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GOD

IS THE ISSUE

BRAD BRIGHT

REVISED



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God Is the Issue: Becoming an Agent of Real Change

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This book is dedicated to the man who has made the God of the Bible the issue wherever he has gone for more than fifty years. From him I learned that one's perspective on all of life's issues, big and small, is colored by one's view of God. And today, I too believe with everything inside me that God is the single issue upon which all of life hinges. I dedicate this book to the greatest man I have ever known, or ever expect to know—my father.

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But there are two people to whom I owe my greatest thanks. The first is my late father, Bill Bright, who over a period of months convinced me that I needed to write this book. Without his encouragement I would have never begun the process. The second is my beloved bride, Kathy, whose tremendous patience, understanding, listening skills, and encouragement gave me the time, space, and daily feedback I needed to effectively formulate my thoughts on paper. She deserves as much credit as I for this book.

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Foreword

One afternoon just prior to 9/11, my younger son, Brad, dropped by the house. Sitting at the kitchen table we began chatting as we often do. And as is pretty typical in our family, the conversation soon moved to a discussion of the current state of our American culture. Our two sons, Zac and Brad, spent their growing up years exposed to a constant stream of national and world visitors through our home, listening to and participating in dialogue about God and the needs of the world around us. Now that the boys are grown and have their own families and ministries for our Lord, little has changed when we sit down together. Zac brings the thoughtfulness of a pastor/philosopher, while Brad injects the viewpoint of a former political activist now ministering with Campus Crusade for Christ.

This particular day I was exercised afresh about the terrible tragedy of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision, which has resulted in the murder of approximately 40 million innocent unborn babies. I have several times proposed to have myself lashed to the pillars of the Supreme Court building until that horrendous ruling is rescinded. (I have never followed through with that action largely due to my beloved wife, Vonette, who shares my views concerning the evil of abortion but prayed with me for a better solution.)

“But Dad, abortion is not the real issue,” Brad said.

The puzzled look on my face was an invitation for him to

continue: “Abortion is just a symptom. God is the issue! Abortion, homosexuality, active euthanasia, and pornography are all just symptoms. We have let others set the agenda for us. They have framed the debate and we have been foolish enough to accept their terms of engagement. We must reframe the entire rhetorical playing field in order to make God the issue within the culture.”

As Brad continued to flesh out his thoughts, the light went on! Why had I not thought of this before? As a nation, our spiritual blood has been poisoned, yet we are merely treating the boils that have resulted. In order to cure a sick culture, we must attack the root cause: the exclusion of God from American culture. “You must write your ideas down,” I said to Brad.

In the months following that initial conversation, I continued to urge him to commit his ideas to writing and refine them into book form. I consider them important enough for every leader in America who follows Jesus Christ to consider. Much of what our Founding Fathers put in place still stands—a free press, individual liberty, a market economy, and so on. But without question, the greatest difference between the America of 1776 and the America of 2003 is the banishment of the God of the Bible—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—from the public square. *That fundamental flaw in the fabric of our modern culture can be traced the weakening of every moral seam since.* Only by restoring God to His rightful place as the central issue in all of human life—political, spiritual, moral, economic, philosophical—will there be sufficient motivation and reason to correct what ails America.

In the following pages Brad demonstrates the absolutely

critical distinction between focusing on morality and focusing on the *source* of morality in the public square—the God of the Bible. Morality is only a symptom. God is the cause. The question we must ask ourselves is whether or not we are content to merely suppress cultural symptoms such as abortion, with varying degrees of success, or whether we really wish to cure the underlying disease. How we answer this question has major implications for how we expend our time, energies, and resources.

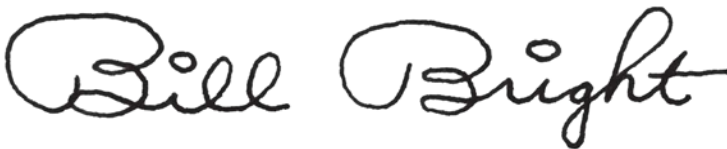
There are three reasons I am pleased to commend Brad's book to you: First, it is a message both Brad and I believe is from God Himself, nurtured in Brad's heart and confirmed in mine during years of observing godlessness from one coast to another in our country. Whether working with political leaders in Washington, D.C., or debating anti-God radicals on the university campus, Brad's conviction that God is the issue has grown deep roots and borne abundant fruit.

Second, the message of *God Is the Issue* is eminently biblical, and a message for our times. While wishing I had enjoyed Brad's insights fifty years ago in my own ministry, I can rest in the fact that God raises up His spokesmen (and spokeswomen, like Esther) to come to the kingdom "for just such a time as this." I believe this book is a sorely needed paradigm message for America, and that it comes providentially at this time.

Third, every Christian can and should apply this approach when tackling the tough moral, spiritual, and political issues facing our nation. Paradigm shifts do not happen overnight. But the progress we make in thinking, and therefore acting, biblically about this subject will determine the kind of culture our children and grandchildren will inherit from us.

We need not settle for a “post-Christian America,” or yield to the relentless onslaught against the God whose followers were instrumental in founding this great nation. As Ezekiel saw the dry bones of Israel come back to life before his eyes, we can see the soul of America revived by restoring God to His rightful place in our land—in our hearts, on our lips, in our homes, in the boardroom, in the classroom, in the marketplace, in the public square, and in the halls of government.

Brad and I are praying that God will place it upon the hearts of leaders to intentionally influence tens of millions of our fellow Americans to once again make the God of the Bible the watershed issue within our culture. It is our desire that America will *soon* say again with sincerity and authenticity, “In God we trust.” Learning to attack the cause instead of the symptoms of moral and spiritual decay will require a reprogramming for today’s Christian community. We are counting on you to be a part of this God-ordained movement for His glory and praise as we seek to help our fellow countrymen once again discover the God of the Bible.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill Bright". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a large, prominent "B" at the beginning and a long, sweeping tail on the "t".

Founder, Campus Crusade for Christ, Int'l

Introduction

There are moments in life when we must face reality, ask the tough questions, and then choose a new course of action. I believe American Christians are at one of those crossroads in the history of our nation. The strategies of the past few decades to recapture the culture are not getting the job done. We are losing the battle for the hearts and minds of our fellow countrymen.

This book was conceived in the fall of 1992 as I sat in a pew at Hollywood Presbyterian Church listening to Dr. Lloyd Ogilvie (who went on to serve eight years as the Chaplain of the United States Senate before retiring in March 2003). His sermon that day was entitled “The Answer is God.” For years I reflected on the meaning of what he said that day, and I too have come to the conclusion that the answer is God—both in street-level practice and in theory. He is the answer to every dysfunction I face as an individual, and He is the answer to every dysfunction we face as a society. If there is no God, then the questions of life are truly meaningless. In the words of King Solomon of ancient Israel, “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). God really is the only issue.

Since the nation’s founding, many churches across America have preached consistently about the person of Jesus Christ. That history has been punctuated by several periods of preaching on various and sundry social ills. During the decades since the moral upheaval of the 1960s, we have seen an increase in that kind of preaching again. And yet, despite our preaching, as

we begin the new millennium we are confronted with a society that is shamelessly attempting to shake off all remaining vestiges of decency and morality. Society has removed God from His place at the center of everything and given Him a seat on the sidelines. And we as the church have acquiesced to their agenda, and have joined the debate over symptomatic issues instead of clarifying that God is the logical and necessary starting point for all cultural debates.

