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**Are you tolerant? (Should you be?)
*Deconstructing the gospel of tolerance.***

**Daniel Taylor**

**I**t is the only serious sin left. Even murder has its mitigating factors, but not this one. It is the pariah sin, the charge that makes you untouchable without need for further explanation. The sin is intolerance, and the greatest sinners in late twentieth-century America are evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. America is sick of intolerant people, and it's not going to tolerate them anymore.

How did orthodox Christianity, whose spread throughout the world was predicated in great part on its inclusiveness ("Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden"), come to be a symbol of exclusivity and intolerance? One possible answer echoes the sentiment seen on the church signboard: "If you feel distant from God, guess who moved?" It seems so simple. Christians have stayed true to a 4,000-year-old revelation of moral truth, ultimately rooted in God's eternal nature. Naturally this of-fends the "do your own thing" sensibilities of talk-show hosts, Hollywood filmmakers, White House spin doctors, and those who follow after.

A less sanguine explanation is that tolerance was invented in response to the spectacle of Christians slaughtering each other in the name of Christ. The religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe led to the increasingly widespread conviction that there had to be a better way to decide these things than with the sword. The answer was tolerance, essentially a decision not to decide—that is, to decide on the private level but not on the public.

Historically, then, tolerance was the liberal, secular answer to the inability of conservative religionists to compromise with those who differed from them. Tolerance, in this sense, is relatively new, not something even thought desirable through most of human history.

After all, why tolerate error? This is precisely what tolerance requires of us. Genuine tolerance, as opposed to its pale counterfeits, requires us to allow those who espouse or live out ideas we think wrong, perhaps even harmful, not only to do so but also to try to persuade others to do the same. A number of important notions imbedded in this concept are often ignored when charges of intolerance are thrown around.

First, one is not tolerant of something unless one objects to it. I do not tolerate something I either accept or am indifferent to, because it requires nothing of me. Most social liberals, for instance, cannot rightfully be said to be tolerant regarding homosexual behavior since they have no objection to it. You do not have to tolerate that which you accept or affirm. If you want to know whether a liberal is tolerant, ask what he or she thinks of Jesse Helms or Pat Robertson or Kenneth Starr.

If tolerance requires an initial objection, then conservatives, ironically, may be much more tolerant than liberals, because there are so many more things to which they object. The least tolerant person is the person who accepts everything, because such a person is not required to overcome any internal objections. To paraphrase G. K. Chesterton, turnips are singularly tolerant.

A challenge for those who prize tolerance as one of the highest public goods is to distinguish between healthy tolerance and a diseased moral passivity or indifference. What is the difference between a genuinely tolerant society and a morally bankrupt one, incapable of calling evil for what it is? Is Chesterton on to something when he says tolerance is the virtue of those who don't believe in anything? Too much of what passes as tolerance in America is not the result of principled judgment but is simple moral indifference. Invoking "it's not my business" may keep us from becoming a nation of prudish snoops, but historically, it also has led nations into collaboration with great evil.

**I**f tolerance requires an initial objection, it also implies withheld power. If I would stop something if I could, but am powerless to do so, I am not tolerant, merely impotent. True tolerance means I voluntarily withhold what power I have to coerce someone else's behavior.

In an open society such as ours, where a wide range of divergent thinking and behavior is protected by law and custom, one must show varying degrees of tolerance even to that to which one objects. In opposing abortion, for instance, some seek legal sanctions, others rely on moral suasion or civil disobedience, and still others seek pragmatic compromise. A radical few murder abortion doctors. All but the last actually demonstrate tolerance, to differing degrees, in that they seek to persuade more than to coerce.


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This suggests an interesting paradox within the notion of tolerance. At the core of tolerance is a kind of intolerance. If you can only tolerate that to which you object, then you have already shown yourself somewhat intolerant in making that initial objection.

This hidden aspect of tolerance doesn't bother those who think there's plenty in the world to object to, but it *is* unsettling to the interminably open-minded. Their raison d'être is captured succinctly in a dictum offered approvingly in my son's high-school sociology text as it discusses homosexual practice: "everything is right somewhere and nothing is right everywhere."

Thus relativism absolutizes pluralism. That is, it takes the clearly observable fact that we have a multitude of views and values and practices in the world—pluralism—and draws the illegitimate conclusion that there is no justifiable way of choosing among them. Truth is merely opinion, goodness only what the majority says it is.

