

# Law and Grace: Combating the American Heresy of Pelagianism

*The American Church has fallen under the error of Pelagianism. Law and Grace do not represent two plans of God, but two phases of the same plan of redemption: preparation and fulfillment.*

“For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.” (John 1: 17, NASB)

A young college student once told me that a pastor’s son argued with him that no religion—and especially not Christianity—was about faith in any God, but rather the good works that we do for others. Christianity, so the preacher’s boy said, concerned doing to others what we would have done to us; it does not even matter if God exists or not, only the good we do for people counts—philanthropy, morality and being a good person matters most, not faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

What the young theologian argued was that all religions are basically the same. They are moralistic<sup>[1]</sup>, which means they inspire people to do good works and that any metaphysical aspect, such as who God is or what he may have done for humanity is irrelevant. Similarly, we often hear that people choose to do evil and that they are not born that way, it is the environment that makes us corrupt—that we are not corrupt by nature.

This all sounds like common sense, but amounts to a denial of the central Christian belief in salvation by grace through faith alone. If we are not sinners by nature but only by choice than we can conceivably make more good choices than evil ones in order to redeem ourselves and then there would be

no need for faith or a savior. Good works and keeping either the internal law of conscience or the old Mosaic Law would suffice.

## **Salvation by Grace Through Faith Alone**

Salvation by grace through faith provides the great distinctive of the Christian faith compared to the other world religions. In contrast, the monotheistic religions Islam and Judaism both present a path of works salvation through obeying either the Torah or the Qur'an. The pantheistic religions, like Buddhism and Hinduism, believe in a rigorous path of enlightenment. While they subscribe to a unique theological heritage and may even be saved, many within the Christian sphere tend to under-appreciate and even unintentionally deny God's free and eternal gift of salvation through a well-meaning but misdirected emphasis on the Mosaic Code, also called the Law (or the Ten Commandments) or other moral and legal codes that operate in a similar fashion, as measuring sticks for salvation.

Christians continually misunderstand and misuse the Law, thus placing themselves and others in bondage to a *de facto* works salvation mentality. The Apostle Paul argued that we did not begin with the Spirit in our salvation only to be perfected by "the flesh" in the works of the Law (Galatians 3: 3). Paul repeatedly identified legalism as a work of the flesh or sinful human nature and worldliness. He spoke of "the elemental principles of the world" (Galatians. 4: 3 and Col. 2: 8, 20) not as secularism, or so called "worldly" practices such as dancing, smoking or movie attendance, as Christians do today. Rather, worldliness according to these passages was the religiosity of the Judaizing heresy that imposed legal restrictions on believers such as circumcision (as seen in *Galatians*) or dietary restrictions, festivals and Sabbath observance or angel worship (in *Colossians*). Paul rejected his great religious inheritance, status and fame as a Pharisee,

considering it all a work of the flesh, so that his righteousness would not derive from the Law, but from Christ (Philippians 3: 1–9). Religious legalism represents as great a threat to grace in the New Testament than any libertine license for sin.

Works salvation indicates a profound insecurity concerning individual freedom in the world's religions and a desire to impose an authoritarian structure. Christians are not guiltless either, as they harbor the same tendencies to impose the Mosaic Code or some form of it on Christians and non-Christians alike. For example, Torah Observant Christians, *Reconstructionism*, *Theonomy*, and *Covenant Theology* all hold to a continuity between law and grace that brings Christians back under the legal and moral requirements of the Mosaic Code. The persistence of Christians who want to commit themselves to the Law, even after 2000 years of Christian history, indicates the Church's misunderstanding of the role of the Law after Christ and the Church's uneasiness with its own belief in grace.

## **The Role of the Law Today: Instructive, *not* Operative**

Preachers and theologians are known to say "We are still under the 10 Commandments" or "The moral law is still in effect, but the rest has been fulfilled by Christ." Although, these explanations offer some guidance on what to do with the 800 pound gorilla in the room— with the theology of grace—they ultimately cannot avoid inconsistencies either with the Law or with the New Testament principle of grace, God's unconditional love.

The Mosaic Law was given to Israel on Mount Sinai as their Constitution and guide to holiness; it was never capable of bringing eternal salvation, but served as a teacher to the preservation of Israel in the Promised Land while demonstrating God's righteous character. It was a temporary

operating system, so to speak, that was necessary in order to display human sinfulness and point to humanity's need for grace. But, crucially, it was destined to pass away or be retired once the plan of God came to fruition in the Life of Christ (Galatians 3). It showed only humanity's guilt, yet foreshadowed in its practices the promise of God's ultimate work of grace (Hebrews 8: 5; 10: 1). Once grace arrived in the work of Christ, the Law was no longer necessary (Hebrews 8: 6). The Law only pointed to human need for grace or the presence of sin. The Law shows people their unrighteousness. God demonstrates his mercy only after explaining and portraying his righteousness. God gives the Law first to demonstrate sin and *then* sends his Son to reveal His love and grace.

The Mosaic Law functions similarly to natural law or general revelation in demonstrating humanity's need for God, the absence of God from the human heart (Romans 1 & 2). The Law and general revelation both perform a preparatory role: either telling humanity it does not know God, as with general revelation, or revealing humanity's sin, as with the Law (Romans 3). They give no saving knowledge, but function only to condemn and never to save. Law and Grace do not represent two plans of God, but two phases of the same plan of redemption: preparation and fulfillment.

## **One Law, Indivisible, With Grace for All**

There is only one Law, which must be accepted as a whole. The unity of the Law applies equally to either its total fulfillment in Christ or to the possibility that the Law remains operative after Christ. The Law cannot be subdivided into different sections such as moral, ceremonial and civil that were applicable before Christ and those sections still applicable after Christ. Any theological approach to the Law that states its partial effectiveness misunderstands the unity of the Law and the work of Christ that has already fulfilled

the Law in its entirety. One either keeps the whole Law or does not (Galatians 3: 10; James 2: 10; Matthew 5: 19; Deuteronomy 27: 1; 28: 1; 30: 8). Likewise, either Christ fulfilled the Law or he did not. Nowhere in the New Testament does it say the Law was partially fulfilled in Christ, leaving the Church to fulfill the rest. A change in one aspect of the Law, such as the Old Testament Priesthood, necessitates the inauguration of a new law and not merely a partial change in the old law (Hebrews 7: 12). Paul argued against the *Judaizers*, who imposed legal restrictions on Christians, that if they accepted one part of the Law they were “under obligation to keep the whole Law” (Galatians 5: 3).

Any return to the Law rejects faith in Christ and even creates a hindrance to the progression of the plan of God in history. The Book of Hebrews gives a dire warning to all who return to these former elements: “For if we go on sinning willfully after we receive the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment.... Anyone who set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severe punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and has insulted the spirit of grace?” (Hebrews 10: 26–29).

## **Does Retirement of the Law Mean God Changed?**

The problem many express with notion of the Law’s retirement is based on this conclusion: God cannot change, so how can He, in effect, repeal his own law? The Law was given in order to maintain Israel as a separate people who would act as a conduit through whom God would send his Messiah to reach the whole world. “When the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law” (Galatians 4:

4). *The Law was by its very nature temporary and conditional to Israel as an operative system in the history of God's plan of universal redemption.* Once the Law and Israel achieved their purposes, or were "fulfilled" in Christ they became obsolete (Hebrews 8: 13). The Law had an expiration date, a shelf life that only lasted until Messiah arrived. The Law played a preparatory role for the coming of Christ; it never had the power to save, but only to condemn in identifying and demonstrating human sin and inadequacies. Its function was to ready mankind for salvation. The Law is good and holy, but it is also obsolete and incomplete (Romans 7; Galatians 3).

## **Good News! The Law is Fulfilled in Christ**

The Law was not abolished, repealed or revamped in any way in the new age of grace. Jesus himself says that he did not come to destroy [*katalyō*] or subvert the Law, but to fulfill [*plēroō*] it (Matthew 5: 17), which means to complete, to finish, accomplish or expire. Paul repeats Jesus' declaration by stating that "Christ is the end [*telos*] of the law," meaning he is the termination or conclusion of it (Romans 10: 4). Jesus does not change the Law nor add to it which he himself admonishes against (Matthew 5: 17–19). The Law was fulfilled in Christ, meaning he met all of its requirements and standards as well as the subsequent punishments for failure. He lived the Law for humanity, keeping it perfectly as our representative before God, and died for all of us, meeting its requisite punishment for sin. Jesus' last words on the cross "It is finished [*teleō*]" (John 19: 30), marks the completion and fulfillment of the Law and effectively completes all of its requirements, obligations or demands for us. Any attempt to place believers back under the Law, even partially, amounts to a rejection of the work of Christ. "You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Galatians 5: 4).

The Law is no longer operative because all its demands were satisfied. Its expiration date has matured and it is no longer in effect since the death of Christ. The Law then has no direct application in the new age of grace. The Law is to the Church what the *Articles of Confederation* is to the United States. They serve great historical value in providing a history that led to the creation of the U.S. Constitution and contain pertinent principles of government decentralization to learn from—but no one is obligated to abide by them any longer. As a system of government it has been retired. The Mosaic Law, like the *Articles of Confederation*, today serves a strictly instructive role; it retains an honorary position as *system emeritus*.

Although, the Law as a binding system has been retired in the plan of God's redemption, it serves an important role in the advice and instruction readers learn from it. The Law offers examples of righteousness and models of holiness. Paul noted that "whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction" (Romans 15: 4). He adds that the history of Israel serves as an example of learning for the Church today (I Corinthians 10: 6) and that "All Scripture is ...profitable for teaching ... and for training in righteousness" (I Timothy 3: 16). The Church looks back to the Law for guidance and for the meaning of holiness and righteousness, but never applies the Law in the same way as Israel did as a civil nation. The New Testament writers use the Law as examples of righteousness in the reiteration of the Ten Commandments (Romans 13: 8–10; James 2: 8–11). The Law must be used "lawfully" (I Timothy 1: 8) as instruction and not as a binding operating system.

To argue for subdivision in the Law such as ceremonial, dietary, moral, sacrificial, etc., in essence denies the Law's instructive capacities today. The Law is either obsolete in its entirety or it is operative in its entirety and if it is obsolete yet still instructive, it is instructive in its entirety today. The Law has not been abrogated, as if God

somehow made a mistake. Again it was fulfilled, and hence has accomplished its purpose; its *telos* and reason for existence has been realized. The Law was then retired; it serves now only to instruct in righteousness and to demonstrate sinfulness.

The Law never comes to the Church today unmodified from its original context in ancient Israel. If the so-called "moral law" was binding, then its enforcement and punishment must also be binding. Partial Law advocates must change the meaning of the Law to make it palatable. Every system that adopts an operative role for the Law modifies it to some extent through illegitimately subdividing the Law into convenient sections, in a clear case of selective morality, where only some principles from a given system are conveniently chosen and partially applied through abandoning its original meaning and context to fit a contemporary understanding. For example, Sabbath observance is now on Sunday instead of Saturday or the commandment against adultery applying to a monogamous Christian context instead of its original Hebrew polygamous one.

Without enforcement of the Law there is, in reality, no Law. The Church cannot honestly say it is somehow under the obligations of the Law if also does not keep its enforcement. This is where the entire operative approach to the Law breaks apart into utter incoherence in relation to the New Testament principle of grace. The penalty for most infractions against the Law was death by stoning and was often administered by a civil and religious authority (Deuteronomy 17). Since the Church does not inherit Israel's civil authority, enforcement of the Mosaic Law becomes impossible [\[21\]](#). (See my article on the prophetic voice of the Church [here](#).)

As the premiere Law of all time, greater than the Code of Hammurabi, greater than the Qur'an, greater than Roman law (Galatians 3:21), the Mosaic Law offers itself as instruction and example for individual morality and civil society, but

requires no uncontestable obligation regarding its adoption and enforcement. The Law ceases to be a legalistic code that must be enforced to the letter upon pain of death. Instead, it *speaks* as the Word of God. *It now brings life instead of death.* In Christ “the ministry of death” transforms into “the ministry of the Spirit” and life” (2 Corinthians 3).

## **A New Commandment**

Though the Law was fulfilled, accomplished and expired in Christ, and its requirements and penalties no longer directly apply today. This does not mean the Church lives lawlessly and without moral standards. The fulfillment of the Law in Christ means the fulfillment of the Law in his Body, the Church. Jesus and both the Apostles Paul and James stated that the commandment of love fulfills the Law (Matthew 22: 37–40; Mark 12: 29–31; Romans 13: 8–10; Galatians 5: 14; James 2: 8). “Love ... is the fulfillment [*plērōma*] of the Law” (Romans 13: 10) The Church, as well as Christ, bring a completion and conclusion to the Law. Jesus left the Church with a new commandment of love that fulfills the old Law. Just as the old Law marked the distinction of Israel as a holy people from the rest of the pagan nations (Deuteronomy 28: 1–2), so the new commandment of love distinguishes the Church from a hostile world system: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 14: 34, 35).

