

The Great Commission Imperative: Proclaiming God's Truth in Word and Deed

Richard D. Land

Richard D. Land is President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. A graduate of Oxford University, Land speaks widely on ethical issues, and is the author of several articles. All Scripture quotations are from the King James version unless otherwise noted.

The Lord's Great Commission to the church and to all His disciples down through the ages is an all-embracing mandate. Jesus commands all Christians to go into the world and to proclaim the Gospel with the goal of conversion of the listeners to saving faith in Jesus Christ. It was, and is, a truly all-encompassing commission ("all nations") with an all-encompassing message ("Teaching them to observe *all* things whatsoever I have commanded you" [Mt 28:19-20, emphasis supplied]).

Both the Old and New Testaments exhort believers to proclaim the whole of God's revelatory word and to warn of the dire consequences failure to do so produces. Proverbs 29:18 says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." The word "vision" (*hazon*) encompasses the entirety of God's truth revelation and embraces the totality of His revelation. Through His prophet Isaiah, God warned the people of His changeless, eternal truth standards and of how they would be used to measure the people's morality when He said, "I will take the measuring line of justice and the plumb line of righteousness to check the foundation wall you have built" (Isa 28:17, NIV). In the final days of Judah's apostasy and idolatrous rebellion, God sent Jeremiah to sound the warning and to issue the plea, "Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls" (Jer

6:16). In taking his leave of the leaders of the church at Ephesus, the Apostle Paul drew attention to the all-encompassing nature of his evangelistic ministry when he said, "Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God" (Ac 20:26-27). Clearly, the Apostle Paul was convinced that he would have been gravely irresponsible and guilty had he neglected to proclaim "all the counsel of God."

The Current Crisis

Today, at the brink of a new century and a new millennium, we stand in the midst of a profound moral and spiritual crisis. At this critical juncture of American and world history, a truly biblical response to the Great Commission imperatives that includes a spirit-led proclamation of the entirety of God's revelation is needed. Such a response involves proclaiming God's Word. It means informing, exhorting, and convicting the people of their desperate need for repentance, regeneration, and revival. Without God's standard of righteousness people will live wild, pagan, unrestrained lives that devastate themselves, their progeny, and their fellow citizens.

America faces an appalling crisis of the mind, the heart, and the spirit. Its homes and communities are at risk. Evidence of decay is present. People from all walks of

life are now concerned with these problems. They believe something is terribly, tragically, perhaps terminally wrong. Former Senator Mark Hatfield has observed:

I see the social fabric of the country being torn apart, being neglected, being abused...the number of abused children that's on the increase—the number of teenage pregnancies, the amount of runaways that we have to confront—missing children—all of these are evidence that something is wrong in the social fabric, beginning with the family and moving out into the community.¹

George Gallup, Jr., surveys the vast amounts of information at his disposal and concludes, "I would venture to say that the great problems of our time are not economic and political, but they are religious and moral.... We are in a moral crisis of the first dimension."²

Indeed! We are faced with crippling epidemics of alcohol and drug abuse, mindless violence, and a rampant materialism which often becomes nothing less than idolatrous worship of the "good life" of material affluence. We are beset with sexual immorality and pornography-fed violent sexual crimes against women and children both inside and outside the home.³

Our civilization's profound, foundational moral crises are spiritual and philosophical in origin, as several prominent commentators have noted. For example, in 1946 Carl F. H. Henry called "the secular philosophy of humanism or naturalism" modernity's dominant influence.⁴ In 1949, T. S. Eliot warned of the West's inevitable choice between a reassertion of Judeo-Christian values in culture or its acquiescence to an emerging pagan, humanistic culture.⁵ In his commencement address at Harvard University in June, 1978, Soviet

exile Alexander Solzhenitsyn stressed the West's moral bankruptcy, saying,

The humanistic way of thinking, which has proclaimed itself our guide, did not admit the existence of intrinsic evil in man, nor did it see any task higher than the attainment of happiness on earth. It started modern western civilization on the dangerous trend of worshipping man and his material needs...as if human life did not have any higher meaning.⁶

