

Martin Niemoller was a decorated submarine commander in WWI, an ardent nationalist and a pastor in Germany. At first he welcomed the rise to power of Adolf Hitler. Later, however, he realised that Hitler was heading the wrong way, and he became an outspoken critic of Hitler and Nazism. While most churches and church leaders acquiesced to the leadings of Hitler, Niemoller protested his anti-Semitic and anti-Christian tendencies. For this Hitler had him imprisoned. Said Hitler to Niemoller: "I will protect the German people. You take care of the church. You pastors should worry about getting people to heaven, and leave this world to me."

Unfortunately, too many Christians today are heeding Hitler's advice. Many Christians have set up a false dichotomy between spirituality and earthly activity, between the church and this world, between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of men. As a result we are seeing society becoming further and further corrupted and secularised. The church is losing battle after battle with the world, and it is largely our own fault. We have opted out of our responsibility to be salt and light in the world. We have refused to be the Good Samaritan that Jesus urged us to become. We have refused to occupy till He comes.

Most of us are aware of the tragic civil wars taking place in countries like the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. These conflicts have split apart whole nations, and have resulted in much needless death and destruction. In Australia we can rejoice in the fact that we are at peace, both with ourselves and with our neighbours. But can I suggest that we are involved in another kind of war: a war of ideas, a clash of values and cultures. Moral civil war is waging in Australia over a whole range of issues: sex education, pornography, abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, etc. As in all conflicts, there are two competing sides, seeking dominance and victory. On the one side, there are those who hold to the Judeo-Christian world view. On the other side are those who can best be described as secular humanists. The former side upholds values like marriage, sexual fidelity, the work ethic, honesty, discipline, self-control, moral absolutes, a transcendent set of rights and wrongs.

The other side more or less rejects those values, and instead preaches a gospel of selfishness, hedonism, permissiveness, narcissism, irresponsibility, instant gratification of desire and moral relativity. The latter side tends to predominate in the centres of power, the media, academia, the entertainment industry, the political bureaucracy, and so on.

There are really only two institutions left that are not under the control of the secular humanists: the family, and the church. Mind you, inroads are being made, but they still have some life left in them. It becomes clear then why, the church and the family are under such severe pressure and such concerted attack: they represent the last strongholds of defence against a secular culture which has in a few short decades turned upside down most of western culture.

Now in all conflicts, ultimately one side will prevail, and the other will fade. And to the victor will go the spoils. The prize being fought over is our children. The way our children grow up and the framework of values they adopt will largely be determined by how this struggle plays itself out

I am concerned about this struggle for many reasons, but the main reasons are my wife, and my three young sons. And their children. It is because of my children and future grand children, that I am committed to this struggle. I am committed to fighting the good fight. My side may not ultimately prevail, at least in this world, but I am not going to give up without a fight. Why should Christians be involved in the social/cultural arena? Why should Christians bother with seeking to reclaim the culture? Briefly, Christians should be involved for the following reasons:

The example of Christ. The ministry of Jesus was a perfect blend of evangelism and social concern. The story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) tells us that Christian compassion is not mere sentimentalism but concrete action. The Samaritan didn't just perceive an injustice, as the Priest and Levite did, but took appropriate action as well.

The biblical view of humanity. In the parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46), there is no mention of evangelism or prayer meetings. Instead, Jesus says those who are most welcomed into eternal life are those who ministered to people's physical and emotional needs.

People are not just souls to be saved, although that is vitally important.

The holistic view of humanity. Evangelism is meant not just to bring people into the kingdom. It is also meant to result in social transformation. Verses like Eph. 2: 10 and Titus 2:14 speak of the “good works” that are to follow and are to point to our right relationship to God.

The biblical view of government. Government is ordained by God (Rom. 13:1-4) and Jesus told us to render (carry out our duty or obligation) to Caesar, to civil government (Mark 12:13-17).

The character of God. God is Lord of both the sacred and secular (Isaiah 58). Indeed, he is Lord over all the nations (Dan. 4:32), and is concerned as much with issues of justice as with mercy (Ps. 146:7-9).

Salt and Light

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world.” (Matthew 5:13,14). Remember, he didn’t tell his disciples, “hands up everybody who wants to be salt and light”. He said they are salt and light. But he warned that the attributes of salt and light could be wasted or rendered useless if not used properly. Salt serves a negative function. It is to prevent deterioration, decay, rot. On the other hand, light serves a positive function. It illumines, it exposes, it reveals. Christians are to be actively involved in both functions. We are to act as a moral preservative in society. And we are to set a standard of righteousness in a sin-darkened world.

The ancient Christian leader Tertullian exhorted the Christian minority of his day to be the “soul” of secular Roman culture. Pagan Rome was beset with corruption and moral decay, but Tertullian urged the Christian community not to retreat from that culture but to contend for it. If Christians do not act as salt and light, who will?

In the light of the above, why has the church so often opted out of its social responsibilities? Several reasons come to mind.

