

The Ministry of the Watchman

Restoring a Vital Missing Link in the Ministry of the Church

By Jeffrey D. Breshears

“This is what the Lord said to me: ‘Go, post a watchman and have him report what he sees.’” – Isaiah 21:6

“When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?” – Psalm 11:3

Most people think of Christianity primarily as a religion – a formalized belief system with its distinctive doctrines, rituals, traditions, clergy, sacred scriptures and institutions. Many Christians, however, understand that it is more than just a religion – it is in essence a spiritual relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. But Christian faith is also a worldview – a comprehensive revelation of reality that conditions our understanding of everything in life. In that respect, it encompasses not only our theological beliefs but our philosophy of life and our very lifestyle itself, including our moral and ethical beliefs and practices. It is (or should be) the value system by which we process our culture, the arts, and our interpersonal relationships with others, just as it should also inform and influence our social, political and economic values and beliefs.

Our goal in life should be the formation and the cultivation of a wholistic and integrated faith that takes in all of life – including our social and civic responsibilities. Similarly, any church with a wholistic and integrated approach to ministry will seek to be socially relevant and culturally engaged. To truly fulfill their calling, churches must educate, equip and motivate Christians not only spiritually but intellectually for the challenges we face today.

In that regard, a vital aspect of a healthy church with a wholistic and integrated approach to ministry – and a fatal missing link in most churches – is a watchman-type ministry that educates Christians regarding the significant cultural issues of our day, and equips and motivates them for proactive engagement with a society that is becoming increasingly hostile toward traditional Christian values and beliefs. Ours is a culture in crisis, and Christians need to understand what is happening, how we got in this

condition, and how we can be a source of salt and light in the midst of a society and culture that is rapidly disintegrating. But to change our culture, we must first change the culture in our churches.

The Watchman

In ancient and medieval times every walled city and castle, along with most towns and villages, posted a watchman around the clock. Although not exactly a high-status job, everyone recognized the watchman’s importance – after all, the safety and security of the entire community depended upon him. For the most part it was a lonely and monotonous job entailing long hours manning one’s post, and the task was often assigned to soldiers or slaves, although in some societies such as Old Testament Israel citizens took turns on a rotation basis similar to modern-day jury duty. The watchman had to be alert, trustworthy, vigilant, and of course, loyal, and the results could be catastrophic for those who failed.

(Chinese history in particular includes several accounts of corrupt or cowardly watchmen who succumbed to bribery or intimidation and opened up a gate in the Great Wall to marauding barbarians.)

From his position atop the city wall or watchtower, the watchman steadfastly manned his post through long dark nights and all kinds of foul weather. If he did his job well, few people noticed. On the other hand, if he succumbed to drowsiness or distraction and failed to sound the trumpet at the first sign of danger, he could be whipped, beaten, fined, or even executed. Even during daylight hours, while workers were in the fields and vineyards and orchards, a watchman was posted on a nearby hilltop or perched up in a tree. A good watchman knew the surrounding landscape and ecology and could read it for signs of approaching danger. Flickering lights in the distance might signal an approaching army. A stampede of deer emerging from the forest or a covey of quail suddenly flushed from the woodlands could indicate a band of brigands advancing on the settlement. The sooner the watchman detected the danger and sounded the alarm, the better chance the residents had to survive.

The Culture War

We don't live in walled cities anymore – the advent of gunpowder and modern artillery rendered walls mostly obsolete. Nor do we station watchmen in guardhouses at the city limits. Thankfully, we also don't live in fear of an imminent invasion by a foreign power, and until Nine-Eleven it had been sixty years since the last serious attack on American soil at Pearl Harbor. Nonetheless, we still face serious threats to our quality of life and the integrity of our culture and its institutions which render the principle of the watchman as relevant today as in the past. But the threats we face today are primarily internal rather than external, philosophical rather than physical, and moral rather than military. And precisely because they come from within, these threats are considerably more insidious.

In the hierarchy of contemporary “politically correct” values, nothing ranks higher than tolerance, diversity, and multi-culturalism. Indeed, there *is* much to appreciate about a society that has not only tolerated but also accepted and integrated people of diverse social and ethnic backgrounds from all over the world.

But the ideology of multi-culturalism goes well beyond the mere appreciation of different cultural traditions. Philosophically, it is a form of cultural pluralism that declares all cultures (and all cultural values) to be equally valid and meritorious. As assumptions go, this one is not just naive, but positively dangerous. The ideology of multi-culturalism is a key component of a secular humanistic agenda, which is derived from an atheistic/naturalistic worldview. There is a reason why America has been, and still is, the world's “last and best hope for mankind,” and that reason is rooted in the unique cultural traditions on which this nation was founded. Fundamentally, it is based on a Christian theistic worldview from which America derived many of its guiding principles and values, and it is this worldview that is currently under assault by cultural deconstructionists who are hell-bent on replacing it with a radically different kind of culture.

