



CHRISTIANS: PART OF THE PROBLEM OR PART OF THE SOLUTION? (Summer 1987)

By James W. Skillen

The May 25, 1987, *Time* magazine portrayed the United States as undergoing a grave ethical crisis. Some dismiss such alarmist rhetoric as inappropriate for a weekly secular news magazine. Others say our society's sick condition is much worse than imagined—that the U.S. is under severe judgment.

What do news stories revealing sexual immorality in the televangelism world, deception among top appointed political officials and unethical trading on Wall Street tell us?

Beyond the questions of personal misbehavior lie numerous additional problems of serious national concern. Will we ever put the destructive drug culture behind us? Are the schools really preparing our children for a responsible future? Do we see any possibility of reaching a society-wide consensus on what to do about issues as new and disturbing as surrogate motherhood, genetic engineering and AIDS?

At the highest public-policy levels we face challenges calling for the utmost wisdom and determined responses. International trade, budget and financial crises spark ever-increasing warnings about trade wars, deep recessions and even a potential world depression. Congress and the President show little evidence of being able to provide coordinated leadership to guide us through this trying economic era. Arms negotiations with the Soviet Union seem both more promising and more threatening than we have known for some time, but do we know how to make the most of the current situation? The Middle East, Central America, South Korea and South Africa all represent potential explosions of immense proportions, crying out for multilateral international diplomacy in which the U.S. should be engaged. But is the U.S. ready to give capable leadership?

In the midst of all these critical and confusing circumstances, are Christians offering some solutions to the problems, as we imagine we are, or are we simply part of the problem—part of a self-interested, materialistic culture that is running away from responsibility rather than shouldering it?

To make a difference, we need to examine ourselves in the light of God's Word to see how to repent from sin and turn to paths of righteousness in our families, professions, churches and neighborhoods. We must also step forward to serve and reform the public order. Just laws and good public policies will not

automatically flow from a renewal of individual ethical concern, and public justice will not automatically take care of itself if we simply concentrate hard enough on our families and schools and churches. This is not to say, however, that we can neglect any aspect of personal ethics in areas in which we hold responsibility. A healthy republic and a relatively peaceful international community cannot be built on sexual immorality, deceitful bankers, slovenly employees, drug-addicted children and preachers enticing followers with dreams of materialistic success.

Equally true is the fact that the moral recovery of society must take shape in each area of life—including the political and legal realms—by way of dedicated, purposeful action fit for each arena. A republic cannot be reformed apart from action by citizens prepared to serve their civic neighbors through laws and policies that do justice to all. Political renewal requires political action. Legal reform requires wise jurisprudential acts and judgments. No shortcuts are available. Nothing human automatically takes care of itself.

Now is the time for Christians to accept their civic responsibility with thanksgiving, to join together for service and to give public evidence of a selfless concern for justice that others will not believe possible until they see it demonstrated. Today is indeed a day of God's judgment, a time for repentance. But by God's grace, as long as it is still today, we also face opportunities to offer light in the darkness and to put some leaven in the loaf.

What will you say to your children about this dark American hour? What evidence will your law practice show that you are part of the solution and not simply part of the problem? Remember, your actions will speak louder than your words!

James W. Skillen, now retired, directed the Center for Public Justice for 30 years. He is the author or editor of 15 books and frequent contributor of essays and commentary to a diverse range of magazines and journals. He earned his Ph.D. at Duke University in political science and international relations, his B.D. at Westminster Theological Seminary, and his B.A. at Wheaton College. His books include With or Against the World? America's Role Among the Nations, and A Covenant to Keep: Meditations on the Biblical Theme of Justice.