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Disagreement without Disunity

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Disagreement without Disunity Dr. Don Sisk Tue, 05/02/2023 - 10:14 I am nearing my ninetieth birthday. I made public my call to preach on Thanksgiving night of 1954. A few days after that I preached my first sermon in the prayer meeting service of the Black Oak Baptist Church in Gary, Indiana. Two years later, I began pastoring. I have been in full-time ministry since 1956—nearly seventy years. Because of the various ministries I have served in, I've preached in literally thousands of churches all over the world. Being in so many churches is a blessing because I get to meet men and women who are faithfully serving Christ all around the globe. But going to so many places does have a downfall: I sometimes see the sad disunity among God's people. Churches, Bible Colleges, mission organizations, preachers, and ordinary Christians find reasons to quarrel with one another. Of course, every church or organization has some differences with the next organization. But among the independent Baptist places where I am privileged to serve, most have so much more in common than different. Yet, for some reason, we emphasize our differences more than our common practices and beliefs. Would it not be wonderful if we would emphasize our commonality rather than our differences? Many years ago when I became the Far East Director of BIML, my pastor, Dr. Lee Roberson, was generous in giving needful advice—principles by which to conduct my ministry. One night as we were driving together back to Chattanooga from a meeting, he said to me “Don, you go anywhere that you believe God is leading you to go and minister. Some of the places you go to some of the brethren will criticize you. Don't fight with them; just keep going where you know God wants you to go.” Of course, Dr. Roberson was speaking about doctrinally-solid Baptist churches. And that was good advice. He was right on both points—some brethren criticized me, and I learned not to spend valuable time defending myself. For the first eight years of my ministry. I was a Southern Baptist. When I began to see the liberalism and compromise taking place in the Southern Baptist Convention, I became an independent Baptist by conviction. I'm grateful for that decision, and I would do it all over again—even today. I soon learned, however, that independent Baptists sometimes aren't very independent in their relationships with one another. If I did things the way they wanted me to do and went where they wanted me to go and refused to go where they did not want me to go, I was accepted. But when I didn't meet those criteria, I was not always accepted. Over my nearly seventy years in the ministry, I have seen several leaders try to be a Baptist pope (although not, of course, with that title). None of them have succeeded. The reality is that we must each answer to God—not to each other. “Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth.” “But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at naught thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (Romans 14:4, 10). When biblical doctrine or sin is involved, of course we must separate. And yes, we all have our preferences. We have a right to have them. However, pastors, in particular, have a responsibility to establish leadership guidelines for their church workers. But, pastors do not have the right to determine preferences for other churches. I realize we must not call the violation of biblical principles a preference. We are commanded to “contend for the faith” (Jude 3). But we need not be contentious about matters not pertaining to the faith. Throughout the New Testament, we have examples of the conflict that comes through pride and the good that comes when people who have differences give deference to one another. John the Baptist—And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him. John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:26–30). Some of the disciples of John the Baptist realized that when Jesus began His ministry, people were going to Him instead of to John. They told John, “all men come to him.” (By the way, all of the people were not going to Jesus. We often unwisely exaggerate when we want to make a point.) The answer that John the Baptist gave to his disciples was classic: “He must increase, but I must decrease.” John did not become jealous or competitive. In fact, he was not trying to make disciples for himself in the first place; he was pointing people to Christ. So rather than feeling insecure, he rejoiced in what Jesus was doing and how the people were following Christ. I fear—and I can speak from experience—that we have a tendency to criticize others not because of something bad they are doing, but because they are doing more and are seeing more results than we are. In short, we become jealous. None of us are in competition with other good Bible believing organizations or individuals. We are on the same team. Their success is our success, and it's all for the glory of God. But when team members become jealous of one another, we all lose. John the Apostle—And John answered and said, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name; and we forbid him, because he followeth not with us. And Jesus said unto him, Forbid him not: for he that is not against us is for us” (Luke 9:49–50). Basically, what John was saying was, “They didn't graduate from our college—or they weren't with our mission organization—or they are not in our camp—or they aren't doing things like us.” And what did Jesus tell John? “Forbid him not: for he that is not against us is for us.” To allow others to do things differently than we do without criticizing them is Christlike. And to attempt to be an enforcer of others is Johnlike—the immature, pre-resurrection version of John. Paul and Barnabas Paul and Barnabas were a wonderful team who were greatly used of God. In Acts 13, they were sent out as missionaries from the first organized church missions program. Throughout Acts 13 and 14, we read of the amazing ways that God used them. Then, when they returned to Antioch, they continued to work together, including speaking to the Jerusalem council in Acts 15. But when it came time for their second missionary journey, they had a falling out. “And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do. And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work. And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; and Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God” (Acts 15:36–40). Because we know this story of Paul and Barnabas' disagreement, we aren't surprised when we read it. But if we had known Paul and Barnabas before this incident, we would never have suspected that they would have parted ways. Perhaps the most amazing thing about this separation, however, is not that it happened, but what did not happen—specifically that they did not spend time criticizing one another. In fact, you do not find one word in Scripture of Paul speaking poorly of Barnabas or Barnabas of Paul. They parted ways, but they did not spend the rest of their ministries criticizing one another. And they did not draw John Mark into tests of loyalty over their disagreement. In fact, just before Paul was martyred, he makes the statement, “Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11). There are things that happen that make it nearly impossible for particular people to work together. But even if two Christians can't work together, they can be kind to one another. If we have differences with a brother, we can determine, “Even though I cannot work with this person, I am not going to be critical of him.” Paul in

Prisonâ€œSome indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will: The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds: But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel. What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoiceâ€œ (Philippians 1:15â€œ18). Paul was in prison for no other reason than preaching the Word of God. He did not look at his prison time as a hindrance to the ministry, but as an opportunity to preach to the other prisoners, to the people in authority, and to all of the other leaders. No doubt, many of them were converted. Because of Paul's boldness, many other leaders became bold in preaching the gospel. Some of these were sincere. And evidently, some of these were just trying to irritate Paul. Yet, Paul's conclusion was that regardless of the preacher's motives, he would rejoice that Christ was being preached. Years ago, I determined that I, too, will rejoice when others are preaching the gospel. When God's Word is preached and people are getting saved, baptized, and added to the church, I am going to rejoice. Rather than being jealous or critical, I am going to rejoice. I think we independent Baptists need to take Jesus' words in John 13:35 more seriously than we do: â€œBy this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.â€œ If you are preaching the gospel, winning people to the Lord, discipling believers, and training leaders, you are my brother in Christ, and I love you, appreciate you, and will gladly pray for you. We can be brothers without being identical twins. Category Pastoral Leadership Tags Pastoral Leadership Christian Living

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