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Reclaim the High Ground

by Thomas A Gilson

CHAPTER ONE

The High Ground

In our battle for the soul of a culture, it is not enough to be right. We must also be wise.

It seems like such a long time ago, and in many ways it was even longer than that. I was in college during the mid-1970s. From time to time my Christian friends and I prayed in our dorm rooms for persecuted Christian brothers and sisters in the Soviet Union. Times were grim for believers all over the Soviet bloc. Times are still grim in many parts of the world.

Sometimes our conversation would drift to conditions in America, and we would try to picture what it might be like for Christians in America to face persecution. We really couldn't imagine such a thing, though. Thirty-five years ago, the prospect seemed little more than idle speculation.

It wasn't that America was such a genuinely Christian country at the time. The 1960s had turned sexual morality upside down. Violence on campus and in the streets remained a fresh memory. The country was reeling from recent revelations of White House corruption, and we were licking our wounds from failure in Vietnam. It was hardly a halcyon age. But at least the

Christian faith enjoyed a measure of respectability. Sure, we knew persecution was theoretically possible, but only in an academic kind of way.

Nobody was thinking then that a culture war would soon break out, with religion at its heart. Nobody thought that within a generation, more than one best-selling book would call Christianity one of the most destructive forces on earth. No one predicted that within our lifetimes, a Human Rights tribunal in Canada would prosecute a preacher for speaking what the Bible says, or that pastors in Sweden and England would be jailed for the same reason.

It was, as I said, a long time ago.

Losses On the Spiritual Battlefields

Christians in North America still do not face persecution the way our brothers and sisters do in many parts of the world. But the prospect is no longer inconceivable. What remains hard to conceive is the depth of social and spiritual change our generation has seen since those days in the dorm rooms.

We are in a spiritual war. It's more than a fight for legislation on abortion or marriage; more than a matter of what is shown on TV or in the movies or what is posted on the Internet. It's not primarily a political war, though many non-believers think politics are the main thing on Christians' minds. It includes these things, but in reality it is a full engagement battle for the spiritual heart and soul of our age.

How are we doing? Reports are hardly encouraging:

- Secularists in America — the religiously uncommitted — have doubled in number since 1991, according to the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey.¹ These religion-rejecters include our children, our brothers, our sisters, sometimes even our parents. They are our children's schoolteachers and administrators, our neighbors and our co-workers. Increasingly they are turning away from Jesus Christ.
- David Kinnaman of the Barna Institute and his co-author Gabe Lyons revealed in 2007² that American 18 to 29-year-olds hold overwhelmingly negative views about evangelical Christianity. These are not just statistics. They are family and friends, people we live and work with, people we love.
- The Institute for Jewish & Community Research polled 1,200 American college professors in 2007 and found that while a large majority held "warm" or "favorable" feelings toward Buddhism, Judaism, Catholicism and non-evangelical Christianity, more than half (53 percent) held "cool" or "unfavorable" feelings toward evangelicals.³ Our country's intellectual leadership is opposed to evangelicalism, and is leading our children away from belief in Christ.

¹ Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Kiesar, "American Religious Identification Survey 2008, Highlights," <http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/reports/highlights.html> (accessed 3/22/2010, 2010).

² Kinnman and Lyons, 2007, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity... and Why It Matters*, p. 256.

³ Gary A. Tobin and Aryeh K. Weinberg, "Religious Beliefs & Behavior of College Faculty," *Profiles of the American University*, <http://www.jewishresearch.org/PDFs2/FacultyReligion07.pdf> (accessed 3/22/2010, 2010).

- Gay rights activism has not only come out of the closet, it has completely captured the media, which presents homosexuality as good, right, and honorable. It owns the minds of young Americans, who consider it more of a sin to condemn homosexual practices than to engage in them.
- Gay "marriage" has been approved in several states.
- Legal support for abortion continues unchecked, and many fear that Federal funding for abortion procedures is just a stroke of the President's pen from being enacted.
- Religious freedom is under threat in America through newly enacted hate crimes legislation. Though the act excludes pastors and churches from its restrictions, only time will tell whether the courts will genuinely protect Christians' freedom of speech and religion.
- Some Christian leaders are pronouncing evangelical Christianity on the verge of falling apart. The late Michael Spencer, an ordained Southern Baptist pastor, wrote a blog series titled "The Coming Evangelical Collapse." His series was picked up for print publication by The Christian Science Monitor in March, 2009.⁴ Others are echoing the theme.

⁴ Michael Spencer, "The Coming Evangelical Collapse," *The Christian Science Monitor*, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0310/p09s01-coop.html> (accessed 3/22/2010, 2010).

