they judged, or condemned one another. They did not only condemn and action, but they condemned the ones who acted. The reactions went beyond issues and entered into personalities. They despised, rejected, and condemned their brethren who disagreed with them. One thing we must note is that people on both sides of the issues did this.

The form that this rejection takes can be overt or subtle. It can appear as a simple "cold shoulder", or it can be open criticism and rebuke. This rejection can be seen in who is called upon to lead a song or to lead in prayer. It can be seen in who is accepted or rejected as qualified to preach the gospel. This rejection can be seen in who is deemed spiritual and who is deemed carnal. Sometimes it is seen in an extremely judgmental attitude that declares one saved or lost on the basis of whether they do or do not take part in these "questionable issues" which are actually issues of Christian liberty.

The conduct of Peter and others at Antioch is also something that is seen as a response of weaker brethren. "But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation. But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?" (Gal.2:11-14) There are times that the weaker brethren will remove themselves from the company of those with whom they disagree. While we appreciate anyone who has the strength to be firm in their convictions, we must contend that the manifestation of the grace of God is much more important than maintaining customs and opposing things that are issues of Christian liberty. Paul stated that he lived his life trusting Christ to make him right with God. He refused be caught up in the

performance trap. Neither did he allow others to pressure him into acting in a way that would appear to be condemning people who had trusted Christ. Sadly, today we see many who refuse to fellowship and associate with good, godly brothers and sisters in Christ, and that because of issues that are questionable issues and not issues of doctrine or morals.

Another way that people are rejected and excluded is by becoming the subject of negative conversations. Paul asked a question about the eating of meats and said, *"For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks?" (1Cor.10:30)* It is so very troubling to see people who declare themselves to be "strong in the Lord" mock, ridicule, and slander their Christian brethren over issues of Christian liberty. In reality, this response is the response of a weaker brother. We must not become embittered toward anyone who acts in this manner, but we should pray for them.

Compromising One's Conscience

The other response that we see to these questionable issues is when one compromises his/her conscience. If a person forms convictions about issues of Christian liberty, he should live by his convictions. Though he should not impose those convictions upon others, he should live up to his own convictions. Paul stated that *"I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean."* (Rom.14:14) A person who forms a conviction about a matter should not violate his/her conscience. Unfortunately, the weaker brethren may violate their conscience and do that which they feel is wrong. If they do, for them it is wrong because they have, in their hearts, gone against God. One cannot violate sincerely held convictions and not sin against God. We do not speak of every sincere conviction such as moral and doctrinal convictions as being of this nature, but we speak of convictions about issues of Christian liberty. We know that God has taught us right from wrong in matters of morals and doctrines. He has, however, left it to us to decide for ourselves about issues of Christian liberty, or "questionable issues." While the Bible is silent, and has left it open to our discretion, as to whether one should or should not eat in a fellowship hall, a person who believes it is wrong to do so, and then eats in one has violated his conscience and has sinned in so doing. Stand by your convictions, but stand graciously. *"Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin."* (Rom.14:22,23) If a person believes that to take part in a certain

questionable issue would cause him to harm his fellowship with God he must not compromise his conviction. If one cannot take part in something with the faith that God will still love and accept him, to take part would be sin because it is not an act of faith in God. *"For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ."* (1Cor. 8:10-12) When one violates his conscience, he has sinned. Sometimes people "go along to get along." When they do so, they have sinned. One is obligated to form one's own opinions and convictions about issues of Christian liberty. Then, one is obligated to live according to those convictions.

Conclusion

While we shall study later about how we should conduct ourselves one to another when we have differences about these "questionable issues," let us remember to heed the admonition of Paul the Apostle: *"Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him."* (Rom.10:3) Let us neither judge, exclude, nor reject those who differ with us concerning issues of Christian liberty. We should rather accept one another, because God has accepted us. That is the way to live graciously. That is the way to hold our convictions and not compromise with what we feel to be wrong. Do not take part in that to which one is opposed, but love the ones who do take part. God is gracious and we must be gracious also.

