

Scriptures: Gal. 4:16. Eph. 4:11-16. 2 Tim. 2:24-26. 2 Thess. 3:13-15. Gal. 5:13-15

One of the most intriguing of recent modern innovations for me is the internet. Our congregation uses email to share prayer requests and announcements and I stay in touch with a fairly large and varied group of people through electronic mail. We even have a friend's page on Facebook and I interact with over 200 people on my friends list on Facebook.

It is never the same as either speaking face to face or on the phone, but it does allow a lively exchange of information with a broad spectrum of people and I often engage in conversations of a spiritual nature and it is here I need to exercise great patience and a great deal of wisdom because there is an increasing number of people who either have no faith in the traditional sense or who come to faith from a number of strange and confusing perspectives.

The Scriptures I have chosen speak of an ongoing challenge which the Apostle Paul had with people who were less interested in hearing the truth than they were in molding it, folding it, polluting it and using it as a means to spread their own ideas in disguise. This undermining of our faith has been a challenge for Christian believers for centuries and it is not always easy to speak the truth in love with those who claim to be insiders – brothers or at least cousins, but who have ideas which have no business claiming to belong to the house of faith in any ordinary understanding of the same.

So briefly today, I want to talk to you about how we can exercise this cautious discipline and maintain a dialogue with those who need to hear the truth and who will listen better if it is shared in love.

Last week, I got into a discussion on Facebook with a bunch of Messianic Jewish and Gentile believers about whether there were two versions of G-d's Word, one written (we call it the written Torah), and one oral (we call it the oral Torah). I proposed that what tries to pass for the oral Torah is nothing more than the traditions of men trying to claim a divine authority which they do not possess – and this claim that traditions which are not in the Bible come from G-d exists in Christianity as much as it does in Judaism and I am not in agreement with either claim (Jewish or Gentile).

One person who was on line immediately attacked me and accused me both of ignorance and a lack of respect for the truth of G-d which he says came down to us through the traditions of the learned rabbis. My first reaction was to go ballistic and let him have the benefit of my extensive theological training, but he only got ruder and he began to attack me by saying that I was not a real Jew.

Well, if we had been face to face, there might have been a fist fight and I have had martial arts training, but people seem to frown on rabbis cleaning people's clocks and re-arranging their dentistry. So I backed off and ignored him, while speaking to the young man who made the original post and I realized that I was dealing with a Jewish person trolling among Messianic believers to pull them away from their faith in our Messiah (Jesus) and to have them submit to the teachings of mainstream Judaism.

The guy still sniped at me and wanted to discredit me and as a Jew. As someone with a fairly powerful command of English, it was a temptation for me to want to cut him up and eat him for lunch, but some Scriptures came to mind and I behaved, mostly.

Gal. 4:16 is a verse I often use in jest, but it does have a serious application: "Have I therefore become your enemy by telling you the truth?" I knew that this person had an agenda against the truth of the Bible and that I had to confront his enmity because I was not willing to let him undermine the truth of the Bible.

So what should I do? I could have called him a heretic and told him to go and try and make converts to rabbinic Judaism elsewhere. I could have told him he was anti-Christian and made him feel like a martyr who was being persecuted for his faith, even though he was attacking mine. So the next passage came to mind: speaking the truth in love, followed by the servant of the L-rd must not strive, but be gentle unto all people and ready to teach.

So, I got sneaky and undermined his position by admitting that the church has traditionally persecuted Jews and that until the church admitted this and also recognized that a Judaism which acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah, is a valid form of Christian faith, the church would continue to stumble and be unhealthy spiritually. I said that the Bible teaches that Christianity and Judaism are the two legs of the one new man and if one of the legs is missing or is crippled, the new man will limp and not walk straight.

That got him quiet for a while, but I wasn't finished with him. I wanted the others on line to reject his teachings and agree with me, but how could I do it without a satisfying frying of my enemy in the fire of my mighty words? Another passage came to mind: If you bite and devour, be careful that you do not destroy one another and I did not want to destroy him or let him destroy the faith of the others who were listening, so I adopted a more friendly approach and no longer responded to his taunts and no longer taunted him (and I am pretty good at taunting).

