

Managing Our Differences: Biblical Norms for Navigating Our Inevitable Disagreements

by Layton Talbert¹

Evangelicalism and fundamentalism are peppered with differences over a plethora of issues: soteriology (Calvinism vs. Arminianism vs. Amyraldianism, with various versions of each); ecclesiology (dispensational theology vs. progressive dispensational theology vs. covenant theology vs. progressive covenant theology); eschatology (multiple views on the rapture and the millennium); spiritual gifts (continuationism vs. cessationism); the significance of the Lord’s Table; the mode and subjects of baptism; church polity; church music; church worship. The list could go on.

These are not insignificant minutiae. And the fallout from these and other differences has divided Christians into disparate groups for centuries. Whether that is, in itself, wrong or sinful will be addressed later in this essay. But the operative principle underlying this essay was stated by J. Gresham Machen a century ago: “It is perfectly possible for Christian fellowship to be maintained despite differences of opinion.”² The more immediate focus is how we manage those disagreements. God has a will about how we handle our differences, and those with whom we differ. That fact is apparent from a number of biblical passages and principles that illustrate, exemplify, inform, and model how to manage the differences that divide us.³ This article highlights just twelve of those principles.

God Never Uses Flawless Vessels

One of the most memorable examples of Christian disagreement emerges surprisingly early in the history of the Church and, even more surprisingly, in a larger context of unity: Acts 15. The identity of the believers at odds in this heated confrontation—both recognized leaders in the church—is even more astonishing: Paul (Latin for *small, humble*) and Barnabas (meaning, *son of consolation*)! Acts 15 exemplifies several principles that speak to the issue of managing our differences, so this passage will surface more than once in our discussion.

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² J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism*, 100th Anniversary Edition (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2023), 48. Among the examples he discusses that should not undermine Christian fellowship are differences in eschatology (he thought premillennialism a “serious” though “not a deadly error”), “the efficacy of the sacraments,” “the nature and prerogatives of Christian ministry,” and Calvinism versus Arminianism.

³ This article focuses on differences in doctrine, interpretation, and practice only among genuine believers within the Church of Jesus Christ who subscribe to—as they have been described historically—the fundamentals of the Christian faith. It does not address the broader issue of differences with liberalism or other views outside conservative evangelicalism, nor does it propose to be a full-fledged essay on biblical separation (though it will address that issue briefly). Those topics are handled admirably and more fully elsewhere. See, for example, Mark Sidwell, *Set Apart: The Nature & Importance of Biblical Separation* (Greenville, SC: Journeyforth Academic, 2016).

The extraordinary unity that emerged from what could otherwise have been a rather stormy conference (Acts 15:22ff) is unexpectedly marred by a disagreement between two of the major participants. The disagreement came “after some days” (v. 36),⁴ but from the standpoint of its literary juxtaposition, the argument is particularly jarring on the heels of the theological harmony established at the Jerusalem Council. Later, when Paul proposed that he and Barnabas revisit the churches in Asia Minor, Barnabas agreed and suggested they again take John Mark along with them. Paul objected; as far as he was concerned this was non-negotiable, since John Mark had proved unreliable on their previous journey (vv. 37–38; cf. 13:13). The result?

And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. (15:39–40)

Is someone always completely *right*—in motive, reasoning, and conclusion—and someone always entirely *wrong* in every disagreement? Does the text demand that we side with either Barnabas or Paul in Acts 15? Did *God* take sides? Are there times when the Lord is neutral—or at least silent? Might the Lord approve for one of his servants what he would not approve for another? Can God lead two presumably prayerful, surrendered servants to two divergent conclusions?

Luke seems to imply that the church at Antioch, at least, generally sided with Paul (Acts 15:40).⁵ But Luke himself studiously avoids any editorial comment beyond a historical description of what happened. And what happened was a heated confrontation. The word translated “contention” or “sharp disagreement” is a graphic one. The Greek term (παροξυσμός) has passed into English to denote a convulsion or sudden violent emotional reaction (paroxysm). In the context of Acts 15, the term portrays “anger, irritation, or exasperation in a disagreement.”⁶ This was a heated confrontation not over a doctrinal issue but a pragmatic one: *who should, or should not, participate in their next mission trip.*

It is, ironically, both embarrassing and encouraging that Paul and Barnabas were unwittingly demonstrating the very humanness they sought to impress on the pagan inhabitants of Lystra (Acts

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⁵ The juxtaposed conclusions of Acts 14 and 15 are arresting. Acts 14 ends with a reference to the Antiochian church’s “commendation” of Paul and Barnabas (14:26, a passive plural participle of παραδίδωμι). Acts 15 ends with a reference to the Antiochian church’s “commendation” of Paul (15:40, a passive singular participle of παραδίδωμι) upon his selection of Silas as his ministry companion. The passage does not expressly state that the church withheld their blessing from Barnabas and Mark, but neither does it say that they gave it.

⁶ Darrell Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 519.

14:15).⁷ It adds to our understanding of this incident when one factors in additional information from other passages. (1) John Mark had deserted them early on their previous journey (Acts 13:13). (2) Barnabas was, by nature and temperament, a peacemaker (Acts 9:27). But (3) Barnabas also happened to be related to Mark (Col 4:10). And (4) Paul had previously been disappointed by even Barnabas's poor judgment (Gal 2:13). These same factors—past experiences, temperament, relationships, previous mistakes—can complicate some of our disagreements. “Sometimes disagreements among Christians seem to be intractable because they arise from differences of experience, insight, or character.”⁸

Neither of these men claimed to have definitive scriptural direction or Spirit-leadership, but both of them had legitimate concerns. Paul was not yet prepared to trust John Mark on another lengthy and potentially dangerous journey where so much was at stake. As John Mark's cousin, Barnabas evidently thought it important to give the young man a second chance, and as soon as possible. The complexity of this uncomfortable confrontation is reflected among a wide range of interpreters.

Barnabas . . . wanted to restore Mark to the ministry and serve in Cyprus. He was right. . . . God built up Mark into being the revered author of the Gospel of Mark! Paul wanted helpers that would not desert the cause under fire. He was right. . . . God provided Silas to go with him and in due time raised up Timothy and a number of other workers.⁹

Paul and Barnabas could not agree, perhaps precisely because no basic principle of the faith was involved; it was a practical matter on which much could be said on both sides, and people of different temperaments would naturally give different weight to different considerations.¹⁰

Even those that are united to one and the same Jesus and sanctified by one and the same Spirit, have different apprehensions, different opinions, different views, and different sentiments in points of prudence. It will be so while we are in this state of darkness and imperfection; we shall never be all of a mind till we come to heaven, where light and love are perfect.¹¹

I regularly remind my students that God never uses flawless vessels. God uses *only* flawed vessels, and for one very obvious reason. It might console us to propose a theological explanation—namely, so that he receives all the glory. That's true enough. But there is an even more pedestrian reason that

⁷ “The two apostolic friends were separated from each other by a quarrel, which proved that they were indeed, as they had lately told the Lystrians, ‘men of like passions’ with others.” W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (1864; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 192.

