POLEMIC THEOLOGY:
HOW TO DEAL WITH THOSE WHO DIFFER FROM US

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It seems strange that one should desire to speak at all about Polemic Theology since we are now in an age when folks are more interested in ecumenism and irenics than in polemics. Furthermore, Polemic Theology appears to have been often rather ineffective. Christians have not managed in many cases to win over their opponents. They have shown themselves to be ornery; they have bypassed some fairly important prescriptions of Scripture; and in the end, they have not convinced very many people—sometimes not even themselves! Under these circumstances one perhaps might desire to bypass a subject like this altogether.

We are called upon by the Lord to contend earnestly for the faith (Jude 3). That does not necessarily involve being contentious; but it involves avoiding compromise, standing forth for what we believe, standing forth for the truth of God—without welching at any particular moment. Thus we are bound to meet, at various points and on various levels, people with whom we disagree. We disagree in some areas of Christian doctrine. We disagree as to some details of church administration. We dis-agree as to the way in which certain tasks of the church should be pursued.

If we are careful to observe the principles that I would like to expound in this article, we may find that they are valuable not only in the religious field but also in the realms of politics, business and family. Who does not encounter from time to time people who are not in complete agreement? Whether it is be-tween husbands and wives, parents and children, co-workers on the job or fellow members in the church, it is impossible to live without disagreement. Therefore it is good to seek to discover certain basic principles whereby we may relate to those who differ from us.

There are three major questions that we must ask; and I would like to emphasize very strongly that, in my judgment, we need to ask them precisely in the right order: (1) What do I *owe* the person who differs from me? (2) What can I *learn* from the person who differs from me? (3) How can I *cope* with the person who differs from me?

What Do I Owe to the Person Who Differs From Me?

Many people overlook the first two questions and jump right away to: “How can I cope with this? How can I bash this person right down into the ground in order to annihilate objections and differences?” Obviously, if we jump to the third question from the start, it is not likely that we will be successful in winning over dissenters. So I suggest, first of all, that we need to face squarely the matter of our duties. *We have obligations to people who differ from us.* This does not involve agreeing with them. We have an obligation to the truth, and that has priority over agreement with any particular person. If someone is not in the truth, we have no right to agree. We have no right even to minimize the importance of the difference. Consequently, we owe them neither consent nor indifference. But what we owe that person who differs from us, whoever that may be, is what we owe every human being—*we owe them love.* And we owe it to them to deal with them as we ourselves would like to be dealt with or treated. (Matthew 7:12)

How then do we desire to be treated? First, we want people to know what we are saying or meaning. If we are going to voice differences, therefore, we have an obligation to make a serious effort to understand the person with whom we differ. That person may have published books or articles. Then we should be acquainted with those writings. It is not appropriate for us to voice sharp differences if we have neglected to read what is available. The person with whom we differ should have evidence that we have read carefully what has been written and that we have attempted to understand its meaning. In the case of an oral exchange where we don’t have any written words, we owe the person who differs from us the courtesy to listen carefully to what he or she says. Rather than preparing to pounce on that person the moment he or she stops talking, we should concentrate on apprehending precisely what his or her position is.

In this respect, Dr. Cornelius Van Til has given us a splendid example. As you may know, he expressed very strong objections to the theology of Karl Barth. This was so strong that Barth claimed that Van Til simply

did not understand him. It has been my privilege to be at Dr. Van Til's office and to see with my own eyes the bulky tomes of Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (incidentally, these volumes were the original German text, not an English translation). As I leafed through them I did not see one page that was not constellated with underlining, double-underlining, marginal annotations, exclamation points, and question marks galore. So here is someone who certainly did not say, "I know Karl Barth well; I understand his stance; I don't need to read any more of this; I can move on with what I have." Each of the volumes, including the most recent, gave evidence of very, very careful scrutiny. So when we take issue with somebody, we need to do the job that is necessary to know that person so that we are not voicing our criticism in the absence of knowledge but that we are proceeding from the vantage point of real acquaintance.

