

A Better Place

Neil Gizzard

The word “utopia” came into our vocabulary when Sir Thomas More wrote and published his “golden little book” of that title. The word itself has since come to hold two meanings:

- a place of ideal perfection, especially in laws, government, social conditions; and
- an impractical scheme for social improvements. (Merriam-Webster)

Further, we find that the word itself is More’s invention, taken from the Greek *ou-topos* which means “no place”) which he used as a play on words on *eu-topos* (which means “good place”). In essence, More was writing about a fictional “no place” so that he could put forth his ideas about what would make a realm a “good place.”

It turns out that More’s *Utopia*

“...was an immediate success with the audience for which More wrote it: the Humanists and an elite group of public officials. More’s *Utopia* describes a pagan and communist city-state in which the institutions and policies are entirely governed by reason. The order and dignity of such a state provided a notable contrast with the unreasonable polity of Christian Europe, divided by self-interest and greed for power and riches, which More described in book i, written in England in 1516. The description of Utopia is put in the mouth of a mysterious traveler, Raphael Hytholday, in support of [More’s] argument that communism is the only cure against egoism in private and public life. Through dialogue More speaks in favor of mitigation of evil rather than cure, human nature being fallible.” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 8, 1990, p. 314)

This book was a forerunner to the Enlightenment, that philosophical and political coup that took power from the hands of the factious “Christian” “church” in power at that time in Europe (power which no true follower of Christ is supposed to hold –Mt. 20:25-26, etc.) and placed power in the hands of “secular” rulers and nobles who were more enthralled and enamored with the notion that man no longer needed God and could govern himself by the use of spiritually unaided reason. Though the Enlightenment subsequently died as a victim of its own excesses (a very foreseeable result for those who have spiritual eyes with which to see), it has left an indelible mark on history and implanted men with the notion that human history is a record of general progress. Though men still prefer to see technological advances and “progressive” governments as beneficial developments for mankind (consider how Sydney and Webb, two of the leaders in England’s Fabian society begun by George Bernard Shaw, “fell in love” with what they saw in Soviet Russia in 1935 – they died before the truth about Stalin’s purges came out!), the truth is there has *always* been a very high price tag – especially in the spiritual and emotional realms – for every single “advancement” mankind has produced.

There are some who believe Christianity (speaking here of both the original Way as well as any of its derivatives and offshoots) is merely some utopian social scheme to make this world

a better place. Indeed there are elements of social improvements to be found throughout the New Testament but these are only the natural fruit of obeying the gospel of love that Christ Jesus and God have given to mankind. Let's face it – wherever followers of Christ humbly and sincerely love and serve one another and the people of this world around them, the world, almost of necessity, becomes a better place to be in! But this does not make the way of following Christ into merely some utopian social scheme. Making the world a better place for people to live is merely a by-product and not even necessarily a goal of true Christianity. Any time we shift the goal away from simply obeying Christ wherever and however He leads us, we have departed from the genuine way of following Christ – no matter how noble or lofty our goals and intentions may be!

And yet the idea that Christians are supposed to produce a better world still persists – even among genuine followers of Christ. And many of the schemes and even “theologies” put forth by these can only be called utopian – that is, an impractical, even foolish scheme that is somehow supposed to produce social improvement. Consider the following “church covenant” proposed by a naïve teacher of the Bible. This teacher believes that God's covenant with His people can be summed up in this way:

- Follow in the footsteps of Jesus.
- Any questions? Ask Jesus.

While this utopian foolishness may at first seem to be appropriately focused on Christ Jesus and may seem to restore Christ to His rightful place of Headship over His body, this oversimplification makes many presumptions and assumptions while it simultaneously fails to safeguard against a number of pitfalls and dangers. Let us examine some of these aspects as they begin to expose why the very notion of utopia draws at us in the first place.

- **Brevity.** Ten words can hardly begin to encapsulate the whole counsel of God on any matter, let alone all of our individual and corporate life and conduct in Christ Jesus. God Himself chose to preserve twenty-seven *writings* of various lengths and He poured out His Spirit of truth upon mankind to lead men, that is, all those who would follow Him, into all truth. (Jn. 16:13) So this naïve, ten-word formula fails miserably on this count alone.

- **What Would Jesus Do?** The call to “Follow in the footsteps of Jesus” suffers from the same problems as the WWJD? mindset: It takes a right question and asks it of the wrong person. Self is asked to grope blindly, make its best “educated” guesses at what it believes Jesus to be like and then put one's best foot forward in the blind hopes of accomplishing some work for God. This blind mimicry of life in and by the Spirit of God – though miraculously God will meet *for a time and season* a sincere follower of Christ in this way – can only leave the disciple groping blindly after God rather than walking according to the leading and guiding of the Spirit of God.

