



STATEMENT DA-050

## VIEWPOINT

### **Christians Criticizing Christians: Can It Be Biblical?**

**by Bob and Gretchen Passantino**

Mike Warnke, whose lucrative career careened through four marriages and more than one affair, says God will judge *Cornerstone* magazine for printing a report disproving his ex-satanic high priest "testimony" and exposing his moral lapses. Healing movement televangelist Benny Hinn says God will attack CRI president Hank Hanegraaff and his family because he criticizes Hinn and his Faith movement colleagues. Lauren Stratford's supporters charge Bob and Gretchen Passantino as agents of Satan because we published evidence that Stratford's best-selling testimony of satanic ritual abuse was false.

When it comes to Christians criticizing Christians, the battle lines are drawn. But are the lines biblical? Is it wrong to publicly evaluate the teachings of a Christian pastor, expose the immorality of a Christian leader, or tell the truth about a popular Christian media figure?

Evangelicals warn people about the false teachings and practices of the cults, which claim compatibility with Christianity and yet deny cardinal Christian doctrine. Our standard is truth and our judge is Scripture. Yet when apologists turn to false teachings *within* the Christian church, some evangelicals apply a different standard. Frequently heard objections include, "Jesus said it's wrong to judge," and, "Criticism is unloving and divisive." Christians who voice these protests fail their own test — they criticize and judge other Christians for criticizing and judging other Christians. Furthermore, these critics fail to understand that without such scrutiny, Christians are misled into heresy and duped by those whose public ministries promote false teachings and/or hide private immoral behavior. Careful, biblical criticism expresses true Christian love and affords essential safeguards to faith.

Good discernment and moral accountability should be practiced among believers. The Old Testament establishes this pattern. Instructions concerning false prophets in Deuteronomy 13:1-5 assume the prophet arises *from the congregation* of Israel. People are admonished to banish idolatry from their families: "If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend..." (v. 6). Deuteronomy 13 instructs the Israelites how to practice good discernment within their communities: "You must inquire, probe and investigate it thoroughly." If the community is idolatrous, it must be dealt with publicly (v. 14). Psalm 50:18 states that one who sees a crime and doesn't report it has moral culpability.

The New Testament continues the theme of good discernment within the believing community, most notably when the Bereans test Paul's teachings (Acts 17:11) and the Thessalonians are commanded to test all things (1 Thess. 5:21-22). *Judgment* is not excluded, but *unrighteous* judgment is. Jesus declared: "Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment" (John 7:24).

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Jesus expelled the money changers from the temple, denounced the Pharisees and scribes, and rebuked the teachers of the Law. He reprimanded Peter in front of the other disciples (Matt. 16:22-23). Paul followed Jesus' example, naming false teachers in the church (2 Tim. 2:14-19) and openly criticizing Peter (Gal. 2:11, 14).

When immorality occurs in the church (Titus 1:15-16), the Bible says to deal with it truthfully and constructively. The procedure for public leaders caught in false teaching or immorality is for them to be rebuked publicly "so that the others may take warning" (1 Tim. 5:20). A congregation member who sins privately against another Christian is not to be exposed publicly unless he (or she) persists in sin, in which case he is to be rebuked before the church and we are to "treat him as you would a pagan or tax collector" (Matt. 18:15-17). Paul followed this procedure concerning the Christian who persisted in sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5:3-12), and affirmed that *judgment belongs to the church*.

Christian leaders are accountable to God's people, whom the leaders serve, and should be "above reproach," "respectable," and "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2). A Christian leader who is a false teacher or immoral should be rebuked to encourage reform (Titus 1:13), and cannot separate his ministry from his life, expecting God to bless his preaching while privately he sins; he is "disqualified for every good work" (vv. 15-16).

Telling the truth about false teaching or immorality in the church corresponds with the ethics and truth which are to characterize the church. The church is the "salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13-14) only if characterized by truthfulness (v. 11) and righteousness (v. 16). The Christian leader has an obligation to "hold firmly the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). No Christian is happy when false teaching or immorality arises, but we cannot neglect responsibility for doctrinal and moral accountability.

Christians sometimes are uncomfortable with criticism within the church because they assume that public criticism, since it is painful, is also destructive. On the contrary, the "pain" of biblically conducted confrontation produces individual growth (1 Tim. 4:16), encourages others to Christian maturity (1 Tim. 5:19-20), promotes church strength (Eph. 4:15), and preserves the church's reputation in the world (1 Pet. 2:12).