

# Gospel holds the cure for extremism

**B**laise Pascal said something that has always troubled me. He said "Men (women) never delight in doing evil as much as if they can do it for religious reasons." (*Pensees*) What a chilling thought.

Pascal had in mind the extremism he saw around him by which cruel people did harm to other people while they visualized the advancement of a religious goal by such acts. But evil acts are evil acts, regardless of the reasons we claim to justify them. It is fortunate for us that this 16th-century Christian, Blaise Pascal, called the terrible bluff of unrighteousness that wears a religious mask.

How can such things happen to us, and what is the cure? Extremism is a human condition of the soul that happens as a result of fear and the loss of hope. Fear and loss of hope happen when our confidence shifts away from the goodness and faithfulness of God. In the loneliness and dryness of that disastrous shift, an odd sort of arrogance takes over our personalities, so that they are not checked and balanced by the Gospel of Jesus Christ as Savior Lord.

We overrate and over-interpret our own understanding of certain narrow themes so that they become for us more certain than they deserve to be, and by that narrow standard we judge other people as our friends or foes. Everything then becomes very definite, and there is no room for complexity or the possibility of our own misunderstanding. This is the arrogance of the soul that causes us to harm everything we touch.

Extremism of every kind is one of the harsh winds that



## From Your Minister

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blows across the world's landscape today. Terrorists explain their acts with religious reasons in many parts of the world today, so that religion is joined together with tribalism and racism to justify harm done to people who are feared.

On Feb. 7, 1993, in a special study of what the New York Times called worldwide "ethnic wars," 48 different conflicts in places such as Azerbaijan, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, even Fiji, were surveyed. We understand the dangers of extremism in our own lives. Anyone who has experienced domestic violence or riots or clashes of advocacy groups knows firsthand about the arrogance that results from fear and the loss of hope.

What is the cure? C.S. Lewis said that the "best cure for bad literature is a healthy diet of good literature." I believe that the same truth is the best and most realistic answer for the harm caused by all extremisms. We need a healthy relationship with Jesus Christ that will give us that mixture of faithfulness to truth and generosity of love that are the marks of biblical righteousness.

The Gospel of Christ creates the quality and depth of hope that makes it possible for us to be models of hope in the complicated society where we live. The only way cultures and people change is by seeing for themselves the durability and inner power of goodness at work in practical examples. These models of hope, in which ordinary people show in living situations that grace is more powerful than hatred, become for real people in real places the influence that really changes our lives and behavior.

Here is where we come in. As Christians, we have a person-to-person, model-of-hope strategy that really works in the desperate places where people have lost their hope. We have from the Gospel an intrinsic modesty and mellowness that is one of the greatest marks of discipleship; according to St. Paul, "Let all people see your moderation (gentleness); the Lord is nearby." (Phil. 4)

When people around us see the stable and down-to-earth humility that comes from the Gospel, they themselves are quieted and slowed down long enough to learn the source of hope. All of this is possible because the Lord is nearby.

There is one scene in the *Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis that I love as much as any other; that is the grand ride of Susan and Lucy on Aslan's back just after the great golden lion has defeated death and despair at the stone table. There is no need to really be afraid or permanently afraid when we are on Aslan's back, and that safe place is the cure for every fear and every reason for the loss of hope.