

**ALBERT MOHLER**  
**STRANGER THAN IT USED TO BE:  
PREACHING TO A POSTMODERN CULTURE**

**STEVEN J. LAWSON**  
**PREACHING AN EXCLUSIVE  
GOSPEL IN AN INCLUSIVE AGE**

# EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

**INTERVIEW**

*with*

**LIGON DUNCAN**

## PREACHING IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

**WHY FAITHFUL MINISTRY  
MUST BE COUNTER-CULTURAL**

**JOHN MACARTHUR**

ISSUE

04

MAR/APRIL 15



Introducing

# EXPOSITOR

Podcast with Steven J. Lawson

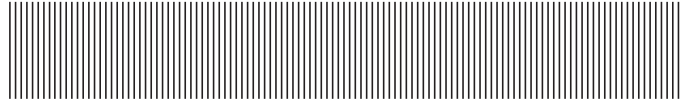
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# What is truth?

This cynical question raised by Pilate, when Jesus Christ stood trial before him, exposed his own secular worldview. He lived in a world in which absolute truth does not exist. Pilate's dismissive voice spoke with disdain. He sneered in mockery, angry that Christ dared to speak with truth. Though he looked straight into the face of the Incarnate Truth, he could not discern it. Pilate was like so many today, a postmodernist living in premodern times.

What is truth? It is defined as that which conforms with fact. It is genuineness, veracity, or actuality. In a word, truth is reality. It is how things actually are. Theologically, truth is that which is consistent with the mind, will, character, glory, and being of God. Truth is the self-disclosure of God Himself. It is what it is because God declares it so and made it so. All truth must be defined in terms of God, whose very nature is truth.

God the Father is "the God of truth" (Ps 31:5; Isa 65:16). Jesus Christ is "full of truth" (John 1:14). In fact, He is "the truth" (John 14:6). The Holy Spirit is "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). Paul calls the Scripture "the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). Jesus prayed "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). Everything about God is truth. Whatever He speaks, He says forthrightly and frankly. God always tells it like it is.

How valuable is the truth? Its worth is more "than gold, yes, than much fine gold" (Ps 19:10). John Calvin says, "Nothing is deemed more precious by God than truth." No one can be saved without the truth. Nor can anyone be sanctified or strengthened without it.

The issue in our day is whether there is absolute truth for everyone, no matter who they are, where they live, or what they do. Many people say truth is whatever they want it to be. They claim that what you believe is 'true for you,' and what I believe is 'true for me,' even when the two are worlds apart. Something cannot be both true and not true. In such a worldview of self-deception, truth is no longer objective.

All truth is universally true. There is no place where truth is true in one place, but not in another. It is comprehensive, total, complete. Francis Schaeffer maintains, "Biblical Christianity is Truth concerning total reality." That is, it exists without any exceptions. Truth is absolute because it is derived from the one God. Absolute truth depends on God and therefore preachers who are committed to God much proclaim the unadulterated truth of Scripture without reservation.



It is necessary for expositors to examine the culture around them and measure it by the truth. But never vice versa, where the culture determines the truth. Every preacher must hold fast to the truth. A postmodern day is upon us in which each person is his own source of truth. Remember, divine truth has the final word in all matters. It tells us how to worship and how to walk. It tells us how to follow Christ. It is the final Arbitrator on any subject. It is the final Judge of every life. All people are measured by the truth. Every life is weighed in the balances by the truth. Every destiny is marked by the truth. The truth will have the final say in every life. ♦



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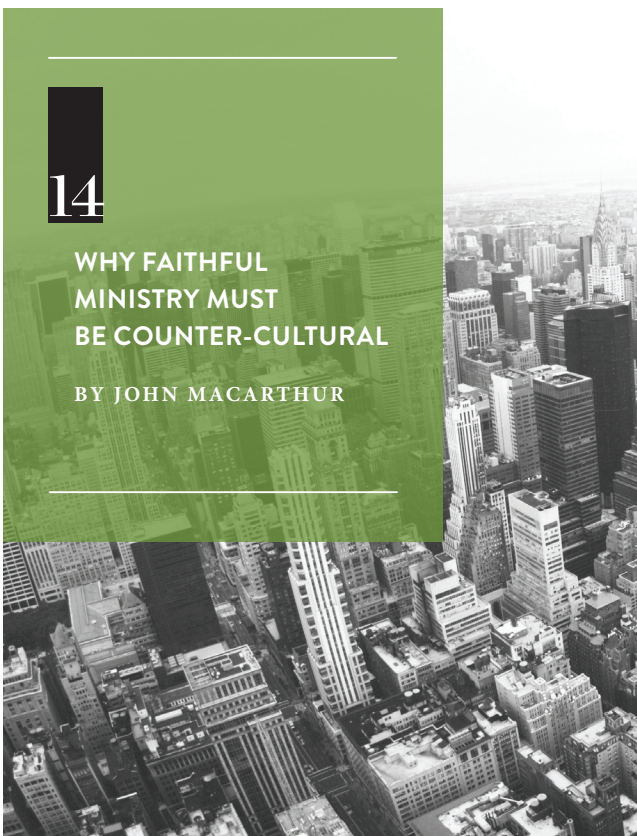
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**FEB/APR15 ISSUE 4 PREACHING IN A POSTMODERN WORLD**

To communicate God's Word effectively in the twenty-first century, expositors need to know how to confront an audience of postmodern listeners with the truth of God's unchanging Word.

**EXPOSITOR**

**ONEPASSION**



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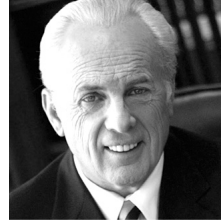


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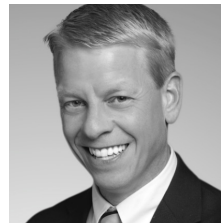
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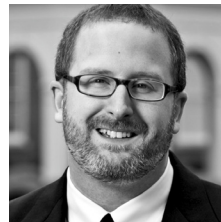
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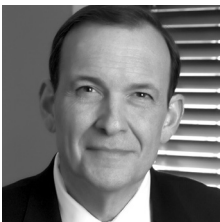
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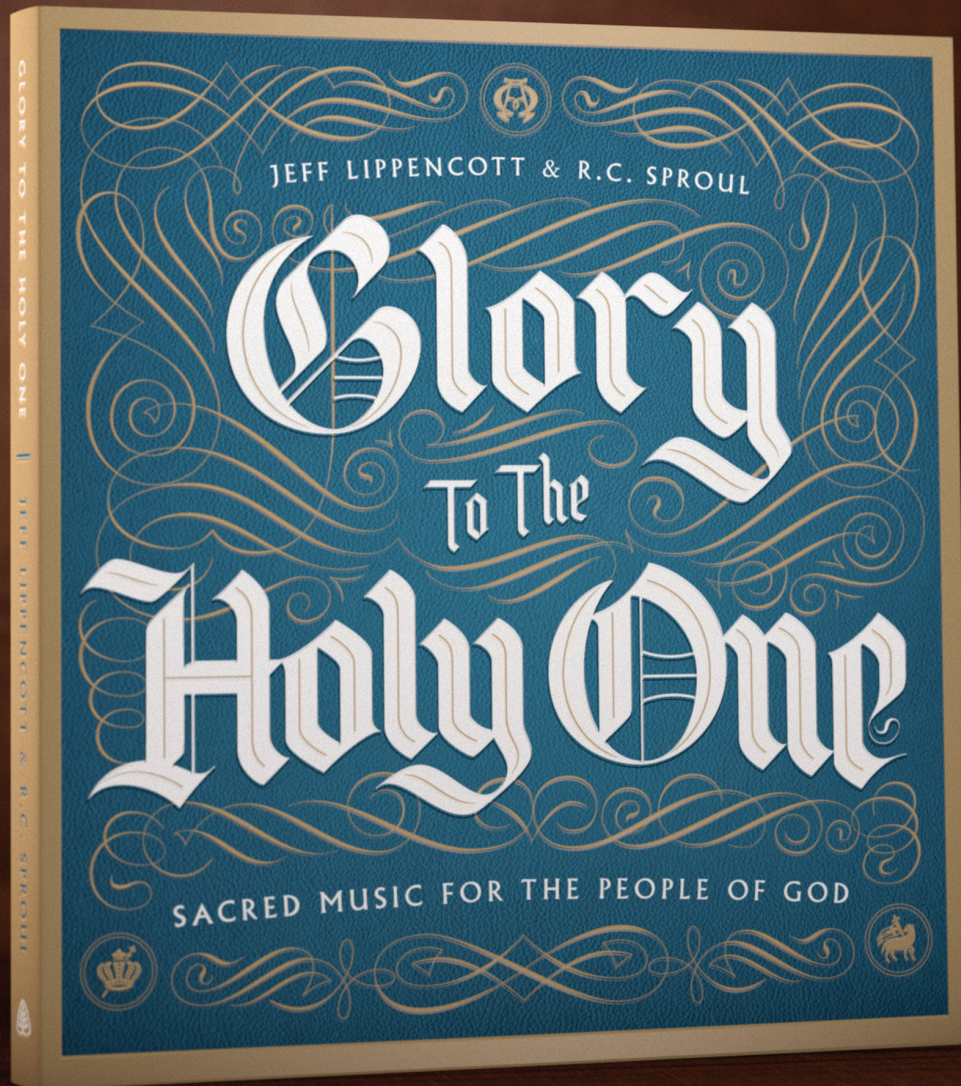
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# PREACHING AN EXCLUSIVE GOSPEL IN AN INCLUSIVE AGE

STEVEN J. LAWSON

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**D**eep within the soul of every expositor, there must reside an unwavering commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Regardless of the cultural currents of the day, and regardless of the changing of the times, he must be persuaded that faith in Jesus Christ alone is the only way of salvation. From Genesis to Revelation, the whole Scripture speaks with one voice, testifying that there is not one drop of saving grace outside the cross of Jesus Christ. Though the world is constantly changing, this truth of salvation in Christ alone never changes.

No preacher can afford to be wrong at this point, as though the gospel can ever be adapted. To be wrong about the gospel is to be wrong everywhere else that truly matters. To be wrong here is to stand in opposition to the saving mission and sin-bearing death of Jesus Christ. To be wrong here is to contradict the meaning of the substitutionary death and bodily resurrection of Christ. To be wrong here is to divert souls away from the only way that leads to God and to usher them onto the broad path that leads to destruction.

The very essence of the gospel itself demands that every

pulpit guard its exclusivity. When the message of the cross is rightly defined, the singularity of the saving purposes of God is automatically established. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone—period, end of paragraph, end of discussion. To this truth, the Bible has a “zero tolerance” policy for any equivocation outside of its borders.

This cuts against the grain of the spirit of this age. In this postmodern world, tolerance is the new virtue. An acceptance of every opinion about religion and morality is applauded. We find ourselves preaching in a postmodern culture in which there are no moral absolutes. What is truth for one person may not be truth for another. In this complex maze of competing worldviews today, every philosophy and ideology has some contribution to make to contribute to the larger body of knowledge.

This eclectic approach to finding the truth may look attractive to some. But the Scripture is adamant that truth is absolute. Further, it asserts that Jesus Christ is the only way to find acceptance with God.

This exclusive nature of the gospel desperately needs to be guarded. So-called efforts to contextualize the gospel today often result in its disappearance. In many cases, the issue is not what *is* being said from the pulpit, but what is *not* said. A gospel message that does not present Jesus as the *only* way is





not the gospel message. The singular nature of the Christian gospel must be proclaimed with conviction and clarity. To be sure, there is no other way of salvation.

The apostle Paul addresses this very issue in the opening section of his letter to the Galatians. In the churches of this region, the gospel had come under siege. The message of salvation had been conflated with *another* gospel, which is, Paul says, no gospel at all. The message of saving grace of God in Christ had come under attack and was no longer being preached as Paul had delivered it.

Within the churches of Galatia, false teachers known as Judaizers were mixing law with grace and fusing works with faith. These defilers of the gospel claimed that salvation must be earned by keeping the law and that sanctification was achieved through the works of the flesh. These perverters of the promises of God sought to change the good news into claiming that salvation was not a gift for the guilty, but a reward for the righteous. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In light of these damning distortions, the apostle Paul could no longer remain quiet. He penned a fiery letter to the Galatians in order to fight the noblest fight any preacher could undertake. Paul contended for the faith, that salvation solely comes through the grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

In the opening verses of Galatians, Paul minces no words. He breathes holy fire. He tells all corrupters of the gospel they are going to hell. He is shocked with the Galatians, who have so quickly been duped by these false teachers. Paul must speak directly to the believers in Galatia and confront them with this present danger at hand. He does not try to win them over by emphasizing the common ground between the gospel of Christ and this “different gospel” (v. 6). He does not say it is merely a matter of semantics. Instead, he goes straight to the heart of the matter: this gospel is a false message.

Such words need to be proclaimed today by every man who stands before an open Bible to declare its truths. The gospel is not subject to negotiation. Those who think so are, in Paul’s words, “accursed.” This is all the more reason that the whole gospel of Christ—including its exclusive nature—must be heralded by every preacher.

### **Deserting the Gospel**

Paul begins this epistle to the Galatians by expressing his astonishment over how easily they have been led astray. He writes, “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him” (v. 6). This word, amazed (*thaumazo*), means “to be astounded, bewildered, or shocked.” Paul is dumbfounded and perplexed with the Galatians. He is stunned that they have so

quickly deserted the gospel he had preached to them. He had just been with them in person and proclaimed to them the truth. It was this apostolic message they received by faith, and by it they were saved. But Paul had no more left town than these Judaizers had moved into the vacuum created by his absence and seduced the gullible Galatians.

According to the apostle, to desert the gospel is to abandon “Him,” namely God Himself. This is to say, God *is* the gospel. To believe the gospel is, in reality, to receive God into one’s life. No one has God in his or her life without having put their whole trust in the message of the gospel. Apart from the gospel, every person is separated from God. An enormous chasm separates holy God from sinful man. If anyone is to know God, that person must believe His saving gospel.

Deserting God and forsaking the gospel is one and the same. If anyone alters the gospel, he has become a spiritual turncoat toward God. The word “deserting” (*metatithēmi*) is a military term used to refer to a soldier who abandons his post in the heat of battle. By falling prey to the false teachers, the Galatians were doing just this. They were forsaking their singular loyalty to God and were abandoning their exclusive allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. The verb “you (plural) are deserting” is in the present tense. Even as Paul is writing this, they are at that very moment falling away from

their fidelity to the true gospel. This makes them defectors of the worst kind, leaving God and joining with the enemy of their soul, the devil.

Paul has to remind the Galatians that it was God, “who called you by the grace of Christ” (v. 6). By sovereign grace, God irresistibly summoned them out of darkness into the glory of the light of Jesus Christ. Apart from any foreseen goodness in them, the Lord Jesus Christ effectually drew them into fellowship with God the Father. Paul charges them with abandoning the very saving call of Christ upon their lives.

The Galatians are leaving the truth, Paul writes, “for a different gospel” (v. 6). This implies there are two kinds of gospels. There is the true gospel, and there is a false gospel. Put another way, there is the saving gospel and a non-saving gospel. There is the message of divine accomplishment, and there

is a message of human achievement.

The Galatians had been saved under the true gospel based upon the finished work of Jesus Christ at the cross. But now, they were giving up this truth in order that they might have a different gospel, a gospel of man, one that linked salvation to man’s actions. The word “different” (*heteros*) denotes a message of a totally different kind. This gospel is not simply a little different; it is *completely* different. Those who have been deceived have exchanged the gospel of God for a lie. This gospel offers no true salvation at all. This other gospel is a sham—a counterfeit gospel with a mangled message. It is nothing more than a rip-off religion that will damn its followers.

Concerning this contrary gospel, Paul asserts it is “really not another” (v. 7). This is to say, a false gospel is not a gospel at all. There is no other gospel by which holy God and sinful man may be reconciled than the gospel of Jesus Christ. Only by the true gospel is the wrath of God propitiated toward sinners. Only by this gospel are sinners redeemed from the curse of the law. Only by this gospel is the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to hell-bound sinners. Only by this gospel can unworthy rebels be presented faultless to stand before the throne of God. The gospel of Christ is the only true gospel. When Jesus said, “I am *the* way, and *the* truth and *the* life. No one comes to the Father but through

Me” (John 14:6), He meant it. The Lord Jesus tells us that He is the one and only entryway into the presence of God. Every other path leads to eternal perishing.

The rest of the Bible affirms this reality. Jesus emphatically declared, “Enter through *the* narrow gate” (Matt 7:13). This passageway is not *a* gate, but *the* gate. Standing before the Sanhedrin, the religious leaders in Israel, the apostle Peter declares, “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). What part of “no” could they—or we—not understand?

To Paul’s son in the faith, the aged apostle asserts, “There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ” (1 Tim 2:5). There are not multiple mediators between God and man from which to choose, but only one. The

**GOD IS THE GOSPEL. TO BELIEVE THE GOSPEL IS, IN REALITY, TO RECEIVE GOD INTO ONE’S LIFE. NO ONE HAS GOD IN HIS OR HER LIFE WITHOUT HAVING PUT THEIR WHOLE TRUST IN THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL. APART FROM THE GOSPEL, EVERY PERSON IS SEPARATED FROM GOD.**

apostle John was equally definitive about who inherits eternal life when he stated, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36). Nothing could be more clear. There are not *many* ways to God, but only *one* way, and it is through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

For every preacher there are hills worth dying on. Wise is the expositor who knows upon which hills to lay down his life. This truth of the exclusive gospel is one of the hills that he is called to guard and defend. Paul’s amazement at the Galatians should be our amazement at so-called Christian preachers in this hour who tolerate another gospel. Now we can understand why the apostle Paul is so dogmatic. To abandon the gospel of Christ is to abandon salvation altogether.