In 1988, Carl F. H. Henry described the drastic extent to which twentieth-century philosophies and educational theories have succumbed to a man-centered, rather than God-centered, focus and orientation.⁷ These humanistic philosophies have become increasingly solipsistic, finding their source of truth within man, either individually or collectively. Man rather than God "now defines 'truth' and 'goodness'" in most universities.⁸ Students are "indoctrinated in the notion that reality reduces finally to impersonal processes" and thus "find no reason for affirming transcendently-binding ethical imperatives."⁹ Henry observed that

a barbarian spirit is lowering over the West and that humanitarianism is now evaporating from secular humanism. In our generation, the West is again approaching the plight of its pagan past, when human existence at the center of world civilization was characterized not only by moral corruption but by spiritual degeneracy as well.¹⁰

Clearly, from 1946 onward, America's moral and spiritual descent gathered momentum. Due to dramatic societal and educational shifts, by the 1980s the nation had become aggressively secular. Today the situation has worsened. The U. S. has become "a pagan society which denies

God and has its own idols and own pantheon of new gods.”¹¹

The downward spiral of sin outlined by Paul in Romans has become a present reality. As “their foolish hearts were darkened, professing themselves to be wise, they became fools” and they “changed the truth of God into a lie and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator” (Ro 1:21-25). Consequently, “God gave them up into vile affections” and “gave them over to a reprobate mind” (Ro 1:26-28).

Several years ago, Carl F. H. Henry described the inhabitants of such a spiritually bereft, narcissistically-besotted culture in lyrical phrases that should continue to haunt us:

Around us today lives a multitude of seething and tormented minds, souls lashed by furious winds and waves of a drug culture . . . They are disinherited spirits, cognitive wanderers, feeble characters whose dutiful selfhood has almost expired, and whose agitated hearts seem steeled against truth. Except for an eerie sense of ultimate catastrophe, a bewildering chaos chills their sense of future. Because they are alienated from the supernatural, they are unstable struts of an insecure society in an uncertain time, bereft of a shiftless center. They readily accommodate this feeling of exile from spiritual realities. Their religious impulses are more a matter of superstition than a power that exerts internal or external influence. They speak now and then of right and wrong, but never of absolutes. They live in a world no longer sure of definitions. Some occasionally churn up the vocabulary of values, but their values take on the sense of mere wants and desires. Their rhetoric cannot conceal the homicides, violence, drug addiction, alcoholism, and broken family patterns that . . . scar the surface of society.¹²

This culture is our mission field. These

hurting millions are our neighbors. They are our co-workers. They are our church members and our relatives.

Christians should draw encouragement, however, from the fact that the current situation is no worse than the one that confronted the first-century church. They, too, lived in a world dominated by pagan, idolatrous philosophies and lifestyles. Most of them had been a consenting part of that world until their conversion. They had to develop a new life, a new mind, a new worldview.¹³ They were commanded not to “let the world around you squeeze you into its mold, but let God remold your minds” (Ro 12:2a, J. B. Phillips translation), and they obeyed. After all, these were the Christians who “turned the world upside down” (Ac 17:6). If they triumphed in their time and place, so can present-day believers, with God’s power, guidance, and assistance.

The Christian Mindset

But how and where do Christians begin their counter-offensive? The place to begin is with a renewed understanding of “the utterly radical nature of the essential message of Christianity” and with the conviction that the “kingdom of God embraces every aspect of life: ethical, spiritual, and temporal.”¹⁴ By essential Christianity, I mean the orthodox, “mere” Christianity of C. S. Lewis found in the Nicene Creed (A. D. 325, 381).¹⁵ Beyond these basics, Paul asserts that we must possess a comprehensive understanding of Christian truth and its applicability to every area of life through the renewal of our minds (Ro 12:1-2; Eph 4:23; Ro 8:5-10; Col 3:1-2). The New Testament does not limit such thinking to intellectuals like Paul. Peter was accused of many things, but he was never accused of being an intellectual. Yet he writes in 1 Peter 1:13-15 (RSV):

Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct.

This mindset must be embraced by every Christian.

