

How Should We Then Live?

The Church In A Post-Christian Age

Once Upon A Revival?

In the year 1904 a revival broke out in the tiny nation of Wales on the southwest coast of Great Britain. Within six months of its outbreak some 100,000 persons had professed Christ as Savior and joined the Church for the first time. By the time the revival had run its course roughly 5% of the population of Wales had done the same.

When the revival spread to America the effect was profound and widespread. In Denver, the Mayor declared Friday, January 20, 1905 a day of prayer. At 11:30 nearly every business and every school in Denver was closed, and the Colorado Legislature voted to postpone business in order to attend city-wide prayer meetings. Similar scenes were repeated in Atlanta where, on November 2nd factories, stores and offices closed at mid-day for prayer and the Supreme Court of Georgia adjourned in order to attend prayer meetings. In Portland, Oregon some 241 businesses signed an agreement to close for three hours between 11 and 2 p.m. in order to allow their customers and employees to attend prayer meetings.

Can anyone imagine similar scenes today? Can anyone seriously imagine Michael Eisner closing down Disneyland so patrons and employees could go to Church? Not likely. Businesses would be afraid to close for such "religious reasons" for fear of offending non-believing customers and employees. And cries of "separation of Church and State" would ring in the media if Legislatures and Courts were to close or postpone business because of a revival.

Background of A Collapse

How did a century that began with such spiritual life and promise end with such spiritual and moral darkness that Christian thinkers now refer to our present day as a "post-Christian" era and "the New Dark Ages." In many ways the Church today is awakening Rip van Winkle-like to find itself in a world it scarcely recognizes. How did we get here? How did this happen?

It happened because the Church has never really understood or appreciated the long-term impact of ideas. Ideas are like raindrops. Taken individually they appear insignificant and easy to ignore. But over time these raindrops collect and combine to form streams of thought which in turn combine to form rivers of life and culture. For the past 250 years (although we could go back further to the time of the Italian Renaissance of the 1600s) Christianity and western culture have been subjected to a constant rainfall of anti-Christian ideas. From the ridicule of a Voltaire and the skepticism of a David Hume, to the denial of absolute knowledge by an Immanuel Kant, the evolution of a Charles Darwin, the dialectical materialism of a Karl Marx and the undermining influence of biblical criticism, Christianity has been ceaselessly pummeled by a constant rain of anti-biblical ideas that have combined to form a river of doubt and skepticism.

By the opening of the 20th century this river of doubt, skepticism and rebellion filled the wells from which Western Civilization drew its drinking water. According to Dr. Carl F. H. Henry (the founding editor of *Christianity Today* magazine) the 20th century witnessed the most radical reversal of ideas and ideals in human history. Dr. Henry observed that at the beginning of the 20th century textbooks referred to the God of the Bible, and the 10 commandments. There was an emphasis upon revealed values, upon the need for an internal change within man in order to achieve "Utopia." But by World War 2 something had happened. References suddenly changed from the God of the Bible to "Nature's God" or "God" in general. Rather than revealed values, the new emphasis was upon shared values. And rather than a change needed in man, the emphasis was placed upon change through education. Finally, in the last half of the 20th century all theistic aspects and references to God had been eliminated. God now counted for nothing in education or in public life. Instead of shared values, the emphasis of the late 20th century was

upon the tolerance of diverse values. Instead of change by education and legislation, the emphasis was upon change through revolution and violence.

The shift from a Judeo-Christian understanding of the world to an essentially pagan one was relatively swift. But it did not arrive unannounced. In 1960 Gabriel Vahanian published his book, ***The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era***. It represented an intellectual and theological thunderstorm which served to swell a growing torrent of unbelief. In his "Introduction" to Vahanian's work, Professor Paul Ramsey of Princeton boldly announced, "*Ours is the first attempt in recorded history to build a culture upon the premise that God is dead.* Confirming Dr. Henry's observation regarding the watershed years between World Wars, Dr. Ramsey wrote, "*The period post mortem Dei divides into two distinct eras, roughly at some point between the World Wars. Until that time, the cultural death of God meant something anti-Christian; after it and until now, the death of God means something entirely post-Christian.*"

With a stroke of the writer's pen and a wave of the philosopher's wand Vahanian ushered in a Post-Christian era, "*The fundamentals of modern culture are neither non-Christian nor anti-Christian; they are post-Christian. They are derived from Christianity, yet in them Christianity suffers 'not a torture death but a quiet euthanasia.'* It may be that our age still is religious. But it is certainly post-Christian."