As we look around Christendom, we note those who have tampered with the gospel by adding the necessity of human works or who preach that other religions can lead one to God. We, too, should be astonished at such widespread apostasy. We, too, should imitate Paul by confronting such error head-on.

### Diluting the Gospel

As Paul addresses the Galatians, he describes the enemies of the cross who have become his avowed adversaries. He writes, “there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ” (v. 7). This is Paul’s first reference to the false teachers who are seeking to retain old covenant practices in the new covenant church. These teachers give primacy to Mosaic law, not the gospel, in matters of salvation. But the truth is, even under the old covenant, sinners were saved not by keeping the Law, but by the grace of God in Christ.

When Paul uses the word “disturb” (*tarassō*), it means “to trouble, agitate, shake up, shake back and forth.” This is precisely what the false teachers were doing to the spiritual lives of the Galatian believers. They were not causing true believers to lose their salvation. Such is impossible. But they were weakening their allegiance to God by diluting the gospel. And in so doing, they were undermining the stability of the church. No church can stand strong when it has forfeited the purity of its gospel message.

These who are disturbing the Galatians are “distorting” the gospel of Christ. This word “distort” (*metastrepsai*) carries the idea of “changing something into its opposite form.” These false preachers were changing the gospel into the very antithesis of grace. They were modifying the message of Christ into what is entirely contrary to true grace. They were tampering with the saving message by diluting it. To be sure, to alter the gospel is to trouble the church at its deepest level.

More specifically, these Judaizers were teaching that faith in the gospel of grace is good, but only as far as it goes. They claimed this message was not enough to save. Neither can it sanctify. They maintained that, for salvation, human works

are necessary to be *added* to the gospel. They asserted that the Galatians must keep the law in order to be righteous before God. Moreover, they taught that believers are sanctified by obedience through their own strength, apart from the inward ministry of the Holy Spirit. They even taught that Gentile believers must be circumcised like Jews in order to find acceptance with God. They asserted that Christians must keep the Ten Commandments and observe the holy days in order to be received by God. In short, Gentiles must become Jewish proselytes and submit to all the Mosaic Law, or they cannot be saved and sanctified.

To combat this heretical error, Paul wrote, “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” (Gal 2:21). This is to say, if the Galatians could become right with God through law-keeping, then the cross was the blunder of the ages. In fact, if a person could be accepted by God apart from the death of Jesus Christ, then God was guilty of child abuse by needlessly subjecting His only Son to the cruelty of the cross.

Throughout church history, and especially during the Middle Ages, some form of “works-righteousness” has infiltrated the true teaching of the church. But in the sixteenth century, the Reformers stood firm upon Scripture, raised their voices, and declared that salvation is by grace *alone*, through faith *alone*, in Christ *alone*. The whole Reformation was fought over this little word, *alone*. Where the Church of Rome said *and*, the Reformers pronounced *alone*. That, in a nutshell, is the entirety of Protestant Reformation. It is this message that must be declared again in our day. Today many claim that salvation is by faith *and* water baptism, faith *and* speaking in tongues, faith *and* hail Marys, faith *and* taking Mass, faith *and* last rites, faith *and* the treasury of merit, faith *and* buying indulgences. There is no end to what can be added to faith *and*.

These false additions to the gospel continue today. Most modern-day preachers acknowledge a place for the cross in their message. But they do not preach the primacy and centrality of the cross. Neither do they proclaim the finality and sufficiency of the cross. These religious hucksters use the right Christian vocabulary, all while assigning different meanings to these biblical words. They claim that salvation is by faith *and* many additional things such as water baptism, church membership, and good works.

Yet another type of adversary is also prevalent today. These are the cult leaders who deny the doctrine of the Trinity. These blind leaders of the blind disavow the absolute deity of Jesus Christ. These whitewashed sepulchers reject the Bible’s teaching on the virgin birth of Christ, His sinless life, His substitutionary atonement, His bodily resurrection, and His second coming. Still others withhold the exclusivity of salvation in Christ alone. But if Jesus is not the only way to heaven, then He is not any way to heaven. In a world enamored with “both-and” thinking, here we have an “either-or”: Jesus Christ

either *is* the *one, true* way to His Father, or He *is not* who He says He is.

### Deviation from the Gospel

In order to propagate their lies, these false teachers had to undermine Paul's teaching. Consequently, the apostle must respond boldly, because the purity of the gospel was at stake. Paul writes, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, let him be accursed" (v. 8). When he says "we," he is referring to himself or any of his associates, whether it be Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, or Luke. When he adds "an angel from heaven," he includes Michael, Gabriel, a seraphim, a cherubim, a ruling or guardian angel, or any elect angel. If any creature speaks a different gospel, Paul announces, he is to be accursed. This word accursed (*anathema*) means "to be devoted to destruction." It indicates to be imprisoned in the flames of hell. The idea is to be eternally condemned. To put it bluntly, such a messenger is to be damned.

By focusing on the true gospel and not on himself as the messenger of the gospel, Paul makes another important point for Christian teachers and preachers. The gospel is not about the one proclaiming it. The gospel is not true because of one's individual authority or the sanction of his associates. Rather, the gospel is the gospel and speaks magisterially for itself. No matter who God chooses to use in the proclamation of His good news, what matters is that the teaching is true to Christ's gospel as stated in the Bible, and not because of any preacher's individual words. This is a helpful reminder that the expositor's job is not to get others to agree with *him*. Rather, his task is to proclaim the gospel of Christ to all who will hear it, and to take issue with those who proclaim another gospel.

As Paul comes to this point in the passage, he is absolutely seething. He is rightly filled with holy indignation. Martin Luther put it this way, "Here Paul is breathing fire. His zeal is so fervent that he almost begins to curse the angels themselves." The German reformer is an example to every preacher, who likewise should be worked up over that which angers the heart of God. No one who stands in a pulpit should ever be indifferent toward that which violates the way of salvation. There can be no room for neutrality when it comes to preaching the gospel. There must be no place for passivity in the ministry of the Word. When the way of salvation is at stake, the man of God must step forward and repudiate any false gospel threatening his flock.

To this very point, James Montgomery Boice writes in his commentary:

How can it be otherwise, if the gospel Paul preaches is true, then both the glory of Jesus Christ and the salvation of men are at stake. If men can be saved by works, Christ has died in vain; and the cross is emptied of all

meaning. If men are taught a false gospel, they are being led from the one thing that can save them and are being turned to destruction.

Boice is right. Those who contaminate the gospel contribute to the damnation of lost souls. Jesus said, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt 18:6). By these words, Jesus means, it is better for a person to suffer death than to teach a false gospel. It would be better not to be alive than to lead others down a path that ends in eternal punishment.

Rather than back down from these strong words, Paul reloads. He will not merely gloss over the damning errors of these false teachers. He reiterates what he previously said with yet stronger language. Mind you, Paul is putting this on the front doorsteps of this book. At this very place in his other epistles, he brings his thanksgiving, saying, "how I thank God for you," or "you are in my every thought." But there are no such encouraging words of appreciation here. Paul is *not* thankful. Rather, he is rightly filled with holy anger because the gospel has been corrupted in the churches of Galatia. His righteous indignation cannot be contained.

So, Paul must confront this damning error again. The apostle restates, "As we have said before, so I say now again" (v.9). He is referring to that time in the recent past when he was there in person. As Paul said to the elders in Ephesus, he undoubtedly told the churches in Galatia that after his departure, there will be ravenous wolves who will come into this church. With such a danger lurking, the shepherds must defend the flock. These spiritual leaders must not give a warm reception to these troublemakers who will inevitably come. Where the truth is preached, false teachers will be drawn to infiltrate those churches. But they must be exposed and repudiated.

When Paul writes "if any



man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received,” he uses the present tense. This implies that, presently, at that very moment, men are preaching another gospel to them. This is not a hypothetical situation about what might happen in the future. As Paul writes, there are dangerous men in their midst preaching this false gospel. The Galatians had received the true gospel from Paul when he was there in person. He preached the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in His substitutionary death. That is what they had welcomed into their hearts. But now, these teachers of another gospel were administering death with their listeners.

In no uncertain terms, Paul states that such purveyors of perversion will be devoted to the destruction of hell. They will reside where there is the weeping and the gnashing of teeth. They will be consigned where there is utter darkness and no relief for the soul. And those unbelievers who follow them share in their destruction. Paul’s strong words of damnation speak to the seriousness of corrupting the gospel. Unless such false teachers repent, they will be in the lake of fire and brimstone.

The idea of false teachers was not new with Paul. Jesus Christ had already warned there would be propagators of a false gospel. Wherever there is the preaching of the true gos-

pel, there will be those who will seek to divert people onto the broad road headed for destruction. By way of analogy, Jesus said there are two gates standing closely positioned next to each other (Matt. 7:13-14). Travelers in life must exercise great caution concerning which gate through which they pass. Both gates are marked as leading to heaven, but only one actually takes a person there. The other gate—easily accessed and heavily traveled—leads to hell.

There are deceptive men, Jesus asserted, standing beside the broad gate that is headed to destruction, urging people onto the broad road (Matt. 7:15-20). They are positioned between the two gates, exerting their deceptions to dupe people through the broad gate. People must look past these slick-talking hucksters and examine their fruit. Some do not think we should examine other people’s fruit. But we must open our eyes and examine their personal conduct, twisted message, and false converts. Examine the kind of fruit being produced and subject it to this one test: is this the saving gospel of Jesus Christ?.

### Devotion to the Gospel

Paul concludes this section by getting down to the bottom line. Here are the two questions that Paul asked himself:



## FOR EVERY PREACHER, THE BOTTOM LINE IN THE PULPIT MUST BE A PREEMINENT DESIRE TO PLEASE GOD AND NEVER MODIFY OR ADJUST THE TRUTH IN ORDER TO PLEASE MEN.

“For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men” (v.10)? If Paul were seeking the favor of men, he would certainly tone down his rhetoric about these false teachers. Such stinging polemics is no way to expand his ministry base. But Paul is not courting the approval of men. Neither is he seeking the favor of the Judaizers. Nor is he courting the support of anyone sympathetic to their soul-damning message. By stating what he is expressing, Paul is seeking the approbation of God alone. This confrontational language by Paul was hardly calculated to win the approval of men. Men-pleasers do not speak such *anathemas*. Paul understood that if you please God, it does not matter whom you displease. And if you displease God, it does not matter whom you please. In this sense, preaching is very simple. Put simply, please God.

Paul concludes, “If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ” (v. 10). Paul says that seeking to please men and serving Christ are polar opposites. These two are mutually exclusive, not mutually inclusive. Such diametrical extremes are either/or, never both/and. Either you are primarily seeking to please God, or you are seeking to please men. It can never be both. Any preacher seeking to please men will be displeasing God. And the expositor who seeks to please God will often be displeasing men. No preacher can have it both ways. Jesus affirmed it this way: “No one can serve two masters. For either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other” (Matt 6:24). The one who preaches will either be a servant of Christ or a slave of the approval of men. Choose wisely which it will be.

For every preacher, the bottom line in the pulpit must be a

preeminent desire to please God and never modify or adjust the truth in order to please men. The expositor must lovingly share the truth of God’s gospel despite the repercussions they will receive from those who oppose such truth. We demonstrate authentic love to individuals by speaking the truth of God to them. We genuinely desire their best when the truth is proclaimed to them. But when we seek the applause of men over the approval of heaven, we are in serious danger of compromising the truth and bringing devastation to those under our preaching.

The apostle Paul wrote elsewhere, “we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts” (1 Thess. 2:4). In the last day, it will not be before men that we will stand and give an account. Rather, it will be before God that every preacher will stand. The Bible says, “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment” (James 3:1). It is certain that those who preach and teach the word will be judged with a far stricter scrutiny by God for what they have said because their words effect others. Paul warned that too many preachers succumb to the snare of pandering to people and becoming ear-ticklers. Paul warned, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths” (2 Tim 4:3–4). Men-pleasing preachers are, in reality, little more than ear-ticklers, back-slappers, and ego-massagers, but certainly not God-pleasers.

As Paul makes this statement at the very beginning of this epistle, he is saying to the Galatians—and he is saying to us—there is only *one* way of salvation. Anyone who tampers with this exclusive message of salvation in Christ alone is accursed. Fighting the good fight of the gospel requires that every preacher uphold the standard of sound words and guard the treasure entrusted us.

In a postmodern world, every expositor must decide whether he will cave in to the spirit of this age or uphold the standard of sound words. If he is to win the approbation of God, he must proclaim the unchanging message of God’s unmerited grace. Of those who corrupt this message of the sufficiency and the finality of the substitutionary death of Christ for sinners, he must say with Paul, “let them be accursed.” May this never be said of us. ♦



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# WHY FAITHFUL MINISTRY MUST BE COUNTER-CULTURAL

JOHN MACARTHUR

**O**ne of the most pernicious tendencies in the church today is an obsessive hankering for applause, academic stature, political clout, large crowds, personal celebrity, and all the other badges of social standing and earthly esteem. Evangelicals seem to have forgotten that we are forbidden be conformed to this world (Rom 12:2). Our minds are supposed to be set “on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Col 3:2). We are not to crave accolades—especially from a world that is filled with hatred for our Master (John 15:18–20).

But if you read popular blogs and bestselling books on church growth and ministry philosophy, you might get a different impression. It seems evangelicals no longer believe that worldliness is a sin. The movement’s main trendsetters relentlessly pressure pastors to contextualize their ministry and message so that the church can stay in step with these postmodern times. The result is an army of young ecclesiastical entrepreneurs and would-be megachurch moguls desperately trying to be as inclusive, pluralistic, and broad-minded as possible, in order to accommodate the new values of a

postmodern culture. If we appeal to the world that way, they suggest, we can find favor in the eyes of unbelievers and thereby win them for Christ.

But the unbelieving world will never be won by entertainment, public relations campaigns, or a toned-down message that caters to people’s felt needs. God’s plan for evangelism in every age is the same: the church must proclaim *the unadulterated gospel* with clarity and conviction—and without change or compromise. “It is the power of God for salvation” (Rom 1:16), and “God [is] well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (1 Cor 1:21).

Missional strategies that truncate the gospel or overshadow it with gimmickry and entertainment are not going to win the culture in this or any other age (Rom 10). In fact, the quest for the world’s approval is nothing less than spiritual harlotry. That is precisely the imagery the apostle James used. He wrote: “[Adulterers and] adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

There is and always has been a fundamental, irreconcilable incompatibility between the church and the world. The Bible’s message of sin and redemption is inherently counter-cultural





in a fallen world. Christian thought is out of harmony with all the world's philosophies. Genuine faith in Christ entails a denial of every worldly value. Biblical truth contradicts all the world's religions. Above all, we believe in the exclusivity of Christ—the truth that Christ alone is “the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through [Him]” (John 14:6). That runs counter to every popular value of this age. Christianity itself is therefore antithetical to virtually everything this world admires. “Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13).

It is impossible to be faithful to Christ while currying the world's favor. In fact, Jesus expressly repudiated the notion that worldly popularity is a measure of effectiveness in ministry: “Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way” (Luke 6:26).

He further explained: “The world . . . hates Me because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil” (John 7:7). In other words, the world's contempt for Christianity stems from moral, not intellectual, motives: “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed” (John 3:19–20). No matter

how dramatically worldly opinion may vary, Christian truth will never be popular with the world.

Yet, in virtually every era of church history there have been people in the church who are convinced that the best way to win the world is by catering to worldly tastes. Such an approach has *always* been to the detriment of the gospel message. The church has only made any significant impact on the world when the people of God have stood firm, refused to compromise, and boldly proclaimed the truth despite the world's hostility. When Christians have shrunk away from the task of confronting popular worldly delusions with unpopular biblical truths, the church has invariably *lost* influence and impotently blended into the world. Both Scripture and history attest to that fact.

And the Christian message simply *cannot* be twisted to conform to the vicissitudes of worldly opinion. Biblical truth is fixed and constant, not subject to change or adaptation. Worldly opinion, on the other hand, is in constant flux. The various fads and philosophies that dominate the world change radically and regularly from generation to generation. The only thing that remains constant is the world's hatred of Christ and His gospel.

In all likelihood, the world will not long embrace whatever ideology is in vogue this year. If the pattern of history is any

indicator, by the time our great-grandchildren become adults, worldly opinion will be dominated by a completely new system of belief and a whole different set of values. Tomorrow's generation will renounce all of today's fads and philosophies. But one thing will remain unchanged: until the Lord Himself returns and establishes His kingdom on earth, whatever ideology gains popularity in the world will be as hostile to biblical truth as all its predecessors have been.

### Modernism

Consider the record of the past century, for example. A hundred years ago, the church was beset by *modernism*. Modernism was a worldview based on the notion that only science could explain reality. Modernism stems from the presupposition that nothing supernatural is real.