The church in America today generally communicates with the culture in one of two ways. Either we preach the straight gospel without regard to the cultural and personal context, or we simply react defensively to the symptomatic cultural ills—such as homosexual behavior, abortion, racism, or pornography. Unlike Jesus, we have a difficult time using the cultural context as a relevant platform for making the God of the Bible the issue. Therefore, God comes across as largely irrelevant to the everyday life of the average American. Consequently, the culture ends up regarding us (along with the God of the Bible) as out of touch or, worse, dangerous.

In light of this, if the Bible is true, and the God of the Bible really exists, we must conclude that we have failed to effectively communicate “God” to our culture.

My hope is that we can learn to use the symptomatic “felt” issues within our culture as springboards to address what underlies the cultural mindset in which we live and breathe—our God-belief (or lack of it). What we believe to be true about God will determine how we live and relate to those around us.

Let me say parenthetically, this book is not written for the person who intends to hold frank and open dialogue regarding

the pros and cons of certain types of symptomatic behavior within the culture, such as homosexuality, premarital sex, abortion, racism, pornography, or euthanasia. Nor is it written for the person who needs to learn how to explain to his non-Christian neighbors the basics of how they may know God personally. It is not even written for the individual who is seeking to further develop an intimate relationship with God. Of course, we need to know how to do all of these things, but that is not the purpose of this book.

This book is written to the person who ardently desires to bring about wholesale change within the American cultural mindset. It is written to the person who wishes to help frame the message that could ultimately allow us to win the war, not just individual battles. It is written for the person who wants to put the “Cornerstone” (God Himself) back into His proper place as the foundation upon which the American social and moral experience will be erected once again.

It is not my intent to denigrate those who have opposed evil and fought valiantly for what is right. In fact, I applaud you and thank you from the depths of my heart and encourage you to persevere. However, despite winning many battles, we are still losing the war for the hearts and minds of our countrymen. The nation in which I am now raising my children bears more resemblance to the Sodom that Lot knew than to the America in which my father was reared. Stemming the tide is no longer enough. *We must either thrust back the tide or acknowledge defeat.* Such an effort demands a radical new plan whose elements are as old as history itself.

The bottom line is this: we need a game plan that distin-

guishes between cause and effect. In that process, we need tactics that allow us to foil and frustrate the opposition by using their own tools and words against them—much like Jesus did with the Pharisees. It is time to return to the basics, but in a more culturally relevant and understandable manner. Only then will we be able to ultimately win the culture war, by making the God of the Bible the central issue within the culture. Debating the issues apart from the larger context of God Himself is the practical equivalent of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic while it sinks beneath the waves. There is no longer any other way to win.

My desire is that this book will help us all along that path—laypersons, pastors, visionaries, strategists, ministry leaders, businessmen, and politicians. I hope it will help us frame the “God” issue in a way that our fellow Americans can more readily understand and accept. I trust it will help us to recapture the soul of America so that we may become the “shining light on a hill” that was the dream of our forefathers. I pray that, along with the sons of Issachar in 1 Chronicles 12:32, we too may understand our times and know what to do.

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Identifying Cause and Effect

“If there is no God then everything is permitted.”
—*Fyodor Dostoevsky*

America, the noble experiment, is under siege. The nation that once aspired to being a shining light on a hill is now one of the world’s leading exporters of pornography. The nation that was once a haven for religious refugees now seeks to exclude religious speech from education and the public square. The nation that once paid the blood price to free its slaves now freely spills the blood of its young on the altar of “choice.” Religious belief, once revered, is now publicly reviled. The foundation of all that most of us once held dear as a nation has so eroded that it can no longer stay the culture.

Many have worked diligently in the public square for almost three decades in order to hold back the tide of evil in America. We all owe those individuals a great debt of gratitude and our continuing support. My prayer is that God will continue to strengthen their hands for the tasks He has given them. However, every year that goes by we continue to lose more ground. For every step we take forward, we seem to take two steps back. So then a natural question arises, “Why?”

Recently, a friend made a comment to me that I have taken to heart, “The first step in bringing about change is to be brutally

honest with yourself.” Honestly, the current strategy of promoting morality without re-establishing the source of morality is not working. Not only has American culture not improved over the last 25-30 years as Christians have actively engaged in the public square, but it has actually worsened.

The primary remedy is not simply to restore “traditional values.” Although it is helpful, it is no longer enough. As a nation we have gone so far down the road of moral relativism that the foundation that once supported traditional morality is now largely eroded. Values, while very important, are merely symptoms, or effects. Therefore, we must not only attempt to restore values, but must deal with the underlying cause of their erosion, otherwise our efforts are ultimately wasted.

In light of this I would like to ask the following questions:

- 1) What was the lead issue addressed by the very first amendment to the Constitution in the Bill of Rightsⁱ? Given the intellectual prowess of the Founding Fathers do you think this was by chance or intentional? Why do you think the Founding Fathers listed it first, even before freedom of speech?
- 2) What kind of speech have the “intellectual elites” such as the ACLU virulently and consistently assailed over the years in an overt attempt to drive it from the public

ⁱThe first amendment to the Constitution of the United States says: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; of the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

square? Why do you think this is?

- 3) Which came first: court rulings suppressing religious speech and removing prayer from public schools, or rulings legalizing abortion and sodomy? Why?
- 4) What is the connection between a person's belief in God and their behavior? If God does not exist, what can you point to in the universe that *OBLIGATES* me to respect your rights and not trample all over you if I perceive such action to be in my best self-interest? In other words, how is the concept of morality divorced from God any more real than the idea of the Tooth Fairy, Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny?

The father of our country, George Washington, understood the answer to these questions very well as reflected by his statement:

Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.¹

He also said:

It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible.²

Our first President knew that the basis of morality is God—specifically, the God of the Bible. Without Him, “national

morality” cannot prevail, because there will be no rational foundation to support it.

The words of our second President, John Adams, are also profound:

*Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.*³

If Washington and Adams were correct in their assessment, those concerned about the moral state of our society need to take the next logical step in order to effectively turn the battle. We must become skilled at distinguishing between cause and effect. We must begin focusing more of our efforts on curing the disease instead of just trying to suppress the cultural symptoms. If we fail in this regard, it will be to our own detriment both as individuals and as a nation.

Some have already begun to understand this while many still have not. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, some of our religious leaders laid the blame at the feet of the homosexuals, radical feminists, abortionists, pornographers, and other misguided groups of blind sheep. However, on September 13, two days after the bombings, Jane Clayson on CBS’s *The Early Show* interviewed Anne Graham Lotz, the daughter of Billy Graham. Jane asked her, “If God is good, how could God let this happen?” Anne’s response nailed the problem dead center:

For several years now Americans in a sense have shaken their fist at God and said, “God, we want you out of our

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schools, our government, our business; we want you out of our marketplace.” And, God, who is a gentleman, has just quietly backed out of our national and political life, our public life, removing His hand of blessing and protection. ⁴

Anne’s response reflected a clear understanding of the difference between *cause* and *effect*, between disease and symptom. She understood that the core issue is our nation’s rejection of the God of the Bible from the public square. God has given us free will. If we want to kick Him out of our house we can do that. However, one of the consequences is He will no longer be there to protect us. If we do not welcome God into our house today, then how can He be there to protect us when trouble comes knocking tomorrow?

