

**Intellectual but no Thoughtful, Righteous but not Just:
Trumping Hermeneutical *A Prioris* for the Sake of the Truth**
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INTRODUCTION

To what shall I liken this issue, and to what can I compare it? It is like a first-century family of God-fearers in southern Judea, who searched the Scriptures and walked in God's ways.

A Parable

A family of gentile believers had two sons whom they loved. The older son was gifted in mind and excelled in learning above his teachers. He searched the Scriptures even deeper than his elders and found much enlightenment ... and many questions. Many were the times at table when he and the family wrestled with issues together. The disputes were oft times fiery, and his words were strong and confident.

But the young man's learning also brought *leanings* that were new and strange to the family. He challenged them to eat meat they had always refused since it had been offered to idols. His father and mother knew there was only one true God—and to honor the LORD they had always been careful to abstain from what had been offered to false gods. One day, the son flaunted his freedom and ate such food before their faces. His elders wailed, "Oh, son, what

have you done? Are you no longer a believing one?"

The older son reacted against their charge, left the Faith, and forsook his family for many years.

Now the second son walked in the ways of the Lord even more strictly than his elders. He attached himself to a sect of the Way and dwelt in community. He devoted himself to fasting and prayer, observance of special days, abstinence from certain foods, and to rising early in the morning to sing the songs of the LORD—loudly.

Upon learning of this son's intent to submit himself to circumcision, his parents urged him not to. They reasoned with him, sharing the truths of equality in Christ: "There is no value in being circumcised or uncircumcised—we are all one in Christ!" But when his mother spoke, the son rejected her counsel harshly. Having been taught a rigid, patriarchal theology, he said, "I will obey only if my *father* commands me." The father, not accustomed to commanding anybody, gently pled with his son to celebrate the sufficiency of Christ—"even to us gentiles"—and to stop his thinking about becoming circumcised.

The son retorted, “So be it.” But instead of following his father’s counsel, he moved out of the community in which he dwelt, left the Faith, and distanced himself from his family.

Those who have ears to hear, let them hear. Listen then, to what the “Parable of the Stumbling Sons” means: *though each of the two sons showed a bold face, they both stumbled on seemingly small things.*

The older son, though arrogant and self-confident, was still *vulnerable*. Whether it was the expression of his parents’ fear that he was falling, the waves of doubts that were swelling in his own heart, or the struggle of wrestling with ideas too great to handle alone, he was *vulnerable*. Though he wore a tough exterior—he bore a sensitive spirit susceptible to being condemned!

The second son, on the other hand, though rigid and self-righteous, was *brittle*. With his overt displays of piety, he reckoned that he had outperformed his parents. Yet he stumbled on their gentle guidance, lovingly shared, with his good in mind. Was it that he had lost face or felt his achievement devalued that he “threw the baby out with the bath water?” Oh, how *brittle* he was—to run roughshod over others, yet snap so quickly when offended!

One can never judge from the outside how fragile is one’s faith on the inside. Thus, “*It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble*” (Luke 17:2).¹

Life is full of debates and disagreements. People may argue different sides with various degrees of vehemence. But regardless of the issues, the face and the faith of individuals is at risk. If in their weakness, these two sons overreacted to the best of intentions from those most intimate to them, then how much more care should we take to be loving and tender toward all those with whom we differ? More important than winning an argument, or to die defending the premise on which it stands, is trumping hermeneutical *a priori*’s for the sake of the Truth. For in Christ Jesus no position “counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6).

Battles of Ideas

The seminary context, as is true of any graduate-level academic setting, is a boot camp for the battle of ideas. Its curriculum is designed to prepare students to prevail in intellectual arguments on multiple fronts. Two such battles of ideas, similar yet contrasting, are apologetics and polemics.