Even that is not enough, however. Beyond what a person says or writes, *we must attempt to understand what a person means.* Now it is true that there are what are called "Freudian slips." That is, there are people who do not express themselves exactly in the way it should be done and in the process somehow they give an insight into a tendency that is in them all along and which leads them to express themselves in an infelicitous but revealing manner. So it is appropriate, I suppose, to note this as a personal footnote, so to speak, in order possibly to make use of it at some time in the discussion. But if somebody fails to express himself or herself accurately, there is no great point in pressing the very language that is used. We ought to try to understand what is the meaning that this language is intended to convey. In some cases, we may provide an opportunity for an opponent to speak more accurately.

I have experienced this in my own home. I have noticed that my wife sometimes says things like, "You never empty the wastebasket." Now as a matter of fact, on January 12, 1994,1 did empty the wastebasket. Therefore, the word *never* is inappropriate! This tends to weaken the force of my wife's reproach. Well, I've learned that I don't get anywhere by pressing this point. This kind of response does not provide dividends of joy and peace in my home. I've learned, therefore, to interpret that when my wife says "never" she often means "rarely" or "not as often as should be." When she says "always," she means "frequently" or "more often than should be."

Instead of quibbling as to the words never and always, I would do well to pay attention to what she finds objectionable. And indeed, I should be emptying the wastebasket. Feminist or not feminist, a husband and father should empty the wastebasket; and therefore, if I fail to do this, even only once, there is a good reason to complain. Nothing is gained by quibbling about how often this happens. I ought to recognize this and be more diligent with it rather than to quote the dictionary.

Similarly, in dealing with those who differ, we ought not to split hairs about language just in order to pounce on our opponent because he or she has not used accurate wording. It is more effective to seek to apprehend what is meant and then to relate ourselves to the person's meaning. If we don't do that, of course, there is no encounter because this person speaks at one level and we are taking the language at another level. The two do not meet and the result is bound to be frustrating. If we really want to meet, we might as well try to figure out the meaning rather than to quibble on wording.

Moreover, I would suggest that we owe to people who differ from us to *seek to understand their aims.* What is it that they are looking for? What is it that makes them tick? What is it that they are recoiling against? What are the experiences, perhaps tragic experiences, that have steeled them into a particular stance? What are the things that they fear and the things that they yearn for? Is there not something that I fear as well or yearn for in the same way? Is there not a possibility here to find a point of contact at the very start rather than to move on with an entirely defensive or hostile mood?

As an example it may be observed that in the fourth century the heretic Arius, and undoubtedly many of his supporters, were especially leery of modalism, a serious error in the conception of the Trinity which claims that the Godhead manifested Himself in three successive forms or modes as Father, Son and the Holy Spirit rather than to exist eternally as Three Who have inter-personal relations with each other. From Arius' vantage point, the orthodox doctrine of the full deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit did of necessity imply a modalistic view. It did not help that one of his very vocal opponents, Marcellus of Ancyra, did, in fact, border dangerously on modalism. Arguments designed to show the biblical and logical strengths of the doctrine of the Son's full deity or vice versa the weakness of Arius's subordinationism would not be likely to be effective unless the instinctive fear of an implied modalism were addressed and shown to be without solid foundation. With all due respect to the soundness, courage, and perseverance of those like Athanasius and Hilary who consistently

resisted Arianism, one may yet wonder if a more effective method of dealing with this error might not have been to allay the fear that orthodoxy inevitably would lead to modalism.

In the controversy between Calvinism and Arminianism, it must be understood that many Arminians (possibly almost all of them) believed that to affirm the complete sovereignty of God inevitably implies a rejection of any free will, power of decision, and even responsibility on the part of created rational beings, angelic or human. Their attachment to those features naturally leads them to oppose Calvinism as they understand it. It is imperative for the Calvinist controversialist to affirm and to prove that he does not, in fact, deny or reject these modalities of the actions and decisions of moral agents but that he or she undertakes to retain these—even though their logical relation to divine sovereignty remains shrouded in a mystery that transcends finite, human logic.