The old Law was not a failure, so that God had to begin again with a New Commandment of Love. The Law was as Paul said, “weak ... through the flesh,” (Romans 8: 3), meaning it was simply incapable of producing anything other than the recognition of sin and condemnation (Romans 7: 7–13). It could never save and transform humanity. For that purpose God sent his Son and “condemned sin ...in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled [*plēroō*, completed, finished or

accomplished] in us who do not walk according to the flesh [sinful human nature] but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8: 4).

Because believers now have the Holy Spirit, they are new creations (2 Corinthians 5: 17) and the Law is accomplished in them. This does not mean Christians live perfectly as Christ did, but that there are no moral or legal requirements that they must meet as a sign of their acceptance by God; instead of living up to a standard, they live out of the sufficiency of Christ. They are guided by the Holy Spirit to accomplish the New Commandment of Love, also called “the law of the Spirit” (Romans 8: 2), “the law of faith” (Romans 3: 27), “the law of Christ” (Galatians 6: 2) and “the royal law” (James 2: 8), reflecting the image of God in Christ. *Jesus did not leave a legal code to regulate every aspect of life, like Moses; instead he gave the Church an orientation of love and freedom.* Law compels obedience through fear of punishment. It dominates the individual’s will so that his choices are not his own. Grace inspires obedience through the revelation of God’s love; “the goodness of God leads to repentance” (Romans 2: 4). Law is for the immature or those who cannot act responsibly without it. They need to be told what to do in external and institutional codes. Grace is for the mature who act according to the Law of the Spirit or the spirit of the Law residing internally in every believer. They live by the Spirit at a higher standard of personal accountability to God and not according to the letter of the Law (Matthew 19). Law is for the lawless, not the righteous (I Tim 5: 5-10).

## **The Internal Law of the Spirit**

The Law of the Spirit expresses the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise that the Law will be written on the hearts of God’s people in a new covenant after God fills them with his Spirit and forgives their sin (Jeremiah 31: 31–34; Ezekiel 36: 24–27; Hebrews 8: 7–13; 12: 24). Believers are not

accountable to the Law, but may approach God through Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest and Mediator between God and man (I Timothy 2: 5; Hebrews 4: 14; 7: 18-19). Grace supplies believers with a greater righteousness and accessibility directly to God, in contrast to the Law of Moses, because as grace fulfills all the requirements of the Law, it also provides both personal transformation and purity of heart through faith. It is not enough to simply *not* commit murder or adultery. One must not harbor hate or lust also (Matthew 5). The Law—is now internalized in believers through the Holy Spirit.

The new Law of the Spirit (i.e., the Law of Love) continues where the old Law left off. But this new law is different from the old because it can only be accepted by faith, a committed trust in the unseen Word of God (2 Corinthians 4: 16–5:7; Hebrews 11: 1–12: 3) as a gift of God’s grace, which makes the old Law a law of works, not a law of faith (Romans 3: 27). Abraham understood that “the just shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17). Anyone living righteously knew it even when they were under the Law—that keeping the Law was impossible, requiring grace (Romans 4). The Law required moral and legal perfection, complete and total obedience or works, requiring human effort in order to achieve acceptance with God. Any attempt to work one’s way back to God on the basis of keeping the Law disqualifies one from salvation by grace through faith (Romans 3–5). “I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” (Galatians 2: 21).

Christians are not justified by grace through faith, only to be sanctified by works either the works of the Law or any other code of conduct. Theologically, Evangelicals typically divide the term salvation into three stages: *justification*, a positional salvation that can never be revoked; *sanctification*, a lifestyle that reflects justification, and *glorification*, the end result of salvation when believers are

restored to the complete image of God in the *eschaton*[\[3\]](#). The Church often struggles the most with the middle stage of sanctification, asserting the need for a code of conduct as many Evangelicals do or even a sacramental merit system as Roman Catholics accept that measures the believer's progress and growth towards Christlikeness. Although most Evangelicals will hotly deny that they are setting up a new works salvation system in their codes, the practical effects are the same: justification is by faith and sanctification is by works.

## The Ontology of Salvation

Grace represents a temporal discontinuity in the plan of God within an overall eternal continuity. The coming of Christ was a radical disruption in the nature of things (ontology) and punctuated history with grace. The new age of grace, only foreshadowed and hoped for in the previous time, was always in view in God's plan of redemption. But until the coming of Christ there was no tangible mechanism to dispense Grace to humanity. Law never acts as a means of salvation, even if there was someone who kept it perfectly, such as Saul of Tarsus (Philippians 3: 6) .

Good behavior does not eradicate the guilt of original sin, simply doing more good works to outweigh our evil ones will do nothing to accomplish salvation, which is the whole substance of the ancient debate between law and grace from Jesus and the Pharisees, to Paul and the Judaizers, to Augustine and Pelagius to the Reformers and the Catholics. It manifests today in the Free Grace Gospel versus Lordship Salvation position as well as the numerous attempts to reassert the principle of law in the Church to act as a hedge against *antinomianism* and moral *libertinism*.

The human condition remains so stricken with sin that only a divine intervention will save people from condemnation. No amount of good deeds—even if they were perfect—could erase the curse of sin inherited from the First Adam (Romans 5: 12–21 ).

*Salvation must be ontological and not simply moral.* There must be a change in *being* and not merely a change in *doing*. This means there must be a change in the spiritual condition of people and not simply a moral or behavioral change. God does not forgive sin without compensation for sin. Salvation requires more than just a divine act of will to rescue humanity, which then translates to morality and law (or contemporary manifestations of *moralism* and *legalism*). This bears out in the New Testament in the struggle between law and grace or works and faith. One position focuses on *ontology* (the transformation of the spiritual condition or essence) and the other on morality (human effort or works). Salvation focuses on either God or man; either God saves humanity by grace or humanity contributes through its merits to its own forgiveness and restoration.

Human nature tends to self-righteousness and belief in its own ability to earn the grace of God expressed in morality and law, or what Paul called "works." Morality means the choices people make based on what they think is right or wrong. Law, that is "Policy" in human terms, is the morality of a few people enforced on the majority, through institutional and legally binding codes of behavior. The modern world has adopted a humanistic perspective that sees humanity as preeminent, not God; it has abandoned ontology and metaphysics.[\[4\]](#) In lieu of metaphysics, the modern world uses morality and law as a guide to life; it creates an understanding of God in its own moral image as glorified law-giver and not the Spirit who changes hearts, minds and lives. Thus Christianity and all religion are reduced to morality as opposed to faith, which is irrelevant to the modern world.

Christianity appears increasingly moralistic and legalistic where a code of behavior replaces living faith in God. This manifests in everything from health and eating rules and dress codes, to Prohibition and club or church membership; middle

class family values become identical with Christianity: ideals such as a high work ethic, patriotism, and belief in *Christian America*. Voting becomes a sacred duty, keeping the Ten Commandments becomes emphasized, along with political activism, and so forth. None of these are bad, but they are never a replacement for faith. Yet, they often are made the test of faith and their presence is often mistaken for a vital life in Christ. These things represent morality and even Christian morality, but morality should never be confused with faith and salvation. Salvation is not morality, it is an ontological change in the condition of the human heart and its relationship with God through the Spirit that is freely given and accepted by faith alone. Morality does not constitute the elements of faith, it follows faith as a natural consequence (Ephesians 2: 8–10), and must never be the measure of faith (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8; 10: 12–33).

## **Moralism: The American Heresy**

The common sense approach to religion in America argues that people are responsible for their own actions and therefore can make amends for their misdeeds with good deeds. Although, this position is not false, we need to seek to correct and learn from our mistakes, it makes no difference to one's spiritual condition, which can only change by faith in the person and work of Christ.

Theologically speaking, most of the American Church has followed the classic heresy known as Pelagianism, [\[5\]](#) a belief that denies the inherent sinful condition. Pelagius the fourth century monk and arch opponent of St. Augustine argued that original sin does not exist as the guilt humanity inherits from the First Adam and that Adam's sin was his own. The human race cannot be held accountable for a sin they did not commit. People are born innocent into a corrupt environment and only become sinful after they have sinned. On the surface this doctrine appears rational and fair, but cuts the heart out of

the principle of grace and throws all religion back into a legalist and moralist mode. Without a notion of original sin, today called “radical evil,” or “total depravity,” or simply the “sinful human nature,” it makes perfect sense that the way back to God is through being a good person or moral reformation. As theologian Paul Tillich noted “[Pelagianism] ... is always effective in us when we try to force God down to ourselves. This is what we usually call ‘moralism,’... Pelagius said that good and evil are performed by us; they are not given [or an ontic condition, meaning we are not born into a state of sin; rather we become sinners through our own misdeeds or sins]. If this is true then religion is in danger of being transformed into morality.”[\[6\]](#)

The principle of grace advocated by the Apostle Paul, St. Augustine and the Reformers radically opposes moralism and makes salvation a matter of a divine intervention in the human condition that can be received only by faith. Works do nothing to alter the human condition of sin and condemnation. No moral or legal remedy exists that will change our basic sinful selves. Moral transformation (works) follows faith, but has no causal effect on salvation or loss of salvation. What God gives in grace he will not revoke (Rom 8: 26-39; 11: 29). Grace is not an excuse or license for sin. Those who argue that way simply do not understand grace and its transforming effects on moral character, nor have they ever participated in it (Rom 6). “For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace” (Rom 6: 14)!

## Endnotes

1. For an article on how Millennial generation Americans display, among other traits, a tendency to be what sociologist Christian Smith dubs moralistic therapeutic deists, see: [www.probe.org/is-this-the-last-christian-generation/](http://www.probe.org/is-this-the-last-christian-generation/)

2. Lawrence Terlizzese, *Romney vs. Obama and Beyond: The Church's Prophetic Role in Politics*, Probe Ministries, 2012,

[www.probe.org/romney-vs-obama-and-beyond-the-churchs-prophetic-role-in-politics/](http://www.probe.org/romney-vs-obama-and-beyond-the-churchs-prophetic-role-in-politics/).

3. The time when God completes His plan of redemption.
4. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 44.
5. Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 124-25.
6. *Ibid.*, 125.

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## **Expanding the Biblical Worldview of Christians in Myanmar**

*Don Closson, who has taught Christian worldview on several continents, recently returned from Myanmar, which has in recent years been oppressed heavily by an atheistic regime. Representing his church Christ Fellowship in McKinney (TX), he shared with pastors and students a biblical perspective on world missions and how the Church there is both historically blessed and currently in a good position to reach their own nation (formerly known as Burma) with the gospel.*

Details of a trip can begin to fade even as the effects of jet lag seem to grow stronger. Fortunately, I do remember many wonderful aspects of my whirlwind eleven-day trip with friend and pastor Ken Stoneking to Myanmar (the U.S. still insists on calling it Burma), one of the poorest and most oppressed

countries in Asia.

## **Praise God for a Fruitful Trip**

This was my most successful cross-cultural teaching experience to date. I say that for several reasons. First, the topic was timely and relevant to my audience of pastors and students at the Mandalay Bible Seminary. I spoke on God's Kingdom as it relates to world missions by breaking the topic down into four parts: the theological, historical, cultural and strategic perspectives. After I finished teaching the 20 hour class over five days, my host told me that he had been struggling with this very topic, particularly how to motivate the church leaders in Myanmar to play a greater role in missions. He expressed that many churches in Myanmar have an inward perspective and needed help seeing that believers have an obligation to be a blessing to those around us. He told me that my talks gave him a number of ideas to develop further after our visit.

## **Myanmar's Uniqueness**

My preparation for this class increased both my own understanding and appreciation for the task of world missions. As I put the lessons together, I got more and more excited about my opportunity to share with the pastors and students. I realized that they live in a strategic place to reach a part of the world limited to Americans. Myanmar is in the global *10/40 window* that defines the least evangelized segment of the globe. In fact, its capital city Yangon is listed as one of the 100 gateway cities to this 10/40 region, the rectangular area of North Africa, the Middle East and Asia between 10 degrees and 40 degrees north latitudes, according to The Joshua Project. The population of the world is growing more Asian every year and Myanmar is centrally located to impact China, Thailand, and India!

