

“You Offended Me – I’m Not Listening to You!”

by Harry Osborne

What would you think of a preacher whose sermons offended people and was perceived as insulting? What if a preacher caused the audience to be filled with anger because of the hard things that he said? What if he went so far as to mock false beliefs? Without further consideration, many would denounce such preaching as wrong. Even if he did not intend to insult people, but merely sought to preach the truth boldly and show the fallacy of error, many would condemn him for offending others.

However, the Bible is filled with cases of those who preached the truth boldly in an effort to bring sinners to repentance, only to see the audience react with anger and offense. Preachers of the truth in Bible times were not men of timidity, preaching a totally "positive" message which was pleasing to all hearers. Their message had elements which were not always appreciated by some who heard. Their preaching was not intentionally offensive or enraging. Yet, preachers of righteousness in Bible times were not always well received by the hearers, nor will we be.

As those proclaimers of ancient truth sought to declare the will of God in boldness and clarity, so must we seek to do in our time even though some will react adversely. This article is not meant as a defense of anyone who intentionally sets out to mistreat or enrage another – such is indefensible. Yet, proper teaching of truth may unintentionally bring those responses.

Preaching of Jesus

Surely no one could dare claim the ability to improve upon the manner and approach of the perfect teacher, Jesus Christ. But look at the effect of His teaching upon others. In Matthew 15, Jesus reproved the Pharisees for their replacing of the law of God with human commands and traditions. This reproof was in forceful terms as He said,

You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" (Matt. 15:7-9).

How did His audience take this reprimand? Did they accept it gladly? No, that is made clear by the disciples who came to Jesus about the matter. "Then the disciples came and said to Him, Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?" (Matt. 15:12). Jesus did not apologize for offending the hearers, but rather reinforced His rebuke as He answered His disciples in the next verse comparing them to a plant that needed uprooting. Did Jesus do anything wrong?

In a rebuke found in Luke, Jesus brought a similar reaction from the audience. After He finished exposing the hypocrisy of many who heard Him, we read of one man who responded to Jesus. "And one of the lawyers said to Him in reply, ‘Teacher, when You say this, you insult us too’" (Luke 11:45). Jesus did not apologize to the insulted lawyer, but proceeded over the next seven verses to pronounce "woes" upon the lawyers of that time because they deceived people by leading them into error. Did Jesus make a mistake in His approach?

In another case, Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath and then taught about the proper use of the Sabbath. The hearers did not appreciate Jesus' teaching. In fact, the Bible says, "But they themselves were filled with rage, and discussed together what they might do to Jesus" (Luke 6:11).

We read nothing about Jesus seeking to mollify their wrath at that time or any other. Was Jesus at fault for their reaction?

When Jesus did the same thing on the Sabbath later in his ministry, there was a mixed reaction from the crowd. The record says, "And as He said this, all His opponents were being humiliated; and the entire multitude was rejoicing over all the glorious things being done by Him" (Luke 13:17). The same

message which put some to shame caused others to rejoice. The difference was not in the approach of the Preacher, but the attitude of the hearers towards the truth.

Mocking Idolatry

Long before the time of Jesus, Elijah reproved the prophets of Baal (a false god) and challenged them to a contest on Mount Carmel to prove who was the true God. When the prophets of Baal prayed for their god to bring fire down upon their sacrifice, nothing happened. After this continued from morning until noon, Elijah began to emphasize the folly of the prophets' actions as is recorded in the Bible:

And it came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened" (1 Kings 18:27).

Clearly, the statements of Elijah were meant to mock the foolishness of believing in Baal and bring rational people to reject such error. His statements were not soothing to the prophets or to those who put their faith in Baal. They were no doubt humiliated as a result of the experience. Yet, Elijah's sarcasm helped to point out the absolute powerlessness of Baal and the foolishness of believing in such a "god." Though it was a hard way to learn, those who learned from that humbling experience ended the day believing in the true God and forsaking the worship of Baal. A little shame for a time kept them from continuing to follow Baal and suffering the eternal consequences. Was Elijah wrong for so mocking that error and openly exposing its folly?

In Isaiah 44:14-17, the folly of idolatry was ridiculed by the prophet. He noted that the wood of one tree was used partly to make a fire for warmth or baking food while the remainder was used to form a "god" to which people bow down. The practice was ridiculous! Though these words were not easy for the idolaters to hear, the message could help urge the idolaters to reexamine their practice because of its irrationality. There was no kind way to humble the foolish practitioner of error then, nor is there today. Did Isaiah do wrong by trying to turn the sinner from error rather than speaking soothingly to them on their road to eternal condemnation?

Conclusion

We could look at many more cases where teachers of truth in the Bible were not well received by their offended, humiliated or enraged hearers. In every case, the attempt of the teacher was to boldly declare the truth, not to maliciously mistreat or intentionally anger the hearer. However, the sinner who refuses to repent of sin will not react positively to being exposed as a sinner. God desires those who have first been humbled (Isa. 57:15; Jas. 4:10). The opportunity for humbling oneself at the exposure of truth came as teachers of truth declared the will of God which "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37; 7:34).

It was the heart of the sinner which determined whether that opportunity turned them to humbly repent or rebelliously react in anger refusing to obey the truth. Those same teachers who sought to reach people in ways which did not leave human pride intact instruct us that we are to follow their example in teaching (1 Cor. 4:16-21). As long as sin and error remain, there will always be the unpleasant task of showing its folly in order to point the sinner to the path of righteousness – a path that requires humility. If one acts as a child in being mad by a parent's discipline and rebuke, the true problem is immaturity, pride or rebellion of the hearer, not the manner of the teacher.

Several years ago, brother Roy Cogdill made a statement about the unpleasantness of the sinner accepting the fact of his sins. He said, "You know, there must be a hundred ways to skin a cat, but from a cat's point of view, there's not a good one." When we are tempted to condemn the preacher because we do not like the message, let us examine ourselves to see if we are reacting properly. It may not be pleasant, but the lesson is needed if it is the truth.