

2nd Opinion: Peril of the church on the defensive

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By John Pierce

The counterculture approach that Jesus took and taught focused on loving enemies, embracing outcasts and giving second chances to those soundly condemned by the religious establishment. I never thought of Jesus as a culture warrior on the defensive.

However, many modern church leaders—including some high-profile Baptists—seem to relish that role.

The church on the defensive is neither attractive nor effective. It is driven by fear and sees all sorts of sociological and scientific changes—as well as most theological rethinking—as threatening.

The defensive mindset is predicated on an “us-versus-them” perspective that sees those who don’t share their viewpoint on social issues and religious doctrine as enemies needing to be changed or defeated.

In today’s evangelical subculture, we often hear about a “biblical worldview.” Christian Reconstructionist groups such as American Vision—that seeks legislatively to restore “America’s biblical

foundation”—use that terminology. Their annual national meetings are called “Worldview Super Conferences.”

Indeed, the fast-moving changes in the modern world—like unprecedented communications, ethnic and religious pluralism, technological advances—can be overwhelming and deserve to be viewed through the lens of Christian reflection. But too many Christian leaders seem overly threatened and too quick to get on the defensive.

A Southern Baptist leader and state convention executive defended taking what some call a negative position by opposing social issues like civil rights for homosexuals.

“I do not believe those of us who hold to a biblical worldview can ignore and white-wash those things that are destructive to our culture and the well-being of people,” he wrote in a newspaper column.

The only problem with such a statement is that not all Christians look through the lens of the biblical revelation and see the same things this leader and other fundamentalists see that put them on the defensive. But, sadly, most people think so, and often we have to explain the difference.

While a good dose of the gospel—that is, good news—is needed in our society, I do not share the same fears that I hear coming from many Christian leaders. Staying in the Christian fort and firing verbal missiles at cultural enemies does not appear particularly helpful in advancing the kingdom of God.

Going outside our ecclesiastical walls and being Christian among those who are not may not be as scary as we sometimes think. It also may be more of what following Jesus is about.

The biggest problems with standing in defense of the status quo is that (1) the changes most often opposed inevitably occur, and (2) the church has

often been wrong through the years about what was argued to be the correct biblical viewpoint. That certainly was the case concerning the treatment of Native Americans, African slavery, racial discrimination, women's rights and more.

We also could go back to all kinds of casualties related to science—from Copernicus and Galileo to more modern battles related to Creation.

It is good when church bodies look back and confess to and repent of their wrong thinking and past actions. It is more constructive, however, to slow down, hear a variety of voices and reach a better—and perhaps new—“biblical viewpoint” at the time the issue is arising.

The alternative to being the church on the defensive is not that we are silent or accommodating of every societal change that comes along.

It is that we act out of love rather than fear that we might lose some of our cultural dominance with every change we encounter.

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