

Disputable Matters

A Policy Statement for Williamsburg Community Chapel Elders

Guiding scripture: Do Not Cause Another to Stumble

Romans 14:13-23

¹³ Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. ¹⁴ I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵ For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

²⁰ Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. ²² The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Stumbling:

- Loss of confidence
- Loss of respect
- Loss of faith in Jesus Christ
- Offends or weakens brother/sister's faith
- Distractions in ministry/leadership

It seems that Paul is giving us some priorities for behavior here. When there is a difference between parties about the “rightness” or “wrongness” of some behavior or some matter the most important thing is to put your brother first. You might say that this is an early discussion of “substance abuse” but the abuse is really “spiritual abuse”. It may be that Paul is focusing here on issues like food and drink that can impact whether one comes to faith or not (see verse 15 and 1 Cor. 8:1-13), but the larger principle seems to be captured by verse 17 which clearly reminds us that the kingdom of God is spiritual, with a goal of righteousness, peace and joy from the Holy Spirit.

But something that is implied is that what appears acceptable to one may be seen as unacceptable to another. There may be room for disagreement. Therefore there is a vital need for brothers in close fellowship, and leadership, to communicate sensitive areas before they become stumbling blocks, if at all possible. It would seem that the ultimate goal should be the advancement of the Kingdom of God by submitting to one another.

And if one holds a more liberal view of a behavior it might be well to sacrifice acting on that view when it would cause a brother holding a more conservative view to stumble.

As Elders we are called to leadership that supports our pastoral staff, especially our Lead Pastor. He is on the front line of ministry leadership and staff administration. There may be times when totally acceptable behavior by Elders may be unintentionally disruptive or distracting to our pastors from the standpoint of maintaining staff unity and advancing the Kingdom of God. Surely the enemy must delight in finding cracks and crevices to cause larger wedges among us. We must not allow our unity in the most important purposes we have to be diluted or distracted by lesser matters that can pit us against each other and throw our main purposes off track. Of course, there may be behaviors by pastors that cause Elders to stumble as well.

Here are some other guidelines or thoughts:

- Let us seek to be non-legalistic, balanced, and rational, with a biblical backing and openness to other points of view (and a willingness to submit to another for the greater good of the Kingdom).
- There are times we must limit our liberty to permit a greater freedom to become possible.
- We must keep in mind the high standards of being overseers and take heed that we not unduly or improperly influence others.
- Where there are areas of behavior and belief that reasonably allow for “agreements to disagree” let us seek to preserve unity and focus on the “agree” aspect more than the “disagree”.
- Public and official or formal associations with sensitive activities should be handled with care. Informal relationships based on friendship, fellowship and discipleship may be preferable to more formal ones.
- When an Elder or Pastor has a concern about Elders involved in “disputable matters” he should bring it to the attention of the Governance Committee (if no Governance Elders are directly involved in the matter) or the Executive Committee otherwise.
- We must build and maintain relationships of trust and transparency between Elders and Pastoral Staff. Ministry, Executive, Administrative and Governance Committees provide opportunities to discuss concerns before they escalate.
- The final decision to take action or modify behavior on disputable matters are the responsibility of the full Elder Board.

Let us remember that the enemy seeks to use issues to fragment and disrupt unity to block the advancement of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let us resolve that he would not succeed by pitting us against each other in any way. We must preserve unity if we are to lead effectively.

When Brothers Dwell in Unity

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

Psalm 133

Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity!

² It is like the precious oil on the head,

running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!
³ It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the LORD has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore.

Approved by the Elders

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