What is a Christian mind or outlook?¹⁶ It has been defined as a “Christian outlook that controls our life and our thinking.”¹⁷ More specifically, it is a

. . . mind trained, informed, equipped to handle data of secular controversy within a framework of reference which is constructed of Christian presuppositions, presuppositions (for example) of the supernatural, of the pervasiveness of evil, of truth, authority and of the value of the human person.¹⁸

Further, it includes specific beliefs about the Trinity, sin, salvation, the church, and the end of earthly history.¹⁹

The Christian’s Response: Salt and Light

To be truly effective in changing lives and changing society, individuals must first be changed themselves. Conversion to Christ must precede “the renewing of your mind.” Conversion does not make that renewal automatic. Paul’s criticism of “carnal . . . babes in Christ” (1 Co 3:1) stands as eloquent testimony to spiritual growth and maturity being anything but automatic. Those who are carnal must understand, however, that they fail Christ and the human race, for Jesus said His disciples *are* “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Mt 5:13-16). Since the world is corrupt, Christians are commanded to be salt, the agent that preserves

from decay. Since the world is in darkness, Christians are to be light, to illuminate the pathway to life. Salt is essentially defensive in nature; it stops decay. Christians who are fulfilling their role as salt retard evil by their presence. They act as “a moral disinfectant” in a deteriorating, contaminated world.²⁰ To be salt, Christians must remain pure. If the salt loses its flavor, then it is good for nothing. Light cannot cease to be light, but it can be obscured by disobedient believers.

These words of Jesus “are a perpetual rebuke to all Christians who suppose [either] that they can, like hermits, withdraw from the world, or that, entering it, they can conceal their true allegiance.”²¹ Jesus leaves no room here either for monastic withdrawal or syncretistic cultural accommodation. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones so aptly writes, “The true Christian cannot be hid, he cannot escape notice. A man truly living and functioning as a Christian will stand out. He will be like salt; he will be like a city set upon a hill, a candle set upon a candlestick . . .”²² The Christian must be in the world, for salt must make contact with what it preserves or purifies, and light must be seen. Though Christians must remain in contact with the world, they must not adopt its ways (Jas 1:27).

Christians who are salt and light provoke two responses from the world.²³ Many in the unregenerate world will find the salt irritating and the light disconcerting. That is why this particular passage is preceded by a passage warning of rejection and persecution (Mt 5:11-12). After all, the Beatitudes portray an entirely opposite value system from that of the world. Those who follow Christ will evoke the same response He did from unbelievers, and John states that when the light (Christ) came “into the world . . . men loved

darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (Jn 3:19). Paul warned Timothy that “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ will suffer” (2 Ti 3:12). But Jesus also mentions a second response. Some will see believers’ good works and will glorify God.²⁴

Being salt and light will not be easy, for many of the most powerful sectors of American society isolate religion to the realm of personal piety. Stephen Carter’s *The Culture of Disbelief* explains some of the many ways in which American culture has come to belittle religious devotion, to humiliate believers, and to discourage religion as a serious activity.²⁵ This sort of opposition is disheartening, but Christians are “salt” and “light” for precisely this kind of world—a society teeming with immorality and seething with secularist hostility.

The Christian’s Rights and Duties

The *Baptist Faith and Message* affirms this call to involvement with the world when it states that “every Christian is under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in his own life and in human society.” The confession also says Christians not only “should oppose, in the spirit of Christ, every form of greed, selfishness and vice,” but “should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth and brotherly love.”²⁶ This statement clarifies one’s *responsibilities* as a Christian and *rights* as a citizen. When Christians bring religious and moral convictions into public policy and political debates, they are keeping faith with the best of Christian tradition. Far too often in recent decades believers have allowed themselves to be driven from the public square by false under-

standings and misleading applications of church-state separation and religious liberty.

President John F. Kennedy once said, “The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie, deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but they myth, persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.” One such “persistent” myth that has afflicted us as a nation is the belief that you cannot, or at least should not, legislate morality. Nothing could be more false. As a practical matter all governments legislate morality. Government must legislate morality in order to fulfill its God-ordained purpose of punishing evildoers and rewarding those who do right (Ro 13:1-7). Indeed, God requires Christians to hold governments responsible for punishing evil and protecting its citizens. Laws against murder, theft, rape, and racism *are* the legislation of morality. When Christians seek to make murder, theft, rape, and racism illegal, they are not so much trying to impose their morality on murderers, thieves, rapists, and racists as they are trying to keep murderers, thieves, rapists, and racists from imposing their immorality on their victims. That is not only the Christian’s right, but his or her responsibility.