Many years ago, Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, articulated the difference between cause and effect:

Birth control appeals to the advanced radical because it is calculated to undermine the authority of the Christian churches. I look forward to seeing humanity free someday from the tyranny of Christianity. ⁵

Sanger’s ultimate goal was not to promote birth control. Rather, she ardently desired to “undermine” the authority of the church in a “calculated” manner. Birth control was merely the means, the vehicle, the tool. The end game was undermining belief in the God of the Bible.

Aldous Huxley, author of *Brave New World*, sheds additional light why many people are so intent on removing God from

our culture in his book *Ends and Means*: “The philosopher who finds no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in metaphysics. He is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants....”⁶ Aldous Huxley may have said the words, but Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin gave them their horrific and logical expression.

The damning and prophetic words of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, spoken three decades ago in an address over the BBC radio network, have come back to haunt us. Accusatorially summing up the mentality of the West during the 20th century, he stated, “Since there are no higher spiritual forces above us and since I—Man with a capital M—am the crowning glory of the universe, then if anyone must perish today, let it be someone else, anybody, but not I, not my precious self, or those who are close to me.”⁷ We have pushed God aside and focused on self. And as we have pragmatically focused on self, we have lost the unpragmatic ability to “love our neighbor”—a necessary element of morality. (It is no accident that Jesus said, in Matthew 22:35–40, that the two universal laws on which all others hang are, first, to love God, then to love one’s neighbor. If there is no God, then there is nothing in the universe that obligates me to love my neighbor as myself.)

It is now time to recognize with Anne Graham Lotz, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and many others that *moral collapse is not the critical issue*. It is no more than a symptom of a much deeper problem. Therefore, to allow abortion, homosexual behavior, or any other moral issue to continue to dominate the primary debate is akin to focusing on patching the cracked walls of a

building constructed on a crumbling foundation. A discerning person will quickly correct the problem with the foundation. Otherwise he will be patching the walls right up to the day that the foundation finally gives way and the entire structure collapses—patches and all.⁸

When my child comes to me with a skinned knee, a Band-Aid is a good solution. When a friend is diagnosed with heart disease, a Band-Aid is no longer adequate. America now has heart disease. Treating the symptoms is no longer enough.

In the Bible, Jesus told the story of two men. One man built his house on a foundation of rock, the other man built his house on sand. One house withstood the storms, the other collapsed (Matthew 7:24–27). Trying to restore “traditional values” or “biblical values” in our nation without restoring the foundation of those values is like the man who built his house on a foundation of sand.

We must begin rebuilding the foundation by making the God of the Bible the central issue of life in the minds of those around us. He must become the dividing line of the culture. Not everyone must believe in the God of the Bible. Not everyone must be a follower of Jesus or believe the Bible is true. But the God of the Bible must become the issue on which everyone has a strongly felt opinion. This will allow us to control the rhetorical playing field. And as any good debater understands, if you can control the rhetorical playing field, you are almost guaranteed victory in the end. Both the apostle Peter and the apostle Paul modeled this for us in the Book of Acts as they made Jesus the primary issue wherever they went. Like them, we dare not be ignored on this one issue. To be ignored necessarily means failure.

To be sidetracked ultimately means defeat. If we fail at this task, we will ultimately fail to reverse the moral slide of society.⁹

If we continue to solely debate “behavior” in the current cultural vacuum of moral relativism, we cannot win the culture war. We will win some battles due to the pragmatic nature of many of our arguments, but never the war. For instance, pragmatism often helps us to promote abstinence because it is clearly the most effective means of preventing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. However, it hurts us in opposing stem cell research on human embryos. Pragmatism says that because they are going to be discarded anyway, we should use those embryos for research to try to help other people.¹⁰ Although being pragmatic is often effective, we must be ever mindful that pragmatism is a fickle ally.

We must face the reality that in most cases our argument does not “feel” as good. In a relativistic culture, “Thou shall not...,” cannot compete with, “Just do it!” Even the Bible is clear that sin is pleasurable for a time (Hebrews 11:25). Why would people deny themselves a single pleasure if, from their perspective, the God of the Bible really does not exist or is irrelevant to everyday life?

However, switch the starting point of the cultural debate from behavior to God and victory becomes a real possibility. This is because it is rationally impossible to begin with the premise “God” (as defined by the Bible) and end with the conclusion that any immoral behavior is acceptable. Why else has the other side worked so hard to remove God from the public square, beginning with public education?

Let me illustrate. While ministering with Campus Crusade

To assert that moral absolutes can exist without a rational basis in the universe is intellectual suicide.

for Christ at the University of Washington, our student leaders decided to hold a debate on moral relativism. I went to one of the professors in the Philosophy Department who was known to be an atheist to ask if he would debate the position that moral absolutes do not exist. After he finished laughing at me, he said that even though moral relativism is the philosophy of the masses, no philosophy professor who had any brains would debate in support of it because it was an intellectually bankrupt theory. I was absolutely shocked to hear this statement from a secular philosophy professor who was a known atheist! He advised me to go to the Literature Department where I should have no problem finding a “wacko” who would gladly take up the cause.

But the most profound statement he made is that “absolutes are self-evident.” By this he clearly meant that moral absolutes must exist in the universe. However, his problem was that he had been unable to develop a rational argument justifying the existence of absolutes apart from God. Of course, this is always the insurmountable problem for those who have an inadequate or nonexistent God-concept. To say that absolutes exist in the universe divorced from any source (*ex nihilo*) is simply a form of intellectual suicide. “God” really is our trump card.

However, I do not believe that we can approach the process of talking about the God of the Bible in the traditional manner

and expect to succeed. God-fearing people have worked hard to stem the tide of evil and yet abortion is firmly entrenched. Racism still pervades society, including the Church. Tolerance reigns supreme in the university. The active euthanasia movement advances under the mantra of “death with dignity.” Pornography continues to tighten its death grip on us (according to James Dobson, about 40 percent of all U.S. pastors are addicted to pornography¹¹). And homosexuals are trying to obliterate the already damaged concept of marriage by gutting it of any last vestiges of real meaning.

Bible believing Christians have become increasingly marginalized and irrelevant to the culture. Some leading pro-morality activists have in effect said that we have lost, so we should just take our toys, go home, and ride out the storm. Even Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn withdrew from the public arena in order to write for future generations since in his opinion we had already lost the culture war with no hope of regaining the advantage in our lifetimes.

The ultimate debate is about changing
society's view of God, not modification of
societal behavior.

The situation is bleak and the current strategy is not sufficient. *We need to develop a new game plan. We need a new set of blueprints. We need a different map.*

Two final points of clarification are needed here. First, we must keep in mind that the ultimate debate is not about chang-

ing societal behavior. Rather, it is about changing society's view of God. As a culture and as individuals, our behavior will necessarily be determined by our underlying God concept.

