

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Christian Brethren Review* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_christian-brethren-review.php

ESSENTIAL AND NON-ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES AND PRACTICES

Tony Lane

Tony Lane lectures in Christian Doctrine at London Bible College, and is an elder of Northwood Hills Evangelical Church. He is the author of the Lion Concise Book of Christian Thought.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to consider when to agree to differ, how to distinguish between essential and non-essential doctrines and practices. How should we handle differences? On what principles do we operate? Such questions are important, though we should not forget another factor which has been prominent in the history of church disputes. That is the factor of *personality*. The story is told of the jury that retired to reach its verdict. After a considerable lapse of time the foreman of the jury emerged, looking very frustrated, to place an order for eleven cups of coffee and one cup of tea, eleven ham sandwiches and one beef sandwich, eleven cream buns and one doughnut. In the actual church situation, personality may turn out to be as important a factor as the issues being discussed. But the purpose of this paper is more limited: to set out the principles by which we may distinguish between those doctrines and practices which are essential and those which are not.

DOCTRINES

How should we handle variations in doctrine? Now it is certainly true that *some* variations in doctrine are far from desirable. In the

New Testament we are urged to preserve the truth of the gospel. Paul warned Timothy of a time when people would turn away from sound doctrine and seek satisfaction for their itching ears. (2 Tim. 4:3f) Jude urges his readers to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. (Jude 3) Paul condemns anyone who brings another gospel. (Gal. 1:6–9) The truth of the gospel must be preserved. However, while there should be *unity* in doctrine this is not the same as *uniformity*. The trouble with moving only in one particular circle of Christians is that one can reach a false impression as to the uniformity of doctrine. In the same way, someone brought up in the north country who never travelled far might imagine that all civilised people eat black pudding or an untravelled Frenchman might regard the eating of snails as the proof of culture. But those of us who have travelled further abroad know that this is not the case. In fact it is supremely by *travel* that we learn (not just in our heads) that there are different ways of doing things. James Clavell's *Shogun*, which has been televised, is a brilliant description of the encounter between two cultures (seventeenth-century English and Japanese) showing how each instinctively regards the other as barbarian—and also showing how they each have good reasons for that judgement! Travel broadens the mind and frees us from provincial prejudice. The same is true of Christian doctrine, where there are three different types of travel that can help us.

First there is *travel through time*. Unfortunately we cannot climb into a time machine to go back to the past, but the study of history does allow us a considerable knowledge about and insight into the beliefs and practices of past ages. Earlier generations of Brethren were influenced by E. M. Broadbent's *The Pilgrim Church*, which claimed to trace a thin line of persecuted 'Brethren' groups throughout the length of Christian history, starting with the Montanists in the second century. It did not seem to worry the author that some of the groups which he cited were wildly heretical, holding to a Manichean dualism between two ultimate gods, one good and one evil. Indeed almost the only distinctive common feature of the groups that he cited is the fact that they were all at odds with the established church—so perhaps the moral to be drawn is simply that there are always some awkward people around! The fact is that we cannot point to a continuous tradition of

people who have seen things just the way that we do. (It should also be noted that it is no more possible for other denominations to show such a continuity. Even the Roman Catholic Church has ceased to claim to be 'always the same' and now talks more of a continuity within a process of development.) This is not of course to deny that there are major points of belief that have been held consistently over the ages—such as the basic beliefs outlined in the *Apostles' Creed*, say. But together with such continuity there has also been considerable variation in belief.

