

Hopefully this article is a reminder that we can keep a sense of balance or moderation when dealing with differences in how we understand the application of some principle or truth which we all hold in common. In matters of this kind, let us remember what Abraham said to Lot: “Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren” (Gen. 13:8).

Best wishes to all of you as you continue to emulate the Bereans: “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11).

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### **MAINTAINING BALANCE IN TIMES OF CONTROVERSY**

“Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand” (Phil. 4:5). Christians need a mature, well-balanced attitude, especially in times of controversy. We need boldness and courage in setting forth principles of truth, balanced with vigilance and persistence in exposing false doctrine, balanced with patience and forbearance in assessing differences which do not destroy the truth, balanced with love and wisdom in our efforts to fulfill all of these duties.

The Greek word translated “moderation” means noble generosity, gentleness, forbearance, fairness, reasonableness, and patience. It is “graciousness with strength & poise of character....the opposite of obstinacy” (A.T. Robertson, *Paul’s Joy in Christ*, 129). This moderation prevents us from overreacting to life’s trials and troubles. It protects us from being thrown off balance in one direction or another.

Christ commands us to demonstrate moderation “unto all men.” We must maintain strength of character, poise, and patience in all cases—we must keep our balance even under severe provocation by men or circumstances. How is that possible? It is secured by keeping our focus on Christ’s presence, power, and promise, not on earthly conditions. He will never fail or forsake us. “The Lord is at hand.”

### **Pray for Spiritual Maturity and Balance**

As Paul prayed for the spiritual maturity and balance of his brethren, so we need to pray for ourselves and each other. Philippians 1:9-11 teaches us to pray that we may grow in “love,” the

unselfish desire to serve God and man. We pray for “knowledge,” that we may learn more of God’s Word as the standard of truth.

Let us pray to grow in “judgment,” discernment, the ability to make more accurate judgments in the practical application of the truth we are learning. This “discernment selects, classifies, and applies what is furnished by knowledge” (M.R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 871). It involves developing “a proper sense of the relative value of things” (Walton Weaver, *Philippians*, 24). Judgment grows in tandem with experience, observation, common sense, and wisdom. This maturity does not come overnight but is a lifetime process.

The object of the maturing process is that we may learn to “approve things that are excellent” (KJV), “distinguish the things that differ” (footnote ASV), or “have a sense of what is vital” (Moffatt’s Translation). This involves the spiritual insight “to see what things are relatively the most important and to put the emphasis in the right place” (A.T. Robertson, *Paul’s Joy in Christ*, 38). As we mature, we learn better how to avoid stumblingblocks and to abound in righteousness as we live in view of “the day of Christ.”

As a part of our spiritual growth and maturity, we must learn to maintain our balance in times of controversy. The Bible is filled with lessons and admonitions which teach us this sense of spiritual balance. A study of the history of the cycles of apostasy confirms the importance of maintaining our balance in times of controversy.

### **I. Balance in Avoiding Extreme Attitudes**

Ecclesiastes 7:15-18 teaches balance in avoiding extreme attitudes. No one can solve every question, enigma, and difficulty someone can pose. One of the greatest enigmas of all time is the absurdity of a just man who perishes in the course of a righteous life while the evil man prolongs his life “in his wickedness” (v. 15). Perplexed by this irony, the friends of Job attacked him in a lengthy, acrimonious debate and engaged in evil surmisings, only to generate more heat than light.

In view of our limited ability to unravel such anomalies and quandaries, Solomon cautioned, “Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?” (v. 16). The man who imagines himself the arbiter of all such matters suffers from the illusion of pretended wisdom and an exaggerated sense of righteousness. He will issue edicts and make laws where God did not.

An arrogant, overbearing, obsessive, self-righteous spirit leads to eventual self-destruction. In spite of his egotism, this man will face problems which dwarf his overrated skills, and creeping doubts will weaken his faith. His egotism causes him to lose the respect of more modest brethren and sows the seeds of conflict even with his admirers. Finally, he will answer to God for his pontifical spirit and destructive actions. Diotrephes ignored such warnings when he rode his hobby horse to the point of casting out saints who refused to bow to his inflated assessment of his own knowledge and ability (3 Jn. 9-10).

At the opposite extreme is the man who uses the enigmas and riddles of life to excuse a course of wilful sin. Solomon warned, “Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time?” (v. 17). To violate the simple, well-known truths of God’s Word and to rush headlong into a life of sin is to tread another path leading to self-destruction.