Apologetics is the defense of the Faith against outsiders (i.e., non-believers). The entrance of this term into Late Middle English in the 16th C came through French or Late Latin from the Greek adjective and noun, *apologetikos* and *apologia*, and means “to speak in ones own defense.”² Polemics, by contrast, is the battle for truth against insiders (i.e., other believers). This term entered the English language in the 17th C via Medieval Latin from the Greek adjective and noun, *polemikos* and *polemos*, and means “battle.”³

Not only do these two kinds of crusades of communication differ with regard to their recipients (insiders versus outsiders), but the linguistic origins of these two terms may also reveal contrasting levels aggression that are executed and experienced in these arenas of verbal conflict. “Apologetics,” for example, has come to mean the *formal and reasoned justification* for doctrine. While “polemics,” on the other hand, whether in religious speech or common parlance, has come to mean a *strong* written or verbal *attack* on someone or something. While we advocate for using a reasoned defense with the un-churched, too often, we exercise a hostile attack on our own brothers and sisters when Christians disagree.

Such polemical battles within the Church can be brutal, inflicting pain and shame on others simply because they disagree. James admonishes us:

My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ... But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace (James 3:10-11, 17-18).

Along with the Great Commission, Christ gave us the Great Commandments. Above all, we must love!⁴

Spectrum of New Testament Viewpoints

The New Testament demonstrates that viewpoints of first-century Christians on certain issues covered quite a wide spectrum. The NT discredits positions at either end of the two poles: the far Left of antinomian libertinism and the far Right of Judaistic legalism. Neither of those—lawlessness or self-righteousness—is orthodox. Yet between those polarities there is evidence that early Christians often disagreed.

For example, two inspired, authoritative NT authors articulated very different doctrines on faith versus works. Just compare the writings of Paul with the writings of James. Paul emphasized that salvation comes through grace and faith alone; he opposed a “works righteousness.” Whereas, James wrote, “I will show you my faith by my works.”

God’s people may hold very different views, even on things that really matter.

New Testament Disagreements and God’s Desire

Scripture is brutally honest in sharing how issues played out in the early church. Sometimes, disagreements were painful with strong emotions and aggressive actions. Paul disagreed so sharply with Peter on the gentiles’ right to the gospel, for example, that he “opposed him to his face for his hypocrisy” (Gal. 2:11). Paul disagreed so sharply with Barnabas over John Mark’s “desertion” that “he parted company” with him (Acts 15:38). Sadly, to this day, the Lord’s Church is known for its splits. The tendency toward disunity is so prevalent among Christians that it has become a brunt of humor among both believers and non-believers.

There were other times in the NT, however, that the Holy Spirit granted wisdom to bring resolution, preserve relationships, and bring agreement. For example, Priscilla and Aquila met with Apollos in private, inviting him to their home in order to dialogue together about their various insights on Scripture (Acts 18:26). Apollos accepted their input and developed a ministry that was widely accepted and ecclesiastically endorsed. It was James' wise leadership that kept from splitting the Church into two churches—a Jewish church and a gentile church. Instead of taking sides, but by valuing both the testimony of the Word and the witness of the Spirit, the Jerusalem leaders concluded “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” not to burden the gentiles with anything beyond the essentials (Acts 15:28).

In John 17 (20-23) Jesus addressed the Father on our behalf.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, *that all of them may be one*, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, *that they may be one* as we are one: I in them and you in me. *May they be brought to complete unity* to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me [emphasis added, TNIV].

It is our love⁵ and unity as Christ's followers that glorifies the Father and validates the Church to the world.

Approach

In this lecture I approach the problem of dealing with Christians with whom we disagree, first, by presenting an exegesis of two NT case studies. These scenarios expose “two sides” typically taken by disagreeing parties and the presuppositions that undergird each position. From analyzing the Apostle Paul's handling of the issues, we arrive at theology—the bigger battle behind the disagreements and the higher road to take. Next, I move to illustration and application, listing additional issues in the Bible on which believers might have disagreed and several from the contemporary context. Finally, I suggest principles of a Christ-like response and invite us all to live in such a way.

CASE STUDIES

#1 Meat Offered to Idols (1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1)

One issue that divided the early church regarded eating meat offered to idols. In 1 Corinthians chapters 8, 9, and 10⁶ Paul modeled how to bring unity in the midst of hostility. The congregation in Corinth was divided over whether or not Christians should eat meat that had been offered to idols in various circumstances: (1) in pagan temples; (2) when the leftovers were sold in the marketplace; and (3) when marketplace food was served in a home. Eating meat on the premises of an idol's temple is an act of pagan worship and thus Paul forbade it on both theological and ethical grounds, but the second two

circumstances were open for debate.⁷ Let's see how Paul dealt with this situation in which Christians disagreed.

