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The Great Evangelical Disaster: What Has Happened To America?

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What Matters?

Time magazine recently published a special sixtieth anniversary edition with the title “The Most Amazing 60 Years.” In recalling the world into which Time was born, this special issue began with the words: “The atom was unsplit. So were most marriages.”¹ Here two things occurring in our era are properly brought together — one, the scientific technological explosion; and two, a moral breakdown. It is not just by accident that these two things have happened simultaneously. There is something which lies behind both phenomena, and in recognizing this Time really has shown amazing comprehension.



The Quest for Autonomy

Something happened during the last sixty years—something which cut the moral foundation out from under our culture. Devastating things have come in every area of culture, whether it be law or government, whether it is in the schools, our local communities or in the family. And these have happened within the lifetime of many who are reading this book. Our culture has been squandered and lost, and largely thrown away. Indeed, to call it a moral breakdown puts it mildly. Morality itself has been turned on its head with every form of moral perversion being praised and glorified in the media and the world of entertainment.

How can we make sense of what has happened? In the main essay of this special edition Time offers an explanation. The essay, entitled “What really mattered?” suggests: “To determine what really mattered in this jumble [of events] seems to require a sense of something beyond the particulars.” We will need, Time says, to discover the “idea characterizing [our] age.”²

Time is quite right in this. In order to make sense of these last sixty years, and equally in order to understand the present and how we as Christians are to live today, we will need to understand the idea of our age—or what we might call the spirit of the times which has transformed our culture so radically since the 1920s. This idea, this spirit, Time says, has been the idea of “freedom”—not just freedom as an abstract ideal, or in the sense of being free from injustice, but freedom in an absolute sense:

The fundamental idea that America represented corresponded to the values of the times. America was not merely free; it was freed, unshackled. The image was of something previously held in check, an explosive force of a country that moved about in random particles of energy yet at the same time gained power and prospered. To be free was to be modern; to be modern was to take chances. The American century was to be the century of unleashing, of breaking away, at first from the 19th century (as Freud, Proust, Einstein and others had done), and eventually from any constraints at all.³

Further along in the same essay Time comments: “Behind most of these events lay the assumption, almost a moral imperative, that what was not free ought to be free, that limits were intrinsically evil,” and that science should go wherever it pleases in a spirit of “self-confident autonomy.”⁴ But, as Time concludes, “when people or ideas are unfettered, they are freed but not yet free.”⁵

Form and Freedom

Here the problem of the 1920s to the 1980s is properly spelled out. It is the attempt to have absolute freedom—to be totally autonomous from any intrinsic limits. It is the attempt to throw off anything that would restrain one’s own personal autonomy. But it is especially a direct and deliberate rebellion against God and his law.

In this essay Time has given that which indeed is central, namely the problem of form and freedom. It is a problem which every culture from the beginning of history has had to confront. The problem is this: If there is not a proper balance between form and freedom, then the society will move into either of two extremes. Freedom, without a proper balance of form, will lead to chaos and to the total breakdown of society. Form, without a proper balance of freedom, will lead to authoritarianism, and to the destruction of individual and social freedom. But note further no society can exist in a state of chaos. And whenever chaos has reigned for even a short time, it has given birth to the imposition of arbitrary control.

In our own country we have enjoyed enormous human freedom. But at the same time this freedom has been founded upon forms of government, law, culture, and social morality which have given stability to individual and

social life, and have kept our freedoms from leading to chaos. There is a balance here between form and freedom which we have come to take as natural in the world. But it is not natural. And we are utterly foolish if we do not recognize that this unique balance which we have inherited from the Reformation thought-forms is not automatic in a fallen world. This is clear when we look at the long span of history. But it is equally clear when we read the daily newspaper and see half the world locked in totalitarian oppression.

The Reformation not only brought forth a clear preaching of the gospel, it also gave shape to society as a whole — including government, how people viewed the world, and the full spectrum of culture. In Northern Europe, and in the countries such as the United States that are extensions of Northern Europe, the Reformation brought with it an enormous increase in knowledge of the Bible which spread through every level of society. This is not to say that the Reformation was ever a “golden age” or that everyone in the Reformation countries were true Christians. But it is clear that through the Reformation many were brought to Christ and that the absolutes of the Bible became widely disseminated in the culture as a whole. The freedoms which grew out of this were tremendous; and yet, with the forms grounded in a biblical consensus or ethos,⁶ the freedoms did not lead to chaos.

