

# Principles for Elders to Disagree Agreeably<sup>1</sup> and Maintain Unity

10/16/95

## Doctrinal Conviction of Pastor-Teacher Paul B. Phair and Elder Team Policy

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### 1. Accept that disagreements among godly elders are inevitable

Paul & Barnabas, Acts 15:36

#### Dedicated men

Two more dedicated men could not be found in the first century. Both were effective; both spiritually minded. Both were predominately selfless and mature in character. But what an argument these two men had!

Headlines: Religious Co-workers Clash Head On

#### Reason for disagreement

John Mark, Barnabas' cousin was helper on first trip.<sup>2</sup> But when the going got really rough -- John up and quit and Paul and Barnabas were left to slug it out on their own. This was the trip in which Paul was later stoned and left to die, and where was Mark? -- gone back in the comforts of home.

#### The Split

v. 39 started out reasonably at first and then became a sharp disagreement; it was a clash of wills. Strong words must have been spoken and the rift could not be mended and they split. As far as we know these two men never ministered together again. They traveled in opposite directions.

### Application

Don't be shocked when disagreements and even conflicts occur between elders. Most of the time we will experience complete harmony and decisions will be made unanimously. But good, godly elders will occasionally have differing points of view, they may even have strong emotional feelings concerning them.

The fact that conflict occurs does not mean that the elders need to feel that disunity must be the end result. The maturity of the elders will be revealed by the manner with which they resolve issues and reconcile potentially strained relationships.

### 2. Realize that elder disagreements usually will come in one of four areas:

#### 1. Methodology

In the conflict between Paul and Barnabas, who was right concerning their plans for John Mark? We don't know. Undoubtedly they both had valid reasons for their plan. God gave no revelation to them as to how they were to decide this issue. What they argued over was how to best fulfill God's missionary task and how to disciple God's

servants and deal graciously with them.

Like Paul and Barnabas, Oakwood elders are most likely to differ over methodology; not issues of right and wrong, sin or righteousness.

Example: Should we be prudent and cut back the budget for the upcoming year? Which areas should we cut, which areas keep? Or should we exercise faith and increase it? If so, what areas do we keep the same and which do we increase? What's the best strategic move?

## 2. Preferences

We have differing tastes: That's why there are Fords & Chevys, Chryslers, Hondas, and Toyotas in our church parking lot on Sunday.

We also have varying preferences in areas such as styles of worship or facility design.

## 3. Convictions

There are two categories of convictions over which there is a potential for conflict.

1. Moral issues that are clearly spelled out in the Bible.
2. Issues that are often referred to as "gray issues". These primarily involve lifestyle choices that the Bible does not clearly address. Believers are expected by God to develop their own convictions based upon Scriptural principles. Such issues include: moderate drinking of alcohol, acceptable forms of

entertainment, observance of certain holidays, apparel, etc.

## 4. Theology

This involves the interpretation of doctrines taught in Scripture.

## 3. In issues of methodology & preferences appreciate the validity of the other view

### Perspective

So often we get angry when we view it with the attitude of: "I am right you are wrong." Instead of "I see it from this perspective and you see it from this perspective."

### Paul & Barnabas<sup>34</sup>

#### Barnabas

Point of view of the overall good of John Mark. It was an opportunity to restore him. Barnabas was moved by his heart. And John Mark did eventually prove even to Paul that he was a faithful servant of Christ.

#### Paul

Paul had his point of view too. Paul's point of view was from the overall good of the ministry. Paul was led by his head. Perhaps the principle of Proverbs 25:19 was in Paul's mind: "Like a bad tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in times of trouble." Have you ever loaned your money to someone who never paid you back? Would you quickly be desirous of loaning to that person again? Probably not.<sup>5</sup>

#### Better outcome

They would have done better if they had appreciated each other's viewpoint. They may still have ended up disagreeing. They may

still have concluded that they needed to go separately. But they could have done so without an emotional blow up and harsh words. They could have disagreed agreeably and prayed that God would bless the other.

#### Better of good choices

Many decisions the elders must reach is not a choice between wrong or right. While not having to agree with the other's conclusion, it is important that the elders appreciate and verbally affirm the valid points of each other's perspective. Often what we must discover is not which is the right or wrong choice, but which of the several valid options is possibly the best.

#### **4. In issues of conviction & theology differentiate between primary & secondary issues**

##### ● Convictions

##### **Primary**

As the elders remain committed to the authority of God's Word, they will not have differing viewpoints concerning the moral issues on which the Bible clearly teaches.