The first side argued *for* eating such meat on the basis of their knowledge. They had an *intellectual* understanding of the issue. For example, they knew that there is only one true God, that idols are “no-gods,” and that God is indifferent about food. Thus, the strength of their knowledge gave them *freedom* in this area making them *strong* in conscience. Paul understood this theology and shared their perspective.

But the second group *didn't know* what Paul and the “intellectuals” knew. Still influenced by pre-Christian culture where eating meat was an act of worship, they lacked freedom in this area and argued *against* eating idol meat under any circumstances. Without sharing the “understanding,” which the first group possessed, the conscience of this second group was *weak*. Paul could understand their *conservative* perspective and appreciated the fact that eating such meat would have defiled their conscience.

Using Paul's descriptions we could label the two positions by their contrasting perspectives as the “intellectuals” and the “conservatives.” Paul showed respect, characterizing each camp by something *they valued*. Note that he did *not* identify the parties as *opposites* of each other. For example, Paul did not call the first group “intellectuals” and the second “idiots”; nor did he describe the latter as “conservatives” and the former as “liberals.” Their opponents might have preferred to use such designations. But not Paul! He valued the positive

elements of their contrasting worldviews.

Now these two kinds of Christians—the knowing ones and the not-knowing ones; the “intellectuals” and the “conservatives”—were both in the same church—not only in the Church of Jesus Christ, but also in the local congregation of Corinth. Thus both groups were believers, precious to God and worth being cherished by their brothers and sisters—regardless of which party was “strong” and which was “weak.” (Because, after all, in this issue the first group was strong and the second was weak, but in another issue the second group might be strong and the first might be weak.)

In their negative interaction, both groups had offended each other, perhaps to the point of causing the other to stumble.⁸ In the heat of an argument, each side is tempted to “put down” the other in a way that shadows their values. Intellectuals and conservatives both have their dark side. You see, intellectuals can be arrogant and self-confident; and conservatives can be judgmental and self-righteous. Intellectuals tend to despise⁹ conservatives for a lack of understanding, and conservatives are prone to condemn¹⁰ intellectuals for a lack of righteousness. It is bad enough that intellectuals think conservatives are in error; but it even worse that conservatives think intellectuals are in sin.

Making room for the devil—in either direction—grieves the heart of God, hurts the other party, and destroys the unity Christ prayed we would show the world!

#2 Circumcision and Salvation

A second issue among early Christians was the question: is circumcision necessary for salvation? This conflict appears again and again throughout the NT. Though the Jerusalem Council gave the official verdict in Acts 15, there were many skirmishes in this debate both before and long after the official ecclesiastical decision.

While the intellectuals appear to be most at fault in the meat-offered-to-idols issue—belittling the others’ perspective and emboldening the weak-in-conscience toward sin; it was the conservatives who kept troubling the church over the circumcision issue—perverting the gospel and throwing the gentile believers into confusion.

Why were the tables turned? It takes a level of power to perpetrate mistreatment on others. And once powerful, either side can come to believe that might makes right and use their power—as if it was God-given—against the powerless. As Lord Acton said, “Power tends to corrupt; and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” *The more disproportionate the balance of power in a relationship, the greater the potential for its abuse.*

What makes a party powerful? What constitutes its strength? In Case Study #1 (concerning meat offered to idols), the “intellectuals” were “strong.” Gentile “intellectuals” were in the *majority* in the church in Corinth.¹¹ It is likely that they also had more *wealth* and held more social and political *power* than “conservatives” did in that provincial setting. These three characteristics constituted the “strength” of the

“intellectual party.” In the City of Jerusalem and the church at large, at this time however, the circumcised “conservatives” comprised a strong *majority* and held all the religious political *power*. Those two factors, along with the weight of the history and *tradition* they represented, constituted the “strength” of the “conservative,” i.e., circumcision, party at that time. *Note well therefore: being “strong” or “weak” is not a characteristic of either position nor of the validity of its presuppositions (“intellectual” or “conservative”), but of its social and historical context.*

