

Editorial: Why do we care what unbelievers think?

February 4, 2016

How much should Christians care what non-Christians think about them, their faith and their actions?



Marv Knox Several readers raised a version of that question in their response to last week's editorial, ["The 'downward death spiral' of hypocrisy."](#) The editorial called a prominent Dallas pastor, Robert Jeffress, a hypocrite for claiming to "not officially endorse" Donald Trump for president while appearing at a Trump campaign rally and calling Trump "the one leader who can reverse the downward death spiral of this nation we love so dearly."

"Christians wonder why unbelievers think we're all a bunch of hypocrites," the editorial observed. It lamented the skepticism and disbelief Christians' actions foster in unbelievers: "What's to stop unbelievers from projecting such questionable ethics upon everything Jeffress says he believes? And ... what's to stop unbelievers from thinking all Baptists and other Christians behave that way? ..."

"The presidential primaries and the run-up to the general election are going to be harsher and more trying than what we've experienced for years and years. We'll all be tempted to say and do things that do not reflect the Spirit of Christ. Politics isn't worth the risk of ruining Jesus' reputation."

Some liked it; some, not so much

Thanks to several Facebook reposts, the editorial circulated widely and generated emails, as well. Some came from former Baptists and unbelievers, who expressed (a) surprise a Baptist editor would counter the public political expression they hear from prominent Baptists and (b) appreciation for the editorial's call for living consistently with Jesus' grace.

But those messages did not express a unanimous view. Several affirmed the call-'em-as-you-see-'em approach to engagement with non-Christians. Here are a couple of statements that appeared on Facebook walls:

- “Why would we allow what nonbelievers may or may not say about us to influence what we do? Permitting our actions to be swayed by nonbelievers would be a sure sign of following the wrong leader.”
- “Isn't it more hypocritical if we are to allow our concern for how our actions are viewed by nonbelievers dictate our actions?”

Questions like that reflect the self-righteous, self-congratulatory condemnation of the Pharisees rather than the self-sacrificial love of Jesus.

Of course, we get it. Some Christians are so proud of holding onto “the truth” they don't care much about souls. They're right, and everyone else is wrong—dead wrong. And by their actions, we can tell they're happy about it.

Smugly satisfied

In fact, far too many Christians who hold to strongly orthodox views of sin and damnation seem smugly satisfied in their assurance people who disagree with them will roast in hell.

That's the reason the “Why do we care what heathen think?” questions are so heart-breaking. They're antithetical to the Spirit of Jesus, who changed

people by love and grace and compassion, not antagonism, judgment and condemnation.

What if ...?

Have you ever stopped to think—and shuddered—about how your life would be different if just a few of your circumstances were different? What if all you knew about Christianity you heard from culture-hating Christians who step in front of public microphones today?

If Jesus were like he's portrayed by so many Christians—Christians, mind you, Christians—on television and podcasts and in the print media today, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with him, either.

So, that's why I care what unbelievers think. That doesn't require me to deny my faith. To the contrary, it requires me to live out my faith. To try as best I can—knowing I'm weak, timid and fallible—to treat people as Jesus did when he walked the earth. Jesus cared what people think; what they ultimately think. And his love redeemed them.

*Jesus! what a Friend for sinners!
Jesus! Lover of my soul;
Friends may fail me, foes assail me,
He, my Savior, makes me whole. ...*

*Jesus! I do now receive Him,
More than all in Him I find.
He hath granted me forgiveness,
I am His, and He is mine.*