

Concerned to Discern

Does anybody care?

A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof? Jeremiah 5:30-31, KJV

As could be agreed upon by most believers, Christians have the right, even the duty, to evaluate and hold accountable to Holy Scripture those who profess the evangelical faith but who, for reason of their manifest beliefs and behaviors, appear to be departing from the faith.[1] Jude told his readers to “**contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints**” (Jude 3). To shirk this responsibility means that believers are being disobedient to the faith once for all delivered. To all Christians, the Spirit gives His anointing which places upon them the responsibility to discern the “**spirit of truth**” from the “**spirit of error**” (1 John 4:6; 2:20-21, 27). To the congregation at Rome Paul wrote:

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple. Romans 16:17-18 (Compare Philippians 3:17-19.)

This same apostle also warned the elders at Ephesus:

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. Acts 20:29-31

In one context, Paul even named the false teachers! (2 Timothy 2:17; Compare 1 Timothy 1:18-20.)

Thus, in fidelity to the apostolic injunctions, in open forums around the blogosphere, various websites attempt to differentiate truth from error. They do so because mainstream Christian publishers and churches—not wanting to become overly controversial and therefore risk the loss of membership and/or sales revenue—ignore issues that those in discernment ministry, for the sake of the integrity of God’s truth as revealed in Holy Scripture, raise. In past generations, evangelicals exposed and faced down the errors presented by Christian-like cults without, but now-a-days, for whatever reason, seem quite unwilling to expose equally destructive heresies within the movement itself. As John McArthur noted eighteen years ago, an undiscerning spirit

amongst evangelicals has bred and is breeding “reckless faith.”[2]

On one occasion, an opponent of discernment ministry questioned the spirit in which discernment ministry is conducted; specifically, that because some writings are critical they are therefore unloving. In syllogistic fashion, this perception might be stated as follows:

*Christians are to love other Christians.
Discerning Christians appear not to love other Christians.
Therefore, discerning Christians and discernment are un-Christian.*

Such criticism ought to be taken seriously, especially in light of 1 John 4:20-21 which says:

If someone says, *I love God*, and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

But the risk of being unloving ought not deter believers from exposing error in the context contending for the truth. As Paul ordered, every believer ought to be to speak “**the truth in love**” (Ephesians 4:15). The problem within pan-evangelicalism today is that the movement weighs too heavy on the scale of love and too “lite” on the scale of truth. Nevertheless, with the anticipation that all will not agree, discernment ministry needs to contend for the faith without being contentious. But in the face of having lost the biblical and theological argument, discerners must recognize they might be subjected to the *ad hominem* attack of being called “unloving”.

But interestingly, the apostle's admonition to speak the truth in love follows on the heels of his stating his hope that the Ephesians would have matured to the point where they would no longer be “**children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming**” (Ephesians 4:14). Thus, one evidence of spiritual maturity involves the ability to differentiate spiritual truth—those beliefs and behaviors which accord with Holy Scripture—from spiritual error—those which do not agree with Holy Scripture. It is therefore understood that discernment must pursue the truth; but coordinately, must do so in a spirit of love. At times, and given the fleshly nature that remains in every Christian (none of us is perfect), this can become a difficult balance to keep.

Yet on this point of the accusation of being un-loving, the critics of discernment, if the issue has been researched and documented, usually do not accuse discernment authors of being untruthful; that is, that they lie. This of course, raises a consequent issue: can speaking of truth offend some persons to the degree that it creates in them an emotional impression that those

who speak the truth do not love them?

On this point, we ought to remember that Proverbs inform us, **“Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy”** (Proverbs 27:6, NASB). We might also remember the instance when Jehoshaphat inquired of the king of Israel about where he could find a prophet of the Lord to make inquiry to. So the king of Israel informed Jehoshaphat: **“There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the LORD, but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil”** (1 Kings 22:8). On another occasion Ahab addressed Elijah: **“Have you found me, O my enemy?”** (1 Kings 21:20). It is evident that the kings perceived the messages of these prophets, Micaiah and Elijah, to be unloving. Of the latter’s encounter with Ahab, Anglican pastor J.C. Ryle (1816-1900) noted something that is as relevant today as it was in his day. He observed:

Alas, there are many like Ahab in the nineteenth century! They like a ministry which does not make them uncomfortable, and send them home ill at ease. How is it with you? Oh, believe me, he is the best friend who tells you the most truth!**[3]**