The assault on America's traditional social, political, and economic values is the basis for the much-discussed “culture war” of the past several decades. Although the primary focus is often on the social and political aspects of the conflict, the underlying issues are philosophical and intrinsically spiritual. In essence, it a battle of conflicting worldviews and ideologies, and in most cases it pits Biblically-based social and moral values against the forces of modernistic secular humanism and cynical postmodernism. And undergirding these contrasting worldviews are spiritual realities, as we are reminded in Ephesians 6:12 where the apostle Paul writes, “Our struggle is not against flesh-and-blood” but against the dark spiritual forces of evil – both in this world and in the supernatural realm. So in effect the culture war is actually just a surface-level manifestation of a deeper spiritual struggle going on behind the scenes for the soul of our nation. But the most apparent effects of the struggle are in the realm of culture, and they are manifest in everything from our moral and ethical values to our political, legal, educational and religious institutions, and in our media and entertainment industries.

We are often reminded that we live in a post-Christian age in which Christian influence is quickly eroding, and some Americans, including many in academia and the media, refuse to acknowledge the eventual consequences of this trend. But history is littered with examples of

fallen civilizations that discovered, only too late, that internal moral decay can be just as debilitating and destructive as any barbarian invasion. It's just not as dramatic. It works slowly and subtly over time, eroding people's values and their sense of honor, duty, civility, and courage. Eventually, it saps their will to resist. Like subterranean termites eating away at a foundation, moral and spiritual corruption inevitably brings collapse and ruin.

The analogy of the frog and the boiling water is a familiar one. Drop a frog into a pot of boiling water and he immediately senses that this is not a frog-friendly environment. Furthermore, he takes appropriate action: he leaps out in a split-second. But drop that same frog into a pot of lukewarm water and gradually turn up the temperature on the burner, and he will acclimatize himself to the changing temperature. Given enough time and heat, the frog will tolerate the water until it boils him to death.

Psychologists refer to the process as "de-sensitization," and it is apparent that especially since the 1960s the moral climate in the American melting pot has increased to the point that this is no longer a Christian-friendly culture. If one compares contemporary society with that of forty or so years ago, it is rather obvious that in most areas of life and culture we have become cruder and ruder (not to mention lewder!). There has been a coarsening effect that is truly shocking. Most everywhere we turn, basic morality and the general level of civility seem to be under assault.

Prior to the 1960s the analogy of barbarians at the gates of American civilization would have served as an appropriate metaphor. For decades a motley assortment of secularizing forces had been gathering outside the city walls, pressing against the gates, clamoring for admission. At points along the perimeter that were left unguarded, a few had managed to scale the wall or squeeze through cracks and fissures in the foundation. At other locations, some gained entry when sympathetic allies on the inside (including politicians, journalists, academicians, and even clergymen) helped them slip past the sentries. But for the most part they were held at bay. There was no grand assault until the cultural guardians within the city – some of the very people and institutions whom we counted on to protect us – began systematically unbolting and opening the gates. Whether motivated by fear, naivete, greed, misdirected sympathy, or a multi-cultural agenda,

they knowingly or unknowingly set the stage for the culture war that has raged ever since.

For nearly forty years cultural barbarians have been methodically ransacking the city, besieging one citadel after another and generally wreaking havoc. For a civilization as immense and complex as America, it takes a while, even once the barbarians have gained entry, for the whole city to fall under their control. There are countless skirmishes and continuous house-to-house street fighting, and it all takes time. But much of the city – including many of its key institutions – has indeed fallen into enemy hands, as Billy Graham noted in 1974:

I am often asked, "Is America at the crossroads?" No, America is not at a crossroads. We have already passed the crossroads... We made a decision a long time ago to abandon God and go our own way.... We chose the road to secularism, hedonism, materialism, and moral permissiveness.*

In his famous Harvard commencement address in 1978, Aleksander Solzhenitsyn essentially echoed Billy Graham's sentiments. Solzhenitsyn decried the fact that over the past three centuries all Christian ideals of duty and sacrifice have been abandoned in the West, and declared that while we've protected human rights and freedom of choice, "man's sense of responsibility to God and society have grown dimmer and dimmer." He concluded that "We have lost the concept of a Supreme [Judge] which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility."