##### **Secondary**

The elders will likely have differences in this area. In these situations the elders must carefully adhere to the five principles outlined by the apostle Paul in Romans 14.<sup>6</sup>

- Accept others and let God direct them; vv. 1-4. In this gray issue, Paul was not primarily concerned about which view was right, the problem was not meat, the

problem was love and acceptance. Paul was not asking for conformity, he was asking for loving tolerance. Paul said, "Let's allow each other the freedom to hold convictions in areas such as these that are unlike our own and accept them in spite of that difference." The one with liberty should not look down with disgust at the one who is more conservative, and the one who is more conservative should not judge and criticize the more liberal one. When we truly accept another person, we remember that the Lord is perfectly capable of directing his or her life. That relieves us from having to be his or her conscience. *It's our job to accept others; it's God's job to direct them.*

- Refuse to dictate to others; vv. 5-8. Elders need to encourage our people to develop their own convictions. While we may inform them of our perspectives and reasons, we are to challenge them to develop their own. We want people to follow Jesus, not to live in conformity to our standards on secondary issues. We should never control or manipulate in order to get compliance.
- Don't assume a position you're not qualified to fill; vv. 9-12. We are not qualified to judge. We lack full knowledge. We must avoid jumping to the wrong

conclusions and making judgmental statements. We will all be much happier if we accept the fact that others won't always fall in line with our convictions in gray matters. Especially in these situations, God alone is to be our judge and jury.

- Express your liberties wisely; vv. 13-18. Our goal is not to please ourselves, or others, it is to please our Lord Jesus. We are not to adapt life choices according to others' standards, we are only to adapt when necessary on the basis of loving care for others. In areas where we have liberties that others don't, rather than flaunting them, we should exercise them quietly. This is for two reasons. One is so that we don't unnecessarily provoke others. The second is so that we will not become a stumbling block to less mature believers. A stumbling block is exercising freedom in front of a believer who follows that conduct in violation of their conviction. However, we elders are not responsible to please everyone else's legalistic standards who are not likely to follow our liberty. It is appropriate to help weaker Christians to be better instructed concerning the scriptural principles for liberty so that they too might be "liberated" or so that they might maturely accept our liberty without passing

judgment or following our practice.

- Pursue actions that promote peace; v. 19. We do need to ask, will my actions and attitudes unnecessarily bring division or will I cause someone else to stumble? If so, then in love I will limit what I do. Great wisdom and maturity needs to be exercised in these situations not to fall into legalism. As an example, for the sake of peace (among other considerations) the elders might set a policy which prohibits the use of alcohol at church functions, or in their own personal lives. This seems to have been a principle that the early Jerusalem church employed when they sent a letter to the Gentile churches asking them among other things, to abstain from eating the meat of strangled animals (Acts 15 -- the Jerusalem council).

## ● Theology

### Primary

There are doctrines which we must regard as primary, doctrines for which we will earnestly contend. Elders are required to refute those who contradict primary truths (Acts 20:29-32; Titus 1:9). While Paul taught about tolerance in Romans 14, he strongly asserted that those who perverted gospel truth should be marked as those who are condemned to hell (Gal 1:6-10). Those are fighting words! Jesus did

say that sometimes the gospel will not bring peace but a sword that divides. Generally speaking, Oakwood has determined the doctrines that it regards as primary as those of the Evangelical Free Church of America statement of faith.

There are two qualifications to the above assertion that the EFCA statement of faith is classified as a primary doctrine. We do not require all members to fully agree to the principles of congregationalism nor to the doctrine of the premillennial return of Christ. These are the only positions that we allow to be taught, and we expect that all members will be respectful of that, but these are not regarded by the elders as being primary doctrines that we will use as a test for membership.

### **Secondary**

Most issues that are potentially divisive in evangelical churches are in secondary issues. While they may be important, secondary issues are those which do not have a bearing upon a person's Christian orthodoxy; they are doctrines which vary in interpretation among evangelicals but need not be tests of fellowship. The elders at Oakwood must exercise great care in determining how to deal with these secondary doctrines. In order to preserve unity it is wise for the elders to determine and inform the constituency what Oakwood's stance is with regard to these issues. Most secondary, evangelically based issues are open. This is one of the hallmarks of the Evangelical Free Church of America. We seek to

major on the majors and minor on the minors.

**Completely open:** The elders have determined that most secondary doctrines are completely open for each member to determine for himself or herself. Such items include: the timing of the rapture, the nature of election, "lordship salvation," and eternal security.

**Moderately restricted:** There are some doctrines the elders have placed moderate restrictions upon; that is, not every member is expected to agree but there is only one view that is approved to be taught and practiced. Such items include: water baptism, tongues, and baptism of the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

### **5. Express your disagreement with tact and kindness**

The elders encourage open discussion of varying viewpoints so that we might profit from the counsel of one another. We never want a minority opinion among the elders to be declined an opportunity for expression within the elder board. We must respectfully listen and consider each other's views.

