## Good Fight of Faith vs Needless Disputes (2)

by Harry Osborne

The same apostle Paul who emphasized the necessity of fighting distinguished between essential battles for truth and needless disputes over mere words and opinions. Differentiating between a good fight and a needless dispute is sometimes difficult, but the difference can be seen when we reduce the conflict to the origin of its fundamental point. In his two letters to Timothy, Paul stated the principles involved. Notice those principles affirmed in these two passages:

*If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself* (1 Tim. 6:3-5).

*Remind them of these things, charging them before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some* (2 Tim. 2:14-18).

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| **Good Fight of Faith** | **Needless Disputes** |
| Wholesome Words | Words to No Profit |
| Words of Our Lord Jesus Christ | Disputes & Arguments over Words |
| Doctrine | Profane & Idle Babblings |
| According to Godliness | Cause the Ruin of the Hearers |
| Word of Truth | Useless Wranglings of Men |
| Approved of God | Cause Envy, Strife, Reviling, Evil Suspicions |

At the core of some conflicts, we see a fight based upon "wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ," while other conflicts are disputes over "words to no profit." Some issues involve doctrinal principles affecting godliness, but some issues are based on opinions or judgments that only subvert hearers if the opinions are bound on them. While God approves the teaching and practice of "words of truth" found in divine revelation, He hates "envy, strife, railings, evil suspicions, wranglings of men corrupted in mind and destitute of the truth." Let us be sure of the nature of the fight before we engage in it. One who decries all efforts to defend and fight for the truth in honorable controversy has surely replaced the banner of the cross with a white flag of surrender. He stands condemned. However, equally condemned is the one who elevates his opinions and hobbies as the rallying point for needless battle, seeking to impose his judgments as binding. He sees every difference as a call to battle. The extremes of viewing either **no cause** or **every cause** as worthy of conflict are both wrong.

What principles help us to distinguish between good fights of the faith and needless disputes over opinions? Clearly, if we correctly recognized every issue as involving doctrine or opinion, we would have no problem in discerning when to fight. While issues do not come with tags denoting the category to which each belongs, there are principles from Scripture to help us correctly distinguish where they belong. Let us examine a few cases from God's word.

**Differences over Eating Meats.** First century Christians had differing practices regarding the eating of meats (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8 & 10). Not all of these differences were a result of eating meat from types of animals forbidden as unclean under the Mosaic law. Prohibitions against eating blood and meat from things strangled had been binding before the law of Moses and continued to be binding under the gospel of Christ (Gen. 9:4; Acts 15:19-21). Many of the Jewish traditions dealt with details of how the slain animal must be bled and how the meat must be washed so as not to eat the blood. Those who sought to serve God could all agree that drinking a cup of animal’s blood would have been wrong. They could also agree that this prohibition did not mean it was sinful for one to consume one molecule of blood while eating meat, for that would have made it impossible to eat any meat.

The doctrine prohibiting the eating of blood was a necessity for all to obey, but that doctrine did not specify every detail involved in obeying it (i.e. exactly how long the animal was to be bled, how many times must the meat be washed, etc.). At that level, there was a **generic** principle rather than a specific one. To keep the doctrine, one must make **unspecified judgments** to apply it. Judgments in applying it may vary with different people, depending on conscience and other factors, but if all humbly consider and apply this principle, there will be no call for battle over differences of this type.

The same could be noted for first century Christians who sought to obey the command to "flee from idolatry" (1 Cor. 10:14). All could see that eating meat in worship of idols was sinful. Yet, Paul spoke of a few cases when one might lawfully eat meat that others offered to an idol while not participating in that idolatrous worship (1 Cor. 8 & 10). How were the brethren to decide what to do in such cases? They had to apply the principles of "sound words" in good conscience in dealing with each situation. Though brethren may have differed in a particular case as to what should be done, they could be united in doctrine as they continued in forbearance of one another in a given application not specified by divine law. Again, fighting in this realm would have been a needless dispute.

**Differences over Keeping Days.** The requirement to give thanks to God for our physical blessings was a necessity under Mosaic law just as it is under the gospel (Deut. 8:10; 1 Tim. 4:4; 1 Thess. 5:18). Jewish Christians in the first century may have lawfully kept the feast of Tabernacles, giving thanks for the harvest. In fact, they may have felt a conscientious necessity to do so as a requirement of being thankful to God. But could they bind that occasion of thanksgiving on all? No, Romans 14 says they could not! Why? Because giving thanks was doctrinally required, but doing so by keeping the feast of Tabernacles was not. Though the doctrine was binding and all could unite in that doctrine, Christians of Jewish and Greek backgrounds could differ in their specific expressions of that doctrine. Why? The differing expressions were ***not specified, but left in the generic realm***. No battle was needed here.

The above differences took place between brethren with strong convictions on the matters involved. They did not agree in every detail as they strove to maintain proper hearts before God (Rom. 14:23; etc.). Yet, they both believed and obeyed the doctrine involved. They were to receive one another and not engage in conflict over the differences precisely because God received them both in their differing practices (Rom. 14:3). God will not receive those not abiding in doctrine (2 Jn. 9-11). The necessary conclusion is that the gospel makes a distinction between differences in matters of conscience and matters of doctrine. Those failing to distinguish between doctrinal difference as in 2 John 9-11 and matters of conscience or liberty as in Romans 14 cannot rightly discern necessary and needless battles.

Doctrinal errors and sinful practices have an inherently corrupting nature. They are based upon the misuse and abuse of God's word (2 Pet. 3:16; Gal. 1:6-9). They are like a gangrene (2 Tim. 2:17). They wax worse and worse (2 Tim. 3:13). They corrupt the hearer (Matt. 16:11-12). They corrupt the church (1 Cor. 5; 15:33). They give license to ever more sin (Rev. 2). They are progressive in their perversion of Scripture and the growing number of sinful manifestations. This progressive nature of corruption is inevitable because doctrinal error and sinful practices inherently conflict with the truth. Observing where teachings or practices lead helps us distinguish necessary battles and needless disputes.

In New Testament times, brethren upholding the same doctrine differed in unspecified judgments, but did not manifest any progressive degeneracy. Why? The variances were not doctrinal. When we hold the doctrine of Christ, but differ concerning judgments over unspecified matters, let us not destroy the ranks of the faithful by turning the battle inward. Such differences call on us to apply the apostolic admonition: "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom. 12:18).