

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST



V

The Church of Jesus Christ

Doctrines of the Church

THE subject of differences in doctrine within the church has been discussed at length by theologians and church leaders.

The question is this: Cannot two different doctrines be held within a church? Ought we not to allow for differences? Should we not be tolerant, and cover up or ignore these points of difference in order to keep peace? Cannot we at least moderate the differences and keep them within bounds?

As always, we seek the answer in God's Word. *There* we find bounds within which we must stay.

There are three phases to be considered: our own attitude in regard to such differences, the points of difference themselves, and to persons with whom we differ.

As to our attitude—we may not let personal interests or any feeling of animosity toward those who differ with us mingle with our zeal in defense of the truth. We are to hate all untruth and evil for *God's* sake, and try to win back to the right path those who have strayed.

When Moses dashed the tables of the law to pieces on the mount, and ground the golden calf to powder, he was not giving vent to his personal bitter anger, but was expressing

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zeal for God. This is evident from the fact that he begged to have his name removed from God's book rather than that God should bring dishonor upon His Holy Name by destroying the Israelites. Paul demands the same attitude of every servant of Christ when he writes to Timothy (II Tim. 2:24) "And the servant of the Lord must not strive but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves, if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth..." And further, "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine" (II Tim. 4:2). These words do not teach indolence or indifference or silence toward the beliefs of others; but they do insist that in all protest against false doctrine the motivation should not be personal feeling but the glory of God and the edification of our fellowmen, also of those with whom we differ.

The points of difference must also be considered, whether or not they concern fundamental doctrine. Where there is difference of interpretation of a certain passage of Scripture and no fundamental doctrine is involved, there should be tolerance. One may have his own opinion without denying another his. For the Christian reader is free to accept that interpretation which he, guided by the Holy Spirit dwelling within him, deems the most nearly correct. This is part of the liberty of the children of God. For we know only in part, and we prophecy in part, because we see but dimly. And through the variety of opinions the meaning frequently becomes more clear in due time.

But if the interpretation is such that it contradicts an article of faith, then it must be refuted, for the truth of the Gospel must be defended against all false doctrine.

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Take for example, Christ's statement in John 14:28, "My Father is greater than I." Some interpret this as referring to His human nature; others say Jesus spoke of His state of humiliation; still others take it to mean that in becoming obedient to His Father as our Mediator, Christ humbled himself. Neither of the three is in conflict with our confessions. But if the text should be interpreted to mean that Christ here disclaims divinity, that He denies His essential oneness with the Father, then we are faced with a doctrine that conflicts with the confession that Christ is true and eternal God. Such differences cannot be tolerated within the church.

Finally in regard to the persons who are led away by false opinions and doctrines. There are two kinds—those who are new or weak in the faith, and those who are strong and who covertly or openly defend their ideas and strive to win other adherents. The first must be dealt with gently, and taught a fuller measure of truth, that they may grow in faith. We must bear with those who are weak.

But toward those who believe and teach doctrines not in accordance with the Word of God we cannot be tolerant. We must defend the truth earnestly, in order that if possible they may be won back, or that they may at least be warned of their error. The full counsel of God should be expounded to them simply and clearly.

Tolerance and forbearance, then, must indeed characterize us in our personal attitude, and where minor differences are concerned, and in our forbearance toward those who are new or weak in the faith.

But those who teach anything contrary to the Word of God cannot remain in the church of God.

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Peace at Any Price?

The articles of Christian faith are like links of a chain. If one link is removed, the chain is broken. For instance, one cannot deny God's eternal election without taking away our assurance of salvation and undermining the steadfastness of our hope. For then man's salvation is left in his own hands; he must exercise his free will and choose to be saved. That, in turn, denies at least in part man's depravity. And if man is not totally depraved, Christ's atonement loses much of its value — in fact we would finally arrive at the conclusion that we do not need Christ for salvation!

