

Churches of Christ --- Then and Now
Lesson 5 – How do we deal with doctrinal differences?

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Introduction: God forgives us to a life of learning and change!

- A. In our previous study we learned that every Christian experiences a resurrection to a new life! **(1 Cor 6:11-14; 2 Cor 5:17)**
 - 1. As was the case in establishing the resurrection of Christ, God continues to teach us how to think as we seek the paths to walk as a Christian.
 - 2. We are in a battle for our hearts and our thoughts!
- B. The Christian's goal is to be like Jesus.
 - 1. We are to empty all of our thoughts, teachings and practices and replace them with the revealed words of God. **(Jn 8:28-29; 1 Pt 4:11)**
 - 2. This involves a reasoning process that involves arguments, discerning contradictions, and applying the word of God to today's issues. **(2 Cor 10:3-5)**
 - 3. Jesus will let us often be tested for our good!
- C. Jesus wants all of us – heart, mind and soul! **(Mt 22:37-40)**
 - 1. Serving God is more than correct reasoning, but correct reasoning is a part!
 - 2. We must know the nature of God and come to love Him. On that foundation we reason and discern the paths of our lives. **(Eph 3:17-19)**

I. How does correct understanding of doctrine affect our relationship with God and with other Christians?

- A. The Bible clearly reveals that there are doctrines that separate us from God and should separate us from brethren that hold them. **(2 John 9-11)**
 - 1. There were many issues that were connected to the question of whether Jesus came in the flesh.
 - 2. The key question was if one was willing to hear and abide only in the teachings revealed by the apostles. **(1 Jn 4:1, 5-6; Acts 2:42)**
 - 3. The resurrection of Christ points us to the source of authority and our attitude towards that authority! **(Rev 22:18-19)**
- B. Doctrinal discernment was commended and a lack of discernment could result in the destruction of a local church. **(Rev 2:2, 14-16, 20-24)**
 - 1. In Ephesus they correctly discerned doctrine but lost their first love. Again, discernment is part and not the whole of a Christian's walk. **(Rev 2:4-5)**
 - 2. We cannot be like the Corinthians that developed a spirit of pride that concluded that doctrinal agreement or getting the "right religious code" was *never* an issue for a Christian! **(2 Cor 11:2-4)**
 - 3. The open-ended fellowship approach resulted in an "anti-reason" approach to doctrinal issues. Paul showed the absurdity of this position. **(2 Cor 11:19-21)**
- C. How do we deal with the various levels of understanding and maturity among Christians?
 - 1. Here is an area where great discernment is needed.

2. Often brethren try to frame this issue in extremes and push towards easy answers. (Ex. “You must divide on all doctrinal issues.” Or “Doctrinal issues have no part of the unity of Christians.”)

II. Key Truths in Unity and Doctrinal Differences

- A. Resolving doctrinal differences *is a vital part of unity*. (1 Cor 1:10; 4:6)
 1. A position that eliminates the need to resolve differences is wrong!
 2. How did brethren resolve doctrinal differences? (Acts 15:1-2, 5-7, 22)
 3. Any leadership that runs from controversy will get greater controversy in time!
 4. Both personal and doctrinal differences should be addressed.
- B. We must put fellowship with God as our first priority.
 1. Doctrinal compromise is viewed as adultery! (Jer 23:14-17)
 2. God strongly warns against extending fellowship to “those who despise Me” (Jer 23:17; 1 Jn 2:19; 1 Cor 11:18-19)
 3. The leadership of Israel said God’s “peace” was with upon those that despised God’s way and that “no evil shall come upon you.”
 4. When Jeremiah tried to openly reason with these grace and love advocates suddenly all of this tolerance was *not shown towards Jeremiah*. (Jer 18:18)
 5. Years ago I heard Hiram Hutto say “Preach the truth and fellowship will take care of itself!” My experience has been that open Bibles and open hearts will bring the fruit God wants.
- C. We should distinguish between collective practices and individual practices.
 1. When I am put in a position to personally be a part of that which I believe to be wrong then I must separate myself from that relationship. (2 Cor 6:14-18)
 2. When I am put in position of supporting men that do not abide in the doctrine of Christ, then their work is put on my account. In a positive way this is true of supporting faithful men. (2 Jn 9-11, 3 Jn 4-8)
- D. We must give time for growth and development.
 1. We need to be longsuffering as one grows in Christ. (Eph 4:1-3, 14-16)
 2. However, when men seek to draw disciples to themselves then quick action needs to be taken. We must discern the difference! (Rom 16:17-18; Gal 4:16-17)
 3. As a new Christian I knew very little about crucial questions in the Bible. I always tried to learn more and move forward because of my love for God. (Heb 11:6)

