

Are Denominations Fair Targets of Evangelism?

In decades gone by, members of the church of Christ were committed to the principle that the Lord's church is unique, that there are not saved people in every denomination.

We were willing to say confidently that teaching a different plan of salvation—the sinner's prayer for example—was not found in Scripture, and thus did not grant entry into the Lord's kingdom. We were willing to say plainly that ignoring the blueprint for the church, which God revealed in the book of Acts, established an organization entirely different from the Lord's church. We were willing to say that the denominations don't represent varicolored branches growing from a common vine, but rather wild unfruitful thorns deviating from the truth, thorns which God had long ago lopped off.

Preachers spoke of “restoring” the New Testament church according to the New Testament pattern. Preachers labored to take the gospel into communities where there was, admittedly, no shortage of Bibles or denominations or religion, but where there was a lack of a group of worshippers meeting under a sign that read “church of Christ.” A street lined with a Presbyterian church, a Catholic church, a Mormon church, a Pentecostal church, an Episcopal church, and an Adventist church was considered not a stroll among common friends, but a ripe mission field! We were often ridiculed as those who believe that “we're the only ones going to heaven.” Part of a preacher's training was to study denominational doctrines and memorize the arguments used to refute them. Any preacher worth his salt was going to engage the local Baptist minister in a series of debates, and any other denominational leaders who would accept the challenge. Preachers would set up a tent meeting, less for the purpose of proclaiming the gospel to those who had never heard of the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and more for the purpose of expounding the truth to those who were zealous but incorrect in their faith and practices. Members of this congregation here in Lake Wales who are above seventy years of age are likely children of those converted out of denominations in one such meeting somewhere in Polk County.

We don't talk about that sort of thing much anymore. We don't hold such meetings anymore.

To the extent that we have softened the harshness of that approach, we have come nearer, I think, to the attitude of Jesus Christ. At times (in my opinion) some preachers were in danger of whittling on God's end of the stick, and passing

judgments that are God's alone to make. Actually, at times, some preachers bordered on being smug and obnoxious, behaving with the same sort of overconfidence and self-righteous pride that Jesus condemned in the Pharisees. It took one family member seven years to obey the gospel because of the offensive attitudes of a string of preachers who bashed (often inaccurately) the things she believed, rather than kindly showing her what the Bible taught. Another good friend of ours might never obey the gospel, because of a preacher who played to his small, familiar audience by disrespectfully poking fun at a certain denomination, unaware that members of that very denomination were within the sound of his voice that morning. We should be careful to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Jesus Christ died to free us from sin—moral sin, as well as doctrinal sin—and he loves the person who is deluded by Satan through the unexamined traditions of denominationalism just as much as He loves the person walking the street who is a victim of immorality.

Attitudes aside, however, to the extent that we have softened the harshness of that message, we have slipped farther away, I think, from the work of God's faithful evangelists. I'm not sure that, deep down, we still agree that denominational believers are fair targets of evangelism. I know that some of my preaching brethren actively paper over these differences and rush to be seen working with other churches in the community. The stigma of being viewed as intolerant or narrow-minded has frightened many preachers into backing away from the message of truth. Nationally speaking, we clearly are raising a generation of youths who do not share the previous generation's attitude toward denominationalism, who do not even realize that there is a difference between teachings, or that such differences matter, and we should not be surprised to start losing those youths to larger and more inclusive (and fun) religious organizations.

Let me remind us of some truths that I am convinced are still truths, and that I am not ashamed to espouse, though it may earn me scorn.

1.) Religious division is NOT the will of God. It is of the Devil and it is not to be celebrated as plurality. We ought stop shopping for the church of our choice, and start looking for the church of God's choice. The Christian religion is based on revealed truth found in Scripture, not on the opinions of men. Thus, it ought to result in a unified body of believers. This is what Christ prayed for (John 17:20–21). Paul spoke against division (1 Cor. 1:11).

2.) Not every teaching in every church is correct. Many churches teach many good things—some more than others. But there is such a thing as FALSE teaching, and it must be identified and contradicted. False teaching jeopardizes souls. Speaking out against false teaching is not to win arguments, but to save those who are blinded by it (Matt. 7:15, Acts 20:30, 2 Tim. 4:3, Tit. 1:9, 2 Pet. 2:1, 1 John 4:1). Remember that Jesus said regarding the Pharisees, who were no religious

slouches, “if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (Matt. 15:14). I will not give support to doctrines I believe to be false (2 John 2:11).

3.) It is possible to THINK one saved, but to be in fact lost, because he confuses sincerity with truth. Read Matt. 7:21–28. I realize with humble fear that I could be included in this list. But the people in this passage were lost not because they heard and obeyed God’s word, but because they did not.

4.) I stand in fear of Matthew 7:13–14, that a majority will be LOST. Since the days of Noah, popularity has never been an indicator of God’s favor. When someone asked Jesus, “Are there just a few who are being saved?” (Luke 13:23) He spoke of the narrow door. We could quickly and easily add people to the membership rolls by watering down the message—but would we add them to God’s book of life?

5.) God has revealed a specific plan of salvation in the Bible. It includes repentance and baptism. There is but ONE BAPTISM (Eph. 4:5) and ONE GOSPEL (Gal. 1:6) and a host of counterfeits. Will God welcome into heaven a sincere person who truly loves and worships God, but who was sprinkled as a baby rather than immersed as an adult? That’s God’s call. He is perfect, and whatever decision He makes will be the right decision.

If God extends salvation to such, it seems to me based more on His mercy than His revealed will, and that takes me into uncomfortable territory. I want to say “may God please loosen all His standards on Judgment Day!” But I also know that God does not lie or exaggerate or vacillate or lie (Heb. 6:18), and that His mercy is never at odds with His revealed word. If God wants to make a merciful exception to Mark 16:15–16, then may He do so, and do so again and again, praise be to God! I realize that I am not perfect by a long shot, and will need such mercy to cover my moral and doctrinal failings, both the ones I know about, and the ones I do not (1 Cor. 4:3–5).

And it is certainly not within the evangelist’s role to decide which exceptions to make, any more than it is the prison guard’s role to decide when to turn the key in the lock and release his favorite prisoner. If God says, “arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16) how presumptuous for a man to say, “Oh, don’t worry, baptism is not really important.” If God says, “homosexuals ... will not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9–11), how presumptuous for a man to say, “gays are accepted at our church.” It is our duty to speak the whole message God gave us, not to invent our own.

I am convinced most religious division occurs not because of what the Bible says, but because of what the traditions of men say. If we could sit down and examine

the Bible together, I believe we would see it alike 99% of the time (100% of the time when the issue is significant). I am willing to change my views and practices if someone will show me that the Bible teaches differently. Are you willing? I admit my weakness and foolishness in the eyes of an all-knowing, all-powerful God. But if God gives us His Bible for any reason at all, it is to be read and obeyed. I don't see how we can settle for denominationalism without throwing out the Bible. —*John Guzzetta*