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CHAPTER ONE

THE BEST THINGS IN THE WORST TIMES

Triumph in a Tough Environment

In the mid-seventeenth century, the rule of Oliver Cromwell in Great Britain began with the execution of Charles I and continued with a campaign to divest England of any vestige of the monarchy. Targeted in the aftermath of the Cromwellian civil war were the Anglicans, who were tied closely to the king, who served as head of the church. Cromwell emptied the monasteries, removed baptismal fonts from the churches, defamed the clergy, and did everything in his power to disengage their place and influence in the culture. If you were an Anglican pastor, those were tough times to be in the religion business.

In the face of such times, some were yet undaunted. An inspiring but little-known inscription hidden away in Harold Church, Staunton, England, reads like this: “In the year of 1653, when all things sacred were throughout the nation destroyed or profaned, this church was built to the glory of god by sir Robert Shirley, whose singular praise it was to have done the best things in the worst times.”

I recently spent four days outside of Minsk, Belarus, where I

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met with 260 godly shepherds of what we used to know as the Soviet Union. I felt unworthy to stand in their midst. For seventy years the church in the Soviet republics did the work of Christ fearlessly under great oppression. Pastors who would not cooperate with the KGB were often imprisoned or forced to live in a peasant status far from the honor that was due their calling. And yet in these, the toughest of times, they endured and remained faithful until the light broke through and their ministries began to flourish as statues of Lenin, Stalin, and Marx were dismantled throughout the land.

I thought of the inscription on a stone marker behind the bust of Marx directly across the street from the Bolshoi Theater just a few blocks from Red Square in Moscow. They are the words of Lenin concerning Marx: "His words will last forever, because his words are true." The men who sat before me in Minsk with legacy-laden faces had never believed that. They never conceded to the prevailing attitudes of their day nor folded under the pressure of their pagan society. They knew they served One whose Word, indeed, will last forever, because *it* is true. And they served with dignity. These were men who did the best things in the worst times.

As we met outside of Minsk, where the temperature rarely rose above fifteen degrees in the warmest part of the day, we gathered in an auditorium where there was no heat and stayed in hotel rooms where there was no hot water. Most of these pastors crowded into small rooms at night where three of them shared an accommodation. We gathered for lunch in a crowded dining room where we ate meals that were subsistence level at best. We taught in multiple sweaters and coats. Yet, none of this seemed to phase these heroes. They sat, listened, and wrote intently hour after hour as we lectured on matters pertaining to the ministry, theology, apologetics, and the Word of God. It was clear to me that long ago they had made up their minds that life for them would not be a matter of comfort and convenience, but rather one of commitment to a calling that would in the long run render them pleasing to God and keep the gospel flame burning during the worst of times.

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Not unlike the Cromwell era when Anglicans were disenfranchised, and not unlike our colleagues who battled through seventy years of oppression in the USSR, we in the United States are now in the process of being underclass and forced into a subculture that faces the challenge of affirming truth in an intensely nontruth environment. Our calling is increasingly defamed, Christianity has ceased to be fashionable, and we are often the object of ridicule. We now must proclaim that there are absolutes in a world where relativism rules. It is our task to call people to something beyond themselves in a day when self-fulfillment has been elevated as the ultimate god. We must be willing to stand unintimidated for biblical correctness when it crosses swords with political correctness. In a culture where tolerance is the ultimate value, we are called to clearly and compassionately proclaim righteousness in a way that delineates between right and wrong and communicates by its very articulation an intolerance of that which is evil.

THE WORST TIMES

In the last four decades there has been a shift in our culture in its assumptions regarding God. The rise of relativism as a fundamental societal creed has eliminated the God of Scripture—the God of the universe—from any consideration in or over the affairs of society. A culture that wants to do what it wants to do must somehow dethrone a God who rightfully calls men to live under His authority—a God who holds us accountable for embracing what is right and eschewing what is wrong.

Relativism provides the philosophical excuse for life on our own terms. And so, in forty short years, the God whose laws had provided societal stability has become an outcast. Now, if there is to be a god at all, he will be created by us after our own imagination or after Eastern, New Age formations. But he will not be the God who is truly there, whose wisdom and ways are right and who not only holds man accountable but ultimately reigns over the affairs of men.

