

**CHRISTIAN
TOLERANCE
& TOTALI-
TARIANISM**

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Christian Tolerance or Totalitarianism

The Christian's way is always a pilgrim's way. It's a life on the road. It's the adventure of a pioneer. The Christian's vision is always the vision of a pilgrim and pioneer. It is a moving through the world by neither sight nor hindsight. It is always a faithing through darkness. Whenever Christians have lost sight of this and have pretended to see what cannot be seen, we have lost our way. By faithing our way along from "faith to faith" we move closer to the day we'll see "face to face." There's no other way to get there.

INTRODUCTION

Two hundred years ago, an English Methodist pilgrim named Francis Asbury pioneered the American vision of John Wesley's practical approach in Christian faith. His pioneering pilgrimage was not unlike ours here and now. We, too, are pilgrims pioneering the vision of a practical approach in Christian faith.

Asbury, according to one of his biographers: "follow[ed] truth whether manifested in subjective convictions or in arguments read from the force and facts of life about him." We, too, are doing that, and we're ridiculed for it just as he was. This often enfeebled pioneer nonetheless traveled hundreds of thousands of miles on horseback "over the long road," preaching the gospel for more than forty years over the Appalachian range, by way of the Delaware Water Gap, and westward through the Cumberland Basin to Kentucky, Ohio and the Indiana territory.

He never married. But in his journeys, he had the close company of "faithful traveling companion[s]"—first, as one biographer describes him, the "strong-bodied, consecrated itinerant" Henry Boehm, and later, the "congenial companionship" and "faithful and tender ministry" of John Wesley Bond. Asbury died in the spring of 1816. "Of kindred in blood, there was none to mourn; but Henry Boehm and John Wesley Bond,

his 'sons' in long and dutiful ministries, stood by the coffin as chief mourners, while thousands of hearts besides in silence revered with mingled sorrow and gladness the memory of the illustrious dead."

Purposes of eulogy don't list what might be thought to be the less "illustrious" aspects of a life, but if we go to Asbury's own journals we find one of the most sober self-assessments ever written. Asbury confessed: "I have said more than was for the glory of God." This is a profound repentance. Each of us would do well to apply it to ourselves: "I have said more than was for the glory of God."

What did Asbury have in mind when he wrote this? He probably wasn't recalling merely idle chatter; Asbury was not, by nature, given to idle chatter. He was no doubt recalling the "strong words" he had used to denounce those with whom he had disagreed *theologically* and those who had "reviled Mr. Wesley ... and poor me. O that I could trust the Lord more than I do and leave his cause wholly in his own hands!" Ironically, it was in his effort *to declare and protect* the glory of God that he had "said more than was for the glory of God." This is a common sin among Christian crusaders of all stripes – including our own. You'll remember from last summer's talk on Luther that he had prayed a prayer he based on the Old Covenant stipulation against witnessing falsely about neighbors: I "confess hav[ing] spent my life so sinfully and ungratefully with lies and evil talk against my neighbors." And there, too, the "neighbors" were *theological* foes.

Asbury was well aware of the *source* of this sin. It was in a lack of faithing, a lack of trusting God: "O that I could trust the Lord more than I do and leave his cause wholly in his own hands!" Crusaders get it into our heads that God needs us more than God does – so we begin to justify any means in terms of ends. Or, in our doubts about being right ourselves, we defensively try to convince ourselves by forcing everyone else to agree with us instead of just throwing ourselves and our ignorance onto the mercy of God. We babble where God has not

spoken, using God's name profanely, fruitlessly trying to advantage ourselves. But we call it all "for the glory of God." And while babbling where God has been silent, we're silent when we should speak up with God's clear word.

In attempting to understand this common tendency toward intolerance and totalitarianism and in order to know how to respond to our own intolerance toward others and their intolerance toward us, let's look at something of the history of totalitarian "heresy" hunting and its biblical solution in the patient practice of Christian tolerance. And, in this summer of 1984, let's use as a springboard to get further into our subject, the device of the fantasy novel, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, by George Orwell (Eric Blair's pen name). The year of the book's title has been imbedded in our culture as a prime symbol of intolerance and totalitarianism.

Ushering in this year so ignominiously designated, Kenneth Kantzer has written an editorial entitled "Orwell's Fatal Error" for Evangelicaland's flagship magazine, *Christianity Today*. But Kantzer makes some errors of his own. He speaks of Orwell's "predict[ing] what it would be like" in 1984. Orwell's parody, though, only *warned*; he himself said he was *not* predicting anything. Kantzer claims that Orwell "completely bought the Marxist-Leninist line." On the contrary, Orwell was as critical of what he called "intellectuals who kiss the arse of Stalin" as he was of every Party-line or "cult of power."

Printed at the very beginning of Orwell's *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, is this statement: "My starting point is always ... a sense of injustice. ... I write ... because there is a lie that I want to expose." And he did far more than preach. Orwell put his own body on the line for the sake of his totalitarian-threatened neighbors in Spain. He paid for that with a nearly fatal bullet in his throat.

