ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Postmodern Perceptions of Biblical Christianity

The Postmodern, Post-Christian nature of Western Civilization reflects a change in how Postmodern people perceive biblical Christianity. For much of the late 20th century, genuine, biblical Christianity was regarded as irrelevant. In the early 21st century, it is regarded as bad for society. A recent study by the Barna Group, which is also reflected in David Kinnaman's book, *Good Faith*, examines the perceptions of faith and Christianity in our Postmodern culture. The conclusion is that millions of adults now view biblical Christianity as extremist. Four short statements summarize Kinnaman's research:

1. Adults and especially non-believers are concerned about religious extremism, which they regard as a "threat to society."
2. Nearly half of non-religious adults perceive Christianity to be extremist.
3. The range of what constitutes extremism is broad, ranging from behaviors that are almost universally condemned to more narrowly defined extremism.
4. Evangelicals stand out from the norm in terms of their attitudes on religious extremism—and they exhibit major differences from the skeptics. **"**On virtually all of the extremist factors assessed in the research, evangelicals and skeptics maintain widely divergent points of view. . . For example, only 1% of evangelicals believe it is religiously extreme for a person to teach his or her children that same-sex relationships are morally wrong. However, three-quarters of skeptics (75%) believe this is extremist. Attempting to convert others generates a perception gap of 10% to 83% between evangelicals and skeptics, an incredible 73 percentage points."

David Kinnaman, who is the president of Barna and directed the research study on religious extremism, comments that "These gaps show the challenges practicing Christians and especially evangelicals are facing. In a religiously plural and divisive society, various 'tribes'—ranging from faithful to skeptic—are vying to decide how faith should work. The most contentious issues are the ways in which religious conviction gets expressed publicly, but the findings illustrate that a wide range of actions, even beliefs, are now viewed as extremist by large chunks of the population. The research starkly demonstrates the ways in which evangelicals and many practicing Catholics are out of the cultural mainstream. In fact, skeptics and religiously unaffiliated are now much closer to the cultural 'norm' than are religious conservatives. In other words, the secular point of view, which says faith should be kept out of the public domain, is much closer to the mainstream in U.S. life. This fact explains why millions of devout Christians are experiencing such frustration and concern. They are feeling out of step with social norms and the cultural momentum. This is most significantly felt when it comes to social views, such as evangelicals' convictions on same-sex relationships. However, the perception of

'social extremism' also applies to many other beliefs and practices, including personal evangelism and missions work."

Theologian Albert Mohler comments on the anticipated results evangelicals should expect when sharing the Gospel or the distinctives of the biblical worldview:

- We should anticipate a context of hostility. "Much of the hostility will look like cultural marginalization."
- We should expect "befuddlement." Evangelicals will not only be treated with hostility or derision, but also we may be perceived as "creatures of oddity. The plausibility structures of society are so different from our own that many people simply cannot understand us."
- We should expect indifference. "Many in our society will not even care enough about our message to spend their energies either in hostility or befuddlement."

In addition to both Kinnaman's research and Mohler's observations, there is a genuine rethinking of religious liberty in our culture. Columnist Michael Gerson observes that "The largest changes of our time — with massive legal consequences — have been in the realm of moral ideas. Legal liberals quote Justice Anthony M. Kennedy more like scripture than precedent: 'At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.' The liberalism of Eleanor Roosevelt — a commitment to universal human rights — has largely been replaced by Kennedy's elevation of personal autonomy. The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which Roosevelt helped shape) honored 'the inherent dignity and . . . the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.' In the aftermath of World War II, her emphasis was on defending the vulnerable. Kennedy's version of liberty is the right of competent adults — by definition, the strongest members of the 'human family' — to define and pursue their own universal mystery." The pluralism of Postmodernism now intersects with the personal autonomy of Postmodernism to produce a real threat to religious liberty in America. Christians now face an array of religious liberty challenges that were inconceivable in previous generations.

What is the nature of this threat? Mohler cites two:

- In some states and at some levels of the national government, hate crime legislation is being considered "that would marginalize and criminalize speech that is in conflict with the new moral consensus."
- This conflict of liberties means that the culture "with the backing of the courts and the regulatory state, will prioritize erotic liberty over religious liberty . . . Erotic liberty has been elevated as a right more fundamental than religious liberty. Erotic liberty now marginalizes, subverts, and neutralizes religious liberty—a liberty highly prized by the builders of this nation and its constitutional order." Our Founders affirmed that rights come from God; they are not "created" by humans.

Demonstrating how serious this threat to religious liberty truly is, consider this reflection made by Jonathan Rauch, an early advocate of gay marriage. His warning is addressed to those who embrace erotic liberty at the expense of religious liberty: "Today I fear that many people on my side of the gay-equality question are forgetting our debt to the system that freed us. Some gay people—not all, not even most, but quite a few—want to expunge discriminatory views. 'Discrimination is discrimination and bigotry is bigotry,' they say, 'and they are intolerable whether or not they happen to be someone's religious or moral creed.'" Rauch cautioned his erotic liberty supporters not to take the path of silencing or punishing those who advocate religious liberty. There is little evidence that Rauch's counsel is being followed!

The Postmodern, Post-Christian culture with its radical pluralism and radical personal autonomy has embraced erotic liberty and is willing to do so at the expense of religious liberty. There is no greater evidence of the counter-cultural nature of genuine, biblical Christianity than this reality. Nonetheless, as salt and light Christians (see Matthew 5:1-16) in this increasingly hostile culture, may we represent our Savior with grace, mercy and compassion.

See Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (2 February 2017); "Five Ways Christianity is Increasingly Viewed as Extremist," Research Releases in Faith and Christianity by the Barna Group (23 February 2016); Albert Mohler in www.albertmohler.com (31 January 2017); and Albert Mohler in *Tabletalk* (January 2017), pp. 68-69.