



The Future of the Church in a Secular Society¹

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Last year in Atlanta I confessed a deep ambivalence about the future. For society, in general, I see impending tragedy. The probability of catastrophe of one sort or another seems overwhelming. Yet for the church—for God’s people and God’s work in the world—I see great hope. God’s resources are limitless; nothing that the church needs to do is hopeless. Even in the presence of secular tragedy and facing the mounting probability of persecution in the church, I am eager to get on with the future. Accounting for one’s pessimism while living out one’s optimism requires more than psychotherapy; it requires faith.

My commitment to seek God’s will for the future was renewed and invigorated last year—not just as a matter of personal spiritual readiness, but in terms of what the people of God can do that will make a difference in the world until the end. Through this Consultation and similar experiences, many of God’s people are finding a more comprehensive and powerful perspective. For example, one of the most recent holistic statements of the contemporary tasks of evangelical Christianity is expressed in *The Willowbank Report*. In it we hear the following:

We deplore the pessimism which leads some Christians to disapprove of actual cultural engagement in the world and the defeatism which persuades others that they could do no good there anyway and should, therefore, wait in inactivity for Christ to put things right when he comes.

We prefer . . . to base the church’s cultural responsibility on Scripture rather than history. Our fellowmen and women are made in God’s image, and we are commanded to honor, love, and serve them in every sphere of life. To this argument from God’s creation we add another from his kingdom which broke into the world through Jesus Christ. All authority belongs to Christ. He is Lord of both the universe and church. And he has sent us into the world to be its salt and light. As his new community, he expects us to permeate society.

My assignment, to deal with the future relationship of the evangelical church to the secular society, demands definition of three terms: future, evangelical church, and secular society.

First, *Future*. The focus on “intermediate future” is suggested as a delimitation. For most people, the *near* future is seen as an extension or continuation of what is already known. “The future” thus tends to be perceived in terms of today’s unsolved problems. On the other hand, the *distant* future, for most Christians, is perceived in terms of ultimate judgment and/or fulfilled kingdom. Thus, an undesignated use of the term “future” runs into all sorts of ambiguity. Is the concern for the future expressed in this Consultation only a matter of coping with the present and anticipating the culmination of the prophecies of the kingdom of our Lord? Hardly. It may be all of that, but its uniqueness lies in grappling with the issues *beyond* the present and *before* the culmination. Hence, the term “intermediate future” is offered in an attempt to clarify this distinction.

Next, *Church*. Defining the church—or more particularly, the evangelical sector of the church—raises *complex* questions. In the interest of getting on with the major burden of the assignment, a compromise between crisp and foggy definitions is assumed: the church is taken to mean the body of the redeemed, either within a particular assembly or at large within a nation,

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region, or the world. The tasks of the church include evangelization, and thus Christians hold a *supra*-national identity and fellowship in the worldwide mission of the church.

Despite the breadth of the concept *church*, the emphasis of the paper is on that region of the world in which most of us recognize our primary stewardship: the church in North America, particularly in the United States and Canada. We cannot presume to speak for the world.

Finally, the term, *Secular Society*—a most problematic definition. The distinction between sacred and secular is ancient, but not inherently Christian. In strictest terms, all of life is religious; although the secular society may deny the sacredness of life, the denial comes from spiritual blindness. Indeed, if you hear Willis Harman as I do, the secular sector is now engaged in re-creating the sacred. All of life has theological meaning in the perspective of biblical premises about creation, sin, and judgment.

The totality of human experience is clothed in moral values, and spiritual meanings are embedded in every thought. Nevertheless, the term “secular” is used here in contrast with the godly or the Christian sector.

I. The Secular Society in Futuristic Perspective

To explore the relationship of evangelical Christianity and secular society in the intermediate future, the place to begin is in the contemporary—but we dare not be confined to current problems and perspectives. What is the condition of society and of the church today? That’s part of it, but the bigger question is: what trend-changing events may be about to emerge?

The systematic study of the future requires the recognition of discontinuity. We now know that any significant new element in the system brings not just more-of-the-same but a whole new set of “rules” whereby social development and history itself are re-conceptualized. Gone is the straight-line notion wherein the future is seen merely as an extension of recent history. *Responsible futurism not only studies trends, but scans the horizon of imagination to identify the possible emergences of factors which will alter everything.*

Secular society is “a mixed bag.” The variations within the “secular” sector range from aggressively anti-Christian to warmly sympathetic to Christian values and virtues.

