

Finding Hope in a World at war with itself

How many of you have been shocked and amazed in a bad way over the pace of change in our culture over the past 5 years? Now if I go back 30 years and think about where we were at as a nation, and what the state of the church was then, or at least what I perceived was the state of the church then, I would never have predicted the trajectory that we are on.

My brother texted me the other day after the shooting at the naval center in DC, in which 12 people who were at work doing their jobs had their lives violently ended. He said ½ the world has gone crazy. I think he was being optimistic. The problem isn't that more people are crazy or desperate than before, but the problem is that everyone is shrouded in darkness, and it is the intensity of the expression of that darkness that is increasing.

Rom 1:21-24

²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them over...

We as a nation have turned our backs on God. Because of this God has given us over to the darkness of sin.

Eph 4:18-19

¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. ¹⁹ Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

So what we are experiencing is the increasing expression of darkness that comes from being in a nation that has chosen lust over God. So God has given us over to it and it only leads to more darkness. Now when I say lust I don't only refer to sexuality, although that certainly is the case, but it really is the lust for pleasure, for whatever self-fulfillment we can find. We live in a culture that is all about "me". Now the problem is that I may understand that it's all about me, but you don't seem to see it that way, and so all kinds of trouble erupts.

Living in a nation that has rejected God is tough. Take the mass shootings as an example. We have about 1 or 2 a year now. Our sense of shock over it has diminished. We are saddened, but no longer surprised. Then we have the debate over gun control which ensues. The one side wishes that no one anywhere had guns (except of course for

those enforcing the no gun rules), and then we'd be "safe". This is a completely unrealistic goal with plenty of unintended consequences (for which the founders of our country foresaw and so wrote the second amendment). The other side responds that everyone should have the freedom to carry a weapon and defend themselves. This approach may help to minimize the casualties at these shootings, but it doesn't address the root problem either.

First, let's recognize that we need to understand the world from a biblical viewpoint for it to make sense to us. And second, we need God to combat the evil that surrounds us and to offer hope and help to the world.

The human heart is born in darkness

We already touched on the issue of a darkened human heart. Truly every one of us was born in that state of being lost. We have a self-willed heart which does not, by nature, want to follow God. This is because we were all born in Adam.

Rom 5:12 Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned—

Going back to Romans 1:24 -

Rom 1:24-32

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator — who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

²⁸ Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

This isn't a prophecy of the world at the end of time, this is a description of the world at the time Paul was writing. The world is in darkness. And as the church has lost its voice in our current culture and America has rebelled against its Christian roots, the expression of that darkness increases. It is accelerated through the government schools and media

which produces movies and video games which train and saturate the minds of people in darkness.

Sometimes we naively say that it's not all bad to have a culture blatantly reject God because then the lines are clearly drawn and we can see the difference between light and darkness. There is some truth to this, but also recognize that what comes with this is the increased brokenness of a culture that leaves carnage in its wake in the lives of people. Those we reach with the gospel will be a harder ministry than we've seen in the past because of the brokenness that comes from a dark culture. Physically, sexually, and emotionally abused people carry baggage that must be dealt with. Drug and pornography addiction carries baggage that may take time to work through. All this will require lots of love and patience.

But we must be willing to pay the price to take the hope that we have to a world in darkness.

If we are going to change our culture, we must change the hearts of people first. As we change the heart, we then can change the mind. This is the call we have as the people of God. And that is why we are people of hope. The solution isn't political, though we certainly should stay involved in politics too. The answer is in being the church that God called us to be.

Just a quick note about why we need to stay engaged with the culture even when they really don't want to hear it. First of all, God calls his people to speak the truth. Whether it becomes a word that leads to life or death is not our responsibility. To be faithful to our calling is. Second, realize that the consequences of sin are very real and fairly immediate. There is a sense that God will need to judge America for its sin, but the judgment of sin is ongoing in its immediate effects on a nation. So we do need to be a voice in this culture.

So we need a biblical perspective to understand the world around us.

Second point, God has called the church to offer hope to the world.

The answer is in being the church that God called us to be. And if we are to offer hope to others, we need to be people of hope ourselves. I want to give credit to a short book by Erwin Lutzer called "Where do we go from here?: Hope and direction in our present crisis" from which I have lifted some thoughts. He offers 5 unshakeable pillars for which to build upon.

1. God still reigns

We have been given leaders of our country who are not leading us in a godly direction. From the promotion of abortion and gay marriage to health care mandates which violate religious liberty, we are being lead as a nation in a wrong direction from a biblical

perspective. But the reality is that in our system of government, our leaders are more of a reflection of who we are than anything. Just as with children of Israel, they selected Saul to be their King. He was like they were, wanting to be something in the eyes of those around them as opposed to being faithful and obedient to the calling of God.

But God is the one who is ultimately in control. Though the nation of Israel flailed and faltered, God's purpose in bringing salvation to the world through that Jewish Messiah named Jesus was accomplished. And now we are in a struggle of great magnitude for the soul of our nation, we nonetheless have confidence that no matter the circumstances we see before us, God has his purposes clearly in his sights and he will accomplish them. For example, after the nation of Judah was carried off into captivity and the temple was torn down, this prophecy was given to Isaiah.

Isa 44:24-28

"This is what the LORD says — your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, ²⁵ who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense, ²⁶ who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,' of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be built,' and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,' ²⁷ who says to the watery deep, 'Be dry, and I will dry up your streams,' ²⁸ who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid." "

So Cyrus, king of Persia was in God's hands to do His will. It didn't matter that he was a pagan king of a pagan nation. So too we must remember that even in times like these that God is truly in control and so we must trust him and look to him no matter what happens.