Solomon taught that the man who truly, sincerely, humbly fears God will escape both extremes (v. 18). True faith must focus on those truths and duties which are clearly revealed, while avoiding extremes which can throw our faith out of balance. *Some brethren are thrown out of balance first in over-righteousness, but then later swing to the opposite extreme of complete surrender to flagrant sin and error.* We must guard ourselves in times of controversy and maintain our balance lest we fall into extreme attitudes which may destroy both ourselves and others.

## **II. Balance in Recognizing Error in People’s Lives**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught balance in recognizing error in people’s lives (Matt. 7). First, he warned against hypocritical judging (vv. 1-5). We can become meticulous, overly scrupulous, and insistent in charging other men with sin or error, while rationalizing and excusing flagrantly sinful attitudes and conduct in our own lives. Jesus highlighted the irony of such hypocrisy by picturing a man with a huge pole or beam in his eye who inspects the eyes of others in search of the tiniest speck to remove. This religious hypocrite is overly strict on others, but grossly lenient with himself.

In the same sermon, Jesus insisted on the necessity of proper judging (vv. 13-23). We must recognize the broad way of sin and error, and the narrow way of truth. We must be willing to repent of our sins and make changes in our lives in order to walk in the narrow way “which leadeth unto life” (vv. 13-14).

To walk in the narrow way, God’s people must distinguish truth from error, false teachers from teachers of truth (vv. 15-20). Jesus warned of “false prophets...in sheep’s clothing” who are

“ravens wolves” (v. 15). “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven” (v. 21).

Balance requires proper judging without hypocritical judging. Especially in times of controversy, we face the danger of sliding from a proper effort to identify error to obsessive, hypocritical judging.

### **III. Balance in Facing Bitter Enemies of the Gospel**

Jesus prepared his disciples to face religious leaders who pervert the truth and bitterly attack the messengers of truth: “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16). The disciples were not to dodge this danger by hiding or diluting the message of truth but were to preach it “upon the house tops” (v. 27). They were to be both *bold* and *careful* in proclaiming the truth.

To be “wise as serpents” is to be careful, cautious, and measured as opposed to being rash and reckless like the proverbial bull in a china shop. To be “harmless as doves” is to be honest, open, sincere, hiding nothing. We must be straightforward and genuine, not using guile or deceit, not pulling our punches.

In order to be truly effective in the work of the gospel, we must strike a balance between being bold and forceful but not rash and reckless. When under bitter attack, we are vulnerable to the danger of overreacting with a reckless, no-holds-barred response. If a boxer is stung by a hard blow, he may be blinded by anger and flail wildly at his opponent, thus defeating himself. In the same way, overreaction in controversy hurts rather than helps the cause of Christ.

### **IV. Balance in Distinguishing Personal Scruples and Doctrinal Apostasy**

Paul taught the church at Rome the importance of distinguishing *personal scruples* and *doctrinal apostasy*. First, in dealing with matters which can be settled by personal conscience, Paul wrote, “Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him” (Rom. 14:1-3).

Thus, Paul teaches us to accept each other in spite of differences over personal scruples. This involves a process of spiritual growth in which we must learn to distinguish personal conclusions and judgments *about* revealed doctrine from the *doctrine itself*. We also learn it is possible to

keep our own conscience clean by not doing anything to violate our conscience, while also accepting those who differ with us over such matters in ongoing fellowship.

Next, Paul is clear that we must identify and reject men who promote doctrinal apostasy: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple” (Rom. 16:17-18). Yes, there are men who “cause divisions” by their persistent pressing of false doctrine. Outward piety and smooth speeches often serve to cloak false doctrine, thus deceiving the hearts of the simple.

How long should we forbear in study with men who start down the road of false doctrine and apostasy? The Bible does not give an exact time frame, but when men persist in pressing their error, we must not compromise with them but rather we must reject them and warn faithful brethren of the danger.

Keeping a proper sense of balance requires learning to distinguish personal scruples from doctrinal apostasy. Those who press personal scruples as divine revelation often generate unnecessary friction, obsessive-compulsive conduct, confusion, bitterness, evil surmisings, harsh accusations, alienation, and factions. Those who treat doctrinal apostasy as personal scruple often compromise with false doctrines and false teachers, allow error to work as leaven, and help apostasy and division to more fully develop. Those who learn to keep the proper balance avoid all of these dangers, so that saints mature, the gospel spreads, and souls are saved.

