

Contending FOR THE Faith™

FOR THOSE WHO LOVE THE TRUTH AND HATE ERROR

CHRIST—THE GREAT CONTROVERSIALIST*

David P. Brown

INTRODUCTION

Jesus was bold and uninhibited in contending for the truth, denouncing sin, exposing error, and marking false teachers. One need only engage in a cursory reading of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to see that Jesus did not tolerate error, or those who advocated it—especially hypocrites. Moreover, Jesus spoke to the spiritual needs of the people He addressed. For example, our Lord did not say to His audience in the sermon on the mount what He did to the Jews in the temple when He was cleansing it. To hear some tell it, all of His sermons should have been,

And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these (Mat. 6:28-29).

But there was a time, a place, and a people who needed to hear, **“It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves”** (Mat. 21:13). Thus, Jesus was a controversialist.

Some biased historians write history the way they wished it had been. Thus, they tell us their skewed views of people, events, and things. Some have done that with Christ. Because of their corrupted theologies, they cannot conceive of Christ being engaged in controversy; they have redefined terms and given us a picture of Jesus that the Bible does not give us. And these claim to be His friends. Thus, our Lord is deeply and grievously wounded in the house of his “friends.”

Men cannot make Jesus over into what they want Him to be. Oh, they may attempt to do it, but they cannot do so with people possessing good and honest hearts, who search

the scriptures, allowing them and them alone, to paint the portrait of Jesus that only they can paint (Luke 11:15; Mat. 5:6; John 5:39; 2 Tim. 2:15). We therefore set ourselves on our course with these words of long ago, **“We would see Jesus”** (John 12:21). Thus, we seek an unvarnished scripture portrait of Jesus, the Great Controversialist.

A DEFINITION OF TERMS

Controversy—“Basically, a controversy is an ongoing dispute between at least two parties, but most often large groups of people, where the subject is of an affecting nature, meaning whatever the subject is about, it has some kind of effect on the people of the dispute or on society as a whole” (“What is Controversy?”). The word *controversial* means: “Tending to provoke or cause controversy by its nature” (“Controversial”). Jesus certainly “tended to provoke or cause controversy by His nature.” And, they were certainly “ongoing disputes” concerning “subjects having an effect on the people of the dispute and on the society as a whole.”

As God is love (*agapao*), so He is truth and vice versa. Love and truth are coeval and necessary to one another in the one divine essence that is Deity. As the essence of God is eternal, then love and truth are eternal. Thus, love and truth are not mutually exclusive—one is eternally present with the other in the one God. Thus, in God it is impossible to have love without truth or to have truth without love. Because love and truth are of God’s essence, He cannot lie. Thus, all love and all truth come from Him and from no other source.

When the eternal Word became flesh, love and truth became flesh. Because Jesus Christ is the truth, everything

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Ira Y. Rice, Jr., Founder
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Editorial...

“O God, thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works. Now also when I am old and gray headed, O God, forsake me not; until I have shewed thy strength unto this generation...” (Psa.71:17-18).

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO LOSE THE TRUTH?

Can it be lost in one generation? If parents fail to teach their children, and churches fail to teach members and the world, where shall we be in the next generation? It is possible to lose the truth completely in just one short generation!

This ought to be a sobering fact pressing hard upon the hearts of all the citizens of the kingdom. It is understood we are to teach others so that the gospel may continue generation after generation (2 Tim. 2:2). The Psalmist in the above quotation keenly and deeply recognized this responsibility, asking for the opportunity to show God’s strength **“unto this generation.”** The influence of Joshua on succeeding generations is seen by noting: **“And Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that overlived Joshua, and which had known all the works of the Lord, that he had done for Israel”** (Jos. 24:31).

Truly we ought to ask ourselves what the churches of Christ are teaching, but another great and very important question for us to ask is this, what are parents teaching their children? For instance:

- Can your children give scriptural evidence of the the plan of salvation and the one true church?
- Can your children express conviction that Jesus died for His church, in distinction from denominations?
- Would your children object to the use of mechanical instrumental music in the worship for any other reason than they know their parents object to its use?
- What would your children say to a church offering fellowship to all of the pious unimmersed?
- Do your children have a burden of soul-saving, or do they they think this should be left up to the preachers? (professional class!)
- Could your children give scriptural arguments concerning the Lord’s Supper, its design and function, as well as the place of its observance?
- Would your children have any convictions as to whether a church should engage in fund raising pursuits other than free-will giving?
- Would your children have any convictions as to whether the church should do works in the community openly secular in their nature?
- Would your children be able to state why the church of Christ is not a denomination?
- Do your children believe that recreation and entertainment are a part of the Lord’s work?