It ought to have been instantly obvious that modernism and Christianity were incompatible at the most fundamental level. If nothing supernatural is real, then much of the Bible is untrue and has no authority; the incarnation of Christ is a myth (this nullifies Christ's authority as well); and all the supernatural elements of Christianity—including God Himself—must be utterly redefined in naturalistic terms. Modernism was anti-Christian at its core.

Nonetheless, the visible church at the beginning of the

twentieth century was filled with people who were convinced modernism and Christianity could and should be reconciled. They insisted that if the church did *not* keep in step with the times by embracing modernism, Christianity would not survive the twentieth century. The church would become increasingly irrelevant to modern people, they said, and soon it would die. So they devised a “social gospel,” devoid of any message about personal sin, salvation, or substitutionary atonement.

Of course, *biblical* Christianity survived the twentieth century just fine. Wherever Christians remained committed to the truthfulness and authority of Scripture, the church flourished. But ironically, those churches and denominations that embraced modernism were the ones that became irrelevant and all but died out before the century was over. Many grandiose but nearly empty stone buildings offer mute testimony to the deadliness of compromise with modernism.

### Postmodernism

Modernism is now regarded as yesterday's way of thinking. The dominant worldview in secular and academic circles today is called *postmodernism*.

Postmodernists have repudiated modernism's absolute confidence in science as the only pathway to the truth. In fact,



postmodernism has completely lost interest in “the truth,” insisting that it is impossible to be certain of any absolute, objective, or universal truth.

Modernism was indeed folly and needed to be abandoned. But postmodernism is a tragic step in the wrong direction. Unlike modernism, which was still concerned with whether basic convictions, beliefs, and ideologies are objectively true or false, postmodernism simply denies the possibility of settled knowledge.

To the postmodernist, reality is whatever the individual imagines it to be. This means that what is “true” is determined subjectively, as a social construct, and it is therefore subject to change. According to the postmodern way of thinking, there can be no such thing as objective, authoritative truth that governs or applies to all humanity universally.

The postmodernist naturally believes it is pointless to argue whether opinion A is superior to opinion B. Having given up on knowing objective truth, the postmodernist occupies himself instead with the quest for “understanding” the other person’s point of view. Seen in this light, the words *truth* and *understanding* take on radical new meanings. Ironically, “understanding” requires that we first of all disavow the possibility of knowing any truth at all. And “truth” becomes nothing more than a personal opinion, usually best kept to oneself.

That is the one essential, non-negotiable demand postmodernism makes of everyone: we are not supposed to think we know any objective truth. Postmodernists often suggest that every opinion should be shown equal respect. And therefore, on the surface, postmodernism seems driven by a broad-minded concern for harmony and tolerance. It all sounds very charitable and altruistic. But what really underlies the postmodernist belief system is an utter *intolerance* for every worldview that makes any universal truth-claims—particularly biblical Christianity.

In other words, postmodernism begins with a presupposition that is irreconcilable with the objective, divinely-revealed truth of Scripture. Like modernism, postmodernism is fundamentally and diametrically opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## Postmodernism and the Church

Nonetheless, the church today is filled with people who are advocating postmodern ideas. Some of them do it self-consciously and deliberately, but most do it unwittingly. (Having imbibed too much of the spirit of the age, they are simply regurgitating worldly opinion.) The evangelical movement as a whole, still recovering from its long battle with modernism, is not prepared for a new and different adversary. Many Christians have therefore not yet recognized the extreme danger posed by postmodernist thought.

Postmodernism’s influence has clearly infected the church already. It’s the very reason so many churches want to tone down their message so that the gospel’s stark truth claims don’t sound so jarring to the postmodern ear. It’s why evangelicals now shy away from stating unequivocally that the

Bible is true and all other religious systems and worldviews are false. It’s why some who call themselves Christians have gone even further, purposefully denying the exclusivity of Christ and openly questioning His claim that He is the only way to God.

The biblical message is clear. The apostle Peter proclaimed to a hostile audience, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The apostle John wrote, “He who does not obey the Son

will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36). Again and again, Scripture stresses that Jesus Christ is the only hope of salvation for the world. “There is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5). Only Christ can atone for sin, and therefore only Christ can provide salvation. “And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 John 5:11–12).

Those truths are antithetical to the central tenet of postmodernism. They make exclusive, universal truth claims declaring that Christ is the only true way to heaven and that all other belief-systems are erroneous. This is what Scripture teaches. It is what the true church has proclaimed throughout her history. It is the message of Christianity. And it simply cannot be adjusted to accommodate postmodern sensitivities.

**THE BIBLICAL MESSAGE IS CLEAR. THE APOSTLE PETER PROCLAIMED TO A HOSTILE AUDIENCE, “NOR IS THERE SALVATION IN ANY OTHER, FOR THERE IS NO OTHER NAME UNDER HEAVEN GIVEN AMONG MEN BY WHICH WE MUST BE SAVED” (ACTS 4:12).**

Instead, many Christians simply pass over the exclusive claims of Christ in embarrassed silence. Even worse, some in the church—including a few of evangelicalism’s best-known leaders—have begun to suggest that perhaps people *can* be saved apart from knowing Christ.

Christians cannot capitulate to postmodernism without sacrificing the very essence of our faith. The Bible’s claim that Christ is the only way of salvation is certainly out of harmony with the postmodern notion of “tolerance.” But it is, after all, just what the Bible plainly teaches. And the Bible—not postmodern opinion—is the supreme authority for the Christian. The Bible alone should determine what we believe and proclaim to the world. We cannot waver on this, no matter how much this postmodern world complains that our beliefs make us “intolerant.”

### Tolerant Intolerance

Postmodernism’s veneration of tolerance is its most obvious feature. But the version of “tolerance” peddled by postmodernists is actually a twisted and dangerous corruption of true virtue.

## CHRISTIANS CANNOT CAPITULATE TO POSTMODERNISM WITHOUT SACRIFICING THE VERY ESSENCE OF OUR FAITH.

Incidentally, tolerance is never mentioned in the Bible as a virtue, except in the sense of patience, forbearance, and long-suffering (cf. Eph 4:2). In fact, the contemporary notion of tolerance is a pathetically feeble concept compared to the love Scripture commands Christians to show even to their enemies. Jesus said, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27–28; cf. vv. 29–36).

When our grandparents spoke of *tolerance* as a virtue, they had something like that in mind. The word used to mean respecting people and treating them kindly even when we believe they are wrong. But the postmodern notion of tolerance means we must never regard anyone else’s opinions as “wrong.” Biblical tolerance is for *people*; postmodern toler-


ance is for *ideas*.

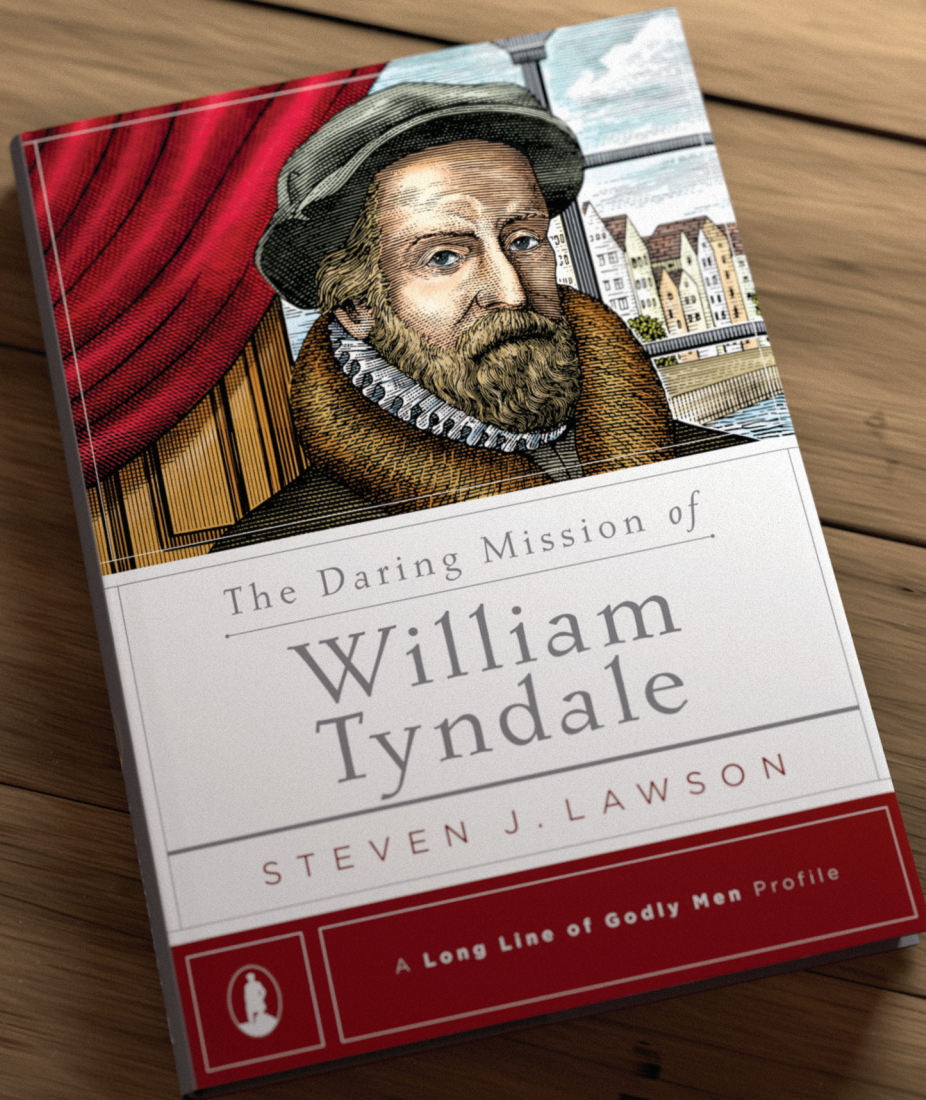
Accepting every belief as equally valid is hardly a real virtue, but it is about the kind of only “virtue” postmodernism knows anything about. Traditional virtues (including humility, self-control, and chastity) are openly scorned—and even regarded as transgressions—in the world of postmodern thought.

Predictably, the beatification of postmodern tolerance has had a disastrous effect on real virtue in our society. In this age of tolerance, what was once forbidden is now encouraged. What was once universally deemed immoral is now celebrated. Marital infidelity and divorce have been normalized. Profanity is commonplace. Abortion, homosexuality, and moral perversions of all kinds are championed by large advocacy groups and enthusiastically promoted by the popular media. The postmodern notion of “tolerance” is systematically turning genuine virtue on its head.

Why does authentic biblical Christianity find such ferocious opposition from people who think they are paragons of *tolerance*? It is because the truth claims of Scripture—and particularly Jesus’ claim to be the only way to God—are diametrically opposed to the fundamental presuppositions of the postmodern mind. The Christian message represents a death blow to the postmodernist worldview.

But as long as Christians are being duped or intimidated into softening the bold claims of Christ and widening the narrow road, the church will make no headway against postmodernism. We need to recover the distinctiveness of the gospel. We need to regain our confidence in the power of God’s truth. And we need to proclaim boldly that Christ is the *only* true hope for the people of this world.

That may not be what people want to hear in this pseudo-tolerant age of postmodernism. But it is true nonetheless. And precisely *because* it is true and the gospel of Christ *is* the only hope for a lost world, it is all the more urgent that we rise above all the voices of confusion in the world and say so. 



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# STRANGER THAN IT USED TO BE: PREACHING TO A POSTMODERN CULTURE

R. ALBERT MOHLER, JR.

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A common concern seems to emerge now wherever Christians gather: The task of truth-telling is stranger than it used to be. In this age, telling the truth is tough business, one not for the faint-hearted.

The times are increasingly strange. That sense of strangeness is at least partly due to the rise of postmodern culture and philosophy, perhaps the most important intellectual and cultural movement of the late twentieth century. What difference does postmodernism make? Just look at the modern media and pop culture, or consider the blank stares you receive from some persons when you talk about truth, meaning, and morality.

Postmodernism first developed among academics and artists, but it has quickly spread throughout the culture. At the most basic level, postmodernism refers to the passing of modernity and the rise of a new cultural movement. Modernity, the dominant worldview since the Enlightenment, has been supplanted by *postmodernism*, which extends certain principles and symbols central to the modern age, even as it denies others.

Much of the literature of postmodernism is nonsensical and hard to take seriously. When major postmodern figures speak or write, the gibberish that often results sounds more like a vocabulary test than a sustained argument. But postmodernism cannot be dismissed as unimportant or irrelevant. This is a matter of concern not only among academics and the avant-garde. This new movement represents a critical challenge to the Christian church and to the individual Christian.

Actually, postmodernism may not be a movement or methodology at all. We might best describe postmodernism as a mood that sets itself apart from the certainties of the modern age. This mood is the heart of the postmodern challenge. What are the contours of this postmodern mood? Is this new movement helpful in our presentation of the gospel? Or, will the postmodern age bring a great retreat from Christian truth? A look at the basic features of postmodernism may be helpful.

## The Postmodern Terrain: The Deconstruction of Truth

Though the nature of truth has been debated throughout the centuries, postmodernism has turned this debate on its head. While most arguments throughout history have focused on rival claims to truth, postmodernism rejects the very notion



of truth as fixed, universal, objective, or absolute.

The Christian tradition understands truth as established by God and known to us through the self-revelation of God in Scripture. Truth is eternal, fixed, and universal, and our responsibility is to order our minds in accordance with God's revealed truth and then to bear witness to this truth. We serve a Savior who identified Himself as "the way, and the truth, and the life" (see John 14:6) and called for belief.

Modern science, itself a product of the Enlightenment, rejected revelation as a source of truth and put the scientific method in its place. Modernity attempted to establish truth on the basis of scientific precision through the process of inductive thought and investigation. Following the lead of scientists, other disciplines attempted also to establish objective truth through rational thought. Modernists were confident that their approach would yield objective and universal truths by means of human reason.

Postmodernists reject both the Christian and modernist approaches to the question of truth. According to postmodern theory, truth is not universal, is not objective or absolute, and cannot be determined by a commonly accepted method. Instead, postmodernists argue that truth is relative, plural, and inaccessible to universal reason. As postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty asserts, truth is *made* rather than *found*.

According to the deconstructionists, one influential sect among postmodernists, all truth is socially constructed. That is, social groups construct their own "truth" in order to serve their own interests, but what is "true" for one group is not necessarily "true" for any other.

Michel Foucault, one of the most significant postmodern theorists, argued that all claims to truth are constructed to serve those in power. Thus, the role of the intellectual is to deconstruct truth claims in order to liberate society. What has previously been understood and affirmed as truth, argue the postmodernists, is really nothing more than a convenient structure of thought intended to oppress the powerless. Truth is not universal, for every culture establishes its own truth. Nor is truth objectively real, for all truth is merely constructed. In other words, it is made, not found.

Little imagination is needed to see that this radical relativism is a direct challenge to the Christian gospel. Our claim is not to preach one truth among many, one Savior among many, or one gospel among many. We do not believe that the Christian gospel is a socially constructed truth but the Truth that sets sinners free from sin—and that it is objectively, universally, historically true. As the late Francis Schaeffer instructed, the Christian church must contend for "true truth."

## The Postmodern Terrain: The Death of the Metanarrative

Since postmodernists believe all truth to be socially constructed, any presentation of absolute, universal, established truth must be resisted. Thus, any grand and expansive account of truth, meaning, and existence is cast aside as a “metanarrative” that claims far more than it can deliver.

It was Jean-Francois Lyotard who defined postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives.” Viewed in light of this incredulity, all the great philosophical systems are dead, all cultural accounts are limited, and all that remains are little stories accepted as true by different groups and cultures. Claims to universal truth—metanarratives—are oppressive and “totalizing,” and thus they must be resisted.

The problem with this, of course, is that Christianity is meaningless apart from the gospel—which is most certainly a metanarrative. Indeed, the Christian gospel is nothing less than the Metanarrative of all metanarratives. For Christianity to surrender the claim that the gospel is universally true and objectively established is to surrender the center of our faith. Christianity is the great metanarrative of redemption.

Our story begins with creation by the sovereign, omnipotent God, continues through the fall of humanity into sin and the redemption of sinners through the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross, and promises finally an eternal destiny for all humanity—the redeemed with God forever in glory and the unredeemed in eternal punishment. That is the message we bear, and it is a life-transforming and world-changing metanarrative.

As Christians, we do not present the gospel as one narrative among many true narratives or merely as “our” narrative alongside the authentic narratives of others. We cannot retreat to claim that biblical truth is merely true for *us*. Our claim is that the Bible is the Word of God for *all*—a claim that is deeply offensive to the postmodern worldview, which charges all who claim universal truth with imperialism and oppression.

The rise of postmodernism presents Christians with the undeniable reality that many people simply do not accept the idea that truth is absolute, or even that written texts have a fixed meaning. All claims to truth—especially claims to uni-

versally valid truth—are met with suspicion, or worse. This presents the Christian with a changed climate for truth-telling and a genuine intellectual challenge.

## The Postmodern Terrain: The Demise of the Text

If the metanarrative is dead, then the great texts behind the metanarratives must also be dead. Postmodernism asserts that it is a fallacy to ascribe any meaning to a text or even to the text’s author. It is the reader, postmodernists say, who establishes the meaning, and there are no controls that limit the meaning that can be imposed.