Like Rip Van Winkle, believers have in large measure slept through these last four decades, and as the alarm clocks ring to

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usher in the twenty-first century, we wake to a world dramatically different, where God has been relegated to the private compartments of a few lives and the churches they attend.

This macromove of society makes our task as spiritual leaders far more complicated.

For reasons best known to God, I have been given the advantage of being a third-generation minister. My grandfather, a 1913 graduate of the Moody Bible Institute, ministered well into the 1970s, first as an evangelist, then as a pastor (in fact, as a pastor in one church for thirty years). My father, who just celebrated his sixtieth year of ministry, has labored faithfully through several strategic pastorates, a stint of denominational leadership, and now, at eighty-three, continues to keep a busy schedule of both preaching and serving on the boards of a major mission agency and a Bible college and seminary. Growing up in that context gives one a sixth sense about ministry. It also gives one a long-view perspective of ministry spanning decades of commitment to the cause of Christ. I have read with interest my grandfather's papers, class notes from Moody, and sermon notes. And I recall a hundred dozen productive memories of my dad's dedication to the Lord's work. Although I am incurably optimistic, I have to admit that trying to tackle spiritual leadership in this season of world history means overcoming challenges and difficulties neither my grandfather nor my father were called to face.

As we seek to effectively manage ministry in this new era, we must understand the nature of the change and the elements of our task that are in flux. When it comes to ministry, ignorance about the context in which we minister is not bliss. There are at least twelve ways in which the landscape of ministry has changed. These changes force the issue of getting serious about how we must configure our ministry to be effective and usable in God's hand.

The Parson's Prestige

A brief look at American history reminds us that in the early days of our country, it was the local minister who held the highest level of prestige. He not only pastored the church, but also

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served as teacher of the school, and as such was looked upon as the prime authority in the community. Ministers no longer hold that status. The secularization of our culture has devalued the position of spiritual leadership to that of a civil servant for marriages and funerals, to be little more than the local holy man who deals in nonessentials and irrelevancies. Just watch the surveys of the most prestigious positions in America, and you'll note that clergy never even make the list. Add to this the growing cynicism toward our kind as the result of various self-inflicted wounds of public failure and you begin to see why we are so marginalized in our influence.

Not only is our status diminished on the outside, but those within may not be as impressed as they once were.

The Parishioner's Perspective

If a shepherd-feeder in our day went to the mirror and said, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the greatest of them all?" and our people were standing on the other side of the mirror, they'd probably answer, "Swindoll!" But it hasn't always been this way. There was a time when our people would have responded, "You, O blessed pastor," primarily because they never heard anyone else. If they wanted to hear one of the superstars they had to take a chunk of time, drive a long way to a conference, experience his stellar gifts, and bring home their written notes.

Technology has changed everything. The best preachers today are piped into our homes and our cars, and even our heads via Walkmans as we jog. Most of us preach our hearts out, hoping to be affirmed by our flocks as superior shepherd-feeders, only to walk through the foyer and hear our flock talking about the terrific series that Stanley is doing on the radio this week. Now that's discouraging! However, if we are committed to the feeding of the saints regardless of who the feeder is, we will be able to celebrate their spiritual growth, even though it may not be occurring directly and immediately through us.

Of course, pleasing church people today is more difficult in more ways than just preaching.

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The Great Divide

When my grandparents passed the torch to my parents, and when my parents passed the torch to me, there were some differences in the generations, but nothing major. We sang the same hymns, worshiped in the same forms, lived in similar societal settings, and basically affirmed the same perspectives regarding lifestyle and mind-set. Yet today, as I pass the torch to my children, I am very much aware (sometimes painfully so) of the phenomenal difference between my generation and theirs. The gap, or should we say the *gulf*, is measured in musical styles and preferences; perceptions of truth; perspectives on material goods, purity, and commitment; and a host of other issues. This makes “doing church” in our day a far more difficult task.

Take, for instance, the phenomenal upheaval in ministering to people through music. The continuum is broad, ranging from people who are comfortable worshiping through the forms of traditional church music to others who do not identify with that form but are instead tuned to contemporary styles of worship—idioms resembling the music that they have been brought up with and have learned to relate to. If you’re a pastor I don’t have to convince you that there is a struggle going on.

