

# What are the limits of passion against error?

## Introduction

The church world today is a heady mixture of outright heresy on the one hand and vehement defenders of the faith on the other. The problem is that some of these defenders use more vile language than the heretics. How can we be passionate for the truth and still be righteous? What limits are there on defending the truth?

## The need to be loving to brethren in error

There are many on the Internet who think it is safe to utter a barrage of disparaging insults and abuse, or even worse, to people who are clearly Christians. Such people can use worldly vilifying terms such as, '*a slithering venomous snake*' or utilise Biblical aphorisms such as, '*his teaching is from the pit of hell*'. Many have gone even further, making personal slanders and cruel statements, such as, '*he is clearly insane or at least mentally ill*'.<sup>1</sup>

I say now, as clear as I possibly can, that such language is abusive, probably illegal and is not the action of a true believer. Anyone speaking in this way immediately disqualifies himself. More than one preacher has gone so far as calling from the pulpit for God to kill a heckler or questioner. Such men are charlatans; a terrible judgment awaits them.

No matter how bad we think that the error is, if the person teaching it is a genuine believer then we have to be cautious, but firm, in our language. There is no place for abuse or slander; furthermore, our admonitions, though stern, must yet be loving. In the case of a recalcitrant brother, or an unrepentant errorist, it may be that we need to be severe in our defence of the truth and we may have to use serious sanctions. In the end, after trying various ways to get the false teacher to repent, the only avenue left is to discipline him by casting him out of the church. Even so, even this is done in love with a view to get the person to repent.<sup>2</sup>

The reason for this caution is that a genuine believer is part of Christ; Christ is in him. If we disparage the believer we disparage Christ himself. If we wrongly judge a believer we wrongly judge Christ.

Therefore, I affirm; we must act lovingly (though firm if necessary) to brethren.

Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. 1

Jn 3:10

He who does not love his brother abides in death. 1 Jn 3:14

We also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 1 Jn 3:16

Bearing with one another. Col 3:13

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, Eph 4:32

Bearing with one another in love. Eph 4:2

Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Eph 4:2

Let us not become conceited, provoking one another. Gal 5:26

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<sup>1</sup> I think that I have been called all these things!

<sup>2</sup> This is a clear apostolic doctrine that we have no space to develop here.

Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way. Rm 14:13

Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honour giving preference to one another. Rm 12:10

Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another? Jm 4:11-12

Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door! Jm 5:9

Note this, John avers that anyone issuing forth unloving language to a brother cannot be a true Christian; 'Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother'. Therefore, those who speak unrighteously<sup>3</sup> of other brothers cannot be true Christians. James says that speaking evil of a brother, grumbling<sup>4</sup> against him, leads to condemnation by God the Judge. If a person says untrue or nasty things (unrighteous things) about a brother he will be condemned and show that he was never truly saved at all.

Brethren love each other and do not act maliciously. Now, as in a human family, a brother may need discipline or may need correcting, but this must be done with love within the family of God.

So, the unloving, malicious, nasty invective that is common on the Internet by supposed Christians towards brethren, is to be condemned. Such people show that they are not saved at all.

### **Dealing with heretics**

However, dealing with out and out heretics, serious false teachers who damage cardinal doctrines or blaspheme God, can be dealt with quite severely. This includes people that have a reputation of being a church leader but whose teaching demonstrates that they cannot be true believers.

Now even these people do not warrant the use of abusive terms, slander, or nasty malice. We can be firm and passionate for the truth without reducing ourselves to wickedness. The Christian apologist must not speak in the old nature but must affirm the righteousness of Christ. We must overcome evil with good and not stoop to their level.

However, passion for the truth does enable those who contend for the faith<sup>5</sup> to be strong in denouncing false teaching, and this has the sanction of many Scriptures and godly example. Let's look at a few.

### *Jesus' strong condemnations*

For example:

**Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? Matt 12:34**

**Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Matt 23:33**

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<sup>3</sup> That is, slander, saying things that are not true, not right; bearing false witness; being malicious. We can criticise to establish truth but the criticism must be accurate and not empty invective.

