

WHEN SABBATARIAN CHRISTIANS DISAGREE

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Recently, a Christian friend and I were having a discussion when it became apparent that we had both examined a topic from biblical perspectives and arrived at different conclusions.

In spite of our disagreement, we both could see that we were striving for the truth and basing our viewpoint on biblical evidence. We came away from the discussion mentally stimulated, and our friendship and mutual respect was deepened in spite of this disagreement. While we experienced an amicable outcome to our disagreement, not all disagreements among Christians end so amicably. At times, people can disagree so strongly with fellow Christians on some matter that they "go their separate ways." In some cases, disagreements among Christians have strained (or terminated) friendships and even split church organizations.

What should Christians do when they find themselves in unresolved disagreements with other Christians? The New Testament includes several examples showing how early Christians reacted when they experienced disputes and divergent viewpoints. By examining these biblical precedents, we can learn scripturally based methods of not only coping with, but profiting from our disagreements.

DOCTRINAL DISAGREEMENTS

The early church experienced doctrinal disputes on a variety of issues. One disagreement (involving circumcision) was so intense that a plenary conference was called to address the issue. Emotions were clearly running high as Acts 15:2 states that Paul and Barnabas "had no small dissension and disputation" with those holding the opposite viewpoint at that conference. Clearly, both sides in the Acts 15 conference had ample opportunity to present their views and evidence as the issue was examined from different perspectives. This was no wild "free for all," however, as the literal meaning of the Greek word translated "disputation" is "joint seeking" (according to "Young's Analytical Concordance"). This account indicates that while an uncensored airing of all viewpoints did occur, the disagreeing participants in this conference were "jointly seeking" the will of God on the circumcision issue.

There are several lessons for modern Christians in this account. The first lesson is that Christians can experience strong disagreements and vehement debate on doctrinal matters and still remain part of the same body of Christ. The Acts 15 conference allowed (even encouraged) the airing of all viewpoints in an effort to determine God's will on the subject of circumcision. Clearly, God's Holy Spirit guided the early church into a consensus decision on this dispute via an "iron sharpening iron" process. Through a full and open discussion of the dispute, the early church came to a consensus decision on the circumcision question and very likely prevented a schism over this matter.

It is also noteworthy that no one in the Acts 15 account was called a "heretic" or "disfellowshipped" simply because of a sincere doctrinal disagreement. This example indicates that Christians are not to be removed from fellowship whenever doctrinal disagreements occur. Paul upheld this principle in Romans 14 while discussing vegetarians who were "weak in the faith." Romans 14:1 states: "Give a welcome to anyone whose faith is not strong, but do not get into arguments about doubtful points" (*The New Jerusalem Bible*). In Romans 14:10,13, Paul also advised: "...why do you pass judgement on your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother?...Therefore, let's stop passing judgement on each other! Instead, make this one judgement: not to put a stumbling block or snare in a brother's way." (*Jewish New Testament*). In Romans 15:1, Paul concluded: "So we who are strong have a duty to bear the weaknesses of those who are not strong..." (*Jewish New Testament*).

Paul warned "strong" brethren (mature Christians who were doctrinally accurate) not to drive weaker brethren away from the truth (or church). All Christians need to realize that when disagreements occur, we do not "make points" with God simply by "proving the other person wrong." While seeking the truth on a disputed issue, we must also make every effort to avoid "giving offense" to those with whom we disagree. Interestingly, Romans 15:1 indicates that God puts greater responsibility on "the strong" for maintaining unity than he does on "the weak" (those who don't yet realize they are incorrect on a particular doctrine or issue).

In Matthew 5:46-47, Jesus Christ said: "What reward do you get if you love only those who love you? Why, even the tax collectors do that! And if you are friendly only to your friends, are you doing anything out of the ordinary?" ("Jewish New Testament). It's easy for all of us to be friendly with those with whom we agree. However, Jesus' statement indicates that God learns more about our character and maturity by observing how we deal with each other when we disagree than when we agree with one another.

ADMINISTRATIVE DISAGREEMENTS

Although Paul and Barnabas were allies on a doctrinal matter (circumcision) in the Acts 15 Conference, they soon separated over an administrative matter. Acts 15:36 indicates that after the conference concluded, Paul and Barnabas disagreed on whether to bring John Mark on an evangelistic tour. Verse 39 states: "the contention was so sharp between them, that they separated one from another" ("KJV, marginal reading). Even though Paul and Barnabas were united on doctrinal matters, they disagreed so vehemently over an administrative decision (a personnel matter) that they had to "part company."

