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PROCRUSTES

In Greek mythology, Procrustes was a legendary bandit with a stronghold in the hills outside Eleusis. There he stopped those who traveled by and tied them to his iron bed. *He* fit on the bed, and believed *everyone else* should fit on it also. If the person happened to be too short, he stretched him on a rack until he attained the proper length; if he happened to be too long, his legs were cut off until he fit the bed of Procrustes. Thus everyone was forced to be the same.

Based on this myth, the term “Procrustean Bed” is used to describe any arbitrary standard to which exact conformity is forced.

As we consider doctrinal beliefs that are held by Christians, can anyone rightly claim he has everything figured out, that he is right on *everything*? Let’s face it: if we are not right on “everything,” doesn’t this imply we may be wrong on some things? And if this is the case, why insist that everyone else should fit *our* Procrustean Bed?

Occasionally—not often!—I have heard from people who say: “I believe everything just as you do!” While this is appreciated in one way, in another way it is *scary*. I certainly do not claim to have the “final” or ultimate revelation. Others may say right out they do not see everything the same way I do. But they count me a brother in Christ, appreciate many of the truths I share, and may send support from time to time—even though they do not agree on “everything.”

While the ideal—the ultimate goal—is that Christians will all “see eye to eye” and “come to the unity of the faith” (Isa. 52:8; Eph. 4:13), with the passing of many centuries this has not happened yet. So, what should our attitude be regarding the “differences” that exist within the body of Christ?

According to the New Testament, especially portions like Romans 14, the emphasis is on *accepting* one another, not *rejecting* one another. Even one who is weak in the faith should be received: “Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not for disputes over doubtful things” (Rom. 14:1 NKJV). Some may choose a certain diet, others may observe a day in a certain way (verses 2-6). “The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit . . . Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another” (verses 17, 19).

If one has a sincere, honest conviction about some point—even though it may not be widely believed—he should not be put down. We can accept and honor him, even though we may not totally agree. By the same token, he should not try to force his personal conviction off on others. It seems this is what Paul was saying: “Do you have faith [a personal conviction or belief]? *Have it to yourself before God*” (Rom. 14:22). “Let every man be fully persuaded in his *own* mind” (verse 5).

A wise pastor can stand for what he believes, without causing unnecessary division. He might say, “I believe in Bible prophecy [or some other subject] a certain way. But I also realize that some of our people believe a different way. I do not think any less of them; we are *family!* We are family because we have the same Father—not because we all see everything exactly the same. We are all learning, sorting things out. All who know Jesus as Lord are welcome in this church. We will love you and not put you down.” With this approach he may teach a lesson more important than some doctrinal viewpoint—*acceptance* of one another.

If we are right on some doctrinal point, and others are wrong, this is *all the more reason* we should not build walls or have a “know-it-all” attitude. “Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies” (1 Cor. 8:1).

We recall the time when a man was casting out demons in the name of Jesus. The disciples rejected him because, as they put it, “He follows not with *us!*” What was Jesus’ response? He said to accept the man, not reject him; that someone who was not against them was with them (Mark 9:38-40). The attitude of Jesus was inclusive, not exclusive.

When religious systems make laws requiring that everyone must fit *their* Procrustean Bed, great harm is done. This is well illustrated in the story of John Bunyan (1628-1688) who was imprisoned in Bedford for most of 12 years. What was his crime? “Preaching without a license”!

Having come from a poor background and with very little education, he followed his father in the tinker’s trade (mending kettles and pots). Then in 1655, a few years after experiencing a dynamic conversion to Christ, he began preaching with marked success.

In 1660 England reestablished a law that made it illegal to “conduct divine service except in accordance with the ritual of

the church, or for one not in Episcopal orders to address a congregation.” Since Bunyan’s ministry was not authorized by the established church, he was put in prison. While there, he wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress*, probably the best-known allegory ever written.

Finally, in 1672, Charles II issued the Declaration of Religious Indulgence and Bunyan was released from prison. In the years that followed, the nonconformist congregation he established numbered as many as four thousand Christians!

A pastor friend of mine told me how he came to Christ in a certain small denomination. There he grew in the Christian life and eventually felt the Lord was calling him to prepare for ministry. This church, his home church, offered to provide financial support to attend their Bible college. But, upon entering this college he learned he must sign an agreement that he would, upon graduation, preach the dispensational, pre-tribulation rapture of the church. In his own heart, he had come to question whether this view was truly scriptural. Being honest about this, he turned down the sponsorship of his home church and chose another Bible college.

Without going into the details of the doctrine itself—one way or the other—let me simply say this: Making belief in a dispensational, pre-tribulation rapture an entrance requirement would have kept some outstanding men out of that college: Wycliffe, Huss, Luther, Knox, Calvin, Tyndale, Newton, Wesley, Whitfield, Edwards, Finney, and Spurgeon—to mention a few!