<sup>4</sup> Literally 'sighing' (inwardly or outwardly); that is a strong complaint or grudge.

<sup>5</sup> Jude 1:3, 'I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith.'

You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. Jn 8:44

Now we must take into consideration that this is the Son of God speaking with perfect knowledge. We do not know the heart of those we contend with and so must be very careful in denunciations. Jesus knew those who were reprobate and could speak accordingly; we do not. However, it does show that strong language can be used against those who are damaging God's people. I would say that, unless God had supernaturally showed a person otherwise, such strong language should not be used by brethren. Those false preachers who do use such language usually do so to appear to have divine authority.

#### *Examples from Paul*

Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! Phil 3:2

For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end *is* destruction, whose god *is* their belly, and *whose* glory *is* in their shame -- who set their mind on earthly things. Phil 3:18-19

Such *are* false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. 2 Cor 11:13

If I come again I will not spare. 2 Cor 13:2

#### *Examples from others*

... those who walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness and despise authority. *They are* presumptuous, self-willed. ... But these, like natural brute beasts made to be caught and destroyed, speak evil of the things they do not understand, and will utterly perish in their own corruption, *and* will receive the wages of unrighteousness, *as* those who count it pleasure to carouse in the daytime. *They are* spots and blemishes, carousing in their own deceptions while they feast with you, having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls. *They have* a heart trained in covetous practices, *and are* accursed children. They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam ... These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. ... While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. ... But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: 'A dog returns to his own vomit,' and, 'a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire.' 2 Pt 2:10-22

Likewise also these dreamers defile the flesh, reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries. ... But these speak evil of whatever they do not know; and whatever they know naturally, like brute beasts, in these things they corrupt themselves. Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving *only* themselves. *They are* clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. Jude 1:8-13

#### *The need to silence false teaching*

The Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees. Matt 22:34

For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped. Titus 1:10

Heretics need to be silenced because they cause damage to the flock. Thus strong means must be dealt to those who refuse to listen to the truth.

Clearly these examples show that both strong action and strong language need to be used in safeguarding the truth from vicious errors. The usual difference between a believer teaching an error and an unbeliever teaching heresy is:

- A true believer only teaches an error because he has made a mistake due to immaturity.
- A believer's error is held sincerely.
- A believer's sin (in teaching untruth) is not unto death.
- A believer's error is the result of a lack of faith and knowledge.

Conversely

- A heretic is being used by Satan to damage the church, or even destroy a local church.
- A heretic is not sincere but uses deceit to further Satan's ends.
- A reprobate's sin (in teaching deceit) is unto death.
- A heretic's deception is the result of a lack of life.

### **The need to fight the right battles**

There are many today that get very antagonistic and bellicose about issues that are not worth fighting for. Usually this is some petty doctrine / practice that has formed a foundation in someone's life for a long time, but which is erroneous. Sometimes it is due to the secular education that young people have had which they cannot shake off when it comes to creationism. Sometimes it is just plain mixed up thinking or a misunderstanding.

What we contend for is Biblical truth; that which Scripture calls, 'the faith'. This is 'the analogy of faith', the summary of Christian doctrines which forms the foundation of our faith.

Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith. Rm 1:5

Receive one who is weak in the faith, *but* not to disputes over doubtful things. Rm 14:1

But now has been made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures has been made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith. Rm 16:26

Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. Eph 4:13

Striving together for the faith of the gospel. Phil 1:27

Rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith. Col 2:7

Steadfast in the faith. 1 Pt 5:9

I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith. Jude 1:3

We are explicitly told to contend for this faith, for this set of doctrines that makes up the Gospel of Christ. That is a Christian duty; all believers must strenuously fight for the faith. But this does not mean fighting for petty issues that are not of the faith.

We must not get vociferous over non-important matters that are not vital to the faith.

