



## A Note from the Pastor's Corner

*“What is the greatest failure of Christians in this country? When they don't think and act as Christians first. Instead, they act first as Americans, consumers, partisans, or sports fans. This kind of idolatry can result in very un-Christian behavior. These kinds of Christians sometimes forget that we are supposed to love the immigrant, provide for the poor, and promote peace among all nations.”*

Even though you've heard and read such statements like this from me, I'm not quoting myself here. These thoughts are from Jim Wallis, President and CEO of Sojourners. I'm quoting him because you need to be aware that these observations are not just mine. They are shared by many American religious leaders. The problem is, few Americans agree – or care.

O sure, there are many who complain bitterly about our decadent society as they point the bony finger of guilt at our 'culture' forgetting that culture arises from the thoughts, attitudes, words, and even the actions of ourselves and our fellow citizens. Most complaints I hear and read have to do with the lack of adherence to a moral code that arose within a culture that existed before most of us can remember. The complainers focus on it as if it were a code of conduct authored by Jesus. The attitude seems to be, “If only everyone else would have as virtuous a public life as I have. It's the government's fault that everybody else is so sex-obsessed. If we required children to pray in school, *then* God would bless us and give us back our prosperity!”

I won't try to guess what the source of those sentiments are, but they seem to be prominent in the written and spoken word of many who have high visibility in our society's religious and political arenas. And so it is that we can initiate warfare, inflict torture on fellow image-bearers of God, venerate the very wealthy, neglect the impoverished, vilify the alien, and act as if it's all acceptable because of the claim that ours is a Christian nation.

We are totally immersed in a politics of selfishness and hear almost daily the words of many in Congress who believe our nation should be a collection of self-sufficient individuals. The use of violence, whether verbal or psychological, seems to be the prime means of expressing the strength of those beliefs. As long as we hear the occasional “God bless America!” from a member of Congress or there's another push to hang a shortened version of “The Ten Commandments” in some public space many seem to feel we might win the battle yet – we being The Church. (I don't recall Jesus ever saying he was doing battle.)

I believe these are examples of the 'un-Christian' behavior that Wallis is alluding to, where the Jesus filter is the final layer through which thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions are passed through instead of the first one. At that point, Jesus' Gospel is often given superficial acknowledgment, distorted, excused, or simply ignored so the opinions already arrived at through loyalty to other –isms, priorities, or influences don't have to be reshaped.

What is the solution? Jim Wallis believes that if Christians would spend more time reading the Bible instead of talking about the Bible it would help them become more Christ-oriented. Maybe – but I'm not so sure about that. Don't misunderstand, now. Reading the Bible is always a good idea.

But the way I experience people, Bible reading is not approached with the expectation that the reader's ideas and attitudes might be shattered – that they could feel lead to become a very different person. Instead, it's read as if the purpose is to gather facts or to commit certain passages to memory. There are many guides to Bible reading that take the reader to a variety of verses in order to provide 'biblical proof' to justify a specific claim. Rarely have I heard a person say that their Bible reading has changed them.

Getting back to Wallis's suggestion, I wholeheartedly encourage every one of you to pick up your Bible and do some serious reading. But do not start at Genesis – start with the Gospels. The Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – are the heart of Christianity. I suggest reading Luke and then John.

But, *please*, do not read a few verses at a time or even a chapter at a time. Commit to read an entire Gospel at one sitting. It won't take any longer than when you sit down to read a novel or watch a TV show. They're really not all that long. Read it for the message, not to harvest 'facts'. As you read, allow the events to come to life in your imagination complete with real, live people. Put yourself in the role of Pharisee, or scribe, or the crowd. Don't pretend that Jesus' words and thoughts are your words and thoughts. Based on what I see reflected in the world around me – both inside and outside the church – most people are more at home in the head of the antagonist than they are in the heart of Jesus.

If Christians are serious about wanting our nation to be one that is in the pursuit of God, they will have to become the change they want to see. Begging God to make everyone else change is not just childish, it misses the point entirely of what it means to become a follower of The Way.

Happy New Year – and happy reading! Pastor Bud