

Extremists Are Too Hot for Modern Churches to Handle (Part 1)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*

March 8, 2006

This column is the first segment of a three-part series regarding this crisis among Evangelicals.

To many church leaders, talk of resisting state authority is taboo. Those who wish to do so are suspected of being generally rebellious and thus become the subject of special ecclesiastical scrutiny. They fear reprisals that could come from being associated with any who challenge political authority and thus discourage (or even outright forbid) them from discussing such issues in the church. Despite possessing theological orthodoxy and Evangelical credentials, many outspoken pro-life libertarians, true conservatives, and constitutionalists are finding themselves to be unwelcome in Evangelical churches. Apparently, church leaders do not want anyone threatening their social peace and prosperity, menacing their internal authority structure, scaring away potential members, or making them think about applying the Gospel to every area of life—including public policy and politics. Proverbs 29:25 says, “The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe.” Nowadays, pastors and other church leaders are often more afraid of men than God when it comes to taking a stand for the truth or even considering challenges to their practical theology—especially to their theology of public policy.

This common mind-set among contemporary Evangelicals has led some churches to become emissaries and apologists for the state. Indeed, many people have recounted to me tragic tales about church leaders who have evidently gone into the indirect service of the state, under dubious pretext, bringing reproach upon Christ in the process. Maybe I end up getting more calls than other people do regarding this topic since I write and speak about public policy issues, but I have to believe that other people are hearing these tales too. One of the key issues seems to be that outspoken right-wingers, who are often critical of political authority, draw attention from church leaders who do not want their authority questioned and who have clearly bonded with the state.

For example, in desperation, a principled and politically conservative friend recently called me, hoping that I could help him. His pastor had turned him over to the state as a potential pedophile—even though there was no evidence of such wrongdoing. Why did this come about? During pastoral counseling, my friend had been repentant about his involvement with internet porn, a sin which had been exacerbated by his wife’s continued sinful repulses over many years.

As a result, his daughter became the subject of pastoral interrogation too. She reported that one time she had hopped up on her daddy’s bed (while he was under the covers) and accidentally touched his crotch. Nothing more came of the incident. But the pastor thought the incident was sufficient reason to turn over one of his sheep to the state. I could hardly believe what I was hearing!

So I called the pastor in support of my friend and he resolutely confirmed the story I had heard. Under the guise of obeying Romans 13:1, the pastor told me that he was obliged to obey the “just” law of Oklahoma which required him to report suspicious activities (like pedophilia) to state authorities when they are mentioned during *confidential* counseling sessions. So he did so, even though he had no firm evidence that such abuse had occurred. The pastor also told me that he had sought the counsel of other “godly” Reformed pastors and they all agreed that he must turn over my friend to the state.

Moreover, the church moved my friend’s wife and daughter to a “safe house” to *protect* them from my friend, and the pastor sternly warned my friend to not go anywhere near his daughter’s school. His wife was happy for any excuse to leave her husband and so readily complied with the pastoral directive. Why wasn’t the wife reprimanded and the man shown mercy and encouraged that he is forgiven for the internet porn instead of being punished? Why did my friend’s daughter need to be protected from her dad? Is it now commonplace that pastors have become such lackeys of the state? Warning: don’t go to counseling with your pastor lest you end up being harassed by the state.

Similar examples of this tragedy exist. A colleague recently wrote to tell me the story about his young grandson and family. They had been kicked out of an Independent Baptist Church in Orangeburg, South Carolina because during Sunday school the boy would not pledge allegiance to the United States flag (located in the church building). He also related to me the story of Pat Baughman in Tennessee, who

was publicly chided by his church on account of newspaper reports about his activities with the “extremist group” the League of the South. Other right wing groups are frowned upon by pastors too: Christian Exodus is the latest abhorred child, joining despised groups like Operation Rescue, Columbia Christians for Life, and Exodus Mandate—just to name a few. In fact, speaking of Exodus Mandate, any right winger will find no faster way to church expulsion than to harshly criticize the government school in a public forum (especially if one or more of his church’s elders or their wives are school teachers).

Just do a search on the internet about true conservatives being harassed by church leaders. Ditto for Christian libertarians (as reports have surfaced on the email list for www.libertarianchristians.org) I have also heard that a freedom-loving man was recently excommunicated from a Baptist church in South Carolina for speeding and then refusing to repent of that “sin”. The action of these church leaders represents the divine right doctrine on steroids. Yet this sort of action is becoming more commonplace in contemporary Evangelical churches. What a sad state of affairs!

Extremists Are Too Hot for Modern Churches to Handle (Part 2)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*

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This column is the second segment of a three-part series regarding this crisis among Evangelicals.

To put it bluntly, Christian churches are full of pragmatists and self-righteous pawns of the state. And the present infatuation Evangelicals have with the state touches us all. For instance, a couple of years ago, a scholar was kept off the local board of Bethany Christian Services (an adoption agency)—a position for which he was well-qualified—on account of the ruckus raised by a neocon Evangelical board member who hated the scholar’s free market economic views. (Bethany receives federal and state welfare money and this brother felt that the man would criticize and threaten that practice).

