

Hate Speech: The Bell Tolls for Thee

In a radio interview recently I heard some well-meaning objections from listeners who just couldn't see the point in last week's Supreme Court's decision in *Snyder v. Phelps*, which upheld the free speech rights of protesters outside of a military funeral. From an empathy standpoint, I can understand why they objected to the High Court's decision.

Just look at the parties to this lawsuit: the losing party was Mr. Snyder, the grieving father whose son was killed in Iraq while serving his country, and who had collected a multi-million dollar verdict against the protesters who picketed the funeral, until the High Court reversed it a few days ago.

The winning party was Fred Phelps and his angry, insular little group whose tortured theology and inflammatory rhetoric (declaring on placards that God killed Snyder's son because of America's national sin) should be denounced by respectable evangelical Christians everywhere. But this case was not about empathy. It was about the ultimate definition of liberty.

If the Court had banned the speech of outrageous folk like Phelps this month, next month it would be censorship of legitimate Gospel-preaching, Christ-honoring people of God who share an authentically Biblical message.

How? By laws that approach us as a Trojan horse, outwardly impressive, but carrying within the weapons that will undo our ability to declare the whole counsel of God to a decaying culture. Calls for banning "hate speech" fit that bill. An op-ed on the National Public Radio (NPR) blog this Monday, penned by radio commentator Wilmer Leon and denouncing the ruling in the Snyder case, illustrates this. He argued that "hate speech," including "religious" expression, should be censored

if it is deemed “derogatory.” Leon wrote that the First Amendment should provide no protection because such speech has “no redeeming political or social value.”

While Christians are admonished to practice “speaking truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15), we also know that the Word of God properly applied can cut like a sword, convicting and correcting all who have ears to hear. To those who don’t, or who simply resign themselves to resist the Truth, Biblical truth can be conveniently dismissed as “derogatory” and having no “political or social value.” When a culture becomes post-Christian, the next step is one that is anti-Christian: a society that will look to any available legal rule in an effort to muzzle the preacher, the sidewalk counselor, or the Christian apologist.

Had the Snyder case been decided the other way, responsible Christian ministries would soon be facing multi-million dollar lawsuits, brought as a tactic of intimidation by those who reject our message. Lest this strike you as mere “sound and fury,” consider the current anti-Evangelical fervor breaking out everywhere in the elite media: the former Time journalist William Dowell in an L.A. Times op-ed openly compared evangelical Christians to Al Qaeda, PBS’s Bill Moyers has declared us to be a threat to planet earth, has brazenly written about “psycho Christians,” MSNBC political commentator Chris Matthews has likened conservative Christians to the Taliban, and Harper’s magazine has accused the National Religious Broadcasters of being purveyors of “hate.”

The ruling in Snyder is not the end, but only the beginning of this issue. The sole dissenting Justice in that case was, surprisingly, the usually conservative Samuel Alito who was ready to suppress religiously controversial expression. Even more telling was the concurring opinion of Justice Breyer, the liberal leader on the Court, who rang a clear warning bell which we ignore at our peril. Justice Breyer noted that this Supreme Court ruling “does not examine in depth the effect of

television broadcasting. Nor does it say anything about Internet postings.”

Translation: if those of you who communicate over a broadcast medium or over the Internet someday run afoul of future, politically correct “hate speech” regulations merely because of the viewpoint you espouse, listen carefully. That bell may be tolling for you.

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