## **Connecting the Dots...**

A serendipity was “connecting the dots” as I researched the relationship between the Church in Myanmar and the early Reformation—going all the way back to John Wycliffe in the 1300s. Wycliffe challenged the authority of the Pope and the refusal of the Church to put the Bible in of the language of the common people. His followers were known as Lollards, and they preached anti-clerical and biblically-centered reforms.

Jon Huss read the teachings of Wycliffe in the 15th century and attempted to reform the church in Bohemia and the adjacent area called Moravia. Gaining a wide following, the Hussites influenced the region around Prague, Czech Republic, including a group which became known as the Moravian church. Huss was eventually burned at the stake in the center of Old Town Square in Prague for challenging the official doctrines of the Catholic Church. However, the Moravian Brethren continued on and became a powerful force for evangelism in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Evangelist and church leader Count Zinzendorf was at the center of this movement during the late 1700s. He traveled to America and England meeting with Jonathan Edwards and other leaders of the Great Awakening that brought revival to both England and the Colonies in the 1730s and 40s.

In 1806 a group of college students at Williams College prayed that God would again bring revival to the country, sparking a movement among college students known as the Haystack Prayer Revival. These five students would help influence a young man named Adoniram Judson to commit his life to missions. Judson set sail for India with his wife in 1812, but the East India Company would not allow them to enter because they feared that missionaries would stir up the Hindus. Taking the first boat East, Judson arrived in Rangoon (now Yangon) in 1813. After six years he had his first convert and when he died at age 62, after spending 38 years in Myanmar, it was estimated that

there were over 200,000 Christians in the country. Judson was the first to translate the Bible into the Burmese language, a translation that was so good that it is still used today and preferred over recent translations because it is more theologically conservative.

## **More Dots**

The day after I left, an earthquake hit Myanmar. Thankfully, God spared the Mandalay Bible Seminary. Then our president visited for the first time in recognition of the political changes occurring there. Please pray for the Christians in this strategic country. They are standing boldly and are ready to be used of the Lord for the Great Commission.

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# **Jesus Christ Superstar**

## **Kanye West vs. John Lennon**

“Who do men say that I am?” (Matt 16:16)

In 1966, rock star John Lennon said the Beatles were “more popular than Jesus.” Lennon made the statement in the context of his predication about the demise of Christianity; “Christianity will go,” he said. “It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue about that; I’m right and I will be proved right. We’re more popular than Jesus now; I don’t know which will go first, rock ‘n’ roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary.” Lennon’s failed predication about the demise of Christianity, like so many since the eighteenth century, grossly underestimated the enormous appeal of Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the most popular figure in history and

everyone wants a piece of him. Recent music artists tend to disagree with Lennon. The pop diva Kesha sings, "Got Jesus on my necklace." Lady Gaga sings, "The three men I'm a serve my whole life is my Daddy and Nebraska and Jesus Christ." In his acclaimed single, "Jesus Walks," a sort of Hip Hop gospel song, Kanye West raps and preaches:

*I ain't here to argue about his facial features  
Or here to convert atheists into believers  
I'm just trying to say the way school need teachers  
The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that's the way I need Jesus.*

It is very reassuring to have Jesus on your team. There is a principle in marketing called "borrowed authority" where a spokesman such as an athlete or movie star endorses a product. Jesus represents the ultimate superstar whose intrinsic authority is borrowed to support every kind of religious and social movement. Even the apparent enemies of faith such as Secular Humanists claim to accept Jesus' social ethics of peace and equality. Today cults and religions, Christian and non-Christian alike, all claim Jesus as their own or as a great teacher or prophet. Islam claims Jesus as a prophet and teacher of Islam who preceded Mohammad and predicted his coming.

The various images of Jesus may error in one of two ways, either in denying his full deity or neglecting his complete humanity. The biblical presentation shows Jesus Christ as the Word of God who became flesh (John 1). He is both Son of God and Son of Man. Traditional theology calls this the God/man union. This means Jesus is both fully God and fully man. This unity must be retained if we are to follow the Jesus of the Bible and not another Jesus invented by the spirit of the age to lend credibility to a given cause or religious movement.

Jesus once asked the apostle Peter, "Who do men say that I am?" Peter offered a very pluralistic answer: "Some say John

the Baptist, others Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." The idea that Jesus was a prophet is not wrong, just incomplete. When Christ asked Peter again, "Who do you say that I am?" he replied that Jesus was not just another great religious leader, but the incarnate savior when he said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:13-16).

## **The Humanist Tradition: Jesus as the Greatest Man**

The emphasis since the Renaissance in Western thought has been on humanism. This means a stress in the arts and sciences on human dignity, freedom, and beauty as well as a renewed interest in the natural world as opposed to a transcendent emphasis on divinity or the authority of the church and the Bible as in the Middle Ages. Every age tends to portray Christ in its own image. In the Middle Ages, Christ is painted as King, divine and regal such as Pantocrator, ruler of all, from the sixth century. Today our view of Jesus reflects the humanist trend from Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1498) all the way to the *Head of Christ* by Warner Sallman (1940), which is by far the most popular portrait of Christ in history.

The famous German poet Goethe noted the sensual power of *The Last Supper*, which represents "'the boldest attempt to adhere to nature, while, at the same time, the object is supernatural,' with the result that 'the majesty, the uncontrolled will, the power and might of the Deity' were not expressed."[\[1\]](#)

This represents the modern liberal Jesus, which has been popular since the nineteenth century. This view shows Jesus as a great man and moral teacher, a faith healer who preached social reform, the Son of Man, but not the Son of God. Modern culture tends to think about Jesus as the greatest man who ever lived rather than the Son of God.

This is also true of “The Quest of the Historical Jesus” of the nineteenth century debunked by Albert Schweitzer as modern people portraying Jesus in their own image as a good ethical man, who did good deeds.<sup>{2}</sup> Despite the fact that the search for the Historical Jesus was shown to be biased towards modern views, it continues in movements like the Jesus Seminar and in the famous Baur-Ehrman thesis. Both argue for a historical Jesus who is not in the Gospels but is thought to be the earliest Jesus. They baptize Christ in contemporary culture by arguing that alternative views of Jesus preceded orthodoxy in the earliest Christian community. This presents another attempt to understand Jesus from a pluralistic perspective. The latest quest seeks greater diversity in our social ethics by presenting various views of Jesus.

A very human Jesus is not necessarily a false view, except if we say this is all that he was. So Jesus is the greatest man that ever lived, but he was more than that as well. He was also the incarnate God.

## **The Gnostic Jesus: The Great Spirit with a Message**

There is no difference between the ancient world and the modern one concerning Jesus’ star power. Yesterday’s Gnostics, like today’s, wanted the credibility of having Jesus attached to their movement without really accepting him as their Lord and Savior, once again tapping into his borrowed authority. Gnosticism was a second century heretical belief that has experienced a considerable revival since the discovery of some of their lost documents in 1945. Gnostics believed that the material world is basically evil, created by a demiurge [Ed. Note: “A supernatural being imagined as creating or fashioning the world in subordination to the Supreme Being, and sometimes regarded as the originator of evil,” Dictionary.com] that departed from the Pleroma (the Gnostic view of God). The

divine spark, or a piece of God, however, remains trapped in our physical bodies that can only be released through secret knowledge of divine messengers like Jesus.

A problem arises theologically when Gnostics reject the belief that Jesus had no physical body because the material world is evil. He only appeared as a man, like a phantom or hologram, but was really a divine spirit. Jesus was not a savior, but a teacher. Gnostics did not believe in salvation, meaning one is saved from sin by grace through faith. Instead, Gnostics taught enlightenment or the impartation of knowledge. People are not sinners, only ignorant of the divine spark within them.

Who was Jesus to the Gnostics? He was not the divine Son of God made flesh, but an elevated spirit being, an emanation sent to give special knowledge of how to ascend back to God. One of the greatest artistic expressions of Gnosticism comes from the modern Surrealist painter Salvador Dali in his depiction of Jesus in *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (1955), which shows a transparent effeminate Jesus as a sort of exalted spirit god administering the communion table. Here Jesus is divine, but not human.

Modern Gnostics like Dan Brown, some Feminists theologians and Neo-Gnostic churches are attracted to the apparent androgyny, diversity, and collusion of opposites in the Gnostic concept of God, which depicted the emanations in the Pleroma as both masculine and feminine. This leads to the notion that Gnosticism was more tolerant of differences and individualistic and offered a prominent role for women because its theological nomenclature spoke of "God the Father" and "God the Mother." [\[3\]](#)

Yet the Gnostic belief system is antithetical to the entire tenor of the modern materialistic worldview. Most Neo-Gnostics adopt the psychological aspects of Gnosticism that appeal to the individual's sense of superiority to the world. It is the

world that is fallen in Gnosticism, not the individual. It is the creator who is at fault, not people. The unacceptable metaphysical aspect of Gnosticism to a modern materialist worldview makes it obvious that Neo-Gnostics are grasping at straws. They are looking for anything to validate their belief in diversity, androgyny, and individual superiority. What better person to turn to than the leading cultural figure of all time, Jesus Christ?

## **Arianism: Jesus the Creator Angel**

Another major error in the history of Christian thought is named for its major proponent Arius (250-336). Arianism believes that Jesus was not equal with the Father but was a created being like an angel. In fact he is the chief of all the angels. Arius' famous line states "there was a time when he was not."[4](#) This means Jesus was a created being. All orthodox theology and teaching roundly rejects this view because it compromises the deity of Christ. In an effort to preserve the radical oneness of God, Arianism accomplishes the opposite by falling into polytheism. There is not one God, but two. The Father made the Son and the Son in turn made the rest of the world. It is similar to the modern view that says Jesus is the greatest man who ever lived with the added dimension of being like God but not equal to God. He is a god. This is one of the most common mistakes people make in their understanding of Jesus, even thinking that the term "Son of God" suggests an inferior station to the Father. The term "Son of God" means Jesus is equal to the Father (John 5:18). The Arian heresy was revived by some Unitarians in the modern Age, Isaac Newton being the most famous, but has been especially embraced by the cult of the Jehovah's Witnesses who argue vigorously for the idea that Jesus is not God but a created being.

The famous theologian Athanasius (298-373) argued that our view of Jesus must be tied to our salvation. If we get our view of Jesus wrong we will also misunderstand salvation by

grace. Only God creates and only God saves, but it is humanity that must suffer the penalty of sin. But because people are unable to offer the sacrifice for sin God must offer it himself in human form to save us. The dual nature of Christ solves this problem by making Christ the perfect sacrifice as the God/man. An angel is not capable of offering a sacrifice for sin. This is essentially what the book of Hebrews says: "He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs" (Heb. 1:3, 4 cf. Heb. 2:14-18).

## **New Age Jesus: The Ascended Master**

The New Age Jesus is very popular today. This is the belief that Jesus is one of the greatest religious leaders of all time, an "ascended master" much like Buddha or Krishna. Jesus is not the unique Son of God but one of many divine incarnations. He does not come to deliver us from sin but to enlighten us. He came to show us how we can achieve God-consciousness or to help us realize we are God within. This is similar to Gnostic idea of a divine spark left in humanity after the creation of the world.

Because of this the New Age is often confused with Gnosticism. There are correlations, but there are also substantial differences between the two. New Age thinking is pantheistic. This means God equals the all pervasive force of the universe, which makes it more happy and world-friendly as expressed in the modern ecology movements that find God in nature. Gnosticism is not pantheistic, but radically dualistic; the world is evil and the individual is good but trapped in the material world. Gnosticism tends to be dark and foreboding with other worldly hopes of escape and ascension. New Age tends to have hope in the current historical continuum of

change. There is a New Age of Aquarius dawning right around the corner. We don't find that optimism in Gnosticism.

The New Age version of Jesus expresses another aspect of Jesus' popularity among non-Christian religions as well as spiritual but not traditionally religious Americans. Like Gnosticism, it absorbs Jesus into its belief system, but it also acquires greater credibility for itself by adopting Jesus. Most of the popular views of Jesus are a way of accepting a semblance of spirituality without really committing oneself to the message of Christ as the only way to the Father. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). The great offense today in Christianity is given by our belief in the exclusivity of Christ as the only way to God. Every alternative view of Jesus compromises this central idea, making Jesus one of many ways to God. The enormous popularity of Jesus need not create confusion. The Bible is very clear that Jesus is the Son of God and the only way to the Father. John Lennon and the Beatles have been relegated to the oldies station, but Jesus is still here and more popular than ever. We need to help refocus the culture's acceptance of Jesus as the greatest man and religious leader with the biblical message of salvation that says Jesus is the incarnate Word sent to save us from sin and restore us to the Father.

