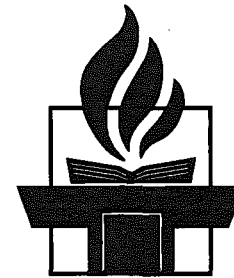


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# *The Church: Living in the Present World Under the Cross of Christ*

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**J**esus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm" (John 18:36).

## **The Kingdom Question**

Do you long for a stronger economy? For safer cities and neighborhoods? For better education? More integrity in the realm of politics? More respect for traditional values in our society? Greater respect for Christians? More godly laws based on biblical texts? Cleaner television and movies? An end to abortion on demand, pornography, homosexual practice and the promotion of this lifestyle in public? Less violence? In short, a better world in which to live and to rear your children and grandchildren?

Do these somewhat represent your hopes for the future? If so, why? Do you believe we Christians have a right to expect these things from society? That the Lord even expects His people to demand them? And if they are not given, to fight for them?

The Lord promises new heavens and a new earth. To long for them is normal and even right. But what exactly do we have a right to expect while we remain in this world in its present fallen condition—besides animosity, hostility, and tribulation? Any of the things mentioned above? If so, on what basis (John 15:19)?

## **The Early Church**

How do our national problems hinder any one from faith, love, repentance, and from pursuing a relationship with the living God? The early church had all of our national woes times ten, and was only stronger for it. Not only that, but they exerted no energy other than fervent prayer and

sincere love to effect a change.

Did they place their hope in a righteous Rome, a more godly Galatia, or a Christian Corinth? Or was their hope solely “reserved in heaven ... (and) ready to be revealed in the last time”(1 Peter 1:4-5)? And regardless of how perfectly they practiced this, it is still the calling to which we are called. The world and its need for reformation is not our calling, no more than reforming Egypt was Israel’s calling in the days of Moses.

#### **Battle Lines**

Even as I write, the “Christian Right” is drawing battle lines in the sand, setting themselves against the President, the “media elite,” liberals in Congress, and all the special interest groups known to man. They are leading tens of thousands of well-intentioned Christians into a virtual mine-field of fear, mistrust, and intolerance, bordering on hatred.<sup>1</sup> This is inexcusable, and is going to backfire with devastating results. It is especially odious in light of the words and lives of Jesus and His apostles. Our calling to be salt and light isn’t even remotely related to the vociferous attacks being clamored about these days in the name of what’s “right and decent.” Proponents of this seem to be Americans first and Christians second, do they not?

The cause of Christ is of a spiritual nature first, and an influential nature second. It is spiritual in its essence and should today, like in early days, move forward on its knees with its soul open heavenward, guided by inward precepts like unconditional love, patience, humility, peaceableness, compassion, and the like. And although we can never tolerate evil in any form, in our midst or in our hearts, neither can we demand that the world be anything other than what it is.<sup>2</sup> We have no directive from God, much less a mandate, to try and “stiff-arm” this world, its systems and people, into conformity with God’s ways, appearing like the kingdom of

light while their hearts remain in the kingdom of darkness! To militantly and aggressively take on the world with an eye to change it, seems to me to display a naïveté as to this world’s nature.

#### **Light in the Darkness**

Someone then says, “But we are to do good deeds.” I say, “Yes, of course!” They say, “Like working to end pornography, and such.” I say, “Not necessarily.” Even though doing good includes a wide variety of activities, they must be ones that reflect not only the character of God, but also His purposes, no matter how noble the activities seem. “But surely God wants pornography and abortion to end!” Of course He does. He wants all men, women, boys and girls to know the truth, and to be set free from all burdens and bondages.

To be lights in the darkness is one thing. To raise the standard of righteousness with our lives is one thing. To speak out with a lump in our throat and a tear in our eye about God calling men, women, boys, and girls to restoration and peace through repentance is one thing. To intercede in prayer for the Lord to have His will done on earth as it is in heaven is one thing. But to pursue a course of change for the betterment of mankind in its rebellious state is quite a different thing, and will bring little, if any, help from the God of the Bible.

