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## **Are We to Transform Culture?**

### **Micah 6: 6-8**

Ironically, Baptists entered the twentieth century with a deserved reputation for being among the most insular and socially irrelevant religious denominations in America.

Yet, upon reflection, at the twentieth century's end, Baptists could rightly boast to having engendered the two Christian spokesmen in modern America who most rightly warranted the title of Biblical prophet.

One of them was raised in a German-speaking household in Rochester, New York.

He imbibed traditional Christian values from his very conservative pastor father.

But in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, his first pastorate was in that part of New York City known as Hell's Kitchen.

Though he entered his pastorate intent on preaching in such a way as to save people from condemnation, eleven years of pastoring in Hell's Kitchen taught him that the hell most of them needed saving from was the life they were already living.

This pastor came to see that the Kingdom of God was not a concept reserved for the bye and bye.

He sensed that the Kingdom of God must be a redemptive reality in the realm of real life.

The church of Jesus Christ must be an active instrument that turned the love of God from a theoretical concept into a liberating reality and an influence that delivered people from the bondage of injustice.

Walter Rauschenbusch started writing books to articulate principles that gave rise to what has become known as "The Social Gospel."

He spoke with power, passion and clarity to call Christians to the realization that if they were not living as a force for transforming the world and the lives of those within it, they had no true relevance.

Let me offer you just a glimpse of Rauchenbusch's world, as expressed from his perspective.

"There, do you see that big clothing house on the corner there?

Brilliantly lighted; show windows gorgeous, all hum and happiness. But somewhere in that big house there's a little bullet-headed tailor doubled up over the coat he is to alter, and as surely as I know that my hand is pressing your arm, I know, too, that he is choking down the sobs and trying to keep the water out of his eyes.

Why? Because his little girl is going to die tonight and he can't be there. Consumption, pulmonary.

Been wasting away for months, can't sleep except her head is on his breast.

And then he can't sleep when her panting is in his ears. He has just been draining his life to sustain hers, and yet Minnie is all the world to him. She's the only drop of sweetness in his cup; all the rest is gall.

Hard work; nothing to look forward to; wife grown bitter and snarling, and tonight the girl dies.

How do I know? Just been there. Her forehead is getting clammy, and her whole body rocks with the effort to get breath. She's whispering, 'Tell my papa to come,' but he'll not be there before one o'clock tonight.

Saturday night, you know; very busy; sorry, but can't spare him.

Oh yes, you can say that: ought to go home, permission or none, but that means throwing up a job that he has been hanging to by his fingernails. It will be six months before he gets another.

And so he has to sew away and let his little girl die three blocks off.

When he gets home, he can sob on her corpse, what more does he want? Exceptional case, you think.

Not a bit of it. It's the drop on the crest of the wave, but there are a million other drops underneath it, all hurled along, or that one drop wouldn't be so high."

Walter Rauschenbusch became the most influential prophet for social justice in the twentieth century, yet he spawned yet another prophet who would transform the world to an even greater degree,

a man who like him was a Baptist, who grew up in the conservative theological home of a pastor father. But when he went to seminary in Boston he read the work of Walter Rauschenbusch and realized that this man had identified something vital about the transforming power of the Christian faith. But when this young preacher took his first church in Montgomery, Alabama, he tended initially to his preacherly business, until one day a black woman named Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white patron who wanted it, planting the seed for a great movement for social justice.

This young black preacher came to be the face and voice of that movement.

He gained the attention of the world in 1963, after he had been arrested and jailed in Birmingham for leading a non-violent protest in the city streets. While he was jailed, the world was treated to indelible images of Birmingham police turning police dogs and water cannons on peaceful protestors.

When Dr. Martin Luther King was released from that jail he issued a call for people to gather in Washington D.C. and march for jobs and justice. People responded to his summons.

They came from every corner of the country, white, but mostly black, and rich, but mostly poor.

They gathered at the Washington Monument and walked to the Lincoln Memorial. There Dr. King spoke. He reminded his hearers that the nation was coming upon an important hundred-year anniversary:

“Five score years ago a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity. But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. . . .

“I say to you my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.’ I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. . . . I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. . . .”

That Baptist preacher’s sermon – for sermon it was – has been judged the most important public address of the twentieth century.

In that speech we find articulated the apex of the Christian’s relationship to culture.

We find a condemnation of a culture that has fallen short of the Lord’s ideals.

His message is a prophetic protest against brutality, injustice and prolonged insensitivity to the rights of a people. But even as his message speaks a word of judgment against a culture’s failings, it does so without hatred of the inhabitants trapped within that culture.

No, said, Dr. King, we as people of faith are meant to apply our belief in such a way that we address and alter the structures of society that imprison *everyone*.

Dr. King’s message relies upon the language of transformation. Christians are meant to *transform* their world.

