

Paul's final instruction in Romans puts us on our mettle to distinguish between tolerable differences in the church and killing errors.

“When Christians Argue”

Romans 16:17-27

July 18, 2010

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Text Comment

- v. 17 “Obstacles” is the same word translated “stumbling blocks” earlier in Romans 14. Such obstacles are impediments to faith and to Christian living that people can put in the way of others.
- v.18 Paul literally says that they serve their bellies. Does this mean that the people he has in mind in this section were antinomians, people who taught that the gospel frees us to enjoy whatever pleasures we desire? Perhaps, but little in this section is specific enough to identify any particular group of teachers or their followers whom Paul feared were likely to lead astray the faithful Christians in Rome.
- v.20 The suggestion seems to be that Satan is at work in the church’s controversies but the Lord will deal with him.

When you parents leave your children of an evening you give the babysitter your most important instructions as you leave: where you will be, how to contact you in an emergency, and so on. Well, perhaps we have Paul doing the same. We wonder why the last major point he makes is about controversy in the church but, then, we usually gravely underestimate how much damage controversy has done to the church, to its life, to its witness and influence in the world, to our own lives, to the lives of our children. We easily think that a paragraph about doctrinal controversy in the church is unlikely to be of much practical help to us. How is that going to encourage our faith this morning or challenge us to higher things or make us feel anew and afresh the love of God? How is this going to help us live the Christian life in love, peace, and joy? But this paragraph is more relevant to your daily life than you know; much more, though the consequences of what Paul is talking about are usually felt over time, not necessarily immediately. Do you have any idea how much better a Christian life you and your children might live, how many more people might come under the sway of the gospel of Christ, and how many more might be saved, if only the church practiced unity much better than she does and if only she remained faithful to the truth as it has been revealed in the Word of God. Controversies of all kinds have weakened the church at precisely the point where the church is most important to us and to our lives as Christians.

We and our children depend upon a vital church, a church that is an adornment of the gospel, as an institution, as a communion, as a community which forces everyone to sit up and take notice about Jesus Christ and the Gospel because of the remarkable way in which Christians live together in the world. We have just heard at the baptism of the influence of the Christian love of others on Meghan and that is absolutely wonderful, but I shudder to think that perhaps as many

more have been kept away from the church of God, from believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, and from finding the forgiveness of their sins precisely because the church *they* have known or knew about was a squabbling church, utterly unimpressive; Christians looking daggers at one another across the aisle, speaking in criticism of one another all the while. How impressive is that? Who is going to think much of Jesus Christ and the love of God if the people of God do not display it toward one another, much less to the world? Our children need to grow up in a church that is bristling with gospel life and the love of God. And through her history nothing has sapped that strength and vitality, nothing has so distracted the church from her great calling, nothing has so compromised the church's witness to the world as controversy, argument, and division between believers on the one hand and the betrayal of the Gospel and the truth of the Bible on the other.

Why should the world pay attention to the church and her message if that message seems finally to have become little more than what you can get on a television sitcom? What is the importance of believing in Christ if the message you are going to receive in the church is virtually the same thing you receive in the culture at large? We are not talking about minor or impractical matters here. We are talking about things that affect the loss of salvation for multitudes of human beings: controversy over nothing on the one hand and a failure to stand and fight for the truth of the gospel on the other. Either is the Devil's work.

Paul often warns against division in the church and against an unhealthy controversy. Take for example this instruction to Timothy:

“Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.”

On the other hand, Paul also frequently warns against the toxic effect of false teaching as possibly fatal to living faith and true salvation. Think of his letters to the Galatians, for example.

The problem is: he never explains in so many words how to distinguish between a killing error and one that must be patiently borne, between necessary controversy and controversy of the unnecessary kind. Earlier in this same letter, you remember, he discussed at some length some incorrect ideas widely cherished especially by Jewish Christians. They were mistakes of doctrine and ethics, Paul makes that clear, but they were not sufficiently serious to be permitted to disturb the peace and unity of the church. Believers were to bear with one another in regard to such differences of opinion. Some have thought that Paul is referring to the same sort of differences of teaching here in chapter 16, though that seems less likely to most commentators because Paul speaks quite differently and more critically of these people than he did of the Jewish believers whose opinions he discussed in chapters 14 and 15.

The problem is a particularly vexing one because history proves that it is all too common for some people to think that the gospel is at stake and the error is therefore a killing error in almost every controversy. But others are sure that virtually any error can be an innocent one and the demands of Christian unity should always come first.