A quote from Erwin Lutzer: "We are called for this moment, and therefore we must remember that the task ahead of us is never as great as the power behind us."¹

2. Jesus loves the church

1 Peter 2:9

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

- God chose us, the church was God's idea
- We are a royal priesthood, we have 24/7 access to God the Father

¹ Erwin Lutzer, "Where do we go from here?: Hope and direction in our present crisis."

- We are a holy nation – set apart for God
- We are God’s people, we belong to him

Recognize that if we truly are a holy people, we will by our very nature expose sin and makes the darkness uncomfortable. Lutzer says: “The church is to be in the world as a ship is in the ocean.” We should not try to use the methods of the world, or concentrate on working through the systems of this world. We have a high and different calling. We are in the world but not of it. We need to be as different from the world as a boat is different and distinct from the ocean it crosses.

History lesson – the early Christian church was neither powerful politically or accepted culturally. Yet they affected slow and continual influence over the world by the consistency of their beliefs and behaviors.

“The consistent lesson of 2,000 years of church history is that the church does not need freedom to be faithful...”²

3. Our mission is unchanged

Paul said to the Corinthians (a church in a very pagan city)

1 Cor 2:2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

To the church in Galatia he said:

Gal 6:14 May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which^b the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

To the church in Philippi he said:

Phil 3:8-11

What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

There is only one message that can transform lives. That Christ died for sinners of which I am the worst. And through faith in him **anyone** can become a child of God who has left behind the ways of the world to follow the way of the One. We cannot change this

² Erwin Lutzer, “Where do we go from here?: Hope and direction in our present crisis.”

message, nor make it more appealing to our hearers. It is narrow and divisive. We cannot just “love on people”. Yes we need to “love on people”, but we must also make known the truth of the gospel. It must be central to all we do.

We must recognize though our mission is only as effective as our lives

Erwin Lutzer: “Humanly speaking, there may be powerful reasons why the world does not believe our message.”

1. The lifestyle of many in the church is the same as those outside, including, unfortunately some high profile leaders
2. We do not effectively preach the truth of sin and the love of God at the same time

Often the message is angry and without grace: think Westboro Baptist. Other times it is without the reality of the judgment of God that is coming or the need for true repentance and change: think about many in the evangelical church, Rob Bell as an example.

We need humility about who we are as well as to be unashamed of the gospel of Christ and unapologetic about its very hard message.

History lesson: Christianity spread in North Africa in the early centuries because Christians were different. Some things that caused pagans to be overwhelmed by the caring attitude of Christians:

- They buried their dead differently, having a firm hope in the resurrection
- They cared for the burial of pagans during the plagues even when pagans would normally burn the dead
- When abandoned babies were left out on the streets, Christians would take them in and take care of them

1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

The situation we are finding ourselves in now in America is not new, it is as old as the New Testament church. We must live such good lives among the pagans. We must strive to be light. Ask the Holy Spirit to look at your life and see if you are being light in the darkness.

We must strengthen our families

I am a big proponent of Christian education. Yes, children can be shepherded in Christ even while in a government school, but teaching our children from a biblical worldview is essential. The family and the church are God's main institutions for transforming the world. And they are interlinked such that churches are made strong by strong families, but families are strengthened by strong churches. Parents, make it a priority to disciple your children and raise them up in the ways of the Lord. Husbands, learn to truly love your wife as Christ loved the church. Wives, respect your husbands. This is so important to our mission.

We must learn again how to be lovingly confrontational and persuasive

1 Peter 3:15 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Do you know that I firmly believe that Christianity is in all ways superior to other views? The Christian view is superior to the world's views of:

- The origin of life – by chance? Not likely...
- The dignity and importance of every person
- Sexual purity as a more satisfying lifestyle than promiscuous sensuality
- Male/female roles being complementary instead in competitive
- A work ethic to glorify God rather than work as a necessary evil
- Tolerance meaning showing respect of others we disagree with as opposed to forced acceptance of every idea as being equal

Christianity did not spread only because of the expression of God's goodness through people who were holy, it also has been because Christians have a truth that is irrepressible. Don't be afraid to express the truth, and learn how to express it well. Learn how to give reasons for the hope that you have. It's a command of scripture to be ready.

4. Our Focus is the Eternal Kingdom of God

So much of our perspective relies upon what we think is "real".

- This world is temporary. Did you ever go camping? We do things to make our stay more pleasant and productive, but we don't put down a foundation.
- Jesus is coming back to bring this world to an end and establish his everlasting kingdom.

Story about swimming the English Channel – Florence Chadwick, 1952/54. Was a ½ mile from the shore when she quit in the cold and the fog. When she realized she was so close she knew she could have finished and was able to do it two years later.

We need to stay focused on the big picture. That Jesus started this work and he will finish it. So why do we get discouraged when the world doesn't print our message in the papers? Or that famous people are hostile to the message of Christ?

1 Peter 4:12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"^a

¹⁹ So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

Where did we ever get the idea that serving God in the world is supposed to be easy?

5. God is still at work

It is never too late to repent. Our nation has had at least 2 great awakenings in our past. God will have mercy on those who humble themselves before him. We must be a people that seeks God's face on behalf of our nation. But whether we see a great revival or not, our faithfulness to God and his calling is up to us.

"It is better to fail at a cause that will ultimately succeed than to succeed in a cause that will ultimately fail."³

Matt 16:18

¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter,^c and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades^d will not overcome it.^e

We are part of something that cannot fail, because it is being built by the master of the universe himself. This is the faith we must continue in and not allow to waver. Whether we see big results or not, whether we see our nation turn back to him or go into the dustbin of history, whether we are allowed to enjoy a peaceful life or suffer persecution for our faith; we must keep moving forward with the resolve of a people who know their God and who believe his promises.

³ Peter Marshall