The witness of God in the world, through natural revelation, human conscience, and the continuity of the living Word within his people, has made its mark. The total effect on secular society is undeniably in the direction of morality and spiritual concern, even as defined by secular standards.

The expressions of evil in secular society are widely varied. From time to time and from place to place, “spiritual wickedness in high places” takes various forms: at one time overt attack on the principles and the people of God; at another time infiltration and subversion.

The humanistic religiousness of contemporary society is introspective if not introverted. It speaks of an inner quest, reflecting the persisting belief that there is little, if any, responsible authority outside oneself. According to Robert Elwood in *Alternative Altars*, it is an “increasingly privatized sort of searching and yet a very intense and very real searching in all sorts of directions.” Looking ahead, Elwood sees these “religions of feelings” taking two possible roads. In the face of worldwide hunger and starvation, the tendency would be toward “doomsday religions.” But if somehow human societies muddle through without catastrophe, he foresees scientific mysticism as the religion of the future.

The secular society seeks piecemeal solutions for basic human problems. Lacking awareness of the spiritual dimension that ties together all of the human traits and functions, the massive

agencies, governmental and private, treat symptoms—bits and pieces of much larger and more interdependent problems.

If Christians are too inclined to grasp the *spiritual* panacea, it is similarly true that secular people grasp at far more absurd bits of the whole human dilemma. Technology, especially because of its proven capacity to usher in “brave new worlds” is seen as the major alternative to moral renewal.

At Harvard last June Solzhenitsyn attempted to scold secular Americans into a moral confrontation with decadence in society. His attack was broadly aimed at “Western civilization” and its “dangerous trend to worship man and his material needs.” His most specific warning was against humanism’s materialistic tendency:

Even if we are spared destruction by war, our lives will have to change if we want to save life from self-destruction. We cannot avoid revising the fundamental definition of human life and human society. Is it true that man is above everything? Is there no superior Spirit above him? (Solzhenitsyn, 1978).

Among the many who resented this criticism were those who see humanistic religion as a viable third position:

. . . Solzhenitsyn’s position does not recognize that some of this nation’s most active humanizers also believe devoutly in God. Many are Jewish, many are Christian . . . the term humanist cannot be equated with either atheist or materialist . . . It is the humanistic educator who stands as a bulwark against the cruel and indecent practices promulgated by all kinds of groups that wish to inhibit the healthful growth and development of our students. (David Aspy in *Educational Leadership* [1978]).

Two views of humanism are apparent: *classical* humanism with its pompous “man is the measure of all things,” and *contemporary* humanism, in which the moral goodness of humanity is expected to bring the ultimate defeat of evil. The latter view may be even more dangerous than the former; it is unstable (short of doomsday) and it exudes a false confidence born of faith in one’s own optimism.

Herman Kahn is popular among the contemporary humanists. It may be partly because he tells them what they want to hear. Given enough faith in technology and enough capital to back up that faith, according to Kahn, it will all come out just great in the long run. (Note: *in the long run*.) Kahn’s shallowness shows most clearly when he deals with the next twenty to fifty years and when he skirts the immense costs of preventing short-run catastrophe.

Most of these problems (energy, unemployment, pollution, food supply, population) in some sense solve themselves. By solving, I mean you live with them. I’m really not as optimistic as painted. But I do think that barring very bad luck or very bad management, we’ll have enormous economic progress.

There’s no food problem, if you tell me who’s going to pay for it . . . (Kahn, in *Sanders*, [1978]).

Technological science is seen as both the oppressor and the savior. What science has created, science can overcome—is the first article of faith for a dominant sector of secular society. (Some Christians help to nourish that fallacy.) At the same time, some secular analysts are becoming aware that there are several technological creatures that cannot be brought under control. People are now beginning to write about a strange and troublesome kink in the yarn. McCabe describes the sentiments of affluent Americans toward a future they fear:

Nor do they wish to think about the potential value and application of technology, it would appear. In these circumstances, what better than to turn inward, or to windmills, or to the relatively simple task of cleaning up, or to nostalgia? Nostalgia is the antidote to fear of what the future might bring. When expectations turn pessimistic, the market in nostalgia rises. (McCabe, 1978).