But Kantzer sees a different "fatal error." He charges Orwell with being "committed to a Christian ethic but without the metaphysical framework of Christian theism that gives it validity." Kantzer here fails to discern what Orwell's friend (and

committed Christian) Malcolm Muggeridge recalls as Orwell's understandable "allergy" to "institutional Christianity." In St. Mugg's words, though, "there was in him this passionate dedication to truth. ... This unrelenting abhorrence of virtuous attitudes unrelated to personal conduct." In this no-nonsense practical approach—even without the clearer hope of Asbury's and Abraham's confidence that the Judge of all the earth will indeed do the right thing—might not Orwell be seen in terms of "religionless Christianity" [Dietrich Bonhoeffer] or "anonymous Christianity" [Karl Rahner]? As one of Orwell's biographers explains, his agnosticism was not "of the strident religiously anti-religious kind." Christians who tend to say more than is for the glory of God need a healthy dose of Orwellian agnosticism now and then. Even Kantzer, who tries to make the illogical point that Orwell "had no faith," recognizes that (along with many of us?) "he was both too much and not enough of a Christian." Kantzer is relieved though to learn that "just before he died, [Orwell] asked to be buried with [what Kantzer calls] a traditional and fully biblical Anglican funeral service." Orwell "loved the language of the liturgies of the English Church," but since "he had no [official] connection with any church, priest or vicar," his request to be buried "according to the rites of the Church of England" was carried out only after some strings were pulled by his friends, including Muggeridge. He probably would not have fared so well had the decision been up to the evangelical or fundamentalist establishment. But Kantzer does say something refreshingly generous for a spokesman in Evangelicaland these days. He muses that Orwell "was very near to God—just outside the door. ... dare we hope, at the end, the good Lord dragged him, too, through the gate—reluctant, fearful, desperate, but seeking?" That is exactly how it was with C. S. Lewis when, in his words, he himself was dragged into the Kingdom, "the most reluctant" convert in all England.

I'd like us to turn our attention to this very "reluctant, fearful, desperate, but seeking" spirit which is so frequently missing in the party-spirit of headstrong orthodoxy of both Right and

Left, secularism and sectarianism, gay and straight, and feminist and anti-feminist establishments. In such a seeking-spirit, perhaps we can learn still more of the humility which befits the creature rather than the Creator, but which was modeled by the Creator Himself, rather than by the creature.

On the eve of 1984, Jerry Falwell tried to stir up his followers with these words: "The news reports often carry news of homosexual campaigns for civil rights." He asked rhetorically: "Is 1984 so far away?" At the same time, under the headline, "U.S. Still a Far Cry from World of 1984," an editor for *U.S. News & World Report* wrote: "Instead of the sex-is-bad prudery of 1984, there is widespread acceptance of sexual expression and varied lifestyles." [Susanna McBee] Falwell sees tolerance for those who are sexually different as evidence that 1984 is here. The editor sees tolerance for those who are sexually different as evidence that it is not.

You recall that, in *Nineteen Eighty-four*, Winston Smith and Julia fall in love in spite of the Junior Anti-Sex League's pushing of celibacy as the only acceptable solution to sexual desires. The Party doesn't tolerate love. According to the Party, "All marriages between Party members had to be approved by a committee" and it was well known that "permission was always refused if the couple concerned ... [was] attracted to one another." Orwell writes: "The Party was trying to kill the sex instinct, or if it could not be killed, then to distort it and dirty it." It doesn't take much imagination to see parallels with the politically religious advocacy of the "ex-gay" movement.

Julia and Winston meet at their hideout to make love in secret, there "among the fallen bluebells." Good as it was, it wasn't all that good "because everything was mixed up with fear and hatred." Afterward, Julia rushes away to go back to what she calls the "bloody" business of handing out more leaflets for the Junior Anti-Sex League. It occurs to Winston that he doesn't even know her surname or her address. "However," says Orwell, "it made no difference, for it was inconceivable that they could ever meet indoors or exchange any kind of writ-

ten communication.” Making love was something to catch as catch can. It had to be done surreptitiously, by stealth and after much careful plotting, in a clearing in the wood or in the belfry of a bombed-out church. But usually it was possible to meet only while “drift[ing] down the crowded pavements, not quite abreast, and never looking at one another, ... carry[ing] on a curious, intermittent conversation which flicked on and off like the beams of a lighthouse, suddenly nipped into silence by the approach of a Party uniform or the proximity of a telescope.” What could be more descriptive of the cruel plight of young gay and lesbian Christians within organized evangelicalism?

Later, after torturous sessions at the Ministry of Love, in order to make Winston an “ex-lover,” he cries out in his sleep: “Julia! Julia! My love! Julia!” Orwell’s observation here is poignant: “In that moment he had loved her far more than he had ever done when they were together.” But “In another moment he would hear the tramp of boots. [The Party] could not let such an outburst go unpunished.” Winston knew that his heresy “was all confessed in that single foolish cry.” He can’t help his still being in love with Julia any more than gay people can help being in love with another person of the same sex, even after undergoing “ex-gay” processing.

The Party brings in a more *effective* anti-sex treatment. It brings in the hungry rats and straps their cage to Winston’s face. Orwell tells us: “For an instant [Winston] was insane, a screaming animal. Yet he came out of the blackness clutching an idea. There was one and only one way to save himself. He must interpose another human being, the *body* of another human being, between himself and the rats.” In order to save himself from the ravages of the Party’s rats, Winston shouts: “Do it to Julia! Not me! ... Tear her face off, strip her to the bones. Not me! Julia! Not me!” Some time later, Winston happens on Julia. But now the old magnetism is gone. They are cold and detached. Having betrayed her, there was no love left.

What Winston did to save himself is what the antigay Party forces “ex-gays” to do to their comrades. But whether we’re

members of the “Ex-gay” Party, the Fundamentalist Party, the Evangelical Party, the Right-wing Party, the Left-wing Party, the Gay Lib Party, the Feminist Party, or the Anti-Feminist Party, it makes no difference here. In order to save ourselves, we’re all quick to will the rats on others. And in order to will the rats on others, we have to depersonalize them, demonize them. Distancing ourselves, we turn them into “them,” and something between us snaps.