⁸ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 448.

⁹ Stewart Custer, *Witness to Christ: A Commentary on Acts* (Greenville: BJU Press, 2000), 226.

¹⁰ David Gooding, *True to the Faith: Charting the Course through the Acts of the Apostles* (West Port Colborne, Ontario: Gospel Folio, 1995), 221.

¹¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), 6:200. Some may be embarrassed that I would cite so “unscholarly” a commentator as Matthew Henry. I do not share the generally low opinion of Henry's insights. Moreover, it is both Philip and Matthew Henry's insightful language relating to managing our differences that fuels the impetus for this article.

is much less flattering; it is because flawed vessels are all God has to work with. Think about that: *that is all he has*. That observation is so elementary that we are prone to overlook it and run directly to the somewhat less humbling theological explanation. But there is another side to this disagreement and division.

The first church conference ended with an expression of unity (Acts 15:22ff)—a unity all the more significant given the high doctrinal stakes and the highly charged nature of the discussion. But Acts 15 does not close on that happy note. Instead, Luke gives us a front row seat to a vigorous debate between two long-time friends and ministry partners. That disagreement ended not with one admitting he was wrong and conceding to the other. It ended in an impasse. They each chose different ministry companions and went their separate ways. And the Scripture seems to be okay with that!

God Can Use Our Differences to Advance His Kingdom

Despite the discomfort we instinctively feel when we read Acts 15:39–41, it is not hard to spot shafts of light shooting through the ominous clouds of disagreement and division between these two stellar Christian leaders. “It was a pity that the present dispute was allowed to generate such mutual provocation, but in the providence of God it was overruled for good.”¹² The result of this significant dispute was, in retrospect, an obvious and even better solution than either of them had imagined or anticipated.

They reach a solid compromise and create two missions instead of one. . . . In sum, here is an example where a disagreement was so great that the ability to work side by side was affected. What resulted was a solution that allowed the advance of the gospel to continue, but in a way that recognized a need for distinct ministries. Sometimes this is the best solution.¹³

Some may lament that Paul and Barnabas failed to display the unity for which Christ prayed. At the risk of furthering disunity, I disagree. I suggest that they preserved that unity by how they managed their differences and their division. How they spoke of each other after they divided is one window into that management.

The disagreement at the end of Acts 15 initially seems to have closed the chapter on their “working partnership.” “We have no positive scriptural evidence that Paul and Barnabas ever worked together again.”¹⁴ But there is no reason to “think that Paul and Barnabas went off shaking their fists at one another. They were good and great men. They certainly agreed to disagree.”¹⁵

How do we know that? Because Paul continued to refer to Barnabas with respect and esteem as a positive example of Christian leadership (1 Cor 9:6). Paul’s reference to Barnabas in this verse does not surprise us as it should; very few interpreters even note the fact that this statement comes after the

¹² F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (1954; reprint, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1981), 319.

¹³ Bock, 520.

¹⁴ D. Edmond Hiebert, *In Paul’s Shadow: Friends & Foes of the Great Apostle* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 1992), 50–51.

¹⁵ Custer, 225.

Acts 15 episode. We are so accustomed to hearing about Paul and Barnabas in the same breath that we breeze past 1 Corinthians 9:6 without batting an eye. But Paul's statement comes some three to four years after the Pauline-Barnaban paroxysm; and there is no record or reason to suppose that Barnabas had ever been to Corinth. A reference to Timothy or Silas would have made sense, since they were well known to the Corinthians; but the name of Barnabas appears like a bolt out of the blue. How would the Corinthians have known enough about Barnabas for Paul to be able to drop so casual a reference to him as an exemplary fellow-laborer? Though Luke never mentions Barnabas after Acts 15, Paul must have kept up with him and his ministry to be able to make such a reference four years later.

After such a fallout, some believers can barely spit out one another's names. They are like Joseph's brothers, who "hated him and could not speak peacefully to him" (Gen 37:4). "When Paul has occasion to refer to Barnabas" after their Acts 15 dispute, "he does so with the warmth of old affection."¹⁶ Paul even ended up valuing and working closely with Mark, the very one he refused to take on the disputed missionary endeavor (Col 4:10; 2 Tim 4:11). That makes it nearly impossible to believe that Paul and Barnabas never worked together again, despite the silence of the historical record. And the fact that Silas (Paul's chosen ministry partner in Acts 15) and Mark (Barnabas's chosen ministry partner in Acts 15) are later found working *together* alongside Peter indicates there was no lasting breach or suspicion between the two respective co-workers either (1 Pet 5:12–13).

The point in Acts 15 is not whether Paul or Barnabas was right, but that God can turn our divisions into his multiplications. That does not mean that the apostolic paroxysm provides a biblical sanction for our disagreements with one another. But it is recorded and preserved for our instruction. Among other things, the incident in Acts 15 teaches us that God may use our differences to multiply the ministry of the Church, and that godly people can disagree, even heatedly, and still be godly and God-used.

Nothing in Acts 15 indicates that the dispute was itself evil, or that either man said things that were sinful, or that either had to repent of their disagreement or division on this point before God could use them. Differences, disagreements, and even divisions between Christians are not necessarily sinful. They are a fact of life among finite followers of Christ in a fallen world. And they can be God's way of multiplying our impact on the world around us.

God Can Use Our Differences to Glorify Himself

A prime directive concerning differences over issues of liberty is 1 Corinthians 10:31. The verse makes a great life motto. But it is far more than a call to sanctify the mundane activities of life by doing them in a way that glorifies God. The contextual application is quite specific.

This verse is *the determinative dictum* for choosing whether or not to exercise a liberty. When read through the lens of context, the gist of Paul's statement is this: in any situation potentially involving the testimony or conscience of yourself or others, whether you choose to eat or not eat, whether you choose to drink or not drink, or whatever you choose to do or not do in such situations,

¹⁶ F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (1977; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 212.

make the choice that most glorifies God. The deciding factor is not whether I have the liberty. The deciding factor is what decision will most glorify God in such a situation.

“Gospel-centered” and “cross-centered” have long been influential buzzwords. Some have suggested that this focus is too narrow, and that there is more to the Bible than the gospel and the cross. That is true. But it is also true that some who use those terms fail to apply them broadly enough. Notice how Paul leverages his argument against exercising a liberty: “If your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one *for whom Christ died*” (Rom 14:15).

