

Dealing With Differences in Understanding Spiritual Topics

How Should We React to Differences With a Brother's Perceptions?

Have you ever faced a situation where you are discussing a Biblical topic with one of your brethren, and you find your beliefs on the topic are quite different than his or hers? I have many times, and have experienced the deep-seated emotions of hostility that arise when attempting to justify one's own position and deal with the opposing view. The response is quite automatic if left unchecked — a defense of the integrity of one's own beliefs of right and wrong. Self-centered pride smolders and perception of oneself is challenged. "Of course I am right; he just needs to be set straight," goes the thinking.

As the years have passed I have become much less threatened by others whose views on issues differ from mine, at least in the realm of Biblical interpretations. How many times have I been personally chagrined after discovering that a closely-held idea was proven to be false? The experience is humiliating, but such encounters have taught me to be extremely careful when confronting someone whose interpretations of Biblical topics challenge my own.

Our Basic Understandings

When dealing with differences in understandings on various Biblical topics it is important to keep several things in mind. Here is a list of ten items to consider.

1. Recognize that all of us are striving after the truth. God's word is truth [*aletheia*, "truth"], (John 17:17), and it is the truth that sets us at liberty [eleutheroo, "to liberate, to exempt"] (John 8:32) within

a world in which Satan wants us to be captured to falsehood and deception (I Peter 5:8).

2. Realize that we are to be known by the love we have for one another. This love is eloquently stated by Jesus in John chapters 13 through 17 during his last thorough discussion with His disciples before the crucifixion.

"By this shall all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love [*agape*, 'God-plane affection and benevolence']" (John 13:35).



"... I in them, and You [the Father] in Me, that they may be perfect in one; and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me" (John 17:23).

We are not to interact with others in the body with "doubtful disputations"

[*dialogismos*, "discussion or debate"; *diakrisis*, from *diakrino*, "to separate thoroughly or withdraw from"], implying if someone has a different view on an issue, such as eating meat versus vegetarianism (Romans 14:1-4), the person who is "strong" or correct scripturally should not despise or judge the "weak" person, "... for God is able to make him stand" (Romans 14:4). Our liberty must not become a stumbling block for those who are weak [*astheneo*, "to be feeble"] (I Corinthians 8:9), for whom Christ died (I Corinthians 8:11), but like Paul said in I Corinthians 9:22 we ought to become weak when with those who are the weak, so as not to discourage them.

Those strong in the faith need to bear the infirmities of the weak (Romans 15:1), and who knows, those whom we consider to have a wrong interpretation of a subject might turn out to be correct after all. Thus, we ought to study the Scriptures daily to discover the truth in all things, as did the Bereans (Acts 17:10-11).

Recall that the spirit God has placed within us is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and moderation (Galatians 5:22-23). In all of our communications with brethren we must apply these qualities of character.

3. We must comfort and encourage our brethren along the pathway of life, not discourage them, as we proceed day by day towards our Kingdom inheritance. We need to comfort [*parakaleo*, “to call to one’s side or one’s aid”] one another, not dispute over subjects, and help others look forward to the resurrection (I Thessalonians 4:18), to being with Jesus Christ forever (I Thessalonians 5:11), by being knit together in love (Colossians 2:2) and forgiving one another (II Corinthians 2:7).

4. Recognize that no two people will ever agree perfectly on the interpretation of certain Biblical precepts. Our background, culture, and experiences in life will color our views on things, much like the writers of the Gospels each had different perceptions of Jesus Christ Himself, making their writings somewhat different from each other. Also, people study subjects to different degrees, and will possess varying understandings depending on their state of knowledge.

5. Appreciate that Satan wants to divide and separate the brethren by exploiting differences among us. He is like a roaring lion, prowling over the earth and seeking whomever he may devour (I Peter 5:8). We must resist him so he will not influence us (I Peter 5:9; James 4:7; Ephesians 4:27; 6:11), and maintain our intimate connection with the Creator at all times (Psalm 73:28; Isaiah 48:16; II Chronicles 15:2).

6. Remember that certain basic scriptural truths will always be understood by all of us and

agreed upon, and we should dwell upon these. Other issues may be up for loving debate, but we should not become dogmatic about those issues until they are thoroughly proven. We must not let “pet ideas” overcome our need to admit a lack of complete confidence in non-salvation issues. What are some of these basic truths?

- The foundation of our faith is repentance from dead works, faith toward God, baptism and the laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal [*aionios*, “eternal”] judgement (Hebrews 6:1-2).

- The Bible as presented to us is the word of Elohim, as recorded by writers inspired by the holy spirit (II Timothy 3:16; II Peter 1:24).

