

## ISSUES and ATTITUDES

(Discourse below by Brent Hislop given at the North Seattle Convention, Sunday, April 12, 1981.)

Our lesson for this afternoon we entitle ISSUES and ATTITUDES. By ISSUES we mean issues of doctrinal controversy. By ATTITUDES we mean simply the attitudes on the doctrinal issues.

Actually we intend to speak less on the issues themselves and more on the attitudes on the issues—our attitudes towards those that differ with us. And we intend to discuss what role issues and attitudes play in our consecrations and in our relationship with one another.

It can be difficult at times to grasp how others can see things so differently than we do. But I think it's true that gaining the right attitude towards brethren with whom we do not see eye to eye on the issues is as important, and sometimes, more important than the conclusion we reach on the issues themselves.

It's a very fundamental lesson of life that you've got to learn to handle other people's ideas and concepts that differ from your own and the difficulty of this is compounded for the Lord's people, for we have the Truth, love it and are jealous of it; and yet there is no uniformity of belief on all points; and we must distinguish between which points are important, and which less important. All truth is important, but there are truths of greater importance, and truths of lesser importance; and we must learn to distinguish between our opinions and fixed truths—a point of difficulty for some brethren.

We can claim no freedom from bias, but we want to try and approach this subject in as reasoned and dispassionate a manner as possible. Doubtless you won't agree with all that we say, but should you be expected to? A question we want to broach in this lesson is, should we be expected to agree in all points, or even most points, and if not, where do we draw the line?

Many doctrinal problems defy simplistic solutions, because they can include added variables of personality conflicts, misunderstandings, heated emotions; brethren pushing their views on others and the like.

There is no one all-embracing attitude towards the various doctrinal problems; with some we must stand firm for or against; with others we should be more liberal. The difficulty lies in knowing which attitude is required by which issue. This isn't easy when there are so many divergent views amongst the brethren; and not made any easier when those we agree with on doctrine, may disagree with us on attitude.

Stop and think for a moment brethren, of some of the contentious issues of the past and present. They include justification; the Jubilees; the 1,000 years; the fall of Babylon; the Harvest; spirit begetting in Babylon; the reign; restitution; the smiting of Jordan; chronology; the covenants; the 2nd advent; witnessing; the closing of the door to the high calling; Armageddon; the winepress, the parallels. And on and on, the list could be multiplied.

We've been through a lot; some through much more than others. What have we learned through it all? It is said that those who fail to learn from the past are condemned to repeat its mistakes. What have we learned brethren; frankly I wonder at times.

Some have become so doctrinaire and dogmatic that they are in danger of overreacting to less important issues. Some have thrown up their hands in despair and hope by ignoring the problems they will go away. Some have become embittered and have taken to backstabbing those they don't agree with under the guise of defending the truth. And some have thrown a blanket of liberality over the whole affair and discount the importance of doctrinal controversies.

And these point up just a few of the problems. But brethren what have we learned? The Lord permits doctrinal problems, large and small, to try us, to teach us. And the tests go beyond mere fidelity to truth, important as that is and it is important; but some see the whole thing in only this one dimension and there is much more to it. Doctrinal problems test our maturity to determine each issue's relative importance and the proper attitude to seek for each given issue.

All Truth is important brethren, but we can't approach all contentions in the same way. This is, or should be a self evident truth, but we'll give an example of this. Our example is the harvest in contrast to the Second Advent. The harvest has been an issue of some contention, but can we approach this in the same light we might contend on the Second Advent, a fundamental aspect of present truth. I think not. Some believe the harvest of the Gospel age finished in 1914; some believe the harvest will end at some future point in time. We're not going to discuss the doctrine per se, that's not our aim here.

But now some of the discussion on this issue is semantics and some substantive. Semantics in that both sides agree spirit begetting continues on a replacement basis, regardless of whether we call it a harvest or a gleaned work. But more substantive as it affects the prophetic outline of the end of the age, including the parallels, spirit begetting in Babylon, the fall of Babylon and other related subjects.