According to Paul, reining in my personal liberty to avoid grieving a brother in Christ is about as gospel-centered and cross-centered as it gets. In both 1 Corinthians 8–10 and Romans 14–15, Paul is dealing with potentially different conclusions between believers on a broad range of issues. Nevertheless, we find Paul propelling the discussion to the same applicational conclusion in both passages: a call to make the choice that most glorifies God (1 Cor 10:23–31; Rom 15:2–6). The rhetorical and even linguistic parallels between the two passages are instructive (emphasis added):

1 Corinthians 10 (NASB)	Romans 15 (NASB)
<p>²³ All things are lawful, but not all things edify. ²⁴ <i>Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor. . . .</i></p>	<p>² <i>Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.</i> ³ <i>For even Christ did not please himself. . . .</i> ⁵ Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be</p>
<p>³¹ Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, <i>do all to the glory of God. . . .</i> ³³ <i>just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many . . .</i></p>	<p>of the same mind with one another . . . ⁶ so that with one accord you may with one voice <i>glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.</i></p>

Our decisions in various circumstances may often differ from each other’s. But if the basis on which we make those decisions is (as Paul exhorts us) the good of others for the glory of God, then God will be glorified even in and by our differences.

Commenting on Jeremiah 35, Derek Kidner describes the Rechabites (facetiously and ironically) as “those obstinate puritans who, as everyone knew, needed dragging into the sixth century!” But he proceeds to make the secondary observation that

God, who loves unity and truth, is no lover of uniformity. By his own order of Nazarites, he called some people, but not others, to an austerity not unlike that of the Rechabites, to make a particular point; and the fact that Jesus and John the Baptist glorified God by different lifestyles should open our minds to the reality and value of specialized callings.¹⁷

That emphasis on our differences raises an important question that begs investigation: why do we differ from each other so much?

¹⁷ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 119 (emphasis added).

*We Need to Understand Why We Differ*¹⁸

Christians are indwelt by the same Spirit, read the same Bible, and use more or less the same tools to interpret it. So why are there so many differences among Bible believers? In part, it is because we do not use all the same tools with the same care, in the same proportions, in the same order, with the same presuppositions, or priorities, or proficiency—or any combination of those factors.

Give a dozen random people of varying carpentry skills and experience the same materials and set of tools, and ask them to build a birdhouse. Most of them may look roughly the same (some more roughly than others). Some will be notably better than others. A few may be barely functional or recognizable. To make the analogy only slightly more apropos, ask the same dozen people to construct a one-tenth scale model of the Biltmore House. Theology, after all, is a considerably more complex endeavor than building a birdhouse.

It is no good asking for a simple religion. After all, real things are not simple. They look simple, but they are not. . . . [Some people complain] that if there really were a God they are sure He would have made religion simple. . . . as if ‘religion’ were something God invented, and not His statements to us of certain quite unalterable facts about His own nature.¹⁹

The Bible is not designed to mean different things to different people, but it often does—not because of the Bible but because of us. Sometimes we can form conclusions different from each other simply on the basis of the translation we’re using. Some think the solution is for all of us to use the same translation; but church history, transmission history, hermeneutics, and human nature all argue against that proposition. The same goes for everyone joining the same denomination.

Why Do We Disagree?

Some of the reasons for our divisions are providential and subjective—our spiritual, intellectual, emotional, volitional, cultural, and experiential differences from each other. And none of those differences necessarily involve any inherent acts of sin. Consequently, several factors contribute to hermeneutical differences among us. And differences of interpretation naturally translate into differences of opinion, doctrine, practice, and (hence) inevitable disagreement.

Some disagreements are the result of *differing theological predispositions*. Whether consciously or not, all of us have a basic theological system that furnishes the lens through which we tend to read the biblical text. We are inclined to see texts in ways that make them fit with the preconceptions of our system, or even with our own personal paratextual preferences and opinions.

Some disagreements are the result of *differing gifts* (Eph 4:7). Some interpreters are simply more or less gifted than others. That is not necessarily a matter of education or raw intelligence. It involves investigative skill, diligence and thoroughness, level of training, and functional familiarity with the

¹⁸ I cannot now tell to what degree I have further developed the content in this section over years of teaching it, but the basic points originated (for me) from my seminary professor and longtime pastor, Dr. Mark Minnick.

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1980), 47–48.

whole range of scriptural revelation. Nor does greater giftedness necessarily guarantee rightness of interpretation; the other issues in this list still factor into everyone's conclusions. But it does help explain some of the differences among us.

Some disagreements are the result of *differing personal backgrounds and individual consciences* (Rom 14:14). This particularly explains differences and disagreements in areas of praxis, but it impacts our doctrinal differences as well.

Those three factors focus on the human element in interpretation. Other reasons are more objective. Some disagreements are the result of *genuine ambiguities in the Bible* (2 Pet 3:15–16). In other words, an objective divine element contributes to our differences, because not all Scripture is equally clear. The meaning of many passages is (at least from our perspective) susceptible of two or more equally legitimate interpretations. Not everything in the Bible is as clear as it could possibly be. Which raises a related question.

Why Are There Ambiguities?

Why did God not banish ambiguity from the Bible? Certainly, he could have made the Bible utterly unambiguous at every point. Clearly, he chose not to do so. So why did God build ambiguities into the Bible? I am not aware of any biblical explanation for that question, but such ambiguities have a number of positive results that may suggest at least some tentative and partial answers to the question.

Ambiguities compel us to search God's words more thoroughly and diligently (cf. 1 Pet 1:10). Ambiguities prompt our meditation on Scripture, which is (or ought to be) a form of fellowship (cf. Pss 19:13–14; 119:148). Ambiguities help us personalize truth that we search out, transmuting it from abstract to impact (cf. Prov 2:1–7; cf. Dan 9:1ff). Ambiguities measure our interest in discerning God's mind and will (cf. Job 23:12; Ps 119:162). Finally, and most to the present point, ambiguities exercise and cultivate our maturity, our charity, and our unity when we disagree with one another (cf. Rom 14:1–15:6).

These reflections are not novel. At the Council of Trent, one of Cardinal Robert Bellarmine's arguments against the perspicuity of Scripture was the admission on the part of the reformers that the Bible contains difficulties. William Whitaker, an Anglican Calvinist (whose portrait reputedly hung in Bellarmine's study, so much did he admire the Protestant's genius), rebutted that "by such difficulties God calls us to prayer, excites our diligence, keeps our interest, causes us to value the Scriptures, subdues our pride, and much else besides."²⁰

Ambiguities and disagreements will help us grow up, if we let them. Part of managing our differences involves recognizing, and accepting as a reality of the human condition, why we come to different conclusions in the first place.

It appears that God has deliberately left us in a quandary about many things. . . . He could have eliminated the loopholes, prevented all the schisms over morality and false teaching that have

²⁰ Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 154.

plagued the church for two thousand years. Think of the squabbling and perplexity we would have been spared. And think of the crop of dwarfs He would have reared!²¹

But this is where it gets challenging. Remember, God uses only flawed vessels because that is all he has. God's use of us, and even God's blessing on our work and ministry, does not mean we are not flawed. Scripture repeatedly demonstrates that divine use does not even necessarily imply divine approval. In the same passage in which God guarantees Israel's success in taking the land, he nevertheless announces that he will *not* go with them because they were stubborn and liable to provoke him to destroy them along the way (Exod 33:2–3).

