

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

March 8, 2009

www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

Are We Supposed to Hate Our Culture?

I John 2: 15-17; I Peter 2: 11-12

Whether you realize it or not, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you are an alien!

The early church grasped this fundamental truth instinctively.

That's why a word for church that has survived to the modern era, "parish," comes from a Greek word meaning, "a company of strangers."

Christianity's first opponents agreed, seeing Christians as a strange people who did not seem to belong to the environment in which they lived. The first followers of Christ testified, 'That's right: We are sojourners who do not belong to this world, we are passing through it.

Our true citizenship is in God's Kingdom. Our ultimate destination is in God's eternal fellowship.'

There have always been Christians who have believed that the only responsible approach to dealing with one's culture is to separate from it.

They have equated loyalty to God with disdain for the world – and with strong Biblical justification.

As I John starkly and unequivocally states: "Do not love this world. Do not love the things of this world. If anyone loves the world, the love for the Father is not in him."

I Peter exhorts the early Christians, "Beloved, I beseech you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul."

At the very least no small number of Christians have noted that the fact we are aliens and exiles upon the earth must have a bearing upon the way we view our lives and how we invest them.

So, the Bible seems pretty clear: do not love the world, and do not love the things of the world. But why? Why hate the world?

Perhaps I can explain the danger involved by means of what I call the parable of the dirt pile.

When Melissa and I were doing yard work late this past fall in preparation for the holidays, a small pile of dirt ended up deposited just outside our garage door.

How the dirt pile got there and who was responsible for its presence shall remain insoluble mysteries. But unquestionably the dirt pile appeared.

Since our sons were home from college for say, 98 days during the Christmas season, I suggested that one of them take a broom and remove the small pile of dirt, a job that would take five minutes minimum.

Both readily agreed that they would do just that – just not right now. As you might guess, when they returned to college 98 days later the dirt pile was still there, but in a diminished proportion, because over a month or so of constant traffic, countless wheels and feet had managed to track a fair portion of that dirt pile inside the garage and beyond.

A garage that I had reorganized, swept and put in pristine condition just before Thanksgiving slowly but inexorably filled with the dirt tracked in from the pile just outside the door.

The meaning of the parable of the dirt pile is simply this:

the people of God are called to be a pure and pristine people, a people dedicated to holiness.

But when we traffic in the world, we become sullied with contact of polluting piles of dirt all around us.

Then we track the world's dirtiness into the tabernacles of our lives and into our churches, sullying the sanctity of our purity with the inescapable impurity of the secular world.

If you don't believe that interpretation of holiness, simply read the Old Testament!

One of the salient themes of the Old Testament prophets to the Hebrew people is,

'Be careful of all interaction with the surrounding culture, because when you engage your culture, you end up tracking its dirt into the holiness of your tabernacles.

You end up compromising your purity through your involvement with the surrounding world.’ Take for example the situation where Moses left to go receive the Ten Commandments. No sooner was his back turned than the Hebrew people made a golden calf and worshipped it. Did the notion of a gold calf just leap into their heads? No! They gleaned it from their culture! The pagan cultures around them worshipped golden calves as a symbol of sexual and agricultural fertility. The Hebrew prophets warned their people to be wary of their interaction with the outside culture, because the more they allowed the influence of the outside culture to mar the sanctity of their faith, the more the Hebrew people ran the risk of losing their identity as the people of God. Both the Old and New Testaments have numerous passages that equate holiness with maintaining one’s distance from the secular world. The implication is pretty clear: to be a good believer entails hating one’s culture to some degree.

The history of our faith is littered with examples of people and groups who have tried to implement the notion of separating from the world completely. They have regarded the outside culture as dangerous. One thinks of the Jewish Essenes who withdrew from their society to live at Qumran, eventually bequeathing to the world the Dead Sea Scrolls. One thinks of the mystic Christian Stylites, who retired to the desert to sit atop columns and engage in prayer, meditation and contemplation, disdaining contact with the world absolutely. One thinks of the modern-day Amish, who limit their interaction with our culture. One thinks of monasteries and convents. All of these are examples of faith communities who have withdrawn from the world in an attempt to worship God more effectively.

Yet, on the whole, Christians have found abstaining from its culture impractical -- indeed, impossible. Rather, Christians have come to conclude that we are not supposed to hate our culture, but we are to hate what our culture does to people. We sense instinctively that our culture tends to beguile people into fixating upon this material world. Our culture tends to tell people that their lives are theirs to do with as they will, and that their worth is to be measured by how many possessions they can accrue. Our culture tends to give people the impression that this earthy existence is all there is, and tends to incite people into giving ultimate concern to a variety of passions that are not worthy of ultimate concern.

We as a Christian community have a responsibility to speak a word of judgment against this culture that ultimately tends to make people feel trapped, despairing and lost. We do not hate culture, but we hate culture’s deadly effect upon people’s lives, and we are compelled as Christ’s representatives to speak a word of condemnation.

In short, we must love our world, and we must love the people within our world passionately enough that we hate our culture enough to challenge and change it.