In a course I teach on *Mere Christianity*, I am always struck by C. S. Lewis' profound concern for the moral condition of Britain in the 1940s. Lewis attributed much of the problem in his day to the collective influence of Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, and to the legacy of the Great War. For him, the decline in social morality was most evident in the breezy hedonism of the Jazz Age.

To us, looking back in retrospect, the forties seem positively innocent by comparison. We recognize that a certain level of moral deviancy will always be normative in a free society, although potentially it is always cause for concern. But it's one thing to *tolerate* a certain level of discreet debauchery (because the alternative would be to grant government too much control over people's lives), but quite another to *promote* or *celebrate* it. And that, I think,

is the problem today: the cultural barbarians who control many of our institutions – specifically academia, the media, the legal profession, the entertainment industry, and much of our political system – actively promote and even celebrate degeneracy. I wonder what Lewis would think of a society in which *Playboy*, M-TV, gangsta rap, Eminem, Madonna, and Britney Spears constitute mainstream entertainment? What would Washington or Lincoln think of a political system governed by some of the most incompetent and corrupt scoundrels in all of American political history? More troubling, of course, is what God thinks. And are we so dense that we can't make the connection between the mentality that accepts this level of gross incompetence and corruption and the declining standards in other areas of life outside the realms of politics and popular culture?

The Ministry of the Watchman

If there is any good news in an otherwise bleak scenario, it is that the situation is neither hopeless nor irreversible. Furthermore, regardless of the circumstances or the forces swarming around us, we have a moral responsibility to stand our ground and fight. To think and do otherwise would be faithless and cowardly.

Many people, of course, realize the precarious situation of our society, but relatively few are actively engaged in doing anything about it. For some, including many Christians, the demands of everyday life sap most of their time and energy. In general, many are just too exhausted or distracted to get involved in anything beyond the parameters of their own immediate concerns. But for many others the problem is simply abject apathy: they just don't care.

Fortunately, though, not everyone is so narcissistic or myopic. Many Christians sense a need to be better informed and actively engaged in the broader issues of life. Oftentimes, however, they lack any organized means by which they can make a difference, and under such circumstances it is difficult to sustain one's passion. Furthermore, when faced with threats and challenges on so many fronts, it can all seem so overwhelming. So many resign themselves to lives of quiet desperation, but in their souls they remain troubled. They know there is more to life than merely looking out for the welfare of one's own self and family. We are social beings, members of a broader cultural community, and the moral and spiritual health of that community impacts

directly upon every individual within it.

For those who are committed to wholistic discipleship, social concern and civic involvement should be an integral part of their value system and lifestyle. The Christian faith cannot be confined to private piety alone, and there is, and always has been, a social dimension to the Gospel. In fact, we cannot fulfill the Great Commandment to love God with "all our heart, soul, mind and strength" unless we also attend to the needs of others and love them as we love ourselves. Jesus commissioned us to be the "salt" and "light" in our society – a directive that goes well beyond just focusing on our own spiritual life. Our calling is to be witnesses for Christ in every area of life, and that includes the social, cultural and political spheres.

Ours is a high calling that requires time, energy, and focus – and perhaps even some personal risk. But Christians who take their faith seriously understand that we have no other option. We're either part of the problem or part of the solution. Edmund Burke's famous quote is always relevant, but never more so than now: "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."

Today, regrettably, a lot of good men (and women) are doing just that: nothing – or at least too little. Furthermore, those who do get actively involved often find themselves constantly on the defensive, reacting to the latest outrage of the moment. As a result, most of the *proactive* elements in society are the pied pipers of Political Correctness, moral relativism and secular humanism who are driving most of the cultural chaos and moral anarchy that we see all around us.

When God spoke through the ancient Hebrew prophets, he often used the analogy of the watchman to warn of impending danger – physical as well as moral. Hence, the prophet Ezekiel writes, "The word of the Lord came to me: 'I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me'" (Ez. 3:16-17). In another time and place, God warned Isaiah, "The watchmen are all [spiritually] blind – they all lack knowledge" (Is. 56:10). The result is a society without moral bearings, ripe for disaster. Throughout history there have been times when the church has functioned faithfully as society's watchman, and in these situations many have turned to it for spiritual, moral, and even cultural

guidance. But today the church has largely abdicated its prophetic role. As Martin Luther King Jr. once remarked, the church should function as a thermostat for society, but too often it's little more than a social thermometer.

