

Beware the Extremist

By Barney Keith

(The following article was written many years ago by Barney Keith, a faithful gospel preacher who preached for over 70 years before passing away March 23, 2011 at the age of 90 (1920-2011) as a result of injuries suffered in an automobile accident.)

A very versatile word in the English language is “extremist.” Much like “legalist,” “radical” and “hobbyist, it can be called into play whenever desired. It would seem that ANY MAN could be called an extremist – it just depends on who is doing the calling and where he stands at the time. A sure way to prejudice unthinking people against a certain viewpoint or matter of doctrine is to charge, “That is an EXTRME view!” An effective tool for poisoning people against a preacher is to claim, “You know, he is an EXTREMIST!” Immediately the dull-witted close their ears to what he says. They make no effort to investigate the Word of God to determine whether it is the truth. All of us need studious minds, desire for truth, willingness to study for ourselves, and fair-mindedness in considering any matter. Above all, we need respect for God’s Book!

Strange But Often True: Some very significant factors enter into this matter of irresponsible use of words, “He is just an extremist.”

- Somehow, it is ALWAYS the other fellow who is extreme – NEVER the speaker.
- Frequently it is used by very “pious” men as a weapon to destroy another – as a prejudicial epithet.
- Often the speaker may not be overly concerned with the basic question of right and wrong. Yet it is better to be extremely right by following the truth than to be extremely wrong by rejecting it.
- It may sometimes just be a self-protective device used by a person who is mortally afraid that HE may be identified with the extremists. Perish the thought! So in accusing the other brother of extremism he implies – for his own safety – “I certainly am not like that. I am no extremist.”

Not Necessarily So:

No one doubts that a man CAN be an extremist, but there are definitely some things that are NOT to be considered as marks of an extremist. If they are, the Bible is full of extremists (including God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the apostles, the prophets, etc.).

Let us observe that:

- One is not an extremist because he insists of divine authority from Christ for teaching and practice. The Holy Spirit requires this (Col. 3:17; Heb. 8:5).
- One is not an extremist because he rejects human traditionalism in religion – even though it may be “common practice of the brethren.” Jesus denounced such Matt. 15:6-9.
- One is not an extremist because he refuses to encourage false teaching and teachers in any way (2John 9-11). Fellowship with God is at stake here.
- One is not an extremist because he publically challenges men to give authority for their practices. Jesus did (Matt. 21:24-27).
- One is not an extremist because he is willing to meet another in public encounter (that is before an audience) and challenge a brother for his departure from the truth. Paul did so (Gal. 2:11-14; Acts 15:1-2).
- One is not an extremist because he calls the names of men who teach the churches error and cause digression. Paul sets the example for this (2Tim. 1:15, 2:15-18).
- One is not an extremist because he presses the truth with vigorous contention for the faith. The apostles did and we are instructed to do so (Jude 3; 1Thes. 2:1-2).
- One is not an extremist because he refuses to back away from the thick of a fight for truth. Paul says God has not given us “the spirit of fear” (cowardice) (2Tim. 1:7-8). A gospel preacher should be ashamed to be a coward.

- One is not an extremist because he teaches faithful Christians to mark and avoid brethren who teach contrary to apostolic doctrine. This is demanded (Rom. 16:17-18).
- One is not an extremist simply because his teaching causes division. Jesus' sword – the word of God – does some disturbing and dividing (Matt. 10:34-35).

Certainly not all division is laudable. Some of it is deplorable and sinful. It is always sinful to divide people by the preaching of error. On the other hand, division brought about by the proclamation of TRUTH – division that results when some men take their stand upon a “thus saith the Lord” and others rally to their human traditions – is to be expected. It was so in New Testament days. It is true today. Men are OBLIGATED to teach the truth. And men are OBLIGATED to separate themselves from error (Rom. 16:17-18; 2Cor. 6:14-18).

The Real Concern:

The real concern of every Christian should be to determine TRUTH. If one searches the Scriptures Acts 17:11 and learns that a thing is taught of God, the truth is EXTREMELY right, and he must believe it, regardless of what others may say or do. To refuse to believe it simply because others may consider it to be extreme is to dishonor the Author of Truth. When problems arise and when questions are raised about any matter, our interest must lie in the Word of God as an infallible, all-sufficient standard of correct faith and practice. As was stated before: it is better to be extremely right by following the truth than to be extremely wrong by rejecting it (East Florence Contender, Nov. 1963).

The Safe Channel

"...That we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting..." (Eph. 4:14). "But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2Tim. 3:13)

High waves on the sea were giving a ship great difficulty as it was being slowly guided into a rocky harbor. The Captain of the ship standing on the bow with binoculars was carefully watching every rock that intruded out of the water. One of the passengers being sorely frightened came to the Captain and said, "Sir, do you know where all the rocks are?" The Captain answered, "No, I don't know where all the rocks are." The passenger replied, "If you don't know where all the rocks are, what's to keep us from shipwreck?" The Captain answered, "I know where the safe channel is."

Likewise, regarding the religions of our time, we don't need to know where all the rocks are. There are hundreds, even thousands, of false doctrines being taught and practiced today, and we don't need to familiarize ourselves with them, nor waste our time studying them. After using up a lifetime in acquainting ourselves with them, evil men would only have that many more for us to learn. However, we do need to know where the safe channel is. We need to be thoroughly acquainted with the safe channel (the Holy Scriptures) so that we can follow in the Way that leads to life.