Furthermore, if we should hush certain doctrines, we are suppressing the truth. If we hide differences under a broad creed that permits of two or more interpretations, as some suggest, we hide truth and leave men in uncertainty. We may not tamper with truth.

Satan knows that he can undermine the structure of the church by slyly removing just one fundamental doctrine at a time, and he frequently loosens a large foundation stone gradually, chiselling it away bit by bit.

That is why tolerance for the sake of peace may be dangerous.

There are those who plead for tolerance in order that others may be drawn to the fold and thus the Name of God may receive greater honor. Ought we not, they say, join hands and thus unite the now so sadly divided Christendom? Can we not forget disputes? Minimize our differences? And thus increase our strength?

Theirs is a beautiful and worthy ideal, to unite the children of God under one roof. It ought indeed to be our

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purpose and desire. But how? Shall we try to cure ills by means of a greater ill? Must we have peace at any price? Shall each give in a little? Tone down doctrines and forget differences?

Paul did not compromise with the Galatian adherence to the law by toning down his teaching of free grace! Quite the opposite! He reprimanded them for giving heed to false doctrine, and sought to lead them back to the truth

If the principles of our faith are man-made, they should be discarded. If they are from God, let no man tamper with them to tone them down. Even though some points may seem to be but small, God has bidden us be faithful in little things, and has forbidden that we subtract even one iota from His Word.

One step toward giving in will lead to a next step. And will not God visit us with blindness if we deliberately darken the truth He has graciously entrusted to us? How shall we justify ourselves if we permit even a little of the truth to be laid aside? Is that *ours* to do?

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Moreover, there can be no *real* and *lasting* peace in the church of God without full harmony of opinions and belief. If doctrines were so toned down and moderated that they were capable of more than one interpretation, those who differed in opinion would still argue and each would do all he could to uphold and spread his own interpretation. For what a man conscientiously accepts as truth, he desires others to believe also. The false unity would not last.

We must indeed seek peace, with all earnestness. Bitterness, ill will, malice, and love of dispute should never characterize a Christian in his defense of the truth. Instead,

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there should be a sincere interest in the honor of God and in the well-being of our fellowmen. Paul says, "As much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men."

But when he says, "As much as lieth in you" he plainly implies that sometimes peace is impossible. When peace is injurious to the truth, peace must give way. Peace with God is of greater value than peace with men. To desire peace at the expense of truth is hypocrisy and weakness —and highly displeasing to God.

Having then purified your souls in obeying the truth through the spirit, unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently. Walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

And the God of mercy and peace, the God of order and unity, grant that we may be of one mind and may together praise Him in unity of faith, now and eternally.

The Imperfection of the Church

There is nothing among men that is as it ought to be. Nothing has remained as God made it. Everything is out of joint; everywhere there is confusion. Sin shook the very foundation of human life, and therefore the walls are cracked and bowed and askew.

The church of Christ does not stand apart, separate from all the disruption and wreckage of the sin-cursed world. Christ gathers His church within that world, and its members are all sinners. Every one of them is imperfect.

Yes, in principle they are perfect, through Jesus Christ; but by no means are they perfect in daily living and doing.

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Even the holiest of Christians struggles till his dying day against the weakness and sinfulness of his heart.

Because the church of Christ is a gathering of imperfect people, it is an imperfect church. The church is holy because Christ is its head; it has beauty because Christ adorns it; it has heavenly gifts and powers. But it is mired in sin, and the filth of sin clings to it.

Not only the lay members, but the leaders as well are sinful. All are men of like passions. And the leaders, because of their position, must guard against the temptation to vain-glory and spiritual pride. Worthy though their office is, it does not exempt them from the grip of sin. They stumble even while they reach out a hand to help others. They are shepherds not because of their own virtues and qualifications, but because the Lord bids them bring His Word and guide the footsteps of His people.

If all the members of the church are imperfect, it follows that even the outward forms, the organization, the management, the activities and the usages cannot but be faulty. How can the walls be strong when the stone is brittle and the cement is weak?