## Notes

1. Quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in History of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 146-147.
2. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: MacMillian, 1964).
3. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Bernard Simon, *The Essence of the Gnostics* (Edison, NJ: Chartwell Books, 2004), 203-220.
4. Quoted in Tony Lane, *Harper's Concise Book of Christian Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 28.

# What is Technology?

*Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese uncovers a disturbing new view of technology: not as neutral, but a way of life that objectifies everything, including people.*

## The Neutrality View

Most people take a favorable view towards technological progress; new cars, cell phones and computers – what's not to like? They embrace technological innovation as a plus despite the suspicions of questionable things like cloning, genetic engineering and nuclear weapons. But what is technology anyway? Do we really understand this all-embracing phenomenon directing human history? We often take for granted that we think we know the answer when in fact the meaning of the greatest social mover of all times remains elusive. When it comes to defining technology we are beset with the problem of defining more than just a word, but a concept and whole way of life and worldview.



The typical definition of technology these days says technology is neutral, suggesting that technology is nothing more than tools that people use as needed. Technology is a means to an end and nothing more. All objects are separate and disconnected. They are neutral and value-free, right? Tables, chairs, and light fixtures have nothing to do with each other and express no values in themselves and are completely determined by our use. They are simply objects at our disposal and present no moral problems so long as we use them for good. We can pick up a hammer and use it, then place it back in the

tool box when finished. The hammer has appropriate and inappropriate uses. Hitting nails into wood is one of the acceptable uses of a hammer; using it to play baseball is not acceptable. So long as we act as good moral agents we use our technology rightly, or so we think. This definition is so widely accepted that we have trouble ever questioning it. When faced with morally questionable uses of technology we fall back on this old cliché: “technology is neutral,” and that settles all disputes. We are all familiar with this popular view and embrace it to some extent. The problem is not that the cliché is so simple or popular, but that it is so wrong. Philosophers have been telling us for decades now that the neutrality of technology definition is wrong and dangerous because it blinds us to the true nature of technology.

## **The Holistic View**

The second view of the nature of technology, held mainly by philosophers, we call the “holistic view.” This view states that the “neutral view” is false because people hold to it as a means of justifying every type of technology. The neutrality view blinds us to the true nature of technology, which is not value-free. The lack of understanding regarding the true nature of technology creates a serious problem for a society so heavily influenced by technological development. As sociologist Rudi Volti says, “This inability to understand technology and perceive its effects on our society and on ourselves is one of the greatest, if most subtle, problems of an age that has been so heavily influenced by technological change.”<sup>{1}</sup> Technology is understood as a social system. We can also call it a worldview, a philosophy of life that sees all things as objects, including people. Instead of defining technology as disparate tools unconnected to each other, philosophers have suggested a more comprehensive definition that says technology does not mean neutral objects ready for use at our convenience, but a way of life that informs and

controls everything we do. In other words, technology is a belief system with its own worldview and agenda—more like a religion than a hammer.

This belief system is often called the *essence of technology* or *spirit of technology* and cannot be seen in technological objects because we cannot see the entire system by looking at individual parts. We must grasp the spiritual essence before we can understand its technical parts. The “neutrality view” looks only at parts rather than the whole and misses technology’s true nature. This is a lot like looking at the tires of your car or its engine parts and thinking you now understand a car from seeing separate pieces of it and never seeing how the whole thing fits together.

The holistic view understands technology as a way of life and spiritual reality that shapes all our thinking. Philosopher Martin Heidegger gives the example of how the Rhine River exists not as a river, but as a source for electricity. Everything becomes stuff ready for usefulness.[{2}](#)

Technology really means an interconnected system rather than a neutral tool. The neutral definition blinds us to the true nature of technology and prevents us from mastering it. Heidegger argued that “we are delivered over to [technology] in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology.”[{3}](#)

## **Technology as Spirituality**

The neutrality argument reassures us that we remain in control of our means rather than our means controlling us. It does not allow us to find the essence of technology in everyday technological objects such as cars, computers, or screw drivers and baseball bats; rather, technology is a way of life

and thought that creates a universal system. Technology means the grand accumulation of all the different technological parts into a global system.

Technology is a system of interlocking systems. As philosopher Jacques Ellul said, "It is the aggregate of these means that produces technical civilization."[\[4\]](#) Technology is our modern frame of reference that speaks of the profoundly spiritual and not the strictly technical. If we look at individual everyday technologies we will miss it. Instead we must see past the common objects to the larger global system that comprises technology as a social process. In the technological system both humanity and nature have no separate standing or value outside of technical usefulness. People are simply resources to be used and discarded as needed.

This view reveals the depths to which technology shapes our thinking by informing us and conforming us into the image of the machine, which represents the greatest example of technological thinking. Everything is understood as a machine and should function like a machine including the government, the school, the church and you! Bureaucracy is a social machine.

The machine is predictable. It has no freedom. It follows mechanical steps, or linear logic. Step one leads to step two, and so forth. Any deviation from its programming causes chaos and possible break down, which is why the machine is the worst possible analogy for human beings to follow. Yet this is the basis of the entire modern conception of life.[\[5\]](#) People are not machines that can be programmed; to adopt this conception reverses the role between humanity and its machines, making people conform to the image of the machine rather than vice versa. Machines are our slaves. They do what we tell them to do. They have no will, feelings or desires. Philosophers tell us that the natural relationship between people and machines is in a process of reversal so that we are becoming slaves to technology. We may control our individual use of technology

but no one as of yet controls the entire system.[{6}](#)

## Neutrality as Modern Myth

Nothing can be explained by the neutrality argument, not even the meaning of “neutrality.” It is simply not possible for any technology to be neutral; even the most primitive tools such as fire or stone axes take the form of their designers. Every technology bears inherent values of purpose and goals. Fire has value for a particular reason, to clear the land, cook food, keep people warm and ward off dangerous animals. By their very design, all inventions and tools reflect our values and human nature. Philosopher of Science Jacob Bronowski argued that “to quarrel with technology is to quarrel with the nature of man.”[{7}](#) Technology is an extension of ourselves and expresses human nature, which is never entirely good or bad, but ambivalent. Our technology reflects who we are and nothing more; it is not divine, it will not save the human race; but neither is it animal, but fully human, whose nature is always ambiguous, capable of great acts of kindness and mercy as well as cruelty and evil. People can be self-sacrificial and giving and self-destructive and greedy. There will always be good and bad effects to our inventions. They are a double edged sword that cuts both ways and it is our responsibility to discern between the two.

The modern bias in favor of neutrality reveals our protectionist tendencies towards all things technological. How is it that sinful people can produce morally neutral technology? We would not say that about art. “Oh! All art is morally neutral! It is all a matter of how you use it!” Yet the same creative forces go into producing technology as art. Is there anything neutral about the works of Caravaggio, Da Vinci or Picasso? Why then should there be anything neutral about Facebook or MX missiles?

This appears simple enough, but as modern people addicted to

our latest toys and novelties we have difficulty admitting we may have a problem. We don't like to think that too much Facebook might be causing young people to be further isolated from the community because they are more accustomed to relate electronically than in person, or that email actually reduces our ability to communicate because of the absence of tone of voice, body language, eye contact and personal presence. TV and film may have a surreal effect on its message, giving it a dream like quality rather than communicating realism.

## Controlling Technology

The solution is not to abandon any of the incredible inventions of the modern age, but to recognize their limits. It is the sign of wisdom that we understand our limits and work within them. We should proceed along a two tiered path of questioning and the application of values. Ellul said that "It is not a question of getting rid of [technology], but by an act of freedom, of transcending it."[{8}](#) The act of questioning is the first act of freedom; by becoming aware of the problem we can assert a measure of freedom and control. Through critical questioning we recognize our limits and thus we are able to exercise a measure of control over technology.

We should develop technologies that reflect our values of freedom, equality and democracy. For example, Ellul did envision in the early 1980's the potential use of computer technology in a way that would create a decentralized source of knowledge that would maintain the values of democracy. We know this now as the internet. However, as Ellul also argued technology cannot change society for the better if we don't change ourselves. The computer can also be used to bring in stifling State control.[{9}](#) We will never have a perfect technology that has no problems, but we should be visionaries in how we think about technology and the application of our values to it.

Limits serve as a warning to us. It is obvious that society has progressed in many ways thanks to advanced technology, but society's spiritual regression shares the same condition as advancement. We have not become better people because we live in the twenty-first century rather than the nineteenth century. Without a renewed spiritual and moral framework to direct our development and give new purpose to the system, technology may become the source of our own destruction rather than improvement. An inventory of advancement compares starkly with the litany of potential catastrophe. We have eliminated disease, but also created dangerous levels of overpopulation. We live longer and more abundant lives materially, but are pushing the natural world into extinction. We are able to travel quicker and communicate instantly, contributing to world peace and understanding, but have also developed the weapons of war to unimaginable levels of devastation.

Without a moral framework to control technology and understand its ethical limits we will go down a path of losing control of technology's direction, allowing it to develop autonomously. This means it will develop in a predetermined linear direction, like a clock that will inevitably strike midnight once wound up. That direction as we have seen moves inexorably closer to the mechanization of humanity and nature. With the right value-system we can begin to reassert control. The choice is yours. Where do you want to go?

## **Notes**

1. Rudi Volti, *Society and Technological Change*, 4th ed. (New York: Worth Publishes, 2001), 3.
2. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (New York; Harper, 1977), 16, 17.
3. Ibid., 4.
4. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. by John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage, 1964), 2.
5. John Herman Randall, Jr. *The Making of the Modern Mind: A*

*Survey of the Intellectual Background of the Present Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 227.

6. Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine; Technics and Human Development* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966); Idem, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970); Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1992); Lawrence J. Terlizzese, *Hope in the Thought of Jacques Ellul* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2005).

7. Jacob Bronowski, "Technology and Culture in Evolution," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 1. 3(1971): 199.

8. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, xxxiii.

9. Jacques Ellul, "New Hope for the Technological Society: An Interview with Jacques Ellul" in *Et cetera* 40.2 (1983): 192-206.

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## **2012: Doomsday All Over Again**

### **Progress or Regress**

It is the end of the world again. The world was predicted to end at least eight times in the past 30 years, from the Jupiter Effect in 1982 to what became a common punch line, "88 reasons why the rapture will happen in 1988." Then there was the granddaddy of all false apocalyptic prophecies: the millennium bug of 2000, when it was widely held that all computers would fail at the turn of the millennium. Let's not forget the two failed predictions of the end in 2011. Now the world faces yet another prediction of the end with the Mayan calendar prophecy of 2012. In an age of super-science, computers, space travel and accelerating progress, why are

people fascinated with the end of the world?

We have all heard the phrase "What goes up must come down." This captures the popular attitude towards progress and regress. Americans believe strongly in human perfectibility and the inevitability of technological progress. This idea states that as technology moves society from its primitive state to an advanced condition it will eventually improve, bringing a better tomorrow. The world is getting better and better. Faith in progress provides the engine for all the accelerating technological changes from space exploration, media, computers, to science and medicine. Historian Robert Nisbet noted the essential role of progress in our belief system when he said that progress does not represent one aspect of modern life, but in fact provides the keystone idea and context for the entire modern worldview, including democracy, equality, social justice and, of course, science and technology.<sup>{1}</sup> The modern world does not exist without the belief in progress. Technological improvement makes no sense without the larger *telos*, or purpose of history, guiding it. Simply put, all of this innovation leads to a utopian future.

So we are left with the question, If America is so progressive why is it so obsessed with the end of the world or *apocalypticism*, a belief that is not progressive, but regressive? This view of history does not move toward a utopian society of universal peace, ease and convenience, but rather toward calamity. Progress and regress share the same view of history. Any belief in progress necessarily has a regressive interpretation. They each look at the same circumstances and data and draw complementary conclusions. One sees the dawn of a great society, the other sees the end of the world. They represent complementary ideas in the same way life and death complement each other. What lives eventually dies, so what progresses will also necessarily regress.

All people intuitively know that they will die one day; so then society, the collective "person," knows it too must one

day die. If progress takes place we know that its opposite, regress, will also happen. Regressive thought states that the progress we take for granted potentially has a downside and in fact will result in something catastrophic. Our society will one day come to an end. It cannot live forever any more than an individual can live forever in a mortal body. We know that what goes up must come down. The current obsession over the end of the world in movies, such as *2012*, *Melancholia* and *Contagion* or wildly popular novels such as the *Left Behind* series, the predictions of popular preachers or the Mayan prophecy all cater to our regressive and pessimistic side. This is not as bad as it first sounds. Death creates the foundation of all religion, philosophy and culture as attempts to provide answers for our questions and solace in times of doubt and need. The reality of death causes people to look for the meaning of life. Christians need to harness the regressive side of culture because it warns of imminent danger and offers the opportunity to introduce people to Jesus Christ. Regressive thinking, like the knowledge of our own death, makes us all aware of our need for God and the Savior. Believers must take advantage of this primal consciousness of the end to tell people about what the Bible says concerning the end of the world and the return of Christ. But in order to do this successfully we must first establish guidelines on how to identify false prophecy.