I think, for example, of the controversies that have troubled just the conservative, Bible believing Presbyterian movement since its inception in 1936. The movement had scarcely drawn its first breath before we were arguing about drinking alcoholic beverages and about eschatology: whether truly Reformed and Presbyterian people could be premillennialists. If you don't know what that term means, you haven't missed much. Don't worry about it. There have been lots of premillennialists in the Presbyterian Church through the ages. Think, for example, of Robert McCheyne or Horatio Bonar, the hymn writer. Charles Spurgeon wasn't a Presbyterian, he was a Baptist, but he too was a premillennialist. Westminster Theological Seminary professor John Murray, a great man and scholar, wrote a series of articles in the fledgling church's magazine attacking dispensational premillennialism as a heresy, a provocation to those in the movement who had sympathies with dispensationalism – the view taught in the notes of the very popular Schofield Reference Bible – or to those who, while not agreeing with dispensationalism didn't think it was a heresy, or to those who felt that Murray's brush painted too broadly and that non-dispensational premillennialism, an eschatology as old as the church fathers, was being indicted as well or was likely to be.

Feelings were hurt, men inclined to get angry got angry, and pretty soon there were two churches instead of one. Today, almost to a man, the spiritual descendants of those on both sides of that controversy admit that the church should never have been divided over such a difference of opinion but, let it be said, these 73 years later there are still two churches, not one. Both churches nowadays rarely indulge spitting contests over eschatology but the split was never repaired.

Another dispute in those early days was over the apologetic theory of Cornelius Van Til, another Westminster professor, a theory it would take the remainder of my time to describe and, doing my very best, many of you would be left utterly bewildered. But an argument developed nonetheless and it too contributed to that early division.

A smaller split occurred in the late 1940s over the issue of the incomprehensibility of God and, in particular, the knowledge of God. Controversies regularly pit one leader against another with disciples falling into place behind their standard bearer. In this case the leaders were Van Til on the one side and the Presbyterian philosopher Gordon Clark on the other. It was an argument that was virtually as incomprehensible as God's knowledge. The result once again was a small split.

Then came the charismatic movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In an entirely predictable way folk in our churches and some ministers were drawn to this teaching and to this new way of practicing the faith. Our Presbyterian churches were largely skeptical of charismatic claims and unpersuaded by the biblical arguments advanced on their behalf, but when one Christian thinks he has discovered the secret of the Christian life he is unlikely to be put off by a theological argument offered by a minister who hasn't discovered the secret! There were no church splits *per se* but folk left for more charismatic pastures, just as folk came into our churches seeking to escape the charismatic influence that had come to dominate their own churches.

At about the same time a controversy over "counseling" developed in our churches. Jay Adams of the Westminster Seminary faculty published a book, *Competent to Counsel*, highly skeptical of modern secular psychology and questioning whether there even was such a thing as mental illness, arguing that illnesses were either of the body, even if the symptoms betrayed themselves

in behavior (requiring medical treatment) or of the soul (requiring pastoral care). The so-called biblical counseling movement grew rapidly and is widely represented in our churches today, but from the beginning it was subject to strong criticism from within our church. A number of writers found Adams' approach simplistic and unhelpful at many points. There has been, over the years since, some movement on both sides toward the middle, but there clearly remains a divide between two camps on this subject.

In the 1970s a new controversy erupted concerning what came to be called *theonomy*, a form of postmillennialism – the view that there is to a golden age of Christian faith and living before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ – that maintained that modern states, such as the United States, ought to be governed by the Law of God and in the millennium would be. The most controversial assertion of this movement was that the capital punishments of the Law of Moses ought still to be in effect today: for adultery, for homosexual practice, for blasphemy and so on. Theonomists were not, as eventually became clear, advocating the immediate imposition of such punishments by the government. That was for a day when the preaching of the gospel and the mighty power of the Holy Spirit would have created a new society. But by the time that had become clear, personal relationships had been destroyed, individual churches split, seminaries divided, and still others had come and gone from our churches.

Then came the Norman Shepherd controversy in the 1980s. Shepherd was a professor of theology at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, the celebrated John Murray's successor and disciple. He took John Murray's side in the dispute about the nature of the covenant in the Bible over against another Westminster professor, Meredith Kline. Again, I won't attempt to describe the details of the *contretemps* except to say that some came to the conclusion that Shepherd was denying justification by faith alone, that we receive the forgiveness of our sins simply through trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and what he did for sinners, while others argued that he was being accused of nothing other than maintaining the Reformation's strong emphasis on the nature of saving faith as a working and obedient faith. We have in our church today detractors and defenders of the teaching of Norman Shepherd and the specter of Shepherd looms above several quarrels presently underway.

