

Remarks on Recent Social Issues
Delivered by Worship Pastor John Gardner
Sunday, September 3, 2017

In 2 Timothy 3, Paul writes:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people...

Skipping down to verse 12:

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

The world around us is in turmoil. There are times it can seem that every kind of evil we can imagine is closing in around us. If it weren't for the promise of God's ultimate victory over evil and an eternity spent with Christ, it would be overwhelming. But in the time until Jesus returns, what a blessing it is to be in a church where we are equipped—every week, not just when we have a sermon series on a biblical worldview—to respond to the questions and challenges we face from day to day.

But sometimes there are specific questions and challenges to which pastors and churches are called to respond, not just in private counsel, but in public declaration. When certain things on the national or international scene grip the attention of the world, and call into question the goodness of the Lord, the sufficiency of His Word, or the witness of His Church, those of us who are called as shepherds of Christ's flock have a duty to provide clarity and direction to those we lead.

While this doesn't mean we must—or even ought to—speak to every current event that hits the news cycle, there are two recent issues which Pastor Phil has asked me to address, before leading us in a time of corporate prayer asking for wisdom and discernment as together we seek to walk in obedience to our Lord in a world which grows increasingly antagonistic toward those who do so.

In speaking to these issues, I want to balance two passages from Paul's letters which I believe ought to shape our response to any major social issue. In his second letter to the Corinthian church, Paul writes:

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

When we enter into the public arena to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), we must remember that our battle is not against flesh and blood; it is spiritual warfare.

The weapons we wield in that fight—prayer, the Word of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit—these weapons have “divine power” to destroy the strongholds of wrong thinking and deception. That gives us confidence and boldness as we answer objections to God’s truth! But at the same time, we must remember Paul’s counsel to his young protégé, Timothy:

Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Tim. 2:23-26)

Some controversies aren’t worth answering. But when we do answer, we must always, **always** be *kind* to everyone... *patiently* enduring evil... correcting our opponents with *gentleness*. Because our goal is never to win an argument; it is to win souls, and this can **only** happen when *God* grants repentance and knowledge. Our battle is not against flesh and blood. Those who oppose God’s truth are not our enemy; they are our enemy’s captives, and our greatest burden is to see them set free by Truth, shared in love. (John 8:32; Eph. 4:15)

With that in mind, I want to focus our attention for a moment on recent ethnic tension that spilled over into violence a few weeks ago in Charlottesville, Virginia, and led to protests and counter-protests in many other cities, including right here in Knoxville, just last weekend.

Many people, from all walks of life, and including many in this congregation, have been asking very difficult—but very valid—questions about how to respond to all the vitriol that seems to be coming from all directions. Where are they going to get their answers? Certainly not from the media!

To believe a lot of what we see on TV, the American South is full of white, conservative bigots who sit in church pews on Sundays, and spend the rest of the week lamenting the fact that they lost the Civil War. Well, we have a word around here for that portrayal: stupid. It’s a politically-motivated, largely fabricated, false narrative.

However, because there really *are* white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and Ku Klux Klan members whose influence unfortunately far exceeds their relatively insignificant numbers, I want to speak here with crystal clarity:

Racism, in *any* form, and *especially* as it was manifested in legalized slavery in our nation’s past, is a despicable, *evil*, anti-gospel, and it has *no* place in the church, or in a nation which calls itself “the land of the free.”

When our denomination drafted a resolution this past June strongly condemning racism generally, and the “Alt-Right” specifically, many people asked why that was even necessary. Well, it’s because of anticipating things like what happened in Charlottesville. Because, whether we like it or not, there are those who are going to lump us—Bible-believing Christians and *especially* Southern Baptists—in with those who seek to perpetuate division and hatred of those who look different than us.

And here’s why, if I can be *really* real with you for just a minute. Right now, in this room, we find ourselves in a community that is 98% white, in a congregation that is *more* than 98% white, in a church

founded in the 19th century as part of a denomination which originally came into existence because the Baptist Missionary Society of America refused to appoint slaveholders as missionaries.

Obviously, our denomination has come a *loooong* way since that time, but because of our heritage, it's understandable how this distinction can be blurry for those on the outside looking in, particularly when our Convention places such a high value on the autonomy of the local church, and not every Southern Baptist church is going to condemn racism as strongly as we do here at FBC Powell.

And it's important for us to realize that, in our context here in Powell, Tennessee, we don't exactly have the greatest perspective on the real-life challenges faced by our neighbors of differing ethnicities. But while we may not have a lot of credibility in the eyes of the world, we have the Truth, and the responsibility to proclaim it, and to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

What that looks like in practice is not something we have time to get into this morning, but a *really* good starting point is [this article](#) by D.A. Horton, an urban church planter with the North American Mission Board, which is also posted on the [FBC Powell Facebook page](#). This is an article we discussed at a recent staff meeting, and Horton's thoughts on what he calls "Ethnic Conciliation" are well worth reading as we think and pray about how we can play a real role in sharing the love of Christ with *all* of our neighbors, and joining in unity with believers from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue (Rev. 14:9). We've also posted a few other resources we recommend in helping us think through things like [our response to Confederate monuments](#).