Second, many would say that the Church in America is faithfully proclaiming the Word of God thereby making God the issue. But if that is true, why do only 9 percent of all “born again” teens believe in absolute moral truth? (That means 91 percent of “born-again” teens do not believe in absolute moral truth.¹²) Why do 40 percent believe that Jesus sinned?¹³ Why do 68 percent not believe that the Holy Spirit is real?¹⁴ Why do 53 percent believe that all faiths teach equally valid truths?¹⁵ Why do 78 percent of all students in private religious schools consider it acceptable to cheat on exams?¹⁶ Why do 95 percent think it is okay to lie to their parents?¹⁷ If American teens who have grown up in the church had a proper view of God, we would not see such statistical symptoms. Based on this and much more data, we can reasonably conclude that the Body of Christ today has failed to effectively communicate biblical truth about God—at least to young people (and the research on adults is not much more encouraging). This is true for a number of interrelated reasons, which we will explore in the next chapter.

In this regard, Oswald Chambers writes in *My Utmost for His Highest*, “Conscience is that faculty in me which attaches itself to the highest that I know, and tells me what the highest I know demands that I do. It is the eye of the soul which looks out either towards God or towards what it regards as the highest, and therefore conscience records differently in different people.”¹⁸

If you still have any remaining vestiges of doubt about the cause and effect relationship between our view of God and our

behavior, let me take the next few paragraphs to see if I can finally convince you beyond a shadow of a doubt that either we make God the issue or we will ultimately fail on every other front.

Philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche anticipated our situation today in 1882 when he wrote of the madman who said:

“God is dead...And we have killed him.... Is not the magnitude of this deed too great for us? Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it?”¹⁹

But then the madman realizes that his listeners do not understand the implications of what they have done and so he continues:

“I come too early...I am not yet at the right time. This prodigious event is still on its way, and is traveling—it has not yet reached men’s ears. Lightning and thunder need time, the light of the stars needs time, deeds need time, even after they are done, to be seen and heard. This deed is as yet further from them than the furthest star—and yet they have done it themselves!”²⁰

Nietzsche’s unmistakable implication was that the Christian God is now “dead” in the minds of Western man but we yet have to recognize that the culture based upon belief in God’s existence is also dead and must eventually be replaced by that which we must create for ourselves.

Nietzsche saw what was coming, but Tammy Bruce, a les-

bian and author of *The Death of Right and Wrong*, describes what has now come: “Welcome to a culture where right and wrong have taken such a beating they’re no longer recognizable. If you think this debasement of our culture can never really affect you, think again. Today’s moral relativism and selfish agendas are moving through the body of society like a cancer, putting all of us at risk.”²¹ This is an out-of-the-closet lesbian saying this, not some “religious fanatic.” She describes moral relativism (morality divorced from absolutes/God) as an aggressive fatal disease. Welcome to the 21st century.

You learn more about people's moral and political behavior if you know their image of God than almost any other measure.

Sam Harris, generally regarded as the founder of the New Atheist movement, summed it up best, “the big war is not between evolution and creationism, but between naturalism and supernaturalism.”²² His goal in the next two decades is to so profoundly impact culture as to make it socially and culturally unacceptable to publicly admit you believe in God by getting atheists to come-out-of-the-closet just as the homosexuals have done.

Finally, in 2006, Baylor University published an extensive study on religious belief in America. Here was Dr. Christopher Bader’s conclusion based on his involvement with the study: “...you learn more about people’s moral and political behavior if you know their image of God than almost any other mea-

sure.”²³ If that is true, then the one thing we need to change in order to change people’s moral and political behavior is their view of God since the two are inextricably connected.

Our view of God will determine our belief system as individuals and as a society.

Do you believe that the key to solving America’s cultural problems is to make God the issue, or do you still have doubts? Do you still believe that if we just tried a little harder or tweaked things a bit here or there that we could turn the cultural tide? I believe that such thinking is akin to playing the game Whack-A-Mole. Whacking at symptoms may produce a short-term fix giving us more time, but whacking down symptoms will never make them go away and stay away.

I am convinced that our view of God will determine our belief system as individuals and as a society. It will determine whether we believe in “sexual preference” or the sanctity of God-ordained marriage. Will I demand “my rights,” or do I fulfill my God-given responsibilities toward others? Do I talk about “death with dignity” or life with transcendent meaning? Is it merely a fetus, or is it a person created by God in His image? Will we, in the sarcastic words of Friedrich Nietzsche, “cry at the grave of God,”²⁴ or will we with the shepherds and the wise men bow at the manger? That is our choice as individuals. That is our choice as a society.

God is the central issue of all life, and therefore our view of God is the central issue for each of our lives as individuals,

and for our culture. If we fail to make God the issue, we shall most certainly and inevitably fail on every other cultural front. Time is not on our side and neither is the culture. If we fail to make God the issue now, even greater personal sacrifice will be required in the future.

Chapter 1 Review Questions

1. George Washington said, "It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible." What results do you see in our culture of attempting to govern America without the influence of God and the Bible?
2. Apply Washington's statement to your personal life. What differences do you see when you allow God and the Bible to "govern" your life? Why does national moral health begin at the personal, individual level?
3. In your own words, describe the difference between focusing on symptoms and focusing on causes. Why are discussions about symptoms irrelevant if there is no discussion about cause?

4. List five problems America faces which are symptomatic of a failure to acknowledge God. For each problem, identify the aspect(s) of God's character which have direct bearing on this issue.
5. What have you done in the past, or what can you do in the future, to make God the main issue in your life? In your community? In your state? In our nation?

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Communicating God's Heart

“For God so loved the world that he gave...”

—*Jesus (John 3:16)*

Today, although the doors of the churches in this nation are still wide open, we are losing the battle for the hearts and minds of our fellow Americans. I believe this is true for a number of reasons, but I will address only three in this chapter.

Lack of Compassion

First, our hearts often do not truly reflect God's heart. We focus on symptoms, but God focuses on the cause. We tend to judge others based on their outward appearance. God always judges based on the heart.

A few years ago, a friend of mine, John (not his real name), was having problems in his marriage. One day his pastor stopped by unannounced and in no uncertain terms made it clear that John needed marriage counseling. After hearing what his pastor had to say, John explained the true problem: he was not following God closely and no amount of marriage counseling would do any good until he decided to put God first in his life. He rebuked the pastor for not having even asked about his spiritual condition. John instinctively understood that a person cannot

follow Jesus Christ and at the same time be consistently self-centered—the primary cause of his marital troubles. I suspect the pastor was reminded that day of the importance of looking beyond the symptoms.

I have to keep this in mind myself. When I was younger, I was extremely judgmental of people who engaged in certain types of immoral behavior. In fact, I was clear that I wished those people would just go away forever. I now cringe inside as I recall this because my words certainly did not come from the God of the Bible who said, “Love your neighbor.” Nor did they reflect the words of Jesus in the story of the Good Samaritan. Fortunately, a number of years ago, a long-time family friend gently pulled me aside and gave me wise counsel. He graciously complimented me on having a clear understanding of “right and wrong.” Then he said, “But, Brad, you do not have the gift of compassion. Whatever you do in life, surround yourself with people who have the gift of compassion and ask for their counsel.” In retrospect, I understand what he was saying with great diplomacy was I did not have God’s heart. I did not even begin to grasp God’s overwhelming compassion for all of humanity. Jesus Christ died for everyone. Who did I think I was to wish that anyone would die in his sins—and spend eternity in hell separated from his Creator?

