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BUCKLE UP FOR THE '90s

The church is heading into turbulent times.

The conviction of Jim Bakker on all charges in federal court says many things to the church.

First of all, it says that God's people are not allowed to play fast and loose with God's money. Contributions are a sacred trust and are not to be used for personal gain. As Hophni and Phinehas, the evil sons of Eli, were guilty of eating the fat of the sacrifices (1 Sam. 2:12-17), so Jim Bakker was guilty of taking tithes and offerings and spending them lavishly on himself.

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But Bakker's conviction says something else that is even more ominous.

America, once a safe haven for Christians, has changed. Government agencies, which once strived to maintain a wide separation between church and state, are now actively investigating church activities. (It was obvious from the beginning that the prosecution was out to "get" Bakker and friends, not only because they had broken the law, but because they were Christians.) The church, once highly respected, has become suspect in the eyes of many. In the days to come it will be common for pastors to be sued—and put in jail—some for righteousness' sake.

Our newspapers report, almost daily, absurd judgments against churches.

Typical is the judgment rendered last January by a U.S. district judge in Biloxi, Mississippi. A practicing witch, who had been working for the Salvation Army without their knowledge that she was a witch, sued that church for \$1.25 million after they fired her. She even admitted she was a witch and had been using the Salvation Army's copying machine to photocopy her satanic rituals. Nevertheless, the judge said the Salvation Army had violated her constitutional rights to freedom of religion when they fired her for practicing witchcraft.

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Dr. John Bendor-Samuel, president of Wycliffe Bible Translators, says our American culture has become "post-Christian." "If a culture rejects Christ," Bendor-Samuel says, "it reaps the consequences, and in a sense that is what's happening [to America]. Our culture has moved away from God and has opened itself up to the power of Satan."

I do not expect the tide of evil and immorality in America to ebb. We are cycling, as cultures and civilizations have always cycled, and are now on the down side of glory. Our once great and godly nation, having crested the hill of God's grace, has begun a slow descent into the abyss of self-destruction.

By this I am not talking, necessarily, of military or material destruction. Indeed, our financial prognosticators tell

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us that there are no signs of a declining financial market. Look only for more prosperity, we're told.

Nor am I afraid of encroaching liberalism. There's certainly plenty of it—in politics, education and the church. But what I fear most is that while the crops look good above ground, the soil is gradually being poisoned. The people I fear most are not the humanists or the liberals, but the right-wing conservatives who equate political conservatism with biblical theology.

The question no longer is, Can we stem the tide of evil in our nation? The question is, How shall we then live in an evil society?

Ten years ago I wrote an article in *Charisma* warning God's people what to expect as we entered the '80s. No, I didn't prophesy the TV scandals, Jim Bakker's prison sentence or Pat Robertson's near-fatal run for the presidency. Nor did I forecast that Jimmy Swaggart would be accused of visiting a prostitute or that Heritage USA would be closed. I dealt with issues. I wrote what I believed the Spirit was saying to the churches of the United States. I was not as concerned with what God was going to do as I was with what He wanted us to do—and be.

I said we needed to learn how to handle civil disobedience—an issue that, in 1980, few evangelicals or charismatics considered relevant. I also warned that denominations would begin to put great pressure on churches and individuals to conform. I wrote: "There will be times in the near future, not only before the tribunals of Rome but before religious

Sanhedrins, when our children will need to know how to say—under the power and direction of the Holy Spirit—"We must obey God rather than man."

"Real death," I concluded, "comes by marching in lock step...under the powerful control of some system."

I also said that "I do not see any lasting hope for this nation...America will eventually be brought to her knees by some Chaldean rapists, who will be loosed upon us by God to shake us to repentance and to force us to flee our temple structures and meet Him fresh and new by the waters of some Babylon."

Sure enough, civil disobedience and conformity have become hot issues in the church over these last 10 years. And I have little doubt that the rest of my predictions will in time prove accurate.

The downfall of America, however, is not so much God's judgment on our nation as His means to purge His church of the spirit of the world.

We've all heard the death rattle of our dying denominations. Last summer the Presbyterian Church (USA) dropped "Onward Christian Soldiers" from its hymnbook because of its military image. They also changed "God of Our Fathers" to "God of the Ages" because of its "sexist tone."

Then in August the general assembly of the Disciples of Christ voted to support the PLO and to oppose restrictions on abortion. They also passed a resolution saying the Bible is not the primary standard of their church and voted down a statement that salvation is possible only through Jesus Christ.

But it is not the death twitches of the denominations that bother me most. Rather it is the worldliness of those thousands of churches, raised by the Holy Spirit during the charismatic renewal, that have been commissioned to combat the forces of Satan. Among charismatics we find:

- Televangelists who have cheapened the gospel by leading viewers to believe they can have a relationship with Christ by sending money.

- "Prosperity religion" teachers who tickle the itching ears of our carnal nature.

- Right-wing extremists whose judgmental attitudes toward all who do not

agree with their doctrinal stance make them today's Pharisees.

● Those who have institutionalized Christianity, leaving no room for the values of a roaming band of disciples led by an itinerant Carpenter preaching a revolutionary gospel.

We ask, Can the church survive in a time of persecution?

That's the wrong question. The church was born in persecution. The times of its most powerful ministry came when it was most persecuted.

The proper question is this: Can the church survive in times of prosperity?

The sad answer, coming from 20th-century America, is no. Instead, we've discovered that in times of prosperity the church invariably takes on the form and nature of the culture.

