## Have We Grown Too Weary to Fight?

*by Harry Osborne*

Over the past generation, the defining characteristic of our society seems best described by the word "tolerance." That appears to be the goal regardless of the potential conflict. Nowhere is that more obvious than in moral and spiritual matters. Our national character has been embroidered with a scarlet ***A***, and the sad fact is that it has become a fashion statement rather than a source of shame. Like Israel of old, we can no longer blush -- we are not ashamed. So, we are urged not to fight it, but to passively accept a higher cultural evolution by being "open" and "tolerant" of unspeakable immorality. When godly people rise to fight the growing moral depravity, they are denounced as "right-wing bigots," "fanatics," "conservative nuts," "extremists," "watchdogs of morality" and similar epithets designed to demonize.

The evidence of a growing tolerance for immorality in our society is overwhelming. The conduct of former President Clinton in the Oval Office left stains deeper than the physical and scared our national consciousness and dialogue with matters not fit for public view. Societal acceptance of homosexuality has taken the sin of sodomy from a place of shame to a cherished “right” with unbelievable speed. Pornography, public nudity, filth in movies, shockingly skimpy fashions and gutter language have gone from being viewed as distasteful to mainstream. Beyond that, when faced with clear proof of wrong-doing, bald-faced lying has become the accepted way to cover-up and cease any controversy. Any attempt to press for the truth is the new unpardonable sin.

While that has been going on in the society surrounding God’s people, too many brethren have mirrored the world around them with the popular call to tolerate a growing list of sins and false doctrines, while demonizing those staunchly standing for truth. Like the sea-change in morality seen in our society, the speed of spiritual compromise among brethren has been unbelievably saddening to this writer. The plea for a "unity-in-diversity" that "tolerates contradictory teaching and practice on important moral and doctrinal questions" was popularized by brother Ed Harrell’s series of articles published in Christianity Magazine beginning in November 1988 (ending May 1990; cited quotation from May 1990, p. 6). It started with a justification for receiving brother Homer Hailey while he taught doctrinal error on divorce and remarriage. Those who would fight the good fight of faith were accused of "unheroic attacks." They were portrayed as "watch-dogs" and "snarling cur" having no other purpose than to "bite and devour one another." Widely known preachers like Paul Earnhart and Bob Owen joined Ed Harrell in so vilifying preachers of truth in print and in meetings. With this picture of faithful brethren as vicious dogs, many brethren got the not-so-subtle message that these savage creatures were to be excluded. Consequently, a new form of quarantine was put in place with meetings canceled and communications severed. It seemed the only one our "more tolerant" brethren could not tolerate and fellowship was a brother who boldly proclaimed the truth -- him they would attack with intolerance. When it came time to fight the good fight of faith concerning the Bible doctrine on fellowship, divorce & remarriage, modesty, the use of intoxicating drink, and even the creation account, those who fought for truth were characterized in similar terms by a growing number.

Where has the effect of such tolerance led us? The spring, summer and sporting fashions of many brothers and sisters show a vastly increased level of exposure accompanying this greater "tolerance." Waterparks and other places known for rampant immodesty are in vogue as party venues for those who are supposedly members of the Lord’s church. Social drinking has been openly defended by some brethren (even preachers and elders) in discussion groups on the internet and social media. A growing number of congregations now receive those in unlawful marriages. Many "non-institutional" brethren openly decry debating against denominationalism and its doctrines in honorable controversy which was integral to the spread of the gospel in the first century and thereafter. It is suggested by some that we not preach things offensive to our denominational friends, but accept them into our membership based on their denominational baptism… and teach them the rest privately… over time… maybe. These brethren claim to walk the way of truth, but they actually travel a far different road. They deny the need to fight the good fight, telling us the fighters are the real problem. They are more comfortable with error and sin than with those who fight against it.

Many truths that we understand today were made clear in the crucible of honorable controversy. Reading the debates and polemic writing of biblical writers and more recent brethren not only help readers today to understand the fallacy of error, but to more fully grasp the clarity of truth. The expansion of the kingdom of God within the hearts of men will always demand the use of the sword alongside the tools for construction (cf. Neh. 4:17-18). Alexander Campbell spoke on the need for righteous conflict in these words:

"If there was no error in principle or practice, then controversy, which is only another name for opposition to error, real or supposed, would be unnecessary. If it were lawful, or if it were benevolent, to make a truce with error, then opposition to it would be both unjust and unkind. If error were innocent and harmless, then we might permit it to find its own quietus, or to immortalize itself. But so long as it is confessed that error is more or less injurious to the welfare of society, individually and collectively considered, then no man can be considered benevolent who does not set his face against it. In proportion as a person is intelligent and benevolent, he will be controversial, if error exists around him. Hence the Prince of Peace never sheathed the sword of the Spirit while he lived. He drew it on the banks of the Jordan and threw the scabbard away" (Alexander Campbell, 1830).

But Alexander Campbell is not the only one to recognize that need, nor does he establish our pattern for action. The inspired word of God establishes our pattern for faith and practice in all things (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 1:13). The divine mandate for us to be militant and fight the good fight of faith could not be clearer. Let us notice a few passages plainly declaring the divine directive to fight in the spiritual battle for truth and righteousness:

**1 Timothy 6:12** - *Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.*

**1 Timothy 1:18-20** - *This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck, of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.*

**2 Timothy 4:1-8** - *I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.*

If we find ourselves more tolerant of the world and less willing to fight for truth than was the inspired apostle Paul, it should tell us that we have not fought the good fight as he did. If we refuse that fight, we cannot expect to receive the victory crown in reward as Paul did.