Similarly, the Calvinist should not glibly conclude that evangelical Arminians are abandoning the notion of divine sovereignty because they assert the freedom of the human will. It is plainly obvious that Arminians pray for the conversion of those yet unconverted and that they desire to recognize the Lordship of God. The Arminian will do well to emphasize this in discussion with Calvinists so as to provide a clearer perception of the actual stance of both parties. It is remarkable that committed Calvinists can sing without reservation many of the hymns of Charles and John Wesley, and vice versa that most Arminians do not feel they need to object to those of Isaac Watts, Augustus Toplady, or John Newton.

In summary, I would say we owe it to our opponents to deal with them in such a way that they may sense that we have a real interest in them as persons, that we are not simply trying to win an argument or show how smart we are, but that we are deeply interested in them—and are eager to learn from them as well as to help them.

One method that I have found helpful in making sure that I have dealt fairly with a position that I could not espouse was to assume that a person endorsing that view was present in my audience (or was reading what I had written). Then my aim is to represent the view faithfully and fully without mingling the criticism with factual statements. In fact, I try to represent them so faithfully and fully that an adherent to that position might comment, "This man certainly does understand our view!" It would be a special boon if one could say, "I never heard it stated better!" Thus I have earned the right to criticize. But before I proceed to do this, it is only proper that I should have demonstrated that I have a correct understanding of the position I desire to contest.

What Can I Learn from Those Who Differ From Me?

To raise the question, "What do I owe the person who differs from me?" is very important, for otherwise any discussion is doomed to remain unproductive. The truth that I believe I have grasped must be presented in a spirit of love and winsomeness. To do otherwise is to do detriment to truth itself, for it is more naturally allied to love than to hostility (Ephesians 4:15). Belligerence or sarcasm may, in fact, reflect a certain insecurity that is not warranted when one is really under the sway of truth. It may well be that God's servant may be moved to righteous indignation in the presence of those "who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Romans 1:18). This explains the outbursts of the Old Testament prophets, of our Lord in His denunciation of the Pharisees, and of the apostles in dealing with various heresies and hypocrisies in the early church. These severe judgments were ordinarily aimed at warning members of the flock rather than winning over some people who had distanced themselves from the truth of God to a point which left no room for the hope of recovery (Psalm 139:19-22; Isaiah 5:8-25; Daniel 5:26-30; Matthew 12:30-32; Acts 7:51-53; Galatians 5:12; Revelation 22:15). But when dealing with those we have a desire to influence for the good, we need imperatively to remain outgoing and gracious.

When we are sure that our *outward* approach is proper, we need secondly to safeguard the *inward* benefits of courtesy. We need to ask the question, 'What can I *learn* from those who differ from me?" It is not censurable selfishness to seek to gain maximum benefits from any situation that we encounter. It is truly a pity if we fail to take advantage of opportunities to learn and develop that almost any controversy affords us.

Could I be Wrong?

The first thing that I should be prepared to learn is that I may be wrong and the other person may be right. Obviously, this does not apply to certain basic truths of the faith like the Deity of Christ or salvation by grace.

The whole structure of the Christian faith is at stake here, and it would be instability rather than broad-mindedness to allow these to be eroded by doubts. Yet, apart from issues where God Himself has spoken so that doubt and hesitancy are really not permissible, there are numerous areas where we are temperamentally inclined to be very assertive and in which we can quite possibly be in error. When we are unwilling to acknowledge our fallibility, we reveal that we are more interested in winning a discussion and safeguarding our reputation than in the discovery and triumph of truth. A person who corrects our misapprehensions is truly our helper rather than our adversary, and we should be grateful for this service rather than resentful of the correction. As far as our reputation is concerned, we should seek to be known for an unfailing attachment to the truth and not appear to pretend to a kind of infallibility that we are ready to criticize when Roman Catholics claim it for their popes!