III. Empty approaches that cause people to ignore doctrinal differences

- A. A misapplication of Romans 14.
 1. There is a specific kind of difference addressed in this chapter! All positions mentioned are right with God within themselves. (Rom 14:1-4)
 2. Paul takes one of the issues and clearly expounds upon it. (Rom 14:14)
 3. If all doctrinal differences are placed in the instructions in this chapter then:
 - (1) No doctrinal difference should have an impact on fellowship with God or with brethren. (v3)
 - (2) We would be sinning to tell another they are wrong about a matter and then trying to teach them! (v4)
- B. A refusal to apply scriptures to modern day questions.

1. Similar to the point made earlier about the misuse of expository preaching, some are taking the view that only issues specifically named in the scriptures should we be concerned with.
 2. I have seen different lists by brethren but here are a few items named: drug abuse, the use of instrumental music in worship, multi-church organizations, understanding baptism to be essential to salvation, the day of the Lord's Supper and giving, pre-millennialism and like issues!
 3. Please note that Satan has for years just changed the name of a thing and people went along! Consider this simple statement in the works of the flesh "And the like." (**Gal 5:21**)
- C. Extending forgiveness and fellowship without correcting false doctrinal practices.
1. This is similar to the position many take in Romans 14. "Continuous Cleansing" or automatic forgiveness means that since God accepts you, then others must as well.
 2. We need to depend upon the conditional promises of God and let God handle all the special situations one may envision. (**1 Jn 1:7-9; Acts 8:22**)
- D. Too many have developed a philosophical approach to doctrinal differences that ends with closed Bibles and conclusions without serious study!
1. Those who take these approaches also commonly scapegoat brethren who say we must work out our doctrinal differences.
 2. Division, despair among brethren and bad attitudes are all attributed to those who want open study and resolve questions that come amongst us. The "Pharisee" label is abundantly used by the grace advocates!
 3. If something has value you will learn to fight for it!

Conclusion: We ought to hear God rather than men! (**Jer 7:9-10**)

Jeremiah 7:9-10 ⁹ "Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, ¹⁰ "and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered to do all these abominations'?"

How Doctrine Disrupts Unity

By Gary W. Summers

As one considers the plethora of "Promise Keeper" rallies there have been in the past few years, as well as all of the unity forums and ecumenical efforts, one simply must wonder how there could be any religious division left in America. How many "lovefests" have occurred in which it has been announced that the sounds the people gathered together were hearing were those old "denominational walls" tumbling down. How many times has Max Lucado oozed forth his false teaching on unity to the delight of emotionally-guided sycophants?

YET THERE'S NO UNITY! First, people left the Southern Baptists because in their conventions some thought they ought to stand for something. When they did, some suggested an exodus to a more moderate, tolerant (translate "spineless") group. No matter what the cause, the idea of standing for what the Bible teaches is viewed as a "risky scheme" by many. Oh, it is easy enough to formulate a statement that harmonizes with the Scriptures and vote on it. But then the news media jumps in, all aghast, and, rather than make a defense, some prefer sidle off the stage of controversy.

Now the Presbyterians are the focus of controversy, and who can predict what havoc their two current conferences will wreak? So far, three issues have arisen. *The Dallas Morning News* reported on June 9th

concerning the first one with this headline: "Some Presbyterians Fear Splintering Over Ordination of Gays" (1G). Just about every different viewpoint has been reported. One "interim pastor" from Austin said: "There's no consensus--no single mind in Christ on these issues" (5G). He advocates "an incomplete resolution."

What is that supposed to mean? "We are resolved that people should either agree or disagree with ordaining homosexuals." Say, there is a middle-of-the-road proposition! The authoritative Word clearly teaches that a person cannot become a child of God if he or she is a practicing homosexual, let alone attempt to teach Christianity to others. It is a sin which must be repented of (**1 Cor. 6:9-11**).

"I wish we could disagree and still be able to love one another," one delegate said (5G). Love has nothing to do with it. People ought to love as God does--He does not quit loving us when we are wrong. Love and fellowship, however, are two different things. If someone begins to teach the devil's doctrine, God still loves him, but He will no longer fellowship him. Instead, He will call on him to repent. Imagine Paul saying, "Lord, I have decided to quit preaching against sin. I'm going to tell people that fornication, homosexuality, and divorce for every cause are all right." How long would Paul have remained an apostle? When God speaks on a subject, that ends the discussion and any future debate.

