

**JUDGING**

**AND NOT**

**JUDGING**

Stephen Palmer

# JUDGING AND NOT JUDGING

## The problem

THERE IS OFTEN considerable confusion over the judging which the Lord condemns, and the application of judgement to ecclesial problems and matters of truth which is essential to following the commands of the Master. For example, when a recent evangelical controversy provoked a response from Christadelphians, voices were heard condemning them on the grounds that they were judging their brethren and sisters. But in saying that a person is wrong to hold certain beliefs or to act in a particular way, are we contradicting the spirit of the Lord's teaching, "Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven" (Lk. 6:37)?

## Judging at Corinth

The response of Paul to problems in the Corinthian ecclesia and their attitude to Paul demonstrates clearly the application of the Master's teaching on judging and not judging. The Corinthians were judging when they should not have, and not judging when it was their responsibility to do so.

The judgement they were making wrongly was of the character of Paul, and Paul in the First Epistle had to re-establish his position as an apostle of Christ: "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ" (1 Cor. 4: 1). In a previous article I have shown how Paul takes hold of the example of Miriam and Aaron's judgement of Moses in Numbers 12 to illustrate the Corinthians' attitude to Paul. Miriam and Aaron called in question the faithfulness of Moses when it was quite clear that the Lord had given His approval. Hidden beneath the complaint they made about Moses's wife there is the suggestion of envy and perhaps a feeling

similar to that expressed by Korah and his followers: "wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?" (Num. 16:3). Yet we know that Moses was "very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3), notwithstanding his elevated position, and their judgement of his inmost thoughts and motives was completely astray. Not only had they dared to judge what no man can judge reliably, "the thoughts and intents of the heart", but they had got the judgement wrong.

In a similar way, the Corinthians were wrong to judge, and had judged wrongly. Paul answers his critics: "it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord" (4:3,4). Paul here is saying that the day of man's judgement was not important to him since the only judgement of character which matters is that pronounced by the Lord. Given this, Paul did not venture to pronounce judgement upon himself. However, he was not conscious of any fault which might be held against him. (This is the import of the phrase, "For I know nothing by myself", which is alternatively rendered, "I am not conscious of anything against myself".) Even so, this did not justify Paul, but he, as the Corinthians, would have to wait until the great day. So Paul says, "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God" (v. 5). Here is a general truth which, though not easily learned, is vital to following the Master's command, "Judge not". However much insight into human nature we may have, and however well we know our brother or sister, we cannot be confident in judging motives and thoughts, neither can we sum up character in a way which will decide our brother's or sister's salvation, and so we should not try.

It would be outright foolishness to argue, however, that to use our mental faculties to weigh up situations, ideas or actions is to judge when we should not. The Lord Jesus, when speaking of a man who resorts to the magistrate to pronounce against his adversary, says, "Yea, and why

even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?" (Lk. 12:57), meaning that the man should use his judgement beforehand and be sure of his ground before taking action which might result in the condemnation of himself.

This principle of judging is applied by Paul to the Corinthians who were not judging when they should have been. One judgement they should have made was of the incident of the man living with his father's wife. The first judgement to make was that the relationship was sinful and if persisted in would have excluded the brother from the Kingdom. In chapter 6:9,10 Paul enforces the point when he says, "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived". The Corinthians should have known; and to allow a brother to continue in a state which would exclude him from the Kingdom, and not to make every effort to convert him, was not to show the love of Christ. Their supposed generous tolerance, far from being merciful, was irresponsible. Indeed, mercy on the part of the Corinthians was irrelevant to the circumstances, since none can show the mercy of salvation except the Lord. It is not for us to presume to arbitrate upon other men's salvation but to apply the commands of Christ and his apostles. It was the Corinthians' duty, therefore, "to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (5:5).

Judgement in this situation did not involve condemning hidden motives since the deed was evident to all. There was no doubt about the circumstances: the brother was persisting in a sinful state. The Corinthians were called upon to judge the situation and take the action which would be in the best interests of the brother (5:9-13).

Paul also rebuked the Corinthians for not judging controversies between brethren within the ecclesia, for the brethren were going to a Gentile court of law for judgement on what should have been dealt with within the ecclesia. "I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?" (6:5). Clearly the exercise of judgement was not

to be abdicated. Once again, however, the judgement was not of motives or hidden thoughts, but of facts ascertained from the disputing parties.

### **Matters of conscience.**

What happens, however, when matters of conscience are concerned? Regarding meats offered to idols, Paul exhorts the Corinthians both to judge and not judge. They should judge, as all believers should, that "an idol is nothing in the world" (8:4). But whilst all believers would agree that "there is none other God but one", not all agreed that therefore it was acceptable to eat such meat sacrificially devoted to an idol. For one brother, to eat such meat was to be guilty of idolatry by association, and his conscience would condemn him. Another brother could eat without any conscience. Paul was of the latter sort. Should the two eat together the strong brother should abstain from the particular meat. But Paul is quite clear about the reason for this. It was not that a brother had to live in accord with the dictates of another man's conscience, "for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience? For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks?" (10:29,30), or as Paul says to the Colossians, "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink" (2:16). The reason was that, by eating, the brother might encourage the weaker to eat also and go against his conscience. In this matter then each brother had to judge for himself his own actions, but those who felt at liberty to eat what they pleased were obliged by the spirit of Christ to forego their freedom for the good of their brother or sister.

