

Dr. Payton unashamedly addresses the cultural gods of our time and place. He uncovers the insidious deception that is the “hermeneutic of suspicion,” which perpetuates the devil’s approach to the Word of God: “Did God really say?” Payton then uncovers our American idols through the lens of Scripture, which refuses to pretend that God’s good and holy Law no longer applies to those who follow Christ. Not only are the gods of our American culture exposed, but Payton also demonstrates that it is only through Christ, the only wise God, that we are both saved from them and given new lives in our culture through Christ and Christ alone.

—REV. DR. ALFONSO ESPINOSA

PRAYERFUL LIVING

IN A
POST-CHRISTIAN
CULTURE



LEONARD R. PAYTON

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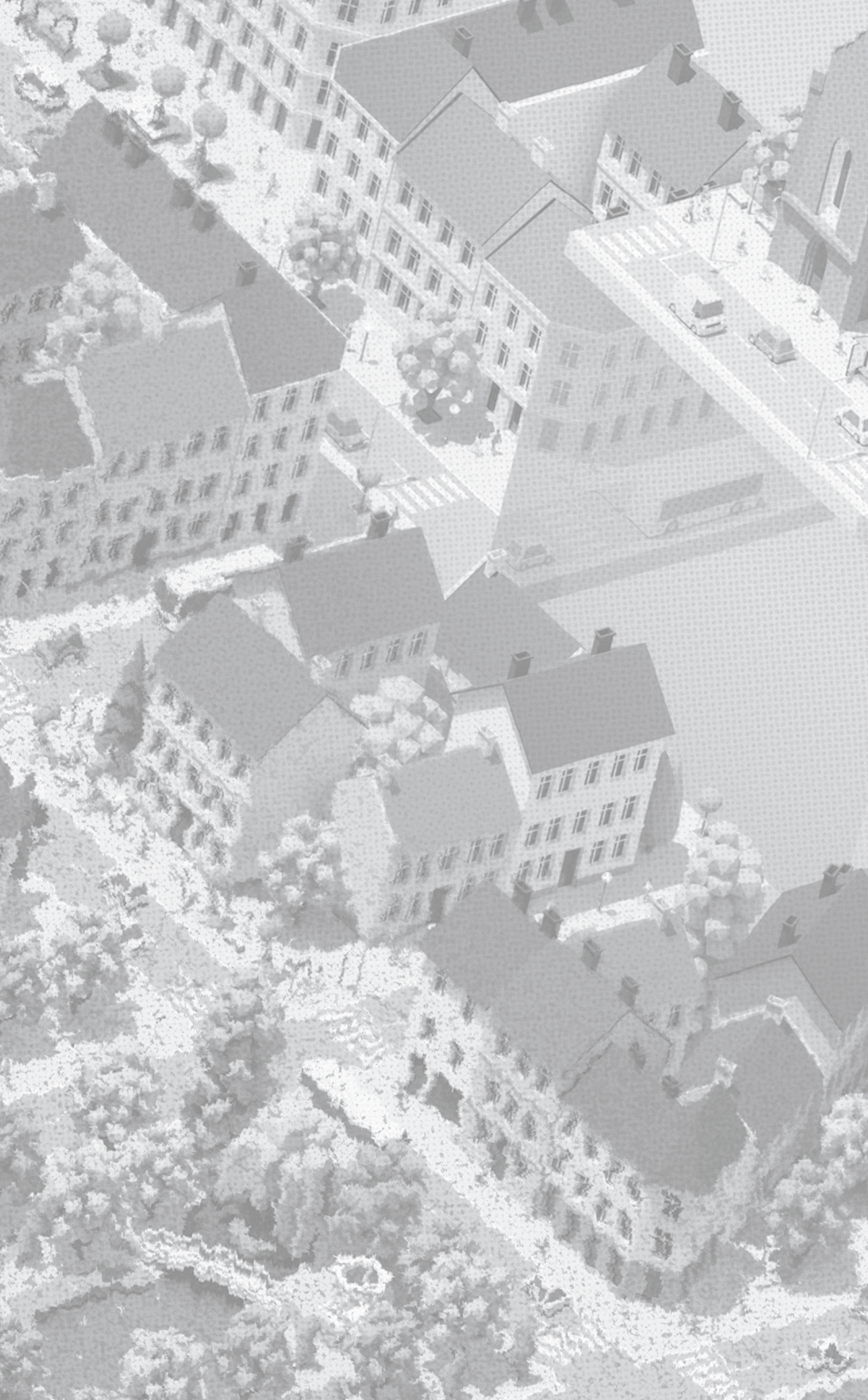
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	i
CHAPTER 1: How Are Christians to Live in This Culture?	1
CHAPTER 2: Three Systemic Evils	11
CHAPTER 3: Who God Is	17
CHAPTER 4: Who Man Is	29
CHAPTER 5: Systemic Idolatry	55
CHAPTER 6: Systemic Sexual Perversion	77
CHAPTER 7: God and History	101
CHAPTER 8: Leviticus 18	111
CHAPTER 9: Is Homosexuality a Biblical Concept?	133
CHAPTER 10: Systemic Greed	155