Such relativism is not the province only of academic texts, it is the spirit of our age and therefore deep in our own bones. It is no surprise, then, that intolerance is our society's greatest sin. The intolerant person is the one thing that cannot be tolerated, the one person who must be shamed or silenced. A guest commentator on National Public Radio shocked even his progressive hosts, but spoke for many, when he objected to the Southern Baptist belief that a lot of people are going to hell: "The evaporation of 4 million [people] who believe in this crap would leave the world a better place." (It's comforting to see that the dreaded Religious Right is not the only source of intolerance in our society.)

Nevertheless—and here's the rub—it is widely acknowledged that no moral person tolerates everything. For some, the intolerable grows largely from issues of justice and fairness—racism, sexism, homophobia, economic inequity. Such people are divided on an issue like pornography, where values that they hold with equal passion—freedom of expression versus ending the exploitation of women—collide. Given that everyone agrees that some things should not be tolerated, the real issue should not be whether one is tolerant or intolerant, but what's included on one's list.

**T**he charge of intolerance has become a potent weapon in the culture wars, all the more useful because it carries a lot of emotional firepower without requiring a great deal of evidence or logical consistency. People complain about others "forcing their values" on them, when they are perfectly willing to do the same on many issues. Or they claim "you can't legislate morality" when, in fact, the overwhelming majority of laws of all kinds are rooted in a moral assertion about how things ought to be. Doctor Laura, the popular yet controversial radio host, has remarked on the hate mail she receives for being so intolerant as to believe there is something like moral absolutes in the world: "The irony is that those people are mad because I made a judgment about somebody's behavior, and, while they may admit that there is more than one possible opinion about the morality of any particular action in life, mine is obviously not one of them."

Those accused of intolerance are usually thought to be guilty of one of two supporting sins—ignorance or callousness. A newspaper article praising a documentary on gay activism on college campuses notes that some might fault the film for not interviewing anyone who sees the homosexual lifestyle as "sinful," but then concludes, "Anyone who tried to make that argument after the poignant stories of Gary and others would look stupid or heartless or both." Stupid or heartless—not much of a choice, but the only one afforded those out of step with the moral climate of our times.

It is no surprise that religion is often seen as the greatest source of intolerance—as when, for example, not only gay activists but also many editorialists blamed conservative Christians for the brutal beating and death of Matthew Shepard. For the last 250 years or so, secularists have waited patiently for the fulfillment of their prediction that religion would die out in the next generation or two. But religious people have been singularly uncooperative, and new strategies have developed for controlling this blight on human progress. If religion won't "wither away" as philosopher Richard Rorty has wished, then perhaps it can be privatized and thereby removed from influence on public life—sort of like localizing an outbreak of the plague.

Such a view is expressed by another academic: "Hope [for tolerance] may lie…in modernity itself and in its principal creation, international commercial society. It is still possible that the structures of this international order will encourage skepticism about religious and other claims to exclusivity and about the motives of those who impose such claims." That's an intriguing idea—if people cannot be argued out of their superstitions (rationalism), or coerced (totalitarianism), then perhaps they can be advertised into submission (materialism). If Darwin and Stalin didn't get you, MasterCard will.

**I**t is actually much easier to be considered intolerant today than in the past. You used to have to breathe a little smoke and fire, maybe vote to keep someone out of your country club, or at least tell inappropriate jokes. The bar has been lowered. Now all you have to do is disagree with someone, especially on certain hot-button issues.

Consider the following story. A priest, a rabbi, and an evangelical English teacher (myself) are on a plane heading to Washington, D.C. The priest and the rabbi together organize an annual trip to the Holocaust Museum in order to promote understanding, reconciliation, and, yes, tolerance. They invite people who they believe are in a position to influence others—one year pastors and religious leaders, another year teachers. The group is given material in advance, including, from the priest, a piece attacking the pope for not being progressive enough.

I have been to the Holocaust Museum before, but I still find it overwhelmingly powerful. There is little I wouldn't do to stand against anything like the attitudes that made it possible, as I hope is clear in my teaching of literature and in my life. But there is one thing I won't do, and that apparently is enough to make me intolerant, though nobody uses the word.

