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The Christian Mission in a Dying Culture: Interview with Phil Johnson and John MacArthur
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PHIL JOHNSON: John, America is considered now the only remaining super power in and a shining beacon for other nations to follow, but it's obvious if you just look at the headlines that America is in trouble. Right now, terrorism is on the lips of most Americans, the financial world has been rocked by scandals involving CEOs in our major corporations. We read every day about horrific crimes against children. There have been political scandals, scandals involving the priesthood, the Catholic priesthood. Every day there is an ideological blood bath in our schools and universities. I want to ask you from your vantage point as a pastor, is it coincidental that so many serious problems are plaguing our nation all at the same time?

JOHN MACARTHUR: Phil, I don't think it's coincidental, I think it's reflective of depravity. You know, we see these as problems and certainly they are problems and they are reflections of the fallenness of our world. But we see them against a backdrop of comfort, prosperity, wealth, freedom, democracy. And so, I think, in a sense, they sort of intrude on our peace, they sort of intrude on the American tranquility and the American quote/unquote dream. But frankly, you know, we're over here and we're saying, you know, things aren't exactly the way they should be. We've got all these problems.

What we're seeing in America is depravity bursting through some of the protective fences that we've tried to build around it. We've tried to deal with morality on a cultural basis, on a law basis. We've tried to maintain a Judeo/Christian moral standard in America and we've been able to do that through the centuries. But as it says in the fourteenth chapter of Acts, “God has allowed all the nations to go their way.” And eventually you can't contain this depravity. When Christian influence is strong, it's because there's many Christians. And as the non-Christians began to out number the Christians and as they begin to gain the ascendency and the power and the culture moves away from the Christian beginnings, such as we had in America and the same is true in Europe, post-Reformation, as those nations that were hot beds of the Reformation as America moves away from that, everything starts leaking out. The seams start to burst and out comes the depravity and we're seeing that all over everywhere in America.
And so, I say it's tragic. It is an indication of our sinfulness. It is an indication of the fact that ungodliness dominates to the point where, you know, there is this tremendous forceful lobby that wants to allow for freedom and wants to make sure that no Christian standards impinge on anybody

and they keep it at bay by saying, “We demand the separation of church and state,” because that's constitutional. We all know if we know the Constitution that that's a perversion to what the Constitution intended. So I just think we're seeing the natural flow of depravity bursting the seams where it was once contained by a pervasive Christian commitment that has diminished and died, secularism has taken over the day. The churches are, in many ways, at fault because they're so corrupt. Liberalism has destroyed the denominations, etc., etc., etc. But this is just the bursting forth of depravity and I think even so, we have it a lot better than many, many nations of the world, if not most nations of the world. And if we're going to say, “Well, is this the judgment of God on America?” I wouldn't say it's any kind of judgment that could be matched with some of the more horrific things that people are going through, but I do see it as an indication that God has allowed us to go our own way and that's the Romans 1 kind of judgment.

PHIL: It is frightening to watch. If you just look in the short span of my life time at the decline of society, the level of hostility against Christianity, the looseness of our moral standards, and all of those things seem very clearly to be in rapid decline. And, granted, we're not as bad off right now as some other nations, but history shows with the rise and fall of nations that we may be headed that direction.

JOHN: Oh, I don't think there's any question about that. And I think the signs are not that, you know, there are dishonest people, there have always been dishonest people. It's now in the public favor that we lie. It's not just that there's some people who don't tell the truth, lying is now not seen as bad as some other things. So if lying helps to ennoble the disenfranchised or if lying gains you some greater end, whether it's an economic end or whether it's stature for you, and if lying suits your fancy and is going to bump you up in self-esteem and then, by all means, lie so you have such a twisted and warped morality. And I think that's what Romans 1 is talking about when it says God gave them over to a reprobate mind. It isn't just that they committed sexual sins, like Romans 1 points out, and homosexual sins, it's that the mind went, that everything was twisted and perverted and turned upside down like Isaiah 5 says, you gave bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter and you reversed everything. You called good evil and evil good. And everything has been perverted. And once that happens, there's no way back. If that ideology dominates, if the ideology says expediency is all that matters, pragmatism rules the day, whatever builds up your psychological self-esteem, whatever makes you feel good about yourself is what is most compelling, let's not make truth an issue. Once you've gone there, then you have a stampede of people who believe that by all means or any means they're entitled to whatever view they want to hold and whatever kind of conduct.

