

Is it Too Late to Save America?

Almost everyone we talk to is deeply concerned about our country. Spiraling government debt, an attack on the fertile fields of free enterprise and persistent unemployment give us plenty to worry about. But our problems are not limited to economics. It now seems that *everything* we hold dear is under attack: faith, family and freedom.

The recent Department of Health and Human Services rule is a clear attempt to undermine faith and freedom. If allowed to stand, it will force religious organizations to provide health insurance that covers sterilization, contraception and drugs that induce abortion. The White House even had the gall to tell American Catholic bishops to get with the program and follow those “enlightened” voices allied with the president. If the federal government can dictate doctrine to churches and force citizens to violate their deepest convictions, what *can't* the government do?

Alongside the attack on faith and freedom is the attack on the family. In February, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld U.S. District Judge Vaughn Walker's controversial decision to strike down Proposition 8 in California. The referendum, approved by a majority of California voters, had defined marriage as being between one man and one woman. The case is undoubtedly headed to the U.S. Supreme Court, where the future of marriage in our country could be decided by nine justices.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said believers are both salt and light. Salt helps preserve what is precious while enhancing its flavor. Likewise, the Christian witness should have a positive effect on every aspect of life and culture. Jesus said that if salt loses its effect, it is good for

nothing but to be trampled underfoot. Sure enough, everything sacred—faith, family and freedom—is being trampled by secularists who have rejected these pillars of civilization.

The multitudes stumble in darkness because many believers, who have been commanded to put the light in a prominent place—on a lamp stand—have hidden, and in doing so diminished their influence on the public by accepting false comfort, compromise and complacency. Light reveals danger and pitfalls while illuminating the path to security and success. Is it any wonder our culture is in such trouble when salt and light have failed to fulfill their divine assignment?

What Not to Do

Unfortunately, many believers see all this as mere “politics”—a useless and corrupt enterprise that distracts us from putting in a good day’s work, paying the bills, loving our families and serving our local church or synagogue. For such people, Washington, D.C., is best ignored.

Even many who are concerned give up without a fight. “Why polish the brass on a sinking ship?” they ask. “We know that in the end times, there will be wars and rumors of wars. Rather than worrying with ‘politics’ in these last days, we should just focus on evangelism and wait for the Lord to return in all His glory.”

We must reject this “last days” apathy. We need to follow the example of the apostle Paul, who spoke of his own time as the last days yet still fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith, even to the point of death (2 Tim. 4:7). We don’t know when the Lord will return, but we shouldn’t use Christ’s future return as an excuse to do nothing in the present.

Perhaps the most common mistakes we make is to get riled up for a few months, focus on one election, and either return to business as usual if the election goes their way or give up if

it doesn't. How Christians vote in 2012 is crucial, but we must be as concerned with our culture's long-term direction as with one election. We can pray for a quick and miraculous restoration, but we need to plan for a long, hard battle.

Politics isn't everything, nor should the church be the arm of one political party. But in today's world, having no political effect isn't an option. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: "Not to stand is to stand. Not to speak is to speak." Now is the time to stand and speak. The future of our country, our children and grandchildren is at stake.

Of course, we need to know what to speak and how to say it. This is a war against principalities and powers, of course, but it is also a war over *ideas*—and ideas, it's often said, have consequences. Unfortunately, believers aren't always the most articulate or persuasive witnesses in the public square.

To get anywhere, we must understand the sources of the ideas that ail us, as well as their alternatives. We must learn to connect and apply these alternatives and think clearly about them, and defend them persuasively in the public square. That's a tall order, but it can be done. In our recent book, *Indivisible: Restoring Faith, Family, and Freedom Before It's Too Late*, we try to supply the weapons and the body armor that every believer needs to win this war.

But knowing and defending the right ideas is only part of the story. In the 1980s, the Religious Right drew conservative Christians into the rough-and-tumble of politics. This helped the country overcome the Soviet threat, become more pro-life and slow the forces that sought to dismantle marriage and secularize society, but it didn't reverse the downward trends.

One significant reason is, the Religious Right didn't emerge from a larger spiritual renewal. The profound cultural changes in Western history—from the Christianization of the Roman world to the Reformation, Counter-Reformation, American

Revolution, and the British and American abolition of slavery—coincided with widespread spiritual renewal. The American Revolution grew out of the First Great Awakening. The abolition of the slave trade in the U.S. grew out of the Second Great Awakening.

In recent decades, there have been renewal movements in many denominations and individual congregations. These movements have partly filled the void left by dwindling mainline churches. Yet by many measures, professing Christians are still hard to distinguish from the general population. If we want to transform the culture, we need transformed Christians. That can only come through the cross—through suffering—and the sanctifying power of a life submitted to the Holy Spirit.

Political discussions should never become an excuse for avoiding the question, “What should I do?” If you’re concerned about world poverty, the first question should be, “What should I do about it?” Compassion doesn’t mean feeling sad because someone somewhere is in need. It means “to suffer alongside.”

