



CHRISTIANITY & CULTURE

AN INTRODUCTION

A Symphony for Our Time

- Chicago (1970): “Canon” / “Once Upon a Time” / “Elegy: Progress?”

The Purpose of This Course

- Prospects for 2024.
- The stakes could not be higher.
 - Secularizing, socializing, sexualizing and racializing every aspect of American life.
- Confronting controversial issues.
- The real nature of America’s “culture war.”
 - The problem of cultural pacifism.
- Christians are called to be a source of Life, Love, Hope and Truth in a spiritually dark world.

Loving Others as We Love Ourselves: The Political Component

A Call to Wholistic Discipleship.

- “Jesus is Lord!”
- Natural law and universal moral and ethical principles of justice.
- Matt. 22:36-39: “*Rabbi, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*”
Jesus: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind. This is the greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.*”
- Consider:
 - *How can we possibly love others if we are indifferent toward the kind of laws and public policies and programs that regulate (and often control) their lives?*
 - *How can we possibly love others unless we are sensitive to – and attentive to – not only their religious and spiritual lives, but their physical, material, emotional, social, intellectual, and creative needs as well?*
- The scope of the Christian faith.
 - A comprehensive worldview.
- Realistically, politics is mostly about damage-control.
- The stark political realities of our time.
 - A general assessment of the Democratic and Republican parties.
- What matters most?
 - The Main Thing is not the Only Thing.
- To ignore the political implications of Christian discipleship is irresponsible and immoral.

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On “Christian Nationalism”

Christendom.

- Constantine (r. 312-37) and Christian sacralism.
- The realm of “Christendom”.
 - ▶ Roman Catholic and Protestant Christendoms.
 - ▶ This unholy alliance of church and state produced a superficially Christianized civil religion that politicized and corrupted true Christianity.
 - ▶ Church officials typically and dutifully blessed the government’s aggressive wars and tyrannical policies – including even unjust laws – usually without dissent.
 - ▶ For some 1500 years, state-sponsored (and state-controlled) “Christianity” served as a force for government coercion and the suppression of basic human rights – including the rights to free assembly and free expression.
- The impact of the American Revolution.
- Manifestations of “Christian Nationalism”: “Christian reconstructionism,” “theonomy,” and “dominionism”.
 - ▶ The New Apostolic Reformation movement.
- The principle of Natural Law.

Modern Republicanism.

- A political system based on Natural Law in keeping with the realities of human nature.
- Limited government, the separation of powers, and a legal system based on just laws and individual liberty as possible.

[NOTE: A constitutional republic – not a democracy.]

- The crucial component: public and private virtue.

Our Calling.

- Our calling as Christians is to think and live as true countercultural followers of Jesus Christ.
 - ▶ Rom. 12:1-2 – *“Do not conform to the pattern [the ways of thinking, speaking and living] of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind [so that you can discern and follow] God’s good, pleasing and perfect will” for your life.*
- Christian values are always out-of-synch with the popular trends of our time.
- The dominant trends in affluent America: egoism, materialism, hedonism.
- The mandate of the “Greatest Commandment”:

H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (1951).

- Richard Niebuhr’s (1894-1962) schematization for five ways in which Christians have interacted with culture throughout history.
 - (1) Christ against culture.
 - (2) Christ of culture.
 - (3) Christ above culture.
 - (4) Christ and culture in paradox.
 - (5) Christ the transformer of culture.

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Chuck Colson on “the Cultural Commission”

Introduction to Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?*

(Tyndale House Publishers, 1999).

- “We live in a culture... in which Judeo-Christian values are mocked and where immorality in high places is not only ignored but even rewarded in the voting booth...”

“Right after signing the contract for this book, and while still plagued by writer’s remorse (was I really convinced that this book needed to be written?), my wife, Patty, and I visited old friends for a weekend and attended their local evangelical church.... I found the message solidly scriptural and well delivered. That is, until the pastor outlined for the congregation his definition of the church’s mission: to prepare for Jesus’ return through prayer, Bible study, worship, fellowship, and witnessing. In that instant, all lingering doubts about whether I should write this book evaporated....

“Turning our backs on the culture is a betrayal of our biblical mandate and our own heritage because it denies God’s sovereignty over all of life. Nothing could be deadlier for the church – or more ill-timed....

“We must show the world that Christianity is more than a private belief, more than personal salvation. We must show that Christianity is a comprehensive life system that answers all of humanity’s age-old questions: Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? Does life have any meaning and purpose?...

“The church’s singular failure in recent decades has been the failure to see Christianity as a life system, or worldview, that governs every area of existence....

“Most of all, our failure to see Christianity as a comprehensive framework for truth has crippled our efforts to have a redemptive effect on the surrounding culture. At its most fundamental level, the so-called culture war is a clash of belief systems.

“Evangelism and cultural renewal are both divinely ordained duties. God exercises his sovereignty in two ways: through saving grace and common grace....

“Understanding Christianity as a worldview is important not only for fulfilling the great commission but also for fulfilling the cultural commission....” [ix-xii, 33]

“Charles Colson and the Cultural Commission,” by Bill Muehlenberg

- An excerpt from *The Sky Is Not Falling: Living Fearlessly in These Turbulent Times* (Worthy Publishing, 2011) – Chapter 11: “Turning the Church Around.”

