

When to make a stand

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1. Three great stands

In the mid-fourth century the bishop of Alexandria looked increasingly isolated as a supporter of the decisions of the Council of Nicaea in 325. As a young man, Athanasius had been present at the Council and he was committed to its view that Scripture teaches the Son is as much God as the Father is. One little word captured the sentiment, though for twenty-five years or so Athanasius avoided debating that word. It was the word *ὁμοούσιος*, ‘of the same substance’. The Son is of the Same substance as the Father — not another substance, not a derived substance, not a created substance — and because he is of the same substance, he is worthy of the same honour and obedience and worship as the Father. Because he is of the same substance, he is able to save us. That was the confession of the 318 bishops who gathered at Nicaea. It was Athanasius’ confession (he only became a bishop three years later). But following the council, one by one the bishops of the ancient church were persuaded to abandon the term and the Emperor himself spoke against it. In what is most probably an apocryphal tale, Athanasius’ servant is supposed to have come into his room one morning agitated and exclaiming ‘Athansius, do you not know the whole world is against you?’ And Athanasius is reported to have said ‘Well then, is Athanasius against the world’. *Athanasius contra mundum* — it is a Latin slogan that has become synonymous with integrity, with a willingness to stand up and confess the truth no matter what the odds. It meant having the courage to stand alone. It is one of the stirring stories of church history. It energises people even today. And one of the reasons for that is that in the end, at the Council of Constantinople in 381 (eight years after Athanasius’ death), he was vindicated.

Fast forward twelve hundred years and travel to the German city of Worms. There a lone German monk stood before all the might of the Holy Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic church. Seated in all their finery were the princes of the Empire and the representatives of the pope. The closest parallel today would be, I suppose, the

General Assembly of the United Nations with the leaders of the great religions as invited guests. Here was an intensely intimidating crowd. And they were in no mood for compromise. The man was not to be allowed to make a speech. He was to answer the questions with just a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. If you know the story you’ll know how he outsmarted them. He divided the works they wanted him to repudiate into three — some were devotional works that no one had any problem with. ‘You wouldn’t want me to repudiate those, would you?’ Some were works written in the heat of controversy and he readily admitted that he could sometimes be too sharp in the midst of controversy. But then there was a third group of writings, those in which he sought as a doctor of the church to speak the truth of Scripture as he was under oath to do, no matter what the circumstances. ‘Let justice be done though the heavens fall’ (*fiat iustitia ruat caelum*). It is one of the great sentiments of the ancient world. For the Luther, though, it was rather the words of Jesus that guided his action: ‘Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away’. And so Luther stood before them all and famously confessed:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason — for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves — I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one’s conscience is neither safe nor sound. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.¹

It’s hard not to get excited by Luther’s courage and clarity. All the more so when you realise his one great fear on the way to this confrontation was not that he would be arrested and burnt at the stake, though that was a real possibility. Rather, he was afraid that when faced with them all, in all the splendour of their power, he would cave in and not make a stand. And so as he was ushered out of the room in the pandemonium that ensued, he was overheard to say, ‘I’ve come through! I’ve come through!’

¹ M. Luther, ‘*Verhandlungen mit D. Martin Luther auf dem Reichstage zu Worms (1521)*’ WA 7:838 = LW 32:112. I have included the controversial last three sentences which did not appear in the official record but were copied down by those present. Their absence from the official record is easily explained by pandemonium that broke out in the hall when Luther reached this point of his speech.

If Scripture teaches it, then I must stand at this point. That was Luther's legacy. In the nineteenth century, the legend was summed up with these words put in the mouth of Luther. I haven't been able to find that he actually said them, but they certainly capture a sentiment found in different words in a number of places in his writing:

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved. To be steady on all battle fronts besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.²

Fast forward again to December 2007. A group of Anglican bishops from Africa, Latin America and Australia meet in a hotel near Nairobi airport. They have been called together by Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria to discuss the crisis in the Anglican Communion. The long history of Western doctrinal and moral innovation had crossed a new line with the consecration of a practising homosexual man as the Bishop of New Hampshire. Those who protested had been badgered into silence or subjected to legal action of one kind or another. The response of the Archbishop of Canterbury had been confusing and equivocal. It was not clear at that point whether he would invite those who had done these things to share with the other bishops in the forthcoming Lambeth Conference (2008) — in the end he did invite them, only excluding the man at the centre of it all and he came anyway. Various warnings had been issued by the Primates. Repeated approaches had been made. But it was now clear that neither the Archbishop of Canterbury nor the Anglican Communion Office were prepared to condemn what had been done in America and in Canada. And so that small group of bishops and a few others gathered in Nairobi. A small group, yes. But together they represented more than half of the active, church-attending Anglicans around the world. And they made a stand. 'We will gather the faithful in Jerusalem to affirm again the gospel we are committed to taking to the world. We won't just say "no" to the gay agenda in the church; we want to say "yes" to God's agenda in the church.' GAFCON in Jerusalem in June 2008 was a statement to the Anglican Communion and to the world that there were Anglicans in the world who were willing to live in

