

College days were great for sitting around and talking about remote philosophies and possibilities. I recall one session, talking about the persecution of Christians in various places and times. Someone said, "You know, we might even live to see persecution happen in America." No one contradicted him; anything was possible. But honestly, I couldn't picture how that might happen.

That was in the mid 1970s. A lot has changed.

It would be going way too far to say that persecution is upon us now. Compared to the torture and enslavement of believers in Sudan, the imprisonment of pastors in China, the martyrdom of thousands throughout history, American Christians are not yet experiencing persecution. But it's no longer inconceivable.

The situation has turned on new definitions of truth, tolerance, and bigotry. People of my generation and older can remember when truth was generally considered to be based in objective reality. It was something that we didn't always know, but that we could pursue. It was "out there" waiting to be found; and if found, it was shared, the same for all.

Today truth is often defined personally. It is for each person to create, and each person's truth is considered equally valid.

Readers at this point are likely to be of two kinds. One group is saying, "What is this nonsense? How can different truths both be right?" The other group, made up more of younger persons, is saying, "Well, of course, everybody knows that's how it is."

This is particularly the case with morality. A survey by George Barna in late 2001 found that only 22% of adults believe there is such a thing as absolute moral truth, which does not change according to circumstances. That percentage had been almost 40% just two years earlier. Ravi Zacharias said it well: "The undertakers of our time have not so much buried God as they have buried Truth."

As a result, there is a new take on "tolerance." Tolerance in Webster's 1913 dictionary meant, "The endurance of the presence or actions of objectionable persons, or of the expression of offensive opinions; toleration." This was of course a virtue in many settings; it meant not taking offense at everything you might consider wrong.

Tolerance today, though, means never considering something to be wrong. Everyone has his or her own take on truth, so who are we to say we are right and they are wrong? Again, younger readers are nodding in unquestioning agreement.

From this flows a new concept of bigotry, a word that was once used primarily in regard to racism. Is there a hope that someday all racial groups may coexist in equality and harmony? Many people now think that all belief systems should also coexist in equality and harmony, as if race and beliefs were parallel in some way. Disagreement with others' beliefs is now viewed as bigotry (even as hatred), just as racial prejudice has been.

When virtually every other (former) vice has become socially acceptable, bigotry remains the great sin of our age--even with this greatly broadened sense of what it means.

Thus Christianity presents a problem. Christians (particularly Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Catholics) claim that Jesus is the unique Son of God, who lived in real history, died on the cross and rose again to rescue the people of His creation from our sins. Because he is the only person with a credible claim of having been raised from the dead, he has the unique right to say (as he did), "No one comes to the Father but through me."

This is an exclusive claim, which makes it bigotry under today's definition, a violation of the current great American value of tolerance. So we see things like military bases prohibited from sponsoring Boy Scout troops, because belief in God is part of the Scout Oath and Law (not just the Christian God, by the way). And it took a Supreme Court decision to confirm that our President could have a prayer spoken for him at his inauguration.

There is certainly discrimination here. Compared to real persecution, of course, it's but a hint. Because it is so new to us, though, many Christians are greatly distressed by it. We've been used to complete freedom to practice our religion. Christian ethics and morals led the Western mindset for centuries, until recently. How should we view these changes?

We certainly ought to contend for truth and against discrimination--but with joy, not defeatism.

Has "Merry Christmas" been replaced by "Happy Holidays?" Are the Ten Commandments being pulled from public places? I'm not thrilled by such things myself, but let's view it from a larger perspective: followers of Christ in the Western world have been extraordinarily blessed for a season. For much of history, in much of the world, Christians have faced far worse--and thrived in their faith anyway.

We are not losing something essential to our lives and ministry; we're moving toward what has been normal experience for many of our brothers and sisters through the centuries. To dwell on how we're being treated poorly would smack of self-pity. The New Testament repeatedly tells us we can rejoice in all circumstances, because God is still good. He hasn't lost his touch, or forgotten how to do his job.

Does the spiritual battle seem more intense these days? That may be so, but if God is true, we're not losing! He has been the God of every Christian who has ever lost his job, or has ever seen her children taken away, or has ever been hauled into prison or slavery because of his or her faith. He's still our God in the same way.

We need not take a defeatist or defensive posture. It's unattractive and unhelpful to our cause. God calls us to live in faith, and he gives us joy and unconquerable love. That's what will show the world there's still such a thing as truth.

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