

Being Salt and Light in an Unsavory and Dark Age: The Christian and Politics

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The great revival preacher Charles Finney declared, "Politics are a part of religion in such a country as this, and Christians must do their duty to the country as part of their duty to God."¹ Considering that Charles Finney is renowned as a revival preacher, not a political activist, his assertion may surprise those who consider it inappropriate to mix religion and politics, but Finney was also a strong proponent of Christian cultural engagement. It was during Finney's time that God stirred in the Northern states once again with such power that hundreds of thousands of conversions were recorded in the churches. The entire Northern United States was changed. Out of this great spiritual awakening a potent political movement emerged which greatly aided the anti-slavery cause and ultimately changed the course of our nation through the election of Abraham Lincoln as President. Had that spiritual awakening not occurred, and had leaders like Charles Finney not encouraged those converted to turn their attention to the culture, it is very possible that Lincoln would not have been elected. Because he was elected, our nation finally settled the greatest moral issue of the day—slavery.

Once again, our nation finds itself at a pivotal moment. It will either continue its downward slide or some great movement will come along and sweep it up to new heights. It is likely that the direction

our nation takes in the first part of this century will set the country's course for at least a generation to come. As He did in the early nineteenth century, so today God can use Christians to make a real difference in our nation's moral direction. We say it will require Christian involvement because the source of our nation's decline is not political or economic. It is moral relativism. Moral relativism reigns supreme in most of the culture-molding sectors of our nation. In much of academia the very concept of absolute truth is held in derision. Even the general populace speaks of individual truth and individual values rather than universal norms. Our nation is quickly losing the ability to espouse universal moral values or to insist that such standards define socially acceptable and affirmed behavior. The result is a vapid culture in rapid decay, where behavior that was considered reprehensible just a couple of decades ago is now allowed, and even applauded, in many culture-defining venues.

Many of those involved in the decline of our culture state that they are personally opposed to much of what is happening, but they do not believe they have the right to tell others how they should conduct their personal lives. So, for example, politicians are declaring their personal abhorrence of abortion, but they do not believe it is right for them to "impose" their moral values on others. This mindset

has also infiltrated the judicial branch. The same-sex marriage debate is exhibit A. The pioneering same-sex marriage ground was actually plowed by the U.S. Supreme Court. In its disastrous decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) the court decided that moral grounds alone are not adequate justification to criminalize behavior, overturning a Texas law against homosexual sex.² This decision created the constitutional grounds to challenge laws prohibiting same-sex marriage. The first state judiciary to take this to its logical conclusion was Massachusetts. In November 2003, four and half months after the *Lawrence* decision, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ordered the Massachusetts legislature to extend marriage to homosexual couples.³ The attempt to rein in the spread of same-sex marriage through passage of a federal amendment defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman cannot even garner enough votes in the United States Congress to allow the states to vote on the question. Where this loss of universal absolutes will lead is anyone's guess, but it is likely that we are witnessing only the first wave of damaging impacts on our culture.

The problem of moral decline is exacerbated in those cultures where the citizenry has the opportunity to choose its leadership, as in the United States. When the people who choose the nation's lawmakers and judges have lost their moral compass, the result is culturally catastrophic. Our founding fathers were acutely aware of this danger. Reflecting on the unprecedented freedoms granted the citizenry by the new Constitution, John Adams insightfully commented, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly

inadequate to the government of any other."⁴ Adams understood that this noble American experiment in unprecedented liberty would not work unless most of the populace acknowledged a higher power than the state to whom they were responsible and accountable. Otherwise, the unprecedented freedoms granted in the new governmental system by the United States Constitution would gradually decline from liberty to license.

We are experiencing the tragic moral trajectory Adams feared. The populace is rapidly losing its moral bearings and it has either rejected Christianity and its moral norms outright, denied its relevance, or relegated it to the level of a self-help regimen. The religion which dominated in President Adams' time has for too many been replaced by a faith in which man is the chief beneficiary. God is invoked for the benefit of the religious. What He desires of people is secondary at best. For many other Americans, yet further adrift on the seas of moral relativism, a Holy Trinity of narcissism has emerged: "I, Myself, and Me."

For the sake of the nation and its future, Christians must become much more involved in its public life. Those who still believe in the existence of moral absolutes and who recognize their accountability to God must bring God's truth and morality back into the public square. Jesus made this clear when He called His disciples the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-16). Jesus used two simple metaphors to help His disciples understand their purpose in the world.

Christians as the Salt of the Earth

Let us look at each of these metaphors in turn as we reflect more specifically upon our responsibility as Christians

living in the world. Jesus' statement that Christians are the salt of the earth is declarative. He was not suggesting that His disciples could be salt, as though they had the option. He was stating a fact. Christians are salt.⁵ Frederick Bruner finds significant meaning in the declarative force of Jesus' statement. He notes, "Christians are, by the simple fact that they are with *Jesus*, the salt of the earth. The Christian ethic is an ethic of 'become what you *are*' rather than the Greek or Confucian ethic of 'become what you *should be*.'"⁶

Jesus reinforced the significance of His declaration with a negative illustration. Salt is supposed to be salty. If it loses its saltiness, it is contaminated in such a way that it can no longer fulfill its purpose, it is useless.⁷ Jesus said that salt that is useless is thrown out. We must be careful not to stretch this analogy too far. Jesus did not mean that Christians who lose their saltiness, (i.e., are corrupted), are literally thrown out of the Kingdom, (i.e., lose their salvation). He was just making the point that people do this with salt, and disciples who do not fulfill their function as salt are about as useless to the Kingdom as contaminated salt is to people who cannot use it as salt any longer. While we should not read anything salvific into this statement, we should recognize that Jesus was issuing a warning to His disciples—If they failed to fulfill their function as salt, they ran the risk of being set aside by God in terms of His purposes for their earthly sojourn.

