

How to Change the Course of America's Decline

i·dol·a·try – of idols. **2.** Blind or excessive devotion to something.

As I was walking the other day, I found myself asking God the most amazing question. It was a question that came to me after much musing about the troubled state of the U.S.

The question was simply this: “Lord, if You judge the U.S., if You harshly judge this nation, what will happen to Your people? And I mean true believers—will they be spared? What about my four precious daughters? What will come of them?”

I almost came to a standstill, in utter shock and horror, at the thought of what the answer to that question could be. And I thought to myself, “If God does to His people today what He did with His people in the Old Testament when the nation was judged, then the answer is clear—and it’s not a good one.”

A story in 1 Samuel gives an amazing account of a situation that many believe parallels the church in the U.S. today. Long story short, after losing a battle and the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines, the Philistines encounter every kind of problem you can imagine. After many an affliction, they realize they have to rid themselves of this curse (the Ark of the Covenant), and they send it back to Israel.

Upon seeing the cart carrying the Ark, the Israelites “rejoiced at the sight” (1 Sam. 6:13). But what followed wasn’t quite what they expected. The Ark did not bring them good fortune or great blessing, as they had thought it would. Instead, for over 20 years, all the presence of the Lord brought the Israelites was judgment, so much so that it says in chapter 7 that “all the people mourned and sought after the Lord” (v. 2)—even though they were in His presence!

What we quickly find out in the next two verses is that while they had the presence of the Lord in the Ark of the Covenant for those 20 years, they also had idols, including Ashtoreths, Baals and other foreign gods, in their midst, in their tents and in their cities—while in the presence of the Lord.

What is an idol? Let me make it so simple that you will know in an instant what yours is.

For some, it is an object, such as a car, a boat, even video games or some material object. For others, it is a person or a set of persons, perhaps someone famous, such as a television, movie, reality show or music personality. For others, it may be something that is like an itch; you try so hard not to scratch it, but sometimes you do, and it is never more than an instant away from your fingertips. It is your apple in the garden—your one thing that you tell yourself over and over that you could stop any time you really wanted to, but you don't. And even though you walk into churches and feel His presence, you just can't seem to move on that next step—that next level—and joy eludes you again and again because you are trying to live a life where both co-exist: the presence of God and that something you know is standing between you and your God.

i·dol (noun) 1. an image or other material object representing a deity to which religious worship is addressed. 2. any person or thing regarded with blind admiration, adoration or devotion 3. a figment of the mind; fantasy.

Media

I have been so alarmed at the boldness and brazenness of the U.S. media the past few years, and even more so in the past year. I have never seen network TV filled with so much brazen, out-and-out immorality, violence and sexuality, which are our version of Ashtoreth poles and Baals.

We come home from church, plop down and let the TV run for

hours in our homes. Try counting the number of television shows with the word *lie*, *liars*, *deceit* or a reference to untruth in them. Homosexuality is presented as just a normal part of society, or, as one show calls it, "the new normal."

We watch programs with great anticipation because they move us or make us laugh or because the music is so good, knowing somewhere in the back of our mind that there are things they're saying and doing that are *not* normal and, in so many cases, just out and out wrong. Yet studies show our TV viewing habits in the church are no different than those in the world.

And then there is every kind of reality program you can imagine, all celebrating immorality, decadence and a no-holds-barred approach to life.

Children are dying in their classrooms and people are walking into movie theaters and shopping malls and schools, killing people at a clip I have never seen in my 40-something years. Teens are taking their lives and entering rehab centers at alarming rates, while one camp of the church wrestles with being culturally relevant and the other camp wrestles with being 100 percent theologically correct and outing any who are not. Were it not for the promise in God's Word, one would think victory was slipping through our hands like water through a broken dam.

When will we learn this isn't anything new? The views of morality that the U.S. media is embracing aren't anything new. They aren't depicting evolving thought processes or progressive breakthroughs. This is as old as the Bible itself. It is the same cycle that has repeated itself over and over and over throughout history. It is our history. It is our Christian heritage, and it isn't a good one.

Over and over throughout history, God's people have gone from seeing God give amazing victories, to drifting away from its center through generational decline, to conforming more to the

culture of the surrounding peoples, to chasing after other gods and then bowing to the other gods, to idolatry, and then, inevitably, to God's judgment—His strong hand of correction. More times than not, this meant captivity, slaughter and loss of life as they knew it. How modern they must have felt in Sodom! How forward-thinking they must have thought they were as Babylon was marching! How righteous and well-educated they must have thought themselves when the Savior of the world stood in their very midst, as they dismissed Him as a threat to their power and position! In 2013, it's a different day, same dilemma.

Is there hope? Absolutely! But a sifting must come first, and that is where I believe Christianity in the U.S. today is and what God is doing in the church as we know it: sifting.

Rick Warren recently told a viewing audience a very simple truth. He stated that every civilization has a starting point and an ending point. All great civilizations, at some point, die. And ours has outlived most.