Today, some 40 years after the announcement, the Church is still reeling from the impact of these ideas. The Death of God announced in the previous generation has resulted in the death of moral absolutes in the following generation. Gone is the Judeo-Christian commitment to absolute truth which provided the moral compass for an entire culture. For if God is truly dead, then the heavens are silent and there is no divine voice to tell man what is morally right or morally wrong. Now, because all morals are relative and none are absolute, all arguments and discussions regarding right versus wrong (including such issues as homosexuality, abortion, pornography, pedophilia, human stem cell research, euthanasia, race relations, etc.) are a matter of opinion, and all opinions are equally valid (because the passionate holding and voicing of an opinion on any topic now becomes a self-validating act). Because there is no absolute truth by which to demonstrate that one moral opinion is valid over another, the result is the current politically correct philosophy of "*tolerance.*" Tolerance is the admission that there are no rights or wrongs, no absolute truth by which arguments can be resolved. The Absolute Truth of God's moral requirements and expectations has been replaced by the new truth of "*tolerance.*" And those dissenting voices who proclaim absolute truth and the need for personal repentance and internal change (such as homosexuals repenting of their sin and experiencing a new birth) are regarded as "*intolerant.*" Intolerance has become the new "*cardinal sin*" of our politically correct post-Christian age.

We've Been Overwhelmed

Certainly the Church was not completely silent or inactive while all of this was occurring, but its responses were often late in coming. In the words of Charles Colson, too many churchmen sport theological bellbottoms. The late 1970s witnessed the formation of the "Moral Majority" and the rise of the "conservative religious right" in an attempt to rally the Church both to engage the political process and to stem the tide of moral decay that was now apparent. In other words, it was a declaration that the Church and its "allies" (i.e., those individuals who were "conservative" in their morals, even if they were not "Christian" in their convictions) were prepared to wage a cultural "war of attrition" against the rising neo-paganism of contemporary American culture.

The result was the election of Ronald Reagan in what was hailed as the "conservative revolution." But shortly after the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan for his first term as President, Dr. Francis Schaeffer wrote a book entitled ***A Christian Manifesto***. In this much-neglected book Dr. Schaeffer, reflecting on the "conservative landslide" which ushered Reagan into office, warned that, in reality, the landslide was probably a vote for better economic numbers, not a vote for Christian values or conservative policies. In the event those better economic numbers should fail to materialize, Dr. Schaeffer warned that we could see a dramatic reversal in voter attitudes.¹ [\[1\]](#) Dr. Schaeffer's prophetic warning was realized in the 1992 election of Bill Clinton.

The intellectual father of the Moral Majority, and a “founding father” of the “conservative religious right,” was a man by the name of Paul Weyrich, now President of the Free Congress Foundation. In February of 1999, shortly after the United States Senate failed to convict and impeach President Bill Clinton, Weyrich sent an open letter to his constituents announcing that, in his opinion, we had lost our “cultural war of attrition” which he had helped launch some twenty years earlier:

*“In looking at the long history of conservative politics, from the defeat of Robert Taft in 1952, to the nomination of Barry Goldwater, to the takeover of the Republican Party in 1994, I think it is fair to say that conservatives have learned to succeed in politics. That is, we got our people elected. But that did not result in the adoption of our agenda. The reason, I think, is that politics itself has failed. And politics has failed because of the collapse of the culture. The culture we are living in becomes an ever-wider sewer. In truth, **I think we are caught up in a cultural collapse of historic proportions, a collapse so great that it simply overwhelms politics.**”²*

Like those Churchmen who sport theological bellbottoms in an age of Italian silk suits, Mr. Weyrich, the Christian right and much of the evangelical Church discovered themselves out of touch with a generation that had drunk deeply at tainted wells, polluted by a river of moral doubt and skepticism born of intellectual rainstorms from decades past. In a Christian version of Rip van Winkle, we had fallen asleep in Church and awoke one day to find ourselves in a post-Christian culture that no longer recognizes the values and principles that we were taught to live by. “Let me be perfectly frank about it,” Mr Weyrich confessed, “If there really were a moral majority out there, Bill Clinton would have been driven out of office months ago. What Americans would have found absolutely intolerable only a few years ago, a majority now not only tolerates but celebrates.” Mr. Weyrich’s conclusion came as a bitter (but professors Ramsey and Vahanian would have said “inevitable”) pill to swallow, “I no longer believe that there is a moral majority. I believe that we probably have lost the culture war. That doesn’t mean the war is not going to continue and that it isn’t going to be fought on other fronts. But in terms of society in general, we have lost. This is why, even when we win in politics, our victories fail to translate into the kind of policies we believe are important.”

