

Epilogue: What the Church Could Be Like in Unity

Essay 1 of 2: Considering Scripture

Romans 14:1-13a says:

"Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but do not argue about opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, 'AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD.' So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God. So let us no longer censure one another" (NASB|ICB|PEB|NASB|NBV).

This shows that Christians are expected to have differing beliefs on religious details. Notions that Christians should not have religious disagreement are contrary to Scripture.

There are two passages that tell us something very important about the significance that these disagreements are to have among us:

1 Timothy 6:3-4a "If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not adhere to sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to a godly life, he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in disputes" (NASB|NBV|NASB|NLT 1996|NASB|NKJV).

Titus 3:8b-11 "I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed God may be careful to devote themselves to good deeds. These things are good and profitable unto men: but shun foolish questionings, and genealogies, and strifes, and fightings about law; for they are unprofitable and vain. A factious man after a first and second admonition refuse; knowing that such a one is perverted, and sinneth, being self-condemned" ¹ⁿ (ESV|ASV|ESV|NLT 1996, RSV 1952|ASV).

This warns of "factious" people with "morbid interest in disputes." Greek under "factious man" is translated "heretick" ²ⁿ in the KJV. 'Heresies' transliterates αἵρεσις plural for "party"³/clique and "choosing."⁴ This is someone so fixated on an "unprofitable" dispute that s/he seeks a religious faction/party rallied around a chosen side of that dispute. The dispute is "unprofitable" because it is irrelevant to "godly life" and "good deeds."

¹ "Law" = Old Testament Jewish worship code, still approved then for Jewish-Christians.

² Disjoint from church definition, Greek transliterated "heresies" in the KJV is not plural for 'disliked view' or 'religious error,' but rather simply a clique/"party."* It also means "choosing."† This is intentional choice, not accidental mistake.

* A. Campbell, *The Christian System*, pages 76-7.

† Vine, et al, *Expository Dictionary*, page 303 NT

³ A. Campbell, *The Christian System*, pages 76-7.

⁴ Vine et al, *Expository Dictionary*, page 303 NT.

These two passages are helpful. Romans 14 tells us that Christians are expected to have differing beliefs on details of religion – these disagreements are not commanded, but they are expected. Disagreement was expected and allowed for in Scripture. Disagreement gives potential for dispute, even if it is nothing more than an exchange of discordant ideas. 1 Timothy 6:3-4 and Titus 3:8-11 both warn against fixation on disputes irrelevant to “a godly life” and “good deeds.” Per these two passages, we are not to let any such disagreements get in the way of “a godly life” and “good deeds.”

Galatians 5:19-21 has a list of “works of the flesh” (ASV) = “wrong things the sinful self does” (ICB) that starts with “sexual immorality” (ESV), includes “idolatry, sorcery” (ASV), has διχοστασια,¹ and ends with “drunkenness, orgies” (ASV|TNIV). Greek διχοστασια is “standing apart.”² This refers to acts of dividing from others; such conduct is among the carnal sins that we mortals tend toward. Greek διχοστασια “standing apart”³ = ‘engaging in acts of dividing’ is listed among and between sinful actions that are widely known in the church to be serious matters. Greek διχοστασια “standing apart”⁴ = ‘engaging in acts of dividing’ cannot be treated any differently.

When we consider this among such passages as the previous ones, we see that if we allow disagreements irrelevant to “a godly life” and “good deeds” to induce us to engage in actions contrary to Scripture, we increase our wrong. If we allow such “unprofitable” disagreements to prompt us to engage in διχοστασια “standing apart”⁵ = ‘engage in an act of dividing,’ we have increased our wrong in the same way.

Unlike uses of Scripture alleged to ‘clearly’ support a ‘side’ in c. 2000 disputes that have fueled of dividing, Scripture passages addressing this behavior itself are truly clear. That lack of ambiguity makes sense given Scripture’s purpose; per 2 Timothy 3:16-7, Scripture is given “so that the| person who serves God| may be complete,| entirely instructed for all good work.”⁶ Scripture is given to promote doing what is good, not satisfy religious curiosity. Unlike the ambiguous disputes, Scripture passages against strife-disputes and factiousness can be understood both rightly and simply.

When enough Christians accept what is wrong and desire to remedy it rightly, a church future like that outlined below will be possible. However, accepting these biblical truths is a necessity if the church is to become predominantly like the model described below. Many attitudes will need to be changed, and difficult decisions will be necessary. Many, many people will need to decide to do what is right even when it is contrary to their own desires or to the desires of people they esteem. Jesus Christ said at Luke 16:13 “No servant can serve two| lords”⁷ because “he will support the one and despise the other” (NBV). Jesus Christ is not open to mixed loyalties when it comes to Him, and many need to accept this truth in meaningful ways. The vague sketch below for how the church could function in the future is doable – and in great conformity with Scripture.