To work to clean up society’s filth, like pornography, child abuse, homosexuality, and any of their evil cousins, is like trying to clean up the coastline of a Valdez-like oil spill with a bottle of Windex and a sponge, while the Alaska Pipeline gushes huge surges of oil into the black deep. The evils in society exist because of the evil in society—the root producing the fruit. And to fight these things, especially with the world’s political and legal systems, is to pull at the strands of abandoned webs and ignore the spiders that spun them.

*The whole world lies in the power of the evil one* (1 John 5:19).

All the *systems* of all the *societies* on earth are in the palm of the Devil's hand, to be played like a vile symphony. As Satan said to our Lord Jesus, "All this domain and its glory ... has been handed over to me" (Luke 4:5-6). The Lord refused him then, and we should still refuse him now. We are not here to moralize or transform the world into goodness today any more than they were in the first century. To show mercy and kindness is our place. To stand for the truth and pronounce the judgment of God on wickedness is imperative. But know this: Satan and his hordes have been building huge tarpits of lies and deception throughout history. Their goal has always been to obscure and counterfeit the truth about the Living God: who He is and what He is doing. And it is only by His kindness and mercy that anyone is ever delivered from these tarpits. We are here as testimonies of and trophies to the truth about who God is, and as instruments of restoration and intercession for the Lord to use as He chooses.

*You are from God little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world* (1 John 4:4).

We are "of God," and thus we are no longer of this world. Let us wrestle to keep free from becoming entangled again in its yoke of bondage. Let us overcome the pull of the world back into itself, even though it appeals to our desire to help and our just longing for a better place. Let's wait patiently for the place "reserved in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:4), not striving for a caricature in the here and now.

#### Nonpoliticos

It could be said that the motives behind much of this political posturing in our day may be something less than pure. Much of what is going on seems to be men and women seeking their own personal interests in the name of Christ.

But at best, at very best, what's going on has more to do with things that are of interest to man, in his present political and social state, than things that interest God. He gains very little, if anything, through all of this political dust stirring.

So let's be very careful in our pursuits. The Lord calls His people *out* of this world. To try to make the world a better place is noble, but *it is not our calling*. The world system is condemned—don't be caught in it, especially trying to make it more palatable. Or like Brer Rabbit, you'll find you've only been punching a tarbaby.

In my judgment, political activity of almost any sort is paled by spiritual activity of virtually every sort. Perhaps you say, "Why not both?" I answer, because they are possibly very close to being mutually exclusive except under the rarest of circumstances. To be spiritually active is, however, to be socially very active. This is eloquently spoken of on almost every page of the New Testament and early church history, focusing upon people as the victims, not the systems which are ruled by men and ideas aligned against God and His spiritual kingdom which is unseen to natural eyes. Our Lord Jesus, the apostles, the prophets, and the saints of the early church exemplified this with every fiber of their being. Can we improve on their testimony?

Walk in the deeds "which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). Deeds like showing hospitality to those who can not repay; bearing no grudges; taking no offense; not being vindictive to any, but showing kindness; being forgiving toward all; sharing our possessions with those in need; being peacemakers where relationships are fragmented and broken; exhibiting fairness to all and expecting it from no one; being gentle to the brokenhearted; loving one another in the church family; not becoming entangled in the world's affairs; seeking the kingdom of God first and foremost in all that we do; seeking those things which are from above; keeping our hearts free

from love of the things of this world; and having our concerns coincide with the revealed will of our Father in heaven.

*Let your light shine before men, in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:16).*

### **Bringing Change**

Why are we instead setting ourselves in battle array against men and women whom God loves? Followers of Christ are of a completely different realm. Why such a fixation on this country, its politics, its news, its tiny happenings? What has so entangled us, deflecting us from our high and holy calling? Why are there popular magazines, TV shows, and even Christian newspapers, so-called, all spewing forth bad news, filled with the sordid things of this world rather than with the things that encourage, bless, comfort and guide; talking about what “they” (the bad guys) are doing to “us” (the good guys) with the same degree of bias and the same tone and attitudes that “the other guys” are accused of? Paul tells us, “Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; for it is disgraceful to even speak of the things which are done by them in secret” (Eph. 5:11-12).

