

THE Soapbox

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Dear Friend:

The dictionary defines a soapbox as “any box or crate used as a temporary platform for making an impromptu or nonofficial public speech.” The speech coming from the soapbox is sometimes characterized as eccentric, maybe even a little fanatical, and so if I am going to get on a soapbox, I will have to be careful not to take myself too seriously.

In this *Soapbox*, from time to time, I would like to share some things from my heart, unofficial things. I do a lot of thinking, reading, and reflecting. And for some time I have wanted to create a little vehicle, a kind of letter to a group of friends, where I can talk about unofficial things. And then, should something here spark your passions or cause some reflection in you, I would love to hear from you. Maybe we can make a soapbox into a conversation, not too eccentric I hope, perhaps even helpful.

And so this is the first issue of *The Soapbox* and here is what is currently on my heart. I spend a lot of time thinking about the condition of our culture. I don't think I am an alarmist, but I am very worried about the shape of our world. I think, by the way, that Christians throughout history have often been worried about the culture in which they live and work. Sometimes they have lashed out in judgment. Sometimes they have withdrawn and circled the wagons out of fear or perhaps self-preservation. Often they simply accommodate to the culture, so that there is little to distinguish Christians from anyone else.

But for me the best of the Christian tradition is when Christians engage the culture in such a way that the world changes, becomes better. God calls us to engage. Often the scruffy, little bands of Christians who have felt most marginalized by their cultural moment have been the ones to change the course of history. I think here of Paul's little churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire, or the monastic movement in Ireland under St. Patrick, or perhaps that bright band of Protestant reformers who steered the gospel back on course for the good of European and American culture.

A young, new theologian named Ellen Charry has recently used some language I like. God wants his world to flourish, Charry says, not just for God's people alone, but for all the world. And here is what worries me: I believe our culture has adopted a worldview that causes the world to languish and suffer instead of flourish. In Chuck Colson's new book he says “we are either contributing to the broken condition of the world or participating with God in transforming the world. . . .” I think these are indeed our choices.

I believe we face what historian Thomas Cahill calls a “hinge of history” where everything just may be at stake. As we stand on the threshold of a new millennium, will the door of history swing wide open to a new flourishing of human experience, or will it

swing completely shut on the kind of civilization we have known? That's a big question. I think it is a question our students are asking. In his marvelous little book *Crossing The Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul II quotes Andre Malraux's famous little statement that the 21st Century will be a century of religion or it will not be at all. Wow, the stakes are very high indeed.

But my big question is this: where will Christians be as the culture chooses between these two options? Will we be sitting on the sidelines, afraid that we can't make much of a difference? Or will we be squabbling among ourselves, arguing over our little differences, while the culture goes about its way, choosing its future without our input?

This summer I spent some time re-reading Fredrick Nietzsche. Nietzsche was perhaps the first formidable philosopher to announce, quite famously, that God is dead. With God out of the way, two things happen: we must create our own meaning, and we must distrust everything. Be cool, be hip with suspicion, be cynical because you can't trust anyone or anything.

Many Christians have surrendered the culture to Nietzsche. It's all over, they say. The Christian voice is everywhere marginalized. Many evangelicals today feel we must withdraw, circle the wagons, walk away in defeat, let the culture go. Paul Weyrich, most recently and prominently, has proposed "a strategy of separation." "In terms of society in general," Weyrich contends, "we have lost." Nietzsche has won.

I cannot for a moment accept this reading of our times. I cannot accept this as a proper reading of Christian history. Nor do I believe this kind of separatist strategy comes close to the mandate we receive from Jesus. This summer I was also re-studying the Apostle Paul, and I have been deeply moved by Paul's vision of both engagement and hope. Now here is a counter voice to Nietzsche. I find in Paul this understanding: if we are going to make a difference to our culture we must bring to our work an imagination of hope, shaped and transformed by the light of the world in Jesus.

In his new commentary on I Corinthians, Richard Hays says that Paul calls for "a conversion of the imagination." Let your minds be reshaped, renewed, transformed. And then, remember this, you will have to learn to get along. No squabbling among yourselves. You must let love be your guiding value. But if you do, as Hays says, you will be "caught up in a cosmic drama, and [you will] play a distinctive role in God's action to rescue the world." Wow. Is Paul asking us to change the world? You bet.

I care very deeply that Christians do not withdraw. In fact we are staking the whole vision for the future of Seattle Pacific on just this commitment. We must engage, winsomely and effectively, in a culture that seems to have ignored the Christian voice. In the face of the Nietzschean, nihilistic vision of despair, who else can make a difference? Let's choose Paul's way. Let's bring God's hope and his flourishing to all the world.

So, that's the first *Soapbox*. What do you think about these things? Let me know.

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