

## **“How To Live In a Post-Christian Society”**

### **Rev. Bill Haley**

*(The following is based on a sermon given at The Falls Church Anglican in Falls Church, VA on May 11, 2014. The audio can be heard [here at the TFCA website](#), in shortened form.)*

You can tell that I’ve lived in the DC area now for almost 20 years, because in the recent NBA playoffs, I was rooting for Washington Wizards over the Chicago Bulls. You see, I grew up in Chicago, and in the 1990s, the Bulls were magnificent. Six NBA titles in eight years, two three-peats. Under their Hall of Fame coach Phil Jackson, they were among the greatest teams in the history of the sport of basketball. Together, they accomplished what their great Michael Jordan couldn’t by himself. They were a team. So it was Jordan, and Scottie Pippen, Dennis Rodman (who would go on to a notable career in international diplomacy), Steve Kerr, Horace Grant, Toni Klukoc, John Paxson, Bill Cartwright, and others who created in the 90s what would become known and remembered as “The Bulls Dynasty”, and ‘unstoppa-bull’. They were.

Here’s why, at least three reasons. One, they had a common goal, that tall, gold-plated NBA trophy. Two, they played great offense *and* great defense at the same time. And three, they played as team.

I find this image helpful as a metaphor as we consider today’s sermon title, “How to live in a Post-Christian Society”. In answering that question, I want to offer these thoughts to three groups this morning: us as individual Christians, us as one specific local church, and even the Church in America in this moment. I probably ought to warn you that this sermon is broad and dense...this one feels like a firehose, even for me! It’s meant to be unpacked slowly, even in the coming months, and prayerfully, with study, maybe even in small groups or with friends.

**How to live in a post-Christian society?** Well, I suppose the shortest, truest, quickest answer comes in two words: **Like Christ!** End of sermon. That answer will go a long way. But there’s more to say of course. How do we as Christians live in this culture now and in the years to come? **Christians must have a common goal, play great offense and defense at the same time, and play as team.** I’ll conclude with what our emotional posture’s gotta be along the way, and it’s a fun one!

**So, what’s the playing field, or the court we’re on?** Call it what you will—post-Christian, pluralist, pagan—it’s obvious that American society has undergone profound cultural changes in the past 40-50 years, which has increased with dizzying speed especially in the last decade. Even those who are elated with our society’s direction are surprised at how fast it’s happened, and those with a commitment to more traditional moral values and conservative religious teachings and traditions find themselves having to adjust to a new cultural landscape that still is rapidly moving off of what what might be considered basic Christian foundations. **Post-Christian?** Maybe not when you look at the statistics of people who call themselves Christian. But increasingly when you look at the lifestyles and core beliefs of many American’s, it’s probably a good term that helps us to realistically assess the challenges to the Christian faith and Christian life.

Last year the Barna Research Group evaluated the lifestyles of a randomly selected group of 43,000 Americans, and “discovered that each generation is more post-Christian than the one that came before it. Only 28 percent of seniors are considered post-Christian, as compared to 35 percent of Boomers, 40 percent of so-called Generation X, and 48 percent of Millennials. Barna’s director noted that this type of research could serve as a glimpse into the ‘spiritual, moral and social future’ of the United States.”<sup>1</sup>

In the past couple of years, there’s been much press about the rise of the None’s. The Pew Research Center published their findings in late 2012 that “the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling.

In the last five years alone, the unaffiliated have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults.”<sup>2</sup> As these trends increase, America will increasingly be post-Christian.

A less loaded adjective to describe our society would be that it is increasingly a **Pluralist** society. From the dictionary, Pluralism simply means “a situation in which people of different social classes, religions, races, etc., are together in a society but continue to have their different traditions and interests”. A civil pluralism has been one of the great hallmarks and accomplishments of the United States, a lot of different sorts of people living side by side in a common society, and this of course has and will increase as decades roll by. And this is not a bad thing, it’s part of what makes America great! *E Pluribus Unum*. “Out of Many, One”.