- Would your children oppose a congregation of the Lord's people extending fellowship to the Christian Church or any other denomination?

Although the list can easily be extended, the results cause the faithful to tremble (or they should) when we realize what will take place if we fail to properly teach our children. Indeed, it is already happening and has been for some time. **“Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh shall he find faith on the**

earth?” (Luke 18:8).

Take a long, hard scriptural look at your children and ask yourself: “Will they and their children be faithful and true to Christ and His one church, the church of Christ as that term is defined and used in the New Testament of Christ?”

How long would it take to lose the truth?

—Author Unknown, Revised by David P. Brown, Editor

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that pertains to the nature of truth pertains to Jesus (John 14:6). Thus, as He said of Himself to Pilate, **“To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice”** (John 18:37).

If one is allowed to define terms to suit one's self, one can uphold anything to be true. Thus, when we read and hear what many teach about Christ, we know they have embraced modern definitions of “meekness,” “love,” “kindness,” “compassion,” “mildness,” and “tenderness.” Therefore, to get at the truth about them, we must view these words in the light of their ancient definitions, how they were used, and to whom they were applied by the inspired writers. If we refuse to do this, we will see our Lord in a false light.

With many, Jesus is thought of as never raising His voice, never opposing anyone, and willing to compromise truth for the sake of peace and union (not unity). Moreover, He is perceived as accepting sinners in their sins, and never demanding that they cease and desist from their sinful conduct. Such people cannot see Jesus ever crossing another person in standing for the truth or in opposing error. This false view of Jesus causes people to think that if a person is sincerely religious, Jesus would never embarrass or offend him/her by pointing out his/her errors and sins. They see Jesus embracing all religions, all churches, all gods, and all philosophies.

To them, Jesus is as an overly permissive parent, giving over to the badgering of His spoiled children's every demand. He is a big “pushover.” Although He may threaten to punish His children when they do wrong, in actuality He never rebukes or punishes anyone. If they will promise Him they will be good, whether they keep their promise or not, the final outcome is that He will not punish them for their evil conduct.

Meekness is not weakness. Its backbone is not that of a wet, limp, and jellied noodle, warm though it may be. It took more strength than we can comprehend for the sinless Christ to become a man, live on earth without sinning, confront hardhearted hypocrites of His own religion and race, willingly enduring what He did at the hands of sinners, and, finally, to suffer a prolonged, shameful, and agonizing death on the cross (Phi. 2:7; Heb. 2:9; 6:16; 12:2-3). Assuredly,

Jesus was not crucified for saying **“Consider the lilies of the field,”** but because He declared, **“Ye have made my Father's house a den of thieves.”**

Love (*agapao*) does not condone or defend sin or sinners, but reveals sin to be mankind's most vehement enemy and those who engage in and promote it to be the enemies of the cross of Christ. Love makes it clear that sin is the only thing that can separate man from God. Because God is love and Jesus is God, then Jesus did and does not condone any wrong, but rather exposes, reproves, rebukes and refutes it, calling for all men to repent of and turn from it, fully embracing the truth.

Thus in the life of the faithful child of God, love never attempts to make error as acceptable to God as is truth, or to compromise the truth with error, but treats it for what it is—error. Thus, a loving Christian identifies, rebukes, refutes, and calls to repentance those who propagate error (false teachers and those living in sin), warning the faithful of the error(s), and identifying the false teachers.

WE CANNOT BE LIKE JESUS

All sorts of efforts have been made in an attempt to stop members of the Lord's church from rebuking error and the false teachers who propagate it. The following is a prime example of one of those efforts. James Hinkle and Tim Woodroof wrote:

As we study the example of Jesus in conflict situations, it is important to remember that in at least one respect, Jesus was very different from us. He was always right! He saw the will of God absolutely and knew God's mind completely. We, on the other hand, “see but a poor reflection” and can only “know in part” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Accordingly, certain aspects of Christ's conflict style are not to be imitated by His disciples. We cannot take the role of teacher and Lord (as He could). We cannot speak with absolute confidence and omniscience (as He did). We cannot see the hearts of others and know with certainty their motives (as He had the ability to do).