I won't become a relativist, or even a universalist. I will not agree, as we were encouraged to agree at the posttrip debriefing, that all major religions are equally valid approaches to God, equally approved by God, and that to think otherwise is to be on the side at least of intolerance, if not of the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Now, that's not really a fair assessment of what was said in the meeting. It was much more cordial, much more affirming, much more good-spirited than that. But it was in the air. It didn't have to be said explicitly, because it was assumed, the common wisdom.

I was asked, spontaneously, to give my response to the trip at that debriefing. I tried to be cooperative, in keeping with the spirit of the two men who were expending a great amount of time and energy and resources to do a genuinely good and helpful thing. But I also said that I hoped my unwillingness to be a universalist did not disqualify me from being part of the dialogue. I was willing to respect most anyone seeking truth in life, but I wasn't willing to agree that every search was equally successful, or that sincerity and being a "good person" were the defining marks of a successful quest.

The priest got up and said, of course no one was advocating relativism. The rabbi spoke to me afterward and said that he, for one, wanted me to be a part of any continuing dialogue. We have since exchanged letters. He still doesn't see why if he can affirm my being a Christian who has a right relationship with God through Christ, I can't affirm his having a right relationship with God without Christ. Or, though he doesn't say it, affirm the Buddhists for having their own adequate truth without either God or Christ.

I try to say to him that he is not really being as flexible as he claims, because he is insisting that only his view on this is correct. I must give up my "triumphalism" (another version of the intolerance charge) and Christian exclusivity, but he apparently has to give up nothing. I become tolerant only by adopting his and the priest's position. He responds that he really is not interested in tolerance; he expects affirmation. Why should his religion, older than mine, be merely tolerated? How condescending of me to offer tolerance, as though he and his religion were something to be put up with.

I reply that I wasn't the one to bring up tolerance in the first place. I agree that tolerance is a fairly weak concept and not an adequate goal for how people should relate to one another. I want to say that he and the priest are really coreligionists. Their religion is ethical humanism—the human quest for being good through human efforts—with a side dish of theism. Their liberal Catholicism and liberal Judaism are not really two different religions getting along with each other, but only different flavors of the same religion. They are much closer to each other in core beliefs than they are to more conservative believers within the religion each espouses. They, in fact, do not really respect other religions so much as they try to shame members of other religions to give up their "absolutism" to join them in the progressive club of the open-minded. And they are as absolute in this requirement as any absolutist fundamentalist of any religion.

I don't say this to the rabbi, however. It is undoubtedly a caricature of his position, it would be hurtful to him, and no one would be the better for me having sounded off. And I have no confidence he would understand, much less be persuaded, even if I were a model of discretion, sensitivity, and logical clarity. Some views of the world operate like parallel universes, neither capable of interacting with the other, and nary a wormhole in sight. Perhaps the progressive will always see the traditionalist as fearfully clinging to past, constricted, and culturally bound notions of morality. And traditionalists will always see progressives as trendy, na•ve, and confused.

Our debriefing of the trip to the Holocaust Museum ends with the priest issuing a dark warning that a Jews for Jesus gathering is coming to town the next week, suggesting that they represent the kind of threat we are all fighting against. I decide not to mention that I have given money to Jews for Jesus for years.

I began giving in the mid-1970s after I met Rivkah, a converted Jew I taught with for a year at a fundamentalist college. She was quitting teaching to join Jews for Jesus and trying to raise support. I liked Rivkah, and I wanted to help her out.

I didn't realize how controversial the organization was until many years later when I was talking to the woman who speaks to my classes when I teach the Holocaust. She is a survivor of five concentration camps, and I respect her enormously for her efforts to let young people see and hear from her what they may pass over or not believe in books. Mrs. W. once mentioned to me that one of her friend's children had joined Jews for Jesus, "a terrible organization." It startled me. It occurred to me that Jews for Jesus was to a Jewish parent what the Moonies would be to an evangelical Christian parent—only worse, because Christians, for all their sense of being under attack, are still far too numerous to be in any danger of disappearing, a situation not felt by many Jews.


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So what am I to think of Jews for Jesus? Do I think of Rivkah or Mrs. W.? Do I listen to the priest or to the Great Commission? Is that commission to go into all the world and preach the gospel and make disciples misunderstood, as some argue, or simply baldly imperialistic and triumphalist as others claim? Is it intolerant even to offer the gospel, without bribe or coercion? Can this story only be told to those who already embrace it? Should no one try to convince anyone to be and believe anything but what he or she was born into? Are feminists and environmentalists equally wrong to evangelize? Is not spreading to others the truth as one sees it a sign of respect and sensitivity, or is it a sign of indifference and confusion? If I have a life-saving medicine and don't share it, I am selfish and properly condemned. What am I to do if I believe I have a life-saving message?

