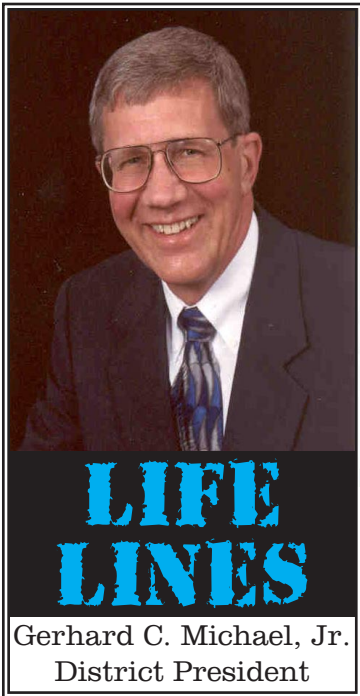


FROM THE PRESIDENT

Countering the Culture



The church is sometimes challenged to be "counter-cultural," "an alternative society." Marva Dawn and William Willimon are two prominent contemporary Christian authors who have expressed this challenge.

Centuries ago, our Lord Jesus said something quite similar. He spoke of his followers being "in the world," but not "of the world." (cf. John 17)

The Apostle Paul said much the same thing when he urged us who trust in Jesus Christ for our salvation, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2)

In my column this month, I'd first like to suggest several areas of our lives where the world's influence may override the wisdom of divine revelation, and then secondly highlight the encouragement we find in the Gospel of Jesus Christ to go God's way in the world, even if it

might be difficult and challenging. By identifying these, I hope to suggest how we can more fully be about the mission God has entrusted to us.



One area where the world's way seems to invade our lives lies in our attitude toward money. The world promotes the idea that more is better. The credit card applications deluge our mailboxes, trying to seduce us into borrowing money that we really don't need, especially when we remember the divine wisdom, "If we have food and clothing, we will be content with these." (1 Tim 6:8)

Even though we have the Biblical minimum, how easy it is to succumb to greed, which the Bible tells us is "idolatry." (Eph 5:5; Col 3:5) Idolatry in turn leads to unhappy people because their hearts are not anchored on anything lasting or solid.

Another area where the church can fall prey to the world's way of thinking is in the use of political power. Instead of waging our warfare in the church with the weapons of righteousness (II Cor 6:7), speaking the truth plainly that its power may do the persuading (II Cor 4:2), we give in to thinking that we can solve our problems by lining up majorities to pressure others to capitulate.

Politics has its place in the world and in the institutional church, but let's not delude ourselves into thinking that politics will solve our problems, especially our relationship with God and one another. That requires God's grace.

In an interesting book, *Blinded by Might: Why the Religious Right Can't Save America*, authors Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson argue that the Moral

Majority failed to accomplish its objectives because it sought to improve the moral climate in America by political means rather than by letting the Gospel of Jesus Christ change hearts and lives, one at a time. They argue that the church will have its greatest impact on the morality of our country when the church seeks to be the church, rather than attempting to legislate a change in behavior.



Sexual ethics reveals another area where we need to resist the world's way and let God's design for the relationship between the sexes be our guide. The world sees nothing wrong with premarital and extramarital sex even though sex is meant to a beautiful bond between husband and wife.

Because adulterous relationships are common place today, it is easy to think, "It can't be that bad when you think of how many people are doing it." Unfortunately such popular thinking runs counter to the Bible's wisdom, "Let marriage be held in honor by all; and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge the fornicators and adulterers." (Heb 13:4)

We are called to behave in a way counter to our culture, in a way that conforms to God's design.

Let me mention one more illustration of how the world's thinking can invade the church. Since we live in a highly individualistic, consumer oriented society, without realizing it, we can ask a self-centered question of the church, "What am I getting out of it?"

Instead of thinking that our membership in the church is comparable to the human body where each part needs to be concerned about the rest of the body, we think in individualistic terms. If I am not getting my needs met, then I will leave rather than seek to address the weaknesses which are frustrating me. We end up with the idolatry of the self.

