

The Wilberforce Movement: A Summary Paper

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The Problem

Western civilization and all it has meant to human progress and flourishing is at its moment of greatest peril: under assault from without by aggressive Islamic extremism, from within by aggressive secularism. We see the latter in the abandonment of the moral values essential to sustain freedom and human dignity, the demographic decline, and the loss of civic courage. This is no less a threat than are terrorist bombs.

The current financial worldwide meltdown is a tragic illustration of what happens when people embrace a lie—a false view of the world. The current crisis started when politicians, albeit well intended, enacted laws to make home ownership available to everyone (whether they could meet credit standards or not). Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac were loaded with lush patronage jobs and in turn were a source of contributions to the politicians who funded them. Government policies were motivated by utopian notions, shaped by the postmodern worldview that there are no limits, that we can do and have whatever we want.

Wall Street soon got in on the act, creating mortgage-backed securities, new instruments that would bundle mortgages with different risk levels, which could then be sold to hedge funds. This was a brand new market, and Wall Street got rich. The problem was they made wrong moral decisions from the beginning. These mortgage-backed securities separated risks from rewards; so mortgage lenders could lend to anyone—and did—whether they could pay back the mortgage or not, because they wouldn't have to worry about repayment. The mortgage would be purchased by some anonymous enterprise in Zurich, lenders would get their fees up front, Wall Street would get their fees, and if the borrower couldn't pay in a few years he would simply sell his home for more than he bought it (everyone assumed home values would keep rising). So everybody got rich. People got homes.

Until, that is, home prices stopped rising. The whole scheme corrupted people. Mortgage lenders were promoting mortgages through the Internet, television and every other way, doing anything they could to get people to take money. The more a person borrowed, the better. Many in Wall Street realized the credit binge could last, and hedged their own sales.

Some lonely voices warned us. The late Larry Burkett was the first. One highly regarded Third World economist said that America was creating an unsustainable culture of debt, that the whole house of cards would have to collapse. When, as had to happen, the schemes began to unravel, Wall Street came up with the euphemism that we were simply de-leveraging. And politicians moved in to try to stop the economic free fall by pouring more money into an already overburdened debt structure. That's like pouring gasoline on a fire: No one has ever spent their way out of bankruptcy.

Millions of Americans bought the lie, believing their leaders who said it was patriotic to spend. Then we were seduced by the totally consumer-driven culture: If you want it, charge it, was the mantra.

Who could survey this disaster and conclude that worldviews don't matter? We should have learned long ago that free markets only work when people exercise civic responsibility. They only work within a Christian worldview that respects thrift, hard work, deferred gratification, paying bills, the rule of law. As theologian Michael Novak so trenchantly observed, free western democracy is like a three-legged stool—resting on political freedom, economic freedom, and moral restraint. Take one leg away and the stool collapses. Our stool has collapsed.

This is not so much a fiscal crisis as a crisis of character. The bill is now coming due from decades of self-indulgence, fueled by the embrace of relativism, an all-restraints-are-off way of life, and rampant materialism. We live in a nation that has lost its way, that can only be fixed when the lie is exposed—the lie that is that we can forget God and by our clever schemes build our own utopia.

Where did the lie come from?

In mid-18th century Europe, the old order had become corrupt, monarchs tyrannical, the church exhausted. Intellectuals began to talk about new ways of making sense of the world. Avant garde artists and writers were the toast of the town in Paris, while theologians withdrew into pious quietude, letting matters take their course. Disparities between the rich and poor were growing. Politicians cared only about their power base to protect them against new ideas.

Clusters of free-thinking writers, critics, and savants led a movement called the Encyclopedists, determined to break away from the constraints of Christendom with its worldly clerics and pompous church-backed monarchs. The ideas of men like Diderot, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Jean LeRond took root among the intelligentsia. The Encyclopedia project, that is, the outlines of a new western secular utopia, impacted scientific speculation, artistic innovation and political transformation led by men like Darwin, Beethoven and Marx. This was called the New Enlightenment in which reason could lead us away from religious repression and superstition.

The very idea of truth was up for grabs. Thinkers like Webber, James, Freud, Dewey, and a cast of thousands built on those first monumental efforts to create a worldview of secular rationalism created a whole new way to look at life, consigning the old religious order to the margins of society. This gave rise to the modern age of secular humanism, scientific rationalism, political utopianism and artistic freewheeling.