A second issue, which is somewhat related—though it may not appear to be on the surface—is something known as the "Nashville Statement" which became a trending topic in the national media earlier this week. Because many of you may not yet be aware of this document, let me give you a brief overview.

The [Nashville Statement](#) is a relatively short document published this week by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which is an organization founded to equip the church on the meaning of biblical sexuality, based out of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville.

The statement is called the *Nashville* Statement because Nashville is the city where the council met to draw up the statement. Christianity has a tradition dating back the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD of naming doctrinal statements, such as the Nicene Creed, after the city in which they were written. The secular world does the same thing, as we see in documents such as last year's Paris Climate Accord. So, despite [Nashville Mayor Megan Barry's strong objection](#) to the name, the Nashville Statement makes no more claim to speak for the people of Nashville than the Paris Accord claims to represent Parisians.

The statement's preamble asserts that we are seeing in our generation such a rapid departure from clear biblical teaching on human sexuality that it represents a crisis for the Church. In their words:

"This secular spirit of our age presents a great challenge to the Christian church. Will the church of the Lord Jesus Christ lose her biblical conviction, clarity, and courage, and blend into the spirit of the age? Or will she hold fast to the word of life, draw courage from Jesus, and unashamedly proclaim his way as the way of life? Will she maintain her clear, counter-cultural witness to a world that seems bent on ruin? We are persuaded that faithfulness in our generation means declaring once again the true story of the world and of our place in it."

I am inclined to agree with the assessment that American culture and the American church are at a point of crisis on the issue of human sexuality, which is why I, along with many of our staff and elders, have personally added my name to the list of those who have signed agreement with this statement. That list also includes the names of nearly all of the Bible teachers I admire most: Al Mohler, Russell Moore, John Piper, John MacArthur, Alistair Begg, Mark Dever... and pretty much every major leader in the Southern Baptist Convention and other conservative evangelical denominations.

The statement is organized into 14 Articles, each of which consists of an affirmation of a Biblical truth and a denial of counter-claims made both by the secular culture *and* by a growing number of churches. For instance, here is Article 9:

“WE AFFIRM that sin distorts sexual desires by directing them away from the marriage covenant and toward sexual immorality—a distortion that includes both heterosexual and homosexual immorality.

WE DENY that an enduring pattern of desire for sexual immorality justifies sexually immoral behavior.”

The remaining 13 articles focus on various related topics ranging from masculine & feminine gender roles to same-sex attraction to transgenderism. The language is concise but strongly worded, leaving no room for ambiguity. There are copies available both on the FBC Powell website and out in the foyer, should you want to take a look at it, but I can tell you that every word of the statement is 100% biblical, including the wording which states in no uncertain terms that approving of sexual immorality is *not* an area in which Christians are free to “agree to disagree.”

You can see why there has been so much outrage... nothing is more counter-cultural today than telling someone “no.”

That said, there has also been a lot of criticism of this statement coming from those who affirm every word of it, including some of the initial signatories who serve on the council which produced it. It’s criticism which I personally share, and which I believe is worth sharing with you. In an admirable effort to be concise, I believe that there are some glaring omissions in the Nashville Statement.

Because, despite the fact that every word is true, and represents what virtually every Christian has believed for almost 2000 years regarding homosexuality and gender identity, the statement loses some credibility by failing to acknowledge areas in which the Church has often been guilty of sin, most notably in the all-too-frequent failure of Christians to treat those experiencing same sex attraction with grace, love, and kindness. One likely cause of the rapid increase in recent decades of people identifying as either homosexual or transgender is the fact that it is difficult for many people to separate an orthodox stance on sexual holiness from the personal *hatred* they have experienced from Christians on account of their sexuality.

Having spent my entire adult life in the arts community, I know and love a *lot* of people who identify as LGBT, and I can tell you that *every single one of them* gives testimony of personally being on the receiving end of verbal, and often physical, abuse at the hands of Christians. A good friend from college still has scars on his body from the beating he received at the hands of his own father, who is chairman of the deacons at a Southern Baptist church. His story is far from unique, and the Nashville Statement would have been far more persuasive had it included an affirmation that Christians are called by God to *love* and treat kindly those who are trapped in sin, and a denial that abuse of those living in sexual immorality is ever excused by Scripture.

Clearly, this was not enough to keep me or many others with similar reservations from signing the Nashville Statement, but I do think it's important that we as a church grasp that truth as we seek to win our LGBT neighbors to Christ.

And this is where these two issues intersect. As we wrestle with how to approach *any* social issue, whether it be related to ethnic diversity, sexual orientation, or anything else, we must find the balance between bold proclamation of the truth, and humble admission of our own shortcomings. We must acknowledge that much of the ethnic tension in our country is the fruit of the willingness of many American Christians to perpetuate the institution of slavery, and to allow racial segregation to continue for another *century* past the Civil War. And we must be willing to repent of moments when we have failed to be gracious and kind toward those trapped in sexual and gender confusion.

