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## Articles

### DEEP SOCIAL CHANGE

By Tom Gilson  
2/3/2009

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#### Four Essential Priorities for 2009

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We need deep social change. Few of us need convincing of that. It seems to me, though, that we have not taken seriously enough the *depth* of social change needed, or the *magnitude* of the challenge. We have especially not reckoned properly the need for *change among ourselves*, we followers of Jesus Christ. Our credibility outside our own communities is low, and is it any wonder? We have failed to fully employ our real power: the power of God, the power of lives lived well, and the power of excellent engagement in the realm of ideas.

I suggest four priorities for deep social change. You may be wary of simple four-point solutions for any major change. I am too. None of these are simple. I am a beginner in all of them. These are broad categories, so they may coincide with existing church or parachurch priorities—or they may lead some groups to re-think their priorities.

In part, these priorities echo those mentioned by J.P. Moreland in [Kingdom Triangle](#) (pp. 111-112). He refers to conclusions drawn by Michael Green, who said the church's explosive growth in its first four centuries came from (1) her ability to "outthink her critics," (2) "the transformed character and biblical compassion of believers," and (3) "the manifest power of the Kingdom of God by the Spirit."

#### 1. Recover a true understanding of God.

It is not just the non-Christian but the follower of Jesus Christ who needs to discover afresh who God is. We've domesticated God, made Him a member of our own parties, and forgotten His sovereign majesty. Seeking change for our country through worldly means, we've neglected to call on God's power and righteousness.

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At the risk of being overly obvious: God is *God*! He is the perfectly good and powerful Creator, Sustainer, Ruler, Judge, Teacher, Shepherd, and Lover of the entire universe! We are fools if we proceed without taking Him into account, and greater fools yet if we believe we already know and understand Him well enough, cognitively or relationally.

My friend Brad Bright is undertaking an initiative to help believers and non-believers [discover God](#). I think he's onto something crucial there. A growing understanding of the true God is essential for the other priorities I will propose here.

### **2. Call on God through extraordinary prayer.**

Deep social change is not ultimately the product of votes or organizing or rallies or letters to Congress or editorials in newspapers. It comes from the hand of God. From the human side, this is a matter of prayer. The time is now for us to step up to extraordinary prayer, meaning just what the word suggests: more than ordinary. More than we have been doing, with a clearer focus on God and on our country's needs, and greater intensity. Extraordinary prayer for many will include regular fasting, possibly for a meal or even a full day every week.

We cannot hope for real impact on society without God being the one who produces it, and we cannot expect God to produce it unless we call on Him urgently to do so. Chuck Colson is urging us to [pray for the Church first](#), rightly so, for it is among Christians that God must show Himself first, and it is the Church that must lead the way in deep change. And we must pray for our neighbors. Who knows what God might do in response? The [top two reasons Muslims come to Christ](#) in Muslim homelands are the lifestyles of Christians (for which, see point 3) and experiencing the power of God in answered prayers and healing.

### **3. Expand our acts of sacrificial service.**

Jesus said ([Matthew 5:16](#)): "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." God is glorified in His people shining His light, and there is no human light brighter than that of one who gives sacrificially for another. This is particularly incumbent on political conservatives who distrust the government's effectiveness and efficiency in meeting human need. To say that government should not be so involved is to say that individual Christians and churches must be, and on an even greater scale than we have been; for the need is real. Otherwise conservatism is seen (to a great extent rightly so) as thinly disguised selfishness.

This is not to develop an apologetic for conservatism, but to express a correction to some forms of it. Much more than that, though, this is about letting God be seen in action through His people.

### **4. Strengthen our mental awareness and involvement.**

Western Christianity—especially Protestant Christianity—has been plagued for at least 150 years with anti-intellectualism. It is as if we thought we had no case to make for our faith, and for its importance in the world, when in fact nothing could be further from the truth. Our intellectual heritage for many centuries was strong, but then it's as if we walked off the playing field. As a result we've lost the universities, the media, and the centers of decision-making.

There is [encouraging news](#) on this front. Christian scholarship is surging where it has not done so in recent years. Christianity remains hobbled, however, by a simple Sunday School mentality that too often expects little actual study. We spend years and years and thousands of dollars learning how to make a living. I present this challenge to you who have been to college—go back and look at some of your textbooks. How light and easy were they to get through? Could you have prepared for class by reading over a few pages lightly with your morning donut or Instant Breakfast? What if there were quizzes and final exams in Sunday school—or in other words, what if we expected ourselves to *learn something new and challenging at church*? Why don't we value that as much as chemistry or computer science?

Our mental life involves imagination as well as scholarship, by the way: it is about the arts as well as the academy. If we were to step up to the table with great ideas, we would be heard.

**Echoing that, this is my challenge to myself and to all of us:** *Grow in understanding God, Call on Him through extraordinary prayer, Increase our acts of sacrificial service, and strengthen mental awareness and involvement.*

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