## **What the Bible Says**

Today people are searching for the meaning of life in the wrong places, such as the prophecies of Nostradamus, astrology and, again, the Mayan prophecy of 2012. It is a sign of the end times when there are many false prophets talking about the end of the world (Matthew 24:11). The false prophet shows that people are aware that the end is near.

There are two rules in Scripture that will help believers identify false prophets, which should be followed without

exception. First, prophecy *must never set a date regarding when the world will end*. Jesus spoke clearly about the signs of His return and the end of the world when He said, "But of the day and the hour no one knows" (Matthew 24:36). Anyone who comes to you with a firm date as to when the world will end such as December 21, 2012 should be avoided. Cultists continually violate this cardinal rule. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses have predicted the end of the world eight times between 1914 and 1975. Popular radio preacher Harold Camping predicted the end in 1994 and twice in 2011. The speculation surrounding the year 2000 was much like it is today over 2012. Scientific evidence was proffered predicting that all computers would fail at the turn of the last millennium. This warning was taken very seriously by most people who made preparations for the potential disaster, demonstrating the pervasive sentiment of impending doom.

However, many Bible-believing Christians also fall prey to the error of date-setting, even if this practice is often veiled in vague language and logic. For example, when prophecy experts identify leading political figures as the Antichrist, such as Hitler, Mussolini or Saddam Hussein, they engage in false prophecy. This approach will invariably get us into trouble because it starts the clock ticking. If Saddam Hussein were the Antichrist, then logically Christ should have returned before the end of his life, since the Antichrist is the precursor to the coming of Christ (Rev. 6:2; 2 Thess. 2:3). However, we know that did not happen. In this way, identification of the Antichrist with any leading figure becomes false prophecy.

How much better it would have been to say Hussein was *like* the Antichrist or prefigured the Antichrist, rather than identify him as the Antichrist. This simple switch in focus spares us the humiliation of false prophecy, but retains all the power of moral denunciation that apocalyptic thinking offers.

This leads to the second rule of indentifying false prophecy:

*all prophecy must have a moral imperative.* This means people should not engage in speculation and prognostication for the fun of it. A biblical approach to prophecy gives a warning about future judgment and a chance to repent: “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near” (Rev. 1:3; see also 2 Thess. 2:1, 5-10). Prophecy engages in denouncing moral outrage, which is why it couches things in the strongest possible language. To say that the world is coming to an end or that someone is the Antichrist gets a lot of attention, but requires a moral cause to justify its claims.

If the prophecy gives a date and it lacks the moral imperative, then the prophecy reveals itself to be false and sensationalistic. The Mayan 2012 prophecy fails on both counts. Although it causes us to contemplate the end, it sets a date and offers no reason for why the world should end. It is simply doomsday all over again!

## **Notes**

1. Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 9, 171.

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### **See Also:**

- [2012: Is the Sky Really Falling?](#)
-

# Christians in the World

*Don Closson looks at three books on how to live the Christian life in 21st century America: Radical, The Next Christians, and To Change the World.*

## Introduction

Have you ever heard a sermon that tried to convince you that our earthly possessions should be looked at more like a hotel room rather than a permanent home? The point being that earth is a nice place to visit, but it's not a believer's final destination.



As aliens and strangers, our real residence is with God which usually implies a heavenly spiritual existence that is completely foreign to our current one. In a bit of a twist, a recent article in *Christianity Today* argued that most evangelicals have things backwards. We are wrong if we think that at Christ's return the wicked will be "left behind" and the righteous will be taken away to a heavenly abode. It's the wicked who will be removed while the righteous remain on earth. The author's conclusion is that we should be more caring about this world because it, not heaven, will be our eternal home.

How we view "final things" or the "end times" impacts how we live today. There is a heated debate going on about the priorities of those who desire to live out a biblical worldview. Should we be focused on restoring this world, redeeming it for God, or on offering the lifeboat of salvation in order to save some from impending destruction along with the rest of the cosmos? Are we to be mostly about creating a restored culture through our Spirit empowered efforts, or are we seeking salvation for a redeemed people leaving restoration of the world to special acts of God?

In this article I will focus on three popular books that offer

different perspectives on how Christians should prioritize their lives: *Radical* by David Platt, a mega-church pastor from Birmingham, Alabama; *The Next Christians* by Gabe Lyons, a conference speaker who has created an organization to encourage dialogue about the purpose of the church; and *To Change the World* by James Hunter, the lone academic, a professor of religion, culture, and social theory at the University of Virginia.

Platt's book is simple and straightforward. He tells his story mostly by giving examples of people in his church who were radicalized by the gospel. Lyons' book is a polemic against what he calls a gospel that only tells half of God's story. Hunter gives us a scholarly tome, calling Christians to humility when it comes to changing the culture in which we dwell. Although these books are different in significant ways, they all present an argument against the so-called American dream of runaway materialism and extreme individualism.

Three different books, espousing a similar message, told with both passion and thoughtfulness. Join me as we consider how Christians are to dwell on earth as aliens and strangers.

## **Becoming a Radical**

The strength of David Platt's book *Radical* is its simplicity. He pleads with us to believe what Jesus says and then to obey it. But like most things in life, his simple admonition hides nuances and assumptions that beg further explanation.

Platt fills his book with example after example of Christians making radical life decisions as they reject both the American dream and the typical American way of doing church. He argues that "[W]e as Christ followers in American churches have embraced values and ideas that are not only unbiblical but that actually contradict the gospel we claim to believe."[1](#) After introducing himself as one of the youngest pastors to

lead a mega-church, he admits that the “bigger-is-better” tendency in our churches is hard to support in Scripture.

Platt’s concerns are worthy of much soul searching and careful interpretation of God’s Word. But about halfway through the book I found myself both attracted to, and frustrated by, the many stories of life change among Platt’s congregants as well as his own struggles over how to lead his church in a way that is Christ honoring. For example, Platt’s discussion of Luke 9 results in this sentence: “We *do* have to give up everything we have to follow Jesus. We *do* have to love him in a way that makes our closest relationships in this world look like hate. And it is entirely possible that he *will* tell us to sell everything we have and give it to the poor.”[\[2\]](#) Unfortunately, when I looked for principles to know when and to what extent Jesus is asking me to do these things, I didn’t find that Platt offered any.

Platt leaves little room for interpretation when it comes to the words of Jesus. Is it possible that Jesus used rabbinic hyperbole or exaggeration common to the Jewish teachers of his day when making his more drastic comments about holy living? Even though Platt occasionally tempers his remarks with an “I don’t have all the answers” or “I have more questions than answers,” he writes as if his reading of the text is obvious and conclusive.[\[3\]](#)

Platt’s book *Radical* is intended to shock culturally captive Christians out of their American Dream stupor and to become serious Christ followers. His one-year dare at the end includes activities from which all believers would benefit. We should be praying for the entire world, reading through the entire Word, sacrificing our money for Kingdom purposes, reaching out to those in other cultural settings, and committing ourselves to multiplying church communities. I just wish that Platt had given us a little more nuanced guidance as to when and to what extent Christians should live a radical life.

## Restoring Eden

Of the three books we are examining in this article, I anticipated the arrival of Gabe Lyons' book *The Next Christians* the most. I had read glowing endorsements and was hoping not to be disappointed.

The first of three sections in the book describes how the world has changed in its perception of Christianity. Although there is much good information here, Lyons resorts to the phrase "perfect storm" once too often in describing our current cultural milieu. He is right to describe attitudes towards believers in post-Christian America as mostly negative, but I am cautious about his complaint that our situation today is somehow unique.[{4}](#)

Lyons describes the church's response to social change as either separatist or cultural. The separatists are characterized by judgmental withdrawal from society, aggressively defending a Christian America that no longer exists. They reduce the Christian's task to saving a few souls via evangelism in ways often offensive to our pluralistic society. It's not a pretty picture. According to Lyons, we are far too influenced by the remnants of the Fundamentalist movement that did battle with modernism at the beginning of the last century.

Cultural Christians seek to blend into the culture rather than judge it, and define the Christian life as primarily doing kind things for others. These self-identified Christians place tolerance high on their list of virtues and are working diligently to avoid topics or actions that might alienate their neighbors. Lyons argues that they have conformed to the culture in a way that relinquishes any hope of having significant impact.

Lyons endorses a third category which he calls *restorers*. He describes these people as those who "envision the world as it

was meant to be and they work toward that vision. Restorers seek to mend earth's brokenness."[{5}](#) They are optimistic, and see "that God is on the move—doing something unique in our time."[{6}](#) Their mission is to see "how things ought to be," and then to commit their lives to making it so.[{7}](#)

In a manner similar to Platt's book *Radical*, Lyons chastises Christians who focus too much on the Gospel message of redemption and emphasizing a salvation that offers escape from this fallen world. By putting restoration back into God's story we don't have to wait for God to give us a new heaven and earth, we can experience it now.

Lyons' call to action is an expansive one and it immediately raises questions about what a restored world should look like; what specific form should our political and economic systems take? He seems to assume that we should know the answer to these questions but I am not so sure that it's that obvious.

## **A Faithful Presence**

We will now consider the most academic of the three books we are examining, James Hunter's book *To Change the World*. Not only is Hunter's book one third longer than the other two, it is far more abstract in content. Where the other two books give significant space to stories of lives changed by a biblical calling, Hunter devotes less than three pages to real life examples. What we do get is a thoughtful overview of how most Christians wrongly pursue political power in the name of Christ.

According to Hunter, Christians can be broken down into three distinct groups: the Christian Right, the Christian Left and the Neo-Anabaptists. The Christian Right seeks to win the culture war. In its eyes, Christian America is disappearing and needs to be defended. Secularism has conquered the media, academia, and government, resulting in a culture that rejects

biblical values and corrupts our children.

In many ways the Christian Left and Neo-Anabaptists look a lot alike. They are hostile towards an unrestrained market economy and capitalism itself. They also share a sharp loathing for the Christian Right. But they differ dramatically regarding the believer's relationship to government. The Left see the government as a partner while the Neo-Anabaptists see it only as a coercive force that uses violence to enforce its will.

Hunter argues that all three groups seek political power in order to change the culture, a goal that will inevitably fail. He spends a large portion of the book explaining why changing a culture is far more difficult than most appreciate. Cultures are more complex and resilient than we think and cannot be changed by just putting new ideas in people's minds.

In the end, Hunter calls Christians to what he describes as a faithful presence. Rather than defending against the secularization of culture, trying to be relevant to it, or even seeking purity from its negative effects he calls for another response that lends authenticity without sacrificing coherence and depth to our faith.

Building a faithful presence requires that our leaders care more about discipleship than fighting the culture war or gaining political power. Christ followers today have faith but lack a vision for living that is distinct from the larger post-Christian culture. For Hunter, "A theology of faithful presence means a recognition that the vocation of the church is to bear witness to and to be the embodiment of the coming Kingdom of God."[8](#) Hunter realizes that the New Heavens and New Earth will be God's restoring work, but by honoring God through our relationships and our tasks we will taste something of His kingdom now.

## Summary

In this article we have considered three stimulating and passionate books, *Radical* by David Platt, *The Next Christians* by Gabe Lyons and *To Change the World* by James Hunter and have been left with three overlapping pictures of what it means to be a Christ follower in the current American culture. Is the Christian life about being a radical, being as counter-cultural as possible? Is it restoring the world to a pre-fall condition? Or is it as simple as being a disciple maker?

The apostle Paul certainly lived a radical lifestyle, but he was limited by a couple of parameters. Paul talks about being free from the expectations of men and yet careful not to give offense in any way that might hinder the gospel.<sup>{9}</sup> He was culturally sensitive enough to know what actions or words might keep people from hearing the good news. He said that he became all things to all men so that some might be saved. He conformed to the culture enough to communicate the transcendent truth about Jesus.

Paul says very little about reforming Roman society, the government, commerce, or education. He seems to be much more concerned about the culture within the church than he does the culture at large. He writes, “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?”<sup>{10}</sup> His desire was for Christ followers to live out the “one another” passages that fill the New Testament. To be loving, encouraging, building up, and bearing with one another in a way that will draw outsiders to the gospel.