As Mr. Weyrich and the Church have belatedly discovered the tainted wells of our Post-Christian culture have had a dramatic effect upon the Church itself. Today only 44% of born again adults (and 9% of born again teenagers) claim to be certain of absolute moral truth. Not surprisingly in the light of this moral collapse, born again adults are more likely to experience a divorce (27%) than are non-born again adults (24%). In a nationwide survey of born again adults, **none** of those interviewed said that the single most important goal in their life is to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ. In year 2000 Presidential Election, 43% of born again voters voted for Al Gore, while 46% voted for George W. Bush.

In short, while 4 out of 10 adults in our Post-Christian culture profess to be born-again, and while many of these claim to be conservative, they are not walking it out in any way that meaningfully affects the surrounding society. For example, in a recent story on pop stars and their faith, "The St. Petersburg Times" noted that in their sexually suggestive videos and latest single, "Bootylicious," popular R&B trio Destiny's Child, who declare their Christianity in nearly every interview, contradict all the talk about God. "Christians who happen to be bootylicious," the newspaper observed. "Nope. No matter how you work it, these two words don't sound right together." Besides Destiny's Child, Lauryn Hill, R. Kelly, Britney Spears, DMX and Sean "P. Diddy" Combs are other secular artists who frequently voice their religious convictions in public. But the "Times" observed that "their lyrics and public lifestyles don't always jibe with traditional religious beliefs of right and wrong."

Commenting on the apparent inability of contemporary Christians to meaningfully affect their culture, Christian trend watcher George Barna recently observed, “believers think of themselves as individuals first, Americans second, and Christians third. Until that prioritization is rearranged, the Church will continue to lose influence, and biblical principles will represent simply one more option among the numerous worldviews that Americans may choose from.”

Revival or Anarchy?

In his book *The Second Coming of the Church*, Christian sociologist George Barna described the state of the American church in terms of two potential outcomes:

“In fact, having spent the last two decades studying our culture, the American people and Christian churches across the nation, I believe that within the next few years America will experience one of two outcomes that will dictate the course of events and the tenor of life for at least the next half century.

*“One of these possible outcomes is **massive spiritual revival**. People are desperately seeking meaning and purpose in life. They have tried materialism, sexual promiscuity, careerism, drugs, pop psychology and hyper-leisure, but none of these pursuits have filled their inner void. Now, millions are exploring spirituality to see if perhaps the faith realm holds the key to satisfying their needs.*

*“The other highly possible outcome in our society is **moral anarchy**. This means that America would devolve into a society in which people refuse to recognize or live in obedience to any laws, rules, regulations, customs, traditions, courtesies or norms unless they feel like doing so.”*

“As a committed Christian, I am urgently praying for revival. As a rational social scientist confronted with a warehouse of behavioral and attitudinal data, I am expecting moral anarchy.”

“At the risk of sounding like an alarmist, I believe the Church in America has no more than five years - probably less - to turn itself and this culture around.”³

But in his most recent book, *Boiling Point*, Dr. Barna, along with co-author Mark Hatch, flatly states that moral anarchy has arrived and now rules our present culture. He argues that the United States is now in a state of spiritual anarchy.⁴

Schaeffer’s Five Pressures & The Rise of New Age Globalism

Reflecting upon the post-Christian landscape of the late 20th century Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer observed that after the death of God and the resulting loss of absolute truth and moral values, modern society would be left with only the two terrible “values” of “personal peace and personal prosperity.” This was confirmed in a survey following the year 2000 Presidential elections which showed that for most Christian voters, their votes were influenced more by their economic self interest than by their spiritual and moral values. Even the Christian community of our post-Christian age had voted for personal peace and prosperity, rather than for moral absolutes. In words which today (25 years later) seem prophetic Dr. Schaeffer observed that:

“Overwhelming pressures are being brought to bear on people who have no absolutes, but only have the impoverished values of personal peace and prosperity. The pressures are progressively preparing modern people to accept a manipulative, authoritarian government.”