Proverbs warns us that "Where there is no vision, the people perish." Every society needs prophets to provide spiritual and moral feedback, without which it is left with only its cultural apologists and cultural critics. The cultural apologists are society's cheerleaders. They are the accommodationists in business, government, education, religion, the media, and the arts and entertainment who embrace uncritically all the latest fads and trends and techno-thrills that come along. Provided the economy is good and the markets are on the upswing, they accept virtually anything so long as it makes life more pleasurable and exciting. Suffice it to say, cultural apologists are usually oblivious to the moral and spiritual climate. To say the least, it hardly rates on their priority scale.

Cultural dissidents are quite another matter. Like prophets, dissidents can be astute critics of the prevailing order, and some are vociferous agitators for change. But most dissidents are little more than malcontents and reactionaries. Typically, they are motivated more by anger, bitterness, and resentment than righteous indignation. These are the cynics and the revolutionaries who would destroy the existing order while offering nothing viable in its place.

Prophets also function as social critics, and at times they may sound like dissidents. But there is a qualitative difference. Prophets are people of character who are attuned to God and speak forth his word. Prophets possess the wisdom, the maturity, and the spiritual discernment to illuminate the present and reveal an alternative for the future. Motivated by love and a burning passion for truth and justice, they offer the only real solution to humanity's spiritual, moral, and social condition.

Mainstream society often confuses its dissidents for prophets, and for too long most of America's acknowledged so-called prophets have been just secular critics. Some have been journalists while others have been authors, artists, song writers and film makers. In addition, there have been notable watchdog groups that survey the political landscape and sound the alarm on corruption or threats to our freedom and security, while others focus on cultural and ethical issues.

Some make legitimate contributions to the quality of justice and civility in our society, and Christians would be well-advised to actively support their efforts.** But given the fact that all of our problems are fundamentally spiritual in nature, strictly secular solutions will never be adequate.

In everyday life many conscientious Christian parents function as watchmen and prophets within their own homes and families. What responsible father or mother isn't constantly assessing the culture in which their children live in order to provide some necessary moral, spiritual and practical guidance? This is why the traditional family dinner hour is important: What an opportune time – in fact, what a sacred time – to gather together as a family and process the issues and events of the day. What an opportune forum for Mom and Dad to interact with their children regarding the things they have experienced during the day, as well as to impart knowledge and understanding concerning current events and things that children have learned at church. What a tragedy it is when we waste this sacred time by sitting and chit-chatting about nothing but trivial matters – or in the case of many families, not even sitting down and eating together on a regular basis.

But beyond this kind of informal family-based ministry, there is a great need today for a focused and structured watchman-style ministry in the local church. Over the past twenty years several notable Christian organizations and publications have emerged that serve in a watchman capacity on the national level. Some specialize in religious issues, while others deal with broader social, cultural, and political affairs.*** Many offer impressive resource materials that benefit individuals and churches alike, but for the most part the resources of national-level ministries like these go under-utilized at the local level, and there is a critical missing link between what they do and what goes on in the local church.

For the church to minister effectively in the midst of a morally confused and dysfunctional society, it must exercise its prophetic role at the local level. For that to happen, it is essential that we restore the concept of the watchman as a vital component of the church's ministry. This is a crucial missing link between what the church currently is and what it can be. Every church, regardless of size, should have an individual or an organized group whose designated ministry is to

survey the cultural landscape and report regularly on matters of particular significance to the congregation. Like the men of Issachar in I Chronicles 12:32 who “understood their times,” this requires people who are attuned to the issues of the day, both nationally and locally, and who have the knowledge, the communication skills, and the organizational ability to function as effective leaders in this area of service.

Those who are called and equipped for this ministry are due the same respect shown to pastors, elders, teachers, and others who function in more traditional ministerial roles in the church. Undoubtedly, in some cases pastors and elders who are reticent to delegate authority will be reluctant to vest a watchman ministry. Some leaders will always be insecure when faced with the prospect of sharing power. But true spiritual leaders understand the principle of servant leadership – that real power is about empowering others, not hoarding it for oneself. They recognize, encourage, and actively support those whom the Spirit has inspired and commissioned for ministry, and they understand that an active watchman ministry will open up whole new areas of involvement that will further strengthen the church.

Qualifications and Responsibilities

As with any ministry, there are biblical qualifications that watchmen should meet.

1. Watchmen must be people whom God has called and gifted for this particular ministry, and whose lives are exemplary. Since many of the issues that a watchman ministry addresses are controversial and potentially divisive, watchmen must be people of intelligence, honor, and integrity who command respect among their peers. They must possess active and alert minds, and be adept at accessing information relevant to the needs of the church. They must also be effective communicators and organizers who can inspire others to action.

