

“Christadelphian, and Biblically Faithful”

– a suggestion of what *The Lampstand* could usefully have said in their July-August 2009 Editorial

“Do all to the glory of God”

A distinguishing feature of the Christadelphian community has been its respect for the Word of God and its authority. From the days of our founding fathers the call has gone forth, “To the law and the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isa 8:20; cp 1 Pet 4:11). For this reason, when Christadelphians disagree among themselves it is important to be especially careful.

We can be sure that every brother or sister has a high view of Scripture, and aims to follow Scripture teaching honestly. There is no question therefore of unfaithfulness, or lack of trust in Scripture. Where disagreement occurs within the community, it is a matter of interpretation of the meaning of Scripture.

The Bible indicates the attitude we should show towards one another. A prime consideration is “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”, for, as the apostle Paul continues, “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism; One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Eph 4:3-6). The maintenance of unity amongst believers is an essential principle. Without it, our profession of faith in Jesus is seen as false – “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (John 17:21). Diversity in practice does not mean a

lack of essential unity. The fact is that unity does not necessarily mean identical roles, something that we Christadelphians well understand when we explain what Jesus meant when he said, “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30). We are one in purpose, “all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28), but “we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us” (Rom 12:4-6).

There would be no need to encourage unity if unity were automatic. Unity in diversity is necessary because there are and will always be differences of understanding and application, and differences in gifts; but more important than these differences is the preservation of our community as one united body in Christ.

In the case of how brothers and sisters can best serve God and our Lord Jesus Christ in the ecclesia, we should observe that it is *service* that is being discussed – not self-promotion, personal power, or influence over others. The apostle continues in Ephesians 4: “unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.” (Eph 4:7), and the issue is how we exercise the gifts given to us. In analysing this subject, as in all other matters of difference, the Biblical principles are “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another,

tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph 4:31-32).

In accordance with these principles, we can observe that there are many aspects to the issue. Some brothers and sisters stress the male involvement as God unfolds His purpose: male prophets, male priests, male kings, male apostles, male elders, male deacons. Others point out that there is some female involvement too: Miriam is a leader (Micah 6:1-4), Deborah is a judge (a position akin to rulership before the people requested male kings), God answered Josiah by Huldah the prophetess (2 Kings 22:12-15), Jesus involved women in an unprecedented way, and Paul recognised women as his fellow workers (Phil 4:2-3); we might think from 1 Timothy that deacons were always masculine, were it not for Paul's ready acceptance and approval of Phoebe (Romans 16:1) as a deacon. It needs to be asked whether being male is prescribed as the criterion for service, or whether it is the appropriateness of the particular individual which is the real criterion. Priests were male in the Old Testament, but Peter describes all believers (male and female) as priests: "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." (1 Pet 2:4-5). So also says John in Revelation (Rev 1:6): "Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen." There is no suggestion in these verses that only the brothers are "kings and priests".

It is recognised by all that the New Testament describes the husband as head of the wife (Eph 5:21 ff), but it can be observed that no difference *in*

ecclesial service is drawn from this. In 1 Cor 11, for example, both male and female have identical roles as far as praying and prophesying. Then again, some will stress that sisters should remain silent in the meeting, being submissive to their husbands (1 Cor 14:34-35), and should learn and not teach (1 Tim 2:11-12), while others point out that sisters do speak (1 Cor 11:4-5), that all are encouraged to do so by Paul (1 Cor 14:39), and that Priscilla along with her husband taught Apollos (Acts 1:26). Spoken activity and teaching is not contrary to submission to husbands (unless done in an arrogant manner), and submission to one another is enjoined on us all: "Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God." (Eph 5:21).

This evidence needs to be understood, alongside the apparent restrictions in 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-12, in a consistent manner. Scripture does not contradict itself, and we need to ensure that our interpretation doesn't either.

As with other doctrines, not every passage of Scripture is plain and straightforward, and when we Christadelphians differ in our understanding, it is not because we refuse to accept what the Word of God says, but because of varying analyses of its message. How wide-ranging are the two apparently restrictive passages (1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-12)? How are these to be understood in light of Scripture elsewhere? By restricting sisters from certain activities in the ecclesia, are we correctly following Scripture?

