### *Annandale Lectures 2000*

### ATTITUDES IN CONTROVERSY

# AMONG CHURCHES OF CHRIST

Attitude refers to “a manner of acting, feeling, or thinking that shows one’s dispo-sition” toward something. In reference to another person, it may be friendly, hostile, or indifferent. Controversy especially denotes “a disagreement of *lengthy duration* over *a matter of some …. importance.*”Of course, one’s attitude might be the same in a brief disagreement over a trivial matter. Some folks are so cantankerous that they will quarrel with anyone who differs with them no matter how minor the issue. We are not concerned here with such personality quirks. The focus of this study is on how *fairly reasonable* brethren among churches of Christ have treated one another in controversy.

Dissension among Christians began rather early in the history of the church. G.K. Wallace once said he knew that the Jerusalem church was a church of Christ because there arose a murmuring among the brethren. The demands of the gospel (Jude 3.), an inclination toward apostasy (Heb. 3:12.), and human imperfection (1 John 1:8.) make controversy among brethren inevitable. There are always some brethren who become infatuated with questionable or unauthorized things in serving God. Very naturally, these cause conflicts. Even profound Bible study often results in views that are divergent from the truth. It is difficult to find a genuine Bible scholar among the brethren over the past two hundred years who has not glaringly missed the mark on something. So controversy cannot be avoided even among a people resolved to follow the Scriptures alone.

The Restoration Movement has never been without internal discord, not even during the high water mark of unity between 1830 and 1860. Subsequent to the Civil War, distressing conflicts over missionary societies, instrumental music, and the preach-er-pastor innovations flourished among brethren. Each of these could be profitably studied relative to attitudes. But this study is limited to controversies that arose *after* the first major division and primarily during the first part of the twentieth century.

Numerous controversies developed during this period. Some resulted in permanent division, while others ran their course without a significant disruption of fellowship. A discussion of all of these controversies, or even the more important ones, is not possible here. Every controversy acquires its own distinctive profile. Each one is different because its nature, advocates, time, duration, attitudes, and effect are different. Even controversies with similar profiles are different. If nothing else, as a cartoon in the *New Yorker* said: “What goes around comes around *more annoyingly*.”

One thing clearly evident is that attitudes in controversies among brethren during the *first half* of the twentieth century contrasts sharply with attitudes in the institutional controversy of the 1950s and 1960s. The main difference rests in the fact that after World War II, there was a deliberate and determined effort to lift the churches of Christ out of the narrow, Biblically entrenched rut they had traveled in for fifty years. The institutional controversy did not develop from an earnest search for the Bible model of church cooperation. It turned on a denial that such a model exists. There are several reasons why the institutional agenda among the churches succeeded with the majority of the brethren. These directly address attitudes among brethren in controversy.

(1) The *Gospel Advocate*, long trusted for soundness by conservative brethren, led the modernizing campaign. Both the editor and the owner of the paper were disinclined to see churches of Christ continue as they had since the division fifty years before. Without publicizing the fact, they began to use the paper’s influence to effect a transformation.

(2) The *Advocate* had no internal opposition because the last of its “old guard” passed with the death of F.B. Srygley in 1940 and attrition soon claimed the remaining more conservative voices. By 1950, a revised roster of contributors filled the paper’s pages and its new direction soon became apparent. Most of the men who had fought in the earlier battles against innovations no longer graced the *Advocate’s* columns.

(3) There emerged a new generation of leaders who were anxious to establish a more auspicious status for the churches of Christ. Mixed in with these were some older preachers whose modernizing zeal heretofore had been squelched by the *Advocate’s* conservative editors. G.C. Brewer, an able and scholarly contender for the truth on many issues, became the journal’s most influential contributor. Brewer was ideally suited to lead a modification project. He upheld primitive, undenominational Christianity, while promoting propositions that would lead to a revisionist, sectarian view for the churches before the end of the century. In this manner, he brought many into the institutional orbit without their being aware that a *fundamental* change was taking place.