As with some other contentious issues, time plays an important part in the harvest issue. Those who believe the harvest is past attempt to see the harvest and parallels as originally

presented without adjustments for time. While those who believe the harvest continues, attempt to make adjustments for time, for which they believe the Pastor sanctioned in his later writings.

Both strive for fidelity to the harvest message as they see it, and I believe both sides should appreciate the integrity of one another in that attempt, though they may not agree with the others conclusions.

Now, it's good that we should try and reach reasonable conclusions. And we may view our conclusions with conviction. Nothing wrong with that as long as that conviction is based on thorough research; but—that doesn't give us the license to turn conviction into contention with those that see differently.

But how quickly contention can develop if any on either side of the issue start to push their ideas. It just creates a climate of confrontation, and doesn't it seem that all too often, our differences are aired under a pressure cooker atmosphere of confrontation, an atmosphere in which reason is very often the first casualty. Brethren, whatever the issue, even more fundamental issues than the harvest, don't get caught up in a contentious, bitter attitude—it is fruitless and worse—damaging to ourselves, to others and to the cause we represent.

In the early church there was a raging controversy over the Law. Some Jewish Christians taught that Christians, Jews or Gentiles, had to subscribe to the forms and regulation of the Law. (Before we get into this, ask yourselves, brethren, how important an issue was this? how do you think you would have reacted to it, as a Gentile Christian, living at that time? and how does this controversy level of importance compare to the level of importance of some of our controversies today? How important was the Law controversy?)

Gal. 5:2 to 4: “Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.” Paul is speaking to Gentile Christians of the danger of putting themselves under the Law, betokened in circumcision. “For I testify again to every man that is circumcised that he is a debtor to do the whole Law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the Law, ye are fallen from grace.”

Paul is saying that Law issue was a life and death matter; and yet in the light of this he could say to Titus (3:9), “Avoid foolish questions and genealogies and contentions and strivings about the Law; for they are unprofitable and vain.”

The Greek word for contentions means quarrelling, wrangling. The Greek word for strivings means a battle. Paul was saying avoid the battling over the Law; don't get caught up in the contentious spirit because it is unprofitable and vain—useless and empty.

Paul wasn't encouraging an "anything goes attitude" and nor do we. His actions toward the leaders of the Judaizers in Acts 15 and Galatians 2 demonstrates this. Thus coupling Paul's words with his actions, we come up with that time-tested maxim—we must contend for the faith without being contentious.

Paul warned of a contentious spirit on a vitally important subject. What about us today, in the Bible Student world? There has been bitter contentiousness over much less important matters. How useless and vain. Something has gone wrong somewhere.

The Law controversy serves us an excellent example of a controversy with both important areas on which to stand firm and areas on which to be more liberal.

Turn with me to Acts 15. The leaders of the Judaizers preached that the Gentile Christians must be circumcised, emblematic of acceptance of the Jewish Law; for they said (Acts 15:1) "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." Paul stood adamant against this and in the words of Acts 15:2, no small dissention or strife ensued.

Though Paul warned Titus about getting caught up in unnecessary contentions over the Law, at the same time he reminded Titus in the 1st chapter of his responsibility as an elder to hold fast the faithful word, that he might be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and convince the gainsayers; and then warns specifically of the Judaizers. The Greek word given as convince, means to reprove, to refute or to expose error. In our Acts 15:2 text, Paul stood fast against the Judaizers and a heated confrontation resulted; but it resulted not from any contentious or embittered spirit on his part, but from a proper defense of the Truth—a notable distinction, I think.

As a result of this confrontation, a council of apostles and elders was called in Jerusalem (recorded in Acts 15), and considering the grave danger of the Law issue, the apostles and elders reached a very remarkable conclusion. It was proposed by James in verses 19 to 21, and adopted by the gathering in verses 22 to 29. James proposed to ask the Gentile brethren to abstain from pollutions of idols, from fornication and from things strangled and from blood. The first two are basic enough but the latter two, abstaining from things strangled and from blood are significant because they were ordinance of the law—Lev. 17:12 to 15.

