

Weaker brothers, damnable heretics - and how to tell the difference
by Dr Roy Clements

Nothing is more disillusioning to a new Christian than the discovery of how much disagreement there is within the church. I have heard of a town in Africa where one of the churches has suffered repeated schism. The parent congregation was called "the church of God". After the first division a new church emerged which called itself, "the true church of God". A little later this too split, and "the only true church of God" was formed! It reminds me of the clergyman from Northern Ireland who, after a bitter row about styles of worship with a colleague from a different tradition, departed with the words: "You go on worshipping God in your way, and I'll go on worshipping him in his!"

It is important to realise that, according to the New Testament, disputes within the church fall into two distinct categories: issues of primary and secondary truth.

Early in church history, a body of teaching was identified which constituted the core of the gospel message. In II Timothy, Paul calls this "the pattern of sound teaching"(1:13). In Jude it is referred to as "the faith once and for all entrusted to the saints" (3). In Galatians, which forms part of this study, Paul speaks of "the truth of the gospel" (2:5,14). No departure from this primary body of doctrine was permitted. Those who contradicted it were censured in the strongest terms and even excommunicated.

There was a another kind of disagreement, however: arguments over issues which did not belong to this core gospel message. Paul sometimes calls these "quarrels about words" or "foolish controversies". In the passage in Romans 14 we shall be reviewing here, he uses the phrase "disputable matters". On such secondary matters, diversity of opinion was to be accepted, and it was those who divided the church over them who came in for serious criticism.

In this study we identify the difference between these two classes of argument and how they were handled.

An example of a dispute about primary issues :

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel, which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belong to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You

are a Jew yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

Through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, then Christ died for nothing!

(Galatians 1 and 2 excerpts)

A good example of a situation when the central corpus of Christian teaching was being contradicted is described in the passage above. Paul speaks with a degree of belligerence here that many find shocking. They are disappointed to hear the apostle, who wrote so eloquently about charity in I Corinthians 13, ranting at those he disagrees with, in what seems to be such a peevishly opinionated and intolerant fashion.

It is easy to see why people find it hard to stomach. We live in a world which is reluctant to express certainty about anything. I recall a wall poster that I saw in a Cambridge student's room. It depicted the great rationalist philosopher Descartes, with the caption underneath:

The philosopher Descartes said the only thing he was certain about was his doubts ...

... but how could he be so sure?

These days, even agnosticism seems unacceptably doctrinaire. The scepticism of Doubting Thomas has been displaced by the gullibility of Simple Simon. Rather than accept that if two people hold opposite opinions, at least one of them must be wrong, we would rather deny the laws of logic and live with contradiction. Nobody is to be damned with that intolerant verdict, 'You're wrong'. Everybody is to be affirmed. Everybody's opinion is to be accepted. Everybody is right! And that, of course, is why Paul's outspokenness in Galatians sounds so politically incorrect to our modern, or perhaps I should say "postmodern", ears.

To many of our contemporary theologians, the fact that some were preaching "a different gospel" in Galatia ought to have been no problem for Paul at all. According to their understanding of the nature of truth, we all have different gospels to some degree. The New Testament itself, they say, contains at least half a dozen different gospels within its own pages. There is Pauline theology and Petrine theology. There is the realised eschatology of the gospel of John, and the futurist eschatology of the Revelation of John. There is justification by faith in the book of Romans, and justification by works in the book of James. The list could go on and on. Little wonder then that church has been plagued by so much theological controversy down the years. Like those famous blind men who tried to describe an elephant, theologians have each taken one particular part of the Bible, interpreted it through their own subjective filters, and then invested that personal theological insight with the status of absolute truth. "The Bible says ?!" they have arrogantly declared, when in point of fact what they should really have been saying is, "This bit of the Bible means this to me." It seems, as I say, unfashionably unenlightened to take a dogmatic position on anything.

Well, suffice it to say that Paul was not embarrassed by dogma, even if few of our contemporary theologians would be prepared to defend it. He clearly believed that there is

such a thing as "the truth of the gospel", and he wasn't prepared to tolerate any contradiction of it.

In what way was the rival gospel that was being propagated in Galatia "different"? What elements of the core message of the apostolic Christian gospel were being challenged? A full answer to that question would involve careful study of the whole epistle, but we get a clear hint about it when Paul refers "the circumcision group". It seems that a party of very conservative Jewish Christians had joined the church in Galatia, and were insisting that to be properly saved a Gentile had to conform to the Jewish cultural distinctives enshrined in the Mosaic law, including circumcision.

