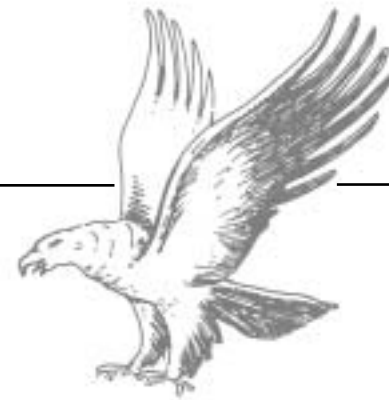


Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



August 29, 2010

Fatwa Chaos

Muslims are struggling with a proliferation of authoritative pronouncements intended to guide the faithful in determining right and wrong. They're not the only ones struggling.

“For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!” (Gal. 5:14-15).

In Islamic theology, a fatwa is “a scholarly opinion on a matter of Islamic law.” Because Islam does not have a centralized authority, such as a pope or a governing council, any imam who fancies himself a Koranic scholar and has an internet connection can issue a fatwa and attract a following. This has created what some have called “fatwa chaos,” an explosion of conflicting edicts that is spreading confusion throughout the Muslim world. Faced with these bewildering — and sometimes silly — pronouncements, some Muslims have resorted to “fatwa shopping,” or posing the same question to a number of scholars, hoping to find among all the responses the one they are looking for. A fatwa rarely involves invoking the death penalty on the disobedient; but it often has the practical effect of promoting division among the faithful.

Before we chuckle at the Muslims’ dilemma, churches of Christ would do well to consider an almost identical situation that exists among us. Like Islam, we do not recognize a single authoritative body that enforces uniformity of thought. Like Islam, we look to a sacred book for our guidance, but must interpret the text to determine its application to the myriad questions of life. And like Islam, we are blessed with a large number of “scholars” who are more than happy to tell us what the true interpretation is—and mark those who disagree as heretics. Finally, like Islam, our own version of “fatwa chaos” is tearing us apart and making us look foolish before a skeptical world.

None of this is new. Paul dealt with the same phenomenon in the first century. The fatwa-issuers then were Jewish Christians with a strong Pharisaic background. The specific issues were different, but the practical effect was the same: Christians began fighting among themselves over a plethora of matters that were inconsequential to the core principles of their faith. The epistle to

the Galatians was Paul’s response to the problem. Paul appealed to his brethren to let brotherly love guide their dealings with each other, and unite in avoiding those sins that are “evident” (obvious, unmistakable) (Gal. 5:19f).

Ironically, some Muslims realize the damage that fatwa chaos is doing to their cause, and are appealing for a more reasonable approach, using language very similar to Paul’s. “The permissible and the non-permissible *are quite often self-evident* (emphasis mine, DK) and may be resolved through the application of common sense. . . . It is rather strange and unfortunate that people have become so reliant on fatwas that they do not try to think for themselves” (Abdullah Bajad Al-Otaibi, quoted by Caryle Murphy, “Fatwa Chaos”, *The Majalla*, online edition, 8/23/10).

Two thousand years ago or today, Christian or Muslim, the real challenge is always the same: getting people to think for themselves in applying truth to their lives, rather than relying on other fallible humans to do it for them. Accomplish that, and the rest is easy.

– David King