## **V. Balance in Defending the Truth Without Stooping to Error’s Tactics**

The Galatian letter teaches balance in defending the truth without stooping to error’s tactics. Paul warns of false brethren who “trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:6-9). We are to reject and expose those who depart from the original gospel. When Peter compromised with false teachers, Paul openly rebuked him (2:11). This same letter teaches that when we defend the truth and fight error, we must not stoop to the tactics of false teachers: “But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another” (Gal. 5:15).

Paul’s defense of the truth was very direct and forceful at times (1:7-8; 2:11, 13; 3:1; 4:30; 5:1, 7, 9, 12). He pointedly argued that the Judaizers who bind circumcision should “mutilate” or “emasculate” themselves, rather than cutting on others to no real purpose (5:12, ASV footnote, NIV). Though Paul used great plainness of speech, every point was designed to win a victory for the truth of gospel, not to vindicate or glorify himself.

After attempting to establish their error by appealing to Scripture, false teachers learn in the heat of battle that they cannot succeed by appealing to the truth. They resort to carnal, bitter, personal attacks, spreading lies, rumors, and misrepresentations. When we suffer personal wounds, we may be tempted to retaliate in kind, but Paul reminds us that such carnal tactics violate the gospel.

We must keep a sense of balance. Let us take the high ground by upholding the truth and exposing error with courtesy and dignity. Let us concentrate on the text and context of biblical passages, not on personal vindication. We can identify accurately false teachers and their doctrines but without bitterness, lies, rumors, and misrepresentations. When false doctrine corrupts people's lives, this also should be exposed to show the leavening influence of error (5:9, 19-21).

## **VI. Balance in Teaching the Truth in Love**

Ephesians 4 reminds us of the importance of balance in teaching the truth in love. The proper disposition and attitude must be joined with sound doctrine. Paul pleads that Christians manifest a spirit which is lowly, meek, and patient, "forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." While maintaining such a spirit, we are to stand united on the solid foundation of the one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all (vv. 1-6).

If Christians are to grow as a healthy body in Christ, they must reject false doctrine and its tactics, but firmly speak "the truth in love" (vv. 14-15). It is possible to be firm and bold without being bitter and malicious: "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you with all malice: and be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (vv. 31-32). We are not seeking the destruction but the salvation of those who err and of those who wrong us.

Times of controversy test our commitment to truth and the sincerity of our love. Our steadfast, unwavering commitment to teach the truth must be balanced with genuine love for God, for brethren, for false teachers, and for all men.

## **VII. Balance in Putting the Cause of Christ Above Self**

True, spiritual maturity and balance are attained only by putting the cause of Christ above self. Paul manifested this unselfish commitment to Christ in Philippians 1:15-18. When Paul was taken out of the public arena by imprisonment, some preachers who stepped into the gap

imagined themselves to be in competition with Paul. They preached the truth of the gospel of Christ but were motivated by “envy and strife” (v. 15). *Could it be today that some of the friction and fighting among preachers is spawned by a selfish spirit of envy and competition, albeit in the name of upholding the truth?* (“Lord, is it I?”)

Paul recognized that other brethren shared the unselfish spirit of love and goodwill, seeking to promote only the gospel of Christ and not themselves. Paul and other such men were set to defend the gospel at all costs for the sake of Christ, not to promote their own personal interests.

What a wonderful example we see in Paul: He expressed no bitterness toward the critics who competed against him, but he simply said, “Every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice” (v. 18).

Spiritual maturity and balance mean always putting the cause of Christ above self. We must never hesitate to defend the gospel at all costs for the sake of Christ, because of an unselfish love for Christ and truth. We must not be afraid to pay the price to stand for the truth in times of controversy, but we do not enter the fray to promote ourselves in any sense. All we do, we do for him without regard to the advantages or consequences which accrue to ourselves.

It is hard to keep our balance in controversy when some who profess the truth unfairly criticize us, misjudge our motives, and promote themselves in a spirit of competition. We must learn to avoid the spirit of personal retaliation but respond by appealing to truth and by focusing on the cause of Christ above all personal considerations.

### **VIII. Balance in the Content and the Tone of Teaching**

Writing again from prison, Paul desired to strike the proper balance in both the content and the tone of his teaching. He longed for open doors to preach the gospel plainly, fully, “that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak” (Col. 4:2-4). He wished to hold back nothing because plain, pointed, powerful preaching saves the lost and edifies the saved. Imprisoned for such preaching, still Paul longed to preach openly again!