The basic problem with what has been called modernism is that it separated reason from faith. But all reason must proceed from certain faith assumptions; otherwise it has no authority for its views. In the post-World War II era, as existentialism came from Europe and swept across American campuses, fueled by the writings of Camus and Sartre, a revolt against discredited modernism, something we now call postmodernism, took root.

But postmodernism, attempting to free humans from the constraints of faith or reason, ushered in an era of relativism and moral libertarianism. It was as much a revolution as the revolution which led to the birth of our nation. This destruction of moral authority was the equivalent of sending an engraved invitation to militant Islam, which has long argued that the West is decadent and will destroy itself. So when Janet Jackson revealed her breast before the biggest television audience in history, the Super Bowl, it fueled the movement of radical Islam. All the while in the West, New Age prophets made the idea of a god or our own making incredibly attractive.

The exhaustion of the Enlightenment and Modernist project is evident to all. The 20th century, for all its successes and progress, did not give us the promised utopia. It gave us the bloodiest, scariest, most chaotic and confused era since the last days of the Roman Empire. And the present century, beginning as it did in the uncertainties and apocalyptic warnings of the Y2K scare and now a worldwide financial collapse, continues on the same trajectory.

The most serious problem is that the church has bought in to much of the modernist/postmodernist secular view of reality. The church has privatized itself, indifferent to what the Bible says about all of life and all of the world. We have contented ourselves to enjoy a sort of hot-tub religion in which therapy has replaced Truth. We do not have an integrated view of life, that is, every aspect informed by biblical truth. Nor does the church have a good sense of its own orthodox roots, the faith entrusted to the saints once for all, the apostles' teaching of the early church, which gave birth to the greatest religious movement in human history and in turn created the greatest civilization ever.

The Current Dilemma

Many Christians are frustrated as we steadily lose influence and secularism becomes, as Herbert London put it in his latest book, the religion of the age. With Christianity being pushed to the corners of society, assaults on religious liberty take place with abandon and are more often than not successful. And we see less and less biblical influence in society, even as the Lie is becoming more and more apparent to people.

For 30 years, the church has fought the cultural battle, principally in the political arena. It has had some success. But it is now in virtual exile. How do we recover?

We must start with basics. Politics, after all, is nothing but an expression of culture; and culture is nothing, as Henry Van Til once remarked, but religion incarnate. So to renew a society, to expose a lie, to restore a healthy biblical worldview in culture, the place to start is in the church. A renewed and strengthened church can profoundly influence our culture. And a healthy culture will spawn people of character and good will to serve in public office. So the most important answer to what threatens the very existence of Western civilization today and the greatest experiment in ordered liberty ever enjoyed by a people lies in renewing the church. The church can transform culture.

It has Happened Before

The First-Century Church. The early church certainly illustrates how great movements are forged. The Gospel was rejected by the establishment of the day, in Jerusalem, Rome, and then in Greece and elsewhere. No prominent figures led it. It was a completely countercultural movement, spread from cell to cell, home to home.

In third-century Rome, when the plagues swept the cities, the wealthy, including the doctors, fled. The Christians stayed and nursed the dying. Many died themselves. But their sacrifice drew thousands to the church. It spread organically, and in a short time became the established religion of Rome.

Celtic Revival. Beginning in the fifth century, after the fall of Rome, the Spirit moved in Ireland. When Patrick arrived around 430 AD, there were but a handful of Christians in that pagan, barely civilized land. It was a land of warring, raiding tribes. There were no cities, no common language; political rule was exercised by tribal kings. While Europe was in decline with the barbarian invasions, a kind of spiritual sclerosis settled on the churches of Europe. But, by the turn of the sixth century, out of Ireland came a powerful renewal, which had been started by St. Patrick. Untold thousands became believers. This Celtic revival swept over all of Ireland, Britain, leapt across the English Channel, and took root in the low countries and Gaul. By the ninth century, it had spread all over Europe. The monasteries that had been established became centers of worship, scholarship, community, culture and social reform.