**W**hat, in short, are theologically conservative Christians to make of all this? Should it bother us to be called intolerant? How far do we go in resisting what we believe to be wrong? (Do we, for instance, call for sodomy laws and the jailing of practicing gays? Or do we support fairness in housing and employment rights for gays but not the legalization of homosexual marriage? Or something else?)

I would like to think that the charge of intolerance is entirely wrongheaded, a badge to be worn proudly by a people committed to goodness and truth no matter what the cost. The problem is, I hang around Christians too much. I hear too many sermons, too many Christian gurus on the radio and television; I get too much Christian junk mail from too many Christian organizations. It is difficult to argue with a straight face that Christians are unfairly accused of intolerance when one is surrounded by name calling, finger pointing, back stabbing, bomb throwing, and plain, old-fashioned gossip. And that's just the stuff Christians do to each other.

It is an admirable thing when one is willing to die for the truth. It is more problematic when one is willing to kill for it. Throughout this century, the church has shown itself more willing to do the latter than the former. A long documentation of fundamentalist and evangelical warring against those within the ranks is both depressing and unnecessary. Anyone raised in this subculture knows the stories, and many bear the wounds.

Another problem with easily shrugging off the charge of intolerance is the selective nature of our moral outrage. We appear to be in a continual lather over things sexual—pornography, homosexuality, abortion, prostitution, adultery, sex education, promiscuity, and fornication —yet we have been amazingly patient, even lethargic, about the evils of racism, and positively resistant to righting the wrongs of sexism. The recent counterattack in the "values" sector of the culture wars, in fact, has the liberals shouting that they are really the moral ones because they are fighting hunger, injustice, and the like, while conservatives are just interested in getting their long, blue noses into people's bedrooms.


**Should** it bother us to be
called intolerant? Is God **tolerant**?


It's no wonder, then, that our reputation in dealing with those with whom we disagree is somewhere to the right of Rasputin. We are seen as the pit bulls of the culture wars—small brains, big teeth, strong jaws, and no interest in compromise. Is this indictment fair? Often not. Understandable? Absolutely.

What is a Christian to do? Well, traditionally we have tried, when confronted with a problem, to figure out what the Bible says. It's too much to consider here what the Bible has to say about the individual issues of the culture wars; many voices are being heard on those issues. But what, if anything, does the Bible have to say about tolerance in general? Is God tolerant? Does the Bible say we should be?

**M**y answer is tentative and anecdotal—and maybe a bit wishy-washy for some. Is God tolerant? Yes and no. The Bible certainly teaches us that God hates sin. That much, I think, is clear. He is depicted as morally uncompromising, righteously angry, holy, and sure to punish evil. Yet he is also depicted as patient, long-suffering, forgiving, and slow to anger—qualities closely related to tolerance. It seems he does, in a sense, tolerate sin—at least for a season. If tolerance is withholding the power to coerce conformity with one's own views, then it seems God is exceptionally tolerant. After all, we do much that displeases him, that violates who he is and what he made creation to be, and yet he does not immediately destroy us or even force us into obedience.

A number of stories from the Bible touch on the issue of tolerance. When David flees Jerusalem under threat from Absalom, Shimei comes out to curse and stone him as he passes by. David restrains those who want to kill Shimei, saying Shimei is perhaps speaking for the Lord. That is an interesting example of tolerance (though undercut by David's deathbed petition to Solomon to take revenge on Shimei). Is it remotely possible that some of the stones that get tossed at Christians for their attitudes and behavior are deserved—even from God? It would not be the first time God used strange messengers.

Surely there are also lessons about tolerance and intolerance in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It may not be precisely intolerance that keeps the priest and Levite from helping the wounded man, but it is close enough to be instructive. Clearly they feel sufficiently removed from him to feel no responsibility to help. Their religiosity does not translate into neighborliness, into godly behavior.

Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan in order to explain the meaning of the command to "Love your neighbor as yourself." Since Christians in our society are essentially accused of being bad neighbors, we should ask ourselves what it means to be a good neighbor today. It is more than Mister Rogers niceness, certainly, but also more than pointing out our neighbor's mistakes.

