

# 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."[<sup>\[1\]</sup>](#) 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.”<sup>{2}</sup> 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.<sup>{3}</sup>

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.[\[8\]](#) 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."[\[9\]](#) 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 aiōnios* (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 *aiōnios* 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 *aiōnios* 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).
10. Richard Melick, *The New American Commentary: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 225.
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.

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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/)

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# If Christ isn't in the name, how will I know it's Christian?

July 22, 2011

Recently, long-standing evangelism non-profit [Campus Crusade for Christ](#) officially announced its plan to change its name to Cru. I admit the over-priced wine bar with mediocre cheeseboards was the first thing I thought of when I heard the news. But the second thing I thought was, *Naturally, that's what people call it anyway.* So I didn't think anything of it. I wasn't freaked out because Christ is no longer in the name. For heaven's sake, Christ himself said, "[Be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves](#);" not, "Subtlety is a sin. Be as obvious and explicit as you can be because that's how people will know you belong to me." No. He said, "[They will know you are my followers by your love for one another.](#)" But yet again, people only see Christians calling their brothers and sisters names like "coward" and "repulsive" and griping at each other. That's just great. (You can read more about how Christians are going to the mattresses here on [Fox News's report](#).)

I agree with Cru: they needed to drop "crusade" from the name. It certainly does recall The Crusades, an awful, dark, embarrassing time in Christianity, or at least medieval Christendom... I'll let my historian colleagues correct my armchair claims here; but that is all the more to the point: popular perception matters; words have baggage, and it is naive to think we can simply plow through it. I will say, it does make it a bit ironic that crusade is the one word they're keeping, even if it is a shortened version of it. Nonetheless,

Campus Crusade for Christ is a dated (and long) name; hence why people commonly shortened it to Cru even before the official name change.

I agree entirely with Cru vice president Steve Sellers when he said it is “more important that the organization is effective at proclaiming Jesus than it is important to have the name of Jesus in the name of the organization.” The fact that people are chalking this up to succumbing to political correctness is evidence that they care more about the outside than the inside; more about appearances than heart; more about rhetorical positions than actually taking a stand. This kind of attitude common among Christians is sad. It isn’t a witness to the world, as Cru has been and continues to be; and it isn’t worthy of the calling we have received in Christ. It reminds me of how many Christians understand “Christian art.” But that’s another blog post for another day.

Part of thinking through our Christianity includes thinking before reacting, perhaps especially on social networking sites where we feel emboldened by our anonymity amid the mob and where instant gratification is part of the point. It also includes being mindful of passages like Matthew 10 and 1 Peter 3 when quoting Romans 1:16.

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# Interracial Dating

*July 21, 2011*

Dear Renea,

We are a strong, white, Christian family. Our 22 year old daughter is dating a black boy. He is very nice, kind, well-mannered. However, we just are not in favor of this interracial relationship. We never envisioned one of daughters dating a black boy. We know all the biblical verses pertaining to this. We're just not sure what to say to her. Need some thoughts on this situation. Your thoughts are so welcome. Thanks.

Dear E,

Thank you for writing in with your question.

I'm surprised to hear you mention knowing the scriptures pertaining to interracial relationships because I confess, I am wholly unaware of any verse which addresses the subject. Old Testament passages speak about the importance of Hebrews marrying Hebrews and not pagans who worship false gods and idols, but that has to do with a person's relationship with God rather than his or her nationality. We know this to be the case when we consider heroes of the faith such as Rahab and Ruth, neither of whom were Hebrews, both of whom came to fear (know) the Lord better than many natural Hebrews and were used by God in significant ways, most significantly as women in the lineage of Christ! This is the same vein which runs through the New Testament command not to be unequally yoked in 2 Corinthians 6. Biblical warnings against marrying certain types of people have everything to do with their relationship with the Holy One (and ours) and nothing to do with nationality, ethnicity or race.

That being said, your feelings and your conflict are real and no doubt a significant part of how you were raised. Based on your letter, it seems you and your husband probably grew up in Bible-believing churches and/or homes which taught against interracial marriages. You certainly grew up in a time in our culture when such relationships were anathema. Your situation reminds me of what the Disciples must have experienced upon

seeing Jesus conversing with, not only a *woman* one-on-one, but a *Samaritan* woman. That's not how they grew up! That's not how a good Jewish man was to behave, yet here was their Master, their Teacher, their Messiah breaking all the rules about race-relations (and gender-relations). I'm sure it was a shock. I'm sure it was quite unsettling, perhaps even unacceptable at first. And I appreciate that what I am saying might be just as jarring, just as maddening perhaps, just difficult to accept.