Ephesians 4:29-31 gives excellent exhortations that we should all heed: "Don't say anything that would (maliciously) hurt another person. Instead, speak only what is good so that you can give help wherever it is needed. That way, what you say will help those who hear you. Don't give God's Holy Spirit any reason to be upset with you. He has put his seal on you for the day you will be set

free from the world of sin. Get rid of all bitterness, hot tempers, anger, loud quarreling, cursing, and hatred.”

We need to be careful that emotions don't distort our perspective or the manner with which we express our differences. With the Spirit's control we can state our difference of opinion with graciousness and avoid being accusatory, sarcastic, scornful, or rudeness” (God's Word)..

### **6. When elders disagreeably disagree, forgive and move on**

Eph 4:31 “Get rid of all bitterness”. This means we are not to hold grudges. We need to

Sometimes the elders will disagreeably disagree. When this happens rather than rehearsing and nursing our hurt, we are to release it by means of forgiveness and moving on. Co. 3:13 LB “Be gentle and ready to forgive; never hold grudges. Remember, the Lord forgave us, so you must forgive others.” Furthermore, when the elders do fail to deal graciously with each other we must each take the initiative to ask for forgiveness or grant forgiveness; the Lord does not give us the option of waiting for other. “Be kind to each other, sympathetic, forgiving each other as God has forgiven you through Christ” (Eph 4:32, God's Word).

### **7. In methodology, preferences, secondary doctrines, and secondary convictional areas, the elders can maintain unity by the “minority” submitting to the “majority”.**

### **Paul & Barnabas**

The ideal manner with which Paul and Barnabas could have resolved their problem would be for them each to have calmly expressed their values and perspectives, verbally acknowledge the valid aspects of the other's view point. Assuming that they still remained with opposing viewpoints, the designated leader of the team (was it Barnabas or was it Paul -- it is usually best to have this spelled out in a “job description”; or they could have “drawn straws”) make the final call and the other one cooperatively support the other. Paul could have said for example “I don't agree that this is a strategically wise decision Barnabas, but I'll pray you are right and I will work to help make your plan be successful. If it is I will rejoice with you; if it isn't, then it will be tragic but I will not hold it against you.

If Paul and Barnabas could not have resolved the problem, they still could have preserved their harmony or reconciled their relationship by agreeing that they could not participate with the other on their plans. They could then have parted with sincere prayer that God would bless the other in their separate missionary ventures instead of parting with an exchange of hot words and angry emotions.

### **Application**

It is always much more enjoyable to have the entire elder team agree on all issues. When there is complete unanimity there is also greater confidence that the Lord has lead in a particular direction. Efforts should be made to seek consensus through

prayer, dialogue and perhaps time. But when this is not possible, then a decision must be made, and the unity must be preserved. This means that the elder or elders with the minority view must cooperatively support the majority decision. They must do this among the elders themselves and in their interaction with other members of the congregation. It would be divisive for the “minority” elders to publicly or privately lobby to others in the church for their position. This is unconscionable! If the minority elders are unable to support a decision in these relatively non-essential areas, then they must

silently, and non-disruptively resign from the elder board.

To preserve unity it is also important that candidates to the elder ministry, thoroughly understand and willingly support the past positions of the elder board with regard to methodology, preferences, secondary doctrines, and secondary convictional areas. It is desirable that the elders express these positions in writing, but there will likely be some that are yet unwritten.

As elders may we “do our best to maintain the unity that the Spirit gives” (Eph 4:3, God’s Word).

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**Oakwood**  
 COMMUNITY CHURCH  
 11209 Casey Rd  
 Tampa FL 33618-5306  
 (813) 969-2303  
 Email: [office@oakwoodfl.org](mailto:office@oakwoodfl.org)  
 Web: [www.oakwoodfl.org](http://www.oakwoodfl.org)

Paul Phair has served as Senior Pastor of Oakwood Community Church since 1987. He earned a Master of Divinity from Denver Seminary, and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He is married to Bev; they have two married children.




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<sup>1</sup> A fuller treatment of some of these items may be found in Paul Phair’s message entitled: *The Grace to Disagree Agreeably; The Art of Giving Grace, part 3.*

<sup>2</sup> Acts 13:5 then v. 13

<sup>3</sup> Excellent imaginary dialogue between Paul and Barnabas, *Grace Awakening*, pp. 185-186

<sup>4</sup> Swindoll does a great job on this. For more insights see *Grace Awakening* 178-187

<sup>5</sup> See also Prov. 25:19 and Swindoll’s comments on this, p. 183

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller treatment on these principles see my message entitled: [The Grace to Let Others Be](#) in series entitled: [The Art of Giving Grace](#).

<sup>7</sup> Other issues that may or may not be classified as “doctrines”, but to which there is a moderately restrictive position taken by the elders includes: role of women, abortion, and divorce