

Column

Should Christians be actively seeking to build a Christian society? Or should they be solely concerned with packing people off to heaven, thus leaving present society to go to hell in the proverbial handbasket? Surely this is a question with which every Christian must wrestle.

I think William Temple, late Archbishop of Canterbury, strikes the right balance when he says: “If we have to choose between making men Christian and making the social order more Christian, we must choose the former. But there is no such antithesis.”

If we adopt Temple’s and-and-both approach, questions that follow include: Can a society in fact become Christian? If it can, how can we tell when one has ceased to be?

Let’s look at the first question: Can a society in fact become Christian? I would want to argue, yes but not fully. What I mean by “but not fully” is that the Kingdom of God will come in its full resplendent glory only when the King returns and takes the throne. But in the interim, it is possible for some gains to be made, some Kingdom objectives realized, some wrongs put right. For example, William Wilberforce, the great social reformer of the late 18th and early 19th century, did not wait for our Lord’s Second Coming to deal with the horrors of African slave trade. Rather, he worked tirelessly for its abolition. After many failed attempts, in 1807 Parliament passed a bill ending it in the British Empire. Who can doubt Wilberforce’s achievement brought Western society a little closer to the idea of the Gospel?

What about you and me? Are there not things we can do in the present to make society better, more humane, even Christian? These might include advocating for fairness, concern and care for the weak; standing for faith and loyalty in married life; and campaigning for the return of honesty and integrity in public life.

Now to my other question: How can we tell when a society has ceased to be Christian? T.S. Eliot in his book, “The Idea of a Christian Society” offers this suggestion:

“A society has ceased to be Christian when religious practices have been abandoned, when behaviour ceases to be regulated by reference to Christian principles, and when in effect prosperity in this world for the individual or for the group has become the sole conscious aim.”

If we take Eliot’s words as our guide, I think we would have to say the society in which you and I live can no longer be described as Christian. Oh yes, we continue to derive benefit and blessing from our Christian inheritance just as light continues to shine from an extinct star, but we mustn’t expect this state of affairs to go on forever.

I say this not to be pessimistic, but rather as a call to arms. Christians of all stripes need to get busy evangelizing society. Where do we begin? I would say with that bit of society most immediately under our control – ourselves. Is our life under the lordship of Christ? One cannot reflect into the world a light one does not have.

Once our life is under the direction of the true King we can then go to work in the sphere of family and home . . . and then ever outward, your street, your community, Atlanta, Washington, the ends of the earth.

As Christians we are called to be advanced signs of the new order, the order that will come in its fullness at our Lord’s appearing . . . colonies of heaven on earth might be a good way of describing our mission in the present. May we so live, knowing that our labor in the Lord in the present is not for nothing (1 Corinthians 15: 58).

*O GOD, the strength of all those who put their trust in thee;
Mercifully accept our prayers; and because, through the weakness of*

our mortal nature, we can do no good thing without thee, grant us the help of thy grace, that in keeping thy commandments we may please thee, both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(Collect for the First Sunday after Trinity).

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