

INTRODUCTION by Jon Zens

Everywhere you turn there is a goal, a purpose that is set before believers time after time, after time. It is stated in many ways, but it goes something like this – “The church’s duty is to transform culture” – “The church is at fault for the culture being so bad” – “The church is not impacting culture the way it should” – “The church’s voice has been marginalized in the culture” – “If what the church is doing is not changing world cultures, it is not fulfilling the Great Commission.” There is a huge assumption lying behind such assertions that needs to be scrutinized carefully. That assumption is: *the Body of Christ in this present age is responsible to transform the culture around it.*

The question must be asked, however, *where did Christ or the apostles ever put such a goal on the necks of believers?* Where is there any New Testament revelation about such a responsibility? If it is so important, surely it would stand out clearly in the New Testament. For all the talk about “transforming culture,” the New Testament is silent about the church accomplishing such an end. To say that “changing culture” is not a goal of the Body of Christ does not change the fact that the Bride does affect society. But such an impact will be a by-product of the life of Christ coming to expression through believers. The believer does not wake up in the morning and say, “Lord, help me to make American culture more like You today.” No, he/she would instead ask, “Jesus, live Your life through me today and bring Your aroma wherever I go!” Christ promised to “build His ekklesia” all over the earth, not to make sinful cultures better places to live.

Does this mean that we pass by and ignore human needs? Not at all. Rodney Stark gave a powerful example in his book, *The Rise of Christianity*. In the second century there was a devastating plague they swept through an area. Most of the relatives, doctors and nurses fled to preserve their lives. Who stayed behind as caregivers? The believers did. They stayed behind to serve the sick at the risk of their own lives. Believers should be known as generous and caring people – “do good to everyone, especially to the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). The Body of Christ is to continue His ministry on earth – “Who went about doing good, and healing all those oppressed by the devil, because God was with Him” (Acts 10:38).

After His resurrection, Jesus announced that He had all authority in heaven and earth. The Lord promised to be “with them” for the whole gospel age. What would be the purpose of Jesus’ authority? “Father, You have given Me authority over all flesh, in order that I may give eternal life to all the ones You have given to Me. And this is eternal life, that they might know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ Whom You sent”

(John 17:2-3). Christ rules over all nations and everything else with reference to the apple of His eye -- the Body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23).

“Transforming culture” is not a proper goal for believers. The goal of all things is Jesus Christ, and one day He will hand His counter-cultural kingdom over to the Father. It is Christ’s purpose that “now through the ekklesia the multifaceted grace of God should be manifested to the powers” and a watching world (Eph. 3:10; John 13:34-35). Tom Frazier’s article in the Spring, 1995, *Searching Together*, helps us to focus on Christ’s agenda for His people who remain in the world. (This article was revised and updated 4/2012)

The Church in The World

by Tom Frazier

The following article comes from [SEARCHING TOGETHER MAGAZINE](#), Spring 1995.

The Kingdom Question

Do you long for a stronger economy? Safer cities and neighborhoods? Better education? More integrity in politics? More respect for traditional values? A greater respect for Christians? More godly laws? Cleaner television and movies? An end to abortion and violence? In short, a *better world*?

Do these longings represent your hopes for the future? If so, why? Do you believe that we as Christians have a right to expect these things from society? Do you believe that the Lord even expects His people to demand them? And if they are not forthcoming, to fight for them?

The Lord promises a New Heaven and a New Earth in which Christ will be all and all. To long for this “hope” is normal and even right. But what exactly do we have a right to expect while in this world in its present condition -- besides animosity, hostility, and tribulation, that is? Do we have a right to expect any of the societal improvements mentioned above? If so, on what Scriptural basis?

The Early Church

Do our national problems hinder anyone from exercising faith, or love, or holiness, or repentance, or from pursuing a relationship with the living Christ? The first century culture in which the early church functioned had all of our national woes times ten -- and yet the *ekklesias* flourished.. Not only that, but

they exerted no energy other than fervent prayer, sincere love and faithful witness in the midst of an evil culture.