Christians as the Light of the World

Jesus also said His disciples are the light of the world. As before, He did not suggest that they can be light. He declared that they are the light of the world (*kos-*

mos). Not surprisingly, Jesus' choice of words is significant. I. Howard Marshall notes that "the nearest thing that the NT has for a word for 'culture' is 'world' (*kosmos*) which expresses the organized life of mankind in the created world. *Kosmos* is not simply the created universe inhabited by man; it is much more human society itself as it inhabits the universe and stands over against God."⁸ Jesus has declared that His disciples are the light of culture, of human society. They are not a candle waiting to be lit; they are the light itself. This time, he used an absurd example to help make His point. No one would light a candle and put it under a bushel. Instead, a person maximizes the ability of a candle to fulfill its purpose. For Jesus, the disciples are already shining. The only question is whether or not they will perform their function and shine their light far and wide.

Political Implications of Christians as Salt and Light

Now that we know that Christians are salt and light, we must understand what that means spiritually and in application in the world. Salt performs many functions. Two principal ones are its flavor-enhancing abilities and its preservative quality. Anyone who has ever been on a bland diet knows what it is like to eat food without salt. Salt helps to bring out the zestful flavor of other foods. No doubt, Jesus had this enhancement aspect in mind. He was helping His disciples understand that they were life enhancers. Their lives introduced a quality of life to the world that the world did not possess on its own. In the Gospel of John He spoke of it as abundant life (John 10:10). By this He meant a quality of life that the world could not acquire on its own. The primary

application of Jesus' promise was salvific. In Him man could be saved from sin's condemnation and experience new birth, a life in harmony with God, enjoying all the spiritual fulfillment that new relationship afforded. However, salvation is not the end but the beginning of the Christian life, a life more abundant here and now as well as in the hereafter.

It is easy to see the importance of this life-enhancing role of Christians in the world. Man, left to his own devices, spirals downward emotionally, morally, and culturally. The lost human condition is a condition of despair. No one should be surprised about this dark descent. Separated from God, man lives without hope in this world and the world to come. One cannot help but despair when he hears continually about war, famine, death, destruction, and misery.

The Christian brings a much-needed positive message into these dark surroundings. Christianity does not ignore the world's present realities, but it is keenly aware of a God who can help humans rise above life's despair and infuse hope. Christians have been bringing this positive attitude into the culture since the first century, improving every area of life they touched and improving the conditions of millions of people. Often, they have been at the cutting edge of humanitarian efforts, rescuing children from Rome's dumps, starting hospitals to care for the sick, building orphanages, ending the slave trade. Today, one can find Christians actively engaged in a wide range of issues to improve the quality of people's lives. They work to resist the pornographers' efforts to spread their "entertainment" to every home, defend the definition of marriage, and engage on a host of other issues. They encourage

sound ethical practices by businesses. They call for selfless virtue in the home, office, and public square.

Engaging at the public policy level of a nation's life enables the Christian to maximize these life-enhancing practices for the benefit of all. Through public policy, Christians can mitigate or even prevent some of the worst moral problems a nation might face. In *Twilight of a Great Civilization* Carl Henry reflected on his earlier work *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*.⁹ While he was pleased with much of what he said in that earlier work, and saw the amazing strides Evangelicals had made since its writing, he also regretted some aspects of that work. He described one feature that he considered to be "a notable weakness" this way: "For *Uneasy Conscience* failed to focus sharply on the indispensable role of government in preserving justice in a fallen society. Essential as regenerative forces are to transform the human will, civil government remains nonetheless a necessary instrument to constrain human beings—whatever their religious predilections—to act justly, whether they desire to do so or not."¹⁰

Henry is simply acknowledging the Apostle Paul's explanation that God ordained government "the civil magistrate" for the exact purpose of punishing those who do evil and rewarding those who do good (Rom 13:1-7). The evangelistic mission of the church is its most important function. Winning hearts *and* minds is crucial. However, both the Bible and history teach us that all men will not be converted, all the converted will not live as they ought to, and even faithful Christians find themselves in need of civil guidance at times. Civil authority is designed by God to meet these needs. In

order to fulfill God's intention for government Christians must be engaged. For example, our nation is currently engaged in a debate about the definition of marriage. We will soon be deciding, or having a judge decide for us, whether or not marriage should be redefined to include homosexual couples. This decision has far-reaching implications.

If marriage is thus redefined, that already damaged institution will be further weakened, perhaps fatally. Studies of the Scandinavian countries that have broadened the definition of marriage illustrate this truth. Stanley Kurtz has documented the significant change in attitudes toward marriage that is accompanying those national redefinitions.¹¹ As the meaning and value of marriage deteriorates, people see less need for marriage. After all, if marriage means anything, then it means nothing. In Norway, for example, where marriage is increasingly rare, couples are choosing simply to cohabitate rather than marry, even persisting in this attitude when children enter the relationship. Thus illegitimacy, with all its concomitant demonstrated disadvantages to children, is soaring.

In addition, if our nation were to allow homosexual marriage, the nation's children would be overwhelmed with messages attempting to indoctrinate them about the legitimacy of same-sex marriage and affirming the normality of homosexuality. Their textbooks would be changed to show homosexual couples living "normal" lifestyles in the same way that heterosexual couples do. The very language used to refer to marriage would be changed. One could no longer refer to husbands and wives; children would be taught to think in sexless terms, like "significant other" or "life partner."

