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(This column originally appeared in the May, 6, 1995 issue of World magazine. Not only did it quickly set the World record for letters to the editor, but at the point it set that record not one favorable response had been received.)

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[Pastors Camp](#)
[R.C. Sproul Jr.'s Speaking](#)
[Schedule](#)
[Other Events](#)

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[R.C. Sproul Jr.](#)
[Kingdom Notes](#)
[Ask R.C. a Question](#)
[Kingdom Moments Videos](#)
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Comfort ye my people

by R.C. Sproul Jr.

Justification by youth alone: When does comfort become confusion?

“Those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?” Jesus asks in Luke 13:4. “I tell you, no!” Do you think that those scores who died horribly in Oklahoma City were more guilty than you or me? Jesus’s answer is still no. Do you think that you or I are more guilty than those children who died there? Billy Graham, in his tender attempt to soothe a grieving nation, suggested at the Oklahoma City memorial service, “Someday there will be a glorious reunion with those who have died and gone to heaven before us, and that includes all those innocent children that are lost. They’re not lost from God because any child that young is automatically in heaven and in God’s arms.”

Mr. Graham reflected the general consensus not just of the world but of the evangelical church, when, in his laudable desire to comfort, he appeared to affirm a new gospel: justification by youth alone.

Though Scripture is clear that in sin we are conceived, though it affirms that outside of faith in Christ alone there is no salvation, we comfort ourselves in the face of grim images of the dead children carried from the rubble with the biblically unwarranted assurance that if one only dies young enough, one will be saved.

To be fair, Mr. Graham was in a demanding situation. Memorial services are never easy times. How much more difficult it must be to comfort an entire nation experiencing genuine despair. We need comforting.

The problem is that in our desire for comfort we sometimes betray the gospel. The Good News is indeed comforting, but it comes with a condition.

Consider how Jesus dealt with those struggling with the apparent injustice at the tower of Siloam, those still bereaved at a tragedy that shook the city of Jerusalem. He offered the good news that the dead were not worse sinners than the survivors.

But there is the rub: It follows that the survivors were no more righteous than the dead. Jesus, in a compassion that sees eternally, reminded his audience of this hard truth, “Unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Compassion must always center around the truth. There is, in fact, no greater tragedy than a man facing death with a false assurance of salvation, save the tragedy of his eternal destiny. Compassion requires that even in the midst of temporal tragedy we sound the alarm: that all men apart from Christ—young and old—are under a death sentence from God Most High.

Compassion requires that we warn the living that even those who died alone, days after the explosion, are experiencing an anguish and torment beyond the televised images, beyond our imagination, one that will last for always, unless they had repented and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Compassion tells us not to sugarcoat, but not to supply a poison pill either. We cannot say for sure what happens to small children who die. But Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:14 that the children of at least one believing parent are viewed differently by God:

“They are holy’ Above all, “It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice” (Job 34:12).

The memorial service in Oklahoma, like all memorial services, was a time to remember. What should have been remembered were the fundamentals, the foundations of the faith.

Mr. Graham would have served the mourners well had he stuck to the simple life-changing truths that he has spoken so clearly so often in so many places: God is sovereign and sometimes ordains tragedy for the good of his people, and for his glory; all men are sinners, deserving nothing but eternal torment; and there is only one name under heaven and earth by which a man, or a child, might be saved, even Jesus.

And we should be comforted in this: If any of the victims believed, from the moment of death and into eternity they will be in the presence of Christ who wipes away every tear..

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11