There are, however, some characteristics of Christ in conflict we would do well to imitate. In particular, there are lessons for us to learn in the attitude Jesus took toward those with whom He clashed. At the heart of Jesus' conflict style was a

firm commitment to win people rather than arguments (154).

Obviously Hinkle and Woodroof absolutely know that “we ... ‘see but a poor reflection’ and can only ‘know in part’ (1 Cor. 13:12).” However, it should be pointed out that 1 Corinthians 13:12 is Paul’s explanation of how the infant church in lieu of the completed New Testament functioned under the direct revelation of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament came in part and parcel. It was not the case that one day the New Testament was not on earth, but the next day the completed book was in the world. Paul is saying that God revealed the New Testament a little at a time as needed. So Hinkle and Woodroof’s usage of this passage is completely out of context. But, we have the completed New Testament. And it has been here for about two thousand years (Jam. 1:25; 2 Pet. 1:3). Thus, said authors ought to have known better than what they wrote. With that error corrected, let us turn to what it is that they unerringly and absolutely know. Their quotes are in italics with my comments following:

“He (Jesus) was always right.”

Is it possible for a mere mortal to be absolutely right about anything? Must one be inspired as were the apostles before one can claim absolute knowledge about anything? Because we do not know everything does not necessarily mean we cannot absolutely know something. Even Hinkle and Woodroof make absolute knowledge claims.

“He saw the will of God absolutely and knew God’s mind completely.”

Who is it that is claiming to know as Jesus knows then or now? Who is it that is claiming omniscience? However, while Jesus was in His earthly ministry before His death, He did not know when the end of the world would be—and He absolutely knew He did not know it. But what He knew He was emphatic and absolute in the knowing of it or them. What Hinkle and Woodroof would have us believe is that unless we can “see the will of God absolutely and know God’s mind completely” then we cannot make any absolute knowledge claims about matters of doctrine. Do Hinkle and Woodroof absolutely know that God exists, that Jesus is Deity, and that the Bible is the infallible, inerrant, all sufficient, final, and complete revelation of God to man?

“... certain aspects of Christ’s conflict style are not to be imitated by His disciples.”

What are these “aspects” of His “conflict style” that “are not to be imitated by His disciples”? Again, who is it that claims to know a person as Jesus fully and infallibly knew a person? Paul said to Timothy and, thus, to all men (and that includes uninspired men): **“And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also”** (2 Tim. 2:2). Can men teach what they do not know? But if they know something, then they can know that they know it and know it absolutely.

“We cannot take the role of teacher and Lord (as He could).”

Who is saying that any mere mortal can “take the role of teacher and Lord (as He could)”? We can know and speak Jesus’ Words and we can know what they imply as clearly and absolutely as we can know what He explicitly (in just so many words) taught. Are Hinkle and Woodroof telling us we cannot do that? What does it mean to preach the word? What did Paul mean when he exhorted Timothy with the words, **“These things command and teach”** (1 Tim. 4:11)? What did Jesus mean when he said, **“If ye continue in my words then are ye my disciples indeed. And, ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free”** (John 8:31-32)?

“We cannot speak with absolute confidence and omniscience (as He did).”

Speaking with “absolute confidence” is not at all the same thing as speaking from “omniscience (as He did).” Thus, we must ask who it is that is saying we are to speak from “omniscience (as He did)”? Let Hinkle and Woodroof give us “a for instance” or an example of a mere mortal in the Lord’s church who is doing this. What these two apostates are teaching is that in order to “speak with absolute confidence” one must be omniscient. This is simply not true. Indeed, Hinkle and Woodroof seem to speak with absolute confidence when they wrote what they did?

“We cannot see the hearts of others and know with certainty their motives (as He had the ability to do).”