Did they place their hope in a better Rome, a more righteous Galatia, a Christianized Corinth, or was their hope solely "in the grace to be revealed at the revelation of Christ Jesus" (1 Pet. 1:5)? Indeed it was, and that hope is still the calling to which we must be faithful. The world's need for moral reformation is not our mission -- any more than reforming Egypt was Israel's responsibility in the days of Moses.

Battle Lines in the Sand

Even as I write, the "Christian Right" is drawing battle lines, setting themselves against the President of the United States, his Administration, the "media elite," the Liberals in Congress, and just about all of the special interest groups that exist. They are leading tens of thousands of well-intentioned Christians into a virtual mine field of fear, mistrust, and intolerance -- bordering on hatred. This is inexcusable, and will backfire with devastating results. It is especially odious in light of the words and lives of Jesus and His apostles. Our calling to be salt and light isn't even remotely related to the vociferous attacks being clamored about these days in the name of what's "right and decent." Proponents of this kind of action seem to be Americans first and believers second, do they not?

The cause of Christ, as it was once called, is spiritual in its essence and should today, as in its early days, move forward on its knees with its soul open heavenward, guided by inward precepts like unconditional love, patience, humility, peaceableness, compassion, and the like. And although we can never tolerate open evil in the body of Christ, neither can we demand that the world be anything other than what it is. We have no directive from the Lord, much less a mandate, to try and "stiff arm" this world, its systems and people, into conformity with God's ways. What purpose is there in having the world imitate the kingdom of light externally, while their hearts remain in the kingdom of darkness! To fixate on society's evils and aggressively take on the world with an eye to changing it, seems to me to display a naiveté as to this world's nature.

Lights in the Darkness

Someone may ask, "But are we not to do good deeds?" I will answer, "Yes, of course!" Again, someone may ask, "Doesn't that mean we should be working to end pornography, and such?" I must answer, "Not necessarily." Doing good certainly includes a wide variety of activities. But our deeds must reflect not only the character of God, but must be in line with His purpose in Christ. "But surely God does not approve of pornography and abortion!" Of course, He doesn't. He wants all men, women, boys and girls to know the truth as it is in Jesus, for only He can set them free from all burdens and bondages.

To be "lights amidst the darkness" is a worthy role. The life of Christ within His Body shines as the light of truth in a dank world that has no hope. To bear witness with a lump in our throat and a tear in our eye to the gospel that calls men, women, boys and girls to restoration and peace through repentance and belief is indeed our mission. And to intercede in prayer for the Lord to have His will done on earth as it is in heaven is not only our privilege, but our responsibility. But to pursue any course of action that attempts to change society's moral character, while its citizens are still in unbelief is, frankly, a waste of time and effort. Nor can those who pursue such objectives expect much help from the Lord..

To work to clean up society's filth is like trying to clean up the Valdez oil spill with a bottle of Windex and a sponge. Evil deeds are the inevitable consequence of an evil society -- "a bad tree cannot bear

good fruit" (Mt. 7:18). To fight such evils -- especially with the world's political and legal resources -- is but to pull at the strands of abandoned webs and ignore the spiders that spun them.

To show mercy and kindness is our place. To stand for the truth and pronounce the judgment of God on wickedness is imperative. But know this: Satan and his hordes have been building tar-pits of lies and deception throughout history. Their goal has always been to obscure and counterfeit the Truth about the Living God; Who He is, what He is doing. And it is only by His kindness and mercy that anyone is ever delivered from these tar-pits. All the systems of all the societies on earth are in the palm of the devil's hand, to be played like a vile symphony. As Satan said to our Lord Jesus, "all the kingdoms of the world have been handed over to me" (Luke 4:5-6). The Lord refused him then -- and we should refuse him now. We are not here to moralize or transform the world into godliness today any more than they were in the first century. We are here as testimonies and trophies of God's grace in Christ, and as instruments of restoration and intercession for the Lord to use as He chooses.