¹ Pointed out in Renn, Expository Dictionary, page 294.

² Vine, et al, Expository Dictionary, page 179 NT; in Mounce, Complete Expository Dictionary, page 1126.

³ Vine, et al, Expository Dictionary, page 179 NT; in Mounce, Complete Expository Dictionary, page 1126.

⁴ Vine, et al, Expository Dictionary, page 179 NT; in Mounce, Complete Expository Dictionary, page 1126.

⁵ Vine, et al, Expository Dictionary, page 179 NT; in Mounce, Complete Expository Dictionary, page 1126.

⁶ NBV|ICB|ASV|RVR 1909 “enteramente instruido para toda buena obra” translated.

⁷ ICB|RVR 1909, 1960, 1995 señores” translated.

Essay 2 of 2: What a Positive Response Would Involve

Galatians 5:19-21 has a list of "works of the flesh" (ASV) = "wrong things the sinful self does" (ICB) that starts with "fornication" (ASV), includes such things as "idolatry, sorcery" (ASV), has διχοστασια,¹ and ends with "drunkenness|, orgies" (ASV|TNIV). Greek διχοστασια is "standing apart"² and refers to acts of dividing.

In a future where everything on this list is treated consistently, avoidance of engaging in division would be treated as something everyone has a role in -- not just 'everyone else.' Just as every Christian is called to keep away from sexually immoral behavior, false gods, sorcery, getting drunk, or engaging in depraved parties, every Christian would see a responsibility to keep away from engaging in division.

Christians would fight this sinful tendency in the face of any type of disagreement. They would do so without compromise to their fleshly lust.

Christians would remember that Jesus Christ and serving Him come first. They would not let any disagreement distract our shared obligation to serve Him.

Romans 14 shows that even in the New Testament-era church, disagreement was expected. Disagreement will never be banished from the church in the natural universe. If we all agreed and were right, we would be agreed upon perfect knowledge. Christians are human. We desire to know ever the better about our interests, which means we seek perfect knowledge in those areas. As Christians, we seek perfect knowledge in religious matters. As humans, we are incapable of perfect knowledge. Therefore, in our efforts as Christians to learn knowledge as perfect as we can, our imperfections will keep all of us from knowing perfectly -- eliminating any chance for agreement upon perfect knowledge. Disagreement is due to all Christians' imperfections; in our future, we humbly accept this.

In study of Scripture, all disagreeing groups and individuals in Christ' church would study together in a desire to mutually benefit each other, rather than in a spirit of rivalry. The purpose of their study together has become for all involved to learn and/or derive the best understandings of Scripture -- not to defend preconceived party-line tenets or to 'one up' each other. The listening is full, as opposed to selectively for opportunities of exploitation in self-promotion campaigns or debates. The listening is in all directions. Regardless of who points out what, every reasonable point raised by a servant of Jesus Christ is considered for its merits, and adopted if correct. No viewpoint is exempt from reconsideration when relevant. When it is evident that a particular discussion over a disagreement is no longer productive for servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, we agree to disagree with all charitableness to each other and continue to serve Him together. We do so remembering that disagreement has been expected in the church since even before the writing of the New Testament was finished.

¹ Pointed out in Renn, Expository Dictionary, page 294.

² Vine, et al, Expository Dictionary, page 179 NT; in Mounce, Complete Expository Dictionary, page 1126.

As our congregations continue to disagree, we do not let this hinder efforts in our shared task to serve Christ. In 1998, ecumenical partnerships between denominations¹ⁿ were at an all-time high²; in our future, we make this local among our congregations in each locality, and have also grown this into a church-wide phenomenon. Locally, congregations of one denomination/fellowship/brotherhood' who can somehow benefit an outside congregation gladly offer what they can. Congregations of a denomination/fellowship/brotherhood' who need assistance do accept it from outside groups or from individual Christians similar to outside groups. Rather than party-line religious tenets, desire for each others' well-being motivated by our common loyalty to Jesus Christ comes first in Christians' and congregations' dealings with each other.³ⁿ

Individuals in a formal congregation or in a similar group are not treated as disreputable persons just for matters of disagreement. It is remembered that they are fellow servants of Jesus Christ, and they are valued for that.

