

CULTURAL PESSIMISM IN MODERN EVANGELICAL
THOUGHT: FRANCIS SCHAEFFER, CARL HENRY,
AND CHARLES COLSON

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Shortly before his election as Pope Benedict XVI in April 2005, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger delivered a sermon in which he spoke bluntly about a “dictatorship of relativism” that was poised to hurl the West into a new “Dark Age.” George Weigel, a biographer of Pope John Paul II, soon drew comparisons between the newly-elected pontiff and St. Benedict of Nursia, the father of European monasticism who labored valiantly to help preserve Western civilization in an earlier period of cultural crisis. As if to ratify this connection between two Benedicts, Weigel invoked the intriguing conclusion to Roman Catholic ethicist Alasdair McIntyre’s *After Virtue*:

[I]f the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds of hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.¹

Whether or not the “dark age” theme represents an accurate portrayal of the West in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, some key Catholic thinkers obviously have not hesitated to use it in their analyses of the moral condition of the present era.

The cultural pessimism of McIntyre and Ratzinger, moreover, suggests a broader context for understanding the fairly widespread propensity in modern evangelical thought to employ images of death, decline, and darkness when describing contemporary Western civilization. In particular, widely-read American evangelicals like Francis Schaeffer, Carl F. H. Henry, and Charles Colson regularly lamented the moral and cultural decay of the West, which they regarded as an undeniable verity of life in the current age. Since such gloomy views are probably shared by many Christians of varying stripes (as well as by some non-believers in the general population), the pessimism of these three evangelical leaders cannot simply be dismissed as idiosyncratic or marginal.

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¹ Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue* (2d ed.; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 263. On the Ratzinger homily and Weigel’s comments, see George Weigel, “Light in a New Dark Age,” *Wall Street Journal* (April 21, 2005) A16.

At the same time, the negative cultural images that Schaeffer, Henry, and Colson used appear to have functioned in a distinctive mode that was rooted in the problems and prospects of American evangelicalism during the second half of the twentieth century. Like the Puritan preachers who used the jeremiad sermon to inspire their audiences toward reform in colonial New England, these evangelical public intellectuals adroitly applied cultural pessimism with a motivational purpose.² They enjoyed some apparent success, at least in stirring evangelicals to a higher level of political engagement. All the same, “dark age” rhetoric may have unintentionally undermined another evangelical priority of the post-World War II era. While Schaeffer, Henry, and Colson all made notable, albeit sometimes indirect, contributions to the Christian higher educational enterprise, their cultural stridency may actually have been counterproductive for the challenge of integrating faith and scholarship. In other words, targeting the “barbarians” of the present age and encouraging a Christian political activism, which often came across as not carefully nuanced, probably made the work of Christian academics all that tougher. Can the integration of faith and learning flourish in an environment where nothing of redemptive value or promise is found in contemporary culture? Does a hostile stance toward the surrounding culture inevitably imply that meaningful dialogue between Athens and Jerusalem is thwarted?

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE RISE OF A NEW EVANGELICALISM

In the aftermath of World War II, American evangelicalism entered a period of extraordinary growth that was marked by noteworthy ventures in evangelism, mass media, and education. In one of the most insightful analyses of this remarkable resurgence, Joel Carpenter points to “some amazing feats of religious creativity and imagination” that “turned failure into vindication, marginality into chosenness, survival into an opportunity for expansion, and a religious depression into a prelude for revival.”³ Brimming with an optimism that had eluded them since the setbacks of the 1920s, evangelicals boldly charted new designs for cultural and political engagement on a scale that would have made their nineteenth-century forebears proud. While many secular observers and cultured despisers had all but buried fundamentalism in the 1920s and 1930s, the movement’s neo-evangelical heirs demonstrated the amazing resiliency of conservative Protestant perspectives in the late 1940s and the 1950s.

As Carpenter so effectively illustrates, this new generation of evangelicals based their optimism on the conviction that spiritual revival in America,

² On the motivational role of the Puritan jeremiad, see David Minter, “The Puritan Jeremiad as a Literary Form,” in *The American Puritan Imagination: Essays in Reevaluation* (ed. Sacvan Bercovitch; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974) 48–49.

³ Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 233.

indeed even a new “Great Awakening,” could turn around the culture.⁴ Neo-evangelical leaders, however, seasoned their hopes for revival with a hefty dose of realism about the cultural scene of the mid-twentieth century. For instance, Boston pastor Harold Ockenga, one of the key architects of the National Association of Evangelicals, often challenged his listeners during the war years by posing two stark choices: the nations of the West could either be rescued by a revival of evangelical Christianity or revert “to the Dark Ages of heathendom.”⁵ The young Carl F. H. Henry, an emerging evangelical star, communicated a similar message in his first explicitly theological book, *Remaking the Modern Mind*, in which he maintained that Western culture was in a state of near collapse.⁶ Even so, a resurgent evangelicalism remained at least moderately upbeat about the prospects for a genuine revival that would bring significant cultural renewal.

By the late 1960s, though, revivalism seemed to have run its course without conspicuously transforming the culture. To be sure, some evangelical leaders sensed an alarming and growing distance between their values and what was happening in America. No doubt sparked by the traumatic impact of the Vietnam War, racial conflict, and trends in sexual morality, evangelicalism exhibited a weakened confidence in the revivalistic hopes and dreams that had motivated the postwar generation. Church historian Grant Wacker aptly depicts this more pessimistic evangelical mindset as “uneasy in Zion,” a figure suggesting a more pronounced adversarial relationship between evangelicals and modern American society. The Duke professor plausibly contends that the current state of affairs is rooted in a long-term tension between “custodial” and “plural” traditions in American life. Evangelicals historically have assumed a moral and spiritual custodianship over culture, an impulse that sometimes clashes with the pluralism inherent in the American understanding of Church and state. The pluralist surge in the latter half of the twentieth century left unprecedented demands for cultural and social readjustment in its wake; many evangelicals responded by fighting “for their accustomed place in the sun.” Wacker even argues that the ensuing culture wars brought some economic and political benefits for the evangelical enterprise.⁷ At the same time, it is clear that evangelicals reacted to their threatened custodial ambitions with an intensified cultural pessimism.

Wacker’s interpretation provides a useful backdrop for examining the “dark age” images in selected writings of Francis Schaeffer, Carl Henry, and

⁴ Ibid. 187–210.

⁵ For example, see Harold J. Ockenga, “Christ for America,” in *United We Stand: A Report of the Constitutional Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals* (LaSalle Hotel, Chicago, IL, 3–6 May 1943) 10–12, 15–16.

⁶ Carl F. H. Henry, *Remaking the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946).

⁷ See Grant Wacker, “Uneasy in Zion: Evangelicals in Postmodern Society,” in *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (ed. George Marsden; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 17–28, for his appraisal. For a more focused treatment of the tensions between evangelicals and modern culture, see Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002). Hankins fails to cite Wacker’s essay, even though Wacker discusses the relevance of a specifically Southern custodial tradition for modern evangelicalism.

Charles Colson. These three leading evangelical spokesmen of the late twentieth century all shared a profound distress over the moral, spiritual, and cultural decline of Western civilization. In addition, all three apparently accepted custodial responsibilities rooted in a venerable evangelical tradition of cultural engagement that seemingly disappeared in the older fundamentalism. Further, these thinkers likely used pessimistic rhetoric as a way of motivating the broader evangelical community to execute its custodial tasks with greater urgency and resolve. In other words, their language was aimed at stirring evangelicals to greater political and cultural activism. Finally, their public attempts to kindle evangelical activism raise questions about the possible consequences for scholarship in the Christian academy.

II. FRANCIS SCHAEFFER: JEREMIAH REDIVIVUS?

In the mid-1960s Francis Schaeffer, an American Presbyterian who founded L'Abri Fellowship in Switzerland, emerged as a fresh intellectual voice in an evangelical movement that heretofore was known more for evangelism and missions than for incisive cultural reflection. Through his lectures, books, and film series, Schaeffer rapidly carved a niche for himself as a critical interpreter of contemporary life and thought in the West. Even the secular media took notice; *Newsweek* magazine, for example, caricatured the goateed, knickers-clad missionary as a fundamentalist "guru."⁸ Schaeffer, however, manifestly spurned the role of a wise sage who dispensed otherworldly wisdom from some remote location, even as he welcomed alienated young evangelicals to L'Abri for counsel and instruction. At the same time, he never seemed entirely comfortable as the popular Christian celebrity that he became between the late 1960s and his death in 1984. In fact, Schaeffer's public bearing suggested a somewhat eccentric prophet who fit awkwardly in both the larger culture and the evangelical subculture. In a relatively recent assessment, historian Michael Hamilton comments that Schaeffer, unlike Billy Graham, represents "the crushed-glass edges" sector of evangelicalism that has "always been ill at ease with the world in which it finds itself."⁹ In short, Schaeffer was as deeply troubled about the prevalent trends in evangelical Zion as he was about conditions in pagan Babylon.