“We especially need to train the next generation in the basics of the faith and infuse them with the Christian worldview: It’s impossible to disconnect kids from the culture. The idea that we can separate ourselves from our social surroundings, as Christians did a century ago, is foolish – unless we move to a desert island. We simply cannot escape the long, grubby arm of television, the Internet, music, and magazines. Our only hope is to teach discernment.... [169]

“Christians are called to be countercultural, a force for moral change in a sinful world. But if we surrender that role, we should be forewarned: if we stop attempting to change the culture, the culture will have already changed us.... When it comes to the culture, there’s no such thing as peaceful coexistence. If we’re not defending truth, fighting for Christian values in all of life, the truth will be sacrificed on the altar of mainstream secularism.” [170]

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“If we’re tempted to ignore the great moral issues of our day, or dismiss them as ‘just politics,’ we are betraying our biblical mandate and our own heritage. Nothing could be deadlier for the church, nor for the culture, since real Christianity invariably provides a healthy influence on society....

“If Christians do not seize this moment and act on the cultural commission, there soon will be no culture left to save. [172-173]

The Art Front

Nancy Pearcey, *Saving Leonardo* (B&H Publishing Group, 2010)

“[Traditionally,] the purpose of art had been to convey a message or a moral. To arouse virtue and courage. To instruct and inspire. To enrich, elevate, uplift, and refine.

[In that regard, art contributed to the mankind’s understanding and appreciation of what was True, Good and Beautiful.]

“In the 19th century, however, artists began to attack the very idea of moral uplift and refinement. They became what literary critic Lionel Trilling labeled an “adversary culture,” deploying their art to undermine bourgeois society.... ‘Until we come to the modern epoch, all art had a social significance and a social obligation,’ observes artist Suzi Gablik. But ‘our great art has been overtly hostile to the social order.’

“This was the operational meaning of the 19th century slogan ‘art for art’s sake’....” [pp. 123, 124]

Ruminations on Aesthetics*

Excerpt from Jeffrey D. Breshears, *American Crisis – Chapter 5: “How Neo-Marxists Corrupted American Culture”* (pp. 190-96)

Three Orientations:

- The gospel mandate: Phil. 4:8.
 - ▶ Plato: The True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

(1) Cultural asceticism.**

- ▶ Since the mid-1960s much of popular entertainment has become an unabashed celebration of decadence.
- ▶ Exceptions to the general trend.
- ▶ To live without inspiring music, literature and art is to experience a sterile existence.
- ▶ The fundamentalist mentality.

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* **Aesthetics** relates to beauty, both natural and manmade – including the ‘fine arts’ such as the literary, the visual, the auditory, and the performing arts. In relation to popular culture, this includes music, literature, painting, sculpture, movies, television, on-line videos, etc.

** **Asceticism** refers to a life of strict austerity, devoid of the usual amenities and comforts of life. I use the term ‘cultural asceticism’ to describe those who have little or no interest in the arts or, for various reasons, choose to ignore the arts.

(2) Cultural consumerism.

- ▶ Cultural asceticism is sterile and uninspiring; cultural consumerism is spiritually and morally debilitating.
- ▶ True art v. crass entertainment.
- ▶ While cultural ascetics run the risk of marginalizing themselves to the point of cultural irrelevancy, cultural consumers allow their values and sensibilities to be compromised and polluted.
- ▶ All art is an expression of a particular worldview.
- ▶ No art is values-free or values-neutral; all art expresses the beliefs and ideals of its creators.
- ▶ Thoughtful Christians reject mindless mantras such as “Art needs no justification” and “Art for art’s sake.”
- ▶ Everything in life should serve a higher and transcendent purpose.
- ▶ Much of popular culture is tainted by values that are untrue, evil and ugly.

(3) Cultural connoisseurs.

- ▶ The need for cultural discernment.
- ▶ The wise strive to refine their spiritual, moral and aesthetic sensibilities.
- ▶ All that we see, hear and think leaves an impression on our soul.
- ▶ Avoid not only visual and imaginative pornography, we also audio pornography.
- ▶ Appreciate the exceptional song, movie or television program that stimulates the mind, stirs the soul, and offers perceptive insights (whether serious or satirical) into the realities of human nature and the great issues of life.
- ▶ Gresham’s Law applies to culture as well as to economics.
- ▶ Christians should guard their hearts and minds.
- ▶ A perplexing dilemma: separating art from artists.

Graph: The Political Scale [see page 6]

The Deciding Factor.

- Political systems must account for the realities of human nature.

Two Extremes:

- Libertarianism.
- Authoritarianism.

Some Applicable Biblical Principles.

- Given the realities of human nature, government is a necessary institution.
 - ▶ Created in the *imago Dei* – the “image of God” – human beings are endowed with a rational mind, a moral conscience, and the capacity for creativity.
 - In addition, we are not only conscious beings, but conscious of being conscious.
 - ▶ However... we also have a self-centered (sinful) nature and orientation rather than one that is God-centered.
 - ▶ We exploit situations and use other people and things to satisfy our selfish desires.

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