

Feature Article: JAF3382

**DISCERNING THE TIMES:
WHY WE LOST THE CULTURE WAR
AND HOW TO MAKE A COMEBACK**

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This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 38, number 02 (2015). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

SYNOPSIS

We lost the culture war, not because we had bad arguments for the positions we espoused, but because we had already lost it on the more fundamental ground of hermeneutics. Focused on theology, philosophy, ethics, and politics, we paid insufficient attention to changes taking place in our colleges in how reading and writing were taught. The old grammatico-historical exegesis, the attempt to discover the author's message to his original audience, was replaced by a new view in which authorial intention is irrelevant at best and meaning is in the eye of the beholder. When people are taught to read this way, the authority of all cultural texts—including our founding documents and Scripture—is undermined, so that even good arguments for traditional values lose their traction. To reverse this defeat, we must recognize the importance of reading and how it is taught. You cannot win the battle for theology or ethics if you have lost the battle for philology.

The culture war is over. We (the Christian Right) lost.

OK, maybe it's not quite over, and we're only losing—albeit rather badly. If you quibble over the difference, you will miss the point.

It was a war we were right to fight, for no one who loves his neighbors can be indifferent to how they will be affected by harmful degradations of the culture that surrounds them. But we ought to have fought it very differently. We fought for many of the right things, but often not in a wise or loving way. We were generally right, and we often argued well, but we lost anyway. How did that happen? Why did it happen? It happened because we didn't understand where the real battle was until it was too late. We probably don't get it yet. Here's what I mean.

WHERE THE BATTLE WAS

The founding documents of the American republic, from the Mayflower Compact to the Declaration of Independence to the Constitution, were on our side. They really were. Nobody cares. Nobody can even tell. Nobody thinks it matters. We lost the culture war on that score because we lost it earlier on the even more basic front of *hermeneutics*.

We lost, in other words, because we did not pay sufficient attention to changes taking place in our schools and colleges in the way writing and reading are taught. A major shift has taken place there over the past century, one with serious implications for every other issue we deal with. Typically, the Constitution—like any literary document studied in our secular schools, including the Bible—no longer has any objective meaning given to it by its authors. It means whatever the “interpretive community” (in the case of the Constitution, five out of nine people in black robes) thinks they need or want it to mean. That is a huge problem in itself, but we have an even bigger one: our fellow citizens are fine with this procedure. Why wouldn't they be? It is how they were taught to read themselves.

Many Christian scholars and Christian institutions of higher education did not stand against this new view with sufficient rigor or energy. Why not? Many Christians either did not understand or just shrugged their shoulders at, or even welcomed, this change in how we read the world. Some even rejoiced in it as an improvement over the hated “modernism” they thought had taken over the Christian movement. How foolish! But we allowed it to happen because its earlier manifestations did not seem to be a threat. After all, they were happening in “English,” not in theology or philosophy, and in the reading of “artistic” works—novels, short stories, plays, poems—rather than “serious” political, legal, or religious texts. And who cares what a bunch of effete aesthetic snobs do with incomprehensible texts that don't matter anyway?

And so in the secular academy, the Old Way—the attempt to understand what an author was trying to say to his original audience, believing that what they would have gotten out of his work must be the authoritative starting point for discussing the “meaning” of that work—was abandoned as naïve, unworkable, even perverse. This banishment of authors from their own texts was first crystallized by the “New Critics” of the mid-twentieth century in their concept of the “intentional fallacy”: just pay attention to what the *text* says in itself, they argued reasonably; the author's intention

for it, whatever that might have been, is a misleading distraction in the process of interpretation. The New Critics' emphasis on "close reading" of the details of the text itself was sound. But wait: did scholars such as W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley¹ and the teachers who followed them *intend* for us to focus on the text as a thing in itself rather than as an act of communication by its author? Ahem.

The aestheticism of New Criticism, its focus on works of art, masked for a while the ideological use that could be made of this new author-free way of reading, not only in other texts but also in the literary works themselves. So most Christian English professors simply picked up this approach to literary texts with never a thought as to what would happen if some of its presuppositions were applied to other texts. And indeed for a while "close reading" produced genuine insights into the texts as works of literary art. But meanwhile, the exile of the author found its fulfillment in the "death of the author" espoused by current postmodern theorists. (But wait again: if authors such as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes really believe in the "death of the author" that they espouse, why do their names appear on the spines of their books?) Now the very distinction between literary texts and other texts has broken down. Now all texts can be mined for their aesthetic value or their ideological usefulness or anything else the critic wants to find in them. The one thing those texts cannot do—are not permitted to do—is to allow our ancestors to share with us the wisdom of the past. The "chronological snobbery" C. S. Lewis warned us about now reigns supreme.