However, there's also an important distinction to be made here on how these two issues are *not at all* the same. Because of the surface similarities—some Christians owned and abused slaves, some Christians hate and abuse gay people; some churches refused to marry interracial couples, some churches refuse to marry homosexual couples, etc.—a growing majority of our fellow citizens, including a great number of people within the Church, view the “Gay Rights” movement as being parallel to the Civil Rights movement.

Church: These are NOT the same thing.

Christians who supported and perpetuated slavery, and who refused to allow interracial marriages were *clearly* in sinful violation of Scripture. And despite the widespread cultural blindness in their day to that particular sin, there were always those, *including* many in the South, who unwaveringly opposed slavery. However, Christians who condemn sexual immorality and refuse to perform so-called gay marriages are *upholding* the clear teaching of Scripture. So while we can and *should* acknowledge past failings in the treatment of both ethnic minorities and LGBT persons by some segments of the Church, we must *never* be persuaded to compromise on the Word of God, the foundation of our faith.

Pray with me, that the Lord would guide us, both individually and as the Body of Christ gathered at First Baptist Powell, as we seek wisdom and discernment in our pursuit of his will for our role in promoting justice in our society, and for courage to speak with boldness, yet with gentleness as we lovingly speak the Truth into a hostile culture.

Lord God, you are high above us and holy, reigning from heaven, all-knowing, all-powerful, judging the nations in perfect righteousness. Yet you are also a loving Father who grants us adoption as sons and daughters, seating us with Christ in the heavenly places, with the freedom to approach your throne of grace with boldness. And so, Heavenly Father, we come to you this morning in need of the wisdom of a righteous Judge, and the guidance of a kind Father.

Lord, we thank you for your many gifts to us which help us to discern your will for our lives. For your Word given to us in the Bible, for the Holy Spirit which guides us into all truth, and for the gift of elders and teachers here at FBC Powell who are committed to seeking your will and upholding your Word as they submit to the leading of your Spirit.

Your Word says that we should count it joy when we meet with trials of various kinds, because the testing of our faith produces steadfastness (James 1:2-4). Father, we confess that we find it difficult to view trials as a source of our own sanctification, and that steadfastness often does not describe our

response to the challenges we face. But in the very next verse, your Word tells us that when we lack wisdom we should ask you in faith, and you will give it, generously (James 1:5). So Lord, we ask you this morning for your wisdom. Show us your will. Teach us how we ought to respond to the challenges we face daily in our post-Christian culture.

God, forgive us for the times we have let you down by failing to reflect your love to our neighbors. Forgive us for the times we have failed to speak your truth with boldness out of a fear of worldly rejection, and for times we have spoken truth without compassion. Help us to walk in wisdom toward outsiders, with speech that is always gracious, seasoned with salt, so that we may know how we ought to answer each person (Col. 4:5-6).

Lord, we ask you to heal our nation. Your Word tells us to watch out for those who cause division and create obstacles contrary to sound doctrine (Rom. 16:17). Our enemy is a great deceiver whose primary tactic has always been to sow division. We see that powerfully in our culture today where we are divided along so many fault lines: politically, ethnically, doctrinally. We pray that you would mobilize your Church—both the Church globally and this church, FBC Powell—to be ambassadors of Christ, agents of reconciliation, peace makers.

Father, just as we see in the scars of our past the fruit of widespread blind spots which caused many otherwise faithful Christians to overlook areas of particularly egregious sin, we ask you to open our eyes to the things we don't see today. Do not allow us to assume that we are immune from blind spots for which our descendants might one day say, "how did they miss that?" Help us to learn from history, not by glorifying the sins of our ancestors, but by remembering both the good and the ill, and seeing how you were at work through it all.

Specifically, Lord, we ask that you give us the grace to fight back against the primary means by which violence continues to be perpetuated against ethnic minorities in our country: the abomination of abortion. Remind us that one of the most important lessons we can learn from the evils of slavery is that slavery has not been eradicated from our nation. Every year, right here in Knox County alone, hundreds of children are bought and sold as sexual slaves in our own back yard. O Father, break our hearts for what breaks yours!

God, strengthen your Church. Draw us closer to yourself by leading us to daily put on the Armor of Christ, with a personal quiet time spent in prayer and in the study of the Scriptures, so that we can both defend ourselves from the schemes of the devil and heroically wield the sword of the Spirit, that we may boldly proclaim the mystery of the Gospel (Eph. 6:10-20). As we are sent out as sheep amongst wolves, help us to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Mt. 10:16).

Here at FBC Powell, grant us unity that will bear witness to the lost world around us of the love that you have for us, and which we have for one another. May we strengthen and encourage one another, exercising patience and grace toward others as we all work through the hard questions we face, knowing that even shared convictions can lead to different strategies for lovingly sharing the truth.

Above all, grow your kingdom in us and through us. May your Word always be treasured here, and may you always receive glory in all that we say and do. It's in the precious name of Jesus Christ that we pray.

Amen.