Marriage is God's idea, not man's invention. He instituted it in the garden of Eden. He knew that man was not complete without woman, and woman was not complete without man. Each needed the other to be complete and fulfilled. God knew that children needed the environment of home and marriage to prepare them for the demands of responsible adulthood. Within the loving relationship between a husband and wife, children learn such crucial characteristics as sacrifice, compassion, service, sharing, and commitment. These are all essential traits that enable communities to function. Any weakening of these will weaken the community.

In addition to its life-enhancing qualities, salt prevents decay. Salted meat, for example, lasts for long periods of time because destructive bacteria cannot survive in that salted medium. Christians act as social preservatives. Christianity brings a set of values into culture that arrest the worst effects of human depravity. Christians living out their values do not eliminate human depravity or the desire of humans to exercise that depravity, but they do help to define and denounce it. Consequently, by their efforts, public policy is more life-affirming. We can see the value of this in the area of the sanctity of human life. Today, more than one million unborn babies are aborted in this country every year. The vast majority of these children are aborted merely because their mothers, often with their father's consent, either by direct involvement or indifference, considered them to be too inconvenient or too embarrassing to bring into the world. These aborted children are people created in God's image whose lives are being snuffed out because government has told women that this is an acceptable

choice. Christians have an opportunity to bring a better understanding of the value of human life into the debate and change attitudes about these so-called “inconvenient” humans. Part of this educational process can be public policy that tells people it is not acceptable to kill unborn children. It can back this up with laws that criminalize abortion and those who perform abortions. Christians can help people understand that in a truly civilized society no one should be permitted to have an absolute right of life and death over another human being—be it a slaveholder or a baby’s mother.

The issue of abortion is just one in a growing number of attacks on the sanctity of human life. Today, people are debating whether or not to derive stem cells from human embryos, destroying the embryos, i.e., nascent human life, in the process. Others are talking about the need to clone human embryos in order to obtain stem cells. Once again, the fact that these embryos are destroyed in the process is considered to be of no significant consequence. Christians who understand that every human life, regardless of age, health, or condition, is created in the image of God and therefore deserves respect and protection, can protect these tiniest humans by outlawing embryo-destructive research and promoting life-affirming practices in its place. For example, they can help gain more funding for adult stem cell research. They can adopt so-called “left-over” embryos that are sitting in in-vitro fertilization clinics.¹²

Metaphorically, Christians are also light. No doubt, Jesus was aware of many ways this metaphor applied to Christians. He certainly intended to emphasize the ability of light to expose what is in the

darkness and its ability to dispel that darkness. As an illuminating agent Christians are seldom surpassed. Lived in obedience to God, the Christian life reveals man’s lost condition and the moral decay of lost human culture. It is easy to identify a Christian who is living faithfully before God in contrast to those around him who are living according to the moral standards of a culture in decline. Take for example, the difference in marital satisfaction between Christian couples who enjoy the interpersonal communication involved in praying together on a regular basis and those who do not share this experience. According to Dennis Rainey, President of the family-oriented Christian ministry FamilyLife, a survey conducted by that organization in 1995 revealed that “couples who pray together frequently (at least three times per week) have higher levels of marital satisfaction than those who don’t.”¹³ Rainey linked this practice directly to a lower divorce rate among those couples in comparison to the rest of the country. This contrast reveals what is possible when a husband and wife are committed to one another at the deepest possible level. This is the result of lives lived in conformity with God’s standards. The obedient Christian life reveals that God’s ways produce happier, healthier, more fulfilled people. Darkness finds no resting place when light enters.

Sound public policy can help illuminate and promote the values that can help people live more rewarding lives. J. Budziszewski has argued effectively that people change their laws in order to help them salve their consciences. He makes the argument that natural moral law is hardwired in the human conscience. When people violate the natural law, their consciences demand satisfaction

for the violation, i.e., guilty knowledge. These include confession, atonement, reconciliation, and justification. At this point, humans have two choices. They can repent and find peace or they can attempt to suppress their knowledge of guilt so they can persist in their activity. Those who attempt to suppress their consciences find it an impossible task, and so must evolve ever more elaborate schemes in their attempt to quiet their offended consciences. Part of this effort includes transforming society “so that it no longer stands in awful judgment. So it is that they change the laws, infiltrate the schools, and create intrusive social-welfare bureaucracies.”¹⁴ One can see how private behavior precedes public policy. Nations seldom change their laws to accommodate conditions that do not exist. They change their laws to accommodate current moral conditions. As light, Christians can prevent this by refusing to allow public policy to be used as a means to silence guilty consciences. This kind of engagement will help to restrain the downward spiral of the culture. It will also put public policy in a didactic mode. Rather than reflecting the moral standards of an ever-coarsening culture, public policy can help remind people of right and wrong.

Light also reveals what is in the dark. In spiritual terms this means that the Christian life exposes man’s sinful behavior. In comparison to a pure life man’s true sinful failings become obvious. So, for example, depraved human reasoning concludes that destroying human embryos in order to search for cures for other humans is morally preferable to doing nothing to attempt to alleviate human suffering. But in comparison to the biblical teaching that all human life is sacred, including the human embryo, embryo-destructive

research is revealed for what it really is—the deliberate destruction of one human being for the benefit of another.

When Jesus called His disciples salt and light, He was not just speaking of those gathered few, but of all His disciples throughout the ages to come. The Apostle Paul’s ministry demonstrates this. Paul was not even present when Jesus told His disciples they were salt and light. Nevertheless, on the road to Damascus, the risen and ascended Jesus encountered Paul and called him to the mission of bringing His gospel to the Gentile world (Acts 9:1-18, see especially vv. 15-16). Paul went on from that encounter as salt and light in the Lord.

