

How to Handle Differences in Belief in Christ

Let me start with a passage from Ephesians 3:2-6.

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

Do you understand the impact of what the apostle Paul was saying here? Israel had been God's only people pretty much since Abraham. If any other nation wanted God to do or not do something or understand God they always had to go to an Israelite. The Hebrews had generation upon generation of a kind of monopoly on God. All of a sudden Paul is saying that because Christ died for the sins of all people, not just Israel's, that Gentiles could now not only go directly to God through Christ but Israel and everyone else who believed in Christ were the same nation. One can certainly understand why he had to write this letter from prison. This could be seen as heresy, blasphemy, anything but true. Birthright and circumcision had been the only way to be one of God's people. Now anyone could be one of God's people. What's worse, he's saying the Jews and Gentiles who believe are of one body. There's no closer relationship than that. He's not saying well, you know, sure, the Gentiles can serve God too but we're still the special ones. No, we're all of the same importance and merely fulfill different roles. We're different parts of the same body. Why was this so hard to swallow? To be honest, I'm not so sure you won't find that view even today among us Gentiles.

I think many of us want something special to point at to be able to prove that we belong to God. That we have it figured out. That we figured out something that nobody else has that makes it so we are definitely going and nobody else is. Ironically, that would be pretty lonesome.

My dad was a preacher so I know I'm OK.

I planted 6 thriving churches so I'm OK with God.

I know I'm going to heaven because all my children became foreign missionaries.

I was baptized in water and it covered my whole body, not just part, so I know I'm saved.

I think the idea of God's gift being freely given strikes us as unfair somewhere deep down in our selfishness. I think it shows most strongly when someone who has had a reputation for sin for years finally comes to the Lord and people tend to be skeptical and think Oh, he's just saying that to look good. or Well that's not fair. He got to do whatever he wanted and now he gets to spend eternity in Heaven? I've been good all my life (a dangerous lie, by the way) and I should be allowed in and he shouldn't.

We get trapped in our standards and our customs some times too. I think about some of the differences in Christian denominations and to me, some seem very trivial and others I can see as significant differences of opinion and interpretation. But, because of those differences some folks who worship Christ just can't worship together as one body or call each other brothers and sisters in Christ. I think that's sad, but I understand. I can't imagine what it must have been like for the Israelites. Gentiles had no problem eating any kind of animal but under Mosaic Law the Israelites had very strict rules about what could and couldn't be eaten. There were animal sacrifices, prayers that had been custom forever and the Gentiles wouldn't know any of them and likely wouldn't be following any of them because Christ never required these things in the new covenant. We think we have strain among different sects of Christians. Imagine the strain between the Jews and Gentiles as they came together under Christ.

Paul had a few things to say about that difficulty in Romans 14:1-6.

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

This is a good summary of some of the more obvious discrepancies between the Jews and their Gentile brothers. So what is Paul's recommendation on how to handle differences in opinion of things that aren't salvation issues? Let's look at Romans 14:22-23.

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

In short, for the little things, do what you believe is right in the eyes of God from your own understanding and faith. And if your brother does something you have doubts about, don't judge him about it. Just don't do it yourself. If you think it's wrong then you shouldn't do it. But don't hold others to your standards. Christ gave His life to save all who would believe in Him and follow Him in their hearts. Since we can't know someone else's heart, if we have doubts about an action then we need to not do it but not tell our brother that what he's doing is against God or blasphemous. Of course, there's always what to do when it's absolutely wrong. But that's a topic for another day.