

Shall We Burn One Another at the Stake?

Every year on the Line of Fire broadcast, shortly before Christmas, we host our annual Christmas debate where listeners call in to discuss whether we should celebrate the birth of Jesus and, if so, if we should celebrate it at this time of the year.

And every year, the passions get high, as some listeners argue that those who celebrate the Savior's birth on December 25th are guilty of participating in idolatrous practices on an idolatrous day, while others claim that this season is all about exalting Jesus in word and song.

In light of Church history, though, these disagreements are quite minor, as I highlight in the *Authentic Fire* book in a chapter entitled, "Shall We Burn One Another at the Stake?"

To give one terrible example, about 1,500 years ago a dispute about the nature of the Son of God led to terrible bloodshed between professing Christians. As noted by Church historian Phillip Jenkins, "Each side persecuted its rivals when it had the opportunity to do so, and tens of thousands—at least—perished. Christ's nature was a cause for which people were prepared to kill and to die, to persecute or to suffer martyrdom."

Church buildings were burned to the ground and church members were burned alive; nuns were violently forced to take communion at the hands of their theological opponents, despite their sobs and shrieks; one bishop forced his religious opponents to live in close quarters with lepers, whose hands were "festering and dripping with blood and pus," until the alleged heretics saw the light.

Yes, professing Christians did this to one another in the name of religious orthodoxy and theological faithfulness.

To give a more recent example, 500 years ago, key Reformation leaders turned against the Anabaptists, who were considered to be part of the radical reformation despite the fact that many of them were true New Testament believers.

And what was one of the reasons they were so severely persecuted? It was their belief that baptism was for believers only and not for infants (the same position held by Baptists and Mennonites and Pentecostals and hundreds of millions of Christians worldwide today).

Anabaptist leaders were persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, and killed, with drowning being a favorite method for putting them to death. Some of the Reformation leaders mockingly referred to this as a "third baptism," and in some communities, there was actually an attempt to exterminate the Anabaptists.

In fact, in 1529, at the Diet of Speirs, both Roman Catholic and Protestant princes and heads of state joined together to pronounce a death sentence on all Anabaptists. And so, professing Christians literally burned other professing Christians at the stake.

As for Martin Luther, although he initially opposed putting alleged heretics to death, lest, in his thinking, he and his followers imitate the violence of the Roman Catholic Church, he ultimately changed his viewpoint and supported attempts to kill Anabaptists. (On a related note, Church historian William McGrath states that, "When [Luther] was in later years reproached for such violent language, and for inciting territorial lords to merciless slaughter [they killed over 100,000 peasants], he answered defiantly: 'It was I, Martin Luther, who slew all the peasants in the insurrection, for I commanded them to be slaughtered. All their blood is upon my shoulders. But I cast it on our Lord God who commanded me to

Speak in this way.'")

Today, there are Protestant leaders who believe that it was the Anabaptists, rather than the followers of Luther and Calvin, who more fully returned to the New Testament faith, yet 500 years ago, their fellow Protestants (and, at times, Catholics) joined together in an attempt to wipe them out. (For many more details, see *Authentic Fire*.)

It is in light of tragic incidents like this that I am grieved by calls for a "collective war" against charismatics (to quote Pastor John MacArthur's *Strange Fire* book) or by the statement, "We're not trying to divide the body of Christ with this conference. We're trying to identify the body of Christ." (This comment by Pastor MacArthur was tweeted out during the Strange Fire conference.)

He further explained that, "There are others who criticized by saying, 'You're attacking brothers.' I wish I could affirm that. We've said this one way or another this week [during the Strange Fire conference]: this is a movement [meaning the Charismatic Movement] made up largely of non-Christians . . ."

It is true that no one in the Strange Fire camp is calling for the violent persecution of charismatics (God forbid). But it is also true that a mindset similar to the one that led the Reformers to persecute the Anabaptists is operative today among those calling for a "collective war" against charismatics. Conversely, that same destructive mindset is at work among charismatics when they mock their cessationist brothers and sisters as spiritually dead, Pharisaic legalists (or worse) and question their salvation.

Isn't it time we learn some important lessons from the past?

Towards the end of the chapter "Shall We Burn One Another at the Stake?" in *Authentic Fire*, I cited the words of Bishop J. C. Ryle, a highly respected, 19th century leader, and they are

worth citing again here. Bishop Ryle wrote, "The true Christian regards all Christ's friends as his friends, members of the same body, children of the same family, soldiers in the same army, travelers to the same home. When he meets them, he feels as if he had long known them. He is more at home with them in a few minutes, than he is with many worldly people after an acquaintance of several years. And what is the secret of all this? It is simply affection to the same Savior and love to the same Lord."

May this attitude dominate the hearts of all true believers as we esteem one another in the Lord and honor one another and learn from one another and sharpen one another – all to the glory of Jesus' name and all for the sake of a dying world. (If you'd like to read more, you can download *Authentic Fire* [here](#).)

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