Colson on Prayer, Church, and America

In his Breakpoint radio commentary of December 30, 2008, Chuck Colson began by saying that in recent months he had been starting his prayer time “by concentrating on the Church. I pray—actually, I plead, the Lord would wake us up, cause us to repent, turn from our own false idols. I pray God’s Spirit would fill us with a burning desire to love Him and advance His kingdom.” He continued, “We can’t pray for our nation to be revived, to be saved, to receive God’s mercy; we can’t pray for our leaders to make wise decisions unless we first pray for the Church.”

Colson then moved to the economic crisis. “When it comes to the economy, our nation has dug a hole for itself. And sure enough, we are continuing to dig. At a recent meeting with President-elect Obama, the nation’s governors had their hands out, asking for federal dollars. The President-elect was all too happy to oblige.” Colson was encouraged, however, to be able to report that South Carolina’s governor, Mark Sanford, had offered the following comment at the governors’ meeting: “We don’t believe economic problems that were in large measure created by too much debt will be solved by more debt.”

This took Colson back to the errors of Christians and their “idolatry of consumerism.” “Our nation is in this crisis,” Colson said, “precisely because we’ve traded in a Christian worldview of work, thrift, savings, and prudence, and instead have embraced the false worldview of consumerism—of leisure, debt, and instant gratification. . . . And insofar as we Christians have abandoned our heritage and have bought into the idolatry of consumerism, we have betrayed not only our God, but the nation we love.” Colson was emphatic: “This nation cannot be saved unless the church is first revived. Renewing the Church is the key to saving America.”

Yet that emphatic assertion was not the climax of the commentary. Colson’s prayerful passion led further: “I no longer know for sure that America has a special place in God’s sovereign plan for the world. I could argue that we have in the past. No other nation has played such a positive role—from helping the poor to defeating tyranny to stopping the spread of disease . . . . But we will be unable to continue to be a force for good in the world if we are bankrupt.”

There is much here for Christians to chew on. There are biblical grounds for Colson and fellow Christians to pray for the church. But who is the church? Biblically speaking, it is the people of God in Christ spread throughout the world. It is a body of the faithful, learning habits of repentance from sin and the practice of obedience to the
Lord. The body of Christ is the salt of the earth and light to the world. Yet Colson’s message leaves me with the feeling that he is talking about the church in America, the American church. The wider world doesn’t come into view until he is talking about the good that America has done and should do for the world. And in that context the worldwide church is nowhere in sight. Rather, it is God’s specially blessed America, rather than the church, that Colson seems primarily concerned about at this juncture.

The church Colson appears to be thinking of is composed of those Americans who should turn from their consumerism so America can be revived, so America can be saved by God’s mercy. Americans—Christians included—have embraced a worldview of “leisure, debt, and instant gratification” and relinquished the worldview of “work, thrift, savings, and prudence.” Now this sounds like something Benjamin Franklin would say, but it doesn’t sound like the heart of the biblical gospel. The Bible’s good news is that God’s mercy in Christ calls people throughout the world to turn from all kinds of sin, including idolatrous nationalism, to a full life of discipleship. It is not a mercy transmitted to the world through God’s thrifty, hard-working Americans.

Does Colson’s deepest concern arise because of the sins of the church worldwide, due in part to the negative influence of the consumerism of its American members? Or does Colson’s deepest agony arise from his fear that God may be withdrawing his special blessing from America?

On what basis could Colson once have been sure that God had a special place for America in his “sovereign plan for the world?” There are no biblical grounds for that conviction. Therefore it is also hard to know how Colson later could have come to doubt that America has that special place any longer. These questions lead to other concerns about Colson’s view of America and the church. Are there other sins and idolatries besides indebtedness and the desire for instant gratification that burden Colson? Does he imagine that America has always been a force for good in the world before it started going too far into debt? Was it hearing that Obama and the governors were willing to go further into debt that really got Colson thinking about sin of indebtedness, or has he been agonizing about this for the last eight years during Bush’s presidency as the national debt kept climbing to double what it was in 2000?

Colson concludes his commentary with this sentence: “For if the Church continues to embrace the ways of the world, I don’t see how America can maintain its place in the world—much less survive in it.” This sums up what troubles me most deeply about Colson’s meditation. The church Colson has in mind appears to be a means to the end of God’s special plan for America, now in danger of losing its special place in God’s plan. But Isaiah tells us that all nations are mere dust on God’s scales and under the same criteria of judgment (40:15; also see Paul in Acts 17:26-31). In praying for the church Colson should think of it not as a means to America’s end but as God’s truly chosen people—Israel fulfilled through the in-grafting of believers from every nation into Christ (Rom. 11:13-24).

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