One thing we are not, at least in the ancient and technical use of the word, is a **Pagan** society. The word Pagan in English comes from the word “Paganus” in Latin, which translates as “rural” or “country-dweller”, with overtones of being uneducated and unenlightened. America is definitely not increasingly rural, rather, it is increasingly urban, and this has a fascinating effect on politics and world-view, easily seen in national elections.

Found in this article<sup>3</sup> the *The Atlantic Magazine* and other places, one graph alone to me at least represents a certain sort of writing on the wall with regards to whether or not America will continue to head in a conservative or liberal direction. It’s been called “Red State, Blue Cities” and represents the voting record for the 2012 presidential election. You see that the number of Democratic voters are highly centralized in major urban centers, blue cities, with vast swaths of rural America voting Republican, making it look like red states. And we know how the numbers went and who won the election, significantly because of the metropolitan vote. Like the rest of the world, America is increasingly urban<sup>4</sup>, more people are living in cities and continue to come to cities to live, making metropolitan areas larger. This trend shows no change.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.christianpost.com/news/america-becoming-increasingly-post-christian-research-shows-93967/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/11/red-state-blue-city-how-the-urban-rural-divide-is-splitting-america/265686/>

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urbanization\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urbanization_in_the_United_States)

Urbanization is the way the world goes<sup>5</sup>, it's the way our country has gone, is going, and will go. This is not bad news either, and it does mean that over time, our population will continue to trend more liberal, not because of ideology, but rather simple sociology. It's been noted and I think rightly, that it's not that people make cities liberal, rather cities make people more liberal.

Whichever term you choose to describe America—Post-Christian, Pluralistic, or Pagan—the fact that we've been undergoing massive societal change with remarkable rapidity seems undeniable, with little indication that it's slowing down. And with this change, for better or for worse, Christianity that is orthodox in its belief and historically consistent in its morality, is increasingly a minority position, and currently an increasingly unpopular notion for the general public, especially the young.

Now this sermon is no hand-wringing Jeremiad or lament. It's just observation. The glad invitation is that we get to be Christians in this age! Sure there are challenges, but friends, it's all opportunity. With joy we shout with CS Lewis, "Further up and Further in!" Let us with joy deeper inward, further outward, and higher upward!

I've said it before and will say it again, that there's some really good news here, that these are the early days for Christians in America, for the first generation in our history, to read the New Testament as if it written for a culture like ours is, when Christians are in a minority in their culture and live more on the margins of common society. We can read the New Testament letters as if they were written actually to us, and of course they are. We can understand what it's actually saying and live the way God is actually calling us to live. Paul and the others who wrote the New Testament were writing to a people who were a minority in their pre-Christian culture, in fact more of a minority than we'll ever experience. Christianity was not a dominant cultural narrative in their time, as it feels increasingly in our time.

So how do we as Christians live in this culture now and in the years to come? Let's remember the Chicago Bulls. They had a common goal, a great offense and defense, and were on the same team. Thus for us...

**Our common goal** as individual Christians, a local church, and the universal church is not complex, nor is it single layered. It is a great invitation, and there's nothing negative or reactive about it. Our common goal for us is good news! For those who believe in Jesus, individually and corporately, our first job is to **give Jesus our whole lives for our whole lives**, and deepen and mature and grow in our own discipleship and life with Jesus. Nothing lasting or strong happens without this. The first goal of our Christian life is a real relationship with Jesus that is ongoing and increasing in its intimacy.

And then our goal is to bear witness to Jesus however we can and as often as we can, through our words and through our actions.

And then we are to grow the Kingdom of God in the power of Jesus for the good of the world now and as pointer to the Kingdom of God that is one day coming and will come in fullness when Jesus Christ comes back.

Our common goal as Christians alone and together is **to give our whole lives to Jesus, give witness to Jesus, and grow the Kingdom of God in the power of Jesus**. In short, our

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.who.int/gho/urban\\_health/situation\\_trends/urban\\_population\\_growth\\_text/en/](http://www.who.int/gho/urban_health/situation_trends/urban_population_growth_text/en/)

common goal is to glorify God, that is to say, to manifest his character through our lives and give him our praise.