PREFACE

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself. (Philippians 3:17–21)

Our citizenship is in heaven. That’s the big citizenship, the one that lasts and the one that demands allegiance above all others.

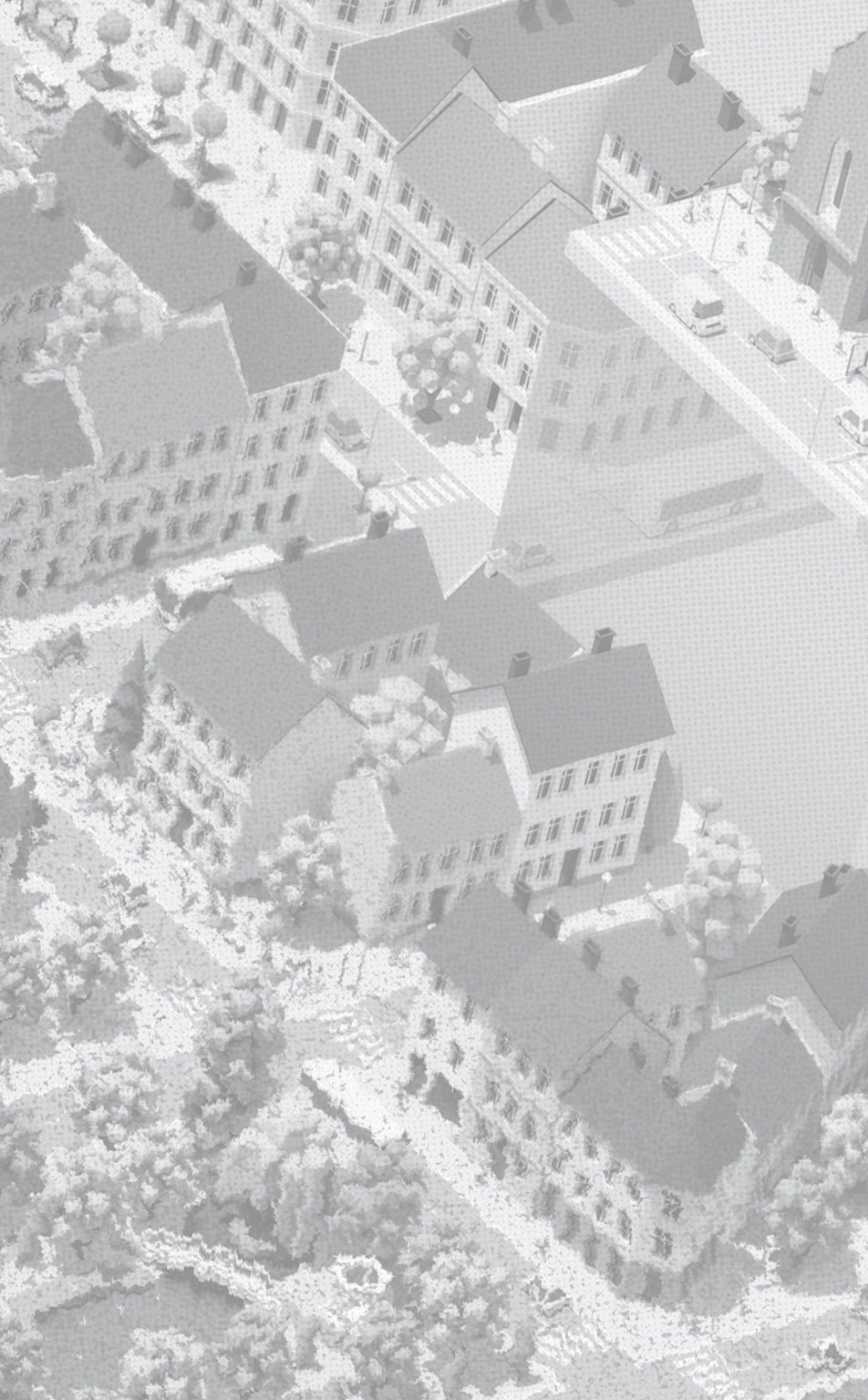
It also happens that we are citizens of a nation, state, and municipality. Sometimes those other citizenships seize our attention and drag us into heated passion. But here’s the problem: It’s just plain impolite to talk about politics. If the Christian pastor bears in mind the words of Paul to Timothy, “the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone” (2 Timothy 2:24), isn’t it best just to leave politics untouched? Then again, so much of what happens in the political world runs afoul of God’s Law, and this is never a matter of indifference for Christians. So how can I as a Christian

