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Too Little Too Late

The Irony of the Evangelical Recovery of a Worldview and Implications for the Christian Community

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Evangelicals "Come Out"

The resurgent political awareness and activism of evangelicals in the 1970s and 80s are now so prevalent that they are hardly newsworthy. The coming out of the closet into the world of politics, law and social policy is nearly complete — at least rhetorically. Christian colleges eagerly market their worldly savvy in business, government and law. Television programs and newsletters abound keeping evangelicals solicited and aware of crises, legislative affairs, and the cultural signs of the times. One doesn't hear so much anymore of the criticisms of the pious that "they were so heavenly minded they were no earthly good."

Surely separatist remnants continue to creep among us, but in the main we've left that world and eagerly become neo-Calvinists committed to God's work in all precincts. College students committed to Christ now are as apt to seek admission to law school, or to work in a politician's Washington office, as to sign up for missions to Africa.

To be sure, there have been problems with the Christian's newly found cultural agenda. The engagement has often been reactive rather than principled. It has lacked a sound theology of the state of law, and been merely an impassioned jeremiad against perceived ills. It has often confused conservative economic or political theory (a sort of evangelical political correctness) with biblical mandates. We have suffered often at the hands of religious media and financially driven agenda which has too often sought slogans and symbols rather than substance. Politicians eager for constituents and lobbyists seeking allies have too often managed to create a bizarre amalgam of issues under labels of a "Christian Coalition" — with little spiritual principle binding legislative goals. At times the political renaissance has been little more than an internal conversation within a subset of evangelicals rather than real engagement with secularists, politicians, jurists, and others.

Yet for all the problems which have plagued the new evangelical engagement, I am convinced that the shift to a public agenda is theologically, culturally, and morally mandated — a more holistic reflection of biblical thought than the personal piety which seemed the exclusive mark of evangelicalism in the American frontier. The moral crises of our day, the relegation of the church by cultural leaders to the backwaters, and a

recovery of a more reformed theology have properly fueled this engagement with the principalities and powers.

No Halt to the Slide!

At the risk, however, of throwing a damper on the revival party, it appears increasingly clear to me that for all the talk and Christian think tanks, the culture moves relentlessly and recklessly toward a Romans 1 crisis, an inexorable descent from a rejection of God to the basest animalism.

Consider, for example, education. For all the books on the need for moral reform in public education, the engagement of parents with school boards, alarmist newsletters, legal defenders, and tragic anecdotes of educational malfeasance — are schools reversing the trends toward secularist, materialist, valueless emphasis?

Consider the media. For all the wringing of hands from Tupelo, or threats of boycotts, are movies or TV programs demonstrating signs of repentance? Does an hour's MTV signal moral enlightenment? Do labels disclosing rock lyrics witness to moral resurgence?

Consider life. Despite the warm appeal that "life is a beautiful choice," has the abortion culture been stemmed?

Consider the American family. Has the plea for responsible sex, the celebration of "promise keepers," or the targeting of dead-beat dads provided us with a vision of sexuality and family life which provides a nurturing environment for children?

I think clearly not. There is not a moral recovery. There is no turning. There is no breaking dawn. There is, in fact, increasing darkness.

As a law professor, I am struck by the radical dissonance of the modern generation from the values and norms which shaped America and once were normative in western civilization. The shift is apparent in the *a priori* assumption of modern students that moral questions are at most private, and for many, mere products of socio-cultural forces which reflect the dysfunctional biases of western civilization. Christian ideas are not simply rejected, they are irrelevant — an intrusive and divisive element. I see no indication that the intellectual culture is having second thoughts about its positivism. The American university's hobby of debunking religious value and moral absolutes continues unabated, while of course it substitutes its own idols which it worships with intensity.

No, I am afraid that candor demands an admission that our situation is like that of a Jeremiah or Ezekiel who, while declaring the faithful Word of God, hold no illusions that the people will repent. He is called to deliver the Word of God but with no promise of success. His listeners are like thorns and briar patches. In fact, the promise is not deliverance, but judgment.