The late Jacques Derrida, a leading literary deconstructionist, described this move in terms of the “death of the author” and the “death of the text.” Instead of being determined by the author’s intent or the words on the page, meaning is created

by the reader in the act of reading. Indeed, the text must be *deconstructed* in order to get rid of the author and let the text live as a liberating word.

This new hermeneutical method explains much of the current debate in literature, politics, law, and theology. All texts—whether the Holy Scripture, the United States Constitution, or the works of Mark Twain—are subjected to esoteric criticism and dissection, all in the name of “liberation.” Every text, according to the postmodernists, reveals a subtext of

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oppressive intentions on the part of the author, and so must be deconstructed. This is no matter of mere academic significance. This is the argument behind much contemporary constitutional interpretation made by judges, the presentation of issues in the media, and the fragmentation of modern biblical scholarship. The rise of feminist, liberation, homosexual, and various other schools of interpretation based on “interest group” is central to this postmodern principle.

The Bible too is subjected to radical reinterpretation, often with little or no regard for the plain meaning of the text or the clear intention of the human author. Texts that are not pleasing to the postmodern mind are rejected as oppressive, patriarchal, heterosexist, homophobic, or deformed by some other political or ideological bias. The authority of the text is denied in the name of liberation, and the most fanciful and ridiculous interpretations are celebrated as “affirming” and thus “authentic.”





Gene Veith, dean of the school of arts and sciences at Concordia University, tells of a young man who claimed to be a Christian and professed belief in Christ and love for the Bible, but who also believed in reincarnation. His pastor confronted this belief in reincarnation by directing the young man to Hebrews 9:27. The text was read: “It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.”

The young man looked back at his pastor and replied, “Well, that’s your interpretation.” The young man was simply unwilling to be instructed and bound by the biblical text. In the name of postmodernism, anything can be explained away as a matter of interpretation.

Of course, the notion of the “death of the author” takes on an entirely new meaning when applied to Scripture, for we claim that the Bible is not the mere words of men but the Word of God. Postmodernism’s insistence on the death of the author is inherently anti-supernatural and ultimately atheistic. The claim to divine revelation is written off as only one more projection of oppressive power that must be resisted.

### **The Postmodern Terrain: The Dominion of Therapy**

When truth is denied, therapy remains. The critical question shifts from “What is true?” to “What makes me feel good?” This cultural trend has been developing during past decades, but has reached epic proportions in the last few years. The culture we confront is almost completely under submission to what Philip Reiff called the “triumph of the therapeutic.” In a postmodern world, all issues eventually revolve around the self. Thus, enhanced self-esteem is all that remains as the goal of many educational and theological approaches, with categories such as “sin” rejected as oppressive and harmful to self-esteem.

Therapeutic approaches are dominant in a postmodern cul-

ture made up of individuals uncertain that truth even exists, but quite assured that our self-esteem must remain intact. Right and wrong are discarded as out-of-date reminders of an oppressive past. In the name of our own “authenticity,” we will reject all inconvenient moral standards and replace concern for right and wrong with the assertion of our rights.

Theology is likewise reduced to therapy. Entire theological systems and approaches are constructed with the narrow goal of raising self-esteem for individuals and special groups. These “feel-good” theologies dispense with the “negativity” of offensive biblical texts or even with the Bible altogether. Out are categories such as “lost” and “judgment,” and in their place are notions of acceptance without repentance and wholeness without redemption. We may not know (or care) if we are saved or lost, but we certainly do feel better about ourselves.

### **The Postmodern Terrain: The Decline of Authority**

Because postmodern culture is committed to a radical vision of liberation, all authorities must be overthrown, including texts, authors, traditions, metanarratives, the Bible, God, and all powers on heaven and earth. All authority is denounced, deconstructed, and cast aside—except, of course, for the authority of the postmodern theorists and cultural figures themselves, who wield their power in the name of oppressed peoples everywhere.

According to the postmodernists, those in authority use their power to remain in power, and to serve their own interests. Their laws, traditions, texts, and “truth” are nothing more than that which is designed to keep them in power. So, when subject to the postmodern critique, the authority of governmental leaders is eroded, as is the authority of teachers, community leaders, parents, and ministers. Ultimately, even the authority of God is rejected as totalitarian and au-

tocratic. Christians—especially Christian ministers—are seen as representatives of this autocratic deity, and are to be resisted as authorities as well. Doctrines, traditions, creeds, and confessions—all of these are to be rejected and charged with limiting self-expression and representing oppressive authority. Preachers are tolerated so long as they stick to therapeutic messages of enhanced self-esteem, but are resisted whenever they inject divine authority or universal truth claims into their sermons.

### The Postmodern Terrain: The Displacement of Morality

Ivan in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* was right—if God is dead, everything is permissible. The God allowed by postmodernism is not the God of the Bible but a vague concept of spirituality. There are no tablets of stone, no Ten Commandments . . . no rules.

Morality, along with other foundations of culture, is discarded by postmodernists as oppressive and totalitarian. A pervasive moral relativism marks postmodern culture. This is not to say that postmodernists are reluctant to employ moral language. To the contrary, postmodern culture is filled with moral discourse. But the issues of moral concern are quite arbitrary, and in many cases represent a reversal of biblical morality. Take the issue of homosexuality, for example. The rise of gay and lesbian studies in universities, the emergence of homosexual political power, and the homoerotic images now common to popular culture mark a dramatic moral reversal. Homosexuality is no longer considered a sin. It is “homophobia” that is now targeted as the real sin, and demands for tolerance of “alternative lifestyles” have morphed into demands for public *celebration* of all lifestyles as morally equal.

Michael Jones has described modernity as “rationalized sexual misbehavior,” and postmodernity is its logical extension. Foucault, who argued that all sexual morality is an abuse of power, called for postmodernism to celebrate the concept of perversity. He lived and died dedicated to this lifestyle, and his prophecy has been fulfilled in this decade. The very idea of perversity has become perverse to the postmodern culture. Everything is permitted.

### Responding to the Challenge of Postmodernism

How should we approach the task of preaching in the face of such confusion? In an age when the reality of truth is itself denied, when most persons think their most basic problems are rooted in a lack of self-esteem, and when personal choice is the all-determining reality of the marketplace, how should we go about proclaiming and defending a gospel that declares to people that they are sinners in need of the one and only Savior?

I would argue that at this critical time of cultural and intel-

lectual transition, the task of preaching must be understood as an apologetic calling. Apologetics—the task of setting forth the truth claims of Christianity and arguing for the unique truthfulness of the Christian faith—must inform every preacher's understanding of his task in a postmodern age.

In Acts 17:16–34, we find a model of Great Commission proclamation matched to an apologetic argument—an argument in defense of Christian truth. In that passage, we find Paul standing at the center of apologetic ministry in the first century—Athens. Athens was the most intellectually sophisticated culture in the ancient world, and even in Paul's day it basked in its retreating glory. Though Rome held political and military preeminence, Athens stood supreme in terms of cultural and intellectual influence. The centerpiece of Paul's visit to Athens is his message to the court of philosophers at the Areopagus, also known as Mars Hill. Some critics have claimed that Paul's experience on Mars Hill was a dismal failure. Luke presents it otherwise, however, and in this account we can learn a great deal about the proper proclamation of the gospel and defense of the faith. Several principles become evident as we consider this great biblical text.

*First, Christian proclamation in a postmodern culture begins in a provoked spirit* (Acts 17:16). Paul observed the spiritual confusion of the Athenians and was overcome with concern. The sight of a city full of idols seized him with grief, and that grief turned to gospel proclamation. Luke records that Paul experienced *paroxysmos*, a paroxysm, at the sight of such spiritual confusion. Athens was intellectually sophisticated—the arena where the ancient world's most famous philosophers had debated. This was the city of Pericles, Plato, and Socrates. But Paul was not impressed with the faded glory. He saw men and women in need of a Savior.

This text reminds us that a proper Christian apologetic begins in spiritual concern, not in intellectual snobbery or scorn. We preach Christ not because Christianity is merely a superior philosophy or worldview, nor because we have been smart enough to embrace the gospel, but because we have met the Savior, we have been claimed by the gospel, and we have been transformed by the renewing of our minds. Our preaching is not a matter of intellectual pride but of spiritual concern. A dying world languishes in spiritual confusion. I wonder how many of us are as grieved by that as Paul was in his observation of Athens. Looking at the spiritual confusion of American culture, do we experience the paroxysm with which Paul was seized?

We live in a nation filled with idols of self-realization, material comfort, psychological salvation, sexual ecstasy, ambition, power, and success. Millions of Americans embrace New Age spiritualities in a quest for personal fulfillment and self-transcendence. The ancient paganisms of nature worship have emerged once again, along with esoteric and occult practices. As journalist Walter Truett Anderson observes,

## WHERE IS THE GRIPPING REALIZATION THAT MILLIONS OF MEN AND WOMEN ARE SLAVES TO IDOLS OF OUR AGE? WHERE IS THE COURAGE TO CONFRONT THE IDOLS ON THEIR OWN GROUND?

Never before has any civilization made available to its populace such a smorgasbord of realities. Never before has a communications system like the contemporary mass media made information about religion—all religions—available to so many people. Never has a society allowed its people to become consumers of belief, and allowed belief—all beliefs—to become merchandise.

America, he says, has become the “belief basket of the world.”

I fear that we have become too acculturated, too blind, and too unimpressed with the paganisms and idolatries all around us. We betray a comfort level that Paul would see as scandalous. Where is the gripping realization that millions of men and women are slaves to the idols of our age? Where is the courage to confront the idols on their own ground?

*Second, Christian proclamation in a postmodern culture is focused on gospel proclamation (Acts 17:17).* Moved by the city full of idols, Paul went to the synagogue and to the marketplace each day, presenting the claims of Christ and reasoning with both Jews and Gentiles. The goal of apologetic preaching is not to win an argument but to win souls. Apologetics separated from evangelism is unknown in the New Testament, and it is clearly foreign to the model offered by the apostle Paul. The great missionary was about the business of preaching the gospel, presenting the claims of Christ, and calling for men and women to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved.

For too many evangelicals, the study of apologetics is re-

duced to philosophical structures and rational arguments. This is not Paul’s method. He is not merely concerned with the justification of truth claims, but, more profoundly, he is concerned for the justification of sinners. This is another reminder of the fact that every true theologian is an evangelist, and every true evangelist is a theologian. The gospel possesses content and presents truth claims that demand our keenest arguments and boldest proclamation. But Christianity is not merely a truth to be affirmed. It is a gospel to be received. Moved by the sight of idols, Paul preached Christ, and called for belief.

*Third, Christian proclamation in a postmodern culture assumes a context of spiritual confusion (Acts 17:18–21).* Paul’s gospel proclamation brought confusion to the Athenian intellectuals. The Epicureans, the forerunners of modern secularists, and the Stoics, committed to pantheistic rationalism, accused Paul of teaching nonsense.

Confusion marks the spiritual understanding of most Americans. Pollsters report amazingly large numbers of Americans who profess belief in God but live like atheists. The vast majority of Americans profess to be Christians but have no concept of Christian belief or discipleship. A quick look around the local trade bookshop will reveal something of the contours of America’s spiritual confusion. Books on religion and spirituality abound, but most are empty of content. You know you are in a confused age when a popular book is entitled *That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist*. Sadly, this confusion has invaded our churches as well. An amazing number of professing Christians allow for belief in reincarnation, channeling, or other spiritualist manifestations.

To the Athenians—and to modern secular Americans—the preaching of the authentic gospel sounds strange. “You are bringing some strange things to our ears,” the Athenians responded to Paul (v. 20). The Christian preacher hears this same response today. In postmodern America, the Christian gospel is strange in its whole and in its parts. Most Americans assume themselves to be good and decent persons, and they are amused at the notion that they are sinners against God. Grace, too, is an alien concept in American culture. Sin is almost outlawed as a category, substitutionary atonement sounds unfair, and God in human flesh is too much to take. Yet that is what we preach.

The Athenians and their tourists loved to spend their time telling or hearing something new—but what Paul preached was simply too much. Americans today are like the Athenians in more ways than they know. Consumers of meaning just as much as they are of cars and clothing, Americans will test-drive new spiritualities and try on a whole series of lifestyles. To many, the gospel is just too strange, too countercultural, too propositional, and too exclusive. To contend for the gospel and biblical morality in this culture is to run the risk of



being cited for “hate speech.” We must assume a context of spiritual confusion, and this is often now a hostile confusion. The gospel sounds not only strange but threatening to the local deities.

*Fourth, Christian proclamation in a postmodern culture is directed to a spiritual hunger (Acts 17:22–23).* Paul’s observation convinced him that the Athenians were a religious people. A deficit of religiosity was not the problem. In fact, judging from the statue Paul noticed, the Athenians seemed to be fearful lest they miss any new philosophy or neglect any unknown deity.

American culture is increasingly secularist. The past century has seen the agenda of secularism accomplished in the courts, in the schools, in the marketplace, and in the media. And yet Americans are among the most religious people in the world. The emptiness of the secular wasteland haunts most postmodern persons. They long for something more. Many people declare themselves to live by scientific rationality, and yet they read the astrology charts, believe in alien abductions, line up to see bleeding statues, and talk about past lives. In America, even some atheists say they believe in miracles. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow suggests that “Americans are particularly fascinated with miraculous manifestations of the sacred because they are uncertain whether the sacred has really gone away.”

Paul had taken account of the plentiful idols and houses of worship found in Athens. He even noted that they were hedging their bets, lest they offend some deity who had not made himself known. Paul seized the opportunity. Brought before the court at the Areopagus, he referred to the altar he had seen that was dedicated to an unknown god. “It just so happens,” he asserted, “that I know that God. Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you” (v. 23).

This is surely a pattern for Christian preaching in a postmodern age. We must seek constantly to turn spiritual hunger toward the true food of the gospel of Christ. God has placed that hunger within lost persons so that they might desire Christ. We bear the stewardship of proclaiming the gospel, and therefore we must muster the courage to confront confused postmodernists with the reality of their spiritual ignorance. Paul never allowed this ignorance to become an excuse, but there can be no doubt that it is a reality. Americans, too, are feeding on a false diet of superstition and myths. The hunger is a place to start. Our challenge is to preach Christ as the only answer to that hunger.

*Fifth, Christian proclamation in a postmodern culture begins with the fundamental issue of God’s nature, character, power, and authority (Acts 17:24–28).* Interestingly, Paul does not begin with Christ and the cross but with the knowledge of God in creation. The God who created the world is not looking for Corinthian columns and the Parthenon, Paul argued. He does not dwell in temples made with human hands. He is the

author of life itself, and He needs nothing from us. Furthermore, He has made humanity and is Lord over all the nations. He sovereignly determines their times and boundaries. The Athenians were partly right, said Paul, quoting their poets. All human beings are God's children, but not in the sense the Athenians believed. In proclaiming God as the Creator, Ruler, and Sustainer of all things and all peoples, Paul was making a claim that far surpassed the claims of the Hellenistic deities.

Paul established his preaching of Christ upon the larger foundation of the knowledge of the God of the Bible, Maker of heaven and earth. That is also how we must structure our own proclamation of the gospel in this postmodern age. People must first understand God the Creator before they will understand God the Redeemer. John Calvin organized his systematic theology around what he called the *duplex cognitio Domini*, the twofold knowledge of God. We must start with the knowledge of God as Creator, but this is not sufficient to save. "It is one thing to feel that God our Maker supports us by His power, governs us by His providence, nourishes us by His goodness, and attends us with all sorts of blessings," Calvin said, "and another thing to embrace the reconciliation offered us in Christ." Seeing people come to faith in Christ the Redeemer begins with seeing them come to grips with the fact that God is their Maker.

*Sixth, Christian proclamation in a postmodern culture confronts error* (Acts 17:29). In this sense, preaching, apologetics, and polemics are all related. Error must be confronted, heresy must be opposed, and false teachings must be corrected. Paul was bold to correct the Athenians with a firm injunction: We ought not to think false thoughts about God. The Athenians made idols out of marble and precious metals. Paul rebuked this practice and proclaimed that the Divine Nature is not like gold or silver or stone. Furthermore, God is not "an image formed by the art and thought of man."

False theologies abound no less in the postmodern marketplace of ideas. Americans have revived old heresies and invented new ones. Mormons believe that God is a celestial being with a sex partner. The ecological mystics believe that the world is God—the so-called Gaia Hypothesis. New Age devotees believe that God is infinite empowerment. Our culture is filled with images of gods formed by art and the thought of man. Our confrontation must be bold and biblical. We have no right to make God in our image.

*Seventh, Christian proclamation in a postmodern culture affirms the totality of God's saving purpose* (Acts 17:30–31). Paul brought his presentation of the gospel to a climactic conclusion by calling for repentance and warning of the judgment that is to come. He proclaimed Christ as the appointed Savior who will judge the world and whose identity has been clearly revealed by the fact that God has raised Him from the dead.

It is not enough to preach Christ without calling for belief and repentance. It is not enough to promise the blessings of heaven without warning of the threat of hell. It is not enough to preach salvation without pointing to judgment.

Authentic Christian preaching both declares and defends the whole gospel. The center of our proclamation is Jesus

Christ the Savior, who was crucified for sinners, was raised by the power of God, is coming again in glory and in judgment, and is even now sitting and ruling at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. We must defend the truths of Christ's deity, the virgin birth, the historicity of the miracles, the truth of the incarnation, the reality of His substitutionary death, and the assurance of His bodily resurrection. Yet we dare not stop at these affirmations, for we must place the person and work of Christ within the context of God's eternal purpose to save a people to His own glory and to exalt Himself among the nations. The task of preaching in this postmodern context is comprehensive, even as

it is driven by the desire to see sinners turn to Christ in faith.