The Will of God And Questionable Issues Pt.3

The Essential Issue (The Glory of God)

As we look back on our study concerning questionable issues, it is obvious that there are things which deeply divide God's people. Many of these things are things which are issues of Christian liberty. Often these things are very distracting and cause much confusion. Many times people who are good people with good intentions sin and separate from their faithful brethren over these sorts of issues. It is the contention of this writer that we must remember that, while we have issues which are important to us, there is one issue that is essential to the Christian life. That issue is

the glory of God.

The scriptures tell us that God made man for His glory. *“I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him.” (Isa. 43:7) “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.” (Rom. 11:36)* Many other passages of scripture could be given to illustrate this point. It is the point of this article to simply remind us what is most important thing on which we should focus our ministries and our energies in this life. That most important thing is the glory of God. God must be manifest in our lives. We are told to let our lights shine before men that they may see our good works and glorify God (see Mt.5:13-16). We are also instructed that we should live our lives in such a manner that, when men inspect our lives and behold our good works, they would give God glory in the day He visits them (see 1Pet. 2:11,12) God intends for us to give Him glory in our lives.

Not only did God create us for His glory and command that we live for His glory, but the glory of God is the motive of God’s work in our salvation. We are told that we are saved and accepted in Christ *“to the praise of the glory of His grace.” (Eph. 1:6)* We are also told that Jesus came to bring *“many sons to glory.” (Heb. 2:10)* The scriptures are filled with instances where God tells us that He saves us that He might receive glory for being merciful and gracious to us.

As we think upon our duty to glorify God, it is imperative that we also understand that God is very jealous of His glory. God is due glory: *“Give unto the LORD, O ye mighty, give unto the LORD glory and strength. Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.” (Ps. 29:1,2)* When we consider that the things which are important to us signify where our hearts are (see Mt. 6:21), and that covetousness is idolatry, (see Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5) we know that it is very easy for *anything* to become idolatrous. Why? Simply because it is easy for us to allow things to become more desirable and important to us than Christ. Not only can statues be idols, but material things can be idols, too. Ideas and principles can become idols if we are not careful. We can emphasize principles and ideals as well as our means of practicing (or not practicing) questionable issues to the point that we neglect to honor Christ. While we do not intend to do so, it is really very easy to lose sight of the most important thing in the world; the glory of God. God is very jealous of His glory. *“The LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.” (Ex. 34:14) “For the LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God.” (Deut. 4:24) “I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.” (Isa. 42:8)* This writer asks all his Christian brethren to

beware of the idolatrous practice of placing principles concerning these questionable issues above the person of Christ. God's glory in our lives is more important than insuring that everyone utters our particular "Shibboleth."

This important truth is well stated in Romans chapter fourteen. Consider the following verses: *"He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks. For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living. But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God."* (Rom. 14:6-12) *"For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."* (Rom. 14:17) The inspired apostle contended that, while exercising their liberties in the way they approached these questionable issues, each was seeking to give glory to God. The man who regarded a special day did so because he desired to honor God. Another man considered every day as a special day in which he was to live for God. Each man sought to live for the glory of God. Thus Paul instructed them to not allow these issues to divide them, as they were all seeking to honor God. We also see that some ate meat and gave God thanks for the meat. In so doing they gave God the glory. Another did not eat meat, and gave God thanks for the food he did eat. In doing so, he gave glory to God as well as the other man. While approaching issues of Christian liberty in two very different ways, these brethren are both found to be giving God glory. The way the brethren practiced the questionable issue didn't matter as much as the spirit in which they practiced it. How well we would do to understand this critical point!

We can do good things in the wrong way and not give God glory. We can have opinions concerning how to conduct ourselves in relation to the matters of Christian liberty and yet fail to give God glory. What we *must* do is seek to please God and manifest His character in all that we do. *Attitude* does make a difference. Our worship can actually become empty and useless if we emphasize the doing over the glory of God. We can make our opinions concerning questionable issues of Christian liberty into doctrines that divide. We can give lip service and outward worship

with our hearts far from God, if we are not careful. (See Mt. 15:7-9) How sad it is to the heart of this writer to see people he loves divided over issues that are largely matters of opinion and interpretation and not matters of fundamental importance. May God help us to give Him the glory by loving our brethren even when we disagree about issues of Christian liberty.