Now why would God be guaranteeing their success in the very moment that He is withdrawing His presence? . . . In one word, it's because of His covenant (v. 1), and His faithfulness to that. . . . Maybe we have not been prepared to acknowledge this, but is it possible that there can be gross disobedience to Scripture and, at the same time, indisputable success due only to God's miraculous work? . . . This is a passage in which God said that it would be so. . . . But what would be missing was God's *approving* presence.²²

It is possible to enjoy a considerable measure of success through the blessing of God but forfeit God's "approving presence" in the process. God may use men and women with whom he is actively, even seriously, displeased. That may disturb our assumed paradigm that divine blessing of ends necessarily implies divine approval of the means or motives or men; but the reality is amply exemplified in Scripture. God uses Balaams to declare prophetic blessing on his people (Num 22–24). God blesses carnal Samsons with success (Judg 14–16). Those are admittedly pretty negative examples; hopefully we do not view all those with whom we disagree in that light. Because God also uses Jehoshaphats, despite repeated rebukes and severe expressions of God's displeasure and disapproval of some of his actions. Our goal should not be God's use or even God's blessing, but God's pleasure.

Sometimes It Is Appropriate to Disagree (Even Vigorously)

The Jehoshaphat narrative furnishes an instructive example of God's use of disobedient giftedness and godliness—counterintuitive as that may sound. Jehoshaphat is roundly commended by the Chronicler. He was one of only eight godly kings in Judah (out of twenty). He was one of only three kings in Judah compared to David (2 Chron 17:3–4). He had a positive spiritual influence on Judah and instituted many great reforms (2 Chron 17:6–9; 19:4–11). He experienced God's blessing on his reign (2 Chron 20:1–30). Scripture's overall evaluation of him personally is highly complimentary (2 Chron 19:3; 20:32). But Jehoshaphat had a defining flaw: a habitual association with the ungodly kings of Israel (2 Chron 18:1–2ff; 20:35–36; 1 Kgs 22:48–49; 2 Kgs 3:6–12). And in every instance, God sent a prophet to communicate his disapproval (2 Chron 19:1–2; 20:37; 2 Kgs 3:13ff).

²¹ Elisabeth Elliot, *The Liberty of Obedience* (Waco, TX: Word, 1968), 56–57.

²² Mark Minnick, "Speak, Lord, in the Stillness" (Mount Calvary Baptist Church, Greenville, SC, Whetstone Conference, June 2007).

For example, after his military confederacy with Ahab, God sent Jehu the prophet to deliver this message: “Do you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord? Because of this, the Lord’s wrath is upon you” (2 Chron 19:2). The alliances of God’s leaders are extremely important to God. When such alliances betray the orthodoxy or the holiness for which they profess to stand, it confuses God’s people. Some might object that applying this to religious alliances is taking it out of context. After all, this is a military alliance not a spiritual alliance. But if God so severely rebukes a merely military alliance—for spiritual *reasons*—we can hardly conclude that he is less concerned or less severe when it comes to religious alliances.

God’s rebuke of Jehoshaphat’s actions through his prophet Jehu in 2 Chronicles 19:2 is instructive. The verse makes the point that even when a man is—like Jehoshaphat—good, godly, and sincere, with an edifying ministry to God’s people that is blessed by God, it does not mean (a) that all his actions are, therefore, right; (b) that his wrong actions should be overlooked or unrebuked because he is, after all, a good and godly and sincere man; (c) that there is not “wrath on him from the Lord” for his wrong actions or alliances, whether we see evidence of that wrath or not; or (d) that his wrong actions and alliances necessarily nullify his good, godly, and sincere character. How do we know that? From the next verse in the text.

Our evaluation of others must be as honest and even-handed as God’s. Can a serial compromiser like Jehoshaphat be genuinely sincere and do good things for the Lord? The answer to that question is 2 Chronicles 19:3: “Nevertheless, some good is found in you.” God takes the rest of chapters 19 and 20 to record all the genuinely good and godly things Jehoshaphat did after this. That must mean Jehoshaphat repented at the word of the prophet and reformed his compromising ways, right? If only that were the case (2 Chron 18:1; 18:2; 20:35; 2 Kgs 3:6–7).

Jehoshaphat’s apparent tone-deafness to the divine word regarding his alliances is astonishing. Scripture commends Jehoshaphat to us as a good and godly man greatly used by God. But part of his legacy is long-term damage to his own family and to the people of God. Because of Jehoshaphat’s intermarriage and cooperation with the house of Ahab, both his son and grandson abandoned his own example of personal godliness and followed the ways of Ahab’s family (2 Chron 21:6; 22:3–4). Thanks to his daughter-in-law, Athaliah, the royal Davidic line was very nearly eradicated (2 Chron 22:10ff). Finally, Jehoshaphat’s alliance with the house of Ahab contributed to the propagation of Baal worship in Judah for years to come (2 Chron 23:17). God sent three different prophets to rebuke the godly Jehoshaphat for the same habitual sin.

In the narrative of Jehoshaphat, the prophets Micaiah, Jehu, Eliezer, and Elisha represent God’s perspective on this godly king’s repeated, problematic alliances. With whom in the narrative are we meant to identify? Whom are we intended to emulate? The genuinely godly but habitually compromising Jehoshaphat? Or those “negative” but honest prophets? Who is most clearly and consistently on the Lord’s side? That is what matters most. Even when we try to apply the inspired Scriptures as accurately as we know how, we cannot claim the divine inspiration of a prophet. But if the prophets are our primary exemplars, then sometimes it is appropriate to disagree with a brother, even vigorously.

Jehoshaphat's sin is pretty blatant; he repeatedly aided the Yahweh-abandoning, Baal-worshipping Northern Kingdom. That is the kind of association that the passage is specifically talking about. Beyond that, the applications can be messy. Even if we are trying to ground our applications in scriptural principle, we will not always come to identical conclusions.²³

At the same time, the Jehoshaphat narrative reminds us that a really godly person can sometimes make really bad decisions—even in the face of repeated rebukes from God's word—and still be a really godly person with whom we are compelled to disagree, perhaps vigorously. The point is that such disagreements, when rightly managed, neither negate the reality of an underlying unity nor consign those with whom we disagree to the dustbin of apostasy.

It is a scripturally demonstrable fact that some differences demand confrontation. One of the most glaring and disconcerting biblical examples of this reality is Paul's confrontation of Peter in Antioch.²⁴ Personal godliness or divine usefulness does not exempt one from severe divine displeasure or from the censure and rebuke of fellow believers. That weighty observation requires a counterweight that highlights the importance of *how* we disagree.

