

When Should We Deal With Controversial Issues?

There are only two times when it is proper to deal with controversial subjects in the church: (1) when the church is bothered with them, and (2) when it is not. That may sound a bit "corny" but it is just plain fact. The philosophy that we should never trouble trouble until trouble troubles us may sound reasonable, but it is borne out neither in scripture nor history.

Religious controversy is *prima face* evidence of error. It does not always mean that one side is right and the other wrong, for both may be wrong. But it is a singular fact that both cannot be right because truth never contradicts truth. That means that all Christians must dust off their Bibles and find out just what is the truth. Paul admonished, "Be not unwise but understanding what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:17). So there is no room for the excuse, "Well I just can't understand." If both can't be right, then every Christian is duty-bound to find out which one is, or if either is.

Religious error is like a physical disease, as long as it exists anywhere in the world, it poses an insidious danger to Christians everywhere in the world. Error is like a disease. It does not usually remain confined to one particular area. It has cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents, grand children, and even good friends, and through them it may travel right to our front door (it often uses the back door!) and creeps in unawares (Jude 3). Paul spoke of false teachers' words as eating like a cancer (2 Tim 2:17): "And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus." (Don't fail to notice that Paul called the names of the false teachers, those spreading the disease. This is important to know so they can be quarantined!)

The world would have been dead from smallpox long ago had every community waited to vaccinate its citizens until it had an outbreak of the disease. The basic theory of immunization is to vaccinate before the disease strikes. The same thing holds true with pernicious religious error. Paul warned the Ephesian elders of dangers that lay ahead, Acts 20:28-29. "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock."

The church or the preacher that delays dealing with error until it strikes really is sacrificing many to the error; for often, once it strikes it is too late to save some. History proves human pride makes it difficult to reverse a commitment. All Christians have a responsibility to stand for truth and against all error. Preachers must guard that which is committed to their trust (1 Tim. 6:20) and elders are with sound doctrine to exhort and convince the gainsayers (Tit. 1:9). He who will not defend the truth is out of harmony with God's word, and fails to honor his trust.

- by James P. Needham

Citizenship Conflicts

Christians are "not of this world" according to our Master (John 18:36). Of course, necessity demands some involvement in the affairs of earth-life, but we must continually remind ourselves that "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). The apostle Peter (1:1) referred to Christians as "strangers" (KJV) or "aliens" (NASB) He wanted them to see themselves as Jesus described them, "not of this world."

But Christians have to be careful about their behavior among people who ARE of this world. Consider Peter's instruction further in 1 Peter 2:11-12, "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to ... Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation." (NASU) If we are not careful, our behavior among "Gentiles" can be counter-productive to our purpose in the world. Our purpose is to bring glory to God by helping others become citizens of heaven, too.

As difficult as it may be, this means we cannot become so engrossed in earthly concerns to the extent that we lose focus on our heavenly hope. Let the Gentiles be Gentiles, but keep yourselves pure (1 John 3:3).

- by Mark White

Shipwrecked!

Lots of folks have recently discussed the story of the *SS Edmund Fitzgerald* - the mighty ship that went down in a fierce storm on Lake Superior - 50 years ago - in November of 1975. It was the largest freighter on the Great Lakes, a true marvel of its time. And yet, in spite of its size and strength, it met a sudden and tragic end. All 29 men aboard were lost. To this day, what caused the ship to sink remains one of the greatest maritime mysteries. Some blame faulty hatches that allowed it to take on too much water when huge, storm tossed waves broke over the ship. Others believe it may have grounded on a shoal as it passed by a small island – damaging its hull. Still others think it broke in two under the stress of the storm. No one knows for sure. A well remembered 1976 ballad by Gordon Lightfoot immortalized “*The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*”.

There's another kind of wreck that happens far too often - one that's not a mystery at all. We're talking about the wreck of a soul. The Bible makes it painfully clear what causes these spiritual disasters. God has not left us guessing about why men fall away, lose faith, and sink their eternal hope.

Paul spoke of some who had “made shipwreck of their faith” (1 Timothy 1:19). He didn't call it a mystery - he named the causes. Some cast away their good conscience. Others are overcome by worldly desires (2 Timothy 4:10). Some grow careless and fail in their obedience - they simply drift away, not because of one great storm, but through small, daily neglect (Hebrews 2:1).

The causes are well known: pride, love of the world, neglect of prayer and study, compromise with sin, failure to heed God's warnings. These are the reefs and rocks that have torn holes in countless souls. God, in His love and mercy, has placed bright beacons and clear charts in His Word to keep us from such destruction. If we ignore them, the fault is not His - it's ours.

The *Edmund Fitzgerald* went down suddenly, and no one can say with certainty why. But when a man's faith goes down, we can always trace the reasons. Spiritual shipwreck never comes without warning. The Word of God tells us exactly what causes it and how to avoid it.

So let's stay alert, keeping our eyes on the Captain's chart, steering clear of known dangers, and continuing to serve faithfully. If we do, when the storms of life rage around us, we'll still be found afloat – secured in the hope “which we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast...” (Hebrews 6:19).

- by Greg Gwin