Now this does not mean failing to contend for secondary doctrines; doing so is part of Christian teaching. Making a strong case for the truth about the Second Coming is part of delivering the responsibility to teach the church. Though considered a secondary doctrine (i.e. you will be saved even if your eschatology is incorrect), such teaching is part of training growing disciples and important. Teaching on the end will inevitably mean that we must demonstrate that other theories are unbiblical. We fight for the truth.

We must never fear of teaching the truth in order not to offend the sensibilities of some. The teacher's job is to instruct in the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). There will always be someone that will initially take offence at something. This is part of the problem of pastoring and the best action is to train people at home on such matters, with open discussion. If it is true, then eventually a believer will accept it.

However, we do not fight for petty issues, for meaningless arguments, for pointless discussions over piffle.<sup>6</sup> Vain arguments are to be avoided – but some people love to pursue these things.

If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, *even* the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a *means of gain*. From such withdraw yourself. 1 Tim 6:3-5

Note that we should withdraw from people who get worked up about pointless arguments, disputes over words and useless wranglings.

But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor *do* the churches of God. 1 Cor 11:16

Let us not become conceited, provoking one another. Gal 5:26

Avoid foolish disputes ... for they are unprofitable and useless. Titus 3:9

### **We need to argue with the right means**

Computers have made many things simpler but they make other things more complicated. Just look at the legal problems that people have had with indiscreet tweets. Some were prosecuted for short but offensive statements.

Now emails really help folk to keep in touch and distribute materials swiftly. They are very useful. But I have found that, from experience, emails are a very poor medium for conducting debates and arguments. It is so easy for the argument to get out of hand.

Somehow, letter writing avoids this; perhaps because the very slowness of the medium forces people to be more considerate and thoughtful when writing longhand. People writing emails tend to write quickly, and often with a lack of enough thought. This situation is worsened when someone feels offended and dashes of an immediate email response.

Another factor is the inability to see body language. Something can be written in one way but received in another when, if it were done face to face, it would not be a problem.

I believe that something likely to be a hot potato between brothers ought to be conducted in person or, at least, on the telephone to avoid such misunderstandings.

### **We need to be peaceful first**

Many cases can be resolved with peaceful means, especially between brethren. It is far better to try to resolve an issue together over a meal or a cup of tea than to immediately dash off a missive of condemnation. Clearly this is less possible over long distances and thus inflammatory issues ought to be conducted over the telephone.

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<sup>6</sup> An old English word meaning 'nonsense'.

All peaceful means ought to be pursued first with both sides being gracious. The problem is that it is often the case that one side is far from gracious from the outset. Sadly things tend to go downhill from that point. If people were less aggressive, disrespectful and abusive to brethren, peaceful means would be more abounding.

In confronting an elder, pastor or teacher one needs to be especially careful, though it is sometimes necessary. Such men have given their lives to shepherd the flock, often involving much sacrifice and loss to do so. They must be respected. Scripture tells us to especially honour teachers, 'Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour [value, honour, deference, reverence], especially those who labour in the word and doctrine,' (1 Tim 5:17). It would be sinful to be disrespectful to such a teacher even if he was actually wrong. Errors need to be pointed out lovingly to brethren, as we have established. But if the teacher was actually correct, then it is a double sin to be abusive to him in argument. Such a thing displeases God and the angels (who rejoice in good order; Eph 3:9 with Col 2:5).

### **Conclusion**

Defence of the truth against error is very important and it ought to be performed with zeal and passion. In dealing with heresy the Biblical examples allow us to use a certain amount of stern and forceful language (perhaps not quite so forceful as the chief Reformers). However, in dealing with brethren who have fallen into error we need to be far more careful and loving. It may still require firmness and passionate language, but it must not be overly strong and never abusive.

However, there is no case when we can allow ourselves the luxury of being plain nasty; we must never be malicious or use slander or grievous personal insults. Far too often supposed believers are doing this today. When believers contend for the faith, above all, they must be righteous and, as far as is possible, irenic.

**Behold, how good and how pleasant *it is* for brethren to dwell together in unity! Ps 133:1**

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