Why? Because the God revealed to us in the Bible and through Jesus is real, he's true, he's great, he's good, he's powerful, he's Love. This is in no way impacted by a culture who can't see it. Our goal to reveal this God in all of his glory is in no way impacted that culture which makes it difficult for us to see it. Our common goal is to glorify God and his Son Jesus in the power of the Spirit. When we do this well, we win, and God is responsible both for the cultural outcome and for our reward.

**What does Christianity playing a good offense and a good defense look like in these days?** Playing offense is when you're trying to move the ball down the court, when you're trying to make progress. Defense is when you're trying to protect something that's valuable, when you're trying not to lose ground. The best teams have play great offense and a great defense, and this is critical, at the same time, in the same game. It's neither time for Christians to circle the wagons or get aggressive in outreach...it's time for both.

Before going through this list<sup>6</sup>, highlighting some a bit more than others, we need to affirm that the reasons Christians do these things is not primarily cultural impact, but rather because they are simply what Christians do for no other reason that God tells us to do them in Scripture, and that we are compelled to do them because of the glorious truth of Jesus Christ. These are Christian responses in any culture whether we find ourselves in a majority, or as in these days, a "prophetic minority". None of these are particularly odd, Scripturally, and none of them, rightly understood, are particularly onerous. Because of the great goodness and glory of God, because of who he is and what he's done for us in Christ, we get to do these things! They're all invitations, all the time! What a great life God has called us to!

The church playing good **offense** in a pluralistic society would include these things, and I'm sure you can add some too. These are hallmarks of a good Christian offense.

I'm going to have Paul give us the first hallmark, because of our text this morning, 1 Corinthians 9.19-23. And remember, the Christians he was writing to were more of a minority in their culture than we'll ever be in ours, and he shares what he was passionate about:

1. **Evangelism.** We too must share the good news of Jesus Christ: Paul was passionate about this. Our text this morning answers the questions "With whom?" and "How?" and "Why?" 1 Corinthians 9.19 *For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*

A. With whom did Paul want to share the gospel? Everybody and anybody, those who were like him and those who were different than him. Jew, Gentile, the

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<sup>6</sup> It's also helpful perhaps to consider Jeremiah 29, the whole chapter, as a background to this sermon. See <http://qideas.org/articles/oh-the-places-youll-go-basic-instructions-for-exile/>

weak, it didn't matter, Paul wanted them to the good news about Jesus—that he was God come in flesh, that he died so that our sins could be forgiven, was raised from the third day by the power of God, and is coming back to claim the whole world, and we can have eternal life in him. The encouragement to us in this is that everybody and anybody is for us an opportunity to share the gospel of Jesus, whether or not they are like us or agree with us.

- B. How did Paul share the gospel? v19, by servanthood. This is very important because it's all about our posture of, our attitude, and tone. Paul evangelized by being a servant, putting himself under those he was hoping to tell about Jesus. Sounds a lot like Jesus doesn't, it. For Paul it was not through persuasion, or his own powerful presence, or through force or argumentation or coercion, but rather by putting himself under those to whom he was speaking that he communicated the gospel of the one who came as a Servant. So we can take from this that our posture in evangelism, including with those who disagree with us and are not like us, is the posture of a servant, and servant's are humble. They serve.
  - C. Why did Paul do this? v23, for the sake of the gospel itself, and that Paul might have many more brothers and sisters to share in the goodness of God with. He did it not only their sake, but for his own sake, and for Jesus' sake.
2. We must offer **acts of love and service to those around us**: When people know you care about them, they're so much more willing to hear what you have to say.<sup>7</sup> The point though of loving people well and serving them well is not to gain a hearing, but rather because this is simply what Christians do and what Jesus calls us to.
  3. We must **love each other**: Jesus promises us, straight from his own lips in John 13.35 "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Christians holding together and loving each other well speaks loudly, Jesus tells us, and even promises us.
  4. We must **offer radical care for the poor and work for justice**: This is one of the main ways the early church went from a pre-Christian minority in it's own day to dominant cultural force<sup>8</sup>. They didn't care for the poor for this purpose...that's just the teaching of Jesus and Bible. Every individual personal matters infinitely to God because he loves them and wants the best for them. And that's why love those who are impoverished, on the margins, and subject to injustice. Because we love people. And, in the early church, profound cultural impact was the effect, but secondary to simple love.