PHIL: And it's clear, isn't it, that our culture has embraced exactly that world view. That's where we are.

JOHN: That's technically called post-modernism which says, you know, modernism was the search for the truth; post-modernism is there is no truth, you have your truth, I have my truth, whatever works

for you is fine for you, whatever works for me. And now you have a massive collision without a standard, without a plumb line, without an objective, definitive standard that applies to everybody.
PHIL: There's probably not a thinking Christian listening to us who doesn't see these problems and grapple with them on a daily basis. And what we want to focus on in the next half hour and even in tomorrow's broadcast, is what we as Christians can do to confront these trends. But before we even begin to talk about what to do, we need to know exactly what the problem is, the nature of the problem we're dealing with.

JOHN: Well I think, Phil, the bottom line nature is the lack of a standard...the lack of a transcendent fixed standard, a law, if you will, or a set of laws, a code of laws, a standard of morals, ethics, spiritual reality that is universal that applies to every one all the time. I mean, we understand the value of that. I mean, we have laws in America that apply to everybody all the time. And they're on the books and it doesn't matter who you are or where you are, if you violate those laws, you set in motion the judicial process, first of all, the police will come and then the judicial process will be in motion that will effect standard punishment for that kind of crime. We have...we understand that everybody can't play by different rules. You can't have a 55 mile an hour speed limit for those who prefer it and 100 mile an hour speed limit for those who prefer that. You can't have a law against child abuse and rape and murder or whatever for those people who want to live that way and obviate the law for anybody who doesn't. We understand all that and we fight for that and we get irate if somebody tries to violate that.

I mean, look what's going on right now. We have all these child molestations and child abductions and kidnapings and some of the most horrific crimes are committed against these precious little children. And there is this massive outcry against that. And, you know, at some point you want to stand up and say, “So why? Why is it wrong to do this? I mean, who said it's wrong to do this?” But I think that is the major problem we face today. There is no universal fixed, objective permanent standard for moral and spiritual reality to which everyone is held accountable. There is one, it is the Word of God, but it is rejected as the standard in favor of everybody setting their own standard.

PHIL: I see where you're going with this. Let me see if I can get you to be very explicit. You're saying that you don't believe the major problem, the major moral issue that confronts our country today is not pornography, it's not homosexuality, it's not abortion, it's not liberalized education, or any of these other things that we typically identify. The real, basic, moral problem in America is the lack of confidence in the Word of God.
JOHN: Well yeah, that's absolutely right. The lack of not only the confidence in the Word of God but the lack of submission to it as the absolute authority. You and I went to Italy one time. I walked in to Pompeii which was preserved because of the volcano, Vesuvius, and I looked at the walls of the homes in Pompeii and I saw the most gross obscene pornographic stuff painted in frescos in the first century in Italy that would rival anything pornographic today. The only difference was the medium was different, this is permanent fresco...today it's in a magazine or a piece of film or whatever that might be. I mean, that is not new. That is not American. One way or another, the wretchedness of the

human heart which is bent on sexuality,, heterosexual sin and homosexual sin, that is nothing new at all. Go back to Genesis chapter 19 where you have a whole city given over to homosexuality, where they want to rape the angels that show up, they're so base, Sodom and Gomorrah. That is not new, that isn't inimitable to American culture. Even abortion, you can go back in history, abortion has been done throughout all of history. That isn't anything new, that isn't anything inimitable in America, the death of little infants for whatever reasons. So those aren't the issues.

The issue is all of that runs absolutely rampant when there is no fixed standard. And when this nation decided that it was above the Word of God, it set itself on a course to literally chaotic and destructive sin.

PHIL: How did the nation decide that? Do you believe there's a conspiracy to undermine?

JOHN: I don't think it's a conspiracy in the sense that there's a few guys doing it, you know, human beings meeting somewhere in a secret room. But I think there's a conspiracy but it's not a human one. And I think basically it's the same old...same old conspiracy of the enemy, Satan, whose desire from the time of the Garden on was to cause people to believe God's a liar. “Has God said,” he asks Eve, and then he turns right around and says, “God didn't say.” And, you know, undermining divine authority is what Satan does. He disguises himself as an angel of light. He comes along, offers himself as the source of the best information, the right approach to life and undermines the truth of God. In that sense there is a conspiracy. And what you have is a population of the children of the devil. I mean, if you're not a Christian, Jesus said, you're of your father the devil. Ephesians 2 says if you're not a Christian, you are under the authority of the prince of the power of the air. Then he makes this statement, that the spirit that works in the children of disobedience.