Perhaps the single most enlightening story for thinking about God's attitude toward tolerance is the gospel story of the woman caught in adultery. We have in this ancient text all the elements of a contemporary "values clarification" exercise on tolerance: a woman accused of a sexual sin (her cosinner nowhere to be seen), religious leaders insisting on strict application of the traditional moral law, and a crowd representing society as a whole. But instead of all this being mediated by Jenny or Jerry, we have Jesus.


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weak a concept to be attributed to God.


The religious leaders care less about the moral law, of course, than they do about defeating an enemy. (Sound familiar?) They have brought this woman to Jesus to trap him. Either he will deny the law of Moses and thereby lose his authority as a moral teacher, or he will agree to the condemnation of the woman and thereby lose the sympathy of the common people who chafe under the arrogant legalism of the religious leaders (and also perhaps get himself in trouble with the Roman authorities who alone can approve the death penalty).

What would today's apostles of tolerance do? They would point out, to begin with, that the woman and presumably her sexual partner are consenting adults. Who is to say that adultery is a sin? Whose business is it anyway? Perhaps it's of interest to offended spouses, but certainly not anyone else. The woman should be freed without blame, perhaps even commended for her bold defiance of archaic and sexist sexual norms, and directed to the nearest lawyer to discuss the merits of a lawsuit against her accusers.

What might today's public defenders of morality do? About what the religious authorities of her day did. They would use her as a public example of sin, show little or no regard for her as a person, call for her public shaming, and exploit the whole situation to advance their call for a return to traditional morality. She would be the poster girl for their next fundraising letter decrying the decline of religious values and calling for sacrificial financial support in order to carry on God's fight against evil.

What does Jesus do? He does the seemingly impossible, affirming the moral law and at the same time refusing to humiliate the sinner. He tells the religious leaders that the one of them who is without sin should cast the first stone. (In the background, a cheer from the lovers of tolerance.) He tells the woman that he does not condemn her. (Two cheers.) But then, crucially, he says what no modern champion of tolerance is likely to say: "Go and sin no more." (A disappointed groan.)

Is God tolerant? Yes, more so than we are. But also less so. God's forbearance never compromises his holiness or justice. He forgives and waits where we attack and destroy. He grieves and judges where we are lax or indifferent. Our goal is to be as tolerant as God but not more so, praying earnestly for the wisdom to know the difference.

**U**ltimately, tolerance is too weak a concept to be attributed to God. God is so much more than tolerant that Christians can rightfully ignore tolerance as a fundamental goal for their own lives—but only if they are willing to live by a much higher standard. God does not call us to be tolerant of our neighbors. God calls us to love them—at least as much as we love ourselves. Before we all nod our approval, we should take a sober look at what that might entail.

Biblical love is always sacrificial love. Don't say you love someone unless you are willing to suffer for that person. Sacrificial love does not say, "Do as I do or you are going to hell." It says, "I would rather be crucified than have you be harmed."

This is the point at which the "hate the sin, love the sinner" maxim is most relevant, but also most questionable. We say this as glibly as the tolerance people mouth their slogans. It is perfectly correct, and also perfectly unconvincing.

If you are loved, you generally know it. And you know it in great part by how someone acts toward you. The simple fact is that the people whose behavior we believe is sinful do not report that they feel loved—or anything close to it. They do not feel as the woman caught in adultery or the Samaritan woman most likely felt when confronted with their sin by Jesus.

"Who cares how they feel?" some will say. "The replacement of objective moral law by subjective feelings is how we got into this mess in the first place." But the assertion of the objective moral law without concern for how it is experienced is legalism, and legalism is the counterfeit of love-based Christian morality.

Evidence for the lack of love in Christian rhetoric is not hard to find and is not limited to the extremes. All I have to do to find it is open my mail. The sad truth is that, in our battle with a hostile culture, we have adopted the culture's tactics. We fight ugliness with ugliness, distortion with distortion, sarcasm with sarcasm.

Consider the ACLU, an organization as self-declaredly opposed to the social agenda of conservative Christianity as any. The tone of their fundraising letters, like most, is consistently alarmist, simplistic, and sarcastic: "Freedom vs. authoritarianism. That's what the struggle over competing visions of morality is all about." "Increasingly we are being assaulted with the belief that somehow we are a nation in steep moral decline." "We are being told by the Merchants of Virtue…that we should return to those good old days." "Right now those who would impose their pious standards of morality on private, personal behavior are dangerously close to winning the debate." It's not exactly an appeal to sweet reason.