Do Not Confuse Righteous Indignation with the Wrath of Man

I am using *confuse* here in two senses. The first is the common definitional sense of *confuse*: do not *mistake* human wrath for righteous indignation (Jas 1:20). The second is the more etymological and theological sense of *confuse*: do not *mix* sinful human wrath into an otherwise legitimate expression of righteous indignation (Eph 4:26).

The textual basis for this scriptural norm is, of course, located in James 1. Note the linkage between unbridled speech, worthless religion, and worldliness.

But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. . . . If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father . . . to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Returning to Acts 15 for a moment, Marshall notes that “the reason for the contention between Paul and Barnabas has seemed so trivial that some deeper cause has been suspected.”²⁵ Accordingly,

²³ We are given minimal textual insight into Jehoshaphat's decision-making policy. Given his otherwise extraordinarily exemplary godliness, however, one cannot at least help wondering whether Jehoshaphat was trying to ground his policy on basic scriptural principle and biblical-historical precedent: “I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses” (1 Kgs 22:4; 2 Kgs 3:7).

²⁴ It is critical to note that the rift between Paul and Peter was not an issue of doctrine but of practice that contradicted and undermined the doctrine on which they were both in perfect agreement (Gal 2:11–21).

²⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, TOTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 257.

some commentators have invented all sorts of ulterior motives in order to explain the “real” issues underlying the dispute.²⁶

For example, Mark allegedly resented Paul’s apostolic priority over his Uncle Barnabas; *that* is why he left the previous mission, and that is why Paul did not want him along this time. Or, Paul still distrusted Barnabas after the Antioch debacle (Gal 2:11–13) and was actually looking for a pretext to go without him (which raises the question of why Paul would approach Barnabas with the idea in the first place, Acts 15:36). Or again, Mark actually left the first mission in protest over Paul’s Gentile focus, so he returned to Jerusalem to stir up the Judaistic faction of the church against Paul. But this is all speculative rubbish.

Even fog will look like a smoking gun to someone who is convinced that there must be a smoking gun. Sometimes we can be so inebriated by our own prejudices that we see only what we expect to see. If we feel compelled to disagree—especially publicly—we have at least four scriptural obligations to meet in doing so.

First, *be slow*. That is the core of James’s charge—“slow to speak, and slow to anger.” Do not fire off posts or emails in the intensity and heat of the moment. Second, *be informed*. That is the “quick to hear” component of James’s counsel. Paul condemns those who “do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions” (1 Tim 1:7 NASB). In short, they do not really know what they are talking about. Informing and influencing others entails an obligation to inform ourselves first. Communicate, confirm, and understand accurately. Third, *be honest*. Speak truth (Eph 4:25). It is dishonest to misrepresent a view with which you disagree; go out of your way to present it in its best light. Fourth, *be charitable*. Speak truth in love (Eph 4:15; 1 Cor 13:4–6). Do not insinuate evil motives or mock brothers in Christ who hold a view with which you disagree. We ought to be willing to hold our friends and fellow believers to these standards; and we ought to expect to be evaluated by those standards as well.

Earlier, I quoted a portion of Matthew Henry’s comment on the Paul-Barnabas dispute in Acts 15 (“we shall never be all of a mind till we come to heaven”). I want to return to that remark because he adds something uniquely insightful along the lines of this biblical norm: “Even those whom we justly condemn we should condemn *moderately*, and with a great deal of temper[ance], because we know not but afterwards we may see cause to think better of them . . . and we should so regulate our resentments that if it should prove so, we should not afterwards be ashamed of [our previous words].”²⁷

There is sound and scriptural wisdom in that. The alternative is regret in retrospect. The eighteenth-century Scottish minister John Brown of Haddington expressed such remorse. In an address to young theological students, he reflected on his participation in the secession from the Scottish church. “I look upon the Secession as indeed the cause of God, but sadly mismanaged and dishonoured by myself and others. Alas! For that pride, passion, selfishness, and unconcern for the

²⁶ The view is accommodatingly put by twentieth-century Episcopalian priest and seminary professor Theodore P. Ferris: “Though Luke puts down the estrangement from Barnabas to disagreement concerning Mark, it is certain that the cause must have lain deeper.” “The Acts of the Apostles,” *The Interpreter’s Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1954), 9:209.

²⁷ Henry, 6:201.

glory of Christ and spiritual edification of souls, which has so often prevailed. Alas! For our want of due meekness, gentleness.”²⁸

Unbridled speech is worldliness. We can become so conditioned by our culture (contra Rom 12:2) that we will post on social media any ungenerous thought that occurs to us—or perpetuate those of others—ignoring in the process the most basic biblical principles that govern our speech and our disagreements with fellow believers. Our reaction to a fellow believer’s error can be just as unscriptural, our attitude toward their perceived worldliness just as worldly.

Every Believer Is Individually Accountable to the Master

Another principle that must inform how we go about managing our differences is far weightier than the space I can give to it here; it, nevertheless, deserves mention. Every man must be fully persuaded in his own mind (Rom 14:5) because each of us will be judged not by one another but by our Master (Rom 14:4). Packaged in this passage like nonidentical twins are both liberty and sobriety. Here is the liberty: the basis of our evaluation before Christ will not be what other people thought of us and our choices (1 Cor 4:2–3). Before you belt out a confirmatory hallelujah, however, here is the sobriety: the basis of our evaluation before Christ will not even be our own conscience (1 Cor 4:3–4) but, rather, *Christ’s* assessment of our faithfulness to the words of God. And that includes his assessment of our faithfulness to his words regulating how we express and manage our differences with each other.

Truth Matters More than Me

One might form the impression from the NT that Paul was a rather narrow-minded, short-fused, pugnacious apostle ready to dispute in the twinkling of an eye. We have already referenced his run-ins with both Barnabas and Peter. To be sure, when “the truth of the gospel” was at stake, he was not prepared “to yield in subjection . . . for even an hour” (Gal 2:5 NASB). When it comes to situations in which he stands to lose *personally*, however, Paul models an exemplary self-effacing spirit.

We tend to be touchiest when we are most vulnerable and wronged. But that is precisely when Paul displays an astonishing magnanimity. Writing from prison, Paul references those who took advantage of his absence from the church circuit. Some, emboldened by his example, preach the word fearlessly out of loving solidarity with the apostle and his mission. Others, emboldened rather by his *absence*, preach the word out of envy, rivalry, insincerity, and selfish ambition, hoping to add to Paul’s burdens and concerns (Phil 1:14–17).