So, you know, you have unregenerate people who are under, to whatever degree, the control of Satan who are espousing his viewpoint and they just...they're on the ascendency, they're in the majority in the society, and so consequently the satanic agenda rises in the ascendency and the Word of God is undermined. It's not as if there's one guy orchestrating the whole thing, one human or one committee, it's just Satan in his kingdom at every point where he has his children doing everything they can to destroy the authority of God's Word.

PHIL: Do you believe the church is partly to blame for having not done its job?

JOHN: Wherever the church, let's be specific, wherever a pastor, wherever a preacher, wherever a theologian, wherever a teacher, wherever a person claimed to be a Christian failed to uphold and affirm the absolute inerrancy and authority of Scripture, they bear a huge weight of blame.

PHIL: Are Christians supposed to confront the sins of our culture? I know you have been accused by some of your critics from time to time of suggesting that we as Christians ought to remain silent and

not confront the sins of our culture. Is that what you teach?

JOHN: Well I'll tell you, not only are we mandated to confront the sins of the culture, Phil, we are mandated to confront the sins of the church. Judgment begins where? It begins in the house of God. I mean, as a pastor, you know, you've been sitting under the ministry for years, you know that when I get up in the pulpit, you can almost be certain that there's two things I'll do. One is, I will confront the sins of the culture, and the other is, I'll confront the sins of the church because spiritual growth as well as conversion is the product of penitence. I mean, don't we understand that? Don't we believe that in order to be saved a person has to come to grips with sin? He has to see himself as this bankrupt person, you know, mourning over his wickedness, understanding his wretchedness, know he's cut off from the life of God, that he's blind, that he's been blinded by his sin, he's been blinded by Satan,, the god of this world. That he is headed for judgment, that he's a doomed captive prisoner waiting for execution.

In other words, he's bearing the weight and the shame of this oppressive sin in his life. Obviously we have to confront the sins of the culture. Not just to...not in a sense to damn the culture but to waken people to the sins that damn the individuals. I mean, in other words it's not that we're trying to fix the culture, it's that we're trying to call the people who make up the culture to repentance. So, of course, you confront the sins of the culture. But you confront them not with a view somehow to manipulating social structures to change the behavior, but to call the sinners in the culture to recognize their sins and to cry out for forgiveness. Then you continue to confront sin even among the people of God because you constantly call them to holiness. That's the issue of sanctification.

PHIL: You can't be a faithful Christian and not do those things. Jesus said, “You're the salt of the earth, you're the light of the world.” Exactly what did he mean by that?

JOHN: That's what He meant by salt. Of course the picture is influence. You bring to bear upon the world influence and it's not just the influence of a good guy, it's the influence of gospel truth.. It's the influence of the message of redemption. As light, you shine the message of salvation into darkness.

You know, it is ironic to me that the people, many of the people in churches, you know, they have everybody sign up to march on city hall and protest abortion and they sign all the referendums and all of that against pornography and they work, you know, against homosexuality and, you know they want to make sure that we have, you know, prayers in the schools and the Ten Commandments in the court, that's a big agenda for them and they all line up to do that. But many of those same churches, you're not going to hear the pastor get up and preach about the individual sins in the lives of the individual people that are sitting in that congregation and less likely are you to hear the preacher get up and do what Matthew 18 says, “Say Joe, over here, has been unfaithful to his wife, he will not repent and we're putting him out of the church.” But that's exactly what the Bible says to do. You know, some of the same churches and Christian organizations who want to take the posture

of collectively being against abortion and homosexuality and all of that and we're all against that, wouldn't think of confronting those sins in person's life, nor would a person sitting in a typical congregation today do what the Scripture says. If your brother's in sin, go to your brother. An individual Christian, go to someone and say, “You know, you're...you're in sin because of what you did, what you said, gossip or because you've been unfaithful to your wife or because of this and this. You know we just want to talk, we want to make the church really friendly for unbelievers. We want to be against...collectively against abortion and we want to be collectively against these other kinds of things.

I remember talking to a pastor of one of the largest seeker-friendly churches in the country and I said, “If you had a guy who was living in homosexual sin in your church and he started coming, how long would it be before you confronted him about it?”