Second there is *travel round the world*. While we cannot literally travel back into the past we can travel to different countries. Even if we do not go in person we can still see other countries on the television and meet people from them. Such travel serves to reinforce the point about variations in doctrine. One example will suffice. In Britain today it is generally assumed that evangelicals will not believe the doctrine of baptismal regeneration—that all who are baptised (of whatever age) are automatically born again. Such a belief is perceived by most to be incompatible with an evangelical stance. Yet if one travels to Scandinavia one finds that the majority of evangelicals there do indeed hold to baptismal regeneration. This is because Scandinavia is strongly Lutheran and Luther maintained the doctrine of baptismal regeneration throughout his life. (How he squared it with justification by faith alone is another story!) It may come as a greater surprise to many to hear that John Wesley, one of the fathers of British evangelicalism who travelled all round the country telling his hearers that they must be born again, also held all his life that babies are born again in baptism. (Again, how he reconciled the two is another story.) In fact it is only in the last century, after the rise of the Oxford Movement, with its leanings towards Roman Catholic beliefs, that British evangelicals became radically opposed to the idea of baptismal regeneration. Thus again a journey through space and time shows us that what appears a uniform evangelical stance is not so uniform after all.

Finally there is another form of travel that demands neither a time machine nor an air ticket. We can, within our own locality, *travel from one group to another*. In order to encounter variations in belief we do not need to go to more theologically distant groups like Roman Catholics. If we were to confine ourselves to visiting

evangelical groups within a radius of a few miles of the London Bible College we would discover considerable variations. One group would believe in the autonomy of the local church; another would not. One would believe it was right to baptise infants; another would not. One group would be more strongly 'reformed' while another would be more strongly 'charismatic'. And so on.

Granted that we are forced to accept the fact of variations in beliefs, how do we react to them? What is our response when we come upon another group that does not see things quite as we do? We could adopt the attitude of Job's friends. Job characterised their attitude this way: 'You are the people and wisdom will die with you.' (Job 12:2) Is that how we see ourselves? We are the ones and if we die out the truth will vanish off the face of the earth. That would be one way to react, in a somewhat arrogant fashion. The opposite reaction is also possible: 'It doesn't really matter what you believe as long as your heart is in the right place.' This approach sounds very good because it appears 'loving' and avoids today's unforgivable sin: intolerance. But it is not satisfactory because doctrine certainly does matter. It does matter what people believe because if they really *do* believe it, it will affect what they do. If we have come to feel that doctrine does not matter it may be because we have become accustomed to believing things merely in our heads without them also affecting our lives. Doctrine does matter and it is wrong to treat differences in belief as irrelevant. But while doctrine matters, it does not follow that we all have to be 100% correct. Experience has taught me that while I may be 100% correct no one else seems quite able to make the grade! Correctness of belief is important—but it is just as important to live out what one believes. In fact, if we had to choose, it would be better to be 50% correct and to live it out than to be 100% correct and do nothing about it. It is tragic to see individuals and churches with a fanatical concern for precise orthodoxy but with a failure to put any of it into practice. Correct doctrine is no use without a practical concern for holiness of life, for serving one's neighbour, for spreading the gospel, etc.

Doctrine is important, but we must not simply identify doctrine or theology with the truth itself. Doctrine should be seen as a description of the truth. Doctrine is *about* the truth, a description of the truth rather than the truth itself. But surely this is being pedantic about a word and making over-subtle semantic distinctions? No. If

we think of doctrine as a description of the truth then it opens up the way for us to acknowledge that there may be more than one description, each of which partially conveys the truth. Consider the surviving portraits of Henry VIII. None of the portraits is Henry himself—they are simply descriptions or representations of him. Each of them, assuming that they are faithful portraits, succeeds in bringing out facets of his character. It would be silly to ask which is the 'right' picture. If we want to know what he was like we will be wise to heed all of the reliable portraits, not just one. Again, suppose you were to apply for a job and three different people write references for you. If they know you well and write good and honest references, there will be three different accounts of you, each conveying part of the truth about you. They will be complementary even if they are not as complimentary as you might wish! As with the portraits, they are different, complementary, partial accounts of the truth. As with the portraits, it is certainly possible for there to be error or deception, but the mere fact of there being differences does not prove that there is error. There can be different, complementary accounts of the truth, each partially true.

