

“YES, BUT ON THE OTHER HAND....”

By D.A. Carson

From 1 Corinthians 7 on to the end of this epistle, Paul frequently resorts to what some have called the “Yes, but” form of argument.

In the hands of some people, of course, the “Yes, but” argument betrays intellectual arrogance, or a mind pathetically committed to relativism.

But there is one place where the “Yes, but” form of argument is an important tool in the hands of a wise pastor. Not infrequently, different groups within the same local church adopt different stances on some issue or other. But because the pastor is concerned not to win an argument or best a debating partner, rather to lead both sides of the issue into mutual reconciliation as well as into a more mature interpretation, he will deploy forms of argument that lead to these desirable ends. And here, the “Yes, but” argument is particularly helpful.

That is exactly the form of argument Paul repeatedly deploys when he begins to address the issues about which the Corinthian believers have written to him (1 Cor. 7:1), and about which they were clearly divided. It will be useful to chronicle some of the principal examples.

Begin with 1 Corinthians 7. “It is good for a man not to marry” (NIV) – more literally, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman” (There is no convincing evidence that the literal expression means “to marry.”). Apparently one part of the church perceives virtue in sexual abstinence, and even in avoidance of all physical contact with women. Perhaps their position became polarized precisely because, judging by 6:12-20, some in the church were lax in these matters. At one level, Paul agrees with those of more ascetic disposition: “It is good,” he writes. “Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband” (7:2). That is not the only biblical warrant for marriage, of course, but it is an important one. Again, “For I wish that all men were even as I myself [i.e. single, whether because Paul was celibate or a widower]. *But* each one has his own gift [*charisma*] from God, one in this manner and another in that” (7:7). Thus both celibacy and marriage are to be viewed as “grace gifts.”

Sometimes the argument takes a little longer to develop, but it is no less potent for that. Dealing with food that had been sacrificed to idols, Paul writes, “We know that we all have knowledge” (8:1). Before qualifying the claim, Paul warns against knowledge divorced from love (8:1-3), and then returns to what we know: “we know that an idol is

nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one” (8:4). This theme is then gently expounded (8:5-6). “However, there is not in everyone that knowledge” (8:7) – and by this means the apostle points out that even those who are right in what they “know” must be constrained by love so as not to damage brothers and sisters in Christ whose knowledge is not so advanced and in whom maturity is lacking.

This “Yes, but” argument is found at the heart of Paul’s treatment of tongues. “I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue” (14:18-19). Whatever the nature of the tongues that Paul speaks in greater abundance than his Corinthian readers, he clearly does not normally use them when the church is assembled. Why not? The issue throughout 1 Corinthians is the *intelligibility* of all that goes on in the corporate meetings of the church. Paul is not prepared to banish all tongues; but he is not prepared to let them have any significant sway in the local congregation (five words versus ten thousand!) – quite apart from the other restrictions that the apostle places on tongues in the surrounding context.

There are two lessons to learn immediately.

First, on some issues the wise pastor is as concerned to let the people to whom he ministers see where they are right as he is to point out where they are wrong. Encouragement is a biblically defined gift, and it should be displayed plentifully in those who handle the Word.

Second, we cannot treat every subject that way. Precisely because he deploys the “Yes, but” argument so frequently in this epistle, when Paul comes down hard his words have special force. “Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse” (11:17), Paul writes, as he introduces his longest section on the Lord’s Supper. There is no “Yes”; it is all “but.” Similarly, when Paul summarizes the Gospel, focusing on the resurrection of Jesus Christ (15:1-8), the argument is all “Yes”; there is no “but.” How could there be?

Only the union of a profound grasp of Scripture and of Spirit-borne pastoral sensitivity will prove an adequate base for deciding, on particular issues, which form of argument is wise, convincing, edifying, right.

Don Carson is author of many books including The Cross & Christian Ministry (on 1 Cor. 1-4; 9) and Showing the Spirit (on 1 Cor. 12-14), both from Baker Books.