

Dealing with Controversy in the Church

Ross Pettigrew

In any group of people, there will be differences of opinion that have the potential to cause controversy and divide. The church is no different. While the important issues in scripture are clear, repeated and foundational to Christian belief, others are not and differences of opinion and personal preferences can be expressed. Sometimes people can hold very strong views about a subject while others are not so convinced. How do we deal with these conflicts, yet maintain the unity of the fellowship?

There are 3 potential sources of conflict. First there are an individual's preferences sometimes called "conscience" issues that, although held by an individual, affect all the Christians in the fellowship. Second, there are practices or traditions that define the way we do things. These may have a scriptural basis, but are not the only way to do things. Thirdly, there are principles defined by scripture which some would see as essential to maintain while others may not. Controversy often develops when someone who regards an issue as a principle, clashes with others who regard it as a preference or practice. The early church struggled with similar issues and left us guidelines for dealing with conflict. Acts 15 describes the process of church leaders deciding what was important and what was not for Gentiles to follow. Some believed that all the Mosaic law, including circumcision, was a practice for all Christians. After receiving Paul's report, James then suggested that only three requirements should be made – avoid food offered to idols, sexual immorality and the blood and meat of strangled animals. Of these, the first continued to cause controversy and Paul modifies the initial decision in 1 Corinthians 8. Food sacrificed to idols became a "conscience" issue and in such issues, we are neither to dictate nor ignore the sensitivities of others.

When it comes to church practices, there are controversies that sadly have over the centuries split the church and given God pain, especially in the light of Jesus' prayer in John 17. Many of these doctrinal matters have been minor but they have left us with many church denominations and sects. Is this how God intended His church to be? In God's eyes, there is only one universal church that will one day be presented to Christ faultless. But in this era of satisfying personal preferences, we choose what products to buy, what supermarket to buy from, what style of music we like and what church we prefer. If one church does not suit my style, I can shop for another. For every local church, it is the leadership that has the ultimate responsibility before God to set the direction, vision and rules governing the church. By attending that church, you place yourself under the authority of the leaders of that congregation.

Personal Preferences

Food offered to idols is not an issue in our culture but there are other issues where individuals have strong opinions. When I was young it was going to movies or a school dance, drinking alcohol and smoking? None of these are prohibited but there are guidelines which some feel very strongly about. The principle in 1 Cor 8 that should always govern our conduct is "Are there Christian brothers and sisters who will be upset and offended by what I do?" 1 Cor 10 takes it even further suggesting that if unbelievers would be surprised at us doing this, we should not do it. The principles for dealing with controversial preferences are further described in Romans 14-15.

Worship Practices

The scriptures do not prescribe a specified way we are to worship God. In fact we never read of the early church meeting together to "worship" because every activity of every day should be worship! The principle Jesus gave was that we must worship in Spirit and truth (John 4). Paul indicated it should be orderly. Different cultures have different forms of worship and even within a culture there are preferences in worship. Some churches have liturgical forms, others a spontaneous style. Different music forms appeal to different groups but there are no rules for how we worship. The outward forms may differ but it is the heart that God sees.

Cornerstone has a historical tradition of open worship which some find strange. The practice is based on the understanding that all Christians are "priests" (1 Peter 2:8, Rev 5:10) and as priests we are encouraged to offer "sacrifices" - not the animal kind but offerings of praise and service to God (Heb 13:15-16). The traditional role of the priest being the only one offering on behalf of the people changed when Jesus died so that any Christian can boldly go "through the veil" (Heb 4:16, 10:19) to present "sacrifices" to God directly. This approach of "open" worship in congregational settings is open to abuse as demonstrated at Corinth. So Paul had to set some guidelines in place because it had become chaotic, with some treating the communion as a free for all meal (Ch 11) and others using the

If you are new or visiting; a special warm welcome to you. We trust you enjoy your time with us.

Today we will be having communion. If it is your practice to participate in this we welcome you to join with us in celebrating the Lord's Supper. If this is not your custom or if you are unsure of what to do please just pass the emblems (bread and wine) to the person next to you.

This Morning
Speaker Ross Pettigrew

This Evening
• JCF 5.00pm
• Creation Evangelism 7.00pm

Monday
Planning meeting 7.30 All Saints Hall.

Next Sunday
9 August. John Hannah
Structured Service on prayer
16th August. Johnathan Sarfati.

Thursday Kidz Club
6:30 - 8:00 pm
7 - 12 year olds
Ph: Allan Maguire - 4767197

Prayer Items

Continue to pray for the outreach opportunities we have with OAC.

Rebecca, Kalene Hospital in Zambia, asks for prayer for grace and wisdom for the way in which she approaches issues in regards to ongoing frustrations with her staff.

Please also pray for a new home group with the younger staff of the hospital starting in her house on Friday nights.

Jason and Shirley, Philippines write: Please pray for us as we travel back to the Philippines. On arrival we are to take another seminar, then we plan to head back to the village to settle back into the translation of the Old Testament