What about Gabe Lyons’ strong emphasis on restoration? In my mind the issue is one of priorities. Most Christians would like to see their efforts result in some degree of healing and restoration in our society. But is healing and restoration of America our first priority? This might be true if one holds the view that Christians must take over society prior to Christ’s return, as do some postmillennialists. But for those

who believe that Christ will return as a conquering king to a world in rebellion, there is no expectation or responsibility for Christians to restore the planet. These differing positions show, once again, the relevance of theology to everyday life.

International speaker and author Os Guinness describes clearly our first priority as believers. He writes, "All that we do must be first and last for Christ and His kingdom, not for America, or the West, or democracy, or whatever. The 'first things' must be first again, and everything else must be viewed only a bonus or a by-product, and not our prime concern."<sup>{11}</sup> Since God has chosen to build his kingdom through the church, it is Christ's church that should receive our primary efforts.

## Notes

1. David Platt, *Radical* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010) pg. 3.
2. Ibid., pg. 12.
3. Ibid., pg. 3.
4. Gabe Lyons, *The Next Christians* (New York: Doubleday, 2010) pg. 11.
5. Ibid., pg. 47.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., pg. 60.
8. James Hunter, *To Change the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pg. 95.
9. 2 Corinthians 6:3.
10. 1 Corinthians 5:12.
11. Os Guinness "Os Guinness Calls for a New Christian Renaissance," *Christian Post*, [www.christianpost.com/news/51309/](http://www.christianpost.com/news/51309/)

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# God Wins: A Critique of Rob Bell's Love Wins

*Dr. Patrick Zukeran critiques Rob Bell's controversial book denying the biblical teaching on hell, arguing that Bell offers another gospel.*

## A New Kind of "Christianity"



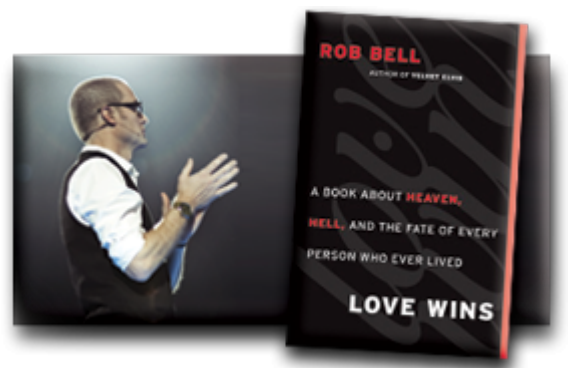
Will all people regardless of their belief enter heaven? In a new book, *Love Wins*, mega church pastor Rob Bell presents his case for universal salvation. Bell states that a Christianity that teaches many will spend eternity in hell while some go to heaven is "misguided and toxic."<sup>[1]</sup> Bell asserts that the message Christians have preached for centuries is actually a harmful message.

Bell argues that God loves everyone and desires all people to be saved. However if the majority of people never come to faith in Christ and spend eternity in hell, God fails to accomplish His will. Since this is not an acceptable conclusion, the only logical conclusion left is that in the end, all will eventually receive His love and enter into heaven.

Bell begins by bombarding the reader with hundreds of questions. The questions are meant to challenge and expose the alleged inconsistencies of traditional teachings and prepare you for his case for universal salvation. On page 1 he writes,

Will only a few select people make it to heaven, and will billions and billions of people burn forever in hell? And if that's the case, how do you know? How do you become one of the few? Is it what you believe, or what you say, or what you do, or who you know, or something that happens in your heart, or do you need to be initiated, or baptized, or take a class, or converted, or be born again? How does someone become one of these few? And then there's a question behind the question—the real question: What is God like? Because millions and millions of people who were taught that the primary message, this center of the Gospel of Jesus, is that God is going to send you to hell unless you believe in Jesus. And so what got subtly sort of caught and taught is that Jesus rescues you from God. But what kind of God is that that we would need to be rescued from this God? How could that God ever be good? How could that God ever be trusted? And how could that ever be good news?{2}

These are good questions and deserve to be asked. "Traditional" beliefs may not always be right, and at times they deserve to be reexamined. Bell then in the final pages of his preface implies that those who oppose his view are judgmental and not open to discussion of vital doctrines of the faith. This is part of his strategy to discourage any criticism of his position. However, Scripture calls us to evaluate all teachings and discern truth from error (1 Thess. 5:21; 1 Jn. 4:1).



In the process of defending his thesis, Bell ends up presenting a new kind of Gospel. Since theological doctrines are connected, when you change the gospel message there is a chain effect that follows. His gospel ends up presenting a distorted understanding of God's character, a variant view of the atonement, and a heaven and hell foreign to the

scriptures.

Bell struggles with a significant question: "Will those without Christ truly spend eternity in hell? Could there be a possibility that they have a chance after death to repent?" The idea that a loved one will spend eternity in hell is a difficult one to accept. Careful study of all the relevant scriptures is necessary when we examine a particular doctrine, especially one regarding our salvation. If in the end we are faced with a conclusion we do not like, we must not compromise biblical truth but accept the words of Christ. Paul warns us in Galatians 1:9 the danger of preaching another gospel. When it comes to essential doctrines of the faith, Christians cannot compromise on the truths taught in Scripture. For this reason we must carefully examine Bell's teachings and see if it is compatible with, or a compromise of, the gospel of Christ.

## **Another Kind of Gospel**

To support his thesis that all individuals will eventually enter into heaven, Bell must alter the gospel message. He admits that his message departs from traditional Christianity and declares that the message preached for past centuries is misguided and in need of transformation.

A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided, toxic, and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness and joy that our world desperately needs to hear. [\[3\]](#)

The traditional message that salvation comes only to those who accept Christ in their lifetime is rejected by Bell. He believes that all people are reconciled to God through Christ's death on the cross regardless of whether they choose to put their faith in Christ or not. Those who do not receive Christ in this lifetime will spend some time in hell but no one will remain there forever. Eventually all people will respond to God's love, even those in hell and enter heaven. Bell states this on several occasions:

At the heart of this perspective is the belief that, given enough time, everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God's presence. The love of God will melt every hard heart, and even the most "depraved sinners" will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God.[{4}](#)

To be clear, again, an untold number of serious disciples of Jesus across hundreds of years have assumed, affirmed, and trusted that no one can resist God's pursuit forever, because God's love will eventually melt even the hardest of hearts.[{5}](#)

At the center of the Christian tradition since the first church have been a number who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God.[{6}](#)

Within this proper, larger understanding of just what the Jesus story even is, we see that Jesus himself, again and again, demonstrates how seriously he takes his role in saving and rescuing and redeeming not just everything but everybody.[{7}](#)

Bell points to several Scriptures to support his argument. One passage is 1 Corinthians 13 which states, "Love never fails." Therefore he concludes, God's love will reach all lost people even those in hell and they will eventually turn to Him since no one can resist God's love forever.

However, there are many passages in the Bible that teach the unrighteous are eternally separated from God and the righteous are forever with God. Daniel 12:2 speaks of a future resurrection and eternal destiny for the righteous and unrighteous: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." Daniel states that there will be a resurrection and judgment of all people. Some will inherit eternal life and others will suffer "everlasting contempt." Daniel teaches in this passage that not all individuals will enter into everlasting life. Those who do not are destined to "everlasting contempt." The Hebrew word for everlasting is *ôlām*. The word in this context signifies an indefinite futurity, forever, or always. It refers to an unending future.<sup>{8}</sup> This is the most likely definition for *ôlām* used later in verse 7 referring to the eternal nature of God: "And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; he raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven and swore by him who lives forever..." We know that God is eternal. Therefore, Daniel is using the term "*ôlām*" to mean everlasting and never ending.

Jude 7 states, "In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire." The Greek word for eternal is *aiōnios* which means "eternal, perpetual, to time in its duration, constant, abiding. When referring to eternal life, it means the life which is God's and hence it is not affected by the limitations of time."<sup>{9}</sup> The word again is used in verse 21 to refer to "eternal" or never ending life with God. So in the context of Jude *aiōnios* is used to refer to an eternal state.

In Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus invites, "Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the

gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." Jesus taught an exclusive view of salvation. He stated clearly not everyone will inherit eternal life; in fact many will follow the path of destruction. This verse speaks against the doctrine of universal salvation.

Hebrews 9:27 ("it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment") teaches that there is no second chance for salvation after death. The preceding verses teach that Christ made the perfect sacrifice for sin once and for all. He paid the price once and His sacrifice is for all time. In the same way that Christ's atonement is final, so all men and women die once and face a judgment which is final and eternal in its sentence.

Bell's gospel is a departure from biblical teaching. God is love and therefore, He does not impose His will on those who refuse to receive His love. He honors the choice of individuals to receive or reject Him. Those who reject Him in this life will not want to be with Him for all eternity. God honors their choice and places them away from His presence in hell. Thus, God's character of love honoring one's choice is upheld. But God's character of justice in dealing with sin is also upheld.

## **Are All Reconciled to God?**

There are several key passages Bell uses to support his thesis that all individuals will eventually enter heaven. One key verse that deserves attention is Colossians 1:20, a favorite verse used by many universalists: "and through him (Jesus) to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." According to Bell, the entire world is reconciled to God through the death of Christ. Christ's death has atoned for all sin and places every person in right standing with God. Those who turn to God in this life will enter heaven

immediately. Those who reject God's love in this lifetime will be temporarily separated from God in hell but will eventually receive His love and enter heaven.

Contrary to Bell's interpretation, this verse does not teach a universal salvation. Rather, it presents the scope, goal, and means of reconciliation. The scope of reconciliation extends not just to human beings but to all of creation which was affected by sin. Romans 8:20-22 says,

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

The physical world was affected by sin, not by its choice but by the choice of Adam. Christ's victory over sin restored order over creation by bringing it again under His lordship, and full restoration will take place in the future.[{10}](#)

Angels and human beings, unlike the material world, have a choice. Reconciliation involves two parties who voluntarily decide to make peace. In this case fallen angels knowingly rebelled against Christ and reconciliation is not possible. Humans also must make a choice to receive God's invitation through Christ or to reject it. This is made clear in the following verses:

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. (Col. 1:21-23)

Paul states that we were once “alienated” from God and we are reconciled “if indeed you continue in the faith . . . not shifting from the hope of the gospel.” The reconciliation depends on the believer receiving Christ by faith and persevering in that faith. Numerous other verses make faith in Christ necessary for reconciliation (Jn. 3:18, 5:24; Rom. 1:17; 3:21-26).

Those who receive God’s gift of life will attain blessings and salvation. Those who refuse are sentenced to eternal death (Jn. 3:18). In the end all things will be put in their proper place. It is in this context all things will be reconciled to Christ and in submission to His lordship (Phil. 2:5-11).

## **Another Kind of God**

In his effort to defend his thesis that in the end everyone goes to heaven, Rob Bell must alter the message of the gospel. However, in doing so, he also alters the character of God. Among the hundreds of questions with which Bell bombards his readers, he asks the following: “If there are only a select few who go to heaven, which is more terrifying to fathom: the billions who burn forever or the few who escape this fate? How does a person end up being one of the few? Chance? Luck? Random selection? . . . God choosing you instead of others? What kind of faith is that? Or, more important: what kind of God is that?”[\[11\]](#) For Bell, a God who would send billions to an eternal hell would not be a God of love. However, in emphasizing God’s character of love he ends up ignoring God’s other attributes, and in the end alters the character of God.

Bell is correct in stating that God is love. However, he commits an error common among universalists. Bell ends up presenting an imbalanced view of God that emphasizes God’s character of love to the neglect of the other character qualities of God. Love is not the only or the most dominant character of God. Along with love, God has other character

qualities which exist together in a perfect balance.

Among the numerous qualities of God, the Bible teaches that God is also just (2 Thess. 1:6), He is holy (Isa 6:3), He is righteous (Ps. 7:11), sovereign (Jude 4), wise (1 Cor. 3:19) true (Jn. 14:6), etc. There are many qualities of God that are just as important as love, and they exist in a perfect balance. Thus, emphasizing one trait to the exclusion of others leads to flawed theology.

God is love and God desires that all individuals be saved. However, God is also just and holy and must deal righteously with sin. God's character of holiness is well emphasized throughout the Bible. This is the theme of Leviticus and, throughout this book, God presents detailed instructions for dealing with sin through the sacrificial system. The Levitical sacrifices are fulfilled in the death of Christ who fulfills the righteousness of God.

The theme in the prophets is that Israel has violated the holiness of God and thus God must judge their sins. Isaiah 5:16 states, "But the Lord Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness." God, being a loving God, sent prophets to warn Israel to turn from their idolatry and disobedience and return to Him. However, after generations of refusal by Israel, God finally had to judge the sins of the people. Throughout the New Testament, Christians are exhorted to live holy lives for that reflects the character of God (Eph. 4:24; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 1:15-6).