Regardless of how people believe regarding the coming of the Lord, the greater issue—and on this I think all would agree—is that regardless of WHEN or HOW Christ comes, we should always be ready, watching, living a life that is pleasing to him (cf. Matt. 24:44; Mark 13:35).

It is sad that some tend to make non-essential teachings a test of faith or fellowship. Take the millennium, for example. I personally know great, dedicated Christian pastors and people who hold differing views on this. It is not a salvation issue. Questions arise as to which verses are intended in a literal sense or which may be intended in a figurative sense.

Consider this: 2 Peter 3:3-13 speaks of the “coming of the Lord”; that it will be “as a thief in the night”; that the very “elements shall melt”; that the “earth will be burned up” and “dissolved.” If taken in a literal sense, two viewpoints emerge—commonly referred to as Pre-millennial and Post-millennial. But each raises questions:

- (1) If the earth burns up *before* a 1000-year millennial reign of Christ on earth, how would there be any earth left upon which he would rule? How would he rebuke the nations and rule over them, if no nations were left?
- (2) On the other hand, if the earth burns up *after* a 1000-year millennial reign of Christ—making way for new heavens and a new earth—how could the Lord’s coming be “*as a thief in the night*” if the saints, by this time, had already been reigning with him for a thousand years?

A pastor we know was doing a verse-by-verse series on the writings of Peter. We happened to hear his message just before the 2 Peter 3 passage. When my path crossed his a few weeks later, I pointed out the difficulty inherent in the two

positions (as mentioned), and asked how he handled this portion of 2 Peter 3. His response: “Very quickly”!

Are some things hard to understand in scripture? Certainly. In this very same chapter, Peter wrote there are “some things hard to understand” (verse 16). It appears that all of God’s treasures are not right on the surface, so that those who are willing to *dig deeper* obtain a more complete understanding of spiritual truth (cf. Matt. 13:11, 16, 17, 36).

It is quite evident that all Christians do not understand the book of Revelation the same way. There are very different views, like: Preterist, Poetic, Futurist, Historicist, and Dispensational. But there is common ground: Regardless of some *details* or how we interpret evil forces like the “Beast,” “False Prophet,” “Harlot,” “Babylon,” etc., all of these are ultimately defeated by Christ!

Christians may differ on which political party they favor or which candidate they voted for. But, as Christians, everyone should agree on this: “*Pray* for kings and for all that are in authority...for this is *good* and acceptable in the sight of God” (1 Tim. 2:1, 2). When Paul wrote these words, a tyrant, Nero Caesar, was king! People in places of authority can make far-reaching decisions that can help or hurt many people. So of course it is “good” to pray for them.

Even with doctrinal differences involving issues like predestination or the security of the believer, both sides *agree* that, by God’s grace, we need to live a godly life, honor God, and do his will.

There are some—scattered through various denominations—who labor long with genealogies, trying to trace their fleshly lineage back through the kings of England, Tea-Tephi, and Jeremiah, supposing this can show they are descendants of Israel. But, even if this were true, what would it prove? The scriptures clearly show that salvation is not by *race*, but by *grace*. Fleshly descent does not count. As John the Baptist preached: “Do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones” (Matt. 3:9).

In somewhat the same way, there are historic churches like the Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church that can trace their history back many centuries. Does this automatically make people who belong to these groups true Christians? Obviously each individual needs a personal commitment to Christ. As Jesus said to a man who seemingly had all the credentials: “*You must be born again*” (John 3:3).

Several years ago when Billy Graham was a guest on the Larry King program, the subject of hell came up. Graham quoted scripture, and then added: “I don’t understand hell, but I know enough about it to know I don’t want to go there! And, no one has to; Christ has made a way out for us.” Details vary among Bible-believing Christians on the subject as to what extent the fire is literal, its purpose, degrees of punishment, duration, and location. But surely there should be agreement on the larger issue: We don’t want to go there—and we don’t have to—because of Jesus Christ!

There are also differences among dedicated Christians about heaven. Some believe heaven, the dwelling place of

God to which Jesus ascended, is in some remote part of the universe or beyond; there are others who believe that ultimately the earth itself will be transformed into heavenly glory. But why divide over such points? WHAT heaven is will be overwhelmingly more important than WHERE it is! There will be no sickness, no suffering, no pain, no crime, no sin, and no death! It will be great, grand, glorious!

In one church there were people who believed two different ways regarding the state of the dead. Some believed that when a Christian dies he goes immediately to be with the Lord; others believed death is a sleep until the resurrection, at which time believers will rise to meet the Lord. Each side appealed to certain scriptures. Did they throw stones at one another? No, not at all. Neither side considered it divisive because all agreed on the greater truth: Believers will spend eternity with Christ *either way*. They shared a common ground.

