

# Faithful Christian Witness In The Space Age Society In Our Social And Civic Relationships

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by Milton Burk

On account of the horrifying happenings of recent years and months and weeks, especially in many of our large metropolitan centers, our space age society is said by many to be a sick society. The growing inhumanity of man as indicated by an increasing incidence of assassination of bigoted discrimination, of wholesale arson, of violent retaliation of unrestrained looting, and of calculated insurrection, is considered the symptom of a serious malady that has overtaken our society.

For many, of course, it is completely incomprehensible that such deplorable things can occur in our society in this age of scientific advancement and human enlightenment. They were so optimistic about the prospects of better understanding, for conciliation, and for a deeper feeling of brotherhood and good will among men, that all these extreme developments in the opposite direction have left them baffled and bewildered, almost in a state of paralytic shock. Many people react with stunned disbelief when they are apprised of the next succeeding diabolical perversity that is perpetrated in this Christian country of ours.

While the dreadful things that have been occurring in our society in this decade of the twentieth century are *distressing* also to Christians, they are not altogether surprising to those who are familiar with the sacred Biblical record. Any number of Bible stories could be cited that picture violence for us, and brutality even between members of the same family. We could say that this is not really unexpected either, for "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth," and "out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies."

It must be acknowledged, however, even by those who appraise the situation in our society from the perspective of God's revealed Word, that, while there have always been lawlessness and criminal conduct in every society, the reckless defiance of law and of divinely established authority as well as the unrestrained boldness in committing overt felonious acts, so obvious to everyone, are phenomena peculiar in large measure to our space age society. When man's determination to commit murder is not deterred by the prospect of being observed in the act by a national television audience; when a band of voting punks can, without compunction, attack and trample a defenseless old man in broad daylight just for kicks; when motion picture cameras serve to encourage rather than to discourage the promiscuous sexual antics of the exponents of erotic art; when belligerent students have no qualms about slugging an instructor or vandalizing his office; when parents and even religious teachers incite the children in their charge to civil disobedience, or perhaps even lead them in this recalcitrance; when divinely-induced inhibitions which one day kept young people from unseemly behavior in private have given way to a tendency virtually toward exhibitions in public, there is more than a little indication that something is radically wrong in our society, something other than the natural depravity of its individual members.

Even in a purely pagan civilization, in a society in which people have little more to work with than the natural law and the natural knowledge of God, there may nevertheless be an outward decency, restraint, and orderliness. Sensitive to the limited knowledge that they have, as well as to the voice of their conscience, people may practice a rigorous self-discipline, live in

compliance with their community's ordinances and statutes, conduct themselves in a respectable fashion, be peaceful and cooperative of spirit, and enjoy as well the favor and blessing of God upon their society. And while the best and highest virtues of the heathen may be but glittering vices in the sight of God, spiritually speaking, they may nevertheless contribute to a well-ordered and law abiding society, to one in which the convulsive rash behavior of our space age society is conspicuously absent.

Is it conceivable, then, that the problem in our society is not a lack of knowledge concerning God and His Law, but rather a rejection of God as God and of His law as binding upon all of our society. When we take inventory of our society and attempt to diagnose its condition, must we not conclude that its ailment is akin to that described by St. Paul in Romans, chapter 1, where he writes: *the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all, ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and God-head so that they are without excuse: because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves: who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the creator, who is blessed forever. For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lusts one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind to do those things which are not convenient; being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, without understanding, covenant breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: who knowing the judgment of God that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.* When people reject, or suppress, the knowledge of God they have been given, in order to be independent of Him, or to assume His authority or to indulge their own evil inclinations, they soon find themselves on a downhill course in the mire of degrading shame and vice. And they glory in it, imagining that they have acquired a sophistication that is to their advantage and credit. When religious spokesmen in our society come to the conclusion and announce that "God is dead," may they not be saying, in effect, that since so many people seem to have so little interest in God and so little use and respect for Him, that, as far as the majority are concerned, He's as good as dead. He's out of it altogether. They don't acknowledge and fear Him as God. They don't accept His Word or submit to His authority. They really don't pay any attention to Him at all. Consequently, He's dead as far as they're concerned.

