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✿ PART 1 OF 3

Societal Deterioration and the Epochal Analysis of a Bungling Church



The Church is “*the pillar and support of the truth*” (1 Timothy 3:15) which God intends to herald His Word in and to a fallen world via evangelizing and discipling the lost. So it stands to reason that the degree to which the Church fulfills its calling is the degree to which it is a preserving and illuminating force in a fallen world (cf. Matthew 5:13–14) and, more specifically, in a given nation. However, throughout the major epochs of American Church history—for many reasons—she does not fulfill that specific task. In fact, her efforts to engage culture have

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★ PUBLIC SERVANT QUOTE

James Lankford

U.S. Senator, Oklahoma



“As a Christian, my faith isn’t just a hobby I practice on weekends. My faith impacts my daily life whether I’m in Washington, D.C. or my back yard.

Elected officials have the same right as every other American: to have a faith and live their faith. I cannot and should not impose my faith on others, but neither can others impose their faith or lack of faith on me.

Houses of worship, parochial schools, faith-based nonprofits, and others serve our communities and the hungry, hurting, and homeless. However, they are continually scrutinized under the misguided notion that faith-based entities in our nation should not be able to compete for public funding or federal or state programs under the guise that doing so would violate the Establishment Clause. But the Supreme Court has rightfully held that Americans should be allowed to participate in their government and not be required to surrender their faith.”

— SENATOR JAMES LANKFORD

been characterized by many clumsy mistakes. The Church is bungling her calling.

Bungling means “making or characterized by many clumsy mistakes.” As you read and reflect on this series I think you’ll agree with me that the word is an appropriate encapsulation that, by in large, best depicts the American Church’s ineffectiveness in bringing about positive change in our deteriorating nation.

For nearly one-half of a century now, the American Church’s major emphasis and involvement in D.C. has been attempts to change the laws of the land. Laws based in biblical precepts (in contrast to the enactment of laws that are untethered to scriptural precepts) are certainly important and worthy objectives, and many in office who name the name of Christ are heavily invested in that noble purpose.

But notice from Luke, chapter 3, that there is a more important discipline and objective that every believer—and the Church as an institution—should be pre-eminently committed to in order to change the direction of a nation to combat societal deterioration. Allow me to state it this way:

**If manifesting biblically-based principles
in civil government is a good pursuit,
Luke 3 reveals an even more excellent pursuit!**

Luke 3:3–14 reveals God’s means to change a culture in the here and now. May that which is good not diminish or eclipse that which is excellent.

In addition to understanding the message of Luke 3:3–14 let us also and importantly trace the biblical proposition of Luke 3—specifically the lack of application of Luke 3—throughout American Church history. Put on your thinking cap!

What follows is the first study in a three-part series that examines the primary calling of the institution of the Church relative to each of five major epochs in American Church history. I think you’ll find this series most interesting and impacting on your life.

Read on, my friend.

Ralph Drollinger



I. INTRODUCTION

For the past 45 years, Church pastors and leaders have hotly debated how the believer should best engage in societal preservation, illumination, and change. Given America's moral decline, this discussion is anticipatable. In fact, this topic was my main focus during my eight years of seminary training. While both sides of the societal change debate represent noble motives and seek the same objective, *how to best achieve it is controversial.*

This week's passage makes a strong and simple case for the following:

The believer's emphasis on heart change will assuredly result in law and societal change.

Embracing "heart change" is to embrace the long game, whereas to embrace "law change" tempts the believer with the promise of quicker results which may not be achievable or even sustainable due to the essence and very nature of the political process. Luke chapter 3 is an insightful passage regarding the guaranteed social benefits that inure to a country where and when the Church prioritizes and centers on evangelism.

Contextually in this passage the "he" is John the Baptist who precedes the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. He was an evangelist who preached the need to repent as a necessary component to receiving Christ. Otherwise, when you think about it, why do you need to be saved if in your heart there is no acknowledgment of being lost? Other than feeling a sense of personal

lostness, why would you seek Christ and His forgiveness?

Following are excerpts from that somewhat lengthy passage that will enable you to quickly see my point:

"And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3).

"Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance" (v. 8).

