

HOW TO DEAL WITH THOSE WHO DIFFER FROM US *PART 3 OF 4*

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HOW CAN I COPE WITH THOSE WHO DIFFER FROM ME?

In the previous two sections, we sought to explore how to derive the maximum benefit from controversy both as to those who differ by being sure that we do not fail in our duty toward them, and as to ourselves in welcoming an opportunity to learn as well as an occasion to vindicate our position. Now after having given due attention to the questions, "What do I owe?" and "What can I learn?" it is certainly proper to raise the query, "How can I cope with those who differ from me?"

Now "coping" involves naturally two aspects known as "defensive" and "offensive." Unfortunately, these terms are borrowed from the military vocabulary and tend to reflect a pugnacious attitude that injects bitterness into controversies. We should make a conscious effort to resist that trend. Furthermore "offensive" is often understood as meaning "giving offence" or "repulsive" rather than simply "passing to the attack." It may therefore be better to use the adjectives "protective" and "constructive" to characterize these two approaches.

Biblical Arguments

In evangelical circles obviously this type of evidence carries a maximum of weight if properly handled, for it invokes the authority of God Himself in support of a position. This is what Luther so eloquently asserted at the Diet of Worms, and what the Westminster Confession also bears witness to in these words:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any way contrary to His Word, or beside it in matters of faith or worship (WCF XX.2).

We need here to be careful to make a reverent use of Scripture, quoting every reference in a way that is consistent with its context. This will protect our approach against the legitimate criticisms levied against proof-texting, a method that lifts scriptural statements from their environment, and marshals them as if they were isolated pronouncements vested with divine authority without regard to the way in which they are introduced in Holy Writ. A notable example of this wrong approach would be to claim that God sanctions the statement, "There is no God" because it is found in Psalm 14:1 and 53:1.

We must therefore, be careful to use the Scripture in such a way that an examination of the context will strengthen, not weaken the argument. Very few things are as damaging to a position as a claim to be grounded in the authority of God's Word, only to find that a more careful examination of the text in its context cancels out the support it was presumed to give. An argument of this type, like the house built on sand, falls with a great crash (Matthew 7:27).

Likewise, a well-advised person will be careful to avoid passages that "boomerang," that is, passages that are used as proof, but turn out to be more decisive *against* the view advanced. For example, some people quote Philippians 2:12, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" to support a man-dependant view of sanctification, but forget that Paul continues, "For it is God who works in you...."

All this demands that we should know the Word of God. God entrusted the sacred Scriptures to His people in order that they may search it diligently (John 5:39) and make it the object of their daily meditation (Psalm 119). To be acquainted with the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) must be the aim not only of professionals like pastors and professors, but also of everyone who wants to be known as a Christian. To be sound in the interpretation, correlation and application of the Scriptures is the way "to be approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed" (2 Timothy 2:15) and every child of God ought to aspire to that.

Defensively we may be aware of passages that are often quoted to invalidate a stance that we find scriptural. Sometimes we may anticipate this objection even before it is raised and be prepared to show how it does not undercut our view. If we have a particularly strong refutation, we may at times wait until the person who differs quotes the passage. In this way we may score the psychological advantage of destroying an argument thought valid by the one across the table. Even this, however, must remain within the framework of "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15).

It may be possible to show that the interpretation (which would see in a particular passage an objection to the scriptural truth we are undertaking to advocate) is simply improper and indefensible because it sets this Scripture in conflict with its near context, or at least with the larger context of the unity of divine revelation. In other cases, it may be sufficient to show that there are one or several plausible alternative explanations of this text that do not precipitate the alleged conflict. Since we are obliged to seek the unity of the truth, a plausible interpretation that averts a conflict deserves the preference.

To sum up, we must ever strive to take account of the fullness of biblical revelation to have the boldness to advance as far as it leads, and the restraint to stop in our speculations where the Bible ceases to provide guidance. Polemic

theology, in this respect, is simply biblical light focused in such a way as to assist those who appear yet caught in some darkness.

General Arguments

These arguments direct their appeal to something other than the actual text of Scripture, namely to logic, history and tradition. While the authority involved is not on the same level as the Bible, it has a bearing on the discussions and must be considered by those who wish to make a strong case.

Appeal to Reason

Human reason, especially when not guided by divine revelation, is apt to go astray either in being unduly influenced by prejudice (what we call "rationalizing") or when reason forgets its proper limits and attempts to apply to the infinite what is valid only for finite categories. Nevertheless, reason is a divine gift to humankind, indispensable to the process of receiving, applying and communicating revelation (Cf. J.I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God*, pages 128-137). It is a part and parcel of God's image in humanity. To fly in the face of logic is to court self-destruction, for logic has a way to beat its own path in the process of history. Rational arguments may therefore be presented with propriety, and those advanced by people who differ from us must be addressed.