Churches are full of older folks, middle folks, boomers, busters, and teenagers. Teenagers and young adults who have grown up in a fractured, video-oriented society where there is little tolerance for cognitive contemplation. A world where deep-seated needs for experience, involvement, and sound bytes drive their existence and expectations.

And then there are the older folks who just want it the way it’s always been.

What’s in It for Me?

Part of this generational transition is reflected in the shift from an industrialized society, where the work ethic was in place, to a service-oriented society, where consumerism and specialization are valued.

While I was pastoring in Detroit, the specific needs of the

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growing singles population in our church led most of us to conclude that we needed to hire a singles pastor. As we processed the vision, we ran into some resistance from the long-timers, or, as we affectionately called them, “the lifers,” in our congregation. Their question was insightful and difficult to field. According to them, in the late thirties and forties the church was running fifteen hundred persons in Sunday school and yet the church had only two pastors. “Why,” they asked, “do we need so many pastors today?”

The reality of it was that the church was planted in a time when the work ethic was valued in America. In fact, it was planted in the heart of Detroit, where immigrants from the old country had come to work in the automobile factories with a sense of the importance of work and contribution. When they went to the factory, they planned to participate and give of themselves as much as they could. When they came to church, they came the same way—walking in with that “what-can-I-do-to-help” attitude.

As you’re aware, all of that has changed. We now live in a consumer-oriented society where we no longer ask “What can I do to help?” but “What will this job (or this church) do for me?” People come to our churches asking “Do I like this pastor? Do I like this choir? Do I like this youth program? Do I like these people?” And asking most of all, “Will this church meet my needs?” It rarely crosses anyone’s mind to wonder whether or not he or she can contribute something or be used to meet the needs of the kingdom in the context of the local church.

Not only are we a consumer-oriented society, but we’re a service-oriented society that provides specialists who serve every part and parcel of our lives. This has given rise to an expectation that employers and organizations like government and the church should be specialists in meeting individual needs. Add to this the fragmentation of our societal structures, with the resultant deep and crying needs in so many segments, and you have people looking to the church to help meet their specific personal needs in specific ways. There are more singles in our churches than in previous times. More divorcés and divorcées. More single par-

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ents. More who have been abused. More alcoholics. More who are addicted to drugs and pornography and have a host of other disorders. Since we claim that Christ is sufficient to meet us where we are and bring us consolation, healing, and growth, you can't fault people for expecting and hoping to find that at church. But most of us as spiritual leaders find ourselves unable to meet such a variety of specified challenges.

Thankfully, there are a host of helpful books, videotapes, and audiotapes that can help us bring healing to a myriad of needs. Yet the pressure on shepherds to be effective in these areas does bring additional stress, particularly in smaller churches that minister in proximity to megachurches that offer high-profile programs to meet specific needs and drain sheep from the smaller fold by the allure of tailor-made offerings for healing and help.

Not only are we caught in the web of consumerism and the high expectations of specialization, but this new generation is becoming increasingly illiterate.

Dumbing-Down

Our culture as a whole is becoming illiterate in terms of its skills of analysis, reason, logic, and other basic cognitive capacities, and the church often reflects the same propensity. According to studies, biblical literacy is at an all-time low in evangelical churches. This dumbing-down of the church makes it difficult for a shepherd to lead his congregation in a thoughtful analysis of truth and its integration into life. The congregation may lack skills for analysis and integration and in actuality know little about Scripture. George Barna says that the job of the pastor

is made even more difficult by the biblical illiteracy of the flock. It seems that no amount of Bible-based preaching, scriptural teaching, or small group meetings moves the congregation to a higher plane of Bible knowledge.

For most of the people sitting in the church on a given morning, the pastor knows that his Scripture readings and references will be the only ones to which they will be exposed during the week. Only four out of every ten adults will read any portion of the Bible outside the church during the week.

Those people who do read will commit about one hour to Bible

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reading during the week. Those people will actually spend more time showering, commuting to and from work, watching television, reading the newspaper, eating meals, or talking on the telephone. Obviously, the Bible is not a high priority in the lives of most people.

