



# The Clarion\* Call

## \* THE CLEAR CALL OF A BATTLE TRUMPET

JESUS SAID, "MY SHEEP RECOGNIZE MY VOICE. I KNOW THEM, AND THEY FOLLOW ME." (JOHN 10:27)

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## *"... One Nation Under God, Indivisible? ..."*

You can see it or hear it any day of the week on your television or radio. Opposing sides in the great American "culture war" roll out their rhetorical cannons and take aim at each other in a sometimes amusing, often disturbing, but always noisy verbal slugfest. But this media madness is merely an illustration of a much greater struggle in which this nation has been immersed for decades. It is a war over basic values and a challenge to all our customs and beliefs.

Ultimately, the cultural debate is a contest of wills between those who believe in *moral absolutes* and those who do not. For those who hold traditional Christian values, our adversaries are not illegal immigrants; they are mostly home grown; they may even be our friends and neighbors; the teachers of our children; men and women who live just down the street; or those who hold responsible positions in business and government. They are, in all respects, people who look and act a lot like you and me.

My friends: We are a nation divided. Americans are of two minds about most things. There are those of us who believe in the old-fashioned values of faith, family, hard work, self-restraint, and freedom from the intrusion of government—commonly referred to as conservatives. The

others—referred to as liberals—favor expanding the size of government, social programs funded by increased taxation, and financial and legal restraints on public expression of religious beliefs.

Jesus said, "*A house divided against itself, cannot stand.*"

One side believes in eternal truths and a God who does not change, while many on the other side favor man-made political solutions and values that are subject to revision. The measure of this cultural divide is not just the polarization of voters, but also the intensity of the verbal battles between the representatives of the two sides in almost every arena of public discourse.

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American society is split over the most basic beliefs: living arrangements, sexual behavior, child-bearing, child-rearing, education, entertainment, and how best to deal with the weak, the aged, the poor, the disabled, and the unborn. Each is a battlefield in the dispute over core values.

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Some would argue that today's "battle of ideas" is a relatively new phenomenon—something born out of the 'free-thinking' sixties or perhaps the 'value-

neutral' nineties. While it is true that each of these periods has had profound consequences for the well-being of the nation, a far greater threat comes from ideas that flourished in Europe some two hundred years ago.

To understand how important this struggle was, and the implications for American culture in our day, some perspective is needed.

The period known as the *European Enlightenment* did more to change our world than any other movement of the last 500-years. The thinking of that age is best exemplified in the writings of French and English intellectuals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They helped give rise to a radical new doctrine which—while tantalizing in its novelty—was (in fact) a rebellion against the historic moral and ethical foundations of Western civilization.

The "enlightenment" that the revolutionary thinkers promised, was based on the defiance of law and custom, and a challenge to authority of every kind. The popular movement they spawned led to a demand for freedom from social, cultural, and moral restraints. It brought rebellion against kings and rulers—and also against the authority of the Christian Church. The Enlightenment was the catalyst for new ideas about a "social

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contract” that superseded Biblical teachings about fidelity, love, duty, honor, and trust. It led directly to the French Revolution of 1789 and the “Reign of Terror” that followed. Ultimately, enlightenment thinking would become the fundamental belief system of twentieth-century idealism and the liberal values of the political Left.

To understand the importance of these ideas, we need to see them in their “worldview” context. In its simplest form, a worldview is the conceptual window through which we see the world. It is an intellectual matrix that helps to give shape and substance to our understanding of life, behavior, and events. Francis Schaeffer said that a worldview is synonymous with one’s philosophy of life. “In a sense,” he wrote, “all people are philosophers, for all people have a worldview. This is as true of the man digging a ditch as it is of the philosopher in the university.” He said that “no man can live without a worldview; therefore, there is no man who is not a philosopher.”

I have found the words of Dennis Prager to be helpful in clarifying the difference between liberals and conservatives. It might well help you to identify where you stand and help you to explain your position or the position you oppose. Prager explains: Left-of-center doctrines hold that people are basically good. On the other side, conservative doctrines hold that man is born morally flawed—not necessarily born evil, but surely not born good. Western civilization never (previously) held that humankind are naturally good.

To those who argue that we all have goodness within us, Prager offers two responses:

- First, no religion or ideology denies that we have goodness within us; the problem is with

denying that we have badness within us.

- Second, it is often very challenging to express that goodness. Human goodness is like gold. It needs to be mined—and like gold mining, mining for our goodness can be very difficult.

This is so important to understanding the Left-Right divide because so many fundamental Left-Right differences emanate from this divide.