Those who refuse the gift of Christ's work on the cross have not been cleansed from their sin and therefore cannot enter the holy presence of God. This is the theme of Hebrews 9, which teaches us that access to God represented in the Holy of Holies at the Temple was not accessible to us. However, the blood of Christ fulfilled the holiness of God and cleansed sinners and made us holy before God. Only through the blood of

Christ is this made possible.

Bell emphasizes God's love but diminishes His holiness and righteousness; therefore, the magnitude of our sin, its effect on our nature, and its offense to God are diminished. God hates sin and judges sin seriously. In Revelation, the wrath of God is poured out upon the world in rebellion. In Revelation 20, those individuals not found in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire. To build a picture of God who is excluded of His holiness, justice and righteousness, who does not judge sin, is to present an imbalanced and false view of God.

Bell argues,

Millions have been taught that if they don't believe, if they don't accept in the right way, . . . God would have no choice but to punish them forever in conscious torment in hell. God would in essence become a fundamentally different being to them in that moment of death, a different being to them forever. A loving heavenly father who will go to extraordinary lengths to have a relationship with them would, in the blink of an eye, become a cruel, mean, vicious tormenter who would ensure that they had no escape from an endless future of agony. . . . If God can switch gears like that, switch entire modes of being that quickly, that raises a thousand questions about whether a being like that could ever be trusted, let alone good. [{12}](#)

Bell argues that God changes according to the decision of individuals. However, God is not the one who changes. He is always loving and reaching out to all people, but He is also holy and righteous and must deal justly with sin. Those who do not want to be with God now will not want to be with Him in eternity. Because He is love, He does not force people to be with Him for eternity but honors their choice. God allows them to exist away from Him in hell. So God does not change; He grants individuals what they desire.

I would also disagree with Bell's statement that God is the one tormenting individuals. Torment comes from within the person. The torment the person experiences is not inflicted by God but comes from the individual who must live eternally with his or her decision to reject the love of God. Therefore hell honors the free choice of men and fulfills the love of God who does not impose Himself on those who do not want Him. It also fulfills His holiness, removing sin from His presence.

## **Another Kind of Heaven and Hell**

To maintain his thesis that everyone will go to heaven, Rob Bell must alter the gospel message, the character of God, and the teaching on heaven and hell. Bell teaches that hell is not eternal but temporary, and in fact heaven and hell are actually the same place. For those who have accepted God's love, this place will be heaven. For those who continue to reject God's love this place will be hell. Hell is created by the individual who resists God's love. Bell states, "We create hell whenever we fail to trust God's retelling of our story."[\[13\]](#) The individual remains in this condition until he is won over by God's love and eventually turns to God. Then what was once hell will become heaven.

Bell derives this from Luke 15, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In this story, after the younger brother returns, the father throws this formerly lost son a big banquet. However, the older brother, jealous and upset over his younger brother's reception, remains outside and chooses not to enjoy the party. Both brothers are in the same place but for one it is a party, for the other it is miserable.[\[14\]](#) Bell states that it is our choice. "We're at the party, but we don't have to join in. Heaven or hell. Both are at the party."[\[15\]](#) The younger brother who has received his father's love it is a joyous time, but for the older brother who has the wrong view of his father it is misery.

Bell is really stretching the interpretation of this parable to support his theology. I am not aware of any New Testament scholar that finds this doctrine of heaven and hell in this parable. The parable comes in the context of the Pharisees and teachers of the law questioning Jesus associating with “sinners.” Jesus, in defense of His ministry and displaying the compassion of God for the lost, tells three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. The younger brother represents the sinners who repent and turn to God while the older brother represents the Pharisees and teachers of the law who have little compassion for the lost.[{16}](#) So the purpose of the parable is God’s heart for the lost and the cold heartedness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. To read into this story Bell’s doctrine of heaven and hell is a stretch. It does not appear Jesus had in mind any teaching on heaven and hell in this parable.

Bell believes that heaven and hell are actually the same place and he also believes that hell is not permanent. He describes it as a “period of pruning” and “an intense experience of correction.”[{17}](#) It appears that Bell views hell similar to the Catholic teaching of purgatory. Eventually this will end when the person turns to God because, according to Bell, “No one can resist God’s pursuit forever because God’s love will eventually melt even the hardest hearts.”[{18}](#)

Another way Bell defends his doctrine of hell is in doing a brief word study. The Old Testament word is *sheol*. Bell explains that *sheol* is the place of the grave in the Old Testament and that it speaks generally of the resting place of the departed spirits. Three words are used in the New Testament: *gehenna*, *hades*, and *tartarus*. *Gehenna*, he says, is the Valley of Hinnon, the garbage dump outside Jerusalem.[{19}](#) The word *tartarus* comes from Greek mythology, referring to the underworld where Greek demigods were judged.[{20}](#) *Hades*, he states, is the equivalent of the Hebrew *sheol*, an obscure, dark and murky place.[{21}](#) He thus concludes from his brief

word study on hell that hell is not clearly defined in the Bible and that holding to the belief that it is a place of eternal suffering is unjustified.

Bell correctly states that *sheol* is the place of the grave and speaks generally of the place where the departed spirits go. There are several occasions where Old Testament saints stated they would go to *sheol*. However, his word study is incomplete. As revelation progresses, we see there are different fates for the righteous and the wicked. There is indeed a judgment which determines the destiny of individuals.

As mentioned above, Daniel 12:2 speaks of a future resurrection and eternal destiny. "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." Daniel states that there will be a resurrection and a judgment that determines the eternal destiny of individuals. Some will resurrect to eternal life while others to everlasting contempt. As noted earlier, the Hebrew word for everlasting is *ôlām*. *Olām* is used more than three hundred times to indicate indefinite continuance into the very distant future. There are times it is used to designate a long period in the past or a designated long period of time in the future.[{22}](#) Context determines the definition. In this context it signifies an indefinite future or forever. This is the most likely definition for several reasons. First, the context found in verses 1 and 2 speaks of the resurrection at the end of the age. This is speaking of the final judgment before the righteous enter into eternity. Second, in verse 3 it is used of the righteous shining forever. Third, it is used later in verse 7 referring to the eternal nature of God. "And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; he raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven and swore by him who lives *forever*." Daniel describes an eternal state of reward and life for the righteous but an eternal state of contempt for the unbelievers.

In Isaiah 66:22-24, Isaiah speaks of the Lord establishing His kingdom and restoring Israel. He concludes saying, "And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind." Here Isaiah refers to state of eternal torment for those who rebel against the Lord.[{23}](#) Although *sheol* is used of the general resting place of departed spirits, as revelation progresses the Old Testament mentions a different eternal destiny of the righteous and unrighteous. The eternal state is further revealed in the New Testament.

In reference to the New Testament words, the most commonly used word is *Gehenna*. Bell is correct that *Gehenna* is derived from the Valley of Hinnon outside of Jerusalem, but once again his word study is incomplete. *Gehenna* is associated with evil, and, in the context of the New Testament, symbolizes more than just a garbage heap. It served as a physical picture of the eternal state of suffering.

In Matthew 18:7-9 Jesus states, "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire." The Greek word for "eternal" is *aiōnios*. This word means "eternal, perpetual to time in its duration, constant, or abiding." When referring to eternal life, it means the life which is God's and hence it is not affected by the limitations of time.[{24}](#) The fire described in verse 8 is an eternal and never-ending fire. In the very next verse Christ states that it is better to enter heaven blind in one eye than "be thrown into the hell (*Gehenna*) of fire." In just the previous verse, the fire of

hell was said to be eternal. From the context then we should conclude *Gehenna* is an eternal state, not a temporary one.

In Mark 9:47-48 Jesus says, "And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'" Jesus states that in *Gehenna*, the worm lives eternally and the fire is also eternal. *Gehenna* then is described as an eternal abode.

Jesus further states that the punishment in hell is eternal and not temporary. In Matthew 25:46, the judgment of the sheep and the goats, Jesus states, "And these (the goats) will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Bell attempts to show in Matthew 25:46—the separation of the sheep and the goats—that when Jesus said "eternal punishment," he did not mean the punishment was eternal. He writes, "*Aion*, we know, has several meanings. One is 'age' or 'period of time'; another refers to intensity of experience. The word *kolazo* (punishment) is a term from horticulture. It refers to the pruning and trimming of the branches of a plant so it can flourish. . . . Depending on how you translate *aion* and *kolazo*, then, the phrase can mean 'a period of pruning' or 'a time of trimming' or an intense experience or correction." [\[25\]](#)

However, I find Bell's explanation unsatisfactory since the verse states that the goats will "go away into *eternal* punishment, but the righteous into *eternal* life." Here the eternal life of the believer is seen in contrast with the eternal judgment of the unbeliever. If he is to be consistent, we must interpret that the righteous will not enter into an eternal state of life in the presence of God but a temporary state of life. However, this would not make any sense in this verse. Why should we understand that the word "eternal" for the righteous means everlasting but it is taken to be a temporary state for the unrighteous? Since the righteous enter

everlasting life, we should take the preceding phrase that the goats will enter a state of eternal punishment.

Paul writes in 2 Thess. 1:8-9, "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power." The words "everlasting destruction," when used together, refer to an eternal state of punishment. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* states that *Ólethros ai□nios* (destruction everlasting) refers to destruction which is eternal or everlasting. It is destruction or a state which is imposed by God forever. In a similar way the phrase "eternal judgment" used in Heb. 6:2 means an eternal sentence imposed by God. All of these designations of punishment stand in contrast to eternal life as the inherent punishment for those who reject Christ's salvation in that they will be separated from the life of God which they rejected. As to the duration of what is designated as *ai□nios* when it comes to punishment, it is only proper to assign it the same duration or endlessness as to the life which is given by God. [{26}](#)

Revelation 14:9-11 states, "A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: 'If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever.'" In this passage the Greek word *ai□nios* is repeated at the end of verse 11. The phrase "forever and ever" is used twelve times in Revelation. Each time it refers to an eternal existence. Eight times it is associated with the nature of God or the never ending rule of God. For example Revelation 4:9-10 says, "And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the

throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever.” The most consistent interpretation of 14:9-11 is that the suffering of the unbelievers is of an eternal nature.

Jude 7 states, “In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.” Once again the word here is *aiōnios*, signifying an eternal punishment.

It is difficult to interpret passages like these (2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 7; and Rev. 14:9-11) to mean something other than eternal or never-ending punishment. Bell’s interpretations are incorrect and his word studies are incomplete. When you look at several passages in their context, it is very difficult to support Bell’s view.

## **How Many Stones Cry Out?**

Is Jesus the only way to eternal life or are there other ways to salvation besides Christ? Bell makes his case that there are other ways to eternal life. Bell builds his case from Exodus 17 where Moses struck the rock which brought forth water for the Israelites. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul states that Christ was that rock which Moses struck. Thus, Bell makes the leap that if Christ was in that rock, it is very likely He is in numerous rocks. Bell writes,

According to Paul, Jesus was there. Without anybody using his name. Without anybody saying that it was him. Without anybody acknowledging just what—or more precisely, who—it was. Paul’s interpretation that Christ was present in the Exodus raises the question: Where else has Christ been present? When else? Who Else? How else? Paul finds Jesus there, in that rock, because Paul finds Jesus everywhere. [{27}](#)

It appears Bell is stating that one need not know the gospel message of Christ as taught in the New Testament. A person can be saved through other means and messages. Bell further states,

As obvious as it is, then, Jesus is bigger than any one religion. He didn't come to start a new religion, and he continually disrupted whatever conventions or systems or establishments that existed in his day. He will always transcend whatever cages and labels are created to contain him, especially the one called Christianity. Within this proper larger understanding of just what the Jesus story even is, we see that Jesus himself, again and again, demonstrates how seriously he takes his role in saving and rescuing and redeeming not just everything, but everybody. [{28}](#)

Bell emphasizes that he believes that salvation comes through Jesus and Jesus alone saves all people. He refers to Jesus' words in John 14:6. However, he believes that Jesus may be found in the numerous other religions but identified by different names, symbols, or teachings for Jesus as the creator is present in all creation. Therefore, Christianity does not have the exclusive message of salvation. Other religions contain the presence of Christ through their teachings. How and where they do, Bell does not explain.

Bell states again that specific knowledge of Jesus and the message of the cross is not necessary for salvation. "What he (Jesus) doesn't say is how, or when, or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through him. He doesn't even state that those coming to the Father through him know they are coming exclusively through him. He simply claims that whatever God is doing in the world to know and redeem and love and restore the world is happening through him." [{29}](#) So for Bell, salvation is possible without understanding who Jesus is, his atoning work, and the message of the cross.

