

When it comes to truth, it's all or nothing

BY DAVID POSEY

Vance Havner, commenting on the state of churches in his day, said, "they are teaching every shade and grade of doctrine and they would turn God's sheepfold into a zoo. Instead of the church going into the world, they would bring the world into the church."

That problem is even more acute today. Truth has taken a backseat to getting more people in the door, presumably to "teach them later." But is that what's happening? There is no evidence that people are becoming more like Christians we read about in the New Testament; in fact, there is very little resemblance.

There are many churches today that receive openly gay people into fellowship without pointing out the error of their ways and seeking to help them repent. But to open our doors to practicing homosexuals requires a reinterpretation of the scriptures that condemn that lifestyle. On the other hand, if we observe these passages as they are written, we have no choice but to conclude that such people are excluded from God's kingdom until and unless they repent (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

Reductionism ad nauseam

Instead, many churches have reduced the basis of fellowship until it almost ceases to exist. This approach has been practiced in the mainline denominations for years. A Lutheran scholar's analysis of why Lutheranism has suffered unprecedented losses in membership comes down to what he calls "reductionism." What he means is that the doctrine of a Lutheran is no longer couched in affirmations, but in a series of repudiations, or reductions. The most obvious form of this would be a "grace-only" doctrine in which man is completely absolved from any decision regarding his salvation.

Reductionism is common in most mainline churches today. Several years ago, at a convention of a men's-only group, "The Promise-Keepers," the keynote speaker asked each person in the crowd of 5,000 to yell out the name of the church they belong to. Of course, the sound was a cacophony of confusion. But then the speaker asked them to yell out the name of their Savior.

"Christ!" was the predictable reply. The emcee said, "don't you see, we are all saved by Christ, so *what difference does it make what church we belong to?*"

If it doesn't make any difference what church you attend, then why did Jesus bother to instruct his apostles in church doctrine at all? Why does Paul instruct the church in Ephesians (see 4:1ff) or correct issues in I Corinthians?

The teaching of many denominations is best defined by reducing everything to a few principles such as "love" and "grace." So, they put words into God's mouth and say that homosexuality is not sin, just a "life choice." And baptism is not necessary for salvation because we are "saved by God's grace."

Theologically, the goal is to refrain from placing any human restriction on God's exercise of His grace. The result is that they have flung their doors wide open, accepting anyone who will accept them. They ignore references to Christ as Lord (He's just our *Savior*, not our Master) and have reduced ethical concerns primarily to a few social issues - feeding the poor is relevant but avoiding fornication is not. In fact, in a survey recently, young people think recycling is a greater sin than pornography!

One might think that these denominations' buildings are overflowing, since there are few rules and so much "cheap grace." Actually, main-line denominations have lost a large number of members in the last 25 years. Perhaps people really do expect religion to stand for something. *Novel idea.*

"We have met the enemy. . ."

It's bad enough to see this new practice in denominations; but I'm seeing it practiced by some of my brethren lately. I've received emails that argue that the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are not part of the New Testament, but of the Old. In another letter I received years ago, a preacher argued that the letters are not inspired. Of course, if both of these brethren are right, what are we left with? Acts and Revelation? In other words, some are saying that we are applying God's word too restrictively and are not leaving room for God's grace to work. So, they reduce the basis of fellowship to a few well-accepted, rarely controverted, abstract truths found in Scripture.

The problem for this view is that the Bible makes no clear distinction in the quality of "truths" to be believed. There is reference to "weightier matters," justice and mercy and faithfulness, in Matthew 23:23, but that hardly settles the question, because commitment to Christ isn't mentioned explicitly in that passage. Furthermore, in the same passage, Jesus told them to do those "weightier matters" without leaving the "little things" undone.

I don't know anyone who has proposed that we put all of our religious eggs in the Matthew 23:23 basket, but it illustrates the problem. The Bible makes no clear distinction between truths we must keep and truths we can ignore.

So, those who like the reductionism idea because it reduces the judgments we must make about who we can be in fellowship with must come up with a crystallization of a few crucial truths that everyone must agree on. And, even among the reductionists, there is disagreement on this point. If the Promise Keeper approach was true — that church affiliation doesn't matter — you would think churches would combine. But that hasn't happened.

There is a sense in which some of God's words tend to shape us into the kind of people He wants to be and, therefore, take a more central position in our lives. The word "love" is an obvious example. If we love (God, wife, child, brethren) we "fulfill the law" (Matthew 22:37-40; Romans 13:8-10; cf. I Timothy 1:5-11). But to reduce all of God's words to the word "love" goes beyond what God has done Himself.

The rest of God's word helps us define what "love" means and therefore is just as important?

The "Core Gospel"

Some use the term "the core gospel" to describe these "central" truths. For example, some say, "Only commands are important, not examples or inferences." But how do they know that? If you know that a divinely-inspired apostle did a thing a certain way (for example, gave specific instructions for qualifications for elders or took the Lord's Supper on a certain day every week), who are you, when faced with the identical situation, to question the apostle's judgment in the matter?

Read Matthew 18:18 — Jesus gave his apostles binding power. Upon what basis can we assume that Christ will accept a different kind of service, when one of His appointed men has spoken on the matter?

Others argue that only the gospels are essential for Christians to heed; the letters are, at most, “good advice.” But who told them that? What passage in the Bible — whether determined by command, example or necessary inference — would lead one to such a conclusion? If the letters are not inspired, then they are not even “good advice,” because the men writing them claim to be writing God’s words (see Ephesians 3:1ff.). If they are not inspired, it’s a cruel trick. If they are Scripture, then II Timothy 3:16-17 teaches that we are to use them for doctrine, reproof, correction, and discipline.

“But Paul was referring only to the Old Testament in that passage.” Oh? So what is the basis for accepting the gospels but not the letters? They were written by some of the same men, and some of the gospels were written later than some of the letters.

John wrote a gospel and three letters and a prophecy —was he only inspired while writing his gospel and the rest is “good advice”? How do we separate the “gospel-Scripture” from “letter-Scripture”? And what would you say to Peter who called Paul’s epistles “Scripture” (II Peter 3:16)?

What is in the letters that bothers these brethren? It’s clear: the reductionists know all too well what the letters say and require, and they don’t like it. They are too restrictive and they don’t want to be restricted.

It seems clear enough that this whole effort to reduce the basis of our faith to the lowest common denominator is an effort to assert the Self into defining the parameters of faith, instead of trusting God to do it. Instead of surrendering ourselves completely to the will of the Lord, we set out to choose what part of the will we will comply with.

Ironically, though some would stress the words of Jesus over the words of the apostles, their attitude is condemned by the Lord Himself: “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Mt. 16:24).