

11. Striking the Balance

by Chuck Smith

The importance of balance in teaching and living out our faith, avoiding division over non-essential issues, and trusting in God's sovereignty and love.

Scripture: Joshua 24:15, 1 Kings 18:21, Isaiah 55:8-9, John 8:31, John 15:6-7, John 15:16, 1 Corinthians 13:1, Galatians 5:21, 2 Timothy 2:15, Revelation 22:17

Topics: "Unity in Diversity", "Balance in Theology"

Description

Chuck Smith emphasizes the importance of striking a balance in theological discussions, particularly regarding non-essential issues that can divide the church. He advocates for inclusivity and grace, recognizing that strong convictions can coexist with differing views on topics like the ministry of the Holy Spirit and Calvinism. Smith encourages believers to focus on essential doctrines while allowing for diverse interpretations in non-foundational matters, promoting unity and love within the congregation. He highlights the need for a balanced approach to scriptural teachings, acknowledging both God's sovereignty and human responsibility without forcing a resolution between the two. Ultimately, he calls for a faith that embraces the mystery of God beyond human understanding.

Transcript

"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

II Timothy 2:15

An important characteristic of Calvary Chapel Fellowships is our desire not to divide God's people over non-essential issues. This is not to say that we do not have strong convictions. When the Bible speaks clearly, we must as well. But on other issues we try to recognize the Scriptural validity of both sides of a debate and avoid excluding or favoring those in one camp over the other.

An example of this kind of inclusiveness is found in our approach to the debatable issue concerning the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We don't take a typical Pentecostal view, nor do we take a typical Baptist view. The minute you set your position one way or the other, you've lost half of your congregation. Why would you want to lose half your congregation? Our desire is to be able to minister to as broad a group of people as possible. The minute we start taking hard-line positions on any of the non-foundational controversial issues, we alienate part of the people. In the essential doctrines of the faith, we must take a firm stand. But

in the non-essential areas, we accept that people may have differing views, and we accept these in the spirit of grace. It's important to recognize that we can agree to disagree and still maintain a spirit of unity and love.

We do believe in the validity of the gifts of the Spirit, and that these gifts can be expressed today. But we don't believe in excesses that so often accompany a freedom in the use of the gifts of the Spirit. So we avoid the controversy.

If people want to speak in tongues, we encourage them to do so in a private devotional setting to assist in communicating their love, their praises, and their prayers to God. We look to I Corinthians 14 as our biblical example. We don't insist that a person speak in tongues as the primary evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. We believe that there are other evidences that are more credible than speaking in tongues. As Paul said, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." (I Corinthians 13:1). We don't emphasize tongues as the primary manifestation of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but we look for love as the fruit of the Spirit. I believe that we can stand on a solid Scriptural basis doing that and, at the same time, encourage people to receive the gifts of tongues.

As Paul explained, you may use it for your personal prayer life and for your devotional life, singing unto the Lord. "For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also. Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest?" (I Corinthians 14:14-16). If you're in a public assembly with no interpreter present, and someone is speaking in tongues, how is a person sitting in the seat of the unlearned going to understand? You might well be praising God, but the other people aren't edified. We need to do all things decently and in order. In this area, we don't fit in the Pentecostal category, nor do we fit in the cessionist category that would deny any valid experience of the sign gifts of the Holy Spirit today.

Another example of maintaining a balance on debatable issues is our approach to Calvinism. This is an area that people get very emotional about. We're neither 'Five Point Calvinists', nor are we Arminian. We do believe in the security of the believer. We don't believe that you can lose your salvation because you lost your temper or told a lie and, as a result, need to go forward next Sunday night to repent and get resaved.

We believe in the security of the believer but we also believe in the 'perseverance of the saints.' We don't believe that because you are a saint you will necessarily persevere, but that you need to persevere because you're a saint. Jesus said, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;" (John 8:31), and "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." (John 15:6-7). Jesus Himself is the One that brought up the possibility of a person not abiding in Him. So we seek to take a balanced position rather than getting on one side and pressing the 'Five Points of Calvinism.' When you take hard stands on these non-foundational issues, you'll just empty your church of all of those who have Methodist, Nazarene, and other Arminian-influenced backgrounds. Why would you want to do that?

The eternal security of the believer is a debatable issue at best. There are Scriptures on both sides. You have John 3:16. What does "Whosoever believeth in Him" mean? Does that mean that anybody can be saved? It appears to me to mean that, and so we don't take the hard-line Calvinistic position of limited atonement that says Jesus didn't die for everybody, only those who would believe in Him. We do not accept that believing in Him has nothing to do with human responsibility, but is totally the sovereign choice of God. This position states that God has ordained some to be saved and some to be lost. If God has ordained you to be lost, tough luck, buddy. There's nothing we can do. This is a denial of the free moral agency. Instead, we believe that God has given us the capacity of choice. The reason He gave us a capacity of choice is so that the love we express toward Him might be meaningful and real. That's the balanced position that we take.

There are people who are always trying to pigeon-hole Calvary Chapel. Do you believe in eternal security? I say, "Yes, of course I believe in eternal security. As long as I abide in Christ, I'm eternally secure." Now, dispute that. If you don't abide in Christ, are you secure? Can you have security outside of Jesus Christ? I don't know of any security outside of Jesus Christ. But I believe as long as I abide in Him, He's going to keep me from falling, He's going to present me faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. And no man can pluck me out of His hand. I believe that, and I experience God's security.

