

GUIDELINES FOR CONTROVERSIES

by Ray C. Stedman

When the Apostle Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy from his dungeon in Rome, he realized that Timothy was living in a world that was about to explode in conflict -- a world that was very much like the one we live in today. Timothy had another problem too: he was teaching a church which was threatening to split apart and divide into factions over arguments and divisions which were separating believers. So, in this letter, the apostle tells how to handle both of these problems -- how to live in a world that is threatened with conflict, and how to live in a church that is threatened with controversy.

In the section which we have before us today the apostle is dealing with the matter of controversies, church fights, incipient splits, times when the congregation is divided over some issue. Paul here tells us what kind of controversies should and should not be allowed, and how Christians should conduct themselves in the midst of them.

Paul puts it very plainly. Second Timothy 2:23:

Have nothing to do with stupid, senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to every one, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness. {2 Tim 2:23-25a RSV}

Some have read that passage as though it said, "Never get involved with any kind of controversy. Don't ever take up sides or press any issue to the point that it creates argument. Stay away from it." But that is not what it says at all. In fact, if you read it that way it often results in what many churches do today, which is to take issues that need to be debated and sweep them under the rug. They cover them over and pretend they do not exist; they try to maintain a facade of outward peace, while division and dissent seethe and ferment underneath until it explodes in the breakup of a congregation.

That is not what the apostle is saying at all. In fact, in other places he has said very clearly that there must be controversies in churches. Look at First Corinthians 11:19: "There must indeed be controversies [*heresies* is the word] among you in order that those who are approved might be made manifest," {1 Cor 11:19 KJV}. In other words, how are you going to tell who is mature enough to handle a controversial matter unless you have a controversy to work on? So there must be heresies, differences of viewpoint, among you, Paul says.

We can be very grateful indeed to the great controversies of the past in the church which have served to clarify truth. The great Lutheran hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," resulted from the controversy that raged around Martin Luther over the doctrine of justification by faith. The church has never forgotten that controversy which cleared the air on what was a very important doctrinal matter.

But what the apostle is saying to Timothy is that there are certain kinds of controversies he must never get involved in. "Have nothing to do with them," Paul says. There are two kinds particularly -- stupid controversies, and senseless controversies.

The word that is translated "stupid" here is the word *moros*, from which we get our word, *moron*. Paul is talking about moronic controversies, foolish, trivial matters which, even when they are settled after long and loud debate, do nothing for you; they do not advance the Christian cause in the least degree. Such trivial matters may be interesting in some limited way, but they should never be allowed to become controversies and have people divide over them.

In the Middle Ages we know that the scholars of the church debated at great length issues like how many angels can stand on the head of a pin. That is a foolish question. Angels are spirits, and as such do not occupy space. The head of a pin is the same as the top of a mountain to angels.

But we have our own ridiculous questions today. I have heard people debate heatedly and at great length what prominent world figure in this day has a name which can be reduced numerically to the numbers 666. One can buy a lot of books today -- very inexpensively -- suggesting names that have been advanced in the past of people who are no longer with us. The last person I saw mentioned in this regard was Anwar Sadat. He, however, was assassinated a few weeks later so he has been removed from the running on that.

Take a question such as I have heard hotly debated, "Was Jesus crucified on Wednesday, Thursday or Friday?" That question does have some degree of historical interest -- there is evidence for a day other than the traditional Friday -- so perhaps that issue merits an hour or so of discussion or study. But what difference does it make even if it is settled? To divide up and separate from other believers because of that is ridiculous, yet there are people who do that.

Another example is the debate going on today about whether the Shroud of Turin is the burial robe of Jesus or not. Again, this is an interesting question. It has some significance and it merits some discussion. I have read most of the articles I have run across on it. But it does not merit controversy or argument or heated debate, because even if it proves to be the genuine burial robe of Jesus, how has that advanced us? How are we profited by that? The most it can be is a slight additional evidence of the historicity of the Biblical story, yet for centuries that has been well established so it does not help us much.

You can probably think of a dozen more debates on trivial matters like this that get nowhere. Those are what Paul calls foolish, moronic debates. Have nothing to do with them.

Then the second word is translated "senseless." This word really means unlearned, arising out of ignorance. As such it refers to questions that are basically insoluble; we do not know enough to answer the questions that are being asked. Take, for example, the mode of baptism in the early church. Many people have angrily debated that. They are sure they are right and can prove that the early Christians immersed people. But another crowd says, "No, they sprinkled them," or "poured water over them." That has been hotly debated, even to the point of trying to determine whether they put them face down forward, or three times backward, whatever.

