Full of grace and truth?

(I'm aware that this essay is far from a cogently argued treatise, but that reflects my ongoing struggle to think it all out, and so any help anyone can offer would be much appreciated. Thanks.)

Let me start on firm ground... If God came to earth, what would he look like? Answer, he *did* come to earth, and we do know what he was like: *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* (John 1:14) And how absolutely wonderful it would be if every Christian was 'full of grace and truth'!

In an effort to be a little more like Jesus, I have recently been re-reading (for about the fourth time in 8/10 years) Yancey's brilliant 1997 book *What's so amazing about grace?* – I wanted to see if it had anything that would speak into my new-found Trinitarian/relational approach to God. It does. Grace is all about loving relationships.

Yancey tells us how, as a youngster among the Southern Baptists of the USA, it was impressed upon him that the Bible teaches that certain things are wrong: drinking and smoking, of course, but also make-up and jewellery, hair length of boys, skirt length for girls, not reading any Sunday newspapers or playing sport on the Sabbath... and the list went on. But those Christians really believed that those things were wrong, and Yancey says that at Bible college they tried to justify from the Scriptures that they were wrong.

He also tells, very powerfully, of his friendship with Mel Smith, who was gay, and how he tried to let grace and truth inform their relationship. He felt that Mel was wrong in what he was doing, but he stuck with him, as a friend, through thick and thin. And this was at a time when gay pride marches were opposed by groups of placard-carrying Christians who shouted slogans that I certainly won't repeat here – you can read the book for yourself.

Today, I have questions only, not answers, but as I've said, we need to be faithfully questioning each other and the Scriptures; we need to be challenging one another's assumed ideas (prejudices?). That's not to prove that someone else is wrong but rather to be willing to change our own views for the sake of love, of grace, and yes, of truth.

So my first question is this. Is it ever the job of the church to tell society at large what's right and what's wrong? Yes, Jesus tells us that we should be light (illuminating) and salt (a preservative), but *how* should we do that? One of the major difficulties we have had over the past few centuries is that, in countries where Christianity is in the majority, we've been able to influence the moral life of society for what we see as the better. In the UK, our legal system is based on Christian morality, but what about now that we're not in the majority?!

The very real danger is that the church – and therefore by implication the individual Christian – is seen as telling the rest of society what's right and wrong – moralising and being judgemental. I've often complained that the media, films, TV, etc. 'unfairly' seem to portray Christians as biggoted and judgemental. But is it *actually* unfair? Or is that just what people genuinely observe about us?!

But maybe there are issues on which we **should** take a stand, and so my second question is, how do we decide whether any given issue really is right or wrong?

For example, I'm pleased and proud that Christians were so prominent in the fight to abolish slavery, but ironically, one of the books I've read (sorry, I can't remember which!) pointed out that when Christians led that fight, they tried to argue from Scripture that it was wrong. But actually, that's a very difficult line to support. True, the Bible teaches that slave owners should treat their slaves well, and that although slaves should gain their freedom if they can, otherwise they should respect their masters and work hard, even when they're not observed. But it never actually says that slavery is wrong.

And it's interesting, isn't it, that something so obviously morally wrong as slavery wasn't clearly condemned by Jesus or by the early church?! Maybe that's because Jesus didn't actually come to teach us what is right and wrong? Maybe he came to teach us the way of love and grace so that we can **move forward,** changing society's accepted morality to enable us more easily all to live in love with one another.

To take another issue, what about chastising children? In the past, some Christians have argued that the Bible clearly teaches "spare the rod and spoil the child". But psychological research has clearly shown the negative effects of corporal punishment on children. Does God want us to ignore this research or, rather, to be willing to change our views?

I've given all these examples to suggest that claiming "the Bible clearly teaches" is not that straightforward; it depends, of course, **how** we interpret Scripture. For example, doesn't Paul clearly teach: *Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him?* (1 Cor 11:14) Yes, we say, but that is relative to the culture of the time. OK, so what about *If [women] want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.* (1 Cor 11:35) Culturally conditioned? Yes, I think it is, but how do we decide **which** bits are culturally conditioned? So I for one am much more reticent to say to anyone, "the Bible clearly teaches...".

Now, to tread on really difficult and potentially divisive ground, what about something that, as Christians, we've always been taught was morally wrong – homosexual practice? Taking on from the example of chastising children, there's plenty of research (although we hardly need it) to show that ignoring and/or repressing same-sex feelings has caused great psychological harm to many people.

The important thing is that, although Yancey thought that what Mel was doing was wrong, he still supported him as a friend, in every way he could. (Actually, I'd be very interested to know Yancey's view 20 years on, whether he still holds quite so strongly the wrongness of homosexual practice.) Personally, I have hitherto assumed, unquestioningly, that homosexuality was wrong, but that was not from any careful Bible study – just from personal feelings and prejudice – but I no longer hold that strong view. I'm really not sure what I think, but it is certainly not, for me, a 'the Bible clearly teaches' issue.

Father, please give me more grace and truth... especially grace.

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