And so it's okay to need time to wrestle with this radical biblical truth that goes against everything you've been taught just as Christ's first followers were constantly having to do. Since Christ's Loving-Truth sets us free, I beg you to wrestle with it, to try to accept it; but even if you cannot, I appeal now to your love for your daughter, a love that has no doubt grown from parent-child love to also include friend-love now that she is an adult. Support your daughter, love your daughter, respect her (decisions) as the adult she is. Don't let your preferences—reasoned as they may be considering the difficulties that can still come as a part of interracial relationships—drive a wedge between you, driving your daughter away from you. Don't give the Enemy a foothold to break down and breakup your family, your love for one another. I implore you with familial affection in Christ our Lord.

Dear E, may our great God give you grace and bless your family in this scary step of faith we call life.

With love and respect,  
Renea

This blog post originally appeared at  
[reneamac.com/2011/07/21/interracial-dating/](http://reneamac.com/2011/07/21/interracial-dating/)



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# Contemplative Prayer

*June 16, 2011*

Dear Renea,

I work with a wide variety of Christians in a largely Evangelical area. Some of them are particularly skittish and nervous about the concept of contemplative prayer. Some claim it's nowhere to be found in Scripture.

What would you say to such a person?

Dear V,

This is a great question! I confess, because I've never been uncomfortable with contemplative prayer, I've never really considered the need to make a defense for it. Simply let your Bible fall open at random; the chances of it opening to a psalm about meditating on the Lord or his statues are pretty high.

I would also want to say that there are lots of elements in our contemporary worship habits which are not mentioned in Scripture, that Scripture does not have an explicit list of how we should do church or how we should manage our personal spiritual disciplines. The Bible provides us with broad principles, which gives us a lot of freedom (and a lot of responsibility to apply those principals with integrity).

I would also be tempted to say (though this is often a really tough sell, especially for those already skittish about such things) that as believers, we are in the business of redeeming culture. Every person is made in God's image and has God's law written on his or her heart. A cultural practice such as Eastern/New Age meditation, is certainly a misdirected

spiritual behavior because it isn't directed toward the One True God. It isn't that there is no value in that practice; on the contrary, I believe Western Christianity has quite a lot to learn from Eastern spirituality, especially since our spiritual roots are Middle Eastern. So we have the power (and responsibility) to redirect what is misdirected, to re-orient reality toward the Kingdom of God.

People are often more hard-nosed about Eastern practices because it is so other to us Westerners (and the Southern Hemisphere has yet to have any influence anywhere near what the East has in our society). So, it's scary, unfamiliar. We're afraid of it, so we throw the proverbial baby out on the street and slam the window shut. To be fair however, our generation didn't have to deal with New Ageism when it first became a phenomenon. We haven't had to watch, helplessly, as many of our friends became swept up in its deception. So we want to remember to be gracious toward one another's fears and intolerance.

Keep asking good questions,  
Renea

This blog post originally appeared at  
[reneamac.com/2011/06/16/contemplative-prayer/](http://reneamac.com/2011/06/16/contemplative-prayer/)

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## **Complete in Christ and Captive to Empty Deception**

*Steve Cable examines four types of cultural captivity that holds Christians in bondage: naturalism, legalism, mysticism and asceticism.*

# Problem of Captivity

God has laid a powerful vision on Probe Ministries, calling us to free the minds of fifty million culturally captive Christians and build them into confident ambassadors for Christ by the year 2020. Our survey analysis has shown that cultural captivity is a growing problem within the church.[{1}](#) To be effective in this mission, we need to understand the different forms cultural captivity can take individually and collectively.

Does the Bible provide any insight into cultural captivity and the tools for setting believers free? In an [earlier article](#), we looked at the differing types of cultural captivity: carnal, confused, compromised, and contented Christians.[{2}](#) In this article we will see insights from the second chapter of Colossians.

In Colossians 2:8, Paul warns the local Christians, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception,” and then he reminds them that they are “complete in [Christ].”[{3}](#) What does this thing look like that can capture someone who is complete in Christ? How can I avoid it or free myself from it in the power of Christ? Surely, the Christians in Colossae were asking the same things. Paul thought as much for he points out four different views that may take genuine Christians captive and keep them from doing their part in the war of ideas.