I'll never forget his answer. He said to me, “Ah, it would probably be two years.” Two years? I said, “Well why?” He said, “Well we'd want to make sure that he really felt accepted.” What is that? You're against homosexuality. You've got a guy in homosexuality which is reflective of his lost condition and you're not even going to go to him and confront it? What kind of a double standard is that?
PHIL: Salt that's lost its savor.

JOHN: Absolutely. I mean, what does salt mean? Are we talking about some collective enterprise played out, you know, in the religious right arena? Are we talking about really salting that guy's life? Or really bringing light to bear upon that darkness?

PHIL: John, as we look at the decline of society and all the moral decay that we see around us, it is tempting for us as Christians to despair or be discouraged. Let me ask you this, I know your answer but I want to hear you say it. Is God concerned or is He troubled or surprised by what's happening in our culture?

JOHN: Well, God isn't surprised by anything and neither should we be. It doesn't surprise me that America is like this. I've said this so many times, what do you expect, unconverted people are going to act unconverted? For a while they may be restrained.

For example. If you happen to be a Muslim living in Iraq, it's unlikely that you're going to publicly commit adultery because they'll kill you. It's unlikely that you're going to rob a bank because they'll chop your hands off if they don't kill you. You can put some artificial constraints, you can make some laws and you can create some severe consequences that will cause people to conform. So there are ways that you can restrain people's tendencies toward the grossest kinds of people. But at the end of the day, in America, we don't have the capability to do that because we're not willing to be a gestapo operation or to operate the way Muslim nations do. So what we're going to see in America as we lose the Christian influence as the Senate and the Congress and the courts of our country become literally

driven to get the Bible out of everything and to keep the separation, we're going to see depravity just continue to flourish and flourish and flourish in an unbounded fashion in this country. There's no question about that.

PHIL: There are those who think that by calling Americans back to a cleaner, more moral kind of life style that they are either preaching the gospel or laying the foundation for the gospel. If I'm not wrong, you'd say, “That's not true gospel preaching.

JOHN: I don't believe that at all. In fact, I think that is absolutely backwards. What am I...as a preacher...what am I going to do? Stand up in front of a congregation of sinful people and say, “You know what I want you to do is I want you to clean up your life so you can get saved.” Nobody would believe that. I don't know any evangelist that's respected by anybody who would preach a message like that. Who would ever say to a congregation of sinners, “You guys really need to clean your life up so you can be in a position to accept the gospel.”

What is that? The truth of the matter is that would be backwards because that's not possible. They're not capable of doing that. The only way that that could ever happen genuinely would be by the work in the power of the Spirit of God transforming them and that comes after salvation, not before. So I don't think we always think about that.

If I meet a person, and I meet them all the time, whose life is in shambles morally, what am I going to say to the guy? “You need to clean your life up so you can understand the gospel?” I'm going to say to the guy, “Do you understand the depth of your sin? Do you understand the guilt that you bear before God? Do you understand that you're headed for judgment and eternal hell and you need to repent and you need to embrace the wonderful gift of salvation in Jesus Christ because you can't change yourself. That's the message. And when we as, quote/unquote, evangelicals harangue all the time about cleaning America up, we are articulating a false message. They can't do that, they won't do that. And in the end of the day, that's not how the problem is solved. We would be better off to just proclaim the damnation and the judgment of God on the sinners who do these things than to try to attack the structures that allow these things.

PHIL: Now let's be clear. You also believe and have always taught that preaching the gospel involves preaching repentance. How do you distinguish between what you're saying and this? I mean, you're saying we don't tell people you need to clean up your lives, but we do tell people that they need to repent of their sins. Where does that fall in the preaching of the gospel, the doctrine of repentance?

JOHN: The doctrine of repentance is absolutely critical. It is absolutely essential. In fact, I just read a new book on salvation that doesn't even mention the word repentance. And, you know, I'm pulling my hair out. How can you write a book on salvation and never mention the word repentance? When Jesus came He said, “Repent for the Kingdom is at hand.” He preached repentance. John the Baptist

preached repentance. That's basic.

Well what is repentance, Phil, is what you're asking? Repentance is not I'm going to clean my life up. Repentance is, “I am sorry for the way my life is, I can't clean it up. O God, deliver me from it.” That's repentance. It is the Publican pounding his chest in Luke 18 and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” I can't...you know, it's what we saw in Luke chapter 4 where Jesus says He came to preach the gospel to the poor, prisoners blind and oppressed. It's when you're at the point of spiritual bankruptcy, spiritual poverty, spiritual blindness, spiritual despair. When you feel like a captive prisoner to your sin and you're without hope. And all you can do is cry out to God in mercy like a drowning man who can't swim and is about to go under for the last time, cries to somebody on the bridge who has a life raft.

