

# Do They Know Us by Our Love?

The first casualty of the culture wars is not truth.

John Ortberg

In the culture wars of the first century, there was a group of activists who came down on the right side of all the values questions. They rejected relativism and secularism. They were unwavering adherents of ethical absolutism. They were committed to the Judaeo-Christian values of monogamy in marriage and chastity outside it. They promoted monotheism against polytheistic Roman paganism. Clearly, The Pharisees were considered the Religious Right of Israel.

But it is interesting that the people who held the “right” values were the ones least responsive to Jesus’ message and most likely to receive his reprimands. His message was received with the greatest eagerness by those who came down on the wrong side of the values issues – the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the religious half-breeds.

Nonetheless, most Pharisees could not accept Jesus’ radical claims and actions in light of their reading of the Holy Scriptures.

The ironic result of their “rightness” in belief and practice was that they became unable to love – did not want the sick healed on the Sabbath, did not want an adulterous woman to be forgiven, did not want sinners to share fellowship with the righteous. They came to see people they were called to love as “the enemy.”

This is a common temptation for all of us who take faith seriously. I regularly get fundraising letters from Christian organizations that paint society in conspiratorial “us” versus “them” colors. I rarely sense from them a caveat – let alone a consistent

tone – acknowledging that love must be the ultimate aim even in disagreement.

Dallas Willard said once that it is very hard to be right and not hurt anybody with it.

It is possible to be so caught up in the joy of being right, in the thrilling sense of being morally superior to those who are “not right,” that you become more wrong than your most degraded opponent.

But what if it is at least as important to love as to be right? What if Jesus really meant it when he said the heart of the law is to love God with your entire being and to love your neighbor as yourself?

An old saying suggests that the first casualty of war is truth. This is not quite true. The first casualty of war is love. And so it is in emotion-charged wars.

The primary task of the church is not to make a powerful apologetic for Christian values in society. It is to participate in, and witness to, the gospel. And the gospel Jesus proclaimed is an invitation to life in the presence and under the reign of God: “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15).

## LOVING OUR CULTURAL ENEMIES

They trended to emphasize not those values that were most important, but those values that most readily distinguished themselves from their opponents.

One phrase often used in the culture wars is *traditional values*. It conveys our deep concern that classic moral

values such as marital commitment, stability of the home, and common human courtesy are rapidly eroding. These concerns need to be articulated carefully and thoughtfully, but when we call for a return to “traditional values,” we must ask to what tradition we want to return.

Thankfully, part of being a Christian, and in particular a Protestant, is the conviction that all traditions constantly need reform. The gospel is about eschatology, not nostalgia. The values to which we are called are not the values of any past tradition, but the eternal values taught and lived by Jesus and expressed authoritatively in the Bible, which stand over and above every party platform and political agenda.

## BEYOND IDEOLOGY

I do fear that with the current culture wars comes the devaluing of one of the church’s primary tasks: discipleship. The reduction of Christianity to an ideology allows people to evade the task of true discipleship. It does not come through holding a certain set of values but by living a certain kind of life. It is far easier to promote values than to live them.

“All men will know that you are my disciples,” Jesus said, not “if you promote my agenda” but “if you love one another.” A watching world will be persuaded not when our values are promoted but when they are incarnated.