² E. R. Charles, *Chronicles of the Schönberg-Cotta Family* (London: Nelson, 1864), 276.

humble obedience to God and what he has made known about himself, his purposes in the world. Here were Anglicans who were not prepared anymore to be led away from the gospel and the teaching of Scripture in the service of the institution or capitulation to the ethical commitments of the surrounding culture. They were willing to be pilloried, to leave behind their possessions and strike out on their own whenever the denomination insisted it all belonged to them, because the gospel of Jesus Christ and the authority of his word must not be compromised. The accounts of suffering and persecution reported in Jerusalem and London and Nairobi and this week in Melbourne are chilling.

Three great ‘stands’ in the history of the church: the stand of Athanasius over the person of Christ; the stand of Martin Luther over the authority of Scripture and justification by faith alone; the stand of the GAFCON Primates over the priority of Christ and his mission, the authority of Scripture over denominational processes, revisionist theology, and ethical practice. These are just three of course. There have been others. Being prepared to make a stand has characterised genuine Christian leadership throughout the last two thousand years. But why? And when? And how?

2. The great biblical example

Before I attempt to outline some *theological* principles which bear on these questions, I want to turn our attention to one more example, the great biblical archetypal example, the example of Paul’s stand in Antioch outlined for us in Galatians 2.

The details of the incident are well known. Peter (also known as Cephas) had come to Antioch and was enjoying fellowship with Paul and the Jewish and Gentile converts in the city. But then men came from James in Jerusalem, at least they purported to come from James in Jerusalem, and after their arrival Peter withdrew from eating with the Gentiles and followed the ritual separation of Jew from Gentile which was a characteristic of Judaism. Paul describes those who put pressure on Peter as ‘the circumcision party’ — obviously a group that insisted on a covenantal and ceremonial separation of Jews and Gentiles even after conversion. So persuasive were these men, Paul tells us in verse 13, that even Barnabas and the rest of the Jewish converts followed their practice.

That is when Paul confronted Peter, ‘face to face’ as he puts it, because ‘their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel’ (v. 14). That is when Paul ‘made a stand’. Not because the gospel is all about table fellowship and the boundaries of the covenant — that suggestion misses the logic of Paul’s words in Galatians 2 altogether. Eating and drinking together, the tearing down of the ceremonial and fellowship barriers between Jew and Gentile was a *consequence* of the gospel but one that was so natural and necessary a consequence that to deny it was to be ‘out of step with the truth of the gospel’.

We must not minimise the significance and the seriousness of Paul’s confrontation of Peter and even his willingness to say ‘he stood condemned’. Paul did not consider this a light thing. No doubt those who witnessed it did not consider it a light thing either. Two apostles opposing one another. Peter, one of Jesus’ three closest friends, being reprimanded by Paul, a relative newcomer. It had the potential to split the fledgling Christian movement apart

But Paul considered Peter’s backflip so significant that he could not overlook it. He explained his reasoning to the Galatians. Peter was doing something that so compromised the central truths of the gospel and the mission to the Gentiles it must be confronted.

The interesting thing is that Peter had not preached against the gospel. He had not denied Paul’s teaching that we are justified by faith apart from works. Indeed, the very fact that Paul appeals to this doctrine in the last paragraph of chapter 2 and into chapter 3 makes clear that this was common ground for them. But Peter had acted in a way that was entirely inconsistent with the fact that both Jews and Gentiles are set in the right with God, not by anything *they* do, religious or otherwise, but because of what *the Christ* has done. If you believe that truth then you cannot separate as if to eat with Gentiles would make you unclean before God.

So at first glance what Peter was doing in Antioch may not have seemed a gospel issue. He apparently affirmed all the right things. But his behaviour undermined his confession. It implied he didn’t really believe it. When push came to shove, something other than the gospel was determining how he was behaving in Antioch. Remember,

the gospel is not about table fellowship, first and foremost. It is not, first and foremost about the boundaries of the covenant. It is about Jesus Christ and the salvation he has won for all who will come to him in faith. But a necessary consequence of that gospel is that the barriers between Jew and Gentile have been torn down — each is justified in exactly the same way. And the apostle Paul was willing to make a public issue of this. He was willing to make a stand, though no doubt some were horrified that he'd been so black and white, so dogmatic, so confrontational.

