**“I Am Set for the Defense of the Gospel”**

*by Harry Osborne*

The apostle Paul affirmed his resolve to stand with the truth of God by saying, "I am set for the defense of the gospel" (Phil. 1:17). Was such a responsibility solely for Paul due to his unique place as an apostle or do other Christians have the same duty? Since the gospel was defended by apostles in the first century, are modern Christians free from the task of defending it from present day assaults? Can preachers, elders and saints of our time legitimately excuse current failures to expose error by claiming a lack the apostolic credentials to undertake this task?

Our culture disdains those who defend Bible truth as an absolute. They uphold, as fundamental, the tenets of relativism. They are absolute certainty that we cannot know anything for certain. Asserting the principles and actions of another are wrong is the cardinal sin of our age: **intolerance**. In school, our children are taught that "diversity" should be celebrated. The desired "diversity" was first limited to accepting those of diverse races and economic backgrounds. If it had stayed at that point, all of us could heartily "Amen" the concept because this clearly taught in Scripture (Acts 10:34-35; Rom. 2:7-11; Jas. 2:1-9). However, the proponents of celebrating "diversity" went on to include adultery, fornication, homosexuality, false religion, and a host of other sinful actions in the category of "diversity" and "alternate lifestyles" that must be accepted and celebrated. At this point, the child of God must see the shift in definition and oppose acceptance of sinful principles and practices. God demands that His people hate, reject and oppose every evil way (Psa. 119:128; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:11; Eph. 5:6-12; 2 Jn. 9-11).

We expect a sin-loving world to justify its evil action and silence its opponents (Jn. 3:19-20; 7:1,7; 15:18-21). Isaiah said, "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness" (Isa. 5:18-23 cf. Ezek.15:22-23). The wisdom writer of old noted God's condemnation of those who would justify evil and tolerate its continuance (Prov. 17:15; 18:15; 24:24). Solomon later notes the response characteristic of the one set for the defense of truth:

***They that forsake the law praise the wicked; but such as keep the law contend with them*** **(Prov. 28:4).**

It is a sad fact that many brethren are now praising the wicked and justifying their acceptance, while they condemn those who contend with the wicked. The opponent of evil is labeled a "watchdog," "unloving" or a "neo-Pharisee." From pulpits to kitchen tables, from Bible classes to college campuses, from "gospel papers" to preachers of repute, a growing cry is heard for tolerance of "diversity" in doctrine and practice where sin is involved. Its current momentum began from brother Ed Harrell's plea for continued acceptance of brother Homer Hailey despite his teaching and application of error on divorce and remarriage (Christianity Magazine, Nov. 1988). It gained steam when none of the editors of that paper challenged the error. The speed of the movement increased when esteemed brethren stepped in to defend and praise our "historical practice" of accepting those who teach some doctrinal errors and sinful practices. It accelerated even more as some lauded our doctrinal diversity as a proof of rightful "autonomy" and "non-sectarianism." It reached terminal velocity when we were told by many that we could receive brethren who advocate the "Big Bang" theory, stellar evolution, a 15 to 20 billion year old universe as consistent with the Bible.

It is past time that we realize there is no violation of congregational autonomy, Bible love or any other principle of Christ in preaching the truth! Conversely, we must see that the Bible recognizes no legitimate autonomy for a church to practice that for which it has no authority. No aspect of Bible love compels one to turn a blind eye to sin practiced by a believer. No principle of Christ authorizes the on-going and continuous tolerance of those in a sinful practice or false doctrine. God's people are protected against the devil's assaults and forces only to the degree that each individual Christian hears and heeds the whole counsel of God.

The same gospel message that brought people to salvation and protected them was the focus of Paul's interest. Even the persecution brought upon him was deemed a blessing because it ended in "the progress of the gospel" (Phil. 1:12). That focus on the gospel is seen in the words used by Paul in speaking of his work and the brethren's part in it. All of them had "fellowship in the furtherance of the gospel" (Phil. 1:5; 2:22). Since Paul was faithfully declaring the truth of the gospel, the saints had fellowship with him by supporting him financially in continuing his work (Phil. 1:3-7; 4:14-17). To take a stand for the truth, Timothy needed to stand with Paul who faithfully declared the gospel (2 Tim. 1:8). If one faithfully declares the gospel today, the same fellowship is possible as we unite in upholding and declaring the truth.

If one fails to faithfully uphold, declare and defend the truth of the gospel, how can a congregation of God's people or individual saints justifiably receive and support that one? Yet, some well-known brethren today are attempting to justify congregations and individuals that financially support preachers of error. The Bible makes it clear that such action is contrary to God’s will (2 Jn. 9-11). Those participating in praise and support of the wicked ought to repent of this evil and summon the courage necessary to contend with the wicked as commanded in God's word. When Paul defended the gospel in the presence of the saints at Philippi and they supported his work, they were all partakers with Paul of grace (Phil. 1:7). What "grace" is found in supporting and working with preachers of error? Are precious souls brought closer to our Lord by setting aside the sword of the Spirit and refusing to defend the blood-bought gospel in order to accept "doctrinal diversity" and adapt to the plea for "tolerance" of wickedness?

After Paul claimed that he was "set for the defense of the gospel," he made it plain that defending the gospel was a responsibility shared by every saint. He called upon the bishops, deacons and all saints addressed to "*stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, and not in any way terrified by your adversaries*" (Phil. 1:27-28). Peter confirmed that all Christians have the same responsibility to "*give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear*" (1 Pet. 3:15). If we meekly submit to God's will and have a reverence for Him causing us to submit, we will ***defend*** our hope to **every** man - including popular preachers of error, college professors, elders leading people astray and much loved old brethren who have departed the truth. The word "defense" from 1 Peter 3:15 and the same word in Philippians 1:17 are translated from the Greek word, apologia, which refers to formal defense or a reply upholding something in the face of conflict. The gospel was the object of both Peter and Paul's repeated defense though opposition to that truth arose through persecution, error and other adversaries. It was not merely the responsibility of apostles to meet this charge, but it is one given to faithful Christians today as the situation arises and necessitates it.

Despite this plain teaching, some argue that faithful brethren cannot emulate the examples of the apostles defending the truth against the assaults of error because we are not apostles. This argument is not only false, but it strikes at the very heart of how we establish authority. Those making the argument will be forced to a "new hermeneutic" since they have denied a basic fundamental on establishing Bible authority. If we cannot imitate the example of apostles in approved action not unique to their place as apostles (i.e. inspired revelation of truth and the miraculous confirmation thereof), how can we to we believe in the binding nature of "approved apostolic examples"? If these brethren are correct in their argument, we must believe the opposite! That is, if an apostle does it, we **cannot** do it! In their quest for a positive gospel that tolerates doctrinal diversity and negates the need for controversy, they are forced to a new mind-set and a new hermeneutic. Let us be certain not to follow them!