The end result is that today if you try to apply the old method, the search for the *author's* meaning (technically called "grammatico-historical exegesis"), to any cultural document, people stare blankly at you as if you were speaking a foreign language. That is one of the major reasons why, even when we had good arguments on the more recognizable issues in what was called the culture war, those arguments had no traction. People simply walked on by as if nothing had happened. To them, nothing had.

Sadly, this blank stare is not limited to "secular" people outside the church. I can tell you that it occurs on the faces of many students in conservative Christian colleges. They may tell you something very different when off guard in the cafeteria from what they put by rote on their hermeneutics exams to please their professor. Outside of class, they take it as a self-evident truth needing no support that readers *create* meaning *in*, rather than *receiving* it *from*, the text. Readers—not authors. These students don't know it, but they have picked up by osmosis the epistemological skepticism of postmodern hermeneutics. *Readers*, not *authors*, are the source of meaning. Authors have no authority. Their presence at the moment of "text construction" has no historical or hermeneutical relevance. That would (horrors!) interfere with the freedom of the interpreter. The "free play of the mind in the text" trumps all other considerations.

These students don't know any of the jargon, but they have absorbed the assumptions. And few of their professors are equipped to challenge those assumptions.

Their more conservative Bible professors can refute the old higher criticism but not the new hermeneutic, and their English professors had to spend their graduate careers pretending to take the chic nihilism of postmodern “theory” seriously if they wanted to get their degrees.² Not all of them came through that experience unscathed, and many had never been told that any other view was even possible. Yet they are often hired to teach in Christian-college English departments because they exude all the expected subjective pieties, and administrators do not know how to ask the questions that could expose the fact that their approach radically undermines the very basis of those pieties.

Now, no matter what you say, even if you still call the Bible the Word of God and think yourself a loyal son or daughter of the church, once you have adopted this view, authority has been transferred from the biblical text to you, the individual. Not only is there nothing to stop you from remaking the text (or the natural world, in the case of the gay rights cadre) in your own image; you have actually been taught that it is your right to do so, and that so doing is unavoidable, even virtuous. Biblical authors cannot be made an exception to this principle when it rules the mind unchallenged.

Yes, we have lost the culture war, and many of us have no idea how badly and how deeply! Many of our own children, even the pious ones, are more influenced by the culture at this critical point than by the church or the Christian tradition. Can this influence be unrelated to the fact that according to many studies they are only marginally better than the world in their practice of Christian morality? Readers empowered to create their own subjective meaning rather than exhorted to find the objective meaning left behind by the author are foxes put in charge of the henhouse when fallen human nature runs up against the demands of the Law of God.

WHERE THE BATTLE IS

So we lost. All right, what do we do now? Most importantly, we realize that the battle is never *finally* lost because Christ is sovereign and He is coming back. Those facts guarantee long-term victory. In the short term, since we do not know when He is coming back, we are to be faithful while He tarries and occupy until He comes. Therefore, the battle we have just lost must be followed by another one that we fight more intelligently, with a better recognition of our strategic position. Having lost the battle for faithful reading, we also have lost the cultural privilege and initiative we once enjoyed. We no longer command anything perceived by our peers as moral high ground. We are no longer defending the received tradition; we are now trying to come from behind. We are the new Moral Minority. Our position is now much more like that of our brothers in the old Roman Empire, except that instead of being the edgy new challenging Way coming in, we are now perceived as the outmoded fuddy-duddies being swept aside. A four-pronged strategy is needed in the situation in which we now find ourselves.

Speak Out

First, in response to this situation, we should not do what some are doing, and give up or surrender or try to retreat back into our private religious ghetto. We should continue to advocate biblical positions publically, even politically, because they are right, wise, good, and the only policies conducive to healthy human thriving in the long run. The unpopularity of biblical positions that are pro-life, protraditional marriage, or pro-traditional family is simply an indicator of how badly those views need proclamation and defense. But we can no longer pretend that they are a default setting, or that they are in any way privileged because there was once a consensus more or less in their favor. That situation belongs to an increasingly remote past. Failure to recognize this fact is one of the reasons we keep losing. We're still fighting yesterday's battles.

Teach a Proper Perspective

Second, we must prioritize reading and hermeneutics, and the way they are taught, as keys to our ability to witness effectively to the truth in all other areas. You cannot very well argue that traditional marriage or the sanctity of life should be normative if norms are inconceivable to your audience as anything other than arbitrary impositions of power. Norms cannot be conceivable as anything other than arbitrary impositions of power if meaning (not to mention truth) is by definition in the eye of the beholder. So if you live in an environment where the very act of reading as taught by almost all those who should be our most proficient readers (i.e., English professors) seems to undercut the very concept of determinative meaning and reinforce the absolute sovereignty of the individual, you will have a hard time making norms seem conceivable, much less believable. When truth is nothing more than a fluid miasma of shifting perspectives, the exclusive claims of Christ might be accepted by a few but cannot be taken seriously by anyone.