Please don’t misunderstand. I don’t like what’s going on in our generation either; it’s repulsive to my own soul, but this is not my kingdom. I must not be surprised that the kingdoms of man produce such, for this is the nature of such kingdoms. If this world’s kingdoms were my own, then I too would fight! This is abnormal, in terms of the church’s better moments in history, for a Christian people to be so absorbed in the affairs of state.

It’s the *obsession* that concerns me, not the *involvement*, per se. We must concern ourselves with things that concern our Lord Jesus and not be caught up in things that concern merely the natural man. Listen to our Lord warn Peter, who

was dangerously close to trying to deflect the Lamb of God from His purpose: “But He turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s’” (Matt. 16:23).

Could He also say this to many of us today? Was it His goal to Christianize Rome or Judaism? On the contrary, He set out to begin a new culture—one that would be His hands and feet, mouth and heart, in the very middle of Satan’s lap. This new culture is His body on the earth. And as His body, we are to effect changes on the earth. As He said, “Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18). Terrestrial change is not only the fruit of a godly life, it is the very will of God.<sup>3</sup> We are called to participate with Him in bringing about changes in this world, changes that go far beyond even our natural sphere of influence, to affect the courses of nations or that affect someone on the other side of the earth. The key is being *still* enough to hear, *close* enough to understand, and *free* enough to obey.

### **Means of Change**

When you come to the world’s negotiating table, you will play by its rules. We’re called to love, they operate by selfishness; we’re called to fairness and equity, they operate by “whatever it takes to win”; we’re called to patience, mercy and meekness, they operate on “intimidation, manipulation and gaining an advantage with words.” That’s why believers will always be treated unfairly by the media, the police, the courts—in short, the whole world. Expect nothing less and nothing more.

Let’s be very careful not to be so earthly minded we’re of no heavenly use. Paul gave us good counsel when he wrote Timothy:

First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:1-4).

The Lord calls us to *pray* for peace in the land that the Gospel may have free course. This is the will of God. He is building an assembly in the heavenlies, a city for all eternity. He is not trying to bring morality, justice or happiness to a people who hate Him. But He will give all He has and is to the people who love Him.

We must not major on earthly means of change and minor on heavenly means. The omnipotent hand of God moves in response to prayer alone. If your experience of effective prayer is lacking, ask the Lord. He will guide you to sources of encouragement in this. The beauty of prayer is its authority with simplicity. It takes the world with all of its complexity and resistance out of the loop; it even takes us out of the loop! We deal directly with Someone completely trustworthy, leaving it with Him. He then takes over. And who knows better? After all, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:9).

Have we forgotten, or never really understood, that our battle is with the unseen forces of darkness? That weapons such as truth, prayer, and fervent love are not mere adornments, but flaming instruments of mammoth proportions when wielded with authority and experience? But our spiritual weapons haven't seemed to work so well. They've seemed less than effective against our invisible enemies. So what have we done? We have changed tactics, trading away God's weapons, which are not the weapons of the world (2 Cor. 10: 4), for weapons more familiar to us that are earthly,

the methods of the world. But is the problem really that our spiritual weapons are ineffective? Or is it that it requires uncompromised, spiritual people to wield spiritual weapons? We have swapped one for the other, like we're at some heavenly flea market and can pick and choose which we would prefer. But the Lord prefers that we "put on the full armor of God" so that we can fight the fight of faith. After all, He is the eternal commander in chief.

#### Gnats and Camels

Many today can be characterized by Jesus' words, "You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel" (Matt. 23:24), attacking the armies of pornography, gay rights, liberal politics, Planned Parenthood, the National Education Association and the National Endowment for the Arts. While on the other hand, the armies of materialism, nationalism, racism, bitterness and religious pride attack them from behind, taking an untold number of casualties. To be sure, some see *both* camps as enemies. And on the one hand, I applaud this. However, I see the second camp as having a far more detrimental effect on the *church* than the first (just as the Amalekites attacked Israel from behind, wreaking tremendous havoc). And the flurry still seems to surround the first camp far more than the second.