(4) Compatible with the attitude epitomized by Brewer, the move to institutionalize the churches of Christ was achieved in part by chicanery. Richard T. Hughes says: “When Churches of Christ undertook modernization, they did so in the name of primitive Christianity, which means they essentially backed into the modern age, often with great reluctance. The process of moderation for Churches of Christ was at best ambiguous and at worst an exercise in self-deception.”1 Whether the deception was inadvertent or intentional may be debatable, but subterfuge played a part. Many went along with modernization without being aware that it was happening.

(5) A successful effort was mounted to shut out of most churches and papers any voice opposed to modernization. Hughes writes: “After a decade characterized by negative journalism, publisher Leon McQuiddy appointed B.C. Goodpasture ... as editor of the *Gospel Advocate* in 1939. Goodpasture used the *Advocate* to create a more constructive journalistic style. Serving in that post until his death in 1977, he arguably became the most influential man among Churches of Christ and the epitome of the ‘editor-bishop.’ He demonstrated that fact in 1954, when he successfully ‘quarantined’ the anti-institutional movement.”2

(6) Silencing opposition did not cease with Goodpasture’s “quarantine.” It was abetted by a successful effort to depict anti-institutional preachers and churches as reac-tionary antis. Hughes says: “Indeed, representatives of mainstream Churches of Christ routinely sought to discredit the movement with the label ‘Sommerite.’ But did the pro-ponents of the movement really stand in that tradition? Were they latter-day Sommerites? The anti-institutional people themselves typically denied any organic connection with and descent from the Sommer tradition. And on the whole they were right.”3 Actually, the non-institutional churches had no sympathetic connection with the views of Sommer on this point. They did not oppose Christians operating schools and other institutions, but they objected to their being supported from the treasury of the churches. However, institutionalists conveniently ignored the distinction for prejudicial reasons.

When N.B. Hardeman introduced the orphan home into the controversy, instead of it strengthening his position, as intended, the orphan home itself became an issue. This aided the institutional cause in three ways. It allowed its advocates to debate the question on a more emotional and excitable level. It gave them a readymade frame in which to portray the non-institutionalists as orphan haters and worse. And it caused non-institutional brethren to get caught up in a controversy over the church’s responsibility to care for orphans. While this is a valid issue, it beclouded the institutional controversy.

Hughes writes: “G.C. Brewer flatly accused the anti-institutional movement of Pharisaism. ‘The Pharisees who gave a tenth even of their garden herbs but showed no *mercy* to the suffering,’ he argued, ‘cared nothing for *justice* ... and had no real *faith* in God.’ Indeed, most among the mainstream Churches of Christ by now viewed the anti-institutional movement as cranky and hopelessly legalistic.”4 To describe brethren in Christ as being without *mercy*, caring nothing for *justice*, and having no real *faith* (Brewer stressed the terms) is about as sever an indictment as one can muster.

Goodpasture and Brewer held such favor among most churches of Christ that they needed no proof to make such assertions believable. We do not judge their motive for the ill treatment of their disaffected brethren. Charity grants that they were so caught up in a strongly held cause that they felt justified in using damaging tactics to silence dissent. This attitude created animosity toward the non-institutional brethren, causing them to be held in base contempt by many. But as animosity begets animosity, the hostility unfor-tunately was reciprocated by many of the estranged brethren. Feelings ran so high on both sides that meaningful dialogue or hope for continued fellowship became impossible.

(7) Some among the non-institutional brethren also manifested a less than honor-able attitude in response to their opponents. Hughes says: “The anti-institutional people, in turn, regarded the mainstream Churches of Christ as irretrievably devoted to moder-nizing schemes, institutional structures, and denominational standing.”5 History shows that such positions usually lead to that, but the charges began before the fact and at a time when many who favored institutionalism failed to see the danger or direction of their position. They thus believed that *they* were being mistreated by the non-institutional brethren.