1) The rise of theological liberalism during the last century resulted in the emergence of the “Social Gospel” which basically replaced evangelism and spiritual renewal with social transformation only. To work against poverty or other social maladies was seen as extending the Kingdom. But this was often done to the exclusion of preaching the gospel and saving souls. Thus Christians reacted against this pseudo-gospel. This in part led to the rise of Fundamentalism. The Fundamentalists rightly restored the priority of the gospel and preaching, but over reacted to the social agenda. Thus Fundamentalists tended to withdraw from the world altogether, seeing culture and society as under Satan’s sole control. It was only in the 1950’s that Evangelicalism started to restore the balance, by both proclaiming the gospel and restoring the church’s social conscience.

2) Premillennial and pre-tribulation eschatological views have sometimes resulted in social quietism. After all, if Jesus is coming back any minute, why waste time with social reform? Why polish brass on a sinking ship?

Several comments can be made. First, people have been setting dates for centuries. We just do not know when Christ will return. Jesus said “Occupy till I come.” He didn’t say, pack your bags, lay back and put up your feet, and wait for me”. He expects us to be busy in our service for him, “redeeming the time, for the days are evil”. Second, in 2 Pe. 3 Peter discusses the return of Christ. After listing some of the cataclysmic events preceding the advent, he says in verses 11 and 12, considering that all this is to happen, what sort of people ought you to be? He says our three responses should be: holiness of life, worship of God and service to man. This, he says, will “hasten on” the Lord’s return. This implies to me that we can also impede or slow up his return. The timing of the second coming, then, is dependent somewhat on us.

3) Third, the history of the church has been the history of social transformation. Wherever Christians have gone, they have improved living conditions, championed the homeless, the poor, the victims of injustice. They have built hospitals, developed literacy programs, ministered to the poor and needy, set up orphanages, engaged in practical mercy ministries, etc. They set up

schools, wrote down languages, were involved in prison reform, abolition of slavery, improvement of workers' conditions, protection of women (suttee in India), etc. Christian philanthropic organisations sprang up such as the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, St. Vincent de Paul, YMCA, Goodwill Industries, rescue missions, etc.

4) Fourth, even if you do accept the premillennial position, you can still be involved in social action. Consider two of the greatest evangelical leaders and social reformers of the past century: Lord Shaftesbury and William Wilberforce. Wilberforce (1759-1833) worked for decades to abolish the slave trade. He was also involved in the Sunday school movement, relief of prisoners, prison reform, working conditions, mentally ill, "the reformation of manners", etc. Shaftesbury (1801-1885), like Wilberforce, was a member of the British House of Commons. He was involved in alleviation of bad conditions in insane asylums; worker's conditions, especially women and children; he helped relieve poor housing conditions; had a great interest in missions and Bible Societies. For 57 out of 60 years in public service he received no salary. Now interestingly, Wilberforce was postmillennial in his eschatology, while Shaftesbury was premillennial. They may have had quite different end time views, but both had a committed resolve to better society around them.

We are in a battle. And the church is all too often losing. But we are losing the battle because many of us are not even engaged in the struggle. Many of us are not even aware that a battle is waging around us. We are simply losing the war by default. The other side is winning because it is meeting no opposition. We have been asleep at the wheel.

But it is time to arouse ourselves from our slumber. The stakes are too high to remain uninvolved. The flood of homosexuality, abortion, pornography, child abuse, and so on will only continue to get worse, And we will only have ourselves to blame. I am becoming more and more convinced that the reason why the world is in such a mess is because the church is in a mess. And of course the church is in a mess because we are in a mess. Personal revival and repentance must be the place to begin. As we put aside our trivial pursuits and selfish ambitions, and rededicate ourselves to serving the Lord and extending his Kingdom, we will see the world changing.

Remember what it was said of the early apostles: they turned the world upside down. We can do the same. Indeed, as you study the history of revival in the church you discover that real revivals always resulted in noticeable and profound social change.

Social change, like evangelism, is a job that has been committed to the church. We can complain about how bad society is, but it is up to us to do something about it. A story from church history is helpful at this point. William Carey (1761-1834), the father of modern missions, faced a problem back in his day. He had a burden to convert the heathen of India. But the Calvinistic Baptists, to which he belonged, weren't as keen. Said his superior, "Now listen, William, if God wants to convert the Heathen, he will do it in his good time, and he doesn't need your help, thank you very much." Now most of us would say "what nonsense! what about the Great Commission? What about preaching the gospel to every creature?" Can I suggest that we are in a similar position today concerning social ethics. Many of us pray about these problems, do spiritual warfare, and evangelise. This is all well and good. But can we not engage the cultural and social problems in those arenas? Can we not get involved in fighting the culture wars? Letter writing is one way to get involved. Visiting your local politician is another, There are lots of other ways. Can I suggest that Christians should be reading the Bible in one hand while reading the newspaper in another? We need to be aware of what is happening in the world if we want to leave our mark.

I conclude where I started, with the words of German theologian and Holocaust survivor, Martin Niemöller: "In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up."

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RECOMMENDED READING

Crippen, Alan. ed.,. Reclaiming the Culture. Focus on the Family, 1996.

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Whitehead. John, Engaging the Culture. Rutherford Institute, 1993.