The postmodern world has no need of half-evangelists preaching a half-gospel to the half-converted, and leading a half-hearted church. What is needed is a generation of bold and courageous preacher-apologists for the twenty-first century—men who will be witnesses to the whole world of the power of the gospel and who will proclaim the whole counsel of God. ♦

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## WHAT IS NEEDED IS A GENERATION OF BOLD AND COURAGEOUS PREACHER- APOLOGISTS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY.

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# JONATHAN EDWARDS AND PREACHING IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

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**H**am and eggs. Baseball and American pie. Bonnie and Clyde. Martin Luther and the *Ninety-Five Theses*. These all go together, pairs that make perfect sense. But, Jonathan Edwards and preaching in a postmodern context? How could these two things possibly go together?

If we stopped at Jonathan Edwards and preaching, that would make sense. In fact, it would be rather helpful. Jonathan Edwards was first and foremost a pastor. His primary genre was the sermon, and he left behind a treasure trove of sermon manuscripts. Many of his well-known books were originally sermon series preached before his Northampton congregation. *Religious Affections*, *History of the Work of Redemption*, *Charity and Its Fruits*—these classics and others first came to life as spoken sermons.

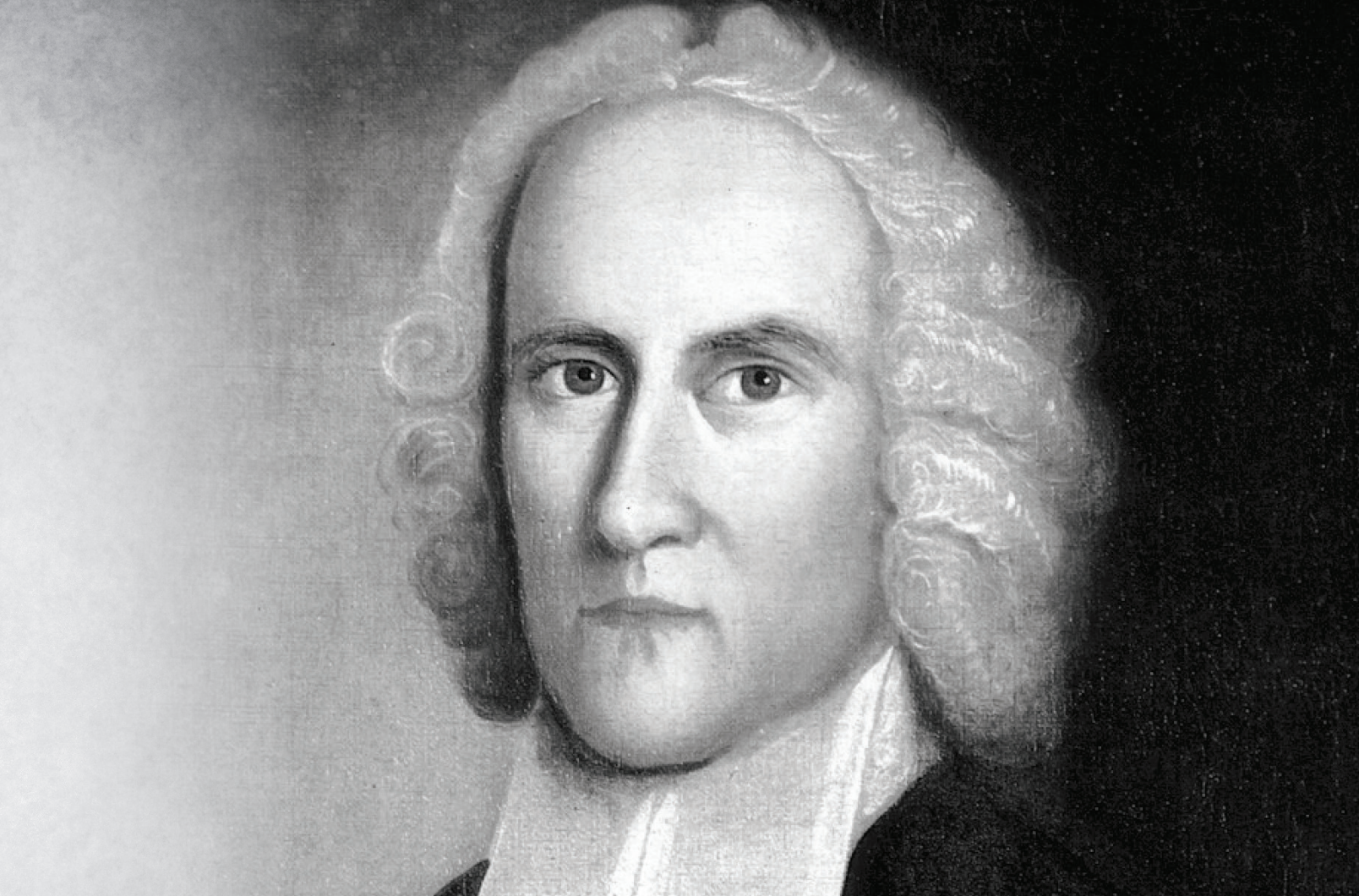
We also have Edwards's thoughts on preaching. In his sermon "Ministers to Preach Not Their Own Wisdom but the Word of God," Edwards declares that God's ministers "are on a divine errand. God has not left it to their discretion what their

errand should be. They are to preach the preaching that He bids them." That piece of wisdom alone testifies to Edwards' role as a trusted mentor to preachers three centuries after his life.

But, again, what about Edwards and preaching *in a postmodern world*? Do these things fit together? Actually, they do. Allow me to explain.

Edwards began his ministerial career with two streams of influence. One has been called the "Connecticut River Valley School of Preaching." This included his father, Timothy Edwards, who ministered for 61 years in East Windsor, Connecticut, and his maternal grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, who had ministered for 60 years in Northampton. The pastors serving up and down the Connecticut River Valley preached in the Puritan plain style, having cut their homiletic teeth on William Ames's *The Art of Prophesying*. As George Marsden points out in his biography, Edwards principally learned from these predecessors that the most effective sermons exalted the affections, but never at the expense of reason. Edwards preached the truth in order to impact others, in order to affect his hearers. These Puritan pastors of the Connecticut River Valley were profoundly committed to the truth and to the persuasive and compelling communication of the truth. In their hands, sermons became works of art.





### Edwards and Modernism

In addition to the Connecticut River Valley preachers, Edwards also had a rather curious line of influence early on: the great minds of the Enlightenment era. Edwards was at Yale when the first crates of books for the library came in. He took on the task of cataloging them. And this, of course, meant he had first dibs on them. They included the theological and biblical studies books of the day. But they also included works by Isaac Newton, John Locke, and the Scottish moral philosophers. Any image of Edwards and his colonial New England ministerial colleagues as “backwoods,” as unschooled and unlearned men, is thus unfounded. These men were exposed to all the new ideas that were circulating in the universities in the UK and on the European Continent.

As for Edwards’s initial exposure to these ideas, the story is well enough told. Edwards’s own confession is that on the first occasion he sat down with the books of John Locke Edwards, he found himself like a giddy miser with gold coins running through his fingers. Perry Miller, the late Harvard scholar who did much to bring Edwards to the attention of the academy in the twentieth century, lamented that Edwards left these philosophical pursuits for the pulpit. Others think the Locke reading may be chalked up to the detours of an ide-

alistic youth. As soon as Edwards came to his senses, he left Locke behind, or so goes this line of interpretation.

The truth lies somewhere in between. Edwards never left his philosophical reading and interests behind once he stepped into the pulpit. He was fascinated by ideas; pursuing them fit rather well with his overarching goal of glorifying and enjoying God with all his heart and soul and strength *and mind*. But Edwards also saw dangerous things in Locke and the other Enlightenment thinkers. Edwards continued to read Locke and his contemporaries. He even quoted them, and quoted them often. It’s simply that Edwards quoted them to disagree with them much more than to affirm them.

Edwards predicted that the Enlightenment would lead to the downfall of the theological commitments in New England, just as they had wreaked havoc in Europe and England. Edwards, consequently, sounded the alarm on the first beachheads of the enemy: Arminianism and Arianism. Soon would come deism. Then it would be “game over.”

### The End of Modernism?

We can begin to understand postmodernism when we grasp what modernism was all about. And Edwards was present at the beginning, or near the beginning, of the spread of mod-

ernism. His critique of modernism at its dawn sheds light on how we should be thinking of modernism in its twilight years, and as it gives way to postmodernism.

Modernism was a belief that truth was knowable, that ethics was knowable, and that reality had ultimate meaning. All of these are good things. But then comes the *sine qua non* of modernism: all of these things are knowable and achievable *through human reason*. Enlightenment, the modernist project, meant nothing more than freeing human rationality to arrive at all knowledge.

How did this project fare? To use the metaphor of the literary deconstructionist Jacques Derrida, the modernist quest for finding ultimate meaning and truth was like searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack. But the needle doesn't exist, Derrida says, or at least the needle has proved elusive ever since the modernist quest began under the founder of modernism, René Descartes. Let's stop looking for the needle, Derrida suggests. Instead, let's play!

This is how Derrida counseled we should read texts: not looking for ultimate meaning, but having fun, playing in them. And texts are simply a metaphor for life and ultimate reality and being. "Just play" was the sum of his advice.

Postmodernism did not deconstruct modernism, but rather simply pointed out modernism's own self-destruction.

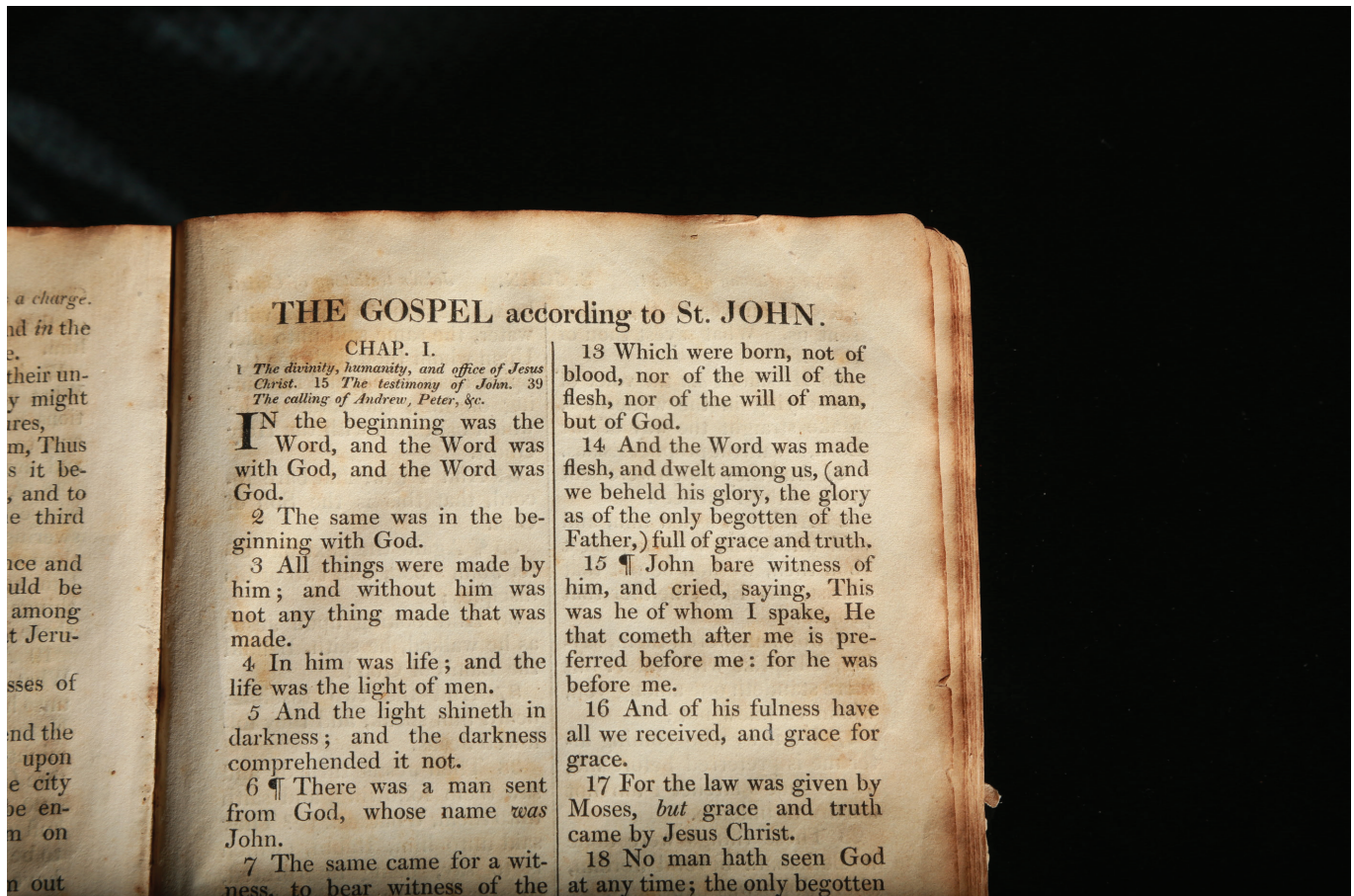
Modernism came with its own self-destruct button. It simply took some time for it to detonate and to work itself out.

Of course, some argue we are not living in a postmodern age, but rather a hyper-modernist age, characterized by hyper-relativism and pluralism. Regardless of what our day may be called, most will likely agree that we are living in new environs. The worldview is different, the entertainment is different, and the philosophy is different than it was when modernism reigned supreme. And we are being told preaching must be different, too.

### How Edwards Might Help Today

Postmodernism might be helpful in pointing out modernity's weaknesses and limitations. It is not all that helpful, however, in providing a solution. It seems postmodernism is rather content with tearing down while not building up. In other words, postmodernism offers a stinging critique, but is rather silent regarding a way out or a solution. In this regard, Edwards might prove rather helpful. He, too, was well aware of the limitations and weaknesses of modernity. He saw exactly the impact it would have on philosophy and culture, as well as its impact on the church and preaching.

Within his modernist context, Edwards gave significant attention to the idea of reason, the nature of humanity, and



the meaning of ultimate meaning. His critique of modernism helps significantly in understanding our postmodern context.

Three things in particular stand out. First, Edwards points out that Christianity is about knowing, but it is not reduced to knowing. Second, living the Christian life is about knowing, but it is not reduced to knowing. Thirdly and finally, preaching is about imparting knowledge, but it is not reduced to imparting knowledge. The modernist seemed perfectly content to leave everything at the level of mere knowledge. “The more you know...” ran the slogan of modernism. The postmodernist seems bent on going in the other direction, due in some part to the modernists’ shortcomings.

It is a fairly wide-held commitment of postmodernism that propositional truth is of little value, sounding like a clanging cymbal to postmodern ears. In Edwards’s sermon “Ministers to Preach Not Their Own Wisdom but the Word of God,” he stresses that the minister is to proclaim doctrine and the congregation is to receive doctrine, even though that doctrine contains mysteries, even though it runs counter to human wisdom, and even though it, as some contend, fails to measure to the high bar of human reason. Edwards declares, “It surely therefore becomes us to receive what God reveals to be truth and to look upon His word as proof sufficient, whether what He reveals squares with our notions or not.” Edwards adds, “God does not need to be told by His messengers what message is fit to deliver to those whom He sends them.”

The age we live in needs to be understood; it provides the context and explains some of the ways people think. We sometimes use the expression “contextualization” to describe our attempts to understand the times. But contextualization can mean different things to different people. When it means an understanding of how people think, or a looking for common ground so as to present the gospel, contextualization can be helpful. We likely see such an example of this kind of contextualization in Acts 17 when Paul speaks at Mars Hill.

But when contextualization means “the context dictates what is said,” things have gone too far. Cultural contexts should not dictate or prescribe. That is true of modern contexts as well as postmodern ones. In the sermon mentioned above, Edwards cites Acts 20:27, telling preachers to declare the whole counsel of God, “whether men will hear or whether they will forbear.”

When Edwards made a case that certain biblical doctrines did not appear to meet the bar of autonomous human rea-

son, he was saying in effect that he would not be swayed by the modernist impulse. He would not cater to the preferences of modernity. Edwards saw dangers in modernism, snares that could entrap preaching and would eventually entrap the church.

So it is with postmodernism. Christianity is doctrine; it is propositions. It can never be reduced to propositions, but it can never be articulated without them. Christianity is about knowing, but it is not reduced to knowing. Christianity is not to be proscribed by either modernity or postmodernity.

So it is with living the Christian life. Knowing what to do needs to be accompanied with doing what we know. Another tenet of postmodernism and postmodern versions of Christianity is that behavior trumps belief; ethics trumps epistemology. Edwards’s *Religious Affections* ought to be required reading on this point. Living the Christian life is both belief *and* behavior. Ethics and doing flows from epistemology *and* knowing. To view the Christian life as behavior over belief is moralism. To view it as belief without behavior is unbiblical.

Finally, we can see the implications of Edwards’s critique of modernism when it comes to the *aim* of preaching. Preaching could look and sound very much like a lecture in the modernist frame. “Postmodern preaching” sets little store by truth.

