

Extremism: A Hallmark of Christianity

By Randall A. Terry

“Extremist!”

This label is nearly as bad as the Scarlet Letter in many American Christian minds. Hostile unbelievers cast this insult like the first “without sin” stone on anyone who dares to take an uncompromising stand on issues.

The fear of being condemned as an “extremist” has been so effective that many tepid Christian leaders in pastorates, seminaries and ministry leadership positions have joined Christianity’s enemies and launched their own quiet, thoughtful, reasoned attack on “extremism.”

The practical result of this is that battalions of young “Davids” sit fidgeting on the sidelines, while the King Sauls of the Church explain to the Davids why it is not God’s will to slay the Goliaths.

However, the charge of extremism - rather than an accusation to be ashamed of - is actually an accolade to relish and revel in; because without doubt Christianity is the ultimate extremist religion. No other religion, no other faith, no other deity even comes close. I submit that the war on extremism from inside or outside Christianity is ultimately a war on Christianity itself.

Consider the extremes of Christ’s attributes and offices.

He is the Lamb of God; he is the lion of the tribe of Judah. He is the Prince of Peace; He is the Man of War. A bruised reed He will not break; He shatters the nations with a rod of iron. Jesus weeps; He has eyes of fire. He does not lift up His voice; out of His mouth goes a two edged sword. Christ is the Savior; Christ is the Judge.

He made Himself a servant; He is the Master and Lord of all. His kingdom is not of this world; He is King of Kings and all kings will bow at His feet. He wore a crown of thorns; He offers a crown of life.

He is fully God; and He is fully man. Those extremes nearly tore the Church apart.

Reflect on God the Father. God is love; God is a consuming fire. God is light; God dwells in the thick darkness. Jacob He loves; Esau He hates.

Let us ponder how extreme the mandates and the fruit of Christianity are in our lives and relationships. The Bible demands that we love our enemies; the Psalmist boasts of his perfect hatred for God's enemies. Christ promised to leave his peace with us; yet he declared he did not come to bring peace, but a sword. Christ brings unity to Gentile and Jew; he divides a mother-in-law from her daughter-in-law. He commands us to rejoice evermore; he adjures us to let our joy be turned to sorrow and our laughter to weeping.

God's dealings with men and nations are equally extreme.

He will save the city for the sake of 10 righteous men; he destroys tens of thousands for the sin of one man. One errant son loses Paradise by one act; one obedient son redeems the world by one act. God forgives the woman taken in adultery; he kills the man for steadying the Arc of the Covenant with his hand. He sends blistering drought in Elijah's day; he drowns the world in Noah's. He brought the first son of David and Bathsheba to the grave; he brought their next son to the throne. The angels rejoice when sinners are converted; converted sinners will judge the angels.

Biblical heroes are a study in extremes.

David is the sweet Psalmist of Israel wedding poetry; David is the fierce warrior who presents Goliath's head to the king. Elijah stands and conquers 400 prophets of Baal; he flees in terror at the word of one woman. Abraham begs God for a son; then willingly offers him as a sacrifice until God intervenes. Peter declares he will die for Jesus; within hours he denies he even knows him. Timid Gideon begs God for a sign; brave Gideon slays two kings on a stone. Saul of Tarsus kills Christians; he is finally killed for being one.

The extremes of Christianity may startle us; they may make some comfortable; but they are not contradictions. The tightrope walker that balances his acts with a long pole holds but one pole. It is the extremes of that pole that keep them in balance. Should he favor one side of the pole and lop off the other, he could not maintain his balance—he would fall.

This is the plight of modern divines. Having accepted the false notion of Christianity's enemies that certain aspects of our God and faith are extreme (and

therefore extremely embarrassing), they have lopped off the extremities that preserve them on precarious heights—and they have fallen; fallen into the safety net of fallen man’s opinions. But this safety net is actually a snare.

Having turned from the Harsh Master who reaps what he did not sow, they have enslaved themselves to harsher masters who sow the wind and reap the whirlwind.

