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Dear Friends:

Here is a one-page article and a long follow up on an issue which has troubled students of The URANTIA Book for a long time. I have spent a great deal of time in the last couple of years trying to improve my own quality of thinking on this issue. Here are the first products of that effort. The URANTIA Foundation has given permission for me to send out copies (and also to recover my costs, about US\$ 3.00 per copy mailed).

If you believe this issue is important and you find these documents helpful, please think creatively about how they could be made more widely available, about what other ways of communicating such ideas can be developed, and about what other aspects of the topic need to be addressed.

Please forgive the mass communication--it saves time and postage. I would love to correspond personally in response to your evaluations.

Regardless of the extent to which you agree with my perspectives, I salute your concern with The URANTIA Book and greet you as a brother!

Love,

Jeff Wattles

True or False Freedom for the Strange Preacher?

How should URANTIA Brotherhood respond to those who it thinks may be undertaking unwise projects with The URANTIA Book? Jesus' remark about the strange preacher is often cited as an answer. According to the story given on pp. 1764-65, the central organization of the gospel movement should not try to establish "administrative control" and "jurisdiction of one group of believers" over other teachers, even if these other teachers are "not wholly worthy" and "do many strange things."

In fact the Brotherhood is already complying with the model of Jesus' teaching. It does not attempt to establish administrative control or jurisdiction over other groups. It does not try to take over other organizations. It does not forbid anyone to teach.

What the Brotherhood does try to do from time to time is to stand up for what it believes to be wise policy. Once we distinguish political imperialism from verbal persuasion, this sounds like a very reasonable thing to do, and many people support the Brotherhood in this effort.

There are, nonetheless, some who believe that even this persuasion threatens the freedom that individual readers have to interpret The URANTIA Book as they choose and to act on their own interpretations. "You see things your way; I see things my way." We hear such reasoning at times, and the story of the strange preacher is invoked to clinch the case for freedom of action. This is the argument I wish to challenge.

Appeal to the precedent of the strange preacher often occurs in a larger context of relativism, a popular view in our culture. Relativism is the doctrine that truth is relative to a given person's interpretation. We hear relativistic slogans often: "It all depends on how you look at things." "You can prove anything from The URANTIA Book." We tend to greet such statements with a smile. They function almost like trump cards in many conversations. But we need to start responding: No, it doesn't all depend on how you look at things; no, you can't prove anything from The URANTIA Book. It is a fact that people disagree, but it does not follow that each person is equally justified in his or her view. Relativism would deprive us of any standard to help us work through differences together. Relativistic slogans are often used to suggest that the speaker has a right to act without interference. Such an attitude is hardly compatible with an organization that tries to discern and pursue wise policy together.

A sophistry uses obvious facts (e.g., that people disagree, that Jesus said this or that) in a fuzzy way to support a dangerous conclusion. The conclusion about false freedom may be unexpressed (no student of The URANTIA Book would assert it outright); or the conclusion may be underexpressed, as in a statement like, "They can't tell us what to do." But sophistries may persist, even if the expression is muted. Again, if the only point were to insist on administrative autonomy for separate organizations, then there would be no fallacy, no sophistry. But the implied conclusion often goes much farther than that, although this may not be fully clear even to the speaker. The fact that one group should be free from the administrative control of another does not mean that it should regard itself as free to do whatever it wants to do. Nor should such groups regard themselves as immune from discussion with the large group, which may be profoundly affected by what the smaller group chooses to do.

Wonderful people pursuing epochal goals can fall into subtle doctrines of false liberty unawares. Adam and Eve did (846.3). The URANTIA Book has been placed in our hands as a trust, and we default on that trust if our counsel amounts to nothing more than saying, "Let each street person or millionaire do whatever ambitious project is truly in the minds of his chosen advisors." Here all I have tried to do is to lay to rest a particular argument. What a bitter irony if Jesus' remark about the strange preacher were perverted into a premise in support of false liberty! It is not loving to permit sophistry to masquerade as tolerance and love. Once we have seen through the fallacies, we can explore in earnest the guidelines that The URANTIA Book itself offers for wise policy.