"You are of God, little children, and have overcome them; greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world!" (1 John 4:4)

We are "of God" -- no longer of this world. As His people, we are to keep ourselves free from entanglement with the world's yoke of bondage. We must not allow ourselves to be pulled back into the world's ways, even though some of its tactics seem useful in accomplishing our desire for a better place. Let us wait instead for the place "not made with hands in the heavenlies," not strive for a caricature here and now.

Aliens in the World

It could be said that the motives behind much of this political posturing today may be something less than pure; that much of what's going on is merely men and women seeking their own interests in the name of Christ. It is very likely that the goal of much "Christian" political activity is to secure the continuation of American affluence. But at best -- at very best -- what's going on has more to do with things that are of interest to man than to things that interest God. He gains nothing from all of this political dust stirring.

So let's be very careful not to be deflected from our pursuit of Christ, for the Lord has left us in the world, but we are not to be part of the world system. To try to make the world a better place may seem noble, but it is not our calling. The world is condemned -- so we should not be caught in its web of its darkness. Or, like Br'er Rabbit, you'll find you've only been punching a tar-baby.

In my judgment, political activity of almost every sort is virtually worthless compared to spiritual activity of almost any sort. Perhaps you counter, "Why not both?" I say because they are nearly always mutually exclusive -- except, perhaps, under the rarest of circumstances. To be spiritually active, however, is to be socially active. Nearly every page of New Testament and early church history bears witness to our mandate to focus on people -- the poor, the needy, the victims of sin and bondage, not on the political systems that produce such bondage. Our Lord Jesus, the apostles, the prophets, and the saints of the early Church exemplified this principle with every fiber of their being. Can we really improve on their testimony?

We are to be involved in the deeds *"which God hath before ordained that we should walk in"* (Eph. 2:10). Deeds like:

- ♣ showing hospitality to those who cannot repay
- ♣ bearing no grudges; not returning evil for evil

- ⤴ taking no offense
- ⤴ not being vindictive, even when it seems justified
- ⤴ being forgiving to all, showing kindness to all
- ⤴ sharing our possessions
- ⤴ showing mercy
- ⤴ being peacemakers to fragmented relationships (especially our own)
- ⤴ exhibiting fairness to all and expecting it from no one
- ⤴ being gentle to the brokenhearted
- ⤴ honoring all men, women, boys and girls
- ⤴ loving one another
- ⤴ binding, loosing, praying, seeking those things which are above
- ⤴ not becoming entangled in the world's affairs
- ⤴ keeping our hearts from coveting the things of this world
- ⤴ seeking the Kingdom of God primarily
- ⤴ having our concerns coincide with our heavenly Father's

In summary, *"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father Who is in Heaven"* (Matt. 5.16). All of us only have 24 hours in a day. The time, energy and resources that get sucked into the black hole of political distraction leave little time for what is important – “let us consider one another to incite [one another] to love and good works” (Heb. 10:24).

Bringing Change

Why, instead, do we set ourselves in battle array to engage in culture wars? As followers of Christ we are from a completely different realm. Why do we have such a fixation on this country, its politics, its news, its tiny happenings? What has so entangled us, deflecting us from our high and holy calling? Why are there popular Christian magazines, TV shows, and even newspapers, all spewing forth bad news -- filled with the sordid things of this world rather than things that encourage, bless, comfort and guide. Why are we so obsessed with what "they" (the bad guys) are doing to "us" (the good guys) -- often exhibiting the same degree of bias, the same spiteful tone, and the same selfish attitudes as those we accuse?

I do not want to be misunderstood. I, too, find the things which are going on in this world truly repulsive, but this is not my kingdom! If it were, I too would fight. I am convinced, however, that it is totally inappropriate for believers to be so absorbed in the affairs of state. It has become an obsession, and that concerns me. I am not opposed to all involvement in temporal matters, but I believe we must focus primarily on things that concern our Lord Jesus and His kingdom activities, and not be unduly caught up in things that primarily concern the natural man.