But something has happened in the last sixty years. The freedom that once was founded on a biblical consensus and a Christian ethos has now become autonomous freedom, cut loose from all constraints. Here we have the world spirit of our age—autonomous Man setting himself up as God, in defiance of the knowledge and the moral and spiritual truth which God has given. Here is the reason why we have a moral breakdown in every area of life. The titanic freedoms which we once enjoyed have been cut loose from their Christian restraints and are becoming a force of destruction leading to chaos. And when this happens, there really are very few alternatives. All morality becomes relative, law becomes arbitrary, and society moves toward disintegration. In personal and social life, compassion is swallowed up by self-interest. As I have pointed out in my earlier books, when the memory of the Christian consensus which gave us freedom within the biblical form is increasingly forgotten, a manipulating authoritarianism will tend to fill the vacuum. At this point the words “right” and “left” will make little difference. They are only two roads to the same end; the results are the same. An elite, an authoritarianism as such, will gradually force on society so that it will not go into chaos—and most people would accept it.⁷

NOTES

1. Henry Grunwald, “Time at 60,” *Time*. October [60th Anniversary Issue] 1983, p.5.

2. Roger Rosenblatt, “What Really Mattered?” *Time*. October [60th Anniversary Issue] 1983, pp. 24, 25.

3. Rosenblatt, p. 25. Emphasis added.

4. Rosenblatt, p. 26. Emphasis added.

5. Rosenblatt, p. 27.

6. The terms “biblical consensus” and “Christian consensus,” as used throughout this chapter and the book, need some clarification. In using these terms I do not mean to say that everyone at the time of the Reformation in Northern Europe was truly a Christian; nor, when these terms are used in reference to our own country, that everyone in our country was a genuine Christian. Rather this refers to the fact that the Christian world view, and biblical knowledge in particular, were widely disseminated throughout the culture and were a decisive influence in

giving shape to the culture. In other words, at the time of the Reformation and in our country up until the last forty to sixty years, the large majority of people believed in basic Christian truths such as: the existence of God; that Jesus was God's Son; that there is an afterlife; that morality is concerned with what truly is right and wrong (as opposed to relative morality); that God is righteous and will punish those who do wrong; that there truly is evil in the world as a result of the fall; and that the Bible truly is God's Word. In the Reformation countries and in our own country up until the last forty to sixty years, most people believed these things—albeit sometimes only in a vague way and often not in the sense that they personally trusted in Christ as their Savior.

Going back to the founding of the United States, this consensus was crucial. This does not mean that it was a golden age, nor that the Founders were personally Christian, nor that those who were Christians were always consistent in their political thinking. But the concept of a Creator and a Christian consensus or ethos was crucial in their work, and the difference between the American Revolution, as compared to the French and Russian Revolutions, cannot be understood without recognizing the significance of the Christian consensus or ethos.

This vast dissemination of biblical knowledge can properly be called a “biblical consensus,” a “Christian consensus” or a “Christian ethos.” And it may correctly be stated that this “consensus” had a decisive influence in shaping the culture of the Reformation and the extensions of these cultures in North America, Australia, and New Zealand. We must be careful, however, not to overstate the case and imply that the United States ever was a “Christian nation” in a truly biblical sense of what it means to be a Christian, or that the United States could ever properly be called God's “chosen nation.”

Moreover, we must acknowledge that there is no “golden age” in the past to which we can return, and that as a nation we have always been far from perfect. As I have mentioned in the past we have had blind spots and serious shortcomings, particularly in three areas: 1) in the area of race; 2) in the area of the compassionate use of wealth—both in how money is made and how money is used; and 3) in wrongly subscribing to the idea of “manifest destiny” as some have done. But having made all of these qualifications, we must nevertheless acknowledge that insofar as the Northern European countries of the Reformation and the extensions of these countries such as the United States do in fact represent a Christian consensus, this consensus has profoundly shaped these cultures, bringing forth many wonderful blessings across the whole spectrum of life. Moreover, the opposite is also true: insofar as our culture has departed from a Christian consensus, as it has so rapidly over the last forty to sixty years, this has had a devastating effect upon human life and culture, bringing with it a sweeping breakdown in morality and in many other ways as well.

7. See further, *How Should We Then Live?* in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, Vol. V (Westchester, 111.: Crossway Books, 1982), pp. 243, 244.

[The Great Evangelical Disaster](#). Francis A. Schaeffer. Crossway Books. Westchester, Illinois. 1984. Pages 19-23.

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