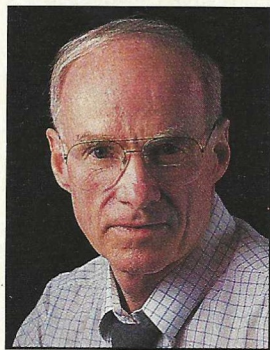


The challenge of being salt and light in an increasingly pagan society.

HOW SHALL WE RESPOND TO OUR BROKEN WORLD?

Newspaper headlines announce daily the growing chaos of a nation that has turned away from God. Christians must respond to our broken world redemptively, but how? Do we march on city hall, campaign for Christian politicians, write letters to the editor, practice civil disobedience? What would Jesus do?



BY JAMIE
BUCKINGHAM

Last June, Bishop John Myers of Illinois issued a pastoral letter to all his priests saying Catholics who are pro-abortion should not take communion. Parishioners responded angrily, shouting into the greedy lenses of television cameras: "Who does the bishop think he is? He's not in touch with the desires of his people. He's not fairly representing how we feel."

Question: Are bishops, pastors and spiritual leaders to represent the people? Or are they to represent God and His desires as found in the Bible?

Earlier this year Episcopal Bishop John Spong ordained a homosexual priest in Hoboken, New Jersey. The bishop was lauded by some in the media as being "open-minded."

Question: Is a bishop to be open-minded or is he to have the "mind of Christ"? Spong was later embarrassed when the priest, Robert Williams, spoke at a symposium on gay and lesbian marriage and said Mother Teresa would be better off taking a lesbian lover.

Godly Episcopalians all over the nation were rightly offended. The bishop and his homosexual priest were not representing God; they were reflecting this godless society.

AN OPEN LETTER

In early June, a full page "open letter" appeared in the Atlanta Journal and Constitution. Titled "Atlanta is Burning Again," it was signed by 60 Atlanta area spiritual leaders.

The letter began with a wrenching statement of personal repentance. "Our hands have not been clean, and our hearts have been polluted. We have sat in stark silence and indefensible passivity as evil has overtaken our city and state..."

Next came a searing probe of the reasons wickedness is sweeping that city—and all our cities.

- "We have allowed the church to ignore the plight of the poor and the homeless..."
- "We have winked at an overwhelming tide of immorality..."
- "We have neglected our responsibility to actively support righteous leadership in government..."

The letter deplored the scandalous conduct of religious leaders and called for Christians to join in "imploring God's mercy before destruction is total."

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Listed were seven major areas of concern:

- *Murder.* Not only killing in the streets but in the abortion clinics.

- *Sexual immorality.* The media in particular has pressed to make homosexuality an acceptable lifestyle.

- *Injustice.* The letter called the action of the Atlanta police against abortion protesters an "outrage" and blasted political injustice against blacks.

- *Oppression of the poor.* Some blacks in power (Atlanta has many black political leaders, including a black mayor) are "conspiring with whites to keep the majority of blacks and urban poor in poverty."

- *Political cowardice.* The government is filled with cowards who refuse to tackle righteous issues in election years.

- *Lawlessness and immorality among leaders and entertainment heroes.*

- *Godlessness.* "Our government is no longer established under God, but is set against Him."

The article closed with a powerful challenge, calling leaders back to the ways of Jesus Christ.

A NATION TURNED PAGAN

But what are the ways of Jesus Christ in this society of changing social values? How are we Christians to live and act in a nation turned pagan?

After reading the article many thoughts raced through my mind.

First, I admired the signers of the letter. They reminded me of the ancient prophets, like Amos, who fearlessly denounced evil and cowardly religious and political leaders: "They sell the righteous for silver...They trample on the heads of the poor...and deny justice to the oppressed" (Amos 2:6-7, NIV). "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies," said the Lord. "Away with the noise of your songs...But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Amos 5:21-24).

Next, I wondered why many of the better-known Atlanta pastors—including some of my friends—had *not* signed the letter.

Finally, the lurid description of At-

lanta's godlessness (which describes my town as well) reminded me of historian Arnold Toynbee's description of Rome just prior to its fall—and of the Bible's description of Sodom and Gomorrah.

As I put the newspaper aside, the words of Jesus—judging the three unrepentant cities of Galilee—kept running through my mind: "It will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you" (see Luke 10:12).

I've visited the sites of those ancient cities: Chorazim, Bethsaida and Capernaum—the hometowns of many of Jesus' disciples. I've walked through their crumbling ruins, kicked the old rocks, picked up shards of pottery from the dust. No one lives there. Only briars grow. The ground seems scorched.

Is this what God is about to do to America?

Americans are living in what Charles Colson calls "the new dark age." In his powerful book *Against the Night*, Colson says Americans "have grown so accustomed to the dark, they don't even realize the lights are out...The vestiges of Christian influence still remain; but those Christian absolutes that have so profoundly shaped Western culture through the centuries are being consciously rejected by the men and women who direct the flow of information and attitudes to popular culture: communicators, educators, writers, and lawyers. As T.S. Eliot put it, 'Paganism holds all the most valuable advertising space.' "

THE JESUS QUESTION

What, then, must be our role as followers of Jesus Christ in this hedonistic society?

Are we to join protest movements? Campaign for Christian politicians? Should we send money to conservative causes? Refuse to pay taxes since much of the money goes to support godlessness? Should we boycott stores whose owners sell smut and pornography? Refuse to buy products whose manufacturers endorse raunchy TV programs? Are we to write letters to the editor, march on city hall, even run for political office?

All, some or none of these things

may be what God wants us to do. What is right for one may not be God's will for another. One thing is certain: Christians must grant each other the freedom to hear from God and act on His Word.

Beyond that, the overshadowing question that faces us as Christians is what I have come to call the "Jesus Question": *What would Jesus do?*

That's the most dangerous question a 20th-century Christian can ask. To answer it means you must ask two other questions:

What did Jesus do?

What would He have me to do?

The first question cannot be answered correctly without a thorough knowledge of the facts and the attitude of the four Gospels. The second can only be answered if you are filled with the Holy Spirit.

When I asked the Jesus Question concerning my own involvement in social action, I came up with an unexpected answer. First, in my study of the Gospels I discovered Jesus never protested against the government even though the Romans openly practiced

genocide, infanticide, slavery, torture, abortion, murder, idolatry, sexual immorality, child prostitution, oppression of the poor and a lavish lifestyle for its leaders. Jesus never marched, lobbied or even spoke out against the godlessness of Rome.

Second, He mandated His followers to become personally involved in social action: "Then [the Son of Man] will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me...I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me'" (Matt. 25:41-45).

How should we live in this godless society? We live as Jesus lived in His pagan world. As I examined my own life I realized my involvement was either academic (I talked about it a lot) or

substitutionary (I gave money so others could perform my calling). But I could no longer live that way when faced with the Jesus Question.

Bottom line: My wife and I had to go out on the streets, find a homeless family and "invite them in." We found a husband, wife and three small children who had been living under a tree. Both parents had been on crack cocaine. They had entered a shelter and made commitments to Christ.

Now they've lived with us for eight months. It's not been easy, especially when the kids set our property on fire. Our lives and finances have been strained. But we had no choice if we were to follow Jesus.

I can't do much about the broad evils of society: homosexuality, abortion, racial prejudice and immorality. But I can do something about one pregnant girl, one homeless family—walking out the ways of Jesus. ■

Jamie Buckingham's popular monthly column for *Charisma & Christian Life* appears on page 162 in this issue.