I am of the persuasion that you cannot prove from the Greek text of the New Testament what was the mode of baptism employed, although you can do so from various versions because they are translated with a bias. But when you get back to the original language there is no way of knowing. I think that is deliberate, because it is not important. We put too much stress on symbols and on carrying through a certain ritual, meanwhile forgetting the great reality behind it which God wants us to know. So debating over that is a futile thing.

I remember when I first came to Palo Alto there were a number of Christians in this country, especially in this area, who were very hotly debating the question, "Could Jesus have sinned? When Jesus became a man, did he so much become a man that, like us, he was not only tempted but he could have sinned?" Almost every Christian agrees with the Biblical statement that Jesus did not sin. He himself challenged the Pharisees of his day, saying to them, "Who of you convinces me of sin?" {cf, John 8:46a KJV}. But the question that was raised was, "Could he have?" That is a hypothetical matter. We do not know enough, Scripture does not tell us enough to answer that. We can speculate all we want to, but that does not give us answers. To debate over that, to argue over it, to get angry about it and call people heretics over a matter like that is absolutely foolish. That is what the apostle calls a "senseless" debate.

The question of the reconciliation of the free will of man and the sovereignty of God -- though that is a subject that merits a great deal of discussion and deep, theological thinking -- nevertheless, ultimately falls in that category. We do not have enough information to settle it. We can believe both are true, but we cannot finally decide once and for all.

This whole matter of whether the gift of tongues is for today or not also falls into this category. This is a debate that cannot ultimately be settled, it seems, because it is always with us. Just last week I met with a group of people from this church who debated this question all evening. Some were pro, some were con, but the discussion was kept at a very high level. It never degenerated to putting people down, calling them heretics or wiping them out. It was a beautiful evening spent in a very profitable discussion that clarified the issues in

many ways, though it did not convince some. That is proper. There is nothing wrong with that. There must indeed be differences of viewpoint among us and they are proper to debate, but to get angry and upset and divide is what is wrong. That is what Paul is talking about here.

So we can put it in a nutshell:

- Discussion, yes;
- Controversy, no.

Stupid, senseless controversies breed quarrels, Paul says. When you start pushing your viewpoint to the degree that you wipe out others, when you put people down and treat them with something less than respect, you breed quarrels and divisions in the body of Christ.

What about proper controversies then, the kind we should discuss? What about attacks on vital doctrines, questions on the proper Christian response to the burning social issues of our day? How should we handle such important issues that people feel so strongly about they feel they cannot surrender lest they give up something vital and important? The apostle has some very clear guidelines for us. He gives us five things, one negative and four positives.

The first one is the negative: "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome." The servant of the Lord is any Christian, but especially Christian leaders like Timothy. The Lord's servant must not be an argumentative, pejorative, belligerent type of person who is ready to come out with guns blazing. There are many people like that who shoot from the lip, always ready for an argument. But the Lord's servant is not out to win arguments; he is not out to squash the opposition or silence dissent by overbearing, heavy-handed approaches. Rather, he is there to encourage discussion and examination. He does not put down opponents or resort to name-calling or diatribe. He is not argumentative, not contentious.

Charles Spurgeon spoke about those in his day who, he said, "... went about with theological revolvers in their ecclesiastical trousers." The Lord's servant does not do that.

What then is the Lord's servant to be?

First, he is to be "kindly to every one." No matter if it is a cultist he is debating, or someone who is very upset about an issue, somebody with an ax to grind, some difficult person who is obviously out to cause trouble and create dissension, the Lord's servant is to be kindly to everyone, the apostle says. Actually, that phrase is translated from one single word in the Greek which appears only in this place in the New Testament. It is a word which means "gentle." A better English translation, perhaps, would be, *approachable*. He is someone who is approachable.

When I was at Dallas Seminary, I had a Bible teacher there who was a godly, gifted man. I had great respect for his Bible knowledge, but when I went to see him once to ask him a Bible question, he was so cold, stern, and harsh with me that I never asked him another question. I listened to him teach, but I never went to him again. That is the opposite of being approachable, open to discussion with anyone.

Second, the Lord's servant is to be "an apt teacher," i.e., skillfully dealing with the facts involved, not with feelings, not with fantasies, but with the facts of Scripture. There is where we must always return. It is so easy for an argument to slide off the facts and onto feelings, experiences, and reactions to things. The Lord's servant must call people back to facts.

