

Living in Babylon

How are Christians to be in the world but not of it? Don Closson offers a way to think about the American culture that God has placed us into.



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Since the era of the Moral Majority and the rise of the so called “religious right,” there has been an ongoing debate within the Christian community about how to define the appropriate relationship between Christians and the contemporary American culture. Many believers find the teaching that Christians are to be “in the world but not of it” difficult to interpret and apply to their daily lives.

Part of our problem in relating to our culture is in identifying an accurate metaphor for modern America. Some see America as a new Israel, a nation that God has providentially blessed, a nation that is special to God in a way that other nations are not. When pressed, few would actually claim that America has replaced Israel of the Old Testament, but many see America as a uniquely Christian nation. Although one cannot dismiss the powerful influence that Christian thought has had on this country, this view of America raises some difficult questions.

For instance, how should believers respond when a majority of Americans reject the Christian worldview regarding specific moral issues such as abortion or gay rights? To what length are we required to go to maintain a Christian society? Many now believe that we are confronted with the dilemma of living in a largely post-Christian America, and that soon we will no longer have the political power to pass legislation that would enforce our views.

A few have already given in to the temptation to respond

violently when the legal system fails to promote a biblical standard, resulting in murdered abortion doctors and bombs set off outside of gay bars in the name of Christ. They reason that if God ordered the Promised Land to be purged of Baal worshippers and their sinful culture by force, violence is justified today in the U.S. to remove its sinful practices.

Christians almost seem surprised to encounter sin in America, or to discover that our culture might be following the path of European nations that had previously been influenced by biblical truth. Some act as if God has promised that America would be exempt from worldly temptations. Even though the vast majority of Christians don't stockpile weapons or plan violent revolution, some of us become angry and paralyzed by the way America has changed over the last few decades.

Rather than seeing the U.S. as the new Israel, it might be more helpful to see it as a modern Babylon. Christians in America should see a reflection of themselves in Daniel, who found himself exiled in Babylon and having to live in an alien culture that was often hostile to his faith. Or perhaps we should identify with the apostle Paul who planted churches and disciplined future leaders under the cruel and tyrannical Roman government.

Let's consider what it means to live a life worthy of the calling that we have in Christ in modern day America, and seek to better understand the admonition to be "in the world but not of it."

Aliens and Strangers

In his new book, *Standing for Christ in a Modern Babylon*, Marvin Olasky argues that if we are to have an influence on the culture that exists in America today, we need to see ourselves more like Daniel in Babylon than like Joshua taking the Promise Land. America is very different from Joshua's situation. Ancient Israel was a theocracy established and

ruled by God for a people who had covenanted with God to live according to Mosaic Law and to be separate from other cultures. America is neither a theocracy nor a promised land. Although America benefited from the participation of godly men and biblical ideals during its founding, it is a republic that derives the right to rule from its people. As people have moved away from strongly held Christian convictions, so have its institutions.

Olasky describes modern America as a theme park for liberty, noting that it is idolized by the rest of the world as a country that promotes nearly unlimited personal freedom without any commensurate requirement for virtue. It is very much part of the "world" or *cosmos* that the New Testament writers John, Paul and James warn us that is contrary to the Gospel of Christ. Regarding this "world" James writes, "don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." (James 4:4) To be a friend of the world is to agree with a system of values that the world represents. This worldview refuses to acknowledge God's role as creator and sustainer of the universe and rejects the moral structure that He made part of its existence. It also rejects the need for a savior. It's not that there is no support for Christian virtue left in America, but that the predominant set of values found in our major institutions no longer reflects a biblical worldview.

If asked, most believers would agree that our life here on earth is principally a place to prepare for the next life. The New Testament provides a clear picture of what our relationship to the world should be characterized by. In 1 Peter (2:11-12) we are told, "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he

visits us.”

Our lives here in America, or wherever God puts us, are to be characterized by the awareness that the world as it exists is not our permanent abode. Our affection for the things of this world should fade, and our desire to build God’s Kingdom should increase because we have become “fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.” (Eph. 2:19)

Ambassadors for Christ

Considerable energy is spent by sincere and well-meaning Christians to make America a more righteous nation. Their dream is to use political power to transform the American culture and its institutions into a society that becomes a beacon to the world for God’s righteousness and compassion. Others have given up on America and see separation from its worldly culture as the only appropriate Christian response, turning their backs to the political process as well as the arts and entertainment that it offers. Many Christians live in a state of constant tension between the heavenly Kingdom of God and the earthly kingdom that God has placed them into. They endure a dual citizenship that seems to pull them in two opposite directions.

The problem for Christians hoping to transform American society is that, although the Bible tells us much about the kind of culture that is to exist within the church, it says little about what kind of culture should exist outside of it. The New Testament doesn’t encourage believers to fight for political reform or even for religious freedom within the Roman political system of the day. There are many “one another” passages that describe how one believer is to relate to another believer, and there are places where we are told to pray for our political leaders and to obey our country’s laws. But little is said about the kind of political or social institutions that should be endorsed by Christians. Beyond working for justice and human dignity in a general way, how

should Christians relate to the current society that we live in?