On the circumcision issue (Case Study #2), though the conservatives held the power they did *not know* the truth. The intellectual minority—even in their weakness offered freedom. This time, as underdogs, the “intellectual” party suffered as victims. Paul may have felt like the lone voice of enlightenment. Yet he was bold in confronting Peter, despising his duplicity and indicting him of error; and he taunted the Judaizers “to go all the way and castrate themselves” (Gal. 5:12). Still, from their position of power, the conservatives behaved in a judgmental way, criticizing the other side for their lack of conformity, calling such a lack of righteousness, indicting them of sin, and some even teaching that the uncircumcised were not followers of Christ.

We see the same characteristics of the contrasting positions in Case Study #2 as we did in Case Study #1. *While “intellectuals” tend to despise others for their lack of enlightenment, “conservatives” are prone to condemn others for their lack of conformity.*

Presuppositions

In these two NT case studies, the opposing positions taken by the various parties are based on their contrasting presuppositions. Before even engaging an issue, each party tacitly holds to unique assumptions that differ from the other party's assumptions. Each party's paradigm, i.e., the worldview underlying their respective way of thinking, differs from the other's paradigm. Each party sees things differently, because they are looking from a different perspective or point of view. Because their arguments originate from contrasting premises or starting points, their reasoning arrives at contrasting conclusions or ending points. And, though the veracity of these theoretical deductions held *a priori* are rarely examined critically, they are the true grounds of the disagreement.

So, which one is right, which one is wrong? Is it better to be an intellectual or a conservative? Yes! Both! *Neither set of presuppositions is better, neither is worse.* Both are subjective viewpoints possessing their own inherent strengths and prone to distinct weaknesses, respectively. Each position has a bias, i.e., a partiality toward or a prejudice against a thing, a person, or a group. Each position is committed to something positive, yet, in the passionate pursuit of good goals, persons holding either position may expose a dark side, the shadow of their strengths. Regarding any issue, every individual has a bias and builds from a premise. And on different issues, an individual may hold varying presuppositions—sometimes leaning conservative, at other times tending toward intellectualism.

Presuppositions are exceedingly important! They are the basis on which a person argues and reasons, the grounds on which an individual interprets reality. They comprise a person's hermeneutical *a priori*. *Dig deep enough, and you will find presuppositions at the bottom of any disagreement.*

Separate from either of the issues of Case Study #1 or 2 (meat offered to idols or circumcision and salvation), let's look at the paradigms of the contrasting *a priori*s. We must remind ourselves again that the two "sides" identified by the Apostle Paul are not polar opposites. Their qualities are not mutually exclusive, nor are their aspirations diametrically opposed. Though the boundaries are fuzzy and the overlap may be extensive, it is evident that the two positions are based on contrasting value systems, worldviews and goals. Their contrasting paradigms might be summarized as follows.

Conservatives, on the one hand, value tradition and security. Their goals are to preserve the past and perpetuate the status quo. They see their roles as guardians, defenders, and protectors. Their style is to urge caution and their tendency is to fear the future. They are susceptible to being narrow-minded, inflexible, exclusive, and judgmental.

Intellectuals, on the other hand, value discovery and change. They see their roles as seekers, inquirers, and enlightened ones. Their goals are to pursue enlightenment, progress, and freedom. Their style is curious and forward-looking. They are susceptible to permissiveness, imprudence, liberality, and pride.

Thus, while intellectuals in their arrogance tend to despise their opponents, the self-righteous character of conservatives is to condemn. When locking horns with opponents, the one party may be *intellectual but not thoughtful*. The other may be *righteous, but not just*. What they both should be about, however, is trumping *a prioris* for the sake of the truth.

Trumping the Presuppositions

If neither perspective is right or wrong, and if we all have a starting premise, what role does understanding about presuppositions have to do with Christians that disagree? (1) We must recognize our own presuppositions and be conscious of both their propensities and deficiencies. (2) We must respect the other party's presuppositions and be aware of their tendencies and failings. (3) Then, disengaging from the subjective pursuit of our own position, we must engage ourselves in the objective pursuit of unity and love, which trumps all *a prioris*.

