

Contending For The Faith

One of the guiding principles of the modern church is that when it comes to theology and doctrine we should “major on the majors and minor on the minors”. What people mean by that is we should only make a big deal out of the most central and core doctrines of the faith, and be willing to “agree to disagree” on everything else. By seeking common ground and downplaying everything that is not a core doctrine, it is possible to find unity among a wide set of Christians. Then we can all work together to try to accomplish common goals.

This pragmatic approach to Christianity – that we should find unity by agreeing on a small subset of core doctrines and then ignoring everything else – has become the universal approach that everyone uses. But is pragmatism and compromise really Biblical? Let's take a step back and see how Jesus approached the topics of doctrine and interfaith dialog.

Early in the ministry of Jesus a man named Nicodemus came to speak to Him. The report that Nicodemus gave was, from our way of thinking, very encouraging. The Pharisees actually recognized Jesus as a powerful and wise teacher who came from God:

John 3:1-2: “There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.”

There is no question how the modern church would have handled the rest of this discussion. The Pharisees actually recognized that Jesus came from God! Any modern church would have seen this as a great opportunity to build bridges to a very large religious group that had the respect of the common people. Sure, the Pharisees had some problems with their theology, but there was so much potential for agreement: the Pharisees accepted the Ten Commandments, they came from a background well versed in the sacrificial system, and they were experts in the Law. Given that the Pharisees clearly had some respect for Jesus (otherwise Nicodemus wouldn't have come in the first place!), why not take this opportunity to put differences aside and work together for the common good? Think of what could be accomplished for the poor if they joined forces! They could feed the needy, heal the sick, and maybe put together some protest groups to try to get the Roman occupation to back off.

If the modern church had existed in those days it would have found a way to come to some sort of an agreement with the Pharisees. After all, there was so much good that could have been done if they just worked together. Who would waste such a great opportunity by getting into areas of disagreement? This is exactly the same reasoning modern churches use when they form alliances with groups that *reject* the gospel in order to take care of the needy or advance certain political or moral causes. If the goal is good and people are willing to help then isn't that all that matters?

But is that what Jesus did? Absolutely not! Jesus actually *ignored* all of their common ground and instead took this opportunity to preach the gospel:

John 3:3: “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Jesus spent the entire discussion talking about the need to be born of the Spirit. Our Lord discussed the gospel and ignored all of their common ground and all the good they could have done if

they just laid their doctrinal differences aside and pursued the common good. Jesus was far more concerned with correcting Nicodemus' misunderstandings about salvation! As far as we can tell, no other topic was even mentioned. The only interfaith dialog Jesus was interested in engaging in was "You must be born again". He went right to the place where the Pharisees were wrong and He focused *exclusively* on that.

If you read through the gospels you will quickly discover that this is what Jesus did every time He had a conversation with someone. Jesus never searched for common ground; instead He searched for sin and corrected it. We can find another example of this later in His ministry when He entered into the home of one of the chief Pharisees in order to share a meal with him:

Luke 14:1-2: "And it came to pass, as he went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread on the sabbath day, that they watched him. And, behold, there was a certain man before him which had the dropsy."

It was quite an honor to be invited into that home, and Jesus was a guest. By the modern way of thinking this would have been a terrific time to put together some kind of alliance to feed the poor, or care for the needy, or champion some pressing social issue. Jesus could have easily kept the topic of conversation focused on items that the Pharisees agreed with. After all, there were a lot of doctrines that they had in common, and Jesus was an *invited guest* in this man's home. Why focus on religious differences (which had already been raised in earlier conversations anyway) when there was so much of an opportunity to join forces and working together?

On top of that, the issue at hand was a very small point of an obscure Old Testament law: was it a sin to provide medical assistance on the seventh day of the week? Jesus taught that it was *not* a sin; the Pharisees taught that it *was* a sin. Jesus had already made His position quite clear, so you could argue that there was no need to bring it up again – and certainly not in this setting! What modern church would make an issue out of a small point of doctrine like that? After all, it had nothing to do with salvation or the gospel. It was a very minor issue – one that people could surely "agree to disagree" on, especially when there were poor people to be fed and a vicious Roman occupation to fight. Why not just set aside the "technical details" of the Law and focus on the bigger picture?

That is how the modern church would approach this encounter, but that is *not* what Jesus did. Instead Jesus made a point of healing that man in front of everyone and then *rebuking the very people who had invited Him over to eat*:

Luke 14:3-6: "And Jesus answering spake unto the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath day? And they held their peace. And he took him, and healed him, and let him go; And answered them, saying, Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath day? And they could not answer him again to these things."

