

The Fight of the Day

Carl F.H. Henry

The Apostle Paul is concerned lest we be asleep when we ought to be on guard duty. We have a fight on our hands, he says, and we need to be awake and primed for it. *Phillips Modern English Version* paraphrases his comments in Romans 13:11-14:

The present time is of the highest importance—it is time to wake up to the reality. The night is nearly over, the day has almost dawned. Every day brings God’s salvation nearer than the day in which we took the first step of faith. Let us therefore fling away the things that men do in the dark, let us arm ourselves for the fight of the day....Let us be Christ’s men from head to foot, and give no chance to the flesh to have its fling.

On my first night’s sleep in Keruzawa, Japan. I had no idea that I was in an earthquake zone until a midnight jolt awakened me to reality. The tremor didn’t register topmost on the Richter scale, but its severity reminded me nonetheless not to take tomorrow for granted. So these words of the apostle, in the middle of the epistle to the Romans, stab us awake and shock us alive to the invisible realities of the spiritual world, lest we be entrapped in a sinful, slumbering society.

Three emphases seem to me to rise from this text in our present life-situation: first, American culture is sinking toward sunset; second, Christian

believers are stretching toward sunrise; and third, we are warriors with a mission in the world.

American Culture Is Sinking Toward Sunset

At the opening of the epistle, Paul unveils God’s anger over the depths of Gentile rebellion. Three times we hear that dreadful refrain, “*God gave them over.*” We read that, because of their persistent wickedness, God “gave them over to the *sinful desires* of their hearts” (1:24, NIV), that God “gave them over to *shameful lusts*” (1:26, NIV), and that God “gave them over to a *depraved mind*” (1:28, NIV).

Exegetes have long noted a progression here; desires, lusts, mindset. As the channel of sin runs ever deeper, God’s compensatory judgment moves ever closer to final abandonment and inescapable doom. The first chapter closes in fact with a warning of doomsday ahead for those who in their own consciences know that all who live wickedly deserve God’s death penalty, yet who nonetheless defy God and even encourage others to do so (1:32).

I have a heavy heart about America. America culture seems to me to be sinking toward sunset. I do not, like some, call America the epicenter of evil in the world. But we have fallen far from lofty ideals for which this land came into

being. I don't intend to spend most of my time reciting a catalogue of vices. Yet our country seemed more and more to act out of traditional character. To be sure, there is a godly remnant —not simply a tiny band but a goodly number — for which we may be grateful. **But it is surely not America at her best when we chart the massacre of a million unborn children a year, the flight from the monogamous family, two and a half million persons trapped in illegal drugs and alcohol** (our country now has a larger drug problems than any other industrialized nation in the world), **the normalizing of deviant sexual behavior** (in the Washington-Baltimore area alone there are now estimated to be two hundred and fifty thousand homosexuals), **the proliferation of AIDS to twenty-five thousand persons, more than half of whom have already died, with reportedly 10,000,000 infected with the virus.**

What is underway is a redefinition of the good life, a redefinition that not only perverts the word “good” but perverts the term “life” as well. What is “good” is corrupted into whatever gratifies one's personal desires, whatever promotes self-interest even at the expense of the dignity and worth of others. In that fantasy-world of sinful desires, shameful lusts, and a depraved mind, sexual libertinism is good, coveting and stealing are good, violence and terrorism are good.

Worse yet, such perversion of the good is connected with what is called “the life.” All that the Bible means by life —spiritual life, moral life, eternal life, a life fit for eternity —is emptied into an existence fit only for beasts and brutes.

“They gave up God,” says Paul, “and therefore God gave them up —to

be playthings of their own foul desires in dishonoring their own bodies,” They “deliberately forfeited the truth of God and accepted a lie, paying homage and giving service to the creature instead of the Creator, who alone is worthy to be worshipped for ever and ever. God therefore handed them over to disgraceful passions” (Rom. 1:24-24, *Phillips*).

Western society is experiencing a great cultural upheaval. More and more the wicked subculture comes to open cultural manifestation. More and more the unmentionables become the parlance of our day. More and more profanity and vulgarity find expression through the mass media. The sludge of a sick society is rising to the top and, sad to say, the stench does not offend even some public leaders. Our nation increasingly trips the worst ratings on God's Richter scale of fully deserved moral judgment.

God who shook the earth at Sinai, God who shook the earth at Calvary, God who is a consuming fire warns of one more shaking, that final and decisive shaking: “Yet once more will I make to tremble not the earth only, but also the heaven. This means,” as the author of Hebrews says, “that in this final ‘shaking’ all that is impermanent will be removed and only the unshakable things will remain” (Heb. 12:26, 27, *Phillips*). The world will be asleep when doomsday comes, Peter warns, banking its life on the premise that “everything continues exactly as it has always been since the world began” (2 Pet. 3:4). “But the Day of the Lord will come,” he emphasizes, “and the earth and all that is in it will be laid bare” (2 Pet. 3:10).

When that great meltdown comes,

where will you be? Trapped in Sodom? **In the bleak twilight of a decadent culture, where will you be?** Overtaken, like Lot, looking back at the citadels of sin? “Wake up!” says Paul; “wake up!” American culture is sinking toward sunset.

Christian Believers Are Stretching Toward Sunrise

The remarkable thing about Paul’s exhortation to awaken from sleep is that it is addressed to Christians. It apprises them not of encroaching doom but of daybreak, of the imminent sunrise, of the full dawning of God’s Kingdom. “Let us arm ourselves for the fight of the day,” he writes, “[and] be Christ’s men from head to foot.”