Surely Christians are different. Surely Christians speak to the sinner with a broken heart. Surely they try to model the spirit of Christ: "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." In many places, perhaps, but not in my mailbox, not on my radio. Consider the following excerpts from a fundraising letter, typical of those from many highly successful Christian organizations: "These shameful 'high priests' of the anti-virtue movement." "As God's people for this historic hour, we rise to the challenge and give whatever it takes to turn back the anti-Christian juggernaut which threatens our way of life." "Do not doubt that prayer will become a crime, the Bible off-limits, and sharing our faith in public forbidden." Who can resist reaching for the checkbook when the whole cosmos is at stake?

But such tactics undermine the Christian witness that the senders seek to proclaim. The letter from which I've quoted displays all the familiar manipulative strategies of modern advertising and political propaganda. The envelope even gives the false impression that it is a registered letter, a touch worthy of magazine subscription marketers and vacation scams. Winning is losing if this is how we are to win the culture wars.

I believe we do this because we do not really trust the gospel. *Turn the other cheek, the first shall be last, lose our life to gain it, love our enemies*. Those bold principles of Jesus make for great sermons, but in our bones we appear not to believe they are practical for everyday living in a hostile society. We seem to believe that if we are not as aggressive and hard-nosed as our supposed enemies, that God (and our organization) will somehow be defeated and goodness will disappear from the earth. The result is that we are perceived, often not unfairly, as simply mean-spirited—as, well, intolerant.

**H**ow should it be? How can we affirm Christian morality, unapologetically rooted in the Bible, without becoming rhetorical bomb throwers?

First, we should resist any appeal whose primary aim or result is to make us either angry or afraid. Anger and fear are our most primitive and instinctive emotions, and they are the surest route (along with sentimentality) to our checkbooks. Neither leads us to love our neighbor, or God either, for that matter. We are eager to cite Jesus' righteous anger in cleansing the temple, but the combination of righteousness and anger is much more problematic in us than it is in him. We would do well to tape a verse from James on our foreheads: "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. For human anger does not result in God's righteousness" (1:19-20).

Second, we should listen to the stories of those who oppose us. Everyone has a story to tell, and the surest route to conflict is to supress the stories of others. A source of frustration for conservative Christians is the feeling that their story is being silenced in the public square. If we want the right to tell our story, however, we must be willing, even eager, to hear the stories of others. And we should listen compassionately, with a bias toward finding common ground rather than listening for an opportunity to attack. This common ground is not the flaccid "everybody is right" of flabby relativism. The goal is not niceness, or pseudounanimity, but a core package of values and rights we can affirm together while we continue to disagree on some fundamental understandings of the ultimate nature of things.

Must Christians be tolerant? Not really—certainly not as our society defines the term. But we must be loving, and that is a far greater challenge, with far greater dangers and rewards. We must find better ways to demonstrate that we do, in fact, love the sinner while we hate the sin.


**(SHOULD YOU BE?)**


Our response to abortion is instructive. In the years immediately after its legalization, Christian opponents of abortion were widely accused of caring about the fetus but not about the woman or even the child if it was born. It was easier to say abortion is a sin than to provide practical help to sinners. Since that time, countless programs, many of them volunteer, have arisen that minister to every need, physical and spiritual, of pregnant women in difficult circumstances. Tangible love has replaced empty denunciation.

We have failed so far to respond as well to homosexuals. We have not been in the frontlines in the fight against AIDS, just as we were not in the struggle against racism. How differently would conservative Christianity be perceived today if we had been the first and most passionate of those offering practical help to AIDS sufferers? The bulk of our response—verbal and nonverbal, literal and symbolic—suggests that we hate the sinner every bit as much as the sin. This is the story we hear from gays in our pews as much as from those in the parades. We can say it isn't so; but talk is cheap. We do not have to affirm homosexuals in their homosexuality, as our culture insists, but we do have to love them, and we haven't yet figured out how to do that.

We have always struggled as human beings to understand and live out the implications of the "thou shalt nots" and the "blessed ares" of the Bible. It is clear that there are things we ought and ought not to do. And there is no reason to apologize for asserting that to a tone-deaf world. But it is also clear that the bedrock of all biblical morality is God's love. That love is not incompatible with judgment ("go and sin no more") but it is incompatible with our not properly valuing all that God has created, including those who offend us.

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