Our reputation will be better served if we show ourselves ready to be corrected when in error, rather than if we keep obstinately to our viewpoint when the evidence shows it to be wrong. I should welcome correction. It renders a signal service to me! I should respond, "I was mistaken in this; I am glad that you straightened me out; thank you for your help." People who are unwilling to acknowledge their mistakes, by contrast, may be called stubborn and lose their credibility.

What are the Facts?

In the second place we may learn from one who differs that our presentation, while correct as far as it goes, fails to embody the truth in its entirety on the subject in view. Although what we assert is true, there are elements of truth that, in our own clumsy way, we have overlooked. For instance, we may be so concerned to assert the deity of Christ that we may appear to leave no room for His humanity. As a Calvinist, I may so stress the sovereignty of God that the reality of human decision may appear to be ruled out. Here again, I should feel grateful rather than resentful. The adversative situation may well force me to give better attention to the fullness of revelation and preclude an innate one-sidedness which results in a caricature that does disservice to truth no less than an actual error may do.

Many of the mainline elements of Christianity are thus, "two-railed," if I may express myself in a metaphor. Unity, yet threeness in God, immanence yet transcendence, sovereignty of God and yet reality of rational decision, body and soul, deity and humanity of the Mediator, justification and sanctification, divine inspiration of Scripture and human authorship, individual and corporate responsibility. One could multiply the examples. When one of the factors is overlooked, one is doing no better than the railroad operator who would attempt to run an ordinary train with only one rail (I do not speak here of monorails!). The person who differs from me may render me great service by compelling me to present the truth in its completeness and thus avoid pitfalls created by under-emphasis, over-emphasis and omissions. Thus my account will be "full-orbed" rather than "half-baked!"

What are the Dangers?

I may learn from those who differ from me that I have not sufficiently perceived certain dangers to which my view is exposed and against which I need to be especially on guard. I may find out notably that there are certain weighty objections to which I had not given sufficient attention heretofore. Here again, I must be grateful for a signal service rendered by the objector. Instead of being irked by the opposition, I should rise to the challenge of presenting my view with appropriate safeguards and in such a way as to anticipate objections that are likely to arise. For example, consider how the Westminster divines were led to express the doctrine of divine decrees (Confession 3, 1).

> God from all eternity did, by the most wise and Holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

The three clauses following 'yet so as thereby" are specifically designed to ward off misunderstanding and to meet objections commonly raised by Arminians or Arminianizing divines. The peculiar wisdom of setting up

these safeguards in the first article of that chapter is the fruit of the bitter experiences made in more than half a century of controversy issuing in rich, balanced and nuanced expression of truth in the Westminster standards.

In France, certain barriers placed on bridges, terraces or quays are called *"garde-fous"*, that is to say "safeguards for the crazy." They provide a fence to prevent those who are careless from failing off the edge. Those who disagree with us provide us with an opportunity to ascertain areas of danger in our view and to build *"garde-fous"* there. It would be a pity if we failed to take advantage of such an opportunity.

What about Ambiguities?

We may learn from those who object that we are not communicating as we should and that they have not rightly understood what we wanted to say. In this we can be benefited also, for the whole purpose of speaking (or writing) is to communicate. If we don't communicate, we might as well remain silent. And if we don't manage to communicate properly what we think, we have to learn to speak better. If ambiguities remain, and it is apparent from the way in which the other person reacts that ambiguities do remain, then we are challenged to make a presentation that is clearer, more complete, more wholesome, and one that will communicate better.

We have biblical precedent for this. The apostle Paul, for instance, anticipated objections which arise from misunderstanding of his doctrine. In Romans 6:1 he writes "What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!" This objection provides a launching pad to articulate more fully his thoughts so that readers will not be permitted to wander away, but will gain a proper understanding of the truth. There are many other examples of this approach in the Pauline writings (Romans 3:3; 6:15, 19; 7:7, 13; Galatians 2:17, 19 etc.). Even our Lord took pains to rephrase or amplify some of His statements that the hearer had not rightly understood at first (Matthew 13:18-23, 37-43; John 11:12-14, etc.).

