**“I Just Don’t Like Controversy” – Who Does?**

*by Harry Osborne*

The willingness to stand in opposition to sin and error is in extremely short supply today. We live in the age of the “why-can’t-we-all-just-get-along” mantra reaching near universal application. Our society has become infected with the pathogen of moral and ethical relativism that stifles negative judgments of almost any immoral behavior, no matter how abhorrent. In religious circles, the almost blanket use of “judge not that ye be not judged,” despite its limited application by Jesus in context to hypocritical judgments, has rendered many unable to accept that this same Jesus commanded “judge righteous judgment” as the remedy to correctly identify evil (see Matthew 7:1-5 cf. John 7:24). That the “religious” world tolerates many evils it would have denounced less than a century ago is indisputable. Thus, a growing number of denominations have even accepted the abomination of homosexuality, rather than calling it what it is – SIN.

Sadly, many brethren have been infected with the same affliction though they fail to recognize the symptoms. Yes, they will still recognize homosexuality as sinful and openly denounce it. But when it comes to many other sins and errors, equally deadly to the soul, the contagion of our time comes out of dormancy and manifests its familiar symptoms. Sermons on immodest dress, social drinking and dancing; as well as refutation of erroneous teaching on broader fellowship, the social gospel, doctrinal soundness, unlawful sundering of marriage or adulterous marriage are taboo in many churches. When it comes to identifying sin and error present among the popular, influential or wealthy among us, many become silent or even give aid and comfort to the wrong doer. Rather than dealing with the evidence of sinful conduct or teaching that conflicts with Scripture, a shocking number of the formerly faithful excuse their silence with the plea, “I just don’t like controversy.”

Implicit in this plea is the concept that those who engage in necessary controversy must do so because they **like it** and get some **personal thrill** from disagreements. Forget the fact that such critics have just engaged in the judging they castigate in others (not to mention that adjudication being based on motives they cannot rightly judge), their appraisal is demonstrably wrong. Openly exposing sin and opposing error is not evidence of a yearning for controversy. The biblical examples of those rightly contending with evil clearly show this fact.

Let us take the example of our Lord and Savior first. Has one ever shown more compassion for man or more concern for humanity? No, His love for the souls of mankind estranged because of sin is beyond question (Romans 5:6-10). Yet, a fair examination of the life of Christ shows He was no stranger to controversy, openly challenging the perpetrators of sin and teachers of error. The same Jesus who showed righteous indignation in casting evil doers out of temple and rebuking the Pharisees in Jerusalem in terms unparalleled by modern opponents of sin and error, immediately afterwards grieved with evident remorse for the souls in danger:

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!* (Matthew 23:37).

The life of Jeremiah was a life filled with controversy as he openly and boldly condemned the evils of the rich, powerful and influential transgressors of his day. Yet, can anyone justly say he did so because he ***liked*** it? No, we know him as “The Weeping Prophet” because his remorse for the plight of sinful Judah is so evident. His authorship of Lamentations attests to the deep heartache that accompanied his courageous stand for truth. If left to act solely from his own desire, unaffected by his responsibility, Jeremiah would have remained silent (Jeremiah 20:7-10). A study of the Old Testament prophets manifests a similar resolute stand against ungodliness, whatever its form, was the result of godly courage, not a love of conflict.

The New Testament apostles show the same unyielding opposition to sin and error. Dare anyone attribute the inspired apostle Paul’s rebukes of sin and error as coming from a cantankerous spirit in search of a quarrel? If so, it would be in direct rejection of the facts (Acts 20:18-31; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 7:8-16; 11:24-31; 2 Timothy 4:2-8). Did the inspired apostle Peter merely crave a fight when he warned of false teachers in 2 Peter 2? No, the very context exhibits a concern for the destructive effects of error on its teacher and its hearers. When one sees wrong and refuses to speak out against it, such silence is not commended, but condemned (John 12:42-43). The parents of the blind man healed by Jesus evidently did not like controversy, but their failure to stand for truth is recognized as cowardice, not commendable reserve (John 9:18-23).

Likewise, our responsibility to engage in rightful controversy is clearly taught by God’s word. Jesus taught that we must directly oppose those who sin against us and be willing to publicly oppose them if they fail to repent. He commanded:

*“Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector”* (Matthew 18:15-17).

Please note that the admonition is not for one to gossip to others about the sin, nor is it to remain silent about it. Both are equally unauthorized responses to such sin. Yes, it takes courage to deal face-to-face with one who sins against us, but that is the mandate of Christ. The excuse that one does not like controversy or does not handle it well does not negate the responsibility.

The requirement to oppose sin and error is repeatedly seen in the gospel of Christ. If one is “overtaken in any trespass,” it is the charge of all who are “spiritual” to address the wrong in an effort to “restore” the sinner (Galatians 6:1). When the truth of the gospel is opposed by sin or error, it is our duty to “resist to the face” the one acting contrary to that truth – no matter who he might be (Galatians 2:11-14). Themes we would rather address must be delayed when it is necessary to “contend earnestly for the faith” (Jude 3). Accepting the erring into our fellowship under the justification that we are trying to build a bridge is forbidden (2 John 9-11).

The obligation to engage in necessary controversy is an undesired, but essential part of being a Christian. Over the years, I have engaged in my share of controversy. In doing so, I have heard the charge of being a “pugilist,” a “watchdog” and even “a snarling cur.” Popular lore would have it that I and those of like kind just love a fight and are fond of arguments. Though I have had numerous disputes over doctrinal matters and spiritual values, I have never liked a one of them! In the still of the night as I try to sleep, the horrors of controversies past and present have their dreaded effect on my mind. Friends now estranged because of spiritual conflict have never escaped my thoughts and prayers. Yet, it is in the loss of some in my own family over matters of faith that leaves my heart most broken and my tears unabated, despite the years.

Dear critic, before ascribing the participation in spiritual controversy to a quarrelsome character, please consider the cost often borne by those “set for the defense of the gospel” throughout history. It is not what any sane person **likes** to do. It brings pain beyond measure and causes an unspeakable grief to be endured – often in separation from those still deeply loved. Yet, it is a case of “necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16).