

# Contending For Truth In Love

by

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One of the most poignant scenes of the Protestant Reformation comes from the Marburg Colloquy in 1529. The conference was convened in hopes that it might unite what was becoming an increasingly fragmented Protestant movement. In Zurich, the Swiss Brethren (later to be known as Anabaptists) had become convinced of believers' baptism and fully separated from the Protestant movement led by Zwingli. In Switzerland and beyond Protestants began to further divide along what came to be called "Lutheran" and "Reformed" lines.

One of the key issues of contention was the nature of the Lord's supper, specifically, the nature of Christ's presence in the supper. All of the reformers were united in the rejection of the Roman Catholic view of transubstantiation. Decreed at the Council of Trent and based on Aristotelian metaphysics, Roman Catholic doctrine asserts that when the priest consecrates the elements the substance of the bread and wine is changed into Christ's flesh and blood, respectively. These elements, which do not change their "accidents" (ie. their form, shape, texture or taste) are then offered as a repetitive bloodless sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ.

The reformers rejected this notion and argued that the supper was not an offering of Christ's body and blood but a feasting on that which has been once and for all time offered on the cross. The reformers further agreed that Christ is present in the supper. Precisely how He is present was and remains a subject of debate and in the sixteenth century became the basis of division.

Luther argued for the real presence of Christ in the supper. While the elements are not changed into different substances, the body and blood of Jesus are present "in, with and under" the bread and wine. "This is My body" can only be taken literally, according to Luther. Zwingli, on the other hand, argued that Christ's words at this point must be taken figuratively and that His presence in the supper is symbolic and spiritual.

A literary debate on the subject reached its height in 1527 and 1528 with charges and counter-charges being made in the strongest of language. Luther accused Zwingli of teaching heresy and the devil's doctrine. The Zwinglian

camp responded with accusations that the Lutherans were flesh-eaters, blood-drinkers whose communion bread was a "baked God."

The religious divisions made it difficult to maintain political and military alliances among the Protestant regions of Europe. In hopes that the political coalitions might be restored Philip of Hesse exerted his influence to convene a meeting of Protestant leaders for the purpose of discussing points of theological difference and coming to points of theological agreement.

Zwingli readily accepted the invitation to meet at Marburg. Luther reluctantly agreed to participate after being pressured by the Elector of Saxony. Together with delegates from Basel, Strassburg, Nürnberg, Augsburg and Swabia, the reformers met at Philip's castle during the first three days of October 1529.

The debate, though more civil and gentlemanly than the previous literary one, rehashed well-known positions. It was obvious that the disagreement over the presence of Christ in the supper constituted, at least in the minds of Luther and his cohorts, an insurmountable barrier to fellowship.

At Philip's insistence Luther drew up a confession consisting of fifteen articles, including statements on the Trinity, Christ's person and work, sin, justification by faith and the Holy Spirit. On all these points there was perfect agreement among the participants.

The fifteenth article deals with the Lord's Supper. On the main points even of this article, both the Reformed and Lutheran parties were agreed. At the prompting of Philip, a final paragraph was added which states,

And although at present we are not agreed on the question whether the real body and blood of Christ are coporally present in the bread and wine, yet both parties shall cherish Christian charity for one another, so far as the conscience of each will permit; and both parties will earnestly implore Almighty God to strengthen us by His Spirit in the true understanding. Amen.

All the participants signed the confession — including Luther and Zwingli.

On Monday morning, after the conference ended, the two reformers met together for one final time. It would be their last meeting on earth. With tears in his eyes, Zwingli held out his hand toward Luther as an expression of brotherly fellowship. But Luther refused to grasp it and instead said, "Yours is a different spirit from ours."

I disagree with what Luther did. But I deeply cherish the reason he did it. Truth matters. It is more important than political alliances. If we love God then we must be committed to the affirmation and defense of His revealed truth. But, if we love God, we must also love people — especially "the brethren."

Devotion to truth, a necessary, noble Christian characteristic, is what motivated Luther to leave Zwingli's hand awkwardly extended in front of him. He had purchased the truth too dearly to sell it cheaply. And in Luther's mind, to have embraced Zwingli's hand would have signaled a compromise on the Word of God.

In our day and age of "can't we all just get along" spirituality Luther's action appears repugnant and utterly indefensible. Strong currents within western Christianity encourage us simply to forget about the issues which we see differently from others who name the name of Christ and pretend that differences do not exist, or if they do exist that they do not really matter. Politeness trumps conviction.

This is the spirit of that slobbery ecumenism to which more and more warm-hearted but wrong-headed evangelicals are being attracted. Truth is sacrificed on the altar of what is mistakenly believed to be unity (but which could more accurately be described as conspiracy). Where such a spirit obtains, no serious consideration of biblical teachings can be proposed because "it will only cause division." To those who are caught up in this spirit, Luther at Marburg looks only like a prideful ogre. But that is not an accurate portrait of the reformer. He did what he did because he was convinced that God's truth was at stake.