My former lack of compassion for the lost is unfortunately not uncommon in the church today. I wish I could say that among those who claim to follow Jesus such thinking is rare. But sadly, I cannot. I wish I could say that my fellow Christians really embraced in their heart of hearts the sentiment, “Hate the sin, but love the sinner.” But sadly, I cannot. I wish I could say

that we live out the command, “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.” But sadly, I cannot.

A number of years ago, after my wife and I moved to a new city, we began looking for a church home. One Sunday we visited one of the more prominent churches in the area. That particular morning the pastor related how he had been out sailing the previous week with friends. Upon returning to the dock at the end of the day, he observed a rather weather-beaten character sitting on the dock reading his Bible. However, on closer inspection he saw a cigarette dangling from the man’s mouth. And then, when a boat being removed from the water slid off its trailer and scraped on the concrete ramp, the man spewed forth a string of expletives.

At this point my mind raced to the story in the Book of Acts where Philip was sent by the Spirit of God out into the desert; there he crossed paths with an Ethiopian royal official who was reading the Scriptures without understanding, just as the man on the dock appeared to be. Recognizing this, Philip explained the Scriptures to him, and after the man embraced Jesus as God’s son, Philip baptized him.

However, to my absolute shock, the pastor told his people that he walked away from the profane man burning with anger as he went. He looked down at the congregation, full of “righteous indignation,” giving vent to his outrage, berating any in the sanctuary who might exhibit similar behavior. I was stunned. Not only had this pastor missed a tremendous opportunity to encourage a person in his search for God, but he had taught his congregation to focus on symptoms rather than the cause.

The next week we returned to the same church only to hear

the pastor tell another story about a drunk driver who had killed a mother and her child that past week. His words were scathing as he heatedly condemned the man. Once again, I felt as though someone had sucker-punched me. Yes, the drunk driver had done a horrible thing for which he should be punished by the state. However, a person who had just inadvertently killed a mother and her child would probably be in the midst of intense emotional distress, and therefore incredibly open to receiving God's forgiveness—if he only understood how.

We reject people because they are sinners.
Yet that is exactly why they need God's
forgiveness—because they are sinners.

I can only wish that the pastor had asked for volunteers from the congregation to go with him to minister to the man with “a cup of water” in the name of Jesus during his time of self-inflicted anguish. It would have been a natural moment to communicate God's incredible love and mercy. Another opportunity missed.

I am sure this pastor meant well, but just as we are all prone to do, he focused on suppressing the symptom rather than confronting the underlying cause. All of us, Christians and non-Christians alike, need to experience God's unconditional love and forgiveness because of our sins. That is what gives us hope. Through this forgiveness we receive the life of Christ—the foundation for real change, both individually and corporately.

It would be one thing if the world hated us because they saw Jesus in us. However, I fear we are often hated because they do not see Jesus in us at all.

Is it any wonder that the world hates Christians? We often speak of God's condemnation, while neglecting to extend His love and forgiveness. We reject people because they are sinners. Yet that is exactly why they need God's forgiveness—because they are sinners. Let us never forget that we too have sinned. Even the apostle Paul claimed to have been the “worst of sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15,16). Jesus came to heal the sick, not the healthy. He came to seek and to save the lost. Jesus also told us to take the log out of our own eye first before we try to take the speck out of someone else's (Matthew 7:3–5). It would be one thing if the world hated us because they saw Jesus in us. However, I fear we are often hated because they do not see Jesus in us at all—rather they see only self-righteous “Pharisees” all too eager to cast the first stone. We should heed the words of Jesus when He accused the religious leaders of His day of being “hypocrites” and “whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones” (Matthew 23:27).

In Revelation chapter 2, Jesus commends the church in Ephesus because their deeds were great, they worked hard, and they did not tolerate wickedness in their midst; yet He had a complaint against them: they had left their “first love” for Him. Jesus said that the entire Law and the Prophets hang on the two

commands to love God and love others (Matthew 22:37–40). The apostle Paul is very clear that if we do not have love, our deeds amount to nothing at all from God's perspective:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1–3).

Whenever God gives me the privilege of mentoring believers, I make it very clear that they will hear very little about behavior, but a lot about having a heart for God. Is this because behavior is unimportant? No! In fact, behavior is extremely important because it is an effective indicator of where the heart is. I watch behavior carefully (including my own), because behavior always follows belief. If behavior does not begin to change over time, there is usually still a heart problem that needs to be addressed. Simply put, I prefer to focus on treating the cause rather than the symptoms.

The pastor of the church we now attend is a lot like Philip in the Book of Acts. He is a man who has God's heart, and distinguishes between cause and effect. One Easter Sunday a few years ago, as the crowds were waiting to enter the church, he observed a number of people cursing and smoking. Instead of taking offense, he got excited because he knew such behavior was an indicator that there would be many in the audience that

day who needed to hear that God loves them unconditionally and offers forgiveness—and he would have the privilege of explaining to them how they could receive it.

Although God's condemnation is very real,
His love is absolutely overpowering.

What a contrast! On the one hand is the pastor I mentioned earlier who focuses on outward behavior and condemns not only the sin but also the sinner. On the other hand is a pastor who understands what the outward behavior really means—it is merely a symptom. Although God's condemnation is very real, His love is absolutely overpowering. God's heart's desire is for reconciliation, not condemnation. That must be our heart's desire also.

Lack of Boldness

This leads to the second reason why we are losing the battle for the souls of our fellow citizens. In the church today, we spend the majority of our time sitting around the campfire, holding hands, and singing “Kum Ba Yah.” We often forget that we are also to stand up and march out singing “Onward Christian Soldiers.” (I mean this metaphorically, of course.) Most of us do not even attempt to communicate with the culture. We mistakenly (or conveniently) think it is the job of preachers and “full-time” Christian workers to evangelize.

While at the University of Washington, one of my fellow team members went to the student body president and asked

him if anyone had ever taken a few minutes to explain to him how he could know God personally. The president responded by saying, “No, a number of my friends have had the opportunity but no one has ever taken it.” (In other words, he knew that a number of his friends were Christians, but none of them had ever bothered to tell him how to begin a relationship with God.) His response reflects one of the primary problems we face in the church today: More often than not, we fail to even attempt to engage the culture in dialogue about who God is.

More often than not, we fail to even attempt to engage the culture in dialogue about who God is.

Once a young Christian I was mentoring told me that evangelism was just a “Campus Crusade for Christ thing.” He said it certainly was not a directive for all believers. After I picked up my jaw off the floor, I suggested that we do a study of the Book of Acts. A few weeks later the young man sheepishly acknowledged that he had been wrong. It was a joy to see him begin to blossom as he followed the example of Peter, Paul, and even Jesus Himself taking advantage of opportunities to tell his peers about God’s love and forgiveness.

