

# **Discerning the Times: How the Left influences the Church**

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It could be an understatement to say that we are living in extraordinary times. The global political landscape has seen significant transitions, the world is still struggling to get on top of the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrations and riots are continuing in many places, and progressive legislation is continuing to change the character of society. A common theme behind many of these changes is the upsurge of leftist ideology; in almost all institutions and areas of life one can observe the impact of left-wing agendas. Leftist ideology is a broad label and incorporates a range of ideas and movements including the new New Left, progressivism, neo-Marxism, critical race theory, Black Lives Matter, The Great Reset, Social Justice, etc. Culture is always in flux but the nature and the speed of the current shifts in society are remarkable. In this short study I want to reflect upon the impact of these social changes upon the church. It is necessary for the church to discern the times, to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, to realise that we are not just in the middle of a cultural war but are also under a massive spiritual assault.

Many liberal and conservative political commentators describe how leftist and neo-Marxist agendas have infiltrated many spheres of Western culture, undermining traditional Western values such as liberty, free speech, human rights, equal opportunity, democracy, and truth, etc. Again, it is not my intention to discuss the influence of left-wing thinking in Western society nor to promote a particular political view – whether progressive, conservative, or liberal – rather it is to describe the influence that the new cultural mindset is exerting on Christians and the church. The gospel of the glorious and exalted Lord, through his death and resurrection, has already ushered in a new and everlasting kingdom that is in the process of subjecting all anti-Christian ideologies and agendas whether conservative or progressive. According to the gospel, all anti-Christian political systems have already been condemned and are about to pass away. In this article my purpose is to point out that the new New Left or neo-Marxist ideology poses a much greater danger for the church than for society. Whether society tends to the right or to the left, it will continue to exist until the Day of Judgment; however, if the church succumbs to the leftist agenda it will cease to be the church.

How does the leftist agenda or neo-Marxist thought influence the church? Many Christians, as well as some churches and Christian institutions, seem to be unaware of the dangers. Christians, especially Christian leaders, must discern the times and understand the perils of our current social context. And then, Christians must formulate an adequate response to these present threats. Indeed, if we have done the first, we already have started to do the second, to be forewarned is to be forearmed. The leftist agenda subverts the church in at least four ways.

1) Firstly, **it diverts our attention away from people's real problem and from the real solution.** As mentioned above, the leftist agenda has pervaded all levels of society, everyone is affected by the new morality of permissiveness, the embrace of homosexuality, gender fluidity, political correctness, critical theory and social justice. On the surface, the terms that these causes adopt to promote their programs appear to be sound, just and respectable (e.g., human rights, justice, pro-choice, anti-discrimination, tolerance). However, the meaning of many of these terms has moved well beyond their traditional understanding and the mindset that they now convey are often opposed to biblical justice and morality. Churches have become hypersensitive to criticism, especially in the context of cancel culture and so have been eager to adopt the language and the causes of the left. Many are bending backwards to accommodate the surrounding *Zeitgeist* or spirit of the age. Christians desperately avoid all things that may cause offence, we want to be a part of the in crowd, we want to be cool and popular. Our language has changed, programs have been adjusted, teaching materials have been rewritten, and even vision and value statements have been altered to accord with the new cultural mindset. As a result, the focus of many churches and Christians have shifted from God's kingdom to a worldly kingdom, from our eternal destination in the world to come to our temporary abode, from the gospel message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins to the message of social justice.

No Christian will deny that issues of justice in society are important, but the biblical diagnosis of the human predicament does not focus on racism, gender equality, or the absence of human rights. Rather it proclaims the confronting message of individual sin and personal wickedness that reside in every one of us. The ultimate solution to society's ills is not social reform, nor equality of outcome, but rather the answer lies in the atoning death of Jesus through which sinners may be reconciled to God and then have the power to live righteous lives. In some cases, the leftist agenda has changed the focus and witness of the church from the gospel message of the cross to a social gospel, which is no gospel at all but a man-made religion that offers salvation by means of virtue signalling and good works. When the leftist agenda gains a foothold in the church, it tends to take over everything. It suppresses the offence of the cross and befuddles the witness of the church. The church becomes like the world and ceases to be light and salt. Of course, most churches do not deny the Christian message or traditional Christian terminology; the problem is the intermingling of the Christian message with worldly ideologies. Many leftist agendas have been baptised into the name of Christianity or have been clothed with a Christian garb. Just like the idolatrous worship of the Israelites at Sinai when they made a golden calf. Aaron encouraged the worshippers with the words, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" (Exod 32:4). Aaron did not prohibit worship, nor did he outright reject orthodox theology, rather he mixed covenantal worship with the customs of the day. The apostle John likewise warned the church, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 Jn 5:21). Children are easily susceptible to being deceived and led astray. We must be genuinely concerned when we perceive that the church is pursuing worldly agendas. Rather, we need to continue our focus on the Lord Jesus Christ, the crucified one, as our only hope for true renewal and peace.