Edwards navigated these two poles quite well. His sermons were a tour de force in persuasion. He could stack proposition upon proposition. He preached truth. But he also knew how to capture the drama. He aimed at impacting his hearers. For Edwards, truth flows to the heart, then out through the hands and feet. Preaching, according to Edwards, should awaken its hearers—*and* the preacher.

The kind of preaching Edwards described and modeled is needed in any age. Perhaps especially, in a postmodern one. ♦

Note: Jonathan Edwards’s sermon “Ministers to Preach Not Their Own Wisdom but the Word of God” may be found in Richard A. Bailey and Gregory A. Wills, eds., *The Salvation of Souls: Nine Previously Unpublished Sermons on the Call of Ministry and the Gospel by Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002). This sermon was preached at the ordination of Edward Billing in Cold Spring (now Belchertown), Massachusetts, 1740.

## PREACHING, ACCORDING TO EDWARDS, SHOULD AWAKEN ITS HEARERS – AND THE PREACHER.

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# PROCLAIMING THE EXCLUSIVITY OF CHRIST AND THE GOSPEL IN A CHANGING WORLD

BRUCE A. WARE

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**W**e live in a day of unprecedented religious pluralism. Of course, human history records that the world has long been pluralistic in the simple sense: there are, and always have been, many religions. This was true for Old Testament Israel and for New Testament Christians, and it is true for us today. But what marks the pluralism of our day as distinct is the imposition of the notion that all religions must be viewed as equally valid. No one religion may claim exclusive truth lest it be branded as intolerant and offensive. Christians today, then, find themselves living and bearing witness in a culture that resists the very truth claims of the gospel itself, i.e., that Jesus Christ is the only Savior and that faith in Christ alone is the means by which any sinner may be saved.

Three positions on the question of whether Christ is the only way to salvation are prevalent today. All three can be detected by how each answers these two fundamental questions: First, *is Jesus the only Savior?* More fully: Is the sinless life of

Christ and His atoning death and resurrection the only means by which the penalty of sin is paid and the power of sin is defeated? Second, *is faith in Christ necessary to be saved?* More fully: Is conscious knowledge of Christ's death and resurrection for sin and explicit faith in Christ necessary for anyone to become a recipient of the benefits of Christ's atoning work and so be saved?

Pluralism answers both questions, "No." The pluralist (e.g., John Hick) believes that there are many paths to God, Jesus being only one of them. Since salvation can come through other religions and religious leaders, it surely follows that people do not have to believe in Christ to be saved.

Inclusivism answers the first question, "Yes," and the second question, "No." To the inclusivist (e.g., Clark Pinnock), although Jesus has accomplished the work necessary to bring us back to God, nonetheless, people can be saved by responding positively to God's revelation in creation and perhaps in aspects of their own religions. So, even though Christ is the only Savior, people do not have to know about or believe in Christ to be saved.

Exclusivism answers both questions, "Yes." The exclusivist (e.g., Ron Nash, John Piper, Bruce Ware) believes that Scripture affirms both truths, first, that Jesus alone has ac-



completed the atoning work necessary to save sinners, and second, that knowledge of and faith in Christ is necessary for anyone to be saved. The remainder of this article offers a brief summary of some of the main support for these two claims.

### Jesus Is the Only Savior

Why think that Jesus is the only Savior? Of all the people who have lived and ever will live, *Jesus alone qualifies*, in His person and work, as the *only one capable* of accomplishing atonement for the sin of the world. Consider the following ways in which Jesus alone qualifies as the exclusive Savior.

1. *Christ alone was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin* (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–38), and as such, He alone qualifies to be Savior. Why does this matter? Only as the Holy Spirit takes the place of the human father in Jesus' conception can it be true that the one conceived is both fully God and fully man. Christ must be both God and man to atone for sin (see below), but for this to occur, He must be conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a human virgin. No one else in the history of the world is conceived by the Spirit and born of a virgin mother. Therefore, Jesus alone qualifies to be Savior.

2. *Christ alone is God incarnate* (John 1:1–18; Heb 1:1–3; 2:14–18; Phil 2:5–11; 1 Tim 2:5–6), and as such, He alone

qualifies to be Savior. As Anselm argued in the eleventh century, our Savior must be fully man in order to take the place of men and die in their stead, and He must be fully God in order for the value of His sacrificial payment to satisfy the demands of our infinitely holy God. Man He must be, but a mere man simply could not make this infinite payment for sin. But no one else in the history of the world is both fully God and fully man. Therefore, Jesus alone qualifies to be Savior.

3. *Christ alone lived a sinless life* (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15, 7:23–28, 9:13–14; 1 Pet 2:21–24), and as such, He alone qualifies to be Savior. As Leviticus makes clear, animals offered as sacrifices for sin must be without blemish. This prefigured the sacrifice of Christ who, as sinless, was able to die for the sins of others and not for Himself. But no one else in the history of the world has lived a totally sinless life. Therefore, Jesus alone qualifies to be Savior.

4. *Christ alone died a penal, substitutionary death* (Isa 53:4–6; Rom 3:21–26; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:10–14), and as such, He alone qualifies to be Savior. The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). And because Christ lived a sinless life, He did not deserve to die. Rather, the cause of His death was owing to the fact that the Father imputed to Him *our sin*. The death that He died was in *our place*. No one else in the history of the

## NO ONE ELSE IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD HAS DIED A DEATH FOR SIN AND BEEN RAISED FROM THE DEAD TRIUMPHANT OVER SIN SUCH THAT SATAN AND HIS POWERS ARE FULLY AND FINALLY DEFEATED.

world has died because He bore the sin of others and not as the judgment for His own sin. Therefore, Jesus alone qualifies to be Savior.

5. *Christ alone rose from the dead triumphant over sin* (Acts 2:22–24; Rom 4:25; 1 Cor 15:3–8, 16–23), and as such, He alone qualifies to be Savior. The Bible indicates that a few people, other than Christ, have been raised from the dead (1 Kings 17:17–24; John 11:38–44), but only Christ has been raised from the dead never to die again, having triumphed over sin. The wages of sin is death, and the greatest power of sin is death. So, Christ’s resurrection from the dead demonstrates that His atoning death for sin accomplished both the *full payment of sin’s penalty* and *full victory over sin’s greatest power*. No one else in the history of the world has been raised from the dead triumphant over sin. Therefore, Jesus alone qualifies to be Savior.

6. *Christ alone defeated Satan and the powers of darkness by His death and resurrection* (Col 2:15; Heb 2:14; 1 John 3:8). It is only because Christ paid sin’s penalty that He was able also to liberate us from its power. That is, the former (the payment of sin’s penalty, sometimes called “penal substitution”) is the *basis* for the latter (the conquering of sin’s power, sometimes called “*Christus Victor*”). An analogy may assist here. Under a just system of laws, a prisoner is locked in jail and his freedom curtailed precisely because he has been convicted of some crime whose penalty involves his incarceration. Notice, then, that his *guilt* forms the basis for his *bondage*. Only because he has been proven guilty of breaking the law does the state have the right to put him behind bars. Furthermore, if a prisoner can prove his actual innocence, such that the charge of guilt

can be removed—e.g., if some forensic or DNA evidence discovered after his incarceration demonstrated his innocence—then the state would be obligated to free him from his bonds and release him from prison. Is it not clear, then, that the *power* of the state to withhold from people their freedom and put them in *bondage* comes from the *guilt* those very people have incurred and the accompanying *penalty* directed at them as a result? Remove the *guilt* and its *penalty*, and you remove the just basis for the state’s *power* to enforce its *bondage*. So, Christ, by His payment for our sin (Col 2:14), has provided the means by which the guilt of our sin is removed and hence, liberation from the clutches of Satan and the powers of darkness is necessarily granted. No one else in the history of the world has died a death for sin and been raised from the dead triumphant over sin such that Satan and his powers are fully and finally defeated. But Jesus has done this. Therefore, Jesus alone qualifies to be Savior.

This leads us to the following conclusion: Christ alone qualifies as Savior, and Christ alone *is* Savior. Jesus’ own words could not be clearer: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). And the Apostle Peter confirms, “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). These claims are true of no one else in the history of the world. Indeed, Jesus alone is Savior.

### Faith in Christ Is Necessary to Be Saved

Why think that faith in Christ is necessary to be saved? The teaching of the apostles is clear, that the content of the gospel now (since the coming of Christ) focuses directly upon the atoning death and resurrection of Christ (1 Cor 15:3–5), and that by faith in Christ one is forgiven of his sin and granted eternal life (Eph 2:8–9). Consider the following passages that support the conviction that people are saved only as they know and trust in Christ as their Savior.

1. *Jesus’ own teaching shows that the nations need to hear and repent to be saved* (Luke 24:44–49). Jesus commands that “repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). The people Jesus here describes are currently both unrepentant and unforgiven. To be forgiven, they must repent. But to repent, they must hear the proclamation of Christ’s work in His name. And this is true for all the nations, including Jews who haven’t trusted Christ. Jesus does not envision the “nations” as already having saving revelation available to them. Rather, believers must proclaim the message of Christ to all the nations for people in those nations to be saved.

2. *Paul teaches that even pious Jews, and everyone else, must hear and believe in Christ to be saved* (Rom 10:1–4, 13–15). Paul’s heart’s desire and prayer is for the salvation of his fellow Jews. Even though they have a zeal for God, they do not know

that God's righteousness comes only through faith in Christ. So these Jews, even though pious, are not saved. Whoever will call upon the name of Christ (see Rom 10:9, 13) will be saved. But this requires that someone tell them. And this requires that those are sent. Missions, then, is necessary, since people must hear the gospel of Christ to be saved.

3. *Cornelius's story demonstrates that even pious Gentiles must hear and believe in Christ to be saved* (Acts 10:1–2, 38–43; 11:13–18; 15:7–9). Far from being saved before Peter came to him, as some think, Cornelius was a pious (10:2) Gentile who needed to hear of Christ, and believe in Christ, to be saved. When Peter gives a report concerning the conversion of the Gentiles, he declares that only when he preached did

Cornelius hear the message he needed to hear, the message by which he would “be saved” (Acts 11:14; cf. 15:8–9). Despite his piety, Cornelius needed to hear the proclamation of the gospel of Christ in order to be saved.

Conclusion: *Jesus is the only Savior and people must know and believe in Christ to be saved.* May we honor Christ and the gospel in this constantly changing and pluralistic world, and may we manifest our faithfulness to God's Word, by upholding these twin truths and living in a manner that demonstrates our commitment to them. ♦

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# THE DANGERS OF POSTMODERN SPIRITUALITY

NATHAN A. FINN

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**A**lmost everyone has at least heard of postmodernism. But what is it? Technically speaking, postmodernism is an intellectual movement with roots in twentieth-century Western Europe that influenced philosophy, literature, architecture, and the arts. However, among ordinary people, postmodernism is more about the rejection of absolute truth, the downplaying of universal narratives that explain our world, and the questioning of once-assumed foundations than it is a well-developed philosophical tradition. In this article, I'm more concerned with "everyday" postmodernism than academic postmodern theory.

Leftwing academics and progressive public intellectuals have championed postmodernism for two generations. However, the seeds of everyday postmodernism are primarily rooted in two major themes that came of age and played off of each other in the period between John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963 and Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974. This is the era most folks have in mind when they speak more generally of "the '60s." The two themes, moral anarchism and

cultural pluralism, are a major part of the legacy the '60s bequeathed to us.

## **American Religion after the '60s**

When Christians reflect upon the '60s, we understandably think of it as a time when our culture's moral foundations were shaken. We continue to reap the harvest of that era's pervasive sexual liberation, widespread mistrust of politicians, racial tensions, feminism, environmentalism, and idolizing of youth. One historian has memorably called the '60s a "decade of nightmares" because of its decadence and radicalism. If it felt good, people did it—often with little thought about the long-term consequences.

Cultural pluralism was also a key trend in this era. New immigration laws opened the doors to an influx of non-European immigrants, many of whom adhered to so-called "Eastern religions" that blurred the distinctions between the divine and the human and were more cyclical and fatalistic in outlook. At the same time, the trend in colleges and universities was to privilege minority voices—those who had previously been underrepresented because of race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. In ways that have proven both helpful and harmful, the '60s marked the beginning of the end of a





Euro-centric, male-dominated narrative of the superiority of Western culture.

The everyday postmodernism that arose from this moral anarchy and cultural pluralism has profoundly shaped American religion. The implicitly Protestant civil religion that was so popular in the postwar years was increasingly thrown off as a growing number of Americans rejected traditional views of God, the person of Christ, human nature (including sin), and salvation. Millions of immigrants did not fit into the tidy categories of Protestant, Catholic, or Jew. Muslims, Buddhists, and practitioners of various Eastern religions made their home in suburban America. Religious pluralism no longer meant a diversity of views within a broadly “Judeo-Christian” framework. This remains the case today.

Many religious practices did not fit within the confines of any world religion. Celebrities such as The Beatles and Shirley MacLain embraced and promoted a hodgepodge of beliefs and practices, including Transcendental Meditation, crystal healing, consulting with psychics and mediums, and reincarnation. By the early 1990s, New Age ideas and other “alternative spiritualities” had become increasingly common, even mainstream, through the bestselling writings of Deepak Chopra and James Redfield, the enormous popularity of the

Oprah Winfrey Show, and a burgeoning alternative medicine industry. In the early years of the twenty-first century, many Americans can be accurately described as “spiritual, but not religious.”

### **Classic Evangelical Spirituality**

Modern evangelicalism was born in the Protestant Reformation, matured under the influence of Puritanism and Pietism, and grew to adulthood in the transatlantic awakenings of the eighteenth century. Since that time, evangelicals have argued that the Christian faith is lived out in a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Drawing upon insights from the historian David Bebbington, I propose that evangelical spirituality has been shaped historically by four emphases: 1) a high view of the inspiration, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture; 2) the belief that conversion marks the beginning of a saving relationship with God; 3) the conviction that the saving work of Jesus Christ is the basis of our relationship with God; 4) the belief that every Christian should be committed to evangelism and acts of service and mercy that are motivated by obedience to the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

Throughout our history, evangelical piety has been culti-

vated through a range of biblically inspired practices. Some of these spiritual practices are individual in nature: devotional Bible reading, personal prayer, fasting, and Scripture memorization and meditation. Other spiritual practices are more communal: gathered worship with a local congregation, corporate prayer, regular participation in the Lord's Supper, and discipleship and/or accountability relationships with other believers. Evangelicals have normally argued that these spiritual practices are means of sanctifying grace when they are rooted in the gospel, arise from faith, and pursued unto the ultimate end of spiritual maturity in Christ.

### **Evangelicals and Postmodern Spirituality**

Regrettably, modern American evangelicalism has been influenced in many ways by the wider spiritual trends associated with everyday postmodernism. Over the past couple of generations, many evangelicals have (over-)emphasized the idea of a personal relationship with God without also equally championing the finished work of Jesus Christ, repentance from sin, and pursuit of holiness that underlie and evidence a saving relationship with God. After studying in the United States at Union Theological Seminary in the 1930s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously suggested that American Christianity was "Protestantism without Reformation." We could justly describe much of contemporary evangelical spirituality as "Evangelicalism without evangel."

The moral anarchy and cultural pluralism of everyday postmodernism have contributed to a milieu wherein many evangelicals engage in spiritual practices with non-Christian roots. For example, some believers are enamored with moralistic self-help books that are plagued by a low view of sin, a high estimation of natural human virtue, and traditional Eastern ideas such as panentheism or even a full-throated

pantheism. Popular would-be spiritual gurus Oprah Winfrey, Dr. Oz, and Dr. Phil enjoy wide followings among evangelicals—especially evangelical women. Though often inspired by noble health concerns, many believers embrace techniques such as transcendental meditation and yoga with little consideration of the spiritual assumptions that undergird these practices. Some even gravitate to horoscopes and other superstitious practices that claim to offer some special insight

into God's will for their lives. It's a fool's errand to pursue spiritual health using tools that aren't inspired by the Holy Spirit and that arise from worldviews that aren't grounded in the good news of the perfect life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Even more troubling than evangelicals dipping into alternative spiritualities is the confusion found within much of self-confessed evangelical spirituality. For many evangelicals, the belief that something is helpful spiritually is all that matters—biblical doctrine notwithstanding. Many "Christian Living" books are little more than baptized knock-offs of the same man-centered drivel that is available in the "Self-Help" section of the local secular bookstore. If you survey recent bestselling Christian books that are purportedly aimed at spiritual growth, you'll find any number of soul-deadening heresies, including redefinitions of the Trinity, antinomianism, and the prosperity

gospel. An even greater number of books promote errors such as an egalitarian view of gender, Arminianism, a second baptism of the Holy Spirit, and alleged visits to heaven during near-death experiences. (Interestingly, one author of a bestselling "heavenly tourism" book has recently admitted he fabricated the experience.)

