“The Danger of Deference”

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The same apostle who wrote, “being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3) also penned the words, “Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned” (Titus 3:10-11). Somewhat ironically, the pursuit of unity sometimes means excluding people! In other words, sometimes the only way to achieve peace is to remove the peace-breakers. Peace and unity among God’s people is a repeated theme in the New Testament, and that was partly because relationships within and among churches has always been susceptible to discord and disunity. Any time sinners, even saved ones, congregate, there will be relationship problems!

One part of the biblical answer for maintaining unity is for believers to practice deference toward other believers. Deference is “submission or courteous yielding to the opinion, wishes, or judgment of another.” Within biblically defined limits, it is the right way for believers to relate to one another, and it makes it possible for churches to work with each other toward common goals. A clear statement of this principle is found in Philippians 2:3-4, “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.” Paul’s instruction to the Romans about how to relate to believers with differing convictions also includes this valuable truth, “So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another” (Rom 14:19).

Practically speaking, the proper practice of deference is an essential ingredient in maintaining solid relationships within and among local assemblies. God expects it of us, and we ought to practice it so that we “live in peace with one another” (1 Thes 5:13). In a world full of selfishness, surrendering rights and yielding to others’ desires, while difficult, is a critical part of our testimony for Jesus Christ.

But there is a dangerous downside to deference. Without clear biblical boundaries, the desire to be courteous and to make room for divergent viewpoints can result in compromise and allow error to spread like a cancer among God’s people and churches. The biblical teaching about deference must be balanced by the truth about the importance of personal convictions, the responsibility to confront error, and the proper exercise of church discipline.

Claiming to practice deference can never be an excuse for failing to develop biblical convictions. The Apostle Paul was clear that though believers may disagree with each other on some issues, each believer’s responsibility to be “fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom 14:5) is not eliminated. Showing deference regarding the convictions of
others does not mean that you give up your own! It means that, in areas of legitimate
disagreement, you will not demand that others conform to your convictions and that you
will not pass judgment on those who don’t conform. It means also that you don’t
deliberately do things that you know will cause a problem in the area of disagreement.

The claim of deference also cannot be used to ignore clear biblical teachings about
confronting clear error. Deference is only legitimate within a very narrow field of
doctrine and practice—it never applies to the clear violation of biblical truth. Rather than
deer to the opinions, wishes, and judgments of those who teach false doctrine, the Bible
calls on us to expose, refute, and reprove it (Titus 1:9-13). We have a higher obligation to
the Lord and His Word than we do to those who are distorting it. In matters of doctrinal
and practical error, we must defer to the Lord, not those who perpetuate false doctrine.

Deference also cannot be used to avoid the proper exercise of church discipline within the
congregation and between congregations. Persistent continuation in clear disobedience
must lead to removal from the congregation (1 Cor 5:12-13). Those who continue on in
false teaching after being properly warned should be rejected (Titus 3:10-11). These
truths extend by implication to the relationship between assemblies. Faithful churches
should not defer to churches which have turned from the truth in doctrine and practice.

What is the relevance of this to contemporary church life? It seems that we need to re-
evaluate the issue of deference, particularly as it relates to those who are advancing
doctrines and practices that are contrary to the Scriptures. The concept of “contrary to the
Scriptures” is very important—I am not suggesting that we impose our opinions, wishes,
and judgments on other people; the clear teaching of the Bible must be the authority at all
times. There are a lot of things about which believers and churches will disagree with one
another, and as long as no clear doctrine of the Scripture is discarded or denied, then
deerence is right and necessary. But where matters of biblical doctrine are at stake,
deerence is not the right choice.

For Fundamentalists, this means that we must be careful about misguided deference
toward Evangelicals, on one hand, and certain errant segments of Fundamentalism, on the
other. Deference to “conservative” Evangelicals cannot be used as a cloak to get soft on
ecclesiastical compromise. There is no basis for claiming deference as the basis for
ignoring denial of the faith or compromise with those who deny it.

There is also no room for deference to professing Fundamentalists who have embraced
defective views of essential biblical doctrines like inspiration, the person and work of
Jesus Christ, or the meaning and necessity of repentance. Frankly, genuine, historic
Fundamentalism may face more danger because of this mistaken deference toward these
new, doctrinally deviant “Fundamentalists.” Local churches, associations, camps, mission
boards, and educational institutions are under constant attack from people who have
departed from historic fundamentalist belief.

The sad part is that these folks have been accorded respectful deference only to return the
favor with attacks that have caused rancorous division within local churches, on mission
fields, and around educational institutions. In this case, deference at points where confrontation was needed has allowed these cancerous false doctrines to spread unchecked within Fundamentalism, perhaps even to the point where the idea of a single, clearly defined concept of Fundamentalism has virtually been lost.

Biblical Fundamentalism must stand unflinchingly for the truth of God’s Word against false doctrine and practice no matter what its origin and who practices it. Within the circle of sound doctrine, there is room and need for proper deference toward one another. Outside of that circle, deference is really unfaithfulness to God and His Word. Any unity obtained that survives only because we are unwilling to confront error will be short-lived and ultimately destructive. The Apostle Paul knew that factious people who refuse to be corrected must be rejected for the sake of obeying God and protecting His people. It seems like we would do well to remember this important truth.