Schaeffer's earliest books like *Escape from Reason* and *The God Who is There* clearly revealed his pessimism over the drift of Western thought, which he believed had been heading in the wrong direction for centuries. Then, in 1969, he published *Death in the City*, a set of lectures that he presented the year before at Wheaton College.¹⁰ In this latter work, Schaeffer employed disquieting images of darkness and death to describe the steady loss

⁸ Kenneth L. Woodward, "Guru of Fundamentalism," *Newsweek* (1 November 1982) 88.

⁹ Michael S. Hamilton, "The Dissatisfaction of Francis Schaeffer," *Christianity Today* 41/3 (March 3, 1997) 30.

¹⁰ See Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1968); *idem*, *The God Who is There* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1968); and *idem*, *Death in the City* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1969).

of a Christian culture in the West. In particular, he found useful parallels in the biblical condemnations that Jeremiah and Paul delivered against the corrupt cultures of Judah and Rome respectively. Their messages of judgment held special relevance for an American society that, between the 1920s and the 1960s, had become post-Christian:

Our generation needs to be told that man cannot disregard God, that a culture like ours that has had such light and then has deliberately turned away stands under God's judgment. God is a God of grace, but the other side of the coin of grace is judgment. If God is there, if God is holy (and we need a holy God or we have no absolutes), there must be judgment.¹¹

For Schaeffer, the reality of divine judgment on modern Western civilization was unmistakable; it necessarily followed from human rebellion against God and it resulted in a decaying culture that smelled of death. Like Jeremiah of old, Schaeffer soberly accepted the prophetic mantle to proclaim a message of doom to his own generation.¹²

If indeed *Death in the City* stands as a jeremiad, it serves to underline Schaeffer's calling as a cultural custodian. Since it is unlikely that many unbelievers read his books or attended his lectures, his target audience in this regard was the church. The church, however, cannot be salt and light in the culture without significant renewal and "constructive revolution." Change was necessary, he consistently argued, because the institutional church shared some of the blame for the current cultural crisis. In the spirit of the colonial Puritans, Schaeffer challenged true believers to function as a "city on a hill" that would impart a culture-transforming message: "May we be those who know the reality of both reformation and revival so that this poor dark world may have an exhibition of a portion of the church returned to both pure doctrine and Spirit-filled life."¹³ Thus the one note of hope that he sounded in this set of lectures actually corresponded to the qualified optimism of evangelical leaders in the 1930s and 1940s, which was rooted in the prospect of a major revival. In addition, his acceptance of the role of cultural custodian at least implied that perhaps the culture could change for the better, especially if evangelical believers were mobilized for engagement.

Since Schaeffer shared with the Puritans a commitment to cultural custodianship, it is reasonable to situate his writings and lectures in substantial continuity with the jeremiad tradition. Nonetheless, the historical and cultural contexts differ considerably; for example, Puritan jeremiads typically were delivered as fast-day and election sermons. Furthermore, as Sacvan Bercovitch and Harry Stout indicate, the Puritan version originated in settings that included an entire populace, assumed an ideological consensus, and reflected a millennial optimism that inspired hope and confidence in the

¹¹ Schaeffer, *Death in the City* 44.

¹² James Sire, who edited several of Schaeffer's books, believes that Schaeffer had an understanding of his role as that of a latter-day Jeremiah. James Sire, interview by author, March 13, 2003, Jackson, TN. See also Schaeffer, *Death in the City* 143.

¹³ Schaeffer, *Death in the City* 12.

ultimate deliverance of a covenant people.¹⁴ In contrast, Schaeffer addressed a more limited audience, lamented the lack of moral consensus in the West, and disclosed a very constrained sense of hope about the future.

Although Schaeffer refers vaguely to fighting “the Lord’s battles with the Lord’s weapons” toward the end of *Death in the City*, his early writings did not set forth a specific agenda for cultural or political engagement.¹⁵ In the period before *Roe v. Wade* (1973), the culture wars had not really heated up and Schaeffer seemed to define moral custodianship primarily in terms of the Church’s need to reform itself; it is not clear whether this would translate into explicit actions by Christians in the society at large. The darkness imagery thus served mainly to alert fellow believers about the depth of cultural deterioration and the necessity of genuine revival in the churches.