What We're Doing Is Not Working

We Christians have been trying desperately to stem this tide, but it appears the world isn't paying attention. We could account for this in many ways — the spiritual hardness of our culture, or the inevitable apostasy of the end times. Explanations of that sort are almost comforting, in a way: they lift responsibility off ourselves and place it somewhere else. But is God not still calling us to be salt and light in our world? Does not his mandate still stand to make disciples? Responsibility for these things still rests on the church.

We must face a hard reality with respect to that responsibility. We're fighting harder but we keep losing ground. We're using methods and approaches that seem biblical, that are familiar to us, and that have worked in the past, but they're not doing the job anymore. Not like they used to. It's painful to acknowledge, yet it's true.: what we're doing isn't working.

James Dobson has owned up to it. In an address to *Focus on the Family* staff members in April, 2009, he conceded that "humanly speaking," we are losing our battles against pornography, abortion, and homosexual rights. "We are awash in evil," he said. Reports of his retreat from battle at the time were certainly overstated;⁵ nevertheless he said he considers this "the most discouraging period of that long conflict."⁶

⁵ "Dr. James Dobson Sets Record Straight," *Fox News*, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,516076,00.html> (accessed 3/22/2010).

⁶ <http://www.usnews.com/blogs/god-and-country/2009/05/14/james-dobsons-political-surrender.html> (accessed 3/22/2010).

Humanly speaking, things are not going at all well for Christianity's causes. Should we not conclude, then, that we are doing something wrong? Richard Stearns, president of *World Vision*, responded to these trends,⁷

“This is serious business. If we are trying to reach out with the positive message of the gospel—the *good* news—to those who have not accepted the Christian faith, then we either have a major problem with our message or with our methodology—or both!”

Yes, it's possible to get the message wrong. The world certainly wants us to think we have it all mixed up, but if we are speaking the truth of God's word, we're on solid ground. To speak, teach, or preach His Word, or to seek to make disciples in His name, could never be wrong. It could never be wrong for us to hold on to tested Scriptural principles of integrity and morality—even though the world would love to see us give up those principles. Our point of failure is not in our core biblical beliefs or in our message. It must lie somewhere else.

Our weakness, I am convinced, is in our strategy. It's *not* our message or our beliefs; it's our methodology, as Stearns put it; the *way* we've been going about trying to bring our message to our culture.

It's not enough to have the right answers. We must also be wise in how we apply them. And we haven't been.

⁷ Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel: The Answer That Changed My Life and Might Just Change the World*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009). p. 227.

The High Ground

I learned a very basic but crucial lesson on strategy in the spring of 2002 at Jay Lorenzen's *If Properly Led* leadership conference at Gettysburg.⁸ Gettysburg actually involved a series of battles over three days; and for three days at this conference, we walked the battlefields where they were fought. On our first day we stood on Seminary Ridge, where J.E.B. Stuart held ground that the Northern army had reached ahead of Lee's troops on the first day of fighting. The next day we visited Little Round Top, a wooded hill where on the second day of battle, Robert Chamberlain's 2nd Maine Army guarded the southern flank of the Union Line. The next day we walked the path of Gettysburg's final, decisive engagement, Colonel Pickett's famous uphill charge toward the Union Army's line at Cemetery Ridge. Each evening we gathered to discuss principles of leadership to be learned from these battles.

Jay, who is a retired Lieutenant Colonel and former professor at the Air Force Academy, gave us great insight into what transpired there in 1863. You need not be a student of military history, though, to recognize a common theme: *Seminary Ridge*, *Little Round Top*, *Cemetery Ridge*. All of them were battles for high ground. In each of them the Union Army held the high ground to start, and each of them the Union Army won.

Military strategy is largely about positioning; it's one of the most crucial elements of victory. Obviously every officer wants to have the most troops on the ground and the most powerful weaponry. Given a choice, though, he would far rather have those men and munitions on the

⁸ <http://ifproperlyled.org/>

high ground looking down on the enemy than in the valley looking up. Battles can be won starting from low ground, but it's much more difficult and the casualties are often much greater.

The first Gulf War in the early 1990s was a two-stage operation: Desert Shield and Desert Storm. President George H. W. Bush gathered a coalition of nations to unite in helping free Kuwait from its Iraqi invaders. Troops were deployed to camp in the sands of Saudi Arabia, and materiel was moved into position. That was Desert Shield. Desert Storm was the actual battle. Desert Storm was one of the shortest wars on record: about 100 hours. It was a stunning military victory for the coalition, which sustained almost no combat casualties. The only question after the war was whether the coalition stopped its advance too early.

Desert Shield was all about positioning — months of it. This patient preliminary work made Desert Storm quick and relatively simple for the coalition (in comparison to other wars, that is; war is never easy in any circumstance).

Christians must heed the lesson these engagements can teach us. We are poorly positioned for the battles we must fight. We have not assessed the situation carefully enough. We have not studied the movements of our culture, nor have we done the long, patient work of placing our assets for maximum effectiveness. As a result we have lost the all-important strategic high ground. We can still win battles from the low ground, but it's much harder, and the spiritual casualties are much greater.