Over the years I have had many people say to me, “Your father must have the gift of evangelism.” Frankly, I am not convinced that he did. But I am convinced that he had God’s heart of compassion for those who do not know the Creator God. When he received a telephone call that was a “wrong number,”

he told the caller about Jesus. He talked about Jesus to taxi cab drivers, CEOs, bag boys, flight attendants, hotel maids, doctors, nurses, criminals, lawyers, and politicians. Growing up, whenever we went on family vacations, we would often realize Dad was missing and turn around to see him talking with someone we had passed twenty yards earlier. It is important to understand that this was a man who was rather reserved by nature. He was not an extrovert by anyone's account. But he wanted people to know the God that he knew.

One of the worst excuses I have heard for not even attempting to tell others the good news about God's love is the statement, "I do not have the gift of evangelism." If such an excuse is legitimate, then I should be excused from having to show compassion since I do not have that "gift" (as I mentioned earlier). I am sorry if this comes across as offensive, but it needs to be said. *If we are not willing to talk about the one issue that is foundational to morality itself, we have no right to complain as the moral state of the nation continues to disintegrate.*

Lack of Training

The third reason we are losing the battle for the heart of America is this: Even when we do step outside our comfort zone and tell others about God's love, most of us do not know how to effectively communicate with our non-Christian peers. We often use words like "grace," "salvation," "born again," "sinner," or even "Christian." These are all good words if properly understood, but in many cases we might as well be speaking ancient Hebrew to our fellow citizens. When we move out of the church into the culture and we continue to speak our "in-house"

language, it is not only unintelligible to the unchurched, but it can make them feel like outsiders. They cannot understand us, and therefore we are ineffective messengers.

While in politics in Washington, D.C., I remember asking an associate if he was a “Christian.” Because of his Southern Bible-belt background he responded, “Of course, I am! What do you think I am, a Communist?!” With my West Coast upbringing, it had never occurred to me that someone would really think in those terms. I have since learned that “Christian” can have a number of perceived meanings in our culture, a few of which are not even remotely positive—or accurate. And if the word “Christian” is misunderstood, do we really think words like “sin” or “salvation” are going to be properly understood?

If I want to communicate with Brazilians, I learn to speak Portuguese. If I want to address a businessman on Wall Street, I use illustrations from the world of finance and wear a conservative suit. If I want to communicate with young children, I keep my vocabulary and choice of topics simple. When we do not understand our audience, we will at best fail to communicate. At worst, we can even come across as stupid, unloving, mean-spirited, intolerant, or hateful—despite our good intentions. Part of being a good messenger is learning how to shape our message so our audience can understand us. (I will deal with this more extensively in the following chapters.)

A few years ago, my wife and I lived next door to two homosexual men, Bill and Rob. They were nice guys and we would chat with them as occasion permitted. One evening as I was working in the garage, Bill stopped by after work to talk. Knowing I was a Christian, he started making statements clearly try-

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ing to provoke a negative reaction. However, I simply turned to him and graciously asked, “Bill, are you a Christian?” He looked at me a bit perplexed and then emphatically responded, “No!” To which I calmly replied, “Then I won’t expect you to act like one.” His behavior was not the primary issue, and he needed to understand that so we could then move to the underlying causal issue—his view of God.

Attempting to correct wrong behavior while ignoring a person's underlying view of God is shortsighted and ultimately destined to fail.

Once, while I was single, I went out of town for a few days and returned to discover I had left raw ground beef on the counter. It was full of disgusting, wriggling maggots and the stench was overwhelming. I often think of that experience as I observe the moral decay of our culture. If meat is left out on the counter, should I be surprised when it rots? If a blind person bumps into me, should I be surprised or offended? Of course not! Likewise, if a person does not believe in the God of the Bible or has a misconception about who God is, why should I be surprised when he behaves as if the God of the Bible does not exist? That person is merely behaving in a manner consistent with his very nature.

In the church we often confuse the symptom with the disease—the effect with the cause. We condemn a pagan for behaving like a pagan. Why would we expect a pagan to act any

other way? Instead, we must help effect a change in that person's view of God. If this occurs, then his outward behavior should naturally change over time to reflect the new belief. In all of the apostle Paul's missionary trips, he never pleaded with pagans to change their outward behavior. Rather, he sought to convince them regarding the identity of Jesus Christ as God. Why? Because, behavior is merely a symptomatic reflection of our view of God. This is true for the non-Christian and the Christian alike. If the behavior is wrong, we should take a close look at the underlying God-concept. Attempting to correct wrong behavior while ignoring a person's underlying view of God is shortsighted and ultimately destined to fail. It is simply another form of behavior modification.

It is time for many of us to exchange our sword for a fishing pole.

In Luke 19:10, following His encounter with a *bated* tax collector named Zacchaeus, Jesus was very clear that He came to “seek and to save what was lost.” Why should our agenda be any different? Jesus said, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). Are we fishing, or are we scaring the fish away? We are called to be messengers effectively extending God's heart of love and forgiveness to a hurting world, not merely “Teachers of the Law.” It is time for many of us to exchange our sword for a fishing pole.

In the following chapters we will explore some ways in which our words may become more relevant to the culture surrounding us.

Review Questions

1. Cite a time in your life when you have drawn your emotional and rhetorical “sword” in an effort to judge or repudiate the behavior of some in our culture. Cite a time when you took out your “fishing pole” in an effort to reach them. How do you explain the difference in your motivation?
2. What evidence would you cite that shows your heart reflects God’s heart for “sinners” in our culture?
3. What national or social issues do you pray about on a regular basis?
4. How bold are you in making God’s perspective known to neighbors, coworkers, or civic leaders? What price, if any, have you had to pay for your boldness?
5. To what degree is lack of knowledge or training an issue in your willingness to take a stand for God’s perspective in our culture? What kinds of training do you need in order to be more effective?

Reframing the Issue

*“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s,
and to God what is God’s.”
—Jesus (Matthew 22:21)*

Great communicators and leaders know that to be effective, they must first develop their message and then stay focused on their message no matter what. This was illustrated in 1994 at the University of Washington in Seattle. That fall term clearly demonstrated the importance and effectiveness of staying on message without deviation.

During the second week of school, Todd, a student, came up to an information table that Campus Crusade for Christ had set up in front of the dorms. His first question was, “Can I sign up for a Bible Study?” The student sitting behind the table, of course, responded affirmatively. His follow-up question came more to the point. “I’m gay. Can I still sign up?” The young woman again responded with an unequivocal, “Yes, we would love for you to join us.” That was probably not the answer he expected. Finally, he asked, “Is there anything I would not be allowed to do because of being gay?” Her next response finally gave him what he had wanted all along. As graciously as she knew how, she explained that due to biblical prohibitions he could not hold any position of leadership in ministry as long as he actively engaged in homosexual behavior. His all too familiar

parting mantra was, “I’m offended.”

The next day, the front page of *The Daily* (the student newspaper) read “Christian group won’t allow gay students to be leaders.”²⁵ The following edition featured an editorial entitled “Why is CCC’s discrimination condoned by UW?”²⁶ There was a call to revoke Campus Crusade’s charter as an officially recognized student organization. It was a classic setup.