We are not saying it does not matter what we believe. *It does matter*. We should study things out—sincerely, honestly, and prayerfully. As we come to understand truth, we should hold to that truth, and firmly so. But, at the same time, keeping in mind that no one has everything figured out—nor do we need to—realizing it is more important *whom* we know, than *what* we know. A good rule of thumb is this:

In essentials, UNITY;

In non-essentials, LIBERTY;

In all things, CHARITY.

As Christians, belief in Jesus Christ as the son of God is an essential. We come to the Father through him. There is salvation in no other; he is the way, the truth, and the life. Certainly this is an *essential* of the faith.

People who say: “Jesus was a good man and a great teacher, but no more than this,” miss the mark. That very statement is self-contradictory. If Jesus was a good man and a great teacher, then we should accept what he taught about himself—*that he was the Son of God*. If he was not who he claimed to be, he was either a liar or a lunatic. As such, he could not have been a good man or a great teacher!

As to those things that are “non-essential,” there should be *liberty*.

Back around A.D. 387, a custom had developed among Christians at Rome: they fasted on Saturday. When Augustine arrived in Milan, he noticed that the Christians there did not fast on Saturday. He asked Ambrose about this, who gave this reply: “When I am at Rome, I fast on a Saturday; when I am at Milan, I do not. Follow the custom of the Church where you are.” Eventually the statement went through some transition and has come down to us as: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” This is not a bad statement, *if rightly understood*.

Customs develop among different churches for different reasons. Generally speaking, they are simply ways of doing things and are neither right nor wrong in themselves. It may be the timing when services are held, the order of worship, the design of buildings, location of pulpit, methods of reaching out to the community, how communion is served or offerings received—things like that.

Sometimes churches have been divided over the type of music used. Often younger people prefer a certain style; older people relate better to familiar hymns. There have been cases in which a young pastor takes a church and feels compelled to do away with all the old hymns. But when there are people in that church for whom those hymns are meaningful, this is a foolish step. Things like this cause unfruitful and unnecessary division. The solution is simple: Assuming the songs are in alignment with scripture and are God-honoring, *use some of each!* The Bible itself mentions variations: psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs (Col. 3:16).

Admittedly, not all differences—even on non-essentials—can be solved this easily. And so, the third part of the slogan comes into play: “In all things charity” (love).

Let’s suppose we are *right* on a certain doctrinal truth, and a fellow Christian is *wrong*. We will not help him by making an enemy, putting him down, or trying to *force* him to believe the way we do. We must “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15).

Some may recall the little children’s story that illustrates this principle:

The Sun and the Wind discussed which of them was the strongest. The Wind said he could prove he was the strongest by blowing the coat off a man who walked on the road below. So the Sun slipped behind a cloud and Mr. Wind started blowing until the man thought a tornado had come up! But the harder the Wind blew, the tighter the man held onto his coat. Finally the Wind saw that he could not blow the man’s coat off, so he gave up.

Then it was the Sun’s turn to try. As Mr. Sun came out from behind the clouds, he smiled kindly on the man. Presently the warm loving rays of the Sun caused the man to pull off his coat. The Sun had proved that the power of love and kindness is stronger than fury and force!



All Christian denominations hold certain basic beliefs in common. They believe in God. Man rebelled against God and sin entered in. Jesus, who was supernaturally conceived, lived a sinless life, and died for our sins. He was buried, but rose from the dead, ascended into Heaven, and sent back the Holy Spirit. Through him we can have eternal life. Differences? Certainly. But, compared to an unbelieving, secular world, all Christians share a whole realm of truth in common.

There is no need to make a “god” out of a denomination; but neither should we make a “god” out of *not* being a denomination. There is nothing wrong with a group having a distinctive history, founder, revival, or unique beginning—except when these things breed sectarianism or exclusivism. I have gleaned, directly and indirectly, from a number of different ministries, churches, and denominations over the years. I will not say, “I have no need of you!” (cf. 1 Cor. 12:21).

No one denomination or group can rightly claim to have *all* the truth. Some that are strong in one area may be weak in another. Some that are seemingly small and insignificant, may be sharing a neglected truth that others overlook or avoid.

Some that are not too deep, theologically speaking, may be good at reaching new converts with the simple gospel message. Others may be so theologically deep, they miss the flow of the Holy Spirit. The ideal is to worship God “in spirit *and* in truth, for the Father seeks such to worship him” (John 4:23).

The body of Christ is made up of individuals who may be different because of race, age, geography, travel, reading, employment, education, family, friends, heart, and mind. Yet, in diversity there can be unity—when the common focus is that of “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (Heb. 12:2).
—Ralph Woodrow

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