Positioned In Strength Or Weakness?

What is this “high ground” of which I speak? It consists of two crucial strategic “hills:” the moral high ground and the the intellectual high ground. We have held those positions in the past, but we have lost them. As I will explain later in depth, our contemporaries see us as morally weak or even evil, and they regard as virtually nonexistent intellectually. The consequences have been devastating.

Sharing the Gospel in America is no longer what it used to be. It has always been and always will be a spiritual matter, of course, and no true response ever comes without the work of the Spirit of God. But as any missionary will attest, evangelism is always a matter of culturally effective communication, too. We must present the Gospel in a way that makes sense to the listener’s mind and heart. What that communication requires has changed dramatically in the 21st century Western world.

This change may not be apparent to us within Christianity. We see ourselves — as we always have — as presenting the timeless and unchanging truth of the eternal God, revealed most clearly in the perfect life and teachings of Jesus Christ, demonstrated most lovingly and powerfully in his death for us and his resurrection. That's our view.

How often, though, is that what our listeners hear from us? Possibly our care and compassion will come through to them, if we are really genuine with it. But, as I will argue in chapters to come, that positive message will be face severe competition from contrary background messages

in our listeners' minds: messages of intellectual emptiness and moral weakness within Christianity.

What others are therefore likely to hear when we evangelize them is this: we are asking them — often *pushing* them, they feel — to re-order their personal, social, and political lives according to advice given by a legendary miracle worker who (maybe, maybe not) lived two thousand years ago. Who would say yes to that?

The Christian message labors under a huge plausibility problem. Our friends and neighbors don't believe us because they don't really think our message has solid substance that is worthy to be believed. This is the intellectual high ground we have lost.

But that isn't all: in the world's eyes, we are morally deficient too. The world doesn't agree with our morality, and doesn't think we live up to what we say we believe. The world sees us as severely lacking both intellectually and morally.

Their view of evangelicals could hardly be more different from the way we see ourselves. We see ourselves standing on the high ground of truth and the wisdom of God's ways. They see us as flailing in a pit of mental and moral failure. Why would they want to sign up to join us?

That is our situation. To some extent it is a matter of perception: really, we are doing better than the world sees us, in both the mental and moral realms (though there is always plenty of room for improvement). The difference between reality and perception — and the difference that makes — will be an important topic in pages to come. But the barriers to evangelism I have

described here work the just about the same whether they are based in reality or in false perceptions. Either way, as far as our listeners are concerned, we have given up our intellectual and ethical credibility.

It will take intentional, long-term, strategic action to regain the advantage that comes from standing on high ground.

Outline of the Book

This book's explicit purpose is to wake up American Christianity to our weak moral and intellectual position, and to outline a positive path toward renewed strength. We have the spiritual weaponry we need for the battle: the truth of God's Word, and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Chapter Two centers our strategies in a proper Biblical context of being "wise as serpents, innocent as doves;" and shows how disastrously we missed a crucial, historic opportunity to be wise as serpents.

Chapter Three extends this spiritual foundation to three key aspects of our life in Christ: Discovering afresh who God is, calling on Him in extraordinary prayer (for the battle is spiritually intense), and following Him in ever-deepening discipleship. These three dimensions of life in Christ will recur throughout the book as I discuss actual steps we can take to reclaim high ground.

Chapters Four through Six address our moral position, beginning with a biblical and historical look at Christians' excellent moral leadership through the centuries in Chapter Four,

followed by an examination in Chapter Five of how we lost that leadership, and how that hinders our effectiveness. Chapter Six offers discipleship-based recommendations for recovering our strength. The same pattern is mirrored in the following three chapters on regaining the intellectual high ground: a biblical and historical look at the issue in Chapter Seven, followed in the next chapter by an historical perspective on our recent losses on that front. Chapter Nine presents discipleship-based recommendations by which any Christian, regardless of his or her education or gifting, can help us recover intellectual leadership. Chapter Ten integrates the moral and intellectual issues, taking a close look at our culture's false beliefs regarding right and wrong, and how we must confront those false beliefs with biblical truth.

The book closes in Chapter Eleven with a view of how our entire world could change if we took up the challenges presented in this book.

Attached to every recommendation in this book, there is one crucial question: "Is this realistic? Can we do this?" Quite simply, by God's grace and with His power guiding us, *we must*. We cannot sit quiet in our weak strategic position. The movements of our culture would not allow us to rest where we are, even if we wanted to. Pressure on the church is increasing year by year. What we've been doing has not been working. If we reclaim our position of strength, however, we'll be able to stand firm. Not only that, we will see God's Word and His Kingdom advance back into the deep structures and foundations of our culture once again.

