

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 2, 1995, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

1 JOHN 2:15, 17

“Do not love the world or anything that belongs to the world. If you love the world, you do not have the love for the Father in you. . .The world and everything in it that people desire is passing away, but the person who does what God wants will live forever.” (Good News Bible)

**AMERICA: HOW DID WE GET HERE FROM THERE?
(5) Where do we go from here?**

This morning we complete the series of messages concerning America — where we are as a nation, and where we are as Christians so far as being “salt” and “light” in society. Today I want to ask the final question and that is, “Where do we go from here?”

I think that many of us as Christians are like Christopher Columbus. He didn’t know where he was going when he started; and when he got there, he didn’t now where he was; and when he got back, he didn’t know where he had been! I think, as Christians, a lot of times when we look at society and the mess it is in, we feel just like that.

I have had a two-fold purpose in this series of sermons:

(1) To gain an understanding of yesterday. I believe it is impossible for us to have a realistic understanding of where we are today without looking at our nation and our history. We have looked in some depth at the last four decades.

(2) The second purpose of this study is to develop a strategy for today. It is well to know what happened yesterday, but it is even more important for us to know what we ought to be doing so far as the future is concerned. So, let’s emphasize that, and let’s talk about it during the next few minutes.

What does the Church need in order to make a difference in our society?

1. The Church needs to have a realistic view of America. I think our sermon series has taught us several things:

(a) It has taught us that as a country we are on a downward trend. There is surely no doubt about that. All you have to do is to look at the 1960s, 70s, 80s, and 90s to know that we have been on a toboggan ride.

(b) It has also taught us that certain choices have caused this problem. Many choices which I believe we made deliberately have, in fact, flaunted God’s law and His purpose for us as a people and have told Him that we don’t really need Him.

(c) We have discovered that America no longer looks first to God. Unlike our forefathers

who would, in times of crisis, first look to God for help and strength, today we no longer do that. In the 60s we looked to the “Great Society” — our government as “Big Daddy” to meet our needs. In the 70s, because of Watergate and the ensuing national trauma, we began to run away from government, and we began to search for other ways to have our needs met, and by the 80s we took things into our own hands, and because of greed we began to say, “Let’s just get a lot of possessions and that will fulfill our needs.” And then in the 90s we find ourselves in disarray, emotionally and spiritually, not really knowing where to look.

A secular writer by the name of Karl Zimmerman, back in 1947, wrote a book in which, as a sociologist, he reflected upon the disintegration of cultures down through the centuries. He discovered that as a culture would fade into decline, there would be an alarming disintegration in family life. He listed seven ways in which this took place:

- a. Marriage loses its sacredness and is freely broken by divorce.
- b. Feminist movements abound.
- c. An increased public disrespect for parents and authorities in general.
- d. An acceleration of juvenile delinquency and rebellion.
- e. Refusal of people with traditional marriages to accept their family responsibilities.
- f. An increased desire for acceptance of adultery; and
- g. An increased interest in the spread of sexual per-versions and sex—related crimes.

This secular sociologist said almost 50 years ago that societies fall when these seven things happen to the family.

May I say in passing that I believe this new and awesome source of information called the “Internet” is one of the most dangerous inventions of this century. With the proper equipment you can bring up on your computer screen almost any information you want. Lots of splendid material is available, but there is also sexual and pornographic filth, raw moral sewage that could destroy the moral and spiritual fabric of America. Ted Koppel on “Nightline” this past week said that there are probably 50,000 people in our country today who are feeding the most lewd and degrading forms of pornography into this Internet system, and it can be accessed by a child of ten who knows how to use the system. So, I warn parents to be very careful how Internet is used in your home.

In Time magazine some time ago, an article appeared with the title, “Beyond 2000 — What to Expect in the New Millennium.” In a very dreary way this article predicted what will happen in the next century. Of course, it fails to take into account the love and power of God to redeem and revive. What they said about the family was especially grieving. Let me read you what the so-called wisdom of this world has to say, according to this article.

a. The family, as we have known it, will soon die. It is nothing more than an interesting anomaly, a mere blip in human history. We thought of it as normal, but we were wrong. The very term “nuclear family” will give off a musty smell in the days ahead.

b. Replacing the family will be multiple marriages, or what will be known as “serial monogamy.” Divorce will be so common as to be considered normal. Some marriage contracts

will have “sunset” clauses, to automatically terminate at a given age. One is reminded of the old couple, each 93 years-old, who filed for divorce. When asked why they had waited so long, they replied, “Oh, we thought we’d wait ‘till all the children were dead!”

c. Many women will live with other women, much like the “Golden Girls” are depicted in the T.V. sit-com.

d. Children will live with a bewildering array of relatives — mothers, fathers, multiple step-mothers and step-fathers, step-brothers, step-sisters, and so on and on.

