

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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February 20, 2016

Evangelical Christianity: Its Role in a Hostile World?

Evangelical Christians should, by nature, be optimists. Our hope for the future is rooted in our confidence in Christ's return and the establishment of His kingdom (Titus 2:13). But, because evangelicals have enjoyed such influence in American culture, it is the immediate future that causes so much anxiety. Evangelicals no longer influence public policy, culture's agenda or its values, morals or ethical standards. Evangelicals are therefore now marginalized in American culture, and contemplation of the future and that of our children and grandchildren causes us to fear. We live in a culture where one of the few certainties is change, and that change involves cultural issues to which God's Word has clearly spoken, but which the broader culture intentionally rejects. The new normal: Evangelicals now experience a heightened sense of vulnerability and find themselves increasingly under attack.

What should the evangelical response be to this change, this vulnerability and this hostility?

1 Peter 2:12 mandates: "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." Further, Jesus, in his high-priestly prayer (John 17:13-18), posits that we are to be "in the world but not of the world." The words of Peter and Jesus create a necessary tension for those of us who love the Lord and long for His coming. We are in effect "exiles" and citizens of another kingdom. Christians have been removed from the world's power at conversion (Galatians 6:14) and, because the cross established a judicial separation between believers and the world, Christians are citizens of a new kingdom (Philippians 3:20). The Bible both discourages absolute physical separation from the people of the world (1 Corinthians 5:9, 10), yet instructs believers to witness to this world (John 17:15), all the while keeping from the influence of the world (James 1:27; 1 Corinthians 7:31; Romans 12:2; 1 John 2:15). Yet, we are to live for Him and represent Him in this antagonistic, tolerant, autonomous culture. How do we do that?

- Many evangelicals are advocating a model of transformation such that we seize control of the major institutions (beginning with the political power centers) and impose the values, morals and ethical standards of God's Word on the broader culture. In effect, this option seeks to force people to live according to God's standards under punishment of the law, thereby creating a theocracy in America that imposes Christian values, morals and ethical standards on all of American culture. Political power provides the solution!
- Other Christians, such as Rod Dreher offer what he calls the "Benedict Option," named after Benedict of Nursia (ca, 480-543[7]), the father of western monasticism. Because we face a new "barbarian darkness," Dreher argues, we must "build resilient

communities within our condition of internal exile.” In other words, Christians should, to a degree, separate from the broader culture and live in community as Christians, isolated from the evil culture.

- In place of these two options, I would argue for an Incarnational model based on Jesus’ public ministry: He separated from the evils of His culture, identified with its institutions and people, yet sought to transform it from the inside out. By adding to His deity humanity, Jesus identified with the world and its social order. Similarly, the church is to do the same. At bottom, this is the heart of Christ’s admonition that we are “to be in the world but not of the world.” Yet Christ separated Himself from the evil distortions of the created order. He had nothing to do with the distorted use of wealth, social position or political power. Finally, through His death, burial and resurrection, He broke the power of sin and Satan and guarantees the world’s transformation when He returns in glory and power. Similarly, the church is to move culture’s institutions toward genuine, biblical righteousness, all the while anticipating Christ’s final transforming work when He returns.

How does the believer live out this incarnational model? First, the Christian always lives with tension, the tension between that which is transformable and that from which he or she must separate. For example, there are many good structures in the culture—art, economics, sports, and vocations—yet there are always the evil distortions of those good structures—pornography, greed, workaholicism, idolatry. The Christian should identify with the good structures and seek their transformation but always separate from those evil distortions. Second, there is no simple formula for living with or resolving this tension. Looking for *the* biblical answer to each practical question is rarely possible. Applying the principles of Scripture to each person’s situation may well produce considerably different judgments (e.g., shall I have a TV or not?). The believer’s responsibility is to know God’s Word, to know the mind of Christ, and then choose a course of action that each believes most faithfully represents God’s revealed will.

In conclusion, Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner write: “If evangelicals are known primarily for defending their institutions, they will look like one aggrieved minority among many. The face of Christianity can’t be the face of fear and resistance. Evangelicals will fail if they are defined by defending their own prerogatives. This is a trap. It would mean constantly fighting defensive battles on terrain chosen by others . . . [Evangelicals] need to rethink the nature of power. Just because Christianity has lost cultural power does not mean it has lost influence.” Historian and sociologist of religion, Rodney Stark has described the early church in the midst of the mighty Roman Empire: Christians stood for care for the sick, widows and orphans; their welcoming of strangers and care for outsiders; their respect for women (who were considered second-class citizens in the Empire); and their connection to non-Christians. “Christianity’s greatest period of vulnerability and political weakness [during the heights of the Roman Empire, AD 33-180] was the time of its most explosive growth. It became a magnet to others as well as a model of compassion.”

Perhaps it is time for evangelical Christianity to end its romance with political power and return to the Incarnational model of Jesus: Identify with the culture in which God places us, but separate from its evils, all the while seeking to be the agents of God's transforming grace.

See Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner, "The Power of Our Weakness," in *Christianity Today* (November 2015), pp. 41-46; and James P. Eckman, *Christian Ethics*, pp. 15-25.