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<sup>7</sup> Jack Kemp "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care."

Read more: [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2014/02/06/give\\_me\\_\\_your\\_huddled\\_masses\\_121483.html#ixzz31VJPCDaa](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2014/02/06/give_me__your_huddled_masses_121483.html#ixzz31VJPCDaa)  
Follow us: @RCP\_Articles on Twitter

<sup>8</sup> <http://worldvisionmagazine.org/story/serve-poor-grow-church>; and Rodney Stark, The Triumph of Christianity

5. We need to **do good works**: Again, straight from Jesus, who said this in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5.16, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”
6. We must **stand firm in our Christian faith and morals**:<sup>9</sup> In a culture that celebrates things that lead to brokenness and death, what Christianity offers is healing and life, and when we offer it to those trapped and wounded by this culture of death, Christianity offers a profoundly compelling alternative. So we must stand firm in what historical Christianity is and always has been, a rock to cling to in tumultuous seas. In the words of Stanley Hauerwas, the church is to be “a colony of life in the culture of death”. In a culture like ours, this on it’s own is outreach.
7. We must **live lives of luminosity**, of an inner radiance that is the result of Jesus living inside of by his Spirit, such that when people are around us, they feel somehow that they are in the presence of God. This is what Paul speaks of when he talks about us being “the aroma of Christ”.<sup>10</sup>
8. It almost goes without saying that we must **be people of deep prayer** and petition. And to those prayers for various people, problems, and situations we read about on CNN, it’s right and good to pray for revival in our country, for the sake of her people and God’s glory.
9. We must **know the whole Gospel and communicate it**.<sup>11</sup> God’s good news includes and still is so much more than individuals being forgiven so that we might have eternal life. The Gospel in it’s fullness—Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection, and New Creation—is a profoundly compelling vision, and I think pretty attractive when deeply understood and well-communicated. We do this of course through deeds, but words of course matter too.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 16.13 “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.”

<sup>10</sup> 2 Corinthians 2.15 “For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16 to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?”; see also John 15.1-9, and the concept of Theosis...

<sup>11</sup> See Scot McKnight, [The King Jesus Gospel](#); and also the works of NT Wright and Tim Keller

<sup>12</sup> See <http://sojo.net/blogs/2014/05/07/dying-church-use-your-words>

10. We must **work for the common good**<sup>13</sup> **with our vocations**<sup>14</sup> **for human flourishing**<sup>15</sup>. What we do with our work, paid and unpaid, is a profoundly important part of God's plan for his Shalom to fill the world, for the flourishing of individuals and society's.
11. Related to this, we ought to partner and **make common cause**<sup>16</sup> **for the common good and human flourishing**. Christians don't have a corner on working on things that are on the heart of God, and working with other's to address God's concerns will not only see some good work get done, but bring us into meaningful contact with those who have yet to believe in Christ, and we can bear witness. What's been going on this past week in response to the abduction of the more than 200 young girls by in Nigeria is a good example of this.
12. Let us continue and constantly pursue and **offer a strong parish life of welcome and worship**. Nicky Gumbel recently said, and I think he's right, "People will come to church for many reasons, but they will stay for only one - friendship."<sup>17</sup> And I've heard more than one person come to our church not as Christians, but the worship they experienced led them to become Christians.

While we're playing good offense, at the same time we must play great **defense**. The danger we face is to emphasize one at the expense of the other. While we're reaching out, we also must dig in deeply. We must, individually and corporately, protect what is valuable to us and valuable to a flourishing society and people, and steward well the inheritance of faith and what God has revealed to us in the Bible and through Christ.

These are hallmarks of a good defense for the Church.