Some in opposition to institutionalism also took inappropriate positions that only underscored the institutionalists’ unfavorable portrayal of them. Furthermore, radical voices began to press an inventory of other issues as being essential to “soundness.” Any among them who deviated from their prescribed “articles of faith” was classified as “liberal.” It mattered not how long one had opposed institutionalism or how much had suffered because of it, if he failed to agree with their shibboleths at any point, he was marked as a “false teacher” and his excommunication urged.

Moreover, some who opposed institutionalism seem to have desired division as strongly as their institutional counterparts. Few leading brethren on either side of the controversy were willing to let congregations determine their own course. Both had attitudes that put them in the position of holding a tiger by the tail. If anyone dared to speak or act contrary to the leaders’ view, he was looked on with suspicion. Those who faithfully preached congregational independence did not always faithfully practice it. Then, too, it seems that some practices of institutional churches were criticized as signs of apostasy, which were of minor importance, if not mere expedients. All this served to reinforce the belief of many that the non-institutional brethren were a bunch of ill-tempered fanatics.

We have touched briefly on some attitudes and actions of brethren in the institutional controversy. Other controversies with their attendant attitudes could be profitably considered. The premillennial controversy led to division because the nature of the doctrine and the persistence of its proponents made it necessary. Nevertheless, the division was slow in coming and reflected a variety of attitudes among those who did not believe the doctrine, not all of them in harmony with divine truth.

Brethren in the period now under review, who were in fellowship with one another, or who recognized one another as faithful brethren, did not always see the Bible alike on every point. But they were in general agreement on basic things. They held the teaching of Christ and the apostles as their sole authority in religion. They taught that salvation and church membership are one and depend upon gospel obedience. They attempted to follow the apostolic pattern for the organization, work, and worship of the church. And they believed that Christians should live morally pure lives.

There was, and obviously had to be, a core of basic belief held by brethren in order to facilitate any degree of unity among them. The fundamental belief among churches of Christ in the first part of the twentieth century centered in a steadfast adherence to the Restoration ideal of Thomas Campbell in 1809: ”Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.” But this had to be more than a reassuring slogan; it also had to be an inflexible goal on both sides of its equation. All things religious had to be measured by this standard, which, in principle, reflects Isaiah’s message to Israel: “To the law and to the testimony! If they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” (Isa. 8:20.) The attitude of total commitment to Bible authority is essential to New Testament Christianity. (Col. 3:17; 1 Tim. 3:16-17; 1 Peter 4:11; 2 John 9-10.) When brethren begin to dabble with the silence of the Scriptures in the teaching, faith, and practice of the church, division becomes inevitable.

Controversies among brethren come from disagreements. Naturally, there could be no controversy without disagreement. It is not factual, historically speaking, for one to argue that there was a time when churches of Christ spoke with a single voice on all matters religious. Throughout the first part of the twentieth century, brethren disputed over a number of issues. Some brethren took positions in matters of faith that were out of step with the Divine Standard, and they did not always hold these as private judgment, nor did their brethren always insist that they must do so to remain in fellowship. However, such matters were not given a pass. Unsound positions were denounced and faulty arguments answered. Some controversies became heated and led to bare fisted debates and sermons in the pulpit and scathing editorials in brotherhood papers. And when brethren pushed erroneous positions that undermined the Scriptures and refused to turn from their course, fellowship was ultimately broken because truth demands it.

The treatment of brethren includes both right and wrong attitudes. We must withdraw from an ungodly person. (1 Cor. 5:4-5.) We must mark and avoid a false teacher, such as described by Paul. (Rom. 16:17-18. We are to refuse fraternity with a divisive brother. (Titus 3:10.) Some treatment of brethren in areas of disagreement that may seem harsh is nevertheless required by the Lord. (Matt. 18:15-17; Jude 20-23.) But not all divine requirements regarding erring brethren involve fellowship. Teaching, reproving, rebuking, admonishing, and correcting are also required. (2 Tim. 4:1-5; Gal. 6:1.) Therefore, controversy does not necessarily indicate a breach of fellowship. F.B. Srygley said: “I have been accused of withdrawing fellowship from certain ones, when I did not know I had done it.”6