Cal Thomas of Falwell’s Moral Majority is on to something. He’s written in the *Fundamentalist Journal* that “nowhere is Orwell’s *1984* better duplicated in America this year than in the use of language.” Thomas refers to Orwell’s “Newspeak,” the language of Oceania, intended to serve the purposes of the Party, the establishment, Big Brother, with such changes as: “War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.” Thomas concludes: “The deceit of Newspeak in Orwell’s *1984* is definitely upon us.” He might better have confessed: “The deceit of Newspeak in *FAL*well’s *1984* is definitely upon us.” For this *is* how Falwell can sit atop what his own newspeak calls “Liberty Mountain” and link the *expanding* of civil liberty to gay citizens with the *oppression* of *1984*. According to Falwell’s own newspeak, *freedom* for gay citizens *is slavery*. Contrary to both the honest first-person testimony of gay people and the best research, Falwell keeps insisting that there is no such thing as homosexual *orientation*. He calls it “so-called orientation.” Contrary to the repeated failures of the “ex-gay” hoax, Falwell pretends the “ex-gay” claims are true.

The *expansion* of civil rights is exactly what is *not* depicted in *1984*; the *repression* of civil rights is exactly what *is* depicted there. Furthermore, it is always the aim of the Party in power to get the oppressed to think they are not oppressed, even to get them to become their own oppressors. This is done through such manipulation of language and thought as Falwell and Company – as well as *their* totalitarian adversaries—try to do. It’s not Falwell’s present agenda to protect or expand what he calls “the so-called civil rights” of gay folk anymore than it was

his former agenda to protect or expand what he used to call “the so-called civil rights” of black folk. But then, is it the agenda of gay liberationists, feminists and the Left to protect or expand the civil rights of antigay, antifeminist Right-wingers? Can evangelicals get fair treatment at the hands of anti-evangelicals?

The Party’s slogan, “Ignorance is Strength,” is also one used by fundamentalist, evangelical, and gay establishment parties. Among the leaders in Evangelicaland, there is a conspiracy of willed ignorance to keep the people in the pew in the dark about the best scientific evidence on homosexuality, the deceptions and cover-ups of the “ex-gay” fraud, and loving gay Christian couples. The evangelical establishment press continues to spew out lies about homosexuality, the “ex-gay” movement, and gay Christians. Evangelicals, from the U.S. Senate Chaplain on down to clerical workers at evangelical institutions, have written to tell us to stop sending them *review* and *Record*. The Party believes that ignorance on the part of its constituency is its strength. But does evidence for the irrationality of sexual promiscuity fair any better in the gay establishment?

Strange as it seems, Cal Thomas deploras as an incarnation of Oceania’s Thought Police those who today would champion tolerance, academic freedom and pluralism. He warns that his readers must watch out because instead of the one approved answer he would insist upon their being sold, they’ll be bombarded by the errors of many “different interpretations.” But really, just how many “different interpretations” of lesbian and gay male lifestyles are permitted by the dogmatic dictators of gay and lesbian “liberation?” Did it really have to take a deadly epidemic to prove that careless sexual behavior can transmit disease? Did it take AIDS to allow the voices of more conservative gay men and lesbians to be given a hearing in gay liberation? Even as the AIDS death toll rises, gay people who call for the closing of bathhouses are called “traitors” and “homophobes.”

The Party realized that if it controlled vocabulary it could control thoughts, since we think in words. Fundamentalists and

evangelicals try to control thought on homosexuality by avoiding the term “gay,” or by speaking of it in the most horrendous terms, as in the shrill and ignorant term, “the gay plague.” The term “gay Christian” is not permitted in official evangelical jargon. Antigay preachers twist the Scriptures to call gay people “Sodomites,” even though the Scripture’s own commentary reveals that Sodom was destroyed because the city and her suburbs didn’t give a damn about the oppressed, the poor and needy. So, in some ways, we’re all such Sodomites.

The fundamentalists have tampered further with the words of Scripture to constrict any ambiguity and construct an antigay Bible. For example, there’s *The Living Bible*, a free-wheeling fundamentalist *paraphrase* applauded by those who couldn’t stand a new *translation* when the Revised Standard Version came out (they called it the “Reversed Stranded Perversion”). In *The Living Bible*, two obscure Greek words are turned into everything fundamentalists mistakenly think they understand as horrible homosexuality. Thus, millions of first-time Bible readers are sold the notion that in reading “homosexuals” in *The Living Bible*, they are reading God’s Spirit-breathed word on homosexuals.

Through the use of “doublethink,” the Party was able to get people “to tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, [and] to forget any fact that has become inconvenient.” This is, again, the method of the “ex-gay” advocacy. The religious dictators want to force homosexuals to say exactly what they decide homosexuals *should* be saying about homosexuality and “ex-gay” phenomena, no matter what lies must be told to do so.

Remember the supposedly “friendly” O’Brien of the Oceania Ministry of Love? Remember his attempt to “deliver” Winston and to conform him to the Party’s specifications? Winston was strapped up for treatment in much the same way that would-be “ex-gays” are strapped up to electric shock machines. O’Brien held up four fingers in front of Winston. “‘How many ... Winston?’ ‘Four.’ ‘And if The Party says that it is not four but five – then how many?’ ‘Four.’ The word

ended in a gasp of pain,” under O’Brien’s torture. And if the antigay evangelical establishment says the homosexuals they “treat” are no longer gay but “ex-gay”—what are they? Over and over, the former “ex-gays” acknowledge that they said what they were told they should say in hopes that it would come true. Lately, with more and more embarrassing public failures to explain, even the testimony from within the “ex-gay” movement doesn’t finally try to claim more than a change in label.