Why does it seem that men who hold principled positions with respect to public policy theology and politics often become targets of personal abhorrence by other Christians? Why is it that Christian leaders are so bent on accepting static, common wisdom pertaining to capricious public policy without real examination of the origins of those static beliefs (which could be the fear of man or pride) along with the means for possible resolution? Tell me, who is more likely to get kicked out of an Evangelical church today: G. W. Bush and Dick Cheney for their apathetic stand on life issues and their promulgation of the war in Iraq, or the impeccably Christian promoters of the American War for Independence (e.g., Patrick Henry, and Samuel Adams), the War for Southern Independence (e.g., R.L. Dabney, Stonewall Jackson, and Robert E. Lee), and modern day promoters of the same principles (e.g., League of the South, Constitution Party, and many pro-life Libertarian Party members)?

Judging from correspondence I recently perused, some church leaders will allow outspoken, principled men to join them but only under the strict condition that they never speak to anyone about their public policy views (even if they are asked). That sounds to me like the problem of church leaders binding the conscience of their members and lording it over them (1 Peter 5:3). Church leaders are overstepping their bounds. What are they afraid of? They give pious excuses (red herrings) about not wanting to be distracted from their main focus but it is not clear that they have other pragmatic or prideful motivations that are not always visible on the surface.

For instance, in another recent tragedy, an outspoken man and his family were simultaneously cast out of two Evangelical churches. “You are not welcome here any longer.” That decree sums up the sentiment of a pair of South Carolina churches affiliated with a major Christian university. The decree was issued to a family who had faithfully attended, given financially, and had been generous and hospitable on many occasions. The husband-father is an activist writer and public speaker who often expresses views that startle some Christians. The family participated in Sunday school and took a keen interest in the church. They had visited the church’s missionaries, attended church-sponsored retreats, and some of them played on the church’s softball team. None of them gave the leadership any cause for concern during church services or caused any kind of disturbance or division, and the elders did not accuse any of them of

ongoing misbehavior in church or with other members. None of them had any practiced unrepentant sin in their lives that would lead them to be ejected.

So why were they ejected? The main reason was the man's weekly column, along with his recent books and prominent public remarks that favored a Jeffersonian interpretation of the Second Amendment. No character or unrepentant sin issue was raised. The family is composed of professing, orthodox Christians who were simply shunned because their church leaders disliked the man's "extreme" views. Like the pastor who worried about the incestuous tendencies of his church member noted earlier, without supporting evidence of mischief from his church experiences, the elders *worried* that the author *might* someday cause division, *worried* that he *might* rebel against the elders' authority in the future, and *worried* that the man's life *might* be out of balance. A few pastors I spoke to regarding the incident considered the actions of these elders to be harsh and unbiblical, but I wonder if most pastors would agree.

These "worries" were based on things the elders had read in the press or the man's columns and books, rather than anything done within the body of Christ. But why should such imagined worries warrant church discipline on a preemptive or proactive basis? Perhaps such anxieties surface when there is an underlying sinful discomfort from harboring a perceived extremist who might rock the boat. Please note that it is only with great sadness and reluctance that I criticize God's people—who are my brethren—in this manner, but I see no other alternative than to bring such egregious practices to light and to pray for our leaders' repentance. Elders and other church leaders should not be scourging extremist members simply because their views make them feel uncomfortable or because they disagree with them. Sad to say, by behaving this way, contemporary leaders follow along the lamentable practice of God's people recorded in Scripture of castigating those sent by God to rebuke and reprove them.

The Lord Jesus, the Apostle Paul, Galileo, Luther, Jefferson, Newton, Witherspoon, Bunyan, the Pilgrims, Roger Williams, Whitefield, women leading the temperance and suffrage movements, and countless others were considered to be "extremists". So what? People who were *not* considered extremists were countless elitists, Tories, papists, Ahab, Mary Queen of Scots, Caesar, Pharaoh, Sadducees, and a host of other folks that should not be very desirable company for Evangelical Christians. To cast someone out for being an extremist on points of practice (but who is otherwise theologically orthodox) is both foolish and unbiblical. And, sadly, the best explanation for ejecting outspoken, principled people from the church might rest in a feeling among church leaders that their ecclesiastical empire and their coddled anti-biblical view of authority and the state are being threatened.

Extremists Are Too Hot for Modern Churches to Handle (Part 3)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*

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This column is the third segment of a three-part series regarding this crisis among Evangelicals.