This is the “dark side” of our post-Christian culture. If there is no God in heaven to establish law and to provide a moral compass for human behavior, then there must eventually be a god on earth to fill those roles left vacant. The moral anarchy described by Dr. Barna, combined with the “two terrible values” of “personal peace and personal prosperity” described by Dr. Schaeffer places the government of our post-Christian culture in the god-like position of making wide-ranging moral decisions for our self-absorbed culture, without the direction of any clear moral compass. Dr. Schaeffer stated it succinctly as follows: *“If there is no absolute (or Law of God) by which to judge the State, then the State has become absolute” (God)*. All that now remains to bring about a draconian shift of power to the government is a crisis of sufficient magnitude that it threatens our peace and prosperity, and demands decisive action by a powerful and authoritarian government for its solution. Dr. Schaeffer went on to list five specific pressures which, individually or collectively, could result in the rise of a manipulative, authoritarian government.

Those five specific pressures were:

1. Economic Breakdown. While inflation was the economic concern of the 1970s reflected in Dr. Schaeffer's analysis, his point went far beyond inflation. Dr. Schaeffer observed that, from a political perspective, *"with most people dominated by the concept of an ever-expanding affluence, it is difficult or impossible to face the danger of economic recession."* Dr. Schaeffer then drew an historical parallel and lesson from history regarding the social and political dangers of economic upheaval among a people who have exchanged moral courage for comfortable affluence. *"History indicates that at a certain point of economic breakdown people cease being concerned with individual liberties and are ready to accept regimentation. The danger is obviously even greater when the two main values so many people have are personal peace and affluence."* If the danger of economic breakdown was significant when Dr. Schaeffer wrote those words, then it is even greater today. The intervening 25 years have seen the accumulation and growth of the greatest debt pyramid in the history of the world, accompanied by the greatest boom in personal prosperity that mankind has ever witnessed. But recent economic events, including but not limited to the collapse of the dot.com market and the precipitous decline of high tech stocks, have raised the specter of a serious economic recession that could trigger a collapse of our debt-supported prosperity. And this possibility raises the question of what individual freedoms and what remaining Judeo-Christian values might our post-Christian society be willing to sacrifice in order to maintain the fleeting illusion of personal peace and personal prosperity.

2. War or the serious threat of war. When Dr. Schaeffer wrote in the mid-1970s, the greatest threat of war came from the Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe. The intervening years have witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union, the tearing down of the Iron Curtain, and the substantial reduction of the threat of war from those nations. But new threats of conflict have arisen in the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, the Balkans, North Korea and from the rising power of Communist China. Regarding the threat of war, regardless of its origin, Dr. Schaeffer observed that the threat of war *"would cause those who have only the values of personal peace and prosperity to be ready for almost any kind of authoritarian government which would be able to remove the threat of war, particularly if (as Augustus did in ancient Rome) it was brought in while seemingly keeping the outward forms of constitutionality."*

3. The chaos of violence. Here Dr. Schaeffer specifically referred to the possibility of "indiscriminate terrorism." The specter of terrorism has grown and become a reality in the twenty-five years since Dr. Schaeffer sounded his warning, and we have seen his warning regarding terrorist organizations coordinating their efforts realized through the rise of such people as Osama bin Laden and Libyan state-sponsored terrorism. From Oklahoma City, to the bombing of American embassies abroad, to the attack on the U.S.S. Cole, the list of significant terrorist attacks both at home and abroad over the past few years is extensive and growing.

4. The radical redistribution of the wealth of the world. Dr. Schaeffer suggested that a radical redistribution of wealth would be accompanied by *"a lowering of prosperity and affluence among those individuals and countries which have come to take an ever-increasing level of prosperity for granted."* This in turn, he argued, could lead to demands for an authoritarian government to preserve the diminishing affluence. Since Dr. Schaeffer made that observation the face of world socialism has changed from old-style communism to New Age Globalism, but this change has made it no less authoritarian. Nor has it changed the reality that socialism is a Christian heresy that seeks to promote a false man-made millennium or utopia on earth which seeks to benefit the masses by impoverishing the affluent. Socialism in all its forms is an attack, whether direct or indirect, upon the 8th commandment (Thou shalt not steal).

5. A growing shortage of food and other natural resources in the world. The resource shortages described by Dr. Schaeffer could easily be created today by the unholy conjunction of radical environmentalism and changes in global weather patterns (whether due to perceived global warming or due to cyclical changes in global weather).