Another similarity between the strategies of Oceania’s Party and those of oppressively fundamentalist evangelicals is in the rewriting of history. You remember that it was Winston’s job to rewrite history in the service of Big Brother because, as the Party theory had it, “Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.” Here’s an example of fundamentalist revisionism. In the *Fundamentalist Journal*, Falwell’s two associates, Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson, attack what they call “Evangelical Tolerance,” accusing evangelicals—as over against fundamentalists—of being “All Things to All Men.” They complain that “Evangelicals are known for their tolerance and love.” This criticism may come as a surprise to gay people who haven’t noticed a whole lot of evangelical “tolerance and love” for them. Christian feminists might say that many evangelicals are not “all things to all women.” The fundamentalists’ criticism would surely surprise the Apostle Paul, for the phrase they don’t like is his own phrasing for his working principle of evangelism—becoming “all things to all people that by all means I might save some.” (The Greek term in I Cor. 9:22 is just as much neuter as it is masculine.) It would be appalling to Paul to hear Dobson and Hindson condemn the “tolerance and love” by which they even incorrectly complain evangelical Christians are known. After all, Paul and John and others were echoing Jesus himself when they wrote that all Christians *should* be known by their love.

In presuming their revisionist church history, Dobson and Hindson offer a big stink-bomb of a test-question that is supposed to separate the fundamentalists from the evangelicals—

the real men from the boys. But it’s the very practice that Paul calls heresy (as we’ll see later). This is their challenge: “Ask an Evangelical whether or not he believes there are flames in hell, and after a 30-minute philosophical recitation on the theological implications of eternal retribution in light of the implicit goodness of God, you will still not know what he really believes. Ask a Fundamentalist whether he believes there are flames in hell and he will simply say, ‘Yes, and hot ones too!’” This is a misguided, macho effort to score a political point. They’re saying that evangelicals carry the Bible with a limp wrist while fundamentalists carry the Bible in firm fists. But here, in this one-upmanship, there’s no evidence of the tears that 19th-century evangelist D. L. Moody said should always be in the eyes of anyone who mentions hell. Rather, Dobson and Hindson press their supposed political advantage: “We dare not neutralize the truth of God’s Word in order to make it more palatable to a generation that has sold its soul to relativism, Humanism, and naturalism.” Now attacks on relativism, Humanism, and naturalism are quite appropriate these days, but “hell” is not the place to pitch the battle. Bragging about their belief in the literal flames of hell, they either don’t really believe it or don’t really care about those they say are hell-bound. After all, they’re on record as clearly wanting no part in Paul’s making himself a Jew to Jews and a Greek to Greeks (even a Stoic?) and “all things to all people, so that by all means” some might be *saved* from hell.

Whether or not you hold one or another view on “flames in hell,” you might think Dobson and Hindson are accurately positioning themselves with the orthodox on the issue. But Fundamentalists today, as well as secular scoffers who make fun of “hell-fire preachers,” suffer from historical amnesia. In effect, if not by intent, they’ve done such a rewriting of church history that you probably think their forefathers believed just exactly what Dobson and Hindson say all Bible-believers have believed and should believe about hell-fire. Let’s hear then from three of the 19th- and early 20th-century’s unimpeachable Christian con-

servatives. They are Charles Hodge of Old Princeton, G. Campbell Morgan the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, and C. I. Scofield of *Scofield Reference Bible* fame and D. L. Moody's own pastor at Northfield.

Said Hodge: "There seems to be no more reason for supposing that the fire spoken of in Scripture is to be literal fire, than that the worm that never dies is literally a worm. The devil and his angels who are to suffer the vengeance of eternal fire, and whose doom the finally impenitent are to share, have no material bodies to be acted upon by elemental fire." Said Campbell Morgan: "I hold most strongly that there is absolutely no warrant in Scripture for the medieval teaching concerning a hell of literal fire." Said Scofield: "Men of God, of equal soundness in the faith, purity of life and power in service, are divided upon the question of the literal interpretation of the passages which speak of 'fire' in connection with the suffering of the wicked."

I have gone into greater length than might seem necessary on this question of "flames in hell" to make a basic point about Christian tolerance vis a vis the tactics of the petty politicians of today's antigay fundamentalist totalitarianism. If this triumvirate of unquestioned orthodoxy can have agreed that the "flames of hell" don't have to be literal flames, how is it that Dobson and Hindson can brazenly demand that the flames are literally flames and that anyone who disagrees is sub-orthodox? And if these late-20th-century fundamentalists can be so idiosyncratically intolerant on something as biblically "familiar" as hell-fire, why should they hold sway when they intolerantly condemn a very much less familiar homosexuality? How can they demand no disagreement among Christians about a homosexuality for which there is very much less, if any, biblical documentation? Besides, they must admit that nobody in the Bible has *more* to say about the *flames of hell* and *less* to say about *homosexuality* than does Jesus himself!

HERESY

Over the centuries, every Party—whether represented within one individual or in an organized group—has sought political power. Lying, bullying and the enslavement of others have been used to hold on to it. The attitude has been: to hell with everyone else. And nothing has been used more often for this purpose than has the manipulation of the *idea of heresy*. Nothing so inflames or justifies oppressing others as the rationalizing notion that "they" are absolutely wrong and that "we" are absolutely right and that *a god says so*. Now we must note that oppression is waged by non-religionists as well as by those who say they do what they do in the name of Yahweh, Christ, or Allah. Militant atheists and shrill secularists who proudly claim no allegiance to any official deity can just as intolerantly and intolerably oppress in the name of whatever idols they've substituted for the divine – whether Soviet Communism, Chinese Communism, National Socialism, Fascism, Americanism, Zionism, Anti-Semitism, Gay Liberationism, sexism, feminism, etc. Our very own pet "me-ism" can quite sufficiently serve to justify every one of our vicious little atrocities against each other.

