

We Need Tough Love

The Apostle Paul wrote the Bible's most eloquent words about Christian love. But when it came to the subject of heresy, he went into verbal-attack mode. He labeled those who were spreading false doctrines "dogs" (Phil. 3:2) and "liars" (1 Tim. 4:2), and he not only labeled heretics publicly but also "handed them over to Satan" in his prayers (see 1 Tim. 1:20, NASB). That doesn't sound much like the "sloppy agape" we often model today.

Paul believed that when heresy goes unchecked it contaminates everyone. He warned his disciple Timothy that false teaching spreads "like gangrene" (2 Tim. 2:17). "Gangrene" can also be translated cancer.

Modern translation: False doctrine is malignant. Get the tumor out before it kills people.

It troubles me that many charismatic and Pentecostal church leaders today are not displaying the necessary backbone to label a heretic a heretic. We have become masters at soft-pedaling and inaction when the Lord requires us to confront.

Case in point: Bishop Carlton Pearson, who was raised in the nation's largest Pentecostal denomination (the Church of God in Christ) and who once worked with the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, began teaching what he calls "the gospel of inclusion" a few years ago. He has become a Universalist, claiming that people do not need conversion in order to be saved by Christ.

Pearson's deception has been widely reported. In Charisma we followed Pearson's demise and announced that one organization, the Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops' Congress, labeled him a heretic in 2004. Since then Pearson has convened a national conference about Universalism that featured John Shelby Spong, an Episcopalian who affirms gay

ordination and does not believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

You would think that every charismatic leader in the United States would sever ties to Pearson until he renounces his apostasy. But that is not the case.

- Popular gospel singer John P. Kee, who pastors New Life Fellowship Center in Charlotte, North Carolina, appeared on the program at Pearson's Inclusion 2005 conference, which was held in Pearson's Higher Dimensions Family church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in June. Having Kee's face on the program certainly gave the conference added credibility in the eyes of gospel music lovers.
- Pearson was the featured speaker at Bishop Earl Paulk Jr.'s Atlanta-area church, Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, in May. Paulk then put Pearson back in the same pulpit in October.
- The International Communion of Charismatic Churches (ICCC), which Paulk founded, still lists Pearson as a member. When I asked an ICCC leader why they did not remove him, he said the organization does not currently have any mechanism to restrict membership based on doctrinal or character issues.
Huh? I think we've identified the root problem. In the loosey-goosey world of charismatic independence, we find it almost impossible to police our own. Everything is about "fellowship," but we lack the teeth in our policies to ensure that we can properly discipline preachers who veer off into doctrinal error.

When I bring up the issue of Pearson's apostasy I usually get a lot of glazed looks from people who don't

want to believe that a brother has fallen into deception. "Don't be so hard on the guy," is a typical response. "Maybe we don't understand his message."

I don't need any more explanation. Pearson has a banner on his Web site that announces "God Is Not A Christian." At press time, his church was to host a combined service on November 17 with a local Unitarian congregation in Tulsa. (Note: Unitarians are nice people, but they do not believe in the deity of Jesus.)

I'm sorry I sound harsh. But I would not be walking in the love of God if I weren't willing to issue this warning in order to protect vulnerable people. Sometimes we have to be willing to offend. "Love your brother" does not mean, "Always be nice."

We Christians don't know how to handle it when the Bible requires tough love. It's time for all of our congregations, denominations and church networks to raise the bar and defend the faith from those who pervert it.

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