Clearly, they remained part of the same body of Christ even though their disagreement on an administrative issue caused them to go their separate ways. There are lessons for modern Christians in the separation of Paul and Barnabas because of an administrative dispute. Notice that Paul did not feel empowered to enforce an artificial "unity" by "commanding" Barnabas to submit to his decision. Neither did Barnabas feel he had any authority to "give orders" to Paul. They "agreed to disagree" on the matter, and decided to serve God separately instead of jointly. Was God's Holy Spirit able to work through both Paul and Barnabas after their disagreement and separation? Of course! Both Paul and Barnabas continued to do God's Work, and there is no evidence that they ever saw each other as enemies or competitors. Perhaps there is a lesson in their experience for modern Christians and church organizations.

DISAGREEMENTS BETWEEN CHURCH ORGANIZATIONS

When one Sabbatarian church has beliefs that another Sabbatarian organization regards as a false doctrine, can their members still interact and accept each other as Christian brethren? Consider the example of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3. All seven churches are acknowledged by God as being part of "his church." Yet God states that two of the churches (Pergamos and Thyatira) had embraced false doctrines. Pergamos had two false doctrines (the "doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans"), while Thyatira had embraced the false doctrines of a prophetess called "Jezebel." While God warned both churches to repent of their false doctrines, God had not abandoned or disowned them. We do not know how long God allows a church to repent of adopting false doctrine, but since God gives such churches (and people) "space for repentance" (Revelation 2:21), so should we. However, we must "hear what the spirit says to the churches," and make every effort to avoid false doctrines because they can weaken and jeopardize our relationship with God.

While God warned the churches of Pergamos and Thyatira to repent of their false doctrines, he did not call them "heretics." There is no indication that any of the seven churches had abandoned God's law. God says to none of them: "You have abandoned my Sabbaths and Holy Days" or "You have forsaken my commandments." In Hosea 4:6, God makes it clear that he will reject those who forget his laws and reject his knowledge. Since Pergamos and Thyatira had not been rejected, they clearly had not forsaken God's laws. If any of the churches of Revelation had been guilty of openly

rejecting key elements of God's law, Hosea 4:6 indicates God would have voiced neither tolerance nor patience with them.

The Ephesian church (which correctly hated the false doctrine of the Nicolaitans) may have regarded the members of the Pergamos church as "a bunch of heretics" because they had embraced this false doctrine. If so, their judgement would have been both harsh and incorrect because Jesus Christ still accepted the Pergamos church as "one of his." Conversely, while the Ephesian Church was very strong doctrinally, Revelation 2:4-5 shows they were unaware of their own attitude problem (i.e. "they had lost their first love") which was jeopardizing their relationship with God.

A lesson for us is that since God himself does not immediately withdraw his fellowship from people who have mistakenly mixed false doctrines in with God's true doctrines, neither should we suddenly withdraw fellowship from those who mistakenly accept a false (or merely "inaccurate") doctrine. Furthermore, the letters to these seven churches reveal that there is much more to our relationship with God than simply being "right" or "wrong" on doctrines. The letters to the churches show that God regards both attitudes and doctrines as important factors in our relationship with him. Further evidence of this fact is found in God's words to the Sardis and Laodicean Churches. God regarded the Sardis Church as "dead" spiritually, and he strongly warned the Laodiceans about their "lukewarm" attitudes even though he attributes no false doctrines to either church (Revelation 3:1-6, 14-22).

Matthew 24:48 warns God's people that they should not "smite their fellow servants" as the return of Jesus Christ draws near. Does it not follow that Sabbatarian churches should not "smite" (ostracize, judge, condemn) their "brother churches" as well? Like brethren in Christ, the churches of God should strive to edify each other and cooperate as much as possible. In John 13:35, Jesus instructed: "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for each other." It seems self-evident that Jesus expects church organizations (as well as individuals) to heed that instruction.

CONCLUSION

Acts 15 records how the early Christian church handled doctrinal and administrative disputes. Because God calls people from very diverse backgrounds and perspectives, disagreements are inevitable. Today God's people are experiencing disagreements on doctrinal and administrative matters, and leaders and laymen alike are deciding (as did Paul and Barnabas) to "go separate ways" even as they both continue to "do God's Work." It is vital that we understand that the early Christian Church experienced similar disagreements. We all need to realize that when we disagree about doctrinal or administrative matters, we remain members of Christ's body and are still responsible to our God and Savior to continue to treat each other as "brethren in Christ." The above scriptures indicate that if Christians (and churches) can "bear" some disagreements among themselves and still "show love for each other," it is evidence that God's people are learning to walk in Christian maturity.

See also the "Editorial" by Herbert W Armstrong, in the March 1938 *Plain Truth*, page 4.