That is all very well with portraiture and reference writing, you might respond, but it is a different matter when we come to divine truth. But is it? Why do we have *four* gospels? We have four *different* gospels. If Matthew was only saying the same thing as Luke, then we would not need Matthew as well. Each of the four gospels shows us *part* of the truth about Jesus. If one gospel could show it all, we would not have needed four. Thus the New Testament canonises the principle of diversity—not the principle of error or contradiction, but the value of a number of different accounts which complement one another and each contain a part of the truth. This same principle continues in the church. Each individual Christian sees the Christian faith from a slightly different angle. We may be compared to a vast crowd standing before the Houses of Parliament, say. We will all see it from a slightly different angle. One will see a part of the building that another cannot see. And so on. We each have different perspectives on the Christian faith. Of course, where we are concerned, there is also the factor of error. Some of our differences arise because some of us (or maybe all of us!) have got it wrong. But by no means all differences arise from error. There is also the factor of partial understandings

and different perspectives. This is why the one-man ministry is wrong. No one person can portray the whole of Christian truth. If a congregation are taught or led by one man only they will suffer from a partial, one-sided approach.

To recap, some differences do arise from error. But diversity in itself should not embarrass us. In fact, diversity is healthy. If I wanted to know as much as possible about the architecture of the Houses of Parliament I would want as many different photographs as possible. I would want photographs from a wide range of angles, not many photographs from the same one angle. If I was thinking of employing someone I would be unwise to rely on just one reference. So also with Christian truth. Diversity can help us to see more of its fulness, just as the four gospels can help us to see more of Christ than any *one* could give. The four evangelists were inspired by the Holy Spirit, and yet it took four of them to present the account of Christ. If no one of them could do the job on his own, how much less is it possible for any 'uninspired' post-biblical writer. In the past many tended to think that Christian truth was fully presented in the systematic theology of this or that writer. If this were the case, then it seems a strange oversight on the part of God not to have chosen that writer to write the New Testament on his own, thus removing the embarrassing diversity. But that is not God's way. The New Testament shows us truth in diversity—four gospels, Paul versus James, etc.

Paul describes the church as 'the pillar and foundation of the truth'. (1 Tim. 3:15) This is an important point. The truth is entrusted to and proclaimed by the whole church—not just one individual or one congregation or one denomination or one generation or one part of the world. The truth is entrusted to the 'catholic church' embracing all generations, all parts of the world and all denominations. This is not to deny that some groups are plainly heretical and are undermining the truth. It is not to deny that *all* theological traditions contain some error and that some contain serious errors. But it is to deny that the truth is found in one part only of the church. We are evangelicals because we believe that this tradition is basically right and preserves many important aspects of the gospel which have been ignored or even suppressed in other traditions. But this by no means excludes the possibility (if not the certainty) that some of these other traditions have

maintained aspects of the gospel which we have neglected. We must not be so preoccupied with pointing out the errors of others that we are no longer interested or able to learn from their truth.

But how do we handle contradictions, where one side or the other (or both) is in error? Do we need to divide every time there is a disagreement? This is what evangelicals have at times tended to do and at this point we should acknowledge that the Catholic tradition has taken the New Testament teaching on the unity of the church far more seriously than we have. In handling differences and contradictions we need to consider the importance of the point at issue. Some doctrines are vital and non-negotiable. If someone argues that Jesus is not God we don't welcome this as another fruitful element of diversity. If, on the other hand, there is a difference over the understanding of the millennium this is no ground for breaking off fellowship or dividing the church. But why is the deity of Christ important in a way that the millennium is not? Surely both doctrines are concerned with biblical truth. Am I not simply displaying my own personal view of which doctrines are important? No.

In the *first* place, it is clear that the person of Christ is central to the teaching of scripture, while the millennium is not. This is seen both from the paucity of reference to the latter and from the central role of Christ in Christian faith, aside from statistical counts of the number of references. These principles give us a helpful guide to the relative importance of different doctrines, but there is still plenty of room for different estimates regarding the importance of particular doctrines. So it is fortunate that we have a *second* way to settle this matter. The New Testament writers themselves identify certain doctrines as particularly important. In 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 Paul identifies the cross and resurrection of Christ. In Galatians 1:6–9 he identifies the gospel of salvation by grace rather than law. In 1 John 4:2–3 and 2 John 9 the person of Christ is identified. It has been noted that there is a common core to the summaries of gospel preaching in Acts. And so on. The New Testament itself encourages us to think in terms of a central core of basic and fundamental truths and helps us in the selection of these truths. The early creeds of the church, culminating in the *Apostles' Creed* and the *Nicene Creed* were primarily attempts at this.

