The Rise of Extreme Tolerance
Scripture: Genesis 3:1; John 18:38
Code: A305

The world may value compromise and tolerance as supreme virtues, but they have a devastating effect on preaching. As more and more evangelical pulpits reflect the surrounding culture, it's time for Christians to proclaim a distinctively biblical worldview.

Many evangelicals (once known for a very prudent and biblical approach to doctrine) are fast becoming as doctrinally clueless as the unchurched people they are so keen to please. At least three decades of deliberately downplaying doctrine and discernment in order to attract the unchurched has filled many once-sound churches with people who utterly lack any ability to differentiate the very worst fast doctrines from truth. I constantly encounter evangelical church members who are at a loss to answer the most profound errors they hear from cultists, unorthodox media preachers, or other sources of false doctrine.

In the church today, there is a growing reluctance to take a definitive stand on any issue. Discernment is frankly not very welcome in a culture like ours. In fact, the postmodern perspective is more than merely hostile to discernment; it is practically the polar opposite. Think about it: pronouncing anything "true" and calling its antithesis "error" is a breach of postmodernism's one last impregnable dogma. That is why to a postmodernist nothing is more uncouth than voicing strong opinions on spiritual, moral, or ethical matters. People are expected to hold their most important convictions with as much slack as possible. Certainty about anything is out of the question, and all who refuse to equivocate on any point of principle or doctrine are therefore automatically labeled too narrow. Zeal for the truth has become politically incorrect. There is actually zero tolerance for biblical discernment in a "tolerant" climate like that.

In the secular realm, postmodernism's extreme tolerance has been foisted on an unsuspecting public by the entertainment media for several decades. A plethora of talk shows on daily television have led the way. Phil Donahue established the format. Jerry Springer took it to ridiculous extremes. And Oprah made it seem somewhat respectable and refined. Shows like these remind viewers daily not to be too opinionated—and they do it by parading in front of their audiences the most bizarre and extreme advocates of every radical "alternative lifestyle" imaginable. We are not supposed to be shocked or notice the overtly self-destructive nature of so many aberrant subcultures. The point is to broaden our minds and raise our level of tolerance. And if you do criticize another person's value system, it cannot be on biblical grounds. Anyone who cites religious beliefs as a reason to reject another person's way of life is automatically viewed with the same contempt that used to be reserved for out-and-out religious heretics. The culture around us has declared war on all biblical standards.

Some Christians unwittingly began following suit several years ago. That has opened the door for a whole generation in the church to embrace postmodern relativism openly and deliberately. They don't want the truth presented with stark black-and-white clarity anymore. They prefer having issues of right and wrong, true and false, good and bad deliberately painted in shades of gray. We have reached a point where the typical churchgoer today assumes that is the proper way of understanding truth. Any degree of certainty has begun to sound offensive to people's postmodernized ears.

One young pastor told me he didn't like the authoritarian implications of the word *preaching*. He said he preferred to speak of his pulpit ministry as "sharing" with his people. He didn't last long in ministry, of course. But sadly, his comments probably reflect the prevailing mood in the church today.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones noticed the same trend several decades ago. His marvelous book *Preaching and Preachers* began by noting that modern society was becoming uncomfortable with the whole idea of "preaching":

A new idea has crept in with regard to preaching, and it has taken various forms. A most significant one was that people began to talk about the "address" in the service instead of the sermon. That in itself was indicative of a subtle change. An "address." No longer the sermon, but an "address" or perhaps even a lecture...what is needed is a chat, a fireside chat, quiet talks, and so on![1]

Lloyd-Jones was simply noticing one of the subtle harbingers of postmodernism's contempt for clarity and authority. A problem that existed in embryonic form in his era is now a full-grown monster.

At the "Emergent Convention" in 2004, a gathering of some eleven hundred leaders in the Emerging Church movement, Doug Pagitt, pastor of Solomon's Porch (an Emergent community in Minneapolis), told the gathering, "Preaching is broken." He suggests that a completely open conversation where all participants are seen as equals is better suited to a postmodern culture. "Why do I get to speak for 30 minutes and you don't?" he asked. "A sermon is often a violent act," he declared. "It's violence toward the will of the people who have to sit there and take it."[2]

Rudy Carrasco, a Pasadena-based Emergent pastor, agreed that preaching is simply too one-sided, too authoritative, and too rigid for postmodern times. "Every day, every week, there's stuff that pops up in life, and it's not resolved, just crazy and confusing and painful. When people come across with three answers, and they know everything, and they have this iron sheen about them, I'm turned off. Period. I'm just turned off. And I think that's not unique to me."[3]

Many in the church, caught up in the spirit of the age, think Christians should never take an uncompromising stand, should never argue about anything. We're not supposed to engage in polemics. I hear this frequently: "Why don't you just state the truth in positive terms and ignore the view you disagree with? Why not steer clear of controversy, forget the negatives, and present everything affirmatively?"

That ethos is why it is no longer permissible to deal with biblical issues in a straightforward and uncompromising fashion. Those who dare to take an unpopular stand, declare truth in a definitive way—or worst of all, express disagreement with someone else's teaching—will inevitably be marked as troublesome. Compromise has become a virtue while devotion to truth has become offensive.

But many of the issues being compromised within the evangelical movement today are not questionable. Scripture speaks very clearly against homosexuality, for example. The Christian position on adultery is not at all vague. The question of whether a believer ought to marry an unbeliever is spelled out with perfect clarity. Scripture quite plainly forbids any Christian to take another Christian to court. Selfishness and pride are explicitly identified as sins. These are not gray areas. There is no room for compromise here.

Nevertheless, I constantly hear every one of those issues treated as a gray area—on Christian radio,

on Christian television, and in Christian literature. People want all such matters to be negotiable. And too many Christian leaders willingly oblige. They hesitate to speak with authority on matters where Scripture is plain. The lines of distinction between truth and error, wisdom and foolishness, church and world are being systematically obliterated by such means.

The world needs Christians who embrace an antithetical worldview, a biblical mindset that answers questions of truth and morality in terms of black and white. Why? Because there is no salvation without absolute, unshakeable truth. Compromising, changing, tolerant opinions don't provide answers for the "crazy and confusing and painful" issues that confront pastor Carrasco every day. Only truth saves and sanctifies and gives hope.

What's needed today is a generation of men and women who will take a stand on biblical truth. People like that fear the Lord, not men, and will find power and courage from the Lord to uphold His truth in an age of extreme tolerance.

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[1] D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 15-16.
[2] Tom Allen, "Postmoderns Value Authenticity, Not Authority," *The Baptist Standard*, July 8, 2004.
[3] Ibid.

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