

## What's Syncretism?

Over the past few months, I've gotten many questions about the "Hot Topic" in the Missouri Synod: Atlantic District President Benke's participation in the "Prayer for America" at Yankee Stadium last September, following the September 11 tragedy.

As we approach the anniversary of both the tragedy and the follow-up event, it's important to examine what happened and what is happening now, as these teachings not only apply to District Presidents, but to all confessing Christians. As the series of events connected to this topic need to be addressed with a wide range of Biblical teachings, I'll be addressing these issues in a series through the next few newsletters as follows:

- September: The "Prayer for America"
- October: Formal charges filed against Dr. Benke & President Kieschnick
- November: Dr. Schulz decision & subsequent removal from The Lutheran Hour
- December: Theological conferences to study the issues

For those not familiar with the "Prayer for America," it was a prayer service organized by Oprah Winfrey and emceed by Mayor Juliani. The focus of the event was a series of prayers offered by clergy of various religions, including Christians of various denominations, Jews, Muslims, and other anti-Christian religions. President Benke was asked to take part in the service, and following getting permission from Synod President Kieschnick, he stood up when it was his turn and offered a prayer.

So, what's all the hubbub?

President Benke has been charged with *syncretism*, a term which means "same beliefs." The "cre" in that word is from the same root as the word "creed," which means, "I believe." Syncretism is the act of mixing beliefs of more than one religion. In other words, President Benke is being charged with giving the impression that Christianity is "one among many" equally valid religions. If he did indeed give that impression, which can be verified that he did at least to some (based on comments on Newsweek magazine's website discussion forums), then this is indeed a serious charge, because while such a teaching, called "Universalism," is very popular in our culture, it is completely against the basic teaching of Christianity, that faith in Jesus Christ is the *only* way to God. In fact, this sin is condemned more often in the Bible than *any* other sin and is the primary reason Israel was constantly being sent into exile by God.

Why is God so against syncretism? Consider the effect of this belief. All religions in the history of the world have taught that salvation, however that religion defines it, comes through good works. You have to do something to be saved. Christianity is the *one* exception to that rule. Only Christianity teaches that salvation (as God defines it!) is 100% a gift of God, won for us by Jesus on the cross, completely separate from our works. Those two principles are not only completely contradictory, but the belief in earning heaven will only earn hell. Believing that all religions are equal denies the basic principle of Christianity, making Jesus' death on the cross completely pointless.

So is syncretism a serious matter? Yes, absolutely. Did President Benke commit syncretism? In 20/20 hindsight, it appears so, but I firmly believe that was not his intention. Is it forgivable? Absolutely, through Christ. What can we learn from this? We have a great treasure in the Gospel, a treasure worth preserving, and a treasure worth sharing.