Another Scripture came to mind: if they won't listen, you should have nothing to do with them, but treat them like a brother and not like an enemy.

This poor soul was not my enemy, even though his teachings were, so I had to make my point in a way which would present the truth of the Bible in a way which would exclude his position, but not his participation in the discussion.

So I returned to my original contention that the traditions of men are not the same as the Bible, even though there are great insights in both Jewish and Gentile religious traditions which we can learn much from.

I mentioned a few famous Jewish commentators who have contributed a lot to Judaism over the years, but at the same time I kept the distinction between the Word of G-d and the writings of men and he backed off a little and admitted he neither had time nor respect for Messianic Judaism, because traditional Judaism was far older – which is not true or even relevant.

So, I mentioned that I was sixty, but that age and truth are not always related, but from that point I decided not to fight with him, I was really talking to my young friend and to other Messianic believers, for whom I had not become an enemy by telling them the truth.

I spoke the truth in love and remained his enemy, but not his adversary. I realized that he had been snared by the devil and wanted to fight against G-d's Word and against the Messiah, but I did not want to give him that chance or give him an excuse to label me and my teachings as hostile so he would no longer have to listen to me or what I had to say.

I did not want to devour him – you can win the argument and lose the soul and it was not about winning or losing, but about maintaining a dialogue where the truth could be shared and defended. Years ago, when the University of Calgary was still part of the U of A, an English debating team defeated their Canadian cousins in a debate about whether water was wet.

You would think that proving water is wet would be easy. You just get a glass of water and throw it on them, was my first thought. However, with great skill, the English debating team proved that water is not wet. How did they do it? Easy, water exists in three forms: as a gas, as a fluid and as a solid. It is only when it is in its fluid state that it is wet, so it is only sometimes, temporarily wet, but is also often a gas and a solid.

They won the argument by trickery that really had nothing to do with water, but everything to do with logic and our wonderful language. Some people like to argue and to split hairs and enjoy a good debate, and I sometimes find myself among them, but when I am talking about spiritual truths and the Bible, debating with people whose spirituality is not based on the Bible can be a trap where we end up putting up walls and creating enemies because we play the game by their rules, instead by the rules of combat found in the Bible and I want to close with a description of these rules.

A discussion which becomes an argument is not profitable and yet we do not have to back down and agree with our opponents in order to avoid a fight.

First we have to define what it is we disagree about and that is where: have I become your enemy by telling you the truth comes in. We need to be clear about what we disagree on and we need to do so in a way which does not immediately call for a fist fight.

Next we have to let them speak and tell us where they are coming from, with as much respect as we want them to give us – which is what speaking the truth in love means.

Next we have to agree to disagree and agree not to fight – which is where the servant of the L-rd must not fight comes in. If they accept our terms a fruitful conversation can occur and we can learn from them as much as they learn from us and we may be able to help them come to faith or return to the faith.

If they do not agree, we need to avoid getting into a fight to the finish, which is where if you bite and devour you may destroy one another comes in. Many of my neighbours do not share my faith in the Bible or in the Messiah from Nazareth, but we have some interesting discussions because we have agreed not to fight – there are even family members I can dialogue with and others I cannot, because in a fight we are all losers.

Lastly, if no further discussion is possible we do not treat them like enemies and we have nothing to do with them as it concerns the things we disagree about and we wait for an opportunity to reopen a dialogue and we remain on alert to avoid future arguments, because we must not fight but be patient and willing to teach – and willing to avoid a fight if teaching is not possible.

If we cannot speak the truth in love, we change the subject or establish ground rules where they know where we stand and we know where they stand and we do not turn every encounter into a standoff. When I had to go, I thanked everyone in the Facebook discussion, even the one I called Mr. Grouchy and I look forward to future discussions on line, not with my enemy with whom I am at war, but with whom I have established a truce and with whom future discussions are possible without turning every conversation into a war of words. May the L-rd teach us to learn to speak the truth in love and not get caught into endless

debates where we end up throwing water back and forth instead of defining our terms and exchanging information.