

When Did a Message of Love Become a Message of Hate?

There is a cost to speaking the truth. This realization came nearly 13 years ago when I was asked to speak at the annual conference for the American Baptists, unaware that they were about to divide over ordaining those who embrace the homosexual lifestyle.

Within minutes of beginning my message, people began to leave the large auditorium. Although it was clear that I had struck a nerve, the clearest message came when a woman approached the platform and attempted to disrupt the service. I told her I would be happy to talk with her after the service.

Afterwards, a large line of people waited to talk to me. I will never forget the very angry 12-year old girl. My heart sank when she said, "I hate everything you had to say. It was mean and hateful!" Though shocked by her comment, I was moved with compassion for such a young life filled with passion for the wrong things. Others asked if I ever received death threats.

As I boarded the plane, I was perplexed and confused. I prayed, "Lord, what's wrong. I'm simply speaking Your word and genuinely loving these people."

The words of Titus Brandsma (martyred at Dachau under Hitler) began to ring true, "Those who want to win the world for Christ must have the courage to come into conflict with it."

I buckled my seat, anxious to head for the familiar comfort of home ... but I knew that my life had made a turn. This gospel of love had, ironically, become a message of hate to those who oppose it: "Yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he is offering a service to God" (John 16:2b).

Speaking the truth was going to cost me (and it will cost you). I knew that my kids would someday be old enough to ask why the hate mail, mean remarks, indignant looks ... while most feedback is very encouraging, those who are upset will often stop at nothing to get their point across.

Do I enjoy this? That goes without answer. Although many applaud boldness, if the truth be told, life would be much easier if I took a secular job and avoided controversy. But I cannot. God radically changed my life by the power of His Spirit through His truth: “[It’s like] a burning in my bones! I’m worn out trying to hold it in. I can’t do it any longer!” (Jer. 20:9m MSG).

One of my great concerns is for the pulpits of America: many are exchanging truth for tolerance, boldness for balance and conviction for cowardice. We don’t want to offend lest we lose our audience. But truth is controversial—it convicts and challenges. We are not to seek the applause of men but the applause of God. The pulpit inevitably sets the tone of the religious climate of the nation. The lukewarm, sex-saturated culture simply reflects the lack of conviction in the pulpit as well as the pew. Granted, there are many wonderful pastors and churches—I appreciate their ministry, but, as a whole, the church has drifted off course.

The only difference between believers and unbelievers is that believers are simply forgiven—they have embraced God’s gracious gift of forgiveness, wholeness and restoration through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Because of the cross, sin has been conquered and atoned for (see Rom. 6). “If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9).

My goal is to simply share God’s gracious gift. If being labeled narrow-minded, legalistic, judgmental, arrogant and intolerant is the cost of speaking the truth in love, so be

it. In 2 Timothy 4:1-2, Paul instructs Timothy, "I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word, be ready in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with all patience and teaching."

Paul is saying to preach the difficult truths as well as the joyful ones; preach the cross and the new life; preach hell and preach heaven; preach damnation and preach salvation; preach sin and preach grace; preach wrath and preach love; preach judgment and preach mercy; preach obedience and preach forgiveness; preach that God "is love," but don't forget that God is just. It is the love of God that compels us to share all of His truth.

Paul continues, "For the time will come when people will not endure sound doctrine, but they will gather to themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires, having itching ears, and they will turn their ears away from the truth and turn to myths" (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

This should sound an alarm in the heart of every preacher, pastor and teacher to seriously reevaluate their ministry—are we encouraging sin by not warning? If so, we're heading down a dangerous path.

A.W. Tozer reminds us that we'll stand to be judged someday: "That makes me both love Him and fear Him! I love Him because He is my Savior, and I fear Him because He is my Judge." We must speak the truth in love despite the cost.