Some doctrines are fundamental in a way that others are not. But

even with those that are fundamental, it does not follow that everyone has to view them identically. Take the example of the person of Christ, a fundamental doctrine. It is important to acknowledge that he is the eternal Word made flesh, fully and truly God and man. But how can these points be held together? There will be different ways in which people attempt to do this and there is room for differences, as long as the basic truths are not undermined. An attitude of humility is important here. We can and should be clear and firm in our affirmation of, for example, the deity of Christ. But we need also to acknowledge that we do not know all of the answers and that our understanding of who he is is feeble and limited. In our understanding and presentation of Christian doctrine it is vital to maintain the balance between authority and conviction on the one side and humility on the other. We need to stand firm on those matters which are clear and important while not pretending that we know all the answers. An arrogant overconfidence which does not acknowledge any remaining element of mystery will serve only to discredit our genuinely Bible-based convictions.

How then should we handle differences? It is good that there are broad-based evangelical bodies such as Scripture Union, UCCF and London Bible College which aim to allow for differences within a framework of agreement on basics. The isolation of basics in this way has a good New Testament warrant, as we have seen. (Whether or not the right doctrines are chosen as basic is of course another matter, which would lead us astray at this point.) However, it is one thing to allow such differences in a 'para-church' organisation; it is another thing to do so in a local church. Scripture Union or the London Bible College can remain neutral on the issue of infant baptism; a local church is deprived of that luxury. But while there may need to be limitations on the diversity of a local church, there is still much room for diversity. Indeed it is not just a case of tolerating diversity but rather of welcoming it as healthy. President Lyndon Johnson once said that where two people think exactly the same, only one of them has thought. If, as we often say, 'two heads are better than one', it is precisely because of the diversity between them. Monochrome congregations are not healthy. If there is a polarisation between 'charismatic' and 'non-charismatic' churches, the result will be the impoverishment of both. It may be

uncomfortable for two different groups to live together, it may well cause problems, but it is better than to allow them each to go to their own extreme in isolation. In the early church an easy way to avoid problems would have been to have allowed the development of parallel Jewish and Gentile churches. It would have accorded with the 'homogeneous unit principle' being urged by some. But Paul regarded it as totally unacceptable, as indeed a denial of the gospel as set out in Ephesians 3:2-6. (Incidentally, how often does the content of this passage ever figure in evangelical presentations of the gospel?) In our handling of differences we need to be more aware of the *sinfulness* of church divisions and to strive as far as is possible to embrace diversity within an acceptance of basic Christian truth. If this had been done in the past there would be far fewer denominations and far less 'cranky' Christian groups.

CHURCH PRACTICES

In considering our attitude to variations in practice it is important to distinguish between scriptural and non-scriptural practices. First of all, *scriptural practices*. Some elements of church practice are clearly laid down for us in scripture and are not optional. The two obvious examples are the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. There can be no justification for abolishing these when we are so clearly taught in scripture to observe them. But while this example may be straightforward, there remain three areas in which differences will emerge.

First, which practices are laid down in scripture? It is obvious to all but a tiny minority that baptism and the Lord's Supper are to be regularly observed in the church while this is not true of a literal ritual of foot-washing. But what of the mode of baptism? Does the New Testament specify whether it should be by total immersion or by sprinkling or does it leave us free in such a matter? Regarding the ministry, does the New Testament lay down one pattern to be followed for all time (be that episcopal, presbyterian or whatever) or does it show us how the early church adopted a variety of different patterns of ministry according to changing circumstances?

Second, those who agree that a certain practice is laid down may still differ in their approach to it. If the New Testament tells us to

baptise, does it tell us to baptise mature believers only or also their infant children? If the New Testament tells us that the church should have deacons, what should their role be?

