

APPROACHES TO RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY

Introduction

- 1) **Religious controversy** will exist as long as there are those who believe error or will not accept the truth – we must be prepared to defend the truth (1 Pet. 3:15; Phil. 1:17; Elijah – 1 Kgs. 18)
 - a) Jesus engaged in religious controversy (Matt. 22); early church (Acts 15; Gal.; 1 Jn.)
 - 2) Religious controversy can occur between friends, neighbors, family, and brethren
 - a) There is **needless controversy** – personal opinions (Rom. 14:1, 10); carnality (1 Cor. 3:3)
 - b) There is **necessary controversy** – truth at stake (Jude 3-4); sinful actions (Gal. 2:11-14)
 - 3) We need to know how to, and how *not* to, approach legitimate religious controversy
 - a) Three examples in the book of Acts illustrate *three approaches*
 - b) These examples involve the Jewish-Christian controversy
- I) **“Let’s Not Talk About That” (Acts 4:1-20)**
- A) Apostles arrested for preaching Jesus and the resurrection (vv. 1-4)
 - B) Jewish leaders could *not* answer the apostles’ argument and miracle (vv. 5-14)
 - C) Attempted to avoid the issue by stopping any preaching or discussion of it (vv. 15-18)
 - 1) They feared that it [truth] would spread throughout the people, therefore they opposed and avoided any open debate and discussion
 - a) Contending for truth is “narrow,” “intolerant,” “troublemaking,” “attacking people”
 - b) Spreading of error is called “dialogue,” “opening minds,” “breaking down walls”
 - 2) Truth does not fear investigation and desires open discussion – truth and error will both be exposed when given a fair and open hearing (good for truth, bad for error)
 - D) Those who are faithful will not stop speaking truth for anyone (vv. 19-20)
 - E) Need to speak “with all boldness,” even when counseled or threatened to keep quiet (vv. 29, 31)
- II) **“We Don’t Have to Decide What is Truth Right Now” (Acts 5:17-42)**
- A) What Jewish leaders feared did happen – truth spread and souls saved (v. 28)
 - B) As they plotted to kill the apostles, Gamaliel spoke to the council (vv. 33-34)
 - 1) Respected teacher of the law and held in respect by all the people (cf. 22:3)
 - C) Counseled them not to act on the matter – just ignore apostles and their teaching (vv. 35-39)
 - 1) Non-decisive, “let it run its course” attitude; put off issue indefinitely
 - 2) Compared them to false men, not to faithful men of old (betrayed his belief about them)
 - D) Still beat and threatened the apostles – even while proclaiming neutrality, tolerance, and non-judgmentalism, they still condemn and forbid the bold proclamation of truth
 - E) Serious matters of divine truth left open, vague, and without serious consideration
- III) **“Let’s Study God’s Word and Learn the Truth” (Acts 17:1-12)**
- A) In Thessalonica, great trouble ensued when the gospel caused religious controversy (vv. 1-9)
 - B) Berean Jews received teaching and studied the Word of God to confirm the truth (vv. 10-12)
 - 1) “Readiness” – prepared hearts that desired truth; wanted to learn truth; daily exercise
 - 2) Respect and reverence for the Word – went to the text for truth (we should encourage this)
 - C) This is the proper approach to religious controversy
 - 1) Not avoid or ignore an issue of truth vs. error
 - 2) Fair and balanced study together of a divine standard toward a common goal of unity

Conclusion

Whenever there is **controversy** over religious questions, our first instinct should be to search out the will of God – Scriptures reveal truth that gives knowledge and the basis of unity (1 Cor. 1:10). Truth invites and encourages fair and balanced discussion, debate, and investigation. Truth can be known, understood, and obeyed if our heart desires to hear and obey God’s word.