pastor deal with these matters of right and wrong without appearing to be electioneering?

Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis once said, “Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants.”¹ Right! Put that evil out there for all to see. Let fellow Christians see the stomach-turning evil and then enlist them not in shrill activism but in going to Him whose power and authority exceeds all things. Cry out together, “Lord, have mercy!”

For some, this discussion of cultural changes might prove dispiriting. That need not be. Jesus already won the battle. When He said, “It is finished” (John 19:30), it really was finished. Yes, it’s a dark world, and yes, Jesus is the light of the world, the only light of the world. We Christians don’t need to “win” any culture wars. Jesus already won for us. We are only engaged in a mop-up operation. It can be fierce at times. It is hand to hand. Through it all, we stride with confidence right into the throne room of Him who rules all things and hears our petitions favorably. We spread out the evil we see and say to Him, “Lord, have mercy,” and He does.

1 Louis D. Brandeis, “What Publicity Can Do,” *Harper’s Weekly*, December 20, 1913, 10.



HOW ARE CHRISTIANS TO LIVE IN THIS CULTURE?

In recent years, we have seen troubling redefinitions of human life coupled with our government actively enforcing those definitions that move away from how our Lord has created us. Our clout as Christians in the public square may continue to shrink. We may face increasing opposition to our religious liberties in the days to come. What are we as Christians to do if our votes mean less and less each election?

Are you in Christ by Baptism? Then your prayers are more powerful than your votes. So let's refine our prayers, ratcheting them up not in angst but in bold specificity. Even as we refine our prayers, we will also need to give serious thought to how God deals with nations. After all, even though our citizenship is in heaven, we also have temporary citizenship in earthly nations.

The Lord is not indifferent to the moral and ethical positions nations take. Thankfully, He has left us a record of how He interacts with nations in the Old Testament, steering and directing the histories of many nations according to His priorities. He doesn't change. Nations come and go, but He doesn't change. Isaiah put it this way:

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever” (40:8).

THE HOLY PRIESTHOOD

Your prayers are more powerful than your votes because you are a “holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). When Peter says you are “a holy priesthood,” he’s not just talking to pastors; he’s talking to all who have been baptized into Christ.

And what are those spiritual sacrifices that you are to offer? They are your praises and profuse expressions of thanks for the salvation Jesus accomplished for you. Certainly! But also they are your intercessions for the world that is hostile to God and flees from His presence. You have access to Him because you are covered with Christ in Baptism. Make no mistake—the world needs Christians to be interceding for it vigorously. Only God knows its intractable problems, and only He can enact the wholesome and entire solution. (Hint: It involves repentance from sin and belief in Christ.) It even involves the civil repentance of unbelievers turning from wicked actions; it’s not just a Christian thing.

Yes, the world is ruled by powerful people in government, business, education, media, and entertainment. But you have been called to make intercession for them (1 Timothy 2). They need you to do that. You have an office that does not usurp theirs but is higher than theirs.

So you are a holy priesthood, exercising that priestly office from within your own skin in the place where you live. In short, you exercise your priesthood within a priesthood that is above and beyond any local nationality. Indeed, you have fellow holy priests in Cuba, North Korea, Mainland China, and so forth.