Bell misunderstands the text of John 14:6 ["I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me"]. Jesus states that He is the only way to eternal life. The "mechanism" is faith in Jesus Christ. Truth is found in general revelation, creation, and the conscience. Therefore, truth about God can be found studying nature (Rom. 1) and through the moral law within each one of us (Rom. 2). For this reason, there are teachings that are true in other religions. For example, many ethical systems in the other religions overlap with biblical teachings. So truth that points to God can be found in general revelation, but saving knowledge of Christ is not found in general revelation. Salvation comes through the special revelation of Jesus Christ. For this reason Paul states, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Rom. 10:14-15) Paul states it is only the specific message of the gospel of Jesus Christ that saves (Rom. 1:16).

There are several examples in the New Testament that reveal general revelation was not enough for salvation, but special revelation was needed. In Acts 10, Cornelius, a God-fearing Roman soldier, believes in God and lives a noble life. However, that was not enough. For this reason, God sent Peter to present the message of the gospel to Cornelius. After hearing the gospel message, Cornelius and his family receive the gift of salvation. Therefore, the message of the gospel must be heard and received for salvation.

Jesus further taught that the message of salvation is narrow and exclusive. This is not only the nature of the gospel message but the nature of truth itself. If Jesus is the son of God, any religion that rejects this truth must be false in its salvation message. In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus stated that the

way to eternal life is indeed narrow and only a few find it. Peter reinforced that Jesus is the only way in Acts 4:12, and Paul states in 1 Timothy 2:5 that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man. If these statements are true, then salvation comes exclusively through Jesus.

It is also logically unreasonable to assume that salvation is possible through other religions. For example, Islam rejects the deity of Christ, the death of Christ on the cross, the resurrection, and salvation by faith in Christ. Many forms of Buddhism reject the idea of a God. Hinduism teaches that Brahma is an impersonal force and is in a codependent relationship with the universe since Brahma is made up of all things. Since the other religions have significant teachings contradictory to Christianity, it is unreasonable to conclude they contain the salvation message of Christ.

So do the stones cry out? There is truth in general revelation (creation and the conscience) but this truth does not save; it points one to God (Rom. 1:18-32; 2:12-16). Salvation requires the gospel message of Christ as stated by Paul in 1 Cor. 15, that we are sinners, Christ died for our sins and rose triumphing over sin, and we are called to receive Him as our Lord and Savior. Without the gospel message of Christ, one cannot attain salvation.

## **Conclusion**

Paul warns us very strongly in Galatians 1:8 the danger of preaching another gospel. Unfortunately, Bell here presents another gospel and in doing so, presents a false message of hope that has eternal consequences. In *Love Wins*, Bell argues that in the end everyone will be in heaven because that is God's will. No one can resist God's love forever, and if all are not saved, God is not glorified. However, in changing the gospel message Bell changes the character of God and the nature of heaven and hell. God is a God of love, and in His love He honors the decision of individuals to freely choose

Him or reject Him. Those who reject Christ, have not had their sins cleansed and cannot enter into the presence of a holy God. In the end, God upholds His love by honoring the choice of all individuals and upholds his righteousness by placing the righteous in His presence and the unrighteous in hell, away from His holy presence. In the end God wins. That is the message of the cross.

## Notes

1. Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2011), viii.
2. *Ibid.*, 1.
3. *Ibid.*, viii.
4. *Ibid.*, 107.
5. *Ibid.*, 107.
6. *Ibid.*, 109.
7. *Ibid.*, 150.
8. Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A.). *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems electronic ed., 2000), 762.
9. Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.), (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).
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11. Bell, *Love Wins*, 2.
12. *Ibid.*, 172-3.
13. *Ibid.*, 172.
14. *Ibid.*, 170-76.
15. *Ibid.*, 175.
16. J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1997), 579.
17. Bell, *Love Wins*, 91-2.
18. *Ibid.*, 108.

19. Ibid., 68.
20. Ibid., 69.
21. Ibid.
22. A. A. Macrae, "1631 ???," in R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr. & B. K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (electronic ed.) (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 672.
23. John Walvoord, and Roy Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), Is 66:22-24.
24. Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*.
25. Bell, *Love Wins*, 90-1.
26. Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*.
26. Bell, *Love Wins*, 143-4.
28. Ibid., 150.
29. Ibid., 153.

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## Engage, Maverick!

I really enjoy Scott's blog which helps us engage creatively and redemptively with pop culture which is so widely influential. So when Scott asked if I would write a guest post on discerning when we should and should not engage, I was thrilled and honored. I deal with the subject of engaging culture on my blog as well (though not nearly as cohesively as Scott does here), so some of my readers may recognize a few things I'm about to say, but this is a great opportunity to bring those somewhat miscellaneous thoughts into a more cohesive treatment. So, thanks again, Scott!

Throughout history the large majority of Christians, Catholic

and Protestant, all across the world, have consistently believed that a major part of our calling is to engage our various cultural contexts to meet people where they are, or perhaps more accurately, meet people halfway, and be salt and light. We get this example from Christ himself who entered into a particular cultural context and met people halfway (between where they were and where Christ was wanting to take them, namely, the Kingdom of God) with metaphors and social activities they already had a cultural framework for.

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is Matthew 10 where Jesus is sending out his apostles. In his instructions to them he tells them to show 'em how to live life to the fullest as we were always intended to live it! ("preach the Kingdom of God"), do creative and redemptive works in their lives ("heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons"), and in all this remember, "be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves."

These are Jesus' instructions to us, his modern-day hands and feet. We are to engage. And we are to do so shrewdly, wisely and with discernment. Not everyone has the same level of freedom to interact with various aspects of our unbelieving society. Everyone is different. There are certain things which are particularly spiritually unsafe for me; I know it in my guts and bones; I just can't go there. But I also know that doesn't mean it is as dangerous for others as it is for me, and I don't begrudge others their freedom.

Personal conviction derives from the way God has uniquely created us as individuals and how our singular personality and wiring is affected by the Fall – our particular tendencies, weaknesses, addictions, our circumstances, our personal history. These are the primary factors we should consider when we prayerfully decide whether a particular book, movie, song is spiritually safe for us to read, watch, listen to, and engage through our Creation-Fall-Redemption view of the world.

Anyone who believes he or she is safe from the all the various temptations available in pop culture is a fool. My friend and colleague [Todd Kappelman](#) wisely notes and advises, "Exercising rampant Christian freedom does not necessarily mean one is a strong Christian [referring to 1 Cor 8]. It could indicate that one is too weak to control one's passions and is hiding behind the argument that they are a stronger brother." When we engage our culture, we must use a "framework of moderation," to use Todd's phrase, that addresses *our particular weaknesses*, for we are all of us the weaker brother somewhere. We need to be honest with ourselves about our weaknesses, and the best way to do that is to ask God and ask other believers who love us and are discerning and nuanced in regard to engaging culture, to invite the inner circle of our faith community into the part of our lives where we ask serious questions about the books we read, the movies we watch and the music we listen to.

There is a difference between conviction and legalism. One of those differences is the legalistic compulsion to impose one's personal convictions on others. It is possible to abstain in a genuinely free way. I greatly admire my friends who abstain; who don't even have a TV, for example. Together we add to the richness of each others' lives by bringing perspective to one another about who God is and how we relate to him. Together we present to the world a more complete picture. It is the diversity of the Body that most beautifully represents Christ to the world. And it is vital to our Christian calling to live as much as we can in the tension between the pulls of legalism and libertinism. The ebb and flow of this kind of living is part of what it means to live the full, rich, abundant life of Christ.

When you cannot personally engage by reading/watching/listening to this or that for whatever reason, abiding an attitude of general engagement as a member of the Body of Christ fosters that humility-infused unity so

foundational to our new life.

This blog post originally appeared at  
[popcultureandfaithministries.blogspot.com/2011/03/engage-maverick-guest-blog-by-renea.html](http://popcultureandfaithministries.blogspot.com/2011/03/engage-maverick-guest-blog-by-renea.html)

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## the unfit ones

outside the box  
in need of a home  
but this box is comfort  
it's all that we've known

*why won't you just fit?*  
square peg  
round hole

we'll file off your edges  
( 'til you're smooth just like us)  
with the blade of this Book  
which says, by the way, don't fuss

This blog post originally appeared at  
[reneamac.com/2011/06/23/the-unfit-ones/](http://reneamac.com/2011/06/23/the-unfit-ones/)

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# When the Church Is More Cultural than Christian

*July 7, 2011*

So, I'm reading this excellent biography of Bonhoeffer right now, and I've been mulling this question. Well, I guess it's twofold, really.

**Background:** You probably know this already, but just in case. In Nazi Germany the German church pretty much abandoned any form of orthodox Christianity in order to fit in with the culture. Bonhoeffer, Niemoller and others formed the Confessing Church as a stand for true Christianity in the face of the cultural abdication of the wider church. Most were either imprisoned or killed for their efforts.

**1 – Do you think that the American church is undergoing a similar shift to fit in with cultural norms on a broad scale that could threaten orthodox Christianity (clearly, hopefully, not to the extent of the Reich church, but still, I see some possible parallels)? What do you think are the areas in which the American church is most at risk? Why?**

**2 – Do you think we have leadership that is taking a stand for orthodoxy in a counter-cultural and true way on the national scene? If so, who?**

Yes. The American church acquiesces to the culture in various ways which are detrimental to the Gospel. It's tricky because it is vital to the Gospel that the Gospel (whose hands and feet are the church) be relevant. Churches which are highly separatist and never adapt to or accommodate culture do violence to the Gospel as well, so it's tricky. And we'll none of us ever get it 100% right. Ever. I keep trying to tell God humility is overrated; he never listens.

I think there are two veins in which American churches are perhaps more American than Christian. One is liberal; one is conservative. (Brilliant, I know.) The tendency is to point the finger at the other and overreact for fear of falling into the other's traps. We're so focused on not falling into *this* trap, that we don't even notice that what we think is a bunker is merely another trap of another sort.

Now to your actual question: What are these traps?

Liberal:

Of course there are the far left examples like: Employing poor hermeneutics which 1) Undercut Scripture as a text which is not historical or literal at all, and 2) justify sin, usually sexual sin such as premarital sex and homosexual sex and the sexually-related sin of abortion. And then there is the slightly more subtle trap of feeling the need to bend over backwards to kiss the keister of Science. Finally, there is the acquiescence of the (pseudo)tolerance mantra of hypermodernism: partly out of fear of being legalistic, partly because it is more comfortable, we succumb to Relativism.

Conservative:

Employing poor hermeneutics which truncate Scripture as a text which is entirely literal (it seems to me that this is a very Western thing to do, but I could be wrong; it could simply be a human thing to do... we feel more comfortable in black and white). Such a lack of hermeneutic leads to overly hard-nosed positions about creation and "the woman issue" among other things. It also leads to, instead of justifying sin, creating an extra hedge of rules so that we can be darn sure we avoid the undignified, socially unacceptable sins, perhaps especially, sexual sin.

And then of course there's the idea of a Christian America; or that politics can fix every(one else)thing.

Traps for all:

[Moralistic Therapeutic Deism](#) is probably a problem for both

sides. So is materialism of course, privatism and spiritual professionalization—You'd better keep your hands off of my individual rights and my private life... and: spiritual things go in one compartment, which is private and has no business interfering in the public sphere: ie. faith and science and/or faith and business. Professionalization is also quite Western. I love this quote from GK Chesterton's *Heretics*:

*But if we look at the progress of our scientific civilization we see a gradual increase everywhere of the specialist over the popular function. Once men sang together round a table in chorus; now one man sings alone, for the absurd reason that he can sing better. If scientific civilization goes on (which is most improbable) only one man will laugh, because he can laugh better than the rest.*

Professionalization probably also includes running our churches too much like businesses.

Finally, Q number 2: Yes. What's tricky about this is that one must sometimes be under the radar to be counter-cultural, partly because when you're counter-cultural, no one wants to listen to you! Eugene Peterson, Tim Keller, NT Wright, Nancy Pearcey, Os Guinness (an outside perspective is always helpful) and the [Trinity Forum](#), Jamie Smith, especially in the area of how we do church and spiritual formation... I'm sure there are others, including my [colleagues](#) who are currently working on assessing and addressing this issue of cultural captivity: first creating an Ah-ha moment about our cultural captivity, and secondly, creating a way out of captivity and into freedom.

Good question!

This blog post originally appeared at [reneamac.com/2011/07/07/when-the-church-is-more-cultural-than-christian/](http://reneamac.com/2011/07/07/when-the-church-is-more-cultural-than-christian/)