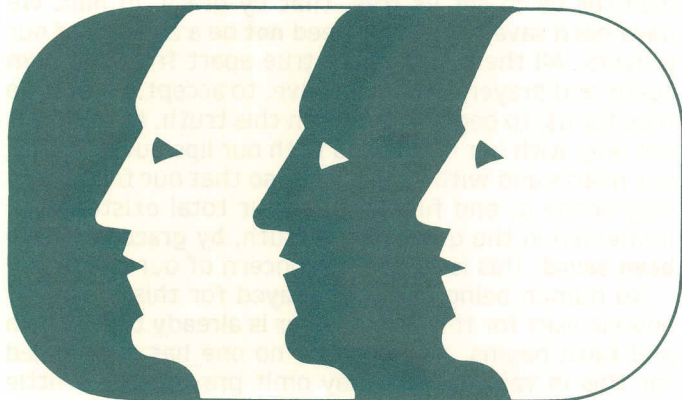


# When Good Men Differ

## Part I

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John Milton, author of "Paradise Lost," was a theologian as well as an epic poet. He once affirmed that truth is like a virgin who has been cruelly hewed into innumerable pieces and scattered through the world and that, therefore, the search for truth in its wholeness is tedious and difficult.

Much of the problem in seeking theological truth, however, arises from a source Milton did not mention — our poor, depraved, weak human nature which seeks to defend itself from insecurity by refusing new concepts which challenge and disturb. Evidence for this can be found in many areas apart from religion. For example, we have the reminders given by Henry Rogers:

The heavens were as bright and the intellect of men as vigorous, three thousand years ago, as now. Yet a true astronomy is but of yesterday. Till within the last three hundred years, men in general, and philosophers among them, believed that the earth was stationary, and that the sun and stars revolved around it. Even when the Copernican theory was at last discovered, how slow were men to believe in it, and how tenacious of ancient error. Harvey's well-known saying, that "he could not get any man above forty to believe in the circulation of the blood," is instructive: it is a specimen of the difficulty with which even scientific truth breaks through the obstructions of ignorance and prejudice. (*The Superhuman Origin of the Bible*, p. 388)

One of the early classics on psychology was William James' *Talks to Teachers*. It is eminently readable and reflects a genius for expressing ideas in such a way that they come across as self-authenticating. On this problem of accepting new truth James has pertinent lines:

In all the apperceptive operations of the mind, a certain general law makes itself felt — the law of economy. In admitting a new body of experience, we instinctively seek to disturb as little as possible our pre-existing stock of ideas. We always try to name a new experience in some way which will assimilate it to what we already know. We hate anything **absolutely** new, anything without any name, and for which a new name must be forged. . . .

In later life this economical tendency to leave the old undisturbed leads to what we know as 'old fogysm.' A new idea or a fact which would entail extensive rearrangement of the previous system of beliefs is always ignored or extruded from the mind in case it cannot be sophistically reinterpreted so as to

tally harmoniously with the system. We have all conducted discussions with middle-aged people, overpowered them with our reasons, forced them to admit our contention, and a week later found them back as secure and constant in their old opinion as if they had never conversed with us at all. We think them old fogies; but there are young fogies, too. Old fogysm begins at a younger age than we think. I am almost afraid to say so, but I believe that in the majority of human beings it begins at about twenty-five. (pp. 159-161, see also pp. 165-167)

In another place James deals with the problem of prejudice which arises because of the particular camp to which we belong.

The self-same person, according to the line of thought he may be in, or to his emotional mood, will apperceive the same impression quite differently on different occasions. A medical or engineering expert retained on one side of a case will not apperceive the facts in the same way as if the other side had retained him. When people are at loggerheads about the interpretation of a fact, it usually shows that they have too few heads of classification to apperceive by; for, as a general thing, the fact of such a dispute is enough to show that neither one of their rival interpretations is a perfect fit. Both sides deal with the matter by approximation, squeezing it under the handiest or least disturbing conception: whereas it would, nine times out of ten, be better to enlarge their stock of ideas. (*Ibid.*, p. 163)

Note how James thus tries to save us from the natural error of thinking it is only "the other side" which makes this error. He continues by telling us that for most humans their stock of names and concepts is mostly acquired during adolescence and shortly thereafter. The sad result of this is that if one has not been exposed to any specific intellectual "ball-game" by about twenty-five years of age it is a thousand to one against our becoming ever adept in that new area. But, consolingly, James also says that if we have been in the habit of changing our minds and adding to our mental stock the odds are very much better.

More recently Leon Festinger has written *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* which builds upon the psychological truths earlier expressed by James.

