

The Quest for Christian Values
“Honoring God in a Pluralistic Society”

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My all time favorite story and one you have heard before, is the story about a little girl sitting in the family room one night drawing a picture. Noticing the intensity of his daughter's activity, her Dad asked, “What are you doing?” “I'm drawing a picture of God,” replied the girl. “How can you do that?” inquired the Dad. “Nobody knows what God looks like?” Then with a smile on her face the girl said, “They will know when I finish my picture!” In a pluralistic society driven by uncertainty and relativity there are times when I long for the confidence of that little girl.

Today I want to begin a series of sermons on “The Quest for Christian Values.” Over the last 40 years America has been involved in a cultural conflict. It started in the 1960's with the rise of secularism, fueled by the sexual revolution and politicized by the question of God in public life. This movement was countered in the 1980's with the reaction of the Moral Majority and the calculated political empowerment of the so-called Christian Right. This counter movement, popularized by cable TV and the Internet, found plenty of grandiose talk show personalities and self-ordained, entrepreneur preachers to spread its message. So here we are in 2005, politically divided by blue states and red states, religiously divided by mainline denominations and independent mega churches, in a society that becomes more multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and pluralistic by the day. WHAT A GREAT TIME TO BE ALIVE! Or, to put it in the words of Jesus as he commissioned his disciples, *“Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves”* (Matthew 10:16).

The Christian value I want to explore today is “Honoring God in a Pluralistic Society.” In the midst of a public debate, a scribe, a professor of the law, came to Jesus and asked, *“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”* Common question, ordinary question; a question raised daily by this teacher as he tried to divide the rules of Judaism into great and small, more important and less important, heavy and light. And the answer Jesus gives is a Sabbath school answer: *“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”* Every good Orthodox Jew said that every morning and every evening and had it on the door post and some wore it in leather bags on their heads. And then He took two statements out of the Old Testament and quoted them: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength.”* The second is this: *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* In one simple statement the 613 laws of Judaism were reduced to the Ten Commandments of Moses which are summarized in two principles from the Old Testament to love God and love your neighbor, which could really be captured by the single word, love. “They will know we are Christians by our love.” All Christian values begin here, with love.

LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART.

To love is to honor; to hold in high esteem, to be devoted to, to give your all to. God desires that from his children. Whoever has your heart has you.

God is the deepest desire of our hearts. I remember in seminary during the late 1960's listening to a visiting professor advise us want-to-be pastors to think long and hard about devoting our lives to the local church. Devote yourself to teaching, to counseling, to urban renewal. The local church will die in your lifetime and you will be left hugging a corpse, he said prophetically. I am glad to have lived long enough to prove his prophecy wrong. In spite of feeble pastors like me, beyond denominational quarrels and politics, not to mention the pressure and stress of everyday life, churches are filled today with millions of people whose hearts are deeply devoted to God. Oh, the power of a heart devoted to God.

For those who would like to wipe the name of God out of American history and sand blast references to God from public buildings, and purge our country from religion instead of granting us freedom of religion, you may have a bigger battle than you think. Do not underestimate the willingness of people to stand up for their convictions. While I may question the wisdom of the Alabama judge who refused to remove the Ten Commandments from his Montgomery courthouse and even theologically wonder if he is breaking the second commandment by defending his graven image, I cannot doubt the passion of his heart nor his willingness to put his treasure where his heart is.

Love God with all your mind. God is more than our minds can comprehend. Mind has to do with intellect, understanding.

Isaiah 1:18 says, "*Come now let us reason together.*" If there was ever a time for reasonable people to speak up, the time is now. Reason tells me we are a religiously different people than we were a generation ago. I remember when the first Catholic church was built in our little rural community of Baptists and Methodists. I remember the comments made in our churches about that. We bought our clothes from a Jewish retailer in that little town but they had to travel more than 60 miles away to find a synagogue. It isn't that way anymore. We are not just Protestants and Catholics with a few Jews scattered here and there. We are Muslim, Buddhist, Bahai, Hindu, Native American, and New Age.

