

*Clash of Swords*

We won't turn the world rightside-up without a struggle.

# CLASH OF SWORDS



*A ReVision Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe*

T . M . M O O R E

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

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A *ReVision* Resource from The Fellowship of Ailbe  
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Contents

Welcome to <i>Clash of Swords</i>	4
1 A Dangerous Place to Stand	5
2 A Conflict of Claims	7
3 A Conflict of Hopes	9
4 A Conflict of Ethics	11
5 A Conflict of Cultures	13
6 A Conflict of Truth	15
7 Preparing for Conflict	17

## Welcome to *Clash of Swords*

Welcome to *Clash of Swords*, a preview of what to expect as the Christian worldview intersects and interacts with the worldviews of our unbelieving age. *Clash of Swords* is part 6 of a 6-part series on the Christian and civil government. Other titles in the series include:

*Two Swords*  
*God's Servant for Good*  
*The Limits of Politics*  
*Christians and Public Service*  
*When Not to Obey*

In our day, as in many others, civil government has a vested interest in what people believe and how they live. Civil government is the most active promulgator of the secular worldview, investing its resources and energies in education, science, the arts, the environment, business, the media, and many other sectors of society, to encourage a way of life grounded in materialism and naturalism and committed to the central importance of government as the primary agency responsible for human wellbeing.

It stands to reason, given this scenario, that those who hold to a Christian worldview will find themselves at odds with the agenda and programs of government from time to time. A clash of swords is inevitable between those who wield the Sword of the Spirit and those who incline to the sword of men. But what will that look like? What forms can we expect this conflict to take? And how can we prepare to stand firm on the Word of God in the midst of such conflicts?

This is the focus of this final series in our study of a Biblical view of government.

Like the other studies in this series, *Clash of Swords* has been developed for individual or group use.

We are happy to provide this resource for your use at no charge. If you find these, or other resources of The Fellowship of Ailbe, helpful in your walk with and work for the Lord, please consider sending a gift to support this work and help us extend our outreach to others. You can donate at our website, [www.ailbe.org](http://www.ailbe.org), or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

May the Lord bless you as you take up this study of the Lordship of Christ, and how He works to express that through the right working of civil government.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 A Dangerous Place to Stand

*“...and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus.” Acts 17.7*

*“You therefore, son of man, prophesy,  
And strike your hands together.  
The third time let the sword do double damage.” Ezekiel 21.14*

### *The power of Rome*

The world is ruled by two swords – the sword of men, which is human government, and the Sword of God, which is the Sword of the Spirit, the Holy Word of God. In every generation, those swords have clashed; and we should expect these clashes to be not infrequent in our own day, when governments invest so much of their energy and resources promoting and enforcing a secular and materialistic worldview.

In every generation and culture the clash of swords has been present, and those who profess faith in Christ and are living within the framework of His Kingdom must strive with all their strength for the Sword of God to prevail.

But that prevailing will not occur except through periods of conflict and turmoil.

In the Roman Empire during the two centuries following the resurrection of Jesus Christ, there was no more dangerous place to stand than in opposition to the decrees of Caesar. The Roman Emperor’s authority was regarded as absolute and final. We see how easily Pilate was cowed into violating his own conscience and casting aside the advice of his wife when the crowds warned that if he let Jesus go he would be no friend of Caesar.

The power of Rome was maintained through a system of puppet monarchies, governorships, and military jurisdictions. While Rome was willing to allow local authorities to maintain order, ensure the collection of revenues, and otherwise further and support the interests of the Empire, disciplined and well-armed troops stood ever at the ready to suppress and destroy any opposition to Caesar. When Paul was sent from Jerusalem to Caesarea, 470 soldiers accompanied him. And we can be sure the temporary loss of this considerable contingent did not significantly diminish the number of soldiers still available to maintain Rome’s interests in Jerusalem (Acts 23.23).

### *Christians and Rome*

Thus, to be charged in public with “opposing the dogmas of Caesar” – the literal translation of our text – was no casual matter. The only thing worse than being the focus of such a charge was to be charged also with “practicing” – again, our text – “another king.”

