

Happy Holidays and Sound Doctrine
Pastor Steve Cole, Nov./Dec., 1996

I sat staring at my computer screen for over an hour, trying to think of some warm, fuzzy thoughts on the holidays for this issue of our church newsletter. I'm sorry to disappoint some of you, but I'm just not a warm, fuzzy holiday sort of person. I truly hope you have a wonderful Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year, but I often feel that articles on those themes tend to evoke wide yawns. If that's not true for you, I'm sure you can find lots of warm, fuzzy articles in other publications you receive.

It's not warm and fuzzy, but an issue that continues to be on my heart (I wrote about it in a newsletter article earlier this year) is the current push toward Christian unity. I received something today that informed me that it is indefensible if our church does not cooperate with other churches and ministries. If the proper biblical and theological parameters are added to that statement, I would agree. But it's the blanket statements to the effect that we must drop *all* denominational and doctrinal differences and work together that concern me.

Another example: We received an invitation for our church to attend a prayer seminar in town, sponsored by many of the local churches. I feel that by not participating, I'll be labeled as separatistic and even against prayer! But the seminar includes instruction in the latest fad, "spiritual mapping." This involves identifying and praying against the territorial demons who have spiritual jurisdiction over our city. It's a highly subjective practice with scant biblical support. There's not a verse or an example of Paul doing this in his missionary endeavors. And yet we're being told we must learn this latest technique if we want to evangelize our city! How can I be a faithful shepherd and support such spiritually weird stuff (Titus 1:9)?

Another example comes from a message given by Max Lucado to the 40,000 pastors at the Promise Keepers pastor's conference in Atlanta earlier this year. Clergy from evangelical churches, the liberal National and World Councils of Churches, Roman Catholic churches, and even some from Mormon churches were there. Many Flagstaff pastors attended.

Lucado compared the Christian church to a ship and rebuked those who refused to acknowledge the presence of another group on the ship. He stated that the sin of disunity is at the root of our prayers not being answered and is a cause of people going to hell. He asked, "Would it not be wonderful not to be known as either Protestant or Catholic?" He then pled that every pastor who had ever spoken against another group or denomination find a member of that group and apologize. If Martin Luther and John Calvin had been there, they would have had to apologize to the Pope!

I'm sure that there has been much sinful sectarianism in the past on the part of pastors and denominational leaders. But the important question is, What does Scripture say about unity among churches? What about the importance of sound doctrine (read 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus in this light)? The current push toward unity and prayer de-emphasizes doctrine as being unimportant at best and divisive at worst. But in John 17, where Jesus prays for the unity of the church, He also prays, "Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17). Love without doctrinal truth is not biblical love.

We should be as loving and inclusive as we can be without compromising sound doctrine. But doctrine is not an impractical subject for theologians to argue about. It is the meat of the Word that nourishes healthy Christian living. I want us to be on guard against the "drop all doctrinal differences and just love one another" wave that is currently sweeping the American church. Unity is important, but not at the cost of biblical truth. Biblical love goes hand in hand with sound doctrine. So as you chew on your Thanksgiving and Christmas turkey, chew on these thoughts as well. They're not warm and fuzzy, but I think they're spiritually nourishing!