But by the sixteenth century much of Christendom was in the tight grip of an increasingly corrupt church in Rome, which operated in alliance with princes and kings throughout Europe. Though it is little publicized, there were stirrings of a Catholic reform movement that predated Luther and Calvin, though many of its adherents later worked with both of the great Protestant reformers.

The Reformation. Luther likened the church, having lost its orthodox teaching and having fallen into various forms of political corruption, to the Jews in Babylonian captivity. In 1520, he issued his first major pamphlet, “The Pagan Servitude of the Church.” The people of God, he argued, were prisoners of a false worldview.

The Reformation itself was moved by a burning desire to go back to the apostolic era, the church fathers, and recover the true Gospel. That has been the burden of every spiritual order that has come into being since—the scholastic theologians, the leaders of the Catholic Reformation. It motivated the courage of the Separatists against the liberalizing efforts of the Latitudinarians in seventeenth century England. It led to the efforts to recover the Gospel and revive the church by Whitfield, Edwards, Wesley and the revivalists and reformers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The Wesley Awakening. Wesley sought the reform of England at a time when it was every bit as apostate as America is today, every bit as dead spiritually as Europe is today. It was a perk of office for a Bishop to have a mistress. Slave traders had bought out seats in the Parliament, which gave rise to the term “the rotten borough system.” Wesley,

working with Edwards and Whitfield, produced small societies, cell groups across England committed to holiness, righteous living, and the restoration of biblical orthodoxy. Wesley's preaching and teaching influenced William Wilberforce, a member of Parliament, who was joined by other reformers in something called the Clapham Sect. The members lived in close proximity, prayed together three hours a day, and led the political campaign against the greatest abomination of modern times, the slave trade. For 20 years and against huge odds and against the financial interests of the British Empire, the reformers succeeded in abolishing the slave trade in 1807; in 1833, days before Wilberforce died, slavery itself was abolished in the British Empire.

But it didn't stop there. This passion moved great social reformers like Lord Shaftesbury. There were over a thousand of what Edmund Burke called the "little platoons," societies formed to end a host of abuses. Poor houses were cleaned up; reform of child labor laws was enacted; unions were organized, establishing the rights of individuals to human dignity in the workplace. A great reform movement spread across England, fueled by Wesley, whose 236 books were circulated by circuit riders, as Wilberforce's pamphlets were, through this network that permeated British culture. Tidal waves of public support pressured government leaders. The culture was transformed. From this came William Booth's assault on the slums of East London and the great Oxford movement, led by John Cardinal Newman. The movement attacked liberal theology and brought about a new emphasis on early church teachings. This spread through the Anglican and Catholic churches, fighting the increased secularization of the Church of England.

One thing all of these movements had in common was to bring the church back to the faith entrusted once for all to the saints, to free it from the grip of cultural fads and utopian schemes. They also had in common a passionate desire, led by the Spirit, to renew the cultures in which they lived. As the monks did in the monastic era when they preserved the great canons of Western civilization, they re-invigorated arts, literature, music, and the best of culture.

The Church Together

Many of these movements, particularly in modern times, have been marked by unity among all believing churches. Abraham Kuyper, the great Reformed theologian, led just such a movement in Holland at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The Dutch churches, which had been captive to secularism, were revived, and a great political movement followed led by Kuyper himself, who became Prime Minister.

We are seeing signs of this common commitment to orthodoxy today and defending the Christian faith, just as we saw it in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Just two years ago, Pope Benedict XVI and the head of the Orthodox Church of Greece, Archbishop Christodoulos, agreed to join forces in defending Christian values against growing secularism in Europe. During his recent trip to Turkey, Benedict signed a similar joint declaration with Patriarch Bartholomew I, spiritual leader of the world's 250 million Orthodox Christians. Similar movements are occurring between evangelicals and Catholics, most notably Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT), a group of prominent Catholics and evangelicals that for the past 15 years has been seeking common

ground. Most recently, Pope Benedict gave a remarkable homily in which he embraced the basic truths of *sola fide*, justification by faith alone. Churches, regardless of tradition or background, recognize that when a great movement of the Church starts, it must embrace all true believers.

The crisis demands that, even as we acknowledge our theological differences, we stand together to defend Christian influence as the only hope to save Western civilization.