Timothy is admonished to show wisdom in both his life and teaching (vv. 5-6). Doors are opened to teach by the Christian’s godly life, but when the door opens, we must be wise in the tone and tenor of our teaching. Our words must be “opportune in time and theme and appropriate to the persons involved” (A.T. Robertson, *Paul & the Intellectuals*, 130). Our words must be “with grace”—kind, courteous, dignified.

Timothy needed wisdom “to answer every man”: sinners seeking salvation, false teachers perverting the truth, saints needing edification, and reprobates wanting to argue only for the sake of arguing. A special measure of wisdom is needed to discern “hobby questions, side issues to evade the lessons, minor matters that detract from the main point. Surely there are few things that call for more patience and skill than the asking and answering of questions” (Robertson, *Paul & the Intellectuals*, 132).

We face great tests in times of controversy as to whether we are able to strike the proper balance in the content and the tone of our teaching. *As to content*, will we pervert truth to promote false doctrine, or modify truth for compromise, or misuse truth in overreaction to error? *As to tone*, will we replace kindness, courtesy, and dignity with explosive anger, arrogance, intimidation, bombast, character assassination, misrepresentation, theatrics, plays for sympathy, and bitterness? The cause of Christ and truth are advanced by balance in the content and the tone of our teaching.

### **IX. Balance in Grasp of Truth With Room to Grow in the Truth**

Peter shows that Christians can grasp or hold to the truth while acknowledging there is always room to grow in the truth. First, he affirms that the truth was firmly established in the hearts and lives of those to whom he wrote: “Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth” (2 Pet. 1:12). Principles of truth already learned, embraced, and obeyed must be repeated over and over lest we lose our grasp of them. The context warns the brethren not to be led away from the truth in which they were grounded.

Next, Peter makes it very clear that these same brethren had room to grow in “knowledge” of truth, a lifelong process. “And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge” (v. 5). This is “a practical knowledge that admits of expansion” (D.E. Hiebert, *Second Peter & Jude*, 53, cited by C.D. Hamilton, *2 Peter & Jude*, 38). Unless our faith is dead, we will always continue to grow in this practical knowledge, discernment, discretion, or judgment in application of truth to various situations.

Brethren committed to the precepts and principles of truth often discuss and disagree about some details of application, precisely because we are striving to grow in understanding how to apply the truth in various circumstances. This is a healthy sign of our commitment to the truth, not proof that we are all false teachers and apostates who have abandoned the truth. *It is the common experience of brethren committed to the truth that the learning and maturing process includes growing in knowledge, making judgments about various details in application of truth,*

*and areas of personal conscience or scruple.* Bearing with each other, listening to each other, we learn from each other rather than condemning and withdrawing from each other.

Peter also issued a sober and stern warning against “false teachers” who replace the truth with “damnable heresies” (2:1). Such men deny the very precepts and principles of truth and, therefore, cannot promote growth in judgment in the application of truth. Rather than growing in knowledge, they replace the truth with heresies leading to apostasy in doctrine and life, corrupting more and more, ending in destruction (as outlined in 2 Pet. 2-3).

If we are to keep a proper balance, we must learn that grasping the truth while acknowledging that we are growing in knowledge is *notequivalent* to tolerating denial of truth, compromise of truth, and apostasy from the truth. Growth in knowledge implies different levels and degrees of understanding in some details of the application of truth, but *not* denial of the precepts and principles of truth. Growing in knowledge is a process which does *not* engender apostasy in doctrine and life, corrupting more and more.

We face two equally important challenges in times of controversy. First, brethren established in the truth must discern and fight against heresies which engender apostasy in doctrine and life, corrupting more and more. Compromise with such movements is deadly. Second, brethren established in the truth must discern differences of understanding which reflect our common struggles to grow. Rather than equating this process with apostate movements, rather than fighting and dividing into factions, we must learn to forbear and edify one another in love.

With maturity and balance, we can meet both challenges successfully.

## **X. Balance, Or Lack of It, In Modern Controversies**

Many examples of apostate movements through the years reveal general patterns and cycles in the development of apostasy. The truth is unchanging from age to age and God always has a remnant who are well established in the truth, always ready to resist apostasy. Apostasy does not first appear in the form of sweeping, startling changes but rather in subtle, incremental steps which acclimate us to a more liberal-minded spirit. This prepares us to move further and further from the truth over a period of time (Gal. 5:9; 2 Tim. 3:13).