Since when does teaching someone the truth on anything require that we “see the hearts of others and know with certainty their motives (as He had the ability to do)”? Again, who is it that teaches that we must be omniscient before we can know the truth about salvation and teach it to others? However, the Lord told mere mortals that by people’s **“fruits ye shall know them”** (Mat. 7:20). When one tells me that a believer who has repented of his sins does not have to be baptized to be saved from sin, at least I know that person does not properly understand the truth about the one baptism (Eph. 4:5). How would anyone know that a person needed instruction if they could not know such a person was in error?

“There are, however, some characteristics of Christ in conflict we would do well to imitate.”

How do Hinkle and Woodroof know that there are “some characteristics of Christ in conflict we would do well to imitate”? Can they “take the role of teacher and Lord (as He could)”? Can they “speak with absolute confidence and omniscience (as He did)”? Can they “see the hearts of others and know with certainty their motives (as He had the ability to do)”? The answer to all three questions is a resounding “no”—they cannot do as Jesus did in the sense of His omniscience and authority. But, according to them, if you are not able to be omniscient then you cannot teach with

absolute confidence. According to them, they do not possess the wherewithal to teach absolutely, authoritatively, and conclusively, but they are going to absolutely, authoritatively, and conclusively teach “some characteristics of Christ in conflict” that “we would do well to imitate” anyway. And, thus they have absolutely concluded that “we would do well to imitate” Christ as they see that need in our lives. The legs of the lame are not equal!

“In particular, there are lessons for us to learn in the attitude Jesus took toward those with whom He clashed.”

But Jesus’ attitude came from one who bore all the marks of Deity. Are the authors telling us what aspect of Jesus’ life and teachings we can imitate when they do not possess any of the traits that they say are requisite for one to possess in order to do as Jesus did? Are they picking and choosing the lessons we are to learn from Jesus and those we are not to learn from Him? By what criteria do they make the distinction between what lessons we can learn from one who is omniscient and those that we cannot learn. And, where do they get the wherewithal to teach with authority anything to be a lesson to us from the life of Jesus? They do not have the authority and omniscience of Christ, but that does not seem to bother them when they want to teach their doctrines.

Can we emulate the attitude Jesus had when he approached the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4)? Or, should we have the attitude of Jesus toward Peter when He rebuked him (Mat. 16:23)? Or, can we have the attitude of Paul when he instructed Titus to teach elders:

For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake. One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, The Cre-tians are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies. This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith; Not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth. Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled. They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate (Tit. 1:10-16).

“At the heart of Jesus’ conflict style was a firm commitment to win people rather than arguments.”

What an indictment!! If anyone desires to win an argument, one does not have “a firm commitment to win people.” Where did we ever learn such a thing? It seems to me that Jesus made and won arguments because He desired to win people. People are intellectual and rational beings. Thus, God through the great prophet Isaiah declared on behalf of God to His people **“Come now, let us reason together”** (Isa. 1:18). In teaching Felix, Paul **“reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come”** (Acts 24:25) and on and on we could go. We cannot win people to the

Lord and not make the case for Christ, His gospel, and His New Testament church. One does not love the sinner by trying to figure out ways to allow him to remain in his sins and in all manner of false doctrine because we are afraid to rebuke him. To love someone as Jesus did is to tell the truth of God he needs to hear no matter how much he may hate it or love it. It is our obligation to God to live a Godly life and that means teaching the truth to people and refuting the error they may be in whether they like it or not. As Paul asked the Galatians, **“Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth”** (Gal. 4:16)? Why would Paul ask this question if he did not know they could well become angry with him for telling them what they needed to hear, but that they did not desire to hear?

Let it be clearly understood, no one is advocating in any way or to any degree that we should do any hurt to people or abuse them. But the problem with many people in and out of the Lord’s church is that they do not want one to be told that one is wrong, that a person must repent of the wrong done, and change one’s life to what the truth of the gospel demands of him to be. Thus, they attempt to present Jesus in such a way as to remove the militancy of the church, and thereby allow people to live in sin.

JESUS’ APPEAL TO THE WORD OF GOD

The Sadducees did not believe in angels, spirits, or the resurrection. Knowing our Lord’s teaching regarding the resurrection, on one occasion the Sadducees attempted to put our Lord in a dilemma. They presented to Him a case under the law of Moses where a woman had been married scripturally seven times to seven different brothers. Now, since Jesus believed in the resurrection, they asked Him whose wife will she be in the resurrection. By their questions they thought they could catch Jesus in a contradiction and thus they could deny the resurrection. Of course Jesus knew this and replied with:

Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as angels in heaven. But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead but the living (Mat. 22:29-32).

