

# The Spirit Is Saying 'Forward' !

While reflecting on a powerful quote from the lips of **Catherine Booth**, I was struck by the fact that the latest strategies of the American church, strategies to avoid conflict with the world, are not only wrongheaded. They are actually diametrically opposed to the strategies we should be following.

Let me explain what I mean.

**Catherine Booth** was the co-founder of the **Salvation Army**, along with her husband, William Booth, and for decades the Salvationists were known for their fearless, uncompromising preaching of the **gospel**, their sacrificial living and their compassionate care for the hurting and the poor.

Catherine was the more fiery preacher of the two, and in her sermon "Aggressive Christianity," she exclaimed, "Opposition! It is a bad sign for the Christianity of this day that it provokes so little opposition. If there were no other evidence of it being wrong, I should know from that. When the church and the world can jog along together comfortably, you may be sure there is something wrong. The world has not altered. Its spirit is exactly the same as it ever was, and if Christians were equally faithful and devoted to the Lord and separated from the world, living so that their lives were a reproof to all ungodliness, the world would hate them as much as it ever did. It is the *church* that has altered, *not* the world."

I had quoted these words almost 25 years ago in my book *How Saved Are We?*—not to mention many times since—but last week, when I posted them on my Facebook page, something hit me between the eyes.

On the one hand, Catherine's words are more relevant now than

when she uttered them in England in the 1800s, since in so many ways the church of America and the world do “jog along together comfortably” today.

As I wrote in 1989 in *The End of the American Gospel Enterprise*, “Like Sardis, we have become the ‘perfect model of inoffensive Christianity’ (G. B. Caird), ‘having a reputation of being alive, yet being dead’ (Rev. 3:1). Like Sardis, we have so come to terms with our pagan environment that we provoke almost no opposition and make virtually no impact. And like Sardis, situated high on a mountain rock, we have felt safe and secure in this world.”

And that was written back in 1989. Just think of how much more compromised and inoffensive we have become since then!

But as I reflected on Catherine Booth’s piercing words, I said to myself, “Yet in many other ways, the church of America and the world are absolutely not jogging along together comfortably. We find ourselves in conflict, and there is often hostility, anger, legal persecution and, occasionally, even violence directed against us.”

Yes, the truth be told, on some important fronts, we *are* experiencing real opposition from the world, and some of it is vicious and angry.

Where exactly are we experiencing fierce opposition? And what are these important fronts?

I can answer those questions in two words: **abortion** and **homosexuality**.

Yet these are the very fronts from which many Christian leaders are urging us to retreat, telling us that we need to stop provoking so much controversy and that we need to quit standing up for these vital social issues if we want to win to Jesus those on the other side.

Now, I totally agree that we must be full of compassion and grace when we stand for righteousness and that we must overcome evil with good and hatred with love. And to the extent we get in the flesh and become mean-spirited and nasty, we are already defeated and we have brought reproach to the Lord, not to mention driven away those He died for.

And I absolutely affirm that the first and greatest priority is winning the lost and making disciples.

But didn't Jesus say that those who were "persecuted for righteousness' sake" were truly happy and blessed (Matt. 5:10, ESV)? And didn't He say that this is how the prophets before us were persecuted (vv. 11-12)? And weren't the prophets persecuted for calling their nation to repentance and for rebuking social evils?

Why should it be different with us?

When Paul spoke to Felix about "faith in Christ Jesus," didn't he also speak to him "about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment," and isn't this why Felix became alarmed (Acts 24:24-25)? (Felix was basically living in adultery with his wife, based on the laws and customs of the day.)

But today, when it is clear that we have hit a nerve when we stand up for the life of the unborn, to the point that peaceful pro-life activists have been attacked by police, some are telling us that we need to adopt a softer, more gentle tone.

Isn't this simply a matter of compromise and appeasement?

And today, when it is clear that we have hit another major nerve when we oppose homosexual activism—while welcoming every lost person into our churches to hear the gospel and receive God's love—we are told that if we will only drop this divisive issue, then we will see many more gays and lesbians saved and helped.

Again, I do agree that we have become too politicized on these issues—they are really gospel issues first and foremost and political issues second—but in reality, unless we affirm homosexuality as God-blessed and God-given, we will still be viewed as Bible-bashing homophobes. And we will soon learn the truth of Winston Churchill's remark that "an appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile—hoping it will eat him last."

Pastors, leaders, parents and all concerned believers, hear me clearly today: When and if same-sex marriage is codified as law throughout America, gay activists will not simply say, "We have finally achieved our goal!" To the contrary, all of us who do not affirm and endorse homosexuality (and bisexuality and transgenderism) will be singled out as intolerant bigots, and our freedoms of conscience, speech and religion will be the next things to go.

In fact, they are already on their way out, unless we take a stand for righteousness today.

What then do we do?

First, we **repent** of all known sin in our own lives, purging ourselves of hypocrisy, with God's supernatural help.

Second, we ask God for a broken heart of compassion for those who oppose His standards.

And third, we ask the Lord for courage to stand, refusing to compromise or back down regardless of cost or consequence, prepared to be persecuted for righteousness' sake and counting that persecution a true joy, always lifting up the name of Jesus in spirit and word and deed.

Where are we experiencing opposition today? That is where we need to take our stand.

As Martin Luther said, "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God

except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved and to be steady on all the battle front besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point."

I hear the Spirit of God saying, "Forward!" I do not hear Him saying, "Retreat!"

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