

Let's Not Bite and Devour One Another

How do we expose error without dividing the body? How do we hold to our convictions while honoring those who differ with us? In the aftermath of the Strange Fire conference, these are questions we cannot ignore.

Paul issued this strong warning to the Galatians: "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another" (Gal. 5:14-15, ESV).

Here are five important principles to follow if we want to avoid unnecessary casualties:

1. We really do need each other. This is a fundamental principle of how the body operates: "As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'" (1 Cor. 12:20-21).

I said it on the radio when speaking to Phil Johnson from pastor John MacArthur's ministry, and I'll say it again now: I honestly believe that I need John MacArthur and that he needs me. I say that without hyperbole, and I mean it from the heart. (If your first reaction is scorn—in either direction—then I'd say this is something you need to work on.)

It would be arrogant for anyone to think their group or denomination had it all—how much more arrogant would it be for an individual minister to think he or she had it all!—and the fact is, we all have blind spots and we all have strengths and weaknesses.

Rather than despise others who appear to be weak where we are

strong, we should instead ask, “How can I serve that brother or sister? And what do they have that I need? How can I learn from them?”

The attitude Jesus condemned was this: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this [fill in the blank]” (Luke 18:11).

2. Surgeons cut carefully. Sometimes we like to be bombastic and make sweeping statements. It sure rallies the troops and makes for good sound bites, and it sure feels good to be dogmatic. “You won’t hear any compromise from this pulpit!”

But this is often more harmful than helpful, since we paint with such a broad brush that we condemn the innocent with the guilty.

If I start my sentence with, “Let me tell you something about those Baptists,” whatever I say afterward is virtually guaranteed to be inaccurate, since not all Baptists are the same. It would be the same if I said, “The problem with those charismatics is ... ” Whatever comes next is not going to be accurate, even if it applies to many. And that means I will be guilty of speaking falsely against many others at the same time.

Why can’t we be more nuanced in our words? Wouldn’t that better honor the Lord?

3. Don’t be hasty to call others false prophets or false teachers. Based on New Testament usage, a false prophet is a ravenous wolf in sheep’s clothing and therefore a hellbound sinner (Matt. 7:15-20), while a false teacher is a nonbeliever (or backslider) who introduces damnable heresies to the church. (See 2 Peter 2:1, where it states they “secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.”)

Because of that, I refuse to call a brother or sister in the

Lord a false prophet or a false teacher, even if they prophesy falsely (in which case they need correction and are falsely called a prophet) and even if they teach something false (does anyone dare claim to have perfect doctrine on all points)?

It is therefore unbiblical to use the “false prophet” or “false teacher” moniker for believers who are in error, and we can deal with their error effectively and strongly without damning them to hell. (Are you 100 percent sure they are not saved? Without a doubt? Remember: I’m not talking about a cult member here but about someone who claims to be born again through faith in Jesus.)

And while there are absolutely times when it is right to address people by name—I have sought to do that in a godly way in these columns over the months—God will be the judge. In many cases it is possible to deal with issues without naming names, which also avoids unnecessary division and strife within the body.

4. Before we differ with each other, we have to understand each other. In talking with a dear brother who attended the Strange Fire conference and is himself a cessationist, I realized how he thought of one thing when he said “charismatic” and I thought of another thing. It was easy to talk right past each other.

It’s the same with the prosperity gospel. Some people take it to mean “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work” (2 Cor. 9:8), which is obviously biblical and true. Others take it to mean that Jesus died to make us rich and that the test of our spirituality is the abundance of our possessions. This is a dangerous and deadly deception (Luke 12:15; 1 Tim. 6:6-10).

I know rich Christian businessmen who are absolutely committed to Jesus, living godly lives and believing God has given them

wealth to help spread the gospel worldwide. And I don't see them as being attached to their money at all, although they pray for prosperity in accordance with many biblical texts. I know other people who are carnal and worldly minded as they pursue prosperity with the help of some manipulating preachers. (Click [here](#) for my 1990 chapter on "The Prosperity Trap.")

So, before pronouncing someone wrong, why not ask, "Can you define your terms for me?" You might actually be in agreement!

5. Major on the majors. I received an email today from a woman who is a financial supporter of my ministry and listens to my radio show by podcast every day. She also attends Pastor MacArthur's church, differing with him on a number of points.

And I regularly hear from other listeners who tell me, "I love your show and agree with you most of the time, but not all the time," which is exactly what I would expect. (As my guest Dr. Sam Storms said the other day, "I don't always agree with myself!")

We might have different burdens and callings—and we could make a good case for many of them—but that doesn't mean we're not part of the same body, saved by the same Lord, working against the same devil, trying to reach the same world and going to the same eternal destination.

If you keep the main things the main things and concentrate on driving down the center of the road, you're far less likely to fall into a ditch.

Let the exaltation of the Lord Jesus be our ultimate passion—to the glory of God and for the good of a dying world—and we will find far more in common with each other than we ever imagined. And rather than our biblical distinctives dividing us, they will enrich us.

To sum things up, there is error to be addressed and there is

sin to be corrected, but we can do it in a constructive way or a destructive way. What will it be?

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