And what kind of base of knowledge can the minister realistically hope to build upon through his teaching efforts? Lay members are abysmally ignorant of the basics of the Bible. Most cannot name half of the Ten Commandments. Most people do not know that it was Jesus Christ who preached the Sermon on the Mount. Asked about the book of Thomas, nearly half of all adults will be unaware that such a book is not in the Bible.

The names of the gospels—the first four books in the New Testament—are not known to most people. In fact, probably the most quoted verse is, “God helps those who help themselves.” Unfortunately, though people think that verse is in the Bible, Ben Franklin wrote that line two hundred years ago.¹

And then Barna asks the penetrating question: “Where do you start with this type of audience?”

Our culture is oriented to video experiences, discussions of serious issues in sound-byte formats, and more storytelling than substantive dialogue—and all of these have impacted the mental formations of Americans.

Not too many decades ago even the non-Christians in our society had a fairly decent grasp of basic biblical stories and content. In today’s society, Christians who are fairly regular adherents to the faith may know less than the non-Christian did in the days when the Bible was held in high esteem in our society.

This dumbing-down of the Christian mind creates fresh challenges in preaching, discipleship, and the educational programming of our ministries which already suffer from a long season of neglect in regard to doctrine.

The Demise of Doctrine

Because of the disintegration of values and societal stability, we have, for the most part, shifted from preaching on doctrinal themes to focusing on pragmatic applications of Scripture. The majority of our pulpit, seminar, workshop, and writing emphases now focuses on families, sexuality, identity, relationships, bitter-

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ness, forgiveness, cultural conflicts, and a host of other valid ministry concerns. Noting this trend, *U.S. News & World Report* observes, “Many congregations have multiplied their membership by going light on theology and offering worshippers a steady diet of sermons and support groups that emphasize personal fulfillment.”²

Dealing with contemporary issues is not the problem. Our fault has been that we have dealt with them without grounding our treatment of them in the basic doctrinal realities that undergird them. Much of what we hear today is perceived by the average listener as being true because it is better than the alternative, because it works, because it will make life better, or because it will make them happier. Those all may be true, but that is not the reason we should be committed to biblical formulas for living. Biblical principles are imperative because they are applications of the authoritative Word of God and grounded in fundamental doctrine. They are practiced by a true follower whether they “work” or not, make us happy or not.

I fear that in the press of the felt needs that have surfaced in our degraded environment, we have bred an intolerance in our listeners for proclamation that focuses on the foundations of our faith. Foundations—doctrine seem to be less relevant, less thrilling, and less oriented to our needs. Admittedly, this is partially our fault as preachers and teachers. In Scripture, doctrinal teaching is accompanied by specific values and life-related applications inherently linked to the substance of the doctrine. In the Bible, for instance, instruction in family life, which has become so popular in the last several decades, is intrinsically grounded in doctrines dealing with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18–21), ecclesiology (vv. 22–24), Christology (vv. 25–33), and the nature of God (6:1–4). Morality is biblically rooted in the doctrine of redemption (1 Corinthians 6:15–20). Servanthood is built on the foundation of the Incarnation (Philippians 2:3–11).

The jeopardy for us is not so much that those of us who grew up with stronger doctrinal roots will be swayed. It’s that the next generation will know a form of existential Christianity that will be easily jeopardized by its rootlessness.

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Of course, focusing on foundations would be easier if our people weren't so distracted.

Stepping Up the Pace

There is no doubt that the busyness of our society has made us more distracted than we have been in the past. With all of our conveniences, appliances, and advanced equipment, you'd think we'd have more time. Strange, isn't it, that instead we've become busier? Busy with community activities, Little League, civic responsibilities, jobs, family commitments, vacations, travel, and a dozen other things that give us a life not unlike the gerbil who spends most of his time running that weird wire wheel in his cage.

Busyness makes it difficult for us to recruit workers and to program successful special emphases in our churches. Some of us remember when you could hold a missionary conference for a week from Sunday to Sunday (in earlier days for two weeks) and fill the church every night. In the days of D. L. Moody and Billy Sunday, people would crowd halls built especially for the crusades. Night after night for four to five weeks, thousands of people came to hear God's Word proclaimed. (Before we get too covetous of those days we need to remember that in that era the only exciting things that ever happened in town were the circus and the revival meetings.)