In the 1980s and 1990s the debate over the length of the creation days – 24 hours or something else – erupted into controversy as the 24 hour day men became more militant about their views and attempted to force their position upon the church. Presbyteries all around the PCA were divided until every ordination exam turned into a floor fight between the different sides of the question while the poor young man who simply wanted to be ordained stood there attempting to dodge the brickbats. During the same time the "sonship" movement in our churches became controversial, some lauding the recovery of sanctification by faith, others criticizing what they saw as simply another form of antinomianism, that is, an emphasis on the believer's sonship and the certainty and completeness of his acceptance with God at the expense of an equal emphasis on the necessity of a believer's obedience to God's commandments.

And we could go on and on. We know all too well how the so-called "worship wars" have affected the unity of the church, though those wars are largely over. And nowadays there are arguments over the redemptive-historical interpretation of the Bible especially as it bears on the preaching of the Bible, the proper way to describe the relationship between law and grace in the

economy of God's salvation, the nature of the subscription that ought to be required of Presbyterian ministers to the *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, the so-called federal vision, and so on. [Much of the above from J. Frame, "Machen's Warrior Children"]

Believe me, if our short history as a church is anything to go by, the prediction most likely to be correct is that we will find something else to argue about before too long and something else to cause us to separate from one another even though we share the same faith in every major particular.

But, at the same time, there are controversies that have without question been essential to the maintenance of the faith, if not in our church certainly in others. In American history, in the last century in particular, once great churches, gospel preaching, Bible-believing, missionary sending churches are now pale shadows of what they once were. Their leadership has gone over to the world, no longer believes the Bible to be the Word of God in any historic Christian sense, and presides over dying denominations whose final expiration can be calculated with near mathematical certainty as the membership ages and the numbers decline year after year.

Controversies in these churches are not over the length of the creation days but over whether God created the world at all, over whether Christ actually rose from the dead or whether one must be a Christian – connected to Jesus Christ by living faith – in order to be saved; over whether the law of God, say its commandments regarding the sexual life, must still be obeyed, and whether there is such a thing as divine judgment. These are controversies of a completely different order. For years now faithful believers in these mainline Protestant churches have fought a rearguard action, attempting to prevent their churches from complete and abject capitulation to unbelief and to becoming nothing more than organs of contemporary culture and its worldview. Our culture is dying, everybody can see that, and predictably many churches who have made their peace with it.

But Paul doesn't tell us here in Romans 16 precisely what controversies he is talking about or how precisely to distinguish these from those he discussed at length in chapters 14 and 15. There we were told not to be a stumbling block before our brothers and sisters (14:13), though that was in regard to a disagreement Paul says explicitly Christians were to tolerate in the church and not to make a matter of dispute and division. So it is possible to become a stumbling block to other believers in regard to disputes that do not warrant being made a test of faith. And, no doubt that has happened far too many times. People have been driven from the church, their faith questioned, their doubts increased because other believers have made a life and death issue over what should never have been taken so seriously. It created ill will and the church became ugly instead of beautiful and her witness was diminished sometimes nearly to the vanishing point.

Here Paul warns against those who cause divisions and create stumbling blocks in some other way, a way he does not describe in any detail. *The question raised by Paul's remarks in vv. 17-20 is precisely when is a difference of opinion about biblical teaching and Christian ethics to be borne in loving unity and when are we to insist that a teaching or a practice is to be publicly contradicted and the one teaching it to be avoided?*

Paul does not say. Instead he says that he wants these believers to be “wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.” Paul seems to mean there much the same thing as what he wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 14:20):

“Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.”

And both of those exhortations by Paul seem to mean largely what the Lord Jesus meant when he exhorted his disciples to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” [Matt. 10:16]

In other words, Christians are to be sensitive to the possibility of sin and evil being done in the name of Christian truth, wary of being caught up in unnecessary controversy and wrangling over teaching, but, at the same time wise enough to distinguish between tolerable differences and killing errors. They should be equally concerned not to make a division when unnecessary and to make one if required. In other words, there can be no law that infallibly indicates to us where the line is crossed between differences with other believers that we must patiently and cheerfully accept for the sake of the blessing of the church, the maintenance of its unity, and the glory of God, on the one hand; and on the other those deviations from biblical teaching that are genuinely fatal to faith and Christian life if allowed entrance into the church’s mind and heart.