Caesar was the only legitimate and ultimate king in Rome’s jurisdiction. More than that, Caesar was nearly a god, with sole authority, working through the Roman Senate, to grant a measure of legitimacy to the many religious sects that were scattered around the Empire. No religious sect which denied the Emperor’s authority, contravened his decrees, and publicly pledged loyalty to another king would be long tolerated.

The first Christians – such as Paul and those who accompanied him in Thessalonica – were not political activists. They did not draw up political agendas, plot the overthrow or subvert the authority of local magistrates, or call for the dismantling of the Empire. Indeed, the first Christians taught that Roman government was divinely established and intended by God Himself for the good of humankind, as we have seen (Rom. 13.1-4).

*Necessarily at odds*

But the message the first Christians proclaimed, and the lives they pursued consistent with that message, were easily enough interpreted as being a threat to the *status quo*.

Paul and the early Christians proclaimed the advent of a new Empire. They insisted that a new and eternal King had taken His seat in the heavenly realms – above Caesar and even above all gods and deities, men and nations. They declared that this King was calling all people to repent and profess loving allegiance to Him, and to seek the progress of *His* rule as their highest priority in life. And they showed by their lives of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit that they were not your typical citizen of the political regime maintained by Rome.

So, it's no wonder that, when the people of Thessalonica heard this charge – that the Christians were practicing another King, Whose name was Jesus – they “were disturbed.” This rebellion, this opposition to Caesar, was happening in their own city, and Roman retribution against incipient rebellions was typically not very discriminating. Collateral damage was not only inevitable, but intentional.

The first Christians were indeed turning their world upside-down, because they understood, believed, lived, and proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom and the reality and inescapability of the Kingship of Jesus Christ.

And that message and manner of life, we can be certain, will “disturb” the Caesars of every age. Clashes between the Sword of the Spirit and the sword of men are inevitable, and we need to prepare well to engage them.

*For reflection*

1. How many different ways can you identify that government actively supports a secular and material worldview in our day?
2. What does it mean to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness in every area of your life? Can you see how doing so might bring you into conflict with people who hold a different view of life?
3. What are your goals for this study? What do you hope to learn?

*Next steps: What does it mean to “practice” Jesus as King in your life each day? Talk with a fellow believer about this question. In what ways does your local church work to equip you for such a way of life?*

*Prayer:*

## 2 A Conflict of Claims

*And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things.* Acts 17.8

*Let the saints be joyful in glory;  
Let them sing aloud on their beds.  
Let the high praises of God be in their mouth,  
And a two-edged sword in their hand,  
To execute vengeance on the nations,  
And punishments on the peoples;  
To bind their kings with chains,  
And their nobles with fetters of iron;  
To execute on them the written judgment—  
This honor have all His saints.* Psalm 149.5-9

### *A new King*

It's not surprising that Christianity, truly lived and boldly proclaimed, should pose a threat to the social and cultural *status quo*, and to the political powers and cultural elites who maintain that *status quo*. From at least the time of Abraham, believers have taken the Sword of the Spirit into battle against all the swords of men, to further the divine economy and agenda.

In first-century Rome the powers-that-be were content for Christianity to have a place in the Empire, as long as its followers understood the rules of the game. Adherents of many strange religious cults populated the subject nations of Rome, and each sect enjoyed a certain legitimacy, because each of them constituted an element of the social glue which held the pastiche of Empire together. As long as those religions did not challenge the authority of Rome and the supremacy of the Emperor, they were free to practice their beliefs. Even the Jews were allowed to practice their faith, because it was understood by Roman authorities that their exalted claims of sovereignty for their God applied only to His chosen people. And the Romans had demonstrated to their own satisfaction that they could manage that.

Everything changed when Christianity broke out in the cities of the Empire.

Christians claimed that their God had come among men for their salvation, had been crucified and buried, but rose again for the redemption of the world. He is now, they insisted, exalted as King Jesus, and all nations and rulers are now called to repent of their sins and submit joyfully to Him, or be trampled under His feet.

Such claims had not been noised about before in the cities of the Empire, and, as in Thessalonica, those making such claims were greeted by trouble and opposition wherever they appeared.

