Naming Names

Scripture: Romans 16:17
Code: B140218

When it comes to false teachers, *naming names* seems to have become the unpardonable sin for many in the charismatic movement. Certainly, much of the criticism aimed at last fall's Strange Fire conference focused on that issue. But is "Thou shalt not call out false teachers" really another commandment for the modern church, or is it an unbiblical shield designed to protect heretics from theological scrutiny?

The apostle Paul spoke to this issue in his epistle to the Romans:

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them (Romans 16:17 KJV).

Tragically, Paul's instruction seems to have fallen on deaf ears among many charismatic and continuationist leaders who should know better. In *Authentic Fire*, his book critiquing *Strange Fire*, Michael Brown wrote:

Have I named names? For the most part no, since there is so much immaturity in the Body and we are so prone to division that the moment someone's name is mentioned, even in the context of a minor correction, that person is instantly demonized by some, as if their whole message is suspect. [1] Michael L. Brown, Authentic Fire (Lake Mary, FL: Excel Publishers, 2014), 32.

Brown might think that naming names causes division, but Paul says clearly in Romans 16:17 that the work of false teachers is what causes division, and that we identify and avoid them for the sake of preserving true unity.

Brown's argument is also markedly out of sync with church history. The Arian heresy, the Pelagian heresy, the Sabellian heresy, and the Socinian heresy—to name just a few—were all named after the heretic who taught them. Yes, their names were named, and still live on in modern memory as a reminder of the damnable errors they taught.

One could hardly say that false teachers find anonymity in the pages of God's Word either. Jesus (Revelation 2:20), Paul (1 Timothy 1:19–20; 2 Timothy 4:14), and John (3 John 1:9–10) were all more than willing to name names.

Of course Romans 16:17 is not talking about witch hunts, but it does highlight the responsibility of Christian leaders to identify, expose, and reject false teachers wherever and whenever they appear. John MacArthur's commentary on that very verse is both instructive and encouraging as he points out that passivity is not an option when it comes to wolves among the flock:

It is the nature of love to warn against harm to those whom it loves. The greatest harm against believers is that which undermines God's truth in which they live. Love is ready to forgive all evil, but

it does not condone or ignore evil, especially in the church.

The mature Christian is to keep his eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances. Paul is not talking about hair splitting over minor interpretations, or about immature believers who are divisive because of personal preferences. We are to “shun foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless” (Titus 3:9). Paul is here talking about something immeasurably more serious. He is warning about those who challenge and undermine the divinely revealed apostolic teaching they had received.

Keep your eye on such men, Paul says. Mark them out as false teachers who are to be opposed and avoided. *Skopeō* (keep your eye on) carries the idea of looking at or observing with intensity. It is from the noun form of that word that we get the *scope* in telescope and microscope. It means more than simply to look at, but to examine and scrutinize carefully.

Evangelicals who adhere strictly but unpretentiously to the inerrancy of Scripture and refuse to join ranks with professing believers who compromise God’s Word are often labelled as divisive. But God’s true church is bonded by His Word and the power of His indwelling Spirit, who applies and builds the church on and through that Word. The ones who truly cause destructive division and disharmony, the ungodly dissensions and hindrances about which Paul speaks here, are those who promote and practice falsehood and unrighteousness. No institution or movement can rightly claim unity in Christ if they are not unified in and by His Word. Whatever spiritual unity they may have is based on the spirit of this age, which is satanic, not godly.

The right response of believers to false teachers, especially those who teach their heresy under the guise of Christianity, is not debate or dialogue. We are to turn away from them, to reject what they teach and to protect fellow believers, especially new converts and the immature, from being deceived, confused, and misled. Paul often argued and debated with unbelievers, both Jew and Gentile (Acts 17:16–17; cf. 9:29; 17:2; 18:4; 19:8–9). He did not, however, provide a platform for those who professed Christ but taught a false and perverted gospel. Such people are not to be debated but denounced. [2] John MacArthur, Romans 9–16: MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994), 371–74.

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