

If God is So Good, Why Does He Let Me Hurt?

This is probably the biggest question, and the biggest obstacle to trusting God, in Christianity. It's a legitimate question, and it deserves a thoughtful answer that honors the amount of pain attached to it. Disclosure: I am writing this while beset by the most physical pain I've experienced since post-polio syndrome started attacking my body with the "unholy trinity" of pain, weakness and fatigue. It hurts to stand, it hurts to walk. Every single step.

Why does God allow it? And my pain is *nothing* compared to the horrific suffering of millions around the world. Doesn't He care? Why doesn't He stop it—surely He can. He could stop it all with a single word. So why does He let innocent people—especially children, for heaven's sake—suffer?

We need to put evil and suffering into perspective, and that means the Really Big Picture. Starting before the beginning of time. When all there was, was God: Father, Son and Spirit, engaged in a three-Personed "holy hug" that had no beginning and has no end. A continual celebration of love, adoration, respect, and delight in each other. At some point Father God decided to create mankind and draw us into His circle of love, adopting us as sons (Eph. 1:4-5) and creating a Bride for His eternal Son (Rev. 19:7), a fit companion who would reign with the Lamb (Rev. 22:5).

But God knew that all of human history would unfold between the bookends of the creation of mankind and the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. The God of light and life, of love and truth, knew that all those things are found only in Him; He knew that to reject Him meant choosing darkness and death, isolation and deception. He knew that Adam would rebel, that His perfect creation would crash and burn in the Fall, and that everything

would be infected and corrupted by sin. He knew that every human being would be born with a compulsion to reject Him, to live disconnected from Him, independent from Him—something like spiritual HIV+, insuring a death sentence. And sure enough, the mortality rate is still 100%.

God knew all this, and He created us anyway. Because He knew the end result was worth it.

Because God is love, He created people to love, and He created people to love Him back. In order for us to choose to return His love, we needed to be free to choose NOT to love Him. God made us with the very real option to say no to Him, so that our yes would mean something. The alternative would be the equivalent to making a phone say, “Good morning, I love you.” The words might be there but there is no heart and no choice behind them—they are nothing more than the result of a programming code. God wanted real and actual love, and that meant that some people He made and dearly loved, could and would say no.

When people say no to God, they not only cut themselves off from relationship with Him, they open the door to all kinds of evil. Some of it comes from sinful human hearts; some of it comes from the demonic realm, angels who also said no to God and became devils. Evil was unleashed by Adam when he disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3) and it has been causing havoc, pain and suffering ever since. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that this world plagued by pain and disease, deliberate meanness and selfishness, is not God’s original perfect creation. If it were, God would indeed be a horrible monster. He knew Adam would open the door to all kinds of evil and suffering, and He allowed Adam to do it anyway. Because He knew the end result was worth it.

Why does God let people suffer?

God uses suffering to cleanse us, to mature us, to burn up

shallowness. (Please see my article [The Value of Suffering.](#)) [He uses pain](#) as His instrument to shape us into the image of His Son (Rom. 8:28-29). God has no magic wand that instantly transforms us from something broken and dirty (and we are far more broken and dirty than we have any idea) into something whole and beautiful. There is no divine “Bibbity-Bobbity-Boo.”

Instead, the Son left heaven, wrapped Himself in human flesh, and came to earth where He lived a perfect, sinless life. Every day of His earthly life, He suffered as a human, limiting Himself to a body that would get tired, hungry, thirsty and dirty. What the first Adam messed up, Jesus the Second Adam corrected. Where Adam disobeyed the Father, Jesus learned obedience through suffering (Heb. 5:8). Jesus suffered throughout His incarnation simply because of His limitations as a human, then suffered an unimaginably horrible death through crucifixion, made even worse because He absorbed all the sin of every human being who had ever lived, was living on the earth at that time, and would ever exist in the future. He took our sin into Himself, actually becoming our sin (2 Cor. 5:21), so that when He died, our sin died with Him. But the Father raised Him from the dead, and He is alive at His Father’s right hand right now in heaven.