But our attitude toward and treatment of brethren with whom we disagree must be conducted in a manner that is reflective of righteousness. In opposing those whom we believe to be in error, it is wrong to include charges of which one is not guilty, to attempt to prove one’s guilt by association, to misrepresent what a brother actually says or does, or to refuse to accept his explanation of a matter, without proof to the contrary. Such behavior is reprehensible, but all too often it enters into controversy among brethren. The fact that a brother may be in error on some point should not make him a target for dishonorable tactics to cripple his influence through the well-honed art of innuendo or a boldfaced campaign of character assassination.

Controversies among brethren are limited scripturally to congregational and individual action. There is no such thing as brotherhood action in the Scriptures. No religious editor, or gospel preacher, has the right to decide whom the brethren should or should not fellowship. Nor is any congregation obligated to accept without question the disciplinary action of another individual or church. John did not recognize the action of Diotrephes in putting some “out of the church.” (3 John 9-10.) Barnabas did not accept the decision of the Jerusalem church to ban Paul from their company. (Acts 9:26-27.)

Much has been said about attitudes in controversy. Able brethren have undoubt-edly exhausted the field as far as anything we might offer is concerned. W.W. Otey wrote to the point in the *Gospel Advocate* in 1938. In an article entitled “Purity and Peace,” he said: “So long as the whole gospel is preached and all error exposed, the manner is of secondary importance; and while there is room for improvement in manner, all should try to work toward the example set by Paul. How mildly or how sternly the work is done must forever remain a matter of human judgment. And, without a doubt, in my judgment, many would be more nearly like Paul if they affirmed the truth in a stronger, more courageous manner and spirit, and so expose error that its advocates would want to give it up. On the other hand, it is my judgment that many would more closely imitate both Christ and Paul if they would modify, not what they say, but the manner and spirit in which they say it. *This is my judgment;* you must use *your judgment.* But certainly there should be no cleavage on this point—and there will not be unless schools, papers, and men allow themselves to be herded into fenced-off groups ... where no fundamental principle is involved.”7

W.E. Brightwell, a 1930s news editor and writer for the *Gospel Advocate*, also made some thoughtful remarks along theses lines in an article called, “Fighting Fair and Foul.” Like Otey, he was firm in standing for the truth and against error. But he decried the attitude that some took in doing both. He saw two elements at stake: the human element and the truth element. Regarding these, he said: “The truth is a fixed goal. Let men reach it as best they can. What if their ladder has some broken rungs, if they arrive at the truth they have reached the right destination. The weakness of men’s power to reason does not alter the truth. But when we come to the human element, there is no difference. I can count up the mistakes of my enemies (?), and run up the errors of my friends; I can check the two rows of figures, and they balance nicely. There is no difference between the classes as to honesty, spirit, purpose, and intent of heart. There is no essential distinction when it comes to logic and consistency. They are all human and subject to the same emotions and the same mistakes. The human element makes all men equal.

“It is not a question of ‘who,’ but ‘what.’ Only the truth can lift men above the weaknesses of human nature. It is a long process and never fully accomplished in this life. In the struggle upward there is only one issue worthy of our consideration—truth!”8

However, it is Brightwell’s application of the elements involved in the attitude of brethren that is of special interest. He writes: “It is high time that we leaned how to fight for the Christian life as a warfare. We have friction, if not faction in our ranks. Some brethren are as mad as the proverbial wet hen. It is a shame the way some brethren feel toward each other. It is a disgrace the methods some are employing to defeat one another. And the saddest thing about it, possibly, is that we take such a small view of the situation. We are most alarmed about the unimportant features. Some of us seem most concerned about saving the party!