Atomic energy and its so-called “peaceful uses” are being recognized as a monster in our neighborhoods. Even such conservative organs of mass media as *Reader’s Digest* is letting complacent Americans in on a little surprise:

The nuclear Regulatory Commission, under pressure from the industry, has allowed serious compromises with safety to creep into the design, construction, and operations of U.S. nuclear plants. As a result, the country has no present way of knowing how safe or unsafe its nuclear program is. (Miller, 1976).

To walk away and mumble, “I told you so,” is irresponsible. Perhaps as never before, responsible, moral people are needed in science and technology—not as slaves of materialism—to design automobile bodies and attachments for electric hairdryers, but on the cutting edge of the scientific counter-technology committed to bringing the marvels of God’s creation back into God-honoring control before they become any further the tools of intentional, accidental, or negligent death and destruction.

II. The Secularization of Evangelicalism

The catalog of characteristics of the “last days” presented in II Timothy 3 includes twenty factors. Surely, today’s secular society falls under indictment on most of these factors. But can we face the fact that quite a few church fellowships and parachurch organizations are vulnerable on many of these same matters: lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant . . . unloving . . . malicious gossips . . . reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God? The distinctiveness of the Christian community seems threatened by the process of secularization within itself.

Indeed, perhaps the most insidious form of syncretism in the world today is the attempt to mix a privatized gospel of personal forgiveness with a worldly (even demonic) attitude toward wealth and power. We are not guiltless in this matter ourselves. (*The Willowbank Report*, 1978).

The values of the secular society of greatest threat are those that deal with the integrity of the family. The Christian premises of love, fidelity, and responsibility are under deliberate though somewhat subtle attack in the mass media. Television, technology’s favorite pet puppy, which, unfortunately, cannot be housebroken, brings into the home an eroding familiarity with lifestyles and values that undercut Christian values, or at least constitute an important dissonance. Remember: people tend to value what they get used to.

The Christian family constitutes a sort of battlefield on which the major secular values wage a continuing battle:

1. *Materialism* affects the Christian family; its ultimate effect is to turn people from a “seeking of the Kingdom of God” to a seeking after the goods of this world through two-paycheck families and neglected children with unsatiated appetites for acquisitions.

2. *Individualism* affects the Christian family; its self-centeredness and selfish ambition retarding development and slowing the maturity of a Christlike focus on service to others.

3. *Faulty communication*, as exemplified in a society wherein knowledge is power, where the senior always talks down to the junior, and where status gives unjust forcefulness to untrue arguments, is a threat to the family. One-way speechmaking substitutes for conversation, and listening becomes the passive role of all but the powerful.

4. *Relativism*, the groundless determination of right and wrong according to whims of the situation, is a deliberate replacement of God’s moral authority and his Word. As such, it threatens the Christian family, especially if the family is relying over-much on the church and its programs for the religious education of its children.

5. *Flawed justice* (or lack of concern for justice) is an especially crucial secular value that can affect the Christian home. Might makes right; seniority equals credibility; people deserve what they get—these are some of the key fallacies of the secular society. The home and the whole church family are to exemplify God's concern for the pursuit of justice.

Thus, the Christian family and the church as a whole are and ought to be in conflict with secular values. But one suspects that many of these secular values may be learned or at least reinforced by experiences in supposedly Bible-based churches, schools, and colleges.

John Perkins (1975) has seen relationships among these secular values and describes the recent debilitation, not only of homes, but of the whole evangelical church:

The purchase of the American Dream, with all of its consumerism and competition and survival mentality, has taken our minds and our resources away from the battleline. The American Dream is keeping us from developing our own leadership and our own economic base from which we can begin to preach the Gospel in our communities.

* * * *

The comfort culture wins too many times.

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... we have cheapened our evangelism to a smile and "Jesus Saves"; we have cheapened our social action to charity or welfare.

