

The Great Culture War
Whose Side Are We On?
June 9, 2013

PRELUDE – Creation Sings

**Worship Songs – Our God’s Alive / Jesus
Paid It All / Christ is Risen / Prayer**

Feature Song – “It’s America”

Good morning everyone.

An America of proms, parades and lemonade stands, with everyone living together in harmony as one nation under God. What a wonderful vision ... even if it *is* a country song.ⁱ

Unfortunately, as we saw last week, that vision – and, more importantly,

whatever of that vision was once reality – is quickly crumbling. There is a massive shift in cultural values playing out right before our eyes, embraced even by those in positions of highest leadership in this country. There is a war over what is “right” and what is “wrong” and who gets to define it. Our culture is rapidly moving away from the firmly- and widely-held conviction that morality is defined *externally and eternally* (by God and revealed not only in the Scripture but through Natural Law as well) to the just as firmly- and widely-held belief that it is *relativistic* – defined by each individual as they see fit.

That shift, as we saw last week, is the logical consequence of rejecting God outright. In chapter one of his letter to the Christians at Rome, the Apostle Paul

twice says that when people collectively choose to reject God, God not only allows them to do so, He turns them over to whatever illogical ideas and destructive desires come into their hearts and mind.

In verse 21 he writes ...

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ...

*Romans 1:21-23
(NIV)*

And in verse 28 he says it again.

They did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind so that they do what ought not to be done.

*Romans 1:28
(NIV)*

He treats them like the younger son in Jesus' famous parable of the father and his two lost sons. When the younger son decides to reject his father and runs off to the faraway land to waste his inheritance in wild living, the father lets him go. He doesn't chase after him; doesn't plead with him to change his mind. Instead, he allows it to play out completely until, finally, the boy finds himself starving and thinking that a big old bowl of pig slop would be mighty tasty.

In many ways, that describes what is happening to our country. In terms of our morals and values, we're starving and we relish the thought of dining at the hog trough.

The question is ... *what are those who follow Jesus to do about this?* How are we to respond to the cultural shift and the attendant (and predictable) decline?

Responding to the Culture

Now, you may not be aware of this but this is not a new question. Millions of sincere followers of Jesus – since the time of Jesus – have wrestled with this exact issue. As the Apostle John writes, the world has *always* been against God

and the People of God. So, dealing with and relating to it properly has always been a challenge.

To meet that challenge, Christians throughout the ages have adopted various strategies (and sometimes combinations of strategies) each with strengths and weaknesses. I want to give you a list of the five most common. Perhaps you have employed one of these personally or you've been a part of a group that has done so collectively.

1. One strategy – and perhaps the most obvious – is to *withdraw* from the culture.

Just leave it all behind. *Literally*. Just sell everything and join a monastery or a convent. Take your family and move to the top of a mountain somewhere. That

way, you'll be free from the influences and decay of the growing godlessness in the world.

One well-known modern day example of this strategy is what we see in the Amish communities. And there's something positive to be said for it. They're a very simple people, they seem to be happy and they seem to have escaped the corruption of the world.

Quite frankly, on occasion I have thought about doing something like this myself. However, I always come back to the truth of the old Clint Black song: "wherever you go, there *you* are." Withdrawing from culture doesn't do anything about the problem of the sin nature that still resides within.

2. A second strategy is to *separate* from the culture.

If you can't (or don't want to) *literally* leave, you can do it *figuratively*.

Basically, you live and work in the world just like everyone else but you reject everything that the culture comes up with that isn't directly permitted in the Bible. No movies, no cards, no gambling, no alcohol, no rock music. You don't smoke, drink, dance or chew or run with women who do. And if you're going to err, err on the side of being too restrictive instead of too permissive. "If in doubt, do without."

Obviously, a lot of fundamentalist Christian churches operate according to this strategy. A lot of church-based

schools and some homeschooling organizations are based in this strategy.

And there is something positive to be said for it. I became a follower of Jesus as a teenager in a fundamentalist church and it helped me see very clearly that the world's values are quite often at odds with biblical values. It helped me to stay on the straight and narrow road that Jesus talked about. Some of you could give the same testimony.

On the other hand, this strategy usually creates an “us vs. them” mentality where people who aren't Christians become “the enemy.” And sometimes, even those who *are* believers but who don't agree with where you draw the line between godliness and worldliness can become the enemy.

A third strategy that Christians have adopted over the centuries to deal with the surrounding culture is to ...

3. *Accommodate* the culture.

Basically, this strategy comes from the recognition that the biblical world was much different than ours.