Our response was not to cower but to confront. However, we refused to do so on our opponents’ terms. The following week we handed out 10,000 flyers at all the major foot traffic points leading into campus. The flyer never used the words “homosexuality” or “homosexual”; rather, it made reference to “a small, vocal minority.” Most students knew who we meant, but we did not want to do anything to distract from our ability to aggressively co-opt and control the rhetorical initiative. We wanted to reframe the issue as “censorship” rather than intolerance. If we had used the word “homosexuality” it would have watered down the focus of our message. We then accused the “small, vocal minority” of being hypocritical, of undermining true diversity, of seeking to ban free speech, and of practicing censorship. The first step was to put them in a defensive posture.

We then ended the front page of the bifold flyer with the question, “What are they afraid you might hear?” This allowed us to segue into our issue: the God of the Bible and Jesus Christ. It also allowed us to wrest control of the rhetorical playing field.

For the next three months, our opponents attacked, calling us homophobes and bigots, while *we strategically ignored their issue*. We countered by accusing them of *censorship*, thereby putting them right back in a defensive posture. We then continued, fol-

lowing up with the question, “What don’t they want you to hear?” allowing us to again talk about our issue—God. We wanted to debate cause, not effect. We understood that treating symptoms while ignoring the underlying disease is shortsighted.

For the entire fall semester the militant homosexuals gave us a platform, which we gratefully accepted. However, they finally figured out two things: first, that under no circumstances were we going to be so foolish as to talk about their agenda—homosexual behavior; and second, *every* time they attacked they were going to be accused of censorship. The strategy kept them in an untenable defensive posture, while simultaneously giving us the opportunity to talk about our issue—Jesus Christ.

Finally, in December, they went away with one final, frustrated whimper from the opinion editor of *The Daily*, a self-acknowledged homosexual. They realized they were doing themselves no favors. Not only were they expending a lot of effort and not making any headway, they were actually losing ground. We were hammering them about censorship while ignoring the homosexual issue. And by talking about Jesus Christ, we were actually undermining their position since a person cannot reasonably embrace the God of the Bible while engaging in behavior that the Bible deems immoral.

Allow me to parenthetically touch on a relevant issue at this point. Some religious people say that the God of the Bible does not condemn homosexual behavior despite the fact that every clear biblical reference to such conduct is, *without exception*, negative. In the entire Bible, there is *not even one* clear statement regarding homosexual behavior that is positive. Not one! (If every statement I make about spinach is negative, then an intelligent

person will soon come to the conclusion that I do not like spinach.) In light of this, the burden of proof is heavy indeed upon those who try to assert that the Bible condones homosexual behavior in any way, shape or form. My challenge to such individuals is to show me just one *clear* statement about any form of homosexual behavior that the God of the Bible speaks of in a positive manner. Just one. If they can I will gladly reconsider my position.

Truth is always the first casualty whenever
we start with what we want rather than with
who God is.

If we adapt Aldous Huxley's statement (which I referred to in Chapter One) to this context I believe it would read something like this, "The homosexual who finds that the Bible does not censure homosexual behavior is not concerned exclusively with a problem in theology. He is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants."ⁱⁱ Once again we see that Truth is always the first casualty whenever we start with what we want rather than with who God is.

The strategy we used at the University of Washington is not new. In Matthew chapter 22, the Pharisees came to Jesus and asked Him if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. They were

ⁱⁱ So that you do not have to flip back to chapter 1, here is Aldous Huxley's statement once again. "The philosopher who finds no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in metaphysics. He is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants."

trying to set Him up just as the “inquiring” university student had done to us. If Jesus said, “No,” He would risk arousing the ire of the Roman ruling establishment. If He said, “Yes,” the masses, which passionately hated their foreign overlords, might turn against Him. Therefore, instead of answering the question, Jesus accused His opponents of being “hypocrites,” thereby attacking their credibility in an area in which they were vulnerable and putting them on the defensive. (This is the same tactic we used at the University of Washington by legitimately accusing our opposition of censorship and hypocrisy.)

When God becomes the central issue,
debates about secondary matters often
take care of themselves and even
go away.

Jesus then followed up by reframing the question: Since the money the Jews used bore the image of Caesar, was it not his? If so, was it right to withhold from Caesar what was rightfully his? But Jesus did not leave the discussion there—His real goal was not to settle an issue about money, but to point people to God. Therefore, immediately after telling them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s,” He added, “and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21). He did not just address the issue at hand—man’s obligation to the state. Rather, He used the opportunity to springboard into the greater issue of man’s obligation to God. In the process He also exposed the Pharisees’ hypocrisy. They weren’t concerned about whether or not they should pay

taxes (any more than the inquiring college student was actually interested in leading one of our Bible studies). The Pharisees' goal was to maintain their own power by discrediting someone they viewed as a threat. But when Jesus took the initiative and reframed the terms of the debate, the same thing occurred as ultimately happened at the University of Washington: "they left and went away" (v. 22). When God becomes the central issue, debates about secondary matters often take care of themselves and even go away.

Matthew chapter 21 records how the religious leaders came to Jesus seeking to corner Him by inquiring about the source of His authority. They hoped to either trap Him into claiming equality with God so they could stone Him, or rhetorically undermine the basis of His authority. However, Jesus made it clear that if they wanted Him to answer their question, they would first have to answer a question for Him regarding the source of authority of John the Baptist: was it God or man? Whichever way they answered His question, they were going to look bad. Jesus put them in a lose/lose situation while making God the pivotal issue in the debate about the source of legitimate authority. Again, Jesus had turned the rhetorical tables, and made God the issue.

In John chapter 8, when the woman caught in adultery was brought to Jesus, the Jewish religious leaders asked if she should be stoned to death according to the Law of Moses. Again, they were trying to trap Jesus. If He did not uphold the Law, they would have a basis for bringing charges against Him. If He did uphold the letter of the Law, He would likely alienate those to whom He was trying to communicate—the masses. So, instead

of directly answering the question, He broadened the terms of the debate in order to uphold the Law, put the religious leaders in a defensive posture, save the woman from stoning, and give her an opportunity to leave her life of sin. His well-known response was, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7). The first person to throw a stone would therefore be claiming to be sinless, the same thing to a Jew as claiming equality with God—a crime punishable by stoning. Jesus effectively used his opponents’ view of God to take control of the situation.

In each case, rather than answering the question, Jesus wrested control of the debate by hijacking the question as a platform for His agenda. Much like an able politician or debater, He moved from defense to offense by always redefining the rhetorical playing field, thereby outflanking the opposition. In essence, Jesus hijacked the question. When confronted by those who tried to trap Him, He consistently and skillfully reframed the question so as to stay on message, thereby pointing people to His Father. We should learn how to do likewise and attempt to do no less.

These examples illustrate the principle of how we may transcend almost any issue, including homosexual behavior or abortion, ultimately making the God of the Bible the focus of the debate, allowing us to stay on offense and control the rhetorical playing field.

In today’s American culture, we must first recognize that the amoral forces of “tolerance” are currently in the driver’s seat, which means those of us who disagree with them are, by default, on the defense. The war in Vietnam painfully reminded

us as a nation that a great defense can rarely do more than delay defeat.