I've taken time with these four examples, three from the history of the churches over the past two thousand years and one from the New Testament itself, to make the point that taking a stand is an entirely appropriate thing to do. It need not to be the result of intolerance, pugnacity, or just the expression of a harder, more cut-throat regional culture. Of course there have been plenty who have argued that that is just what was going on when Athanasius made his stand, Luther his, GAFCON theirs, or Paul his. Each have been attacked as unnecessarily belligerent, driven by personal dogmatism and intolerance. But without these men and women the biblical gospel would have been lost. And without these men and women God's precious people would have suffered a harm far greater than ridicule and persecution.

God himself is loving and generous and full of compassion. But he is not infinitely tolerant. The last judgment and the reality of hell are testimony to that. The strong denunciation of false prophets and false teachers in both the Old Testament and the New Testament is testimony to that. Ultimately our willingness to take a stand is because God's honour matters, God's truth matters, and God's gospel — inextricably tied to God's honour and God's truth as it is — God's gospel matters. It matters to God and it matters to those who have been rescued by God. And we are prepared for people to misunderstand us, to misconstrue what we are saying and doing in the most unhelpful and uncharitable ways, to attribute false motives to us and to deride us as intellectual pygmies and cultural dinosaurs, because when God has spoken, when the loving, generous, good God has made his mind known, then it is no longer a matter of what I think or I'd prefer or what we have decided. The words of Christ must stand, though heaven and earth pass away. And one day they will.

So when do we make a stand? Of course, just as important, perhaps more important really, is *how* we make a stand. How do we treat those with whom we disagree and those whom we think are compromising God's revealed truth and spiritually endangering God's people? Whatever our answer to that question, it must not disqualify the approach of the apostle Paul given to us in Scripture. We are not in a position to look down on him or dismiss his stand as a product of his own psychological make-up. The *how* question is a very important question and one we need to face in the FCA movement because there *are* differences even among us which sooner or later will need to be addressed.

But let me conclude with a brief list of theological principles to consider as we approach the other question '*when* do we make a stand?'

3. Theological principles for making a stand

There are undoubtedly more principles than these that we could profitably consider this afternoon but at least these five can give us a start.

(1) *The good God has given us a good word which is for the benefit of his people.*

The benevolence of God is hardly controversial among us. God has demonstrated his love toward us in this, that while we were still sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5.8). He gives good gifts to his children. His truth is life-giving. Paul could tell Timothy that the sacred writings 'are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' (2 Tim. 3.15). This means, conversely, that God's people are harmed when God's good word is obscured or denied. Error is dangerous and theological error is exceedingly dangerous. It also means that far from trying to minimise the application of this good word God has given us we should be seeking to understand just how much of a difference it makes for our good. God's benevolence and the goodness of his word are foundational principles when considering when to make a stand. I want to ask, 'Is this teaching, is this behaviour, drawing people away from the good God's good word which nourishes and builds his people?' 'Does it build confidence in God's good word as an instrument for good or does it undermine that confidence?' 'Does it

suggest that the truth expressed in God's word is incomplete, or out-dated, or ill-informed?'

(2) *God's word is the only authoritative basis on which to make a stand.* Our consciences may not be bound any further than the word of God binds them. That was Luther's point. We can only confidently make a stand when God has spoken and his word must not be silenced by institutional pronouncements or regulation, personal preferences or reasoning, cultural pressure, or any such thing. Here the theology of the written word of God is critically important. Because these words, though they bear the genuine conscious imprint of their human authors, are ultimately God's word to us, they bear his authority. We can insist that there is no other name under heaven given to us by which we must be saved precisely because God himself has made that known to us in his word (Acts 4.12). So when contemplating making a stand I want to ask 'Has God spoken on this issue?' 'Does his word make clear God's perspective on this truth or this behaviour?' Jesus himself, as well as his apostles, often clinched an argument with the words 'It is written'. That is because they were convinced that where the written word of God addressed an issue, that settled the matter. On that ground a confident stand can be made. 'Holy Scripture has spoken; the matter is decided' (*scriptura sacra locuta, res decisa est*).³

(3) *Matters of indifference (adiaphora) only exist where either Scripture is silent or it gives freedom for diversity.* The concept of *adiaphora* has a clear biblical warrant in Paul's writing about circumcision. Three times he says to the Corinthians or to the Galatians the same thing: 'For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God' (1 Cor. 7.19); 'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love (Gal. 5.6); 'For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation' (Gal. 6.15). When it didn't matter and no one was making an issue of it, Paul could freely avoid all

