

1-1-2003

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Ministry Magazine

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Recommended Citation

Eva, Will (2003) "How to Settle Disputes that Divide Brethren," *Perspective Digest*: Vol. 8 : No. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol8/iss1/6>

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HOW TO SETTLE DISPUTES THAT DIVIDE BRETHREN

Recently, a friend and I were discussing a minor aspect of Seventh-day Adventist culture and tradition. "If I were to find this truth not as I and others have always believed it to be," he said, "I would leave the church."

I had heard similar sentiments before, and as his, they came across as brave and high-principled. But something in his rigidity bothered me. How worthy would the Adventist faith be, I thought, if its credibility ultimately depends on the manner in which a debatable element of its tradition is expressed?

If, to be credible, every belief must be deemed perfect and thus unchangeable, we would be left with

a mighty thin volume of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*. Also in serious question would be other sources of truth—valuable people, books, magazines, organizations—because we had found them to have a flaw or two. Even more serious would be the relationships sacrificed over an "a" instead of a "the," a comma instead of a period.

As editor of *Ministry* magazine, read by pastors and teachers and administrators throughout the Adventist world, I am keenly aware of the other side of the doctrinal coin: Truth is truth and should not be

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mixed with error. As Paul assured the Christian church in Galatia, it takes just a little leaven to permeate the whole lump of scriptural certitudes (Gal. 5:9). In fact, a controverted point of truth or culture may be even more important than we consider it to be.

An Extravagant Stance

We have only to look to Adventist history to gain significant insights into the danger of elevating minors to major status and pronouncing them "inerrant." The date is 1888; the place, Minneapolis. Our Adventist forefathers, commissioned to take the gospel to all the world, are far from "one," in spirit or in truth. The point of contention: whether in the Book of Galatians, Paul was referring to the moral or the ceremonial law. A little lady has described the divisive dispute. One minister, says Ellen White, asserted that "If our views of Galatians are not correct, then we have not the third angel's message, and our position goes by the board; there is nothing to our faith."

"Brethren," she continued, ". . . this statement is not true. It is an exaggerated statement. If it is made in the discussion of this question, I

shall feel it my duty to set this matter before all that are assembled, and whether they hear or forbear tell them the statement is incorrect. The question at issue is not a vital question and should not be treated as such. . . . There has been a spirit of Pharisaism coming in among us which I shall lift my voice against wherever it may be revealed."¹

In this situation, points of debate

had been assigned an importance so great that continued disagreement could result in estrangement and even schism. Ellen Whites use of "Pharisaism" is significant. The underlying mistake of the Pharisee was not merely his proverbial legalism but that he sought to turn his



Will Eva

codified expressions of reality into ultimate tests of faith and fellowship. He felt sincerely justified in rejecting or emotionally disfellowshipping anyone seeing things differently.

Unity in Diversity

A few years after Minneapolis, Mrs. White wrote something that has all the earmarks of profound wisdom and inspiration. With the debate there in mind, as well as all that had happened since, she said:

“We cannot. . . take a position that the unity of the church consists of viewing every text of Scripture in the very same light. The church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions, but we cannot force the mind and will, and thus root out disagreement. . . . Nothing can perfect unity in the church but the spirit of Christlike forbearance.”² What is and what is not the bottom line unifying ingredient among us? Feeling we must have everyone seeing things in the same light is not. The humble exercise of the divine principle of “Christlike forbearance” is.

A particular quality of forbearance is championed here—not just “openness,” nor merely “unity in diversity.” Rather it calls for a spirit that abstains from expressing negativity when it seems most justified. Call it simply “Christlikeness”—the manner in which Christ would respond to a par-

ticular issue or person.

We search constantly for logical, rational, or propositional points of agreement, and this approach has its place. It does not mean, however, that we’re to search one another’s words, minds, hearts, eyes, and expressions for agreement with what we think or what we wish to do on this or that matter. If we do, relationships will suffer as we encounter (and we repeatedly do) others who see things in a different light.

In all this, the only real basis for oneness and Christian solidarity is this fabulous spirit of Christlike forbearance.

Oh, God, fill us with your spirit! □

REFERENCES

¹Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1980), Book 3, pp. 174, 175.

²Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 1, p. 266.

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“For 30 years I have tried to see the face of Christ in those with whom I differed.” When this spirit actuates us we shall be preserved at once from a narrow bigotry and an easygoing tolerance, from passionate vindictiveness and everything that could mar or injure our testimony for him who came not to destroy men’s lives but to save them.—W. H. Griffith Thomas, quoting Bishop Whipple in Streams in the Desert.