In Colossians 2:1-4, Paul warns us that we need a true knowledge of “Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” If we don’t completely understand the fullness of Christ and His work of redemption, we are setting ourselves up for those who would “delude you with persuasive arguments.”[{4}](#) We must fully grasp that Christ alone is necessary and sufficient for our salvation. We must believe it in the day to day living of our lives—being “rooted and grounded in Him.”[{5}](#)

In the remainder of the second chapter of Colossians, Paul lists four specific ways that our thinking can be taken captive by the philosophy of men through persuasive arguments. It is important to remember that these arguments are called “persuasive,” meaning that they appear to make good sense and have the power to sway our thinking. It is only by examining these arguments in the light of Christ’s truth that their falsehood comes to light. I want to examine each of the four, considering how they would appear to the Colossian Christians of that day and how they might play out in this decade.

The examples of cultural captivity exposed by Paul and still relevant to our lives today are naturalism, legalism, mysticism and asceticism. We’ll begin with naturalism.

## **Naturalism: Captive to Scientific Deception**

The first type of cultural captivity highlighted in Colossians is found in our key verse, chapter 2 verse 8:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

This verse has the only occurrence of the word “philosophy” in the Bible. The Greek word literally means “the investigation of truth and nature”[\[6\]](#) as emphasized by the remainder of this verse. Thinking in accordance with the tradition of men and the elementary principles of the world can captivate us. The ways in which man explains how the world works and how we fit into it can be a deceptive trap.

In Galatians 4:3, Paul tells us that apart from Christ we are held in bondage by the elementary principles of the world. When we try to limit the forces at work in our universe to

simply those elementary forces operating in our daily lives, we are missing out on the powerful work of Christ in our world far above and beyond the everyday forces of nature.

So what are the elementary principles that lure us into captivity today? Certainly, one of the most influential is neo-Darwinism. As discussed in many articles at Probe.org, neo-Darwinism says the world is the result of the strictly natural processes of random mutations and natural selection. This theory attempting to describe the current diversity and complexity of life on this earth is the dominant view in our society. It is seen by many as the culmination of understanding our existence in this world. In fact, it is full of problems, having no plausible explanation for 1) the existence of a life-supporting planet, 2) the first occurrence of life on this planet, or 3) the irreducible complexity of life forms on this planet.

I would suggest that those Christians who put Christ's role in our creation at a level below that of these elementary principles are allowing themselves to be taken captive. If one believes these principles are lord over Christ instead of the other way around, that person is living practically as a citizen of this earth rather than as a citizen of heaven.

## **Legalism: Captive to Self-Made Godliness**

A second form of cultural captivity, identified in the letter to the Colossians, is legalism. Paul writes:

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ (Col 2:16-17).

Paul was warning against those attempting to take Christians captive through the subtle lies of legalism, telling the new, Gentile followers that believing in Christ was a good start,

*but* you also need to follow some of the laws of Moses if you are to be righteous before God.

Notice that the items listed in this verse are not instructions on purity and righteous behavior. Rather, they are specific practices given to Israel as precursors of the coming Messiah. For example, the festival of Passover is a marvelous foreshadowing of Christ's sacrifice of Himself as the Lamb of God to deliver us from slavery to the world of sin and separation from God. But, why celebrate the Passover when one can celebrate the real event? These behaviors designed to prepare us for the coming of Christ are no longer necessary now that we have the presence of Christ in our lives.

In the American culture, legalism appears to have been more prevalent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than it is today. But there are certainly forms of legalism which take people captive today. If you are more interested in passing laws to make some form of Christian behavior the law of the land than you are in changing the hearts of men through the gospel of Jesus Christ, you may be captive to legalistic thinking.

Another form of legalism is the practice of picking only parts of the truth as applicable to you. Jesus noted in Matthew 15:3-6 that this type of legalism was present in the Pharisaical view of committing their resources to God so that they would not have to help their mothers and fathers. Today, I can customize my religious beliefs to conform to what I expect from my religion rather than what my religion sets as a standard for my life. The National Survey of Youth and Religion tells us that over fifty-one percent of 18- to 23-year-olds in American say "it is okay to pick and choose their religious beliefs without having to accept the teachings of their religious faith as a whole."[\[7\]](#)

# Mysticism: Captive to Man's Composite View of God

Earlier, we saw naturalism and legalism as two forms of cultural captivity for Christians. Now we will consider another form which can take us captive, mysticism. In Colossians 2:18-19, Paul writes:

Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.