But what about the separation of church and state? Of course, the Constitution of the United States provides for a balance between morality and public virtue and an appropriate separation of church and state. This delicate constitutional balance, solidified and anchored by the First Amendment, is endangered at present, and will not be put right unless people of faith insist upon it. The First Amendment states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” All the restrictions are on the

government, not individuals. The *government* must not establish a religion, nor interfere with the free exercise of religion.

To say the First Amendment's guarantees of religious freedom and separation of church and state were intended to restrict the political participation of people of faith or to disqualify their religious convictions and beliefs from consideration in the public arena of ideas is to distort the First Amendment. Religious conviction was not deemed unnecessary by the Constitution's framers. For instance, John Adams emphasizes the role of religion and morality in our nation's life by saying, "We have no government armed in power capable of contending in human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our Constitution was made for a moral and a religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other."

Religious conviction has profoundly influenced America throughout its history. Christians were an integral part of the anti-slavery, the child labor reform, and the civil rights movements. Christians in previous eras believed their moral convictions left them no choice but to be involved in addressing these issues. They found no contradiction between such action and their commitment to the church/state separation.

Clearly, as American citizens Christians have the *right* to be involved in the legislative arena. As obedient Christians, they have the *responsibility* to be involved. Christians must positively impact society, not just enjoy its benefits.

The Christian's Compassion

Christians who fulfill their rights and duties minister to hurting people. Paul Warren, a Christian psychiatrist, relates the story of Philip, a 14-year-old boy who

had unsuccessfully attempted suicide. Lying in a hospital bed, Philip told his story. His mother was a very dedicated corporate executive. His father was a successful diplomat. Philip had many wonderful toys—many wonderful things. He attended the best private school in Dallas. He had been promised the latest luxury "in" car when he was 16. Asked why he would try to kill himself in the midst of living this materialistic "American dream," he responded, "I decided that when you grow older, you lose heart. Life becomes empty. And the way I feel right now...there is a hole right here in the middle of my heart, and I can't seem to find a way to fill it."²⁷

If Christians are going to be the light of the world, then they must furnish the Philips of this world with a remedy for the "hole" in their hearts. They must share God, who loves them, died for them, and provided an abundant life in which persons are not merely the sum of their possessions. Human beings are more than what they acquire. Salvation, meaning, and purpose are found in the one who said that "he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Mt 10:39b).

It is not enough to talk about loving others. As Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the Gospel all the time. If necessary use words." How is that to be done? Perhaps one of his prayers provides an answer:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy
peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow
love,
Where there is injury, pardon,
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is darkness, light
And where there is sadness, joy.

Divine Master,
Grant that I may not seek to be con-
soled, as to console.

To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying that we gain eternal life.²⁸

It is not enough to believe the right things. It is not enough to say the right things, nor is it enough to do the right things. In order to comply completely with Christ's command to be the light of the world, one must do the right thing with the right motive. As Jesus reminded the church at Ephesus, Christians must do what they do because they love Jesus and want to please Him (Rev 2:1-6). Christians hate sin and its effects, yet love sinners because Christ loves them. Christians serve others because Christ serves them. Any other motive is not worthy of Christ. As John Stott asserts,

The church has no light without love. Only when its love burns can its light shine. Many churches . . . today have ceased truly to exist. Their buildings remain intact, their ministers minister and their congregations congregate, but their lampstand has been removed. The church is plunged in darkness. No glimmer of light radiates from it. It has no light, because it has no love

So the church today, like the church of Ephesus, has a work to be done, a fight to be fought and a creed to be championed. But above all, it has a Person to be loved, with the love we had for Him at first, a "love undying."²⁹

Conclusion

Civic renewal will only result if four conditions are met. First, individual Christians must renew their commitment to Christ. They must be salt and light. Second, committed believers must then lead renewal in their local churches. Third, re-

newed churches must then join with other committed congregations, regardless of denominational affiliation, to effect change. Fourth, this interdenominational force must attempt to convince others of the correctness of the Christian position. Such is the democratic process, not a violation of the appropriate separation of church and state.