### *Authority*

Which of the claims of Christianity do people find so offensive? Which claims tend to clash most pointedly with the preferred worldviews of any age? In particular, what is it about the Gospel which is likely to rankle those hearing it in our own day? Let me mention three.

The first is a claim relative to *authority*. Jesus Christ claims ultimate authority to rule over all nations, peoples, men, and women, and to command and judge them according to the teachings of His Word, which is the Sword of the Spirit. Such a claim is, we might say, somewhat less than fashionable in our highly individualistic, relativistic, and pragmatic age, especially to those entrusted with the sword of men and the power to govern nations.

To insist that Jesus Christ is Truth and His Word is the touchstone for all truth and life is to attack the very heart of radical individualism, the putative sovereignty of reason and science, and the growing autonomy and power of many national governments. To the extent that Christians make this claim they can expect to be opposed, challenged, and worse.

*Repentance*

The second claim is that of *repentance*. The Gospel of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ insists on repentance and faith in Christ as the entry point for Kingdom life and as the ongoing duty of all.

But repentance involves admitting wrong, displaying weakness, and submitting to the teachings, claims, and authority of the Sword of the Spirit. Such disciplines do not sit well with our self-serving and self-sufficient age.

*Ethics*

Finally, the Gospel claims to bring with it a *new ethic* which comes to expression in every area of life as Christ makes all things new in and through us. The Christian ethic demands that we yield sovereignty to Jesus in all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities; that we bring our thinking, affections, and values into line with His; and that we give ourselves diligently to the task of bringing His salvation, Truth, and righteousness to light in every area of our lives.

Christianity, in short, demands the replacement of one worldview – worn out and unsatisfying – with another – eternal, unfailing, and full of blessing. Many will be extremely reluctant to make that substitution; only the grace of God can move them to do so.

The claims of Christ and the Gospel which so disturbed the good citizens of the Roman Empire will likewise trouble people in our day – that is, when we wield the two-edged Sword entrusted to us, making its claims boldly and living them out convincingly.

*For reflection*

1. How would you summarize the basic claims of the secular and materialistic worldview which is pervasive throughout the West?
2. What are some ways the Christian worldview poses a challenge to the worldview of the Western world?
3. In what ways have you experienced this conflict of claims in your own life as a follower of Christ?

*Next steps: How can believers encourage one another to greater consistency in living under the authority of Christ, in repentance, and for the greater realization of the ethics of Christ? Talk with some friends about this question.*

*Prayer:*



### 3 A Conflict of Hopes

*Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." Acts 17.2, 3*

*And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God... Ephesians 6.17*

#### *Contrasting hopes*

One area of conflict that arises between the Christian worldview and other worldviews relates to the great hope of each.

Increasingly in our society, the highest hope and fondest aspiration of the secular and materialist worldview is a world without want, where each person is free to prosper according to his desire and ability. This agenda has been adopted, in one form or another, by every Western government; and it is the basic organizing idea of the curriculum in America's public schools and a prominent item on the agenda of politicians. For secular men and women, living under the protection of the sword of men, there is no higher or greater hope than personal peace and prosperity.

Prosperity within the secular worldview is defined in individual and material terms – as much of the good life as any person might want or be able to enjoy while making room for others to pursue the same quest. This is the hope of people who live, in Solomon's words, "under the sun." They can envision nothing higher than personal material prosperity, and the sense of wellbeing that comes with it; and they will be wary of any worldview which insists that there are other, higher aims in life, the attaining of which demands sacrifice and self-denial.

The secular worldview takes as its highest hope the glorification of man – again, defined in strictly personal and material terms – while the Christian worldview hopes in the glory of God. Those who hold to the Christian worldview are called to make any sacrifice and endure any trial in the pursuit of that great hope.

#### *Everything in its proper place*

It's not that the Christian worldview despises things and wealth. It doesn't. It simply insists that these be kept in their proper place, "under the heavens," and that the pursuit and use of material prosperity be subject to the demands of the Gospel. Love for God requires that Christians hope to please Him, not merely themselves or any other man, and that they not hold their material possessions too tightly, lest they fail to love their neighbors as themselves.