Luke tells us that he even spoke to government officials. He spoke to Felix, the Roman governor of Judea, about “righteousness, self control, and the judgment to come” (Acts 24:25). This conversation covered more than the basic message of salvation. It included a call to live rightly, according to God’s moral standards. It was not unusual for Paul to speak to moral issues. In his letters, we find him speaking on the biblical teaching about marriage, slaves and slave owners, work, family, and a myriad other issues pertinent to the culture of his day. He also instructed his fellow believers to emulate the example of his life (1 Cor 4:16).¹⁵ This certainly sounds like a man who was living out what it means to be salt and light.¹⁶

As those who have inherited the spiritual responsibilities and obligations of our Christian forebears, today’s Christians must fulfill their responsibilities to act as salt and light in the nation’s political life. Responsible stewardship and responsible citizenship allow no other response. As was pointed out in *The Divided States of America?*, Francis Schaeffer,

helped Evangelicals jettison a deep strain of pietism that had misled them to believe they shouldn't be involved in politics and other "worldly" activities. He helped an entire generation of Christians to understand their biblical responsibility to be salt and light in society—and, of course, salt has to touch what it preserves; light has to be close enough to the darkness that it can be seen. Among the questions that Schaeffer repeatedly posed (usually in the context of the abortion issue) in his books such as *How Shall We Then Live?*, *The God Who Is There*, and *A Christian Manifesto*, were these: If not you, who? If not now, when? If not this, what?¹⁷

Schaeffer believed in "truth with a capital T—'true truth,' he called it. That meant it was true not just on Sunday, but also on Monday. It was true not just at home, but also at school and at work and in the public arena. Christians had an obligation to be 'salt' and 'light' as the Bible says (Matthew 5:13-16)."¹⁸ This is admirably reflected in Article XV of *The Baptist Faith and Message*, "The Christian and the Social Order":

All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society...In the spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, and vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death. Every Christian should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love.¹⁹

Christians must enter the public square and bring their biblically-based morality

with them. They have the right, and the obligation, to share their faith-informed moral values with the nation and to advocate the adoption of those values through the democratic process. Government is a divinely ordained human institution. Paul made this case effectively in Rom 13:1-7. The governing authorities are ministers of God for good (vv. 3-4). God holds governments accountable for how they govern and the cultures they produce. They are intended by God to punish evil and reward good. When a culture has sunk too far into moral decay, God has been known to bring swift and severe judgment on the people (Gen 18:1-19:29). But God does not take pleasure in judgment. He prefers for people to turn from sinful behavior (Ezekiel 18:23). It is reasonable to assume that God wants those who know His truth to engage in the process that can help restrain man's immoral inclinations and avoid God's judgment. He did this Himself when He issued the Law to His people Israel. He did not leave the people to try to discern for themselves how they ought to live. He expected the nation's kings and judges to affirm these standards among the people, and He called His prophets to interact with government leaders and the people in order to remind them of their moral obligations.

We are not proposing that the church employ the power of the government to promote or enforce its beliefs. Besides, the Constitution's First Amendment rightly prevents the government from favoring any particular religion. The organized church and the organized state have separate responsibilities, and they should function separately in their efforts to fulfill those responsibilities. This said, however, it is inconceivable that separation of church and state also means that

Christians, and organized churches, should not engage in the nation's political life in an effort to influence its policies through the democratic process.

Our Christian Responsibility towards the State

In addition to the demands of responsible stewardship, responsible citizenship also requires that Christians engage in the nation's political life. Christians are citizens of two worlds, the heavenly kingdom (Eph 5:24; Phil 3:20; Col 1:13) and an earthly one (Rom 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13-17). Responsible citizenship in both requires adherence to their respective duties. As a member of the heavenly kingdom, Christians are to apply the spiritual teachings of the Bible to their lives and live according to the expectations of their heavenly king, Jesus. But these same Christians are commanded to fulfill the duties and responsibilities of citizenship in their earthly kingdom as well. Jesus taught this principle when He told the people that they should render to God what is God's and to the ruling authority that which pertains to it (Matt 22:21). He said this in response to the query about whether or not the people should pay taxes. The payment of taxes was an expectation placed on the citizenry by the government. Jesus instructed the people to fulfill their civic obligations. In the same way, political engagement is an expectation placed on the citizens. This is true in varying degrees, of course, depending on the form of government, but it reaches its highest level of responsibility in democratically constituted government. In a democratically chosen government, it is the duty of the citizens to engage in the nation's political life. To fail to do so is a failure to fulfill the duties and

obligations of citizenship. It is a failure to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. E. Y. Mullins, former president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and chairman of the committee that produced the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*, commented, "The Christian citizen is commanded to render to the state its just dues. He is to perform faithfully his duty to the state (Matt. 22:21; Rom. 13:1-7)."²⁰

Some argue that the effort to change the culture is waged best in the battle to change the way people think. These people focus principally on apologetics to achieve their goal. We agree that it is better to get a person to change his behavior because he chooses to do so, but we do not believe it is a question of either/or. It must be a both/and approach. While we are busy engaging the mind of man, the culture continues its downward spiral, and millions are being caught in its vortex. We can slow down the decline with public policy that upholds, commends, and rewards moral behavior. To do this, we must become involved in the political life of the nation. The political arena is part of the overall effort of cultural engagement. Lawmakers elected by the people determine the laws that will either permit immoral behavior to flourish or restrain it. Legalized abortion is just one of many examples of this truth. The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention is heavily engaged in efforts to convince women not to abort their babies, but in the meantime, an entire government-authorized industry is at work convincing them that it is not only acceptable but legal to abort their unborn children. The culture must be engaged both privately and publicly.