Positively, it behooves me to show that my view is in keeping with the totality of revealed truth, with the structure of the Christian faith as an organism of truth. I will promote the acceptance of an individual tenet if I can show that it is inescapably related to some other element of the faith on which I and the one who differs from me have agreement. For instance, one who accepts the doctrine of the Trinity is pretty well bound to confess the deity of Christ and *vice versa*.

Specifically, it is in order to make plain the damaging or even disastrous effects that a departure from the position I advocate will logically entail. In doing this, I must carefully distinguish between the view that the other person actually espouses and the implication that I perceive as resulting from it. Failure to make this distinction has resulted in the ineffectiveness of much polemic theology. Christians have wasted a huge amount of ammunition in bombarding areas where their adversaries were not in fact located, but where it was thought they were logically bound to end up. Perhaps God has providentially so ordained in order that polemic theology should not be as destructive as the combatants intended. To struggle with a caricature is not a "big deal" and to knock down a straw man does not entitle one to a medal! To be sure, it is a part of the proper strategy to show those who differ that their view involves damaging implications that will be difficult to resist in the course of time, but one must remain aware that it is the present position rather than anticipated developments that must be dealt with.

Negatively, I need to face the objections that are raised against my view. Some of them are irrelevant because they are based on a misunderstanding of the issues. To deal with these will help me to clarify my position and to reassert it with proper safeguards against one-sidedness, exaggeration or misconceptions. For instance, I may show that definite atonement is not incompatible with a universal offer of salvation in Christ, even though the supporters of universal atonement frequently think it is. Other objections may be shown to be invalid because they apply to the view of those who differ as well as to mine. Still other objections may be recognized as peripheral, that is to say, difficulties that may or may not be resolved rather than considerations that invalidate a position otherwise established. For instance, some alleged contradictions between two passages of Scripture represent a difficulty for the doctrine of inerrancy rather than a discreditation of this otherwise well-established tenet of the faith. Obviously the most advantageous situation is found when an objection can be turned around to become a positive argument in favor of the view objected to. Jesus' treatment of the Old Testament Law in Matthew 5:21-42 is a case in point. It might appear to a superficial reader that in this text Jesus repudiates the authority of the Law, when in fact He confirms it and reinforces it by His spiritual interpretation.

Furthermore, it is sometimes effective to challenge a person who differs from us to press for an alternative approach that we may then proceed to criticize. For instance, a person who denies the deity of Christ may well be pressed to give his or her answer to the question, "Who do say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15). Any answer short of full deity may be shown as deeply unsatisfactory, as leading to some form of polytheism or as failing utterly to account for the facts of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It may be hoped that those who have unsatisfactory views may then leave the smoldering ruins of their system and take refuge in the solid edifice of the faith "once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3).

Appeal to History and Tradition

The course of history is a remarkable laboratory that permits us to observe the probable developments that issue from the holding of certain tenets. The decisions of councils or the pronouncements of confessions of faith are often geared to guard against erroneous opinions that God's people recognized as dangerous or even fatal to the faith. To neglect this avenue of knowledge is to risk repeating some mistakes of the past that an acquaintance with history might well have enabled us to avoid. The Christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries should protect us from the twin errors of Arianism and Apollinarianism and of Nestorianism and Monophysitism without our passing through the convolutions that the church of those days experienced. The Reformation of the sixteenth century, similarly, should shield us from repeating some of the mistakes of the Roman Catholic Church.

Positively, it is proper for me to attempt to prove that I am in line with orthodoxy in general and specifically with statements of faith that have received wide acceptance or that are part of the subordinate standards of my church or of the church of the one who differs. This will be especially significant if the formulation was established for the purpose of warding off a position analogous to that of my opponent. Now all manmade statements are subject to revision and correction, but it appears *prima facie* impossible that a view that flatly contradicts the Nicene Creed or the major points and system of the Westminster Standards should turn out to be right, while these revered creeds, tested as they were through centuries of Christian thinking, should be wrong.

Specifically, the position of the one who differs may so closely approximate a well-known heresy adjudged as heterodox that the course of history may provide a portrayal of what happens to those who entertain it. The disastrous course of Arianism, culminating as it did in the Moslem conquest of North Africa in 969, may be an example. We need, however, to be careful to recognize the importance of weighing all operative factors rather than just some selected ones that seem to suit our purpose. The demise of Christianity in North Africa applied largely to Egypt where a Monophysite tendency prevailed, as well as to the lands that had been conquered by the Vandals with their Arian commitment.

Those who would gloat over the increasing heterodoxy of the Arminian movement in the Netherlands should probably be somewhat sobered in thinking of the destiny of Calvinism in New England, which moved from high orthodoxy around 1650 to the rather massive Unitarian and Pelagian defection at the beginning of the nineteenth century. These remarks do not invalidate the value of the lessons of history, but merely admonish to caution in applying them.

Negatively, the course of action would parallel closely what was described in the section on reason. Objections raised against my view may be shown to be counterproductive, because they support rather than undermine my view; irrelevant, because they fail to address my real position or because they burden equally the objector's view; or inconsequential, because they have only a peripheral bearing on the issues.