How do believers reach the hearts and minds of others with that message? Using the most effective and modern communication technologies, Christians "contend for the faith" (Jude 3). They apply its timeless truths to all the crises that wrack America in ways that can be heard and understood. They must communicate "a reasonable explanation of the hope that lies within us" (1 Pe 3:15). Says Stott,

It is comparatively easy to be faithful if we do not care about being contemporary, and easy also to be contemporary if we do not bother to be faithful. It is the search for a combination of truth and relevance which is exacting. Yet nothing else can save us from an insensitive loyalty to formulae and shibboleths on the one hand, and from a treasonable disloyalty to the revelation of God on the other.³⁰

It is never valid for Christians to impose a dichotomy between being a witness or being salt and light. They must do both. It is wrong to seek to feed the hungry and not tell them about the Bread of Life. It is misguided to seek to clothe the naked and not tell them about the whole armor of God, and it is in error to seek to house the homeless and not tell them that in the Father's house there are many mansions. In other words, it is wrong to preach the gospel of light without being also the salt that preserves and the light that penetrates the darkness.

ENDNOTES

¹ "Choices," Documentary produced for N. B. C. by the Radio and Television Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1990.

² Ibid.

³ Cf. Sue Blume, *Secret Survivors: Uncovering Incest and Its Aftereffects in Women* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1990) which describes the extent of sexual abuse within the family unit.

⁴ Carl F. H. Henry, *Remaking the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 9.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, "The Idea of a Christian Society," in *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949).

⁶ Ronald Berman, ed. *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard* (Washington, D. C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1980) 16-17. It is advisable at this point to specify those things which Christians and other theists are not speaking against when they voice their opposition to, and concerns about, humanism. Dr. Francis Schaeffer, who perhaps has done more than anyone else to arouse people to an awareness of modern humanism and its adversary relationship to Judeo-Christian theism has stated the situation succinctly: in *A Christian Manifesto* (1982), 23-24.

Humanitarianism is being kind and helpful to people, treating people *humanly*. The *humanities* are the studies of literature, art, music, etc., those things which are the product of human creativity. *Humanism* is the placing of Man at the center of all things and making him the measure of all things. Thus, Christians should be the most humanitarian of all people. And Christians certainly should be interested in the humanities as the product of human creativity, made possible because people are uniquely made in the image of the great Creator. In this sense of being interested in the humanities it would be proper to speak of a Christian

humanist. This is especially so in the past usage of that term. This would then mean that being humanitarian and being interested in the humanities, Christians should be inalterably opposed to the false and destructive humanism, which is false to the Bible and equally false to what Man is!

⁷ Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization: The Drift Toward Neo-Paganism* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988) 16.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Henry, "Besting the Cultural Challenge," *Life in the Balance*, Proceedings of The Christian Life Commission, 1989, 20.

¹¹ Denton Lotz, "Christian Higher Education and the Conversion of the West," *The Southern Baptist Educator* (September 1987) 7.

¹² Henry, "Besting the Cultural Challenge" 20.

¹³ Oliver Barclay, *The Intellect and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985) 16-17.

¹⁴ Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 86-87.

¹⁵ *I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.*

And I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God; begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father. By whom all things were made. Who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven. And He became flesh by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man. He was also crucified for us, suffered under Pontius Pilate, and was buried. And on the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. And of His kingdom there will be no end.

And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. Who together with the Father and the Son is adored and glo-

rified, and who spoke through the prophets.

And I believe in one holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. And I await the resurrection of the dead. And the life of the world to come. Amen.

¹⁶Cf. Blamires and Barclay, 13ff. for an interesting debate on whether the better concept is “mind” or “outlook.”

¹⁷Barclay, 15.

¹⁸John R. W. Stott, *Your Mind Matters* (London: InterVarsity, 1972) 19, quoting Blamires, 43.

¹⁹Frank E. Gabelein, ed. *Christian Education in a Democracy* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1951) 42.

²⁰R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Tyndale Press, 1961) 63.

²¹A. M. Hunter, *A Pattern for Life*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965) 46.

²²D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount: Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 174.

²³Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco: Word, 1982) 132-133.

²⁴Cf. Jn 8:12: “I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.”

²⁵Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic, 1993).

²⁶*The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1963) 18.

²⁷Paul Warren, “The Life-Denying Ethic of Our Society and Its Contribution to Teenage Suicide,” Pro-

ceedings of The Christian Life Commission, 1989, 49.

²⁸Quoted in R. L. Middleton, *The Gift of Love* (Nashville: Broadman, 1976) 21.

²⁹Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 33-34.

³⁰Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity, 1976) 43.