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**Title:** "Difference of Opinion," by John K. Stayman

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pretty well rehearsed.

Oration.

Difference of Opinion.

for

Commencement July 8<sup>th</sup> 1841.

by

J. K. Stayman.

J. K. Stegman

The study of society is at once interesting and instructive. The history of the progress of mankind from barbarism to civilization, and of the gradual changes and developments which have taken place during that progress, shows us how mind acts upon mind and how circumstances influence and vary those actions; it lays open to our view the constitution of the mind itself, and spreads before us the experience of past ages; it points out the rocks upon which nations have been wrecked and serves as a beacon-light to direct onward in our course through the misty future.

If such benefits may be derived from a careful study of the history of the past, we should think no time too long, and no labour too great, in order to acquire an accurate knowledge of all that has transpired in society from the earliest period of its existence down to its present condition.

But in this study few things strike the attention so forcibly as the wide difference and oftentimes the direct opposition which is found to prevail in the opinions of mankind concerning matters of vital importance. When viewed in this respect, society, instead of presenting a symmetrical aspect appears to be broken up and split asunder into fragments so rough and so widely scattered, that it seems impossible ever to recollect and firmly reunite them together.

These differences of opinion belong to nations and individuals. In nations they are exhibited in their forms of government, in their laws, in their religions and in their manners and customs. It is national opinion which decides whether the form of government shall be monarchical or democratical; and whether

The religion shall be Mahometanism or Christianity. It is natural opinion which lies at the foundation of all natural law; and which stamps upon each nation a peculiarity of manners and customs.

Individuals also differ in their opinions not less than nations. And questions in Morals and Religion, and theories in Politics and Science have been the points upon which they have differed in the greatest degree. The most strikingly marked developments of a difference in the opinions of mankind concerning morals and religion is to be found in the history of the schools of Grecian Philosophy, and may daily be observed in the various sects into which Christians are at present divided. And the political parties of our own country, and the scientific writings which crowd our libraries need scarcely be referred to as a proof of the conflict which has existed in the opinions of mankind on political and scientific matters.

But this difference of opinion is both natural in its origin and beneficial in its influence. It is natural because it results from the constitution of the mind, and the laws which govern its actions. For it seems necessary in order that any two persons should agree exactly in their opinions concerning everything; that there should be in the first place an equality of mental power, and in the second place that the circumstances under which that power is exerted should be similar. Where these two conditions exist it is impossible for us to conceive of any reason why there should be the slightest difference in the opinions of two individuals. Where they do not exist it is just as impossible to conceive how there should be an entire agreement in their opinions.

Now if it were granted that nature is impartial and constitutes all minds equally strong; yet such is the influence of circumstances upon the growth of the mind, that although all were equal in the beginning, none would be found to have grown equally, and in the end to possess equal power; because no two minds ever have been, nor ever can be placed in circumstances entirely by similar in every respect. So that men differ from one another in their opinions not from mere chance or caprice, as we might at first suppose, but necessarily, from the settled and well-known laws of the mind's action.

If any of us had been born in the East we would have been Mahometans then, for the very same reasons that we are Christians now. Our minds might still have possessed the same natural strength that they do now, but this would not alter the result at all. For the circumstances which would have determined our manner of thinking, would have induced us to be Mahometans then; just as the circumstances which have surrounded us, have induced us to be Christians. The irresistible force of education and example of interest and prejudice would have led us to embrace the faith of the Mussulmans, as naturally and as necessarily, as they have at present by operating in a different direction, led us to embrace the faith of the Christians. This is only a single illustration out of many which might be adduced of the powerful influence which circumstances have over our thoughts.

The benefits which result from a difference of opinion are highly important. It awakes in society a spirit of inquiry. It leads to cautiousness in the adoption of opinions and to a close investiga-

tion of the grounds upon which they are founded; and by so doing it impresses deeply upon the thoughts and keeps alive in the mind, things of a most weighty character, which would otherwise from their very nature soon wear away and be forgotten. And no doubt on this account, Providence has wisely ordered that in matters of religion and government especially, men, while they have a common end in view, should differ as to the means of its accomplishment; while they agree in their intention they should differ in their judgement. The controversies of religious sects and the disputes of political parties, have led to the discovery of many valuable truths in religion and politics, which, in all probability, would never have come to light had every thing remained quiet and inactive. And the sharp contentions which have engaged the skill of philosophers and metaphysicians, have in reality been the most powerful and active agents in promoting the cause of science and philosophy.

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If then it is natural for men to differ in their opinions, and of course impossible for all to think alike; and if this difference so far from being injurious, is beneficial in its influence; it becomes us always to entertain a proper respect for the opinions of our opponents, and to be careful that we do not resort to improper means in order to change those opinions. To be narrow-minded and bigoted, to exclude from the rank of a rational being whoever may differ from us in his opinions, is a kind of conduct which though often practised has not the slightest foundation in reason. Prejudice and personal abuse have

too often supplied the place of sound argument where we should least have expected such an occurrence. Intolerance and persecution have too often blackened the fair pages of this world's history.

But we may rejoice that the night of bigotry is nearly past. We may be glad that the age has gone by, in which the intellect of man slumbered and thought lay buried in gloom and darkness. The torch of religion which was burning dimly, for centuries in the cloister of the monk, and which would have gone out had it been possible, has been rekindled. The lamps of science has been replenished with oil, and lighted once more to illuminate the world. A spirit of earnest inquiry after truth, and of religious and political toleration is diffusing itself abroad in society. And every thing gives heart-cheering promise of the dawn and the breaking forth of a new era of light and of liberty of thought over the face of the whole earth.

June 17<sup>th</sup> 1841.

Wichitiam College.

J. K. Stayman.

Commencement Oration of John K. Stayman, Class of 1941  
Transcribed by Sarah-Hazel Jennings, May 2008  
Edited by Chris Altieri, June 2008

### Difference of Opinion

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June 17th 1841  
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