

Which Is Faith and Which is Opinion?

by Tom M. Roberts

One of the ongoing battles that confronts each generation of Bible students is that of determining items of faith, as distinguished from items of opinion. Some claim that there is no conceivable way of determining, decisively, which is which short of allowing a denominational hierarchy or papal decree to establish a canon of accepted creeds. Of course, this is the denominational way and the catechisms, manuals of faith and creed books are formal attempts to establish a distinct body of faith for each sect. Advocates of New Testament Christianity reject such organizational attempts to catalog the Scriptures. However, relying on our individual consciences and/or congregational consensus to determine which part of the Bible we will allow to fall into an area of faith and which will be regarded as opinion (judgments) results in much contradiction and confusion.

Those with a rebel mind relish this situation and capitalize on it by saying that there is no way that anyone can determine such a difference and seek to relegate all matters into the realm of opinion. Inconsistency, however, contradicts their attempt at a universal liberty of the conscience when they demand that the deity of Jesus is the one matter of faith that is absolutely essential. Never mind that this lone bastion carries with it no more warranty that it is a matter of faith than another subject. Never mind that no criteria have been established upon which we may, uniformly, distinguish faith from opinion. We are told that the deity of Jesus is the only matter of faith which would limit fellowship; everything else is opinion. On the one hand, the faith is demoted to the plane of human opinion, resulting in abandonment of sound doctrine; on the opposite extreme, every opinion is elevated to the plane of the faith and churches are fragmented, having no basis for unity.

Are we thus bound to such a chaotic condition in determining matters of faith/opinion? Are there no guidelines to follow, no rules to help us? Are individual consciences or congregational consensus the only factors, short of manuals of faith, which provide assistance in this vital subject? Some propose that we should "preach the man and not the plan," but we are right back to the extreme "deity of Jesus only" proposal and still have not learned anything about why we let this single item be a matter of faith and everything else be matter of opinion. Is the matter hopeless and must we be condemned to a spiritual life of chaos because God has not provided an answer to this

dilemma? Or is it possible that the Bible itself provides the answer if we will allow it to address the question? Can we tell the distinction between faith and opinion? Let the Bible speak.

Definition of "Faith"

Vine says that "faith" is "firm persuasion, a conviction based upon hearing" and "by metonymy, (that) which is believed, the contents of belief, the faith" (p. 71). He lists Acts 6:7; 14:22; Galatians 1:23 and Jude 3 (among other passages) to illustrate the fact. Thayer adds that it is "objectively, the substance of Christian faith or what is believed by Christians" (p. 513). Since we are "to contend for the faith once for all delivered" (Jude 3), be "obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7), and can "continue in the faith" (Acts 14:22), it follows that the faith can be identified, understood, separated from extraneous matters, taught, contended for and followed. The faith is a body of truth given to us by God that identifies the content of our belief. Such belief is not subjective, open to individual approval of conscience, vote by committee or authoritative only by papal bull. The faith is objective truth, to be received as and when we accept the author of the faith, God himself. Personal faith and the faith are so closely identified that one word encompasses both and the distinction is maintained only by context. We can no more relegate a portion of "the faith" to opinion than we can relegate the existence of God to opinion. God exists whether we believe in him or not. The faith exists whether we acknowledge it or not. The parameters of the faith are not diminished because some of its tenets do not coincide with my notions.

In Acts 15, the question of fellowship with Gentiles caused much "questioning" (vv. 2,7). The Holy Spirit, along with the elders at Jerusalem and the apostles "considered" (v. 6) the matter. God's will was declared (vv. 7-21) and the ensuing decision, reached by "accord" (v. 25), was circulated to all the churches as "these necessary things" (v. 28). Now, would "these necessary things" be equated with matters of I 'the faith' I or of "opinion"? When Paul rebuked Peter over this same issue (Gal. 2:11) and said that he I 'stood condemned," was it over the faith or opinion? When he warned against perverting the gospel of Christ into a "different gospel; which is not another gospel," (vv. 6,7), was he respecting what had been declared in Acts 15 to be God's will or was he binding his own opinion on his brethren? Obviously, "the faith" concerns "necessary" things which have been so designated by God and the result of accepting the will of God is accord, rejoicing and peace (vv. 25,31,33).

