

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus" — John 12:21

Dealing with Differences in a Way That Glorifies God

One of the marvels of God's creation is the variety that exists among human beings. We're all equally created by God in His image, and yet no two individuals are exactly alike. Each of us is a unique package of strengths, abilities, personalities, etc. — and each of us deals with life in a different way. Whenever two or more people have the opportunity to work together, it is possible to view their individual differences as a part of the group's strength. Each person in the group brings something to the work that would be missing if that person were absent. A group can have more wisdom and power than an individual could ever have. Any yet, the challenge is for the members of a group to truly work together, making sure that their differences help the work rather than hinder it. The strongest groups are those powered by a common goal or shared vision that is so important to the group that they subordinate their differences to the pursuit of the collective mission. If people care enough about what they are doing together, they won't be hindered by their differences. Their different perspectives will be a part of their strength.

When the work that people are doing is the Lord's work, then the goal being pursued is nothing less than the glorification of God. Everything that happens is to be viewed within the context of this mission. Whatever difficulties and differences may threaten to disrupt the work are to be subordinated to the more important goal of bringing glory to God. Paul wrote, "Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling . . . that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 1:11,12). Differences among Christians should be dealt with in a way that glorifies God. As the Lord's people, we have a goal that is greater than our differences. What we're doing is too important to let the devil separate us.

This certainly does not mean that the truth is to be compromised or that peace is to be pursued "at any price." It means that even when matters of great importance to the faith are being debated, the controversy will be conducted in a mature way, one that (1) preserves the Lord's honor and (2) is most conducive to a unified resolution of the disagreement based on truth. What this requires is learning how to balance courage and consideration. And most of us could use some help with this. Too often, the only two responses we know about are "fight" (unbalanced, immature "courage") or "flight" (unbalanced, immature "consideration"). How much

better if we learned (however difficult that may be) to show both mature courage and mature consideration.

There are at least three good reasons for us to deal with our differences in a way that glorifies God. First, if we don't do this, it's not likely that we'll make much progress removing our differences. If the ideal is for all to come to a more unified understanding and practice of the truth, the best thing we can do is conduct ourselves with godly maturity. When carnal-minded people are debating differences, no one seriously listens to anyone else. Each accuses the other of not listening, and what takes place is simply a "dialogue of the deaf." But among Christians, those whose concern above all else is for the Lord's glory, truth ought to have a much better chance of surfacing and being recognized by all parties.

Second, if we fail to behave ourselves in a way that balances courage and consideration we will give the devil unnecessary ammunition. Do we need to be reminded of our responsibility to protect the gospel's reputation? Have we forgotten the passage that commands us to "adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things" (Tit. 2:10)? We are warned not to give any "opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully" (1 Tim. 5:14), and passages dealing with this aspect of our discipleship can be multiplied many times over (Rom. 2:23,24; 12:17; 2 Cor. 8:21; 1 Tim. 3:7; 6:1; Tit. 2:5,8; Heb. 13:18; 1 Pt. 2:12; etc.). The Lord would say no less to spiritual Israel than He said to physical Israel: "The nations shall know that I am the Lord . . . when I am hallowed in you before their eyes" (Ezek. 36:23).

But third, if we don't disagree in a way that protects the Lord's honor we'll lose our souls. It's just that simple. There are few sins condemned any more clearly in the New Testament than those of divisiveness and factionalism. Paul wrote, "Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned" (Tit. 3:10,11). Again, the passages can be multiplied (Rom. 13:13; Gal. 5:20; Phil. 1:15; 1 Tim. 6:4; 2 Tim. 2:14,23; Jude 19; etc.). And mark it well: the question of whether one's teaching is true or false is not the only thing that defines divisiveness. The man or woman who defends the truth in a way that dishonors the truth will have no cooler quarters in eternity than those who taught false doctrine to begin with.