The Tragic Irony

This is the tragic irony of the modern dilemma for evangelicals enthused by a relevant Gospel. Just now, when we have finally discovered a more faithful biblical witness to the world and our culture — when we are prepared to take the Gospel into the streets, markets, board rooms and courts — when we have appreciated the implications of doctrines of Creation and Lordship for the reach of the Kingdom, when we are ready to address the arts, science, law, and philosophy in a principled, theologically sound manner — just then we are dismissed, ignored, humored, and sometimes chosen as color-contrast or as a foil in some talk show, but not really a part of the debate, the action. Just when we were *coming out*, we are *shut out*; as we were moving from the sidelines, we are marginalized again.

Having stood on the sidelines during the secularization of education, the de-moralization of much of public life, the adoption of the radical version of separation of church and state, the collapse of the family, the celebration of unbridled freedom, the seduction of our Christian colleges that left them with secular philosophies and pious presidents and deceived donors, the marginalization of Christian intellectual thought, the reign of positivism in philosophy — now, we find our newly introduced wares largely unsold in the marketplace of ideas. Ideas have consequences, Justice Holmes observed, and we are reaping the whirlwind.

What a nasty trick our recovery of biblical worldview has played on us: invited to prepare for the party, we show up — only to be unwelcome.

Why Such Pessimism

I do not succumb to the simplistic pessimism of an earlier generation equipped with end-time charts. Rather, I am pessimistic in the sense I believe the biblical prophets often were — because I believe the overwhelming evidence of evil before us. We are witnesses to the principalities and powers, to the “war” of the dragon on the church pictured in Revelation.

The intimations of hope in the occasional moral moment which squeezes itself into public life — a Forrest Gump film hero, the isolated believer acting effectively in some arena, Philip Johnson’s intellectual challenge to evolutionary dogma, or some judicial ruling permitting some degree of religious freedom — these cannot be seriously taken as signs of a sweeping, godly cultural repentance, or even a mini-revival.

The real signs around us are the insatiable hedonism that marks our public and commercial life, the growing rawness and near paganism of public enter-

tainment, the tragedy of the American marriage, the abandonment of children by parents whose lust for convenience and self-centeredness have left their children functional orphans; the not-so-well masked racism; and the failure of the legal system — both civil and criminal — to provide any vision of truth.

The evidence is not just “out there” among the secular pagans, but inside the Christian community as well. As Os Guinness noted several years ago in *The Gravedigger Files*, it is not just secularism as a philosophy which threatens the church, but the invasive secularist way of choosing, deciding, and living which has captured nearly all of us — a way of living which largely discounts or ignores spiritual and biblical principles.

For all the theoretical talk about a Christian worldview, do Christian families act in demonstrably different ways in vocational choices, handling money, or raising children? I think not. Are Christian young people actually rejecting the sexual permissiveness of the pagan culture? Not if the surveys are any clue.

Are churches acting with moral courage and discipline in the face of the explosion of divorce within Christian families? No. Far more common is the sound of rhetoric not from Scripture but some counseling clinic. Our exceptions have swallowed up our rules.

I am struck with how easily the prevailing cultural views of the good life are uncritically bought by even serious believers. Listen to Christian parents talk about the educational choices for their children — from elementary school to the university. At the law school level, Christians who are often deeply committed and

thoughtful people, instinctively assume that able young people ought to go to the “top” schools. And what does “top” mean? Does it mean a place to think Christianly about law, a place where moral and spiritual principles are “in the game?” Not at all. It is the prestige, the job opportunities that come from such a place which define “quality.” Now, perhaps there are justifications for Christian choices of such prestige schools, but certainly not on the uncritical acceptance of the mythology of the culture about such options. The same is true in almost every arena of life.

Sadly, even evangelicalism has adopted a reductionist Christianity, adjusting theology to accommodate culture. Like some positivist lawyer’s treatment of the Constitution, we have tried to keep the Bible “in tune with the times” and in so doing have written a new document. We have done mentally what Jefferson did physically, cut up our Bibles and pasted together a version we like.

“If you marry the spirit of the age you’ll soon find yourself a widower.”

Dean Inge

—Too Little Too Late, *continued on page 10*

A State of Denial

Where there is great reluctance to accept this view of impending cultural doom, this is our situation.

