

## **Introduction**

I read an article not long ago titled **"The Top 50 Inventions of the Past 50 years."** Those top inventions include the following: (1) TV remote control (1955); (2) Microwave oven (1955); (3) Polio vaccine (1955); (4) Lazer beam (1958); (5) Automated Teller Machine (1969); (6) Cell phone (1973); and (7) MRI (1973).

I'm 64 years-old now, which means I've witnessed all of those inventions. I used to get a kick out of old people talking about all the technological changes they've lived through. I'm now one of them. My grandson, for instance, couldn't believe it when I told him we used to have to get up and turn a knob on the TV to change channels. I admit it. I've witnessed dramatic technological changes over the course of my life.

But those aren't nearly as dramatic as the social change I've witnessed, which is America morphing from a Christian nation to an anti-Christian nation. We need to recognize that change and stand as a Christ nation in the midst of it, and that's what I'm preaching about today.

## **A Secular Nation**

In an 1892 United States Supreme Court case, *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, Justice David Brewer, writing for the majority, declared, **"These, and many other matters which might be noticed, add a volume of unofficial declarations to the mass of organic utterances that this is a Christian nation."** By Christian nation, he meant that its cultural consensus was Christian. Its political and societal leaders and the masses, generally, believed two things. First, American culture was based on Christianity. And second, it ought to be.

That was so, for instance, in our educational institutions at all levels. In a 2007 article he wrote, Dallas Willard observed: **"Speeches by the Presidents of even state school, such as the University of California at Berkley, often could have passed for Christian sermons. And even as late as 1965, when I came on the faculty of**

**the University of Southern California, the prayers which the Chaplain delivered on public occasions were noticeably Christian prayers by a clearly Christian person."**

But that's no longer the case. As Willard points out, the Chaplains of secular universities that still have them, like USC, won't mention the name of Jesus in a public prayer. They will, however, **"with great care work in a little Taoism, some Vedanta or Islam, or even words that can be construed as invoking the 'The Goddess,'"** to quote him.

That's a dramatic change and it represents the larger change that's taken place in every aspect of American culture: politics, law, medicine, business, advertising, sports, and television to name a few. From the founding of the United States until the early 1960's, it was a Christian nation as I defined it. But it isn't any more. The Judeo-Christian ethic is no longer its cultural consensus. Secularism is. Leaders and the masses, generally, think and act as if there is no Biblical God.

### **Anti-Christian**

That is a catastrophic change that profoundly affects Christians, and our text reveals how it does. In verse 13, Peter articulates the same point Jesus did in Matthew 10:28. Those who attack his readers can destroy their bodies and property but not their souls. He goes on to point out in verse 14 that those who suffer for righteousness are blessed and exhorts them not to let **"intimidation"** trouble them. Then in verses 16-17, he refers to being slandered and to suffering for doing what is right. We can infer from those verses that first century Christians lived in an anti-Christian culture that reviled and attacked them.

And so do we. Peter's word **"revile"** in verse 16 accurately describes the general posture of non-Christians toward Christianity. They revile it, and here's why. As I've already suggested, Christianity assumed an almost exclusive role in directing our culture from 1776 until the early 1960's. It dominated the social order during that time. Non-Christians at all levels and in all contexts now think that it doing so has victimized

society and them. They regard the Christian as **“the big, bad bully who has been humbled and must be punished for past misdeeds,”** to quote one author. So they do that – punish Christian individuals and groups. They redress perceived wrongs by being assertive against them in ways they can’t be against non-Christian ones. They deny them the right to believe, live, and participate in society in the same way others do. Simply put, it’s open season on Christian individuals and groups. They can be spoken of and mistreated in ways that society doesn’t tolerate if directed toward others.

A joint report by two religious freedom groups, the Liberty Institute and the Family Research Council, confirms that. The report states that anti-Christian persecution is on the rise in America. Liberty Institute founder Kelly Shackleford states in that regard: **“It is dramatic. I have been doing these types of cases for almost 25 years now. I have never seen the levels of attacks like these and how quickly they are now proliferating.”** For instance, a student group at Hastings College of Law, the Christian Legal Society, required members to subscribe to a Christian **“Statement of Beliefs”** and Christian behaviors as well. When it rejected the applications of several homosexuals on those grounds, the law school shut it down as a student group.

That is the kind of attack to which Shackleford was referring and it’s just the tip of the iceberg. Let’s not be naive. There is an irrational and powerful historical swing against Christianity and Christians. We now live in a secular culture that’s becoming increasingly anti-Christian.

### **Always Be Ready**

If we’re Biblically and historically informed, we expect this. Jesus Himself warned us of it in John 17:18-20. If the world hates and persecutes Him, it will hate and persecute us. We should not, therefore, be surprised or thrown off course when it does.