Nevertheless, even though it was a commendable love of God and truth which motivated his actions, Luther cannot be completely exonerated. His refusal to allow room for disagreement on the sacrament caused him to write Zwingli off as an unbeliever. On the final day of the Colloquy he professed astonishment that the Swiss contingency considered him to be a brother. He turned to them and said, "You do not belong to the communion of the Christian Church. We cannot acknowledge you as brethren."

At this point Luther illustrates the following maxim: The greatest strength of Christians who take doctrine seriously can easily become their greatest weakness. Devotion to truth and a passion to have an accurate understanding

of it can lead a believer to dismiss all those who do not agree with him at every point. Love for truth, however, is never an excuse for not loving people. And genuine love for people, especially for brothers and sisters in the faith, necessarily requires a willingness to forebear with weaknesses, including weaknesses in understanding.

The theological pugilism which sometimes accompanies doctrinal Christianity is contrary to the very content and spirit of the gospel. Is not the heart of our message that God loves His enemies and Jesus Christ has humbled Himself to the point of death in behalf of people who deserve divine wrath? The obligations of humility, deference — extended even toward weaker brothers — and genuine love even for enemies stem from biblical teachings which cannot be set aside in the pursuit to affirm and defend other doctrines of the Bible.

At this point I think Luther failed at Marburg. He could not conceive that he himself might not understand the Lord's Supper perfectly. Neither could he allow for the possibility that Zwingli could be orthodox in his Christology and yet mistaken in his understanding of the sacrament. So Luther refused to extend his hand in Christian fellowship.

Better by far to recognize the difference between doctrinal essentials and doctrinal distinctives without giving up either. What is necessary to be a Christian? Repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ? Yes. Submission to Christ as Lord and Savior? Yes. Regeneration by the Holy Spirit? Yes. All true Christians everywhere would agree.

But what about baptism by immersion as a believer? Is this necessary to be a Christian? No. What about commitment to a free church in a free state? No. Local church autonomy? No. But Baptists historically have argued that all of these are distinctive ingredients which help define their faith.

Obviously, Presbyterians, Reformed churches and Methodists would disagree with these distinctives. Do our differences in these areas mean that Baptists should renounce all paedobaptists as unbelievers and have no fellowship with them on that basis? No! But neither should we pretend that we do not disagree, or that our disagreements are not worth mentioning.

A better course is to recognize that all those who hold to the essentials of the faith are to be received as brothers and sisters in Christ, even if they hold to distinctive ideas with which we disagree. Furthermore, while we unashamed-

ly affirm our own distinctive beliefs which we find in the Bible, we should afford that same privilege to other believers, admitting that none of us has yet perfectly understood all that we ought about everything that God has revealed. Sin has affected not only our affections and wills, but also our minds. Therefore we are liable to make mistakes in our understanding and are in constant need of having our thinking reformed by the Word of God.

For this very reason Christians who disagree on certain distinctives ought to argue their points of contention with a desire not only to be understood but to understand those with whom we disagree. It is possible to be both rigorous and humble. All who love Christ and His Word should welcome the efforts of those who strive to clarify revealed truth at any point.

From its inception the *Founders Journal* has been committed to Baptist distinctives. We have never been ashamed to align ourselves in that historic stream of evangelical Christianity known as Baptist. We do so knowing that the river of orthodox Protestant Christianity is much broader than our Baptist stream, and we have openly acknowledged our agreement with Presbyterian and Reformed brethren on the nature of salvation and the doctrines of the gospel.

We see ourselves as a part of that greater work which God is doing in recovering the gospel of God's grace to a generation of evangelicals who seem to have doctrinal amnesia. And we applaud and try to encourage all who are working for reformation and renewal — regardless of whether or not they agree with us on baptism. The essentials are more important than the distinctives.

But we are Baptist by conviction. And our convictions are informed by the Word of God. For that reason we have taken up the theme of baptism in this issue of the *Founders Journal*. The foundations of our faith, including the distinctive elements of that faith, are always worth examining and clarifying. Our paedobaptist brothers and sisters with whom we disagree need to know why we believe what we do. And those who disagree with us need to be challenged to reexamine the Word of God to see if their beliefs are properly grounded. Obviously, we cannot both be right.

Truth is worth disagreeing over. It is worth maintaining ecclesiastical separation. On that, both Baptists and paedobaptists agree. It is to be hoped that we can also agree, in our pursuit of the truth, with Zwingli's prayer

which he prayed upon entering the conference at Marburg:

Fill us, O Lord and Father of us all, we beseech Thee, with thy gentle Spirit, and dispel on both sides all the clouds of misunderstanding and passion. Make an end to the strife of blind fury. Arise, O Christ, Thou Sun of righteousness, and shine upon us. Alas! while we contend, we only too often forget to strive after holiness which Thou requirest from us all. Guard us against abusing our powers, and enable us to employ them with all earnest for the promotion of holiness.