Paul Winslow and I were discussing a matter at a staff meeting the other day. I brought up something that he took issue to, very kindly and gently, but he brought out some facts. I said to him, "You know the trouble with you, Paul, is that you don't know how to argue. You just deal with facts, but you can't get a good argument going with facts!" We laughed about that, but that is the point -- the servant of the Lord must be an apt teacher.

Then third, he must be "forbearing." That is a great word. It means he must keep his cool, be unruffled and

not respond in kind to what people are handing him. That is not easy to do.

When somebody attacks me personally in a debate, I want to attack back. I want to start with his remote ancestry and point out to him what is wrong with that, then bring it right down to the present, and show him how fouled up he is, and, furthermore, how much worse he is going to get as he proceeds into the future!

But that is not what a servant of the Lord is to do. He is to recognize that when he is reviled, if he reviles in return, he has departed from the example of his Lord, who, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; ... but he trusted to him who judges justly," (1 Pet 2:23 {RSV}).

What that is saying is you cannot keep your cool by merely deciding not to get angry. Will power alone will not handle this kind of pressure. I have tried it. I have determined not to get upset in a certain controversy and found that as the pressure mounted and I was attacked personally I could not keep my promise to myself and I would strike back. No, it is not will power alone, it is dependence on Divine aid. It is an inward reliance on God, a calling on God to help you at that point, to recognize your weakness and help you to stand and not respond in kind. That is what forbearance refers to.

The fourth thing the apostle says sums up in a kind of a harmony of action all of the above. He says, "correcting his opponents with gentleness." Here the word gentleness is really the word *meeek*. And meekness is not weakness. We often think of it that way -- a kind of a chinless, Casper Milquetoast type of response where one remains meek and quiet. That is not the idea. Meekness in Scripture is selflessness. Meekness is not letting yourself get involved; it is not taking things personally, in other words.

The King James Version has a very good translation here. It says, instructing "those who oppose themselves." That shows what error does to us. When we get stubborn, when we are sure we are right, when we insist on our own point of view, and get personal, etc., what we are doing is opposing ourselves. We stand in our own way, we become our own worst enemy, and we create our own problems. That is the revelation of this. Until we change ourselves, we will never solve the controversy.

The thing we all know, but so easily forget, is that the only person we can change in a controversy is ourselves. You cannot change other people. You can force their behavior to be different, but you do not change them inside.

We all know about the little boy whose mother tried to get him to sit down and forced him to do so, but he said, "I may be sitting down outside, but I'm standing up inside."

"A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." And a woman -- well, she is almost as bad as a man.

No, you only can change yourself. We do not think we are contributing anything to the problem, but we always are. When an argument exists, and especially when it gets heated, angry, and personal, then we are definitely contributing to it and we are opposing ourselves; we are standing in our own way to the blessing God wants to bring.

If you are dealing with that, it requires what Paul here calls *correcting*. That is a word that means "child-training" -- you deal with it like a child. We have three young grandsons living with us now. Two of them have bikes which they leave right in front of the steps to the house. I have tried to tell them that is not the place to leave them because some of us older and slower people fall over them. It occurred to me the other day, after the umpteenth time that the bikes had been left there, that I had never told them where to put them. I had only said, "Don't leave them there." So I took one of my grandsons and showed him where to put the bike, telling him it was just as easy to put it there, it will not get in anybody's way, everybody will be happy with you, etc. He looked up at me and smiled. I could see that it meant a lot to him just to have me take the time to show him another way to handle the problem. That is the word that is employed here: "Instructing those who oppose themselves." Paul is talking about training them and showing them another way to handle the problem.

That brings us to the last and, in many ways, the most important thing of all. Paul concludes with these words:

God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. {2 Tim 2:25b-26 RSV}

In dealing with controversy, the one thing the servant of the Lord must remember is the Divine possibilities that are always present. He must understand that, if he conducts himself as Paul has outlined here, there is a very real possibility that it will trigger a Divine process of three steps:

The first step is, God will grant the person repentance. It is very remarkable that repentance is not something the person concerned does, it is something God enables him to do. Repentance does not mean to feel sorry; it means to change your attitude, change your heart, take a different view, a different stance on the matter. That is a gift of God. We do not run our lives. Nobody does. We think we do, but we are always either being influenced by the devil and his angels -- master psychologists that they are, able to twist our thinking and influence us in ways we are not aware -- or we are being led and influenced by the Spirit of God who is enabling us to do things that we could not otherwise do. So what we can do is remember that God may grant them repentance.

