

REMARKS AT Houston Baptist University
Conference on “Seek the Welfare of the City”

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What should Churches do?

I wish to thank the Heritage Foundation and Houston Baptist College for the invitation to join you this evening. In the nineties I taught at the Air Force Academy and I was a guest lecturer at the Focus on the Family College Institute – I found many opportunities to join in common cause with evangelicals on issues of character development, support of the family, and defense of the unborn. As Chuck Colson and Fr Neuhaus demonstrated by their friendship, we share much in common, whatever differences we may have. Surrounded as we are by a culture of death and a secular hostility towards true human dignity, we find ourselves together on many issues. Bob Woodson has so ably spoken tonight about personal responsibility; mutual responsibility through relationships, and the problems with government redistribution. What can Churches do to aid in these efforts for civic renewal and social responsibility? I will briefly mention three things.

[1] First, the Church must do what it does best in fulfillment of its mission: it must preach the gospel and teach about the truth of God and man. In this way the Church will form the conscience and form the soul so as to inculcate a heightened sense of personal accountability. Social renewal must begin with truth. But the truth is obscured by powerful ideologies that deny the created order, the fallenness of man, and the hope for redemption. The powerful ideologies of

secularism, relativism, emotivism, and the triumph of therapeutic categories have obscured the fact of human dignity and responsibility, unhinged the role of morality, diminished a sense of sin and responsibility. We must be formed in the truth and recover our sense of truth and reality. Our Lord said: “The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness.” MT 6:22-23. The ministry of truth must have pride of place. As Chuck Colson said: “If we don’t know the norms God has ordained for every area of life, then we will drift with the tide of this postmodern age, and, instead of transforming the culture, as we’re supposed to, we will transformed by it.” This formation of conscience is good for the city; it is good to have men and women formed by truth. Virtually all presidents have acknowledged this. As one example, Woodrow Wilson said in 1911:

There are great problems, ladies and gentlemen, before the American people. There are problems which will need purity of spirit and an integrity of purpose such as has never been called or before in the history of this country. I should be afraid to go forward if I did not believe that there lay at the foundation of all our schooling and of all our thought this incomparable and unimpeachable Word of God. . . . No great nation can ever survive its own temptations and its own follies that does indoctrinate its children in the Word of God. Woodrow Wilson Oct 1 1911

Many years ago Alexis de Tocqueville predicted that in a mass democracy majority opinion would become a new tyrant only to be resisted by intermediate groups like Churches. Tocqueville says “It is safe to foresee that trust in common opinion will become a sort of religion, with the majority as its prophet . . . and democracy might extinguish that freedom of the mind which a democratic social condition favors. Thus it might happen that, having broken down all of the bonds which classes or men formerly imposed on it, the human spirit might bind itself in tight fetters to the general will of the greatest number.”²² Tocqueville 1969, 436. Christians need to be formed in the faith, in sessions such as these; we need to revitalize and

support Christian education so as to resist the heavy hand of majority opinion and develop moral backbone and independence of thought.

[2] A second thing that Churches should do, and already do, is to foster fellowship and community. We live in a mobile society, an almost rootless society. People feel isolated and alone. Again it was Tocqueville who pointed out that when isolated, people turn to a majority movement or seek escape from isolation in a mass movement; when feeling helpless, people turn to a central body and rely on central government. A Church provides a place for meaningful connections and common purpose. We are a community brought into existence by love, God loved us first. And he gave us the mandate to love one another. St Paul counsels us to: “Carry the burdens of each other” Gal 4.2 and to “support one another and mutually forgive one another” Col 3:12. It is really only with such divine support, the grace of God, that we can keep our commitments, endure the burdens of others, and offer forgiveness and reconciliation. Many of the empirical facts listed by the Heritage Foundation study on the benefit of belief and Church attendance stem from the orientation of life and support of a community. This benefits the city directly. My daughter attends a college in Detroit, Michigan where she is studying to become a nurse. She called my wife and I recently to tell us that in a psychology class they discussed the challenges of marriage today. As they went around the classroom she discovered that she was the only person in class whose parents were still together. I say this not in pride or in judgment, but in gratitude to God and my church, and my wife, for learning the way of love. I say to her, and to you young people ready for marriage, find a partner with whom you can share faith and a Christian way of life. It makes a difference. I should mention that I have always admired the Baptist church for its vigorous outreach and ministry to young people, particularly the AWANA.

A community of faithful and devout people can bear many burdens and lend support to the commitments and institutions that undergird a healthy and flourishing city.

[3] So the third item I would mention is that we see our social outreach and service of the Church to the poor and marginalized of the city in the light of the divine charity. We serve not for a political agenda, and not for social manipulation. Mother Teresa often remarked that she was not a social worker because she loved the poor as if they were Christ – “whatsoever you do to the least of my brethren, that you do unto me.” Christians have the true reason for service – that we wish to love as God loves, do to as he commands, to “love your neighbor as yourself.” We are all, as human being, poor, sinful creatures loved by God. We must not forget our solidarity with the poor, the sick or dying, the immigrant, the unwed mother or the unborn child. They deserve our love, fellowship, and material support. This must be our great witness to the truth of our faith and to our seriousness to be part of the solution in the city. There is a common theme for our service -- all life is a gift from God. The work of Foundation for Life or Texas Right to Life is a very good place to find a focus for concrete service to those in need.

[4] Finally I would say that the Churches must not be marginalized in the political arena. The naked public square is not a natural state of affairs, nor a proper ordering of the city. We affirm the separation of Church and state; but that does not entail the separation of morality and the state, nor does it require the isolation of the Church from the city. Neither of these outcomes is good for the welfare of the city. Such an arrangement is forced upon us by ideology , runs contrary to American history and precedent, and spells the doom of personal responsibility and quickened conscience. The foundation of the city’s welfare is morality – justice and fair dealing are part of morality; moderation and decency are part of

morality; respect for the poor and the unborn are part of morality. It is a common and rational morality that is now fading from conscience because of the strong ideologies I mentioned above. And Christians must not be isolated from the political order because they are citizens with equal right, and each person is a vital unity of reason and belief, participant in many associations and groups, all of which depend upon a personal center of morality called conscience and free choice. We go to things as whole men and women. Thus, Christians have much to contribute and much to say and do as individuals and as groups within the city, based upon a formed conscience. The Churches must continue to be centers for the mobilization of conscience against all forms of degradation and exploitation, particularly against the good of life, since God is the author and giver of life. But however human dignity is trampled upon and exploited, Christians must be quick to give support and lend a hand. Christians are salt and light. We know what our Lord warns – salt must not lose its flavor – we must be ever more dedicated to the full truth about man, however unpopular it may be or however politically incorrect. The lamp should not be placed under the bushel basket. Let's let our light shine before the men and women of the city. We have much to do as Christians in the city; but first we have to remember who we are and be faithful to God and his sovereign truth.

I thank you again for the invitation to be with you this evening and I hope the HBU and UST find further opportunities for cooperation, dialogue, and mutual support.

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