Lakeshore Chapel Sermon, delivered on August 12, 1990

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"Always remember the weak, meek, and ignorant are always good targets." This from an internal memo to Lincoln Savings Loan bond salesmen. A Secretary of Housing and Urban Development watched soaps on TV while his rich-girl executive and her pals doled out HUD dollars to their already rich, obviously greedy, friends. When asked if his money had influenced United States Senators, Charles Keating, Chief of Lincoln Savings and Loan, said, "I want to say in the most forceful way that I can. I certainly hope so." Leona Helmsley, often referred to as the Queen commented that "only the poor pay taxes," and took tax deductions for personal non-tax deductible expenses. Every six minutes a woman is raped in this country. Motorists who don't like the way you're driving on a Los Angeles freeway are apt to fire a gun at you. A TV personality mock-sings the National Anthem, spitting toward the flag and grabbing her crotch during the singing.

Is there something amiss in the land? Have we reached a point where the United States as a nation is at moral risk? I am usually an optimist. I prefer to motivate and inspire by positive reenforcement, but I am a realist too, and I want to share with you my concern about the moral climate of our nation.

What characterizes the moral malaise in a society? Certainly, as in all moral breakdowns, "self before service" is the major theme, and the theme manifests itself in human behavior through greed, lust for power, sloth, cynicism and violence. These are human tendencies that social institutions are designed to hold in check, and the process of their development and the success of their function is what we call
civilization. They have been successful enough for the survival of the species over the millennia, but not so completely successful to shelter people from pain, disruption and decline of their cultures, distress, and often early death.

If any of the characteristics, greed, lust for power, sloth, cynicism and violence, dominate a society beyond the point where it can be thwarted, the society will inevitably decline. For a nation to be delivered from the destruction inherent in any of these qualities, citizens must think and behave right. For that to happen, right thinking must be defined and opinion mobilized in support of it. The cause then is carried by an institution or institutions valued by significant numbers of people and personal as well as public behavior is modified. The process is never perfect nor the results absolute, but they pervade enough to insure the survival of the society until the next time. Public morality and public policy and action flowing from it are dependent on a shared concept of personal morality.

The American people both before and after establishing a nation, have looked to the traditional institutions to check the destructive tendencies of humankind, the church and government who through the practice of religion and law attempt from time to time to purify themselves and renew the society.

In American life there were three major periods of spiritual renewal when moral weakness was perceived to undermine the well being of the land. The Great Awakening, lasting from the 1730's through the 1750's, was fueled by the conviction of men like George Whitefield who preached outdoors to crowds of 20,000 people. A burst of missionary
zeal and zest for social justice unleashed new focus in the colonies. Here began the earliest drive to ban slavery as well as a movement for prison reform. Societies were formed to feed and clothe the needy, provide for widows and orphans, and set up dispensaries to treat the sick. Higher education was encouraged and Princeton College opened as a direct result of the revival. Many scholars believe the Great Awakening led to a political liberation that directly contributed to the American Revolution. Jonathan Edwards, the noted New England preacher of the time, writing about Northampton, Massachusetts, where he lived, stated, "There was scarcely a single person in the town, old or young, left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world. Those who were wont to be the vainest and loosest, and those who had been most disposed to think and speak slightly of vital and experimental religion, were now generally subject to great awakenings."

The second period of revival and renewal came in the early national period from the early 1800's to the civil war. The coarse life on the frontier was partially responsible for its origin, and Kentucky and Western New York State were cockpits of religious fervor. People would come for hundreds of miles to camp meetings where itinerant preachers like Charles Finney speaking to crowds up to 25,000 in number sought to transform society by saving individual souls. Finney's advocacy of disinterested benevolence was paving a direct highway to the abolitionist movement. And it was the abolitionists who finally forced the issue to end what is surely the greatest moral evil in American history - slavery.

The period between 1890 and 1917 can be called the third era of
revivalism. To contemporary Americans some of the objectives of the movement - temperance and sabbath observance - do not strike a responsive chord, but close observation shows how important they were as forces for social change. Temperance leaders like Frances Willard urged women to take their moral power outside their homes to influence society at large. The campaign against strong drink was not a narrow moral issue, but a recognition that it was leaving women and children destitute, breaking up homes and leading to domestic violence. Women were on the march, and their new spirit not only carried the nation into the unsuccessful experiment in prohibition, but gained for them the far more important and lasting right to vote. The crusade for sabbath observance touched the way Americans live and was practical as well as religious. Recognizing that laborers often worked 60 to 70 hours a week, calling for sabbath rest was a form of labor legislation.

Our history, then reveals the capacity of the American people for renewal. I hope a head of steam can build up for a fourth era of revival. Certainly the conditions call for it. The greed is evident. Charles Keating, Ivan Boesky and Michael Milliken are shining examples. They and others are on a road to uninhibited self gratification. Misusing people, their resources, the law all are incorporated in the modus operandi of the greedy. Even with their downfall they leave damage beyond measuring such as the S & L scandal.

We have a collective greed too. We are a nation of citizens who want services and safety, but are unwilling to pay for them. Our Congress and Executive offices have a history of failure in financial management. Who is to blame? We are now beginning to eat our seed corn
because we are not willing to curb our appetites or buy more corn.

The lust for power is always with us. Donald Trump might qualify. George Steinbrenner, the baseball and shipping magnate, has the characteristics. The lust for power is the over-riding need to dominate, control other people's lives, make them always bend to the will of the power holder. If they don't conform absolutely, destroy them. In the long run it doesn't work.