Finally, we find that the judgment is about the glory of God. That is why Paul tells us we are not to judge one another. Judgment is the divine prerogative; it is not ours to employ against our brethren. *"For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall*

bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God." (Rom. 14:11,12) Judgment is about God being acknowledged as all glorious and worthy of all our praise. How sorely do we mis-step when we condemn and criticize our brethren who exercise their Christian liberty in ways that differ from our opinions of how things should be done. Judgment belongs to God alone. We obscure the manifestation of the glory of God when we so judge our brethren. We also steal from God the glory that is His alone when we judge our brethren. The question is asked: *"Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand."* (Rom. 14:4)

When we judge our brethren we usurp the authority of God, and thus attempt to take His glory for our own selfish ends. Judgment is about the glory of God and is part of His glorious character. *"Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way."* (Rom. 14:13) Our Christian duty is to love our brethren and to seek

to edify them. *"Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved."* (1Cor. 10:31-33) May God help us to remember that our purpose in life is to give God glory by manifesting His character above all other things. While each person is free to have opinions and convictions concerning issues of Christian liberty, we all have a sacred obligation to seek to glorify God and respect those who differ with us in the way they seek to glorify God in their exercise of Christian liberty.

The Will of God And Questionable Issues **(How to disagree in a Christian manner)**

General Guidelines for Christian Disagreements

As we look at the issues which often divide us we must ask ourselves what the true Christian response to those who disagree with us would be. Too often we respond in the flesh. This causes problems to multiply. In fact, one reason why divisions are so great is the fact that people tend to allow disagreements to become personal affronts. This is definitely not the Spirit of Christianity. We are brethren, and members one of another. This being the case, we must find the true, Christian way to respond one to another. That is the aim of this paper. There are two different approaches that will be taken: the first deals with general guidelines for Christian disagreements; the second will deal with specific commands given in relation to disagreements about questionable issues and Christian liberty.

The first general guideline for dealing with disagreements is to be found in the examples of the Old Testament. We are told that *“whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.” (Rom 15:4)* This being the case, we should find much help in a couple of Old Testament examples. Consider the example of Abraham and Lot as seen in Genesis chapter thirteen and verse eight. There was strife between the herdsmen of Abraham and Lot. Instead of allowing this to be a problem, *“Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren.” (Gen 13:8 KJV)* How great a blessing it would be if we as God’s people would keep in mind the fact that we are brethren. The unity that exists among the children of God should be greater than a unity that is based upon conforming to someone’s standards and preferences. Christian unity is a unity of the Spirit. (See Eph.4:1-6) It is a shallow sort of thinking that bases unity upon personal preferences. We must go deeper and base our unity upon the fact that we have the same Savior, are baptized for the same reason, and are indwelt by the same Spirit. True unity is spiritual.

The next thing we should notice about Abraham’s wisdom in dealing with Lot is the fact that Abraham was willing to submit to his brother. Abraham said, *“Is not the whole land before thee? separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left.” (Gen 13:9 KJV)* How often are we willing to humble ourselves before our brethren instead of insisting upon our own way? There is

altogether too often a stubborn insistence that things must be done as we wish for them to be done. That is not the Spirit of Christ. There are times we must suffer wrong at the hands of our brethren for the sake of the gospel. *“Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded? Nay, ye do wrong, and defraud, and that your brethren.”* (1 Cor 6:;7,8 KJV) Even more wonderful is the fact that, after all the things Abraham sacrificed for the sake of unity, he did not hold a grudge toward Lot, but went to his aid when Lot was in distress. How great a thing love is!