We, on the other hand, struggle even to have a three-day missions *emphasis*. We kick it off Friday night with a great banquet, have a youth emphasis on Saturday, and a great closing meeting on Sunday morning.

Sunday evenings are scarcely populated—to say nothing of Wednesday night. People are just busier than they've ever been before.

In addition to these changes that challenge the effectiveness of the contemporary church, there are a group of changes that directly relate to the philosophical shift in our culture.

Relatively Pluralistic

Ministering in a pluralistic culture requires that we understand

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that it is not a true pluralism, but rather a pluralism grounded in and tainted by our deep-rooted relativism. Actually, Christianity could flourish in a pure pluralistic setting. Pluralism fundamentally says that everyone has the right to his own truth conclusions. As a result, there is a basic respect for a multiplicity of belief systems. Relativism, on the other hand, says that there is *no* truth, and although it encourages us to spend our lives seeking the truth, those who claim to have found it are held in contempt and considered naive, intolerant, bigoted, and otherwise unintellectual.

Relativism has groomed a culture that no longer believes in the absolutes of right and wrong but believes in a pluralism that tolerates everything—except those of us who claim to know the truth.

In the ministries of my grandfather and father, there was basic cultural assent to the principles that they proclaimed. Divorce was not encouraged. Homosexual acts were clearly wrong. Adultery, pornography, and a host of other social evils were out of bounds. People were not less evil in those days; it's just that they admitted that what they were doing was wrong. This made preaching about righteousness and godliness far more palatable to even the casual hearer. Today, to attempt clear and nonnegotiated teaching regarding principles of right and wrong, sin and righteousness is often greeted by both saint and sinner alike as something “too negative,” or too “culturally insensitive” to be dealt with in a public forum.

While waiting for my shirts at the dry cleaners recently, I heard a highly respected scholar delivering a lecture on fundamentalism over the radio. He stated that the one thing that was true about fundamentalists was that they believed in absolutes. And then in a cynical aside said, “and to top that, they believe they know what the absolutes are.” Although this pluralistic perspective characterized us as being arrogant and foolish, the truth is we do not claim to arbitrarily choose which absolutes we will promote, nor do we have a corner on knowing what all the absolutes are. It goes deeper than that. It's that we believe in a God who is absolute and true. And since there is a God who is

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true and who has revealed His truth to us, we humbly affirm what is already grounded in the nature of His existence. The absolutes we affirm find their source in the essence of the God we serve. We affirm as well that these absolutes are standards to which we will be held accountable. But very few people, even some who have been around the kingdom for a while, will either understand or feel comfortable when we get dogmatic about absolutes.

A recent study reveals how deeply entrenched this relativistic pluralism is even among the new generation to whom we minister. Josh McDowell notes

seventy percent (70%) of today's generation (both church and nonchurch youth) claim that absolute truth does not exist, that all truth is relative. Most of them say that everything in life is negotiable, and that "nothing can be known for certain except the things that you experience in your own life." . . . Our society has so emphasized personal choice and tolerance that practically an entire generation of young people has rejected an absolute standard for right and wrong, and this thinking has greatly affected your children and mine.³

Alan Bloom of the University of Chicago notes: "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. . . . Some are religious, some atheists; some are to the left, some to the right. . . . They are unified only in their relativism."⁴

Our predicament is complicated by the reality that this shift from theism to relativism has vested moral authority in the individual.

I'll Do It My Way

There was a time when just the fact that you were the pastor gave you a big head start in terms of people's respect for your authoritative statements about God and life. But the relativistic mind-set has given us permission to play God and determine what is best, right, and not right for us, quite apart from any external authority. People today, regardless of what is said, listen

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for the most part with the arms of their hearts folded. They assume they have the right to decide for themselves. The failure of public figures hasn't helped us in this arena, nor have educational systems that teach students to make up their own minds about moral issues, regardless of what authority figures like God may have said.

This would not be a particular problem for the shepherd if it weren't for the fact that we speak not in our own authority, but in the authority of the Word of God. When our constituents distance themselves and maintain their autonomy, it is the authority of Christ in their lives that is victimized.