Since the secular society has already largely accepted the default of the family, there are millions of children who are not being cared for adequately. (As Professor Nicholi, I also refer to Urie Bronfenbrenner's studies.) Thus something ought to be done—in the name of concerned humanity. Perhaps it will be necessary to extend public institutions into preschool child care in the manner of the proposed extended child-care legislation. (Americans do have a long-standing habit of asking schools to fill the gaps resulting from default in any sector of social life.) But if more social welfare mechanisms are created, what will this do to what little is left of the family? By further reducing the importance of the family will we not be formalizing an already sad condition? Should the church fill this gap? Individual churches are rushing into child care and formal schooling at a remarkable pace. To what extent do these efforts reflect Christian values? To what extent are they merely imitations of the secular institutions?

Since the time of Thomas Aquinas, Christianity has been holding hands with Hellenistic-style formal education, largely oblivious of the dangers it poses especially in relation to the development of the church. The dangers are inherent. When the church accepts the schooling model of human development and its assumptions about knowledge, learning, and human relationships, some non-Christian values come along in the bargain. Much that is secular in the church can be traced to its having drawn indiscriminately from the values of the academy of pre-Christian Greece.

The sort of hierarchical and authoritarian leadership that thrives in many evangelical churches should be called what it is: secular. What can be done to encourage the church to withstand secular perversion and to be about its task of confronting culture? ("Secular perversions" here refers to things that are organismic and deeply functional in the church's institutional forms—violations of justice, truth, responsibility, and unity.) Whatever is secular in its origin and whatever is justified or rationalized by secular and pragmatic logic must be disciplined against the Word and against the reforming work of God in the world. I am fretful not so much about the secular society as about ourselves—we who are to stand against the worldly order to see that the work of Christ is carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit.

With reference to ecclesiastical leadership styles and hierarchical elitism, the issue is not that the church is confronting some new problem, but that the church historical has never dealt

adequately with an *old* problem: Jesus' teaching on servanthood has rarely cut through the institutional structures of historical Christianity.

Many conditions in the church today are reflections of conditions in the secular society. Many people in the church demonstrate the same needs felt by people in the secular society toward their institutions. These very needs—to be dominated, to be manipulated, to be passive, to “let somebody else do it,” and to transfer obligation and responsibility—are characteristics of today's secular society. The culture of affluent North America has become largely characterized by passivity. To be part of something by simply watching is typical of the secular society. And so it is in many churches.

When the church caters (or panders) to non-Christian needs, the church is on dangerous ground. Consider, for example, these non-Christian needs that are exemplary of fallen humankind: need for status, need for acquisitive individualism, need for being powerful or, by contrast, the need to be dominated by power. These are sick needs; they are unredeemed needs. They are not characteristic of the people of God in any normative, biblical way. Instead, they are secular; yet the church has accepted them as normal.

I observe, with pain, that much of what we stand for as evangelicals looks ever so much like a thorough accommodation to secular norms. Until we get our own house in order it is unlikely that the church's influence on the secular society will be deeply felt.

Holding more firmly to the whole Word of God is the only antidote to the advance of secularism in the church. Christianity is a matter of faith, hope, and love. Not irrational—and surely not altogether mystical—Christianity is based on *informed experience*. God has revealed himself; the message is in our hands to examine, comprehend, implement, and share. Within that message is a substantive view of the future.

III. The Challenge of the Secular Perspective

The secular world is changing. The church is changing. The ministries of the church, no less than the shaping forces of the world, are changing. At the very least, any adequate way to look at the relationship must deal with change. The important questions are (1) what is happening? and (2) what are the implications for the church? These two questions center on *change*. It is the habit of traditional societies to resist change and thus to avoid change-related questions and, consequently, to develop only minimal competency in dealing constructively with change. When evangelical Christianity in North America reduced the Gospel to a body of propositions about personal salvation, it became a traditional and conservative subculture within an increasingly secular society. The works of God in reformation were delayed.

So much the pity. The desperate here-and-now demands foresight and planning as never before. In a span of less than a century all of humanity has been brought into subjection to petrochemical technology, the energy for which is now virtually defunct. It is in our time: the oldest among us are only a little younger than the petroleum industry. The single-century doublings of world population became a probability in our lifetime. The conquering of disease and the global proliferation of bio-damage is the mindless trade-off of our lifetime. The wars to end wars and the unthinkable yet probably war to end *life*—these are of our lifetime.

Where will the thinking and planning come from? Can evangelical Christians rise quickly to the challenge of the times? Can they learn to do, belatedly, what the evangelical subculture has previously discouraged—to think and plan for the intermediate future?