Here Paul is describing someone who drifts away by delighting in self-derived sources of truth, that is, "visions he has seen," and other religious practices not taught by Christ. This person delights in mixing together teachings from different religions to come up with one's own personalized religious experience. But Christ calls us to worship the Father and the Son, not angels or our own self sacrifice.

Your first reaction may be that this is not a major area of captivity for today's Christians. However, when we begin to consider examples of this type of thinking, we realize that it is very prevalent in our society.

For example, consider the millions of people who joined Oprah Winfrey in extolling and following the teachings of Eckhardt Tolle, author of *A New Earth, Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*. Tolle teaches a version of Eastern mysticism which he discovered in a vision. Taking his stand on visions, he teaches we are all part of the universal life force to which we should desire to return. He selectively misquotes Jesus throughout the book, identifying Him as one of the early proponents of this mystic religion. Most of Tolle's followers come from Christian backgrounds, professing to be Christians

trying to find a way to integrate his teaching with the teachings of Jesus.

One feature of Tolle's teaching is the view that Jesus was one of many who are bringing a form of truth to us. He believes Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed are all trying to communicate the same truth in different ways. This viewpoint is seen in the National Study of Youth and Religion where over seventy percent of American 18- to 23-year-olds disagreed with the idea that only one religion was true. In our study of American born-again between 18 and 40, we found that less than half of these born-again believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven, not Mohammed or Buddha.

## **Asceticism: Captive to Focusing on the Flesh**

A fourth form of cultural captivity identified in Colossians is asceticism. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines asceticism as "the doctrine that a life of extreme self-denial and austerity releases the soul from bondage with the body and permits union with the divine." Asceticism was promoted in Jesus' time by the Essenes of the Jewish culture and the Stoics of the Greek culture.

Since our hope is rooted in an imperishable life in heaven, one could adopt the view that this earthly body needs to be denied in light of our heavenly home. However, Paul warns us:

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) – in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no



value against fleshly indulgence (Col 2:20-23).

Paul warns the Christians at Colossae not to fall for the idea that we must remove our body from all pleasures of the world to partake of the divine. He points out that obsession with self-abasement and severe treatment of the body actually focus our attention on the flesh. Thus, our focus is on eliminating fleshly indulgence rather than on living lives that please Jesus.

In our post-modern American culture, severe treatment of the body does not appear to be attractive to most young adults (except for extreme cases such as anorexia). Perhaps, though, it is evidenced by some forms of the “buy green” movement. What we do see is the opposite extreme, where an emphasis on bodily enhancement for the here and now takes our focus off the work of Christ. Of course, in other parts of the world such as South America, extreme asceticism is practiced among some believers.

We have seen four types of false thinking that could take Christians captive in Colossae of the first century and can in America today. The four types are naturalism, legalism, mysticism, and asceticism. If we recognize these forms of captivity, as Christians, we can be free of them. We must ask ourselves, Does this way of thinking add anything to the fullness of Christ? If I am already “complete in Him”,<sup>{8}</sup> how can these add-ons make me more complete? Obviously they cannot. So leave them behind and “as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord so walk in Him.”<sup>{9}</sup>

## Notes

1. Steve Cable, [“Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America,”](#); [“Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths,”](#); [“The True State of American Evangelicals in 2011,”](#)

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2. Cable, “Examining Our Cultural Captivity,”

[www.probe.org/examining-our-cultural-captivity/](http://www.probe.org/examining-our-cultural-captivity/).

3. Colossians 2:10

4. Colossians 2:4

5. Colossians 2:7

6. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.

7. [www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/NSYRW3.asp](http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/NSYRW3.asp). "The National Study of Youth and Religion,"

[www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org), whose data were used by permission here, was generously funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., under the direction of Christian Smith of the Department of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame.

8. Colossians 2:10

9. Colossians 2:6

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# American Cultural Captivity

*Kerby Anderson provides an overview of ways in which American Christians are culturally captive: individualism, consumerism, racism, church growth values and globalization.*

## Cultural Captivity

Probe Ministries has dedicated itself to helping Christians be freed from cultural captivity. Therefore, I want to focus on how we as Americans are often captive to an American form of Christianity and thus are culturally captive.



Before we address the issue of cultural captivity,

it might be worth mentioning how small American Christianity is compared to the rest of the world. Philip Jenkins reports that “the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward to Africa, Asia, and Latin America.”[\[1\]](#)

We can put this in perspective by looking at what happened last century. In 1900, about eighty percent of the Christians in the world lived in Europe or North America. Now more than seventy percent live in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

A century ago, if you were to describe a typical Christian in the world, you would probably describe a Christian living in the middle of the United States. Today a typical Christian would be a mother in Zambia or a college student in South Korea.

