

Column

The idea of the Christian gentleman seems to have gone the way of steam locomotives and visits on the front porch. One of the last to contend with such an idea was Andrew Lytle (1902-1995), celebrated editor of *The Sewanee Review*, raconteur and critiquer of culture. Speaking of the Christian gentlemen he once said: “He will keep private things private and public things public.”

Apparently, Jerry Falwell, Jr., had missed this pearl of wisdom when earlier this month he posted on social media a picture of himself with a woman not his wife, both showing their “pregnant bellies”. As it turned out, no great sin -- with perhaps the exception of a breach of modesty and good taste – had been committed. It was just a group of friends, his wife included, clowning around and having a good time at a party.

Nevertheless, lack of discretion, not keeping private things private, costs him his job. A few days later he was forced to step down as president of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va. The writer of Proverbs wisely observed: “A prudent [man] foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished.”

Mr. Falwell is certainly not a simple man. By all accounts, he has done brilliantly as the leader of the university his father founded. More than that, in recent days he has spoken forcefully and cogently on moral issues facing the nation. Nevertheless, in this instance he acted as a simple man might act, and so have we all at one time or another.

The lesson is to foresee evil and avoid even the appearance of it. “Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves,” Jesus tells His disciples (Matthew 10:16). In these days of social media, Jesus’ words have special relevance and urgency.

One final thought involves how Christians are to respond to human weakness and folly. In our creeds we say: “I believe in the forgiveness of sins,”, yet we do not always practice what we profess. Instead of picking up the injured, we leave them, perhaps gleefully, lying on the highway and join the world in trampling over them.

Such behaviour is an offense to the Gospel we say we believe. We should rather take our lead from Jesus who was always eager upon the return of a prodigal to forgive and restore.

This too is part of the idea of the Christian gentleman or, for the ladies, the Christian 'gentlewoman'.

*O GOD, who declarest thy almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity; Mercifully grant unto us such a measure of thy grace, that we, running the way of thy commandments, may obtain thy gracious promises, and be made partakers of thy heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(Collect for Trinity 11, Book of Common Prayer)*

The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.