To think of repentance as some human cleanup job that fits me for salvation is to utterly miss the point. Repentance is a turning from the love of sin to the hatred of sin and the desire for deliverance, knowing you can't do it yourself. It's the cry of desperation.

PHIL: I'd love to go on and we will tomorrow, but with that, we're just about out of time for today. John, we've talked about the moral quagmire in our nation today. In part 2 of this interview tomorrow we're going to discuss the question, what is the Christian's mandate in influencing the culture? We'll talk about how God expects us to make a difference.

John, we've been talking about the moral decline in America, the fact that we life in an immoral, anti-Christian culture. Yesterday I asked you a bit about the sovereignty of God and is God surprised by the decline in our culture. It made me think of Psalm 2 which starts out, “Why do the heathen rage?” And it portrays the culture at large, the anti-God culture as raging. They're furious, they're out of control and raging and yet Psalm 2 goes on to say, “God who sits in the heavens just laughs.” He's not perturbed by it at all.

JOHN: Yeah, He laughs, He holds them in derision. And I think the intent of the Psalm is to say that while man is furious with God, all of man's fury vented against God affects Him not at all. And the laughter is the laughter of divine disdain and for all of man's efforts to somehow successfully bring reproach on God, or somehow successfully hamper or tamper with God's purposes.

PHIL: Yes, and in the sense of being agitated or perturbed by it, He's not. He's not.

JOHN: Not at all.

PHIL: He's in control, He's sovereign. As you look at the church today, lots of Christians seem agitated and perturbed and almost frantic to do what they can to turn the culture around. And today, that's what we want to talk about. What should we as Christians do about the decline of our culture,

the moral decline? How can we as Christians make a difference in all of this?

JOHN: Well, I think first of all, Phil, we have to realize that this is life as usual. This...this is the way the world has always been. I mean, you know, you go back to the book of Genesis, this is the very beginning and what do you find there? You find murder, you find rape, you find incest, you find homosexuality and a myriad of other crimes in acts of lust and lewdness and all kinds of horrific things. And you're not even out of the book of Genesis. This is life. This is fallen life in a fallen world.

I guess today the reason it seems so much worse is because it is now...it is now emblazoned in front of our eyes at every level. I mean, as a kid growing up, I never saw anybody commit adultery. I never saw any homosexuals engaged in homosexual activity. I never saw any acts of fornication. I never saw any pornographic behavior as a kid, I never saw that. Now, it's hard to imagine any kid growing up who hasn't seen that. It isn't that it's never been there, it's just that it's never been as accessible and available as it is now. And, of course, the latest thing is the computers and the Internet.

So I think we have to start by realizing we don't have to reinvent God's solutions. We don't have to...we don't have to re-assess human life as if all of a sudden what's going on in America now is something that's never gone on in the past. And, you know, this is this unique and inimitable little nation in the history of the world and it's all going to be different for us. And so when you understand that, life is just the same as it's always been, it's not any different, only the shapes and sizes are different in terms of the imagery, the solutions then must be, “Let's go back to the Word of God and see what the answer is.” And the answer is that we have to proclaim the only message that transforms the heart and only when the heart is transformed will the life changed.

PHIL: Let me ask you the question, is there a mandate for Christians to engage the culture through political means, public protests, things like that?

JOHN: Of course not. The only mandate we have on a cultural level is sort of a preevangelistic one. If you study particularly Paul's letter to Titus, Paul encourages the believers in Crete to conduct themselves in the world in which they're in with understanding. And I think it's so interesting. He says, in effect in the third chapter of Titus, “Remember that they're unbelievers. Remember that they're lost. Remember that they're pagans. And then remember that you used to be like that. You used to conduct your life like that. For you to ask these people to become something other than they are, you might as well ask a dog to stop barking and a cat to stop meowing. It's not going to happen.

So, you want to remember how it was when you walked in iniquity and you want to live your life...he even says in that section...you want to be submissive to the authorities, you want to be a good citizen. It's exactly the same thing Paul said to Timothy. It's exactly the same thing Peter wrote in his epistle, that we conduct ourselves as godly people in the society, we submit to the king, we submit to the authority. We are model citizens. We use...we live by all the laws that are there. We use the means of

law to bring righteous influence to bear upon the society. But in the end, the mandate, the single mandate that we have is the proclamation of the gospel from person to person to person to person.

