

November 2007

I ran into a couple last weekend in the grocery store. I knew them maybe a decade ago; we went to the same church. I was pushing my cart down the dairy aisle when I heard someone say, “John!” It was one of those embarrassing moments where somebody clearly knows me and I vaguely remember them, but for the life of me, I can’t recall their name and so I say, “Hi!” back, with enthusiasm to cover myself. We chatted for awhile. But what was so painfully obvious (to me at least) was that we are no longer on the same page. They seemed stuck in a time warp – still concerned about the same old issues, still attending the same church, still using the same old language.

The pretense we maintained for a few moments was, “We’re all still in the same old boat, eh?” Just like the good old days. But we’re not, and for the rest of the day I was uncomfortable, though I couldn’t really explain why. Now I think I have some clarity, but I’m uncomfortable setting it down in black and white for fear of being misunderstood.

Not all Gospels are equal.

We’ve fallen prey to this thinking that it’s wrong to draw a distinction between various movements in Christianity, or churches, or Christians. After all, we know it’s wrong to judge. “Judge not,” Jesus said, “lest you be judged” (Matthew 7:11). A good command, by the way. I’m all for it. But the meaning of this warning has gotten twisted into something else altogether. I find that many Christians are uncomfortable, unable even, to make distinctions between various churches and gospels. And they are *really* uncomfortable saying that one is better than another.

I was talking to a friend about a Christian college when I said, “They don’t get it.” I was referring to three issues – that the heart is central to the Christian life, that we are invited into a conversational intimacy with God, and that spiritual warfare is real. Rather core categories. I mean, we’re not talking about the length of Jesus’ robe or how many angels can dance on the head of a pin here. What you believe about these issues will profoundly shape your Christian experience. My friend – who is somewhat loyal to the school – was really upset. “It’s not right to say that,” she said. “It’s arrogant.” Now, there is no question that it *could* be said arrogantly, but I wasn’t being arrogant at all. I was making an observation.

What do you think – is it right or wrong to make observations like that? And voice them?

A few days later a different friend was talking about a church we had once both attended, in particular the women’s ministry (which she was familiar with), and how the Bible study program they were running was focused on duty and obligation, with a heavy dose of legalism. “That’s the last thing women need in their life, more shame and guilt. They’re leading so many women into bondage.” She immediately followed this comment with, “I shouldn’t have said that. It’s wrong to judge. Now God’s probably going to come down on me.” Her sudden shift caused my heart to sink. For one thing, she was right about the women’s ministry, and thus far to my knowledge no one had said it. It *needed* to be said. For another thing, her immediate self-contempt was a classic symptom of the belief I’m describing.

Yes, Jesus told us not to judge. Most Christians know the passage, but they think it means, “Don’t ever let yourself get in the mindset where you think you’re right and someone else is wrong.” But, how will we know when we *are* right? And how will we help someone who *is* wrong?

Jesus also said, “Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment.” (John 7:24). Wait a second. Now Jesus is telling us *to* judge, and carefully. Jesus healed a blind man on the Sabbath, and the Jewish leaders are so upset about it they want to kill him. Talk about missing the point. They had come to worship the Law, not the God of the Law. Jesus is showing them they have missed the *spirit* of the law entirely. “[Y]ou circumcise a child on the Sabbath. Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath? Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment” (7:22-24).

Jesus says, “You guys just don’t get it. I established the Sabbath for your restoration. A day of rest, so that you may be restored. Now you’re angry with me for restoring a man on the Sabbath?! I want you to start making the right distinctions and not the wrong ones.” He does not say, “Don’t make any distinctions.” He says, “Start making a right judgment.” Let’s go to Paul and the Galatian church:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (1:6-9).

Wow. Paul is pretty hacked off here, and pretty vocal about what he sees. The Galatians had begun to embrace a gospel which said, “Yes, faith in Jesus Christ. *And*, you need to be circumcised, and keep the Law of Moses as well.” A different gospel from the one that Jesus and Paul preached. A “sort-of” gospel. Just enough “Jesus” in there to make it *sound* like the real deal. But it’s got other ideas and rules in it that are going to take these folks away from the heart of God and the relationship he offers. (There’s a good bit of this still going around, by the way). Paul isn’t going to ignore it. He has no problem saying, “Hey, wait a minute! You’re wrong about this!” and doing so publicly.

Is Paul “judging?” Well, he’s not being arrogant, and he’s not exposing them to justify himself. But he is certainly making a distinction between the true and the false, the accurate and the not-so-accurate. Do you see? Not every gospel is equal. We need to say so.

This idea that both my friends were under – that it’s wrong to draw distinctions and make value judgments between various forms of Christianity – this is not helpful. And it’s not biblical. But it’s got a lot of good people trapped in bad churches and programs. There’s just enough Jesus words in there to make it *sound* like Christianity. But it’s not the Gospel Jesus preached. That concerns me. Not all gospels are equal.

You must draw these distinctions. Don’t just stay with the old gang because it’s the old gang. Your loyalty is not to a church or a movement, but to Jesus Christ.

For him,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'John' written in a cursive, flowing style.

John