GOD AND NATIONS, STARTING WITH ABRAHAM

Abraham (at first known as “Abram”) was an Iraqi. Did you know that? He was from Ur of the Chaldeans (Genesis 11:31). His father, Terah, moved his family to Haran in what is modern eastern Syria. It was there that the Lord said to Abraham, “Go from your country [Haran] and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (12:1).

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that “by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going” (11:8). So Abraham went west from Haran and then turned south when he reached the Mediterranean Sea until he entered the land of Canaan. For all Abraham knew, perhaps he would continue on to Egypt as he traipsed along the Fertile Crescent. Perhaps he would follow the Nile south until he came to Central Africa. Perhaps God would give him modern Angola. Who knew? Abraham did not. But God did.

And so, once Abraham entered the land of Canaan (modern Israel), the Lord appeared to him at Shechem, saying, “To your offspring I will give this land” (Genesis 12:7). It’s curious. Why didn’t

God say, “To you I now give this land”? The reason is there were nations living in Canaan. Sometime later, the Lord said to Abraham, “The iniquity of the Amorites”—that would be people who lived in the land of Canaan—“is not yet complete” (15:16). God could see the trajectory.

Upwards of five hundred years after Abraham, God brought his descendants, some two million strong, into the land of Canaan to possess it. A few weeks before their conquest began, Moses, who had led them for forty years, gave final instructions. He said, “Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you” (Deuteronomy 9:5).

The Old Testament is not the account of God dealing with Israel while being indifferent to the rest of the world. No. He rules all nations. And because He cares for those nations, He sends believers to them. He sent Jonah to call Nineveh to repentance, and He sent Abraham’s nephew Lot to call Sodom and Gomorrah to repentance. Of course, the sudden demise of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 showed God’s wrath after the citizens threatened Lot and the angels God had sent.

Christian citizens of every nation do well to ask, “How does the Lord view the collective evil of my country?”

EARTHLY CITIZENSHIP

In the meantime, it has occurred to me that I should take out some theological insurance.

There has ever been the temptation to replace the status of Old Testament Israel with one's own nation and then presume that God stands in opposition to the opponents of this new Israel, that God is on our side no matter what. Great Britain was afflicted by this conceit in the late nineteenth century, and the United States has been similarly stricken on occasion. Remember, there was a time that the sun never set on the British Empire. It's very tempting to see some sort of special blessing of God that blinds a nation to the ever present need to repent.

Nevertheless, there is strong reason to be ardently patriotic. God calls you to love your neighbor, and your neighbors are the people who share the land with you. Your patriotism is aimed at making the country good for your own offspring and your neighbors. Patriotism is a good thing. But even as you are fiercely patriotic, don't make God the hood ornament of the car called American patriotism. He won't stand for it.

Even so great a man of faith as Joshua made this very mistake as he led the people of Israel.

When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with His drawn sword in His hand. And Joshua went to Him and said to Him, "Are You for us, or for our adversaries?" And He said, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to Him, "What does my lord say to His servant?" And the commander of the LORD's army said to Joshua, "Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy."

And Joshua did so. (5:13–15)

The relevant question is never if God is on our side but are we on God’s side. When we are on His side, the result is repentance and humility and, in Joshua’s case, recognizing the holy presence of God and taking his sandals off his feet. Do you see much repentance in our land? The opposite of humility is “pride,” the curious label of a whole month now.

HOW SHOULD WE PRAY?

On the one hand, we can pray rather simply as we do in the Lord’s Prayer. When we pray for daily bread, we are praying for good government, among other things. When we do not have good government, all sorts of systems fall apart that provide all we need to support this body and life—things like safety, farming, industry, and so on. Good government matters both for us and for our neighbors. Furthermore, if you tend to be emotionally overwhelmed by the news, I recommend that you set the news aside and pray the Lord’s Prayer often.

Then again, as Americans, we’re in a peculiar position because the government is ours, and we participate in it by voting. When you vote, you are deciding what sort of government we should have. You are actually governing, and is it a good idea to govern while uninformed? I think not.