Remember what our Lord said to Peter when he came dangerously close to trying to deflect the Lamb of God from His redemptive purpose? "Then Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, satan; you are an offense to me, for you mind not the things of God but those that be of men'" (Mat. 16:23).

Was Christ's goal to Christianize Rome or Judaism? On the contrary, He set out to begin a new culture

– a counter-culture -- that would be His hands and feet, mouth and heart, in the very midst of Satan's realm. This new creation is His body on the earth. And it is through His body that Christ will effect changes on the earth. As He said, "Truly I say unto you, whatsoever you shall bind on the earth shall have been bound in the heavenlies; and whatsoever you shall loose on the earth shall have been loosed in the heavenlies" (Mat. 18:18). Temporal change is not our goal; we are called to participate with Him in seeing the Bride of Christ come to expression on earth. This is an eternal, spiritual change that goes far beyond our natural sphere of influence. The key is to learn to be still enough to hear, close enough to understand, and free enough to obey.

Means of Change

To sit at the world's negotiating table is to play by its rules. We are called to love, but the world operates by selfishness; we are called to fairness and equity, they do "whatever it takes to win"; we are called to patience, mercy and meekness, while they use intimidation, manipulation and word games. Why, then, are we surprised when we are treated unfairly by the media, the police, and the courts -- the whole unbelieving world? Ought we not rather to expect nothing less and nothing more?

This does not mean we should have no concern about the things going on around us. It is a matter of appropriate tactics. Our brother Paul gave us some good counsel when he wrote Timothy: "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all people, for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior; Who desires that all humans be delivered [from this world], and come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:1).

The Lord did call us to pray for peace in the land so that the Gospel may have free course. This is the will of God. He is building an Assembly in the heavenlies for all eternity. He is not trying to bring morality, justice or happiness to a people who hate Him. But He does promise peace and every spiritual blessing to those who are in Christ.

We must not major on earthly means of change and minor on heavenly means. The omnipotent hand of God moves in response to prayer, not political activism. If your prayers seem ineffective, ask the Lord to show how to pray according to His will and he will surely hear you. The beauty of prayer is its authority and simplicity. It takes the world with all of its complexity and resistance out of the loop; it even takes us out of the loop! We deal directly with Someone completely trustworthy, leaving it with Him. He then takes over. And who knows better? After all, "as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts, says the Lord" (Isa. 55:9).

Have we forgotten, or never really understood, that our battle is with the unseen forces of darkness? That weapons like truth, prayer, and fervent Love are not mere adornments, but irresistible armaments when wielded with authority and experience? Why, then, do we sometimes seem to be losing the battle? Why does our invisible enemy seem to be gaining the upper hand? What are we doing wrong? We have changed our tactics, trading "the weapons of our warfare [which] are not earthly" (2 Cor. 10:4) for the weapons of this world. We have swapped one for the other as one might pick and choose at some flea-market. But our Lord has clearly taught us to "put on the whole armor of God," and to fight "the good fight of faith." And, after all, He is our eternal Commander-in-chief. Spiritual people, therefore, require spiritual weapons to be effective.

Gnats and Camels

Many today can be characterized by Jesus' words, "they strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel" (Matt. 23:24). They attack the obvious armies of pornography, gay rights, liberal politics, Planned Parenthood, Dan Rather & company, the NEA, et.al., while the armies of materialism, nationalism, racism, bitterness and religious pride infiltrate them from behind, taking many casualties. In my judgment, this second list of enemies is a much greater threat to the Church than the first, just as Israel learned when the Amalakites attacked them from behind, inflicting great injury. And yet, for many believers, it is the perceived threat from the first camp that attracts all of their attention, while this infiltration from behind goes unnoticed.