1. Resilient and Persistent Optimism

One reason we resist the truth of our collapsing culture is the indomitable optimism of the can-do American spirit which too easily replaces a genuine biblical hope with a kind of temporal “light at the end of the tunnel” popular spirituality. It is the “I believe for every drop of rain that falls a flower grows” mentality. No matter what the odds, we shall prevail.

Certainly such optimism, however misplaced or illusory, is socially preferable — at least at parties and churches — to the dour gloominess of doomsdayers. How can churches reach those DINK’s and Yuppies without an upbeat, can-do, self-confident spirit? The tragedy is that this optimism seems rather naked — not much more than a self-help technique for mental health — a sort of whistling while passing the cemetery.

In a recent address to a university commencement, Congressman Henry Hyde — a remarkable person of great integrity and moral commitment — reflected this easy optimism in his suggestion that just as the Berlin wall dramatically fell when the world wondered how it could ever happen, so we are only an election away from changing the decay which has beset our public life. But is that really true? Can recovery be as simple as a change in the lead characters? Is American paganism that thin?

2. Distorted Biblical Confidence — “His Word Will Not Return Void”

Another version of piety tends to discount the impending tragedy — the piety confident in the effectiveness of our Gospel witness. How often have we heard someone insist that all will be well because “His word will not return void” or some other sort of Gospel which sounds very much like we can control history. II Chronicles 7:14 is used as a guarantee that we can control our national destiny. The kernel of truth is that this is well-supported by Scripture within its context, but in its extreme form it smacks of the same defects as the “Gospel of Success” — namely it lacks biblical warrant and historical evidence.

3. Americanism

Another reason perhaps why we find this collapse so difficult to accept is our deeply ingrained sense of the special destiny and covenant character of America with God’s work. Drummed into us from childhood images of pilgrims and Puritans, we have been persuaded of the special spiritual character of America — sometimes even marshaling the language of a New Israel: a chosen people. Add to the Puritan founding,

the great mission thrust of America throughout the world, the moral crusade of WWII, and add America as the protector of Israel — and then a dash of “In God We Trust” and “One Nation Under God” and surely we are God’s people, and He will protect us. Like Israel in the days of Ezekiel and Jeremiah — surely we, His chosen people, possessors of the temple and Word, will not be overrun by pagan Babylon.

The problem with this vision of America is not only that it is a too simple view of history, but also that it seems to embody a rather unbiblical notion that America is essentially good.

And there is just enough truth in this picture to distort our understanding. There have been times in American history of a moral greatness; and her founders were commonly theists with some basic agreed moral principles; and proper leadership can shape a nation’s destiny. But I suspect we are profoundly naive in thinking our spiritual decay is merely like some skin disease, a superficial wart.

Even those aspects of America we love to celebrate in holidays and incorporate into our church services — such as the commitment to freedom — are badly tainted today. The celebration of freedom in the west compared to the repression in the east, is surely tempered by the loss in the west of any sense of the limits of freedom — and the warning seems ignored that “without discipline, freedom doesn’t know what to do with itself.” Freedom in America has meant freedom for the pornographer, the adulterer, the breacher of marriage covenants, and of raw individualism.

4. The Current Comfort and Vitality of our Life

One reason we resist pessimism may be that for many of us, life seems pretty comfortable. We are “at ease in Zion.” Our barns are full, and many of us are building bigger ones. In terms of human comfort, things simply have never been better. We have an abundance of food, entertainment, housing, gadgets. We travel, eat out, get new clothes constantly. In such a world, isn’t it a bit much — conceptually and psychologically — to get all lathered up about some collapsing consensus, or the need to “come out from among them”?

From a biblical perspective, such was often the spirit in Jerusalem. There were prosperous times when words of prophets fell on deaf ears. The prophets could complain of spiritual decay, and of injustice, judicial corruption, commercial dishonesty, and exploitation of the poor. But the dance was too vigorous for anyone to pay much attention.

Our own culture runs precisely such a risk, we who have a stake in it and have done well are especially vulnerable. ■

In the next issue, Professor Buzzard’s concluding thoughts: what’s to be done now.