Throughout all the centuries God has had to labor with His people. Was there ever a time, in any age of history, when the church was truly beautiful, pure, free from spot or blemish? In the days of the apostles things already began to go wrong. Their epistles are full of complaints and warnings against sins and false doctrines.

We Christians of today ought to take this fact to heart, fully realizing that the imperfection and weakness of today's church is not at all unusual or unnatural.

Could we perhaps, by better cooperation and greater zeal, bring about a perfect and glorious church?

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Whoever thinks so, underrates the extent of evil in human nature and deceives himself.

Yet there are those who dream this dream and who burn with eager desire to bring about its fulfilment. They are deeply conscious of the great and holy calling of the church, and they are grieved by its failings, its shameful weakness. To cure the ills seems to them a hopeless task. So the like-minded band together and form a new church or a society, where they may enjoy richer and purer spiritual fellowship of kindred hearts. And thus their dream seems to come true.

But it will not last.

They attain to their happy condition by separating the more pure from the less pure, but that is not a normal situation. While they seem to have excluded much evil from their small circle, and to have escaped dangerous contamination, they soon find that evil came in with them; it is among them; the age-old evil raises its horrid head among even the most consecrated and separated. The dream of a perfect church on earth is a vain dream.

Besides such dreamers in the church, there are also those who, equally aware of the evils, and equally grieved over them, are wide awake and know from God's Word and from history that a healthy church is a rarity and a pure church is an impossibility. They know that there is not one shred of prophecy which even hints at possible perfection of the church of Christ. They realize that they have no right to expect such a church. They would fight evil, yes. But expect perfection? No.

Sin is a destroyer that creeps in everywhere. Therefore we must expect an imperfect church. In fact, we church members carry the sin of the world with us into the church, too often hiding it under a veil of spirituality!

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If the church were not the Bride of His Son, surely God would in holy wrath destroy not first of all the world, but rather first of all the wretched sin-ridden church.

We have mentioned these two kinds of church members — those who dream of a perfect church and those who soberly face the fact of her inevitable imperfection. But let us not carry away the idea that the two classes are always clearly distinguishable. The dreamer has his moments of sober insight, and the man who calmly accepts the fact of evil also dreams his dreams. Men are far more alike than we often think. Where is the believer who does not have a spectre of unbelief crouching within his heart? Where is the man who, while he professes salvation by free grace, does not find himself secretly priding in good works? Even the child of God who believes in free will and despises the doctrine of particular grace bows humbly before his God in his inner chamber, confessing his utter helplessness and unworthiness before his Maker.

But in one man this has the upper hand, and in another that.

Our purpose is not to honor the one and upbraid the other. Rather, we would analyze and understand the holy things of God, in order that we may come to the truth; that untruth may fall away; that thus through the work of the Holy Spirit, God's Name may receive the greater honor.

It is possible to have sinful ideals, ideals that reach out for more than God has seen fit to give us and that indicate a dissatisfaction with God's decrees. The dream of a perfect church upon earth is such an ideal. The imperfection of God's church upon earth is a circumstance which we must accept and bear with patience. If we fail to see that, it is because we fail to see the satanic depths of sin, and fail

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to realize that the church is in its very essence inseparable from the sinfulness of man.

Fighting the Good Fight

Those who cherish the idea of a pure church on earth frequently urge as special incentive the imminent return of Christ. Since He is at the very door, they say, we must break away from this earthly life and go to meet Him.

We must indeed live in the consciousness that Jesus may come tomorrow, or may even appear upon the clouds tonight. The disciples themselves were ever aware of the nearness of His coming. For them eternity did not lie at the end of time, but is now; Eternity is the very ground, the foundation, upon which Time rests.

But we must not err in striving *to meet the Lord* instead of patiently awaiting His coming.