PHIL: Now, before we probe further what the Christian's role ought to be, let's make clear what you're not saying, because you've been misunderstood at times and misrepresented on this issue. You've been characterized as someone who is unwilling to get involved in controversies about sexuality and the sanctify of human life, traditional family values, and things like that, because these are political in nature and therefore unworthy of our attention. That's the way your position has been characterized.

In fact, we received a letter from a close friend of the ministry that sort of illustrates how widely this confusion has been spread. This dear woman writes and I'm quoting her, she says, “I just can't believe you would keep silent on moral issues while our society crumbles. Please let me know exactly where you stand.”

JOHN: I did a series on abortion many years ago that has had a long life and it's been used by many of the anti-abortion ministries throughout America, probably for 15 years. It's a biblical series on that. We have repeated our position on that time and time again. I did a series years ago on homosexuality, what God thinks of homosexuals. That series has gone on to be a fruitful series through the years. And also it is true that our church has become, I suppose in some ways, uniquely characterized as a place where homosexuals have been converted. I mean, through the years we've seen numerous people come out of the Hollywood Gay environment and be converted to Christ and baptized in our church. And there's never been a question about where we stood on the issues of pornography. But my approach has always been to bring to bear upon all of that, what the Word of God says, to bring to bear what the Word of God says. That's what I am, I'm a preacher, whether I'm preaching through the spoken Word or whether I'm preaching on tape, or on radio, or whether it's in a book, there's not going to be any equivocation as to where I stand on sin. I stand where God stands. I...I want to have the same attitude toward those things that God has toward those things. And I have proclaimed through the years that what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6, that, you know, the effeminate and the homosexuals, etc., etc., etc., etc., aren't going to enter the Kingdom of God. But we've made it crystal clear where we stand on all those issues.

But to do that is to fulfill the biblical mandate. For me to become a political activist, for me to take my time, my energy and money to try to orchestrate some alteration of American cultural structure to somehow externally force people into certain behavioral categories would be really a terrible distraction and waste my energy and resources because in the end that's not what they need. You know, I mean, take Bill Clinton, for example. What was the solution with Bill Clinton? I mean, how would you approach Bill Clinton if when he was President you could see his influences impacting America? Which would be the most impactful alteration? To force him by the sheer power of the religious right and the potential impact on his future by lobbying or to see him converted to Christ? I mean, there would be no question. Because if he was really transformed, I mean everything would

change.

PHIL: He goes to the heart of the issue.

JOHN: He goes to the heart of the issue so if that's how we would deal with one person, that's how we ought to be dealing with every person.

PHIL: Well I agree, it's ludicrous that you would ever be characterized as someone who is afraid of controversy or who advocates silence on anything where Scripture speaks.

JOHN: Well, I've even been called a coward. I'll let the Lord judge my own life and ministry. But if by being a coward you mean an unwillingness to confront sin, an unwillingness to speak boldly the Word of God, I feel like I've done that my whole ministry long. I just...I have just confined my ministry to the biblical message and the biblical means.

PHIL: Yeah, it seems to me that the criticism comes from those who feel that if you're not willing to lobby in the political arena on these issues, then it's tantamount to advocating silence.

JOHN: Yeah, and nothing could be further from the truth.

PHIL: Right. But are you saying that Christians shouldn't be involved in any way in politics? What about voting? Should we as Christians exercise our right to vote?

JOHN: Well, I think you have the benefit of doing that in a democracy which provides for you an opportunity to make a public statement that has some impact about what you believe is right. If there are two people running for an office, one of them loves the Lord and is a Christian, and the other one is a homosexual, I want to vote for the Christian. That's a statement that I can make that exalts what is right and what is righteous. If I have two adulterers to choose from, I'm not nearly so compelled to vote. You know, I think there are biblical issues with regard to political structures and things. But in the end, I just feel that as a Christian I should through the means of my channels as a citizen do whatever I can to express my commitment to the divine law and what would please God. And I take every opportunity to do that.

PHIL: We mentioned yesterday the Bible's mandate to be salt and light, not really mandate but a description of the Christian. You are salt and you are light of the world, that's often portrayed as a call to social action. How would you respond to that.

JOHN: Anything but...anything but.

PHIL: What does it mean?

