

Walking with God in a Pagan Nation

During the 1960's and on into the '70's, Americans were jarred seeing vulgarity and revolutionary ideas tossed about publicly. As a result, a spate of Christian books appeared describing a paganization of American society. Interestingly, for the past 20 years or so, no such books have been published. Why? I suspect because what the authors of those books (and many church-goers in America) found shocking, namely the gradual acceptance of pagan practices in our nation, has become the new normal. Thirty years ago two insightful evangelicals wrote "The Sensate Culture" (Harold O.J. Brown) and "Twilight of a Great Civilization" (Carl F.H. Henry) anticipating the transformation of America into something Christians wouldn't recognize. They were correct. The progression they predicted appears to have been almost supernaturally fulfilled. Our country is now a pagan society, with pagan values and beliefs fully incorporated into daily life. What's going on currently is the deliberate abandonment of all the persisting biblical values that had long been a traditional component of American life so that only a totally pagan society remains.

Our publicly-educated and college-educated young people have been radicalized, not just politically but into adopting grossly pagan values, beliefs and convictions as their normal way of living. They've been taught that traditional Christian values and beliefs are reactionary, obsolete, even anti-social, and are therefore to be shunned if not despised and opposed. The censoring of anyone who has (or had) a tinge of conservatism, the obscene and vulgar speech in music and on radio and in general discourse, the flaunting and promotion of homosexuality not only in our culture but as government policy, the rancor and contempt in political speech – all this is in-your-face evidence that this is not the country we grew up in. Our nation is being deliberately transformed into something older Americans won't recognize, into something worthy of God's fierce judgment. The burden of this Sunday School lesson is, how do followers of Christ live in a society such as what ours has become so that God is glorified by their lives?

In the past, it was easy to be a Christian. America had Christianity as its national or civic religion. Society had absorbed so much from centuries of the church's influence, biblical values such as respect for others, compassion for the needy, forgiveness of offenses, respect for marriage, penchant for truth, belief in the supernatural, etc, that it could be assumed almost everyone was a Christian. Raised in a Christian milieu, we learned biblical values automatically just by living in America. Of course not everyone was following Christ. Most were nominal Christians; they attended church at least once in a while, and supposed that because they didn't murder, commit robbery or adultery they were OK with God. Church leaders enjoyed prestige and perhaps a sense of power. Non-Christians easily tolerated Christianity, it was part of being American; it was Western civilization. Believers didn't need constantly to be on their guard against idolatry or threats to their worldview. Well, no more. That era is over. And we need to adapt.

To walk with God, that is, to live righteously pleasing Him, being godly ourselves, we need to understand what we're to eschew and what we're to adopt instead. The challenge is a perfect repeat of what Christians in ancient Rome needed to understand, which is why the letters to the churches in the New Testament were penned. Those early believers had been immersed in pagan society when they came to Christ, and they needed to be radically changed into righteous, God-glorifying, Christ-like people. They did it by absorbing into their minds and lives those letters to the churches. We need to do the same because we today are in the same situation, trying to live godly in what is now a pagan nation.

Pagans lust for money, power, and sensual experiences, especially in the realm of sex. They have a robust appetite for, and suppose they have the absolute freedom to indulge in, whatever pleases them. Lewd dance . . . why not? Marijuana, pornography . . . OK too. Their personal relationships are superficial, if even that; more likely they exhibit contempt for others. Their contemptuousness easily slides into hatred and acceptance of violence. Greed, bigotry, manipulating and using other people, all these characterize paganism. They play games and entertain themselves in a huge variety of ways, including gambling. They are enamored of stories, fictional stories especially, thus watching TV and movies occupies much of their lives. Their stories invariably feature sex, violence, conflict, tragedy, and crime, the very characteristics of paganism itself. Modern pagans also love new gadgets, new fashions, new architecture, new *anything!* They are permanently restless because they're malcontent. They categorically deny absolute and universal truths (i.e., biblical truths) because such truths interfere with their love of freedom. Of greatest importance is, pagans firmly believe that the end justifies the means. Thus any truth claim or assertion of fact they make is probably a lie, and they gleefully use any tactic however nasty in order to win. Their clamor for "justice" is bogus. There's more, but these suffice.