He considers the question: "What happens when Belief A is confronted by contradictory Evidence B?" The result is strain, tension, anxiety, or what Festinger calls "cognitive dissonance." Groups will usually handle this cognitive dissonance in one of three ways. One, they will try to change the **information** by trying to increase the desirability of Belief A; diminish the significance of Evidence B or deny it altogether; or, stress the similarities between Belief A and Evidence B, even if there are outstanding dissimilarities. Two, they will try to change the **environment**, either externally by trying to gain more adherents to Belief A thus making the strain less intense; or internally by eliminating the person or persons who represent Evidence B. Three, they will try to change the **group** itself. Statements will be made that will substantiate Belief A; or if enough people can agree to it, Evidence B will be accepted and Belief A abandoned; or perhaps both will be put to one side and Position C will be accepted. (See Leon Festinger's *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford University Press, 1957.)

A particular group will not usually utilize all of these mechanisms for the reduction of cognitive dissonance, but it may use several of them. Many will recognize that several well-known and well-loved churches today exemplify Festinger's theory.

Festinger and colleagues have applied this theory to



the disappointed advent movement in New England during the mid-1840's. In the opening chapter of the work **When Prophecy Fails**, they discuss the psycho-mechanisms used by early Adventists to accommodate themselves to the fact that Christ did not return at the time that many had predicted.

The author points out that instead of accepting the disconfirmation and discarding the erroneous belief, groups will often try to proselytize more fervently for their cause. **"If more and more people can be persuaded that the system of belief is correct, then clearly it must, after all, be correct"** (Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schaehter, **When Prophecy Fails**, p. 28, emphasis original).

**A Christian will not conclude that church leaders who reject new truth are therefore as wicked and perverse as the Pharisees. Rather he will recognize that all human nature, including his own, is of one piece and sadly tarnished by the effects of the Fall.**

Much of the religious past as well as the present is illuminated by these insights. We begin to understand why the Pope of Luther's day, instead of praising God for the new light on the simplicity of salvation shed by Luther's writings, could rather appeal to God to arise and overthrow the wild boar that had entered the church vineyard. Similarly, the Wesleys were regarded by their church as dangerous enthusiasts and the Episcopalian body rejected the reform which would have nourished and strengthened their own congregations as nothing else could. The Wesleyans also repeated the same mistake continually.

Those who longed to see the fulfillment of the Blessed Hope of Christ's return were expelled from American congregations of Methodists and others in the 1840's. And on the other side of the world the newly risen William Booth was ejected by the Wesleyan church he had served so energetically for years.

Never should it be thought that just one or two religious groups are prone to this type of blind folly — it has characterized all church movements however pure their beginnings and however pious and zealous their leaders. We do not present these facts to condemn any person or group but in order to warn all, including this writer and those who labor in harmony with him.

Gamaliel's counsel of "hands off" has never been acceptable to religious leaders. Even the Baptists of England passed a vote of censure against the mighty Spurgeon because he preached against the modernist apostasy within its ranks. Baptists, not atheists, hastened the death of Spurgeon according to his own testimony. Some years later the same Baptists raised a monument to the memory of the man they had "crucified." All of which demonstrates that neither

individuals nor groups learn readily from experience, for the identical English Baptist church had despised their own Carey a century before its antagonism to Spurgeon.

Jesus explained it all during the last teachings of his earthly life as he anticipated his own agony. Undoubtedly in this instance the guilt was infinitely greater, but the fatal tendency of religious persons in all ages is identical with that which he condemns here.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you build the tombs of prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' . . . Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town. . . . O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! (Mt 23:29,30,34,37)

And how can we today personally profit by the testimony of psychology and church history? First — we should not be discouraged if human nature in our own day continues to act and react as it has in all previous centuries. A Christian will not conclude that church leaders who reject new truth are therefore as wicked and perverse as the Pharisees. Rather he will recognize that all human nature, including his own, is of one piece and sadly tarnished by the effects of the Fall. The words of Henry Rogers apply to the Christian church in general:

How often does God permit his most excellent gifts to be in some degree marred by the hands through which they are administered! How often does he allow the slips and weaknesses of the wisest and best to tarnish their worth or diminish their usefulness; not indeed to the frustration of the great objects for which they are equipped and sent into the world, or of the benefits they were destined to confer upon it; but so far as to evince that there is a baser element in even the most precious things of earth, of ignorance and infirmity even in the noblest forms of humanity. (**The Superhuman Origin of the Bible**, p. 420)

Second, we should guard against our own native reactions to new challenges and to the inevitable prejudice and antagonism which accompany the appearance of new truth (on both sides). All of us have many things to learn, and many to unlearn. And all of us, apart from continual dependence upon Christ, are exceedingly weak.

Third, we should see the importance of Augustine's advice for those involved in theological controversy. "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." Perhaps he devised this motto after meditation upon our Lord's words in the same sermon quoted above, words warning against attending scrupulously to the minute matters of religion and neglecting the weightier matters of righteousness, mercy, and faith (see Mt 23:32).

There is yet another danger to be avoided by all Christians contending for "the faith once for all time delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), and that we will address next month.

For the present our admonition is — be of good cheer though good men differ. Let us not be so proud as to expect all to agree with ourselves. Believe God is on his throne and that he does all things well, but according to his own timetable. Romans 8:28. □