Now, the apostles had, from the earliest days of the church's existence, resisted any such requirement. The book of Acts tells us how they had wrestled with the issues arising from the success of Gentile evangelism and had emphatically repudiated all legalistic conditions on the admission of non-Jewish converts to the church. The core gospel message declared that anyone, be they Jew or Gentile, must be saved solely by the generosity of God's own redemptive act in Christ's atoning death on the cross. To put it in theological shorthand— we are saved by "grace alone", without any contributory "works of the law". To demand circumcision of Gentiles was a radical denial of that message of grace. That is why Paul speaks against this "different gospel" with such ferocity.

He goes on to cite an incident that clearly illustrates how important the issue was in his estimation. It had occurred some years earlier when the apostle Peter visited Paul's home church in Antioch. This was predominantly a Gentile church, and initially Peter, who had learned from his experience with Cornelius, the Roman (see Acts 10-11), that Gentile believers were to be treated no differently from Jewish ones, was happy to share the same meal table with his non-Jewish brothers and sisters. However, while he was there some conservative Jewish Christians from Jerusalem turned up who belonged to the "circumcision party". Intimidated by these influential new visitors, some of the Jewish Christians in the Antioch church abandoned their former practice and refused to eat with Gentile believers any longer. Even Peter and Paul's colleague Barnabas behaved in this way —a measure of how deeply rooted in Jewish cultural sensitivities the taboo regarding contact with uncircumcised men was.

Paul, however, was absolutely outraged by this behaviour. It was bad enough that the emissaries from Jerusalem should still be locked in their old racist prejudices about not eating with Gentiles, but that Peter and Barnabas should so weakly follow their lead was a humiliating embarrassment. A crucial matter of gospel principle was at stake. The "circumcision group" were essentially arguing that Gentiles could only be saved if they surrendered their Gentile cultural identity, and became "Jewish". But the gospel of grace, which had been personally revealed to Paul by God himself, said no such thing. On the contrary, it maintained that anyone could be baptised into the Christian church just as they were, simply on the basis of faith in Christ.

Paul tells us how he confronted Peter publically over this issue. It is not hard to imagine the silence that must have fallen in the room, as these two leaders faced one another in a tense stand-off. Paul clearly felt he had to risk the scandal of such a confrontation because Peter was seriously in the wrong.

First, his behaviour was inconsistent:

'Come on, Peter You know perfectly well that you enjoy a pork chop with the rest of us these days! So how come you have suddenly rediscovered all your old Jewish scruples and are insisting that our Gentile brothers in Christ must be circumcised before you can eat in their company? You're just playing a part, Peter, for the sake of these conservative Jews from Jerusalem whom you want to impress. It's all a shameful charade. It's hypocrisy!'

But secondly, his theology was inconsistent too.

'Look Peter, as Christians you and I have trusted Christ as our Saviour precisely because we know we cannot be saved any other way. We have been justified (that is, declared righteous in God's sight) by faith, not by observing rituals and laws. Whatever flirtations with Jewish legalism we engaged in during our old days in Judaism, they have been abandoned since we became Christians. You cannot be a Christian and a legalist, Peter. We both recognize that. Because we know we are saved by grace not works of the law.

Well, I refuse to allow the centrality of that grace to be undermined by unreformed Judaists in the church, no matter how influential they may be. For if righteousness could be gained through their kind of legalistic observance, then the work of Christ on the cross is an irrelevancy. It would mean that his death had not really changed anything. And to say that isn't just hypocrisy, it is damnable heresy.

Peter, don't you realise, when you turn your back on those Gentile brothers of ours simply because they don't follow our Jewish cultural traditions, that you are betraying something absolutely fundamental to the gospel message? You are saying that Christ died for nothing!'

Clearly then, as far as the apostle Paul is concerned, there is such a thing as primary truth and it is not negotiable.

Great Christians can let the side down sometimes where this gospel truth is concerned. Peter was an apostle, but on this occasion in Antioch he made a serious error of judgement. If Peter erred in that way, how much more will lesser Christian heroes today sometimes do the same—be they bishops, or popes or even eminent leaders in the Evangelical Alliance?

Everyone of us is responsible before God to try to understand the theological controversies that trouble the church to the best of our ability, and if we conclude that a core element which is essential to the authentic gospel is being denied, then we must speak up.

