

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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“Speak the Truth in Love”— to a Postmodern, Postchristian Culture

The assumption of personal faith, which used to be a staple of American culture, is no longer valid. Postmodern pluralism and relativism define our culture and personal autonomy drives individual ambition and meaning. For those of us who love Christ and see our identity as being in Christ, it is easy to become defensive and imagine ourselves as “an aggrieved and repressed remnant.” But the New Testament offers another approach: Believers in Christ are to speak the truth in love. Jim Daly, President of Focus on the Family, argues that Christians should be a “joyful minority. [But] we are no longer effective at persuasion because we lack humility. Some in the faith community are losing legitimacy among younger people because many Christians only speak truth and fail to do truth.” As columnist Michael Gerson persuasively suggests, “A faith characterized by humility and considering the person [who is valuable but broken, and in need of God’s grace] would be busy enough. The prevailing culture counts both virtues and victims. The broad decline of institutions leaves many people betrayed, lonely and broken—not only unaffiliated with religion but unaffiliated with family, with community and with all the commitments that give meaning to freedom.” Therefore, I believe it is time for evangelical Christians to reassess how we relate to this Postmodern, Postchristian culture. A culture firmly anchored in midair is a culture that hurts people, creates dysfunction and is overly sensitive and defensive.

Permit me to illustrate this Postmodern penchant for oversensitivity and defensiveness.

- Columnists Kathleen Parker and Peggy Noonan have both recently addressed the “trigger warnings” and the call for “safe zones” on America’s college campuses. A “trigger warning” is usually conveyed by a sign carried or posted near the auditorium where a speech is to be given, “alerting students to the possibility that the speaker may express an idea that could trigger an emotional response. A discussion about campus rape statistics, for example, might cause a rape victim to suffer.” Parker also adds that “trigger-phobia” has been taken a step further, for students are urging their professors to add warnings to syllabi alerting students to “the possibility that a course might prompt uncomfortable thoughts.” Peggy Noonan illustrates another example of “trigger” warnings at Columbia University. In a class where Ovid’s great classic *Metamorphoses* was being discussed, especially the myths associated with Persephone and Daphne, which includes depictions of violence, sexual assault and rape, a student in the class was “triggered,” which, because she had been a victim of sexual assault, was “completely disengaged from the class discussion as a means of self-preservation. She did not feel safe in the class.” Apparently if a classic work of literature makes a student feel bad, it should no longer be in the curriculum. But as a

Columbia student wrote in an op ed piece in the Columbia student newspaper, *The Spectator*, Ovid's work "like so many texts in the Western canon contains triggering and offensive material that marginalizes student identities in the classroom." The Western Canon is "full of histories and narratives of exclusion and oppression" that can be "difficult to read and discuss as a survivor, a person of color, or a student from a low-income background . . . Students need to feel safe in the classroom, and that requires a learning environment that recognizes the multiplicity of their identities." This oversensitivity is difficult to take seriously. As a Christian, I believe we live in a fallen, broken world and it is simply unrealistic to be fixated on the idea of personal safety. As Noonan correctly observes, "People will say, and do things that are wrong, stupid, unkind, meant to injure. They'll bring up subjects you find upsetting. It's uncomfortable. But isn't that the price we pay for freedom of speech?" Furthermore, when it comes to the classics of literature, by their very nature, they make us uncomfortable, unsettled. It is not realistic, nor is it even sensible to ban great works of literature simply because a student feels "unsafe" reading and/or discussing them. Finally, Noonan asks these piercing rhetorical questions: "Social justice warriors always portray themselves—and seem to experience themselves—as actively suffering victims who need protection. Is that perhaps an invalid self-image? Are you perhaps less needy than demanding? You seem to be demanding a safety no one else in the world gets. Are you a bunch of frail and sensitive little bullies? Is it possible you're not intimidated but intimidators?"

- The defensiveness of this Postmodern generation is illustrated by the attempt of this generation to manage unpleasant speech, which is in effect the suppression of ideas. As Parker writes, "Colleges and universities often boast of their diversity in terms of race, sex, gender or sexual orientation, but too often they fail to encourage diversity of thought." Kirsten Powers, a television commentator and recent convert to Christianity, has written a powerful book entitled *The Silencing: How the Left is Killing Free Speech*. In an interview, Powers poignantly observed that "the illiberal Left is circumventing th[e] process: 'We've already decided what's true, and if you dissent from that, we're going to treat you as someone who deserves to be punished and lose their job or be expelled or get a bad grade.' The loss is that we all lose information and knowledge. Research doesn't get done because people are afraid of reaching the wrong conclusions, or they're never there in the first place because they can't even get hired." She also concludes that "the illiberal Left reminds me of religious zealots, except of a secular religion. The average religious person has their beliefs, but they're not trying to get people fired who don't have their beliefs. But zealots *do* do that. It's not enough for them to believe it; they can't tolerate other people who don't believe what they believe, and they have this absolute certainty that they're right. It's self-sanctifying. They have to establish that they are morally superior to people who disagree with them. It's social signaling: 'My identity comes from the fact that I'm pro-gay marriage and pro-choice and believe in climate change and oppose charter schools.'" Mitch Daniels, President of Purdue University reflects a healthy response to the intolerance and McCarthyism of the Left: "If universities want to embarrass themselves with their behavior, allowing people to be shouted down or disinvited, that's their problem. But if they're spawning a bunch of little authoritarians with an inverted view of our basic freedoms, that's

everybody's problem." Both Purdue and the University of Chicago have issued a statement of principles of free expression. Both guarantee that "It is not the proper role of the university to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive." Praise God for these institutions that are taking this bold stand!

What then are Christians to do in this kind of culture, laced with an unrealistic, oversensitive pursuit of "safety" and an arrogant defensiveness that seeks to silence all speech and all ideas that threaten the illiberal Left's agenda (to use Powers's words)? Christians are by nature countercultural. Because our values, our morals and our ethical standards come from God's Word, we will always be going in the opposite direction of the culture. The Constitution affirms that we have the right to express our views, and it is proper for us to insist on that protection. But we are not zealots! We present the case for Christianity with firmness, with fortitude—and with love! We do not hammer people over the head with our Bibles. Instead, we seek to understand the Postmodern worldview and challenge its presuppositions and its assumptions—with love. We need to present our worldview in the language of this culture, which will cause them to listen and consider the claims of Jesus Christ. Tim Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, is doing just this. For eight months, Kristen Powers heard Tim Keller preach and then "gave in." She writes of Pastor Keller that his sermons are "intellectually rigorous, weaving in art and history and philosophy [with the Bible]. As he made the case for Christianity, he made the case against atheism and agnosticism. He expertly exposed the intellectual weaknesses of a purely secular worldview." After eight months, "I concluded that the weight of evidence was on the side of Christianity." Pastor Tim Keller is a model of how to speak the truth with love into this Postmodern, Postchristian culture.

See Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (23-24 May 2015); Kathleen Parker in the *Washington Post* (19 May 2015); Interview by Katelyn Beaty with Kirsten Powers in www.christianitytoday.com (11 May 2015); Kirsten Powers's testimony in www.christianitytoday.com (22 October 2013); and Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (25 May 2015).