Many have argued that political activism distracts the church from its primary

mission of evangelism and disciple-making. We agree that the church's first task is to win lost souls. Individual Christians should make evangelism their highest priority, and churches need to as well (Matt 28:18-20). However, neither individual Christians nor churches can ignore what Jesus said about the need for the church to engage the culture. The Lord's "Great Commission" to His followers was not only to evangelize, but to "make disciples" and to teach those converts "to observe everything I have commanded you," which would include His expectation for them to act as salt and light (Matt 5:13-16; 28:16-20). Cultural engagement is part of Christian discipleship.²¹

Some argue that Jesus was talking about how His disciples should live, not that they should impose their values on others. Richard Mouw partially reflects this attitude. In speaking of the role Christians should play in regulating sexual behavior in culture, he declares that "Christians ought not to act in such a way that the sole purpose of their action is to prohibit non-Christians from behaving in a promiscuous manner." He says that Christians should only get involved in regulating the sexual behavior of non-Christians when they have a "legitimate conviction that sexual patterns have important connections to other serious dimensions of human existence." Incredibly, his philosophy for Christian public policy engagement leads him to state that "opportunities for sexual promiscuity must be restricted when it infringes seriously on the genuine rights of others—for example, on the rights of children. But the Christian's 'right' to rest in the knowledge that no one is enjoying pornography is *not* one such genuine right."²² In principle Mouw may be correct. It is crucial that

Christians do not seek to impose personal preferences on society. However, he uses a horrific example to make his point. It is difficult to imagine any situation in which Christians would not be justified in their insistence that pornography is dangerous and hurtful to others, especially, but not only, in the way that it dehumanizes women and leads to horrific crimes of sex and violence against women and children.²³

To assure they are not attempting to interject personal preferences into public policy, Christians must be fully aware of God's moral standards. These standards are communicated either by way of direct propositional directives or principles contained in biblical texts.²⁴ If God prefers a particular moral commitment, it is preferable for all people, not only Christians, and Christians should strive to help bring their culture into conformity with that standard.²⁵

Others object to Christian political involvement by claiming that it uses the power of the government to force religious beliefs on people. Those who make this argument are making a serious error in judgment. They suppose that morality and religious belief are the same thing.²⁶ In reality, they are not. Religious belief pertains to the theological beliefs a person holds. These beliefs inform a person's conscience, thus shaping his or her morality. The religious beliefs are the foundational truths that order the Christian's world. They are the truth claims to which he adheres and through which he thinks about life. They inform his worldview. Out of his worldview he develops his system of ethical thinking and from there he shares his insight on the great moral questions of his day. For example, the Bible teaches that God is the author of life.

Those who embrace this theological truth develop an ethic about the sanctity of human life. From this ethical perspective, the Christian answers such questions as appropriate responses to violence, abortion, and stem cell research. While it is true that the Christian's answers to these questions were informed by his religious beliefs, it is obvious that they are not his beliefs. His religious beliefs informed his decision-making process.

This is an important distinction. Without it, it would not be possible for people of faith to engage in influencing public policy. In truth, however, without this distinction, no one could engage in public policy. People of faith work from a set of foundational truths that enable them to form a worldview, but everyone has a set of beliefs that serve the same purpose. The atheist, for example, may develop a worldview in which he declares that humans have relative value, based not in anything intrinsic to his nature, but rather in his ability to contribute to human society. Where might this worldview and ethic come from? It would come from his foundational belief that humans are merely an interesting product of the forces of nature. Both the atheist and the Bible-believing Christian have a foundational belief that leads to the creation of his worldview, which leads to the development of his ethic of the value of human life.²⁷ These ethical positions provide the moral framework for making decisions in life. The application of the ethic is not the foundational belief. It is informed by it.

Keeping one's religiously informed beliefs out of the role of public policy development was not what our founding fathers had in mind when they wrote the Constitution or the First Amendment. Many of these men professed a deep per-

sonal faith and a significant majority of them adhered to a Judeo-Christian worldview. If they believed that their foundational beliefs disqualified them to govern, they could never have written a single word or passed a single law. Given the fact that they recognized their religious roots, and even codified their religiously informed ethic about the value of human life in the Constitution, makes it obvious that they did not believe that they were imposing their religion on others when they made value judgments about what would, and would not, be acceptable practice in this new republic. Yale Law School professor Stephen Carter comments, "In a nation that prides itself on cherishing religious freedom, it would be something of a puzzle to conclude that the Establishment Clause means that a Communist or a Republican may try to have his or her world view reflected in the nation's law, but a religionist can not."²⁸

The following excerpt from *The Divided States of America?* makes an important distinction between religious faith, the moral values individuals deduce from that faith, and the necessary commitment to democratic processes:

People of faith *share* their faith. They don't assume that it should be accepted just because it is religious. They have the right to bring to the public arena the values that are informed by their faith, and to share with the public the insights they have gained through their faith. If the public agrees, then that becomes the public policy of the nation by consent of the people. We must always agree to government 'of the people, by the people, and for the people' and by consent of the governed. Even if the people make the wrong decision, we must abide by the will of the people and seek to change the will of the people in future elections... Otherwise, there is a terrible tendency for it to become

coercive, as vitiating of human freedom as a naked, purely secular public square devoid of religiously informed moral values is of the same freedom of conscience and belief. In either extreme, the rights of the minority and of the weak are not protected.²⁹

Having accepted their status as salt and light, Christians must ask God to give them a desire to engage in the nation's political life. Many Christians are doing all they can to escape from the world in order to shield themselves and their children from its secular influences. What they are discovering, however, is that they cannot completely escape. The culture gets in one way or another. Paul warned the Christians in Corinth that they would have to leave the planet to achieve their goal of separation from the world (1 Cor 5:11). This is not the answer.