We must never think God needs His people to live well and live free in a Christian nation for the kingdom to be advanced. In fact, many of the greatest moves of God came when His people were in the minority or under the oppression of a foreign government, burning at the stake or even in slavery or prison, as was the case with Daniel, Esther, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Moses, Joseph, Paul, Barnabas—and the list goes on and on.

This life we live today could be gone tomorrow, as has been the case with every major civilization in the history of the planet—and for most, their end was swift and painful.

The Church

I will tell you this, and I say this in sincerest prophetic utterance and persuasion that I have been called to say it: God loves His church and stands ready to bless her even in

these evil days. But God will not be mocked, and He is a jealous God. We must never forget that He is a jealous God, and the highest form of idolatry is when His people begin to break free from the yoke they surrendered to and begin to live according to the limits of their minds, their reason, their surrounding culture, their media and their vices: Ashtoreth poles and Baals.

I have watched too many once-mainline denominations and well-known pastors yield to the wisdom of the day and stray from their founding principles and the Scriptures with which they were formed. In their pursuit to be relevant, they find themselves being, in all things once absolute, relative. The same goes for the colleges founded in their names.

Let me be clear: Any movement, church or individual that would relegate the Bible to metaphors, good stories and anything less than the inerrant, living, breathing Word of God is committing the highest form of idolatry, as it's the equivalent of declaring yourself to be the God of your life, weighing all things through the finite reasoning of your own mind and conscience, church committee or denominational vote. We do this to our own great peril.

On a more local level, there is great idolatry taking place in the local church today. There just is. When views on issues such as abortion, suicide, adultery, divorce, homosexuality, alcoholism, drug use, sex outside of marriage, gambling, foul language and other leading issues are no different in the church than they are in the unsaved world, there is idolatry. It means you have refused to surrender your own desires and beliefs to the will of the God of the universe and His Word and you have refused to bow your knee.

Whether you call it idolatry or not, when you say, "I know the Bible says this, but I am going to do this, or I think differently," then you have declared yourself to be your own god, and that is the highest form of idolatry. In the words of

Calvary Chapel founding pastor Chuck Smith, "If the Bible is not completely true or inerrant, then, pray tell, who decides which parts are true and which parts are not?"

When a church or a church leader does this, you can call it whatever you want, but when God's hand lifts, you can sing all the songs you want and pray all the prayers you want to pray, but you are singing and praying to dead air, no matter how good the music makes you feel or how inspiring the words of the leader may be. You have taken your anointing and covering from your God and placed them in the hands of man or an ideology and have become no more than a club or a group. And the nation incurs the loss, as does the church.

Hope

Our hope is as old as our faith itself, and it can be summed up in one word: surrender. So many churches are struggling, and many have closed. They say it's the economy, but one look at Europe—once the seat of so many great missionary and evangelistic movements in church history—and you will see great parallels to the decline of Christianity in the U.S. over the last 20 years.

I do not wish to pour salt in the wounds of precious pastors in the trenches, but I do want to say that even in these difficult financial times, I know of many churches that are flourishing and seeing amazing moves of God. What do these churches have in common? These churches possess a passionate commitment to prayer, private fasting, seeing the lost come to Christ and a passionate commitment to God's Word—all of it. And they speak the truth in love about the idols. Martin Luther King once said, "A lie cannot live." Where God is moving, your lie will surface, and it will stare you in the face and demand a decision. That is the power of the Holy Spirit.

I am not ready to throw in the towel, and by God's grace,

Satan will not have my children. My Bible says that no weapon formed against me will prosper. My Bible says that He will build His church and the very gates of hell will not prevail against it. My Bible says that *if* His people will humble themselves and pray and turn from their wicked ways, then will He hear from His Father in heaven and heal their land. The promises are there, and they are real.

We hold the answer, friends. We always have. You hold the answer, friend. You always have. Bend your knee. Come under the authority of God's Word. Guard your children against the "new normal."

Churches, be willing to break from your weekly and yearly calendar and schedule regular times of prayer and fasting! Give as you have never given before. Do not turn a blind eye to the orphan, the widow, the single mother, the alien or the hungry. See beyond your own shores, and set foot on lands you have not known. Extend a hand weekly to the lost, and make evangelism and discipleship the pillars of everything you do. Pray for your leaders. Pray for your president, whether you agree with him or not. Pray for his children. And pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

Pastors, engage as you have never engaged before. We do not need words from the stage only. We need shepherds who smell like sheep and prophets who are not afraid to proclaim what God whispers in his or her ear. We desperately need leaders who are strong and courageous.

The passage in 1 Samuel 7 shows that everything changed with three simple acts. The people destroyed their idols; they assembled to fast; and they confessed.

We are not so different than our ancient church ancestors. I know I'm not. I have my something, just like you have your something. And I have tried in vain to serve and worship One while entertaining the other in those off hours—those hours

when no one is looking. But I have a name for it now—idolatry—and it must die if I am to go on with Him.

I find myself confronted with the same proposition the rich young ruler was confronted with when asked to rid himself of the one thing he held dearest, wanting Jesus' presence and His plan for his life with every fiber of his being yet not really letting go of that Ashteroth and that Baal. They must die, or else God must give the blessing and anointing to another. The same goes for you, my friend.