If the Lord is to come as a thief in the night, the church should go about its daily duties in quiet devotion, until He suddenly appears. We are not to keep looking out the window, or climbing to the housetops to gaze eagerly into the distance, while neglecting our work and giving our household duties but scant attention.

Indeed we must watch. We must so live that we are ready to welcome Him at any moment. Like a Christian family that, having commended home and children to God's care for the night, quietly goes to bed and to sleep, and awakens in the morning to resume the daily task, so the church of Christ upon earth must go on quietly, prayerfully, with its common daily tasks, until He comes, in His own time, to break off this round of daily duties.

A deep and living faith in God's Covenant is the foundation of our quiet, watchful, patient waiting and working.

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For included in God's covenant are also all the chosen who are yet to be brought into the fold, though they may now be drunkards, or thieves, or self-righteous rejectors of the truth. They are destined to be saved; and it is through the ministration of the church that they must be brought to the light and taught in the truth.

This one confession, that God is God, and that He will bring in His own, makes us* patient to bear with the imperfections and weaknesses of the church, since He has seen fit to place that cross upon us. And it also keeps us humble before Him, as we must confess our own guilt. "The sin of the church is also my sin. I, yea even especially I, am at fault."

Not one of us will then blame the world or the indifference of fellow-Christians for the evils of the church, saying, "Z am a zealous laborer in the Lord's vineyard! I am not guilty of this coldness and indifference! I shall lead the way to perfection!"

That holier-than-thou attitude is sinful and abhorrent.

But, being keenly aware of his own sins, and knowing full well that he has fanned the flames of sin perhaps more than others, the true Christian fights against sin the more earnestly and zealously.

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Fight we must, constantly, without rest. Every child of God is a soldier of Jesus Christ, called as were the Levites of old *to war the warfare of the Lord*. And every office bearer must know that as he takes office he *enters into that warfare*.

It is a warfare *for* God, *against* Satan. It is a participation in the war which God himself wages against Satan, and which God's holy angels wage against Satan's angel-hosts.

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The war of the world against the King of glory. The war of the spirit against flesh. War within us and without. War which emanates from God and is directed against the might of Satan, the world, death, sin, deceit, and the lusts of the flesh.

Therefore it is a war of every one who is anointed with the Holy Spirit. He must fight with Christ, for Christ, and under the leadership of Christ.

It is a war of which Paul testifies, "I have fought the *good fight*, I have kept the faith, henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me in that day."

It is evident, then, that there can be no true zeal for the church without spiritual warfare against sin.

Zeal for the church, however pious it may appear to be, is abominable hypocrisy if it goes hand in hand with neglect of spiritual warfare against such enemies of God as lying, uncleanness, self-righteousness, cold-heartedness.

Some there are who pretend to be faithful watchmen upon Zion's walls but harbor such sins in their own hearts, or overlook them in their children and fellow-church members.

They are unfaithful.

For they allow the enemy free play within. They cry out against the danger of the wolf howling outside the walls, while a pack of wolves is busily devouring the sheep within!

That is not real devotion to the cause of Christ. Nor does it reveal true faith.



The battle for the Lord must begin *within ourselves*; only then can it kindle outward and be sincerely waged with equal fervor against enemies all around.

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Our impassioned battle cry must ever be: Friend or enemy! All that is from the Evil One is your enemy, everywhere and in all forms—in your flesh, in your thoughts, in your very virtues, in the disrupted social conditions, in the schools—lower as well as higher—in your homes, and also in the church of your Lord.

Are you zealous for the church with great enthusiasm, while neglecting the evils which creep into your home, your friendships, your social life, and worst of all neglecting to fight your own personal spiritual battles? Then you are living a lie.

To “war the warfare of the Lord” and to “keep the watch of the house of the Lord”* is to battle in every sphere, in every manner, in all relationships; every moment, always and everywhere standing against Satan, always and everywhere and in everything on the side of God.

Many will be ashamed upon reading this, even as our own soul bows in shame at the writing.

For who of us would dare say that his own hands are clean for the battle?