If you’re worried that families are falling apart, you can’t just focus on divorce law, welfare programs and Internet porn; you should also think about how you treat your spouse and children. If you’re panicked that the national debt is spiraling out of control, then look at your own finances and reflect on how you view the costly entitlements that the government has promised you.

The pursuit of holiness is a challenge for us all. About a century ago, a newspaper asked British author G.K. Chesterton and some other writers to submit essays on the topic “What’s wrong with the world?” Chesterton’s essay was brief. “Dear Sirs,” he wrote, “I am.”

Still, though we often fail, God calls each of us to a holy life overflowing with His Spirit. “If you are what you should

be,” said St. Catherine of Siena, “you will set the whole world on fire.” Our world needs a multitude of torches aflame with the Spirit.

To be effective, our personal holiness and public engagement must also be accompanied by tangible, Spirit-filled growth in unity that others can see. Jesus told His disciples, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus prayed that His disciples might be one, as He and the Father are one (John 17). For 1,000 years, the body of Christ was unified. In 1054, however, tensions between East and West led to a tragic split that has never fully healed. Then, in 1517, Martin Luther, responding to widespread corruption, sparked the Protestant Reformation in the West. Since then, Protestants and Catholics have spilled time, energy and blood fighting each other—to say nothing of how Christians have often treated the Jews. There are now some 42,000 denominations worldwide. We seem to be better at splitting than working together.

This division has made us feeble culture warriors. In his recent book *To Change the World*, sociologist James Hunter explains that cultures are normally shaped and changed, not by majority vote, but by small numbers of “elites” working in overlapping *networks*. That means 299.9 million Americans might believe one thing—might have history, reason and revelation on their side—but the 100,000 with influence can set the cultural agenda.

Part of the reason Christians have been so ineffective is that we’ve failed to love one another as Christ has loved us. We don’t even have one big alternative Christian network where we can pool our resources and reinforce our efforts. We have all sorts of separate, non-overlapping, even hostile Christian institutions and networks. It hardly matters if 80 percent of the population is Christian if we’re so riddled with divisions

that we work at cross-purposes.

Secularists are much more functionally unified than believers. We're reminded of Joel's prophecy, which describes the judgment of consuming locusts working in unity. "They each march in line ... do not deviate from their paths. They do not crowd each other, they march every one in his path; when they burst through the defenses, they do not break ranks" (Joel 2:7-8, NASB).

With Christians divided, secularists have pushed believers farther and farther to the margins. The principles our grandparents treated as common sense—the right to life, the dignity of marriage—are now treated as bigotry. The moral consensus that sustained our country has ceased to exist. And millions of Americans now see the blessing of opportunity and free enterprise as a curse.

Glimmers of Unity

At the same time, the progress of secularism has started to bring believers together. People of faith have encountered each other in recent years over issues such as abortion and marriage.

Praying outside Planned Parenthood offices, orthodox Catholics have found they have more in common with faithful Lutherans than with liberal Catholics who think like secularists. While campaigning for a state referendum on marriage, Southern Baptists have joined forces with Pentecostals they used to avoid. At crisis pregnancy centers, staunch Calvinists have discovered they have more in common with evangelical Methodists than with liberal Presbyterians. Recently, Catholics and Protestants have stood together to oppose the Health and Human Services mandate.

It's sad that it has taken aggressive secularism, abortion on demand, and a frontal attack on marriage and religious freedom for Christians to discover that we have much in common.

We need to go beyond defensive alliances on public policy, however, and strive for a deeper and more lasting unity. We have serious doctrinal disagreements, but *we share core beliefs and moral principles and worship the same God*. If believers stand on these foundations, we can help fulfill Jesus' prayer for our unity, even though we still may disagree in some areas.

In the last couple of years, the two of us—an evangelical and a Catholic—have met with scores of Catholic and Protestant leaders, and spoken to thousands of Christians around the country. Over and over, we have heard the same thing: The Holy Spirit seems to be drawing together *all* of those in the Judeo-Christian tradition despite our differences.

We're convinced that God wants to pour His Spirit on the church for the good of our entire culture. Jesus would never have prayed for His followers to be one with Him and perfected in unity if it were impossible or unimportant. Oneness is not sameness. In fact, diversity grounded in unity can be an asset.

Paul also challenged the church at Ephesus to make "every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit in a bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). Unity is a sign of the kingdom of God; in our division we have reduced that kingdom to a future reward rather than a living, present reality. It's no surprise that we have not shaped our culture like we should have.

If we are to be salt and light for our culture, we must be able to understand and explain the sources of the darkness with a consistent voice. Let us pray that we can, by our unified public witness, preserve the good in our culture. Let us also pray that we can expose the bad and give guidance to those who are headed for disaster.

Our future is at stake. It's not too late, but it is later than most people think.

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