- These folks all lived in pre-scientific patriarchal societies.
- The biblical authors simply didn't know what we know.
- And they didn't deal with a lot of the issues facing us today.

Therefore, whenever their worldview comes into conflict with the modern worldview, you probably ought to err on

the side of what the latest scientific and social research says while trying to hang on to as much of the core of Christianity as you can.

A modern day example of Christians who have adopted this strategy are the old mainline Protestant denominations (such as the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Presbyterian Church USA) which, today, are more noted for their social activism than for their adherence to biblical doctrine.

And there is something positive to be said for this strategy because it forces us to live in the real world. If Christianity doesn't speak to the issues of our day, then it really isn't of much value and it would be foolish to be a Christian.

However, the major challenge with accommodation is, ironically, the same as the challenge of separation: *where do you draw the line* – in this case, between a biblical worldview and a modern worldview? How far can you go before you're compromising fundamental doctrines and values?

Unfortunately, what often happens is that those who choose this as their primary strategy accommodate the culture so much that they are no longer “Christian” in the purest meaning of the term. This is what has happened in a lot of churches in mainline denominations. They have rejected the foundational belief in the literal resurrection of Jesus from the dead because modern science (which is based on the presumption that

the world is a closed system of cause and effect) claims there is no possibility of outside intervention by a Divine Being ... which means that miracles – such as a man literally rising from the dead – simply cannot happen.

So, to this point, we've got “withdraw from the culture” ... “separate from the culture” ... and “accommodate the culture.” However, a lot of Christians haven't cared for any of those strategies.

- The first just isn't practical for most people.
- The second is often too extreme and negative.
- And the third usually leads to a watered-down powerless imitation

of Christianity that is virtually indistinguishable from any other “spiritual pathway.”

... which is why this next option has become the strategy of choice for a large majority of American believers today.

4. And that strategy is to *change* the culture through political power.

... primarily by taking advantage of the amazing rights we have as citizens in this country ...

- to freely express our opinions without fear of government reprisal;
- to create and join political parties which are consistent with Christian morals and values;
- to push for laws that uphold and

reflect those morals and values.

- and to support politicians and judges who will protect and enforce them.

This particular strategy rose to prominence among conservative evangelical Christians in the early 1980s as a result of Rev. Jerry Falwell and his organization, *The Moral Majority*. Falwell, pastor of Liberty Baptist Church in Lynchburg, VA, was technically a Fundamentalist but his appeal spread far beyond that smaller group because a) he was a godly man and an excellent speaker and b) it was clear that cultural values were beginning to shift and many Christians (who, again, didn't care for the first three strategic options) were growing increasingly concerned about it.

Falwell (and other Christian leaders who followed in his footsteps over the past three decades) realized that most followers of Jesus were either uninterested or uninformed about issues and candidates with respect to traditional morals and values and so they created specialized organizations to motivate and educate believers. *Most often these organizations endorsed candidates and positions of the Republican Party* – a trend that continued right up to the 2012 Presidential Election.

By the way, as I was preparing for this message, I discovered some fascinating history I wasn't aware of even though, as a young man, I was quite influenced by this movement. In an article written 10 years ago, two social scientists reported

the effects of anti-religious media bias discovered by their research.

What they found was that among political journalists, the dominant paradigm—what you might call the “official story”—holds that religious conservatives bullied their way onto the American political scene with the election of Ronald Reagan, and rudely brought into the political arena the culture war that had been raging since the 1960s. That’s exactly wrong, they say, because the “true origins of this conflict” were, in fact, *“the increased prominence of secularists within the Democratic Party, and the party’s resulting antagonism toward traditional values.”*

Here’s what’s fascinating:

Until relatively recently, both major parties were of similar mind on issues of personal morality. Then came the 1972 Democratic Convention, at which secularists—defined as agnostics, atheists, and those who seldom or never attend religious services—seized control of the party and nominated George McGovern. Prior to that year, *neither party had many secularists among its delegates.*

According to a study of survey data from the delegates (of that era), the Democratic party was badly split between religious and moral traditionalist on one side, and secularists on the other. They fought over moral issues: abortion,

women's rights, homosexuality, and the traditional family.

The “secularists” triumphed, giving us ... the long march of religious and moral conservatives to the GOP, which became the party of traditionalists by default.

“What was first an intra-party culture war among Democratic elites became by the 1980s an inter-party culture war.”ⁱⁱ

... which explains much of the political dynamic of the past 30 or so years .