The only truly effective response to the coarsening of the culture is to engage it on every level, including the political. At this point, motivation is extremely important. Some get involved because they see it as their duty to fulfill God's expectation. Some get involved out of desperation or anger, to protect their families and to fight back against the growing tide of immorality. Others get involved out of love for the millions, or billions, whose lives are being devastated by a declining culture and the bad public policy that feeds and reinforces the decline.

This last motivation seems to be the most Christ-like motivation.³⁰ It is also the most likely to compel Christians to make the kinds of sacrifices necessary to make a difference. It was God's love that led Him to choose to sacrifice "His only begotten Son" for the world's sinners. It was love that drove Christ to the cross. Love is the strongest motivating force that can

cause someone to willingly sacrifice for others. Love for their fellow man is what can impel Christians from their places of comfort and retreat into the bruising, resistant, often hate-filled world that they desire to change. Only God can instill this love through His Holy Spirit in Christian hearts for lost mankind and an immoral culture (Gal 5:22-23).

Overcoming Barriers to Christians Political Involvement

With God's love motivating them to act, Christians must overcome several potential barriers to their involvement. First, they must overcome their fear of the government. While their concern over their tax exempt status is understandable, too many churches live in such inordinate fear of losing that status that they have circumscribed all political engagement in order to make sure they are untouchable. While this may keep the government inquisitors off their backs, it puts them in a position where they may find themselves giving more serious account to God. After all, it is unlikely that Jesus will ever say, "Well done, good and faithful servant, you protected your tax exempt status." However, He may very well say, "I sacrificed My life for you, why didn't you at least do what the laws of your country allowed to protect people from the ravages of moral decline and immoral public policy?"

The truth of the matter is that churches can do a lot before they come close to violating the restrictions placed on them to retain their tax exempt status. Every church can still speak to the great moral issues of the day, including abortion, pornography, and homosexuality. They can distribute voter guides that help their members and their communities

understand the positions of the various candidates. They can hold voter registration drives. They can invite candidates to speak as long as they invite *all* the candidates in a particular race.

Furthermore, as individual citizens, Christians can engage in any level of public life they choose. A growing cacophony is attempting to convince Christians that they violate the First Amendment if they engage in efforts to influence public policy. These voices are attempting to convince Christians that because they are religious people their moral convictions are constitutionally barred from the debate. We have already described the distinction between morality and religious belief. The Christian has as much right to attempt to have his moral convictions codified into law as anyone else.

The clauses of the First Amendment that address church/state relations apply to religion, not morality. In addition, the First Amendment is designed to keep government out of the church business, not to keep Christians out of government. The amendment consists of two clauses. The first clause, known as the "Establishment Clause" prohibits Congress from establishing a national religion and giving it favored status. This is the clause most often emphasized by liberals. They are fearful that government will be used by some religious group to promote a particular set of religious beliefs. While we support efforts to prevent government from promoting religious belief, we disagree strongly that morality born out of one's religious beliefs is inherently religious. The second clause, known as the "Free Exercise Clause," is also focused on the government. It prohibits Congress from passing laws that would restrict the exercise of religious belief.

This clause is most often the clause that evangelical Christians emphasize. They are concerned that the government may introduce policies that intrude on the life and work of religious organizations or impede the consciences of individual citizens. Obviously, neither of the clauses prevents Christian engagement in the nation's public life.

Second, Christians must stop worrying about public perception when it comes to engaging the culture. Many pastors and church members fear that their involvement in public policy issues and elections will sour people on their church or their denomination, making it more difficult for the church to reach them with the gospel of salvation. It is more likely that those who reject a church's message because that church or its members have become politically engaged are using that as an excuse to reject the church and its message rather than for the stated reason. It is like the old "the church is full of hypocrites" argument that people have used for centuries as their excuse for rejecting the church and its message. The truth of the matter is that the message of the Bible includes very clear teachings on the moral issues of every age and of God's expectations for a nation's leaders. God has moral standards, and He expects all people, in and outside the church, to live by them. To remain silent on these standards is a disservice to a community and a nation. The people need to know what God has to say. Christians have the responsibility as salt and light to make known God's perspective.

Third, Christians must themselves begin to live more faithfully. Too much of the church has become captive to the culture. The result is that the church has lost its moral high ground. When divorce

occurs within the church almost as regularly as it occurs outside the church, it should not surprise anyone that the world is not listening to us when we speak on moral issues. When Christians begin to live according to the moral guidance of the Bible, and their families and relationships are healthy, the world will take notice. They may choose not to accept our answers, but they will not be able to deny the effectiveness of our morality.

Engaging the Political Process

Having overcome the obstacles to public engagement, Christians must engage the political process. They can do this at a number of important levels. First, they should register to vote and then vote in every election. Of course, it is not enough to just show up to vote. Christians need to make sure they are well-informed and that they are voting about issues, not personalities. An informed voter is an intelligent voter. Christians must take the time to become acquainted with the issues involved in the election, not just the partisan politics or personalities. These issues will vary depending on the level of office, but the more information the Christian has, the more likely he will be to select someone who will help resolve problems in the most biblically responsible way.

