

Be Careful About What You Call a 'Different Gospel'

It has been said that heaven, at one and the same time, will be a great eye-opener and a great mouth-closer. You will be surprised to see many people there, and many people will be surprised to see you there. How true this is!

In the last week, I have been criticized for failing to condemn Joel Osteen and Creflo Dollar to hell while, on the other hand, I have been criticized for daring to take issue with their messages at all.

Someone claimed that Bill Johnson was the "biggest wolf ever" while, on the other side of the spectrum, someone claimed that John MacArthur was guilty of blaspheming the Spirit.

A Calvinist told me that Mike Bickle was a false teacher while someone else asked me how a Calvinist like James White could even be saved.

I witnessed one pastor being attacked for saying that those who did not believe in divine healing were preaching a "different gospel" while he, in turn, was condemned for preaching a "different gospel."

And then were the lovely tweets like these: "Charismaticism is a cult of Satan" and "cessationists who mock [charismatics], mock for the same reason why Elijah mocked false prophets. Why Ezekiel called idols dung pellets."

How can we possibly move forward in the midst of such division and name-calling?

I would urge everyone involved on all sides of today's doctrinal and practical controversies to tone down the rhetoric so we can focus on the real issues involved.

Calling everyone you differ with a “heretic” doesn’t help the cause of Christ, and church history has more than enough examples of Christians damning other Christians to hell (or even drowning them or burning them at the stake).

The fact is that non-essential doctrinal differences don’t determine who goes to heaven and who goes to hell, and as passionate as we might be about our beliefs, if someone holds to the essential fundamentals of the faith and has not denied the Lord by living a life of unrepentant sin, that person is our brother or sister.

They may or may not speak in tongues; they may be Calvinist or Arminian; they may reject or accept female pastors; they may be pre-trib, mid-trib, post-trib, or no-trib; they may believe in divine healing for today or believe that sickness can be a gift from God—this is just the beginning of a very long potential list—but if they have recognized themselves as lost sinners, put their trust in Jesus, the divine Son, as the only Savior and Lord, believed that He died for their sins and rose from the dead, and they now live a new life of obedience to him, according to God’s Word, they are saved, which makes them part of the same spiritual family.

In light of this, we need to be very careful about calling other believers “heretics” or branding something a “different gospel,” something so extreme that Paul pronounced a curse (*anathema*) on those who preached it (see Galatians 1:6-9).

In other words, Paul was not speaking of differences that believers might have within the faith (and, as I just stated, there are quite a few of those). Rather, he was speaking about a different message entirely, one that was completely outside the faith—a message that could not save. In fact, it was a message that would actually damn people rather than save them.

In the case of the Galatians, there were people whom Paul described as “false brothers” (see Gal. 2:4) who were teaching

that in order for a person to be saved, he had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. According to Paul, this was a “different gospel,” which was not the gospel at all.

Yet Paul didn’t say this about some of the other errors he had to deal with among believers in other cities, since the errors were not grave enough to disqualify someone from the kingdom.

And while he did call out people who had departed from the faith, like “Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened” (2 Tim. 2:17-18, ESV), he didn’t stop there. He also added, “But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity’ ” (v. 19).

In other words, even though there are heretics, God knows those who are truly saved; as for us, if we claim to be His we must depart from iniquity.

Why then must we be so quick to go beyond the rule of Scripture and take it upon ourselves to damn to hell other professing believers if—to repeat—they hold to the fundamentals of the faith and have not denied the Lord in word or deed?

At one point in their ministries, there was a very serious division between John Wesley (1703-1791) and George Whitefield (1714-1770) over the doctrines of predestination and election, and even though they reunited in the Lord, their followers did not unite as quickly, if at all.

Yet there were others who were pained by the division, having richly benefited from both of their ministries. (This reminds me of an email I received from a young man who wrote, “I’ve been listening to Pastor MacArthur in the morning on my way to work and Dr. Brown’s radio show at night for a while now. Please keep this in mind, both Dr. Brown and MacArthur have been the top two Christian leaders in helping me come to

Christ and helping me to not fall away by reminding me to keep my focus on Jesus.” This is very meaningful to me in the midst of my differences with my esteemed senior colleague, Pastor MacArthur.)

May I suggest that this famous exchange, which took place after Whitefield had died, has a relevant lesson for all of us who are passionate about our beliefs and zealous for the truth?

A woman who had been blessed by both men’s ministries approached Wesley after Whitefield’s death, wanting to ask him a question, explaining that she was “very much afraid what the answer will be.”

With Wesley’s encouragement and despite her fears, she asked, “Dear Mr. Wesley, do you expect to see dear Mr. Whitefield in heaven?”

After a long pause Wesley replied, “No, madam,” causing the woman to exclaim, “Ah, I was afraid you would say so.”

Wesley then explained with intense earnestness, “Do not misunderstand me, madam; George Whitefield was so bright a star in the firmament of God’s glory, and will stand so near the throne, that one like me, who am less than the least, will never catch a glimpse of him.”

Perhaps if we too approached our differences with more deference and humility we would be more effective in our witness for Jesus and closer to the prayer for unity that he himself prayed (John 17). We could still expose error as we saw it and still hold to our convictions with passion before God, but if could do it without condemning to hell other believers who differ with us.

So let’s put the theological bombast aside and be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one

hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:3-6).

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