It would suit everybody if there were universal agreement on how these passages should be understood; but there is not and never has been. We need therefore to examine them with care, as we do other Scriptures. The presentations given recently should

enable brothers and sisters to understand the issues and see why there is disagreement. Advertised elsewhere in *The Lampstand* is the Seminar given in Adelaide on 9 February 2008 and available on DVD. Brothers and sisters are recommended to listen to this carefully. Likewise they should also examine the detailed response to this by the authors of *All One* where they give a counter-critique pointing to misinterpretation on the DVD. This is available on www.sistersspeak.info, as too is the presentation in Adelaide on 7 March 2009 which offers “The Other Side of the Story”. All those involved in these discussions believe that their position stands firmly on the Word of God. A constructive approach from all of us is to analyse the points, and to adjust or correct interpretations as appropriate.

There are several further considerations we should bear in mind:

(a) It is a vital part of our heritage from the pioneers that we put Scripture above tradition, not vice-versa.

(b) Traditions vary and change – and interpretations of the Bible can also be traditions, and therefore subject to revision in light of further examination of Scripture.

(c) It is an important principle of Biblical interpretation that verses must be read in context. There may still be problems in agreeing on the context, but a context is clearly there, and verses should not be extracted from their contexts and quoted as if clear in themselves. This applies to all doctrines (e.g. Luke 23:43, John 6:38), and is important when assessing 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2.

(d) It is important to avoid exaggeration or exaggerated language. Truth is not served by any misunderstanding or misrepresentation of what others say or think.

(e) We should seek to argue against

the strongest arguments that can be made for the position we oppose, not be content with criticising side issues on which the presenter of the other case may have put a point badly.

(f) We should not assume that the New Testament is a rule book from which we extract laws. We should look for the principles, and apply the principles as appropriate for our circumstances today.

(g) It is obvious that agreement will not easily be reached, but hopefully the discussion to and fro will enable a closer understanding and a more exact comprehension of Scripture.

There are two areas of ecclesial practice which should be a helpful guide to the future.

(1) Our Christadelphian practice follows the New Testament in respects of morality and upright behaviour; but it does not follow it in matters of detail in ecclesial organisation. We do not appoint bishops, elders and deacons. We apply the moral principles (such as using alcohol responsibly, being honest with money, being gentle and peace-loving) but don't necessarily apply other criteria presented in the Letters to Timothy and Titus. Do we appoint only married brothers as office bearers, or only those who are good teachers, or hospitable, or only those with children (1 Tim 3:1-4)? We should be aware that our ecclesial practices are based on moral criteria from the New Testament but not on specific organisational details.

(2) We appoint office-bearers by voting, which practice is not taught in the New Testament, but is nevertheless a sensible approach, involving both brothers and sisters in the exercise of authority in running ecclesias. Yet some of the arguments presented against sisters being involved would also logically suggest that this Christadelphian practice should be

revised, and only brothers vote. All would agree that this would be a retrograde step. So we continue with a good practice but recognise our inconsistency.

These varied applications should caution us against any attempt to enforce one unified practice. We agree on the basics in our Statement of Faith. Let us not seek to impose new criteria. Where Christadelphians seek to give glory to God, we should regard different details of application as inevitable and acceptable. Where ecclesias feel it is right to have greater involvement by sisters, because of their genuinely held understanding of the Bible that this is the will of God, it is appropriate that they be encouraged to do so, even if others do not wish to make any change. Our Christadelphian community is big enough to allow differences of practice amidst recognition that genuine difference of understanding exists.

We need to remember finally that our overriding aim should be to seek God's Kingdom and His Righteousness (Mat 6:33), and all our attitudes and behaviour need to be consistent with our commitment to this purpose. As Paul says, "do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31). Let us seek in discussion of this issue to "walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love" (Eph 4:1-2).

www.sistersspeak.info

<p>This is a suggestion of what could have usefully been published in the July-August 2009 issue of <i>The Lampstand</i>, in accordance with good Scriptural practice and Christadelphian understanding, and with a view to encouraging and upbuilding the unity of our Community.</p>
--