e. There will be more older people and fewer children than ever before. A trend toward childlessness will accelerate.

f. Children will be routinely victimized; bounced from home to home as families splinter and re-form. Many will have no one to care for them. Boys and girls will roam the streets much as they did in Charles Dickens’ London, or as they do in Brazil today.

g. The triumph of feminist religion will cause many Christians and Jews to shun references to God in personal terms; no more “Lord” or Heavenly Father.” This, in turn, will strengthen the New Age movement that worships a mysterious “nature force.”

h. Forced abortion, such as China imposes upon its women, will be necessary in nations with exploding populations. And then,

i. The bottom line — “An even more radical approach may evolve. It is reasonable to ask whether there will be a family at all. Given the propensity for divorce, the growing number of adults who choose to remain single, the declining popularity of having children, the evaporation of time that families spend together, another way may eventually evolve. It may be quicker or more efficient to dispense with family-based reproduction. Society then could produce its future generations in institutions that might resemble state-sponsored baby hatcheries.”

This kind of prediction breaks your heart, doesn’t it, even though it only reflects worldly wisdom and insight? But it is certainly time for us Christians to wake up and realize how secular a nation we really are. The Church needs to have a realistic view of America. But,

2. The Church needs to have a realistic view of ourselves as the people of God. Look what Jesus said we were to be. Here is His expectation of us. He said, “You are like salt for all mankind. But if salt loses its taste, there is no way to make it salty again. It has become worthless, so it is thrown away and people walk on it. You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one lights a lamp to put it under a bowl. Instead he puts it on the lamp stand where it gives light for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine before people so that they may see the good things you do and give praise to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:13-16, Good News Bible)

Why does the Church have little positive influence on society? I believe there are two reasons:

- a. We love the world too much; and
- b. We love the Lord too little.

I think if I could put it in a nutshell, I would say that the problem with the Church today is that we have fallen in love with the world. Look at the awesome words with which the Apostle John challenges us in 1 John 2:15-17 (Phillips) — “Never give your hearts to this world or to any of the things in it. A man cannot love the Father and love the world at the same time.” As I told you in a sermon not long ago, John’s definition of “the world” is “anything that shuts God out of your life and makes you less zealous in following and serving Jesus.” And John goes on to talk to us about things that come out of the world — “For the whole world-system, based as it is on men’s desires, their greedy ambitions, and the glamour of all that they think splendid, is not derived from the Father at all, but from the world itself. The world and all its passionate desires will one day disappear. But the person who is following God’s will is going to live forever.” (Verses 16-17, Phillips.)

Now remember, the devil’s desire for us to love the world is nothing new. That was what he tried to do to Jesus. You remember how in the third temptation in the wilderness he said, “If You will just fall down and worship me, I’ll give You everything this world has to offer.” (Matthew 4:9) This is nothing new, this temptation to worldliness that we feel as Christians. Satan tries his very best to suck us into the deadly vortex so that he might destroy us.

You remember Lot in Sodom (Genesis 19). Lot in Sodom made four dreadful mistakes:

- a. He placed financial prosperity above spiritual prosperity. We are told that he chose for himself the well-watered plains of Jordan (Gen. 13:10-11).
- b. He thought he could live in Sodom and not be affected by it.
- c. He believed that his family would accept his words instead of his lifestyle.
- d. He didn’t realize how that evil society had such a pull on his family.

I ought to preach a sermon on this fourth point alone. You see, Lot kept his family in Sodom, and allowed them to accept the values of that society, and when the time came when God was going to destroy the wicked city, He said to Lot, “Get your family out of here as quickly as you can.” And what happened? When Lot tried to get the men, who were engaged to his daughters to flee with him to safety, they thought he was joking! He had allowed them to get so sucked into the world that when he tried to save them, they just cracked up and said, “This has got to be hysterical! Leave Sodom? No way. We’re enjoying the fun and games too much to leave this Mecca of pleasure!” Poor old Lot! He just didn’t realize how the evil society had such a strangle-hold on his family. And even when the angels tried to get him out of town, he hesitated, and they literally had to seize his hand and pull him out; he had been sucked so deeply into the lifestyle of Sodom.

You see, there is one principle that characterizes the church when it has a great impact

on society. It is the lordship principle. It is when Christians make Christ Lord of all of life, as we are in total submission to Him.

When Jesus said to Peter, “Launch out into the deep and put down your nets,” Peter must have thought, “Lord, I don’t mind You preaching from my boat, but now You’re beginning to meddle in my life as a fisherman, and so far as fishing is concerned, I’m the expert. Just keep out of this area of my life.” You know the story. But the principle is that as Christians we can’t compartmentalize God and keep Him in certain areas of our life but not in others. He demands to be in control of every area.