After an apostasy begins to develop, a compromise position will form. Some brethren are not ready to embrace an open apostasy, but they are not willing to fight it openly for one reason or another (ties to family and friends, reputation, financial advantage, etc.).

As the apostasy further unfolds, *an overreaction* will occur in some quarters among those who are resisting the ravages of apostasy. In their determination to stop the advance of apostasy, some brethren begin to bind and to press personal scruples or conclusions about differences within the process of growth in the truth. They forget that the healthy process of maturing *includes growing in knowledge, making judgments about various details in application of truth, and areas of personal conscience or scruple*. Also, arguments occur over what passages, semantics, and tactics should be used in resisting the apostasy.

This ferment creates tension within the remnant, diverts the attention of some brethren from the real apostasy as it continues to grow and spread, and thus actually weakens the unity of the remnant and its ability to counter the spread of the apostasy. Some brethren are able to maintain mutual respect while sorting through such differences, but others press these issues, fight over them, and end up separating themselves into factions. Brethren promoting apostasy consider such developments as vindication of their own liberalism and unity-in-doctrinal-diversity. Oddly enough, history shows that after two to three generations, many people caught up in the extremes of factionalism swing to the opposite extremes of ultra-liberalism.

Satan wins by working opposite sides of the street: *liberal movements* and *factional overreactions*. Spiritual maturity and balance are necessary to distinguish and counter both of these tendencies. When we cannot recognize the difference between apples and oranges (these two tendencies), the cause of Christ suffers, the remnant is weakened, and Satan exploits our mistakes to destroy more souls. Both liberal movements and factional overreactions unleash a carnal spirit, rancor, bitterness, unhealthy agendas and obsessions, biting, and backbiting, all of which work only to the advantage of Satan.

Let us reflect on a vital distinction (illustrated on the chart). Within the realm of our commitment to *principles of truth*, Christians are in a lifelong process of growing in knowledge, making judgments about applications of truth, and sorting through matters of personal conscience. This process is distinct from *apostasy* (departure from and rejection of truth), distinct from *compromise* (an effort to hold to both truth and false doctrine, or to those who espouse error), and also distinct from *overreaction* (binding and pressing differences in the growth process to the point of division). The fact that Christians committed to the truth encounter certain differences within the process of growth does not mean we are guilty of overreaction, any more than of apostasy. *The problem is not in the fact that we have such differences but in how we handle them.*

There are many examples of differences among faithful brethren who are growing in knowledge, making judgments about various details in application of truth, and sorting through areas of

personal conscience or scruple. Faithful brethren are united in the truth concerning the man's role to lead and the woman's role to follow the men in the work of the church (1 Tim. 2:11-12). Within the perimeters of this truth, there are several views and explanations of the woman's veil (1 Cor. 11:2-16; must it be worn universally today, and if not, why not, and if so, what kind of veil and under what circumstances?). There are several views and explanations of the woman's silence (1 Cor. 14:34-35; may she participate by making comments in a class with men, and if so, to what extent?). While all parties to such discussions affirm the principle of male leadership, differences in some details of application exist.

Time would fail us to list dozens of similar matters over which faithful brethren have differed through the years. Such differences and discussions have occurred for many years spanning several generations without the appearance of any apostate, corrupting movement as a result of the various views taken. Study and discussion are helpful from time to time, but not charges and counter-charges of heresy and apostasy, not fighting, not separating into several factions.

The course of discussion and growth within the perimeters of truth is quite distinct from the course of apostasy. Apostate movements do not stop and fossilize around one error but are degenerative, departing further and further from the truth. The digressive doctrines of false teachers work gradually and thoroughly like leaven (Matt. 16:6-12; Gal. 5:9). "Their word will eat as doth a canker"—false doctrine works like cancer, gangrene, or blood poisoning, gradually spreading within the host and attacking the vital organs of faith in God's Word (2 Tim. 2:17-18). "Evil men and seducers shall wax and worse, deceiving, and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:13). This degenerative process illustrated by 2 Peter 2 does not occur among brethren who discuss differences over judgments, details, and scruples *within the context of a common commitment to the truth* (see Halbrook, "Are We Doomed to Divide over Every Difference on Divorce and Remarriage?" [1-2] *Guardian of Truth*, Aug. 15 & Sept. 5, 1996). Differences may persist within this context, and one or both parties may hold mistaken judgments, but *a mutual commitment to the truth remains strong and steadfast because no real leavening agent of apostasy is present*, in spite of charges and countercharges to the contrary.

