

Standing On The Issues

We all have heard of the candidate for political office who was asked where he stood on a certain controversial issue. In essence, his reply was, "I have friends and supporters who stand on each side of this issue. I am always going to stand with my friends!" Of course, no politician could say anything that concisely!

"He stands for nothing" is a prejudicial slur sometimes cast against one who is lenient on the critic's pet party issues. When dividing issues are created between two sides, partisans sometimes want to know where others stand on the issues. The person who speaks out boldly and dogmatically supporting current controversies appears to those of like mind as a stalwart defender of the faith.

In my upbringing, I was schooled in the issues of the day that we had created and over which we divided. Through much of my career as a preacher, I took my stand and reinforced those positions I espoused. It was a slow and painful process that led me to conclude that most of those ardently debated things were more contentions than convictions. So I quit standing on the issues and started walking through and over them. I haven't stopped yet, and I am excited by the growing number of disciples who have outgrown those party-making contentions.

So much time and attention has been given to irrelevant, extraneous matters that we have often lost sight of the important things. A person's salvation does not depend upon his ability to make hair-splitting definitions.

As ridiculous as the politician's statement may seem at first, his answer has much merit. On certain points of debate, I may say, "I have good fellow-believers in Christ on both sides of this contention. I am going to stand with the believers!" Believers are more important than most of the things that we have made into criteria for measuring those with whom we may associate. When we make conformity to our own convictions more important than the fellowship of those disciples who fail to value them as we do, we have lost our sense of values.

Isn't this what we should have learned from the Jerusalem conference detailed in Acts 15? The Judean disciples were contending that circumcision was necessary for salvation. This was not just an opinion, but a life-or-death conviction. After discussing the matter, the assembly of apostles, elders, and the church agreed that the Jews could circumcise but no Gentile was compelled to do so. In Jesus, "Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (Gal.6:15). So why make a dividing barrier out of it or other such convictions?

In similar manner, Paul dealt with the scruples about eating foods that had been offered to idols. He declared, "Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do" (1 Cor. 8:8). There were disciples standing on each side of the *meats and days* controversy. Paul stood with the believers on both sides of it (Romans 14), defending their freedom and offering us no acceptable alternative. People are more important than issues! Let them have their own scruples and convictions, but accept the persons.

Does that mean that persons can believe nothing or just anything and be saved? No, but issues have no saving power--only Jesus has! We must believe that Jesus was the Son of God, that he died for our sins, was raised, ascended, and will receive the faithful.

Anyone who “does not abide in the doctrine of Christ (concerning Christ-ch), does not have God” (2 John 9). But disciples may have different convictions about such things as keeping days and eating food while cherishing their fellowship in Christ. The debates of the early disciples were about circumcision, food, and days. We have chosen other things to try to require in our time. The early disciples were not allowed to reject those who disagreed on them. Neither are we.

I have convictions that will not allow me to accept all the teachings and practices or the forms and functions of many other persons like the Baptists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans. But they are sincerely serving God according to their own consciences. I accept them as fellow disciples without endorsing all they believe and practice. I can say the same thing about persons in the Church of Christ! I stand with them as believers with their varying convictions, foibles, and misdirections. We are on the same team.

Why can we not stand with all who seek to honor God and combat sin, at least in activities that do not relate to doctrines or practices? A few years ago a city-wide, downtown *March for Jesus* as a testimonial of faith and solidarity was promoted in New Braunfels, Texas where I lived. It was not even mentioned in our congregation. I marched with hundreds of other cheerful believers, but I saw no other person from our congregations. No, there is no “thou shalt” for such activity, but it was an opportunity. Some of our people decry those who take part in *Promise Keepers* simply because it is a participation with believers from other churches. Many years ago I joined the ministerial alliance in New Iberia, Louisiana in order to get allotted radio time free. I found that all those ministers were just as sincere as I was; each had his own convictions as I did; they accepted each other personally as disciples; and all were cautious not to offend one another. But there were so many objections by brethren that I had to withdraw. Such has been our sad story but, thank the Lord, it is changing! Let us hasten the change.

God has not died and left me on his throne to judge those who call upon him. I want to stand with Him and the multitude of his people -- always ready to defend the freedom he gave each of them. If we cannot stand together accepting each other in love, agreement on all the issues is of little profit. [ch]