**Does it look like love to them?**

By Jack Dunigan

I encountered a Christian zealot on Facebook whose diatribe against gays and just about anything that didn't fit his rather narrow interpretation of what a real Christian looked like was both bitter and vile. He claimed, as do most religious people, that it is his responsibility to point out sin wherever he sees it.

He couldn't be more wrong.

After several back-and-forth comments, his attacks became more fanatical and his words became more vile. It was at that point I broke it off.

Religious people (of any persuasion) always believe it is their responsibility to set everybody else straight.

Always!

It is endemic of religion and pandemic within religion. It is the setting, the context, the structure, and the psychology of religion to impose its will upon anyone and everyone who does not comply. That it is done so under the banner of helping people and advancing morality is only window dressing. Compliance to whatever standards of behavior deemed imperative by the peer group is demanded and usually enforced. Always has been that way, always will be that way.

What religious people fail to recognize, and thus fall into, is that no one, and I mean no one, adheres to the "truth" as comprehensively described in their religion’s manual, whether it is a Bible, the Koran, or the Torah. All of them pick and choose...and the application of the "truth" inevitably changes with time and culture.

Let me say that again. The application of the "truth" inevitably changes with time and culture.

Taken at its word, the Bible encourages slavery and encourages those in slavery to remain slaves, yet few churches would dare focus on that today. Taken at its word, the Bible does not allow women much freedom at all and permits polygamy, disallowing it only for members of the clergy in the New Testament. Yet, those churches which will hammer on someone because they feel they must stand for the truth would never advocate such today.

So, say what you will, but the Bible, once used as a weapon, has lost its value.

Pastor John Pavlovitz wrote an outstanding piece called “Distorted Love, The Toll of our Christian Theology on the LGBT Community.” Doubtless some will find it controversial and even provocative. I found it insightful and honest. Pastor John focused in on one of my most closely regarded themes – that of the love of God and its expression in the earth.

There’s a bar not far from where I am sitting to write this that advertises the best hamburgers in Florida. We’ve enjoyed them and they are good (might not be the best but we won’t quibble). It is a ragged about the edges hangout patronized by folks who, if the cars they drove up in can be any judge, are not members of any country club. The first time I was there I remarked to Sue that this is the kind of place Jesus would hang out at.

You see, it is not my job to straighten out the world. But evidently many, perhaps most religious people think it’s their job. Platitudes and slogans about the love of God are best used from afar. We can smile from inside our cars, wave from across the street, and blast away from behind the security of our Facebook page.

But being friendly towards sinners is not anywhere nearly the same as being friends of them.

And frankly, the religious crowd is really, really bad at this.

Really bad.

It seems that we’ve become religious after all.

Pastor John’s article is quite correct that Jesus eliminated all of the wrangling by replacing all other rules with just two - love God and love each other. Everything else is only someone's attempt to gain the upper hand over someone else. It is religion that demands to control others. It is Jesus that demands we do not.

Amazingly, and completely to be expected, whenever someone suggests that anything other than harsh judgment and condemnation be applied to anyone not fitting the mold, this happens. Read on.

In the mid-1960's, my wife was a student at Elim Bible Institute in New York. She wrote her thesis on divorce and remarriage, stating the many facets of arguments for and against it. In those days the very thought of divorce was anathema in "respectable" circles. She neither proposed nor discouraged either divorce or remarriage. She did present arguments designed to provoke thought and challenge presumptions.

Remarkably, well, maybe not so remarkably, authority figures at the college challenged her by suggesting that she was in love with a married man or a divorced man. Neither was correct. It may have been a logical assumption and perhaps to be expected. But it somehow provokes me as being the fastest route to discounting an argument without exactly having to think about it.

As uncomfortable as topics like this one can be, true seekers of justice and equity do not shrink from the task of challenging their assumptions and making whatever amendments might follow. Simply retreating into platitudes, cliché’s, or traditions will not do. The Pharisees tried, still try, to discount, discredit, and ultimately destroy anyone who cracks the window and lets in fresh air.

The challenge therefore for you and I is if the love that so easily trips off our tongues is really real. Does it look and feel like love? Or would we really rather just be friendly towards than friends of? Remember that when the Pharisees brought out the woman accused of adultery the only ones condemned in that encounter were those who had pointed it out.