JOHN: Well it simply means that we are to live gospel lives. We are to live lives that demonstrate the gospel and to proclaim the gospel in the culture. Our influence is not to try to push culture into certain moral perspectives. The light that we bring to bear is not the light of morality, it is the life of saving truth. And the influence that we bring to bear is the influence of that saving truth. I could be living in my neighborhood and I could be against all of the cultural sins of the day, I would be, you know, married and have a model family and live a moral life and be an honest guy and pay my taxes and go to work on time and come home on time and not, you know, cheat my employer. I could do all of those kinds of things and I wouldn't be salt or light. I wouldn't be salt or light until I opened my mouth to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, and therein lies my influence.

PHIL: Would you be opposed to the idea of a Christian serving as a politician?

JOHN: No, no more than I would be opposed to the idea of a Christian serving as a policeman, or a judge, or a school teacher, or a fireman, or whatever...I mean, you know, salesman. It's an arena of life in which a Christian can serve and I hope you understand this, with a view to presenting the gospel in that environment. I think that the real task of a Christian congressman, let's say, Christian senator or a Christian anywhere in the political world is not..his primary task is not to get a quote/unquote Judeo-Christian moral standard somehow written into the law. His objective is to reach everybody within the sphere of his influence as a salt and light for the gospel.

PHIL: Do you have any animosity or feel like you're competing with those who are trying to change society through social action? It seems like there are more and more Christians who have devoted themselves to that.

JOHN: I don't have any animosity, Phil, you know me. But I'm really passionate about what the Bible teaches and I'm passionate about what's right, preaching the gospel, that's what we need to do. That's what we're mandated to do, that's what we're commanded to do. And I really believe that's what we're held accountable to do. And I think our eternal reward is going to be related to that kind of thing. And there isn't going to be any eternal reward for, if I can say it, the wood, hay and stubble. And while wood, hay and stubble isn't bad, and, you know, lobbying for these kinds of things certainly isn't sinful, it is not redemptive and it's not the gold, silver and the precious stones.

And, you know, people criticize me, I think, because they don't understand, you know, they may have a caricature of me, or they...I'd wish they'd ask but, I think I'm doing what the Word of God has called me to do. I'm not trying to reinvent anything and I think if you are consistent with the Word of God you're going to be against all the things that God is against, but you're going to find the message and the means that the Bible lays out to deal with them.

PHIL: It's often been said that politics made for strange bedfellows. One of the dangers, it seems to me, of the church aligning itself too closely to any political party or political agenda is that it requires a compromise.

JOHN: That is a grief to me, that is a very, very major problem. Let's say I've decided I'm going to be against abortion or homosexuality and I'm going to get into some kind of coalition with Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, etc., there goes the gospel, I can't bring it up. It has to be set aside. I can't bring it up because as soon as I bring it up I blow up the organization. I can't...you know, this is a simple illustration. In almost every community, certainly in our community, there are associations of pastors and religious leaders and they meet in the community and they meet for purposes like this. They come together, they have a breakfast, they get an agenda and they're going to fight abortion and they're going to fight homosexuality and they're going to lobby for prayer in the schools. They're going to lobby to put The Ten Commandments on the wall of the courtroom. And they want me to get involved. They want me to join them and get involved.

Okay, so I go to the meeting. This has happened in the past. There's a Buddhist. There are Roman Catholic priests. They're Mormons, liberals that don't believe in the inerrancy of Scripture and question the deity of Christ. But they're against these things. So we're all going to do this and all of our churches and religious organizations are going to cooperate, we're going to produce these fliers. We're going to write these petitions. We're going to...

That only works if I never introduce the gospel. As soon as I say, “Gentlemen, the message we need to give the world, the message we need to proclaim here is that this is wrong, to do this is sin. It is a sin that God will judge and all sinners will be punished eternally in hell. So we plead with you to embrace t he only hope of salvation which is Jesus Christ.”

As soon as I said that...Bam, there goes the organization. They won't work with me because if I say that's the message you have to preach, the organization is over. So to perpetuate the organization, anybody like me is not there, so to me the success of these things in some ways testimony to the successful compromise. The New Testament model of the pro-morality religious right was the Pharisees...Pharisees. They were the religious right, they were extreme. They were against everything that the religious right is against. They were for all of biblical morality to the nth degree and Jesus said, “Frankly, I'd rather hang around tax collectors, prostitutes and drunkards than those guys.” Why? Because they had attained a level of self-righteousness whereas the other people when Jesus confronted them with their sin, they broke under that and they repented and were saved. When Jesus confronted the Pharisees with their sin, tried to kill Him.