### **Controversies and Divisions 1850-1930**

During the late 1700's-early 1800's, thousands of people left denominationalism and committed themselves to *the principles of truth* revealed in New Testament Christianity. By the mid-1800's, these people committed to the restoration of the ancient order of things began to experience second-generation problems. The rise of the missionary society (1849) and instrumental music (1851) started *a cycle of apostasy*, which corrupted more and more as brethren were swept back into the mainstream of denominationalism from which their fathers had emerged (1875-1900). A

*compromise position* accepted the society, rejected the instrument, and accommodated continued fellowship with much of the evolving error, though protesting from time to time. This was the origin of the somewhat conservative Christian Churches and the very liberal Disciples of Christ. A remnant established in the truth resisted this apostasy every step of the way.

*A period of overreaction* set in among some brethren determined to resist the apostasy (1900-30). Some insisted on the use of one container in serving the Lord's Supper. Others opposed simultaneous Bible classes, located preachers, the use of literature, or colleges which included Bible classes. Another group bound a specific order of worship. Different views were taken regarding the Morrow Fund to distribute Bibles. Some brethren pressed their views more than others and some separated into factions, charging all who disagreed with them as being part of the apostasy.

Daniel Sommer (1850-1940) bred factional tendencies by pressing his views in opposition to such practices as the located preacher and the Bible college. One of his proteges was W. Carl Ketcherside (1908-89). Such issues did not cause division where discussed as differences among brethren equally committed to the truth and yet growing in knowledge, making judgments, and holding personal scruples. After many years of pressing such issues to the point of alienation or even open division, Sommer began to exercise more forbearance. He endorsed and defended an article entitled, "Can't We Agree on Something?" (*American Christian Review*, June 21, 1932). The article mentioned six issues which ought to be left to individual judgments among brethren united on "THE NEW TESTAMENT PLAN," and added, "This...is written in behalf of the thousands who desire to reach that Better Land, and who never will know, and never can understand, 'the finer points' in our arguments for and against some things that have disrupted us."

Ketcherside was incensed. He accused Sommer of selling out the truth and embracing apostasy. He wondered how Sommer could fellowship brethren with whom he differed. Ketcherside took up the gauntlet, pressed these issues through every avenue he could find, challenged for debates, and generally promoted division. Many brethren in the various factional groups formed during the years 1900-30 eventually fell into ultra-liberalism (1960-present). The 1950's saw Ketcherside undergo a gradual transformation allowing him to embrace all wings and factions with roots in the restoration movement, and the 1960's saw him embrace the ecumenical concept of Christians in all denominations. (On Ketcherside's evolution to extreme liberalism, see Halbrook's series, "At Last...Now...An Open Confession," *Truth Magazine*, [Sept. 16-Oct. 7, 1976].)

Sommer found a sense of balance, which allowed him to distinguish apples from oranges, or to “distinguish the things that differ” (Phil. 1:10, footnote ASV). Ketcherside never did. After promoting extreme factionalism in his younger days, he spent the rest of his life introducing and promoting doctrinal unity-in-diversity among brethren, sweeping many into ultra-liberalism.

### **Controversies and Divisions Over Institutionalism-Liberalism (1945-2000)**

After the division resulting in the formation of the Christian Churches, churches of Christ gradually recovered and worked hard to spread the gospel during the early decades of the twentieth century. This remnant was determined to maintain *the principles of truth* revealed in the New Testament without addition or subtraction. Then, another *cycle of apostasy* occurred after World War II involving local churches building and maintaining or simply providing financial support to human institutions (colleges, child care institutions, retirement centers, camps, etc.). The work of local churches was centralized through the sponsoring church plan (one church receiving funds from many churches to oversee a work common to them all, such as sending out and supporting preachers). Also, local churches provided benevolence to alien sinners, not only to saints. In addition, social and recreational activities were provided by the churches. As typically happens in digression, this apostasy corrupted more and more, gradually leading many churches into the mainstream of modern denominationalism (1970-2000).

A remnant established in the truth valiantly resisted this apostasy at great cost, defending the New Testament pattern for the organization and work of the church. Meanwhile, *a compromise position* was taken by some brethren which approved church donations to orphanages but not colleges, and approved donations to only certain kinds of orphanages (those under an eldership vs. those under a board representing no one congregation). This position accommodated continued fellowship with much of the evolving error, though protesting from time to time.