"And the crowds were questioning him, saying, 'Then what shall we do?' And he would answer and say to them, 'The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise.' And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.' Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, 'And what about us, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages'" (vv. 10–14).¹

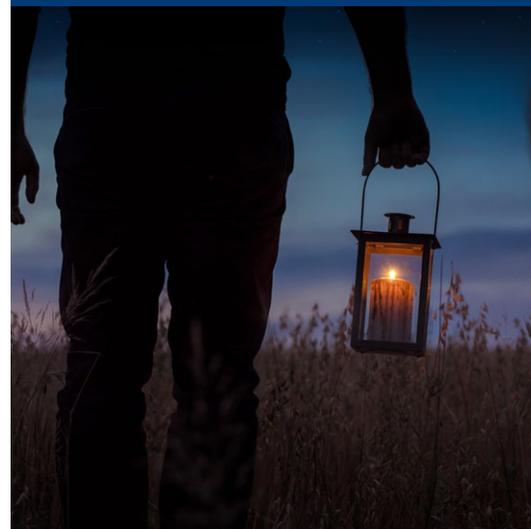
I have purposefully edited the passage in order to emphasize and clarify the point of this study, i.e., its read in a way that makes the social implications of John's evangelism immediately apparent. All were profoundly affected by John's preaching and possessed an internal Holy Spirit-driven curiosity and unctio characterized by and resulting in the same question: *What shall we do?*

The large crowd that John drew repre-

♥ VERSE OF THE WEEK

Matthew 5:13–14

"You are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world."



John the Baptist preached that conversion should lead to the betterment of society not a withdrawal from it.





John Jay



“By conveying the Bible to people ... we certainly do them a most interesting act of kindness. We thereby enable them to learn that man was originally created and placed in a state of happiness, but, becoming disobedient, was subjected to the degradation and evils which he and his posterity have since experienced. The Bible will also inform them that our gracious Creator has provided for us a Redeemer in whom all the nations of the earth should be blessed—that this Redeemer has made atonement “for the sins of the whole world,” and thereby reconciling the Divine justice with the Divine mercy, has opened a way for our redemption and salvation; and that these inestimable benefits are of the free gift and grace of God, not of our deserving, nor in our power



“Saint John the Baptist Preaching to the Masses in the Wilderness”

sented much of society. Luke identifies the first of the three cultural sectors in verses 10 and 11 as *the multitudes*. The second curious sector identified in verses 12 and 13 were *tax gatherers* (for the occupying Romans), and the third section, verse 14, were *some soldiers* (Jewish soldiers most likely).

The Pharisees regarded these professions as questionable, but before providing a brief examination of each, it is important to note that John the Baptist is not preaching that these people give up their professions. Rather, he instructed the people to remain in

their professions but to behave honorably and honestly.² This is an important distinction to recognize relative to the thesis of this study.

John the Baptist is preaching that conversion should lead to the betterment of society not a withdrawal from it; that those who are converted to Christ will turn from their former sinful ways and lead lives pleasing to God.

The implication in this passage is that true repentance will always result in a certain form of behavioral change. Let’s examine these groups:



Pieter Breughel the Younger (1564–1638), *Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest*

A. THE MULTITUDES

These commoners were curious regarding the implications of conversion and were told by John, “*let the man who has two tunics share with him who has none; and let him who has food do likewise.*” A *tunic* was customarily worn under one’s outer garment for extra warmth. Sometimes two were worn or an individual had an extra one. This instruction serves to illustrate the principle, “*love your neighbor as yourself,*” as taught by Moses in Leviticus 19:18 and Jesus in Matthew 19:19. Accordingly, the first illustration of the implication of salva-

tion is that we will love others like we love ourselves. In Philippians 2 Paul says “*regard one another as more important than yourselves.*” What a great world this would be if everyone practiced this ethic in culture! Here then is the first implication of what the Bible teaches: There is a relationship between conversion and societal betterment!

B. THE JEWISH TAX GATHERERS

Tax gatherers were perceived to have sold their soul to the occupying Roman forces and were despised and

John Jay (continued)

to deserve. The Bible will also [encourage] them with many explicit and consoling assurances of the Divine mercy to our fallen race, and with repeated invitations to accept the offers of pardon and reconciliation.... They, therefore, who enlist in His service, have the highest encouragement to fulfill the duties assigned to their respective stations; for most certain it is, that those of His followers who [participate in] His conquests will also participate in the transcendent glories and blessings of His Triumph.”

