

CONTENDING OR CONTENTIOUS?

Jude 1:3

“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.”

Proverbs 18:19

“A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle.”

A Father was sitting quietly in his easy chair reading the newspaper. He was suddenly interrupted by an argumentative group of children outside his window. He raised the window and said, “Kids, stop it! Honey, what’s wrong?” His daughter replied, “Nothing, Daddy, we’re just playing church!”

Unfortunately, we can learn bad conduct in some churches as well as good conduct. Is there a church anywhere that has not had contentious congregants? “Contend” and “contentious” are two different words, with two different meanings, revealing two different attitudes and two different motives. While scripture encourages the one, it condemns the other. Yet the two are so closely associated that many assume that one must be contentious in order to be contending.

The cause of Christ would be well served if all of us understood the difference between the two words and avoided the one while applying the other. Therefore, let us step back, take a deep breath and get a good grip on the meanings of the two words.

CONTEND

The word “contend” that Jude uses is from the Greek word “epagognizomai” and from it we get the English word “agony” or “agonize.” Our dictionaries define “contend” as follows: “To strive against difficulties; to strive in controversy or debate; to assert, affirm, allege or avow; to state to be true or existing; to compete for something; engage in a contest; to maintain.” – Webster’s New World Dictionary

CONTENTIOUS

“Inclined or showing an inclination to dispute or disagree; involving or likely to cause controversy; heated arguments or controversy; given to struggling with others out of jealousy or discord; quarrelsomeness. Synonyms are: argumentative, belligerent.” - The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language

“Exhibiting an often perverse and wearisome tendency to quarrels and disputes; showing an inclination to dispute or disagree. Synonyms: argumentative, wrangling, bickering, combative, quarrelsome.” - Merriam-Webster Dictionary

**“Like charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire,
so is a contentious man to kindle strife.” (Proverbs 26:21)**

Spurgeon's comment on the above verse was, "Wherever he is, quarrelling begins, or being already commenced, it is fanned to a fiercer flame. He is a stoker for Satan's fires."

- Spurgeon's Devotional Bible

No fuel, no fire! The fire of an untamed tongue and an unChristlike attitude have inflicted deep wounds and scars that remain long after the contentious confrontation has ended. Some churches have been destroyed by the flames of contention when fed by the fuel of rumors, whispers and insinuations. "People demand freedom of speech to make up for the freedom of thought which they avoid." – Soren Kierkegaard, philosopher

Considerable godly effort and righteous work lies in smoldering ruins as the result of the fuel from thoughtless vocal vehemence driven either by ignorance, pride, arrogance, and revenge, or a combination thereof. I like Spurgeon's phrase: "a stoker for Satan's fires"!

Much so called "contending for the faith" is nothing more than opinionated outbursts that hurt more than help the cause of Christ; that inflame rather than inform. Such speech is usually not researched or documented truth but repeated party lines. Dogmatism and intimidation are tactics, not facts; tools not truth! I would hate to die for an opinion while not having a valid conviction.

Ray Stedman writes: "some think that contending for the faith means to roll the Bible up into a bludgeon with which to beat people over the head. Such people feel that they need to be very contentious in contending for the faith. But this is not what Jude has in mind at all. He is simply talking about the need for proclaiming the truth."

SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE

Paul admonishes the Ephesians about "speaking the truth in love." (Eph.4:15) There is a tendency for those who have knowledge of the truth as it is in God's Word to want to forcibly insert truth into closed minds, whether they are the minds of the unsaved or minds of the saved.

God does not need bullies or obnoxious verbiage in defense of faith. The Gospel offends without our help. ("I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense." - Isa.8:14 quoted in Rom.9:33; Galatians 5:11 speaks of "the offense of the cross.") Those under conviction are often offended by the content of God's Word, for it convicts the soul of its sin. It should be the Gospel message which offends not the Gospel messenger. C. H. Spurgeon said, "The truth is like a lion. Whoever heard of defending a lion? Just turn it loose and it will defend itself."

The Lord is pleased for us to walk and work together in unity and harmony as His children, doing His will in reaching the lost and helping one another grow in dedication and service while contending for the faith without being contentious!

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