In order to discover how really heretical the allegedly "Christian" idea of heresy is and in order to know how very sinful its use as a deadly weapon has been and continues to be, let's turn to the Bible. Does the Bible justify our use of the idea of heresy to separate ourselves from each other, "the sheep from the goats" as it were? Does the Bible justify heresy hunting and heresy harassment?

The biblical term *hairesis*, translated "heresy," was originally used to designate "choice" or "schools" of thought, and as such, was neutral. In Judaism, for example, there were various "schools" such as the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and Essenes. In Acts 24 the leaders of the Jewish religious establishment accused Paul of stirring up dissension as ringleader of the "school" or "party" or "sect" or "heresy" of the Nazarenes. It is

in the sense of divisiveness and schism, of a factious party spirit, that Paul begins to use the term negatively. Paul regards such division-making among Christians as a work of "the flesh," the central principle of a systemic fallen humanity. [Gal. 5:20] He sees such heresy harassment as a grave breach of mutual lovingkindness. In his letters to Galatians and Corinthians, the term is "acquiring the pejorative sense of 'faction,' but the charge is divisiveness rather than heretical teaching." [Richard Bauckham] According to the evangelical *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, "The only New Testament use of 'heresy' in the sense of opinion or doctrinal error occurs in II Peter 2:1, where it *includes a denial of the Redeemer.*" [Italics mine.] Biblically then, heresy in the negative sense is rejecting Jesus Christ, as Luther knew when he observed: "Nobody can become a heretic except according to Scripture. Christ alone is the sign that is spoken against."

Now even though there is only this one late first-century biblical passage linking heresy in any sense to doctrinal error, and even here it is also a matter of unloving relationship, the idea of heresy in Christendom eventually became virtually synonymous with all sorts of heterodoxy, often of the most petty kind. Ironically, down through the centuries, the alleged "heretics" were tortured and killed by acts which were themselves heretically unloving. Otherwise tolerable distinctiveness has been turned into intolerable divisiveness. Merely *different* Christians have thus been bullied and excluded. Many of these "heretics" have been following Christ in sincerity, by the light they have, no matter how dimly other Christians may perceive it. [cf. Gal. 5:20; I Cor. 11:18; I Cor. 12:25]

Recently, a huge book entitled *Heresies* was published. Contrary to the biblically-negative usage of "heresy" as denial of Christ, its Right-wing author, Harold O. J. Brown, defines his topic on the first page in rigidly intellectual terms. Brown says that heresy is "false doctrine, i.e. one that is simply not true and that is, in addition, so important that those who believe it, whom the church calls heretics, must be considered to have abandoned

the faith." *What faith?* This is not only an extra-biblical stretch, it's a very silly definition, for Brown himself admits that "It is impossible to document what we now call orthodoxy in the first two centuries of Christianity." He admits: "It took four centuries for most Christians to arrive at a statement (not an explanation) of the relationship between God and man in Jesus Christ." Brown's book does nothing better than to recite the hundreds of conflicting ideas held as true or false at one time or another by people both inside and outside ecclesiastical power structures. And all of this, remember, is restricted to the clergy and leaves untouched and even unknown what the unlettered masses of simple Christian believers thought. If he accomplishes nothing else, Brown ironically succeeds in demonstrating that there have been intellectual disagreements and a variety of opinions on virtually everything over the course of ecclesiastical history. According to even Brown: "church history reveals more confusion and controversy than continuity." He starts out to prove the case for a rationalistic continuity of "orthodoxy" from which to identify "heresy" and ends by demonstrating the opposite.

There's a parable of Jesus that can help in this discussion of heresy and heresy hunting and harassment. Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven was like a farmer who planted a field of wheat. While the farmer slept, an enemy came in and sowed weeds among the wheat. The farmhands discovered what had been done and asked the farmer if they should get in there and pull up all those weeds. The farmer told them to wait, that they shouldn't rush in and try to pull out all the weeds because in attempting to do so they could every easily yank up good wheat as well. The wheat and weeds should be allowed to grow together until the harvest. When the harvest comes, the reapers will know how to separate the wheat from the weeds. All the necessary weeding will be done at that time. [Matt. 13:24-30]

We have here a clear reminder that we must exercise patience and not prejudge the Last Judgment. Anglican writer Charles Kingsley once observed that no parable is clearer than

this one, none is more direct and practical, and none has been less regarded over the centuries. Said Kingsley: "Toleration, solemnly enjoined, has been the exception. Persecution, solemnly forbidden, has been the rule." He chided his fellow churchmen to be patient, lest they "be found more fastidious than Almighty God." Commenting on this parable, Anglican vicar John Newton (the author of "Amazing Grace") wrote in very practical terms. Newton said: "One reason why we must not attempt to pull up the tares which grow among the wheat is, that we have not skill for the work; like a weeder, whom Mrs. Newton employed in my garden at Olney, who for weeds pulled up some of her favorite flowers." Some people don't know a pansy when they see one!

In scanning the history of the hunts for heresy, John Newton wisely concluded that "a mistaken zeal for truth has produced many controversies, which have hurt the peace of the people of God among themselves; and at the same time have exposed them to the scorn and derision of the world. ... Every branch of doctrine, belonging to the faith once delivered to the saints, is not equally plain to every believer. ... the controversies which have obtained among real christians [sic], have not so much affected the truth as it lies in scripture, as the different explanations, which fallible men of warm passions, and too full of their own sense, have given of it."