Clearly enough it was a concession to appease the Jewish brethren's sensibilities, for, verse 21, these Mosaic prohibitions had long been taught in their synagogues and they considered these things forbidden and reprehensible.

But we might raise the question here—if they gave an inch, in asking the Gentile brethren to observe these few ordinances of the Law, wouldn't it give the Judaizers a footing upon which to promote their false teachings of full compliance to the Law? Probably so, but it's evident that the greatest good could be achieved by this initiative—though it wasn't without its dangers. It wasn't a compromise—they didn't abandon principle; they stood unmoved on the question of circumcision and hence full compliance to the Law.

Their proposition asked for a Christian spirit of tolerance and understanding. A certain liberality; again, not without its dangers—but, better by far than an adamant stand that could have only served to ostracize some of the Jewish brethren; rather in granting them a measure of appeasement they gave them room to grow, time to come to understand the new and living way.

Though doctrinal conflicts we face may not be of the same sort or severity as the Law issue, nonetheless there are some good lessons in all of this for us. To stand fast where we must, to be liberal where we can; to take a measured and reasoned approach to error as did the Jerusalem conference did, that we might avoid compounding the problems that already exist. To realize that what attitudes we take, what solutions we employ are very often of themselves wrought with some danger.

And I think for this reason some fear liberal attitudes on differences because of the inherent danger of such an attitude leading to further and graver errors—a legitimate concern, for we've seen over the years certain issues grow and encompass other areas of present truth; ultimately and pathetically leading some brethren to a wholesale rejection of parts of the present truth message contained in the Volumes.

Many of the brethren have been through some tough doctrinal experiences and as a result there is a danger of a rigidity leading to overreaction on any and all differences. And I personally think we've seen some of this on issues like the harvest, spirit begetting in Babylon and the fall of Babylon, to name a few. A reactionary attitude is to be avoided just as an excessive liberality that can minimize the importance of fidelity to truth.

It's hard at times not to react strongly to thoughts that just don't make any sense to us. Spirit begetting in Babylon is a good example of this, both sides on the issue generally tend to have strong views, perhaps in part because they have polarized one another. And yet I think when we look closely at the issue, trying to be objective, whatever our position, we can see some room for tolerance with one another. Firstly because both schools of thought base their thinking extensively around prophecies that are not self-evident and without room for question. Secondly, both sides have points they really can't answer, at least, without a good deal of rationalization. With this subject we are dealing with absolutes, as long as we distinguish between possibility and probability: essentially it's a matter of looking at a body of material and making our conclusion based on the

preponderance of evidence as it seems most reasonable to our minds; while appreciating that there is evidence to the contrary and hence recognizing strengths in others arguments and weaknesses in our own.

Some would have us measure the importance of doctrinal error by how it affects our consecrated walk. This has some merit, but it's limited, as many doctrinal matters have little direct effect upon our consecrated lifestyles. On the spirit-begetting-in-Babylon question, the pro side might worry the other side won't witness; while the con side might worry the pro side putting too much emphasis in a great witness message. These fears may be well founded with some; but for the most part not so—we must avoid sweeping generalizations and in honesty we must avoid exaggerations of any sort of other's positions. And you know, those having to exaggerate to buttress their position demonstrates a marked weakness in their own beliefs. Exaggeration is really a compensation for weakness in one's grasp of a subject.

Honesty with ourselves is central to framing our attitudes on doctrinal issues and central to our decision-making on the issues themselves. Honesty will apprise us as to what degree our process of decision making on issues and attitudes is unduly influenced by other brethren, those we admire and are close to and those who we find less harmony with; and it will apprise us of the degree of influence from forceful characters and from partial—less than thorough research in study.

Honesty asks us to consider how great an influence our natural disposition has on these spiritual matters. If we are by nature conservative, will we be inclined to be less strict, more open in our views; and if liberal, more rigid—not very likely. The new mind is to moderate the excesses of our temperaments and we have to take care to see that it does. Honesty will guard us against rationalization, bending things to suit our preconceived conclusions.