Third, were some New Testament practices intended for that time only? Should we expect to encounter apostles today? Were gifts like speaking in tongues and prophecy for the apostolic age alone? Is the New Testament teaching on the role of women related to the particular social conditions of that time and therefore in need of modification for today? So even with those practices set out in scripture there is scope for disagreement.

How do we handle such differences? Differences of practice are less serious than differences in doctrine in that we find them less of a bar to fellowship. But, ironically, they can also be more of a bar to church unity. A congregation may remain neutral in the Calvinist-Arminian debate, but it must decide whether to baptise infants or not. There are three general observations to be made at this point. First that some variety of practice within a church can be healthy. Second that Christians should be willing to belong to churches where they do not necessarily agree with all the practices. But, third, we should not therefore assume that the question of practices is unimportant. The practices of the church affect the way in which it visibly manifests itself. They can undermine the gospel just as much as unsound doctrine. Archaic practices can proclaim that the Christian message is irrelevant and outmoded. Tyrannical church government proclaims a tyrannical God. And so on.

What of *non-scriptural practices*? Is the church allowed to introduce practices which are not laid down in scripture? At the Reformation there was disagreement over this question. Luther took the line that the church is free to do anything as long as it is not *contrary* to scripture. He included in this, practices like infant baptism, the wearing of vestments by the clergy and the use of a liturgy. Where scripture was silent the church is free. This approach was criticised within the Reformed Calvinist tradition and some took this to the extent that the church may do nothing that is not positively commanded in scripture. Therefore we may not use music in worship, sing hymns or found Bible colleges—let alone have Christian Brethren Research Fellowships—because none of these is ordained in scripture. How rigidly this principle was applied varied according to whether or not one was permitted to

turn to the Old Testament for help—to justify music in worship or church buildings, say. Today most Christians would recognise that this approach is too legalistic and restrictive. It involves treating the New Testament as a code of canon law, which it is not. On the one hand, the New Testament lays down a few broad general principles and then leaves us to work it out for ourselves in the freedom of the gospel and with the guidance of the Spirit. On the other hand, the New Testament leaves many questions unanswered and therefore, by implication, open for us to make up our own minds. We are not told how many services to have on a Sunday or when to hold them—or even where. It is too restrictive to forbid the church to do anything not specifically laid down in scripture, though this freedom should be used with caution. The issue of infant baptism clearly involves important theological principles and any defence of it needs to appeal to more than ecclesiastical freedom. Even issues like clerical garb involve theological principles (the relation between ‘clergy’ and ‘laity’) and such principles need to be considered in the exercise of our Christian freedom.

What of *local variations* in practices? As with doctrine, those who do not travel may have a false picture of uniformity in practice. As one travels through time, round the world and from group to group, one discovers a considerable diversity in the way that churches are run and organized. They all have some form of leadership and ministry, but this takes a wide variety of forms. They all, apart from a few odd groups, observe baptism and the Lord’s Supper, but in many different ways. Now it does not follow that all of these ways are equally valid or necessarily valid at all. But experience shows that churches of many different kinds are blessed by the Lord—with a growth in numbers, in Christian holiness and maturity and in influence upon society. This indicates that we should be thinking not so much of a normative blue-print to be followed by all but rather of a few basic principles which can be applied in a variety of ways. There are four points to watch in the application of biblical principles.

First, we must make sure that the application of these principles really is relevant and appropriate to our present situation and not just a legalistic adherence to a pattern that might have been relevant fifty years ago. This point is especially important in our modern world where the pace of change is so fast. It is also important in that

our society is orientated towards the future and impatient of past traditions. Once upon a time it was considered good to adhere to venerable ancient tradition—but not in our contemporary society. The church should therefore beware of an unthinking conservatism that is opposed to all change. We must be free to adapt. To take a trivial example, if thirty years ago those unbelievers who attended church did so in the evening, it made sense then to have an evangelistic service in the evening. If today (as is true in our area) they come in the morning, that is the time to reach out to them. A few years ago our church changed its pattern so that the main morning service was a family service, designed so as not to make the outsider uncomfortable. The *immediate* result was that twenty or thirty new people started coming regularly. It is true that structures cannot of themselves create growth. But it is equally true that bad structures can of themselves prevent growth, as was the case with us.

