

Must We Study With Those With Whom We Differ Religiously?

By Rodney Pitts

The above question is one that everyone should consider. For, it concerns how we will respond to those who might ask us a difficult question related to our faith, to those who might seek our input concerning a religious discussion, or to those who may ask us to have a bible study concerning a particular subject of biblical interest. For many the answer to this question is a simple “no!” For some the answer is a resounding “yes!” Yet, for others the answer is not so clear. Of course, to truly answer this question properly we must consider what God’s word has to say about the subject.

God Wants His People to Defend Their Faith

Whatever answer someone may give to the question of this article, one thing that must be kept clear in our minds is that these differing answers are not God’s fault. For, God has clearly revealed His desire for Christians to defend their faith. Peter wrote: “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15).

In addition to this we see that God wants us to combat division among His people by getting all to *speak the same thing* in Christ. For, in 1 Corinthians 1:10 Paul told these brethren to “...all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10). Is it not amazing how different the unity Christ desires is from that which is accepted by the religious world today? Yet, this is Christ’s desire. And, since Christ desires for His followers to “speak the same thing,” we have to study our doctrinal differences in order to come to an agreement as to what Christ’s word tells us to “speak.” For, Peter commanded, “If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God...” (1 Peter 4:11). This requires that when people question our faith, our answers must be biblical answers, not our opinions or what we feel or like. Also, Paul explains that the basis for the unity Jesus wants is the fact of there being only “one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all” (Ephesians 4:4-5). Since there is only one hope and one Lord, we should not be surprised that there is only “one faith.” Jesus is not going to teach or condone differing and contradicting doctrines or faiths. So, if we hope to be faithful to God, we must be willing to give biblical reasons for the hope that we have in Christ to those who honestly seek to know about our beliefs.

Further Proof

Although 1 Peter 3:15 should suffice in answering the overall question of this article, there are other statements of Christ that obligate us to study with those we differ with religiously. First, Jesus’ desire that we all be “one” demands that we study with those we differ with religiously. In John 17:20-22 Jesus’ prayer for unity reads, “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; ²¹ that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. ²² And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one.” The thing that strikes us the most in this statement is that the “oneness” Jesus desires is the same as that enjoyed by Jesus and the Father. This is significant because the oneness they shared was not just one of “acceptance” in love, but one of sameness in doctrine and practice. For, Jesus and the Father did not contradict each other’s teachings and practices, but were in complete agreement concerning the words and actions of Jesus (John 5:19; 8:28). And, it is also very important to note that it is only this degree of unity among believers that will cause the world to believe that Jesus was sent from God (17:21). Thus, to play down religious differences, to preach acceptance of all “Christian faiths,” and to refuse to study one’s religious convictions with others is not only in contradiction to Jesus’ prayer, but also helps promote division and unbelief.

Second, the fact that God says one can “wander from the truth” and endanger one’s spiritual life by doing so necessitates that we study with those of differing religious beliefs. In James 5:19-20 we read, “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that

he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and a cover a multitude of sins.” Now, there are several things that we should learn from this passage. First, we learn that there is truth and there is error. For, if truth is relative to one’s conception of it, how might one “turn from **the truth**”? Second, we see that turning from the truth results in one becoming a sinner in error. Third, note that this warning is directed toward anyone “among you,” or among Christians, showing that a Christian can turn from the truth of God resulting in being guilty of sin and in jeopardy of spiritual death. So, if we truly love the souls of others, we will be concerned about what the truth of God teaches and will seek to help the world conform to it. Of course, this cannot be done without first studying the scriptures ourselves that we might know and use the truth correctly. For, we must do as Paul told Timothy and “be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). And, once we are sure of the truth, we must then seek to study with others, including those we differ with religiously, in order to bring them to the truth and God’s salvation which is found in it.

Objections Answered

It is not unusual for some to object to the above approach based upon their belief that “God does not want us to argue about religion.” Well, if one means by this that God does not want us to be mean-spirited or malicious in our discussions about the Bible, to that I give a hearty “amen!” Jesus wants us to be “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Yet, to argue concerning the teaching of the bible is not necessarily a bad thing. For, the correct definition of “argue” is “to give reasons for or against something, to contend in words: dispute; debate; to persuade by giving reasons” (*The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). Therefore, to refuse to study with others on the basis that God does not want us to “argue about religion” is to deny God’s command to “...be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15). Also, if arguing, or seeking to persuade others concerning the bible’s teaching, is contrary to God’s will, then Jesus’ disciples violated this regularly. For, the apostles disputed and reasoned regularly with those in error concerning the teachings of Christ (Acts 9:27-29; 17:17; 19:8-9).

Another argument presented against discussing biblical differences with others is that “Since we are to love one another, discussions of religious differences must be rejected because they often result in pain and heartache.” Although I understand that discussing our religious differences may result in pain and heartache, the truth is that love often demands that we do that which produces these results. For, in parenting, is it not true that lovingly correcting our children often demands something that will bring a bit of pain and heartache? And the same is true concerning being faithful to the Lord. For, God Himself chastens His people. Hebrews 12:5-6 reads, “And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: ‘My son, do not despise the chastening of the lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by him; for whom the lord loves he chastens, and scourges every son whom he receives.’” So, if the supreme love of God is shown in the chastening of His people, we must not assume that the “pain and heartache” that may follow learning the truth are contrary to love.

Also, we must keep in mind that Jesus said the gospel would separate families, causing one’s family to become one’s enemy (Matthew 10:34-39). And, the Bible shows that there also came a time when Christians knew that to convert someone to Christ was to convert them to a life of persecution and even death (Acts 7:59-8:4). Was it, therefore, contrary to love to teach them about Christ? Surely not! So, despite the fact that truth may be painful, may separate families and friends, or may even bring death upon those that accepts it, to teach the truth of salvation is to show the greatest of love for others.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by encouraging you to take your responsibility to biblically defend your faith seriously. This means being ready not only to give a scriptural reason for your hope, but to also seek to question the doctrines and practices of others in the spirit of love. For, Jude 3 states, “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”