As Dr. King said: “I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi . . . will be *transformed* into an oasis of freedom and justice. . . . With this faith we will be able to *transform* the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.”

Here ultimately is the Christians’ understanding of the relationship of their faith to culture.

We are to hate when our culture falls short of our Lord’s ideals of harmony and justice in society.

We are to extend ourselves and apply the values of the Christ to transform our culture and address structures of inequality in such a way that we liberate ourselves and our brothers and our sisters.

We are to hate when our culture falls short of God's ideals,  
but we are to apply our faith in such a way as to transform culture  
so that God's intention for society might be realized.  
We are to apply the ideals of our Lord to our culture in such a way that we render  
the Kingdom of God a reality in people's midst.

Neither Dr. King, nor Dr. Rauschenbush, though both were criticized in their day as radicals,  
saw anything truly innovative about what they were saying  
They regarded everything they said as an echo of what had been pronounced by God's prophets of old.  
As Micah said so plainly: "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of  
oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6: 6-8).  
Isaiah thunders, "Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates;  
they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. . . . Learn to do good;  
seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow." (Isaiah 1:14;17))  
Then there are those searing words of Amos:  
"I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . .  
But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." ( Amos 5:21-26)

The notion that the Social Gospel was a twentieth-century theological innovation, as has often been charged,  
is just a lie.

Our faith from its beginning has been committed to the transformation of the world.  
There has been nothing privatized about our call to live in relationship with God.  
Our religion has never been simply a matter of a private interaction between ourselves and God.  
When Isaiah says of our God:

"He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples;  
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more," –  
that is a transforming vision of faith!

When Isaiah says that one day , "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down  
with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them . . . ."  
that is a cosmic vision of faith -- the opposite of a privatized religion.

That is a spiritual vision that sees God's people serving as God's instruments  
to bring about a wholesale change in reality.

Yet, I have to remind you that we cannot forget the lessons that we learned in noting  
the paradoxical nature of Christ's relationship to culture.

Even at our best, even when we try to apply our faith with passion and integrity,  
we still fail, we still fall short of God's glory,  
and sometimes, even our best intentions have tragic consequences.

When I say to you, we are to transform our culture, what I am saying is,  
we want our faith to be the servant of culture.

We do not want our culture to be the servant of our faith.

There is a very distinct difference between these two approaches.

I repeat: when I say that we want to transform our culture we are admitting our desire to employ our faith as a  
servant of every aspect of culture. We are not trying to make every aspect of culture a servant of our faith.

Look at an Islamic society. Their religious leaders want to transform culture, too. But when an Ayatollah wants to transform culture he wants to make every aspect of culture a servant of his faith. He wants his religious faith to wield the power necessary to control every aspect of his people's life. He wants religious authorities to be able to dictate how people can dress, how they wear their hair, where they can work, who can work, what music they can listen to, what movies they can rent, what shows they can watch, etc.. He intends that before any political policy can be implemented it must have the approval of the religious authorities. That is a very different vision from what I am trying to say. In their vision, all of culture is seen as a servant of their faith. That's a very different view from trying to make one's faith a servant of every aspect of culture. In a place where religion controls everything, religion takes on the character of the "everything" that it tries to control. Such a religious vision can only be maintained by the power of coercion. The vision I am urging upon you is a transformation effected through persuasion. This approach is much more inefficient in its impact. But it is the right way to do things. We are not to control our culture, we are not called to make the culture conform to our will. Rather we are called to transform our culture by the way we apply our faith and live our lives.

I close with just a final thought. We have something that the world desperately needs. We have the power of hope. We have the energy of optimism! That doesn't mean that we as Christians go around saying, 'The world is half-full, not half-empty.' No, it means that we go around saying, 'There is something optimum, something higher and greater, for which we can strive as a society.' Read Micah, read Isaiah, read Amos, read Walter Rauschenbusch, read Dr. King – none of them are Pollyanna. All are severe critics of their world. But they criticize their world in order to pave the way for their world's transformation. Years ago I read a commentator's analysis of Charles Dickens. He commented that all of Dickens' critics complained that the author was too ridiculously optimistic. But, said the commentator, when Dickens' critics offered their complaints about the state of the world, they did so in despair. When Charles Dickens complained about the state of the world, he made us laugh, he made us cry, he made us care -- and he made us want to change the world. His words were not complaints of despair. He criticized the world in order to prepare for its transformation. Martin Luther King articulated a dream, not so it would remain a dream, but so people of faith would bond together and make the dream a reality. Walter Rauschenbusch described Hell's Kitchen not as a journalistic exercise, but to pave the way for that society's transformation. We are to hate our culture when it falls short of God's glory. But our faith is ultimately a key, and with that key we can unlock the potential of our lives and the lives of those around us. Only when we do so can we really know what Dr. King meant when he ended his great speech with these words: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we're free at last!"

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Fourth and Last in a Series