Definition of "Opinion"

While we have been using the word "opinion" as the common term describing that

which is different to "the faith," it is readily acknowledged that "opinion" is not a New Testament term. One of its equivalents would be found in Romans 14:1: "scruples" (ASV) or "doubtful disputations" (KJV). Here, Vine states that the word denotes "a seeking, then, a debate, dispute, questioning" (p. 322), and gives Acts 15:2 as an example of an unsettled question (though it was about to be settled). In Romans 14:1, it obviously refers to a matter of no consequence to God (though it may be a matter of consequence to men who differ regarding it). We should emphasize, perhaps, that our zeal concerning a "scruple" does not make it a matter of faith. In this passage, "judging" is prohibited by men and deferred to God since we should not "set at naught thy brother" (v. 10) over matters of indifference to God. One can quickly see that there is a vast difference between a matter of "the faith" and a matter of "indifference." This is further illustrated in 1 Timothy 1:4 where Paul exhorted Timothy to avoid subjects that "minister questionings, rather than a dispensation of God which is in faith," a clear distinction between faith and opinion. The same word is used in 2 Timothy 2:23 where the same young preacher is to refuse "foolish and ignorant questions, knowing that they gender strifes." To Titus, he admonished: "shunning foolish questionings, and genealogies, and strifes, and fightings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain" (3:9).

The Problem Addressed

We have constant and recurring problems distinguishing between matters of faith and opinion. Yet, as can be readily seen, there is a vital and observable difference. Matters of faith have to do with revelation, the will of God, the expression of truth, necessary things. This truth is knowable, identifiable, and complete as a body or unified whole. It is uniform in every age (since its revelation), applicable to every society and circumstance and able to be obeyed by every accountable creature. God will hold us responsible for our treatment of it (Gal. 1:6-9; Jude 3; Eph. 5:17; 3:4; etc.). But with opinion, we enter the realm of human judgment, faulty reasoning, biased conclusions and traditions "handed down from the fathers." As the Jews came to hold their traditions on a par with God's revelation, men today are jealous of their opinions and insist on their practice as though they are matters of faith. Are we thus to be torn constantly between these poles, unable to "understand the will of the Lord"? I know that one church cannot speak for another church or for all churches. Nor may one person speak for another or for all others. But can we not agree on the fact that the difference between faith and opinion is discernible? Can we not study to learn if there are principles in the Scriptures themselves which help us identify matters of faith that affect and limit fellowship? If this is possible, and I for one believe that it is, we will not be so quick to bind matters of opinion or to loose matters of faith, confusing ourselves and those whom we would teach.

Matter of Faith --- Matter of Faith Matter of Opinion

Baptism:

Faith - Matt. 28:18-20; Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38; 1 Pet. 3:21; et al. Immersion in water for remission of sins. Violation of the faith to promise salvation on other terms.

Opinion - Use a baptistry or not; wear shower cap or not; only preacher baptize; use "baptismal formula" when baptizing.

Preaching:

Faith - Matt. 28:18-20; Rom. 1:16; Gal. 1:6-9. Violation of the faith to use anything other than the gospel to bring to Christ.

Opinion - Travel by boat, plane or ship; use TV, radio, or press; use gospel meetings, VBS, etc.

Lord's Supper:

Faith - Matt. 26:17-30; Acts 2:42; Acts 20:7 (cf. Exod. 20:8); 1 Cor. 11:23-28. On first day of week in assembly of saints with unleavened bread and fruit of vine.

Opinion - Number of containers on table; time of supper in worship; time of day.

Work of the Church:

Faith - Preaching (1 Tim. 3:15); Benevolence (1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8, 9; Acts 11:27-30); Edification (Eph. 4:11-16); etc. Violations of the faith include institutionalism, centralized control, and social gospelism.

Opinion - Amount of aid to be given to needy; give goods, service, or money; how long to continue aid; number of classes; who teaches the class; age divisions; what kind of literature.

Singing:

Faith - Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Heb. 2:12, etc. Vocal music is plainly a part of the faith but instruments are another kind.

Opinion -Whether to use a tuning fork or pitch pipe; kind of book; who is to lead; how many songs.

Conclusion

Many of the items listed above as opinions are not of the sort that have divided churches, although some of them are. These are listed as illustrative of the differences many fail to make. Many of the things currently being labeled as opinion are clear violations of the faith (cf: institutionalism). Their introduction as opinion creates a problem to those who see them as violations of the faith. And herein lies the problem. Without a doubt, determining the difference between faith and opinion will continue to be a challenging task and one that is fraught with many dangers for fellowship among disciples. But, at least, let us approach this study with an attitude that accepts the proposition that God has made a distinction between the two and that it is discernible. The alternative (that faith and opinion are essentially the same) is ludicrous and elevates the ideas of men to the level of divine wisdom. It is axiomatic that those who hold the faith in common will walk in the same direction while those who elevate opinion will splinter and divide. Let us determine to "contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered unto the saints."

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