Second, if we are to avoid an unthinking conservatism opposed to all change, we must also beware of the opposite danger. There are many churches today in which 'old' and 'traditional' are automatically words of condemnation while 'new' and 'change' are automatically words of approval. We must not be carried away by the spirit of the age to the extent of abandoning all that is good from the past, jettisoning the riches of our tradition. Christian freedom towards such traditional practices means being free to change them—and to keep them if that is appropriate. Either way, we must make sure that biblical principles are being applied in a way that is appropriate to our present situation.

Third, these practical matters have to be decided by the church. There has been too much of an unbiblical individualism in western Christianity as a whole and among the Brethren in particular. When it comes to practical decisions the church must decide (by whatever procedures the church makes its decisions) and the individual should then accept this, even if he is not happy with the decision. There are too many prima-donnas in the church, who leave the moment they do not like something. Such an attitude is proud, arrogant and unchristian. But to say that, is not to justify heavy-handed methods of leadership in which decisions are made by a small group without any reference to the views of the rest.

Fourth, an obvious point: each church makes its decisions in the light of its own circumstances. Other churches are free to make

their own decisions and each one should respect the freedom of the other.

CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

What of Christian freedom in the area of individual behaviour? Each Christian group has its own shibboleths, though not necessarily the same as each other. A true story will illustrate this. Some years ago I spent a holiday with a friend on the Isle of Lewis. When we arrived at Stornaway we called on the Free Presbyterian minister. Now the Scottish Free Presbyterians (not to be confused with the Free Church of Scotland, the 'Wee Frees') are very strict in all sorts of ways. Any attendance at a theatre or cinema is prohibited. You cannot shave on Sundays and be a member. Before we called on the minister I warned my friend and told him to be careful about what he said. When we arrived there were two other ministers there who happened to be passing through. We were invited in and almost the first thing that happened was that one of them offered us a cigarette! My friend told me afterwards how disorientated he was. He had been warned how strict these people were and the first thing that happened was that they broke one of the taboos of British evangelicalism. What was taboo among us was unquestioned among them, while many of their taboos seem bizarre to us. Travel shows us that many of our taboos are local rather than universal and thus encourages us to reconsider them—though in this instance it did not lessen my dislike of smoking!

What are the principles to be applied in this matter? Where a practice is condemned in scripture (such as adultery) there is no problem. But what of other matters where scripture is silent? This was a major issue for the Reformers who faced Roman Catholic taboos such as the prohibition of eating meat on Friday. Luther and Calvin both taught much the same on this matter and their teaching is still relevant today. They taught that we are not bound by human traditions or regulations. Our Christian freedom means that we are not in bondage to them. But Christian freedom does not mean that we abandon all constraints. It is to be seen as a middle path between legalism and licence. We have freedom—but this is to be tempered by love. Christian freedom means that we *may* do certain things, not that we *must* do them. It should not be used in such a way as to

make a weaker brother fall. This is the message of Paul in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. If our use of our freedom puts a brother in danger of sinning we are not to exercise it.

This is a familiar principle, but it needs to be used with caution. There are those who use it in such a way that we are all of us bound to give in all the time to the scruples of the weakest brother to be found—thus bringing us back into a bondage worse than that from which we have been freed. We need to remember that there are legalists as well as weaker brothers. The weaker brother is the one who (in Paul's time) was in danger of sinning against his conscience by eating meat offered to an idol. Paul would not eat such meat if it would make a weaker brother stumble. The result was *not* that he became a 'total abstainer' but that he abstained in certain circumstances. (1 Cor. 10:25-30) If anyone came to Paul and demanded that he should become a 'total abstainer', then this person was not a 'weaker brother' but a legalist who was trying to bring others into bondage. Paul strenuously resisted legalists. (Gal. 2; Col. 2) This distinction comes out again in Paul's attitude to circumcision. He circumcised Timothy. (Acts 16:3) This was to enable Timothy to exercise an effective ministry among Jews. But in Galatians we read of a different situation. Judaizing legalists were insisting that Titus should be circumcised, and Paul resisted them in the name of Christian freedom (2:3-5).