In the light of these dangers facing the Church in the post-Christian age the warning of Paul Weyrich to his constituents is sobering:

“Don’t be misled by politicians who say that everything is great, that we are on the verge of this wonderful new era, thanks to technology or the stock market or whatever. These are lies. We are not in the dawn of a new civilization, but the twilight of an old one. We will be lucky if we escape with any remnants of the great Judeo-Christian civilization that we have known through the ages.”

How Should We Then Live?

The title of Dr. Schaeffer’s book on the decline of Christian thought was taken from Ezekiel 33:10, **How Should We Then Live?** Ezekiel 33 is, of course, the great “watchman” passage in which the Prophet Ezekiel is warned of God’s impending judgment if Israel does not repent of its sin. The culmination of the passage comes in verse 10 where Israel declares, *“If our transgressions and our sins be upon us, and we pine away in them, how should we then live?”* While this may sound like a lifestyle question, it is not. Rather, it is a survival question. The Israelites were wondering, if everything Ezekiel had said was true, how could they possibly survive the impending judgment of God. In the end, Israel did not survive. She did not repent. Judgment fell, the nation was taken into captivity by the Babylonians and Jerusalem was destroyed.

Twenty-five years ago Dr. Schaeffer wrote his book in the hopeful prayer that the coming generation (in which we now live) *“may get its feet out of the paths of death and may live”* (Schaeffer, page 258). Unfortunately, the decline which Dr. Schaeffer so ably analyzed and documented has continued, even accelerated, during the intervening years. And in the ensuing struggle the traditional organized and institutional Church as most of us have known and experienced it has been overwhelmed by a surging tide of post-Christian paganism.

Now the Church of the 21st Century is caught between the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, if our sins and those of our culture overtake us, like a modern day Lot who never left Sodom, and the judgment of God falls, how shall we escape? On the other hand, what about the possibility of a genuine movement of the Spirit of God in revival that renews the Church and sweeps millions of new souls into the Kingdom of God. How should the Church of Jesus Christ be responding to this dilemma and the challenges before us? How can we shed our theological bellbottoms and respond in a manner that is appropriate to our times, and even anticipatory of what may yet be coming? How can we become a prophetic counter-cultural witness to (and at times against) our post-Christian and increasingly pagan culture?

Many Christians today are looking to the possibility of widespread revival as a quick and easy solution to the problem of long-term cultural decay. But neither history nor Scripture offer any guarantee that revival will bring social and cultural transformation and the reversal of long-term decay. While the Evangelical Awakening in England in the 1700s transformed English Society, it was a process that unfolded over a period of 100 years. Are we prepared to take a long-term view of renewal, transformation and the long-term impact of biblical ideals. Are we willing to commit ourselves to lifestyles of personal discipleship, regular fasting and fervent intercession for revival? And as we pray and plan for the possibility of a new movement of the Spirit of God in revival (yes, even in the midst of a collapsing post-Christian culture) are we prepared to radically re-think our failed institutional and organizational structures and to implement new ones. We need new structures which can absorb, encourage and equip the fruit of revival (young believers who need fellowship, encouragement and instruction) and which provides for the meeting of individual needs during difficult times (including persecution). I believe that the next great movement of God’s Spirit in power and revival will manifest itself in and through small groups of believers meeting as home/cell churches or fellowships. While many traditional churches are looking to revival in the hope that God will renew failed programs or dying institutions, history tells us that this seldom happens. God seldom “revives” institutions or structures. As Jesus warned us, new wine tends to destroy old wineskins (institutions or structures). New wine calls for new wineskins, and I believe that networking home/cell churches will be the new wineskin of the next great outpouring of God’s Spirit in revival and renewal.

¹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1981). Dr. Schaeffer's treatment of this issue is contained in Chapter 6, pp. 73ff.

² Posted on the Free Congress website at www.freecongress.org. The September 6, 1999 issue of *Christianity Today* magazine reprinted Mr. Weyrich's letter, along with responses by six leading evangelicals, including Ralph Reed, Cal Thomas, Jerry Falwell, Don Eberly (his response is particularly good), James Dobson and Charles Colson. These are a "must read."

³ George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Word Publishing, 1998). You can visit Dr. Barna's website on the internet at www.barna.org/.

⁴ See Press Release of April 16, 2001, "Researcher Predicts mounting challenges to Christian Church," posted on the internet at:
www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=92&Reference=F