

“Not A Salvation Issue”?

Years ago Jacques Barzun, in *The House of Intellect*, developed the concept of the “thought cliché,” viz., a phrase that catches on, becomes widely used, and while fostering the impression of embodying substantive insight, becomes a substitute for clear thinking. Barzun suggested that conversations based on thought clichés blur our vision, dull our minds, and render us incapable of discussing and analyzing complex matters.

Most American churches are well-into a period of accelerating change. Moreover, the situation is complicated because of the different forces at work both in churches and in the broader culture that are forming various alliances. The present situation for our culture and for our churches is one that requires careful analysis and clear thinking. Only on this basis can we address difficult issues and make wise decisions that honor and serve God.

The widespread use of phrases such as “its not a salvation issue,” reminds one of Barzun’s “thought cliché.” We may be granting this phrase and others undeserved standing. In the first instance, “not a salvation issue” gives the impression that there exist clear lists of “salvation issues” readily applicable to individual lives and to congregations. Secondly, the phrase encourages a minimalist approach both to Christian faith and to Christian practice. That is, it invites the question, “what are the minimal beliefs and practices necessary for recognizing a person or community as ‘Christian’?”

It should be noted that this is not the same as asking, “what beliefs and practices are necessary to sustain faithful churches and faithful lives over time in a secularizing, hedonistic, and entertainment-saturated society?” Does the latter question introduce grounds for going beyond the “minimum”? If so, does this suggest that minimal Christianity is seriously deficient? And, are there circumstances in which minimalist Christianity’s deficiencies do in fact become “salvation issues”?

Michael R. Weed