The Christian's faith is not taken seriously if it is only a mechanical preoccupation, fixated on the mechanical and chronology of rapture and tribulation. Faith that refuses to be addressed to the

realities of our troubled times is not worth having. In the perceptions of secular scholarship, the Christian—especially the evangelical—is still lumped with the primitive Bible-thumper as largely “out of it.” Christianity is not seen as offering any promising answers; surely the church (no matter what theological color) is not seen as a powerful force. The stereotype is still being reinforced by the sweet, benevolent, entertaining (and mindless) glimpses of Christian community now offered on late-night television. Instead of coming to grips with the screams of a society that is steadily becoming more conscious of its sure destiny, the pulpits drone on and on with that perversion of eternal security that sounds ever so much like complacent singing in a very distant lifeboat.

Christians have lost the initiative on many of the pressing social issues. Instead of having an agenda of redemptive themes, evangelical Christianity is seen often as being a one-issue movement. Listen to this:

To be for freedom, justice, and peace in America today is to speak against war and imperialism, against racism and witch-hunts, against corporate monopoly and tax rip-offs and economic exploitation.

The paragraph above seems almost to be the outline for a twentieth-century version of the Magnificat! But, no, it is merely an advertisement for a radical magazine called *The Progressive*.

Perhaps these words seem less important, less convincing to the Christian who knows they come from secular humanists; but the message must be taken seriously. Christians must become brave enough to hold onto biblical principles and biblical language even when they are co-opted or reflected from secular sources. Why should we be less enthusiastic about liberation, justice, peace, unity, and dialogue simply because these have become catchwords of various secular or quasi-Christian movements?

IV. Metaphors For The Intermediate Future

Students of the Bible are quite familiar with two rudimentary metaphors of the function of the church in the world: salt and light.

“You are the salt of the earth . . .” (Mt. 5:13). The disciples of Jesus Christ are thus described in terms of an active process of involvement. The oft-rehearsed function of salt in preservation and forestalling decay says much about the worth of the church in the world. To the Jewish listeners on that mountainside, *salt* would also have suggested wisdom—the need to be informed and to apply knowledge. Salt would have suggested perpetuity and covenant—the symbols are of God’s faithfulness to his people and through his people to the needs of the whole world. Further, the symbolic meaning of salt was associated with hospitality. Commissioning His disciples to be salt provided a metaphor of their serving in the world and thus extending God’s invitation to care and sustenance.

The major thrust of Christ’s use of the metaphor should not be overlooked: “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.” The message includes the admonition not to be content with the designation—the label—as salt, but to be about the business of *being* salt.

“You are the light of the world” (Mt. 5: 14-16.) In this second rudimentary metaphor Jesus shares a symbol that is part of his own being and is included in the descriptions and the self-descriptions of Christ. Identified in the first creative process (Genesis 1:3), symbolic of joy, encouragement, new hope, spiritual comfort, and authorship of enlightenment, *light* is a powerful metaphor. Fulfillment of this metaphor implies visibility and assertiveness.

In theological perspective, the metaphor of light speaks of identifying with Christ in that redemptive process of the Gospel, bringing spiritual enlightenment and awakening moral consciousness, enabling secular humankind to see themselves more clearly and to bring their works

into judgment under the righteousness of God. The major vehicle is the “good works” which become visible because the Christian’s reflection of Christ illuminates them. These good works are not of the Christian’s doing except as the Holy Spirit brings them about as His own fruit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance.

In these two metaphors we have a detailed picture of the work of the church in the world. Whatever the future may bring, these metaphors will stand. All our images of the future—and especially our images of the future of the church—start here.

We must choose well the path to walk into the future. Alternative metaphors can be the starting point for an exploratory study of the choices open to us in the probable conditions of the intermediate future. I offer four:

Metaphor I—The Unheeded Conscience

If Herman Kahn and others who foresee a rosy future fulfilled through wonders of science and technology are right, the church is likely to be all but forgotten. If evidences of long-term resolutions of the dominant human social problems (hunger, disease, political oppression, and war) do appear, Christians should readily thank God for yet another reprieve for sinful humankind. But with the passage of time—especially of an *easy* time—the “light of the world” will be less and less welcome. In the minds of many the question would be (far more than today) “Who needs it?” The church of Jesus Christ, as holder of the testimony of God’s truth, would be seen as superfluous—good times produce less God-consciousness than do foxholes. Thus the church—the *unheeded conscience*—may itself lapse into profound neglect or apostasy.