But in the secular worldview, in an economy of getting-and-spending, while, because of God's common grace, many generous and caring people may be found, in the main, such things as self-denial or sacrifice on behalf of others, and giving generously and consistently to relieve the distress of others do not constitute a driving force or defining motif. Instead, they are more on the order of something to make us feel good about ourselves, no matter how meager our practice of them. The goal of a free and prosperous society is not pursued by appeals to the hearts and minds of a secular public, but by wielding political power in an agenda of regulations, entitlements, and redistribution of wealth.

#### *A challenge to their hopes*

The people who resisted the Apostle Paul and sought to enlist Caesar in silencing him were threatened by his preaching the hope of the resurrection. The hope of the Jews was in the preservation of their distinct identity through dutiful adherence to traditions and laws. The hope of the Romans was for an orderly and peaceful economy on earth where the pleasures and comfort of the few were achieved by the subjugation of the many.

## *Clash of Swords*

When Paul came, pointing men to the hope of the resurrection, announcing the coming of a Kingdom where all are equal before the Lord, and calling into question existing definitions of the good life, it was inevitable that he would find himself at odds with the power brokers of his day, Jewish and Roman alike.

The Gospel, in fact, goes so far as to insist that those who do not know the Lord are, in this world, *without* any real or reliable hope (Eph. 2.12). It makes a mockery of every human idol and teaches that the only true and lasting hope is to be found in the glory of God, known and lived (Rom. 5.1, 2; 2 Cor. 3.12-18; 1 Cor. 10.31).

Such notions trouble the hearts and pique the souls of those whom God is preparing for salvation, and so we must continue to insist on them, and to live out the hope which is ours.

But to the devoted secularist, the committed materialist, and the cultural elites whose wellbeing depends on the gullibility of the masses, maintained by the skillful wielding of the sword of men, exposing and denouncing the idols and false hopes of our secular culture will be received as a provocation deserving stiff resistance. The Sword of the Spirit will clash with the sword of men over the question of mankind's great hope, and we must be prepared to stand firm, taking the Sword of the Spirit joyfully into every arena of life.

Like Paul, we must embrace the Christian hope and live and proclaim it boldly, knowing as we do that conflict with our contemporaries is inevitable.

### *For reflection*

1. Paul says that believers stand in the hope of God's glory (Rom. 5.1, 2). What does this mean to you? How do you experience this hope?
2. How do the media, politicians, and the public schools of the land promote the idea of peace and prosperity as a person's highest hope? How do they resist the hope claims of the Gospel?
3. "The Sword of the Spirit will clash with the sword of men over the question of mankind's great hope, and we must be prepared to stand firm, taking the Sword of the Spirit joyfully into every arena of life." What does this require of us as believers?

*Next steps: How is it apparent to the people you see each week that you live a different hope than that which they are pursuing (1 Pet. 3.15)?*

*Prayer:*

## 4 A Conflict of Ethics

*“These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.” Acts 17.6*

*For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Hebrews 4.12*

*Bucking the settled worldview*

In Paul’s day, “opposing the dogmas of Caesar” was tantamount to denying and bucking the settled worldview of the civilized world. Paul wielded the Sword of the Spirit even, when necessary, against the sword of Caesar and his cosmopolitan agenda.

Like the character “Sportin’ Life” in Gershwin’s musical, *Porgy and Bess*, Paul’s message to the smug and settled cultural elites of his day was, “It ain’t necessarily so.” And, in fact, as he and his companions lived, preached, and taught the Gospel of the Kingdom, they showed people a better, truer, more fruitful and satisfying way of living, and, in the process, challenged the ethical claims of the worldviews of their day.

Paul trusted the Sword of the Spirit to reach the hearts and minds of the people of His day, and He wielded it boldly, consistently, and unapologetically.

Jewish tradition was empty, Paul declared, and Rome had no power to subject those who are free in Jesus Christ to their pragmatic way of living. No wonder Jews and Romans alike declared that he and his ilk were turning the world upside-down.