It also explains the reason why so many American Christians in the past 30 years, if they had been asked “whose side are we on in this culture war?”

would have answered without hesitation, “We’re with the conservatives. We’re with the Republicans. And we need to do whatever we can to get those candidates elected, even if they don’t totally line up with what we believe on other issues. That’s the firewall that prevents the culture from going totally down the wrong path.”

Now, there is something positive to be said for this strategy in that we do have rights in this country that a huge percentage of the rest of the world does not have and we ought to make use of those rights as a matter of good stewardship. We ought to be thankful to God for the privilege to shape the political process and we ought to lay it at the feet of Jesus and use it for his glory

just like we should every other privilege he has given us.

However, the downsides of this strategy are becoming more and more apparent with every passing year. I'll just give you – very quickly – three that I have seen specifically as it applies to Christians and the Republican Party.

1. Identity confusion between Christianity and Republicanism in the minds of non-Christians (the idea that if you want to become a Christian you also have to become a Republican).
2. Christians are often forced to “baptize” other policies that are just as destructive as the shift in cultural values (such as the endorsement of the unbridled pursuit of monetary

gain, which is highly prized in many conservative circles yet totally anti-biblical).

3. Christians are often made to look hypocritical when other “moral” values are neglected. (For example, why aren’t Republicans as concerned about the environment or education or helping people in poverty as they are about blocking gay marriage? That’s not to say that *Christians* aren’t concerned about those things but because the Republican Party is not, it appears that we are not).

Of course, even more significant than any of these is the fact that the strategy has failed. As one of Mitt Romney’s advisors put it after last year’s election, “the culture wars are over and we lost.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The culture isn't changing and the Republican Party keeps losing Presidential elections.

Today, many strategists are currently advising party leaders to end the association with social conservatism ... a suggestion which is causing many Christians great angst and much consternation. If the Republicans don't push this agenda who will? Where will our help come from in the future?

Maybe ... it will come from where it was supposed to come from in the first place. Jesus never told his followers to advance his cause through worldly power. In fact, he said just the opposite. On the day he was crucified, John tells us that ...

Pilate summoned Jesus

and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

“Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?”

“Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?”

Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

“You are a king, then!” said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You say

that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

John 18:33-38

(NIV)

Whose side are we on? As Jesus' followers, we're not called to be first and foremost on the Republican or conservative side. We're not called to be on the Democratic or liberal side. *We're on Jesus' side.* We're called first and foremost to be about *His Kingdom* – the state of existence where He is in charge – and not the kingdoms of this world.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying to not vote Republican ... or Democrat ... or Libertarian ... or

whatever. I'm not saying don't become a politician and run for office. I'm just saying don't be fooled into believing that political power – even though it is such a great gift – is the primary way that Jesus wants us to deal with the shift in cultural values.

And I know by now that some of you are thinking, “Ok, Rick, come on and tell us ... what is the primary way? How *are* we to respond to the cultural shift and the attendant decline?”

You may or may not know that Christianity took root in a world very much like ours in terms of what was going on culturally:

- Extreme permissiveness, especially in terms of sexuality;
- Religious and spiritual pluralism including worship of nature;
- The mixing of cultures due to the increased ability to travel
- Rampant abortion (and killing of deformed infants as well as baby girls)
- An obsession with violence and death as a form of entertainment
- Mistreatment of women and minorities as well as class warfare.

In addition, when you read the letters of Paul, in particular, to the churches of the first century, it's very clear that it was difficult to be a Christian and that Christians and their beliefs and values were marginalized.

However, within the span of two centuries, without any political or military power whatsoever, the Roman world became Christianized from the bottom up! *Culture changed*. How did that happen? What was their strategy?

In his book, *How Christianity Changed the World*, Dr. Alvin Schmidt argues that the early Christians did not set out to change the world. Instead, the world was affected *as a by-product of their own transformed lives*.

And this is the fifth (and final) strategy for responding to the culture – the only one with any prospect of success whatsoever going forward – and not just in the United States but most of the Western world.

5. To create a counter-culture within the culture so attractive that people want “in.”

This is how the first Christians turned the world upside down. They had no power to change the system. They had no platform on which to stand as “culture warriors.” All they could do was be the kind of community that Jesus called them to be right in the middle of everyone else – a gracious Christ-following community of salt and light in the darkness.

“You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it

*on its stand, and it gives
light to everyone in the
house.*

*In the same way, let your
light shine before others,
that they may see your
good deeds and glorify
your Father in heaven.*

*Matthew 5:13-16
(NIV)*

That was the strategy. That is the strategy.