Another "pastor" commented: "If they let each presbytery decide whether to ordain gays and lesbians, then what's not to stop them from letting each presbytery decide its own theology?" (5G). Of course, control over all their members is the basis for a denomination in the first place. All of them began with a specific doctrine. Now they have annual conventions to decide what that doctrine is. Of course, if they relied on the Scriptures in the first place, they would neither be a denomination nor have an annual convention.

God never designed the church to decide doctrine. Jesus is the head over the church, and he ordained elders to lead each congregation in the Truth. Men have no authority to invent their own teachings. Those who love God continue even to this day "in the apostles' doctrine" (**Acts 2:42**).

The June 16th headline in *The Dallas Morning News* was "Delegates Vote To End Presbyterians' Ban on Gay Ministers" (1A). The assembly voted to give each of the 173 presbyteries an opportunity to ratify the proposal during this next year. If the majority does so, their ministers can be openly homosexual. The head of the Presbyterians for Renewal said: "What has crept into the Presbyterian Church is not just a difference of opinion, but unbelief."

He is right. This decision is a rejection of what the Bible teaches. But so is denominationalism itself. One wonders when was the last time that he or other denominational officials were called upon to defend their existence. What passage speaks of the Presbyterian Church? Who were Presbyterians in the Bible? In what passage did Jesus decide to build His church and divide it into various branches? May those who see this General Assembly decision as an assault on faith and the integrity of the Scriptures use it as a springboard to re-examine **ALL** their practices! May this defeat serve as a catalyst to cause them to return to the Scriptures in all things!

The moderator of the General Assembly "asked the assembly to pause for prayer four times during debate. After the votes were tallied, he asked for silence and another moment of prayer" (20). Is prayer supposed to sanctify the decision? Will prayer somehow take corruption and turn it into purity? Will prayer take error and transform it into truth? Too often people assume that, once they have prayed about something, their decision must have been prompted by the very wisdom of God. No wonder foolishness reigns!

The Battle Over John 14:6

One would think that the General Assembly of Presbyterians would have been worn out over the decision on ordaining homosexuals, but no--they also decided to tackle an even more controversial topic: whether or not to believe **John 14:6**. Of course, that was not the way they put it. Rather, they voted on "Is Jesus the only way to salvation?" Having already voted down **Romans 1 and Jude 7**, guess what they decided? According to a June 15th article in *The Dallas Morning News*, a majority of more than 500 delegates voted against a proposal "that said Jesus is the lone vehicle of salvation" (4A). As one person put it, if salvation does not come through Jesus alone, "who are the other deities we are talking about?" Also, what does **John 14:6** mean?

"One side called for tolerance of non-Christian faiths." So what did the other side call for--shooting them? People misunderstand tolerance. Christians can be civil and non-threatening to anyone who is not a Christian: atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, etc. Tolerance, however, does not mean refusing to tell them that these religions are wrong and that they will be lost in their sins unless they come to God through Jesus. Since when has it been a matter of: "Agree with me, or I'll kill you"? Did the apostles and Christians in the first century go forth with swords to convert the world? No, they were armed with the Gospel. If people cannot be converted with reason and evidence, they will just have to remain part of the majority (**Matt. 7:13-14**).

One delegate commented: "I don't have the right to say that other people can't find God in other ways." Why not? Jesus said it. People are afraid to speak the truth because of the way the "politically correct" will pillory them. At least when Peter denied the Lord, he feared for his life (he still sinned in so doing), but this individual and others like him are perpetually spineless. Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost and for the remainder of his life. He was not ashamed to tell the Jews that they were wrong in crucifying Jesus (which was not a lack of love on his part), nor did he hesitate in saying, "There is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved" (**Acts 4:12**). But those who are afraid to say the same thing today demonstrate continual cowardice.

Either Jesus is THE way, or He is not. He is not A way, implying that other "Saviors" may also get people to Heaven. If He is not THE way; then He is NO way. Jesus told people that they were either for Him or against Him (**Matt. 12:30**). No Scripture says, "I am *sort of* the way, *kind of* the truth, and *perhaps* the life (for some)." Denominations have been insisting, in response to criticism of their existence, "We are all just trying to get to Heaven. We're just traveling different roads." They should not be surprised that some are now willing to let some of those other roads belong to various "world religions." Pluralism is making great headway. Even the columnist acknowledged this fact and said that once a question such as this one would have been a "no-brainer."