Relativism's birth of the autonomy of the individual in regard to moral authority is spawning a society not unlike the Old Testament times when "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

Princeton University sociologist Robert Wuthnow, in his book *The Restructuring of American Religion*, observes, "We are becoming less theologically and institutionally grounded and more inclined to make up our own faiths as we go along." Jefferey Sheler describes it as the "design-your-own approach to spirituality."⁵

Behind Closed Doors

The challenge of individuals who believe that moral authority has no external source is encouraged by our culture's commitment to the value of privacy. Privacy in American society has been elevated to constitutional status. Many of today's social agendas are grounded in the assumption that our constitution guarantees the right of privacy to all citizens and thus that we all have a private sphere into which no one has a right to intrude. Current abortion law is grounded in this concept, as are alternate secular preferences. Recent Senate confirmation hearings on Supreme court nominees have focused on the candidate's view of privacy. This has been a veiled way to ask the candidate about his or her views on the hot topics of abortion and gay rights.

The cascading effect of this is that Americans are increasingly coming to believe that there are areas in their lives into which no one else has the right to intervene. As this attitude seeps into the

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sphere of the exercise of our faith, it jeopardizes fundamental issues like *total* surrender, submission, and lordship. Privatism leads to religious lives that are compartmentalized, in which God occupies several unrelated and often isolated segments of our lives but not all segments. It gives us permission to set up other compartments where no one, including God, has the right to enter. Harvard professor Stephen Carter points out in *The Culture of Disbelief* that society finds it easy to tolerate “people whose religion consists of nothing but a few private sessions of worship and prayer, but who are too secularized to let their faiths influence the rest of their week. This attitude exerts pressure to treat religion as a hobby.”⁶

Privatism works against the nature of the church as a community and militates against the functions of discipline and accountability.

The psalmist David was aware that there were no private sectors in his life when it came to God’s right to enter and morally cleanse his life. He prayed, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way” (Psalm 139:23–24). Anything short of inviting our Lord’s full involvement in every area of our lives is something less than authentic Christianity.

Correctly Incorrect

It’s tough today to preach in a context that ascribes personal, sociological, and moral meaning to certain perspectives, concepts, phrases, and words that at one time were innocuous. On the lighter side, it keeps us on our toes to stay current. People who help on planes are no longer stewardesses, they are “flight attendants”; the handicapped are, at this writing, “challenged.” The slightest nuances that violate perceived cultural correctness supposedly disenfranchise sensitive hearers. On a recent ministry assignment in Boston, I included in my message an illustration about a husband who came home from work and failed to notice the hard work his wife had been doing that day to straighten the home. I then reversed the illustration and told about a disap-

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pointed husband whose wife had failed to notice the stellar job he had done to clean the garage and get the yard in shape.

Although the illustrations fit well into applying the principle of the message, they did not fit well into the mental grid of a couple of university coeds. After the message they graciously thanked me for being there and then asked why I had so carelessly undone what they had worked so hard to rectify. In their minds I had affirmed stereotypical roles of men and women they felt needed to be changed. They had devoted themselves to the liberation of men and women from roles that they saw as restrictive. I had said nothing that indicated that all women should be at home or that all men ought to work in the yard, but my applications, in the grid of their perspective, were culturally incorrect.

More seriously, when political correctness contradicts that which is biblically correct, by and large the relativistic American will reject that which is biblical. It is “correct” to be tolerant. The Bible disagrees if we are talking about sin. It is “correct” to reject absolutes. The Bible disagrees. It is “correct” to affirm our right to alternate sex preferences. The Bible says that is *not* correct.

It’s not surprising, since Christians have refused to shift and chosen rather to fight the drift, that we are often maligned and marginalized in secular America.

The Maligned Minority

Christianity at best has become undervalued. We have been pushed out of the mainstream and relegated to a subculture that runs counter to the prevailing paganism of our day. As we have noted, during the last forty years the broad base of the culture has finally decided that it doesn’t want God telling us what to do, what not to do, what is right, and what is wrong. In fact, as people have decided to do the things they want to do, those of us who have tried to put the brakes on have been viewed as impediments to social progress. What Francis Schaeffer predicted has come to pass. There is now a backlash against Christians and Christianity because we are perceived to be against those things that are “good for us,” that make us a more progressive, enlightened community of people. As a result, we who are Christians

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are ridiculed in sitcoms and movies and are discounted in terms of what we say, what we believe, and what is important to us.