Paul’s response is extraordinary: “What is the result? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is being proclaimed, and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice” (Phil 1:18 NET). Even when the motive behind the preaching was ignoble, selfish, and sinful, Paul did not concern himself with that; that was the Lord’s business (1 Cor 4:1–5). The damage or cost to him

²⁸ John Brown, “Address to Students of Divinity,” in *Young Preacher’s Manual, or A Collection of Treatises on Preaching*, ed. Ebenezer Porter (Boston: Charles Ewer, 1819), 25. Thanks to my friend and colleague Robert D. Vincent for alerting me to this quotation.

personally was, to his mind, irrelevant so long as truth was being preached. “It is impossible to conceive a finer piece of broad-minded tolerance.”²⁹

Unity Is Possible without Unanimity

In his book *Exegetical Fallacies*, D. A. Carson identifies a number of logical and hermeneutical flaws that are common even among practiced and informed scholars. In his preface, he explains that one of his driving concerns is the Church’s “hermeneutical disarray.” An express goal for the book is to contribute to hermeneutical uniformity.

The importance of this sort of study cannot be overestimated if we are to move toward unanimity on those matters of interpretation that still divide us. I speak to those with a high view of Scripture: it is very distressing to contemplate how many differences there are among us as to what Scripture actually says. . . . There is a disturbing array of mutually incompatible theological opinions.³⁰

We all need help identifying and rooting out erroneous reasoning and fallacious conclusions, exegetical and otherwise. To that end, Carson’s book is invaluable for evaluating the hermeneutical strengths and weaknesses of ourselves and others. But I want to raise what may seem to some a nearly heretical question: is hermeneutical unanimity actually necessary? For that matter, given all the factors at work in our fallenness and the wide array of reasons for our differences, is hermeneutical unanimity even possible? “It is,” after all, “the peculiar trait of men to war over ideas, not least, theological ones.”³¹ Often that is badly done; but that does not necessarily mean it is bad to do.

Unity is a critical biblical concern. But unity and unanimity are not the same thing; and the difference is more than merely syllabic. Unanimity would be nice, but it is not a biblical obligation. Romans 14 testifies that a lack of unanimity in the Church is not only tolerable; it is to be expected. In fact, lack of unanimity is one of the best tests of unity.

Think again about Acts 15. Is it not ironic—and instructive—that the very chapter that records the remarkable unity of mind that emerged from the Church’s first major debate (vv. 22, 25) should conclude with a falling out between the two men who are, at the beginning of the chapter, inseparable? Rather than speculating where the text is silent, or assuming that only one of them was Spirit-filled, scripturally informed, and exclusively in the right, everything else we know about both of these men should lead us to assume that both of them were actively seeking God’s guidance and that God was either directing or allowing different conclusions. The whole chapter illustrates that God may use even sharp disagreement to further his purposes without eroding unity—that, in fact, even division need not undermine an underlying unity, *depending on how we manage those disagreements and divisions*.

²⁹ Machen, 22.

³⁰ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 18.

³¹ Austin Brown, *A Boisterously Reformed Polemic Against Limited Atonement* (Pensacola: independently published, 2022), 158. See my review of this work later in this issue of JBTW.

It is our differences that drive us to re-evaluate our own positions and those of others in the light of Scripture. We all ought to be studying Scripture more closely as a result of our differences than we would if we all agreed on everything. And that is a good thing.

We have the right, the privilege, and indeed the obligation to differ when a scripturally informed conscience compels us to do so. As long as membership and matriculation are voluntary, every church and institution has not just the right but the obligation to be as precise in their doctrines and positions and policies and practices as they believe Scripture requires them to be. At the same time, we are equally obligated to seek to have a mind as fully informed by Scripture, as open to the insights of other godly people, as sensitive to the Holy Spirit's illumination, and as free from the motivations of either the fear or the pleasure of man as possible.

That is easier said than done. But so is sanctification. And that, in essence, is what this whole essay is about. Philip Henry, the lesser-known father of Matthew Henry, remarked:

*It is not so much our differences of opinion that doth us the mischief (for we may as soon expect all the clocks in the town to strike together, as to see all good people of a mind in every thing on this side of heaven), but the mismanagement of that difference.*³²

You can hear in Matthew Henry's comments on Acts 15 (cited earlier) the echo of his father's wisdom. Put another way, the problem is not *disagreement* (lack of unanimity), but *ill will* (lack of unity) that tarnishes God's glory in the Church.

Unity Is Not a Goal, but a Fact—Act Like It

The NT does not present unity as a goal we are to strive towards, a dream we nourish and hope someday to attain. Unity is a present reality we are supposed to recognize, guard, and live in light of. Two major passages corroborate this perspective.

John 17

Some interpretations of Jesus' prayer for the unity of his followers (John 17:11, 20–23) make it sound as if the answer to that request is entirely up to us. Some give the impression that his request for unity remains miserably unanswered—again, because of us. But Jesus' prayer was not an appeal aimed at his followers; it was a request directed to the Father. As such, it was answered just as definitely and definitively as his request that the Father would glorify him (17:1) or that he would preserve the elect (17:11). Jesus did not ask the Father that we might someday be unified; he prayed to the Father to make all his followers a unity—or, to use the term the Spirit would later direct Paul to use, a body. Christ prayed that the Father would inaugurate the mystery of the unity of the Church as one new man, a previously unrevealed mystery known only to the Godhead.

³² Matthew Henry, *The Life of the Rev. Philip Henry, A.M.*, corrected and enlarged by J. B. Williams (London: J. S. Hughes, 1825), 54 (emphasis added).

Now, foreseeing the addition of many more who would increase the diversity of temperaments, backgrounds, and interests, he made a special plea that all might be one. . . . He was not calling for uniformity . . . nor was he calling for agreement in external opinion. The concept parallels the Pauline concept of the body of Christ, that all believers belong by a vital rather than a merely formal relationship (1 Cor 12:12–13).³³

I am suggesting that the correlation between the prayer of Jesus and the teaching of Paul is more than mere parallel. Rather, the revelation to Paul of the mystery of the Church, and his teaching of the unity of Jew and Gentile in one body, is the *answer* to Jesus' prayer. *The problem is not that the Church has miserably failed to make the request of Christ a reality; answering the prayer of the Son of God is hardly within our prerogative or power. The problem is that the Church miserably fails to live out the reality requested by Christ and fulfilled by the Father.*

The Father granted every other request the Son ever made,³⁴ and he granted this one as well. The proof of that is the NT teaching that all believing Jews and Gentiles *are united in one body* in Christ—not in theory, and not in anticipation, but in present reality. It is the teaching of the NT that this is an accomplished fact, a spiritual reality (cf. 1 Cor 12; Eph 2–4).

Ephesians 4

Paul confirms that this unity is not an elusive ambition we aspire to; it is a present reality. There is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph 4:4–6). This unity is not to be gained but to be maintained (Eph 4:3). You cannot maintain something that does not already exist.

The unity of all true believers in Christ, created by our mutual union with Christ and possession of the same Spirit, is a fact, a prayer uttered by Christ and infallibly answered by the Father. Our union with Christ and unity in the Spirit is an established reality that we need to treasure and guard and in which we need to grow as we progress in our study and mature in our understanding of Scripture.