No modern church, if invited over to someone's house like this, would find some obscure point of Old Testament law, make a big deal out of it, and then publicly rebuke the very person who invited him over for dinner – *but that is exactly what Jesus did*. The Lord saw that they were in error in one point (a point that, today, churches would all agree is "minor" and should be ignored) and so that is the very point He focused on and the very point He rebuked.

But He didn't stop there. When He looked around and saw other sin going on He rebuked that as well:

Luke 14:10-11: “But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”

Jesus – while an invited guest in someone else's home! - saw that people, in pride, were trying to take the best seats for themselves and so He rebuked them for it. Can you imagine being invited over to someone's home, seeing some minor sin or error, and then rebuking them on the spot for it? No modern church would ever approach interfaith dialog that way, but that's what Jesus did!

The Lord did not stop there. In that very same dinner Jesus criticized the selection of people that the chief Pharisee had invited over for a meal:

Luke 14:12-14: “Then said he also to him that bade him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompence be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.”

Jesus did *not* try to form an alliance with the Pharisees. Instead He rebuked them repeatedly while He was an *invited guest in one of their homes*, and He commanded them to repent of their pride and live their lives very differently. Even though Jesus had made these points before and even though Jesus knew the Pharisees disagreed with him, Jesus still brought them up again anyway and He still rebuked them for it. Jesus wasn't interested in the things that the Pharisees were doing right; instead He focused exclusively on what they were doing wrong. When He had a chance to speak with them that is the *only* thing He talked to them about – *their errors*.

How many pastors today, if invited to speak to a group that was engaged in some sort of heresy, would take the opportunity to rebuke that sin and correct them? How many Christian pastors, if invited to speak to Mormons, would spend the whole sermon rebuking Mormonism? No one would do that today – but that is *exactly* what Jesus did! He was relentless and would never ignore sin of any kind.

It didn't matter how big the sin was, either. Do you know what convinced the Pharisees to start plotting to kill Jesus? It is because Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath:

Matthew 12:9-14: “And when he was departed thence, he went into their synagogue: And, behold, there was a man which had his hand withered. And they asked him, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath days? That they might accuse him. And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days. Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other. Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him.”

Jesus saw that the Pharisees were wrong over what the modern church would call a very minor issue, and He rebuked them for it over and over and over again. He refused to “agree to disagree” or try

to find unity and common ground. He saw that they were wrong and so He kept pushing the issue until they finally decided to kill Him.

Did Jesus “major on the majors and minor on the minors”? Did He “agree to disagree” on secondary issues? Absolutely not! He refused to ignore *any* sin or error, no matter how small. When He had discussions with people He actually *focused on their sin and error*, not on ways to find unity and common ground in order to work together! Jesus acted as if the most important thing was to correct whatever the error was, no matter how small it might be or how much it might anger people. Jesus could easily have healed people on days other than the Sabbath but He chose to do it on the Sabbath in order to make an issue out of it.

In other words, Jesus had a completely different view of truth than the modern church does. Jesus taught that *every single word* that God ever uttered had huge significance and was worth fighting *for* and worth fighting *over*:

Luke 4:4: “And Jesus answered him, saying, It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by **every word of God.**”

Notice that Jesus mentioned *every* word of God. He didn't say “some words”, or “the most important words”, or “the words that are central to the gospel”. No, Jesus said that we need to live by *every single word of God*, with no exceptions! There was nothing we could disregard on the grounds of “seeking unity”. When Jesus gave the Great Commission He did not command His disciples to only teach *some* things, or to teach only the core doctrines, or to make whatever compromises were necessary in order to form alliances and not alienate people. Instead He commanded them to teach *all things* and to observe *all things*:

Matthew 28:19-20: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: **Teaching them to observe all things** whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

That is exactly what the apostles did: they left nothing out and taught *everything*, no matter how divisive it might be. They even taught things that modern churches consider to be secondary doctrines! Interestingly, the apostle Paul considered himself to have done his job because he proclaimed *everything*:

Acts 20:26-27: “Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you **all the counsel of God.**”

Notice that Paul did not say “I taught you the gospel, and that is really all that matters. The other stuff is secondary and doesn't matter very much.” No, Paul said that he taught them *all* of the counsel of God. There is no hint that any disciple ever compromised *any* doctrine (no matter how small) in order to “pursue unity” or “forge alliances”. Instead the New Testament insists that we be completely blameless and “without spot”:

1 Timothy 6:12-14: “**Fight the good fight of faith**, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses. I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and

before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession; That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ:"