Part of Mark’s account reads, **“Is it not for this cause that ye err, that ye know not the scriptures, nor the power of God?”** (12:24).

The question of the resurrection was settled by an appeal to Exodus 3:6. Jesus pointed out that the present housing for man’s spirit is earthly (2 Cor. 5:1-4). However, He points out that such will not always be the case. At death, men put off their earthly tabernacles, but the spirit continues to live, **“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also”** (Jam. 2:26). Jesus proves His point

by emphasizing that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were alive when God spoke to Moses though their earthly sojourn had been over for years. Thus, there is a resurrection of man into the new and eternal building after the likeness of Christ's glorified body (Phi. 3:21; 2 Cor. 5:1-4; 1 Cor. 15:40-57; 1 John 3:1-3). Notice the present tense verb found in Exodus 3:16, making it clear that when Moses penned those words and when Jesus quoted them, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were living following their physical death. Thus, the question was settled by scripture and the power of God.

At one time Jesus and His disciples were charged with violating the Sabbath by plucking the ears of grain on that day (Mark 2: 23-28). Jesus pointed out that David, out of necessity, ate what otherwise he could not (1 Sam. 21:6). Thus, Christ taught that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore, Jesus, the sinless man, was lord even of the Sabbath. By a proper application of scripture to the point at issue, the matter was resolved.

In the minds of honest and good people, a correct appeal to scripture covering the disputed issue will settle the controversy. But when men with less than honest hearts refuse to accept the truth, they will oppose it and those who teach it. Rather than recognize their error, they opposed and fought against Jesus. In such a case, the one who taught the truth should not feel any shame and we must not allow ourselves to be discouraged when others reject the truth.

AN APPEAL TO THE TRUTH CONFESSED OR TO AN ESTABLISHED CUSTOM

The slander of the Pharisees was powerfully exposed and completely refuted when Jesus appealed to something that they admitted to be true. The accusation directed against Jesus was that He was casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons (Mat. 12:24). Jesus responded by reminding the Jews that their own exorcists claimed to have the power to cast out demons. **“And if I by Beelzebub cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? therefore shall they be your judges”** (Mat. 12:27). The truth the Pharisees admitted actually condemned them because of its logical implication.

The Pharisees and scribes considered Jesus' association with publicans and sinners gross misconduct. Therefore, they rebuked Jesus with, **“Why do ye eat and drink with the publicans and sinners?”** (Luke 5:30). Jesus answered, **“They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I am not come to call the righteous but the sinners to repentance”** (Luke 5:31-32). The Pharisees could say nothing because they admitted the truth that Jesus gave as the basis for His actions.

So, they turned to another question (Luke 5:33-39). In an attempt to resolve what they considered to be a conflict between their conduct and that of Christ's disciples, the disciples of John asked, **“Why do we and the Pharisees fast**

oft, but thy disciples fast not?” (Mat. 9:14). It appears that the Pharisees and the scribes were also party to this question (Luke 5:33). Jesus simply explained while He was with them they had no reason to fast. Therefore, His disciples were eating and drinking. When Jesus was no longer with them, they would fast. Then He appealed to a common custom among them, patching old garments with old cloth and not new. They understood what that meant and made the application.

ARGUMENT AD HOMINEM

The *argument ad hominem* (argument to the man) does not prove a proposition to be true. However, it does show that one cannot hold to two positions that contradict each other. He must give up one or the other positions or both. Consistency will not allow him to hold both.

A woman possessed with a certain infirmity for eighteen years came to Jesus for healing. After He had healed her, the ruler of the synagogue condemned Jesus' action with, **“There are six days in which men ought to work: in them therefore come and be healed, and not on the day of the Sabbath”** (Luke 13:14). Then Jesus employed the argument ad hominem and declared:

Ye hypocrites doth not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering? And ought not this woman being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan had bound, lo, these eighteen years, to have been loosed from this bond on the day of the sabbath? (Luke 13:15-16; *ASV*, 1901).

