

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*  
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***On Picking Your Battles***  
*Joshua 24.14-15; Matthew 4.1-11*  
Russ Dean, October 30, 2005

The parent who has not learned this simple truth has simply not learned to parent. Whether, “I want my passy,” or “Dad, can I have the car keys?,” the wise parent is the one who analyzes the present situation in light of the entire situation, and who counts the cost before she answers. The worst fight I’ve ever been in began in a grocery store encounter over a free sample of some sweet snack. It did not soon end, and when the dust did finally settle, all innocence was gone and the so-called wisdom of adulthood had clearly lost to the passion and instinct of a two year-old. The parent who has not learned this simple truth has simply not learned to parent. When it comes to conflict: Pick Your Battles!

We are a nation at war, as we are sadly told so often these days. And though we cannot feel the destruction of the “shock and awe” still raining down on a largely innocent people, the greatest theatre for this conflict is on the home front. The heart of the conflict is right here. The current skirmishes being fought in Iraq and Afghanistan are, I believe, extensions of a war being waged for the hearts, minds, and souls of the American people. What is the meaning of our freedom? What is ours on this growing/shrinking planet? Can the democratic experiment withstand the challenges of a pluralistic society? What will become of the Judaeo-Christian ethic that formed the principles that gave us birth? Who are we?

I suspect, if we could see as God sees, we would realize that most physical wars are just the byproducts of much more covert operations. That physical wars are the tangible out-

workings of the inner angst of people of too little faith. Jesus challenges his disciples over and over, “*do not be afraid... only believe.*” The real war we are fighting today is a Culture War -- a war being waged for the hearts, minds, and souls of the American people. Who are we?

In his important book, *Christ and Culture*, theologian H. Richard Niebuhr suggests that there are three powers in all societies: state, religion, and culture. The state has compulsive authority. (You know the old adage about Death and Taxes.) Religion also has such authority. Perhaps this is not clear today in our world, but for many people the church is still as compulsive as any power can be. But culture, he says, the third legitimate authority in any society lacks this compulsive power:

Culture is: “the sum of all that has spontaneously arisen for the advancement of material life and as an expression of spiritual and moral life – all social intercourse, technologies, arts, literature and sciences. It is the realm of the variable, free, not necessarily universal, of all that cannot lay claim to compulsive authority.” p.31

Culture is, in a very non-technical definition, all that we feel around us. It is our non-tangible environment. It is a presence as inescapable as the air we breathe, giving shape to our lives. Niebuhr may be right to call culture non-compulsive, in a literal way, but the subconscious tides of culture always pull strong. And this undercurrent is the source of this culture war that is defining our American life.

As we consider this war, I think it is worth noting that the culture that has raised us is a culture that was created to a great degree by the Church. Our culture was formed out of the great ideas of the church of the Middle Ages and Renaissance: art, architecture, science, medicine, literature, government. Isn't it ironic that so much of the church which created them

now stands at odds with all of these aspects of our culture, denouncing them as secular and decadent? Why is it that the Church now fears that which we have created? It is as if we are afraid to hear the sound of our own voices. Afraid to listen to the doubts and hopes swirling around in our own heads.<sup>1</sup>

My point is this: the Church has, to a great extent, produced the culture in which we live. So, we should take pride in it. And, the Church has also the beneficiary of culture in many ways. So, let us be grateful. But as the Church – as the Church – let us stand outside, as willing outsiders, and let us offer our voice with its much-needed contribution to the culture. And let us take Jesus at his word: *do not be afraid... only believe*. If the church is not strong enough to survive in this culture, it does not deserve to do so.

Disturbing as many of today's issues are, I am not afraid of the issues this culture raises. None of these issues can destroy the Church. The Culture War itself, however, reveals a threat that could prove our demise, and it is this: the Church in America, the Church, left and right, has lost the counter-cultural identity of its Christ. The Church is not the culture. And the culture is not the Church.

Conservatives fight the Culture War because they seem to want a “Christian culture.” Conservatives seem to want the culture to do the work of the Church, for the culture to protect the traditions and precepts and beliefs of the church, for the culture to teach our values in the

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<sup>1</sup> The content of this footnote was part of the manuscript, which I omitted for the sake of time: “Let me be clear. I do not believe that all art is edifying, and I’m not sure all that passes for art really is. Let the Church offer its voice. But all art is an expression of the feelings, emotions, insights, and sensitivities of the artist, and as long as we affirm that God has, in some sense, endowed these feelings, emotions, insights, and sensitivities, then the Church should be large enough to accept the enterprise – even if some art offends our doctrines. (Who knows, we might even learn from their critique.) And, all science is not healthy – just because we can do something, does not mean that we should. The Church must stand apart from the institution to offer words of critique and ethical counsel. But, how legitimate is our voice in the dialogue, and, more importantly, how true to Jesus, when we decry as ungodly, research in the name of enhancing life, while turning a blind eye to the sciences of destruction, namely the development and perfection of the killing arsenals of war?”

