

Week 5: Strategies for the Church and Workplace

NCAC Adult Sunday School

October 17, 2021



Key Resource: *Being the Bad Guys: How to live for Jesus in a World That Says You Shouldn't* by Stephen McAlpine (The Good Book Company, 2021)

WHAT WE'VE COVERED SO FAR:

- Over the past several decades Christianity has moved from being generally seen as a force for good to being something that was tolerated to being seen as wrong and even dangerous.
- Today the world celebrates a new religion built on commitment to individual autonomy and celebration of personal authenticity at any cost. Ultimate meaning is now found in the self.
- A core component of this new religion is gender identity, which can be different from one's sex assigned at birth and is determined by each individual based on their feelings.
- In this new religion, the only real "sin" is doing anything that prevents another person from being "their true self." Thus, the Bible's view of gender is seen as restraining and oppressive.
- As we observe the marginalization of Christianity, Christians need to be careful to not take on a victim mentality. Christ calls us to love and pray for all others—even those who persecute us.
- As we listen to the world encourage everyone to "follow their heart" and "be their true self," we need to both remind ourselves and help others see that our true self can only be found in Jesus.

TODAY'S CLASS: STRATEGIES FOR THE CHURCH AND WORKPLACE

What are various ways churches (or Christians) might respond to all that's going on in our culture?

"We no longer hold the cultural reins. Our views are not respected. Once we were thought of as fairly harmless (if we were thought of at all). Now we are seen as part of the problem in society—a group intent on holding things back. Once we were considered important in the government's scheme. Now we are viewed by the government as an impediment to its vision of a flourishing future. Once we were allowed to get on with our specific worship practices. Now these same practices are viewed with hostility and deep suspicion by our neighbors, who are more than happy to inform on us. Identifying as the people of God is on the back burner now. The cultural heat has been turned up. Better to keep our heads down and wait for the angry cultural storm to pass." (Being the Bad Guys, pg. 93)

Though that quote on the previous page might sound like something describing our present day reality, McAlpine shares that as a depiction of life for the Jewish people as presented in the book of Haggai. After returning from exile in Babylon following Babylon's defeat by Persia, God's people sought to re-establish their identity, which included laying the foundation to rebuild the temple.

However, they found that their neighbors were opposed to this and were intent on obstructing their efforts. The final blow came when their neighbors wrote to the king of Persia, accusing the Jews of stirring up rebellion by rebuilding the temple. The king's reply is recorded in Ezra 4:21-22:

²¹ Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me. ²² And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?" (Ezra 4:21-22, ESV)

The Jews were seen as the bad guys. In the eyes of both their neighbors and their government, the goals, values and interests of the Jews were viewed as an obstacle to human flourishing. How did the Jews respond? Unfortunately, not only did they choose to settle into a quieter life that would not upset others around them, they even justified their choice, convincing themselves that keeping their heads down was wise and strategic:

"Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD." (Haggai 1:2, ESV)

Yet, as the Jews began to neglect God's work, it's clear that they stayed busy—busy working on building better, cozier lives for themselves, while forgetting their identity as God's people. God took note of this and raised up the prophet Haggai to call His people back to Himself:

³ Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, ⁴ "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?...⁸ Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the LORD. ⁹ You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the LORD of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house." (Haggai 1:3-4, 8-11, ESV)

What can we learn from God's words to His people?

Why is it so easy to forget our identity as God's people and get caught up in the ways of the world?

The call to honor God above all else, to stand confident in our identity as God's people, to actively live out this identity, and to do all we can to make Him known is still our call today. Though we must act wisely and lovingly, we must resist all pressure to retreat into silence, to alter our message, to join in church-bashing, or to compromise our convictions for the sake of acceptance by the world.

STRATEGIES FOR THE CHURCH: "DON'T RENOVATE THE WRONG HOUSE"

1. PREFERENCE GOD'S PEOPLE: COMMIT YOURSELF TO YOUR CHURCH

"If we look back in 30 years' time and ask what basic strategy has been most successful in staying the hand of secular culture, I'm convinced that the sheer simplicity of committing to meet with God's people will win hands down. The church is the New Testament temple of God, and we neglect this building program at our peril." (*Being the Bad Guys*, pp. 98-99)

²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:23-25, ESV)

What are we encouraged to do as we "meet together"?

What makes doing this especially important in our current culture?

"Do not underestimate how attractive this is to outsiders. A friend I go running with, who is not a Christian, often talks about how she feels almost jealous of my church community. She and her husband are migrants in Australia and feel the lack of family. They look at our church and see a support network that feels like, looks like and operates like the family they don't have. My friend perceives something good in what we have, even as we ourselves allow familiarity to breed contempt." (*Bad Guys*, p. 101)

2. PROCLAIM GOD'S PRAISES: BRING JESUS INTO YOUR EVERYDAY CONVERSATIONS

"The world is happy to have spiritual belief as a privatized side dish. Let's encourage each other to reinvest our everyday language with 'Jesus' talk, and to speak of him as if he matters in the 'real world'. How Jesus-focused are you? Are your non-Christian friends convinced that you are more enthusiastic about Jesus than you are about your renovation project or the university grades of your children? Are they amazed by how much Jesus sets the tone of everything you do?" (*Being the Bad Guys*, p. 102)

*"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."
(1 Peter 2:9)*

As we engage our culture, why is it so important to start by remembering our true identity?