Sloth: The slothful gobble up the seed corn faster than anyone else. Look at the welfare dole that pays more to stay from work and have babies. Look at the unemployment that encourages people to stretch the law to the limit and beyond so that the able-bodied can be paid while not working. Sloth weakens the economy and character.

Have you ever observed anything more cynical than Mayor Marion Barry giving talks to children on clean living and saying 'NO' to drugs while smoking and snorting as much cocaine as he could get his hands on. No matter what the verdict, he is a shame to the human race. A strong society exists only if there are shared common values. Behavior like Barry's is truly cynical because it undermines the teaching of necessary values. What child can believe anything positive if Barry was once his or her model? A pervasive cynicism prevents foundation building for a society.

And violence: Our nation is the murder leader of the world. Violent crime and the sexually deviant behavior that often accompanies it appears to be a 'made in America' product. Many of our citizens are injured daily by mindless drug infected people who mask as wild animals. The injury and loss of life are only part of the evil. The
mind of the person who perpetrates such crimes is often impervious to persuasions that could extricate him from his condition. His spirit is dead, and there is no spark that can ignite it.

I think there is enough evidence to declare a need for spiritual renewal. But in the past the appeal was made to a nation of enough shared values to rekindle a strong sense of moral purpose based on those values. Is there too much diversity of experience today, or is the moral vacuum too great to elicit a response? That is a possible problem. Yet we should not be deterred because the challenge appears formidable. America is resilient and must have renewal.

To whom should the modern day George Whitefields, Charles Finneys and Francis Willards address their message, and where will they come from?

There are two groups of people in our population that are of particular interest to me. The first needs hope injected into their spirits, and moral information into their minds. They are mostly poor but not necessarily so. They are usually without benefit of positive family life or minimal good education. They tend toward amorality if not immorality. They are more likely to act without thinking, to be substance abusers, and to satisfy untempered instincts. They don't disbelieve so much as they disengage in belief altogether. They often have psychologically inflicted wounds that they do not understand, yet determine their behavior. They are a vast underclass, and they are our greatest national problem.

I am reminded of the excitement for missionary work created by past revivals. The revival era of 1890 to 1917, my father's time, drew
many young people, including him, to minister and teach in foreign lands. Now the same motivation and personal commitment must send the message carriers to our own underclass. We will have to settle for limited success, but what success is possible may just save the nation.

The second group are comprised of there are a significant number of people who come from backgrounds where religion was likely as not to be a part of their family's life. Exposed to more ideas than similar people in past generations, confronted by old rules that did not seem to fit new conditions, they either rebelled against or wandered away from their religious traditions. But as most of us, they will eventually seek purpose, understanding of themselves, and a society that reflects their personal good tendencies toward justice, peace, freedom of speech and movement, and safety for themselves and others. They will not all buy into the same theological doctrine, nor will they all associate to the same degree with an organized church. For the most part, they are searchers. When they are ready they will listen to reasonable explanation. What they will share is a summons to honesty, both personal and public. They will ask that people be accountable for their actions, including themselves. They can be aroused by a sense of justice. They can rekindle a work ethic, and even insist on it. They will listen to reasons why people must share with one another, and they will be persuaded to share. They will be ready to find and understand the spirit of God that is within them.

They have the background through family life and education to respond to a call for shared values. Integrity is not beyond their understanding. They have to define their beliefs more clearly so that
they may be more firmly committed to them. The message they must understand is that a moral code of behavior imbedded deeply in the religious tradition of their society is the best guide for survival, for each personally and for all together. That practical insight will be the core of the revival. Specific moral acts and requirements will follow from it. To be moral makes sense. It may be difficult to achieve, but simple to understand. Morality is a long range survival kit, and people should require it in all segments of their society. It is accomplished through a core of shared values that determine acceptable behavior and laws that define and enforce that behavior.

Will the church be a generating force in the renewal of America? It has been in the past, but as I inferred previously, more people are farther removed from it today. Will they listen? Is the church ready for the challenge?

The Fundamentalist churches accepted the challenge. At best they have increased their adherents, given millions of people a simple straightforward set of beliefs to guide them, and set forth standards for public morality. At worst some of their most prominent leaders with their simplistic gospel have succumbed to the complexities of greed and the lust for power. The problem for the fundamentalists is that their perception and requirements cannot possibly attract consideration from millions of people who must actively engage in the quest for a high public morality. There may be many yet uncalled to whom their message may one day sound loud, clear and captivating, but there are more who will never hear their trumpet no matter how loudly and seductively played. Can religion then be diversified enough and strong enough to
call a diverse population to the standards of public morality America
needs to survive?

Who will appeal then to the majority of people, most of them in
the second group that I described? Can there be revival without the
church, a revival that will speak to the spirits of our citizens? I
don't think so. It is the responsibility of the church. The
Fundamentalists are a power, but their generator has its limits. I see
the churches of "main line" Protestantism and the congregations that
have been spawned by that tradition as the source of an enlightened
call to personal and public morality. I see them as being able to
adjust their vocabulary and open their thinking to reach the many minds
of America. I see the possibility of the church attracting good minds,
the kind that do the thinking which finally refines itself into popular
belief. My hope may be a "long shot" but I know that no past American
revival has transpired without the Protestant church itself being the
center of renewal. The message must be one of sharing rather than
destruction through greed, of the judicious use of authority rather
than the dominance of power, or the satisfaction in honest work instead
of the morally crippling condition brought on by sloth, the joy and
fulfillment of faith rather than the hopelessness of cynicism, and love
of neighbor and family rather than the anger reflected in violence.
This is an old gospel, as old as the church itself, and it needs to be
effectively told to each generation just as it was so effectively told
at the beginning by Jesus of Nazareth. It's the only way to go. We need
to see it bear fruit in our national life.