Reclaiming Endangered Virtues

Bob Perry

Michael Phillips is not the type of guy who would start a fight. Nor is he one to hype apocalyptic Chicken Little stories. He's not even political. So, when a calm, measured thinker like him compares our present cultural situation to pre-World War II Germany, it's a good idea to stop and listen to what he's saying. He makes his point very clear in the opening of his new book, *Endangered Virtues and the Coming Ideological War*:

> Progressivism has declared war on its adversaries. [No one would] call it a phony war. It's real enough. But compared to what is coming, it may be, [that] "We ain't seen nothing yet." We are *in* the ideological war, and it will get worse … How is the church, and how are individual Christians meeting the changes of our time? … Silence, neutrality, and docile compliance will not be an option much longer.[1] (emphasis in the original)

Phillips has been writing in the Christian marketplace since 1977 and has sold over seven million books, mostly fiction. But when he read Rod Dreher's *Live Not By Lies*, something struck a nerve in him that compelled him to delve into the non-fiction, cultural-political genre and take a stand for traditional virtues—namely, Dreher's warnings about "soft totalitarianism" and his comparison of the situations that confront us in "woke" culture to Alexander Solzhenitsyn's 1947 admonition that those who "live not by lies" cannot:

> say, write, affirm, or distribute anything that distorts the truth; participate in any collective action unless he truly believed in the cause; take part in a meeting or discussion that is closed and not open to the truth; vote for any unworthy candidate; support journalism that distorts or hides facts; and remain at an event or in a discussion when he heard lies, ideological drivel, or propaganda.[2]

As Phillips notes, making a claim like that today would prohibit participation in most any around-the-water-cooler discussion at work, or even acquiescence when watching the evening news. But our refusal to accept or participate in nonsense is a local reaction to something much bigger. If politics is the arena where worldviews clash, we are engaged in more than a disagreement about how to approach diverging policy goals.

We are on the road to ideological warfare.

The battle will not be won through any fraudulent, hollow slogans or virtue-signaling. Effecting real change is hard. And it will take distinctly virtuous people to make it happen.

The Culture Makes His Case

As if on cue, the culture has done its best to prove Phillips's point. This past summer, fully naked drag queens paraded through New York City chanting, "We're here, we're queer, we're coming for your children."[3] Meanwhile, in San Francisco, the "San Francisco Gay Men's Choir" uploaded a YouTube video featuring dozens of men threatening the same in song.[4]

More recently, we've witnessed the presidents of Harvard, MIT, and the University of Pennsylvania—administrators of places where speech that includes unapproved pronouns, questions abortion, or claims that "all lives matter" in an email is considered a micro-aggressive threat of "violence" and constitutes grounds for ejecting the transgressor from campus. But these same administrators consider calls for genocide against the Jews — *actual threats of real violence* — "context dependent."[5]

Rod Dreher explains that the Ivy League Presidents' reluctance to tell the truth should come as no surprise.

> This **is exactly how soft totalitarianism works.** "Soft" because there are no government agents standing over them with guns to their heads forcing them to act on this profoundly illiberal, racist ideology—but it is totalitarianism nonetheless … This appalling display reveals once again that the American ruling class is morally bankrupt … You wonder why all the American elites are on the same side ideologically? Because they were trained at these institutions. Because the ideology into which they have been groomed is their normal. Because dissent is not allowed.[6]

Michael Phillips's book is the antidote for this kind of moral bankruptcy. It is a call for courageous Christians to shun the cowardly silence. It's an exhortation to stand up and say, "No more."

Virtues and Unvirtues

Phillips's approach begins by reminding us of what it means to be virtuous. Contrary to the truth-denying doublespeak generated by postmodern relativism, the virtues can be defined. And so can their opposites. Phillips starts off doing just that. He offers the reader a combination of biblical wisdom and the clarity of philosophical and political giants who have influenced him. His goal is to illuminate:

> "… the divide between the virtue [being described] and what I call the 'unvirtue' of a nation and its people … Virtue *requires* reading the signs of the times and discerning what is occurring in our cultural world at our own particular time in history."[7] (emphasis in original)

The result is an engaging discussion brought by a Christian man who has thought deeply about important things. In each offering, Phillips provides the reader with practical applications of what it looks like to live out the virtue being discussed. And with it, he warns of the ramifications that will follow for those who ignore them. In each case, he seamlessly blends biblical truth with examples from what is going on every day in the world around us. The result is a clear, accessible treatment of our cultural predicament and advice about the kind of person each of us needs to be to navigate it well.

Disengaged Engagement

We would be indebted to Michael Phillips if he had merely left us with this clear exposition of what it means to be virtuous. But he doesn't stop there. His final section gives six principles for putting the virtues into practice. His strategy of "disengaged engagement" reflects our call to be *in*, but not *of*, the world—to be "visibly distinct." Here, Phillips's approach becomes personal.

His view is that, if there is to be change in the virtuousness of the broader culture, we cannot look to the elites to lead us to it. Both virtue and *unvirtue* are contagious. The antidote to the chaos we see around us must percolate from the bottom up and from the inside out. And that means every one of us needs to get to work.

The real virtuousness we must cultivate and transmit is built on the objectively defined principles of the authority of Scripture; God's character, nature, and purposes; and good old fashioned common sense. To live virtuously is to internalize the wisdom of these treasures. It demands that those who practice it call out its forgeries, eschew politics as its medium, demand integrity and truthfulness in ourselves and in others, and stand in the cultural gap with both courage and empathy. If we can incorporate these practices in our lives, we will sow the seeds of virtue.

Michael Phillips offers no illusion that the conflict will be an easy one to win. Fighting wars—even ideological wars—is painful, dark, and dangerous work. But sometimes it is immoral *not* to go to war. We owe a debt of gratitude to Michael Phillips for unapologetically reminding us of that simple fact.

Follow Up

Michael Phillips followed up on *Endangered Virtues* with a fictional account of a future America in the throes of ideological war. The books is titled *The Invisible War: Tribulation Cult Book 1*. The story centers on four college friends who follow

divergent life paths — two Christians who become ministers and their liberal counterparts who rise to the summit of world politics. The journeys of the four highlight many interconnected themes through the lives of men and women who must decide where they stand and what role the church is meant to play as the nation increasingly splits along liberal and conservative lines. *The Invisible War* was published in February, 2024.

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[1] Michael Phillips, *Endangered Virtues: and the Coming Ideological War* (Sterling, VA, Fidelis Publishing, 2023), pp. 5-6.

[2] Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "Live Not by Lies," *The Solzhenitsyn Reader: 1947-2005* (Wilmington, DE, ISI Books, 2009), p. 559.

[3] YouTube: "Pride Chant: We're Coming for Your Children," available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xm08CkYoL2U

[4] YouTube: "Creepy Gay Choir Sings, 'We're Coming for Your Children,'" available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xm08CkYoL2U

[5] Rod Dreher, "Soft Totalitarianism Comes to Washington," *Rod Dreher's Diary*, available on Substack at: https://roddreher.substack.com/p/soft-totalitarianism-comes-washington

[6] Ibid.

[7] Phillips, p. 5, 54.