Think of our Lord beholding the money-changing enterprise taking place in the Temple’s Gentile court. He sees dishonest mercantile activity “ripping off” people when they are sincerely trying to worship God. Worst of all, this dishonest activity is being perpetrated by the Temple’s own authorities! Our Lord becomes enraged and exerts himself to physically overturn this culture and drive out the money-changers, because he loves the worshippers enough to challenge the culture that is bilking them. Think of Martin Luther, a pious monk who goes to Rome and sees his church hawking grace like an insurance salesman. He becomes enraged and is moved to start a revolution that overturns his culture and changes the character of the world. Think of slave trader John Newton and William Wilberforce who look around their world and see an economy that traffics in human beings, and they become enraged. They hate their culture enough to challenge it and change it, starting a movement that will result in the abolition of the slave trade. Think of that young Baptist pastor, Walter Rauschenbusch, who lived in and ministered to that section of New York City known as Hell’s Kitchen at the turn of the twentieth century. He saw firsthand the economic deprivation and social oppression of his people, and he became enraged.

He challenged Christian believers to recognize that their faith had an inescapably social component. He called them to see that Christ expects the power of Good News to be brought against unjust structures of society.

Think of that same New York City fifty years later. Into its concrete jungle came a young minister named David Wilkerson, who encountered the culture of gang activity and witnessed the violence, the hopelessness and purposelessness that characterized those young lives. He became enraged. He loved those young people enough to hate their culture, and he erected a cross to stand over against their switchblades, calling them to a Gospel of Good News that challenged their surrounding world. Florence Nightengale, Mother Teresa, Millard Fuller -- all are Christians who looked at their culture and loved the people trapped within it enough to hate that culture and challenge it. If we would be true to the calling of our Lord, we must do the same.

Of course, to hate our culture and speak a word of judgment against it causes the culture to hate us in return. Our Lord does not want us to be ignorant of that fact and says plainly, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you."

Our Lord says plainly, "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all manner of evil against you on my account."

To live as a Christian is to evince a certain contempt for the world's behavior and standards.

Pause for a moment to ponder an ironic question:

Why have totalitarian, officially atheistic, governments over the past century spent so much time killing and oppressing people of faith?

I mean, if you don't believe God is real, why waste time killing people who believe in a God you don't think exists? Does that not seem senseless?

Yet totalitarian governments have feared Christians because we stand for the reality of a dimension of holiness. Totalitarian governments believe that human beings are but an instrument of the state, to be manipulated in whatever way the government deems appropriate.

Over against that attitude the Christian community says, 'No, each individual life belongs to God.

Each individual life is an expression of the sacred, and each life can express the will of God.

Moreover, each individual life has certain inalienable rights that no government can abrogate.'

Governments have tried to squelch the Christian movement because it stands for a dimension of authority and meaning that transcends the jurisdiction of all earthly governments.

We don't live in an avowedly atheistic society, but we certainly live in an avowedly materialistic society, and our culture's messages are every bit as insidious.

Our culture says to its people, 'Sexuality is nothing more than a biological function. Just enjoy it.'

The Christian community must counter by saying, 'No, sexuality is God's gift.

Sexuality has a transcendent dimension and should be practiced as such.'

Our culture says, 'Marriage is a legal fiction, a temporary economic, romantic alliance.'

We are compelled to say, 'No, marriage is an experiment in the sacred adventure of two people so loving each other that they become one communal soul, physically, spiritually and emotionally.'

Such an act can't just happen. It requires both people to open their being to the nurture of God.

Our culture says to its people, 'Accrue what you can, because your value is measured by your possessions.'

We must stand and say, 'That is not true! That is a lie!' We must say to people,

'All that you have, all that you love, all that you delight in -- it is all a gift, an expression of grace.

It is all rooted in the beneficence of God.'

We live in a culture that says, 'I want to be free. I want to do my own thing.'

We as a people of God must say, 'My friends, true freedom is found in relationship with the divine.'

When our Lord says, 'Walk in my word and you will be free,' that is the formula for finding true freedom.

True freedom grows out of a relationship with the eternal.

Freedom is not the license to do anything, anytime, anywhere. That's not freedom -- that's slavery.

These are words of counsel that we must give our culture,

even though our culture does not want to hear them.

I remind myself of this phrase as a pastor all the time – and this is a role that the church must claim also – *there are times when somebody must be the parent!*

There are times when the church must speak as a voice of sanity and say to a wayward, unreflective culture, ‘The messages you are distributing are wrong, misleading, destructive, dangerous, and ultimately unhealthy for individuals and the world.’

Christians must summon the courage to speak a word of judgment to a culture that needs to hear it -- and we must summon this courage to speak that word of judgment for the culture’s own good!

The truth is, the world does well to hate us, *because we really are a subversive people.*

The Roman government did right to put Christ to death, for they were right to realize that he was inaugurating an ethic that would turn the world topsy-turvy.

In Christ’s world, it is the half-breed Samaritan who is the hero.

In Christ’s world it is the woman who gives two pennies who is considered the most generous giver.

In Christ’s world it is tax collectors and harlots who can become disciples, and a demoniac who can become a prophet.

In Christ’s world, it is the meek and the mourning and the peacemakers who ultimately reign in triumph.

In Christ’s world it is the last who shall ultimately finish first.

We really are aliens and exiles on this earth.

For we believe in the very depths of our being that nothing that happens in this life, nothing that happens in death, nothing that has happened in the past, nothing that is happening in the present, nothing that will happen in the future, not economic circumstances, nor government powers, not anything can separate us from the love of God embodied in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We are strangers in this world, yes.

But in fact it is the world that has become strange, strange and dangerous.

So we must say to the world, ‘Come unto the Christ and we will show you a better way to live.’

Because if we cannot speak that message -- if we do not speak that message -- then we have nothing to offer the world in which we live.

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

March 8, 2009

First in a Series