In America we have equated the church with Americanism. Some go so far as to equate it with the Republican Party. Our heroes are political conservatives and television evangelists rather than the unknown Pauls and Silases sent out by little churches to die on for-

eign soil as missionaries. In most churches the average member does not know the name of a single missionary—much less a missionary martyr. Yet while we highly honor our "big preachers," hundreds of thousands of nameless men and women are dying each year for the cause of Christ in nations few Christians even know exist.

General Douglas MacArthur, at the close of World War II, warned: "History fails to record a single precedent in which nations subject to moral decay have not passed into political and economic decline. There has been either a spiritual awakening to overcome the moral lapse, or progressive deterioration leading to ultimate national disaster."

America is in the "progressive deterioration" stage, with no sign of a spiritual awakening.

● Bible reading and prayer are no longer allowed in public schools—even at football games.

● The display of nativity scenes on public property is forbidden.

● The Word of God is seldom heard in the halls of justice—or the halls of Congress. And we sadly conclude it is heard in the White House only to appease us voters who hold it as our absolute standard in life.

Such is the price of democratic government—where no voice is more important than another.

What should we do? Demonstrate against moral evil? March on state capitols demanding biblical legislation? I applaud such efforts. Yet Jesus did not come to save society. He came to save men and women from society. And in the long run all efforts to return America to God will prove futile—a waste of time and money.

Chuck Colson, speaking to the National Leadership Conference last year, said: "It is the great paradox of the church that throughout history whenever the church has felt it should reform society it has fallen on its face. Whenever it has tried to be an instrument of social or political reform it has failed. God uses the church when it is the

church—reflecting Jesus. It is at that time, in paradox, that God uses it to transform culture and society.”

Colson was simply elaborating on what Martin Luther said four centuries ago: “Let the church be the church.”

This civilization, too, will go the way of Greece and Rome. In fact, there is evidence it already has. The barbarians have taken over. Yet church leaders keep trying to bail water from a sinking ship—when they ought to be giving lifeboat drills instead.

I do not believe, as some do, that at any moment nukes from Russia will be hurtling over the North Pole to destroy us as evidence of God’s judgment. We are still the greatest nation on earth. More dollars pour from Americans into foreign missions than from all other nations combined. I praise God for that. I am grateful I was born here rather than any place else on earth. Nevertheless—and I write this with deep sadness—I believe the glory of God has departed. We are slowly sinking into the oblivion of spiritual deadness and

human immorality.

Like you, I too read the reoccurring prophecies of “great revivals” coming, with the stadiums of this land filled with spiritually hungry people. I simply don’t believe God is saying that. I hope—oh, I hope—that I’m wrong. But I believe those “prophecies” grow out of our human yearning for better things.

Revival is coming. Right now it’s coming to Africa. But the revival to come in America will be in the catacombs—not the stadiums. Like the first-century Jerusalem church we should be sending our finest to the mission field, rather than trying to restore the kingdom to Israel.

Are the hard times we’re facing all bad? No. They may be the church’s only salvation.

The task of church leaders is now more clearly defined than ever before: to teach believers how to live—not only to survive but to flourish—in a hostile environment. As the early church spent much time instructing people how to die with boldness and grace, so Ameri-

can Christians must be preparing for the inevitable time when believers will again be persecuted for righteousness’ sake.

As we close out the millennium the battle will grow more intense. Many leaders will fall as Satan takes aim at those on the point. The church, the family of God, must learn how to heal and restore those who drop in battle—not judge and condemn as we have done in the past. For the time will soon come when there are none but wounded healers among us.

This is not a message of gloom. It should bring us great joy. Jesus said, “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:12, NIV).

In late 1896 the committee planning the Diamond Jubilee for Britain’s Queen Victoria asked the poet laureate of England, Rudyard Kipling, to write a hymn to be read at the Jubilee Celebration. Months went by and the committee grew restless, wondering what the

old poet had written. Kipling, however, refused to let anyone hear his poem until the day of celebration when he stood to read it to the nation.

The piece turned out to be a powerful denunciation of the pride and luxurious life-style infecting the empire that so proudly boasted of how it ruled the waves. Although the committee was touting another 100 years of British greatness, Kipling titled his poem, prophetically, "Recessional."

*God of our fathers, known of old,
Lord of our far-flung battle line,
Beneath whose awful hand we hold
Dominion over palm and pine,
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget, lest we forget.*

That prophecy now applies to America in turn.

Over the last several years some of God's best-known representatives have turned out to be false prophets. Some have faded away. Others have been buried in an avalanche of infamy. The church, because of its representatives, has been shamed and scorned by soci-

ety. Once-great churches and public ministries are now but shells of their former selves. Large denominations, weakened by inner strife and debilitating liberalism, have cracked and are crumbling.

Yet this does not mean we have been wrong to pray for His kingdom to come. Nor does it mean God is finished with what He has promised in this world. It simply means the kingdom of God is to be manifest in the hearts of men and women, not in the structures of this world—until the King returns.

So what is the message from heaven as we enter the last 10 years of this millennium?

First, God's call is still the same. It is God's will that the good news be proclaimed to every tribe and nation. That remains an absolute.

Second, God's promises are still the same. "I'll be with you to the end of the age" is not canceled out simply because circumstances change.

Finally, God is still in the miracle business.

Years ago when I was working with Pat Robertson on the book *Shout It From the Housetops*, I was inspired to write down a slogan that captured how I felt about people who dared to risk all for Jesus. I still have it hanging above my desk as I write this article: "Attempt something so big that unless God intervenes it is bound to fail."

Take heart, Christian! Despite the deterioration of this nation and the worldly spirit in many churches, there are still millions of Christians who are trusting God for miracles, and countless churches operating under the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

For American Christians these next 10 years can be our finest hour—the most difficult yet the most exciting years of our history. So welcome the '90s with joy, but tighten your seat belt. We're heading into turbulent times. ■

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