2) Secondly, **the leftist agenda, by highlighting group identity, sows discord, division and suspicion.** Racism is a great evil and has been rightly condemned by Christians. So too, the suppression of women must be denounced and opposed. An important truth of the gospel is that Jesus came to break down the dividing lines between different races, genders and classes of people (Eph 2:11-18). Through the gospel, Christians are all one and equal in the Lord Jesus Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, etc. (Gal 3:28). For many decades Martin Luther King's vision "not to be judged by the colour of my skin but by the content of my character" has been the ideal. However, with neo-Marxism, anti-racism has become decidedly racist. Not being a racist is not enough, one must actively honour those of a certain colour and at the same time shame those of another colour. In the past we insisted that people must be appointed (or sacked) and promoted (or demoted) irrespective of the colour of their skin. However, with the new morality one's race or gender has become a major factor for promotion or demotion. This mindset has also infiltrated the church and Christian institutions. Needless to say, it breeds an "us versus them" mentality, which produces discord and a culture of suspicion. Paul urged us not to be ignorant of the wiles of the devil, who always wants to sow dissension and bring about division. When there was friction between the Hellenists and the Hebrews in the early church, the selection criteria for seven men to address the problem were a good reputation, being filled with the Holy Spirit and possessing wisdom (Acts 6:3). Interestingly, race or group identity was not one of them. We also note how Paul recommended several people for ministry functions irrespective of gender, class, or race (e.g., Rom 16:1-16; 1 Cor 16:10-19; Phil 4:2-3; Col 4:7-17).

3) Thirdly, **the leftist agenda blurs moral standards and shifts ethical boundaries.** The moral standards and expectations operating in Western society have changed markedly over the last few decades, especially in the area of sexuality. In this new morality sexual behaviour no longer has deep spiritual meaning, rather it's simply a physical act based on a consensual arrangement between any number of autonomous individuals. This new permissiveness in society has also infected the attitude and behaviour of many Christians. The new morality promotes a culture of death (e.g., abortion, assisted suicide, euthanasia and gay marriage) and attacks the traditional family structure. A survey published by the National Church Life Survey in 2011 indicated that around 50% of Christians do not think that sex before marriage is immoral. According to research published by the Christian Research Association in 2012, 44% of Christians consider that having an abortion is not morally wrong. More and more churches are accepting homosexual practices and blessing gay partnerships as a legitimate form of marriage. These trends clearly depart from the Bible's teaching on holiness and traditional Christian morality. The Scriptures call upon God's people to be separate and insist on holiness, without which no one will see God (1 Cor 6:9-10).

One characteristic of the new New Left, in contrast with the Old Left, is its attempt to occupy the moral high ground, which is very appealing to the young moral conscience. Within the church, the rejection of biblical moral standards is masked by covering the new morality with a Christian terminological cloak. In the name of "love", "acceptance" and "being non-judgmental", unholy

behaviour is not only tolerated but even justified. In the same way Satan tried to deceive Jesus by cloaking his temptations with the words of Scripture (Matt 4:1-11). Paul also warned us that the devil masquerades as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14). For postmodernists, an individual may determine his or her own morality, which is often judged by the consequences of actions, whether they are desirable or undesirable and not on the moral compass of the Bible. The new understanding of “tolerance” demands that we accept all opinions as equally valid, as not to do so will cause offence which must be avoided at all costs. Churches have become safe spaces rather than places where the truth is taught, where sin is exposed and where lies are uncovered. Those who oppose the new morality are branded as bigots and are censured, they are excluded and cancelled. As Christians, whose worldview and morality are based on the Bible, we must insist that God’s word is truth and that God’s standards of holiness do not change. Truth, by definition, involves morality. In the Bible we read, “Your righteousness is righteous forever, and your law is true” (Ps 119:142), and “The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever” (Ps 119:160). The Bible denounces those who call evil good and good evil (Isaiah 5:20). Today, the world thinks it can create its own “truth” and define its own “morality” according to humanistic and hedonistic presuppositions. The inevitable result is not human flourishing but degeneration, exploitation and hopelessness. As Christians, we should not fall into the same labyrinth of relativism and despair.