As long as the Pharisees held that their conduct was right, they could not consistently question Jesus' conduct.

Jesus did not hesitate to meet error pointedly. Our Lord asked questions, argued, and most effectively confounded His enemies and destroyed their arguments. If we would emulate Jesus in all things, we must imitate His conduct in meeting error and its proponents.

TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE

Some have forgotten that Christians are to seek God's blessing and favor and not those of man (Gal. 1:10). Why call ourselves servants of God and seek not His favor?

What is intolerance? When a man demands that another give up his error under threat of force, that is intolerance. But when one through correct reasoned persuasion from the scriptures and refutation of another's false positions show that he should dispense with error and embrace the truth, that is tolerance. Jesus was tolerant and, to the extent He was tolerant, we too must seek to follow Him. To bring men to see their errors and thereby create within them a sharp sense of guilt for their sins is our responsibility. It is what one seeks to accomplish in preaching to and defending the gospel before sinners and erring saints alike. This is why Jesus was a controversialist, but it is not intolerance. One must have a clear concept of truth and a personal sense of one's responsibility in denouncing error as well as that of urging men to

reject error and submit to the truth if they are to be faithful teachers of the Word of God. However, let us never confuse this with intolerance.

BIAS AND PREJUDICE

Since my youth, I have not understood how one could claim to believe in Christ and fail to see that Christ engaged regularly in controversy. Thus, to be a Christian (one who is of Christ) one will be involved in religious controversy as our Lord was involved in it. It is an integral part of living the Christian life—a necessary part of being faithful to our Lord.

I have found it rather interesting, to say the least, that some members of the church will militantly argue that it is wrong to debate. Many years ago in my first full-time work, I came early to the midweek Bible study to find an older sister and brother already in the building. They were involved in a discussion that had waxed rather warm by the time I arrived on the scene. They were in the process of debating whether it was scriptural to engage in religious debates. The brother was in the affirmative and the sister was in the negative. Realizing the situation, I listened long enough to find an opening and remarked that I really was enjoying the debate. Only with my remark did both disputants realize what they were doing. The man was quite pleased with my observation, but the woman did not know what to say. For a Christian to be opposed to religious controversy is equivalent to saying that I love God but I am opposed to worshipping him. It is simply absurd to believe such a thing.

The people who are opposed to controversy tend to avoid discussions or issues that would bring into view matters likely to cause controversy. Thus, they plead for a spirit of tolerance. But the following quotation reveals that for which they are in actuality calling.

There are many pleas made these days for ‘tolerance.’ But often ‘tolerance’ is not the right word for that which is demanded. What is meant is ‘compromise.’ Tolerance and compromise are not the same thing. This is tolerance—to grant to another the same rights which I claim for myself. This is compromise—to sacrifice heart-felt conviction in order that someone else may be pleased or in order to avoid a breach of peace (Beardsley).

To compromise with wrong in the name of tolerance is to dishonor God and His Word.

Practically every day of our Lord’s life on earth found Him either opposed by or opposing error and sin. He had many conflicts with the scribes and Pharisees (Mat. 23 and 12:24) He also taught that His followers would have trouble, opposition, and controversy (Mat. 10:35ff.).

Many religious persons have a dread of controversy and wish truth to be stated without any reference to those who hold the opposite errors. Controversy and a bad spirit are, in their estimation, synonymous terms, and to strenuously oppose what is wrong is considered as contrary to Christian meekness. Those who hold this opinion seem to overlook what every

page of the New Testament lays before us. In all the history of our Lord Jesus Christ, we never find Him out of controversy (Beardsley).

How do people study their Bibles and fail to see that whole books of God’s Word are given over to polemics? The letter of Jude is a case in point. Remove Jude’s rebuke to false teachers, his warning to Christians, and his exhortation for Christians to fight against error and one does away with the book. It is a wonder to me that some church members do not remove it from their Bibles because it is not a “positive” presentation of the truth. Of course, they have done so in their minds and thinking.

How far does one read into any of the Bible, especially the New Testament, before one reads of controversy over doctrine? But there are those who will argue that we ought to “preach the gospel” and not “argue” among ourselves. Like the man and woman earlier mentioned, they do this without seeing their self-contradiction.

