

Seminar 3 — Phil Johnson  
March 6, 2014 — 3:45 p.m.

***BOUNDARIES AND BRIDGES:  
KEEPING THE FAITH AND GUARDING THE FLOCK WHILE REACHING THE WORLD***

When is it appropriate to build a fence and when is it appropriate to build a bridge when you disagree with another ministry? This question comes up frequently in my dialog with other ministries and people. When do we separate and when do we pursue the unity Christ prayed for in John 17 (He prayed for us to be one five times)?

Elsewhere He says something similar (Jn. 13:34-35). We should never minimize harmony and unity among the brethren. The first problem Paul deals with in 1 Corinthians is the factions that had developed over the apostles.

We have become accustomed to turf wars, but Paul wants to dismantle those groups. It is folly to have those kinds of groups. To destroy the unity of the church is to destroy the foundation of the church, which is Christ. This is one of the issues at stake in Philippians (4:2ff). Paul exhorts the friend to bring them back together.

We are to turn away from false teachers and expose them for what they are and to refute their false teachings. Some suggest that these themes of unity and exposure are conflicting, so they say we should not ever address those issues and we should be tolerant and embracing of anyone who claims Christ.

People today have real difficulty distinguishing between real unity and diversity. The world is attempting to convince the church that diversity is more valuable than biblical unity. It is the duty of true believers to make the most of real unity that truly exists in the unity in Christ. If we have believed the same gospel then we follow the same Lord...and that makes unity.

Everything the Bible says about true unity emphasizes the importance of being of one mind — being in agreement about the gospel and its implications (which is the last thing that will happen in an ecumenical gathering).

Historically, fundamentalists were known for building fences and evangelicals were known for building bridges.

What is wrong with being committed to both duties? Isn't that what Scripture demands? Both fundamentalists and evangelicals had something biblical to offer in the beginning. But they both melted down...

The church is lacking in shepherds who are willing to protect the flock of God. The church today could use some secure boundaries and fences. Cf. Acts 20:25-31 — Paul's farewell address to Ephesus.

Paul's central duty for the church in that passage was protection of the church from wolves — savage wolves. He knows that threats would arise from the very body of men he was speaking

to. These were the elders of that church! They were orthodox spiritually mature men, who evidently were harboring some false teachings, etc. It would come from within their own ranks. It had to be as shocking as the warning of Christ in the Upper Room that defection would come from within the 12.

You can't maintain that kind of vigilance if your primary concern is large-scale bridge building. If you are concerned with fellowship across confessional boundaries more than protection of your own flock you must rethink your priorities.

Today, the idea of building boundaries doesn't sound very nice! You are going to make dogma a test of fellowship? Don't you care about diversity? that's a common attitude these days, which is why there is relentless emphasis on bridge building and alliances — even among groups like Muslims who claim affection for Jesus (though they don't repent). Cf. T. D. Jakes and the Elephant Room (Keller and Carson's article in response — something that will not eventually work because even though nailing down the center still leaves the boundaries and fences unguarded and the danger is that the sheep will easily leave). [Much of the rest of Johnson's talk critiques the position offered in that paper.]

The reason people and organizations drift is not because they don't have boundaries, but because the boundaries are not defended diligently enough.

But we must not just draw boundaries; we must also be unified around a core body of truths — but even that is contingent on a clear understanding of the gospel...

If we truly want to stand together for the gospel, we must be willing to contend for the gospel. Standing together and contending are not mutually exclusive. They are united in one common commitment to core truths embodied in the gospel. We don't achieve unity by setting aside doctrine, but by striving for a common understanding for the truth.

If there is a doctrine that is essential to our faith, it's worth fighting for — we must stand with other believers and defend that doctrine against any others who will attack it.

What Jude expects us to defend are the core doctrines of gospel truth. If the gospel is the truth that binds all Christians together, then it must be defended vigorously any time it comes under attack — either by overt enemies or by subversion from within. This is the ground we must earnestly defend. The goals of defending and unity go hand-in-hand. (Note “the apostle of love” in 2 Jn. 7ff.; cf. also Gal. 1; and Peter)

The question of who is in and who is out is a legitimate question! For a pastor to abdicate that duty is the worst kind of ministerial malfeasance.

We need more evangelical courage. We must not only affirm the truth, but also proclaim and defend it. That's the biblical prescription for unity.