To put it a different way, it is Christian wisdom, prudence that is required; the savvy to know the difference between one thing and another. The more we live as Christians in the world the more of this prudence we ought to have. Obviously there are a great many, I include myself among them, who regret having indulged a controversialist spirit in the past and are more acutely aware of the wrong in that and more determined not to be found guilty of it again. Other Christians no doubt feel that their experience has taught them the other lesson: that certain errors of doctrine and ethics so violate the principles of our faith and so clearly contradict the teaching of the Word of God that they cannot be tolerated without eventual and inevitable damage being done to the souls of men.

Such Christian wisdom and prudence, in the nature of the case, cannot be defined. It is precisely the skillful application of the knowledge of God’s Word and the experience of life to the thousand and one circumstances that confront us as we live in the church and rub shoulders with those who do not think as we do in all respects. But in the case of controversy and disagreement over doctrine and ethics, such wisdom includes certain fundamental insights. For example, consider these.

- I. *First, wisdom accepts that some disputes or disagreements, even over the right teaching of the Word of God, are obviously more important than others.*

One significant characteristic of the wise man or woman, wise in the biblical understanding of the term, is *his or her sense of proportion*. This is precisely what many of our older men have learned from the last sixty or seventy years of our conservative Presbyterian history: we made far too many mountains out of molehills. We do not need to dispute over and we should not take with great seriousness the question of what punishment may be meted out to sinners during the millennium (if, in fact, there is a millennium!). The question of the length of the creation days is

of comparatively little consequence given the fact that it happened long ago and however long they were they're over now.

One of the very first things that must be decided is whether the difference of opinion that has surfaced between Christians concerns a matter of vital urgency. I do not say of importance because anything taught in the Bible and anything touching the practice of the Christian life is important. But does the matter strike at the vitals, does it represent a threat to the nervous system of our faith, or is it the kind of matter that wise men and women understand Christians will disagree about, the kind of matter that tests our unity but ought not to threaten it.

We are finding that this is a particular problem for a church like ours, the Presbyterian Church in America. We are a *confessional* church. That is, our theological standard is the *Westminster Confession of Faith* with its two catechisms. Our ministers, elders, and deacons at least are required to vow their heartfelt submission to this confession. But that confession is quite unlike the doctrinal statements of many American churches. Their statements are general and often take no more than a page: a few general articles of faith with very little detail and nothing more.

Not so for us. Our *Confession* has thirty-three chapters and the Larger Catechism has 196 questions and answers. Doctrines are laid out in some detail and specific features and implications of the doctrines are drawn out in substantial statements. There is a lot to confess and, accordingly, a great deal with which one might find a disagreement here or there.

During my vacation I intend to work up a statement of my differences with the *Westminster Confession and Catechisms*. I don't have to do this, but the recent controversies have convinced me that we ought to be more explicit in our interaction with our theological standards. None of my exceptions concerns a major doctrine, none rises to the level of a fundamental of our theological system – the only such differences that I am required to advise the Presbytery of – but I thought it would be a good example to the rest of the men of our Presbytery if I took the time to write up my disagreements with the *Westminster* standards. None of any great importance, none worth a controversy, but human nature being what it is, I'm sure everyone could be the cause of a controversy, even of a division if we allowed it to. I love the *Westminster Confession*, it is a statement of my faith, a beautiful statement, but no one agrees with everything in it and in the *Catechisms*. In the *Larger Catechism*, for example, it is stated that the government ought to pay the salaries of ministers (as was the case in the mid-17th century in Britain). None of us thinks that today. It isn't very important that our theological standards assert this because nobody still agrees with the assertion. But in other such cases there are disagreements. But, you get the point: the more we put down in our statement of faith, the more inevitable it becomes that there should be disagreements about some points.

The first thing, then, is to measure the real importance of any particular issue or difference of opinion between believers.

II. Second, wisdom seeks to gain and maintain an historical perspective.

Reading church history has made me both a more cautious and a more determined polemicist. I am well aware of how many silly and unnecessary divisions there have been in the church and

what great harm those divisions did not only to the body of Christ but to the reputation of the Lord Christ in the world. His greatness is not likely to be appreciated by people witnessing his body squabbling over details. Jesus himself said that his people's unity would be an impressive witness to the world. The lack of unity among Christians, then, diminishes that witness. But I am also aware of how great churches have been destroyed and the souls of millions with them because of the toleration of serious error.