“The shame of the way some feel is not because the feeling is directed at their so-called brethren, but that it is inconsistent with truth! The disgrace is not in the fact that they are seeking to defeat brethren, but that the methods employed are unworthy of the truth…. What do personalities have to do with this fight for truth? We are not fighting men, we are not fighting for men; we are fighting for truth, or else we had better give up the fight …

“Our fighting should be strictly impersonal. We should speak without regard to who may or may not be standing in the way of the truth. Weather we call names or do not call names, it should be purely impersonal. Some call names, while others draw pictures. I have done both, so I can speak freely. We will not debate the local method. Back of the fight, in the heart, in the motive, the spirit should be impersonal.

“We should do nothing for spite, or through vengeance, for the truth for which we fight condemns it.

“If we resort to political methods to win our point, we are murdering the truth for which we pretend to fight. There is nothing more foreign to the truth of God than the disposition to adopt political methods. The person who can find it in his heart to play politics in religion should have the decency to disassociate himself with the truth until he is converted. His efforts will destroy the truth, not promote it.

“He who resorts to force in fighting is fighting against the truth; and there are more kinds of force than mere physical force.

“Seeking to down somebody, to weaken his influence, or damage his reputation is in principle resorting to force. To state accurately what one teaches, and condemn what is false in that teaching, is not damaging; or if it is, the damage is self-inflicted. Men must be judged by their teaching and their practice. But to harbor the desire to damage someone, brother or no brother, is foreign to the truth for which a Christian is called to fight.

“To seek by direct or indirect means to cause physical, financial, or social discomfort or inconvenience to any person, brother or not, is not the function of a soldier of the cross. To seek to get some brother fired because he differs with me is the same in principle as burning heretics at the stake….

“To attack one’s teaching is fair. It is not his own. When he utters it, it becomes public. And he has no commission to teach error. But to magnify human weaknesses is unfair. I am not obligated to call one to preach who teaches error or condones the teach-ing of error. I am not called upon to ignore or cover up facts, but to deliberately seek to injure one because he is on the other side of some issue is neither fair nor honorable.

“If one can speak the truth with such force that the truth seems to dictate to others, to influence their actions, happy is he as a good medium of the truth. But to seek by any other means than the force of preaching the truth to influence men savors of the principle of blackmail.”

Concluding his polemic against evil attitudes and methods to uphold truth and condemn error, Brightwell says: “Although my methods be more refined than those of earlier centuries, and my persecutions be petty as compared with theirs, (in using such methods) I am resorting to force and laying myself bear to the wrath of God who justly hates pretenders.”9

Before closing, we call attention briefly to a searing controversy that ran from the 1880s to the early years of the twentieth century. This is the so-called “rebaptism” controversy. The leading contenders initially were Austin McGary and David Lipscomb. The controversy became intense and bitter in the 1800s and led to the establishment of the *Firm Foundation* by McGary to refute what he and others called “sect baptism.”

The roots of this controversy reach back to the beginning of the Restoration Movement and center in what a person must know at the time of his baptism. The reformatory work of Barton W. Stone and of Thomas and Alexander Campbell began within the fold of pedobaptists. When the reformers learned that sprinkling does not meet the demands of Bible baptism, they were immersed before they understood that there is a connection between baptism and the remission of sins. When they came to clearly see this relationship, few, if any, of them were baptized again. They knew they were immersed in obedience to Christ and, therefore, they believed that whatever blessings the act bestowed upon them were theirs whether they understood it or not.

This controversy ran on several years, and remnants of it are alive today. Lipscomb died believing that a person could be baptized for the remission of sins without understanding at the time of his baptism that that was its purpose. G.C. Brewer summarized the controversy in 1939. In identifying the disputants, he said: “The fight was between the Firm Foundation and the Gospel Advocate; at least, these two papers were the champions of the two sides. The issue by the Gospel Advocate side was designated as ‘rebaptism’ and by the Firm Foundation side as ‘sect baptism’ or ‘Baptist baptism.’”10

As to the nature of the controversy, Brewer said: “The Gospel Advocate was accused of defending Baptist baptism and of ‘receiving’ members from the denomina-tions on their ‘sect baptism.’ Various exaggerated ideas as to what the Gospel Advocate contended for were spread abroad. The whole of it was expressed in the phrase ‘shake ‘em,’ meaning that the sects were inducted into the church by a handshake.

