

Did Chuck Colson's Last Message Have Meaning for 2016?

Chuck Colson understood American politics perhaps better than anyone, including the seedy underbelly.

Prior to giving his life to Christ, Colson was a lawyer in the Richard Nixon administration, and eventually went to prison as one of the "Watergate Seven." But as a result of his conversion, he founded the Prison Fellowship and launched the "BreakPoint" radio program.

As one of the leading Christian voices of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, he frequently talked about the decline of American culture. And his final message to the world, delivered just hours before a brain hemorrhage felled him, he spoke very directly to the matter of winning the "culture war."

"My topic is the cultural environment today. Culture at a crossroads, which indeed it is," he said in his opening remarks at the Breaking the Spiral of Silence Conference hosted by the Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview. "What you've just witnessed [is the] Department of Health and Human Services attempting to impose a mandate on the church and Christian groups and organizations, [that they] would have to provide insurance for things that violate our conscience, and that we wouldn't be allowed a conscientious exemption. What's extraordinary about that is there have been battles over religious liberty ever since the nation was founded. And most of them have ended up in court decisions, sometimes legislative [action]. This is the first time in history—which is why Cardinal Wuerl here in Washington said this is the most serious invasion of the church by government ever—it's been

done by a bureaucrat in a government agency simply writing it and putting it out as law. Normally in a court case you get a chance to argue both sides. But there wasn't a chance for two sides to be argued this time. It was done by executive fiat."

Colson said the church had to learn how to defend itself against "this sort of thing, and do it in a way that is constructive." He said incidents like the Obamacare contraceptives mandate were "just the tip of the iceberg," the latest visible manifestation of a growing hostility toward Christianity brought on by government officials who feared the power of the church.

"[W]e all worship a king higher than the kings of this earth, and that's seen as a threat," he said. "And we're also seen as wanting to impose our views on people. Don't let them tell you that. We don't impose anything, we propose; we propose an invitation to the wedding feast. To come to a better way of living, a better way of life. It's the great proposal. We couldn't impose if we wanted to. And we don't want to impose."

But Colson didn't believe in a top-down solution. And, in his final message, he said as much.

"I happen to be one of those who believe that societies are changed by movements at the grassroots," he said. "I think cultures are changed over the backyard fence and the barbecue grill. I don't believe they're changed from the top down."

It's a message that perhaps resonates again today. At the time of his speech, the American political process was once again in full swing, with a presidential election only a few months off. But Colson said that election wouldn't be the solution to what ailed the country.

"What we are seeing now is the full fruits of 30 years of relativism, the death of truth, in the academy in particular, and in public discourse, and the coarsening of public discourse, [the] coarsening of politics," he said. "Everybody

looks to the elections and thinks the elections will settle this problem or settle that problem. Elections are important. Whoever serves in office, it makes a difference what kind of person that is and what that person believes. But elections can't solve the problem we've got. The problem we've got is that our culture has been decaying from the inside for 30 or 40 years. And politics is nothing but an expression of culture.

"So how do you fix the culture?

"Culture is actually formed by the belief system of the people, by the cult, which is us, the church, [it] has been historically. So if things are bad, don't think it's going to be solved by an election, it is going to be solved by us. When you have a healthy cult you have a healthy culture. When you have a healthy culture you have healthy politics. So it comes right back to us. Look in the mirror. That's where the problem is. And if we can through the church renew the church to really bring a healthy cultural influence, then there is some hope that we can bring change."

Ultimately, Colson said, it was time for a "movement of God's people under the power of the Holy Spirit" to begin to impact American culture. This "desperately needed" movement was why, he said, he devoted so much of his final years teaching biblical worldview.

"I think that's at the root of our problems, and once we can get that understood by the church that [Christianity] is a worldview and we have to live it and express it and contend for it, otherwise it's not going to be there," he said. "We're the ones who are the custodians of that. [Otherwise] you'll see the continued deterioration of the culture and all that goes with it. So I think the responsibility has to be taken by the church for a movement that will bring back the authority and the strength and the winsomeness of the cult, which then in turn affects the culture."