

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Christian Priorities in a Dysfunctional Culture

In Matthew 5:13-16, the Lord Jesus issued a series of shocking declarations about His disciples: After his discourse on the Beatitudes (5:1-12), he announced, “You are the salt of the earth . . . the light of the world . . . a city set on a hill [that] cannot be hidden.” These metaphors used by Christ are rather striking, for they reject any sense of a group of secret, silent, secluded disciples. A city resting on top of a mountain (as most cities of the ancient world did), cannot be hidden. It is unabashedly conspicuous, visible and can be seen by everyone. Light is impossible to hide; it penetrates even the smallest crack or crevice. And salt, whether as a seasoning that adds flavor or as a preservative that prevents decay (the likely meaning in the ancient world), is unique and distinguishable. Jesus’ disciples are distinct in the way they live their lives; they are genuine and exceptional. Why? Because Christians are citizens of a very different kingdom—the kingdom of God. Scottish pastor, Iain D. Campbell, writes that “The primary loyalty of every believer is to Jesus, and His claim on the lives of His people is absolute. He has given them a kingdom (Hebrews 12:28), and an inheritance (1 Peter 1:3), as a consequence of which they are citizens of a heavenly world (Philippians 3:20), looking to things that are unseen and eternal (2 Corinthians 4:17-18). Yet, in John 17:13-18 (Jesus’ high priestly prayer), Jesus prays that the Father “not take them out of the world” (17:15). Instead, as Jesus is “not of this world,” so we “are not of this world.” As the Father sent Jesus into the world, so He is sending us into the world; we are “in the world but not of the world.” To be “in the world” is to be salt, light and a city sitting high on a mountain.

For those of us who live in the United States, it used to be rather comfortable being salt, light and a city on a hill. After all, Christianity for most of this nation’s history has set the cultural agenda. No longer! Theologian Albert Mohler argues that “The Christian church has always enjoyed the moral high ground; it has always been understood to be the guardian of what is right and righteous, at least in Western societies . . . [But] for the first time in the history of Western civilization, Christianity appears to be on the underside of morality, and those who hold to biblical teachings concerning human sexuality [for example] are now ‘ousted’ . . . from the position of high moral ground.” As someone once said, “the culture war is over and we have lost.” American culture is radically and completely accommodating to values, morals and ethical standards completely opposed to everything God has revealed. Campbell poignantly observes that “The Christian message can never be easily domesticated in the world; since the days of Jesus and the Apostles, there has been no culture that was ready to entertain the message of the crucified and exalted Messiah. To the Jews it was an offense, and to the Greeks it was utter folly (1 Corinthians 1:22-23). Modern culture is no less and no more ready to welcome this radical message that demands repentance and faith in God.” Correctly, Mohler observes that “The confessing church must now be willing to be a moral minority, if that is what

the times demand. The church has no right to follow the secular siren call toward moral revisionism and politically correct positions on the issues of the day.”

Hence, this new reality for the American believer (as well as the European believer) is especially challenging. What do we do? Is the solution a political one? Do we seize power and then force the rest of the culture to follow our values, morals and ethical standards? Many evangelical believers in America are buying into this political illusion: “If we can just elect the right people to public office, everything will be fine.” This is the perspective of many evangelicals (some estimated percentages are as high as 60% to 70%), who see Donald Trump as the solution to America’s economic, military, social and financial challenges; we can also infer to America’s moral and ethical problems too. But politics will not bring in the kingdom of God: It did not happen when evangelicals voted for Ronald Reagan, or when they voted for George W. Bush. Evangelical Christians now are identified with the “Religious Right,” which in 2016 has morphed into embracing a grossly immoral, bombastic casino owner whose personal values, morality and lifestyle represent everything Christianity has stood against for two thousand years. A hatred and loathing for Hillary Clinton, many argue, means, I “must vote for the lesser of two evils.” The surreal pragmatism of evangelical Christianity in 2016 will mark it for a whole generation. Is this being salt, light and a city on a hill?

Mohler exhorts that “The church must awaken to its status as a moral minority and hold fast to the gospel it has been entrusted to preach. In doing so, the deep springs of permanent truth will reveal the church to be a life-giving oasis amid America’s moral desert.” The New Testament depicts the church metaphorically as a living, organic body over which Christ is the head. But as theologian John W. Tweeddale suggests, the American church is manifesting a “decapitated ecclesiology” and a “disembodied Christology.” Thus, the “church [must represent] the ongoing work of the ascended Christ. Therefore, the goal of the church is to reflect the priorities of Jesus for his people.”

In this *Perspective*, I am not reproving believers who might vote for Trump. Nor am I admonishing believers who might vote for Clinton. [We still practice the secret ballot in the United States.] I am pleading with believers to consider where our real citizenship lies, where are true values lie and where our mission in life resides. We are to represent Jesus Christ, even in the political realm, because once the election is over, our status as a moral minority will not have changed. The Head of the church and our coming King has given us our requisite mission: To be His salt and light, consciously beaming as a city on a hill. Our Gospel is one of salvation attained through the substitutionary work of our Savior, not the platform or bombast of the Republican Party and its current leader.

Consider Peter’s words in 1 Peter 3:8-17 (ESV):

⁸ Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹ Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. ¹⁰ For

**“Whoever desires to love life
and see good days,
let him keep his tongue from evil
and his lips from speaking deceit;
¹¹ let him turn away from evil and do good;
let him seek peace and pursue it.
¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”**

¹³ Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

See Iain D. Campbell in *Tabletalk* (October 2015), pp. 74-75; and John W. Tweeddale and Albert Mohler in *Tabletalk* (July 2016), pp. 63 and 70-71.