The incident Paul recounts illustrates how pressure groups within the church have the power to compromise us on such key issues. Peter would not have made his mistake if he had not been looking over his shoulder at that influential party of Jews from Jerusalem. Isn't that so often the way? We act, not out of personal conscience, but out of a conformist desire for acceptance and approval by others. It takes a great deal of courage to stand up in public, as Paul did, and refuse to be intimidated. But there are times when we must find that courage, or live with the shame of hypocrisy.

Of course, there are people who think they are "standing up for truth" in this heroic manner, when in fact they are just being downright obstructive and pompous. I guess we've all come across rigid types who do not know when it is appropriate to meet other

people half way. Many English people, I suspect, are temperamentally disinclined to speak up about controversial subjects precisely because we do not wish to be accused of such boorishness. 'Don't rock the boat!' we say. 'Anything for a quiet life!' 'Least said, soonest mended!' We have dozens of such proverbs indicating our British reluctance to confront people openly on serious points of disagreement. Indeed, this is the creed of modern pragmatism. It is why our age has produced many politicians but very few martyrs. It seems recklessly extremist to fight for a cause, these days, let alone to die for one. How did that classic proverb put it in the days when Soviet militarism threatened the peace of the world? 'Better red than dead!'

Well, let Paul teach us that, despite our postmodern scepticism about truth and our political preference for pragmatists, there are occasions when a man or woman of principle is neither a bigot nor a trouble-maker, but a hero. Conscience must never be sacrificed on the altar of expediency. There are times when the truth of the gospel is at stake, and then, like Martin Luther, we have to dig in our heels and say, 'Here I stand, I can do no other. So help me God!'

But (and it is a big 'but')—this is only the case when it is the "truth of the gospel" which is at stake. We are not at liberty to elevate all our opinions on religious questions to that degree of importance. There is another category of disagreement within the church which must be handled with far greater moderation.

An example of a dispute about secondary issues

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.

One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? Each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Romans 14 (excerpts)

Superficially the issue at stake here seems rather similar to the one in Galatians; it is a dispute about ritual, not circumcision this time but dietary regulations. Some of the Christians in Rome were refusing to eat meat. There are several possible reasons for this, but the most likely is that all the meat sold in the market or served in the restaurants in Rome had been offered to a pagan deity. Most Christians were not bothered about this. They reasoned that, since idols did not represent real gods, idolatrous incantations and ceremonies could not make any difference to the acceptability of the food. Others, however, had real scruples about the issue. Eating meat that had been offered to idols felt like an act of spiritual treachery. They decided that, as an act of Christian witness and personal sanctification rather like Daniel's in the court of Nebuchadnezzar (see Daniel 1), they should adopt a vegetarian diet. Similar disagreement was rife about the observation of holy days.

The church in Rome was therefore divided between those we may call "conservatives", who maintained certain distinctives within their secular environment, and the "liberals" who felt these were unnecessary.

It is important to note, however, that unlike the situation in Galatia, this was solely an issue of personal belief and practice. No one was teaching that you had to be a vegetarian to be saved! No one was challenging the fundamental truth of salvation by grace alone. Indeed, one suspects that the "conservatives" would have found difficulty providing a fully satisfactory defence of their abstemious convictions. They seem to have been suffering from a kind of emotional hangover from their pagan days. There was an element of irrationality in their scruples—perhaps even of superstition. They couldn't explain why exactly they felt uncomfortable about meat sold or served by idolaters, but they did. Fear of idolatry was so ingrained in them they experienced an inescapable gut reaction to the issue which did not yield to simple argument, this generating a classic "taboo" response.

I remember encountering a rather similar situation in Africa. Local Christian elders objected to the use of a traditional drum to accompany singing in church because, back in their tribal villages, such drums were associated with devil worship.

Donald Barnhouse, a renowned expositor of the mid - 20th century, tells how two senior Christian ladies at one of his conferences expressed outrage that some of the younger women were not wearing stockings. Barnhouse told them: "But the virgin Mary didn't wear stockings". "She didn't!", they replied! Like the African elders, their opinions were shaped by an irrational prudishness rooted in their cultural background. Similar church disputes about alcohol, smoking, sabbath observance, acceptable styles of music, charismatic gifts, more recently, the role of women in leadership and, most recently, homosexual partnerships, have marked the last hundred years. Not infrequently, these have been elevated to the status of "defining issues", where a group insist that a genuine Christian must take one particular line on such questions, thereby promoting division and exclusion within the fellowship of the church.

Well, notice that, according to Paul in Romans 14, the stakes on questions of secondary truth must never be raised in that way.

