

## Are You Concerned at what Your Church Teaches?

It should be the serious concern not just of pastors and teachers but of all Christians that they know what their church believes, teaches, and confesses. In the history of the visible church, indifference to sound doctrine and practice, that is to say, indifference to the Word of God itself, inevitably leads to the loss of that precious Word. For so precious to God is His own Word that He will not allow it to be forever taken for granted, then ignored, and ultimately despised. When that happens, sooner or later, He withdraws it - God takes His Word seriously, even when people refuse to! When the pure Word goes, its saving benefit of course will go also. Woe to those who are careless with His Word so precious and life giving! Woe to those through whose indifference faith is threatened and often destroyed! Woe to those who having the pure Word and sacraments consider them nevertheless optional and thereby guarantee their eventual loss! On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it (Luke 11:28). Blessed are those who with always repentant and still faithful hearts live to learn it, preserve its saving doctrine in our midst, and share it in its truth and purity with all the world just as Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:18-20).

But still some loudly protest: "We shouldn't be so narrow-minded, so bigoted. After all, look at all the damage that has been caused in the history of the world by religious intolerance! We should therefore let people believe whatever they want to believe, lest we reignite the bloodshed in our society and nation that we have seen so often elsewhere."

No one should be forced to believe something that they do not want to believe. A refusal of church fellowship is not a license for violence. Indeed, both the doctrine of the Lutheran church as well as its history make the point: Faith cannot be forced, and no one should ever attempt to force faith or pure doctrine on anyone. Only the gospel can create faith; the sword only creates hypocrites. It is a sad and tragic mark in history that others have tried to force a doctrinal position - invariably a wrong one! - by means of the sword of the state. Both Roman Catholic persecutions of those they considered heretics and equally zealous and often bloody Protestant efforts along the same lines were disgraceful, sinful, and utterly contrary to the Word of God.

But what about orthodox Lutherans when they were in the majority in parts of northern Europe? When they were in the majority, when the rulers themselves were Lutherans, they never started wars or put a knife to anyone's throat to force them to be Lutherans. And that was not because they were indifferent to false doctrine. It was rather because they took the doctrine of the means of grace seriously: Only the gospel can create and sustain faith, and God has given the work of preaching the gospel and preserving sound doctrine to the church - not to the state. A pure doctrinal standard can be gained only by the pure preaching and teaching of God's Word; expulsion from the fellowship of an orthodox, confessional, and evangelical visible church of those who reject the Word is not the same thing at all as launching a Roman inquisition or a Protestant heresy trial followed by a burning at the stake!

Indeed, it is evidence of the indifference of so many to the truth of God's Word and the perversity of others that they defend all manner of error and then try to wrap their defence in the mantle of love. Again, it's not love by any proper definition of that word to be indifferent to teachings contrary to the Word of God, teachings which always harm faith and often destroy it.

As for those outside of the church who point to examples of bigotry and persecution as their excuse for despising the visible church and ultimately the gospel itself, one might well point out that if they want examples of bloody persecution, they will find them more readily and abundantly among their fellow unbelievers: Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot, just to mention a few of the more recent examples, were all unbelievers who loathed the gospel. Each in his turn shed more blood than all of the badly mistaken people put together who called themselves Christians and persecuted those who disagreed with them.

We make the point not to defend persecutions or persecutors but merely to note the intellectual dishonesty or ignorance of those who reject the gospel and a defence of sound doctrine because some abused the gospel and used it as an excuse for violence and bloodshed. The intellectually dishonest and the ignorant are happy to ignore the role of the church, of believers, in feeding the hungry, in building schools and hospitals, in tending to orphans and widows, in counselling the troubled, etc., all of which are consistent with Jesus' love and His assignment to us as Christians (Galatians 6:10). Such works are the constant occupation of those who strive to imitate in life the love of Christ in His life and death for us. But scoffers would much rather focus exclusively on the infrequent and unhappy errors of those who mistakenly thought that it was their assignment to bring by force the kingdom of heaven to earth. They are like the idol worshiper Ahab, who together with his wife, the wicked Jezebel, murdered the faithful prophets in Israel. Then, when the nation suffered the divine consequences of its sins and Ahab met the great prophet Elijah, Ahab greeted him with the words: "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" (1 Kings 18:17) - as though it was Elijah's fault that God was angry with the nation!

So, then, we will not apologise for holding to the truth of God's Word. Nor will we be ashamed to say in love to God and in love to those in error: "This is what the Lord says!" That is exactly what God Himself has called us to do (Ezekiel 2; Luke 9:26; Revelation 22:12-20).