In congregations and ministry endeavors, people do not pester ministers, leaders, teachers or other workers over religious disagreement. They respect that these servants of Jesus Christ have more important concerns. Personal religious opinions are left unexpressed when doing otherwise would be disruptive. Even in disagreement, Christians submit to each other and mutually respect each other as fitting for healthy operations of their congregations.

¹ Sometimes, official denomination mergers would be cumbersome, and are unneeded anyway. Acts 2:47b examples how "the Lord added to them day by day those |who were being saved" (ASV|NASB). All Christians are added to one church by Jesus Christ, and they are all in one church regardless of human formalities.

If haggling over mergers causes distraction from Jesus Christ's larger priorities for His church, such haggling should just be abandoned. A denomination is not always a division, and need not be a division-faction; a denomination can simply be an association of congregations. Even if a denomination began as a faction, it need not disband if it is no longer factious; it can continue to exist as an association of congregations.

² In Crow, Duke, The Church for Disciples of Christ, page 7.

³ The 1801 Cane Ridge Revival at the Cane Ridge Meeting House is an important event in the annals of efforts for church unity. At the 1952 Annual Cane Ridge Meeting, Baptist minister Edwin T. Dahlberg noted that we have international cooperation, but "more often than not it is a case of governments and peoples keeping themselves warm. They are thinking in terms of return. From a secular point of view this may be legitimate. But it does not begin to be on the same level with brotherhood in Christ, which is self-denying, and willing to lose its life from Christ's sake."*

In secular cooperation, normally what is intended is what each party has to gain for themselves. It should not be that way among Christians.

Rather than think "What is in it for us?" as we ponder cooperation, Christians should think "What benefit can this have for the cause of Jesus Christ and serving Him?" We should be prepared to give up whatever wishes we might have in order to cooperate best to the service of Jesus Christ.

This includes material goods, and also desires to advance favorite religious precepts. As Christians, serving Jesus Christ must come first to us.

*Edwin T. Dahlberg article in Thompson, Voices from Cane Ridge, page 219.

In the decades surrounding 2000, most denominations/fellowships/brotherhoods' allowed disagreement among themselves within the confines of their party-line religious tenets and for interpretations of the book of Revelation. In our future, we have become consistent and are extending this to all Christians and for interpretations of all Scripture.

People who have disbelieved the Bible, or failed to value the Bible as it ought to be, have seen their mistake. Jesus Christ said to people with access to Scripture at Matthew 22:29 "You don't understand because you don't know what the Scriptures say" (ICB), and as of c. 2000 there were church groups that did little Bible teaching and thereby contributed to this Christ-disapproved status.¹ In our future, this has been corrected; all congregations teach the Bible extensively, and rightly teach its precepts about unity.

Persons who insist upon initiating acts of division or unkind deeds on basis of disagreement are not accommodated. This is the case regardless of such persons' religious tenets, financial contributions, support of leadership's agendas, or status among a congregation. It is acknowledged that they are sinning, and if they persist in trying to make it a church matter, they are addressed as sinners.

A Christian's faithfulness is judged by how s/he follows Christ's values in overall life, rather than whose religious tenets s/he agrees with in matters of disagreement. It is like this at all times, whether it be away from church assembly or at church assembly.

When people are needed to do tasks for the Lord, they are chosen for faithfulness to Christ and His values, and their qualifications to do the actual task itself. It is this way always, including in benevolence, or in outreach – and outreach is focused toward non-Christians instead of other Christians. Endeavors to make disciples for Jesus Christ are unadulterated by factious efforts to make Christians into converts to some group.

Regardless of denomination/fellowship/brotherhood,' we like to see signs that a congregation is thriving. We like to see congregations of Christ's servants faring well.

Congregations make resources they can contribute available to other congregations regardless of denomination/fellowship/brotherhood' to assist in the service of the Lord. Pooling of resources to facilitate the best service for the Lord is common.

Regardless of disagreement, congregations in a locality see a duty to share the work of the Lord there locally. This duty has a higher priority than to 'carry their part' to support an agenda for a denomination/fellowship/brotherhood' in a region. Regardless of who agrees with whom and on what, congregations of a locality maintain at least slightly stronger cooperative and fellowship ties to other congregations in their locality than to congregations outside their locality.

In this design for a future of the church of Christians, disagreements are never allowed to distract from seeking and doing the best for the Lord and His people. Unfortunately, as of c. 2000, the church overall is a long way from this. Still, the reader is invited to wistfully imagine how wonderful it would be if Jesus Christ, His values, His people, and His work would all be given first importance throughout all of His church. ■

¹ Kroll, [Back to the Bible](#), pages 65 and 67.