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Legislators and Gladiators

Polling sites closed several hours ago, and based on trends in early returns, President Bush will go to bed tonight with a smile on his face. It appears that a majority of voters are confident of his leadership and have rewarded his party with control of both houses of Congress. In terms of stalled items including the Homeland Security measure and a stable of well qualified judicial nominees, this win for Bush is huge.

But in far too many homes tonight, the general election is little more than a scroll across the screen during the sit-coms. Sadly, many Christians observe elections and politics with a detachment—due in no small part—to a gnawing feeling that, like the preacher of Ecclesiastes, “all is vanity!” What with one ruling after another favoring vice over virtue, it must be true that we are “Slouching towards Gomorrah.” So why bother being involved?

Chuck Colson believes there are many reasons for Christians to be involved in their culture, whether to do so seems promising or futile. In his book, *Loving God*, Colson tells the story of a pious man in ancient times who dared to challenge Rome. Here is his story:

“In the fourth century there lived an Asiatic monk who had spent most of his life in a remote community of prayer, raising vegetables for the cloister kitchen. When he was not tending his garden spot, he was fulfilling his vocation of study and prayer.

Then one day this monk named Telemachus felt that the Lord wanted him to go to Rome, the capital of the world—the busiest, wealthiest, biggest city in the world. Telemachus had no idea why he should go there, and he was terrified at the thought. But as he prayed, God’s directive became clear.

How bewildered the little monk must have been as he set out on the long journey, on foot, over dusty roads westward, everything he owned on his back. Why was he going? He had no idea. But obediently, he went.

Telemachus arrived in Rome during the holiday festival. You may know that the Roman rulers kept the ghettos quiet in those days by providing free bread and special entertainment called circuses. At the time Telemachus arrived the city was also bustling with excitement over the recent Roman victory over the Goths. In the midst of this jubilant commotion, the monk looked for clues as to why God had brought him there, for he had no other guidance, not even a superior in a religious order to contact.

Perhaps, he thought, it is not sheer coincidence that I have arrived at this festival time. Perhaps God has some special role for me to play.

So Telemachus let the crowds guide him, and the stream of humanity soon led him into the Coliseum where the gladiator contests were to be staged. He could hear the cries of the animals in their cages beneath the floor of the great arena and the clamor of the contestants preparing to do battle.”

“The gladiators marched into the arena, saluted the emperor, and shouted, ‘We who are about to die salute thee.’ Telemachus shuddered. He had never heard of gladiator games before, but had a premonition of awful violence.

The crowd had come to cheer men who, for no reason other than amusement, would murder each other. Human lives were offered for entertainment. As the monk realized what was going to happen, he realized he could not sit still and watch such savagery. Neither could he leave and forget. He jumped to the top of the perimeter wall and cried, ‘In the name of Christ, forbear!’

The fighting began, of course. No one paid the slightest heed to the puny voice. So Telemachus pattered down the stone steps and leapt onto the sandy floor of the arena. He made a comic figure—a scrawny man in a monk’s habit dashing back and forth between muscular, armed athletes. One gladiator sent him sprawling with a blow from his shield, directing him back to his seat. It was a rough gesture, though almost a kind one. The crowd roared.

But Telemachus refused to stop. He rushed into the way of those trying to fight, shouting again, ‘In the name of Christ, forbear!’ The crowd began to laugh and cheer him on, perhaps thinking him part of the entertainment.

Then his movement blocked the vision of one of the contestants; the gladiator saw a blow coming just in time. Furious now, the crowd began to cry for the interloper’s blood.

‘Run him through,’ they screamed.

The gladiator he had blocked raised his sword and with a flash of steel struck Telemachus, slashing down across his chest and into his stomach. The little monk gasped once more, ‘In the name of Christ, forbear.’

Then a strange thing occurred. As the two gladiators and the crowd focused on the still form on the suddenly crimson sand, the arena grew deathly quiet. In the silence, someone in the top tier got up and walked out. Another followed. All over the arena, spectators began to leave, until the huge stadium was emptied.

There were other forces at work, of course, but that innocent figure lying in the pool of blood crystallized the opposition, and that was the last gladiatorial contest in the Roman Coliseum. Never again did men kill each other for the crowds’ entertainment in the Roman arena.”¹

Like Telemachus, there are many today whose hearts are pierced for the afflicted. Their cry of forbearance is for the little ones who are destroyed in the womb or beheaded and stripped of usable body parts at the moment of birth. They cry out for the young who are defiled by Internet porn and the vulnerable who are persuaded at school to try “safe” fornication or sodomy.

Both scorned and ignored, these valiant ones plead before magistrates on behalf of the innocent. They speak against “no-fault” divorce, expanded gambling, free needles for addicts, and sex-ed programs that serve up contraceptives and abortions to children without parental involvement.

Sure—it is commendable that we vote. But God forgive us if that’s the best we can offer.

Rick Forcier

Executive Director

¹ Loving God, Charles Colson, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1983, pg.242-3