Honesty will dictate a fair appraisal of how we use the Pastor's writings. A very simple example—his expectations of a church alliance and resurgence of power. The Pastor wrote extensively on this subject. Now, some feel that time and hindsight have modified his expectations of prophecy in this area. Among other things they emphasize a view of the parallels that suggest 1914 as the date of destruction of the nominal systems (Vol. II foreword), emphasizing that perhaps the Image of the Beast would receive no more vitalization, than its backing by the Church of England, some years before, World War I; (R5349) emphasizing a viewpoint that the winepress of Rev. 14 began in 1914. (Citing R5697) Emphasizing such statements, while minimizing other statements such as Vol. 4, Foreword and R5554; that the Pastor expected churchianities alliance and exaltation to power future from his writings. And minimizing a view of the parallels that sees 1914, not as the ending of destruction of the nominal systems, but the beginning. (R5950)

Minimizing (winepress, Vol. IV, pages 18, 19, 51, 311) the 4th volume approach that speaks of the winepress as one of the very last features of the time of trouble.

But now, those who feel that churchianity will yet unite, receive such power must by the same token, emphasize that which the other minimize and minimize that which the other emphasize of the Pastor's writings.

Honesty is central to our process of decision making on the issues and attitudes. And consider brethren, that it may well be on the less important areas that the decision-making process counts as much or more than the conclusion itself. And our attitudes, how we hold our views, may be as important or more important than the conclusion on the issue itself. This of course would be limited to more minor points as opposed to important aspects of present truth.

Some like to think in terms of absolutes—black and white; and feel uncomfortable with anything less definitive; and yet I think on some, again some less important truths, a broader approach is commendable.

For example—the plagues of Rev. 16. The most reasonable approach to this subject I've heard was given by a brother who listed the options—gave their strengths and weaknesses; drew his preference by what seemed most reasonable to him based on the bulk of the evidence. And I think this approach harmonizes well with the Pastor's statement that prophecy can't always be understood fully until fulfilled.

It would be nice to have a uniformity of thinking, on all points of truth, but on more minor points it's not reasonable to expect. The Pastor outlines what we should expect of one another as a basis of fellowship, outlining the most fundamental of atonement doctrines. But of course, much more is required for elders, those who would be our teachers. And I think there would probably be pretty uniform agreement between us that understanding and acceptance of the harvest truths contained in the Studies in the Scriptures is the doctrinal criteria for eldership. But even here we have to make a distinction, a distinction between differences of interpretation on the Pastor's writings, on more minor points and outright rejection of doctrines clearly spelled out from the Scriptures, such as the presence, the Jubilees, the chronology to name a few.

Consideration of fellowship and eldership is an integral part of the discussion on issues and attitudes; and you can't help but be struck by the fact that the Pastor was more liberal in his requirements for fellowship than many of us are. Brethren, don't try and make the criteria for eldership, the criteria for fellowship.

Handle the truth well, guard against demanding too much of one another, just as you would guard against excessive liberalism. Avoid the extremes, avoid over-simplification;

take each issue on its own merits. Take care to determine each issue's relative importance. And how do you determine an issue's importance brethren, and the proper attitude to take on it?

I would encourage you to sit down sometime and try and put your thoughts on the various doctrinal controversies and your attitudes on them, down on paper. It will help you assess your own thinking because it's not easy to put specific thoughts down in a rational organized manner when all the variables are added in. Variables like personality conflicts, misunderstandings, brethren pushing their ideas, varying circumstances and the like. Nevertheless I think this would be valuable for us, in that our attitudes on the various issues might be better thought out, and perhaps it might help us to act rather than react when the winds of controversy blow. And blow they will, as sure as the sun rises. Doctrinal controversies, large and small, have always been a part of the church's experience and will be to the end. Nothing we can do will circumvent this. They are part of our testing; we simply have to learn to grow by them and minimize their negative impact. And wasn't this really what the Apostles and elders at the Jerusalem council did? Their actions really weren't a solution to the Law controversy; for it continued while the Apostles lived and after they died. They didn't diffuse the controversy as much as they minimized its negative aspects.

