

## **RESPONDING TO DIFFERENCES OF BELIEFS & PRACTICES**

Wil Berg, December 2020

Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 14 give instruction based on godly love for successfully dealing with controversial and divisive issues.

**ROMANS 14** – The first controversy here is one of conscience between a meat eater and a vegetarian. “For one believes he can eat all [clean] things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables” (verse 2, NKJ).

“The meat eater should not despise the vegetarian, nor should the vegetarian condemn the meat eater – they should reflect that God has accepted them both” (verse 3, J. B. Phillips translation = PHI). “For the Lord is able to make him stand” (in the final judgment – verse 4, Holman Christian Standard Bible = HCS; NIV).

The second controversy described is, “One person considers one day to be above another day. Someone else considers every day to be the same. Each one must be fully convinced in his own mind” (verse 5, HCS).

“Why do you criticize your brother? Or you, why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before the tribunal [judgment seat] of God” (verse 10, HCS).

“Let us therefore stop turning critical eyes on one another. If we must be critical, let us be critical of our own conduct, and see that we do nothing to make a brother stumble or fall” (verse 13, PHI).

“So let us concentrate on the things which make for harmony [peace, HCS], and on the growth of one another’s character” (verse 19, PHI).

**1 CORINTHIANS 14** – Prophesying (verse 1) = one who “speaks edification and exhortation [encouragement, HCS] and comfort to men” (verse 3, NKJ).

In the first part of this chapter Paul explains the necessity of an interpreter for those speaking in different languages, so all can understand what is being said.

Verse 26 onward shifts the focus to instructions for maintaining order in church services. Everyone had something to say. So to maintain propriety, Paul gave 2 or 3 men opportunity to speak, and directed the listeners to evaluate in their minds [“think over”, PHI] what the speakers were saying (verse 29).

“But if something [“a message of truth”, PHI; “a revelation,” NIV] was revealed to another person sitting there, the first prophet [speaker] should be silent [“stop talking”, PHI]. For you can all prophesy [speak] one by one, so that everyone may *learn* and everyone may *be encouraged*” (HCS, verses 30-31).

“And the prophets’ spirits are under the control of the prophets, since God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (verse 32, HCS).

Another translation is, “The spirit of a true preacher is under that preacher’s control” (PHI).

The KJV, NKJ and RSV translate it as, “And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.”

Whichever way one interprets verse 32 some conclusions seem apparent: there was interest in what was being taught, concern about correct understanding and differences of opinion, and much discussion between the speakers and others.

## Thoughts/Suggestions

Because our understanding of God the Father and His Son is so important and foundational, we should be careful how we build on this foundation, but especially where we encounter differences of interpretation of belief and practice. The following instructions and principles are taken from Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 14:

1 – Have a loving concern for the spiritual growth and well-being of all the brethren. In addition to Paul's comments about this, Peter instructed the brethren to "love one another fervently," and to "love the brotherhood" (1 Peter 1:22; 2:17).

While everyone agrees there is an on-going need for love, there are differences in how love is interpreted. Some practice love by sharing their views with the brethren. Others feel the need to protect the brethren from controversial discussions and viewpoints. Transparency is usually best (John 15:15), but wisdom is needed to properly evaluate different situations.

2 – Accept the reality that there will always be differing viewpoints and opinions regarding both beliefs and practices. For example: tithing gross or net; necessity of 3<sup>rd</sup> tithe in countries which already tax citizens to support the poor; what it means to keep Sabbath holy (watching TV, eating out in a restaurant, etc.); appropriate hair lengths, acceptability of make-up; what it means to put leaven out (putting out the last few pieces of bread vs. cleaning the entire home and vehicles); voting in national elections and who is the "most righteous" candidate; dating outside the church, etc.

3 - Give loving respect for those who have differences of belief, and maintain kind relationships with everyone. Scripture also teaches we should not criticize, get angry with, or look down on

those who have different understandings. Instead, we should defuse hard feelings and resentments by respecting differences on interpretive matters. Love the brotherhood. Only God can change minds. "God is able to make him stand" (Romans 14:4).

4 – It is the Father and His Son who reveal knowledge, wisdom, and understanding to those who seek and pray for it (Daniel 2:30; Proverbs 2:6; Luke 24:45).

5 – As they are able, elders should always be willing (be easily entreated) to carefully study all viewpoints of the brethren, to understand their positions and Scriptural support. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the different points of view. Formulate and ask questions for clarification.

6 – On controversial matters, each member must come to be "fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5, NKJ). We cannot (and should not try) to control other's beliefs and practices. Trying to change firmly held beliefs of others can squelch God's Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19), and cause offense and/or discouragement.