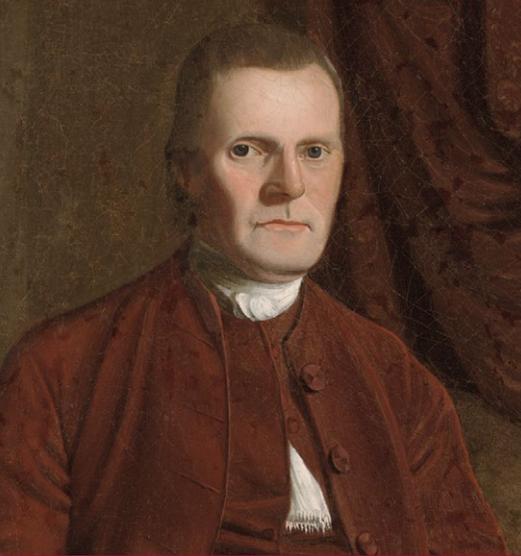
— John Jay, president of Congress, diplomat, author of *The Federalist Papers*, original Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Governor of New York.

John Jay, *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay, 1794–1826*, Henry P. Johnston, editor (New York: Burt Franklin, 1890), Vol. IV, pp. 494, 498, from his “Address at the Annual Meeting of the American Bible Society,” May 13, 1824.





Roger Sherman



“God commands all men everywhere to repent. He also commands them to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and has assured us that all who do repent and believe shall be saved ... [G]od ... has absolutely promised to bestow them on all these who are willing to accept them on the terms of the Gospel—that is, in a way of free grace through the atonement. ‘Ask and ye shall receive [John 16:24]. Whosoever will, let him come and take of the waters of life freely [Revelation 22:17]. Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out’ [John 6:37].”

— Roger Sherman, signer of the Declaration of Independence, signer of the Constitution, “Master Builder of the Constitution,” judge, framer of the Bill of Rights, U.S. Senator.

Correspondence Between Roger Sherman and Samuel Hopkins (Worcester, MA: Charles Hamilton, 1889), p. 9, from Roger Sherman to Samuel Hopkins, June 28, 1790.

Societal Deterioration and the Epochal Analysis of a Bungling Church – Part 1

hated by their fellow countrymen. In fact, the gospel writer Matthew was a Jewish *tax gatherer* prior to his conversion. Often, they would exact a tax that was far beyond the profit margin necessary to stay in business and allowed by their Roman franchisor. John addresses this very thing: *Collect no more than what you have been ordered to*, he says to the onlooker who is counting the cost of coming to Christ. In 1 Thessalonians 2:5 Paul states to the believers, “*for we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed.*” Greed is characteristic of selfish, fallen individuals and is often the motivation for the exploitation of others. John has just said to *the multitudes*, “*Love your neighbors.*” Now he is saying to the *tax gatherers*, “Don’t rip off your neighbors.” Here then is another cultural implication of repentance and conversion: the curtailment of *greed*. When one comes to Jesus He fills the void, so as to recharacterize a person’s inner being. Someone who is filled with Christ is not in constant want. What a different place this world would be if true of everyone, “*The lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want*” (Psalm 23:1).

C. SOLDIERS

The last of the three illustrative groups that Luke records are the *soldiers* who came to John the Baptist. Most commentators agree that these were Jewish soldiers who provided protection and enforcement for the Jewish *tax gatherers*.³ John is literally telling them not to extort money by violence. The Greek word he uses means to “not shake violently.” If you are coming

to Christ and desire His Lordship in and over your life, it means you won’t shake down people anymore! John tells the powerful in society that if you desire to follow Christ it means you will no longer misuse your power to take advantage of others but rather *be content with your wages*.⁴ What a different place this world this would be if those in power did not practice violence! Leading them to Christ is the biblically revealed solution to such abuse!

Conclusively, Luke 3 is a *powerful* passage that serves to illustrate the pragmatic implications of societal betterment that stem from an institutional Church solely focused on soul conversion. Each individual representing the three segments of culture is instructed by John to bear character qualities that will most certainly benefit society! Here then—and it is very simple to see from the redundancy of the passage—is *the best way for believers to effect societal change* in the long run. To disagree with this is to disagree with the simple, clear narrative passage.