Paul asked the quarreling Corinthians, “Where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?” (1 Cor. 3:3). In Christ, we are called to do more than what comes “naturally.” It doesn’t take much character or competence to “strive” (people in the world do it all the time), but Christians are to exemplify a higher standard. When we “stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27), that’s when we demonstrate that our goal is greater than our differences. Jesus commanded, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5:16). We’re not released from this obligation when controversy breaks out. Indeed, there is never a more important time for us to be careful about our “light” than when disagreements arise. Controversial situations provide a quite special opportunity for the Lord’s light to shine. By handling disagreements in a more honorable way than is known in the world we set an example that is both powerful and distinctive. We show in a very practical way that the gospel really has made a difference in our own lives — and that the Lord’s people have the maturity to work through any difficulty that obscures the glory of the Lord Himself.

Gary Henry

Amazing Race

Sports are not a recent phenomenon. Man has long been interested and engaged in athletic contests. Their influence is even reflected in the language of the Scriptures, particularly Paul’s writings. “I press on to the goal” (Phil. 3:4). “Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1-2). “I have finished the course” (2 Tim. 4:7).

In 2 Corinthians 9, the apostle devoted an entire paragraph to the comparison of the Christian life with “the games.” The Isthmian Games were held every two years at the Isthmus of Corinth, eight miles outside the city. They were modeled after the Olympic Games and included events such as foot-races, boxing, wrestling, and chariot races. In such an environment, Paul’s Corinthian audience would have had little trouble making the jump from the physical games to their own spiritual contest.

All Christians are involved in a race. It is not a sprint or a dash, but a marathon to be “run with endurance.” It is a race that has hurdles and twists and turns and one that must be conducted according to the rules. And unlike sports seasons and games held every two or four years, this is a race that is ongoing.

What does it take to be successful in the race of life?

You have to finish what you’ve started. “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win” (1 Cor. 9:24).

Running is not the same as winning. Just because you got out of the starting blocks does not mean that you have crossed the finish line. Just because you have run for a little while does not mean that you have gone far enough. In this race, you win when you finish what you’ve started.

In the next chapter, Paul used the Israelites as an illustration of this point. They all left the bondage of Egypt. They all passed through Red Sea. But they did not all make it to the Promised Land. Because of their disobedience along the way, most of them “were laid low in the wilderness” (1 Cor. 10:5).

The Christian race involves determination to complete the journey you have begun. Otherwise, you lose.

You must see the need for discipline. “Everyone who competes in the games exercises self control in all things” (1 Cor. 9:25). There were specific requirements for the athletes who entered the Isthmian Games. They had to prove that they were of pure Greek blood. They had to show that they had not forfeited their citizenship through misconduct or improper behavior. And they had to demonstrate that they had submitted themselves to ten weeks of training, willingly foregoing things that would interfere with their goals of competition. Otherwise, they were disqualified.

In our culture of convenience, everything must be obtained immediately. We want quick fixes, overnight success, and ten minute abs. But the Christian race is not run this way. It takes time, effort, energy, and deep concentration. It takes a willingness to bring your heart, soul, strength, and mind into subjection to a new Master. It takes a decision to follow the guidelines specified in the Word of God. To run without discipline, as even Paul admitted, is to run the risk of disqualification.

You have to keep your concentration on the prize. “They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable” (1 Cor. 9:25). The reason an athlete subjects his body to exercise and training is the reward that awaits him. When Craig Biggio was interviewed near the close of his career, he was asked if he would rather be elected into the Baseball Hall of Fame or win the World Series. He didn’t skip a beat when he answered, “I want that ring.”

In the Isthmian Games, the winner of the contest received a crown made out of olive branches and, in later years, pine leaves. And that was well worth it to them. How much more, then, our “crown of life” (Rev. 2:10) and our “unfading crown of glory” (1 Pet. 5:4)? It’s the reason we started running in the first place. How tragic to forfeit the prize for something of far less value. Don’t take your eye off of where you’re going. When you do, you start running in the wrong direction.

We have all overcome obstacles to get this far down the road. There are likely other trials that await us up ahead. But let’s not stop until we get home. This is a race to the finish.

Bubba Garner