This means that God knows what it means to suffer. There is no pain, no suffering we can endure, that God Himself did not experience even more during Jesus’ time on earth. This same suffering God promised, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5). The Father knew He would send the Son to suffer, and the Son knew that’s what He would leave heaven for.

He did it anyway. Because He knew the end result was worth it.

God allows pain and suffering and evil because He has a plan, and He’s working His plan. The end result is that He is redeeming and restoring all the evil, pain and suffering of this sin-sick world. He will set all things right in the end. The last chapter of the Bible makes it clear that there is a

happy ending to what is NOT a fairy tale. What started out as a Three-Personed holy hug of the Father, Son and Spirit loving each other while still remaining one God, will be a hugely enlarged circle of love that includes millions, possibly billions of people God made in His image, marked "Mine," and drew into the divine circle to love and be loved forever.

At that point I believe we will agree, as we look back on evil, pain and suffering on earth, that it was so, so worth it.

This blog post originally appeared at [If God Is So Good, Why Does He Let Me Hurt?](#) on July 15, 2014

Expanding the Biblical Worldview of Christians in Myanmar

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

Details of a trip can begin to fade even as the effects of jet lag seem to grow stronger. Fortunately, I do remember many wonderful aspects of my whirlwind eleven-day trip with friend

and pastor Ken Stoneking to Myanmar (the U.S. still insists on calling it Burma), one of the poorest and most oppressed countries in Asia.

Praise God for a Fruitful Trip

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

Myanmar's Uniqueness

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

Connecting the Dots...

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

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

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

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

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

More Dots

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

Jesus Christ Superstar

Kanye West vs. John Lennon

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

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

Jesus Christ is the most popular figure in history and

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Humanist Tradition: Jesus as the Greatest Man

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

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

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

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

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

The Gnostic Jesus: The Great Spirit with a Message

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arianism: Jesus the Creator Angel

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

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

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

New Age Jesus: The Ascended Master

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

2012: Doomsday All Over Again

Progress or Regress

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

We have all heard the phrase “What goes up must come down.” This captures the popular attitude towards progress and regress. Americans believe strongly in human perfectibility and the inevitability of technological progress. This idea states that as technology moves society from its primitive state to an advanced condition it will eventually improve, bringing a better tomorrow. The world is getting better and better. Faith in progress provides the engine for all the accelerating technological changes from space exploration, media, computers, to science and medicine. Historian Robert Nisbet noted the essential role of progress in our belief system when he said that progress does not represent one aspect of modern life, but in fact provides the keystone idea and context for the entire modern worldview, including

democracy, equality, social justice and, of course, science and technology.^{1} The modern world does not exist without the belief in progress. Technological improvement makes no sense without the larger *telos*, or purpose of history, guiding it. Simply put, all of this innovation leads to a utopian future.

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

All people intuitively know that they will die one day; so then society, the collective "person," knows it too must one day die. If progress takes place we know that its opposite, regress, will also happen. Regressive thought states that the progress we take for granted potentially has a downside and in fact will result in something catastrophic. Our society will one day come to an end. It cannot live forever any more than an individual can live forever in a mortal body. We know that what goes up must come down. The current obsession over the end of the world in movies, such as *2012*, *Melancholia* and *Contagion* or wildly popular novels such as the *Left Behind* series, the predictions of popular preachers or the Mayan prophecy all cater to our regressive and pessimistic side. This is not as bad as it first sounds. Death creates the foundation of all religion, philosophy and culture as attempts to provide answers for our questions and solace in times of doubt and need. The reality of death causes people to look for

the meaning of life. Christians need to harness the regressive side of culture because it warns of imminent danger and offers the opportunity to introduce people to Jesus Christ. Regressive thinking, like the knowledge of our own death, makes us all aware of our need for God and the Savior. Believers must take advantage of this primal consciousness of the end to tell people about what the Bible says concerning the end of the world and the return of Christ. But in order to do this successfully we must first establish guidelines on how to identify false prophecy.