Let it be said here that we are not advocating an argument that rises from and promotes personal opinions and likes and dislikes or only “fussing and fuming” with one another. These must be avoided. However, the New Testament is clear that Christians will be involved in doctrinal conflict until the world ends at Jesus’ second coming.

Is the truth of God constantly under attack, misrepresentation, and dilution? Paul and Barnabas “**had no small dissension and disputation with**” the Judaizing teachers (Acts 15:1-2). What if no one had opposed these false teachers because the brethren did not believe in controversy? This heresy would have spread throughout the churches and choked the church to death. The same is true of Paul withstanding Peter to the face over this same matter (Gal 2). Those who depart from the faith are to be rebuked “**sharply, that they may be sound in the faith**” (Tit. 1:13). Confronting error and those who teach it is part of what Paul is urging Christians to do when he writes to Timothy to “**fight the good fight of faith**” (1 Tim. 6:12). Near the end of his turbulent life, Paul declared that he had “**kept the faith**” (2 Tim. 4:7) and this pertains to confronting false teachers in and out of the church.

Some well-meaning preachers, desiring to maintain peace and harmony where they preach or in controversial matters in the brotherhood, run like the proverbial scalded dog, fearing that it will split the church and they will lose their job. They are nothing more or less than cowards. Granted that wisdom must be exercised in dealing with controversial issues, but they must be dealt with as the Bible teaches. Controversy in local churches is very healthy if righteousness and New Testament principles are being defended. Where did we ever learn otherwise? Certainly not from the Bible.

It might surprise some people, but controversy has been a blessing to the Lord’s church. I thank God for the great

and good men who have mounted the polemic platform to meet and denounce error and those who advocate it, no matter what the error was/is. Remarking on church members who were unwilling to fight, a denominational preacher, J. C. Ryle, said:

The only positive thing about them is that they dislike distinctiveness and think extreme and decided and positive views are very naughty and very wrong. These people live in a kind of mist or fog. They see nothing clearly, and do not know of what they believe. ... They are eaten up with a morbid dread of controversy and an ignorant dislike of party spirit; and yet they really cannot define what they mean by these phrases (Beardsley).

I have quoted this man because he has a better understanding of the importance of truth and the terrible danger of error than a great many of my brethren do—especially some preachers.

The Greek scholar, J. Gresham Machen had this to say on the matter:

Again, men say that instead of engaging in controversy in the Church, we ought to pray to God for a revival; instead of polemics, we ought to have evangelism. Well, what kind of evangelism is it that is indifferent to the question what evangel it is that is to be preached? ... not the evangelism that Paul meant when he said, 'Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel.' No, my friends, there can be no true evangelism which makes common cause with the enemies of the cause of Christ ... (Beardsley).

What biblical truth is not controversial—God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, etc.? Now, how can the church be faithful to Christ and not be controversial as well? The truth pricks, stabs, scalds, and enrages the hearts of men. If you do not recognize that, then you need to be converted to Christ yourself.

CONCLUSION

As noted earlier, a person who argues that a Christian should not debate is grossly inconsistent for he is debating when he does so! It is a sad thing when those who claim to be Christians do not see that polemics better enables us to do much good. Do we not see that truth and error in contrast will cause truth to shine clearer? If we are to be true follow-

ers of Christ, we must avoid weakness in both courage and conviction. We must recognize that when brethren oppose debating they are revealing that they are unconcerned for the truth. For only a person of such low concern for the truth can refrain from opposing error. The church enjoyed its greatest growth during the time of debates. Thus, no matter the cost to us personally, let each Christian determine to uphold the truth against all error. Moreover, we must strongly encourage the brethren who publicly meet error. We must be militant and aggressive in our teaching. This is the example Jesus has left us. This is the manner whereby men are stirred up. This is what caused men to oppose Jesus and the apostles. Debating now will have the effect it did then—some believed and some did not.

I say again, if a church member is not controversial as we have attempted to describe it in this chapter (as Jesus, the apostle Paul, Stephen, et al., were), that person has little to no concern for the truth. The spirit one exercises must be one of meekness and fear—as those terms are defined and used in the Bible. This will cause one to be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. We must appeal to scripture and right reason, not to personalities, questioning of motives, and similar attacks of any kind. A close study of Jesus will show us how the meekest of all men was the most controversial of men.

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