A clear biblical teaching for all believers is that we are to be ambassadors for Christ. Some may be called vocationally to politics, the arts, or even the entertainment world, but each of us can and should be an ambassador for God's Kingdom wherever He places us and regardless of how He has gifted us as individuals. To do this well, ambassadors need to be cognizant of our sovereign's message or agenda. 2 Cor. 5:18-20 says that we have been given a message of reconciliation, and that God is using us to appeal to our neighbors to be reconciled with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

All of us desire to see our culture transformed into a reflection of God's truth, justice, and mercy. However, we also need to acknowledge the role of providence in both the timing and the extent of any future cultural revival. America has experienced awakenings in the past and God has certainly used individuals and organizations to realign our culture with His character. But ultimately the timing and the manner of revival is in God's hands and it will be accomplished by those who see themselves as ambassadors sharing Christ, not as a King David ruling on God's throne over America.

Jeremiah's Charge

Using the metaphor of believers in Babylon, it might be helpful to read how the prophet Jeremiah told the children of Israel to live among the pagans of that day. He told them to:

“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will

prosper.” (Jer. 29:4-7)

It is significant what Jeremiah did *not* tell the Jews to do while in Babylon. They were not told to establish the Kingdom there; it wasn't the right place or time. They were also not instructed to use guerilla tactics to overthrow the Babylonian political structures. God Himself would eventually bring about the conditions of their release to rebuild the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem. They were to instead seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which God had sent them, and to pray to God for it. This is very similar to the language that Paul uses in writing to Timothy when he tells him to pray “for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” (1 Tim. 2:1-3) As mentioned earlier, Peter says we are to “live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (1 Pet. 2:12) He literally says that we are to live a “noble lifestyle” so that the pagans will see our good works and eventually recognize and give glory to God.

Unfortunately, according to recent surveys Christians are not known for their “noble lifestyles.” In one survey, George Barna discovered that “evangelicals” ranked near the bottom of a list of population segments regarding favorable or positive impressions, right between lesbians and prostitutes.^{1} We are often so consumed by our displeasure with what unbelievers are doing that we fail to see the activities of our daily lives in terms of ministry. When we integrate into our daily living an understanding to reflect God's image, be stewards over His creation, and love others as we love ourselves, we will begin to view all of our activities as acts of worship and service to God. As Peter reminds us regarding Christian maturity: “For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 1:8)

The Language of Addition

How do we stand for Christ as His ambassador in America without getting depressed? It might be helpful to ask how the apostle Paul kept his cool in Athens as he viewed the various idols built for a pantheon of Greek and Roman gods, or how Daniel was able to function in a pagan Babylonian government that “praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand.” (Dan. 5:23) Both men probably had to turn to God often, quiet their souls, and occasionally see some humor in the culture in which God had placed them, all the while realizing that it is ultimately God who changes cultures by working through flawed but redeemed individuals.

Marvin Olasky remarks in *Standing for Christ in a Modern Babylon* on the impractical focus Christians often have on using censure, boycotts, or legislation to erase sinful behavior from American society. He writes: “We need to understand that saying, ‘Thou shalt do X because God says so,’ leads to blank stares or incredulous glances. . . .”^{2} He adds “We should understand that in the American liberty theme park, we cannot eliminate the negative; so our realistic option is to emphasize the positive.”^{3} A nation that has elevated tolerance and choice to its greatest virtues is much more likely to respond to positive moral alternatives than to chastisement.

Just as Paul offered an alternative to the gods of Athens, we need to be prepared to suggest a Christian alternative to the views held by unbelievers in America. As effective ambassadors everywhere must do, we need to understand the issues of the day and respond in a manner that resonates with the culture.

When P.E.T.A. and others extol the rights of the “species of the month” while saying nothing of the killing of unborn children, we need to suggest the view that children are far more precious than chickens, dogs, and cats. When the splendor

and wonder of human sexuality is twisted and perverted in novel ways, we need to be ready to offer the benefits and beauty of monogamous heterosexual unions for both spouses and their offspring. When someone argues that morality is subjective and that anarchy is a reasonable response, we should be prepared to offer a picture of how biblically revealed virtues can profit a society. Using the language of addition will encounter far more listening ears in America than will the language of boycotts, censure, and anger.

The ultimate reason for being an effective ambassador, and for apologetics, is to improve the chances that the gospel will be heard and received. Our mission is not to merely reduce sin but to model Christ so that people will come to know and accept the wonderful message “that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them . . . so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor. 5:19,21)

Notes

1. Barna Research Online, <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=127&Reference=D> (Jan. 30, 2004).
2. Marvin Olasky, *Standing for Christ in a Modern Babylon* (Wheaton, Ill.:, Crossway Books, 2003), 23.
3. Ibid.

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