

Contending For The Faith

One of the guiding principles of many churches 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 isn't a core doctrine it's possible to find unity among Christians. Then we can all work together to try to accomplish common goals.

In other words, this “pragmatic” approach to Christianity teaches that we should find unity by agreeing on a small subset of core doctrines and largely ignoring everything else. From what I can tell this is widely viewed as the right way to do things. But is this sort of compromise really Biblical? Let's take a look at how Jesus approached the topics of doctrine and interfaith dialog.

Early in Christ's ministry a man named Nicodemus came to speak to Him. What Nicodemus told Him was, from our way of thinking, very encouraging. The Pharisees 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's no question how many modern churches would have handled the rest of this discussion. The Pharisees actually recognized that Jesus came from God! This would be seen as a great opportunity to build bridges to a large and influential religious group which had the respect of the people. Sure, the

Pharisees had some problems with their theology, but there was also a lot of common ground. 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 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 *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 laid their doctrinal differences aside. 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 focused *exclusively* on that.

If you read through the gospels you'll discover that this is what Jesus did every time He had a conversation with someone. Jesus never searched for common ground. Instead He looked 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 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 kept the topic of conversation on items 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 an opportunity to join forces and work together?

On top of that, the issue at hand was a small point of an 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 while the Pharisees taught that it *was* a sin. Jesus had already made His position quite clear, so you could claim there was no need to bring it up again – and certainly not in this setting! What 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. Surely this was an area where people could “agree to disagree”, especially when there were poor people to be fed and a vicious

Roman occupation to fight. Why not set aside the “technical details” of the Law and focus on the bigger picture?

That's how some modern churches would approach this encounter, but that's *not* what Jesus did. Instead He made a point of healing that man in front of everyone and then *rebuked 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.”

There are few churches today who, if invited over to someone's house like this, would find some obscure point from the Old Testament, make a big deal out of it, and then publicly rebuke the very person who invited him over for dinner – *but that's exactly what Jesus did*. The Lord saw that they were in error in one point (a point that today many churches would say is “minor”). and to Him that was a very big deal. He focused on that point and rebuked the lawyers and Pharisees over it.

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, and then rebuking them for it on the spot? There aren't many modern churches which would approach interfaith dialog that way, but that's what Jesus did!

The Lord didn't stop there either. In that very same dinner He 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 He had made these points before and even though He knew the Pharisees disagreed with him, He still brought them up anyway and He still rebuked them over it. Jesus wasn't interested in the things the Pharisees were doing right; instead He focused on what they were doing wrong. Whenever He had a chance to speak with them that's the *only* thing He talked to them about – *their errors*.

How many pastors today, if invited to speak to a group which was involved in some sort of heresy, would take the opportunity to rebuke that sin and correct it? How many pastors,

if invited to speak to Mormons, would spend the whole sermon rebuking Mormonism? I suspect the answer is “not very many” – but that's *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's 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 minor issue and He rebuked them for it 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 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? Not when it came to sin! He refused to ignore *any* sin no matter how small. When He had discussions with people He *focused on their sin*, not on ways to find unity and common ground. Jesus acted as if the most important thing was to address their sin problem, no matter

how small it might be or how much it might anger them. Jesus could easily have healed people on days other than the Sabbath but He chose to do it on the Sabbath to make an issue out of it.

Jesus had a completely different view of truth than many modern churches do. He taught that *every single word* which 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 didn't command His disciples to only teach *some* things, or to only teach 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 always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

That's 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!

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.”

Paul didn't say “I taught you the gospel and that's really all you need. 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's 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 must 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 didn't 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 commanded people to *fight* so that they could 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* – and yet the New Testament insists that we be *without spot*. It's not good enough to “major on the majors” because in the eyes of God *everything* is major. God never said anything that He hopes we'll 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 our heart. *Jesus cares about the tiniest and most minute parts of His Word!* Does He say we ought to major on the majors and not sweat the small stuff? Absolutely not! Instead he gives us a dire warning about getting even *the least* doctrine wrong. It's *not* fine to get the big things right and the small things wrong. If you get *anything* wrong – even “small” things – there will be consequences when you stand before God and give an account to Him! Jesus *never* divided any of His teachings into categories of “things that matter” and “things you can shove under the rug if it helps you build an audience”. Instead He consistently rebuked even the smallest sins every time He encountered them.

This is how the book of Psalms put it:

Psalm 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 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 to gain a wider audience? *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 *believing the same things!* It never says we should achieve unity by agreeing to ignore our differences. It never says we should ignore all doctrines except for the most central ones and achieve unity by not believing much of anything. That's 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're that dogmatic about everything then you'll only have fellowship with a very small group of people. This argument implies that having fellowship with more people is better than remaining faithful to everything God has commanded. That may make sense to many people today but that's something Jesus never did. He was *far* more concerned about defending the truth and rebuking sin than trying to maximize the size of His audience!

For example, take the time when Jesus miraculously fed thousands of people. Because of that tremendous miracle a multitude was seeking Him. How did Jesus respond to this? He immediately preached something so difficult that the crowd was driven away:

John 6: “56 He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.
57 As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.
58 This is that bread which came down from

heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.

59 These things said he in the synagogue, as he taught in Capernaum.

60 Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it? . . .

66 From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.”

Jesus found the core point of disagreement and He addressed it immediately, even though it drove a multitude of people away from Him.

Where does the Bible teach pragmatism? Where does it say that unity is more important than truth, and if lesser truths start to cause division we should get rid of them? *It never says any of those things.* Instead it tells us not to 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 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 we need to ignore doctrinal differences if it will help the common good. Instead he's commanding us to *avoid* joining with those in error (and to rebuke error wherever we find it), *not* to minimize our differences so we can forge ahead

together!

This isn't 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” sins:

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 many churches would teach they're not, and say they aren't worth fighting over and we can therefore “agree to disagree” to pursue unity. If some people believe one way (such as the Catholic church, which forbids priests from being married) and others believe differently then we should lay the issue aside 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 speaks of these heresies as a departure from the faith! Those who have an errant view of these “minor and secondary” issues are *in sin* and need to be rebuked for siding with *devils*. There's no sense of proportion here that these are minor issues.

God is very clear that He requires us to contend for the faith – not just part of it, but *all* of it. There are no minor doctrines to God, and nothing we can ignore and “agree to disagree” on. Jesus rebuked error every time He encountered it, no matter how small it was. He even said that those who were getting the *smallest* commands wrong were in big trouble.

On what grounds do we say that “contending for the faith”

means laying aside all doctrines except for the ones most essential to the gospel? Jesus never did that and His apostles never did that either. Many churches do this on a regular basis – but you'll never find a Biblical basis for ignoring *anything* God has said.

Instead of compromise we must clearly teach the whole counsel of God. When we encounter sin in the church we must rebuke it instead of ignoring it. Doctrinal differences must be brought up and addressed, not laid aside. Difficult passages must be preached, not skipped. We must faithfully teach the whole counsel of God and defend everything He's taught us. The church doesn't have the option of limiting its message in order to gain a wider audience.