Now notice this: Submission to Christ must come before we make any attempt to change the world. I would contend that our problem is that as Christians we have tried to go out and change the world without allowing God to completely change us. And if we’re not changed, two things are evident:

a. Our beliefs and our behavior are not consistent. We will talk the talk without walking the walk. As offensive as it may seem, if you really want to see someone who believes and behaves in the same way, you often have to go to the “cults.” Isn’t that scary even to think about? But it’s true. If you want to see somebody who says something, and then follows through and does it, you often have to go the cults, not Christians, to see a model of consistency in belief and behavior.

In the mainline denominations in this country today so often we have what I would term “Cafeteria Christianity” — mix your own morals; choose your own values; pick your own commandments; but at the same time profess to be a good Christian!

In 1907 a man by the name of Reid Smoot was elected as a U.S. Senator from the state of Utah. In those days the Mormon Church still allowed polygamy, and some of the senators were reticent about seating Mr. Smoot because of his church’s belief, and they were really going after him in their sanctimonious way; until finally a senator from Pennsylvania stood up and looked at them, knowing that some of them were notorious philanderers, and he said, “I’d rather be seated beside a polygamist who doesn’t ‘polyg’ than beside a misogynist who doesn’t ‘misog’”! It’s so easy to make statements and not back them up with a corresponding lifestyle.

b. We rely on man-made systems instead of God. One of the finest things Chuck Colson has written is what I’m going to quote now. Listen — “The flaw of the 80s was to rely on politics alone as we admittedly sought a quick fix to the nation’s ills. This was appealing, but the excessive politicization damaged us in ways that now seem self-evident. For one thing, conservative Christians were stereotyped as the new ‘Religious Right’ and were dismissed as another special interest group. For another, many have married the gospel to a particular political agenda, and when their political spouse lost power, so did they. Third, many Christians focussed so much on politics and the kingdom of man that they forgot their first duty, which was membership in the Kingdom of God — worship, evangelism, and discipleship. This is why powerful movements transforming society so often move, not from the top down, but from the bottom up. Two centuries ago John Wesley preached to working class crowds across England. Hearts were changed through the power of the Holy Spirit, the ‘Great Awakening’ began, and

political reforms, such as the abolition of slavery and improved conditions of the poor, and educational reforms, inevitably followed. As we take stock, I think we will awaken to the profound truth that being precedes doing. What we do must flow from what we are. We cannot export something that we don't have. Before we can bring a holy influence into society, we must first be holy people; and the institution by which we are equipped to be holy people is the Church, the community whose identity, purpose and mission transcends political agendas and whose power comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit. This means getting back to the basics. The Church must be the Church, holy communities of men and women being equipped to be God's people in the world, witnessing His love and truth to society. This is the key to our influence. We will never win the war by 'our man' who is sitting in the White House, nor will we lose it when our candidate is defeated. We will win by building up the body of Christ. We will win it one house, one block at a time, as God's people are equipped by the Church to live out their faith in this world. And as we do this, we must keep our priorities straight. If the Church is to have a reforming influence, its first priority must be, as the people of God, to worship and serve our King, and all else will flow from this."

In Exodus 32 we read how God was prepared to wipe out the people of Israel because of their gross idolatry in crafting a golden calf which they proceeded to worship. Moses came down from Mount Sinai, bearing in his arms the tables of stone on which were inscribed the Ten Commandments, and he was outraged by such hideous idolatry. And God said to Moses, "I'm going to destroy the nation of Israel because of their spiritual adultery." And three things happened:

a. Moses put God on the line. Moses said, "God, how can You do this? These are Your covenant people! You promised to take care of them." In other words, Moses said, "God, You can't wipe them out. You promised that Abraham's seed would be as numerous as the stars in the sky."

b. Moses put his people on the line. He said to them, "God will relent if we become holy people once more and forsake our wicked ways." And,

c. Moses put himself on the line as their leader. He said, "God, please forgive their sin, but if not, blot me out of the book You have written. Take me first. Wipe me out!" In other words, Moses said, "As a leader I challenge my people to be holy people, and if I can't have a holy people, then take me!"

We're so excited, and rightly so, about the building of our new church; but if we're just going to move a bunch of people to a new location and not have holy people, I don't want to go. A building program is not at the top of my priority list. I want to see holy people raised up so that when we get to Kingstowne, we can get on our knees and worship the one and only true and living God. If I can't have a church of holy people, I don't want a church. We will only make an impact on the Franconia/Kingstowne corridor and beyond if we are a holy people. The only difference we will make on America is if we live what we talk. Do you live it? At home, at work, amongst your friends, as an American citizen, are you known to be a holy person because you walk the walk?

Where do we go from here? We go to total, unconditional commitment to Christ; and if you are not prepared to make that kind of commitment, then there's no way God can use you for His purpose — to bring this great country of ours back to Himself through a spiritual revival.

Joshua said, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!" If God's people would say that, and then act upon it, we would soon see a transformed America!

AMEN.