³ The Reformers reworking of the traditional axiom traced to Augustine's Sermon 131: 'Rome has spoken; the case is closed' (*Roma locuta, causa finita est*).

controversy by having Timothy circumcised (Acts 16.3). However, when it was an issue, when people were making something of it, Paul could resolutely refuse to endorse circumcision: when in Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus ‘even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek’ (Gal. 2.3). Similar things could be said about the practice of eating food which had previously been offered to idols. It is not an issue when no one is making an issue out of it (1 Cor. 8.8) but once it is made an issue, and there is the danger of harming a brother for whom Christ died, it is no longer a matter of indifference (1 Cor 8.9–11). There are circumstances in which something which might generally be thought to be a matter of indifference becomes a matter of principle.

Historically the term *adiaphora* applied to the continuation of practices that existed in the Roman churches prior to the Reformation, such as the wearing of distinctive clerical dress and, as the Book of Concord (1580) put it, ‘ceremonies and church rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word’. It was *never* applied to matters of doctrine. It was *never* applied to matters directly addressed in the Scriptures. There is undoubtedly disagreement in the churches and perhaps even among us here on some matters of doctrine and some matters directly addressed in the Scriptures. But these would never classically be considered *adiaphora*. They are instead a reason to keep talking as we seek to come to a common mind, not a reason to stop talking and retreat to our own view. The simple fact of disagreement on an issue between godly men and women who are all seeking to be faithful to Christ and the Scriptures is not in itself sufficient to render an issue *adiaphora*. Too many other things can be going on in those cases, some of them acknowledged, some of them hidden, even from ourselves. We must not allow too quick an appeal to *adiaphora* to close down the conversation.

There is ample ground for generosity towards *people* in Scripture — believers and unbelievers, those we agree with and those we don’t — and ample precedent in church history for such generosity. We are called upon as disciples of Christ to love one another and not to be divisive (Jn 13.34; Rom. 16.7; Titus 3.10–11). But

there is little ground for what some oddly call ‘a generous orthodoxy’. Generosity towards people — most definitely; but tenacious faithfulness when it comes to biblical doctrine. So our decisions about when to make a stand need to take account of matters of indifference, which exist where either Scripture is silent or it gives freedom for diversity.

- (4) *Christian ministry must have the courage to say ‘no’ as well as ‘yes’.* Nobody likes negativity. It is much easier and much more acceptable to say ‘yes’ all the time. And yet you don’t have to read far into the Pastoral Epistles or any of the New Testament letters actually, before you realise that teaching and correction, encouragement and rebuke, go hand in hand in Christian ministry. Of course there is the question of *how* you say ‘no’, how you correct and warn and administer a rebuke when that is necessary. There is no license for harshness, or censoriousness, or condemnation in the New Testament. The goal is always repentance and restoration and a life realigned to the word of God and the mission of the gospel. But God’s people need to know not only what is true and right and appropriate but also what is false and wrong and improper. The ancient creeds spoke not only of what the truth was but also about what was not true. ‘Begotten *not* made’, according to the Nicene Creed. ‘Two natures *without* confusion, *without* change, *without* division, *without* separation’, according to Chalcedon. Very often the leaders of the church, following the example of the apostles, found that saying what was true was not enough. They also needed to be clear about what was not true. For the sake of the precious people for whom Christ died, we must be prepared to say ‘No’ as well as ‘Yes’.
- (5) *The goal of making any stand is not a ‘party win’ but confessing Christ and caring for his people.* We far too easily dissolve into factions and tribes and parties. It is a very human trait. And it happens amongst Christians as well. At one level it is entirely normal and good that we should gather with others with whom we have a common mind and a common mission. But if it becomes an exclusive grouping, if it refuses to learn from others and to go with them back to the Scriptures to hear God’s truth together, if it is an instrument of division and

not one of mission at all in reality, then the group or party or collaboration is actually an opportunity for great harm rather than great good. Our concern in speaking the truth, and confuting error, and seeking to live out what we have been told and believe, is in order to confess Christ is Lord fully, genuinely and without hesitation. It is in order that Christ might be known in all the world and Christ's people might be built up within the churches. So we need to ask ourselves what is the real goal for which we are making this stand: to draw attention to ourselves or to draw attention to Christ? To put down those who oppose us, or to guard and protect and build up those who belong to Christ?

You know, even refusing to make a stand amounts to making a stand in the end. It is a statement about what matters most to you and for what you would be willing to risk misunderstanding, rejection, persecution and worse. It is always possible to do it all wrong. But not being willing to do it at all just doesn't fit with the God who has spoken to us, the priority of Christ and his gospel, and the preciousness of his people.