Our modern, sophisticated, would-be “heroes of the faith” slay no tyrants, conquer no kingdoms, risk no martyrdom. Instead, they get photos with tyrants, protect the status quo of the kingdom, and frequently martyr the reputations of their extremist brethren.

By trying to blend the heat of God’s mercy and the coldness of his judgment, the “balanced” have exchanged their glory for the similitude of a lukewarm, politically correct ox, fit only to be spewed out of Christianity’s mouth. By the forced blending of God’s unapproachable light and the thick darkness in which he dwells, the moderates of Christianity have created the drab-grey-God who neither inspires wonder nor dread.

They have balance; the balance of a fixed, lifeless statue.

One achieves healthy balance by remembering both the goodness and severity of God; not by blending them into divine indifference. One maintains balance by accepting the extremes of black-and-white; not by creating a bland, grey divinity.

What Christianity’s detractors both inside and outside the church must accept is that Christianity *is* extreme – extreme to the wildest degree. Perhaps nothing reveals this extremism more than the final state of man. The righteous live in night-less light, the wicked are cast into outer darkness. The redeemed dwell in perpetual joy; the rebels weep and gnash their teeth forever. Those who die in friendship with Christ have eternal life; those who die rejecting His grace have eternal damnation. It does not get any more extreme than this.

Those who reject extremes must inevitably reject Christ and Christianity.

By rejecting the extremes of male and female, our seminaries have created religious eunuchs and barren heralds; neuters that cannot reproduce their kind. By castigating Christianity’s extremities, have castrated its vitality.

Please show to us the “balanced” moderate who has done anything great in history. They have won no great battles, they have no tragic defeats. They have no boast, they have no denials. They offer no heads of giants; their songs are trite and predictable.

When moderates in the Church call for balance, they really want to lop off the embarrassing extremes of Christ, His Church, and His history. But by doing so, they make Christianity an embarrassment. It is no longer, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also...” but rather, “These men who want a place at the table have come to discuss compromises.”

Past enemies of the Gospel feared extremist Christians: “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marveled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus.” Our modern leaders are learned, but not bold. Now our enemies marvel that Christian leaders won’t fight for Christianity; they take note that they have been with Balaam.

These new champions - pitiful eunuchs - inspire neither dread nor ecstasy, neither joy nor weeping. They inspire *nothing*, because only extremes inspire people. Mediocrity, gray, blandness... inspires no one. They cannot advance and conquer for Christianity, for they cannot even defend her. They are safe, and they are irrelevant or worse yet; they are relevant only as religious hostages to be paraded before enemies like trophies from a conquered kingdom. By the waters of Babylon they have sung skillfully. Unlike the three Hebrew children, they bow deeply.

Conquered brothers, captured sisters, be loosed of the chains of your safe, grey, lukewarm, mediocrity. Cease giving succor to the enemy. Your war on extremism is a war on Christianity itself, and you cannot win. Come, battle demons with us. Relish the exhilaration of triumphs; curse the hapless defeats. You can only achieve great victories by risking great disasters.

Stop trying to give God a facelift; he doesn’t need your plastic surgery. Stop trying to amputate the extremes of Christianity you find so embarrassing.

To the unbelieving rebels; behold the goodness and severity of God. If you repent and believe the gospel, you will receive forgiveness and mercy from the God who made you, and sent His Son to die for you. But if you continue to

rebel, and die outside of God's friendship, you will be judged. If you spurn His mercy, you will drink the terrifying cup of His wrath forever. And your accusations of Christianity's extremes will taunt you for all eternity.

Finally, to young and old believers alike - who yearn for militancy in the Church Militant - take this advice: flee the guidance of these barren doctors of divinity. Go to them for the Sacraments – yes – but do not follow their lead into the ghetto of mediocrity. *They will deliver you from extremes, but they will rob you of your strengths to deliver.* They will inoculate you from the pain and anguish of childbirth, because they will sterilize you. Better to be in anguished labor for Christ than to be a quiet gelding for Jesus.

Rejoice in the boundaries of extremism. Rejoice in the God of extremes. Find your balance in the extremes of Christianity. Boldly declare: "I am an extremist!" and then live out that extremism to the extreme.