By the mid-1970s, however, Schaeffer evidently sensed that the brewing controversy over abortion in the United States demanded a more substantive response. In a major book and film series, *How Should We Then Live?*, he reiterated his negative evaluation of the West’s moral and cultural climate. His pessimism showed in both the work’s subtitle, *The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*, and in the continuities he found between a dying Roman Empire and modern society: “degeneracy, decadence, depravity, and a love of violence for violence’s sake.”¹⁶ In addition, Schaeffer again assumed a prophetic stance by invoking the “watchman” passage from Ezekiel 33, which actually inspired the title of this volume. Just as Ezekiel warned the ancient Israelites to turn from their wickedness, Schaeffer and other concerned Christians had a solemn duty to help people today get their “feet out of the paths of death.”¹⁷

Despite obvious similarities with earlier works such as *Death in the City*, for two probable reasons the tone of *How Should We Then Live?* seemed more somber. First, Schaeffer openly vented his anger over the dangers of an imperial judiciary. In the aftermath of *Roe v. Wade*, he worried about the implications of “sociological law” for other moral issues such as euthanasia.¹⁸ Second, and relatedly, he questioned whether comfortable twentieth-century believers would have the courage to oppose the prospect of an oppressive order imposed by an authoritarian government. By pointing to activists from a previous era like John Wesley and William Wilberforce, Schaeffer appeared to be embracing a more aggressive model for cultural custodianship and engagement.

¹⁴ Harry S. Stout, “Almost Zion,” review of *The American Jeremiad*, by Sacvan Bercovitch, *Fides et Historia* 12 (Fall 1979) 83–88. See also Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), for the broader picture of how the jeremiad fit into Puritan homiletics. In the latter work, Stout remarks that “no minister ever dared insinuate that New England was so evil that God had abandoned the country and annulled its covenant” (p. 63).

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 142.

¹⁶ Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1976) 226.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 257–58.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 218–23.

What is more, the darkness of the hour in the West did not justify a retreat of the faithful: "We are not excused from speaking, just because the culture and society no longer rest as much as they once did on Christian thinking. Moreover, Christians do not need to be in the majority in order to influence society."¹⁹ Schaeffer certainly painted an overall gloomy picture of the decline of Western civilization; but one of his principal aims in doing this was to motivate fellow Christians to fight rather than capitulate. In fact, he seemed to link that motivational purpose to the restricted expression of hope for the future that he offered: Western culture could either accept an "imposed order" or affirm "the base which gave freedom without chaos in the first place—God's revelation in the Bible and his revelation through Christ."²⁰ In other words, the West might opt for spiritual revival; but it is not clear whether Schaeffer really believed that what happened in the early church and the Reformation represented a credible scenario for the present or future, especially if Christians continued to embrace the worldly values of personal peace and affluence.

In retrospect, *How Should We Then Live?* anticipated the core concerns of his remaining life and ministry. The book and film series *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* reflected his intensifying passion for protecting the sanctity of human life. Some credit him and his co-author Dr. C. Everett Koop for helping to mobilize conservative Protestants to join Roman Catholics in the campaign against abortion.²¹ Schaeffer's *A Christian Manifesto*, his shrill plea for believers to resist and even disobey unjust laws, logically flowed from his prior fears about authoritarian government.²² Finally, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, published the year of his death, bared Schaeffer's pessimism about the readiness and capability of American evangelicalism to provide a viable alternative to modern secular culture.²³ While the Christian Right seemed the most receptive to his recruiting efforts for the culture wars, other evangelicals—especially Christian academics—wondered whatever happened to Francis Schaeffer.²⁴

While Schaeffer adjusted some of his priorities and strategies in a more militant direction during the 1980s, he never wavered in his diagnosis that

¹⁹ Ibid. 256.

²⁰ Ibid. 252.

²¹ Francis A. Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1979). On the authors' impact on the pro-life movement, see Richard John Neuhaus's commentary, "The Schaeffer Legacy," *First Things* (June/July 1993) 63–64. After the 2004 presidential election, Jerry Falwell testified that Schaeffer personally chided him in the late 1960s for being a "total failure in confronting the culture," which apparently provoked the Baptist preacher to address abortion, school prayer, and other issues that became part of the Moral Majority's agenda. See Jerry Pierce, "SBTC adopts \$19.2 million budget, resolutions on cultural issues," *Baptist Press* (November 5, 2004), <http://www.baptistpress.org/bpnews.asp?19489>.

²² Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1981).

²³ Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1984).

²⁴ For two very different sets of assessments shortly after Schaeffer's death, see Lane T. Dennis, ed., *Francis Schaeffer: Portraits of the Man and His Work* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1986) and Ronald W. Ruessegger, ed., *Reflections on Francis Schaeffer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986). For more recent, generally positive evaluations, see the articles under the theme "The Legacy of Francis Schaeffer," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6 (Summer 2002).

a terminal illness jeopardized the heart of Western civilization. There can be no doubt that his convictions about the state of the culture were deep-rooted and sincere. At the same time, his pessimistic cultural analysis enhanced his increasingly more forceful appeals for Christian warriors. In the long run, however, not everyone who agreed that there was “death in the city” necessarily welcomed Schaeffer’s solutions for reviving the corpse.