The effort made to clarify our thought for others will often result in clarifying it also for ourselves. We may thus secure a firmer hold upon the truth, a better grasp of its implications, and relationship to other truths, a more effective way to articulate and illustrate it. These are boons for which we may be grateful to those who differ from us.

When we give due attention to what we owe those who differ and what we can learn from them, we may be less inclined to proceed in a hostile manner. Our hand will not so readily contract into a boxing fist, but will be extended as an instrument of friendship and help; our feet will not be used to bludgeon another, but will bring us closer to those who stand afar; our tongue will not lash out in bitterness and sarcasm, but will speak words of wisdom, grace and healing (Proverbs 10:20, 21; 13:14; 15:1; 24:26; 25:11; James 3).

How Can I Cope with Those Who Differ from Me?

In the previous two sections, we sought to explore how to derive the maximum benefit from controversy both as to those who differ by being sure that we do not fail in our duty toward them, and as to ourselves in welcoming an opportunity to learn as well as an occasion to vindicate our position. Now after having given due attention to the questions, "What do I owe?" and "What can I learn?", it is certainly proper to raise the query, "*How can I cope with those who differ from me?"*

Now "coping" involves naturally two aspects known as "defensive" and "offensive." Unfortunately, these terms are borrowed from the military vocabulary and tend to reflect a pugnacious attitude which injects bitterness into controversies. We should make a conscious effort to resist that trend. Furthermore "offensive" is often understood as meaning "giving offense" or "repulsive" rather than simply "passing to the attack." It may therefore be better to use the adjectives "protective" and "constructive" to characterize these two approaches.

Biblical Arguments

In evangelical circles biblical arguments carry maximum weight if properly handled, for they invoke the authority of God Himself in support of a position. This is what Luther so eloquently asserted at the Diet of Worms, and what the Westminster Confession also bears witness to in these words:

> God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any way contrary to His Word, or beside it in matters of faith or worship (WCF 20, 2).

We need here to be careful to make a reverent use of Scripture, quoting every reference in a way that is consistent with its context. This will protect our approach against the legitimate criticisms levied against "prooftexting," a method that lifts scriptural statements from their environment, and marshals them as if they were isolated pronouncements vested with divine authority without regard to the way in which they are introduced in Holy Writ. A notable example of this wrong approach would be to claim that God sanctions the statement, "There is no God" because it is found in Psalm 14:1 and 53:1.

We must therefore be careful to use the Scripture in such a way that an examination of the context will strengthen, not weaken, the argument. Very few things are as damaging to a position as a claim to be grounded in the authority of God's Word, only to find that a more careful examination of the text in its context cancels out the support it was presumed to give. An argument of this type, like the house built on sand, "falls with a great crash" (Matthew 7:27).

Likewise, a well-advised person will be careful to avoid passages that "boomerang"—passages that are used as proof, but turn out to be more decisive against the view advanced. For example, some people quote Philippians 2:12, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" and forget that Paul continues, "For it is God who works in you to will and to act ...."

All this demands that we should know the Word of God. God entrusted the sacred Scriptures to His people in order that they may search it diligently (John 5:39) and make it the object of their daily meditation (Psalm 119). To be acquainted with the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) must be the aim not only of "professionals" like pastors and professors, but of everyone who wants to be known as a Christian. To be sound in the interpretation, correlation and application of the Scriptures is the way "to be approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed" (2 Timothy 2:15), and every child of God ought to aspire to that.

Protectively we may be aware of passages that are often quoted to invalidate a stance which we find scriptural. Sometimes we may anticipate this objection even before it is raised and be prepared to show how it does not undercut our view. If we have a particularly strong refutation, we may at times wait until the person who differs quotes the passage. In this way we may score the psychological advantage of destroying an argument thought valid. Even this however, must remain within the framework of "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15).

