

When Controversies Arise

Controversies and issues are a part of life. We face them at school, in the home, at work, and in religion. How we handle those controversies will determine the direction we will take in life and our relationships. In the area of religion there have always been and always will be various issues each generation must face. This is partly due to new converts and the influence of the world on Christians.

The very word "apologetics" means the branch of theology concerned with the defense or proof of Christianity (taken from dictionary.com). There are those that believe it is un-Christ like to engage in religious discussions and debates. This is mostly due to the un-Christ like attitudes often displayed in such discussions, however, we are admonished to defend and spread the word of God, Jude 3, 1 Peter 3.15.

In the first century the eating of certain foods, observance of days, circumcision, eating in the temple of idols, eating meats sacrificed to idols at home or at someone else's home, and a host of other issues arose. Of those issues some were of a personal nature and dealt with personal conviction. "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind." (Romans 14:5) While the person holding the personal conviction often thinks it is more than personal we know from Romans 14 that it was personal and not scriptural dogma. Some issues were binding where God had not bound. For instance, the Jews wanted to make circumcision a condition of salvation. And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." (Acts 15:1) By making circumcision a condition of salvation they went beyond the doctrine of Christ. Then there are those who want to negate or loosen part of God's law. This can be seen in Matthew 19.1 when the question arose "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason?" The practice of many at that time was to allow divorce for any reason. Jesus' answer was no, Matthew 19.4-6.

Finally, some issues were due to false doctrines promoted by false teachers. Brethren denied Jesus came in the flesh, 1 John 4.1ff. Others were denying the resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15).

Today we have similar issues such as the deity of Christ, the AD 70 Doctrine which teaches the resurrection occurred at the destruction of Jerusalem, women preachers, one-man eldership, more than one man must be qualified to have elders, divided classes, one cup on the Lord's Supper, Sunday night observance of the Lord's Supper, and the list goes on. Again, the issue may be a matter of personal conviction, some binding where God has not bound, others loosening where God has not loosened, and some contradict the very doctrine of Christ. We must be able to make the distinction.

What is important is how we handle these issues. What I notice in the New Testament is how the enemies of Christ often opposed the Gospel. They made personal attacks on Paul. "For his letters," they say, "are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." (2Corinthians 10:10) Did it really matter how tall Paul was or the color of his hair or even if he had hair? Did his lack of eloquence matter? Paul defended his apostleship in passages such as Galatians 1.1 but he did not defend himself. Personal attacks are a sign of a weak argument and moral character. At the same time the person defending the truth should not interpret questions or disagreements as personal attacks. I may like you personally but that does not mean I will accept your teaching if I deem it contrary to the scriptures. The enemies of Christ resorted to carnal methods such as disruption and violence. "But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people." (Acts 17:5)

How should one respond to various religious controversies? Seek to establish Biblical authority. Have book, chapter, and verse before you accept

anything. Be like those brethren at Berea who searched the scriptures daily to see whether the teaching of Paul was true, Acts 17.11. Look for the Biblical principle. For instance, if one seeks to bind circumcision they must bind all of the Law of Moses, Galatians 5.3-4. Make sure you are properly defining your words. False teachers will often use a non-Biblical definition to change the teaching of the Bible. Finally, keep it simple. The doctrine of Christ is simple. While some doctrines are more complicated than others the gist of the Gospel is pretty simple. Look at all the passages on a subject and realize they harmonize rather than contradict.

Our task is to "rightly divide the word of God" 2 Timothy 2.15. That means to understand what the Bible teaches and not what we want it to teach. Then we are to defend the word of God. - - Dennis Tucker