III. CARL HENRY: BARBARIANS AT THE GATES?

In the exhilarating period after World War II, Carl F. H. Henry stepped forward as one of the key leaders in the new evangelical movement. Displaying intellectual and theological vigor, he helped immensely in shaping an evangelical identity and ethos in the modern world, especially through his stints as a seminary professor and editor of *Christianity Today*, evangelicalism’s flagship publication. The holder of two earned doctorates, Henry arguably earned recognition as the most influential American evangelical theologian in the second half of the twentieth century. His six-volume *magnum opus*, a landmark work of systematic theology, duly demonstrated his philosophical rigor and comprehensive theological vision.²⁵

As Henry grappled with worldview issues, he became increasingly apprehensive about the triumph of naturalism and the erosion of Christian theism in the West, particularly in culturally-formative institutions like the universities and the media. In 1969, the same year that Schaeffer published *Death in the City*, Henry delivered a convocation address at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia entitled “The Barbarians Are Coming.” His pessimism about modern culture was palpable as he compared the untamed savages that helped to undermine the Roman Empire with the neopagan forces “rumbling and rustling in the tempo of our times.” He then cited the misuse of scientific achievement and the wasteland of secular education as two prime indicators for the imminence of barbarism.²⁶ Like Schaeffer, however, Henry reserved his strongest criticisms for the church, even suggesting that the world probably viewed anemic believers as “Hogan’s army waiting for Godot.” Christian ineptness and irrelevancy, he asserted, would allow the new barbarians to win by default:

Unless evangelical Christians break out of their cultural isolation, unless we find new momentum in the modern world, we may just find ourselves so much on the margin of the mainstream movements of modern history that soon ours will be virtually a Dead Sea Caves community. Our supposed spiritual vitalities will be known only to ourselves, and publicly we will be laughed at as a quaint but obsolescent remnant from the past.²⁷

²⁵ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1976–83). For information about his life and career, see *idem*, *Confessions of a Theologian: An Autobiography* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986).

²⁶ Henry, “The Barbarians Are Coming,” in *Twilight of a Great Civilization: The Drift toward Neo-Paganism* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988) 15–16. In “The West at Midnight,” *Christianity Today* 20/1 (October 10, 1975) 34, Henry wrote of “a barbarism that will dwarf anything known to pagans in pre-Christian times.”

²⁷ Henry, “Barbarians” 18–19.

While the appropriateness of Henry's colorful analogies may be disputed, his invitation to cultural engagement was unequivocal. Indeed, his frustration level might be partly explained by the fact that he had been calling on conservative Christians to adopt a more pro-active stance toward the social order since at least 1947.²⁸ In one of his "Footnotes" pieces in *Christianity Today*, he even accused his constituency of a silent retreat: "If in a time of cultural decay evangelicals live as if their tongues were cut, and confine their light inside the churches, do they deserve a better fate than the godless?"²⁹

By the 1980s Henry's ever-growing alarm over the decadence of Western culture was evident in several published collections of his essays and addresses.³⁰ The alleged evangelical revival of the mid-1970s, trumpeted by a *Newsweek* piece on "the Year of the Evangelicals," left him markedly unimpressed a decade later.³¹ In fact, his speech to the National Religious Broadcasters in 1983 pointed to an intriguing paradox: "A marked deterioration in American society generally, has arisen at the very time when evangelicals have been emerging from the subculture into the culture."³² In other words, evangelicals were engaging the culture, but in counterproductive and ineffective ways. Their hopes for sustaining a moral and spiritual custodianship of society thus faced enormous obstacles.

One of Henry's most trenchant delineations of Western cultural decay came in comments that he shared in 1987 with the faculty of Asbury College in Wilmore, Kentucky. After referring back almost two decades to his remarks about the commencement of a "barbarian" invasion, he painted an even darker picture by claiming that in the intervening years paganism had tightened its hold on the West. The dean of evangelical theologians then summarized the religious, intellectual, and moral reasons why this was so:

These factors—the extensive loss of God through a commanding spread of atheism, the collapse of modern philosophical supports for human rights, the brutish dehumanization of life which beyond abortion and terrorism could encourage also a future acceptance even of nuclear war, and a striking shift of sexual behavior that welcomes not only divorce and infidelity but devious alternatives to monogamous marriage as well—attest that radical secularism grips the life of Western man more firmly than at any time since the pre-Christian pagan era.³³

²⁸ See Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947). For a similar emphasis closer in time to the "Barbarians" message, see *idem*, *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971).