In the meantime, sometimes one of the best ways to preserve that unity and peace is to agree to divide and live out our Scripture-informed consciences. Philip and Matthew Henry were right. It is not our differences or even our divisions that are the enemy of unity. The true enemy of unity is the manner and spirit in which our differences and divisions are managed.

Unity is not a goal toward which the Church must strive in order for Christ's prayer to be realized; it is the reality in light of which we are to live and act. That unity does not mean we never disagree; it does not even mean we never divide. Sometimes division is necessary not just to maintain purity but to preserve unity. The key is how we manage those differences and divisions. When we do differ with

³³ Merrill C. Tenney, "The Gospel of John," in *EBC*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 9:167. Few interpreters that I am aware of connect Christ's request and the doctrine of the unity of the Church in one body. Cf. a passing, second-hand reference in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John* (1873; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 3:227. See also Matthew Henry, 5:1164, who notes that Jesus' request for unity includes "that they might all be *incorporated in one body*" (emphasis original). This is, in my opinion, a significant oversight that misshapes many applications of Jesus' prayer.

³⁴ Any objection that the cup-request in the garden (Matt 26:39) is an exception fails to take into account the full request: "nevertheless not as I will, but as you will." That was granted.

one another, sometimes even vigorously, it is necessary to remind ourselves of another biblical principle.

Keep the Bigger Picture in View: He Is Not the Enemy; He Is a Brother

The obvious text for this point is 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15. But we have to hold and practice and think and pray in terms of *both* 3:14 and 3:15. Christ’s disciples have differences that will sometimes necessarily divide them, especially when some choose not to obey apostolic instruction: “Note that man, and have no company with him” (v. 14). But the passage compels us to counterpoint that division with a recognition: “Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (v. 15).

Think about that. A believer’s disobedience to clear apostolic commands is serious and warrants division. But even in those circumstances, he is to be regarded as a brother not an enemy. If that applies even to those who disobey clear apostolic commands, it certainly applies to those who disagree with us on the interpretations and applications of some of those apostolic commands.

A minister planning to write a public article criticizing a fellow minister first wrote to John Newton for his advice. Newton gives some insightful, practical counsel along these lines of managing controversy with brothers in Christ.³⁵

Dear Sir,

As you are likely to be engaged in controversy, and your love of truth is joined with a natural warmth of temper, my friendship makes me solicitous on your behalf. . . . *I would have you more than a conqueror, and to triumph not only over your adversary, but over yourself.* . . . I may reduce my advice to three heads, respecting your opponent, the public, and yourself.

Consider Your Opponent

As to your opponent, I wish that before you set pen to paper against him, and during the whole time you are preparing your answer, you may commend him by earnest prayer to the Lord’s teaching and blessing. This practice will have a direct tendency to conciliate your heart to love and pity him; and such a disposition will have a good influence upon every page you write.

If you account him a believer, though greatly mistaken in the subject of debate between you, [remember] the Lord loves him and bears with him; therefore you must not despise him, or treat him harshly. The Lord bears with you likewise, and expects that you should show tenderness to others, from a sense of the much forgiveness you need yourself. In a little while you will meet in heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts; and though you may find it necessary to oppose his errors, view him personally as a kindred soul, with whom you are to be happy in Christ forever. . . .

³⁵ The following excerpts are from Letter XIX, “On Controversy,” in *The Works of John Newton* (1839; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2021), 1:186–91 (emphasis added).

Consider the Public

By printing, you will appeal to the public, where your readers may be ranged under three divisions: First, such as differ from you in principle. . . . Though you have your eye upon one person chiefly, there are many like-minded with him. . . .

[Second, those who are not doctrinally or theologically informed.] These are very incompetent judges of doctrine; but they can form a tolerable judgment of a writer's spirit. They know that meekness, humility, and love are the characteristics of a Christian temper. . . . The scriptural maxim that "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God," is verified by daily observation. If our zeal is embittered by expressions of anger, invective, or scorn, we may think we are doing service of the cause of truth, when in reality we shall only bring it into discredit. . . .

[Third, those who are already inclined to agree with you and the arguments you advance.] You may be instrumental to their edification if the law of kindness as well as of truth regulates your pen, otherwise you may do them harm. There is a principle of self, which disposes us to despise those who differ from us; and we are often under its influence when we think we are only showing a becoming zeal in the cause of God. . . . *Self-righteousness can feed upon doctrines as well as upon works; and a man may have the heart of a Pharisee, while his head is stored with orthodox notions.* . . . I hope your performance will savor of a spirit of true humility, and be a means of promoting it in others.

Consider Yourself

This leads me, in the last place, to consider your own concern in your present undertaking. It seems a laudable service to defend the faith once delivered to the saints; we are commanded to contend earnestly for it, and to convince gainsayers. . . . [But] what will it profit a man if he gains his cause and silences his adversary, if at the same time he loses that humble, tender frame of spirit in which the Lord delights . . . ?

Be upon your guard against admitting anything personal into the debate. If you think you have been ill-treated, you will have an opportunity of showing that you are a disciple of Jesus, who "when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not." This is our pattern, thus we are to speak and write for God, "not rendering railing for railing, but contrariwise blessing; knowing that hereunto we are called."

Managing our differences well demands maturity, humility, and Christlikeness. That brings me finally to a dubious-sounding conclusion. My word choice is admittedly droll but, at the same time, serious.

Celebrate Perspicuity!

We are bombarded with the cry to “celebrate diversity!” Here’s another angle on that. Underneath our differences in interpretation and application as brothers and sisters in Christ is a doctrine that is central to our theological heritage: the perspicuity of Scripture.³⁶

Perspicuity is one of the foundations for religious liberty in the West. Implicit in the affirmation of Scripture’s clarity is the recognition that individuals have the responsibility and the ability to interpret Scripture for themselves. . . . Of course, this . . . doctrine has opened a door to all sorts of problems—factions, eccentric interpretations, rampant individualism, and the like. But despite these dangers, the freedom that perspicuity protects is worth the cost. . . . The biblical doctrine of perspicuity can be abused. But a raft of bad interpretations and the sometimes free-for-all of Protestantism is still worth the price of reading the Bible for ourselves according to our God-given (and imperfect) consciences. Freedom of religious inquiry and expression would not be possible without confidence in the clarity of Scripture.³⁷

Every difference and disagreement is a reminder that God has spoken his words not just to one man but to all, not just to a spiritual hierarchy or a scholarly aristocracy but to his people at large.

And every difference and disagreement that is managed well is a testimony that, despite those differences and disagreements and even divisions, we are

elect from every nation, yet one o’er all the earth;
our charter of salvation: one Lord, one faith, one birth.
One holy name we bless, partake one holy food,
and to one hope we press, with every grace endued.³⁸

May we seek, and may God grant, the grace to live in light of the unity of the body of Christ by agreeing where we can, being willing to disagree and even divide when we must, and managing those disagreements and divisions well—to the glory of God.