- **Conflict.** Let there arise under this naïve “church covenant” a question about any given matter (doctrine, revelation, conduct, practice, etc.) and

immediately this formula will put the greatest weight of influence on the man or woman who is perceived as the most godly, the most “Spirit led,” the most knowledgeable of the Bible, the most experienced, the best teacher, etc. Men who perceive (or desire) themselves to be “leaders” or even those who are perceived by others to be “leaders” will entrench themselves in whichever camp they prefer and split the whole group without hesitation. While it is noble sounding to talk about “following in the footsteps of Jesus” and asking Him to answer all questions, the person who has the most Bible knowledge – perhaps the most dangerous man in any given assembly – is almost certainly going to be the least likely to truly follow Christ and seek His answers. This one already knows all “the right answers” and never needs to seek God’s counsel on such basic issues.

One author has pointed out the basic flaws in all utopian-type thinking: Almost universally – whether applied to communistic, socialistic, political governments or breakaway “church” sects and “restorationist” idealists and zealots – there is a perceived “unspoiled beginning,” coupled with a perceived need to change the current prevailing system, preferably to replace it with “absolute purity” in a theocracy in which “the righteous bear rule openly,” and capped off with some form of hope in a future and final culmination in which “the faithful” attain to some renewed or revived or resurrected form of that “unspoiled beginning” from which the original historical group fell away from. (see *Utopia: The Perennial Heresy*, Thomas Molnar, 1967, p. 16, 22-23) Within these parameters we can readily see the Soviets, the Nazis, the Muslims and many of the various groups and communities that have arisen trying to make “a better world” a reality for themselves and their followers. But equally included in these parameters is modern “Christianity” – that is, that monstrous, institutional deviation away from simply and personally following the Spirit of Christ and God, that thing the New Testament identifies as the great falling away from the faith. (2 Ths. 2:3, Mt. 24:10)

It is precisely because utopian thinking so closely parallels genuine Christian thought along many lines that it is so readily confused with the genuine way of following Christ. But at the root of all utopian schemes – any plan that calls for men to act corporately for the primary purpose of improving the quality of life – is discontent and dissatisfaction. And instead of seeking God in prayer, patience and endurance, men concoct their own theories, solutions and even “theologies” and begin to draw men after these notions. Today’s “religious right” and abolitionists like John Brown during the pre-Civil War days fall under this category. Sadly, this is also precisely what the Bible calls lawlessness, doing what is right in one’s own eyes (Jdgs. 21:25, etc.), a thing that has nothing in common with righteousness (what is right in God’s eyes – 2 Cor. 6:14)

The writer of Hebrews tells us to “be diligent to enter [God’s] rest” and that “he who has entered His rest [through belief in Christ] has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His.” (Heb. 4:3, 10-11) If we are still pursuing our own works, we are still demonstrating the sin of unbelief – we do not believe that God’s way and will for our life is superior and more necessary than our own opinions of what needs to be done. Because we are discontent and dissatisfied (not at rest) with the difference between how the world is and our own notions of how the world ought be, we must work to make the world “a better place.”

The bottom line questions we need to come to terms with are these: Is the way of following Christ to be oriented on God or man? That is, should Christians be solely concerned about their relationship with God or should they be completely focused on how they can serve

their fellow men? Is true Christianity about making this world a better place or is there some deeper issue at work in the history of this world?

The serious seeker of God, even when he cannot clearly explain what this really means, knows there are deeper issues at work. He knows also that it is *from* the life flow of His relationship with God that his care for and service to his fellow men comes. To seek to serve men for the sake of serving men is mere philanthropy – to serve men as God divinely leads and enables is to participate in the very nature of God. The latter is of eternal value – the former is largely a waste of time and resources.

In the end, God Himself will bring total destruction on this world. (2 Pet. 3:7, Rev. 16:1, etc.) God's purposes are not about making this world a better place to live in – it is Satan who is much more interested in making this life a comfortable, easy, wealthy existence where sin and selfishness are tolerated and promoted. Rather, the true follower of Christ is still called to be a stranger and a pilgrim quietly passing through this world, "looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God...looking for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." (2 Pet. 3:12-13) Sometimes following God has led the genuine follower of Christ into a concentration camp or to a painful "early" death at the hands of demonized tormentors – hardly what anyone would rightly call "a better place"!

Only as we keep our eyes focused on Him who is the source of all life and godliness will we be able to perform all the good works He has prepared in advance for us. (Eph. 2:10) Then, whether those good works make the world a better place (which is not always an unlikely result) or simply confirms some wicked and unrighteous man in his judgment, we will still be content to walk in God's will for our life, we will be at rest in Him and we are not likely to be caught up in some utopian scheme that, while touting the noble-sounding goals and lofty virtues of improving the quality of life, in truth, simply diverts the believer in Christ from the path of obedience that confirms his place in Christ's kingdom. (Mt. 7:21, Heb. 5:9, etc.) This truth will never be popular with the humanists and elitists who wield this world's power and resources – but it remains a truth nonetheless.

Let he who has ears hear.

Neil Girrard
Paidion Books
P.O. Box 327
Capitan, NM 88316

Website – www.paidionbooks.org

Email – paidion@paidionbooks.org

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