The words may perhaps mean God sometimes has purposes in mind that we do not know. All we are seeing is the immediate struggle, the immediate problem, and we would love to see it resolved. We think that that is the main purpose God has in mind as well, but not always. He is, of course, concerned about peace. He is the great Mediator. The Lord Jesus is the One who brings peace, who breaks down middle walls of partition that separate people. But sometimes he is accomplishing something else besides, and he delays the repentance, or he is working out another purpose that we cannot see. So we cannot always count on the fact that our efforts at ending controversy are going to succeed. It may be that God will not grant repentance for his own reasons.

But if he does, then the second step is clear: "They come to know the truth," Paul says. The way you can tell that repentance has been granted is that they agree with the Scripture. They accept it, they know it to be true, and though it may involve painful adjustments on their part, they are committed to it, they follow it.

The third step is, "and they may escape the snare of the devil." The devil's traps are always designed to destroy, to wreck, to ruin, to hurt, to harm, to leave people shells, full of meaningless actions that go nowhere; to take away joy and peace and love and delight. The devil does this by trapping people in ways that confuse and deceive them.

I had a very vivid example of a situation like that just this week. A young man drove five and a half hours to see me in order to talk with me about a marital problem. He and his wife are Christians, and have been married for a dozen years, but of late he had fallen in love with another woman -- a familiar story in our time. He told me that he had never really felt any sense of affection for his wife, but this woman met his needs, she turned him on, and made him feel fulfilled and satisfied. Yet his conscience bothered him because he knew it was not right. He was being terribly tormented. His business was failing, his own life was rendered miserable; he could not sleep as he was torn by these conflicting desires which he vividly explained to me. He said he had had a dream that the Lord had come and put his hand of blessing upon this union with the other woman, and said that it was the right way to go.

The man had come to me hoping that I would help resolve the conflict, and help him find a way by which he could rightly divorce his wife and marry the other woman. I did not condemn him. I understand those feelings. I did not put him down or in any way ridicule him or make him feel like he was a pariah. I explained to him what was happening. I pointed out, as gently as I could, that no matter how delightful that other experience was, no matter how much it seemed he was being fulfilled in a way he had never been before, how it appeared to offer hope for enjoyment and blessing in his life that his marriage never had, despite all that, as God looked at the situation it fell under the description of a very ugly word. I did not even have to tell him what it was. He supplied it. "I know," he said, "It's adultery, isn't it?" That is what it was, adultery.

There are some things said about adultery, what it does to us, how it destroys, how it demeans, and tears us apart, and destroys our humanity, and we looked at those. I read to him some pages out of John White's

wonderful book, *Eros Defiled* . Then we talked about what was happening in his own personal life as a result. As we talked, I could see that God had granted him repentance because, despite his feelings, he looked at me and said, "I know you're right."

Then we talked about what it would mean to go home, and give up this other woman. It would be rather like the feeling of passing through death, as though one has lost a loved one. But many people have to do that when loved ones are taken home, yet God enables a recovery to come in, and, sooner or later, they go through a process which leads at last to peace and quietness. Then this man could re-approach his marriage with a whole new look at what marriage was, and learn from this. God takes us through circumstances like this sometimes to show us what we have not been doing about our marriages, what we can do, and what the possibilities are.

When we had finished he thanked me for having been faithful to him with the Word of truth. He went away resolving that he would pass through the death of giving up the other woman so that he might fulfill the will of God, and thus escape the snare of the devil. Had he gone on, and tried to work this out on the terms he had in mind when he first came to me, inevitably he would have ended up not getting what he wanted and having to pay all the bills along the way. That is what always happens when we run from God, and have destroyed another person's hopes, dreams and happiness, which we have sworn to uphold. That is what adultery does.

When we are faithful, when we conduct ourselves as Paul describes here, we trigger a Divine process that can result in release, even though that may take us through a form of death. But if we come on argumentatively, angry, and contentious, we make that process highly unlikely to occur. That is the thrust that Paul leaves us with.

May God help us to be faithful to the Scripture, yet in such a way that we are aware of the pain and the hurt that another person can be involved in. Having been involved in it ourselves to one degree or another, we understand that it is only through death that life comes.

As Jesus put it, "Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone [loneliness, emptiness, meaninglessness], but if it dies it brings forth much fruit," {cf, John 12:24}.

That is where the Apostle Paul would lead us as well.

Prayer

Lord, teach us to walk according to the truth of the Word, this wonderful Book of reality that shows us life the way it really is and enables us to see through the deceitful snares of the devil, these alluring circumstances that seem to offer so much and deliver so little. Lord, forgive us and strengthen us to walk by faith and by the Spirit in the love and grace that you provide. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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