A Counter-Cultural Community

And in the time we have left this morning I would like to highlight a few characteristics of what that salt and light counter-cultural community looks like and, quite frankly, if you are a believer

in Jesus as your savior and your leader, *challenge you to let go of every other strategy and embrace this vision.* And again, I'm not saying don't vote and don't have political opinions. I'm saying don't confuse those with the way of Christ because millions of believers who've never had those rights have had huge transformational impact on their cultures.

And, if you are *not* a believer, this may sound odd but I'd like to offer an apology to you for my actions and the actions of other believers and Christian leaders that have not been consistent with this vision. We were wrong and we are thankful that Jesus has forgiven us ... and we ask and hope that you will forgive us, too.

The first characteristic of a salt and light counter-cultural community is that ...

1. We hold to the concept of absolutes and reject relativism when it comes to defining right and wrong, and in truth in general.

This obviously puts us in direct opposition to the world around us. We believe that morals and values are eternal and external. We don't get to make it up as we go along according to our personal situation and whatever our heart tells us. So, we give serious attention "to the sacred text [of the Bible] as the firm and only basis on which life and decisions should be based."^{iv}

Of course, that does raise the question ... *what about the fact that Christians*

don't always agree on what that text says regarding morals and values?

For example, and this is kind of a trivial one, many fundamentalists believe that watching a movie (to use a more trivial example) is a sin while many other Christians have no problem with it. Yet both groups claim to be holding to moral absolutes! How can this be?

Here's the deal. The Apostle Paul writes ...

Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything

*completely, just as God
now knows me
completely.*

*1 Corinthians 13:12
(NLT)*

As long as we're on this side of eternity, we're not going to have complete clarity on God's will for every situation. We're looking at spiritual reality as if all we have is a dull mirror. *However, we don't stop looking into the mirror just because it's dull!*

That's what it means to hold to the concept of absolutes. As believers, our responsibility is to know God's Word, to know the mind of Christ, and then choose a course of action that we believe most faithfully represents God's revealed will.^v Now, obviously, we may differ on that course of action, but the

point is that the source is God and God's word not the culture.

That's the first characteristic of a salt and light counter-culture.

2. Here's the second: We fight the right battle using the right weapons against the right enemy.

The culture – primarily the news and entertainment media – tells us that the battle is between liberals and conservatives. It's between gays and straights. It's between gun-control freaks and the NRA. It's between pro-lifers and pro-choicers. And so on and so forth.

And if that really is the battle then your enemy is the idiot on other side. To win you have to power up using the weapons

of politics and propaganda and public opinion.

Sound familiar?

But the Bible paints a very different picture of the battle ... starting with who the real enemy is.

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Ephesians 6:12 (NLT)

And it defines the nature of war.

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they

cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

*2 Corinthians 4:4
(NIV)*

And it says that our weapons are different from the world's weapons.

Though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. 2

Corinthians 10:3-4 (NIV)

I like how Catholic theologian Peter Kreeft expounds this principle in his essay “How to Win the Culture War.” He

writes that ...

Our enemies are not “the Protestants” or “the liberals.” Our enemies are not Muslims, who are often more loyal to their half-Christ than we are to our whole Christ, who often live more godly lives following their fallible scriptures and their fallible prophet than we do following our infallible scriptures and our infallible prophet.

Our enemies are not anti-Catholic bigots who want to crucify us. They are the ones we’re trying to save. They are our patients, not our disease. Our word for them is Christ’s: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” They

are not our enemies, they are our patients. We are Christ's nurses. The patients think the nurses are their enemies, but the nurses know better.

Our enemies are not even the media of the culture of death, not even Ted Turner or Larry Flynt or Howard Stern or Disney or Time-Warner. They too are victims, patients, though on a rampage against the hospital, poisoning other patients. But the poisoners are our patients too.^{vi}

I like his analogy because it reminds us that we're not dealing with objectified nameless faces of "the other side" – we're dealing with people who God loves so much that he sent his Son to die for

them on the cross. We're dealing with people who have been blinded by our enemy and theirs.

And it reminds us that the only weapons we have to fight this battle on their behalf and ours are those which have the power to bring light and demolish strongholds. What are those weapons?

- Prayer for deliverance from the power of the enemy (as Jesus taught us to pray)
- And truth and love to shine into the hearts of those who have been blinded by him ...

... which leads to the next characteristic of a counter-cultural salt and light community ...