³⁶ For an excellent and thorough study of this topic, see the previously cited work by Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture*.

³⁷ Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 67–68.

³⁸ Samuel Stone, “The Church’s One Foundation” (adapted).

Appendix: A Model Expression of Unity

Ezra’s prayer for the sinning people of God (Ezra 9) displays an exemplary solidarity between leader and people. The issue was not only intermarriage among the people but intermarriage among the leaders—intermarriage with the very kinds of surrounding unbelievers that had historically corrupted their relationship with the Lord and that finally led to their decimation and captivity only four generations earlier. Ezra’s reaction was severe (Ezra 9:1–4) because he understood the broad historical perspective and what was at stake in this tilt toward compromise with the surrounding world.

When we listen carefully to his prayer, we hear something quite surprising. It is his pronouns. Ezra does not pray about “them” and “their” sin; he prays about “us” and “our” sin.

⁶ O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for *our* iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and *our* guilt has mounted up to the heavens. ⁷ From the days of our fathers to this day *we* have been in great guilt. And for *our* iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today. . . . ¹³ And after all that has come upon us for *our* evil deeds and for *our* great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than *our* iniquities deserved . . . , ¹⁴ shall *we* break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with *us* until you consumed *us*, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? ¹⁵ O LORD, the God of Israel, you are just, . . . Behold, *we* are before you in *our* guilt, for none can stand before you because of this. (Ezra 9:6–7, 13–15)

Why did Ezra pray this way? He had not participated in those sins that were once again endangering the nation. Moreover, what does his prayer have to do with us as Gentile members of the Church? First, the NT teaches that passages like this are for our instruction and encouragement (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11). Second, Bible prayers are not just interesting historical artifacts; they model not only scriptural ways of praying but a scriptural spirit in praying as well. Third, we are not members of Israel or part of a theocratic nation; we are part of something even more intimate and spiritually binding—a universal body of true believers united in what is called the Church—whether we like it or not, whether we like all of them or not, and whether we agree with all of them or not. They are brothers and sisters (as Paul reminds us) “for whom Christ died,” and for whom Christ will return, and with whom we will live in perfected love and respect forever. If they are brothers and sisters, that means they are family. We are members united in one body, just as Jesus prayed. In a very real way—more real than if we were united merely by blood or race or nationality—what happens to one of us affects all of us. And fourth, the kinds of things that threatened individual Israelites and therefore the nation Israel—things for which Ezra prayed with such astonishing solidarity—are the same kinds of things that threaten not just our churches but our Church as a whole.

This ancient passage is pregnant with a number of strikingly timeless applications. First, the principle extends beyond individuals marrying unbelievers. Literal marriage to unbelievers is the obvious first-level application. But the spiritual significance of such marriages indicates that even bigger issues are at stake as well. The mixed marriages were wrong because (as with Jehoshaphat’s

marriage alliances with the house of Ahab) they created relationships and loyalties (to family) that conflicted with higher and fundamentally opposed relationships and loyalties (to God). Such relationships function as the means of introducing pagan elements of the world into the community and worship of Yahweh (Ezra 9:1).

Second, the principle includes marrying the Church to the culture. The reason God forbade physical marriages with the people of the land was because such physical marriages implied a metaphorical marriage with the culture (Exod 34:11–16). The language of Ezra 9:2 (“the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands”) is pregnant with application to the effects of marrying the Church to the surrounding unbelieving culture and the practices that accompany it, particularly when they undermine God’s words.

Third, the principle involves particular emphasis on the responsibility of leadership. The passage’s specific attention to the involvement of even the priests and the Levites (Ezra 9:1) and the fact that “the hand of the princes and rulers have been chief in this trespass” (Ezra 9:2) has compelling implications for the unique responsibility of leadership in maintaining the purity of the church.

Fourth, the prayer contains a humbling lesson for separatists. It is easy for separatists to cultivate the attitude that we are not the problem and have nothing to confess—our job is to identify problems and warn people. But the biblical pattern goes beyond praying for the purity and growth of our church or our group. Why not pray that way for genuine believers and churches outside yourself and your circle? Of all people, separatists should pray for the purification of the body of Christ at large. Such praying provides a powerful lesson and example to God’s people—to foster, alongside a scriptural explanation of the issues that divide us, a sense of solidarity, a largeness of spirit toward the people of God who are not a part of *our* church or *our* movement. That spirit is reflected in what and how we pray for others.

Finally, this kind of praying is part of a broader biblical pattern. Ezra is not alone in this kind of solidarity praying (cf. Dan. 9). In Scripture, it is the separatists who take the lead in confessing the sins of the community of God’s people and interceding for God’s people at large. If anyone could have pointed fingers, it was men like Ezra and Daniel. But these men prayed and confessed with this sense of solidarity as though they too were guilty; you hear it in their pronouns when they pray. Worldliness and compromise in the Church need to be identified, but it is not just *their* problem. It is *our* problem because it is the Church’s problem. It is *our* problem because Christ’s honor and cause and people are at stake. The Church is not divided between “us” and “them.” The Church is all about *us*—all of us—and *Christ*. Ezra’s and Daniel’s examples suggest that our attitude—both in censure and in intercession—needs to reflect that awareness. But the pattern extends beyond Ezra and Daniel.

Praying like this—whether individually and privately, or pastorally and publicly—is an expression of the spirit of Paul in Philippians 1:15–18, and of Jesus in Luke 9:49–50. Read what was going on in some of the churches in Revelation 2–3; we would not dare fellowship with some of them, and rightly so. Yet Christ still claims them, addresses them as his churches, and displays an astonishing willingness to acknowledge good things even in some of the worst of those churches. Correction and warning are biblical necessities because solidarity and unity are biblical realities.

This is no argument for an ecumenical spirit. It is an argument for a biblically ecclesiastical spirit that embraces what Scripture itself teaches is a single body with one Head. It is an argument for maintaining an awareness of our unity in Christ despite our differences, and for thinking and praying with a sense of solidarity and passion for the purification of the whole body of Christ, for the glory of Christ. “Union in religious duties, especially in the duty of prayer, in praying for one another, and jointly for their common welfare, above almost all other things, tends to promote mutual affection and endearment.”³⁹

Even when it was others who were clearly in the wrong, Ezra and Daniel did not pray about “them”; they prayed about “us.” Even more than Israel was, we really are all in this together. We cannot remain faithful to the NT and ignore that reality.

³⁹ Jonathan Edwards, “An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God’s People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ’s Kingdom on Earth, Pursuant to Scripture-Promises and Prophecies Concerning the Last Time,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (1834; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 2:295. Thanks to my friend and colleague Robert D. Vincent for this quotation.