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1983

The Church in the World and Against the World

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Recommended Citation

Hindson, Edward and Dobson, Ed, "The Church in the World and Against the World" (1983). *SOR Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 138.

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FUNDAMENTALISM TODAY



by Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson

The Church in the World and against the World

The American society is in social upheaval! Fear of change and the uncertainty of the future have gripped our nation. From the kindergarten classroom to the marble halls of academia, school children and professors alike recognize that ours is a changing world. From the kitchen sink to the corporate board room, virtually every level of society has been dramatically challenged to rethink the moral, social, and ethical values of our culture. In this post-industrial, transitory society we stand on the horizon of a new technological era—the information society.

As we move into this new era, every element of our society is being challenged to justify its role in the shaping of the American dream. While some people tenaciously cling to tradition of the past and others embrace the prospect of the new, the question must be asked: What should be the role of the church in society? Will she condescend to the old or capitulate to the new? Jesus addressed this very issue when He told His disciples that they were to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. The ultimate role of the church must then transcend the very culture in which it exists. While maintaining its mission within the culture, it must also transform that culture by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our Lord explained this twofold role of the church when He said, "Ye are the salt of the earth... Ye are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13,14).

The Church in the World— The Salt of the Earth

Salt is a preservative. In this regard, the Christian sees himself as part of God's moral preservative in society. He is both a citizen of earth and a citizen of heaven. His focus is both temporal and eternal. Though his expectation is heavenly, his moral obligations are earthly. Like our Lord Himself while He was on this planet, the Christian cannot help but have compassion on this fallen world. He finds himself torn between the competing interests of the celestial and the terrestrial and therefore cannot passively function in any society. He must prophetically address the world in which he lives. There are several ways in which this can be done.

1. *Evangelism*—When Jesus gave the Great Commission to His disciples, He intended for the church to become an organism of born-again, baptized, and growing believers banded together for the purpose of world evangelization. Spiritual reproduction must ever be the heartbeat of the

church in society.

2. *Civil Obedience*—The Bible teaches that government is ordained of God (Rom. 13:1-5). Therefore, Christians are to be citizens who pray for and obey those in authority. We must pay taxes, obey laws, and contribute to the general welfare of society.

3. *Social Concern*—We have a scriptural mandate to protect and help the widows, the fatherless, and the poor. Christians cannot ignore the call of the oppressed peoples of this world. Morality and justice are inseparable in the mind of the Christian believer.

4. *Pluralism*—In a free democratic society, religious liberty is guaranteed through a commitment to pluralism. We are free to express and promote our religious convictions within the lawful boundaries of the Constitution. We must willingly protect these freedoms for all men, even those who oppose us.

Jesus told His disciples that they were to be in the world, but not of the world. The ultimate role of the church must then transcend the very culture in which it exists.

5. *Personal Testimony*—Showing Christ in one's life is the most undeniable expression of witness that a Christian can present to the world in which he lives. It is the message of Christ viewed in the receptacle of a transformed life that gets the salt out of the shaker and into society.

The Church against the World— The Light of the World

Light penetrates the darkness. Even the smallest candle can dispel the greatest darkness. In this sense Jesus foresaw the mission of the church as one of resisting and exposing evil. The ultimate conflict of the ages has been the struggle of light and darkness, good and evil. Therefore, the Christian finds himself locked in an inevitable spiritual war against unrighteousness and injustice. For this very reason, Christ

Christians in the world often find themselves *against* the world. This role of prophetic consciousness expresses itself in the following ways.

1. *Voting*—The political process of a democratic society gives opportunity for each individual to express his convictions in a tangible way. Since the political process is the legalization of the social process, to divorce ourselves from politics is to divorce ourselves from society itself.

2. *Lobbying*—There are currently over 11,000 political lobbying organizations in Washington, D.C. These include groups demanding favorable legislation for homosexuals, feminists, abortionists, and even a pro-incest lobby! There are precious few Christian lobby groups that espouse biblical moral values. It is no wonder there has been little Christian influence exerted upon our government in recent years. Politics is an uncomfortable domain for the church and people of piety. Yet it is in this arena that significant moral decisions are being formulated which affect both the church and the individual believer.

The role of the church in these complex and changing times must ever be the same as it has always been—the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

3. *Boycotting*—The lawful boycott has often been utilized effectively by various elements of our society to inaugurate change. This method was used to bring pressure upon the sponsors of television programs in order to initiate more family-oriented programming. This approach to effecting positive change in society should certainly remain a legitimate option for the Christian community in the future.

4. *Demonstrating*—While group demonstrations can certainly degenerate into an uncontrolled mob, peaceful demonstration is within the parameters of the law. The March for Life, I Love America Rallies, and so forth, all have been successful and legitimate methods of bringing moral issues before the general public. These methods are as valid as Martin Luther's nailing his Ninety-five Theses to the church door in Wittenberg.

5. *Resisting*—Social resistance should not be the first option of the Christian. It becomes necessary only when we have pursued every other possible alternative. When every option has been exhausted without effecting moral change, then the Christian must stand upon the absolute faith of God's Word, even though that stand may bring the heavy hand of the state against him. Daniel was thrown into the lions' den because he violated the law of the Persian empire. The early Christians, likewise, were persecuted by the Roman state, which viewed them as having committed acts of civil disobedience.

Conclusion

In the past, Fundamentalists have emphasized only the preaching of the gospel, while Evangelicals have called for

more social concern. Liberals have actually attempted to change society by aggressive social and political programs without the gospel. The Liberal agenda has failed for lack of a biblical and theological base. Evangelical "centrality" has too often degenerated into moral "neutrality." Content to retreat to their spiritual "fortresses," Fundamentalists have generally neglected the social and political process altogether. The time has come when we can no longer have concern without action, change without conversion, or social agenda without theological truth.

The role of the church in these complex and changing times must ever be the same as it has always been—the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We must first call people to Christ, who alone can change them. We must work to correct the injustices of an immoral and ungodly society. We must be willing to confront evil with the courage of our convictions regardless of the cost. May God help us to do it! □

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