As we are seeing, contrary to what fundamentalists of the 1980s would have us think, those who deplore dogmatic heresy hunts and who tolerate a bit more theological diversity have been among the most evangelical believers in church history. But they, too, were not exempt from being hounded as heretics by their more conservative neighbors. The great father of English hymnody, Isaac Watts, (who wrote such classic hymns as "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" and "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross") was, himself, repeatedly accused of holding heretical beliefs—and there *was* some ambivalence in the finer points of his Trinitarian theology. It was out of his own bitter experience in being persecuted that he warned: "a dogmatic in

religion is not a great way off from a bigot, and is in high danger of growing up to be a bloody persecutor."

CHRISTIAN TOLERANCE

The problem of intolerance and totalitarianism has been rooted in the sin of pride, the vice of tyrants. Each of us has been, at times, so damn sure that he or she needed to be right that each of us has tried to force others to see things exactly our way. To this end conservatives have censured liberals and liberals have sneered at conservatives. The petty conservative in each one of us has condemned those who we saw as too liberal and the petty liberal in each one of us has mocked those we saw as too conservative. Our insecurities have made Lady Macbeths of us all, protesting too much both our own alleged purity and our neighbor's alleged impurity.

Paul shows us the way out of such family feuds. None of us has to crawl out on any limb that our brothers and sisters have already crawled out on just because they insist that we must come out there and sit on their limb or else they'll knock us out of the family tree. Writing to the Christians in their house churches in Rome [Rom. 14], Paul said that the more conservative didn't have to become more liberal, the more liberal didn't have to become more conservative, the Jews didn't have to become Greeks and the Greeks didn't have to become Jews. In that flagship passage of Christian tolerance, Paul appealed to them all to "Welcome each other ... the same way Christ has welcomed you!" [Rom. 15:7] He urged: "Welcome the weak believer, but not in order to argue over scruples and opinions. Some believers think it's o.k. for them to eat anything; some others think that they may eat only herbs. Let not the one who eats everything despise the one who abstains and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats." [Rom. 14:1ff] We might paraphrase: Some believers think it can be right for Christian gay people to engage in homosexual behavior while other believers think it cannot be right

for Christian gay people to do so. Let not the one who engages in homosexual behavior despise the one who thinks it wrong to do so and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who engages in the homosexual behavior. Why? Because, Paul reasons, God has accepted each one. [Rom. 14:3] He asks, "Who do you think you are, passing judgment and despising the servant of another? It's before his or her own Master that that person stands or falls." And then, before anyone can jump to the conclusion that he's admitting that those with whom they disagree will fall, Paul adds: "and God is certainly quite able to see to it that those other servants stand." Paul admonishes: "Let every one be fully convinced in his or her own mind. What each one does is done unto God. ... Why do you then pass judgment on your sisters and brothers? Why do you despise them? For we shall all stand before *God's* judgment seat. Each of us will have to answer, not to each other, not for each other, but to God, for ourselves. Therefore, let's stop condemning one another." Moreover, according to Paul: "Nothing is dirty in itself. But if anyone thinks something is dirty, to that person it is dirty. So don't encourage that person to violate his or her conscience. If you do, you show no love. Let's all pursue the things that make for peace and that build up the common life, the community we have together in Christ. If you have a clear conviction, apply it to yourself in the sight of God. At the same time, consider the welfare of your weaker neighbor, just as Christ did not consider himself but the welfare of others." Paul goes on to urge his readers: "Never put a stumbling block in the path of a brother or sister." What sort of stumbling block might one throw in the way of a brother or sister? A hindrance that reads: "You will go to hell if you are a practicing homosexual" or "You will go to hell unless you are celibate" or "You will go to hell unless you are just as I am." "Just As I Am" is not an imperative for others.

Notice that Paul doesn't reject the idea that there are indeed more enlightened believers and less enlightened believers. He speaks of them respectively as the "strong" and the "weak."

This approach takes for granted that all theological opinions are not of equal value. Some are better than others. Some are truer than others. Paul is not championing some sort of late-20th-century relativism. And Paul is granting that these differences of opinion between Christians can be recognized and respected—and even vigorously debated. He is doing just that in what he argues about the "strong" and the "weak" and how they should relate to each other.

But for Paul, there is a more important level of understanding than the "knowledge" that simply "puffs up." To Paul, it isn't basically a matter of being *ideologically* correct. To Paul, it's basically a matter of being faithfully loving. In I Corinthians 8, he attributes the differences between the "strong" and the "weak," the more liberal and the more conservative, in part, to cultural differences, differences in background, conditioning and customs. Today, as more conservative and more liberal Christians, "weak" and "strong," we, too, are all coming from our own particular personalities, imprinting, conditioning, customs, experiences, traditions—though as Christians, we all usually prefer to say we're coming from the Bible. However, to say so with such self-serving certainty is naïve.

As an evangelical historian has noted: "the type of religion a person derives from the tenets of orthodoxy has less to do with the actual teachings of Scripture than with his or her own inner predilections." [Richard Pierard] What each one of us is about today has to do with "inner predilections" going back far into our irretrievable past. Some of what we're about goes back to what went on long before we were born. Why some so naturally embrace this idea and recoil at that idea is not easily sorted out and explained. The era and place of birth and rearing? DNA? Imprinting? Early social learning? Later experience? Presuppositions? Prejudices? Agendas, conscious and otherwise?