Christians must also vote from the foundation of their values. In order to do this, they must make sure they are thinking about things from a Christian worldview. A Christian worldview is a biblically faithful belief system that answers the fundamental questions of life, such as, is there a God? Where did humans come from? Why is there evil? What is humanity's purpose? What lies in the future? The answers to such foundational questions provide the starting point for addressing

the issues of life. From such an informed perspective, Christians can better discern the best answers to the problems of the day and vote for people and policies that are most likely going to achieve those goals. This is much more effective than simply voting for the most likable candidate, or for one's particular party.

Second, every Christian should find ways to get involved nationally and internationally. There are great pressing needs on both of these levels. The pro-life struggle is far from settled. It is difficult to imagine an issue more in need of Christian involvement. New fronts in this "culture war," like embryonic stem cell research and euthanasia, are opening up regularly. The needs are also great internationally. The world is in desperate need of greater Christian involvement to address poverty, human trafficking, tyranny, and a host of other needs.

Third, Christians should become involved with national organizations to help them stay aware of developments in the issues they are concerned about. These organizations can help keep them informed about developments and also alert them when they need to act. The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission has a series of web sites and radio programs designed to help Christians stay abreast of events and become involved. The Commission also regularly sends out action alerts that can help Christians know where their voice is needed most to make progress on issues of concern to them.

John Adams, our nation's second president, furnished some timeless words of caution to our country as he considered the future of the new nation. He wrote,

While our country remains untainted with the principles and manners

which are now producing desolation in so many parts of the world; while she continues sincere, and incapable of insidious and impious policy, we shall have the strongest reason to rejoice in the local destination assigned us by Providence. But should the people of America once become capable of that deep simulation towards one another, and towards foreign nations, which assumes the language of justice and moderation while it is practicing iniquity and extravagance, and displays in the most captivating manner the charming pictures of candor, frankness, and sincerity, while it is rioting in rapine and insolence, this country will be the most miserable habitation in the world; because we have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion.³¹

It would appear that John Adams had a heart-wrenching premonition of the future of the nation he loved so dearly. The challenge set before us is to do all we can to prevent this chilling image from coming to fruition. Christians must rise to the challenge and engage in our nation's life with the same fervor that drove our forefathers to risk life and liberty to bring it forth. May God help us all to leave our nation a more moral and God-honoring land than we found it.

ENDNOTES

¹Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (ed. William G. McLoughlin; Cambridge: The Balknap Press, 1960), 297.

²*Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003).

³*Goodridge v. Department of Health*, 798 N.E. 2d 941 (Mass. 2003).

⁴Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States* (vol. 9; Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854), 229.

⁵Robert Gundry's attempt to explain Mat-

thew's manipulation of Jesus' statements about salt and light in Mark 9:49-50 and Luke 14:34-35 to produce this passage seem totally unwarranted (*Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 75-76). The contexts all refer to the demands of discipleship, but they are all very diverse. The reference in Mark speaks to the need for disciples to be encouraging and affirming of others who profess Christ. The key verse appears to be v. 39, where Jesus begins His response to those who asked about hindering others who appear to be following Him. In v. 50 He tells His disciples to "be at peace with one another." The reference in Luke speaks to the importance of counting the cost of discipleship and making certain that one is totally committed to its demands. The illustrations in Luke 14:25-33 all point to this meaning. If one has not adequately counted the cost, the demands of discipleship will reveal the lack of commitment, i.e., tastelessness, and render the disciple useless. In the current passage the reference is to the faithful application of the principles in the Beatitudes to one's life, cf. vv. 1-12. Gundry supposes that Matthew cobbled together the passages from Mark and Luke to create the saying as it occurs in his Gospel. This proposal calls into question Matthew's veracity and Jesus' creativity. It declares that Matthew put words in Jesus' mouth to suit his purpose and it supposes that Jesus could not use the same metaphor in more than one context to make different points. There is no adequate reason to doubt the authenticity of Matt 5:13 as a saying of Jesus in connection with His teaching the Beatitudes.

⁶Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Com-*

mentary (vol. 1; *The Christbook, Matthew 1-12*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 188.

⁷Some have questioned what Jesus could have meant here because salt is a very stable compound. It doesn't stop being salty. However, A. B. Bruce (*The Expositor's Greek Testament* [vol. 1; *The Synoptic Gospels*; ed. W. Robertson Nicoll; 1903; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 101-02) cites a number of sources that explain the actual occurrence of salt losing its "sharpness" through contamination by other substances. It is easily conceivable that Jesus was speaking of this kind of process, which would render salt unusable.

⁸I. Howard Marshall, "Culture and the New Testament," in *Gospel and Culture* (ed. John Stott and Robert Coote; Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), 39.

⁹Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1947).

¹⁰Carl F. H. Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization: The Drift Toward Neopaganism* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), 167.

¹¹Stanley Kurtz, "The End of Marriage in Scandinavia," *The Weekly Standard*, 2 February 2004, 26-33.

¹²Very recently amazing discoveries in the laboratory appear to make it possible to use skin tissue to create stem cells with all the pluripotent capabilities of embryonic stem cells, without causing the destruction of any embryonic life. The entire nation owes an incalculable debt of gratitude to the courage and moral vision of President George W. Bush

for resisting the incredible pressures brought to bear on him by the secular media and powerful high-tech business interests to approve federal funding for embryo-destructive stem cell research. Without his willingness to hold the moral line, we would have been confronted with the specter of millions of human embryos being created through cloning which would have been killed within fourteen days of gestation to harvest their stem cells for research purposes. A righteous God would not have allowed such barbarically immoral behavior and the society that condoned and subsidized it to go unjudged. Without President Bush's courageous stand these researchers would never have had the motivation to go into the laboratory and spend the time and resources to come up with a morally-neutral alternative to the embryonic stem cell research which sacrificed unborn human embryos.