We can summarise his position on such issues as follows:

1. The "conservatives" must be made aware of the irrationality of their prejudices.

Paul does this by indicating his own sympathy for the "liberal" position and by labelling the "conservatives" as "weak in faith". If he had wished to remain completely neutral and even-handed in this dispute he would have done neither of these things. The fact that he does indicates that, if he makes some concessions to the "conservatives" (as we shall see he does), he is not thereby pandering to their scruples. Their over-sensitivity was ill-informed. There are times when conservatism is not a mark of spiritual fidelity but of spiritual immaturity, and it is part of the Christian leadership to make that clear.

2. There are to be no recriminations by either group.

The tendency in this kind of situation, of course, is for a slanging match to develop, in which each side caricatures the other with derogatory labels. The "liberals" disparage the "conservatives" as "stick in the mud" and "narrow-minded". The "conservatives" anathematise the "liberals" as "secularised" and "compromised"—indeed, the very words "conservative" and "liberal" become pejorative.

Paul rejects all such recriminations. "Don't look down your nose at those who disagree with you", he says. "Don't put them on some spiritual blacklist. Don't treat them with contempt." Rather they are to "accepted" as Christian brothers and sisters.

He insists that neither group has any right to judge the other. If they are orthodox Christians who share a commitment to the primary truth of salvation by grace, then they are accountable on lesser issues, not to their fellow church-members, but to God. No matter now aggravatingly "conservative" or disgracefully "liberal" they may be, it is part of Christian duty to acknowledge all true believers in Christ.

This implies, of course, is that there is a legitimate area of private opinion. As Paul puts it: "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind". Many Christians, of course, do not like "grey" areas; a thing is either "biblical" or "unbiblical" in their view and they feel uncomfortable with uncertainty. But there are many secondary issues where it is inappropriate to pontificate like that. Even if a person is sure in their own mind about the rights and wrongs of such issues, Paul suggests it may often be better to keep your opinions "between yourself and God". According to the apostle, there is nothing hypocritical about holding a private view on a question, knowing that some other Christians would strongly disagree, provided your own conscience is clear about it. What matters is heart motivation. If the vegetarian and the meat-eater both give thanks to God for their food and eat it with a clear conscience in his sight, then they are both doing the right thing.

3. We must cause no unnecessary offence

Paul recognises that the "liberals" in this kind of dispute are in an inherently stronger position than the "conservatives", since they have a choice about whether to eat meat or not, whereas the "conservatives" are bound by their scruples and can only refrain. In fact, for a "conservative" to eat meat in defiance of his conscience would be disastrous. For, even though in God's eyes such eating is spiritually innocuous, for him it would have the psychological nature of sin, since he would believe that he was offending God (even though a more enlightened person would realise that actually he was not doing so).

The consequence of this rather tortuous moral conundrum, is that there are times when the "liberals" must be willing to make some concessions to their "conservative" brothers and sisters. Paul insists that we may not trample on the sensitivities of other Christians, no

matter how misplaced we feel those sensitivities are. And we must certainly never encourage a fellow Christian to act in a way that is contrary to their own conscience.

It is important to issue a couple of caveats at this point:

(i) Paul is not suggesting that we must be bound by the weak consciences of other Christians in all our words and actions—only in those public words and actions which directly affect them. The "liberals" could still eat meat in private; but they should not flaunt their liberty on this matter in the presence of "conservatives" who could be offended or embarrassed by their behaviour.

(ii) Paul is not suggesting that there should be a conspiracy of silence that prevents such "disputable matters" from being discussed in the church. As we have already noted, he makes clear his own "liberal" position on the question of eating meat.

(iii) Paul is not implying that "conservatives" can spiritually blackmail others on the grounds that they are "weaker brothers". Some "conservatives" are just obstinate traditionalists who want things their way. In such circumstances it's vital to consider the feelings of the non-Christians whom we wish to evangelise and the young Christians whom we wish to encourage too. The incident reported in the gospels where Jesus was criticised by the Pharisees for plucking ears of corn on the Sabbath is a case in point. Jesus makes no concession to these offended Jews, no doubt because as far as he was concerned the "weaker brothers" in that situation were not the censorious Pharisees but his band of young disciples.

Paul's key concern is that peripheral issues should not be turned into defining issues. There is such a thing as primary truth, and when it is under threat we must be willing to confront its deniers. But, on all other issues, diversity of opinion and practice must be tolerated, albeit in a way that shows respect and sensitivity toward the vulnerable.

John Stott is fond of citing the words of the puritan divine, Richard Baxter, in this connection:

In things essential - unity.

In things inessential - liberty.

In all things - charity.