DISPUTABLE MATTERS

A Whitepaper on Biblical Peacemaking Principles from Alliance Peacemaking

By Gary D. Friesen
Do you grow weary of the endless disputes and debates in your church? Sincere followers of Christ desire to be obedient to Him and live consistent with their faith, but the way they live out their walk of faith can involve points of heated contention. These disputes are seldom issues essential to the faith, but rather issues that people treat as if they are essential. How do you guide your church through these never-ending controversies?

First some perspective. A.W. Tozer once said that disagreements are the price of church progress and growth. "That a live and expanding church will have a certain quota of difficulties [is] a result of its life and activity. A Spirit-filled church will invite the anger of the enemy."¹

The everyday conflicts over disputable matters will always be with us. The fact that they are frequent and common makes it clear that the church needs a biblical remedy. This paper is designed to give you clear guidance for handling these controversies.

What is a disputable matter?

In Romans 14 and 15, the Apostle Paul describes disputable matters—what the English Standard Version refers to as "quarrels of opinion"—as those disagreements in which it’s permissible for Christians to act in different ways. These choices are also referred to as matters of Christian liberty. Examples include:

* What curriculum would best serve our youth?
* What worship fits our congregation?
* Does God permit us to tattoo our bodies?
* What type of schooling is right for our children?
* May Christians drink alcohol?
* May a Christian support any political party?
* May Christians play violent video games?
* and so on...

What do I need to understand about disputable matters?

Disputable matters are in contrast to indisputable matters. Indisputable matters are those truths that are essential to the Christian faith. They are defined by our doctrinal statements and include core beliefs such as the triune nature of God, Jesus being fully God and fully man, His atoning death on the cross, and the hope of glory for those in Christ. These are the basis for Christian fellowship; they are essentials that we would die for.

In contrast, disputable matters are issues we should not die for and which do not serve as conditions for Christian fellowship. Are these matters worth discussing? Yes, they often are, but they certainly aren’t a test of a person’s saving faith. A wise leader knows how to distinguish between disputable and indisputable matters.

¹ Tozer on Christian Leadership by A.W. Tozer, copyright © 2001 by Zur Ltd.
Disputable matters are not about sin. People are not in sin when they choose differently than you do on a disputable matter. However, the way a Christian responds to these disagreements can be sinful.

How do I respond?

Peacemaker Ministries offers excellent guidance through the “4 G’s of Peacemaking”:

**Glorify God:** Are my action and words pointing to God or to someone or something else? At the very least, God calls us to be governed by love in the midst of disputable matters (1 Tim. 1:5), and to “accept one another ... just as Christ accepted you” (Rom. 15:7, NIV). Christ accepts us with all our sins and flaws. Have we continued to accept one another, even in our flawed condition? (See also Romans 14:1.)

**Get the log out of your eye:** Have I reacted sinfully against someone who disagrees with me, instead of listening and seeking to understand her point of view? Our greatest obstacle may be our own sinful attitudes, words, or actions. For example, in Romans 14:2-13, Paul warns against passing judgment or condemning those with whom we disagree. Have you in any way passed judgment on someone with whom you disagree? If so, obey Christ’s direction to confess your sin, so that your relationship can be restored. Then you will be ready to have a fruitful discussion.

Distrust both your “dislikes” and your “favorites.” Sometimes small pet peeves become so important that they displace and obscure the issues that matter most. On the other hand, the good things we love can also get in the way of what matters most. That favorite might be a particular author, worship style, or teaching method. We need to be aware of our dislikes and favorites and not let any of them be a barrier to our relationships with other believers.

**Gently Restore:** Disputable matters can be significant and worth discussing. The way we talk to one another about these topics is important. Healthy dialogue helps us lead our church through difficult discussions, such as the way we worship, how we educate our children, and what sort of movies we choose to watch. A helpful guide for this kind of discussion is Peacemaker Ministries’ PAUSE Principle:

- **P** repare (pray, listen, learn)
- **A**ffirm relationships (Remember to accept one another as Christ accepts us.)
- **U**nderstand interests (Care about and learn what is important to people on all sides.)
- **S**earch for creative solutions (Work together to explore solutions that meet all interests.)
- **E**valuate options objectively and reasonably

As we work through disputable matters, Paul warns against coercing someone else to violate his own conscience (Rom. 14:13-23). We are called to respect and love those who have different views on these issues.

---

2 The Four G’s of Peacemaking are quoted with permission. Visit [www.Peacemaker.net](http://www.Peacemaker.net) for additional information on biblical peacemaking.

3 The PAUSE Principle is quoted with permission.
For example, when I first came to Christ, God made it clear to me that I was to stop listening to secular music. I was convicted that this music had become an idol in my life. It would have been wrong for a more mature believer to try to persuade me otherwise, just as it would have been wrong for me to pass judgment on another believer who had no such restrictions. And after some time passed, I knew that I could again enjoy the music that once had an idolatrous hold on my life.

Go and be reconciled: When dealing with disputable matters, we are called to extend to each other the forgiveness that God has already extended to us (Matt. 6:12; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). And in Romans 15 Paul urges us to exercise this forgiving spirit by seeking to please our neighbor for his good, to build him up. "For even Christ did not please himself..."

Paul then points to the indisputable truth of our unity in Christ, as he ends his instruction on responding to disputable matters:

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God (Rom. 15:5-7).

Imagine a church in which everyone understands how to handle disputable matters. God would be glorified as people engage in healthy discussion; relationships would be strengthened and conflicts rare. Such a church would be a demonstration of St. Augustine’s words:

In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things love.

Alliance Peacemaking is always available to provide experienced biblical counsel as you seek to respond with godly wisdom to the conflicts that arise in disputable matters. We can work with your leaders and your District Superintendent to provide a redemptive path forward.

Alliance Peacemaking
719-265-2018
alliancepeacemaking@cmalliance.org