

INFLUENCES OF THE COMMUNITY

When Israel entered the promised land, they failed to destroy the Canaanite people as God directed. As a result, they found themselves trying to establish their own culture within an already entrenched culture. Mostly, they failed, eventually giving in to the pressure of the surrounding sinful environment.

We find ourselves in that same situation today in America! Jesse Ventura (late governor of Minnesota) said, "Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak minded people who need strength in numbers. It tells people to go out and stick their noses in other people's business" (U.S. Catholic, Dec. 1999, p. 10). Einstein said, "Religion should give up a God who concerns Himself with fates and actions of human beings" (Christian Century, Oct. 27, 1999, p. 1027). Petty Kamuf, feminist professor at the University of So. Calif. said, "Reading aloud to your children is an act of violence that represses the young because it forces them into the jail of patriarchy and cultural structures. Children are unaware of this abuse because the psychic pain involved is so great that their memory is repressed" (U.S. New & World Report, Dec. 4, 2000, p. 24).

However, the main negative forces of our culture are much more invasive. They include T.V., movies, the internet, fashion, literature, music, exposure in many forms to the life-styles of the rich and the famous, etc. For instance, I read recently that before one of our children reaches the legal age to drink an alcoholic beverage, he or she will have been exposed to 740,000 incentives to do so. The sexual provocation on T.V. is terrible. It was reported in the Pastor's Weekly Briefing (Apr 14, 2000, p. 1) that in 1999 as compared to 1989, there were 3 times more sexual references, 5.5 times more foul language, that genitalia were mentioned 7 times more often, and homosexuality 24 times more often.

The article just quoted stated that during that 10 year period, the level of violence on T.V. stayed about the same. However, our children are often hurt by the growing incidence of violence to which they are personally exposed. A study, reported in Lutheran (Oct 2002, p. 8), found that in a one month period, two-thirds of young people in grades 5 through 12 experienced emotional violence, one-third were bullied, and 8% were attacked by a weapon at least once.

At the same time, organized religion appears to be at a low point having lost much of its influence on our culture. According to Barna Research Group (Sep 17, 2002, p. 1), the top influencers on American

culture today are movies, television, the internet, books, music, public policy and law, and family . Churches are not listed in the top 12 .

Most of the time, the Jews were unable to resist the crunch of the alien culture, and began conforming to it. How are concerned parents in the U.S. doing today in their efforts to shield their children from the enticements of a culture increasingly contrary to Biblical norms? Apparently, not very well. Some claim that we lose at least 50% of our children to the world. It may be much more! The Southern Baptist Council on Family Life recently reported that 88% of children raised in evangelical homes will leave their church by the age of 18 and never return (Pastor's Weekly Briefing, Aug 10, 2002, p. 1).

Long ago, David asked, "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Psl 11:3). Solomon warned, "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it" (Psl 127:1). The Bible is filled with information about how the people of God are to go about resisting the negative influence of the culture in which they live. While we may not be able to keep the God-centered foundations of our nation from being destroyed, we certainly must try to do so. Here are some suggested ways that we can go about doing that.

Biblical examples show how God's servants have used political means in an instrumental way. Nehemiah used his relationship with King Artaxerxes of Persia to get permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 2:1-8). Paul used his rights as a Roman citizen to save his life from a Jewish mob, and to finally be able to preach the gospel in Rome (Acts 25:8-12). It is a great blessing to live in a democracy where every citizen has a voice. Christians should diligently use the power of the vote to defend the will of our founding fathers that this be "one nation under God, with liberty and justice for all." Before voting for persons to hold positions of public trust, we should give special attention to the moral standards and history of candidates.

Our freedom to speak and to write should be used to respond to editorials and public actions that are designed to undermine the God-centered traditions of our nation. This may be done in letters to the editor, through printed materials, and by availing ourselves of both public and private platforms that we have access to in this free society.

The Bible says Christians should be salt, light, and leaven in this world (Matt. 5:13-16, 13:33). Salt, light and leaven can have their effect only by coming in contact with the substance they are to influence. By the same token, the followers of Christ are not to retreat from the world, but to engage it in every forum! This will not usually be done by meeting in a building! The greatest advance of the church

occurred when believers were driven out of Jerusalem and began penetrating the world with the gospel message (Acts 8:1-4).

Profiting again from our national freedoms, there is much that can be done by individual Christians to improve our culture (as many are already doing!). We should seek to be leaders in parent-teacher groups in public education, in participating in after-school programs for students, in taking part in sports, social, music and drama programs for adults and young people, and in a myriad of other ways mixing with our fellow citizens in good works.

While I personally have never ventured into politics, I know that many brothers and sisters in Christ have done so and have been able to make a difference. Paul was in prison in Rome when he wrote to the Philippians, sending them greetings from Caesar's house-hold (4:22). It is possible that these high-placed brethren were able to be of aid to him while a prisoner, and may have been instrumental in his eventual release. I do know through personal experience, that church personnel overseas who have run into legal difficulties, have been aided greatly by members of the church holding important government positions. I have also seen how Christians in the military, in the diplomatic corps, in non-military service capacities (dependent schools, supply centers, etc.), and in various forms of business and secular work have been powerful missionary voices for Christ abroad.

It is not possible to list all the ways in which Christians can be salt, light and leaven in this fallen world. It is enough to make the point that the Lord wants us to make a difference in individual lives. He is the one who has told us not to be afraid of whatever this world may offer or do, as He has already defeated the world (John 16:33). We are told that He who is in us is more potent than any demonic power that exists (1 John 5:4). The Lord is our active partner, and has promised that His power will work in us and through us beyond our most extravagant request, or our most creative imagination (Eph. 3:20-21). That is why we are to approach our battle against Satan and his forces without fear, but rather with optimism and with a smell of victory. We can truly do all things through Him who strengthens us (Phil. 4:13).

Finally, it must be said that prayer will always be the most powerful means for effecting our culture. By our reasoned argument we are to challenge men and women to do what they can. However, when we pray, we are asking God to act. The Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul said, "First of all, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity." (1 Tim. 2:1-2). Let us pray daily for our rulers

and for all those who are in positions of authority that we might indeed live tranquil and quiet lives in all godliness and dignity.

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