Now you may think it unfair for me to characterize pornography and the rest as "gnats." I agree that all true sins are heinous, and that they will someday be judged severely by God. But I do not believe we should be struggling against these things with the weapons of the world like a gladiator against his opponent. There are much weightier spiritual matters that ought to concern us. It is when we stoop to the level of the world's methodologies that we "strain at the gnats." There is nothing wrong with publicly denouncing true moral evils, but it is when we labor in prayer, beseeching God to change the hearts of men and lovingly minister to those who find themselves caught up in the gears of the world's evil machinery that we truly make a difference. It is through such spiritual efforts that we are to counter the affect of the evil that is ever present around us.

There is a place and proper way to speak out against the wrongs and wickedness of governments and individuals. But why all the fervor for and trust in political change? Did the Lord or the apostles adopt this stance? Jesus may have addressed wrongs, but He never sought to redress them, except by laying down His life as the firstborn of a new creation in order "to bring many sons to glory." This world is dying and will soon pass away. Christ did not come to reform it, but to begin a new creation, the Body of Christ. Romans 8:28 promises that everything will work out for good, but remember that it is a promise "to those who are called according to His Purpose" in Christ, and cannot be applied to fallen cultures.

Home Sweet Home?

Why are so many working so hard to change a world that is "under judgment"? Do they think it is their calling to repatriate and reform a condemned world? Have we not been "delivered from the kingdom of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of His dear Son" (Col. 1:13)? Or have we become too at home in this world? Have we become so at ease with the good things it has to offer that we have lost a vision for Kingdom of God? Have we made detente with this world in spite of Christ's warnings that it is our enemy?

We must see the world for what it is, and not become so comfortable and at home in it that we fail to recognize its true character. Jesus said that when He returns to bring judgment on this world, people will be eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. I might add: working, vacationing, retiring, building, pursuing dreams, and on and on. Are any of these things wrong? Only when they unduly distract us from our more eternal spiritual responsibilities. Do we perhaps want to take advantage of the good things of this world and wage war against its evils -- hoping, perhaps, to have more good things to enjoy in the present life? If this were the purpose of God, why is it such a foreign concept in Scripture? "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?" (James 4:4). The Judgment of God is on both the bad and the so-called "good" of this world: "Love not the world neither the things in the world," period (1 John 2:15).

What is it that drives, motivates, even compels us to look to the courts, to Congress, or to the White House for our future? Why are some even demanding a protected minority status for Christians? Why

are we knocking on doors to promote political causes when the visible church is in such disarray? Is it because we have become too "entangled in the affairs of this life" (2 Tim. 2:4)? Perhaps a current inventory of our treasure chest is in order. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21). We are prophets, servants of the Most High God, ambassadors of Christ, agents of reconciliation to bring people back to God, not movers and shakers of society. "Our citizenship is in heaven, from where we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:20).

In my estimation, many professing believers today have become revisionistic in their use of the biblical narrative. When I read the pages of the New Testament, and then look at today's Christianity, it is like going to see the movie version of a masterfully written novel. The substance, the genius, the fullness, is missing, and only the skeleton remains. There are a few barely recognizable parts, but everything else is changed for the worse. It is but a sickly imitation of the original.

We seem more concerned with the sanctity of the American dollar than with the spiritual bankruptcy of the Lord's people. We are more concerned with America's image in the world than with God's glory on the earth. We are more exercised about perceived encroachments on our civil liberties than we are about using our liberty in Christ to serve others. And we are more alarmed over the outward immorality in America than with the spiritual adultery in today's churches. "Brethren, these things ought not to be." Our need is not to get prayer back in the schools so much as it is to get prayer back in the body of Christ!

Salt and Light

Lest anyone think I am secretly advocating monastic living as opposed to living in the world, let me say that nothing could be further from the truth. We are salt, and as such our godly presence and lives hinder and retard the rottenness of society, and we give it flavor from on high. We are lights in a perverse culture, speaking of Christ to one another "as it were, the oracles of God" (1 Pet. 4:11). And we are intercessors, joining with God in seeing His eternal purpose in the Son to be realized on earth. How we pursue these worthy objectives, though vital, is not within the scope of this present writing, though its necessity is beyond debate. We all know we are to be "blameless and harmless, the sons of God in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:15). How we live out His calling may be a personal matter, but it is also something that must be open to the discernment of the whole body of Christ. Is this not why we have been given all the corrective letters in the New Testament?