We therefore need to be much more vigilant against all forms of the postmodern "hermeneutic of suspicion" and much more aggressive in making the case for authorial intent as the foundation of textual meaning. Can authors communicate with their readers in their texts? The people who tell you they cannot are saying this in texts in which they are doing, quite successfully, the very thing they deny is possible! The ultimately self-refuting nature of such a stance is something we need to hammer relentlessly. The English professor who believes that authors can communicate with their readers is now the most needed missionary on the planet, and sending him or her into the secular academy (or even the Christian school) is the most strategic mission strategy we can mount.³

Sadly, the church herself has become a mission field in this area. Does the Christian college you support have people on its English faculty who piously believe that deconstruction (for example) is just one more neutral technique to be applied to texts, that it is something Christians should "take seriously" and "learn from"? (Not

that I am advocating ignorance of it. People should be aware of the poisons in their cabinet!) You would be surprised at how many do. If you hire such people or contribute to their salaries or send your young people to study under them, you are aiding and abetting the Enemy. It is no exaggeration to say that the result will be more debased definitions, moral relativism, and brutally slaughtered babies.

The Importance of Art in Communication

Third, we must recognize the crucial role of the imagination alongside reason in cultural apologetics. Failure to take seriously the importance of literary art (and all the arts) in the formation of human minds and hearts was one of the reasons we were blind to the shift that took the ground out from under our feet until it was too late. We must not forget that the greatest apologist of the twentieth century was the greatest not only because he gave us the rational arguments of *Mere Christianity* and *Miracles* but also because he showed us what they looked like incarnate in the *Chronicles of Narnia* and the *Space Trilogy*—and most of all because in him reason and imagination were seamlessly integrated in one unified vision of the wholeness and the wholesomeness of Christian truth. We need more advocates who have learned such wholeness from writers such as C. S. Lewis.

How is such integration relevant to the culture wars? Exhortations to sexual faithfulness, for example, will be fully effective only if they flow from sound arguments for why God's commands really are the expression of His love for us rather than arbitrary prohibitions. And those rational arguments will be fully convincing only if they are accompanied by compelling portraits of such faithfulness that make it genuinely imaginable as the only path to human thriving and fulfillment.⁴

Walk Humbly

Fourth, we must adjust our rhetoric to address the audience that actually exists, not the one that was here two generations ago. We need to stop berating people for departing from a position they never held, and instead do the hard work of evangelizing and discipling them from scratch. Maybe from less than scratch. They are jaded and cynical about what they think Christianity is, and that is partly our fault—not because we were wrong but because we were (and are) stupid in our approach.

Here's an example of that stupidity: On my way to church I used to pass a billboard proclaiming a meeting in which the Christian Right was going to "take back America." Have we no idea how this message comes across to the multitudes of on believers who read it on a public billboard? It would only reinforce all their worst stereotypes and prejudices about us. Even as an in-house communiqué, it did not send quite the right message. We have to *win* America back before we can even begin to think of *taking* it back.

It's finally about recognizing what the real battle is, something we have not been

very good at. It is too late to preserve the American republic (we have to *restore* it). We have lost the opportunity to appeal to the old consensus and we need to stop acting like it is still there. We need to continue our political opposition to atrocities such as abortion and perversions such as same-sex marriage but we should stop putting any hope in it until we do better at the prior job of evangelism and discipleship. We cannot win the battles for theology, philosophy, ethics, and politics if we lose the battle for philology (literature and reading). If we don't understand these things, we will be fighting shadows on an empty field the Enemy has already abandoned for juicier prizes.

Better to wise up now than later.

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NOTES

- 1 "The Intentional Fallacy," in *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (1966; repr., Boston: Wadsworth, 2005), 1027–34.
- 2 For the fountainhead of postmodern theory, see Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Humanities," in *Critical Theory since Plato*, 1206–15. For an excellent evangelical critique, see Alan Jacobs, "Deconstruction," in *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal*, ed. Clarence Walhout and Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 172–98.
- 3 For further discussion of how to make such a defense and mount such a strategy, see my books *Inklings of Reality: Essays toward a Christian Philosophy of Letters*, 2nd ed. (Lynchburg, VA: Lantern Hollow Press, 2012), and *Reflections from Plato's Cave: Essays in Evangelical Philosophy* (Lynchburg, VA: Lantern Hollow Press, 2012).
- 4 For further discussion of how this kind of integration has been and can be done, see my book *Mere Humanity: G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien on the Human Condition* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2006), and my article, "The World of the Rings: Why Peter Jackson was Unable to Film Tolkien's Moral Tale," *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 26, 6 (November/December 2013): 14–16.