Metaphor II—The Ghetto

Minorities of various sorts, particularly religious and racial, have been pushed into ghettos. Throughout history, minorities which posed psychic threat to those in the ascendancy were enslaved or oppressed. In the Middle Ages the term *ghetto* described the place where a minority population chose to live (or was required to live)—a distinct and peculiar people in an assigned place within a larger society. Christians should take special note that the institutionalization of the ghetto, in Europe and much later in the United States, was to keep God’s ancient people, the Jews, “in their place.”

It can happen again—especially if conditions become very bad and a scapegoat is needed (as in Nazi Germany). To mobilize and encourage the ascendant society, some minority may once again be singled out for “special treatment.” In order to qualify for this dubious benefit, a group of people must be indeed distinct. They must either dress differently, look different, believe differently, or have very different customs. Preferably, there should be at least a bit of truth in the accusation that they see themselves as being superior in some way that is irritating or offensive to the large society. So long as evangelical Christians are mostly white, middle-class, aspiring, acquisitive winners in the capitalistic game of secular society, they are unlikely to qualify as unique except in their self-proclaimed pietisms.

But in the highly probable event that the value system of the church will become more clear and more firm and, because of the increasingly worldly values of the secular society, the church will come more directly into confrontation, the conditions for persecution will have been met. From then on it will be only a matter of time and a question of intensity. The church of Jesus Christ will once again come under sustained and systematic persecution. The community of the family of God may be invited, encouraged, or even compelled to keep to itself. The church as the ghetto of godly influence—isolated—its effect as salt and light effectively neutralized.

Through their experiences during the Holocaust of Nazi occupation, the Polish Jews learned something very curious about themselves and their ghettos. To be forced into isolation, people have to have or come to accept a “ghetto mentality.” They have to come to see being isolated and being cut off from the ascendant society as being somehow appropriate or deserved.

Today “ghetto mentality” has come to mean that lack of self-esteem that makes a person or group particularly vulnerable to being persecuted. No discredit to the faithful, brave Jewish people, but to understand modern Israel, one must see it as the place where many of the survivors of Hitler’s horrors apply today what they learned in the ghettos. The cry, “never again,” rings out, inspiring a sense of identity, of purpose, and, consequently, of worth. “They may kill us. But we will not be herded into submission.”

Since the church in modern times has had no large-scale experience with the demeaning effects of the ghetto, Christians may do even as the Jews did in the early Middle Ages; create their own ghettos, voluntarily, as a misguided investment in group security.

When the principle of love is brought to bear as an evaluative criterion, the ghetto falls short. The ghetto speaks of a hope for saving oneself and one’s own. But the cost is relinquishing the contacts through which the church ministers to a spiritually dying secular society. God never meant for His people to accept the ghetto mentality.

Metaphor III—The Underground

The *underground* suggests a necessity to achieve principled objectives in concealed, covert, or extra-legal ways. In the period when the United States was developing a moral conscience in reference to slavery, the “Underground Railroad” was an only slightly organized network of godly and humanitarian people working together to help slaves gain freedom in the free states or in Canada.

The broader use of the term underground is in reference to resistance or guerrilla movements within an invaded or occupied country. There is something romantic, almost rhapsodic, in the courage and persistence of a resistance fighter in the underground. His or her head is unbowed. To live is for honor, to die is greater honor. While the underground lives, the enemy’s victory is hollow. If the underground dies, hope dies with it.

This is our Father’s world. We claim it in his name for the furtherance of his redemptive works. But it has been invaded. The enemy occupies our Father’s world. The church, if not highly visible, is at least present in the form of an underground resistance. The victory of Satan is hollow, so long as this underground lives. And it will live; our Lord promises, “. . . I will build my church.”

The likelihood of increased tension between the church and the secular society raises the question of persecution. After centuries of drifting with the secular tide, the church can hardly go any further; even the one crucial issue of family values (love, fidelity, and responsibility) may differentiate Christians as a peculiar minority. The maintaining of a godly lifestyle in the face of increasing secularism, especially since that secularism is destined to be materialistic and spiritually empty, will fulfill all the prime conditions for persecution. Persecution, coupled with increased anxiety over the spiritual integrity of our families, could easily force Christians underground. A minority, persecuted, fearful, but surviving as the witness of God in a perverse era.