Our truth-claims and calls to repentance are a threat to the godless power base of this new paganism. The word *Christian* did not resonate with tones of honor and respect in the early history of the church, and increasingly it is the same today. In the past, those who resisted the flow were tagged as “fundamentalists,” then the “radical right,” then the “religious right.” Now, more and more, the public references are simply to “Christians” who create trouble by opposing agendas that have been deemed politically correct. It’s hard for a secular society to tolerate those of us who cannot tolerate that which is an offense to God.

We live in a world that, for the most part, no longer wants to hear what we have to say. And it is possible that the churches we shepherd in the decades to come, if we remain authentically committed to Christ and His truth, may indeed suffer persecution beyond the social and media intimidation we now face.

Added to this long list of perplexing dilemmas and differences is the stress we heap on ourselves as we compare ourselves to fast-growing, stellarly gifted ministries whose leaders have unusual capacities to accomplish great things in short periods of time; the pressures of working with volunteers; and the reality of finding ourselves in the midst of increased spiritual warfare.

It’s just plain tougher to stay committed to, encouraged by, and unflinching in our call than it has ever been before.

COURAGE AND CONFIDENCE

But then God has not called us to a kingdom cakewalk. Biblical metaphors for being productive in the work of His kingdom all reflect the reality of a tough task. Scripture says that we are like *athletes* in training to win the prize, and that we are to run with focus and discipline lest we ourselves should be disqualified in the process. We are like *farmers* who faithfully carry out our responsibilities in the face of heat, cold, drought, and flood. Regardless of the environmental elements, we do our work of planting and watering and then trust God to bring the harvest. We are like *soldiers*. It is clear that soldiering is a difficult task. It

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requires a commitment to a cause greater than ourselves, worth being wounded for, worth dying for, worth giving up comfort and convenience for if necessary. It demands a commitment that is rooted in total allegiance to the will of a Commander in Chief whose wisdom we trust, whose strategy we believe in, and on whose field we are willing to spend our lives. Ministry has always been tough.

It was tough for John G. Payton when he, with his young wife, left the British Isles for the New Hebrides Islands, where no missionary had ever gone before. It was tough to hear the captain of the ship that took them ashore tell them they were foolish. Tough to land on that shore with no support network, no friends, no manuals on proven missiological principles for reaching cannibal-infested islands where no white man had ever been. It was tough to live in a camp on the beach wondering how they would ever penetrate the jungles, the villages, and the hearts of the natives. It was tough when his wife gave birth to their child and died in childbirth along with the baby. It was tough to sleep on their graves every night lest the cannibals come and dig them up.

In time God began His move when an expelled native from the tribe found his way to the beach and made friends with Payton, taught him the language, and then led him back to the village. And although it had not been easy to minister there, he left thirty years later writing in his journal that he had come to the sound of cannibal drums and left to the sound of church bells.

It was tough for five brilliant, committed, savvy, and adventuresome young men to walk away from their wives and children and land on that Ecuadorian jungle beach on the Curaray River, trying to build friendship bridges with the Auca Indians, knowing full well that they might never see their wives and children again. And they didn't.

It is tough for a pastor in a small American village or a struggling urban ministry where no one knows his name, who is never asked to speak at conferences, who never knows the limelight. It's tough to be unaffirmed and criticized to boot. It's tough to be confused, to be weary, to be spent, and to have to spend again. It's just plain tough. And it's tougher now than it has been before. Yet

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the call comes for us to be faithful. To do our best. To do the best things, even in the worst times. To keep singing to ourselves the words of the Isaac Watts hymn:

*Am I a soldier of the cross,
A follower of the Lamb?
And shall I fear to own His cause,
Or blush to speak His name?*

*Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize
And sailed thro' bloody seas?*

*Are there no foes for me to face?
Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend to grace,
To help me on to God?*

*Sure I must fight if I would reign;
Increase my courage, Lord;
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
Supported by Thy Word.*

My mind reflects on the first three centuries of the church, when Christians did the best things in the worst times—in times not unlike our own. In fact, their era was far more brutal, more violent, and more oppressive toward Christianity than we will ever fear to face. Christians were burned at the stake, used by Nero as pitch-coated torches to light the streets of Rome, and fed to lions to the cheers of packed arenas. Yet they neither recoiled nor recanted. They were faithful from the very core of their beings. Ultimately, their faithfulness empowered by the Spirit made the difference. A difference so dramatic that after three hundred years of blood-spent, nonnegotiable perseverance by Christians, the godless empire declared Christianity the religion of the land.