The Bigger Battle

There is a bigger battle going on than the apparent issue that puts opponents at odds with each other. It is the battle of Faith, which we wage when we aim at the true Enemy and love others as objects of God's grace instead of as opponents in an argument. For in any disagreement, it is not only ideas that are subject to attack, but individuals are also at risk. As in the parable of the Two Sons who Stumbled, you may never imagine how fragile one's faith may be. The Enemy is always at work, even behind believers, to draw us into wanting to win our wars of words at any

cost, tempting us to use the ways of the world to do the work of the Lord.

Christians—especially scholars—often approach a conflict of ideas as some attorneys approach a courtroom. More than establishing truth, a lawyer's aim can be to win the case. Attorneys argue from precedent, use logic to induce or deduce conclusions, and handle witnesses—advocating for their own and attacking their opponent's.¹²

By questioning one's credentials or the consistency of his or her testimony, an attorney may seek to erode the credibility of a witness' argument. A lawyer may listen carefully, not just to understand the other's position, but in order to expose every item they may use in cross-examination. They may be crafty about the spin they put on answers and are masters of intimidation. In Law School they are taught not to be overly aggressive, but by showing respect, to lull the witness into a trap—and *then* be firm. They are to insist on getting answers and taking control and will not tolerate evasion, digression, reframing the question, quibbling, or making excuses. Attorneys are taught to ask leading questions and to be persistent in getting at what they want. They are trained to wear a poker face, showing no facial expression at the counsel table.

Then there is the attack on the witness' character. Attorneys are taught "argumentative weapons" (like emotion and passion, stories, and rhetorical questions) to "knock the opponent off his game," and to challenge him with something for which he has no real answer or cannot explain. "Make him look bad—make him squirm! And when the witness tries to reconcile

inconsistencies, draw attention to the struggle.¹³”

It is a severe strategy—designed not to establish truth, but to win. And in this kind of competition, a victory for one means a defeat for the other. It is a win-loose game. Dog-eat-dog. Devour or be devoured—at *any cost*.

This all-out level of commitment—“at any cost”—reminds me of a similar expression used by another lawyer, a Jewish one ... from Tarsus. The Apostle Paul’s expression (in 1 Cor. 9:22, NIV) is “by all possible means.” Paul’s words describe not the method he used for destroying his opponents, but for rescuing them, delivering them, i.e., bringing them salvation. Throughout 1 Corinthians chapter 9 Paul describes the rights he refuses to exploit in order to give others the greatest possible access to faith in Christ. Paul “put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ” (v. 12, NIV). He made himself “slave to everybody, to win as many as possible” (v. 19, NIV). And what was he out to win? Not just arguments, but eternal souls! And bringing souls to faith—as well as preserving those in the Faith—are processes accomplished in love.

That’s *the Truth*—with a capital “T”—which trumps all hermeneutical *a priori*s.

The Higher Road

Just as an attorney impeaches a witness, Christians overly committed to winning the argument may demonize their opponents. If God has called us all to love our *enemies*, how much more should we show grace toward brothers

and sisters with whom we disagree! Let’s take the higher road of love.

Case Studies Revisited

Listen to Paul interact with the two parties in Case Study #1:

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But those who love God are known by God. ... But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak (1 Cor. 8:1-3; 8-9).

What is the proper response when Christians differ on issues? The intellectuals’ knowledge must be tempered with love. Instead of avoiding contact, or simply tolerating, they should try to listen and learn what the conservatives have to offer, valuing the conservatives as making a genuine contribution to the Christian community. Intellectuals must resist demeaning others for the legalism of their “weaker” conscience. Intellectuals must repent of arrogance, and instead of despising, respect the conservative as a sincere brother and sister in Christ.

And, what of the conservatives? The conservatives’ legalism must be tempered with love. Instead of avoiding contact, or simply tolerating, they should try to listen and learn what the

conservatives have to offer, accepting intellectuals as genuine members of the Christian community. Conservatives must resist putting down intellectuals for their “calloused” (emboldened) conscience, but repent of being judgmental and, instead of condemning others as heretics, accept intellectuals as true brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the case of the circumcision issue, though the power has shifted sides, a Christ-like response is the same. *Intellectuals must stop despising the conservatives and show respect for their scruples. Conservatives must stop condemning the uncircumcised and accept them as believers.*

Reconciliation is a timeless call, regardless of the issue.