The Wilberforce Solution

Some years ago, we realized that if the church was to be revitalized, it would need stronger teaching in biblical worldview and biblical orthodoxy. The Wilberforce Forum was established, first to start teaching this to serious Christian laymen. Thus was born the Centurions Program. Each year a hundred mature Christians agree to a one year course of instruction, including three residencies at a training center near the Prison Fellowship headquarters. In between, there is much learning online. A very impressive faculty has been assembled, and Centurions have come over the last five years from every Christian tradition and denomination to be grounded in biblical truth, to become serious disciples, and to become themselves teachers of biblical worldview.

Of the 500 graduates thus far, over half are active either in their churches or in their communities, teaching worldview. Some have had spectacular results. Regional cohorts have been formed of Centurions who meet together, study together, continue to learn from one another, and spread that teaching through their areas of influence.

The next phase of the project has been to assemble all of Chuck Colson's teachings from his 25 books, thousands of lectures, writings, and thousands of BreakPoint commentaries. All of this is being organized into a new website, which will be launched in June 2009. This will make available in audio and video and printed form not only Colson's vast resource of Christian worldview teachings, but also the teachings of the Centurions faculty, a very impressive and distinguished group. Access will be available on the website to some of the classic teachings of Francis Schaeffer, Abraham Kuyper and others. It will be a unique resource for those seeking to learn biblical orthodoxy and biblical worldview. People coming to the website will be able to download courses or custom design a course for their church from the wealth of video materials available. All of the Centurion teaching will be online, so will Colson's many DVD teaching programs such as *The Faith*, "Wide Angle" with Rick Warren, and *How Now Shall We Live?* with Nancy Pearcey. The website will be linked to other available resources so that churches may draw from the very best of orthodox Christian teaching to equip their own members to do what the church is called to do in today's culture; that is, to defend the Truth and to not only proclaim but live out the Gospel in every single walk of life.

The Movement. The object of this website and the work of the Wilberforce Forum, however, is not simply to provide resources to those who want it. Rather, it is to fuel a social movement, that is, to reach out to the church to create the kind of movement that we saw in England in the nineteenth century, equipping believers to embark on a common mission, nurturing Christian transformation in minds, lives, relationships,

ministries, and spheres of influence across the country. Much as Wesley created small groups across England, we will encourage small groups and cohorts led by Centurions and others to form informal centers of teaching and learning in every community in America.

Recognizing that this is much too big a task for one ministry, we conducted a conference call with 20 other Christian leaders whose organizations advance biblical orthodoxy or a biblical worldview. It was an extraordinary meeting in which all of the participants agreed to work together in a movement. This is not to raise one organization over another; nor is this to create a new organization; nor is this to get credit. It is rather to spread the resources. It is to draw upon the best teaching wherever it is.

Chuck Colson told the conferees that his purpose was not to advance himself or his organization. At 77 he wants only to be expended and used to support all institutions and groups committed to the same goal. This needs to be a genuine movement led by God's Spirit, not by any individual; one in which all the resources of people working in this area can be pooled and shared, where websites can be linked, where one group, the Centurions perhaps, might teach the staff of another Christian para-church movement; or where *The Truth Project* might be encouraged by all of the participants in the movement; where the published resources of, for example, the Acton Institute, might be more broadly used and where the great teaching of institutions like Biola or Calvin could be made available on line to lay people.

The whole object of the movement is to penetrate culture. The frontal assault over the last several years has proven inadequate. What we must do now is be salt and light, rubbed into the culture so to speak, in such a way that the people and institutions around us slowly begin to understand that they have embraced the Lie. Our job is to expose the Lie and replace it with the Truth of a biblical understanding of all of reality.

Conclusion

If the right resources are invested, a truly grassroots movement can be inspired in America. It took decades for this to happen in England. But with today's instant communications and ability to share resources over the Internet, a movement like this could begin to have a tremendous impact in just a few years. It is the old Navigators model of disciples making disciples; it is the Wesley concept of small groups. It is the Celtic concept of creating centers of learning and knowledge to preserve the great truths of the Western civilization and of the Bible. It is to bring together the best that we can learn from the Christian experience over 2,000 years, to penetrate modern American and Western culture, to reverse the downward spiral, to turn what is now upside down right-side up, to expose the Lie and to defend the Truth.