New life in Jesus Christ meant precisely that. Among the Christians a new ethic of love, grounded in the precepts of God’s Law, was unleashed in the world by the power of God’s Spirit. To be sure, the world had never seen anything like it. Suddenly people from every strata of society were in one another’s homes, studying and worshiping together, sharing their possessions with those in need, embracing one another in the Name of the Lord, and speaking excitedly about new life in Jesus. Such a way of life – this life of self-denial and caring for one another – could only cause neighbors and local officials to wonder about the power that might be motivating this.

*Set-asides*

At the same time, those who were coming to faith in Christ began to lay aside certain practices which, in the light of God’s Law, they saw to be offensive to God and contrary to His good and perfect will. People’s sexual behavior changed. Consuming large quantities of food and alcohol no longer held them in thrall.

In Ephesus, local silversmiths who made their living selling images of false deities, feared they might be soon out of work (Acts 19).

The first Christians became more industrious, more attentive to their spouses and families, and earnest in the pursuit of good works. They started the ball rolling toward the elimination of slavery, the elevation of women, the protection of children, and the rights to property and freedom for all.

Such changes in behavior not only caused people to wonder, but, in many cases, caused them to react. For, in the light of this new ethic of moral self-denial, their own fleshly and indulgent ways were exposed and called into question, if not openly condemned. The economic and social order managed under the sword of men was now being challenged and overturned by those who wielded the Sword of the Spirit.

*Illuminating the darkness*

Light has a curious way of illuminating questionable practices carried on in the darkness. Jesus explained that men love darkness, because their deeds are evil. When the first Christians began to know the power of God's Spirit, training them for holiness according to the teaching of God's Law (Ezek. 36.26, 27), they "lit up" the dark world around them, exposing evil deeds that had long been accepted as normal, and heaping condemnation on the heads of those who determined to preserve the *status quo* at all costs (1 Jn. 2.8).

The result, as Peter explained in his two epistles, was conflict, issuing in persecution. We have no reason to think that this should have changed for our own day.

I have often been asked why Christians in America don't suffer persecution. Jesus and Paul both taught us to expect it; Peter said it was not a "strange" thing to happen to devoted followers of the Lord. And here, perhaps, is where the answer lies. Survey and poll after survey and poll find that the ethics practiced by most Christians today do not cause them to stand out against the dark background of our secular age. In our neighborhoods, communities, work places, and schools, Christians seem to fit right in with the ethical agenda of our unbelieving age.

Rather than wielding the Sword of the Spirit in our everyday lives, our culture, and our communities, we are leaving it sheathed on the bed table at home, as we march in lock-step with the spirit of the age and sword of men.

But if we ever decide truly to *devote* ourselves to following Jesus, walking in the light as He is in the light, we may soon enough begin to see that ancient conflict of ethics and worldviews flaring up around us once again.

*For reflection*

1. How would you describe the role of the Law of God in your walk with the Lord?
2. Would you say that believers today are overturning the dominant culture or being overturned by it? Explain.
3. Why do believers find it so difficult to live a consistent Christian ethic amid the secular, materialistic, and individualistic spirit of our age?

*Next steps: Christian ethics, beginning with the Law of God, speaks to every area of life. In what ways does your church work to equip its members to live the Christian ethic? Talk with a pastor or church leader about this question.*

*Prayer:*

## 5 A Conflict of Cultures

*“These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.” Acts 17.6*

*For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ...*  
2 Corinthians 10.4, 5

### *Transformed culture*

The cultural world of ancient Rome was a wonder, to say the least.

Wherever one traveled in the Roman Empire he could experience the benefits of Roman culture. Augustine enumerated many of these toward the end of his sweeping and majestic work, *City of God*. He attributed Rome’s cultural grandeur to the grace of God. As he wrote, “man’s invention has brought forth so many and such rare sciences and arts...that the excellency of his capacity makes the rare goodness of his creation apparent, even when he goes about things that are either superfluous or pernicious, and shows from what an excellent gift he has these inventions and practices of his.”

Of course, Augustine did not commend all of Roman culture: He condemned in particular the lurid stage plays, savage gladiatorial combats, rampant idolatry, and corrupt practices of educators and government at all levels. In *City of God* Augustine, like many of his Christian contemporaries, wielded the Sword of the Spirit against the cultural and social norms sustained by the secular governments and thinkers of his day.