Why all this? Because it's all that pagans know. They have no purpose other than to enjoy this life of theirs to the max. So personal happiness and fulfillment is their highest good, their greatest value. "My life is mine, to live it as I please," says the pagan, as if he were an autonomous being, a god. In essence, because they don't acknowledge God's existence (or if they do, they purposely don't submit to His self-revelation and to His sovereign rule), pagans define themselves. Tragically, so do Christians. When Christians say, "I'm free to live as I please as long as I believe in Jesus" they also are defining themselves, exactly as the pagans do. Dear reader: We are creatures! *God defines us. So we must know Scripture, and we must know theology.*

But paganism is deep and subtle. And dangerous to us in the Church because if we fail to recognize it, we will easily adopt the pagan worldview and offend our holy God. So let's think carefully. Three characteristics of paganism:

1. Pagans are idolaters. In Rome at the time of Christ, everyone worshiped the emperor. Pagans in other societies throughout history similarly idolized their ruler or their government. Such worship is common in almost all pagan societies. Much of pagan religion had to do with manipulating the gods who controlled their State. Today's America is no different. Modern pagans demand an all-encompassing, omniscient, powerful central government; it's an idol. Of immense concern is this: Christians unwittingly are participating in this idolatry. We suppose our system of government is like a great circus tent, enveloping 3 rings. One ring is Christianity. The other rings . . . well, one might be atheism. Our government grants everyone the liberty to believe whatever they want to regarding religion. Because our constitutional government grants us the freedom to practice our religion, we are politically engaged, perhaps even obsessed, with how the State can be controlled to assure that our freedom and way of life isn't abridged.

Not only government has become an idol, so is that notion of freedom. Even in the church we accept that all people are free to believe whatever they want regarding ultimate issues. "It's their business what they believe, not mine. Live and let live," we say. So we remain indifferent to their spiritual state, because we acknowledge that our American government's ideal of freedom has priority. We ignore the warnings and imperatives in God's Word. We love that our authoritative government system, which we regard as history's most ideal ever, guarantees the American "way of life," which is a life of not only liberty but prosperity, peace, comfort, opportunity and security, which we cherish. We Christians easily confess: "Our form of government fosters law and order, free enterprise, and individualism rather than being collectivist; these virtues in themselves justify our loyalty." This idol has taken the place of God.

Science is another idol. I find it appalling that almost all theologians, including evangelicals [!], have capitulated to the understanding of origins that science offers, rather than holding fast to what Scripture so clearly states as truth. This reveals a love of what man can understand about our world (even if it's only speculative!), instead of humble submission to God. It's hideously idolatrous. Pagans deceive themselves with the notion that science is a way to discovering truths about our world. That's self-deception because, to a pagan, science is really a way to try to control our world, as if science were a god.

In our pews, people hold smart-phones before their eyes instead of a Bible. Inked words, whether on parchment or paper, are permanent; dots on a screen are evanescent. But we love those tiny dots! Our church leaders look to the internet for inspiration when preparing sermons or lessons instead of to the Spirit in prayer. The power that the internet platforms have to manipulate and control humanity seems supernatural, as if the handiwork of a god. The media engage us, isolate us, fill us with fantasy, and turn us into apathetic spectators. The media keep us from thinking, and that's the point! Pagans don't *want* to think (they fear it). Yet . . . we're in love with technology. Why? Because it enriches our lives, because it's novel, and because it's fulfilling. Fulfilling? Yes, it's an evil god, one that holds us captive by thrilling us with its (man-made) capabilities. "Hey!" someone will protest. "Tech only gives us tools to use!" No. It creates an artificial environment where thoughts of God are not permitted. Pride in the achievements of science and technology keeps us in thrall to it.

2. Pagans are utterly selfish. They are self-absorbed, narcissistic even, which leads to a whole cornucopia of further lusts and desires, such as jealousy, slander, sloth, anger and rage, arrogance, and lots more. Pagans evaluate the world and all relationships with respect to themselves; their focus is always on their needs and their desires. They see themselves as totally self-sufficient beings. They repudiate all forms of self-sacrifice, even if it means not having children; they abort babies to selfishly maintain their personal peace and comfort. Consumerism likewise reflects pagan self-absorption.

