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Keeping The Faith In a Faithless Age: The Church As The Moral Minority

Thursday, July 15, 2004

“The greatest question of our time,” offered historian Will Durant, “is not communism versus individualism, not Europe versus America, not even East versus the West; it is whether men can live without God.” That question, it now appears, will be answered in our own time.

For centuries the Christian church has been the center of Western civilization. Western culture, government, law, and society were based on explicitly Christian principles. Concern for the individual, a commitment to human rights, and respect for the good, the beautiful, and the true—all of these grew out of Christian convictions and the influence of revealed religion.

All of these, we now hasten to add, are under serious attack. The very notion of right and wrong is now discarded by large sectors of American society. Where it is not discarded, it is often debased. Taking a page out of Alice in Wonderland, modern secularists simply declare wrong, right, and right, wrong.

Quaker theologian D. Elton Trueblood once described America as a “cut flower civilization.” Our culture, he argued, is cut off from its Christian roots like a flower cut at the stem. Though the flower will hold its beauty for a time, it is destined to wither and die.

When Trueblood spoke those words over two decades ago, the flower could still be seen with some color and signs of life. But the blossom has long since lost its vitality, and it is time for the fallen petals to be acknowledged.

“When God is dead,” argued Dostoyevsky, “anything is permissible.” The permissiveness of modern American society can scarcely be exaggerated, but it can be traced directly to the fact that modern men and women act as if God does not exist, or is powerless to accomplish His will.

The Christian church now finds itself facing a new reality. The church no longer represents the central core of Western culture. Though outposts of Christian influence remain, these are exceptions rather than the rule. For the most part, the church has been displaced by the reign of secularism.

The daily newspaper brings a constant barrage which confirms the current state of American society. This age is not the first to see unspeakable horror and evil, but it is the first to deny any consistent basis for identifying evil as evil or good as good.

The faithful church is, for the most part, tolerated as one voice in the public arena, but only so long as it does not attempt to exercise any credible influence on the state of affairs. Should the church speak forcefully to an issue of public debate, it is castigated as coercive and out of date.

How does the church think of itself as it faces this new reality? During the 1980s, it was possible to think in ambitious terms about the church as the vanguard of a moral majority. That confidence has been seriously shaken by the events of the past decade.

Little progress toward the re-establishment of a moral center of gravity can be detected. Instead, the culture has moved swiftly toward a more complete abandonment of all moral conviction.

The confessing church must now be willing to be a moral minority, if that is what the times demands. The church has no right to follow the secular siren call toward moral revisionism and politically correct positions on the issues of the day.

Whatever the issue, the church must speak as the church—that is, as the community of fallen but redeemed, who stand under divine authority. The concern of the church is not to know its own mind, but to know and follow the mind of God. The church's convictions must not emerge from the ashes of our own fallen wisdom, but from the authoritative Word of God which reveals the wisdom of God and His commands.

The church is to be a community of character. The character produced by a people who stand under the authority of the Sovereign God of the universe will inevitably be at odds with a culture of unbelief.

The American church is faced with a new situation. This new context is as current as the morning newspaper and as old as those first Christian churches in Corinth, Ephesus, Laodicea, and Rome. Eternity will record whether or not the American church is willing to submit only to the authority of God; or whether the church will forfeit its calling in order to serve lesser gods.

The church must awaken to its status as a moral minority and hold fast to the gospel we have been entrusted to preach. In so doing, the deep springs of permanent truth will reveal the church to be a life-giving oasis amidst American's moral desert.