²⁹ Henry, "The West at Midnight" 34.

³⁰ For example, see Henry, *Christian Countermoves in a Decadent Culture* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1986).

³¹ Henry, "The Uneasy Conscience Revisited," in *Twilight* 163–64. Cf. Kenneth L. Woodward *et al.*, "Born Again!" *Newsweek* (October 25, 1976) 69.

³² Henry, "Trumpeting God's Word to a Nation in Decision," in *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society: Promoting Evangelical Renewal and National Righteousness* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1984) 14. His pessimism about an effective evangelical alliance that would help to transform the culture is evident in Henry, "American Evangelicals in a Turning Time," *Christian Century* ("How My Mind Has Changed" series; November 5, 1980) 1060–61.

³³ Henry, "Diagnosis of a Troubled Time," in *Twilight* 27.

Henry's catalog of evidence for cultural demise may have been intentionally hyperbolic. Nevertheless, it stands as an eloquent testimony to his keen awareness of the encroaching darkness, as well as to his essential agreement with Schaeffer on the sick condition of Western culture.

Henry also echoed Schaeffer by exhorting Christians to take up arms for spiritual and cultural warfare. In a late-1980s sermon, Henry reminded his audience that "Christians have duties in the cultural upheaval around us. . . . We are warriors with a mission in the world."³⁴ He proceeded to pose a litany of probing questions:

In the battle between good and evil, are you armed and engaged in "the fight of the day"?

In the battle for the minds of men, are you armed and engaged in "the fight of the day"?

In the battle for the will of humanity, are you armed and engaged in "the fight of the day"?

In the exhibition of the Christian mindset, are you armed and engaged in "the fight of the day"?

In the employment of Christian countermoves, are you armed and engaged in "the fight of the day"?³⁵

This martial imagery sprang naturally from the language that Henry used to portray the rottenness of the culture. In such desperate times, the only appropriate Christian response would be cultural engagement and penetration. Thus expressions like "barbarian," "pagan," "decadent," and "twilight," like analogous terms employed by Schaeffer, functioned more to arouse Christians to their duties as cultural custodians than to insult or annoy secular humanists. As with Schaeffer, hope for the future in part depended on effective Christian mobilization for cultural renewal.³⁶

IV. CHARLES COLSON: IS THERE LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS?

Since his remarkable post-Watergate conversion, former Nixon staffer Charles Colson has become widely known and admired as an articulate evangelical commentator on a wide variety of issues, including prison reform, politics, the courts, church renewal, evangelical-Roman Catholic relations, postmodernism, and the integration of faith and learning. He is most recognized for his books, *Christianity Today* columns, and leadership role in Prison Fellowship Ministries, along with its affiliates like Justice Fellowship and the Wilberforce Forum. Unlike Schaeffer and Henry, Colson speaks and writes as a layman with no formal theological training. Nevertheless, his addresses and published materials amply testify to his wide reading and inquisitive mind.

³⁴ Henry, "The Fight of the Day," in *Twilight* 42-43.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 43.

³⁶ Henry, of course, put his ultimate hope in the return of Christ, which at times led him to write apocalyptically. See Henry, "The West at Midnight" 33-34.

Colson's perspective on the moral and cultural situation in the West plainly resonates with Schaeffer and Henry, both of whom he regards as mentors. For instance, Colson's co-authored tome on Christian worldview themes, *How Now Shall We Live?*, is not only dedicated to Schaeffer but also carries a title that clearly alludes to Schaeffer's previous book and film series.³⁷ Colson's debt to Henry is most evident in a work that conveys a distinct cultural pessimism in the title *Against the Night*. Colson dedicated this volume to Henry, and many of the ideas and images contained in it can be tracked to the senior colleague's earlier work.³⁸

Against the Night, which began as a lecture series at Wheaton College, especially drew on Henry's lecture cited above, "The Barbarians Are Coming." In fact, Colson structured much of his book around the barbarian motif; the term is used for a wide range of enemies with a secular worldview who undermine fundamental institutions in the culture such as the family, government, school, and church. The "new barbarians," according to Colson, have brought Western civilization to the very brink of collapse:

I believe that we do face a crisis in Western culture, and that it presents the greatest threat to civilization since the barbarians invaded Rome. I believe that today in the West, and particularly in America, the new barbarians are all around us. They are not hairy Goths and Vandals, swilling fermented brew and ravishing maidens; they are not Huns and Visigoths storming our borders or scaling our city walls. No, this time the invaders have come from within.³⁹

Of course, if these modern cultural villains are not uncivilized and do not attack as foreigners from beyond our borders, in what sense can they be branded as "invaders" and "barbarians"? The labels aptly fit the terrorists who struck New York and Washington on 9/11, but they constitute rhetorical overkill when applied to those in our own society who espouse relativism, hedonism, utilitarianism, or existentialism. Colson—and Henry before him—probably intended to suggest that modern "barbarians" function like the ancient ones by assaulting cherished norms and weakening cultural foundations. The language, however, obscures more than it clarifies.