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. [And we might add—be reconciled to one another!] God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we

might become the righteousness [and we might add wisdom] of God (2 Corinthians 5:16-21).

ILLUSTRATION & APPLICATION

Other Issues in the Bible

In the interest of brevity we will not look into, but merely list, several issues in the Bible on which believers may have disagreed. Because, especially in the Old Testament, the authors usually narrate such issues with theology in mind, it might take stepping back into reconstructing the historical context to realize that there might have originally been multiple viewpoints. Place yourself in the context surrounding each issue, and ask yourself, which side would be more natural for you to take?

Remember: God’s people may hold very different views, even on things that really matter.

Old Testament

- Moses’ Being Forbidden to Enter the Promised Land
- David’s Being Permitted to Lead After Moral Failure
- To Eat or Not to Eat the King’s Meat in Exile?
- Israel’s Poor Performance at Proselytizing Pagans
- Ezra’s Command to Put Away Foreign Wives

New Testament

- Physical Contact with Samaritans (... with the Unclean; ... with the Dead)
- “Adultery of the Eye”
- Equal Pay for Last-Minute and All-Day Workers
- Reinstatement of the Prodigal

Contemporary Issues

- What Kind of Music is God's Music?
- Divorce and Remarriage of Believers, Ministers, and Church Leaders
- Human Rights for Homosexuals
- China Partnerships: with Government-Sanctioned Three-Self Churches or with the Un-Registered House Church Movement?
- What does it mean to be Pentecostal?
- What is Holiness?
- Interpretation of Tongues: in the Second or Third Person?
- Are there Apostles Today?

Again, we remind ourselves: God's people may hold very different views, even on things that really matter.

LIFE APPLICATION: A CHRIST-LIKE RESPONSE

Non-Negotiable Principles

From the exegesis of the two NT case studies, and the theology such exegesis illuminates, several principles of a Christ-like response begin to emerge. There are three non-negotiable principles.

1. A Cognitive Attitudinal Principle: Christ's Example is Humility.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ... he humbled himself” (Phil. 2:5).

We must concede that God's people—good people—may hold very different views, even on things that really matter. It was true in Corinth, true throughout

the early church, and it is still true today. That means that people just as good as we are, might disagree with our position. And just because they disagree does not mean they are bad people—defective in their thinking, or deficient in their morals. Whichever *a priori* we or the other party might hold on an issue, we must refrain from putting down the other party—even in our hearts—whether such be by despising or condemning,

It is not likely that any person, or either position, could be always right. Reflecting on the examples from the Bible, we note that God's perspective was not consistently represented by either one of the two human perspectives. God's heart on one issue could be described as conservative—holding fast to that which is good. God's heart on another issue could be aligned with the intellectuals—letting the light of liberty shine in darkness. This does not mean that God is indecisive, double-minded, or hypocritical. It only illustrates that neither of the human presuppositions match God's heart exactly, because neither is absolutely true. Because our cultures are fallen, sometimes tradition is wrong and needs to be corrected. At other times, what looks like leaping forward might actually be creeping away from center.

Holding a different view does not make a person bad—or even necessarily wrong, just different. And sometimes, different is good! Balance may be just what is needed. But the church will not benefit from the needed balance if we blackball the other party.

Just because we feel more comfortable with one presupposition or the other, does not make it right. The way a person

is raised influences what feels natural. Since we were all raised differently there is no way of correlating comfort with correctness. And being in the majority, does not assure veracity. “For the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. Enter through the narrow gate” (Matt. 7:13). Nor does might make right. Just because a person (or a position) has power, does not necessarily mean they are right. In fact the greater the power that is held, the greater is the temptation for abuse or coercion. With greater enfranchisement comes a ever greater responsibility to be more and more sensitive to others.