The reason the world's way so easily persuades us is because the world's way is simply a reflection of us sinful people. When the world promotes greed, condones sexual promiscuity, endorses power politics, or stresses individual rights at the expense of the community, it's just doing what we sinful people do naturally and individually — turn in on ourselves. For that there is only one solution: the Gospel of Jesus Christ.



Our call as the church is to be counter-cultural, to reflect the love and wisdom of the divine way. It's not easy but it's worth the effort, going against

the grain. God's way is far superior to the world's way. The world's way is colored by the power of sin, and as the Bible teaches us, leads to death. That's its wages (Romans 6:23).

The gift of God, however, is eternal life, and that's what we in the church are privileged to live. By living this new, eternal life, we can live in the world, even influencing it as salt flavors food, light dispels darkness, and yeast causes dough to rise. The differentness of God's way works, persuades and exerts its influence!

What can help you live in the world as God's people, resisting the culture? Let me share with you a few thoughts that I have found helpful.

First, think of the One who called you, saying, "Follow me." It's Jesus. He said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me." (John 4:34) When the crowds clamored after him and sought to make him a bread-king, he escaped through their midst; he was not going to be used by them for their purposes.

Instead he reached out to the blind, the deaf, the demon-possessed, the sick, the dying, the outcasts and brought them healing and help. He did it freely as the Lord's Servant.

His service was not just helping the needy; it also reached out to those who were trapped in their self-righteousness. Through parable and direct speech, he exposed their self-reliance and hypocrisy that they might abandon their pride and trust instead in the mercy of God. With his disciples who misunderstood his mission again and again, he patiently corrected and taught.



No matter how effectively he carried out his divine assignment, it was still resisted, but in the resistance of humanity, God got his mission accomplished. Human objection to Jesus' ministry led to his death, the precise climax God planned to redeem fallen humanity from its self-absorption and sin.

By his innocent death, the sacrifice for the world's sin was made. We know this through his resurrection, God's sign that his death was sufficient for all.

And that's what can help you go God's way in the world, countering the world's self-centered culture. The One who has called you is the Lord, the Victor over death, the ultimate champion. Following him leads not to defeat but to triumph, life not death. Following him in the world is participating in his triumphal procession, no matter what the world may say!



Strengthening your resolve to go counter to the culture

can be the remembrance of your baptism. When you got baptized, you were united with Jesus Christ in both his death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-5). You have come to fullness in him through this holy washing (Colossians 2:10).

When Jesus got baptized, the heavenly voice said, "You are my son." The devil sought to call that affirmation into question with his temptations, but guess what? The heavenly voice does not lie. That same voice has been said over you in your baptism, "I have called you by name; you are mine."

United with Jesus Christ, you are a child of God; you belong to him; you can call him, "Abba, dear heavenly Father." By remembering your baptism day after day, you will remember who you are, who your Father is and what your privilege is: to live as his child in a world that has been marred and polluted by humanity's sin.

Think of the power for going God's way in the world when you partake of Holy Communion. There the Lord himself feeds you with his body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. He is united with you in this holy meal. He says, "I am with you; I will help you; you are not alone."


Not only that, however, for holy communion is not a private dining experience between you and Jesus. You are there partaking with your fellow communicants and the saints through the centuries. You are part of a mighty host, which empires can oppose but not conquer, for in the Lord Jesus, we live in victory.

Through Holy Communion you receive the gracious forgiveness that removes the barrier your sin has erected between you and God and you and your fellow Christians. You are part of a powerful company that no hydrogen bomb can destroy. In the community of the church is strength to persevere. You are not traveling by yourself. The ultimate outcome is yours.

Even though living in the world is not easy, it is an assignment we must undertake. If we do not live out our faith in the world, how will others ever realize what a blessed difference faith makes?

With the power of God's grace in Jesus Christ, the triumph of his cross over the forces of darkness, the victory he shares with us in Baptism and Holy Communion, and the support of our fellow Christians, you and I can counter the culture; we can live in the world and not belong to it; we can infect the world with God's grace and mercy; we can be the church carrying out the mission God has given us.

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Every congregation is a church in mission, and every member is a missionary; with all of us working together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, empowered by His Gospel to share His love.

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