This preoccupation with barbarians prompted Colson to pose another dubious historical analogy in *Against the Night*. In the last major section of the book, he commended the culture-preserving efforts of medieval monastic communities: "These monks and nuns held back the night, and eventually the West emerged from the Dark Ages into a renewed period of cultural creativity, education, and art."⁴⁰ Aside from the fact that the phrase "Dark Ages" is a misnomer that derived from Renaissance humanists who had no patience for anything medieval, Colson also entertained an overly idealistic view of the monasticism of that period. While many monastic figures certainly helped

³⁷ Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1999).

³⁸ Colson, with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, Servant Publications, 1989). For perspective on Henry's role as a personal and theological mentor, see Colson, "Rest for a Warrior: Remembering Carl Henry" (December 12, 2003), <http://www.townhall.com/columnists/chuckcolson/20031212>.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 133.

to sustain civilization, those who evangelized the barbarians sometimes were too quick to make their peace with the superstitions and customs of the more primitive "culture." Furthermore, since Colson has consistently advocated assertive cultural engagement in our time, his monastic model, with some exceptions, would appear to weaken his case.

Even so, it is instructive to note that Colson's discussion of monastic and other "communities of light" occurred in the context of the final third of his book, under the heading "A Flame in the Night," where images of light tended to trump the more pessimistic vocabulary found in the earlier divisions. Schaeffer's dour mien betrayed barely any optimism, while Henry allowed for hope based on the sovereignty of God, the Second Coming of Christ, and a few hopeful glimmers of vibrancy in the evangelical community.⁴¹ Colson, on the other hand, seems to be the most optimistic of the three, particularly about prospects for the church "to take its stand as the main line of resistance against the new barbarians and to provide the culture with a new sense of moral vision."⁴² For the past decade or so, Colson has worked diligently to awaken Christians to the need for cultural engagement, including the urgency of equipping themselves spiritually and intellectually for combat.⁴³ What perhaps he has learned is that the pessimistic images of darkness and decadence can only go so far in motivating the church or individual believers to cultural activism. He surely has not relinquished the more negative portrayals of contemporary culture, as a perusal of *Christianity Today* columns over the last several years will reveal. At the same time, his literary endeavors to mobilize the faithful for cultural custodianship are frequently leavened with heartening affirmations for the troops and positive signals that the battle is indeed winnable.⁴⁴ Colson's more balanced approach may very well hold more potential for reaching listeners in the broader society than was true of Schaeffer or Henry.

V. CONCLUSION

For the past two decades, secular media coverage of the culture wars in America has tended to focus on evangelical and fundamentalist celebrities

⁴¹ For examples, see Henry, "The Crisis of Our Times and Hope for Our Future," in *The Christian Mindset* 149–50; *idem*, "The Barbarians Are Coming," in *Twilight* 17–18; and *idem*, "God's Press Corps in the Cultural Crossfire," in *Christian Countermoves* 137–38.

⁴² Colson, *Against the Night* 135. Later in his "Communities of Light" chapter, Colson begins with the Alasdair McIntyre statement referred to in footnote 1 (see *ibid.* 155). For a recent and more definitive exposition of the church's custodial duties, see Colson and Ellen Vaughn, *Being the Body: A New Call for the Church to Be Light in the Darkness* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2003), which is an updating of their *The Body: Being Light in Darkness* (Dallas: Word, 1992).

⁴³ See "What We're Fighting For: Chuck Colson and Dr. Dobson Reflect on a Nation in Turmoil," *Citizen* 11 (November 1997) 6–9; and Norman Miller, "Stay in the Culture War, Colson Urges, As Man Has 'Run Out of Options,'" *Baptist Press* (June 21, 1999), <http://www.baptistpress.org/CurrentBaptistPress/story3>. For an insightful analysis of Colson's journey, see David Gushee, "Colson's Life Illustrates Many Truths," *Jackson Sun* (May 18, 2001) 11A.

