

Grace to You :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Is Democracy Good for Christianity?

Scripture: Galatians 5:11

Code: QA505

Note: This post is adapted from a Q&A session at Grace Church from the early 1990s. Though world events were different back then, the primary concern expressed here is still very relevant today.

Question: How do we explain the anomaly, that the church is growing and alive in Communist countries, and that the evangelical church is almost completely dead where democracy has ruled?

Answer:

A remarkable sidelight to the staggering political changes that have remade our world in recent months is the emergence of a vibrant Christianity from behind the Iron Curtain. All over the Communist bloc, where atheism was official dogma for half a century, the church is growing and alive. I have personally seen evidence even in China that the church there is thriving--even though for the most part it has been forced underground.

By contrast, in "free" Europe, where democracy has ruled, the evangelical church is almost completely dead. Biblical Christianity there has long since ceased being a significant force. Atheism and humanism have taken over. Public policy is governed almost totally by philosophies that are intolerant of and even hostile to the truth of Scripture.

It is happening in America, too.

How do we explain this anomaly? Are our "freedoms" helping the church or hurting it?

I am certainly not in favor of totalitarianism. But we who live in free societies need to understand the dangers inherent in the system that gives us our freedom.

It is more than a curiosity that the church has flourished behind the iron curtain while dying in the West. The reasons are clear. Lacking any visible external threat to our faith, we in a free world that has lost any sense of subtlety of the enemy and how he attacks. We have grown careless and apathetic. We have become concerned more with our own comfort and well-being than with the command of Christ that we should follow His steps.

How such a thing could happen is no great mystery--especially to those who have lived for Christ under Communist persecution. There, the cost of following Christ is understood from the beginning. Shallow conversions are unthinkable in a society where identification with the Savior can cost you your job, your family, your freedom--even your life.

Our culture, on the other hand, has made way for a brand of Christianity where taking up one's cross

is optional--or even unseemly. Indeed, many members of the church in the Western world suppose they can best serve God by being as non-confrontive to their world as possible.

Having absorbed the world's values, Christianity in our society is now dying. Subtly but surely worldliness and self-indulgence are eating away the heart of the church. The gospel we proclaim is so convoluted that it offers believing in Christ as nothing more than a means to contentment and prosperity. The offense of the cross (cf. Gal. 5:11) has been systematically removed so that the message might be made more acceptable to unbelievers. The church somehow got the idea it could declare peace with the enemies of God.

That kind of thing could happen only in a free society.

Let me share with you a letter I received recently:

Dear Brother John,

I read your article "Deadly Trends of Popular Christianity" (Jan/Feb 90) and I am sorry to say, but I agree with you one hundred percent. Until 1980, I lived in Romania, being exposed daily to the persecution, mockeries, insults, etc.

I come in this country considered by me with a high spirituality, with so many Christian churches, activities, radio, TV, etc., to find what I call "Easy Christianity." I understood if I speak up, people in the church do not like to hear and I was accused about being divisive. To me it is no wonder, because we really are living the last days.

It is sad when you see what is happening here in the United States, while in those opposed countries the spiritual life is taking really off the ground. In this way, if the Lord will not return in the next ten years, I would not be surprised if Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union will send their missionaries here in the States.

I am also writing expressing my frustration too. I am in a church that for the last three and a half years has met in a rented building. All of a sudden the building was put for sale. What was the decision of the elders of this church, after "consulting" through surveys, personal discussions, collective discussion with about seventy people (the size of the church)? To disband the church because they said thirty-three percent of the above number wanted to move to different churches because ours did not deal with "their problems, their needs, their hurts, their disappointments"-- exactly what you said.

I look back to Romania, amazed to hear that 200,000 people kneeled in the downtown city of Timisoara (the city where the uprising started) cried, "God is with us" and repeated after a Christian man the prayer "Our Father," which was not publicly said since the Communists took over that country.

Just an example: in the capital of Bucharest my former church has almost 1000 members in a small building where only 300 people can be crowded, many of them standing up Sunday mornings three hours, Sunday night two hours, Thursday night two hours, etc. And here in the United States people decided to disband a Bible-believing church. I almost cannot believe it.

The same week I got that letter, a leading Soviet scientist--a believer--was a guest in our church. He told me that he routinely teaches creation science to his students in Russia and has never encountered any opposition. He was shocked to discover that in America teachers are forbidden by law from teaching anything but evolutionary theory. That should at least challenge our notion of what constitutes true freedom.

Western Europe, where the Protestant Reformation was born, has become the world's neediest mission field. The awful reality is that with the Iron Curtain now gone, the Communist nations, not the "free" ones, offer the greatest spiritual hope for Europe.

Meanwhile, if the church in America does not get back to biblical Christianity, we will soon see the end of our influence for Christ as well. It is not really far fetched to imagine that ten years hence, missionaries from Romania might be evangelizing America.

Everyone is astonished to see how rapidly the face of the modern world is changing. What few Christians seem to realize is how frighteningly fast the church is declining at the same time. In what may be the greatest days of missionary opportunity ever, much of the church has been caught unaware.

We must wake up. The cold war may be over, but the spiritual battle rages on. We cannot afford to be indifferent. We cannot continue our mad pursuit of pleasure and self-gratification. We are called to fight a spiritual battle, and we cannot win by appeasing the enemy. A needy world needs to be confronted with the message of salvation, and there may be little time left. As Paul wrote to the church at Rome,

"It is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand. Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light (13:11-12).

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