

Should a Witness disagree with the organization publicly?

When certain men from Judea came down to the region where the Apostle Paul and Barnabas were teaching and establishing Christianity, they came with a teaching that was contrary to what Paul associated with the Law of the Christ. The account is recorded for us at Acts 15:1. The weight of the enforcement of the teaching was of such magnitude that to refuse to follow it meant a person could not be saved.

Did Paul go along with this new understanding, this new policy, because it came from the central “governing body” of Christians in Judea, namely, Jerusalem?

Verse 2 reveals the answer for us. There, we find that there was “no little dissension and disputing” between Paul and Barnabas and these men from Jerusalem. Paul did not sit idly by while these men went about trying to institute this new policy or doctrine. He did not quietly contact these men and speak with them about his disagreement with what they were saying and trying to get others to follow. He didn’t even sit down to write a letter to the apostles and the older men at Jerusalem to get their opinion. The fact of the matter is, Paul took it upon his own initiative to not only confront these men over what he saw as a wrong teaching, but to make it a public forum, likely for the benefit of all who were listening, so there would be no question left in their minds what was of the Law of the Christ and what was not.

Did these men have authority to bring a new teaching? Clearly they did, for we read further in verse 2 that they themselves arranged for Paul and Barnabas and “some others of them” to take the matter back to Jerusalem. If Paul didn’t recognize their position in the Christian arrangement, he certainly wouldn’t have left it to them to make arrangements to return to Jerusalem, yet the record shows nothing of Paul’s disagreeing with their arrangements—only the teaching they had brought from Jerusalem.

The disputing certainly didn’t end by taking the matter back to Jerusalem, where the apostles and the older men were. Again the matter broke out into “much disputing,” as reported in verse 7. And since there was “much disputing,” it can be understood that everyone must have had an opinion on the matter and they were offering their opinion in the disputes that took place over the rightfulness of the teaching that had gone forth from the “governing body” there in Jerusalem.

The end result of the matter was this: the “governing body” of the Christian *ecclesias* decided to add “no further burden to you, except these necessary things...” and stated what those four simple regulations were, once and for all time. The teaching that had gone forth was rendered incorrect, and dropped as a doctrine.

Things might have turned out very differently for Christians, had Paul and Barnabas chosen not to stand up to these men who had been sent forth to inform the congregations of the first century of a necessary qualification for salvation.

Unfortunately, it wasn't too much later that Paul began to realize that word of his standing in opposition had spread far and wide, accusing him of being an apostate. That can be found in Acts 21:21. Paul wasn't teaching according to what others among the Christian *ecclesias* thought he should be teaching, and it was even suggested that he was "teaching... an apostasy," or, forming a sect. He was given certain suggestions to help ease the minds of those who suspected him now, and he demonstrated that he was not an apostate, nor seeking to establish a sect, for he was a humble man who always looked out for the best interests of those who might hear him expounding the profound truths of the Christ. He would later write of why he did this, in his letter to the Corinthians, where we read at 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 that he became what his audience needed in order that the message he brought be accepted by them and that he might be a sharer of it with others.

There are two points that we can draw from the above. First, discussing "controversial" matters among those of like faith in a public forum is acceptable, and sometimes necessary in order to establish the validity of a teaching or understanding. Obviously, there is an unwritten fact that the parties would approach the issue in a Christ-like matter, not as being superior or in haughtiness, but rather in trying to get to the heart of the matter. Still on that point, we can also recognize that when a dispute is not getting resolved, it must be brought before "older men" who will listen to the dispute and impart their own counsel. (Proverbs 11:14) There is no scriptural evidence that when a matter cannot be resolved by the ones that began the dispute and they seek the "older men" that they simply hand the matter over to the "older men", while they themselves return home and await a conclusion of the matter. This can be demonstrated from the account as recorded in Acts 15:1-35, where nowhere do we read that anyone returned home and waited an organizational decision.

The second point that we can look at is that the discussion of "controversial" matters did not take place in "secret" or private, away from the general population of Christians who were present and aware of the disputes. This meant that there was an audience observing the proceedings, listening to the disputes, listening to the various viewpoints and applications of scriptures, and drawing their own conclusions, based on what they heard. They closely observed the ones involved in the dispute. Paul later recorded that there was to be a principle for such disputes, not only because of the need for Christ-like behavior during "controversial" discussions, but for the sake of the audience. He wrote from personal experience and practiced what he spoke of in all that he did. In his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 14 and verse 40, Paul explains that we are to "let all things take place decently and by arrangement."

Having a willingness to discuss even difficult or controversial matters openly would also prevent inaccurate assessments of a decision that was made. Everyone would be clearly aware of every side of an issue, once and for all time. Disagreements and even disputes

between fellow believers is allowed, as can be seen from the account in Acts 15, so long as 1 Corinthians 14:40 is in effect.

Even Jehovah God himself set the example of not allowing controversial topics to be kept “under wraps,” so to speak. In the book of Job, we read how the angels came before Jehovah God, and along with them came Satan. In a conversation, Satan, in effect, challenged Jehovah in front of the other angels that were looking on. Jehovah could have told Satan that he would be happy to discuss the issue with Satan, but that it would have to take place in private, away from the other angels, some of whom might be “stumbled” if the conversation was allowed to take place in front of them. But he did not handle the matter in such a way. If he had, what might have been the result? Might the angels have supposed that Jehovah was hiding something from them? That he wouldn’t have been able to meet Satan’s challenge? Indeed, Truth will always prevail, even when tested, will it not? Jehovah had no reservations about discussing matters with Satan publicly, because he knew that his audience would see that righteousness would prevail. He even allowed Satan to bring whatever evidences Satan thought would prove his case. That is how confident one can be when they are truly operating from a position of Truth and Righteousness.

In an organization, namely that of Jehovah’s Witnesses, that prides itself on conforming to the example of the first century Christian *ecclesias*, and relies upon the Word of God as its foundation for its policies, it falls far short of following the examples set out above. Disagreements are not only disallowed among Jehovah’s Witnesses in relation to organizational understanding, but those who choose to follow the example as set forth by Paul in addressing teachings that are scripturally wrong are shunned and cast out of the organization and branded as heretics or apostates. The same spirit can be seen in Witness forums professing to be open to discussions of even “controversial” issues, yet refuses to allow a fellow believer to engage in them unless that Witness sides with them in their view. Otherwise, the fellow Witness is directed to discuss the matter privately.

The recurring question is this: Where would the Christian congregation be today if Paul had followed the demands of the Watchtower and not spoken up that what was coming from the central governing body of the first century Christian *ecclesias* was in error? Even the apostles that had walked with Christ during his ministry did not see the error of such a teaching going forth, as recorded in the account in Acts 15, until Paul and Barnabas forced the issue into their laps.

The recurring question is this: What would the angels have thought, had Jehovah told Satan that if Satan had an issue or disagreement, then Satan will have to discuss the matter with him privately, not in front of his angelic brothers?

Submitted for your perusal,
Timothy

Time tells all Truth...