Perhaps the most obvious one is that conservatives blame those who engage in violent criminal activity for their behavior—more than liberals do. Liberals argue that poverty, despair, and hopelessness cause poor people, especially poor blacks—in which case racism is added to the list—to riot and commit violent crimes. Since people are basically good [liberal view], their acts of evil must be explained by factors beyond their control. Their behavior is not really their fault; and when conservatives blame blacks for rioting and other criminal behavior, liberals accuse them of “blaming the victim.”

In the conservative view, people who do evil are to be blamed—because they made bad choices—and they did so because they either have little self-control or a dysfunctional conscience. In either case, they are to blame. That’s why the vast majority of “equally” poor people (black or white) do not riot or commit violent crimes.

Likewise, many liberals believe that most of the Muslims who engage in terror do so because of the poverty and especially because of the high unemployment rate for young men in the Arab world. Yet, it turns out that most terrorists come from middle class homes. All the 9/11 terrorists came from middle and upper-class homes. [Osama bin Laden was a

billionaire.]

Therefore, material poverty doesn’t cause murder, rape or terror. Moral poverty does. That’s one of the great divides between Left and Right. And it largely emanates from their differing views about whether human nature is innately good.

Prager concludes, “Conservatives believe that the way to a better world is almost always through moral improvement of the individual by each person doing battle with his own moral defects. The Left, on the other hand, believes that the way to a better world is almost always through doing battle with society’s moral defects. Thus, in America, the Left defines the good person as the one who fights the sexism, racism, intolerance, xenophobia, homophobia, Islamophobia and other evils that the Left believes permeate American society.”

This accounts for why the liberals are so preoccupied with politics as compared to conservatives. Whenever the term “activist” or “social activist” or “organizer” is used, one infers that the term refers to someone on the Left.

Conservatives believe that the process of making a better world is largely a one-by-one-by-one effort. And it must be redone in every single generation. The noblest generation ever born still has to teach its children how to battle their natures. If it doesn’t, even the best society will begin to rapidly devolve, which is exactly what conservatives believe has been happening to America since the end of World War II.

Liberals don’t focus on individual character development. Rather, it has always and everywhere focused on social revolution. The most revealing statement of then-presidential candidate Barack Obama, the second most committed Leftist ever elected President of the United States [second to our current President

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Biden], was made just days before the 2008 election: “We are five days away from fundamentally transforming the United States of America,” he told a large rapturous audience.

Conservatives not only have no interest in “fundamentally transforming” the United States, but they are passionately opposed to doing so.

Conservatives believe that America can be improved, but not transformed let alone “fundamentally transformed.”

The Founding Fathers understood that the transformation that every generation must work on is the moral transformation of each citizen. Thus, character development was at the core of both childrearing and of young people’s education at school. John Adams said: “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” And in the words of Benjamin Franklin: “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom.”

Why is that, you ask? Because freedom requires self-control; otherwise, external controls [which means an ever more powerful government] would have to be imposed.

Just as there is a sharp contrast between liberals and conservatives, there is the same between the secular and sacred points-of-view.

Because of our reliance upon Scripture and the 2,000-year history of our faith, most Christians have answers for comprehensive life and worldview issues. For progressive liberals, however, and for non-theists (in general), this is a more difficult. The answers of skeptics these days will likely be derived from the philosophy of naturalism— informed by Darwinian evolution, Freudian psychology, the

pragmatism of John Dewey and Horace Mann—and the politics of tolerance, diversity, and multiculturalism that dominates academia today.

For the Christian, clarification and understanding of the issues may be enhanced by debate and rhetorical analysis; but wisdom is discovered through submission to the will of God, through the serious study of His Word, and through interaction among the “fellowship of believers.” Reason alone—as the eighteenth century surely proved—is an insufficient guide to wisdom and can easily mislead individuals and entire nations into disastrous misjudgment.

Alexander Hamilton, who immigrated to America from the British West Indies in 1772, understood only too well the risks of European idealism. During the American Revolution he warned that after the war of guns and bullets was over, the patriots would face an even tougher challenge. For the real war, he said, would be “the great battle of ideas.” And so it was.

Already, during the Revolution, there were some who took issue with the Christian principles of the Founders. Thomas Paine was among them. His pamphlet, *Common Sense*, was a bestseller in colonial America that helped to spur the break with Britain. A freethinker and a deist, Paine subscribed whole-heartedly to the enlightenment ideology. In his writings—particularly in his major work, *The Rights of Man* published after the war in 1792—Paine challenged the traditional religious belief of the time and attacked the conservatism of the esteemed British philosopher Edmund Burke, who had condemned the French Revolution. Eventually, however, due to the unpopularity of his views, Paine left America for Great Britain; but soon fled again, this time to France, where he served briefly in the revolutionary

council [the National Convention]. Then, after being imprisoned by the French on the charge of being an intellectual and an aristocrat, Paine returned once again to America, where he died in 1802, penniless.