One "Senior Pastor" here in Dallas commented on this decision. He accused the General Assembly of exercising "creative unbelief." (*The Dallas Morning News*, June 23, 28A). After stating that Jesus is the *only* path to salvation, he commented: "Every once in a while we have a General Assembly that, unhooked from its Biblical/theological moorings, kicks against the goads...." He concludes by saying that "it truly is a sad day in the life of the Presbyterian Church USA." *Unbelief* is an appropriate designation for doctrines that oppose the Scriptures. Again, the very concept of denominationalism unhooks people from their Biblical moorings.

Days of Creation

Heretofore we have been discussing recent events occurring in the Presbyterian Church USA. Meeting the week following this group was the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). According to *The Dallas Morning News*, the "more conservative PCA is the smaller of the country's two main Presbyterian denominations" (June 16, 5G). The PCA is slightly more than 10% of the PCUSA. For those who are wondering about the difference, the smaller group would not currently even consider ordaining homosexuals; they also do not believe in ordaining women as "pastors."

They follow the Westminster Confession of Faith which states: "It pleased God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost...in the beginning to create...the world...in the space of six days; and all was very good." This smaller group is now debating whether the days of Genesis are literal or not. Theoretically, they must also be debating whether or not their Confession of Faith also meant six literal days.

Last year their General Assembly decided that there were four possible interpretations to the means by which God created the world. The article does not state what they are, beyond mentioning the literal and the figurative. Presumably there is a "gap" theory in there somewhere and perhaps even a "modified gap" theory. None of these, except the literal, is correct. The rest came into being to try to accommodate evolution, which some mistakenly thought had been proved. Yet after 142 years since Darwin wrote *The Origin of the Species*, evolution remains an unsubstantiated theory, and the numbers in Genesis are still literal.

A day *may* stand for more than a twenty-four hour period of time in the Bible, but not when it is preceded by words such as *first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh*. Day is not used figuratively when it has an evening and a morning, either. **Exodus 20:11** is not the least ambiguous as it explains the reason for the fourth commandment, keeping the Sabbath day holy: "For in six days the Lord made the heavens

and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it."

There is not one reason ever given in the Biblical text to doubt that these were six literal days. If someone wanted to convey the idea that these were six literal days, what more could have been written toward that end? How many Israelites ever doubted that it was six literal days? Only when evolution demanded eons of time did anyone ever consider any other explanation. But all alternate explanations are vain because this truth is so well established in the Scriptures. It is strange that a "conservative" group that believes the Bible is inspired would question this teaching.

Denominationalism and Unity

So what have we seen about unity? Unity can exist in one of two ways: 1) By regarding the Bible as it is in truth--the inspired Word of God (**2 Tim. 3:16-17**), or 2) By disregarding the Bible and any doctrine whatsoever. This last method is advanced by Rubel Shelly, Max Lucado and others. Forget any specific Bible teaching; let's just affirm our love for each other. Hugs can hide a multitude of instructions.

The problem with unity rallies is that they only last so long as people do not attend worship anywhere on a regular basis. Sooner or later, somebody is going to insist that the Bible be studied, and then there will be disunity. There are already two large groups of Presbyterians. Members of the denomination cannot get along with each other: hence, two groups. But they cannot get along with each other, either. The larger group just resolved to ordain homosexuals; some will rebel against that. They refused to uphold that Jesus is THE way to eternal life, and some are upset about that. The more conservative group is debating the literalness of **Genesis 1**. If there are four interpretations, and all of them are equally acceptable, that is tantamount to saying that we cannot know the Truth.

See what a problem doctrine is? No wonder unity meetings are about *feeling good*. **Thinking** would kill them. No wonder shallow messages are gaining in popularity and people prefer entertainment to reason and analysis. The minute something of substance is taught, disagreement erupts.

How did Jesus deal with this problem? He chose substance. What about when people disagreed with Him? He showed them where they were wrong and what the Truth was (**Matt. 22**). "But He didn't unite all of them," someone observes. Sure He did. He united them against Himself and His disciples. Unity is desirable, but Truth is paramount. Jesus would have united all of Israel if He could have; it was His devout wish (**Matt. 23:37**). But Truth (doctrine) is more important--even if disunity results and prevails.

Only a few will choose to walk in Truth. The rest will reject it--because of tradition (**Matt. 15:1-9**), immorality (**2 Peter 2**), the desire to have their own following (**Acts 20:30**), peer pressure (**Matt. 26:69-75**), lukewarmness (**Rev. 3:15-16**), or because they have lost their first love (Rev. 2:4). All of them will have to live eternally with their decision.

So long as doctrine thrives, there will be division among God's people. Even man-made denominations cannot avoid it. It is simply a fact of spiritual life. We do not rejoice in division, but we do rejoice in the Truth and in the God who revealed it to us. Only those who love Him will experience true unity forever.