Again, from John Perkins,

The world is tiring, but we are to endure. The world will become frustrated, but we can have hope. The world will withdraw, but we must strike. We are God’s guerrilla fighters, his spiritual saboteurs. We must now go to battle in our communities armed with the evangelism, social action, and political encounter through which Jesus can work. (Perkins, 1975).

The underground metaphor has one major problem. It is drawn from the experiences of warfare (a not unfamiliar nor unbiblical frame of reference for “soldiers of the cross” who are armed with the armor, the shield, and the sword). But the watchword of any underground is “kill or be

killed.” The Christian commitment to love our enemies and to pray even for those who spitefully use us requires a most unusual sort of an underground. If the metaphor is apt at all, it suggests a process to subvert secularism through love, concern, and good works, fulfilled as “insiders” or infiltrators.

If Christians reject being pushed into a ghetto and are able to avoid the paranoia that can undermine an effective underground, the conditions are just right for fulfilling this metaphor. Those of us who work within the institutions of secular society are aware just how well God has distributed His faithful. It is not just recently that Christians are holding strategic roles in government, institutional education, health care, media, and other influential public sectors. Wherever one turns, it is reassuring to discover that God has his witnesses. We are a distinct minority, for sure, but we are there, fulfilling the preservative and curative functions of the “salt of the earth.” In recent years the trend has been for these infiltrators to take their mission more seriously and to differentiate more firmly between good and evil, speaking up more boldly, acting more on faith and accepting less of the pragmatism that undermines godliness.

Indeed, the church as a bold and brave underground is an apt metaphor if we are to seek a recapturing—a possessing—of the secular world in the name of Jesus Christ.

Metaphor IV—The Field Hospital

The world is at war. Literally and figuratively, “wars and rumors of wars” have long characterized the human condition. But the warfare of guns, armaments, and the military is only the visible tip of deeper trauma. Spiritual warfare constantly affects all humankind. “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Ephesians 6:12). This warfare is not only a matter of the forces of God against the forces of Satan. Indeed, such is the evil that besets this world that it knows no peace within itself. The “peace that passes all understanding” is inner peace, not freedom from external attack and conflict. The secular world does not have inner peace. People of the secular society are constantly victimized *by each other* and by the inescapable pressures, anxieties, doubts, infidelities, and passions that dominate the unredeemed creation. Satan hates the church, but he treats his own people hatefully, all the same.

The spiritual *warfare* among secular people shows every promise of increasing. As the secular society seeks freedom without responsibility, truth without source, and “the good life” without justice, degeneration will mount to hysterical trauma. The casualties of this warfare are already piling up; one can hardly imagine the suffering to come. Will we prepare ourselves to staff the *field hospitals*? The Christian community, although resented for its peculiarity, may very well be appreciated for its healing and restorative capabilities.

It is in the redeemed nature to be engaged in the relief of human suffering and to be active in constructive and restorative processes. Evangelical Christianity shows signs of moving away from its defensiveness, its obsessive self-demonstration, and its self-righteous weighing out of each good act according to its “opportunity” to serve as a vehicle for verbal witness. We may be returning to the heart of Christ’s compassion wherein the motive of good works is not clever strategy but an expression of what we *are*.

The field hospital is more than a tent and a stack of medical supplies. What makes it work is people who know what they are doing. Among the proposed metaphors of the church in the intermediate future, the *field hospital* demands the most in the way of preparation. The gifts of the Holy Spirit to the church must be claimed not only for the good of our own inside community, but also for our servanthood in the secular society. To fulfill the ministry of Christ to a needy world we must claim the gifts of healings and helps. It may well be the destiny of the church to minister in the front lines among the spiritual, emotional, and physical traumas that fall out from the culmination of

the power of Satan. The church may honor its Lord best as the field hospital—a prepared community of relief and restoration in tragic times.

I close with a reminder from the *Lausanne Covenant*:

... we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbor and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist. When people receive Christ they are born again into his kingdom and must seek not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world. The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead.

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In respect and appreciation for those now indispensable review services that direct the attention to valuable and scattered resources, the four which the author reads regularly are cited following:

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