4) Finally, and perhaps most importantly, **the leftist mindset subtly supplants a biblical worldview with a secular or humanist one.** The Devil’s aim is to replace the foundation of Christianity; once the foundation is destroyed, sooner or later the whole house will come tumbling down. It is no secret that our universities, especially in the humanities and social studies departments, have become centres for the teaching and promulgation of leftist ideologies. These institutions have trained the teachers of our public and private schools. Today, education departments are among the most left leaning institutions in government bureaucracy. In other words, for decades the leftist agenda has been advocated in the public school system, inculcating the secular and humanist worldview upon the minds of our youth. Many Christian parents and church leaders have been unaware of this massive cultural shift that has taken place in our schools, starting around two or three decades ago. It takes years for a worldview to form and establish itself in the minds of the populace, but once it is established it is exceedingly difficult to remove. Leftist ideology is not just a collection of arbitrary ideas, it has become a quasi-religious worldview with ardent devotees. I am amazed to observe how some Christians who are quite disinterested in topics related to the gospel, theology, or the Bible, suddenly become passionate advocates of the leftist agenda when the conversation turns to current affairs. Christianity is only one possible way of life out of many choices. And one is even free to choose what to accept and what to reject from the content of biblical revelation. The role of the Christian is just to be nice, to judge no one, and to acknowledge every new ideology and movement that commandeers some of our buzzwords as legitimate. Needless to say, this kind of mindset has saved no one.

Rather, in the New Testament Jesus and the apostles not only challenged the presuppositions of their listeners head on, but they also exposed their idolatry, inconsistency and immoral behaviour. To those who strive to create their own utopia on earth Jesus asked, “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” Instead, Jesus announced a blessing on those who are poor for the sake of the kingdom of God (Luke 6:20). If our primary focus is on this life then we are of all people most to be pitied, for everything will pass away. For a hedonistic society and a worldly church, suffering is to be avoided at all cost, but for Paul cross bearing or sacrifice is an integral part of the Christian life (1 Cor 1:23; 2 Cor 1:5; Phil 1:29). In the letter to the Romans, Paul exposed the immorality of society as a form of judgment from God (Rom 1:24-32) and exhorted Christians to stop being conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom 12:1-2). In the letter to the Corinthians, Paul dealt decisively with sexual immorality, teaching that it defiles the church and that the unrepentant should be excommunicated (1 Cor 5-6). It is only through the conviction of sin, that people will turn to the Saviour. For Jesus and Paul, there is a God who is holy and righteous, and who also holds people to account. Life does not consist in the abundance of one’s possessions (Luke 12:14), life is more than food and the body is more than clothing (Luke 12:23); rather, the followers of Jesus are to focus their minds on the kingdom values of poverty, meekness, righteousness, purity, peace and persecution.

We are living in precarious times and many menacing clouds on the horizon are steadily drifting towards us. Western society has changed from being broadly based on a biblical worldview and morality to being antagonistic towards the gospel. And it is unlikely that those who have tasted the blessings of the gospel will soon come to repentance and faith again. Like a mutating germ becoming more virulent and more resistant to antibiotics, so too, humanly speaking, the prognosis for society and the church is not encouraging. Christians need to be serious students of the Bible and church history and must discern the times in which we are living. We need to prepare for the storm that is about to burst over us. We need to prepare for absurd accusations and charges – what the early church experienced we may experience again. We will be called haters and bigots, we will be cancelled and ostracized, we will be regarded as being uninformed and as the scum of society.

Yet, those who are called to be saints do not need to fear. In fact, the onslaught of persecution may be a blessing, for during persecution the dividing lines between light and darkness are more easily discernible. When the winds blow most strongly the chaff is removed from the wheat. Much more dangerous is the subtle but insidious creep of the spirit of the world in the church. Like a quietly growing cancer, the patient does not realise that he or she is slowly being poisoned from the inside. The glorious Lord of the church may well use persecution to purify the church so that Christians may again shine like gold in society, attracting those who yearn for truth, holiness and everlasting life. The only one we need to please is our God and our Lord Jesus Christ, preferring his honour above that of man. Our Lord is in heaven and he controls nation states, corporations and society to confound the plans of the ungodly; and at the same time, he is shepherding his sheep and building his kingdom. Sooner or later, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is the Lord of glory.