1. It's both good offense and good defense to have a **rich corporate worship and a strong parish life**. This helps sustain us, week by week. The author of Hebrews in 10.25<sup>18</sup> tells us not to neglect meeting together, and encouraging each other, all the more as time goes by. Showing up in church on Sunday matters!
2. We must continually **deepen in our personal discipleship**. The church is only going to be as strong as it's members.

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<sup>13</sup> See the works of Andy Crouch, including Culture-Making and <http://qideas.org/articles/whats-so-great-about-the-common-good/>

<sup>14</sup> See Tim Keller, Every Good Endeavor; Ben Witherington, Work; and others on the topic of Vocation

<sup>15</sup> See Bill Haley "On Work and Human Flourishing" at <http://www.washingtoninst.org/620/on-work-and-human-flourishing-twenty-men-fixing-a-road/>

<sup>16</sup> See Peter Kreeft, Ecumenical Jihad

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/htb.leadership.conference.2014.people.come.to.church.for.many.reasons.they.stay.for.one.friendship/37220.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 10.24 "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."

3. We must conscientiously **cultivate the spiritual and character formation of our children**. The inheritance of faith is one of the greatest gifts we can give to our kids, and statistics show that most people come to their faith at a young age. So that command of God to his people the Jews in Deuteronomy 6. 4-7 is as relevant to us as them, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”
4. We must continue to form **counter-cultural communities as both alternatives to the prevailing culture of death and also as agents of the preservation of Christian teaching and morals**<sup>19</sup>. For many years I’ve been struck and formed by the insights of Alidair MacIntyre at the end of his book, *After Virtue*. He’s reflecting on general parallels between ancient Rome and contemporary America. He published the book in 1981 and I imagine would say the same thing now, even moreso... “A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman imperium and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that imperium. What they set themselves to achieve instead...was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought also to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point...This time, however, the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time.”
5. We must know, really know, that our **our deepest identity is in God and our primary citizenship is in heaven**. Paul says in Philippians 3.20 that “our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ”. When we call to mind this constant New Testament theme, we are much more able to weather the diminishment of the earthly countries we are citizens of and deeply love, for when recall that our primary identity is in Christ and home is in heaven, our hope, and the locus of our stability, is in the right place, and we are solid. What we have now and inherit doesn’t shake.
6. We must be **willing to endure loss and suffering, even gladly**. Jesus in our Gospel reading today of Mark 10.30<sup>20</sup> and the whole New Testament promises Christians suffering and persecution, and tells us not only don’t be surprised by, but, like

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<sup>19</sup> The Clapham Sect, along with William Wilberforce, of 18th and 19th century England remains a strong and enduring example of this. See [http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm\\_send/471](http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/471) and other resources

<sup>20</sup> Mark 10.29 “Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”



in 1 Peter 1.3-9<sup>21</sup>, even rejoice in it! To expect suffering and loss for the sake of Christ, and not be surprised by it, prepares us to be able to gladly endure it, and persevere.

7. We must **fight against dehumanization and the destruction of life**<sup>22</sup>, and the forms this take in our current society are legion. Christians must be those who fight for the dignity of every human life from conception to natural death...and at every stage in between, for all people, and all individuals. Christians must not only be pro-life, but consistently pro-life, concerned about the welfare of children after they're born, and concerned about the whole life of adults, not just how they die.
8. We must **have and demonstrate strong marriages and vibrant celibacy**<sup>23</sup>. In a culture of divorce and the hook-up culture, fidelity and purity will not only lead to our own happiness, but also shine like a beacon to those hurting themselves in the dark, and give them a way out.
9. Finally, to protect what is valuable we must **remain clear on the Bible's teaching**. There's little worse, when a ship is seeking, to hoard the lifeboats. How we do this however, matters, that is to say, Tone Matters.

A few weeks ago, with some of you, I attended a wonderful annual conference simply called Q, which was led by it's founder Gabe Lyons. He posed four excellent questions we as Christians can be asking in this our moment in this our society: What is wrong? What is confused? What is good? and What is missing? And Gabe provided excellent answers to the answers we find for those questions.