But how can this happen in a society in which the Gospel of Christ and the Christian Church have so long exerted a positive influence? Or have professing Christians over the years absorbed more of the secular spirit of the society in which they live than they themselves are

aware of or can even recognize? Do the people of our society, especially those who can observe us frequently, do they get the impression that our Christian faith is meaningful and relevant to our daily living, that we really do fear, love, and trust in God above all things? Or, would they detect in us an independent or selfish spirit, or perhaps a moody, morose, or worrisome disposition? What impression would they get of our Church's mission program if they knew that what is expected from us in a whole year for its support is less than the amount of the check we wrote the other day for membership in a local swimming club? What would that unchurched neighbor think about our congregation's emphasis upon preaching and searching the Scriptures, if he discovered that scarcely 50% of the members were in church on an average Sunday morning or that less than 5% availed themselves of the opportunity for spiritual growth through Bible Class attendance? What kind of testimony are we giving if we are always available for cards or bowling with the neighbors, but couldn't possibly give an hour a week of service in the Lord's Kingdom? What is the impression we leave upon our children and their friends if, when driving them home, we exceed the speed limit by 10 to 20 miles per hour and curse the stop signs that delay our three-hour session in front of the television screen? But, of course, we're in church practically every Sunday, while those neighbor kids and their parents never seem to make it. What are we going to say to that Negro family that wants to move into our house next door? What would our friends and neighbors say if we rented it to them? Supposing they'd want to join our church after a while. What would the other members think? Or the pastor? Indeed, what would the Lord think, of His Church, and of its mission?

The people who live in our society, whether friends, neighbors, casual acquaintances, or even strangers, all get an impression of our church, and of our Lord, not first by the orthodoxy of our confession but by the observable significance that both have in our human relationships and attitudes. There must be any number of people in our society who never gave the Gospel a hearing for the single reason that they were prejudiced against it by the conduct or approach of its exponent. This is not to excuse anyone for turning a deaf ear to the truth of the Gospel; it is only to suggest that we may put a stumbling block in its way by our carelessness or presumption. I have the recollection of a young Negro couple, both of whom were college graduates, telling me in no uncertain terms that they would never set foot in a Lutheran Church of a particular affiliation for the simple reason that the pastor's major, if not exclusive, concern when he first called on them was the amount of their annual income. There must be something, almost anything, that would be less offensive to lead off with.

In our space age society, then, we find on the one hand people who are determined that God shall not be God. In their vain pride and foolish conceit they want to be independent of God, of His authority, and of His control. They try deliberately to shut out of their consciousness every revelation, every witness, and every evidence of God and of His holy Law. They would dethrone God and His Christ in order to exalt themselves and to indulge themselves without hindrance and without restraint. They would do away with God, with religion, and with the church, so as to impose themselves and their own will upon the victims of their malicious rebellion against God. The avowed purpose of Communism, so determined to achieve its aims and goals, is the utter enslavement or slaughter of the advocates of religion and of God.

Of this menace must Christians ever be aware. To its threat must they ever be alert. Against its godless materialism and ungodly premises must they ever witness and warn. Indeed, "the fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works." "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision. Then shall He speak unto them in His wrath, and vex them in His sore displeasure."

But in our space age society on the other hand we find people who are disillusioned, people who are bewildered and perplexed, and people who are confused, distressed, and despairing. In some instances their dismay or their dilemma may be due to the inconsistency of our witness, by word or deed. If the testimony of our words is the witness of faith and fervor and of joy and gratitude, while the testimony of our deeds is a witness of fear and failure and of gloom and thanklessness, then our witness is uncertain and incongruous. If the testimony of our words is one of love, and compassion as well as of justice and fairness, while the testimony of our deeds is one of suspicion and resentment as well as of prejudice and bias, then our witness may be deterring and self-defeating. May our consistent witness to the redeeming grace of God in Christ Jesus ever be joined by a consistent witness to the sustaining power of Christ in our every endeavor in His Name.