

How to Love Brethren Who Differ on Joint Work

Intro: In our lessons so far we have considered some important things about how we deal with conscientious differences.

Thus far we have seen that in cases where believers hold different positions of faith and either believer does not feel compelled to violate his own personal faith, we may simply receive each other, practice what we believe is right and give others the same right to do differently from us without judging or rejecting them. In such matters of individual application we may work together in spite of differences and there are a host of issues that fit into that category (some of the more common ones are the war question, wearing head coverings, personal moral decisions like eating in restaurants that serve liquor, and many other such questions.)

But, what happens when brethren disagree about matters that involve the joint action of the church? What if the action under consideration makes me a partner in what is contrary to my own belief? What if someone has conscientious objections to decisions made about such work? How does the local church deal with those with conscientious objections to that which we do together?

Misuse of Romans 14-15

In many congregations Romans 14 has been the “go to” passage when there are differences among brethren about the church’s worship and work. The rationale is this:

Paul urges the strong brother to relinquish any practice that causes another brother to violate his conscience.

Some congregational actions violate a brother’s conscience.

Therefore, the congregation must relinquish any action to which a brother may claim conscientious objection.

I affirm that such a use of Romans 14 removes it from its context, results in disobedience to God, and creates a reductionism that would ultimately make the local church ineffective and paralyzed.

This application misuses the context and results in disobedience

In the context of Romans 14-15 the practices of which Paul speaks are individual in nature. This is seen by Paul’s statement. “Let each man be fully persuaded in his own mind”. Applying Romans 14 to congregational matters requires that the strong give up their practice altogether, letting the weak brother become the conscience for everyone else!

In the context of Romans 14-15 the practices Paul mentions could be surrendered because they do not involve “the kingdom of God” (obedience to God). However, our

organization, worship, and work are matters of God's kingdom.

Subverts God's plan for leadership

God's plan is that the church be led by those with spiritual maturity indicated by a thorough knowledge of God's truth and the ability to teach and defend it (Tit. 1)

Would you make an elder out of the weakest brother in the congregation?

No! He is not qualified.

But if we let the brother with scruples determine the congregation's course, we have given the reigns of leadership to him! We have made an elder out of him, haven't we? How is it possible to yield to every objection to church work without destroying the principles of leadership God has given?

Do we have scriptural leadership if a church is controlled by a few objectors with scruples rather than by the wisdom of the mature?

Paralyzes the local congregation

Our own past history should help us see the logical end of this view. In the past there have been conscientious objections about virtually every aspect of the church's worship, organization, and work. Brethren have objected to:

Having Bible classes

Having women who teach children's classes

Having more than one container in the Lord's Supper

Having a "second serving" of the Lord's Supper on Sunday night

Women praying with head uncovered

Some object to singing certain hymns because of perceived "unscriptural" ideas by their authors.

The use of "contemporary" hymns (supplemental song books)

Use of visuals in teaching

Use of translations other than the KJV

Objections to elders who do not have more than one child, or whose children become unfaithful after

leaving home or who have some past transgression that is known, etc.

Now if we logically commit to the idea that we must accommodate the consciences of all who object, then the church would be reduced to virtual inactivity.

So I submit that Romans 14-15 teaches a valuable lesson about Christian's treat each other in personal differences, but it cannot be applied to congregational matters.

How then do churches deal with conscientious differences involving joint activity? What principles should govern our practice?

Authority--We need to keep focused on the word of Christ as the standard of authority in all congregational matters.

Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:11)

Thus, if we are to avoid congregational problems we must:

Remain open to a greater understanding of what Christ has said.

Take time to study controversial issues carefully and fully with reliance only upon what the Scripture teach before adopting a practice.

Work to determine a viewpoint that neither restricts nor expands the bounds of the authority of Christ.

Continue to teach the truth and show the full authority of God's commands for worship and work even though they may not be a part of our practice.

Leadership--We need to choose leaders with knowledge of the word and wisdom to guide us in congregational matters and submit to them.

Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. (Hebrews 13:17)

Wise leaders will take the time to communicate and persuade others that their vision is the proper one. Leaders who become autocratic will pay the price with the loss of the flock who asked them to lead.

Wise followers will listen to wisdom from good men who are knowledgeable in the word.

Edification--We are to focus on real edification rather than personal likes and entertainment.

Let all things be done for edification (1 Cor. 14:26).

By edification the Scriptures refer to experiences of worship and study that impart God's word meaningfully so that increased faith and action is the result.

Sometimes people confuse edification with personal preferences in a style of music or presentation or whether it has entertainment value.

Edification is about building faith because truth is being taught!

Unity--We need to work for harmony and avoid a factious spirit.

it seemed good to us, having become of one mind (Ac. 15:25)

It is the obligation of each of us to try to be as humble and yielding as possible toward our brethren, to have faith in their desire to do what is right, and not lord it over others.

And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another. (Romans 15:14)

A lot of people in a lot of churches will lose their souls because they turned local churches into war zones.

It is ironic that people professing faith in Christ should practice numerous works of the flesh trying to prove that they are right about something! When churches allow congregational actions to lead to “strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying”, it is already a defeat for us!

Too many churches have been destroyed by people who said, “my way or the highway”.

Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, (Titus 3:10)

Independence--We need to exercise our congregational independence in doing what we agree to be right.

Some churches will leave the faith as we understand it. We are in our rights to instruct people about that and urge them to avoid wrong practices; and we may need at times to listen to what others are saying about us. Even so, there are clearly limitations put on who decides what we do!

Local churches do not need to look for some “higher authority” for approval, whether it is brotherhood consensus or the view of area preachers. The Bible does not teach the obligation to maintain some kind of uniformity of churches to project some denominational solidarity. Instead it urges each church to be busy doing its work under its leadership.

shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; (1 Peter 5:2)

Conclusion: Though Romans 14 is not the answer to the problem of differences about collective work, there are these principles to help assure the peaceful and effective work of congregations.