Paul does not say "Defend the core doctrines of the gospel, but beyond that feel free to compromise wherever necessary in order to build alliances, grow your church, and gain influence. Only the gospel matters; everything else is secondary and isn't worth fighting over." Instead Paul commands people to *fight* so that they can be "without spot" and "unrebukable". Do you know what spots are? They are very tiny things – blemishes that are almost unnoticeable! You might say that spots are *minor* – yet the New Testament insists that we be *without spot*. It is simply not good enough to "major on the majors" because in the eyes of God *everything* is major. God has never said anything that He hopes we will just ignore. According to Jesus *all* of His Words count:

Matthew 5:19: "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

This verse ought to strike fear into the hearts of modern churches everywhere. *Jesus cares about the tiniest and most minute parts of His Word*. Does Jesus say we ought to major on the majors and not sweat the small stuff? Absolutely not! Instead Jesus gives us a dire warning about getting even *the least* doctrine wrong. It is *not* fine to get the big things right and the small things wrong; if you get *anything* wrong – even "small" things – there will be serious consequences for it when we stand before God and give an account! Jesus *never* divided any of His teachings into groups of "things that matter" and "things you can shove under the rug if it helps you build an audience or get along with other groups". Instead Jesus consistently rebuked even the smallest sins and errors every time He encountered them.

This is how the book of Psalms put it:

Psalms 119:127-128: "Therefore I love thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold. Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way."

Which precepts of God did the psalmist care about? *All of them*. Which precepts did the psalmist consider to be right and worth caring about? *All of them*. Which false ways did the psalmist hate? *Every one of them*. Which precepts did Jesus or His disciples compromise on in order to gain a wider audience or forge alliances? *None of them*.

Yes, unity is something that God desires. But what God requires is for us to find unity *in* the truth, not unity *in spite of* the truth:

1 Corinthians 1:10: "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

The New Testament teaches that we achieve unity by *all believing the same things!* It never says

we should achieve unity by agreeing to throw our differences out the window and forge together in spite of having very different minds and very different judgments. It never says we should ignore all doctrines except for the most central ones and achieve unity by not believing much of anything. That is actually *the opposite* of what this verse is saying. We need to believe *everything* and be in agreement over it.

Some people argue against this by saying if you are that dogmatic about everything then you will have fellowship with a much smaller group of people than you would otherwise. But is your goal to have as big an audience as possible or to be faithful to what God has commanded? Jesus was *far* more concerned about defending the truth and rebuking sin than He was trying to maximize the size of His audience! Where does the Bible teach pragmatism? Where does it say that unity is more important than truth, and if some lesser truths start to cause division we should get rid of them? *It never says any of those things*. Instead it tells us to not be unequally yoked together with darkness:

2 Corinthians 6:14-15: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?”

That doesn't sound like a call to interfaith dialog, does it? No, that sounds a lot more like a call to *avoid* making alliances with the ungodly. Paul isn't telling us to find Mormons and Muslims and Buddhists and work with them as long as we can find common ground. He's not telling us that we need to ignore minor (or major!) doctrinal differences if it will help the common good. Instead he is telling us to *avoid* joining with those in error (and to rebuke error wherever we find it), *not* to minimize our differences with them so we can forge ahead together!

Once again this is not just talking about unbelievers – it applies to the church as well. Even *within* the church the New Testament never misses an opportunity to rebuke even the most minor of errors:

1 Timothy 4:1-3: “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.”

Are the doctrines of marriage and diet central to the gospel? I think most churches would say they are not, and therefore they aren't worth fighting over and we can “agree to disagree” in order to pursue unity. If some people believe one way and others believe a different way, well, we can just agree that we have different stances and move forward together.

But that's not what the Bible teaches, is it? No, it condemns these false teachings as “doctrines of *devils*” and actually speaks of these heresies as a departure from the faith! Those who have an errant view of these “minor and secondary” issues are wrong *and in sin* and they need to be rebuked for siding with *devils*. There is no sense of proportion here that “these are minor issues and, in the grand scheme of things, who cares?”.

God is very clear that He requires us to contend for the faith – not just part of the faith, but *all* of it. There are no minor doctrines to God; there is nothing that we can ignore and “agree to disagree”

on. Jesus rebuked error every time He encountered it, no matter how small it was, and He said that those who were getting the *smallest* commands wrong were in big trouble.

On what grounds, then, do we say that “contending for the faith” means throwing out all doctrines except for the ones most essential to the gospel, and ignoring everything else? Jesus never did that. The apostles never did that. Churches do that all the time – but you will never find a Biblical basis for ignoring *anything* God has said, or pretending that some of the commandments and teachings of Jesus matter but most of them do not.