In Ephesians 2, the apostle Paul declaratively states the same thing that Luke has illustrated via the life and preaching ministry of John the Baptist: That prior to coming to Christ, we “*were all dead in [our] trespasses and sins, in which [we] formerly walked*” (v. 1). We all “*formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging in the desires of our flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath*” (v. 3). But to those who have repented and are regenerate in Christ Paul states, “*you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk*



as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consist in all goodness and righteousness and truth)” (5:8–9). The sequence of both Luke and Paul’s passages serve to illustrate the contrasting nature between those who are unregenerate versus the repentant who have bowed the knee and come to Christ (cf. John 1:12).

Many other parallel passages exist, but if you have no more time to further read this study, I have herein made my point: Evangelizing the lost is the biblically revealed means by which the Church is to go about changing culture.

Parts 2 and 3 will provide you with a more profound understanding as to how the American Church has *repeatedly* bungled—in fact in every major epoch of its history—the simple message that John the Baptist and the apostle Paul herein heralded!

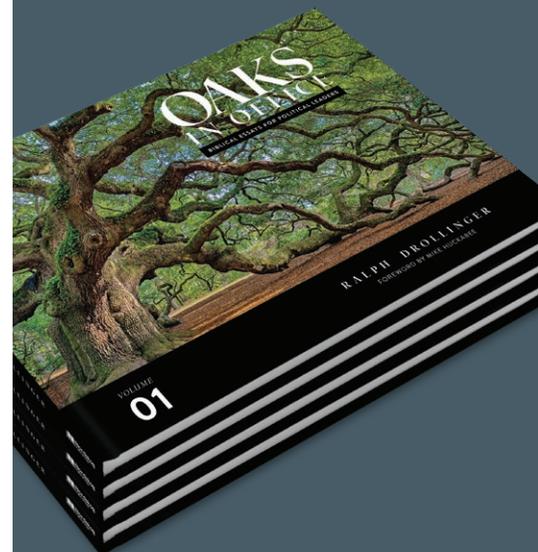
In its attempt to change the country by focusing on better laws, American Evangelicalism⁵ has discounted and woefully underemphasized the power of what John the Baptist and the apostle Paul are illustrating: Evangelism! And look at what has happened: the nation has only gotten worse; it has not changed for the better! In the past 45 years of attempting to change laws more so than hearts, the Christian activist movement has little to show for

its efforts. The country is increasingly secular and increasingly sticking its finger in the eye of God.

Would you agree with me that it is time for believers to make evangelism a priority in the capitol?

With the diminishment of the Religious Right movement in recent years, the time is now to discover, commit to, and emphasize the simple biblical formula for effecting societal change as illustrated in Luke chapter 3 and the book of Ephesians. What follows is a brief history of how this lack of what I will hereinafter summarily refer to as a “Luke 3 emphasis” has played itself out in American Church history in its underemphasis on evangelism. What follows will provide a broader historical perspective relative to this important topic and will result in helping you shape a better-informed, deep-seated conviction concerning the preeminence of evangelism—not only as it relates to building God’s kingdom in heaven, but also to social change in our nation. What follows is an examination of this matter via the major epochs of American Church history.

Next week, in Part 2, the eschatology of the Puritans and the encroachment of Theological Liberalism will be examined.



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1. *New American Standard Bible: 1995 update*. 1995 (Luke 3:3–14). LaHabra, Calif.: The Lockman Foundation. Used with permission. Four examples of parallel passages to Luke 3:3–14 and Ephesians 2 and 5—passages which similarly connect evangelism/repentance with positive benefits to society in the here and now—are as follows (among many others):

Isaiah 1:16–18

“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow.”

Acts 26:20

“...but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.”

Galatians 5:22–24

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

Philippians 1:11

“having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”

2. I. Howard Marshall, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary; The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) p. 142.
3. Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, the Gospel According to St. Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) p. 96.
4. “A soldier’s remuneration was in fact low and the temptation to increase it by rapacious dealings was strong.” Heidland, H. W. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) Volume 5, p. 591f.
5. Note I have specifically referred to the Church now in a more specific manner: Evangelicalism. I am incorporating this change herein to more narrowly define what I mean as the Church. The Church as used to depict broader Protestantism (in the sense of Theological Liberalism), or Catholicism, or the Orthodox Church are not what I intend to include when I use the word “Church” in the context of this Bible study. I believe Evangelicalism is biblically representational more so of the biblical definition of “the Church” than the later forms.



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