We should **“always be ready”** instead, to quote Peter in verse 15. Those words of his imply that God’s work through Christians isn’t

disadvantaged by hatred and persecution. It can actually flourish as the history of Christianity has surely shown. Hatred and persecution tend to purify faith and foster courage. Besides, as Elisha told his terrified servant in 2 Kings 6:16, **“Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”** Or as the beloved disciple wrote in 1 John 4:4, **“Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world.”**

### **Make a Defense and Give an Account**

So let's not fret about the hostile environment in which we live. Let's always be ready instead to do what Peter exhorts us to do in verse 15. **“Make a defense”** and **“give an account”** to the individuals and groups that revile and attack us. Those statements mean first, that we stand for and second, that we proclaim Jesus and His gospel. Notice the clause **“to everyone who asks you”** in that same verse. It implies that the defense we make and the account we give are culture specific. We stand for and proclaim Jesus and His gospel in response to specific points of view and actions that are directed against Him and it – and us.

The most challenging of those today are spin offs of a social expression called **“pluralism.”** Pluralism rightly understood is a good thing. It means individuals and groups are free to believe what they will and to practice what they believe – as long as it isn't contrary to law. Political or social forces shouldn't suppress their freedom to do that, whether they're atheists, Muslims, Buddhists, or Christians to name a few. But anti-Christian individuals, like Bill Maher and Michael Moore, and anti-Christian groups, like the ACLU and the Freedom from Religion Foundation, have distorted pluralism in order to suppress Christian beliefs and practices. It's in the context of that distortion that we make a defense and give an account. There are four principles in that regard that we need to stand for and proclaim.

First, Christian individuals and groups have the same right to believe and to practice what they believe that all others have. And we should assert that right by articulating it and defending it whenever and however

we have to. Let's go back to Hastings Law School shutting down the Christian Legal Society. The group subsequently filed a law suit against the school based on the First Amendment rights of free speech, association, and religion. Its case, *Christian Legal Society v. Martinez*, went all the way to the United States Supreme Court, which ruled, wrongly, 5-4 against it. The Christian Legal Society, nonetheless, is a model for us all. Christian individuals and groups can and should stand up for their right to think and live as Christians.

There's a second principle we need to stand for and proclaim. Truth isn't pluralistic. Reality doesn't adapt to us. We have to adapt to it. I have the right to believe that my cell phone never needs charged. But society accepting that right of mine won't keep my phone working. Things are what they are and just believing to the contrary doesn't change them. That means if a belief is false, it doesn't get truer as time passes. It continues to be false no matter how long people hold it. It also continues to be false no matter how many people embrace it or who embraces it. According to a recent CNN poll, for instance, 54% of Americans believe homosexual relationships between consenting adults isn't a moral issue. But it is. Social acceptance of a belief doesn't make it true. Truth isn't pluralistic.

We need to stand for and proclaim a third principle. Everyone's beliefs and practices aren't equally right. **"You have your beliefs and I have mine."** **"Let's agree to disagree."** **"Anything goes."** Comments like those reflect what people think. All beliefs and actions are equally right. But they aren't. Some are right. They express reality. Others are wrong. They deny reality. A young attorney I knew named Donald believes in what is called **"casual sex."** Based on 1 Corinthians 6:16, I believe in **"consequential sex."** The psychological reality is that to touch a person's body in sex is to touch his or her soul. That means that Donald's belief and mine aren't equally right. I'm right and he's wrong. Everyone's beliefs and practices aren't equally right.

We need to stand for and proclaim a fourth principle. Everyone's

beliefs and practices aren't equally beneficial. Oprah and others think all beliefs and practices, religious ones at least, come out at the same place – achieve the same results. But they don't. Some are more beneficial. Others are less beneficial or even detrimental. And that's our advantage as Christians. Christian beliefs and practices are the most beneficial of all. Our message is simple and clear. Individuals or societies that follow the teachings and example of Jesus will be far better off.

Those are the four principles and here are their implications. First, I don't have to agree with everyone's beliefs and practices – and don't. Second, I don't have to like everyone's beliefs and practices – and don't. Third, I have the right to express my disagreement with and dislike of beliefs and practices – and do. And fourth, I have the right to try to change the beliefs and practices of others – and do. Those four implications capture the very essence of Peter's exhortation in verse 15. They define well what it means to make a defense and give an account.

But notice how we're to do that in verses 15-16, "**with gentleness and reverence; and a good conscience.**" That means that we're appropriately modest and non-dogmatic about our own views. It also means that we respect the worth of those who disagree with or even attack us. We see them how the Bible teaches us to see them, as neighbors, and do what the Bible teaches us to do, love them as we do ourselves. That is in fact the very reason we try to change their views and practices. We want them to have the same well-being and joy we do.

## **Conclusion**

I'd sum it up this way in closing. In 1986, a *Boston Globe* writer coined the term, the "**Red Sox Nation.**" It refers to the team's fans and connotes how utterly devoted they are to it. Today, I'm coining a spin off term, "**Christ Nation.**" It refers to disciples and friends of Jesus and connotes how utterly devoted they are to Him. Are you a member of Christ nation? If so, always be ready to make a defense and give an account. It will flourish if you do.