The Christian hope – that God might be glorified in all things – coupled with an ethic of holiness, self-denial, and love, will issue in cultural opinions and products, from the humblest and most common of everyday conversations, actions, and implements to the grander and more enduring cultural forms of the arts, government, education, and society. What Christians strive for and how they strive for it must issue in forms of culture, and, as they do, many aspects of the surrounding culture will be exposed as sinful and shallow and made subject to dramatic transformations.

### *Christianity and culture*

Culture consists of the artifacts, institutions, and conventions by which people define, sustain, and enrich their lives. People make culture and then use it to make their way around in life. Most people don’t think about culture very critically; they simply accommodate to whatever suits their tastes and enables them to achieve their larger objectives. This pragmatic approach to culture suits the priorities of those who wield the sword of men, because it allows them to cater to and patronize subjects who hold a variety of cultural tastes and practices.

But from the beginning, Christians thought about culture not as something that everyone should be free to pursue and indulge as they like, but from the perspective of the Kingship of Jesus Christ and the glory of God. They sought to discover how to make and use culture so as to benefit others and to honor and exalt God, even down to the most ordinary, everyday aspects of their lives (1 Cor. 10.31).

One thing the first Christians learned early on was that any form of culture or any cultural activities which opposed the glory of God had to be put aside. Culture that promoted the worship of false gods, encouraged and supported illicit behavior, took advantage of or oppressed others, was merely vulgar or frivolous, or led people away from the Truth of God to the Lie of unbelief – all such culture had to be denied, set aside, and, if necessary, eliminated.

In Ephesus, Christians made a public show of repentance by burning the trappings and writings of their

pagan culture (Acts 19) In Philippi, Paul interrupted a perfectly typical Roman cultural practice – the exploitation of slaves – by casting a demon out of a young girl (Acts 16). In Antioch, Christians broke all kinds of social and cultural taboos, as Jewish and Gentile believers fellowshipped, worshiped, and shared together (Acts 11).

Christians scandalized esteemed Roman institutions by freeing their slaves, standing up to corrupt public officials, rescuing exposed children from death, providing for widows and orphans, and caring for those dying from the plague.

*New forms of culture*

At the same time they began to innovate new forms of culture – in literature, the arts, local government, husband/wife relations, popular education, even in dress and conversational manner – which the world had never seen before.

And, as we can imagine, these new cultural practices, together with the renouncing of illicit cultural practices, frequently put Christians at odds with their contemporaries.

When we live for Christ, in every aspect of life, we will find ourselves having to oppose Caesar and many of the cultural ways which are flourishing under his authority and approval. We must neither apologize for our convictions nor accommodate to the cultural forms of the dominant worldview of the day. Instead, let us press on to forge new culture, at every level and in every form, that honors God and exalts our King.

*For reflection*

1. What would you describe as some distinctly Christian expressions of culture in your own life?
2. In the culture you encounter each week – at home, work, school, in the community, on the news, and so forth – do you find any forms or expressions that are offensive to God? What is the Christian's responsibility with respect to such things?
3. What would you say are the key ideas to keep in mind when thinking about glorifying God in all your cultural activities?

*Next steps: What is the glory of God, and what does it mean to live for the glory of God in even the most ordinary, everyday, and mundane cultural activities (1 Cor. 10.31)? Talk with a church leader about this question.*

*Prayer:*

## 6 A Conflict of Truth

*“These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.”* Acts 17.6

*“Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.”* John 17.17

### *Pragmatic again*

In the world of the Roman Empire, “truth” was a highly pragmatic notion.

Whatever sufficed, or whatever one had to do in order to survive and prosper within the Roman system was considered “true.” But most people knew this was only a façade. When Pilate chided Jesus with his “What is truth?” retort, he was not so much asking a question as declaring a conviction, that truth, as desirable as it may be, is not something the average Roman could ever expect to know.

For Pilate and people all over the Roman world, “truth” was whatever the Emperor decreed and the Senate confirmed. To stand against Rome and her view of truth was as foolish as defying the law of gravity. You could end up getting seriously hurt.