Christians have duties in the cultural upheaval around us. God has not told us to build an ark or to escape the floodwaters by taking to the hills. If there is hope for America, it will come through the vigorous proclamation and application of the Christian message.

The early Christians knew the fierceness of the battle. They knew Gentile wickedness at its worst; it was the moving spirit of the society in which they were reached for the gospel. “You were spiritually dead through your sins and failures, all the times that you followed this world’s ideas of living and obeyed the evil ruler of the spiritual realm.... We all lived like that in the past,” writes Paul, “and followed the desires and imaginings of our lower nature, being in fact under the wrath of God by nature, like everyone else.... We were dead in our sins” (Eph. 2:2, 3, *Phillips*).

Don’t for a moment forget that we ourselves were dug from the sludge of a

sick society. When recently I wrote *Confessions of a Theologian* it had a double exposure—first, on the world from which Christ rescues even those who become theologians and pastors and deacons, and second, on the world to which Christ lifted me, the eternal world to which He lifts prostitutes and drug addicts and homosexuals and other redeemed sinners. The risen Christ is in the moving and lifting business. How far has He removed you from the old life and lifted you to divine service? How high has Christ lifted you?

It is one thing to run away from sin; it is yet another to run up a flag for faith. “Fling away the things that men do in the dark,” exhorts Paul, and “give no chance to the flesh to have its fling.... Be Christ’s men from head to foot **Let us arm ourselves for the fight of the day.” God wants your mind. He wants your will. He wants your heart—the whole self.** “Christ in you” is Paul’s great theme in the letter to the Colossians. Where your feet go, does Christ walk with you? Where your mind reaches, is the mind of Christ yours also? In whatever you will embrace, is Christ’s will astride your own?

During the days of the youth counterculture a lad went door to door asking, “Does Jesus Christ live here?” Taken aback, one housewife replied, “My husband’s a deacon.” The lad answered, “That’s not what I asked: Does Jesus Christ live here?” Christian believers are stretching toward sunrise. **“Be Christ’s men from head to foot”!**

We Are Warriors With A Mission In The World

Christian duty requires of us more

than personal piety and devotion, important as that is. It's not enough to say "no" when the culture holds that fornication is a morally acceptable option and that we may abort the unborn child if it's unwanted or take hallucinatory drugs if we are minded to do so.

Are you aware of the cultural challenges we face? Or are you yourself debilitated by the shoddy secular values of our time?

"The fight of the day"—are you aware of what that entails?

In the battle between good and evil, are you armed and engaged in "the fight of the day"?

In the battle for the minds of men, are you armed and engaged in "the fight of the day"?

In the battle for the will of humanity, are you armed and engaged in "the fight of the day"?

In the exhibition of a Christian mindset, are you armed and engaged in "the fight of the day"?

In the deployment of Christian countermoves, are you armed and engaged in "the fight of the day"?

Just as there are depths of depravity in human life, so too there are levels of dedication. And just as God progressively abandons renegades to their rebellion, so too He rewards the righteous in their spiritual renewal. When ancient Rome fell, it was the godly Christian remnant that walked head-high into the future. When medieval Christianity compromised its Biblical heritage, the Protestant Reformation emerged to bring great blessing to Europe and the world. When the post-Enlightenment era spawned an anti-Biblical mindset, the eighteenth-cen-

tury evangelical awakening in England spared that nation the travesties of the French Revolution. What will be the final verdict on the evangelical confrontation of today's radically secular humanism? We are on the threshold of the decade of destiny, in the last generation before we leave behind the twentieth century, the end of one century and the beginning of another. What spiritual situation do we bequeath not only to those who follow us, but also to our contemporaries?

Christianity is qualitatively different or it has nothing distinctive to offer the world. The real arena in which we are to work and witness and win over others is the world, or we have ceased to be light, salt, leaven. Christian duty requires courageous participation at the frontiers of public concern—education, mass media, politics, law, literature and the arts, labor and economics, and the whole realm of cultural pursuits. We need to do more than to sponsor a Christian *subculture*. **We need Christian counterculture that sets itself alongside the secular rivals and published openly the difference that belief in God and His Christ makes in the arenas of thought and action. We need Christian countermoves that commend a new climate, countermoves that penetrate the public realm.** To live christianly involves taking a stand for God that calls this world's caesars to account before the sovereign Lord of the universe, that calls this world's sages to account before the wisdom that begins with the fear of the Lord, that calls this world's journalists to account before The Greatest Story Ever Told. **We must strive to reclaim this cosmos for its rightful owner, God, who has title to the cattle on a thousand hills, and for Christ who**

says to the lost multitudes, “I made you; I died for you; I ransomed you.”

What does that mean for the world of the liberal arts and the sciences? What does it imply for the mass media? What are its consequences for the political realm? What does it imply for the debate over human freedom and justice and rights?

We may not know all the answers, but we know some absolutes at least, and that puts us head and shoulders above the relativists, and the woods are full of relativists today. Each of us must find his or her proper station and platform in “the fight of the day” and use our God-given talent to reflect the truth and justice of God into the world of public affairs. Everywhere around us is strewn the philosophical wreckage of those who rely only on the

voice of conscience, on social utility, on aesthetic gratification, on majority consensus —on everything but a sure Word of God, If you are still wavering between the God of the ages and the spirit of the age, listen to Paul’s warning summons. **American culture is sinking toward sunset. Christian believers are stretching toward sunrise. We are warriors with a mission in the world.** Have you enlisted, winsomely and courageously, in what Paul calls “the fight of the day”?

(From *Twilight of A Great Civilization* by Carl F.H. Henry, copyright 1988, pp. 39-44. Used with permission of Crossway Books, a ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois 60817. www.crossway.com)



Arlington National Memorial