Now you may think it unfair for me to refer to pornography and the rest as "gnats," because they are heinous, will be judged severely by God, and should be exposed as evil today. But I don't believe we should be struggling against these things *like* a man wrestling with an opponent. There are much weightier matters given to us to wrestle with. I believe we shouldn't "strain at the gnats," but rather pronounce the judgment of God on them publicly, labor in prayer for the will of God and the hearts of men privately, and minister faithfully to those who get caught up in and crushed by the gears of their evil machinery. I say, at the risk

of oversimplifying, this is our responsibility to these blemishes and evil spots on the earth.

To speak out against the wrongs and wickednesses of governments and individuals is right, it is Christian, courageous and prophetic in the best sense. But why all the fervor for change? Did the Lord or the apostles ever adopt this stance? Where in the Gospels do we see this approach? Jesus may have addressed wrongs, but He never sought to redress them, except by laying down His life as the firstborn of a new generation in order “to bring many sons to glory.” The world is passing away. He came to begin a new creation. Romans 8:28 is one of our favorite verses—remember that it says, “to those who are called according to *His* purpose.”

#### Home, Sweet Home?

Why are so many working so hard to make so much difference in a world “under judgment”? Do many think this is our calling: to repatriate and reform a condemned world? We have been “transferred . . . to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14).

Or is it that we have become too much at home in the world? Have we become so at ease with the good things it has to offer that we have lost a vision for the kingdom of God? Have we made *detente* with this world in spite of the warnings that it is our enemy? We must see the world for what it is, and not become so comfortable and at home in it that we fail to recognize its true character. Jesus said that when He returns to bring judgment on this world, people will be eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage—I might add: working, vacationing, retiring, building, pursuing dreams, and on and on and on. Are any of these things wrong? No more so than eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. It is the spirit in which they are carried out. On the one hand, we have made peace with the

good of the world, while on the other hand, we seem to be at war with its evil, trying to bring that in line, so it too may be good. If this were the purpose of God, why is it so foreign to the pages of Scripture? “Do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God” (James 4:4)? The judgment of God is on both the bad and the good of this world. “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15).

What is it that drives, motivates, even compels one to look to the courts, to Congress or the White House for our future? And even to call for a minority status for Christians! What moves us to knock on doors for politicians while the church of the living God lies desolate and in ruins? Have we not become so “entangled” (2 Tim. 2:4) in this life and its affairs that we cannot “please the one who enlisted him as a soldier”? Perhaps a current inventory of our treasure chest is in order.

*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also* (Matt. 6:21).

We are prophets, servants of the Most High God, ambassadors of Christ, agents of reconciliation to bring men back to God, not movers and shakers of society. “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:20).

In my estimation, Christians today seem to be trying to rewrite the New Testament. When I read the New Testament, and then look at Christianity today, it’s like going to see the movie version of a masterfully written novel. The substance, the genius, the fullness, are missing, only the skeleton remains, with but a few barely recognizable parts. Everything else is changed for the worse, for the paltry.<sup>4</sup>

We, the people of God, seem more concerned with the sanctity of the American dollar than with the spiritual bankruptcy of the Lord’s people; more concerned with America’s image in the world than with God’s glory on the

earth; more concerned with outward morality in America than with the spiritual adultery in Christians' hearts.

*"My brethren, these things ought not to be this way"* (James 3:10).

Our need is not to get prayer back in the schools so much as it is to get prayer back in the churches! "If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth" (Col. 3:1-2).

#### **Salt and Light**

Lest anyone think I am secretly advocating monastic living as opposed to living in the world, let me say that nothing could be further from the truth. We are salt, and as such our godly presence and lives hinder and retard the rotting of society, and we give it flavor from on high. We are light, exposing the deeds of darkness by speaking the truth. The apostle writes, "Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God" (1 Peter 4:11). In this way we light the way home. And we are intercessors, joining with God in seeing His eternal purposes realized on the earth.

How we pursue all this, though vital, is not within the scope of this writing. But the necessity of doing it is beyond debate. We should all know we are to

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life (Phil. 2:14-16a).

And how we live out His calling for us, though a personal matter, in a very critical sense is something in which we must be open to the scrutiny of the whole body of Christ as to what we believe is important and how we go about

pursuing it.

Otherwise why all the corrective letters in the New Testament?