What goes around comes around. Today, once again, we have entered an age in which pragmatism is the standard of truth: Whatever works to get us what we want, and, if necessary, to leave room for others to get what they want, must be true. The only fixed norm of truth in ancient Rome was the capricious brain of the Emperor. Whatever fixed norm of truth exists today is similarly to be found within the desires and decisions of individual men and women, institutionally embodied in civil government. To suggest otherwise – to suggest that people are not finally and fully autonomous – is to open oneself to ridicule, or worse.

Pragmatism, while perhaps not the “official” worldview of our secular age, is certainly that which is promoted by Western governments. And for this reason, we who hold to a Christian view of truth can expect that, from time to time, we’re going to encounter conflict with the pragmatic agenda of our secular age.

### *Challenging “truth”*

Those who believe that “truth is what you make it” have little patience with those who insist that “Truth is what God declares.” Jesus Christ claims to be the Truth; He tells us that His Word is Truth, and that, as we live our lives trusting in Him and abiding by His Word, we will know the Truth that sets us free from the death-grip of sin, doubt, fear, hopelessness, and death (Jn. 8.32).

Paul and his friends got in trouble in Thessalonica – as in many other places – because they challenged existing standards of truth and insisted that Christ and His Word alone are Truth. A good many people, and many of them people of influence and power, were heavily invested in the pragmatic view of truth practiced throughout the Roman Empire, and they were not going to accept being told they had been wrong all their lives.

### *Truth in the public square*

The Christian claim to know the Truth sounds arrogant, unrealistic, and condemnatory to the pragmatists of our day, just as it did in ancient Rome. The Christian practice of resorting to Scripture for solutions to whatever seems wrong with life is greeted with scorn and denunciation by those who will not yield their presumed autonomy to an ancient Book and its defenders. They will have none of such nonsense in *their* public schools or square.

In our day, as in ancient Rome, the powers-that-be and their cultural elite sidekicks have captured the bully pulpits of the land, and they are using them to propagandize a view of truth that could not sustain the Roman

Empire against internal corruption and external threat, and that will not sustain ours. At the risk of scorn, opposition, and conflicts of various kinds, Christians, who know the Truth as it is in Jesus, must stand up and declare their allegiance, expose the folly of pragmatic unbelief, and call the world to its senses, before it is too late.

And, at the same time, we must make certain that, increasingly, every aspect of our lives is grounded in and expressive of the Truth that is in Jesus.

Many Christians may find it easier and less threatening to sit silently by while proponents of the Lie poison every nook and cranny of life with the myth of pragmatism. Our increasingly secular, materialist, and hopeless age is the consequence of this, as Francis Schaeffer argued in his book, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*. Though Christians may turn a deaf ear to truth claims of a pragmatic age, God will not. Even now His wrath is beginning to be revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Rom. 1.18ff).

Let's make sure that we don't, by our reluctance to live and proclaim God's truth, find ourselves on the wrong side of the Lord.

*For reflection*

1. How would you counsel a new believer to begin grounding his life in the Truth of God?
2. The truth claims of our pragmatic age leach into our minds and hearts, very often when we're not even aware. How do you maintain vigilance against the "winds of doctrine" that blow all around you each day?
3. How well prepared are you to explain the Truth of the Gospel to an unbelieving neighbor, friend, or co-worker?

*Next steps: Suggest some ways Christians can help one another hold firm to the truth of God's Word. Talk with some Christian friends about this matter.*

*Prayer:*



## 7 Preparing for Conflict

*Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.* 1 Thessalonians 5.20-22

### *Prepare for conflict*

In Thessalonica the Christian movement was exposed for what it truly was: A work of God's Spirit that was turning the world of ancient Rome rightside-up for Jesus Christ.

The conflict which arose in Thessalonica came about because Paul and his companions opposed the dogma of Caesar – the commanding worldview of their day, sustained and enforced by the civil authorities – and dared to practice another King, even Jesus Christ. Paul's letters to the church in Thessalonica were meant to provide guidance and encouragement as they persevered in the task he had set for them, and prepared for what would undoubtedly be more conflict to come.

What the first Christians experienced as they opposed Caesar, we can expect as well. The clash of swords, between those who wield the Sword of the Spirit and those who abide under the sword of men, must continue in every generation. So it will be important that we, too, prepare ourselves for the conflict of worldviews that following King Jesus necessarily creates.