They seek virtue, thus self-righteousness is a hallmark of self-centeredness. They seek meaning, so they gravitate to causes such as environment and climate and Marxism and social justice and etc. Life without meaning is empty, unfulfilling, unacceptable. They seek meaning in “self-realization” which is just a fancy term for unmitigated selfishness. Gay pride is selfishness. Contempt for others is selfishness, and it unfortunately easily slides into hate. Seeking revenge is selfishness. Imagining oneself harmed by others is selfishness. Acquisitiveness is really self-love. Drug abuse is extreme self-love. So is the incessant urge to be entertained. Our culture is saturated with reasons to love oneself.

And because we believers dwell in this modern American culture, selfishness infects us. Are we even aware of this thoroughly pagan worldview? I think not. That’s why we ignore Jesus’ demand that, to follow Him, we need to hate ourselves (Luke 14:26 and elsewhere) so that we can love God instead, as He alone is worthy of love. I regret to have to make this observation, but our churches are filled with people madly in love with themselves. If we’re not constantly yielded to the Spirit, our sin nature by default forces “self” on us. Our pagan culture reinforces it, amplifies it, teaches it, and we unwittingly adopt it. The pagan self-indulgence warps our theology. So, for example, we view God as our Friend, ready always to help us out. Or as an interested Spectator, applauding when we worship on Sundays or when we do something good, but disappointed when we fail. The god we suppose we know is gentle and mild (like our version of Jesus), who asks us for just a little time and effort and winks at our pretended loyalty. It’s all so very sad.

3. Pagans are thorough-going materialists. They have to be! They deny the existence of God, indeed, they deny anything that’s supernatural. They’ve thus imprisoned themselves in this physical world. They’ve deliberately removed from their lives anything transcendent. The existence they know is therefore one that’s unreal; so they live a fantasy. They deny the existence of sin, or if they acknowledge it, they trivialize it. They know nothing of an existence after death (yet they fear death!). They don’t and can’t understand morality. They accept using other people as a means to an end. They know only what’s available in our culture. They crave entertainment and pleasant, sensual experiences. They seek after information in a vain attempt to occupy their minds, but not for wisdom. They fill their lives with inconsequential matters, such as politics and subversive conspiracies or other supposedly serious issues, or with adventures, or with sports, or with *anything* that seems rewarding in the here-and-now. They’re “worldly,” in other words. Christians who participate in such worldly matters with worldly values are living like materialists. Like pagans.

Paganism is subtle and deceptive. We must understand it so we can be exceedingly careful not to be part of it. (It’s why I’ve written all the above.) In its barest essence, paganism is rebellion against God. It’s the attempt to live completely unrestrained by His preceptive will, with their sin nature fully expressed. Let me say it differently: Religion is the most dangerous of all human activities. That’s because religion dictates our thoughts, values and behavior, indeed, our worldview. And that, in God’s perfect justice, determines our ultimate destiny. Paganism is the worldview that results from the [yet un-named] religion of rebelling against the God who everyone knows really is there. That religion is one of indifference if not hatred of God, of deliberately *not* wanting to walk with God. It’s a religion of wanting to be a god ourselves instead of a creature. And it is dangerous in the extreme.

By grace, we’ve been called out of this world. But because paganism is intolerant of Christians and their biblical values, believers need to know how to live in this new, hostile era. How do we please God? How do we live godly? In this or any period of time, we live according to the revealed will of God by obeying His Word. And if we know and love God, we will want to obey Him. But in this new culture we’re in, a few imperatives have special priority:

- (a) We should understand paganism so that as it confronts us, we recognize it and respond biblically, i.e., with love.
- (b) Serving Christ by committing to Gospel outreach will give us the perspective we need to endure.
- (c) We’re going to need to embrace Paul’s theology of weakness, found in 2 Corinthians, a doctrine we’ve ignored for way too long.
- (d) We’re going to have to take seriously as never before the hard sayings of Jesus found in the Gospels. We need to know and to live *all* the Word of God. And
- (e) we mustn’t grumble or fret or try politically or in other ways to reverse America’s transformation, because it has every appearance of being God’s doing. He is sovereign over the nations and is doing something great and wonderful in the world. Let’s rejoice at this new opportunity to walk with Him.

Enoch walked with God during exceedingly evil times (Gen 5:24). God wants us to walk with Him. It’s why we’re here and why He’s redeemed and brought us into relationship with Himself. The gift of the Holy Spirit, the most important part of the Gospel, enables us to do that, by yielding to Him. I hope we all desire to do that more than anything else.