We also see another Old Testament example concerning disagreements in the Psalms. *“False witnesses did rise up; they laid to my charge things that I knew not. They rewarded me evil for good to the spoiling of my soul. But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom. I behaved myself as though he had been my friend or brother: I bowed down heavily, as one that mourneth for his mother.”* (Psa 35:11-14 KJV) Though he was mistreated the Psalmist still prayed for those who did him grievous wrongs. It is impossible to despise someone for whom you sincerely are praying. It would indeed help us much if we would only take heed to God’s word and pray for all men – even those who disagree with us.

Specific Commands Concerning Disagreements About Questionable Issues

1. Receive your brethren. *“Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.”* (Rom 14:1 KJV) This simple sentence is a command to us that we should receive our brethren who differ with us in areas of questionable issues and Christian liberty. Neither should we receive him for the purpose of attempting to convert him to our viewpoint on these issues. It is not about disputing with this person about his judgements concerning these issues. *“For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him.”* (Rom 14:2,3 KJV) Notice that we are commanded to receive our brethren because Christ has received us. There should be no doubt in our minds about our condition when Christ received us. We were all sinners in need of forgiveness. Christ did not receive us because we agreed with Him, but in spite of the fact that we did not please Him. That is the glory of grace. (See Eph.1:3-7) If Christ received us in such a manner, we should also graciously receive our brethren who differ with us on issues that are not fundamental issues of doctrine. While some would view this as compromising, the truth is that, to not do so is to compromise the grace of God and

make God's grace appear to be something that is conditional instead of being unmerited favor. The hard-nosed, unbending approach toward our brethren who differ with us on issues of Christian liberty is the compromising approach. It perverts grace and makes grace appear to be something that has to be earned. Salvation, fellowship, and church membership are not earned, but are gifts of God's grace. Our place is to demonstrate that same grace to our brethren.

2. Don't judge your brother. *"Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him". (Rom 14:3 KJV)* Again, this is a command from God, not an option. We must receive our brethren and not set them aside. I realize that human nature has a hard time doing this. We do not like the fact that people don't always agree with us. We would rather people do things the way we have always done them. The problem is strictly a fleshly problem, though we would rather think it to be otherwise. If our disagreements are about the questionable issues and issues of Christian liberty of which we have studied, we must receive our brethren. It is not our place to judge one as not qualified to serve Christ if he disagrees with us in these areas. It is not our place to set aside as nothing one who disagrees with us. If Christ has received our brethren, even though they do not agree with us on these sorts of issues, they have still been received of Christ and are not to be condemned by us. Remember, *"Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand."* (Rom 14:4 KJV) Judgement is not our prerogative. It is the Divine prerogative. We must never condemn our brethren, because, when we do so, we usurp the authority of the Almighty. How great is our sin when we judge our brethren!

3. Don't cause your brother to compromise his personal convictions. *"Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way."* (Rom 14:13 KJV) The brother who is weak has many fears about issues of Christian liberty. He often sets up fences to keep him from compromising his convictions. He does not have the faith that he will be right with God if he exercises his liberty. If, in this state, he does exercise liberty he will be compromising his convictions and sinning. He has not been faithful to his convictions, nor has he trusted in God. (See Rom.14:20-23) If we insist on things going our way, or if we judge our brethren, they may feel pressured into compromising their convictions. In so doing we have tempted our brother. We have grieved our brother with our meat (see Rom.14:15) and have not exercised true, Christian love. While

our brother may get upset by hearing of our doing that with which he disagrees, that is not grieving him with our meat (liberty). To grieve our brother with our liberty is to tempt him to compromise his convictions and do what he feels in his heart is wrong. In areas of Christian liberty, if one feels something is wrong, to him it is wrong. (See Rom.14:14) We must NEVER tempt our brethren to go contrary to their convictions, no matter how foolish and trivial they may seem. To do so is to cause him to sin because he will not be walking by faith.