And why are we homosexual and they are not? We don't really know. They don't really know. It no doubt goes back

even earlier than when they were making mud pies and we were making mud quiche—with Perrier!

As a psychotherapist, I agree with G. K. Chesterton's observation that "One may understand the cosmos, but never the ego; the self is more distant than any star." That's why the evangelical James Smetham refused to join in the attack on the deaf abolitionist Harriet Martineau in regard to her Unitarian faith. Said he: "I can't unwind her seventy-four years of act and thought." But unlike the naïve psychoanalysts, we don't have to try to unwind ourselves or anybody else and get back to a point behind and beyond explanation. Suffice it to trust with the Psalmist that the God of the cosmos and more knows each of us completely. God knew us before ever we were. He is our maker. And He is our savior.

When we read the sermons, journals, letters, theological treatises of Christian leaders of different centuries, cultures, temperaments, we may readily recognize their devotion to God. But in these many cases, it was dressed in a different vocabulary from our own, different emphases, styles and even some ideas that are at odds with our own. Being children of our own time and place as all of these were children of their own time and place, we can fail to recognize these other children of God as our real sisters and brothers in Christ. Superficially, they may seem so unfamiliar. We miss the familial features. So it's not for nothing that we'll all have to go through the radical extremities of death and resurrection in order finally to live together as the family of God.

Paul intervenes for the here and now, to show both more liberal Christians and more conservative Christians that we should exercise long-suffering love toward each other instead of demands for intellectual or behavioral conformity. But Paul has no sympathy whatsoever for the religious rationalization of "lovingly" lording it over others. The Apostle asks the Corinthians: "Why should my freedom be judged by another person's conscience?" [I Cor. 10:29f] When Paul partakes of that from which the "weak" abstain, they attack him on the basis that if

they think it wrong for them, it should be wrong for him as well. Paul says this sort of lording it over others' consciences must stop, for it is not an expression of love. At the same time, the sanctity of the individual conscience also demands that the "strong" respect the "weak" believers whose tender consciences will not allow them to boldly indulge without spiritual jeopardy and injury. The "strong" must not assume that their own freedom to partake with a good conscience means that the "weak" Christians can also partake with a good conscience. The "weak" should not be enticed into doing what they're not ready to do. If, by the example of the behavior of the more liberal believers, the more conservative ones are encouraged into imitation, the "weak" will suffer pangs of conscience for which the "strong" must bear some responsibility. In either case, one is in danger of coming under the condemnation of another person's conscience. Again, love must guide both.

In this 500th birthday year of the Swiss Reformer, Zwingli, we'd all do well to remember that when that courageous Christian humanist mounted his pulpit in Zurich, he preached that nothing is binding on the conscience except the *clear* word of God. It is obvious that disputes over the interpretation of God's word evidence that things may not be as clear as either side claims. Ecclesiastical history is strewn with example after example of "biblically based" certitudes that have changed from generation to generation—even within the same denomination, not to mention the same individual. The disputes of even a few years ago, let alone of centuries ago, can now seem either trivial or incomprehensible to us. And yet, Christians opposed Christians—even killed each other—over these differences of opinion. Zwingli himself had the blood of Anabaptists on his hands.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have heard from today's fundamentalists and evangelicals about how very "cut and dried" Christian theology has supposedly always been, and is supposed to be today. But we have

seen from the history of heresy and from the letters of Paul that so much of what passed or now passes for Christian doctrine is anything but “cut and dried.” We have learned from Paul that if there is anything that our Christian walk demands it is the loving protection of the conscience of everyone rather than the unloving projection of our own conscience on anyone. We all have fallen short in this. In this sense, Oceania was set up in the Garden of Eden when Satan tried to lord it over Eve and when Eve and Adam tried to lord it over each other. Ever since then, we’ve been in the grips of each human ego’s bent toward the subjection of everyone else to his or her own use.

During these 365 days we are living in the year Orwell picked as the title for his parody. He did this by arbitrarily reversing the last two digits of the year in which he wrote the book. But we who would be followers of Christ the Lord can see in 1984 the absolutely significant fact that this is not just arbitrarily 1984. It isn’t merely a matter of how we happen to reckon calendar time. This is *AD* 1984. *AD* stands for *Anno Domini* 1984. This means the “Year of our Lord,” 1984. Jesus Christ, the Lord, marked a new beginning in the history of humankind when he ushered in the coming of the Kingdom of God around nineteen hundred and eighty-four years ago.

“Jesus is Lord.” That is the most ancient Christian creed. It means that, through all the terrible effects of totalitarian prejudice that “1984” symbolizes for any year, both within and without ecclesiastical and other political jurisdictions, within and without our own suffocating egocentrisms, we need have no final fear for we live under the Loving Lordship of Jesus Christ. “Jesus is Lord,” not only of the Sabbath he said was made for our own welfare rather than the other way around [Mark 2:28] but, as evangelical theologian Helmut Thielicke put it: Christ “is also Lord over dogmas.”

Jesus is Lord over everyone who would bully us. Jesus is Lord over us, though we would bully others as well as ourselves. And the bullying of *consciences* is a favorite bullying. But Jesus is no tyrant. He’s the Lord of Love. It’s in this Love

that we may see behind what seems to be. In speaking of the resurrected Jesus’ appearing to disciples hiding behind locked doors and of Thomas’ hesitation in recognizing him, Thielicke observes that “Thomas did not simply say ‘it fits,’ but rather ‘my Lord.’” Thielicke explains that this shows that Thomas recognized the Lord by his love and not by physical characteristics, just as Mary had probably done on Easter morning.”