The cycle of controversy and apostasy resulted in *a period of overreaction* (1960-2000). Some brethren were sure that we had been overlooking other digressive practices in areas where brethren sharing a common commitment to the truth had always allowed room for individual judgments and the exercise of personal conscience. They began to bind and to press their views in opposition to individually-supported colleges which included Bible in the curriculum, the Akin Fund (money left by J.W. Akin [1873-1960] to be distributed to congregations needing help in supporting their local preacher), foundations or similar business arrangements to publish Bible study materials, the typical practice of churches providing the Lord’s Supper at the Sunday evening service, funerals or weddings in the church building, borrowing songbooks for singings in homes, etc.

Heated discussions and occasional alienations have occurred, but generally not to the point of division. Division over such matters would have tragically weakened the strength of the remnant in its efforts to resist the spread of liberalism. No corrupting apostate movements have formed as a result of the various views advocated because the differences are shared by brethren equally committed to the authority of God's Word, brethren learning and growing within the perimeters of a serious commitment to the truth. False doctrines release the acids which dissolve respect for the authority of God's Word, thus waxing worse and worse as time passes (2 Tim. 3:13).

### **Controversy Over Marriage, Fellowship, and Subsequent Issues (1988-Present)**

The division over liberalism was largely completed by the early 1960's. Conservative-minded saints and churches worked hard to recover, to regroup, and to spread the gospel in the decades which followed. This remnant was united in its determination to maintain *the principles of truth* revealed in the New Testament. This period of relative peace and progress could not continue indefinitely. The moral decline of our nation had an impact on the thinking of many brethren. The moral precepts and principles of God's Word teach that people never before married may marry, a person whose mate dies may marry again, and a person who puts away his mate for fornication may remarry (Matt. 19:3-9; Rom. 7:2-3). The faith of saints in this doctrine would soon be tested in the crucible of controversy.

*Another cycle of apostasy* began about the time Homer Hailey became more vocal in denying that Christ's marriage law applies to all the world (Mar. 1988 at Belen, NM; publication of *The Divorced and Remarried Who Would Come to God*, 1991). Others became more aggressive in advocating that the put-away fornicator is free to marry a new mate, and that remarriage is permitted no matter why a divorce occurs (see Jack Freeman in *Halbrook-Freeman Debate*, 1990; Jerry F. Bassett, *Rethinking Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage*, 1991).

God always has His 7,000 who will not bow to Baal. A remnant well established in the truth rose up to resist this new apostasy over marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Within a short time, a *compromise position* appeared. Some brethren were not ready to embrace the apostasy but also were not willing to fight it openly by identifying or separating from the men teaching the false doctrines. Ed Harrell advocated a doctrinal unity-in-diversity which "tolerates contradictory teachings and practices on important moral and doctrinal questions" (*Christianity Magazine*, May 1990, p. 6; one of seventeen articles on fellowship by Harrell, Nov. 1988-May 1990; sixteen-article series reprinted in booklet form 1998).

*Christianity Magazine* was edited by some very talented men but helped to popularize the "positive" approach which avoids confronting or debating false doctrines and false teachers

head-on. A general atmosphere of broader tolerance rapidly spread far and wide among brethren during the 1990's. Renewed controversy erupted when some brethren denied the literal days of creation and other literal events in the early chapters of Genesis, and when some denied the eternal torment of hell. For many brethren, the spirit of tolerance associated with the marriage question extended to these new controversies, though these brethren did not necessarily endorse the false doctrines involved any more than they did on marriage.

It was inevitable that this new cycle of apostasy would generate *a phase of overreaction*. The faithful remnant is greatly and justly alarmed about the central role of false theories on marriage, divorce, and remarriage in the current digression. We all are alarmed over false doctrines which deny or dilute the doctrine of one man for one woman for life, the only exception being that an innocent party may put away a fornicator and marry another mate. Because of this alarm, some brethren react with tension over any degree of difference on marriage. The reality is that among the faithful remnant, we all differ at times over semantics, tactical arguments, and other nuances involving *growth in knowledge, judgments about various details in application of truth, and areas of personal conscience or scruple*.