*To those things that wrong, Christians must stop and confront.*

*To those things that are confused, Christians must clarify and compel.*

*To those things that are good, Christians must celebrate and cultivate.*

*To those things that are missing, Christians must create and catalyze.*

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<sup>21</sup> 1 Peter 1.3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, 9 obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

<sup>22</sup> See the Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching, found at <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching.cfm>

<sup>23</sup> See Christopher West, Theology of the Body for Beginners: A Basic Introduction to Pope John Paul II's Sexual Revolution

In short, we must play great offense and great defense, at the same time.

And the great news is, we're **on the same team** with other Christians, and we have a lot of great teammates. Who are they? They are those who have been filled with the Spirit of Jesus because of their faith in Jesus, the Son of God. They are those who believe in incarnation of Christ, and his death and resurrection, and his coming again. They are those who hold to the orthodox Christian faith, genuinely affirming it's Creeds, those who believe that God's word in the Bible is the highest authority, and authoritative. This is not divided along denominational lines, but is rather more about actual faith than which form of Christian traditions. Our team includes the Roman Catholics<sup>24</sup>, and the Eastern Orthodox in it's many forms, and our brother and sister Anglicans in their major forms of charismatic, Anglo-Catholic, and evangelical emphases. We are on the same team, and what unites us is overwhelmingly greater than what divides us.

In the last 15 months or so I've been in Burma, Congo, and China, and in every case the orthodox Christians there, and I'm thinking specifically of Anglicans and Catholics, had a profound unity both relationally and in mission in their countries, almost an identifiable unity, for the simple reason that in those countries, Christians are a persecuted minority, and their cultural challenges are huge and the stakes high. Denominational division amongst Christians is not only a scandal but a luxury, and we're losing that luxury in our day, thanks be to God! The forcing together of God's people in our day is one of the great blessings of the challenges we're facing in our broader culture in this time.<sup>25</sup> In his grace, and completely unstrategized, our own parish is shining example of this grace and blessing!

So how to live in a Post-Christian society, that is, the current court we're playing on, the one we didn't choose but God has chosen us to live in? Christians have a common goal, a great need to play great offense and defense at the same time, and we get to play as team. On the far side of complexity is simplicity. Most simply, in this day like any day we're to live like Christ, really, and nothing less. Most simply, in this day like any day we're to love like Christ, really, and nothing less.

**With what emotion?** Three come to mind, and the first is grief.

**Grief:** I love my country of America, and I'm grieved, deeply, by where it is and where it seems to be going. I don't think our nation's direction is leading to human flourishing either for individuals or as a society, and that our capacity to be a blessing to the world has and is diminishing. If I were an American first and a Christian second, I might be tempted to despair.

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<sup>24</sup> See [Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission](#) by Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus; and [http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/evangelicals-and-catholics-together-marks-20-years/2014/05/07/3fbee1c4-d62c-11e3-8f7d-7786660fff7c\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/evangelicals-and-catholics-together-marks-20-years/2014/05/07/3fbee1c4-d62c-11e3-8f7d-7786660fff7c_story.html)

<sup>25</sup> See <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/05/the-uncertain-future-of-protestantism>

As it is, I grieve. I fear that, using the language of Romans 1<sup>26</sup>, that somewhere in the past decades, God has given us over as a country to our lusts and greed and arrogance, and this in part explains the speed of the cultural shift we've observed in the last decade, a dark snow-ball effect. It is bitterly ironic and short-sighted that a large part of what has made this country great is becoming increasingly unwelcome in it. I grieve what feels to be the squander of several centuries of God's favor and God's blessing to America. I grieve those whose lives are and will be wrecked because they were sold a lie. This leads to our next emotion.

**Compassion:** We must have compassion on those who are being wounded and broken in a culture that increasingly confuses the ways of death with pathways to life. Maybe these folks are wounded by their own hand, or by the hand of another...it doesn't matter. The church has got to be a place of grace and not judgment, clear in our invitation to healing through Christ, new life in Christ, and a better life with Christ, both now and forever. It's been said before, and I agree, that the image that best captures the vocation of the church in these and coming days is that of a field hospital.