What the Bible Says

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

There are two rules in Scripture that will help believers identify false prophets, which should be followed without exception. First, prophecy *must never set a date regarding when the world will end*. Jesus spoke clearly about the signs of His return and the end of the world when He said, "But of the day and the hour no one knows" (Matthew 24:36). Anyone who comes to you with a firm date as to when the world will end such as December 21, 2012 should be avoided. Cultists continually violate this cardinal rule. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses have predicted the end of the world eight times between 1914 and 1975. Popular radio preacher Harold Camping predicted the end in 1994 and twice in 2011. The speculation surrounding the year 2000 was much like it is today over 2012. Scientific evidence was proffered predicting that all computers would fail at the turn of the last millennium. This warning was taken very seriously by most people who made preparations for the potential disaster,

demonstrating the pervasive sentiment of impending doom.

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

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

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

If the prophecy gives a date and it lacks the moral imperative, then the prophecy reveals itself to be false and

sensationalistic. The Mayan 2012 prophecy fails on both counts. Although it causes us to contemplate the end, it sets a date and offers no reason for why the world should end. It is simply doomsday all over again!

Notes

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

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See Also:

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

Christians in the World

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

Introduction

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

As aliens and strangers, our real residence is with God which usually implies a heavenly spiritual existence that is completely foreign to our current one. In a bit of a twist, a



recent article in *Christianity Today* argued that most evangelicals have things backwards. We are wrong if we think that at Christ's return the wicked will be "left behind" and the righteous will be taken away to a heavenly abode. It's the wicked who will be removed while the righteous remain on earth. The author's conclusion is that we should be more caring about this world because it, not heaven, will be our eternal home.

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

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

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

dream of runaway materialism and extreme individualism.

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

Becoming a Radical

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

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

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

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

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

Restoring Eden

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

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

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

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

Lyons endorses a third category which he calls *restorers*. He describes these people as those who "envision the world as it was meant to be and they work toward that vision. Restorers seek to mend earth's brokenness."[{5}](#) They are optimistic, and see "that God is on the move—doing something unique in our time."[{6}](#) Their mission is to see "how things ought to be," and then to commit their lives to making it so.[{7}](#)

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

Lyons' call to action is an expansive one and it immediately raises questions about what a restored world should look like; what specific form should our political and economic systems

take? He seems to assume that we should know the answer to these questions but I am not so sure that it's that obvious.

A Faithful Presence

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

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

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

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

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

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

Summary

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

The apostle Paul certainly lived a radical lifestyle, but he was limited by a couple of parameters. Paul talks about being free from the expectations of men and yet careful not to give offense in any way that might hinder the gospel.[{9}](#) 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?"^{10} 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."^{11} 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/

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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

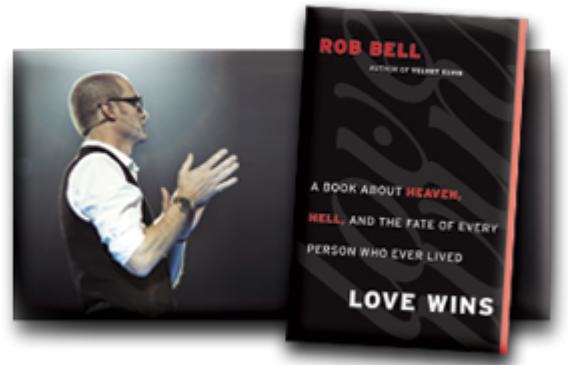
heaven? In a new book, *Love Wins*, mega church pastor Rob Bell presents his case for universal salvation. Bell states that a Christianity that teaches many will spend eternity in hell while some go to heaven is “misguided and toxic.”^{1} Bell asserts that the message Christians have preached for centuries 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 ai□nios* (destruction everlasting) refers to destruction which is eternal or everlasting. It is destruction or a state which is imposed by God forever. In a similar way the phrase "eternal judgment" used in Heb. 6:2 means an eternal sentence imposed by God. All of these designations of punishment stand in contrast to eternal life as the inherent punishment for those who reject Christ's salvation in that they will be separated from the life of God which they

rejected. As to the duration of what is designated as *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.

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

There is a difference between conviction and legalism. One of

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

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

This blog post originally appeared at
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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

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reneamac.com/2011/06/23/the-unfit-ones/

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/

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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