2. A Theological-Ideological Principle: God’s call is to unity.

Christ’s prayer in John 17 for unity of his followers is an expression of divine will for every era of the Church. Our love for each other is to be our hallmark as his disciples (John 13:35). The ministry of reconciliation, making and keeping peace, is a timeless call (2 Cor. 5:16-21).

A credo of John Wesley (not original to, but often quoted by, him) is: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty: in all things, charity.” Not only should this ideology help us to allow for differences on non-essentials, but may it guide us to grant grace to draw that circle larger.

3. A Behavioral Principle: God’s way is through love.

The old adage applies to the battles of ideas among believers: “It’s not whether you win or loose, it’s how you play the game!” Paul could say to the

intellectuals, “Knowing is not enough—it’s living the life that counts.” Preserving relationships and protecting people are even more important than guarding tradition or leaping forward.

AN INVITATION

Consider making several habits part of your relational disciplines.

1. Stop making room for the devil.¹⁴

- Admit that we all have presuppositions and that they are at the crux, hermeneutically, of our disagreements. Confess as sin the dark side, or shadow, or our strength.
- Confess to God, and apologize to those you’ve hurt, for the times *an priori* has justified your putting down a brother or sister, whether by despising or condemning them.
- Ask for forgiveness for calling names, making assumptions, having bad attitudes, or practicing patronization or condescension.
- Forgive those who’ve misjudged and mistreated you.
- Refuse to let it happen again!

2. Grant greater grace; draw a larger “circle.”

- Grant grace to people whose presuppositions differ from your own. The greater the difference, the greater the grace required! Give them the benefit of the doubt: don’t jump to conclusions; don’t demonize the opposition; don’t go on a witch-hunt! Instead of attacking them as enemies, treat them as family. As Paul

advised, “Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters — with absolute purity” (1 Tim. 5:1-2).

- And what do I mean by grace in this case? Justice is giving **others** what they *deserve*; mercy is *not giving* them what they deserve; and grace is giving them what they *don't deserve*. So, when you think others are wrong, when you think they are liberal, when you think they are narrow—when you're sure they don't deserve it—show them love. After all, if they did deserve it, it would not be grace!
- Draw the circle of inclusion a little larger than you are comfortable with—especially if your opponents are in a weaker position than you. If you are enfranchised, use your privilege to build a bridge to those who are not, by treating them as insiders instead of outsiders—regardless of *a prioris*.

3. Watch your words, guard your tongue, mind your mouth.

- Refuse to call others names. Speak charitably of the other party with as much integrity when they are absent as when they were present.
- Finally—pray! Pray prayers of petition, asking for wisdom and strength to make things right. Pray prayers of blessings for each other.

As you consider making these loving responses to those with whom you disagree a part of your relationship disciplines, I invite you to make a commitment in this context of accountability.

May we be known as a community that reflects Christ's character with integrity, loving all God's children as brothers and sisters. In such a way the light of Jesus' love shine brightly—in us, on us, and through us!

¹Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the Bible are from the NRSV.

²S.v. in *Oxford American Dictionaries and Thesaurus*, Version 1.0.1(1.0.1), Copyright 2005 Apple Computer, Inc.

³Ibid.

⁴“Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:14).

“Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8)

⁵“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

⁶Compare Romans 14 (in the context of chapters 13-15) where the issue also arises.

⁷Cf. Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 284-286; 373-374; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 357-491, esp. -363; and James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16, WBC 38B* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 794-843.

⁸In Greek the words for “offend” and “cause to stumble,” *skandalizomai* from *skandalon*, share the same stem.

⁹The self-confident intellectual is inclined to “look down on,” *kataphroneo*, i.e., to despise, scorn, or devalue the conservative for their lack of enlightenment.

¹⁰The self-righteous conservative is prone to put down, “judge down,” *katakrino*, i.e., to condemn the intellectual for apostasy.

¹¹Perhaps also in Rome where Paul deals with the same issue (cf. Rom. 14 in the context of chapters 13-15).

¹²One of my fine Greek students here at the Seminary, Benjamin Franklin, just passed the Bar Exam this winter and was sworn in to the legal practice as an attorney. Ben prepared for me the following summary of the strategies of cross-examination taught in law school and how to discredit a witness. This process is called “impeaching the witness.”

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Eph. 4:27.