

## Discerning The Barbarians

Ken Myers

Much of obedience is understanding the context. God tells us to love our neighbors. To obey that command, I must know my neighbors and what specific love they require.

We are called to be obedient in loving God and neighbor in *concentric circles of particularity*. We live in a house on a certain street, in a certain town, state, and nation with characteristics that distinguish them from others. When we define the context of the time of our lives, we might think of such details as how old we are (busters or boomers, energetic adolescence or morose middle-age) or what stage our family is in (dominated by diapers or tuition payments).

My hunch is that few Christians think of the larger concentric circles of time when evaluating the context of their obedience. What is the age or stage of our civilization? What difference does the state of our culture at large make to our loving God and neighbor? A time of epoch-making cultural decline will present different challenges and require different priorities than a time of renaissance and progress.

My goal is to persuade my readers to take seriously the claim that we are living in the twilight years of Western civilization.

The theme of the “decline of the West” isn’t as common today as it was a generation or two ago. Between the two World Wars, it was a recurring theme among intellectuals, perhaps because the devastation the World War I destroyed the comfortable belief in the inevitability

of progress that had been settling in throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

More disturbingly, it may be that people don’t lament the decline of the West any longer because we have declined so far that we no longer recognize it.

In 1948, T.S. Eliot published his essay, “Notes toward the Definition of Culture.” Eliot, too, was concerned about the loss of Christian influence in the West. “I do not believe that the culture of Europe could survive the complete disappearance of the Christian faith.” Eliot was concerned about Christianity as a culturally influential force, not just as a private belief system. There can be many Christians in a society in which Christianity has, for all practical purpose disappeared.

Eliot rejected the sort of cultural relativism which is now the accepted wisdom of the modern academy. He believed that “the most important question that we can ask is whether there is any permanent standard by which we can compare one civilization with another, and by which we can make some guess at the improvement or decline of our own. We have to admit, in comparing one civilization with another, and in comparing the different stages of our own, that no one society and no one age of it realizes all the values of civilization....We can distinguish between higher and lower cultures; we can distinguish between advance and retrogression. We can assert with some confidence that our own period is one of decline; that the standards of culture are lower than they were 50 years ago; and that the evidences of this decline are visible in

every department of human activity. I see no reason why the decay of culture should not proceed further, and why we may not even anticipate a period, of some duration, of which it is possible to say that it will have not culture. Then culture will have to grow again from the soil; and when I say it must grow again from the soil, I do not mean that it will be brought into existence by any activity of political demagogues.”

I believe that Eliot is right about the long process necessary to recover civilization, and I have to ask whether the church in this twilight time is vigorously preparing its children for the responsibilities ahead. It may be attractive to retool Christianity to make it more barbarian-friendly, but I don't believe it's a way to love God or neighbor, and to care for coming generations.

It's important to remember that the claim that our civilization is collapsing is not simply a judgment made from totaling up statistics on violent crime or the frequency of divorce or compiling anecdotes about juvenile delinquency. These problems are symptoms that *something* is wrong, but not necessarily symptoms that our civilization is disappearing. What makes it seem certain that the Western tradition is dying is the way those in authority (in government, education, the media, and the professions) explain and try to address these problems. What is missing from nearly all public responses to public crises are arguments relation the symptoms to basic moral principles. Whenever these problems are seen as having simply economic or therapeutic remedies, whenever their essential moral significance is denied, the Western way is smothered. When it becomes

impossible to conduct extended public discussion about sexually transmitted diseases, or homosexuality, or abortion as moral issues, the Western view of man as a moral creature and of society as a moral order is denied.

In the early 1930's, the Reformed theologian and churchman J. Gresham Machen published an essay called "Mountains and Why We Love Them." Machen, the founder of Westminster Theological Seminary, had returned from a visit to Europe, during which he spent some time hiking in the Alps. Machen had been very moved as he stood on the Matterhorn, observing the landscape before him, aware of what that land represented. "You are standing there not in any ordinary country, but in the very midst of Europe, looking out from its very center. Germany just beyond where you can see the northeast, Italy to the south, France beyond those snows of Mount Blanc. There, in that glorious round spread out before you, that land of Europe, humanity has put forth its best. There it has struggled; there it has fallen; there it has looked upward to God. The history of the race seems to pass before you in an instant of time, concentrated in that fairest of all lands of Earth. You think of the great men whose memories you love, the men who have struggled for light and freedom, struggled for beauty, struggled above all for God's Word. And then you think of the present and its decadence and its slavery, and you desire to weep. It is a pathetic thing to contemplate the history of mankind."

Machen understood the tragedy of his time in way few of us do today. And he knew that such sentiments were likely to be pooh-poohed. "I know that there are

people who tell us contemptuously that there are always croakers who look to the past, croakers who think that the good old times are the best. But I for my part refuse to acquiesce in this relativism which refused to take stock of the times in which we are living. It does seem to me that there can never be any true advance, and above all there can never be any true prayer, unless a man does pause occasionally, as on some mountain vantage ground, to *try*, at least, to evaluate the age in which we are living. And when I do that, I cannot for the life of me see how any man with even the slightest knowledge of history can help recognizing the fact that we are living in a time of sad decadence – a decadence only thinly disguised by the material achievements of our age, which already are beginning to pall on us like a new toy.”

Machen knew that like obedience, prayer requires an understanding of the context. He knew that we could not represent the Gospel in our time without understanding the meaning of our moment. He knew that we could not resist worldliness without understanding something of the trajectory of the world’s ways. He knew that we could not be faithful to the city of God if we were ignorant about who and what was governing the city of man.

---

*Ken Myers, host of the Mars Hill Tapes, is also a monthly columnist for Tabletalk.*