What does it look like to "proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness"?

What's been your experience as you talk about Jesus out in public?

"Without Jesus we have no compelling reason to offer any vision for human flourishing beyond what the world already has. Our arguments for a Christian social and sexual ethic sound to some like little more than a desire to regain power. But Jesus' resurrection ushered in a new ethic. Our hope for the culture is not the image of Adam and Eve in the garden but the image of Jesus in the new creation. That's why, both personally and in community, we should make much of praising Jesus and focusing on what he has done for us." (*Being the Bad Guys*, p. 104)

3. PROMOTE GOD'S PROMISES: LOOK FOR WAYS TO SHARE THE HOPE OF THE GOSPEL

"...ironically there's currently an openness to the gospel message in our society, despite the hostility. Historic levels of anxiety, fear and loneliness abound. The church is a community of promised resurrection hope in a society that is terrified of death and anxious about missing out on the good stuff that advertising offers. We have something which many in the world want but cannot find. It may not always feel as though this is true, but it is true nonetheless." (*Bad Guys*, p. 105)

¹³ *"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:13-16, ESV)*

Although salt served multiple purposes in Jesus' day (including preserving and fertilizing), one of use of salt was to make food taste better. "We are intended to spread through the world and enhance it, adding flavor to things which would be bland, drawing out the blessings of whatever is good, and providing a contrast by being distinct and different." (Andrew Wilson, *God of All Things*, p. 107)

What are some ways we (individually or collectively) could do better at being salt in this world?

How can we ensure our works actually lead to Gospel conversations and people giving glory to God?

² Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. ³ At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— ⁴ that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. ⁵ Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. (Colossians 4:2-6, ESV)

What can we learn from Paul's words here about making Christ known in this world?

STRATEGIES FOR THE WORKPLACE: "WHEN THE CULTURE WAR COMES TO YOU"

How have you experienced some of the "culture war" coming into your work or school environment?

What have you found helpful in maintaining a positive witness for Christ in our current culture?

Like many today, Daniel, the Jewish advisor to King Darius of Persia in the sixth century B.C., one day went to work only to find that his world had changed. Jealous of his success, Daniel's colleagues sought a way to bring him down:

⁴ Then the high officials and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom, but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him. ⁵ Then these men said, "We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God." (Daniel 6:4-5, ESV)

Unable to bring Daniel down by pointing out flaws in his work or character, his opponents encouraged the king to enact a decree that for the next thirty days all prayers were to be made to King Darius alone (Daniel 6:6-9). How did Daniel respond? As McAlpine observes, Daniel sought to be faithful, faultless and fearless.

1. BE FAITHFUL. Almost instinctively, Daniel refused to change his convictions or his practices. He continued to put his pursuit of God and his worship of God above all else, without any hesitation:

When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously. (Daniel 6:10, ESV)

What will help us remain faithful to God and His ways as the pressure mounts against us?

2. BE FAULTLESS. As Christians we have to accept the fact that if we truly live for Jesus, it is inevitable that some will hate us, malign us, and persecute us simply because we don't embrace their values. However, if we stay obedient to Christ and live by His principles, it's likely that with time some of those watching will notice, feel conflicted, and wonder what it is that makes us so different.

¹³ Then they answered and said before the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or the injunction you have signed, but makes his petition three times a day."

¹⁴ Then the king, when he heard these words, was much distressed and set his mind to deliver Daniel. And he labored till the sun went down to rescue him. (Daniel 6:13-14, ESV)

What are some things we can do make sure the "mud doesn't stick" when it's thrown at us?

3. BE FEARLESS. Key to Daniel's faithfulness was the fact that he cared more what God thought than what others thought. Daniel's big view of God allowed him to act fearlessly, even when this may have meant the loss of privilege or freedom. Daniel's proper view of humanity allowed him to address others as equals—as fellow human beings. Doing the same will allow us to love other people—even those who disagree with us—knowing they all have the same sorts of wounds, fears, hopes and desires that we have...but also knowing that we have the true answer to all their questions and all their dreams.

When living for Christ involves risk, how do we keep God big and people the right size?

By faith [Abraham] went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land...For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:9-10, ESV)

So, what's the key to living confidently and joyously in our world? It's knowing Jesus is in control, He has conquered sin and death, our identity lies in Him, and He is coming back—and when He does, this age of hostility toward God's people will give way to an age of eternal celebration in Him and of Him!