The third emotion we as Christians need and get to have in this moment is the strongest and brightest! It's **JOY! JOY!** A couple of months ago I took a spiritual retreat, to pray about many things, and among them was to confess to God a low-grade but relatively constant state of discouragement when I thought of the state of the country and the state of the church. I told God, "I'm tired of being bummed out about all this." And God has been giving me new eyes, to see old truths in new ways, and believe them again anew, and the result has been a new Joy. This has come from encountering again the brightness of Gospel itself, and simply being reminded about the reality in the second coming of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Lover, who will come.

Late last year Pope Francis wrote a letter called simply The Joy of the Gospel, and I found the first five pages about just that, the joy of the Gospel, to be convicting, inspiring, even thrilling, and heart-changing. It's nothing new, but was a powerful reminder. He writes, "The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner-emptiness, and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew...The Gospel, radiant with the glory of Christ's cross, constantly invites us to rejoice...our Christian joy drinks of his brimming heart." The good news of Jesus Christ is good news, that sets all other news in a different perspective. Christians of all people ought to be the most joyful! This takes a lot of forms, but the deepest essence of our faith is joyful, optimistic, and expectant.

Speaking of expectant, I've been newly convicted that I'm not looking forward enough, or farther ahead enough, to the second coming of Jesus. Yes, Yes, Yes! Jesus is coming back and the Kingdom of God will come in it's fullness. Jesus has already won the battle! Regardless of whatever else happens on this earth, it's not the end of the story. Regardless of whichever direction our culture goes or how far, it's not the end of the story. Regardless of whatever price I have to pay for Jesus and his Gospel, it's not the end of the story. The end of

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<sup>26</sup> Romans 1.24 "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator..." and in the following verses

the story is that Jesus is coming back. He's already won, and he's got the world, and our country, well in hand for his purposes. And he'll make it right, whatever the "it" is. There is great joy when we touch again that deep truth, and a central aspect of the hope of the Gospel. Jesus will return and claim the whole world, and his own, as his own. With this great hope there is great joy! I heard a preacher say a few weeks ago, "Of all the people who don't need to freak out over the state of the world or culture...it's us!"<sup>27</sup> And she was right, deeply right. So, I say to myself, looking at a shifting cultural landscape, "No moping Haley! Jesus is coming back! Now and til he does, get down to the business of living like him. And don't forget the breadth and glory of what he's done." No moping Church! Jesus is coming back! Now and til he does, let's get down to the business of living like him. Let's never forget the breadth and glory of what he's done.

We started this sermon with the story about those champion Chicago Bulls, who had a common goal, played great offense and great defense at the same time, and who played together as team. A person might say, "Well, they had Michael Jordan! I'm no Michael Jordan."

Their coach Phil Jackson remembers<sup>28</sup> back to when Jordan first came on the team, and the other players on the team were so intimidated and dazzled by him that even during real games they often would actually stand back just to see what Jordan was going to do next. If he had the ball, they wouldn't call for the ball. They relied on him to win the game for them. And they couldn't take a championship. Jackson's first task in his coaching was to convince the other players that they had a real part to play on the team, and to do it, and that without them, they weren't going to reach their goal.

Friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow followers of Jesus...we each have our part to play in this moment in our society, this moment which God has given to us, not another. And we've all got to play our part...until we meet Jesus, one way or the other, and we will. And then we'll get to hear those words which are far more valuable than any NBA trophy or anything that rusts or fades, those words, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Amen. Maranatha! Amen!

### **For Reflection and Discussion:**

- 1) How do you understand this moment in American society relative to Christianity?
- 2) What do you think the common goal for the Church in America should be?
- 3) Which part of offense and defense are you most drawn to? Find most challenging?
- 4) How can you cultivate Joy?

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<sup>27</sup> Christine Cain

<sup>28</sup> Phil Jackson, Sacred Hoops