The modern Evangelical church fears being too "extreme". They are unlike the world in that they believe the Gospel and reject Darwinism and abortion-on-demand. But in other ways they rather enjoy being like the world. Like the leaders of Israel that Jesus rebuked, there is little that the world can hate about the church any more (John 7:7a) since the church is so much like the world in terms of culture and politics. Many Christian leaders remain recalcitrant or prickly and woefully ignorant, refusing to entertain new ideas that arise to challenge cultural trends in public policy. Instead of bringing up any demonstrable sin issues when castigating an extremist, pragmatic elders often bring up nebulous opinions about a few of their friends who deem the extremist-on-trial's views to be detestable, offensive, and "radical".

They blow off the fact that Jesus, Paul, Luther, and countless others have been "offensive" too. After all, they quickly (and inaccurately) point out that our Savior and those other men were mainly extreme in the sense of how they brought the Gospel to men—but not in other spheres of life. In the errant view of some church leaders, it is wrong to be extreme about anything except for preaching the Gospel—not even being an extreme pro-life advocate is excluded. Such wimpy leaders focus on a few complaints, ignoring favorable commentary from others regarding a targeted extremist's efforts. They simply take the easy way out, ridding themselves of a potential threat.

The plea of many leaders who eject extremists is that they want their ministry to be focused on what is important rather than secondary issues. However, this stance is a red herring. In all honesty, I find it hard to believe that situations where perceived extremists are called on the carpet merely arise out of higher level pastoral concerns to promote the Gospel, or in order to ensure that the main focus of ministry in the church does not differ from more lofty pastoral roles. One of the key roles of pastoral ministry is to ensure that the church of Jesus Christ is built up, edified, into a “holy nation” and sanctified. Therefore, the pastoral staff should be concerned that their flock is not dabbling in or imbibing sin by undertaking practices permitted by public policy. Theft, murder, and sloth, for instance, are serious matters not to be taken lightly by church leaders or church members. And if there are wily proactive public policies that feature such evils—even ones which have become accepted in Christian practice (e.g., welfare, social security, public education, business licensing, etc.)—then Christian leaders should view correcting the practice of, use of, or reliance on such policies by Christians as a high priority.

Furthermore, church leaders should welcome men who will watch out for (or stand guard against) such bad things entering the church. Heralds of truth should not be castigated by elders for their efforts. After all, what would those pastoral concerns be about such men that would lead to castigation? For instance, if a man is writing in his chosen field of expertise (e.g., public policy, economics, practical theology), why should he be singled out as a wrongdoer for having that emphasis in his life? Do elders also bust Christian accountants and physicians for spending “excessive” time in their fields? Would such elders also complain that those professionals are going to be remembered more for being accountants or doctors than Gospel preachers, thus making them “unbalanced”? There is nothing wrong with being remembered principally for working in one’s chosen field. Look at the people in Genesis and afterwards in the Bible which are identified in terms of their profession, musical abilities, etc. (Genesis 4:21; Acts 9:43; 16:14).

Making the Great Commission the paramount priority of the church is a defect of pietism that has afflicted Evangelicals for decades. The Gospel is to affect all areas of our lives, from entertainment to finances to public policy. Gospel permeation is multifaceted rather than narrowly-focused. Thus, isn’t the shallowness of the ministry at pietistic churches evinced by preeminence being granted to the Great Commission *per se*? I think it does. An active role in social affairs and engaging our culture (along with its public policies) are part of the Christian’s role in having “dominion” over the world and “doing business” until Jesus returns (Genesis 1:26-28; Luke 19:13). Yet those who choose to foment cultural engagement are shunned as radicals by the pietistic pragmatists that fill our pulpits!

I must admit that it pains me to be critical of Christ’s church, an institution that I love. As a result, I have sought much counsel while writing this article. One Baptist pastor I spoke to regarding the statist, authoritarian, and pragmatic behavior of modern Evangelical leaders declared that the contemporary Evangelical church is by and large a “whore church”. God still has His remnant of course. But it is sad that extremists Roger Williams, John Bunyan, Charlie Reese, Michael Hill, Vicesimus Knox, John Leland, Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, John Hancock, Stonewall Jackson, and Robert E. Lee, along with columnists like Vox Day, John Cobin, Steven Yates, and Ben Graydon, are not (or would not be) welcome in many fundamentalist or Evangelical churches. Won’t these churches face the frown of our Lord for being so narrow-focused, compromising, and anti-biblical? God save the church from pragmatism in matters of public policy! God save the church from the inane and crass revitalized divine right of kings perspective of the state and its policies!

In the meantime, extremists must duck and cover in many (or even most) Christian churches. Perhaps it is worthwhile to recall Jefferson’s apropos thinking at the close of the Declaration of Independence. “We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces [formally announces] our separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace, friends.” The sad reality is that Jefferson’s words seem to becoming more and more applicable to our spiritual relations. As Jesus said, “a man’s enemies will be those of his own household” (Matthew 10:36). I had always taken that verse to describe the estrangement that a new convert feels, or the reviling he receives, by the hand of unbelieving family members. Now I fear that its application carries over to the church family as well, both to false brethren and to pragmatic brethren who find Christian “extremists” simply too hot to handle.