Winning the Battle

We may know these things, but look at us! We have allowed the world to enter the sacred places of our hearts to such an extent that our salt has "lost its savor" (Luke 14:34), and the light that is in us has become darkness (Matt 6:23). We have become so entangled in the affairs of this world that we must be reminded again, "So likewise, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all that he has" (Luke 14:33).

Re-scripting the New Testament to fit unsanctioned agendas is taking place in most denominations within the church in America. We have become obsessed by the notion that our government is taking away our "freedoms," yet we have barely begun to live in the freedom Christ bought for us at Calvary! We have become so used to, even spoiled by certain privileges we have enjoyed for decades that when they are taken away we complain about losing our "constitutional rights." Know this: we are completely free in Him, regardless of who or what is in power in any government anywhere on this or

any other planet! We can do the will of God and complete the work of Christ under any regime within any society.

Again, please don't misunderstand. I love the freedoms I've enjoyed for forty-five years. Humanly, I wish they could last forever! But what does that have to do with the Lord, the Gospel, and the God revealed in Scripture? We must see our role in this life from a divine perspective. This does not mean that we are exempt from natural concerns, for we are on earth and we are called to be merciful even as our Father is merciful. We are to show forth His compassion and kindness at every opportunity. But the question remains: "Where is your heart?" The rain falls and the sun shines on sinner and saint alike. We are to show kindness to all people. But we need to remember that this present world is under judgment. God's heart is set upon the Bride He has chosen for His Son -- the House He is building for Himself with living stones. We, too, must be about our Father's business for we have been "called according to His purpose." And where is it revealed that His purpose is for His people to be the moral police of worldly cultures steeped in unbelief?

Our error is most likely unwitting. No matter. Just as the Lord called five of the seven churches in Revelation to repent, even so is he perhaps calling five out of every seven professing believers today to a change in their perspective. He is not calling us to live a cloistered life. But neither has He called us to clash with men and women in the streets, in the courts, in the nation's schools -- nor anywhere else -- except as others become offended by our godly lives and faithful witness to the gospel. We have been warned in Ephesians 6 that ours is a battle with unseen foes, that it is a conflict to be waged in the Spirit, cautiously and respectfully as with any powerful enemy. We may find ourselves harassed, mistreated, maligned, mistrusted, misrepresented, dragged into court, thrown in jail -- all unjustly, yet we are still "more than conquerors" (Rom 8:37), for the battle is the Lord's! And His battles are not fought in the courts, nor at the polls, nor in the press, nor with the weapons of war, but by the power of the One who "must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet" (1 Cor. 15:25).

If we must be militant, let it be on our knees.

"All of His battles are won in prayer. Ministry is merely the gathering of the spoils of war." J. S. Carroll

In Conclusion

Are you being still enough to hear Christ's voice? Are you open enough to understand Him? Are you free enough to obey? Very serious questions!

** I believe we are too interested in changing society, specifically the part that offends our values and sensibilities.

** Mistaking this for our calling, we employ the world's means of change, because our battles are ours, and not the Lord's.

** All of this is because we have joined our hearts to the systems and methods of this world. Pursue Christ with your whole heart -- forsaking everything but Him, that we might lay hold of that for which we were laid hold of.

There is much more that could have been said. Surely, I have not covered every base, but I have focused on several areas where confusion abounds. I, like you, am in a constant state of learning. I do not claim to have all the answers. But I would maintain that the New Testament does not reveal that it is the "duty" of Christ's assemblies to "change culture." If you find something rising up within you akin to irritation, please let it rest upon your heart for further consideration.