⁴⁴ See Colson, "The Upside of Pessimism," *Christianity Today* 38/9 (August 15, 1994) 64; and Colson and Pearcey, "The Sky Isn't Falling," *Christianity Today* 43/1 (January 11, 1999) 104.

such as James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson. In doing so, a less dramatic but important story may have been missed. Evangelical intellectuals like Francis Schaeffer, Carl Henry, and Charles Colson have resourcefully helped to maneuver recruits into cultural activism by providing a philosophical and theological rationale for it.⁴⁵ In addition, by persistently confronting believers with images of the dark shadows settling on civilization in the West, they have rallied Christian forces to civic engagement with a real sense of determination. Rather than simply curse the darkness, these three thinkers have at least proposed where to position the candles. That in itself suggests that they had not abandoned all hope.

The pessimistic rhetoric employed by Schaeffer, Henry, and Colson, then, seems to be aimed primarily at a Christian audience.⁴⁶ Rather than persuading unbelievers to flee the darkness and decadence of modern life, the language of these writers represents a way of appealing to fellow evangelicals to assume what Wacker calls a “custodial” role in relation to the culture. What remains to be seen is whether the darkness imagery, particularly when it generates a militant spirit, is the most constructive means to advance the kingdom. In particular, the belligerent fervor of some Christian political activists in recent years opens them up to some not very flattering characterizations by contemporary observers.⁴⁷

In addition, the confrontational, attack-mode style that often accompanies “dark age” rhetoric undercuts the mission of evangelical Christian higher education. First, it seems quite likely that some of those exposed to such language, especially students and their parents, will be more apt to dismiss the culture than to engage it seriously. After all, if the “barbarians” control secular knowledge and ideas, of what value can they be? Why bother to relate Christian beliefs and perspectives to human knowledge if so much of the latter is entrenched in the shadows of a “dark age”? The danger in this outlook is that it can easily undermine the Christian intellectual tradition by producing what Union University President David Dockery has criticized as an “anti-intellectual, personal, inward, and subjective Christianity.”⁴⁸ Granted, Schaeffer, Henry, and Colson all would be horrified at such a prospect; indeed, it flies in the face of the project envisioned in Colson and Pearcey’s *How Now Shall We Live?*⁴⁹ Still, as Schaeffer repeated many times, ideas have consequences.

⁴⁵ For evidence that Schaeffer, Henry, and Colson have influenced Southern Baptist culture warriors, see Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon* 27–30, 36–37, and 105.

⁴⁶ Martin Marty theorizes that evangelicals have utilized “siege mentality” language to help hold themselves together in a secular culture. See “The New Protestant Mix: Evangelicals, Mainlines, and Crossovers,” James C. Spaulding Memorial Lecture, University of Iowa (February 15, 2001) 18.

⁴⁷ See, for example, James A. Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁴⁸ David S. Dockery, “Sanctifying the Secular: Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition” (convocation address delivered at Union University, Jackson, TN, September 3, 2004) 8.

⁴⁹ Interestingly, “barbarism” and “dark age” analogies appear in this book. See Colson and Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* ix–x and 299–302.

Second, hostile, combative, and even exaggerated descriptions of contemporary culture threaten efforts to integrate faith and scholarship by undercutting Christian concepts of general revelation and common grace. Philosopher Arthur Holmes, who has been a key player in faith-learning conversations at Wheaton College and the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, has eloquently cautioned against a completely negative or critical stance toward contemporary culture, noting that it contains an “admixture of wheat and tares.” In the context of a critique of Jacques Ellul’s cultural pessimism, Professor Holmes offered a more compelling vision, particularly for those involved in Christian higher education:

[T]o regard the secular as so beyond help as to turn us to spiritual rather than creational means ignores the reality of common grace. The God who makes the sun to shine on the just and the unjust alike graciously works through the processes of nature and history to preserve in sinful men a degree of wisdom and creativity and civil righteousness, and thereby he accomplishes his present purposes in society. Whatever men do that is right and good they do by the goodness of God, for every good gift comes from above. Whatever men know they know by the grace of God, for all truth is God’s truth wherever it be found.⁵⁰

Hence, if secular culture is not as rotten as the purveyors of death and darkness images insist, Holmes’s paradigm will yield a more constructive correlation between faith and the academic disciplines.

None of the foregoing is to deny that prophetic judgment is a valuable component of cultural pessimism. Enlisting soldiers or even moral custodians for the culture wars, however, requires a much greater degree of cultural rejection than integrating faith and learning. Schaeffer, Henry, and Colson evidently wanted to pursue both missions; in reality, their “dark age” rhetoric served the former while subverting the latter.

⁵⁰ Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth is God’s Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 23.