However, Paine’s unhappy end was not the end of the controversy. Just as the eighteenth century had seen the flowering of freedom and democratic ideals, the nineteenth century would witness an unending succession of new philosophies and movements to challenge the endurance and resolve of the new nation.

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed innumerable skirmishes between advocates of traditional beliefs and those who favored the “new ideas.” The administration of President Thomas Jefferson (1801-09) was especially open to new scientific discoveries and to news of social and intellectual developments in Europe and beyond. Mr. Jefferson, who was a talented architect, builder, naturalist, educator, and linguist, accumulated an exceptional library. He was devoted to learning and encouraged original thinking of every kind. Nevertheless, though eccentric, he was a religious man who participated regularly in Sunday worship. His plans for the University of Virginia, which he founded in 1819, included the requirement that the curriculum must include, along with science and the humanities, the discipline of religion.

In fact, almost all the historic universities of America including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Columbia, Brown, Bryn Mawr, Amherst, and many others were founded as religious institutions in the conviction that a moral education built upon dedicated study of the Holy Scriptures was essential for the development of character and

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leadership. To be properly educated, the Founders believed, was to be versed in the moral heritage of our culture and the values that make civilization possible.

However, over the years the spirit of the European Enlightenment made inroads into American thought, and the past two centuries have seen Christian principles systematically stripped from the curriculum in each of those great institutions. Today, these universities have become breeding grounds for subversion and anti-American sentiment. In the name of tolerance, diversity, and other schemes of the political Left, references to Christian virtues and Western values have been generally banished.

The spirit of rebellion that has grown up among America's cultural elites leaves no place for God or for a belief system that is shaped and informed by the Christian religion. As a consequence, the minds of many are closed to any expression of faith in public and academic settings. Thanks to the efforts of the ACLU and many others, God is no longer welcome in the public square.

Jesus said, "*A house divided against itself, cannot stand.*"

There is no doubt that the challenges before us are many and complex, but we are not without resources. While the spirit of America may have been weakened by dissension over the last several decades, it is not dead.

Many of you remember what happened in the wake of September 11, 2001 (20-years ago) when the Pentagon and the Twin Towers were struck by terrorists America's spirit awakened as if from a long and troubled sleep. At the time, columnist David Limbaugh wrote: "Let's wake up ... the anti-Christians, in the name of

pluralism and tolerance, are intent on banishing the God of the Bible and Biblical values not just from the public square, but from our culture in general. As unpopular as it is to say, Biblical values—thoroughly ingrained in our Founding Fathers and unmistakably incorporated into our founding documents—are what has made these United States of America utterly unique in history." And then, with uncanny insight and spiritual wisdom, Limbaugh writes: "Our culture—including our unparalleled tradition of freedom—has declined and will continue to decline in direct proportion to our rejection of Biblical values. Of course, Christians want no part of established religions; but neither do we want, nor can we afford, the excommunication of our founding values from the public square or our culture."

What is most needed at this time to insure that those values are protected and extended is for Christians:

- to be faithful;
- to be well informed about the nature of the threats to our physical and emotional well-being; and
- to remain committed to doing the work of the Kingdom.

We have the resources to change the course of history: It has happened before. But we will need knowledge, concern, compassion, diligence, spiritual maturity, a commitment to steadfast prayer, and the discipline to work in every way possible as God provides opportunities and endurance.

Jesus said, "*I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work.*" (John 9:4)

My friends, we can certainly do no less.

Let us pray.

Your Word, O Lord, says, "*A house divided against itself cannot stand.*" Our country is quickly becoming more and more polarized. Evil is more evil than ever before. The very fiber and thread of our nation is quickly unraveling, leaving nothing more than a shoddy garment of what once was a great and wholesome nation. What would our forefathers think if they saw us today? Lord, today, we Your people, pray—forgive our sin, heal our land, and give us righteous men and women who are not afraid to lead us in Truth. Amen.

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Footnote: In the Pledge to the U.S. Flag we citizens say,

*"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, **indivisible**, with liberty and justice for all."*

Yet, we are a divided nation—living with great discord among "*we the people.*"

Jesus said, "*A house divided against itself cannot stand.*" (St. Mark 3:24)

This is my message preached on 22 August 2021 from the pulpit of the historic Fort Snelling Memorial Chapel, Minnesota. It is available on CD and DVD.