- Jesus Christ is the Son of God who existed forever with the Father, who lived on earth, was crucified, buried, and resurrected on the third day, and is the One whose life was given for us that we might have eternal life; there is only one door to eternal life, and that is through Jesus Christ (John 14:6).

- The commandments of God are for everyone at all times, and they define sin and righteousness (Psalm 119:172; I John 3:22-24; Romans 2 to 7).

- All prophesy will be fulfilled, though we may not know exactly how or when.

- The Scriptures are of no private interpretation, but interpret themselves (II Peter 1:20).

- The millennial Kingdom of God will arrive, giving 1,000 years of peace and prosperity on the earth (Revelation 20:4).

7. Use differences of opinion on topics as motivation to research deeper into God’s word, not to draw contentions and separation. True maturity will motivate us to strive towards the fullness of Christ’s stature (Ephesians 4:13). “Iron sharpens iron” (Proverbs 27:17), but this exercise should lead towards the uncovering of truth, not confrontation, and must be done in love. After all, rebuking a wise, mature Christian will cause him to love you even more (Proverbs 9:8).

Our greatest motivation in fellowship should be love towards our fellow man, a desire to build him up even as Jesus Christ washed the feet of the disciples. Note that Paul and Barnabas separated for a time over the issue of whether to take John Mark

along with them on a tour to revisit the churches established in Asia Minor. The separation was not due to doctrines and Biblical understandings ... rather due to the failure of Mark to accompany them in their service to the brethren (Acts 15:36-40). Searching for Biblical truth should not draw contentions among us.

8. Recognize that we all have a pesky human nature that wants to exalt itself above others, and we will not be able to avoid every last bit of conflict we might have with one another. We should be alert to condemn our own shortcomings when faced with differences of opinion on non-salvation issues. Recall what Paul lamented when discussing the war within himself:

“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (Romans 7:18-19, 22-23).

Like Paul, we must plead with God to deliver us out of our wretched bodies of death! There is no better way to escape the trap of debating over non-salvation issues than to renounce our human nature that wishes to exalt itself, and rest our hope solely in the Creator of all who has given us life (Proverbs 13:10; Titus 3:9).

9. Appreciate that our differences with others on scriptural matters are likely to arise because we do not fully understand the other person’s point of view. We must exercise great patience while striving to understand the opposing point of view, and practice the love that Paul explained so well in I Corinthians 13:4-7.

“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil;

does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”



10. Use prayer as a major tool to avoid confrontations with a brother or sister in Christ. Pray that you will hold your tongue when a difference of opinion may threaten to cause you to speak hurtful words (James 3:2-10). Pray that you will gain knowledge and wisdom regarding a divisive topic that will lead you towards the truth on the matter.

In Summation ...

Recall that our differences in understandings on non-salvation topics pale into insignificance against the reality of spending eternity together. We have a deep-seated obligation to our brothers and sisters in Christ — those possessing His spirit — to express agape love to them, which is summarized in Matthew 7:12:

“Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is [the meaning of] the Law and the Prophets.”

Practice the foot washing attitude of Jesus when He stooped down to wash the disciples’ feet on the Passover before His crucifixion. Here was the Creator of all things visible and invisible (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16) showing Himself to be a servant of the twelve disciples in an incredible display of humility and kindness ... even when He knew he would in a short time be mercilessly pummeled and desecrated, then nailed to a stake and finally pierced and killed. WE ARE THOSE DISCIPLES! We need to treat one

another just as Jesus washed the disciples' feet, showing us how to be true kings and priests that we are destined to be after the resurrection (Revelation 5:10). He even washed the feet of Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Him. Are we willing to wash the feet of those who are our enemies?

While it is true that Jesus Christ came not to bring peace, but a sword on earth (Matthew 10:34), we within the ecclesia must not suppose that the sword was meant for those within the body of Christ. Within the body is to be peace, joy, patience, love, kindness, humility, and correct judgment (Galatians 5:22-23). Our conflict is with the evil lusts of the flesh from those outside the body which breed conflict, controversy, jealousy, anger, confrontation, competition, and despair. Indeed, the division among men is between those that obey the truth and those who do not, those who receive Him and those who do not (John 1:11-12; 3:16-18). Jesus said, "He who is not with Me is against Me" (Matthew 12:30).

Remember what Solomon said:

"He who corrects a scoffer gets shame for himself,

And he who rebukes a wicked man only harms himself.

Do not correct a scoffer, lest he hate you;

Rebuke a wise man and he will love you.

Give instruction to a wise man and he will be still wiser;

Teach a just man and he will increase in learning" (Proverbs 9:7-9).

As if foot washing was not enough of a sign of Christ's love for us, He added,

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).