Granted, the New Testament informs Christians of their responsibility to be loving (John 17:23; 2 Timothy 2:14-16; James 4:11; 1 Peter 1:22; 4:7-8; 1 John 2:9, 11; 4:20-21; Jude 18-21). Agreed—we are to love genuine brothers and sisters in the Christian faith. But like Jesus, we are forced to ask, especially in the days of apostasy in which we live, **“Who are our brothers?”** (See Matthew 12:48.) Any definition of brotherhood must rest upon NT passages that define *brotherhood* to include those individuals who evidence submission and fidelity to the beliefs and behavior established by Holy Scripture, who together manifest that we’re members of the born-from-above family of God (John 3:3, 7). In Christendom, there are professors and possessors, for Paul wrote that, **“they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel”** (Romans 9:6). Ultimately, Jesus will separate the wheat from the tares (Matthew 13:36-43). That is why the ministry of discerners ought to be discernment, not judgment. In the end, the Lord Jesus will judge (See John 5:26-30.).

Nevertheless, we need to look at 1 John to see if it confirms the assumption that division and differences are invariably wrong, that discernment hinders the greater Christian community from aggregating itself into a single polymorphous “Kumbaya.”

We note John wrote his first letter to a hurting church that false teachers/antichrists devastated with their false doctrines. False teachers—professed Christians who for reason of having subtly introduced destructive and divisive heresies into the body of Christ revealed they were not Christian—had devastated the church to which John was writing at that time and place (By the way, where’s the “love” on the part of false teachers?). The naïve sheep did not know what had hit them, what had ruined the loving fellowship they had once enjoyed. Wolves in sheep’s clothing are very unloving and destructive. The biblical metaphor implies they’re the natural born killers of the sheep. So John informed the remaining believers: **“They [i.e., the false teachers and their followers] went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us”** (1 John 2:19). Discernment ministry is necessary to

expose unbiblical beliefs and behaviors because they destroy the blessed fellowship enjoyed by His beloved. Discernment is necessary to expose those who, often contrary to their claim to be otherwise, are not “of us.” We note the division in the fellowship was instigated by those pretending to be Christians but were not. So John added: **“These things have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you”** (1 John 2:26).

As in the politics of a free society, all of us have a right to state our take on the condition of Christianity today. It is the believer's responsibility to state not only what's right with the church, but also what's wrong. Believers have the God given right, if not duty, in Scripture to express biblically informed opinions. Let the views play out in the marketplace of ideas, and may God's truth win out in the hearts and minds of blog readers. Yet amidst it all, Jesus' warning ought to be heeded:

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. Matthew 7:15-23, KJV

Jesus' words serve as a solemn warning to all who profess to know Him, including any and all in discernment ministry. Paul tells us: **“Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves”** (2 Corinthians 13:5). Again, the apostle instructs believers to **“examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil”** (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22; See Ephesians 5:11.). Yet again, he states:

If anyone advocates a different doctrine, and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. 1 Timothy 6:3-5

In light of these scriptural admonitions—and others abundantly extant in both testaments—Dr. Harry Ironside (1876-1951) observed:

Of late, the hue and cry has been against any and all negative teaching. But the brethren who assume this attitude forget that a large part of the New Testament, both of the teaching of our blessed Lord Himself and the writings of the apostles, is made up of this very character of ministry . . .[4]

He then went on to state:

Error is like leaven of which we read, A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump. Truth mixed with error is equivalent to all error, except that it is more innocent looking and, therefore, more dangerous. God hates such a mixture! Any error, or any truth-and-error mixture, calls for definite exposure and repudiation. To condone such is to be unfaithful to God and His Word and treacherous to imperiled souls for whom Christ died.[5]

Genuine Christian love “**does not**,” indeed cannot, “**rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth**” (1 Corinthians 13:6). Meanwhile, as the apostasy of this current evil age unfolds and plays out, all of us ought to heed Jesus' question:

Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?

Luke 18:8

ENDNOTES

[1] We ought to remember that through two-thousand years of history, Christian churches, even the Roman Catholic, have declared certain beliefs to be incompatible with the Christian faith. Thus, discernment ministry has had a long history in the church. Discerners are not "the odd group out," but rather find precedent for their ministry within the Protestant Reformation itself, for the key word in protestant is "protest"!

[2] John F. MacArthur, *Reckless Faith: When the Church Loses Its Will to Discern* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994).

[3] J.C. Ryle, "Unsearchable Riches," *Holiness* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1879): 281.

[4] Dr. Harry Ironside (1876-1951) was a Bible teacher and author who for eighteen years served as pastor of Chicago's Moody Memorial Church (1930-1948).

[5] Ibid.