Christianity has also become diverse. “More people pray and worship in more languages and with more differences in styles of worship in Christianity than any other religion.”[\[2\]](#) Put simply, American Christianity is no longer the norm in the world. Yet we as Americans often make the mistake of assuming that our Western values and assumptions should be the standard for the rest of the world.

Many of my observations come from insights in the book, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*.[\[3\]](#) Soong-Chan Rah provides numerous examples of how the American church is captive to a white, Western view of the world and thus is culturally captive. Obviously, the church has been captive to materialism, but I will focus on some of his other descriptions of captivity, namely, individualism, consumerism, and racism.

It is worth noting that the phrase “captivity of the church” has been used in different contexts with varied meanings throughout church history. Martin Luther, for example, wrote the tract *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in which he compared the Catholic Church’s teaching on the sacraments

to the captivity of the Israelites by the Babylonians.{4} R.C. Sproul has written about how many Christians are captive to the Pelagian view of the basic goodness of humanity instead of holding to the biblical view on original sin.{5} And Nancy Pearcey's book *Total Truth* was written as an attempt at "liberating Christianity from its cultural captivity." {6}

American Christians don't like to think of themselves as being culturally captive. But the truth is that they have to a significant extent been assimilated into American culture. While they rightly criticize many of the sins and failings of American society, they are more conformed to the culture than they would like to believe.

## Individualism

One example of American cultural captivity that Rah uses in his book is American individualism. He is hardly the first person to talk about this. Many social commentators over the last century have discussed and documented American's obsession with individualism which has created an individual-focused worldview.

On the positive side, the rugged individualism of Americans is responsible for the willingness to explore, build, and being willing to "go it alone" when circumstances required it. An individual willing to take a bold stand in the midst of theological heresy or cultural captivity is a good thing.

American individualism also has many negative sides. Christians should be aware of the impact of individualism on their theology. Rah says "the church is more likely to reflect the individualism of Western philosophy than the value of community found in Scripture. The individualistic philosophy that has shaped Western society, and consequently shaped the American church, reduces faith to a personal, private and individual faith." {7}

To put this in perspective, consider that most of the books of the New Testament were written to churches and communities of believers. Only a handful of books (such as Titus and Philemon) were written to individuals. Yet when most Americans read the New Testament, they focus on the individual aspects of the biblical truth rather than consider the larger corporate aspect being presented in Scripture.

Often our Bible study focuses on the individual and personal understanding of God's Word when so much of it applies to our relationship to the entire body of Christ. Often worship is self-focused and self-absorbed.

Ask a typical Christian about sin, and he or she is likely to describe it in personal terms. Sin certainly is personal, but it can also be corporate. But if you only have a personal, privatized faith, then you are also likely to see sin as merely a personal matter. Rah concludes: "Evangelical theology becomes exclusively an individual-driven theology instead of a community-driven theology."[{8}](#)

## Consumerism

Another example of American cultural captivity that Rah gives is consumerism. This is a topic that I have addressed before not only on radio but in my book *Making the Most of Your Money in Tough Times*.[{10}](#) Even secular commentators have noticed that American culture is infected with "affluenza."[{11}](#)

Rah says, "Materialism and consumerism reduce people to a commodity. An individual's worth in society is based upon what assets they bring and what possessions they own."[{12}](#)

How has consumerism affected the American church? First, it means that we have been willing to include materialistic values into our worldview and lifestyle. Often it is difficult to distinguish Christian values from the materialistic values of American society. Some commentators point out that many of

our churches look more like shopping malls than like churches.

Second, consumerism affects our mindset and perspective about spiritual things. A consumer mindset sees the spiritual life as a consumable product only if it benefits the individual. Believers with a consumer mindset usually aren't living for eternity but for the here and now. Essentially they are so earthly minded, they are no heavenly good.

Third, consumerism affects the way we choose to fellowship with other believers. "American evangelicalism has created the unique phenomenon of church shopping—viewing church as yet another commodity and product to be evaluated and purchased. When a Christian family moves to a new city, how much of the standards by which they choose a church is based upon a shopping list of their personal tastes and wants rather than their commitment to a particular community or their desire to serve a particular neighborhood?"[\[13\]](#)

Finally, consumerism even affects the way we measure success. We should be measuring success by the standards of Scripture. Often, we measure it by the American consumer value system. Consider what many refer to as the ABCs of church growth. These are: attendance, building, and cash. Often the success of a church is measured in the same way a secular business would measure its success. The bottom line is often the number of attendees or the size of the church budget.