Paul told the Corinthians that they needed to be very careful in the exercise of their liberty. It could become a stumblingblock to the weaker brethren. *“But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak. For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.”* (1 Cor 8:9-13 KJV)

Notice that the issue is not an issue of offending our brother by hurting his feelings or doing that which he dislikes. The issue is making him to offend by sinning against his conscience. We will probably never be able to go through our lives and do everything to please everyone. We can, however, work very hard at not being a hindrance and causing our brethren to compromise their convictions. Let us remember that our brethren have a right to their thoughts concerning these issues of Christian liberty. We are commanded to *“Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.”* (Rom.14:15 KJV) We are to form our own convictions about questionable issues. We should search the scriptures to determine for ourselves what should be the best course for us when it comes to questionable issues and Christian liberty. When we have done so, we should also honor the conclusions at which our brethren who disagree with us have arrived. By so doing we will find ourselves being ministers of peace and unity in the body of Christ.

4. Love your brethren. *“But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.”* (Rom 14:15 KJV) May God help us to remember that love is the fulfilling of the law. *“Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other*

commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” (Rom 13:8-10 KJV) If we love our brethren it is definite that we will do everything in our power to not hinder him, and to help him. Here is the crux of the whole matter, is it not? We do not have the Christian love among us that we need to have. Again, when one makes such a statement as this, we often hear “Compromise! Compromise!” Yet, to be ugly, offensive, obnoxious, hateful, and a stumblingblock in the name of love is where compromise lies. It is felt by those who cry “Compromise!” that it is loving to boldly affirm one’s convictions in any setting whether it edifies or not. It is stated that it is loving to “tell the truth” about these matters. Yet, God’s word is truth (Jn.17:17), and we have seen that God’s word gives us much leeway in the area of Christian liberty. If love covers the multitude of sins (1Pet.4:8), it is loving to overlook the disagreements we may have concerning these particular issues. It is not loving to rub one’s convictions in the face of those who disagree with us. Love seeks unity. Love seeks to edify. We are commanded to love. The approach of those who cry “Compromise! Compromise!” when statements such as these are made will only destroy us. Yet, we are commanded “*For meat destroy not the work of God.*” (Rom.14:20 KJV) We must all see that the issues of Christian liberty are not issues that should divide us. Whether we are among the strong or weak is no matter when it comes to the fact that we are all commanded of God to love our brother. If we persist in fussing, fighting, and feuding over these things we will destroy ourselves. “*For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.*” (Gal 5:14,15 KJV) Let us never forget that love is the key!

What to Do When Convictions Become Doctrines

One of the greatest problems concerning questionable issues and Christian liberty is when one person (or group of people) makes their convictions a standard of doctrine. When this happens all others are expected to conform. While we should all attempt to accommodate one another in the spirit of love and grace, when personal convictions become doctrines we must resist. Jesus cried out against this in His day saying, “*Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.*” (Mat 15:7-10 KJV) The way of Christ is to stand against hypocrisy and forced cooperation.

Service to God must be from the heart. It is so with our convictions about Christian liberty as well. When one attempts to force their convictions upon another, while it is wrong to be violent or ugly, it is righteous to resist and not comply. Never should we allow others to tell us that our exercise of liberty or understanding of questionable issues causes us to be out of fellowship with God or His church. We must resist this intrusion upon our liberty. The commandments of men are not to become doctrine.

This problem is greatly aggravated when someone states that salvation is dependent upon agreeing with their interpretation of questionable issues and their manner of exercising (or not exercising) Christian liberty. The book of Galatians is a letter of protest about just such behavior as this. The problem in the Galatian churches was the fact that there were those who stated that uncircumcised people were lost. Today the problem is similar: often people are condemned as “not being led by the Spirit”, “not having the Spirit”, or simply cast aside as “unqualified.” Why? Simply because they do not bow to the wishes, whims, and convictions of others. These convictions about Christian liberty and questionable issues should not be allowed to be divisive in such a manner. We have already seen that the command is for us to receive, not judge, our brethren. Now, we must look to the other side of the issue: that is, we must not allow others to judge us as unaccepted of God. We must resist this because it is false doctrine. I know this sounds harsh, but consider the following statements Paul made about those who sought to impose their standards on the Galatians:

1. “I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.” (Gal 1:6-9 KJV) To state that someone is lost because they do not agree with us about issues of Christian liberty is to add to the gospel. This is a perversion of the gospel, and is actually another gospel which is not a gospel. It is not truly good news. How sad it is that many, while attempting to please God, are bordering on heresy simply because they want to impose their convictions upon others. We must realize that there are issues of much greater importance than the issues which we have allowed to divide us as God’s people. The doctrine of pure, free grace must be upheld at all costs. We must resist this idea that someone is lost because they do not agree with us on these issues which are not fundamental issues. To insist otherwise is heresy!