On the other hand, Bill Clinton consistently demonstrated that the best defense is actually a tireless “take no prisoners” offense. For instance, instead of reacting to the phrase “family values,” he and his administration hijacked the term by redefining “family” from a father, mother, and their children to pretty much whatever the individual wanted it to be. Instead of honestly answering questions under oath before a grand jury about his affair with Monica Lewinski, he disingenuously reframed in a misleading way by parsing the meaning of “is” when he said, “It depends on what that meaning of the word ‘is’ is.” Distract. Divert. Spin. Counter-charge. He always found a way to duck and then move back onto the offense—to stay on message. Although he lacked any vestige of integrity, he was masterful with rhetoric. Only rarely did he directly answer charges leveled at him. He understood the well-worn political adage, “I don’t want my opponent to admit anything, I just want him to deny it.”

Those who want to remove God from our culture understand that if they can control the terms of the debate keeping us on defense, they can also control the outcome.

Bill Clinton understood that in order to win, he had to be on offense making the charges, not trying to defend himself against them. Likewise, those who want to remove God from

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our culture understand that if they can control the *terms* of the debate keeping us on defense, they can also control the outcome. If we are to win, we must reframe the entire issue in a manner that allows us to move back onto the offense—to stay on message.

Therefore, if our rhetorical response is merely to condemn a symptomatic issue such as homosexual behavior, abortion, racism, or pornography as morally reprehensible (which they are), we will lose (i.e., the behavior will continue, or other symptomatic behavior will replace it). In much of our culture, condemning immoral behavior is deemed intolerant (opposition to racism being the one notable exception—at least for now). And if we come across as intolerant, we lose much of our ability to communicate to a large segment of our culture, which is exactly what the opposition wants. But here is the real bottom line: each time we defensively react to their issue, they are able to further marginalize us in the eyes of the broad culture, and worse, get us off message. It is that simple—and that profound.

Matthew 13:24–30 records the story Jesus told of a farmer who discovered that someone had planted weeds in his wheat field. He instructed his employees to let the weeds grow up with the wheat until harvest time, so that uprooting the intertwined weeds would not damage the wheat. Likewise, God does not ask us to pull weeds in His wheat field; rather we are instructed to nurture, water, and fertilize His crop until the time when He harvests it.

In this regard, I believe that when Jesus said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged,” He was making more than just a moral proclamation. He was also making a statement containing

the seeds of a powerful strategy, because He knew that the most powerful force in the universe is love, not hate, nor its cousin, condemnation. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”²⁷ Jesus demonstrated this when he laid down His life for us out of love; He did not come to condemn us, even though the basis for condemnation is very real. Therefore, God Himself, the author of love, is the logical starting point in changing our culture.

The goal is to reestablish the critical
connection in people’s minds between
God and morality

In order to make God the starting point, we must first establish a clear link in the minds of our fellow citizens between their view of God and their position on any given moral issue. Let me re-emphasize I am not talking about addressing moral content, which comes later in the process. Rather, the goal is to reestablish the critical connection in people’s minds between God and morality. In the minds of many Americans, there is currently a disconnect (a firewall) between belief in God and their position on many moral issues due to the pervasive influence of moral relativism. For instance, in modern society we often hear the question, “How does that make you feel?” as though my feelings are the most important consideration. Wherever this question pops up in regard to a moral issue, we should always reframe with “How do you think that makes God feel?” moving

the focus from self to God. We must intentionally help reconnect the intellectual disconnect. In this process, the opposition unintentionally gives us a platform to advance our agenda, similar to what occurred at the University of Washington.

The operating premise here is summed up in the often-heard political response, “That’s a good question, but I think the real issue is...” In other words, do not answer the question asked; rather, view the question as an opportunity to talk about our issue—the God of the Bible. As we saw earlier in this chapter, Jesus effectively used this strategy to His advantage on many occasions. Initially, we must strategically ignore the “good question” of the moral rightness or wrongness of a given matter and move immediately to the “critical question” of the existence and identity of God, who is the basis of morality itself. Without God, morality is little more than a fairy tale on the same level as Santa Claus and the Easter bunny

This tactic is critical for several reasons:

- First, the time is ripe. On September 11, 2001, the entire playing field shifted in our favor. Since that day, God has been far more welcome in the public square than He has been in decades. Even U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman said in a speech at Notre Dame, “We as a nation must strengthen our moral foundation because so many of the social problems...are at their heart moral problems.” A few moments later he closed the loop by saying, “I believe that we are still struggling to regain our moral balance, in part because we are struggling to regain our spiritual balance.”²⁸

- Second, it allows us to move the terms of the debate away from issues over which we have limited control, toward an issue that we can frame and direct. The opposition will still attack. In fact, they may initially react with an intensity we rarely see. However, the key difference is that we will be able to begin taking territory rather than continuing to lose it. This does not mean that we will necessarily convince our opponents, but we will be better positioned to influence the thinking of the masses who are not already committed to an anti-God ideology.
- Third, according to pollster George Barna, 85 percent of Americans consider themselves “Christian.” Of these, 8 percent are evangelicals, 33 percent are born-again non-evangelicals, and 44 percent are “notional Christians.” (The latter are those who consider themselves to be Christian, but do not embrace core Bible doctrines.²⁹) This means we will tend to have an audience predisposed to our point of view if we choose our words wisely. Our challenge is to always relate the debate back to the God of the Bible.
- Fourth, once we establish linkage in people’s minds between God and a given moral issue, it will be an easy matter to establish the same link between God and any other moral issue. Once our foot is in the door, it is easy to begin opening it even wider.

- Fifth, it enables us to make the existence and identity of God the central issue we must debate as a nation. Once this occurs, we are in the driver's seat. At that point the principles of social change will work in our favor *if we stay on message*. We have the opportunity to shift the debate from sexual preference, death with dignity, or “choice” to the underlying question, “Who is God?”
- Sixth, God is the underlying watershed issue.

Let me once again reemphasize, our view of God will determine our belief system as individuals and as a society. If we fail to make the God of the Bible the issue, we will most certainly and inevitably fail to reestablish the moral foundation of the nation. Not only is God the central issue, but “God” is the only issue (when properly framed) that can consistently enable us to maintain control of the rhetorical playing field. Is it therefore any wonder that the opposition strives with such passion to censor religious speech in the public square—especially in education?

Chapter 1 Review Questions

1. How comfortable are you in the “offensive” role—taking the debate to our opponents rather than just defending yourself against the opponents' charges?

2. How can Christians balance aggressiveness and love? Are the two compatible or mutually exclusive? When does aggressiveness cross the line into carnality?
3. How would you evaluate your temperament—pro-active (offense) or compliant (defense)? If you are not naturally aggressive, how willing are you to take on that role when necessary in order to make God the issue?
4. When Jesus demonstrated aggressive behavior in words and action (such as driving the money-changers out of the temple), was He doing something unique to Himself or setting an example for all of His followers? Why?
5. Statistically speaking, why should it not be difficult to reframe the rhetorical debate about God in America with the general population? If the majority of Americans claim to believe in God, why isn't God found throughout the public square in our culture?

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