So often these issues come down to a matter of semantics. People end up dividing over the interpretation of a few words. We had a staff member here at Calvary who was very much committed to support groups. During his time with us he led many to faith in Christ. Unfortunately, we had a parting of the ways that left this man so bitter that he now belongs to a group called "Fundamentalists Anonymous." He is now actively encouraging people to abandon a biblically based faith in Jesus Christ.

Is he saved? In reality, he's an enemy of Christ. If I were an Arminian, I'd say he's backslidden. If I were describing him from a Calvinist position, I would say he was never saved. Now we're both describing the same man, but the terms by which we describe him create the division.

We recognize this fact. The man has turned his back on Jesus Christ. It's obvious. Is he backslidden, or was he ever saved? The problem is if I say he was never saved, then where's my security? How do I know I'm saved? He had the earmarks of being saved. He had a desire to serve the Lord. He was seeking to lead others to Jesus Christ. I desire to serve the Lord and I desire to lead others to Jesus Christ. So maybe I'm not saved. Now, that isn't security to me.

So, you see, it's a matter of semantics. How can we describe what we observe in a person's relationship with the Lord? The whole division is over whether I describe him as backslidden, or whether I just say he was never saved. If we divide, we naturally create a division. We drive half the people out of the church because I'm going to say he's backslidden and the next guy is going to say he was never saved. When we allow this kind of debate we divide the church.

That's why I don't take a dogmatic position on this because I believe that the Scripture teaches both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. If you take either of these positions to an extreme, to the denying of the other, then you've got a real problem because the Scriptures teach both. But then you might ask, "How can we reconcile them?" I don't. I don't have to. God didn't ask me to. God just asked me to believe. When I come across a person living in fornication, in adultery, or walking after the flesh and he says, "Don't worry about me, man! I accepted Christ at a Billy Graham crusade when I was a kid." Yet the person is a drunkard and fornicator. But he says, "Once I've been saved I'm always saved! So don't worry

about me." Believe me, I'm going to rattle that guy's cage as best I can. I'm going to take him to Galatians 5 where the Bible talks about the works of the flesh. At the end of that listing the Bible declares, "As I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." (Galatians 5:21). I'll take him to Corinthians and to Ephesians. I'll show him where those who are living after the flesh and devoted to living after the fallen nature's desires, are not going to inherit the kingdom of God.

Yet, on the other hand, if I'm speaking to saints with an oversensitive conscience who, every time they mess up and do something wrong, feel that they've lost their salvation, I'm going to take them to the Scriptures that give us the assurance of God's love. I'll show them how Christ is holding them and that no man can pluck them out of the Father's hand. I'm going to take them to the passages that will give them assurance.

So the position I take on the issue all depends on the condition of the person I'm talking to. I can take either side and argue it ad infinitum. I can trade Scriptures with people on both sides of the issue. I can let you choose what side you want, and I'll take the other side. I can produce as many Scriptures and make as good an argument as you can.

So the very fact that it is an argumentative issue demonstrates that there are two sides. If there was a clear definitive teaching, then there would be no argument. If we didn't have Scriptures that declare, "Come! And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely," (Revelation 22:17), then you'd have no argument. But the fact is that there is the clear teaching of choice given to us by God. He expects us to make that choice. "Choose you this day whom ye will serve," (Joshua 24:15). "How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him." (I Kings 18:21). But yet Jesus said to His disciples, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain:" (John 15:16). There are two sides to this issue, and it's important that we not get caught in a hard-line position on one side to the exclusion of the other, because then you've effectively divided your congregation.

I, like every other student in Bible college, wrestled with this issue. I was reading Arthur W. Pink's *The Sovereignty of God*. I got so confused because Pink states that man has no choice in the issue of salvation. It is all up to God. There's no human responsibility. As I was reading the book, I got so confused that I finally stood up, took the paperback, and threw it across the room. I felt like Martin Luther throwing an ink well at the devil. I said, "God, I can't understand it." I was frustrated mentally. It was then that the Lord spoke to my heart and said, "I didn't ask you to understand it, I only asked you to believe My Word."

I rested from that point on. I still cannot in my mind rationalize the two positions. I can't bring the two together, which is the problem that we so often have. It's like a railroad track. The two rails are running parallel and if they come together you're in trouble. So I believe them both, even though I'm not able to reconcile them in my mind. But I don't have to anymore. I can be satisfied just to believe them without having to reduce them to the narrow limits of my intellect.

Trying to bring God within the confines of my intellect is a real lesson in frustration. Try to understand eternity! Try to understand infinity! Try to understand the limitlessness of space! Try to imagine where the edge of space is. How far do you have to go out before you see the sign that says, "Dead end. No exit. Nothing beyond this point"? We need to recognize that God is greater than what can be confined or understood in our mind. He said, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,

saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9). Now if God says that His ways are beyond our finding out, then it's an exercise in futility to try to find out. It's beyond our finding out.

We need to just accept the limitlessness of God. When I come to these crisis points now, those places where my intellect starts to hit a dead end, I simply stand there and worship the God Who is so awesome that I can't reduce Him to my understanding.

As you begin to minister, as you go through the Word, you will come across those Scriptures that speak of the sovereignty of God. When you do, teach it. When you come across those Scriptures that teach the responsibility of man, then teach that. In this way, you can be sure that the people are getting a well-balanced spiritual diet.

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