Are we followers of Christ known by our love? We should be. Is it our love by which our leaders encourage us to be recognized? It should be. Or is it by loyalty oaths to the details of dogma drawn up by this group or by that committee by which ecclesiastical leaders test allegiance to Christ? When Jesus said that nothing is as important as our wholehearted, willed, love for God and for our neighbors, including our enemies, he was saying what John recognized “we’ve had as commandment from the beginning,” [II John 5; Mark 12:33f]. In James’ letter we read: “Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? ... If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well. But [as Phillips renders it] once you allow any invidious distinctions to creep in, you are sinning.” [James 2:4ff]

Paul instructs the Ephesians to “forbear each other in love, with all humility and gentleness and patience ... Be kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another.” How? “As God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you.” [Eph. 4:2 and 32] Paul doesn’t say “forbear” and “forgive” only if the others agree with your own version of orthodoxy, only if they repent of their homosexuality, become “ex-gay,” come out of the closet, accept their homosexuality, parrot your creeds as written in “exclusive” language, parrot your creeds as rewritten in “inclusive” language. He says “forbear” and “forgive” as God forgives us in Christ who, while we were still enemies, still sinners, died for us.” [Rom. 5:8] We read in John’s first epistle: “Everyone who loves ... knows God. The one who doesn’t love, doesn’t know God, for God is love.” [I John 4:7f and 11] Where is the

“knowledge of God” that “puffs up” as intellectual assent in this straightforward truth of God? Where is that cold and cruel orthodoxy that lords it over others in the love that serves one another? “Knowing God” is a knowledgeable personal relationship. And it is demonstrated, not by devotion to what some call dogma, but by devotion to those whom some call dogs. These “dogs” stand before us in Christ’s stead. As such, we’ll meet them again on the only Judgment Day that counts. [Matt. 25:31ff]

Paul reminds Thessalonians that he was “gentle among [them], just as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her children ... [and so they too are to] comfort, encourage and build up each other ... [and] be patient with everyone.” [I Thess. 2:7; 5:11 and 14] He does not say we’re to be patient with only those who agree with us? He does not say we’re to be patient with only those who do it our way? After all, patience isn’t needed if the others are agreeing with us and doing it our way. Patience is required if we’re not at the same place. We are to be patient simply because God is patient with us. We are to be patient because, in the words of an evangelical New Testament scholar: “People matter more than things, more than principles, more than causes. The highest of principles and the best of causes exist for the sake of people; to sacrifice people to them is a perversion of the true order.” [F. F. Bruce]

Nobody could reasonably question that Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer was Valiant-for-Truth. He was a vigorous defender of evangelical Christian orthodoxy against the soul-sapping secularism of 20th century culture. But even Schaeffer, in his final indictment of what he saw as even evangelical accommodation to secularism, published just months before his death this spring, begins with a chapter on “What Really Matters?” There, he indicates that it is love of God and love of neighbor that really matters. He finishes by saying at the close of his appended and previously published essay, “The Mark of the Christian,” that it is love to all that is “the one true mark” of the Christian.

But sadly, Orwell and so many gay people and other hated “heretics” have turned themselves off to what they might know of the love of Christ because they have seen no real love shown by crusaders “for Christ” who mistreat them in the name of “Christ.” After watching Falwell preach about God’s sending AIDS against gay people for whom Falwell claims “love,” a person with AIDS said: “If one more of these people comes up to me and says he loves me, I’m going to hit him.” Jesus, who rightly called self-righteous religious leaders “white-washed tombs,” will not mistake a “no” to them as a “no” to him. He who voluntarily put his own body between all of us and “the rats,” cares more about all of us than we can imagine. We did it to him to save ourselves. He interposed himself to save us all.

Among the prayers of Susanna Wesley, the mother of John and Charles, are the following excerpts. She prayed: “I have found that to know Thee only as a philosopher; to have the most sublime and curious speculations concerning Thine essence, Thine attributes, Thy providence ... will avail me nothing, unless at the same time I know Thee experimentally; ... unless my soul feel and acknowledge that she can find no repose, no peace, no joy, but in loving and being loved by Thee. ... To behold Thee in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world unto Thyself; ... It is something my heart feels and labors under, but my tongue cannot express. I adore Thee, O God! Amen.”

With a mother who prayed like that, no wonder her son Charles could write: “Sweetly may we all agree,/ Touched with loving sympathy,/ Kindly for each other care;/ Every member feel its share./ Love, like death, hath all destroyed,/ Rendered all distinctions void;/ Names and sects and parties fall:/ Thou, O Christ, art all-in-all!”

And with a mother who prayed like Susanna Wesley, no wonder her son John could conclude: “I am sick of opinions. I am weary to bear them. My soul loathes this frothy food. Give me solid and substantial religion. Give me a humble, gentle lover of God and others, somebody full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy, people laying

themselves out in the work of faith, the patience of hope, the labour of love. Let my soul be with these Christians, wheresoever they are, and whatsoever opinion they are of.”

But sadly, notwithstanding such a wonderful Wesleyan heritage, those who today have responsibility for the 9-million-member Methodist church in America met this summer in Baltimore for their bicentennial General Conference and cast two heavy stones against their homosexual brothers and sisters. One stone was meant to knock them out as candidates for Christian ministry. The other stone was meant to knock them out as human beings with as deeply-felt needs for sexual intimacy as anyone. Was it for *this* that Wesley sent Asbury to Baltimore two hundred years ago? Was it for *this* that Jesus came and laid down his life and rose from the dead almost two thousand years ago? Was it for *this* that Jesus sent us out to be light for the world?