Everyday postmodernism has also affected the modern spiritual formation movement among evangelicals. In the

## **IT'S A FOOL'S ERRAND TO PURSUE SPIRITUAL HEALTH USING TOOLS THAT AREN'T INSPIRED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THAT ARISE FROM WORLDVIEWS THAT AREN'T GROUNDED IN THE GOOD NEWS OF THE PERFECT LIFE, ATONING DEATH, AND VICTORIOUS RESURRECTION OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST.**

1970s, a growing number of evangelicals became interested in a range of historic practices that collectively are known as the “spiritual disciplines.” In principle, this is a healthy interest. As mentioned above, we evangelicals have always embraced a number of faith-motivated practices that the Lord uses as means of sanctifying grace to make us more like Jesus Christ. But not every spiritual discipline, or every application of certain disciplines, is spiritually beneficial. Unfortunately, the self-centered ethos of everyday postmodernism has fostered a laissez-faire approach to spiritual disciplines: if it’s been done before, then we are free to do it today.

In particular, many evangelicals have been introduced to Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox approaches to prayer and meditation through the spiritual formation movement. Now, I want to be careful here so that I’m not misunderstood. All of church history is our history, and we can learn from every tradition that has attempted to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, even those that were also characterized by theological errors we’d rightly reject. For example, I want to sound exactly like the most devout Roman Catholics or adherents to Eastern Orthodoxy when I talk about the Trinity or the doctrine of Christ. We need to recognize that God’s kingdom doesn’t perfectly coincide with the boundaries of our denominational traditions.


Nevertheless, evangelicals are heirs of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, meaning we are part of a tradition born out of a rejection of medieval Catholicism’s unbiblical views of Scripture, tradition, justification, sanctification, and the sacraments. (Though the break with Orthodoxy happened earlier, and the errors are not identical, the same principle applies.) We ought to be suspicious of any spiritual practice associated with traditions that we believe are wrong on some of the most important questions of the Christian faith. As Don Whitney argues, we should be cautious about promoting gospel growth through strategies advanced by men and women whom we believe had a deficient view of the gospel.

Many forms of contemplative prayer, notably the Jesus Prayer (Orthodoxy) and Centering Prayer (Catholicism), are rooted in man-centered forms of mysticism that downplay the distinctions between God and His human creatures. Some extreme forms of fasting smack more of medieval legalism than

biblical sorrow for sin and longing for the kingdom. Silence and solitude, when divorced from prayer and Scripture meditation, are not inherently beneficial to one’s spiritual health. Religious pilgrimages—even those masked as evangelical tourism—are born out of superstitious notions that echo the medieval belief that some places are more holy than others. Neo-monasticism, though no doubt pursued out of sincere motives to seek holiness and serve others, remains inferior to the local church, the only God-ordained community of spiritual faithfulness. It’s understandable (though unfortunate) that mainline Protestant liberals often look to techniques as the answer to their spiritual hunger. But we evangelicals know better. Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. This includes our spiritual formation.

### Recovering Authentic Evangelical Spirituality

The best way to combat the temptations of everyday postmodernism is to look to the only sure source for spiritual growth: the Word of God. Evangelicals do not need to try and baptize medieval mysticism for our own purposes; it represents a spiritual gruel that will never adequately nourish our faith and spur on our sanctification. And, of course, we should strongly denounce the satanic imposters for inauthentic piety that are promoted by the gurus of faddish alternative spiritualities. Our spiritual growth will only be fostered when we adhere as closely to Scripture as possible rather than gravitating to every spiritual practice that has been promoted at some point in church history (or, God forbid, on daytime television).

Authentic evangelical spirituality—by which I mean biblical spirituality—is rooted in the gospel, nurtured in the community of the local church, cultivated through biblical spiritual disciplines and the ordinary means of grace, and lived out in loving obedience to the Great Commandment and Great Commission. This is the path to godliness, and it is superior in every way to all of the pathways put before us by everyday postmodernism. “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:9–10, ESV). 





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# PREACHING IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

with Ligon Duncan

## What does it mean to say we are preaching in a “postmodern world”?

In part, it means that we live in a world where people doubt the reality of the truth. They believe the truth is a construct. It may be individually invented, it may be socially constructed, but they don't believe it is rooted in the way things are. They do not believe in a truth that corresponds to reality, and that means preachers need to recognize that they are engaging with a new kind of generation of skeptics.

## What are the major theological issues that an expositor confronts in a postmodern world?

One very significant issue, because of where we are in our cultural moment, is the shift in cultural views of Christian

morality. One hundred years ago, when Bible-believing expositors had to deal with theological liberalism, which was skeptical of Christian supernaturalism, people tended to be critical of Christian orthodox dogma, but liked Christian ethics. They liked the Sermon on the Mount, but they wanted to strip the claims of Christ of their supernatural content and miraculous components. They just wanted to simply affirm the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount.

Now, we are preaching in a world that thinks it has a more elevated morality than Jesus. It looks down on Christian morality as narrow, bigoted, archaic, and even immoral. For instance, when an expositor preaches from the Old Testament, in the minds of many is the question, “Is the God of the Old Testament a genocidal maniac?” Therefore, the Christian expositor has a new set of challenges, and in fact, I like those challenges. When Christians were engaging people twenty-five years ago, the conversation was much different than it is today. At that point, we had to defend who wrote certain books of the Bible and answer questions on historical-critical issues. Now, people want to challenge Christianity on moral grounds because they know so little about the Bible. I am happy to engage in that discussion, for it gives us some incredible leverage.



**LIGON DUNCAN** is the Chancellor of Reformed Theological Seminary and the John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology. A 1983 graduate of Furman University (B.A. History), he received the M.Div. and M.A. (Historical Theology) from Covenant Theological Seminary. He earned the Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh, New College, Scotland, in 1995.

While in Scotland he also studied Systematic Theology at the Free Church of Scotland College (now Edinburgh Theological Seminary) with Professor Donald Macleod. Ligon served as the Senior Minister of the historic First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, MS, from 1996 until 2013. He and his wife Anne have two teenagers and reside in Jackson, MS.

## To what extent should expositors today speak to cultural issues from the pulpit?

Christian ministers have always spoken to cultural issues. There have been differences as to how we did that, and there are certainly areas that are very tricky when an expositor addresses national or political issues. Recently, I was reading the Puritan Thomas Brooks. He was preaching before the English Parliament, using Isaiah 10:6 to just rip the Scottish Presbyterians to shreds for pulling out of their alliance with Oliver Cromwell after the execution

of Charles I. We love Thomas Brooks, but he probably didn't preach to the culture very well in that sermon.

So, there are some real pitfalls to avoid when trying to preach or address the culture. In striving to do this correctly, we can become lapdogs for the reigning political party or cultural trends, or we can fail to prophetically address cultural sins, majoring on minors and minoring on majors. In other words, there are numerous ways to go astray. However, it is important to remember that *every time* a pastor is preaching the Word of God, he is speaking into the culture.

One dominating trend within the last fifteen or twenty years is that younger men have not wanted to be as negative in their posture toward the culture as they perceive their spiritual fathers to have been. They perceive the tone of evangelicalism on issues such as abortion and homosexuality to be negative toward the culture, and they have wanted to strike a more ameliorating tone in their preaching. I understand why this is so, but I also want to say to some of our younger brothers that the culture *knows* they don't like or agree with us, and there is no way to soften that. I would rather start out by saying to the culture, "You don't like what I am going to say in four distinct ways, but I believe it anyway, and I'm going to preach it to you, and here is why you should accept it." I don't want to try to fool the culture by being ambiguous in those areas where Christian truth claims come into conflict with cultural norms or views.

### **As you travel and speak in many different venues, you have a unique perspective on the whole of the body of Christ. What is your current assessment of preaching today?**

Given what we have come through in the last fifty years, especially the "seeker movements" of the 1970s, there are some real grounds for encouragement in terms of expository preaching. When I was in seminary, there were very few voices in the circles in which I found myself that championed expository preaching.

My professor of preaching was a real supporter of expository preaching, and even in our seminary context everybody dogged him for that. Most thought sermons were out, skits and sketches are in. However, I am happy to report that I see among a lot of young Reformed guys an understanding that we need to be very robust in our biblical exposition in preaching. Now, does that mean all the preaching I hear out there is the type I would want to commend? No. There are many distortions and patterns that are unhelpful. But at least I am encouraged that we get a large hearing among those Reformed men and that they are willing to listen to us make a case for how and why to do expository preaching. At least we have a shot to persuade the younger generation not only to do expository preaching, but to do it in particular, biblical ways.

### **If one of these young Reformed pastors came to you and said, "Help me," what would be three things you would say to them that transcend the moment and flow down from godly, faithful men of the past?**

One, I would say make it a habit to listen to a handful of great preachers regularly. Don't copy them. Don't try to *be* Lawson, Lloyd-Jones, Piper, MacArthur, Sproul—but you had better be listening to a steady diet of great, faithful, expository preaching. If you listen to four or five guys regularly, you will not end up mimicking them but you will be able to tell the difference between superficial non-expository story-telling and deep, rich biblical exposition.

Two, read Sinclair Ferguson's *Ten Commandments for Preachers*. He gives excellent counsel.

Three, read Thomas Brooks's *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*. Look at how he discriminates in his preaching, in the sense that he recognizes that not everybody in the congregation is dealing with the same problem or the same condition. If I have one criticism of preaching I hear among young Reformed guys today, it is they think everybody has the same problem and that there is a generic spiritual solution to that problem. What Brooks will teach you is that there are dozens of spiritual conditions and problems sitting under your nose every Sunday morning, and you had better be specific in how you address those problems. Therefore, every sermon is not going to be the same. With some, it's as if they are preaching the same sermon from a different text every Sunday morning. When you read Brooks and the Puritans and listen to the giants, our spiritual problems are not one-size-fits-all, and the solution is not one-size-fits-all. The solution is always Jesus and grace and the gospel, but the way that that is applied is astoundingly varied in the Scriptures, and it should be in our preaching as well.

### **What would be one more area of counsel you would give our readers in the area of biblical preaching?**

Our greatest lack in the Reformed world today is in application. I think there has been a recovery of redemptive-historical themes in preaching, sometimes to the exclusion of topical-systematic themes. There has been a recovery of a sense of the importance of exposition, but I still think our application lacks. When you hear people say, "Oh, Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer have helped me so much in my Christian life," you think to yourself, "What in the world is going on?" I have to say that as superficial as that preaching is and as wrong-headed as it is, the itch that it is scratching is two-fold. One, it is giving people hope—it may be giving them false hope, but it is giving them hope. Two, it is superficially speaking to their lives. As Reformed preachers, we need to know that false teaching is heretical, and we need to speak against it. But we also need to do a better job of preaching the Word in such a way that people don't walk away from our preaching



## INTERVIEW WITH LIGON DUNCAN

saying, “Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer are more applicable to my life than that.” We need to be doing such a good job in our application that people don’t walk away wanting the expositor to show more of the relevance of the Scripture in their lives.

### **Who were some of the primary influences in your life who helped shape you into the person the Lord has matured you to be in your preaching?**

I have so many debts in this area that it is difficult for me to enumerate them. From boyhood to my teenage years, I grew up under two faithful expositors. Gordon K. Reed was my pastor until I was eleven years old, and Paul Settle was my pastor through my teenage years and then in college and seminary. Both of those men got up on Sunday morning, opened the Bible, and applied it to my heart and life. It is probably incalculable the debt I owe to them. Most would have no idea who these men are; they are not famous, and they are not speaking at conferences, but they were faithful to drive the Word of God into my life through consistent exposition. Do not underestimate the power of the Word of God when you stand up on Sunday morning. You have no idea who may be sitting under your preaching.

My father and mother were also great influences upon me. My father was not a pastor, but he served as an elder of a local congregation, and my mother is a very well read and intelligent layperson. My mother is the one who handed me Martyn Lloyd-Jones. When I was an early teenager, she read

Lloyd-Jones’s exposition on the Sermon on the Mount, and I remember her copy literally falling apart from her study of it. She was reading all the people that I started to read as a teenager: Martyn Lloyd-Jones, J. I. Packer, R. C. Sproul, Francis Schaeffer, and James Montgomery Boice.

When I went to Covenant Seminary, Dr. Robert G. Rayburn was my professor of preaching, and he was a powerful expository preacher. The reason I ended up going to Covenant is that Dr. Rayburn preached a Bible conference at our church in 1982, and he preached on the book of Malachi. The sermon series was called “Seven Signs of Serious Spiritual Sickness.” It was a seven-part exposition of the book of Malachi, and I thought, if a guy can make Malachi speak like that, I want to go sit under his preaching. Sitting under him while in seminary was invaluable in shaping me in those early years.

Then when I went to Scotland, I was able to sit under the ministries of heroes such as Eric Alexander, Sinclair Ferguson, William Still, and Jim Philip. Hearing those men expound the Scripture was huge for me. I got to sit under heroes and learn from heroes, and all of those feed into me. God allowed me to not only hear their preaching but also to have relationships with them. I learned firsthand that this is not just what they did in the pulpit; this way of life was real to them outside of the pulpit. All of those things feed into who I am today in the pulpit. ♦







COLUMN

THE LECTERN, THE MASTER'S SEMINARY



# LET'S PUT GOD ON DISPLAY BEFORE EVERYONE AROUND US: GOD AS HE DEFINES HIMSELF IN HIS WORD

by Michael Grisanti

One of the common features of a postmodern world is the rejection of any exclusive truth claims. Postmodernism views all truth as relative and any exclusive truth claims as arrogant, offensive, and impossible. As we live and minister in that kind of a world, how should we preach and teach God's Word and present God's character to those to whom we minister?

On the one hand, we must navigate the fine line between those beliefs and practices that are non-negotiable and those that are negotiable. In light of the Bible's teaching on "liberty" and the issues of a weaker and stronger conscience, there are times when we must not be adamant about the need for everyone to accept our understanding or arrange their lives according to that understanding. Here are some examples: what music should we listen to, what movies should we watch, can a believer drink a glass of wine, etc. There is room to disagree without rancor in these cases. Of course, there are biblical principles that offer guidance concerning these issues, but broadly speaking, if the Bible does not explicitly or clearly address a given issue, we need to allow room for disagreement rather than holding to our preference as an exclusive truth claim.

On the other hand, generally, the above reality is not what threatens the church and the believers who make up that church. There is the one extreme of *arrogance*, i.e., a "just my way" attitude with regard to whatever I prefer or think. Even though this arrogance can be destructive, it is not as dangerous as the other extreme, *reticence*, i.e., a "whatever way works for you" attitude about all beliefs, especially those that are explicitly, clearly, and repeatedly taught in Scripture. We do not want to crash on either rock of extremity, but rather to allow the Bible to determine those exclusive truth claims that guide our lives and provide content to our preaching and teaching.

Doubtless, there are numerous truth claims presented by the Word of God that should serve as core values for every believer and church that longs to honor our great God. I would like to focus on one passage's definition of God. Although this is not necessarily a controversial passage that the postmodernists try to hijack, it makes a central point. God Himself defines who He is, and that biblical definition should impact our living and preaching in far-reaching ways.

We are familiar with the account of the prophet Jonah, who was totally opposed to carrying God's message to the Ninevites. Chapter 1 of Jonah, however, gives us no indication of the grounds for Jonah's opposition to God's directive. Later, after Jonah's deliverance from death by the great fish, his preaching the divinely appointed message of imminent judgment on the Ninevites, and the widespread repentance that caused God to withdraw this promised punishment (to Jonah's horror), we read what originally drove Jonah to flee in the opposite direction, away from Nineveh. What he knew to be true of God drove him to rebel against God's command. He was afraid that Yahweh would exhibit those character traits toward the rotten, cruel Ninevites.

He declared: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster." (ESV)

"Gracious" refers to God's generous giving of blessings that are undeserved. The giver is the superior, who is under no obligation to be gracious. The recipient has no merit to justify any such treatment. "Merciful" describes God's extending compassion not only to those who do not deserve it, but also to those who *desperately need* it. It is helpful to note that this word is closely related to the word for a woman's womb. This word association provides for us an illustration of the meaning of this virtue: the feelings of compassion a mother would feel for her child, the product of her womb. The tender, loving



## THE LECTERN

care a mother gives to her child is illustrative of the compassion God feels for His spiritual children. You can be sure that however strongly a mother feels for her child, God's compassion for His children exceeds that infinitely.

As the God who was "slow to anger," God withholds His judgment on sin or patiently endures as He gives sinners the opportunity to repent (2 Pet 3:9). He is ever so slow to reach the point at which He must express His divine wrath. He is longsuffering to those who are falling short of His desires, yearning that before judgment must fall, they will repent of their godless practices.


Jonah also knew that Yahweh abounded in "steadfast love." This loyal/steadfast/covenant love was closely connected with the covenant God made with Israel. It seems to highlight the determination of God to be faithful to His covenant and thereby to His people. It refers to God's persistent, sure covenant love for His people all through the ages.

Finally, Jonah's God was characterized by "relenting from disaster" (or relenting from bringing disaster). The basic point is that if people genuinely repent, God is willing to withdraw His promised punishment.

What Jonah knew to be true of his God was absolutely correct. This same collection of divine traits occurs in numerous other Old Testament passages (Exod 34:6-7; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Joel 2:13; Nah 1:3). The horrifying

reality was that what Jonah *knew* to be true of His God had no clear impact on the way he lived. On the one hand, we all face the scary prospect of having correct knowledge of key truths (in our head) that does not tangibly impact our lives (through our hearts). Besides that danger, we face another danger in our postmodern world. With all the emphasis on tolerance and pluralism, we are pressed to dilute (or even reject) the clear and distinctive presentation of God found in the Scriptures. You have probably heard people say, "My God would not do that!" The world presses us to define God in a way that destroys His incomparability and avoids offending anyone who might have a different idea.