Paul's closing words to his friends in Thessalonica suggest some excellent guidelines for us to follow.

### *Three guidelines*

First, *don't go looking for trouble!*

Paul says we should "abstain from every form of evil." Christians are not provocateurs; we are not political firebrands seeking to overthrow the existing order. We are not fifth-column subversives plotting the violent overthrow of the existing regime. We are ambassadors of the King of righteousness, peace, and joy, and we bring a message of transforming grace, truth, and hope.

If we want to make sure our message is heard, we shall have to live in the righteousness, peace, joy, grace, truth, and hope the Kingdom of Christ promises. At the same time, we must be very careful and loving as we oppose the dogmas of our age and help others to see the folly of the secular, materialist, and pragmatic path.

Second, *test everything!*

The Lie, as Paul refers to the worldview of unbelief (Rom. 1.18ff), insists that God is irrelevant and human beings are the measure of all things. This view of life is so widespread and pervasive these days that it has come to affect and shape everything in our culture. The Lie is the witness of the fool, who says "There is no God" (Ps. 53.1), and "God is not concerned about me or my life, and I have no accountability to Him. I can do what I want, as I want, with whomever I want, and it's none of God's concern."

If we aren't careful, for example, about the way we use our time, the diversions in which we become involved, and the manner in which we conduct our relationships, we might find ourselves living the Lie more than the Truth, squandering opportunities for Kingdom progress rather than making the most of them (Eph. 5.15-17).

We must be constantly vigilant against the Lie, testing every choice and opportunity by the Truth that is in Jesus. If we allow the evil of the Lie to find a home in our soul, we'll be ill-prepared to survive conflict when it's necessary to do so.

Third, *follow the Spirit and Word of God!*

We “quench the Spirit” when we do not rest in His teaching, seek His fruit, and live in His power. The Spirit has an agenda for our sanctification – that we might eagerly and effectively do the will of God (Phil. 2.12, 13). Our task is to understand His agenda and to pursue it by dwelling in the Word of God and allowing the Word of God to dwell in us richly (Jn. 15.4-7; Jn. 17.17; Col. 3.16). We must not “despise” the Word of God but love it, consume it, and live in it, by the power of the Spirit, if we are going to be equipped for every good work and every trial that might come our way.

*On earth as it is in heaven*

We are followers of Jesus Christ, the King of Kings. We take the Sword of the Spirit into all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities. Our goal is to see Christ’s Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, so that righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit can reach to every person and all of culture. We want God to be glorified, and we live in the hope of that glory, according to the ethics of the Kingdom, and for the task of making disciples and renewing culture wherever we go. As we follow this calling we can expect to find ourselves at odds with the commanding worldviews of the day. We do not despise the sword of government, for we recognize that God can use government for good. But we are not naïve about the state of things in our world, where pragmatism, materialism, and secularism have become the dogmas *du jour* of our unbelieving age.

Clashes of these two swords – the Sword of the Spirit and the sword of men – are inevitable, for we have set a course of opposing everything that vaunts itself against the knowledge of God, whatever guise that may take (2 Cor. 10.3-5). We need to make sure we’re prepared for such conflict when it arises to challenge our mission, to glorify God in all things.

*For reflection*

1. How prepared are you for conflict with the worldview of pragmatism, materialism, and secularism?
2. What are some things you can begin to do in order to become better prepared for the clash of swords?
3. What are the most important things you’ve learned from this study?

*Next steps: Talk with a pastor or church leader. What can you do to help the members of your church become better prepared for the clash of swords?*

*Prayer:*

*Clash of Swords*

*Questions for discussion*

1. What do we mean by the “clash of swords”? How should we expect to experience this in our day?
2. Why should we expect to find ourselves caught up in this clash of swords?
3. What are the likely consequences if believers fail to wield the Sword of the Spirit in all areas of their lives?
4. What can you do to become better prepared to take an active and effective role in the clash of swords?
5. How can you help your fellow believers become better prepared for the clash of swords?

*Prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at [www.ailbe.org](http://www.ailbe.org) to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship to help us extend our ministry and resources to others. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.