2. A watchman ministry requires individuals who are not only concerned, but knowledgeable. To function effectively in this capacity, watchmen should be well versed in the Bible, theology, Christian history, and apologetics. As the apostle Paul counseled Timothy regarding elders, the watchman should not be “a novice,” but someone who has a mature understanding of the Christian faith as well as a sophisticated understanding of contemporary issues. They should understand the

principles and applications of a Christian theistic worldview as well as alternative worldviews such as naturalism, existentialism, eastern pantheistic monism, the New Age, and postmodernism. A watchman should be knowledgeable in classical and modern political theory and ideologies such as conservatism, liberalism, socialism, Marxism, and libertarianism. They should have a firm understanding of American history, society and culture; the American political system; and modern entertainment and popular culture.

3. Watchmen must think and act, as much as possible, in an objective, non-partisan, and inclusive manner. An effective watchman ministry is about building bridges, not walls. The watchman must be scrupulously devoted to truth and integrity, yet humble and open to alternative opinions. When dealing with political, economic, and cultural matters, the watchman understands that these are man-made systems. As such, some are more fair, just, and realistic than others, but all have their flaws and limitations.

There are no divinely mandated political or economic systems, just as there are no divinely mandated music or art forms. There are, however, universal moral and ethical principles that can be applied to politics, economics, and culture that promote justice and civility while checking greed and corruption. A watchman ministry is no place for simplistic thinking, nor can the watchman be an agenda-driven ideologue blindly devoted to any particular socio/political theory, whether libertarian, conservative, liberal, Christian socialist, or any other fixed position. In this regard, watchmen must read and study broadly in order to understand issues from a variety of viewpoint. Obviously, cultural watchmen are principled people with firm convictions, but in order to function effectively in a pluralistic and multi-cultural environment it is incumbent upon us to be as knowledgeable and conversant in other viewpoints as possible.

The ministry of the watchman entails three basic functions: (1) Organization; (2) Education; and (3) Mobilization. Working in coordination with the ministry of The Areopagus, watchmen organize regular monthly meetings in their church for fellow-members who want to stay informed on significant contemporary cultural issues. These monthly sessions provide a forum for sharing information, processing and discussing relevant issues, and generating and coordinating any appropriate responses that are warranted.

Although the watchman ministry is based in the church, it's outreach should extend into the community at large. Working cooperatively with colleagues in other churches and Christian ministries, a primary goal is to establish a city-wide coalition of interested parties that can respond proactively and effectively on a local level. (This coalition might include, whenever practicable, non-Christians, as Habitat for Humanity has done so successfully over the years.) At times, the watchman might organize correspondence campaigns directed toward political, civic, or business leaders on a matter of local or national interest. In other scenarios, watchman ministries in various churches might organize cooperative rallies, public celebrations, protest demonstrations or boycotts. (The public outcry a couple of years ago over Abercrombie & Fitch's salacious advertisements is an example of how sensitive corporate America can be to criticism and negative publicity.)

Christian activism should be primarily proactive and positive, and it should extend beyond merely critiquing or protesting the negative. Christians need to be encouraged and mobilized to promote the positive things in our culture that enhance the moral, political, and cultural quality of life, including anything in the arts that warrants our support such as Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, or Ben Stein's recent documentary, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*. Christians have the potential to impact our culture significantly through what we support, how we vote, and what we purchase, but rarely do we exercise this power in any decisive way. Hollywood, the music industry, and corporate advertisers realize that Christians are, for the most part, factionalized and disorganized, so they regularly ignore our sensibilities. Too often, the Christian community is a house divided against itself.

In order to change our culture, we must begin by changing the culture in our churches. A significant step in this direction – and a crucial missing link in the current ministry of the church – is the restoration of the ministry of the watchman ministry

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* Quoted in Robert L. Linder and Richard V. Pierard, *Twilight of the Saints*, p. 30.

** A few examples include the Rutherford Institute; the Heritage Foundation; *National Review*; *The New Republic*; *The Drudge Report*; *Common Cause*; Amnesty International; David Horowitz's *Frontpage Magazine*; Internet blog sites such as *Townhall.com*; radio talk shows such as Rush Limbaugh, Laura Ingraham and Dennis Prager; and TV news magazine programs such as *Sixty Minutes*, *20/20*, *Dateline NBC*, etc.

*** A few examples include Chuck Colson's "BreakPoint;" the American Center for Law and Justice; the Alliance Defense Fund; *Christianity Today*; *Books & Culture*; Evangelicals for Social Action; The Christian Research Institute and *The CRI Journal*; Concerned Women for America; *The New Oxford Review*; *World* magazine; *Touchstone* magazine; etc.