

Dealing with Doctrinal Differences in the Church Part 1

How do we handle doctrinal differences in the church? Membership in the church is based on a person's faith in Jesus Christ. But in the same fellowship, not every one has the same degree of faith. And because each believer grows at a different rate, it is inevitable that even sincere Christians differ in their interpretation of the Bible. Those who are more discerning may gather more insights from a verse. Those who are newly converted may require more study to discern the issues and meaning. Even amongst matured Bible teachers and students, there are differences of opinions about a doctrine. In such a situation, the interpretation of the Church is very important. What the Church teaches, of course, must be judged according to the Scriptures. But every local Church as a pillar and ground of the truth must lead the members to know the truth.

What if the Church does not have an official stand concerning an issue or doctrine, but is in the process of working out a position? In the first place, we should thank God for the leadership in wanting to provide a Scripture based teaching for the people of God. Whether or not we agree with the conclusion eventually is another matter. Differences and disagreements can be solved via the means of protest and acquiesce. But at least the Church's effort in finding a biblically based teaching and solution should be honoured and respected. Any member who becomes impatient with the leadership and sinfully hurls insults and inconspicuously discredits the intention of the leadership sins gravely, albeit in the name of zeal and truth.

1. Let me offer a few humbling thoughts as our church embarks on a study of the divorce-remarriage teaching.
We must find out what scripture says about the issue. Nowhere else does God speak authoritatively in a way that is mandated on all Christians. It is to God's word that we must submit. And if God's Word clearly contradicts our personal bias and convictions, then our views must be regarded as biblically incorrect.
2. We must make sure that we are communicating fairly. It is fairly easy in a doctrinal controversy to misrepresent a position. When we hold strongly to a certain position, it is easy to prejudge our differing brethren without giving them a chance to speak completely about the matter. In dealing with doctrinal issues, we sometimes like to pick those parts in a thesis and document that lean towards our position. This biased research can potentially distort a position and dangerously misleading.
3. We need to make sure that we do not overload a non-essential issue to make it a test of orthodoxy. When we do that, we lean towards ultra-orthodoxy and legalism. An old axiom that is repeated oftentimes is helpful here: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials, charity".
4. Following from the above, we need to focus on those Reformed fundamentals that unite us a church together. Our love for the precious doctrine of God's sovereignty and particular grace should bind our hearts and mind together. Here I appeal to everyone that we should never give up such a rare kindred spirit for the love of God's sovereignty, unless the issue at hand jeopardizes God's sovereignty and redefines the gospel.
5. Some people's starting position is "I simply cannot deal with those Christians who think that." Here I must say that this spirit is wrong and needs to be corrected. Even when you are convinced that the brother is wrong, you are required to admonish him in love. 1 Corinthians 12 uses the figure of a human body to teach us the importance of mutual dependence in the body of Christ. Even in a controversial debate, our starting point should be, "They are part of Christ's body just as I am, I cannot say 'I don't need you'." I suggest that we do not begin with the fixed supposition that we can't deal with, and live with those who differ from me. The biblical imperative from 1 Corinthians 12 is that we can, and we must.

6. Finally, we need to explore to what extent our disagreement limit our ability to work together. In exploring this possibility, we may even discover that significant doctrinal issues limit us a lot. But in the end, this does not give us licence to let things degenerate into sinful fighting and unkind rhetoric with other dear brethren in the Church for whom Christ died.

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