But let that not dishearten! For we *must* feel ashamed. God’s Word must bring upon us, again and again, a conviction of sin that burns as a fire into our very inmost being.

Only let us take care that our principles remain founded upon the true foundation.

If we fight for the church of God and neglect the evil within our own hearts, however men may attempt to justify such action, we incur the judgment of God—

When we acknowledge our own guilt, acknowledge the justice of the accusation against our false zeal, then pardon is assured us. And the Lord our God will lead us on.

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Each must ask himself: Does my zeal for the church flow from my inner battle against sin and Satan?

He who truly takes up the fight against sin and Satan in his own heart and in his personal life, must necessarily fight sin and Satan in the church also.

He who looks on unconcernedly while untruth and sin grow rampant within the church of his Lord is also weak, half-hearted and sickly in his own spiritual struggle.

The good fight must be fought in every sphere. *In* the church and *without*. Wherever the shadow of Satan falls, the soldier of the Lord is called to prompt action.

Obedience

The motives of all you do and strive to do may never be found in your desires, but always and unconditionally in the Lord.

As long as your complaints about the church, and your efforts to improve the church, are motivated by *self*, because the imperfections annoy *you* or displease *you*, and because the church falls short of *your* ideals, then you are on the wrong path.

Then, if your efforts fail, you will grumble because your needs are not filled and your rights are not honored. And eventually you will perhaps withdraw yourself as from something unworthy of your labors.

But once you realize that *not my honor* but the *honor of God* is the true motive for the battle against evil, then the beauty of simple obedience will become clear to you. Then you will no longer say, "The church must change because I cannot endure this lack of consecration." But you will say, "I may not be idle, for I am in the service of my God, who

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commands me to battle incessantly and undauntedly against the desecration of His church.”

Then, too, it no longer matters if there are no immediate results upon your efforts and protests against evil. *That makes no difference at all.*

For you realize that you have no right or claim to a model church. You acknowledge yourself a humble sinner whose imperfections add to the corruption of the church.

Whether you live to see the church sink deeper into the mire, or to see it lifted to higher planes *makes no difference.* You are in duty bound to defend her against her enemies all the days of your life, with all of God’s children.

You obey. God bids you labor in His vineyard, and you do so with all the strength He gives you. He bids you not to sit with the scoffers and the ungodly, and you separate yourself from them. He bids you resist the onslaughts of evil upon His house, and you resist them.

When you have learned thus to obey, the battle for the Lord goes on without pause, yet calmly and steadily. It is a labor that looks not upon the results.

You are no longer striving for what *you* want or deem necessary; you are not impatient, not wearied with complaining or unmanned by disappointment. You simply obey. You are not less zealous, but more; not less constant, but more persevering.

And God, who is merciful, will crown your efforts, in home and heart and church, with His blessing.



By nature we crave freedom. We say, “I shall be master of my fate!” and “I shall do as I please.” We chafe under

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rules and laws. Hence we also protest that the church must not interfere with individual self-expression.

And by nature we are also inclined to slothfulness. It is so much more pleasant to sit idle than to exert ourselves! We love our ease.

Imagine the activity, the upheavals, the changes, the disruptions that would ensue if all Christians obediently put into actual practice the will of Christ! We admire the men of old who gave their all and dared to risk their very lives. But our admiration seldom produces willingness to part with our own earthly possessions.

The craving for freedom, plus the distaste for exertion and danger, make it easy for us to accept the teaching: "Sit still and see what the Lord will do."

But we should be up and doing. And the Word says, "Whatsoever your hand findeth to do, do it with all your might." And, "All who would live godly lives shall suffer persecution."

May He, before whom we humbly confess our own guilt and for whose Name and honor we have striven also in the writing of these essays, use our words to open the eyes of many to their calling as members of the church of Jesus Christ.



PART II

CHRISTIAN PATIENCE

*“Let us run with patience the
race that is set before us.”*

HEBREWS 12:1.