In some cases it may be possible to show that the interpretation which would see in a particular passage an objection to the scriptural truth we are undertaking to advocate is simply improper and indefensible because it sets this Scripture in conflict with its context, or at least with the larger context of the unity of divine revelation. In other cases it may be sufficient to show that there are one or several plausible alternative explanations of this text that do not precipitate the alleged conflict. Since we are obliged to seek the unity of the truth, a plausible interpretation that averts a conflict may well deserve preference.

To sum up, we must ever strive to take account of the fullness of biblical revelation to have the boldness to advance as far as it leads, and the restraint to stop in our speculations where the Bible ceases to provide guidance. Polemic Theology in this respect is simply biblical light focused in such a way as to assist those who appear yet caught in some darkness.

General Arguments

These arguments direct their appeal to something other than the actual text of Scripture, namely to logic, history and tradition. While the authority involved is not on the same level as the Bible, the Word of God, it has a bearing on the discussions and must be considered by those who wish to make a strong case.

Appeal to Reason

Human reason, especially when not guided by divine revelation, is apt to go astray either in being unduly influenced by prejudice (what we call "rationalizing") or when reason forgets its proper limits and attempts to apply to the infinite what is valid only for finite categories. Nevertheless, reason is a divine gift to humankind, indispensable to the process of receiving, ap-plying and communicating revelation (cf. J. I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God,* pages 128-137). It is a part and parcel of God's image in humanity. To fly in the face of logic is to court self-destruction, for logic has a way to beat its own path in the process of

history. Rational arguments may therefore be presented with propriety, and those advanced by people who differ from us must be addressed.

Constructively, it behooves me to show that my view is in keeping with the totality of revealed truth, with the structure of the Christian faith as an organism of truth. I will promote the acceptance of an individual tenet if I can show that it is inescapably related to some other element of the faith on which I and the one who differs from me have agreement. For instance, one who accepts the doctrine of the Trinity is pretty well bound to confess the deity of Christ and vice versa.

Specifically, it is in order to make plain the damaging or even disastrous effects that a departure from the position I advocate will logically entail. In doing this, I must carefully distinguish between the view that the other person actually espouses and the implication that I perceive as resulting from it. Failure to make this distinction has resulted in the ineffectiveness of much Polemic Theology. Christians have wasted a huge amount of ammunition in bombarding areas where their adversaries were not in fact located, but where it was thought they were logically bound to end up.

To struggle with a caricature is not a "big deal." And to knock down a straw man does not entitle one to the Distinguished Service Cross! To be sure, it is a part of the proper strategy to show those who differ that their view involves damaging implications that will be difficult to resist in the course of time, but one must remain aware that it is the present position rather than anticipated developments that must be dealt with.

Protectively, I need to face the objections that are raised against my view. Some of them are irrelevant because they are based on a misunderstanding of the issues. To deal with these will help me to clarify my position and to reassert it with proper safeguards against one-sidedness, exaggeration or misconceptions. For instance, I may show that definite atonement is not incompatible with a universal offer of salvation in Christ, even though the supporters of universal atonement frequently think it is. Other objections may be shown to be invalid because they apply to the view of those who differ as well as to mine. Still other objections may be recognized as peripheral, that is to say, difficulties that may or may not be resolved rather than considerations that invalidate a position otherwise established. For instance, some alleged contradictions between two passages of Scripture represent a difficulty for the doctrine of inerrancy rather than a discreditation of this otherwise well-established tenet of the faith. Obviously the most advantageous situation is found when an objection can be turned around to become a positive argument in favor of the view objected to. Jesus' treatment of the Old Testament Law in Matthew 5:21-42 is a case in point. It might appear to a superficial reader that in this text Jesus repudiates the authority of the Law, when in fact He confirms it and reinforces it by His spiritual interpretation.

Furthermore, it is sometimes effective to challenge a person who differs from us to articulate an alternative approach which we may then proceed to criticize. For instance, a person who denies the deity of Christ may well be pressed to give his or her answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15). Any answer short of full deity may be shown as deeply unsatisfactory, as leading to some form of polytheism or as falling utterly to account for the facts of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It may be hoped that those who have unsatisfactory views may then leave the smoldering ruins of their system and take refuge in the solid edifice of the faith "once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3).