¹³Dennis Rainey, *One Home at a Time* (Colorado Springs: Focus on the Family, 1997), 86.

¹⁴J. Budziszewski, *The Revenge of Conscience: Politics and the Fall of Man* (Dallas: Spence, 1999), 30.

¹⁵Paul also recognized the need to include others in the task. He instructed Titus to appoint elders in the cities of Crete to lead the work of the churches in those places (Titus 1:5). It is impossible to imagine that the church today is not related directly to Paul's work and those early churches. Every generation of Christians has had handed to it the mantle that Jesus laid on the

shoulders of His first disciples and on Paul. We are called by the same God and equipped by the same Holy Spirit to continue what they began.

¹⁶Of course, we have only presented a small part of the biblical evidence. One can find numerous examples in the Old Testament, for example, of prophets confronting kings and cultures with God's demands for holy living, and not only within the believing community. Jonah preached to the inhabitants of Nineveh to repent of their immoral lifestyle (Jonah 1:1-2; 3:4). The king of Nineveh and his people understood that God's coming judgment was not related so much to their unbelief as their immoral lives. They sought to escape God's judgment by turning from the "wicked way and from the violence" that characterized their lives (Jonah 3:8). God withheld His judgment when He saw that "they turned from their wicked way" (Jonah 3:10).

¹⁷Richard Land, *The Divided States of America? What Liberals and Conservatives are Missing in the God-and-Country Shouting Match* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 8.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁹*The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: LifeWay, 2000), 19.

²⁰Edgar Y. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1974), 426.

²¹William Hendriksen (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973], 284-85) attempts to reconcile the biblical priority of evangelism with its attendant call to engage the culture in an unusual way. He

conceded that there may be occasions when the church must speak out on some non-theological issue, but he argued that the salt and light metaphors apply principally to the church's responsibility for "spreading forth the message of salvation, that the lost may be found ... those found may be strengthened in the faith ... and God may be glorified." Then, strangely, he declared that "those who, through the example, message, and prayers of believers, have been converted will show the genuine character of their faith and love by exerting their influence for good *in every sphere*." It's as though Hendriksen divided the church into two groups, those who preach the gospel and their converts who will engage the world more generally. Jesus did not make any such distinction among His disciples. He called all of them salt and light. The gospel preacher and his converts are all under the same obligations. Whatever the salt and light metaphors mean, they mean for all Christians.

²²Richard Mouw, *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 78-79.

²³Mouw's principle is important, however. It is important for Christians to make sure that they are not imposing their personal preferences on others just because they are able to do so. For example, some Christians do not believe males and females should swim together in the same swimming pool. The attempt to maintain moral purity may be commendable, but this is a private interpretation of biblical

teaching. Since it does not appear to be required by Scripture, it would certainly be inappropriate to impose this standard on others by law.

²⁴Discerning what God requires of a particular people is complicated at times by the nature of the biblical material. We offer here a couple of starting points. First, Christian ethics distinguishes three types of law in the Old Testament—the ceremonial, the civil, and the moral. These are important distinctions for those who are attempting to understand what requirements in the Bible are applicable today. The ceremonial law of the Old Testament is not applicable because it pertained to Israel's worship system. The civil law also is not applicable because it governed life in the nation of Israel. The moral law, however, still applies because it governs man's relationship to other people and to God. Moral principles that are still relevant today can be garnered from the other two types of law, but one must be careful that he is not reading his own preferences into these principles. Second, one must also distinguish between teachings or situations that reflect a particular cultural situation from teachings that communicate universal norms.

²⁵One must also always keep in mind the critically important distinction between private behavior between consensual adults, (which should not be made illegal and in most cases should be tolerated but not affirmed by society), and coercive victimization of others, which

should be illegal.

²⁶Interestingly, even Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), xviii, confuses this point. He says that during the 2004 presidential election he and others with him "insisted that poverty is a religious issue." Poverty is a moral issue. Concern for it is part of what it means to be a faithful religious person, but the issue of poverty is not religious in nature.

²⁷In deciding whether or not a man could be denied employment by the state of Maryland because of his particular faith, the Supreme Court ruled that a religion does not have to include belief in the existence of God to be considered a religion. It can be "founded on different beliefs" and still be considered a religion. In his footnote to the decision, Justice Hugo Black said that secular humanism was one such religion, *Torcaso v. Watkins*, 367 U.S. 488 n. 11 (1961). Because Black made this comment within the footnotes, it is part of the *dicta* of the decision, which means that it is the judge's personal opinion, not part of the legal opinion setting legal precedent. However, it is significant in that the court has ruled that belief in the existence of God is not required as part of the definition of what qualifies as a religion, and at least one Supreme Court justice believed that secular humanism qualified as a religion.

²⁸Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*

(New York: Anchor, 1993), 113.

²⁹Richard D. Land, *The Divided States of America?*, 130.

³⁰While we disagree with Philip Yancey's extremely skeptical view of Christian political engagement, we share his concern that Christians must engage from the grace-filled attitude of love. He counsels, "Politics draws lines between people; in contrast, Jesus' love cuts across those lines and dispenses grace. That does not mean, of course, that Christians should not involve themselves in politics. It simply means that as we do so we must not let the rules of power displace the command to love." Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 264.

³¹Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, 228-29.