It is that historical perspective that makes us both wary and determined at the same time and makes us better able to distinguish tolerable error – or what some of us take to be error – from killing error. I don't want to be like Alexander Whyte, the great Scottish pastor who died in 1921, a hero of mine who in his penchant for loving and trusting everyone assisted in the promotion of unbelief in the Free Church of Scotland; but I also don't want to be like A.W. Pink who spent the last years of his life alone, never in church, never at the Lord's Table because he couldn't find any church that he agreed with about everything! Reading church history is the antidote to both errors and the greatest encouragement to both wariness of controversy and loyalty to gospel truth.

III. Third, wisdom is careful to listen and to listen to both sides.

What happens all too often in controversy, whether religious, social or political, is that the parties are drawn up early on and then no one pays any attention to what the other side says. Men are more concerned to defend their positions than to correct them, more concerned to state their own opinions than to consider the argument of the other side. Accusations are then often made that are patently untrue, but no one listens to the denial. Or, in the case of serious error, justifications are offered for some defection from the Bible's teaching and no one on that side listens to the warnings that such justifications are worthless, a mere papering over a serious departure from the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.

One of the considerations I judge to be most important in coming to a conclusion about some teaching – whether it is good or bad; if wrong whether it is a serious error or one of little consequence – is the opinion of men whose judgment I trust and whom I have learned to regard as men of sound judgment and careful thought and loyalty to the Word of God. If everyone or almost everyone of such character is of the opinion that the teaching being offered is dangerous, then the burden of proof rests much more heavily on those who would argue that Christians have nothing to fear from this teaching. And *vice versa*.

For example, there are good men in our church who are convinced that the teaching of Norman Shepherd, now in his retirement, once professor of systematic theology at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, is pure old-fashioned heresy, justification by self-effort, by works; a man or woman gets to heaven by earning his or her way, error of the most dangerous kind. I have not read Shepherd and haven't much interest in revisiting that debate. But here is my problem. Some men in whom I have virtually limitless confidence do not think Shepherd's teaching was heresy; quite the contrary. They think it was Westminster Calvinism and Reformation theology in a perfectly Biblical and historic form. He was simply emphasizing the fact that God saves you in order to transform your life and that sanctification is as important to God – a godly life, obedience to God's commandments, and service rendered on behalf of Christ's kingdom – as the

forgiveness of your sins. Professor John Frame, whose books have profited me greatly, and Professor Richard Gaffin, whom I have thought for years to be one of our very best theological minds in the Presbyterian and Reformed world, are both defenders of Norman Shepherd. Fortunately, I don't have to make a decision—Norman Shepherd doesn't belong to our church—but I'm much more hesitant to get on the condemn Shepherd bandwagon if Frame and Gaffin aren't on it already! See my point? I can't help trust the judgment of those men because I have put that judgment to the test so often in the past and found it sound and reliable. On the other hand, if those men and others like them were alarmed by some teaching, I would probably be inclined to be alarmed by it too!

But I hope I would still want to hear the other side and be careful to judge the issue without prejudice and a party spirit which, spirit, alas, far too often predominates when Christians begin to argue. For example, I have heard some say that Richard Gaffin, a man I know, whose books I have read, whose scholarship has helped me in many ways through the years, believes in justification by works, salvation by self-effort, and not by faith in the finished work of our Lord Jesus Christ who died for our sins on the cross and rose to give us new life. But he believes nothing of the kind. Such an accusation is pure slander (libel, now that it has been printed on blogs), preposterous and so malicious and would be thought so by anyone who knew Professor Gaffin or had read his books. The fact that such false accusations are often made should make us very careful before we pass judgment on matters which we have not carefully investigated ourselves.

Watch out for those who cause divisions and watch out for those who put stumbling blocks in the way of true Christian faith and life. Watch those who disturb our unity and loving communion in the church, but watch out for those who would also take away our faith. Watch to the left and watch to the right because the problem comes from both sides all the time. The Devil will be happy to undermine the truth of God by dividing Christians from one another over little or nothing and just as happy to undermine that truth by persuading Christians to tolerate killing error. He will as happily use the mountain as the molehill as either will do the job. Watch and think and pray and be harmless as a dove and shrewd as a serpent. Be determined that you are not going to be among those snookered either by a heretic or by a contentious person. Be determined to grow into that wisdom that sees the difference and sees though the matter and knows how to act in a way that is loyal both to the unity of the body of Christ and the truth as it is and forever shall be: that truth our Savior has revealed to us in his Holy Word, one glorious part of which is Paul's letter to the Romans.