

Editorial: Love can overcome fear of ‘the world’

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Fear—or high anxiety, at the least—wafted through the large auditorium on a windy spring evening. Hundreds of parents assembled to listen to speakers talk to them about raising their children.

Sitting among them, I couldn’t tell if most of the parents carried their tiny torches of fear with them or if a couple of speakers struck sparks of fear and then fanned the flames for all they were worth.



Editor Marv Knox
In the moment, I felt flames of anger rising in my own spirit. That’s because I felt those speakers preyed on the parents’ fears to sell the products they promoted. Later, away from the venue, I questioned my assessment because it questioned their motives. Perhaps they really fear the same things the parents fear and they altruistically created their resources to help. Either way—and it’s not my place to judge—the fear felt palpable.

They fear culture. The parents are scared about raising their children, to say nothing of turning them loose, in “the world.”

And those two speakers gave them plenty of fuel for their flaming fear: Supreme Court cases that could legalize gay marriage. Sections of the Affordable Care Act (aka Obamacare) that regulate contraception. Atheist

university professors. Social relativism. Ambiguous gender roles.

While some aspects of culture certainly contradict traditional Christian beliefs and practices (and we must admit in humility that Christians don't agree on many issues or interpretations of issues), and some members of society aggressively confront people of faith, fear is not a valid Christian reaction to culture.

Three responses come to mind:

- **Fear contradicts our testimony and undermines faith.**

In the first century, John the Evangelist [told](#) the early church: "... the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). The first recipients of his encouragement suffered political and religious persecution. John bolstered their faith by reminding them the Spirit of Christ is stronger than any force they encounter or challenge they endure.

Today, many U.S. Christians claim to be persecuted because others disagree with them or—gasp!—mock them. Such a claim insults Christians elsewhere who endure actual physical and political persecution and, of course, martyrs who actually die for their faith.

Besides, what does Christian fear of the world say about Jesus? Christians shouldn't expect unbelievers or people of other faiths to accept their truth claims if, at the same time, they live in fear of culture. What kind of a wimpy God can't hold his own with an agnostic or atheist?

- **Christian duty demands we rise above fear.**

One of the great books of faith is [Christ and Culture](#), written in the middle of the last century by the theologian/ethicist [H. Richard Niebuhr](#), but still relevant and enormously helpful. Niebuhr describes five ways Christians relate to culture—"against," or rejecting culture; "of culture," or

accommodating faith to the dominant culture; “above,” or synthesizing faith to culture; in paradox with culture; and transforming culture.

Ironically, many American evangelical Christians embrace two contradictory approaches. Those people who expressed so much fear of culture place themselves against or in conflict with culture. But many also accommodate large elements of culture, or at least the parts that support their lifestyle. So, they simultaneously loathe such aspects of culture as public education and entertainment, while they embrace materialism and conservative politics, much of which is shaped far more by economics than faith.

A more compelling vision urges Christians to follow the Christ who transformed culture. That’s certainly not accepting culture at face value, but it definitely involves living in the culture and engaging it for a greater good. Scared Christians fail at this. Courageous Christians who also are grounded in Jesus excel at it and make a positive difference in the world.

- **If we love God’s world, we will not fear it.**

After John reminded the early Christians the One who is in them is greater than the one who dominates the world, he reminded them of the [power of love](#): “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” If we love God and also love the world God made, we need not fear it.

This is a wonderfully evangelistic thought. If we love God’s creation—even the people who challenge and contradict and hate us—we can be instruments that drive out fear. Love powers us to transcend fear. Our love can overcome their fear, too.

“Perfect love drives out fear.”