To allow a brother or a sister to behave in a way we would not, or to hold a view which would restrict our freedom if applied to ourselves, is contrary to human nature, and it is not surprising that the question over meats offered to idols was a source of dispute and bad feeling. Judgements were made which should not have been, as Paul explains to the Romans. The strong brother, the one who could eat meat without pangs of conscience, was despising the restricting weakness of his neighbour. But the weak brother was condemning the life of the stronger and so

judging the service of "another man's servant" (Rom. 14:4). There are some things then that we should not presume to judge in our brother or sister, but leave to "the judgement seat of Christ" (v. 10), at which one day we will all stand.

The judging condemned by Paul discussed so far has been committed by the weaker brother, the one who applied his own scruples to his brother. But the strong was also in danger of judging the weak. Paul says: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations (not to judge his doubtful thoughts)" (Rom. 14:1). The strong brother could spend his time trying to persuade the weaker brother of his weakness and in so doing condemn his apparent ignorance and hardheadedness in refusing to be convinced. In this question the strong brother was to refrain since it was not a matter of principle. Eating meat was neither good nor bad, and he should "follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another" (v. 19)

### **Application today**

The wisdom given to the Apostle Paul by Christ can and must be applied today. We cannot successfully, and should not attempt to, judge motives and unexpressed thoughts, and we should not act upon suspicions. By making a judgement upon a brother in such a way, what we are in effect saying is, "If I did as you have done or said what you have said, then I would have been thinking such and such". We are making a judgement by putting ourselves in the place of our brother, and a condemnation of that brother in essence is a condemnation of ourselves. Such judgements are liable to reflect our own weaknesses and biases and speak more of ourselves than of our brother. How often are judgements made which, when all the facts are known, are shown to be false. It is salutary to remember that with what judgement we judge it will be measured to us again.

This sort of judging, outrightly condemned by Jesus, is the sort that

gives rise to evil speaking and to slandering the name of a brother or sister, and can be done through gossiping or frivolous conversation. James says, "Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge. There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?" (Jas. 4:11,12).

In these conversations, which arise so naturally, in which another brother or sister becomes the topic of conversation, almost invariably, evil, direct or implied, is spoken of them. But when we pass such judgements we are setting ourselves up as judges, presuming a knowledge far beyond our reach. We should beware whenever such conversations start, and remember the beam in our own eye. It is far better that we should avoid speaking about individuals altogether.

The situation is very different when a brother or sister speaks or writes contradictory to the truth. We cannot judge the character of a speaking brother from what he says, but we must judge the truth of his words. If there is doubt on first principles then the point must be clarified by further discussion and dealt with accordingly. To decide that a brother is teaching error and that he should not be allowed to continue to do so is not in itself to judge the character of the brother nor to judge hidden thoughts. It is to judge expressed thoughts, and is a responsibility of the ecclesia. Ironically, those who condemn such a response as judging are themselves judging the character and motives of their brethren when they should not, and not judging the matter of truth when they should. They have succeeded in turning the principles upon their heads. And to make this observation is not to judge the hidden thoughts of the critics but to judge the truth of what they say.

When an ecclesia makes a judgement upon the behaviour of a brother or sister which is blatantly and persistently opposed to godliness (as was the case of the brother in Corinth) it is not judging motives or hidden thoughts, neither is it presuming to anticipate the judgement seat of Christ. Rather, the ecclesia is endeavouring to follow the commands of

Christ and save a soul from condemnation at the judgement seat by bringing them to their senses. It is possible that the weaknesses of individuals party to the ecclesial decision may cause censorious and unkindly words to be heard, but these imperfections, unhelpful as they are, should not lead us to reject the responsibility laid upon the ecclesia. From the examples of the first century, as well as from our own experience, it is clear that naturally we tend to judge personalities and avoid the duties which are onerous, and there is a temptation to misuse Scripture to justify our own stand. But let us judge ourselves on this.

Regarding judging matters of conscience today there is always room for dispute. Not because Paul's counsel is unclear but because we find it difficult to decide what is only a matter of conscience and who is the weak party in the dispute. Without an inspired judgement both sides will claim to be the strong. Let us be clear first, however, what is a matter of conscience. It must be a question where there is no clear Scriptural teaching and one which involves actions which in themselves are neither good nor bad. Eating meat is one aspect of an essential activity, but many of the issues which may be raised today as matters of conscience would not fall into the same category. For example, what leisure activities are acceptable may be a matter of debate, but such discussion begs the more fundamental question of whether it is right for a brother in Christ to have leisure time to fill. Perhaps a good example of a matter of conscience involving an essential activity, work, is the non-active membership of a trade union.

Whatever the issue might be, let the strong bear with the infirmities of the weak who are obeying their own consciences. Should others try to force their views on us, we are not constrained to follow unless our own way is in danger of encouraging them to go against their conscience. It may well be that pride or personality lies behind many such quarrels, but we are in no position to decide who is proud or arrogant (unless it is ourselves), and we must leave that judgement to Christ. It is sufficient for us to concentrate on the issues raised and to apply

Scripture honestly so that every man may be fully persuaded in his own mind.

Brother Stephen Palmer.

The Testimony, Feb:1983:Page. 49:

\*\*\*\*\*