state-sponsored schools and in cultural projects. We have a right to expect schools not to teach blatant immorality, yet the job of values education for the follower of Jesus must never fall to the culture. If we want our children to learn what it means to follow Jesus, we must teach them, here. If we expect the culture to teach this, we have misunderstood how radical is the way of Jesus, and how opposed are his values to the values of any culture.

If the culture becomes the Church, then the Church, with its prophetic voice, will cease to be.

And, on the left, liberals are content with living in a secularized culture (which I think the Church always must be), but we are too content, for we are too willing to accommodate the values of the culture within the church. We say we just don't want to be like the Fundamentalists. Fine. (Good!) But the question is, do we want to be like Jesus? For Jesus' values: turning the other cheek, loving our enemies, offering forgiveness and pursuing reconciliation, seeking the good of the least deserving among us, finding power through self-giving instead of strength, trusting in a God we cannot see instead of a security we can see... these values, if we really live them, will put us at odds at every turn with a culture that has made us comfortable and affluent. And neither comfort nor affluence, are values of Jesus.

If the Church becomes the culture, then the Church, with its prophetic voice, will cease to be.

We will not win the culture war. For Christ will always call his followers to a set of values that are higher than those set by the culture – and higher than most are willing to follow. (What is a “Moral Majority” any way? The calling of Christ is to radical to ever become a majority, in any culture.) His calling will work, however, as *salt*, to season the culture, and

*light*, to pierce some of its darkness (from Matthew 5). But as long as this world lasts, culture will never go away, so, the Church must constantly ask: What battles will we choose?

The Religious Right names these in terms of a few hot button issues, mostly involving our sexuality. We will get little help from Jesus on these hot button issues, which should instruct us as to their overall importance to us.<sup>2</sup> In the temptations, on the other hand, we see the battles Jesus did choose to fight. As they were for Jesus, these are the temptations of our culture. Henri Nouwen interprets the temptations in his book, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. I have time only to mention his characterizations.

First, in the temptation to turn stones to bread, Nouwen says Jesus is tempted by relevance. Being relevant sounds like a good thing, doesn't it? Shouldn't the church want to be relevant? (Which means, "related to the matter at hand.") But the temptation is to be related to the matters of the culture – and not to the things of God. Nouwen says, "I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his/her own vulnerable self." This battle, against cultural relevance is a battle worth choosing.

The second temptation, to allow the angels to descend, is the temptation to popularity. Surely there is no greater value in our culture today than to be popular, with a few pastors and Christian authors among the most famous of today's stars. But Jesus said life is not about a display of our gifts and talents, not about the spectacular things we might do as individuals, nor

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<sup>2</sup> The issues the Religious Right has chosen are important issues, but they are issues Jesus spent little, if any, time dealing with. Jesus said nothing about homosexuality, though I agree the conversation is an important one in our society. Jesus said nothing about abortion, though I agree the conversation is an important one in our society. My point is only that much of the Church has taken a few issues, highly charged and emotional, and has staked its claim of fidelity to the Christ around these issues. Where is Christ's concern for the poor and the oppressed in their platform? Where is Christ's involvement in peace and justice? I am not suggesting that they have no concern for poverty or injustice, but that these issues, so important to Jesus, seem to get lost in the flurry.

as a church, to merit God's favor, and Jesus refused at every turn to do what would have made him popular in his culture. This battle, against cultural popularity is a battle worth choosing.

The final temptation, to possess all lands and nations, is the temptation to power. I need not say any more, though I think so often of the political call for "peace through strength." It is one of our nation's un-official mottos, but nothing could be more diametrically opposed to the values of Jesus, whose only power was self-giving and death. This battle, against cultural power, is a battle worth choosing.

These battles, against cultural relevance, against cultural popularity, against cultural power are so much more difficult than any hot button issues of any religious piety, yet they stand, if we would choose to fight them, to give the Church so much more legitimacy and a so-needed-voice in the culture today.

I said that the angst of the Culture War comes down to this always- and all-important question: Who am I?

The one who stood against his culture, even at the cost of his life, dares us answer: I am a child of God. And so is my neighbor.

His battles are worth picking, for his is the only word that can bring a Culture of Peace.

May it be so!