Agreement on these principles will lessen, but not remove, differences in this area. We may all agree that we are not in bondage to human traditions but we would all agree that there are moral principles which need to be applied. The freedom of which Paul and the Reformers spoke applies easily to *ritual* matters, but not so easily to those which are argued on *moral* grounds. Let us consider some examples. The Bible nowhere explicitly condemns the taking of heroin, but in the light of the results of heroin taking there is little dispute that it is to be excluded on Christian moral grounds. What then of alcohol, which can also be addictive? All Christians would agree on the need for restraint but what of total abstinence? There is a case to be made for this, but surely the Christian cannot regard it as obligatory since the Bible repeatedly approves the moderate use of wine and Christ himself both turned water into wine and ordained its use in the Lord's Supper. Was he morally misguided? What of smoking then? The verdict of modern

medicine is that the moderate use of alcohol can actually be beneficial but that all smoking is harmful. The conclusion must be that the Christian is advised not to smoke—especially because of the encouragement to the young to adopt a practice that is so addictive. But this conclusion is not the same as making the issue an evangelical taboo. The Bible explicitly condemns gluttony and there are many evangelical Christians who are very proud of not smoking but yet blatantly overeat—with the appropriate consequences both for their figures and for their health! There is always the danger of a selective morality that condemns some faults and condones others.

In ethics, as in theology, diversity is not necessarily bad. With alcohol there is a role for the Christian teetotaler who recognises the right of others to drink, but bears witness to the fact that one can live a happy fulfilled life without alcohol. Equally there is room for the moderate drinker who answers the abuse of alcohol, not with abstinence, but with a demonstration of the correct use of it. This bears witness to the goodness of God's creation. Again, it is right that most Christians should marry to show that marriage is a good gift of God and to set a pattern of Christian family life. There is also a place for those like Paul who voluntarily renounce this right in order to devote themselves more fully to the extension of God's kingdom. They bear witness to the fact that it is possible to lead a happy and fulfilled life without being married. We have here the principle of different and complementary vocations. Neither bears witness to every aspect of the truth. It is important for the sake of the church that there should be some who opt for the way of abstinence—as long as they do not try to impose it on others. This principle of the variety of vocations can also be applied to the issue of warfare. The mainstream Christian position is to allow Christians to fight in certain circumstances. For the church as a whole to adopt a pacifist position would be ethically irresponsible. And yet it is also important that there be Christian pacifists. They bear witness to a side of God's truth, found especially in the Sermon on the Mount, which would otherwise be lost. The history of the church illustrates some of the unpleasant results that can ensue when there is no pacifist contribution to the Christian stance. No one person can both be a pacifist and a non-pacifist, but it is important that the church should contain both.

CONCLUSIONS

First, we should all have a 'catholic' rather than a sectarian spirit. We should recognise legitimate variety and also our own fallibility. We should recognise this in practice, not just in theory. We should realise that the Brethren represent only one small part of Christendom, and that we are not the people and truth will not die with us.

Second, we should not swing to the opposite extreme. There are some churches which are ashamed of their Brethren background and seem determined to disown it. But while the Brethren tradition may not be infallible and while it may be just one part of the wider Christian tradition, it is not therefore to be despised. Whatever their weaknesses, the Brethren bore witness to the New Testament concepts of the diversity of gifts and a shared leadership at a time when these truths had been largely forgotten. It is ironical that just as the mainstream churches are coming to see the evils of the one-man ministry and are coming to take on board elements of the Brethren tradition, so many progressive Brethren churches are becoming ashamed of their heritage. I am not for a moment suggesting an uncritical adherence to Brethren tradition. But to reform a tradition is not to abandon it.

Finally, the principle of Richard Baxter sums it all up nicely: 'In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity'.