

PRINCIPLES AND METHODS

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KEY ISSUES

- Methods are not optional; they are most necessary. But if we treat them like principles, we are going to do a lot of damage.
- We have to understand the difference between situations where we cannot “agree to disagree” and situations where we can.
- Bearing with one another in love is not relativism, and it is not compromise. It is refusal to compromise on a deeper issue.

Methods are of course necessary and inescapable, but they can only be employed safely when we understand the principles beneath them. Those who are focused on methods only will tend toward a blinkered tunnel vision. They might do what they were told to do, but they don't understand *why*. And those who grasp the principles but who neglect an appropriate amount of attention to method might write a great article or book, but will have trouble running a school in the real world.

The Bible tells us to strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). Many aspects to this require much thought, study, and work. One particularly important area is the distinction between *principles* and *methods*.

The principle is that you have to get from here to

there. The method would be a cab, a bus, a train or a plane. To use another example, if you have a four-lane highway, two lanes going to Heaven and two lanes going to Hell, and on each set you have a Ford and a Chevy driving alongside one another in the same direction, it makes no sense for the drivers of the two Fords to beep and wave at each other in a show of solidarity. They are sharing a method (Fords), but not the principle (driving the right direction).

A TEXT AND ITS TEACHING

“Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to *disputes over doubtful things*. For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls” (Rom. 14:1–4).

The disputes over food in the Roman church are unlikely to be duplicated in your school. Your disputes will have different subject matter . . . but the principles here are constant. Your disputes might be over extracurricular activities, or curriculum selection, and not over what food is served in the cafeteria. But this

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text still gives us some fundamental principles.

First, we are to *receive* those whom God has *received*. All squabbles over doubtful things simply show that we think that God's standards for fellowship are too low, and that we have a better grasp of what constitutes personal holiness than He does. Secondly, "doubtful things" are not determined by some supposed ambiguity in Scripture. Many doubtful things have a clear resolution in Scripture which is not the same thing as a clear resolution in the heads of the saints. *Courtesy and love are not relativism*. In this case, the weaker brother ate only vegetables. Knowing who is right (the one who is not limited to vegetables) does not change this principle. Third, the traffic in this goes both ways. The one who eats may not despise (hold in contempt), and the one who refrains may not *judge* (condemn). Fourth, if you are right about your brother, God is able to correct the problem. If you are wrong, *as you quite possibly are*, He is able to correct *your* problem.

THE NATURE OF CONTROVERSY

There are certain things which are necessary to remember in the middle of all such debates. First, methods are not bad; they are necessary. And "my" methods are not in view here. This particular discussion is prior to any debate over methods. Second, what is settled in history, and what is settled in principle, are two different things. Cultivate humility of mind. Third, in any controversy, if you guess at the motives of others, assume that you are almost certainly wrong. Fourth, God requires you to be a steward of all He gives. This includes how you avoid controversy, and how you conduct yourself in it. And last, it is frequently wrong to give offence, but it is always wrong to take offence.

PRINCIPLES & METHODS

The reason people have trouble with this has nothing to do with chance (Matt. 23:16–24). The teaching of Scripture is plain, and the problems which come from

ignoring this important distinction are *the result of sin*. This spiritual problem is perpetuated by a certain kind of individual—the kind our Lord calls *fools and blind*. When we are tempted to strain out a gnat and swallow a camel, we must remember that what was obvious to Christ was not obvious to the Pharisees. Our temptation is to reason from left to right in an improper fashion. *If they were really committed to this principle, then they would . . .*

Here is another tangible example. The principle is that you want to provide a godly, safe, and wise teaching environment for all your students in the third grade. That is the principle. The method would involve whether or not to hire Miss Brown, or Mrs. Henry. If another board member does not vote for the candidate you think the best, this does not mean that they have rejected the principle. They have simply disagreed about Miss Brown or Mrs. Henry.

GUARDING THE TONGUE

Are you fully convinced on whatever the issues are? That, in itself, is good (Romans 14:5). But if there is any occasion for troubling others for whom Christ died, then you should keep your convictions to yourself. At the same time, know your own heart—there are many ways to steer a conversation into trouble without overt comments. "I don't know why she got so defensive. All I did was . . ." We must pray for a love of peace, and strive for humility of mind.