3. We follow the example of Jesus – we love and serve while speaking with both truth and grace.

After last Sunday's message, someone asked me, "How do I deal with the people around me with whom I disagree concerning lifestyle choices? I don't want my silence to be taken as affirmation but I also don't want to be judgmental saying, 'that's wrong' whenever something is wrong."

I've thought about that all week and I think the answer is in doing what Jesus did. Jesus loved and served people – even those who were against him and who disagreed with him – at the same time as he was telling them the truth and offering them grace. With the woman caught in the very act of adultery, he first stood up for her and

protected her from those who would have stoned her. And then, after they all walked away he said, “Where are your accusers? I don’t condemn you either” (which was grace). But, then he added “go and sin no more” (which was truth).

That should be our strategy as well. Actually, it *has* to be our strategy because, in this culture, people have to earn the right to be heard and you do that through love and service – putting the needs of others before your own.

And only after that happens can you share truth – “this is who you are (and who I am) and who God is and here is how we have fallen short” – without it feeling like condemnation or merely trying to “win” an argument.

And whenever we share truth, we always need to share grace – “this is how much you and I matter to God and what Jesus has done for us and is planning to do for us even though we don’t deserve it.”

And, finally, we don’t do any of that sharing unless...

- a) We have been given a public platform to do so.
- b) we have been invited to do so by a person who has observed us or been impacted by our love and service.
- c) It appears it might be beneficial to someone if we shared truth and grace and we have asked and received permission.

And once we've done that, we pray and hope that God shines the light and people respond. That's all we can do.

So, as a counter-cultural community of salt and light ...

- We hold to the concept of absolutes and reject relativism when it comes to defining right and wrong.
- We fight the right battle using the right weapons against the right enemy.
- We follow the example of Jesus – we love and serve while speaking with both truth and grace.

But there's one more characteristic and I

have to tell you that this one concerns me greatly.

4. We prioritize the flourishing of this counter-cultural community ... which is also known as “the church.”

When Jesus started the movement he never intended it to be a loose collaboration of individuals. He intended it to be a community called “the church.”

In fact, the New Testament tells us that ...

- He is the head of the church;
- That he loves the church – as a husband loves his wife.
- And that he actually died not just for the individuals who make up the

body of the church but for the church as a collective body.

The church matters to Jesus and he intends for it to matter to us. That's what it takes for us to be a strong and thriving counter-cultural salt and light community in the middle of an increasingly godless world.

Unfortunately, as Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference recently wrote:

“The most important problem in America is not moral relativism, cultural decadence or spiritual apathy. The number-one problem in America stems from the unfortunate posture of a lukewarm

church.”^{vii}

He’s referring to what Jesus once told one of the churches of his day: “you are neither cold nor hot – you’re lukewarm about me and about your church – and I want to spit you out. So, repent of your half-hearted commitment!”

How do you measure commitment to a church? Show up. Pray. Give. Serve. Care.

I have sometimes wondered ... Are we as committed to and passionate about this community as we are our political or social agenda? How many of us think of ourselves as Christians first and foremost?

<PRAYER>

- We hold to the concept of absolutes and reject relativism when it comes to defining right and wrong.
- We fight the right battle using the right weapons against the right enemy.
- We follow the example of Jesus – we love and serve while speaking with both truth and grace.
- We prioritize the flourishing of this counter-cultural community ... which is also known as “the church.”

Feature – Salt & Light

CLOSING COMMENTS – Rick

1. Next week – Father’s Day ... “The Incredible Value of Good Christian Men”

(honor, challenge and encourage not just dads but all guys – be here it’s going to be great).

2. We’ll resume this series in two weeks ... *The Tragedy of Friendly Fire* ... what happens (and what should happen) when followers of Christ disagree on major cultural and political issues.

3. Offering at door.

Endnotes

ⁱ I’m referring to Rodney Atkin’s song *It’s America* which the band did just before this message.

ⁱⁱ “The Godless Party (Media Bias & Blindness—And the Big Story They Missed),” Rod Dreher, Touchstone Magazine, April 2003
<http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-03-023-f>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/romney-advisor-concedes-what-we-all-know-the-culture-wars-are-over-but-will-republicans-ever-listen/>

^{iv} Charles E. Kinzie, "The Absorbed Church: Our Inheritance of Conformed Christianity," *Sojourners* 7 (July, 1978), 22.

^v Robert Webber, *Saints and Sinners*, explained at
<http://graceuniversity.edu/iip/2011/12/11-12-31-1/>

^{vi} <http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/how-to-win.htm>

^{vii} <http://www.charismanews.com/opinion/38947-how-do-we-respond-to-a-violent-culture>