2. *“Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also. And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain. But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.” (Gal 2:1-5 KJV)* Paul called those who desired to infringe upon their liberty “false brethren.” In other words, Paul’s doubts were not about those who were not circumcised, but about those who insisted that those who were not circumcised were lost. Today, we must fear for those who insist that someone is lost because they do not conform to the convictions of others. Why must issues of Christian liberty be so divisive? There is a great problem in the heart and mind of someone who desires to condemn their brethren who do not agree with them about matters that do not pertain to how a person is saved, or the nature of the person who is saved. Should the disagreement be about doctrine or morals we would understand. It is practically impossible to understand how someone could so pervert the scriptures to claim Biblical justification for stating that a person is lost simply because they do not dress as we feel they should, or because they eat in a fellowship hall. We should fear greatly for those who are so judgmental: they have not rightly understood the grace of God.

3. *“But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.) For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation.” (Gal 2:11-13 KJV)* Paul stated that Peter was to be blamed for separating from his brethren on such trivial grounds as he did. Fear does odd things to us. We often act in ungodly ways because of fear. I am saddened by the fact that good brethren are often to be blamed because they have let fear drive them to do and say things that they know better than to do and say. Pressure from others around us is hard to bear. Even harder to bear than that should be the fact that we could be a great hindrance if we do not stand for Christian liberty and the grace of God. Paul also stated that it was hypocrisy for Peter to withdraw from those with whom he had fellowshiped in the past. How often are we one thing in the presence of some men, and something else when

we are with others who have differing opinions. It is a known fact that things such as this happen. A man is treated well or not treated well depending on who is present. This is hypocrisy! These things ought not so to be! The Spirit of Christ within us should convict us that we are not being consistent and that this tendency should be resisted. Our brethren are our brethren regardless of who is present, and regardless of how they agree or disagree with us regarding these issues which are not fundamental to Christianity.

4. *“As many as desire to make a fair show in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. For neither they themselves who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh. But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.” (Gal 6:12-14 KJV)* Paul stated that the real problem lay in the fact that the judgmental people were proud people. They wanted to make a good show in the flesh. They wanted people to see how “spiritual” they were. How often is this the case! Pride is hated of God. We must hate pride as well. Doctrine tells us that our boasting should only be in Christ who died for us. We have nothing else about which to boast. We have earned nothing. We have no reason to expect pats on our backs. We are sinners saved by grace. Let us accept graciously those who disagree with us, and uphold the wonderful grace of God who loves us and gave His Son for us. To do otherwise is sin.

Conclusion

In closing, I must state that, while some of the statements made in this article sound harsh, this writer harbors no ill will to those who disagree with him. There is a great need for us to be zealous and jealous for the doctrine of the grace of God, however. Grace is the gift of God (Eph.2:8,9) and is not of works (Rom.11:5,6). We are saved by grace (Eph.2:5) and kept by grace (Rom.5:1,2;1Pet.1:3-5) and stand in grace. It is sinful and false for us to state that, for someone to be saved; they must do according to the dictates of our private conscience and convictions about questionable issues and Christian liberty. This is contrary to grace. This is adding to grace, and adding to God’s word. It must indeed be resisted by all who believe and love the truth. I love my brethren. I love those who disagree with me. I am as human as others, and often allow myself to get very irritated and angered by my brethren. For this I often have to repent. This writer asks his brethren to pray for him that he would learn to put into practice the principles contained in this article. May God bless each reader.