Our Constitution affords you the liberty to vote selfishly. Maybe you have lots of money and you don’t want the government to take any more from you than is absolutely necessary. Then again, maybe you think you’re not getting a fair shake and so you want

the government to tax people who have more than you do and then redistribute the takings your way. Either way, you are voting for your own self-interests. It's a selfish vote and therefore, at its foundation, a failure to love your neighbor. (A little foreshadowing here: Systemic greed will be one of the three big evils we will ponder later.)

Because you vote and take part in shaping our government, you really do need to pay attention to what is going on in the world around you and pass it through the filter of the Holy Scriptures and then pray accordingly. You need to know how God measures and directs societies and governments. The Scriptures are not silent on this point.

Let's do a little exercise. Let's apply the Canaanite template to our own country, and let's resist the temptation to funnel our results into some sort of partisan bucket. Consider these questions:

1. What was the wickedness of the Canaanites?
2. What parts of that Canaanite wickedness do I practice or affirm?
3. Therefore, of what do I need to repent?
4. How much of that Canaanite wickedness is culturally accepted today in the United States?
5. How much of that Canaanite wickedness is ensconced in American law?
6. How might this knowledge of Canaanite wickedness in American life inform how I vote?

7. Finally, and most important, how should I, as a holy priest with superseding citizenship in heaven, pray?

That's a big bunch of questions. None of them can be answered until we have a handle on the wickedness of the Canaanites, which we can piece together from a number of Old Testament passages.

THE DOWNFALL OF THE NORTHERN KINGDOM OF ISRAEL

Let's concentrate on one remarkable summary passage, 2 Kings 17:6–18, which analyzes the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. God split off these ten tribes from the house of David because Solomon had led Israel into idolatry. The Southern Kingdom of Judah would survive until 587 to 586 BC when the Babylonians finally destroyed Jerusalem. Let me be right up front: The Lord dispensed with the Northern Kingdom of Israel because it imitated the wickedness of the Canaanites and refused to listen to the prophets He sent them, including Elijah and Elisha.

In the ninth year of Hoshea [the last king of Israel], the king of Assyria captured Samaria [the capital of Israel], and he [the king of Assyria] carried the Israelites away to Assyria and placed them in Halah. . . . And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God . . . [by] fear[ing] other gods and walk[ing] in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel [the Canaanites]. (17:6–8)

And then 2 Kings gives us a representative but not exhaustive list of those wicked Canaanite practices.

First, “they built for themselves high places in all their towns” (17:9). They invented their own worship. Many Americans today say they are “spiritual” or “people of faith” and yet will have nothing to do with “institutionalized religion.” Americans are building “high places” of self-invented faith.

Second, “they set up for themselves pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree” (17:10). “Asherim” were statues of a fertility goddess, and their worship involved all sorts of sexual acts apart from the husband and wife God had joined in marriage. Gosh! This sounds quite American to me. Furthermore, the fertility desired was not necessarily more children. It was agricultural wealth—in other words, the good life as Canaanites then would have imagined it, riches and luxury.

Third, “and they served idols” (17:12). An idol is anything other than the one true God to which you look for good. Idolatry seems rife in America.

Fourth, “they despised His statutes” (17:15). How many times have you heard of someone objecting to the public presence of the Ten Commandments? If you went to a city council meeting today and proposed that the Ten Commandments be posted inside the police station, how many people would look at you as if you had just made some impolite bodily noise?

Fifth, “they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings” (17:17a). The Israelites made these sacrifices to the false god of the Ammonites called Molech. They thought if they appeased Molech by offering their child, he would make their life go better. Can you think of a legally protected right frequently practiced in many of our

states that matches this? It's called abortion. Abortion is often presented as a women's rights issue. But consistently, men poll quite a bit more in favor of abortion than women. More sex, less responsibility. We're deep into Molech worship here in America. Planned Parenthood might be better named the Church of Molech.

Sixth, they "used divination and omens and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, *provoking Him to anger*" (17:17b). It's just too easy to dismiss this one as superstition that surely no modern person practices. And yet, when I look at the new book display in my local public library, I can usually find something about witches, the occult, tarot cards, and on and on. Paganism is making a roaring comeback. But consider this: Any predictive system used to counter the Lord and His will is a sort of divinization because it's setting God aside, and when you set God aside, you're making yourself into a god. Science can easily become this too, not to mention stock and bond prognostications.