So when my Muslim friend called me the other day to assure me of his continued prayers for my health, should I have thanked him or told him not to bother? I thanked him for his prayers. Come now and let us reason together. We live in a different kind of world.

Reason causes us to question our desire for a Christian nation. James Kennedy of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church said recently, "There is nothing more powerful than an ideal whose time has come. And the idea of reclaiming American as a Christian nation has definitely come." While I respect Dr. Kennedy, I have some questions.

Is the goal of Christians to make America a Christian nation or to make Christians of people who populate this nation? Do we want a theocracy or a democracy? Do we want religious freedom or religious monarchy? At the table of wisdom we need to hammer some things out. If I think my small mind has comprehended all the ways of God, I need to be the first to repent because God is so much more than my small mind can imagine or my emotions can grasp, or I will ever be able to reason.

Love God with all your soul. God is the spark of the Divine within. Love God with all your soul, your psyche, your spirit, your real self. Genesis 1:26 says, *“Then God said, let us make humans in our image, in our likeness, so he did. God saw all that he had made, it was very good.”* There is a spark of Divine in every human being. The Imago Deo, the image of God, is stamped within us. Thinkers have given it different names: Sangster called it the “homing instinct.” Augustine called it the “restlessness until we rest in God.” Paul called it “the law written on the heart.” Quakers call it the “inner light.”

Who then can be saved? As a life-long Christian, I believe Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. I love to tell the story of His life, death and resurrection, of His grace, forgiveness and love. It is the calling of every Christian to bear witness to Christ and when necessary to use words. So I challenge you today to accept Christ as Lord and Savior and become a faithful disciple.

As to the breadth and depth and scope of Jesus’ saving act, only God knows. Jesus said, *“I have other sheep which are not of this fold.” “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father.” “Let the wheat and weeds grow together until the time of harvest.”* Who are we to second guess Christ?

God is the giver of free will. Love God with all your strength. Dunamis. Power. Linger here just to say, If God believed in us so much that he granted us free will, should not we grant that freedom to others as well, even to those who know not the name of God?

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF

Love others. I will have more to say about this next week but will get us thinking about it now. The essence of love is Respect. Agape – goodwill. Respect is more than tolerance. I tolerate people because I have to. I respect people because they are children of God. I cannot love God and stick my tongue out at my brother, whoever my brother may be. God expects more of me. The Christian attitude is that of hospitality to the stranger, as well as friends.

I used to give a lot of public prayers. When I pray in church I pray in Jesus’ name, even though we are not told to do so in the Lord’s Prayer. When I pray in inter-faith gatherings, political gatherings, I leave that salutation off my prayers. Am I compromising my Christianity? I do not think so. I am trying to extend hospitality.

The expression of love is Equality. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. The problem with loving our neighbors as we love ourselves is that many of us do. We

harbor a poor self-image. We carry around a baggage of guilt. We live in an unblessed and upset state of life. Since we beat up on ourselves, it follows rather naturally that we beat up on others too. Only when we accept God's acceptance of us will we be empowered to extend God's acceptance to others. Let God love you. Let God love through you. Live by the golden rule. Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.

The evidence of love is Cooperation. The religions of the world will never believe alike. But have we not the common ethical compassion to love alike? A friend sat in my office last Sunday and said, "I just can't begin to comprehend this tragedy that has struck South Asia." Then he said, "If there is anything redemptive to come from this awful human tragedy, could it be that the religions of the world, the races of the world, the countries of the world, and the people of the world unite in their common effort to bring relief? Would that not be an act of God?"

Last weekend you put \$39,000 in our offering plate for Tsunami Relief. Last Friday at the Islamic Center in Nashville, worshipers dropped over \$22,000 in donations for tsunami victims. Is this not what love is all about?

When it has all been said and done, Jesus said, "Only two things really matter: do I love God? Do I love others?" Herein lays one core Christian value.