In the context of the Law controversy, Paul warned the brethren in Gal. 5:15 that if they bite and devour one another, to take heed lest they consume or destroy one another. Powerful words and a dire warning of the dangers of contentiousness. Stop and think of Gal. 5:15 the next time you find yourselves at odds with someone over doctrine—contend without being contentious—some can be stumbled by it.

Paul tells us in 1 Cor. 3:1-3 that a contentious spirit is a sign of immaturity; and James asks us in James 4:1, from whence comes wars and contentions among us? He answers—from lusts. The Greek word means selfishness and a lack of concern for others. James warns us again in 3:14-18 that contention is a tool of Satan and says where it exists there is—the King James says, confusion and every evil work—a very weak translation that misses the impact of the Greek which should read more nearly that, where strife or contention is, there is anarchy and every evil work.

Contention leads to a spirit of anarchy, brethren, pulling apart rather than pulling together. But rather James tells us to seek the wisdom which is from above, “first pure, then peaceable, reasonable, forbearing, compliant; full of compassion and good fruits, without partiality and unfeigned.” And he continues—the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those that make peace. A climate of peace between us, peace, not based on false conceptions or indifference will foster the development of a rich fruitage or harvest of righteousness. Amid our doctrinal conflicts, peace between brethren is sometimes a rare

commodity. But whatever our position, let's not allow a contentious spirit to disrupt fellowship and our own spiritual stability.

It's all too easy to become embittered by hard doctrinal experiences and have this bitterness carry over into other areas of our consecration. Some can scarcely talk to brethren they disagree with, without an air of tension, and that's tragic—we have so much to offer one another; and we've seen brethren value such a dogmatic stand that they have even alienated those they agree with on doctrine.

If you're secure with what you believe, you need not feel personally frustrated, nor necessarily feel the truth threatened with other's differing views. If their differences are serious enough, try and help them without getting into a contentious spirit; for as Paul said to Titus, it's useless and vain. And if they are teachers in the church, the rule to remove your support from their ministry is simple enough and can be done without commotion. But amid it all, speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) and in meekness instruct those who stand in opposition. (2 Tim. 2:25) And Paul said this of some very serious deviations; how much more it should be our attitude amongst so many of our differences.

If someone of our number came up to you and said there is no literal resurrection; that what is meant by resurrection is merely deliverance from sin to newness of life at consecration; how would you react? I'd probably be inclined to jump all over them; but Paul says to instruct such in meekness; and though he took very stern measures against them by putting them out, for they overthrew the faith of some. He said to Timothy to instruct them in meekness, if peradventure God would grant them repentance to the acknowledgment of the truth. Instructing in meekness, speaking the truth in love—it all sounds so simple, and yet it's hard to put into practice.

Stop and think a moment, brethren, of the doctrinal controversies still ahead of us. What will they be? and how important, how greatly will they divide us?

Stand firm for the truth, brethren, but take great care and love of the truth need not conflict with love of the brethren. We can't compromise truth and principle for others; but distinguish between present truths, more or less important, and don't expect or demand more from one another than we have a right to—we need one another.

You know pretty soon the days are going to drive us together; and we won't be probing one another to make sure we see eye to eye on the harvest and the fall of Babylon, as we do now. And perhaps that's part of our problem today, we don't get much opposition from the world; because (1) They don't much care what we believe, and because (2) Very few of us are doing much of anything to attract persecution; and hence the combative energies that every Christian must have are not being used against opposition from the world; and this combativeness can get pent up and turn in against the brethren.

We must avoid strife and a contentious spirit, without abandoning important truths and principle. Let's follow after the things which make for peace, and things whereby one may edify another. Avoid adamant positions on less important truths and avoid excessive liberality. Assess your thinking on the issues and attitudes. Strive for fidelity to truth and endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace; and may the Lord bless us all in this effort.