#### **Winning the Battle**

This we know. But look at us. We have allowed the world to enter the sacred places of our hearts. We have become joined in our hearts to far too many things to ignore it any longer. So much so, that our salt has become tasteless (Luke 14:34), and the light that is in us has become darkness (Matt. 6:23).

*So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions* (Luke 14:33).<sup>5</sup>

Rewriting the New Testament to fit our unsanctioned agendas may seem to be too strong an accusation, but to me it appears to be what's going on in most corners of the church in North America. We seem almost bewitched by the notion that our government is taking away our "freedoms," while we've barely begun to live in the freedom bought for us at Calvary! And although this nation is taking away privileges we've enjoyed for decades, we have become used to them, perhaps spoiled by them, even thinking they are our rights.

Let's not be mistaken about this: We are completely free in Him, regardless of who or what is in power in any government anywhere on this or any other planet! We can do the will of God and complete the work of God under any regime within any society.

Again, please don't misunderstand. I love the freedoms I've enjoyed since 1950, when I was born. In the natural realm, I wish they would last forever! But what does that have to do with Christianity, the Gospel, and the God of eternity? We must end our idolatrous love affair with the national state of America.

We must become more concerned with life from a divine



perspective. I do not say this to the exclusion of natural things. We are on the earth and are called to work, relate to one another, be merciful as our Father is merciful, show His compassion and kindness at every opportunity and be responsible. The question is, as always, "Where is our heart?" The rain falls and the sun shines on sinner and saint alike. We are to show kindness to all men regardless of their doctrine or politics. But both the world and the body are under judgment. His heartbeat is for the bride He has chosen for His Son, the house He is building for Himself with living stones. We must be about our Father's business.

We have publicly erred unwittingly. No matter. Just as the Lord's call to five of the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 was to repent, even so today it appears that He is calling perhaps five out of every seven Christians in the West to have a change in their perspective, especially regarding their true loyalties to the things of earth and the kingdom of our Christ. Just as the Lord does not call us to a cloistered life, neither does He call us to clash with men and women in the streets, in the courts, or anywhere else. We are warned in Ephesians 6:12 that the battle is unseen, to be waged in the spirit, cautiously and respectfully (as with any powerful enemy).

Though we be harassed, mistreated, maligned, mistrusted, misrepresented, dragged into court, thrown into jail—all unjustly—the battle is the Lord's. And His battles are neither fought nor won in the courts, at the polls, or in the press ... only His way.

As J. S. Carroll wrote many years ago, "All of His battles are won in prayer. Ministry is merely the gathering of the spoils of war."

#### Conclusion

I have three simple propositions I think must be prayerfully considered by thoughtful and earnest believers in our

generation. They are:

1. I believe we are too interested in changing society, specifically the part that offends our personal values and sensibilities.

2. Mistaking this interest in changing society and its values for our Christian calling, we more often than not employ sinful man's *means* of change, because the battles are ours and not the Lord's.

3. Finally, I believe all of this is because we have joined our hearts to the idols and darlings of this perishing world order. Our need is to repent, turn to the Lord with a whole heart, and forsake everything but Him in order that we might lay hold of that for which we were laid hold of in saving grace and mercy.

Are you *still* enough to listen, *close* enough to understand, and *free* enough to obey? Let us be a militant church once again, down on our knees before the true sovereign of heaven and earth.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Jesus taught that hatred is murder of the heart, i.e., to hate someone is tantamount to wishing he did not exist, therefore mental murder. This seems to be a very common attitude among many Christians today toward secularists and humanists, whom we are plainly told to love even if they are our enemies, for the Lord sends both sunshine and rain to them as well as us.
- 2 The terms "evil" and "wicked" in the Scriptures have strong overtones of self-will and selfishness.
- 3 We are to so live that our presence will be as "salt" and "light" in our communities, both preserving from moral decay and exposing the unfruitful deeds of darkness because of our moral purity, which serves as light in a dark place.
- 4 In other words, shrivelled, withered, or deflated.

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- 5 To “give up” everything means to place something away from us, not permitting it to become part of us; to separate ourselves from it. This is different from His words to the “rich young ruler,” whom Jesus told to “sell all that you have.” Here it is to give it up in heart, to break with it emotionally, to no longer be joined to it.

**Author**

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