What our world needs to hear is a biblically-based presentation of God in all His glory, majesty, and power. He is the one and only God to whom all mankind will have to give an answer. Brethren, postmodern thinking (any way is fine) leads to postmodern living (any conduct is fine). May that never characterize our preaching or our behavior. An absolutely distinctive God of great power deserves nothing less than followers who live clearly distinctive lives that point everyone around them to that awesome God.

In a postmodern world that rejects exclusive truth claims, let's commit ourselves to be preachers and teachers who place the spotlight of our preaching and teaching on the great God of the universe, as the Bible defines Him. 

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COLUMN

TRUTH REMAINS



# CHARLES H. SPURGEON: LIFE AND LEGACY

by Steven J. Lawson

**H**ailed as the greatest preacher of nineteenth-century England, Charles Haddon Spurgeon is arguably the preeminent preacher of *any* century. Regarded as the most widely successful expository preacher of modern times, this thundering Victorian voice heads virtually every list of renowned preachers. If John Calvin was the greatest theologian of the church, Jonathan Edwards the greatest philosopher, and George Whitefield the greatest evangelist, then Spurgeon surely ranks as its greatest preacher. To be sure, Spurgeon's chief place amongst preachers is secure in church history as, truly, one of evangelical Christianity's immortals. To this day, this pulpit stalwart remains the "Prince of Preachers."

Never has one man stood in one pulpit, week after week, year after year, for almost four decades, and preached the gospel with greater worldwide success and lasting impact than Spurgeon. Down through the centuries, expositors such as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, Calvin, and countless others have committed themselves to preaching in a verse-by-verse style through entire books of the Bible. But this was not Spurgeon's approach. Though "an expository preacher *par excellence*," Spurgeon drew his message each week from a different passage in a different book in the Bible. Rather than being a sequential expositor, this free style uniquely distinguished Spurgeon from these other great preachers, positioning him to be, first and foremost, an *evangelistic* expositor.

Throughout his prolific ministry, Spurgeon was consumed with a gospel fervor. As was his practice, this quintessential preacher would isolate one or a few verses to use as a springboard to proclaim the gospel. By his own admission, he asserted: "I take my text and make a beeline to the cross." Every time Spurgeon stepped into the pulpit, he intently set his gaze upon the salvation of sinners through the saving message of Jesus Christ. This famed preacher, Hughes Oliphant Old notes, was sent "at a particular time to a particular place to preach the eternal gospel for the salvation of souls and God's

everlasting glory." As an evangelistic pastor, perhaps none can compare with Spurgeon's place in history.

Though he deeply loved theology, Spurgeon stated, "I would sooner bring one sinner to Jesus Christ than unpick all the mysteries of the divine Word." The fact is, this prodigious figure reveled in seeking the salvation of the lost. Hear Spurgeon as he further emphasizes the central importance of evangelism in his ministry:

I would rather be the means of saving a soul from death than be the greatest orator on earth. I would rather bring the poorest woman in the world to the feet of Jesus than I would be made Archbishop of Canterbury. I would sooner pluck one single brand from the burning than explain all mysteries. To win a soul from going down into the pit is a more glorious achievement than to be crowned in the arena of theological controversy... to have faithfully unveiled the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ will be, in the final judgment, accounted worthier service than to have solved the problems of the religious Sphinx, or to have cut the Gordian knot of Apocalyptic difficulty. One of my happiest thoughts is that, when I die, it shall be privilege to enter into rest in the bosom of Christ, and I know that I shall not enjoy my Heaven alone. Thousands have already entered there, who have been drawn to Christ under my ministry. Oh! what bliss it will be to fly to Heaven, and to have a multitude of converts before and behind.

To understand this gospel focus is to feel the very pulse of Spurgeon's heartbeat. To grasp this evangelistic thrust is to touch the live nerve of his soul. Simply put, he was compelled to preach the gospel and gather in the lost. As an expositor, Spurgeon truly possessed the heart of a soul-winner. What caused Spurgeon to be evangelistic in the pulpit was the transforming effects of the new birth that had taken place within his own heart.

## Born and Born Again

A descendent of French Huguenot and Dutch Reformed stock, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) was born on June 19, 1834, in England, in a little cottage at Kelvedon, Essex. Many of his Protestant ancestors had been driven out by persecution from their native countries and found refuge in England. Spurgeon would say, "I had far rather be descended from one who suffered for the faith than bear the blood of all the emperors within my veins." Sovereignly placed into a family of preachers, both his father, John, and grandfather, James, were Independent ministers who faithfully pastored Protestant congregations. He was the eldest of seventeen children, and his younger brother, James, would later serve as his associate pastor at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. Moreover, Charles's twin sons would likewise follow him in the ministry.

When his mother was to deliver her second child, young Spurgeon, age two, was sent to nearby Stambourne to live with his grandfather, where he would remain until age six. Through this godly influence and subsequent visits, Spurgeon was afforded exposure to many Puritan works, including John Bunyan's *Pilgrim Progress*, Richard Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*, and Joseph Alleine's *Alarm to the Unconverted*. Despite this spiritual influence, though, Spurgeon remained unconverted. He recalled: "I had heard of the plan of salvation by the sacrifice of Jesus from my youth up; but I did not know any more about it in my innermost soul than if I had been born and bred a Hottentot. The light was there, but I was blind."

On Sunday morning, January 6, 1850, Charles, age fifteen, was walking to church in the little town of Colchester, when a snowstorm drove him into a small Primitive Methodist church. Only a dozen people were in attendance, and even the minister could not arrive. A reluctant lay preacher stepped forward to expound Isaiah 45:22: "Look unto Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth." This unassuming figure exhorted this small congregation to look by faith to Jesus Christ alone. Fixing his eyes directly on young Spurgeon, he urged, "Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but to look and live." Like an arrow from heaven's bow, the gospel hit its intended target.

Spurgeon recounts, "I saw at once the way of salvation. Like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people only

looked and were healed, so it was with me." Gazing by faith upon Christ, this young teenager was dramatically converted. Consumed with joy, he recounted that he could scarcely contain himself "even for five minutes without trying to do something for Christ." Such boundless energy would mark his life from this point forward. He transferred to a school in Cambridge, where he was baptized. The next Sunday, he took his first communion and joined St. Andrews Baptist Church.

With growing zeal, Spurgeon, age sixteen, preached his first sermon in a small cottage at Teversham near Cambridge. His preaching gift was immediately recognized. Though only seventeen years old, young Spurgeon was made the minister of a rural Baptist church in a tiny village, Waterbeach. At the

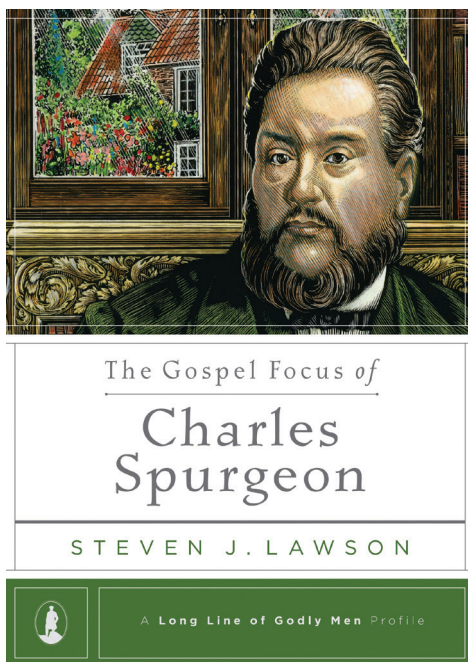
Waterbeach Baptist Chapel, Charles preached the gospel with extraordinary power and noticeable results. Despite being in a small hamlet known for its debauchery, this humble Baptist chapel grew over the next two years, from a mere forty to over one hundred members.

## New Park Street Church

The spreading reports of this preaching prodigy soon reached London. On December 18, 1853, Spurgeon was invited to preach at the largest and most famous Particular Baptist church in all of London, the New Park Street Chapel. This historic church, staunchly Calvinistic, had been pastored by such distinguished luminaries as Benjamin Keach (1640-1704), John Gill (1697-1771), and John Rippon (1750-1836). But this bastion of truth had fallen into serious decline of late. A mere 200 people were meeting in a building

that was built to seat 1,200. After preaching there for three months, Spurgeon, now age nineteen, was called to be its pastor, a flock that he would faithfully shepherd until his death, thirty-eight years later.


Under Spurgeon's preaching, New Park Street Church instantly grew. Within months, five hundred people were in regular attendance. After the first year, the building could not contain the swelling crowds that were coming to hear this young phenom. The chapel was enlarged to seat 1,500, with additional standing room for 500 more. Still, the people were jammed along the walls, down the aisles, and crammed into windows sills. Tickets were soon issued without cost, necessary for attending even the mid-week services. London streets became blocked with traffic in the neighborhood of this chap-



el. The city of London had not witnessed such a meteoric rise since the electrifying preaching of George Whitefield.

These enlarged crowds soon forced the church to move into Exeter Hall in the Strand, an enormous public building, seating 4,000 people with standing room for another 1,000. But even this large structure could not contain the growing multitudes. Hundreds were turned away on a weekly basis. London was abuzz over this young preacher in their midst. A new church building would have to be erected for the fast-growing congregation. Plans were soon drafted for what would become the famous Metropolitan Tabernacle, the largest Protestant house of worship in the world.

Meanwhile, Spurgeon moved his bulging church into an even larger venue, Music Hall at Royal Surrey Gardens. This vast edifice with three large balconies seated 12,000 people. From the first service on October 19, 1856, this massive

structure was filled from floor to ceiling. Thousands were still turned away. With countless unbelievers attending, every service proved to be an evangelistic occasion. Converts were interviewed each Tuesday afternoon by Spurgeon, who was assisted by helpers. So numerous were the lost souls being saved that he claimed that he never preached a sermon in this grand building but that God saved souls. At a time when London was the most prominent metropolis in the world, never was a preacher so embraced by a people. 

Excerpt from *The Gospel Focus of Charles Spurgeon* by Dr. Steven J. Lawson, published by Reformation Trust in 2012 and available at [ligonier.org](http://ligonier.org).

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# AUGUSTINE: REKINDLING OUR APPROACH TO PREACHING

by Dustin W. Bengé

In a culture that seeks to define truth based on mere personal opinion and experience, the Word of God stands as a stark reminder that truth has not only been adequately defined, but has been clearly spoken by God Himself. Theologian Sinclair Ferguson, in his most recent work, *From the Mouth of God: Trusting, Reading, and Applying the Bible* (Banner of Truth, 2014), presents Scripture as the very mouth of God.

In the Introduction, Ferguson explains what he desires to accomplish through this work:

*From the Mouth of God* is essentially an expanded study of this powerful description of the Bible. It sets out to explore three questions:

First, why it is that Christians throughout the ages have believed, with Jesus, that the Bible is God's mouth, from which His word is heard?

Second, how should we approach reading the Bible in order to gain a better understanding and appreciation of its message?

Third, how can we do this in a way that is well-grounded in Scripture and that actually helps us get to know the message of the Bible better?

With great pastoral wisdom and theological insight, Ferguson explores and answers each of these questions in the three divisions of *From the Mouth of God*.

Part one explores the vast array of subjects that are commonly addressed in any discussion of the doctrine of Scripture—inspiration, inerrancy, authority, canon, perspicuity, and sufficiency. Ferguson, in his inimitable pastoral voice,

unpacks these individual doctrines with such clarity that even a novice in theological terminology could understand them. Each of these doctrines serve as an individual piece in assembling a larger puzzle that answers the question, “Is this God's Word?” Ferguson states, “This conviction that the Bible is the Word of God arises from its nature as the Word of

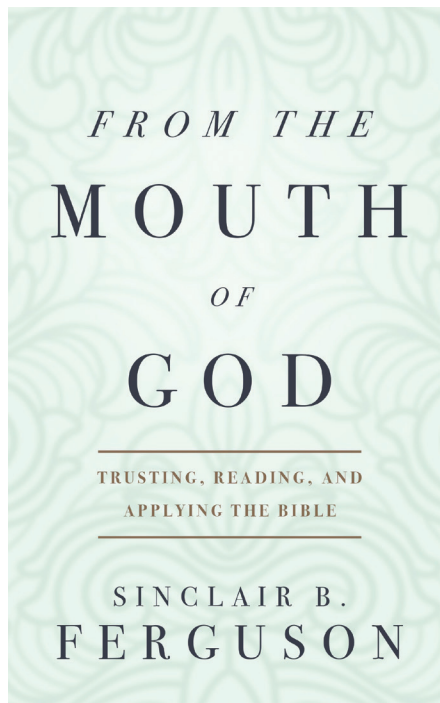
God and the Spirit's persuading us that this is indeed what it is” (52). Quoting Abraham Kuyper, the theologian who became Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Ferguson describes what takes place in the heart as people realize the book they are holding is the very Word of the living God:

The veil is gradually pushed aside. The eye turns toward the Divine light that radiates from the Scripture, and now our inner ego sees the imposing superiority. We see it as one born blind, who being healed sees the beauty of colours, or as one deaf, whose hearing being restored, catches the melodies from the world of sounds, and with his whole soul delights in them (52–53).

Tantamount to our ability to proclaim the truth of holy Scripture is our personal conviction of the inerrancy

and authority of the Bible as being from the very mouth of God. In essence, you cannot preach what you don't believe.

The second section focuses upon the interpretation of Scripture. Ferguson begins by raising some warning flags, identifying common traps to avoid in our interpretation. He then provides five valuable keys of interpretation. By using these keys, Christians can unlock the storehouses of Scripture





## TRUTH REMAINS

to gain access to indescribable spiritual treasure. For instance, key number three challenges the Christian to read and study the Scripture as an unfolding drama. In other words, we must see the “Big Picture” or the “Grand Narrative.” For in seeing this panoramic view the reader discovers how the drama of redemption will unfold. If used properly, this key will markedly transform the way you read and understanding Scripture as a whole.

Chapters six and seven describe how these keys are practically applied to our reading and study of different genres of Scripture such as history, poetry, prophecy, the epistles, and the Gospels. Finally, Ferguson pulls everything together by taking the reader one step further in understanding how these principles apply to our interpretation of the Bible by using them to interpret the book of Ruth.

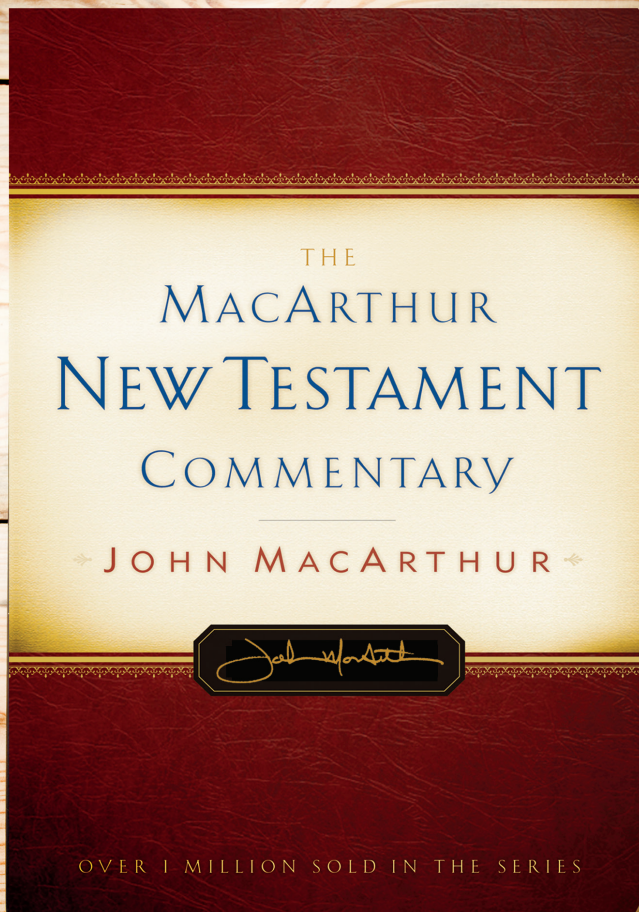
The third section secures the foundation of application, demonstrating that the Bible calls for more than mere intellect or theological proficiency; it calls for a transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Ferguson states, “As we dig more deeply into the teaching of God’s Word, our lives undergo a transformation because our minds are being renewed through its impact” (152). Then, in this concluding section, we are brief-

ly offered some basic guidelines for applying the Bible to our current time and lives.

To incite further reading and study, two articles on guidance in reading and studying the Scripture by John Murray and John Newton are provided in appendices, followed by a succinct guide for further reading and a daily Bible reading plan.

The overarching strength of this work is the simplicity and applicability with which Ferguson writes. The practical advice and pastoral astuteness set forth in *From the Mouth of God* should cause Christians, novice and experienced alike, to search the Scriptures to find truth. May we all sit at the feet of a theological and pastoral father to us all and hear his closing words, “The Bible is a great book. It is the ‘God-breathed’ book, the ‘mouth of God.’ That is why Jesus said, ‘It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (179). ♦

*From the Mouth of God* by Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson, published by The Banner of Truth Trust is available at [banneroftruth.org](http://banneroftruth.org).



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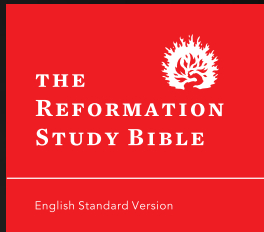
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