

Saturday "Sermon"

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December 4, 2010

Peace on Earth

Anne Rice, the well-known author, made news a decade ago when she re-embraced the Christian faith and began writing wonderful novels about the early life of Jesus. She made news again last summer when she announced that she had "quit Christianity in the name of Christ" because of all the hypocrisy she found in the church.

"I remain committed to Christ as always," she wrote, "but not to being 'Christian' or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to 'belong' to this quarelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group." And she is hardly alone.

According to a number of studies, affiliation with Christian churches continues its dramatic decline, while the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation is increasing even more rapidly. Evangelical pollster George Barna has repeatedly reported that there is little measurable difference between the moral behavior of churchgoers and the rest of American society; and where there are differences, the moral behavior of churchgoers is frequently worse than that of atheists and agnostics.

Christian activist Ron Sider wrote that "By their daily activity, most 'Christians' regularly commit treason. With their mouths they claim that Jesus is their Lord, but with their actions they demonstrate their allegiance to money, sex, and personal self-fulfillment."

Couple all this with the editorial in the last-ever issue of *U.S. News & World Report* just two weeks ago, which was entitled, "Watching America's Decline and Fall," and the forecast becomes even more dismal. *The New York Times* recently wrote, "However you want to define the American dream, there's not much of it that's left anymore."

Columnist Cal Thomas recently noted that "The rules for achieving the American dream might no longer be taught in and supported by culture, but that doesn't mean they don't work. The rules are known to previous generations: studying and staying in school . . . avoiding drugs that harm your mind and body; getting married before you have children and working hard to stay married . . . living within one's means; [and] demonstrating personal honesty and professional integrity. . . ."

These character qualities develop through disciplined decisions that are anchored in eternal realities, realities revealed by God in the Bible and uniquely demonstrated in the life of Bethlehem's Child. If you and I genuinely desire "peace on earth" this Christmas, we'd do well to return to governing our own personal lives by God's guidelines such as those Jesus gave in Matthew 5-7. We may not be able to change many things about our world, but there are some things we really can change . . . and it's high time we did.