Some among us are ready to bind and press their conclusions as divine revelation about such views as 1. no divorce for any cause, 2. no divorce unless there are multiple witnesses to the fornication, 3. the innocent mate must initiate civil divorce proceedings, 4. the innocent mate must countersue if the guilty party sues for divorce, 5. if a person preparing to fornicate waits for his civil divorce papers to commit adultery, his faithful, innocent mate should not remarry, 6. mates cannot reconcile after a divorce for fornication, 7. a put-away fornicator cannot remarry even after his former mate dies, 8. in the case of an innocent party who initiates divorce proceedings for fornication in one jurisdiction, and the fornicator later files in another jurisdiction where the court rules first, the innocent mate cannot remarry.

Actually, such questions are endless and endless disputing about them constitutes striving “about words to no profit” (2 Tim. 2:14). All of us will have opinions about one or more such issues, but surely all of us will admit no one has the ability to settle all such matters to the satisfaction of everyone. There are multiple questions about annulments, about what legal steps an abused wife may take to get protection, and about similar quandaries. New issues are looming: One brother argues that when we convert married homosexuals, the one who files for the divorce may remarry but not the one who is put away.

Jesus gave precepts and principles to guide us but no set of detailed rules which directly address every variation of every case, much less all of the theoretical and academic possibilities about which we could argue. Local churches and elderships must deal with the real and actual

situations they encounter on a case by case basis, using the best judgment they can about how the principles apply to certain details and complications. There will be times when the best they can do is to set forth the scriptural principles, and to leave some details of application between God and the parties directly involved. At times relationships will be strained when faithful brethren who agree in doctrine disagree in its application to specific cases.

*We will not divide so long as we approach such matters with mutual respect and recognition that our discussion is occurring in the context of a common commitment to the principle of one man for one woman with only one exception.* If we begin to divide over such matters, we will start sliding down the slippery slope of rampant factionalism. No two of us will be able to unite for very long. Balance can be maintained among brethren who *distinguish* between differences discussed within the context of a common commitment to a principle of truth *and* differences which attack and destroy the principle, thus initiating an apostate movement which corrupts more and more. Apples and oranges.

Study of such issues may be helpful, but not charges and counter-charges of heresy and apostasy, not fighting, not separating into several factions. Weldon Warnock and Jim Deason conducted a brotherly exchange on one such question in *Searching the Scriptures* (Nov. 1985 & Mar. 1986). Neither man advocated pressing his view to the point of division. After engaging in this exchange for study, each man moved on to other matters. They did not seek to generate friction, nor declare war, nor become obsessed with one subject, nor challenge for debates, nor cancel meetings, nor press for division.

If we take the opposite road in pressing dozens of similar points, we will only succeed in splintering the remnant into a thousand splinters while the real apostasy goes marching on.

### **Moderation: Maturity and Balance**

“Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand” (Phil. 4:5). May God help each of us to grow in Christ so as to develop a mature, well-balanced attitude in this time of controversy. We need boldness and courage in setting forth principles of truth, balanced with vigilance and persistence in exposing false doctrine, balanced with patience and forbearance in assessing differences which do not destroy the truth, balanced with love and wisdom in our efforts to fulfill all of these duties.

As we grow in love, knowledge, and judgment, may God grant us the insight “to see what things are relatively the most important and to put the emphasis in the right place” (A.T. Robertson, *Paul’s Joy in Christ*, 38). To the degree that we learn this lesson, we strengthen the

bonds of unity among God's people (Eph. 4:1-3). To the degree we ignore it, we weaken the bonds of unity and move toward the precipice of factionalism and self-destruction (Gal. 5:15).

This plea and prayer for Bible-based, Bible-balanced unity will be met with cries and charges of compromise and apostasy in some quarters. Such overreactions only show how near the precipice of factionalism some of us are, and confirm the need for this fervent plea. In reality, Bible-based, Bible-balanced unity helps prevent the advance of apostasy, but a blind, bitter spirit of factionalism ultimately strengthens the appeal and the forces of apostasy.

We are indeed in the throes of a new cycle of apostasy. Let us keep our focus and keep our eyes on the ball, as the baseball coach says. The remnant of God's people must not fall into the fallacies of factionalism, biting and fighting each other. We desperately need the help of God and the help of each other, every single one of us, so that we may "stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27). We are too few to decimate our own forces. We must not fail our God and fail each other by losing our balance in the heat of the battle. Therefore, "Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love" (1 Cor. 16:13-14, NKJV).

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[This article was published as Ron Halbrook, "The Renewed Commitment to Balanced Preaching," in Mike Willis, ed., *The Renewing of Your Mind: Truth Magazine Annual Lectures July 12-16, 2004* (Bowling Green, KY: Guardian of Truth Foundation, 2004), pp. 174-193]