

## Christian Duty in a Pagan Culture

Scripture: Acts 4:18–20; Acts 5:40–42; Galatians 6:10; 1 Timothy 2:1–4; Titus 3:1–2; 1 Peter 2:12; 1 Peter 3:15

Code: A122

*In an increasingly secular and ungodly culture, many Christians wonder about their role and duty. Should we lobby for rights that have traditionally belonged to us? Should we make every effort to implement a Christian agenda? Should we completely reform the government? The Bible speaks clearly about our duty, and it's all about governing our character.*

Over a quarter of a century ago the late apologist and Christian thinker Francis Schaeffer asked the question, "How should we then live?" in his landmark book of the same title. The relevance of that question has not changed. If anything, it has only become more urgent for believers at the dawn of a new century and millennium.

Society has taken a nosedive into greater and greater evil, debauchery, violence, and corruption, and outside the church, the landscape seems filled with "modern barbarians." The temptation is strong for believers to jump into the cultural fray as self-righteous social/political reformers and condescending moralizers. All the while those self-styled Christian activists forget or ignore their true mission in the world and completely miss the answer to Schaeffer's question—an answer that God's Word spells out quite clearly.

As noble as a desire to reform society may be, and as stirring as the emotions sometimes are when involved in the "rightness" of a political cause, those activities are not to be the Christian's chief priorities. God does not call the church to influence the culture by promoting legislation and court rulings that advance a Scripture point of view. Nor does He condone any type of radical activism that would avoid tax obligations, disobey or seek removal of government officials we don't agree with, or spend an inordinate amount of time campaigning for a so-called Christian slate of candidates.

The church will really change society for the better only when individual believers make their chief concern their own spiritual maturity, which means living in a way that honors God's commands and glorifies His name. Such a concern inherently includes a firm grasp on Scripture and an understanding that its primary mandate to us is to know Christ and proclaim His gospel. A godly attitude coupled with godly living makes the saving message of the gospel credible to the unsaved. If we claim to be saved but still convey proud, unloving attitudes toward the lost, our preaching and teaching—no matter how doctrinally orthodox or politically savvy and persuasive—will be ignored or rejected.

The New Testament is very clear about how we ought to embrace and live out our primary mission in a pagan society. One such example is in Titus 3:

Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be uncontentious, gentle, showing every consideration for all men. (Titus 3:1-2)

Notice that Paul simply followed the Lord's model and did not expend time and energy admonishing believers on how to reform pagan culture's idolatrous, immoral, and corrupt practices. The apostle also did not call for believers to exercise civil disobedience to protest the Roman Empire's unjust laws or cruel punishments. Instead, his appeal was for Christians to proclaim the gospel and live lives that would give clear evidence of its transforming power.

Believe it or not, Christians have obligations to a pagan society. When you live as God wants you to in an unbelieving culture, the Holy Spirit uses your life to draw the sinner by softening his attitude toward God (cf. 1 Peter 2:12).

## **Submission and Obedience**

The first two duties—submission to government and obedience to all human authority—I've combined under one heading because they are so closely related. They are just one more reminder that Christians have certain requirements of attitude and conduct in relation to their secular leaders. Those reminders reiterate the idea that believers are not exempt from following civil laws and directives, unless such orders contradict the Word and will of God (see Acts 4:18-20; 5:40-42). That twofold prompting also gives us the scriptural premise from which all our other public actions ought to flow.

## **Readiness for Good Works**

Our third major duty toward society is to have a readiness "for every good deed." Here the apostle Paul is not referring to some minimal, reluctant adherence to doing what we already know is right, but to a sincere willingness and heart preparation to do good works to everyone, as we have the opportunity. No matter how antagonistic the people around us may be, we are to be kind servants to them when their lives intersect with ours. "So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Galatians 6:10).

God wants us to be recognized for what we might call "consistent and aggressive goodness"—good deeds done out of love for the Lord and love for other people.

## **Respectful in Speech**

Next, we have the scriptural duty of not maligning anyone, not even those unbelievers who are most antagonistic toward biblical standards. Titus 3:2 begins with Paul's command "to malign no one," and refers to cursing, slandering, and treating with contempt. In fact the Greek term rendered "malign" is the one from which we derive the English word *blasphemy*. We can never use such speech with a righteous motive.

It is sad that many believers today speak scornfully of politicians and other public figures. When they do that, they actually manifest a basic disregard of their responsibility toward authority and hinder God's redemptive plan. In another of Paul's pastoral letters, he urges us to pray for everyone's salvation, even for that of those who occupy official positions of authority (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

## **Peaceful and Gentle**

Paul goes on in verse 2 to mention two more Christian duties. First, he reminds us that we must be friendly and peaceful toward the lost, not belligerent and quarrelsome. In the ungodly, postmodern world we live in, it's easy to condemn those who contribute to the culture's demise and write them off as corrupt sinners who will never change. If God's love for the world was so broad and intense that His Son died for a multitude of sinners (John 3:16), how can we who have received that redeeming grace be harsh and unloving toward those who have not yet received it? Until God is pleased to save an individual, he or she is going to behave like an unbeliever, and it is wrong for us, meanwhile, to treat them contemptuously for acting according to their nature.

Secondly, Paul reminds us that we must be "gentle," a word in the Greek that means being fair, moderate, and forbearing toward others. Some have translated this term "sweet reasonableness," a definition denoting an attitude that does not hold grudges but gives others the benefit of the doubt.

### **Consideration for Others**

The final duty in the apostle Paul's list of reminders to believers is that they should be "showing every consideration for all men" (1 Timothy 2:2). The word rendered "consideration" always has a New Testament meaning of genuine concern for others.

Scripture clearly describes Jesus as the One supremely characterized by humility, or consideration for everyone—the same trait that should identify His followers. Jesus used the word to depict Himself when He told His followers, "Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am *gentle* and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29, emphasis added).

All our dealings with unbelievers should display that kind of attitude, as the apostle Peter also wrote: "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15). Sincere, heartfelt consideration to all men is foundational for our Christian walk in a pagan society.

Our duty as we relate to an increasingly secular and ungodly culture is not to lobby for certain rights, the implementation of a Christian agenda, or the reformation of the government. Rather, God would have us continually to remember Paul's instructions to Titus and live them out as we seek to demonstrate His power and grace that can regenerate sinners. Changing people's hearts one individual at a time is the only way to bring meaningful, lasting change to our communities, our nation, and even the whole world.

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