“The Firm Foundation was accused of practicing ‘rebaptism’—of forcing people who had been scripturally baptized to be rebaptized. Thus the Gospel Advocate was by the other side considered unsound, soft, and a compromiser with the sects. The Firm Foundation, on the other hand, was accused of making a law where God has made none and demanding that people submit to that law in order to have its fellowship. Hence, it had started a sect of its own, according to the accusation.” 11

The scope of this study does not permit a detailed review of the controversy, but it could be studied as an example of how brethren may become sectarian in contending for what they conceive to be the truth. It also could be studied as an example of how *not* to treat brethren in controversy. Granting that one side or the other had the truth and contended for it, the *attitude* manifested by some on both sides is reprehensible by the Bible standard. Yet, the attitude has echoes among churches of Christ today. The contro-versy was unduly harsh and characterized by brethren being branded as false teachers and threatened with a break of fellowship. Everyone was placed in a box. “If we did not fight,” Brewer recalled, “we were ‘were lined up’ with one side or the other.”12

Nevertheless, as rancorous and acrimonious as the controversy was, it did not result in a division into definable “brotherhoods.” The churches survived the battle with some scars, but with no permanent damage to unity. The matter eventually became pretty much a non-issue. The reason a general division did not occur, we believe, was due to the spiritual maturity of men on both sides. The controversy’s last hurrah came in 1915 with the final debate on the subject. J.C. McQuiddy of the *Gospel Advocate* and John S. Durst of the *Firm* *Foundation* debated the question in their respective papers.

Within five years of that debate, the controversy had fairly well ceased. Commen-ting on this, Brewer said: “Who changed his position on the issue? No one! Who won the fight? Nobody! Reason and righteousness won. We all changed our ‘attitude’ in the mat-ter. We decided to quit abusing and misrepresenting each other, and also to quit dis-fellowshiping each other. Then we found out that *in practice we are all alike,* with the possible exception of a few radical individuals. We all teach the truth on baptism; and whenever people will submit, we baptize them. If they will not submit, we cannot baptize them either in Austin or in Nashville.”13

What we have tried to do in this discussion is to give some appropriate thoughts about the attitude and treatment of one another by brethren in some of the controversies among churches of Christ in the first part of the twentieth century, including the mid-century institutional controversy. The tactics used by leaders among the institutional brethren to squelch the voice of opposition and to effectively rid the institutional churches of dissenters, is one of the most shameful examples of mistreatment of brethren in Restoration History, although all of the shameful attitude was not confined to one side.

Some influential institutionalists regarded the institutional division as merely a “sloughing off” of a radical element for the good of the church. This manifests an erroneous attitude toward brethren thought to be in error that is out of harmony with the New Testament. The abuse of power by which the division was effected is surely beneath the comportment of those who strive to serve the meek and lowly Jesus. But the most disturbing aspect of this attitude toward brethren is its evidence among non-institutional churches of Christ today. Some apparently have learned nothing from the past mistakes of brethren or from the teaching of the Bible about proper and improper attitudes and behavior in controversy among brethren.

Peter said: “Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. For ‘He who would love life And see good days, Let him refrain his tongue from evil, And his lips from speaking guile; Let him turn away from evil and do good; Let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, And his ears are open to their prayers; But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.’” (1 Pet. 3:8-12.)

**Notes**

1Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 231.

2Ibid., 239.

3Ibid., 230.

4Ibid., 233.

5Ibid.

6*Gospel Advocate*, Mar. 30, 1939.

7Ibid.,Dec. 29, 1938.

8Ibid.*,* Sept. 1, 1938.

9Ibid.

10Ibid., Jan. 19, 1939.

11Ibid.

12Ibid.

13Ibid.

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