

Dear Pastor, Are You a Shepherd or a Hireling?

There are countless thousands of outstanding Christian leaders in America today, men and women of sacrifice and courage and integrity. But, the truth be told, there are many others who have compromised their convictions and chosen the fear of man over the fear of God. My dear fellow leader, does that describe you?

For years, we've been told not to be confrontational and not to address controversial moral issues lest we offend the world and drive away the lost. And so, in the name of wisdom, a spirit of compromise has entered our pulpits, and we sound more like spiritual politicians than truth-telling shepherds.

May I ask how that non-confrontational has worked for us? It hasn't.

The world still hates us, and those with a worldly social agenda have made massive progress, aided and abetted by our silence. This is downright shameful.

In my just-released book, *Saving a Sick America*, I quote from an 1873 sermon by Charles G. Finney. His words still burn like holy fire.

Finney, who had served as President of Oberlin College, brought this striking charge:

Brethren, our preaching will bear its legitimate fruits. If immorality prevails in the land, the fault is ours in a great degree. If there is a decay of conscience, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the public press lacks moral discrimination, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the church is degenerate and worldly, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the world loses its interest in religion, the

pulpit is responsible for it. If Satan rules in our halls of legislation, the pulpit is responsible for it. If our politics become so corrupt that the very foundations of our government are ready to fall away, the pulpit is responsible for it. Let us not ignore this fact, my dear brethren; but let us lay it to heart, and be thoroughly awake to our responsibility in respect to the morals of this nation.

Do these words still hold true in 2017?

Without a doubt, in Finney's day, the pulpit played a greater role in society, and there was a greater reverence for Scripture and respect for the church at that time. So, in that sense, his statement needs to be modified. But it should not be thrown out entirely.

To the contrary, since the great majority of people in the USA still claim to be Christian, since our airwaves are flooded with 24/7 gospel radio and TV programs, since we have *New York Times* best-selling Christian books, and since roughly one-third of Americans attend church services on a regular basis, the answer remains Yes: The pulpit is largely responsible for the moral state of the nation. And it is the pulpit that helps set the spiritual and moral climate in the rest of the church.

Yet many of our leaders preach a toothless, pep-talk gospel that fits in perfectly with our convenience store, quick-fix Christianity, promising all kinds of benefits without any requirements. What a deal! Who could refuse it?

No wonder we are producing consumers rather than disciples.

What else can we expect when we so studiously bypass the cross in so much of our teaching? What else can we expect when we preach God the genie rather than God the judge?

In 2014, George Barna reported the results of his latest poll.

During an interview on American Family Radio, Barna explained

that, “What we’re finding is that when we ask [pastors] about all the key issues of the day, [90 percent of them are] telling us, ‘Yes, the Bible speaks to every one of these issues.’ Then we ask them: ‘Well, are you teaching your people what the Bible says about those issues?’ and the numbers drop ... to less than 10 percent of pastors who say they will speak to it.”

And what, exactly, holds them back from addressing controversial issues from the pulpit, including, “societal, moral and political issues”?

According to Barna, “There are five factors that the vast majority of pastors turn to. Attendance, giving, number of programs, number of staff and square footage.”

He continued: “What I’m suggesting is [those pastors] won’t probably get involved in politics because it’s very controversial. Controversy keeps people from being in the seats, controversy keeps people from giving money, from attending programs.”

Talk about selling out to the world! Talk about compromising for the sake of numbers and money! Talk about failing to address life-and-death issues—issues that most congregants desperately want addressed—in order to expand our square footage. What an outrage.

I urge every pastor and Christian leader reading this article to ask yourself some honest questions (as I ask myself as well).

If your congregants are slumbering, are your words calculated to wake them up? If your congregants are compromised, are your words calculated to convict them? If your congregants are worldly, are your words calculated to call them to repentance?

I know there are many other questions to ask, including, What if your congregants are hurting or discouraged or hopeless?

Are your words calculated to heal and encourage and inspire?

Those are worthy questions to ask as well.

But today, we seem to put all the emphasis on the last set of questions and almost no emphasis on the first. Why?

My dear fellow leader: Is God calling you to train a holy army of world-changers, or is He calling you to build a luxurious, Christian country club?

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority."

Isn't that where we find ourselves today? {eoa}

(Excerpted and adapted from the chapter "Restoring Thunder to Our Pulpits," in *Saving a Sick America: A Prescription for Moral and Cultural Transformation*.)