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Charles Dickens opened his classic *The Tale of Two Cities* with the now familiar line, “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” Nothing could be more true for us as we move into the twenty-first century.

Although these days are for us “the worst of times,” they offer a strategic opportunity to present the clarity of the gospel to a world that more than ever has an increasing awareness of the needs and emptiness of life. As paganism matures, the despair, disorientation, and disenfranchisement will deepen as life gets worse and solutions prove ineffective. Then believers will have the opportunity to stand by the side of early Christians whose pagan environment gave them the privilege of impacting their world with the biblical strategy spoken of by Christ, who said:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:14–16)

It was to a persecuted and displaced church whose lot would get worse before it got better that Peter wrote:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation. (1 Peter 2:9–12)

Even a casual review of church history notes that the worst of times environmentally were actually the best of times for the church. When the pressure comes, a generation rises with clear and unflinching convictions, understanding their identity in Christ and the unsurpassed value of His eternal cause, and willing to be

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rejected, misunderstood, and underclassd for Christ if necessary. Such a generation has so undaunted and tenacious a grasp on truth and righteousness that it produces lives, families, and actions that are noticeably different in stability, peace, success, productivity, and an undaunted sense of hope and confidence. This noticeable difference becomes a compelling beam of light that a dark and despairing world cannot ignore.

If we do ministry well in these times that are for us increasingly the worst times, they may indeed prove to be, in the hand of God, the best times for the gospel and the advance of His kingdom.

Will Durant, who was often contemptuous of or amused by Christianity, writing of the rise of the church in the days of Caesar, drew this relevant and timely observation:

All in all, no more attractive religion has ever been presented to mankind. . . . It offered itself without restrictions to all individuals, classes, and nations; it was not limited to one people, like Judaism, nor to the freemen of one state, like the official cults of Greece and Rome. By making all men heirs of Christ's victory over death, Christianity announced the basic equality of men, and made transiently trivial all differences of earthly degree. To the miserable, maimed, bereaved, disheartened, and humiliated it brought the new virtue of compassion, and an ennobling dignity; it gave them the inspiring figure, story, and ethic of Christ; it brightened their lives with the hope of the coming Kingdom, and of endless happiness beyond the grave. To even the greatest sinners it promised forgiveness, and their full acceptance into the community of the saved. To minds harassed with the insoluble problems of origin and destiny, evil and suffering, it brought a system of divinely revealed doctrine in which the simplest could find mental rest. To men and women imprisoned in the prose of poverty and toil it brought the poetry of the sacraments. . . .

Into the moral vacuum of a dying paganism, into the coldness of Stoicism and the corruption of Epicureanism, into a world sick of brutality, cruelty, oppression, and sexual chaos, into a pacified empire that seemed no longer to need the masculine virtues of the gods of war, it brought a new morality of brotherhood, kindness, decency, and peace. So molded to men's wants, the new faith spread with fluid readiness. Nearly every convert, with the ardor of a revolutionary, made himself an office of propaganda.⁷

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If we are to be empowered like the early church, then we as spiritual leaders must know and be committed to the best things. Whether we pastors, leaders of Christian organizations, are deacons, elders, youth workers, Sunday school teachers, parents, spouses, or marketplace persons, our capacity to turn the downsides of these days to His advantage will begin with those of us who want to be impact players, and by the very nature of our position, are leaders committed to the nonnegotiated elements of ministry that are indeed the best things.

The essentials are basic and not difficult to grasp. They begin with affirming the divinely prescribed tasks of the church through the lives of shepherds who process ministry in a way that is worthy of respect as they become credible in personhood, proclamation, and the proficient outworking of their ministry.

Effectiveness into the coming century will be measured by knowing and doing the *best things*. May it be said of us, as it was said of Sir Robert Shirley, that the “church was built to the glory of God” by shepherds “whose singular praise it was to have done the best things in the worst times.”