Appeal to History and Tradition

The course of history is a remarkable laboratory that permits us to observe the probable developments that issue from the holding of certain tenets. The decisions of councils or the pronouncements of confessions of faith are often geared to guard against erroneous opinions that God's people recognized as dangerous or even fatal to the faith. To neglect this avenue of knowledge is to risk repeating some mistakes of the past that an acquaintance with history might well have enabled us to avoid. The Christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries should protect us from the twin errors of Arianism and Apollinarianism, of Nestorianism and Monophysitism without our passing through the convulsions that the church of those days experienced. The Reformation of the sixteenth century, similarly, should shield us from repeating some of the mistakes of the Roman Catholic Church.

Constructively, it is proper for me to attempt to prove that I am in line with orthodoxy in general and specifically with statements of faith that have received wide acceptance or that are part of the subordinate standards of my church or of the church of the one who differs. This will be especially significant if the

formulation was established for the purpose of warding off a position analogous to that of my opponent. Now all man-made statements are subject to revision and correction, but it appears prima facie impossible that a view that flatly contradicts the Nicene Creed or even the Westminster Standards should turn out to be right, while these revered creeds, tested as they were through centuries of Christian thinking, should be wrong.

Specifically, the position of the one who differs may so closely approximate a well-known heresy adjudged as heterodox that the course of history may provide a portrayal of what happens to those who entertain it. The disastrous course of Arianism, culminating as it did in the Moslem conquest of North Africa, may be an example. We need, however, to be careful to recognize the importance of weighing all operative factors rather than just some selected ones which seem to suit our purpose. The demise of Christianity in North Africa applied largely to Egypt where a monophysite tendency prevailed, as well as to the lands that had been conquered by the Vandals with their Arian commitment.

Those who would gloat over the increasing heterodoxy of the Arminian movement in the Netherlands should probably be somewhat sobered in thinking of the destiny of Calvinism in New England, which moved from high orthodoxy around 1650 to the rather massive Unitarian and Pelagian defection at the beginning of the nineteenth century. These remarks do not invalidate the value of the lessons of history, but merely admonish to caution in applying them.

Protectively, the course of action would parallel closely what was described above. Objections raised against our view may be shown to be counterproductive, because they support rather than undermine our view. They also may be judged irrelevant, because they fail to address our real position or because they burden equally the objector's view. Or they may simply be inconsequential, because they have only a peripheral bearing on the issues.

Christian's Goal

Perhaps the most important consideration for the Christian is to remain aware at all times of the goal to be achieved. It is the consistent perception of this goal that will give a basic orientation to the whole discussion: Are we attempting to win an argument in order to manifest our own superior knowledge and debating ability? Or are we seeking to win another person whom we perceive as enmeshed in error or inadequacy by exposing him or her to the truth and light that God has given to us?

If the former be true, it is not surprising if our efforts are vain: we should be like physicians who take care of patients simply in order to accredit some pet theory. If the latter be true, we will naturally be winsome. This will increase our patience when the force of our arguments does not seem to have an immediate effect. This will challenge us anew to understand those who differ in order to present the arguments that are most likely to be persuasive to them. God has appointed all of us to be witnesses to the truth. (John 1:7; Acts 1:8) God is the one who can and will give efficacy to this witness. We should never underestimate His ability to deal even with those who appear most resistant. Who would have thought that Stephen could actually reach the heart and mind of anyone in the lynch mob that put him to death? But his great discourse was actually sowing goads in the very heart and conscience of Saul (Acts 26:14). Acts 7 shows that his argument was sealed by his Christ-like spirit in the face of this atrocious murder (Acts 7:59-60). His witness was used by God to win over perhaps the ablest of his adversaries, who was to be the great apostle Paul!

A Christian who carries on discussions with those who differ should not be subject to the psychology of the boxing ring where the contestants are bent upon demolishing one another. Rather "The Lord's servant must not quarrel: instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses…" (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

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