Jesus asked in Mark 8:36, "What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?" A consumer mentality often chooses short-term solutions instead of eternal values despite the possibility of long-term negative consequences.

## **Racism**

Another example of American cultural captivity that Rah gives is racism. Not only was this a chapter in this book, but he actually wrote another book on the subject of racial and

ethnic issues.{14}

Let's begin by stating that the idea of race is actually artificial. As I pointed out in a previous radio program on [Race and Racial Issues](#), both the Bible and modern science reject the idea of what today we call race. For example, the Bible teaches that God has made "from one blood every nation of men" (Acts 17:26). Here Paul is teaching the Athenians that they came from the same source in the creation as everyone else. We are all from one blood. In other words, there are no superior or inferior races. The Bible refers to people groups and nations, but does not label based upon skin color.

Race is also an imprecise scientific term. For example, people of every race can interbreed and produce fertile offspring. It turns out that the so-called differences in the races are not very great. A recent study of human genetic material of different races concluded that the DNA of any two people in the world would differ by just 2/10ths of one percent.{15} And of this variation, only six percent can be linked to racial categories. The remaining ninety-four percent is "within race" variation. That is why "many scientists are now declaring that the concept of race has no basis in the biological sciences, more and more are concurring that race should be seen as a social invention." {16}

How have racial ideas and prejudice affected the church? It is tempting to say that this was merely a problem in the past and should be no concern for a country moving towards a post-racial society. Soong-Chan Rah disagrees: "We are quick to deal with the symptoms of sin in America, but oftentimes are unwilling to deal with the original sin of America: namely, the kidnapping of Africans to use as slave labor, and usurping of lands belonging to Native Americans and subsequent genocide of indigenous peoples." {17}

Race is an important issue not only in our past, but our future. Many church growth methods are based upon the idea of

racial homogeneity. If it is true that the most segregated place in American culture is an American church at 11 AM on Sunday morning, perhaps we should pay more attention to race and racial issues.

## **Church Growth and Globalization**

We can even see cultural captivity in the way we build our churches and the way we interact with the world. We can see the impact some of these ideas about race and racial issues have on church growth.

The popular church growth movement places a high priority on what is called the “homogeneous unit principle” in order to have substantial numerical growth within a congregation. Homogeneous churches tend to grow faster because church attendees are more comfortable with people with similar racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

Racially and ethnically segregated churches are the natural result of such teaching. And not only are segregated churches unbiblical, they are impractical. America in the twenty-first century will be more diverse than any previous century. It will no longer be dominated by white, Eurocentric people.

Church growth principles also prioritize “an individualized, personal evangelism and salvation over the understanding of the power of the gospel to transform neighborhoods and communities. They also emphasize a modern, social science approach to ministry, focusing on a pragmatic planning process that leads to measurable success goals.”[{18}](#)

Globalization is another challenge in the twenty-first century and can also illustrate how we spread our cultural captivity to the corners of the world. Globalization often means that one nation’s values and mindset predominate. In this case, American Christian values (which often are not biblical) are spread and dominate other cultures.



Thomas Friedman says, "Culturally speaking, globalization is largely, though not entirely, the spread of Americanization—from Big Macs to iMacs to Mickey Mouse—on a global scale."[\[19\]](#) Globalization not only allows us to spread the influence of Coca-Cola, Starbucks, and McDonalds, but it also is the means by which American cultural captivity is spread to believers around the globe. Once these values are transmitted to the rest of the world, we will have a global Christianity that is just as culturally captive to American values as American Christians have been.

This is our challenge in the twenty-first century. American Christians cannot merely look at Christians in other countries and shake their heads about their captivity to their particular cultural values. We too must be aware of culture captivity in our midst and "see to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception" (Colossians 2:8). We have been assimilated into the American culture and should "not be conformed to this world" but instead should be "transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

## Notes

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4. Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* trans. A.T.W. Steinhaeuser, *Three Treaties* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947).
5. R.C. Sproul, "The Pelagian Captivity of the Church," *Modern Reformation*, May/June 2001.
6. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).
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8. Ibid., 40.

9. Ibid., 43.
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11. John DeGraaf, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).
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13. Ibid., 55.
14. Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2010).
15. J. C. Gutin, "End of the Rainbow," *Discover*, November 1994, 71-75.
16. Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2007), xi.
17. Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 69.
18. Ibid., 95.
19. Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999), 8.