So, what I think we need to do is find the sinners. You know, He didn't come to call the righteous to repentance. As soon as you've elevated people to the point where they have a sense of their self-righteousness, they're not going to get converted, they don't need a physician. Having said that, let

me say this. I'm sure there are many, many homosexuals, many women who have had abortions, many who have committed the culturally unacceptable sins who think that Christians hate them.

PHIL: That's a poignant truth that you brought out several times, that the hard-edged political agenda of the religious right is actually turning the mission field into the enemy.

JOHN: That's exactly right. They must think we hate them when the truth of the matter is Jesus Himself loved them. You remember, it was He that went to Matthew who was the most despicable man in Jewish culture because he had bought a tax franchise from the Romans who were blaspheming idolatrous pagans who had occupied the land of Israel. And then when Matthew was converted, you remember, he had this big dinner and he invited all the drunkards and prostitutes and riff-raff and petty criminals and all of the, you know, strong armed guys that helped him collect his taxes. And Jesus went there and the Pharisees said, “What in the world are you doing with that crowd?” And Jesus said, “It's not the righteous, sarcastically, who need...it's not the well, you know, the healthy that need the physicians, it's the sick.” And then He said, “You know, you righteous people, I can't do anything with you.”

So what we want to say to those people is what you're doing is wrong, what you're doing is sinful, what you're doing creates culpability before God and the Word of God says you're going to be judged eternally for your sin, including the sin of rejecting His grace in Jesus Christ, repent and turn to the Savior. That takes care of the issue. You know, that deals with, as you said, from the heart.

PHIL: So would you say to all of these Christians who are organizing protests and marching and engaging in political lobbying and all of that, that they could do more for the good of society if they would be evangelists, go door-to-door with the gospel?
JOHN: You know, how complicated is the Great Commission? Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. Just take that whole force of people, all their money, all their media, all their energy and direct it at the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And that's how we would fulfill the Great Commission. This isn't the Great Commission. This is no commission at all in the Bible. There's this idea that we like a certain moral comfort zone for our kids so that it's self-serving, so that it's not nearly so burdened by the destitute sinner's plight as it is by the impinged Christian's discomfort, right? I mean, I just think we've got to get back to what the Great Commission is and I don't think it's ambiguous, I don't think it's fuzzy, I don't think it's hard to get. You go, you make disciples, which means you proclaim the gospel to every creature, you make disciples, you teach them everything that the Lord's commanded. That's the commission.

PHIL: And the political activism that's so popular today, you would see that as something that has diverted the church from its real mission.

JOHN: Oh I wonder sometimes, what if we just transplanted all this...all these people doing this to 1950's Russia, what would they do where they had horrendous oppression, Atheism dominating a society? What would they do? If they did this, they'd wind up in Siberia for the rest of their lives, so they wouldn't do that.

Well I'll tell you what they would do, I'll tell you what the church did. The church patiently, carefully, one person at a time proclaimed the gospel. And when Parastroka(???) came and Glasnos(???) came...Boom, there were millions of Christians, millions of Christians above ground and under ground that surged into the light. And I've gone over there and ministered to these precious people who have told me with their own lips, “We wanted to be certain that if any of us ever went to prison ever it was for the gospel of Jesus Christ and nothing else.”

PHIL: John, let's look way down the road into the future. One of these days you'll stand before God to give account, I know you know that. I know it's on your mind constantly. Are you confident that you're going to be able to say you have made the right choice, that you've done everything you could as a Christian to make the world a better place for your eleven grandchildren?

JOHN: As I think about my life and looking back from that kind of perspective, I have done what I understood the Word of God to mandate me to do. I can't make the world a better place for my kids. I can't make the world a better place for my grandkids. What if one of my grandkids decides to be a missionary in the inner city of New York, what if one of my kids decides to be a missionary in India and spend their life there, is that a better place and to raise their kids in the middle of Hinduism? Is that a better place? I'm not concerned about making the world a better place for my grandchildren. I'm trying to make my grandchildren better in the midst of this wicked world and that only happens through the gospel.

I have one legacy to leave my grandchildren. Not a better world, but the gospel of Jesus Christ and a better life, the only life, the life in Christ. So when I look back from heaven as my prayer is now, “O God, save my grandchildren from the world in which they live. It's no worse and it's no better and it's no different than the world has ever been, but You in Your mighty power and Your grace can save them in the midst of this and they can be Your children in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.”

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