

# Discerning Between Cultural Cowardice and Wisdom in the Pulpit

With the advent of the so-called “culture wars” after legalized abortion in 1973 the influence of the church has rapidly diminished, with biblical values openly attacked by elites and pop culture.

As a result, many pastors refuse to address hot button issues related to biblical marriage, sanctity of life, human sexuality, identity and much more. This result is a truncated gospel—disconnected from unpopular moral issues—except for the “in vogue” concerns like human trafficking, racism and economic equality positions that fit under the rubric “social justice” (a term socialists and Marxists have hijacked for their own political ends).

I lose respect for pastors and leaders who think they are being “prophetic” when they are vocal about “social justice issues” but are totally silent when it comes to significant moral issues that are unpopular with the public. That being said, as a pastor and leader in a secular progressive region like New York City, I have both observed and experienced firsthand the price one has to pay when taking an unpopular position related to certain topics.

For one, it is much easier for a pastor in a rural conservative area of the Bible Belt (of the USA) to advocate for biblical positions related to policy, since many of their political and community leaders espouse similar ethical positions. Conversely, those in more liberal areas already have the deck stacked against them—not only in policy, but in public schools, media and popular opinion—hence, speaking out in public takes more courage, conviction, wisdom and

tactfulness.

Furthermore, it is even more difficult for pastors renting public schools, theaters or other venues in secular enclaves, since they can easily be evicted if enough pressure is exerted upon their landlord whose only bottom line is money and along with that, keeping a good reputation with the powers that be and their community. All of the above means that before passing judgement upon churches and pastors, we need to discern the cultural context of each pastor and leader. Those of us who own our own buildings in progressive cities have a far less price to pay than congregations who can be evicted without a moment's notice.

Does this mean that there is an excuse for silence related to key moral and ethical issues related to life, marriage and identity? Of course not—no doubt there are many wimpy cultural cowards in the pulpit who fear men more than God. However, there are also conservative pastors and leaders who label people (putting them into the unscriptural constructs framed by media and liberal sociologists) and constantly rant against those they disagree with—but they greatly limit their influence, marginalize their audience and often hinder sincere seekers from attending their church and hearing the gospel.

That being said, those leading in secular, progressive cities have to walk in wisdom and be even more spiritually attuned to God regarding how to present the gospel, assimilate new members and apply biblical principles without compromise. If they are totally silent related to the huge cultural issues of the day and lack the courage to uphold ethical standards in their church, their compromise will eventuate in the loss of effectiveness— similar to the church of Ephesus whose lampstand was removed by Jesus (Rev. 2:5). Similarly, those who rant without a filter against those with opposing ideological views will also lose their effectiveness, since they will only preach to the choir and rarely reach seekers.

So what is the answer? Every church has to skillfully exegete their community, present and apply Scripture faithfully and learn how to assimilate new members who comport to the Christian ethos without alienating the seekers who merely attend church services to discover who Jesus is. At times, this may not seem tenable, and seekers may eventually decide against following Jesus, but it should not be because of careless sermonic presentations or unloving actions. If Jesus started off by castigating the woman at the well for her immoral lifestyle instead of lovingly drawing her to Himself without compromise (see John 4) she would have never become the catalyst that brought a whole city to the Messiah.

There is no easy path towards proper biblical or community exegesis. It takes much prayer, discernment, boldness, faith, courage and the love of God that humanizes, instead of categorizes, people.

May the body of Christ become the visible embodiment of the way, the truth and the life of Christ to their communities and cities.