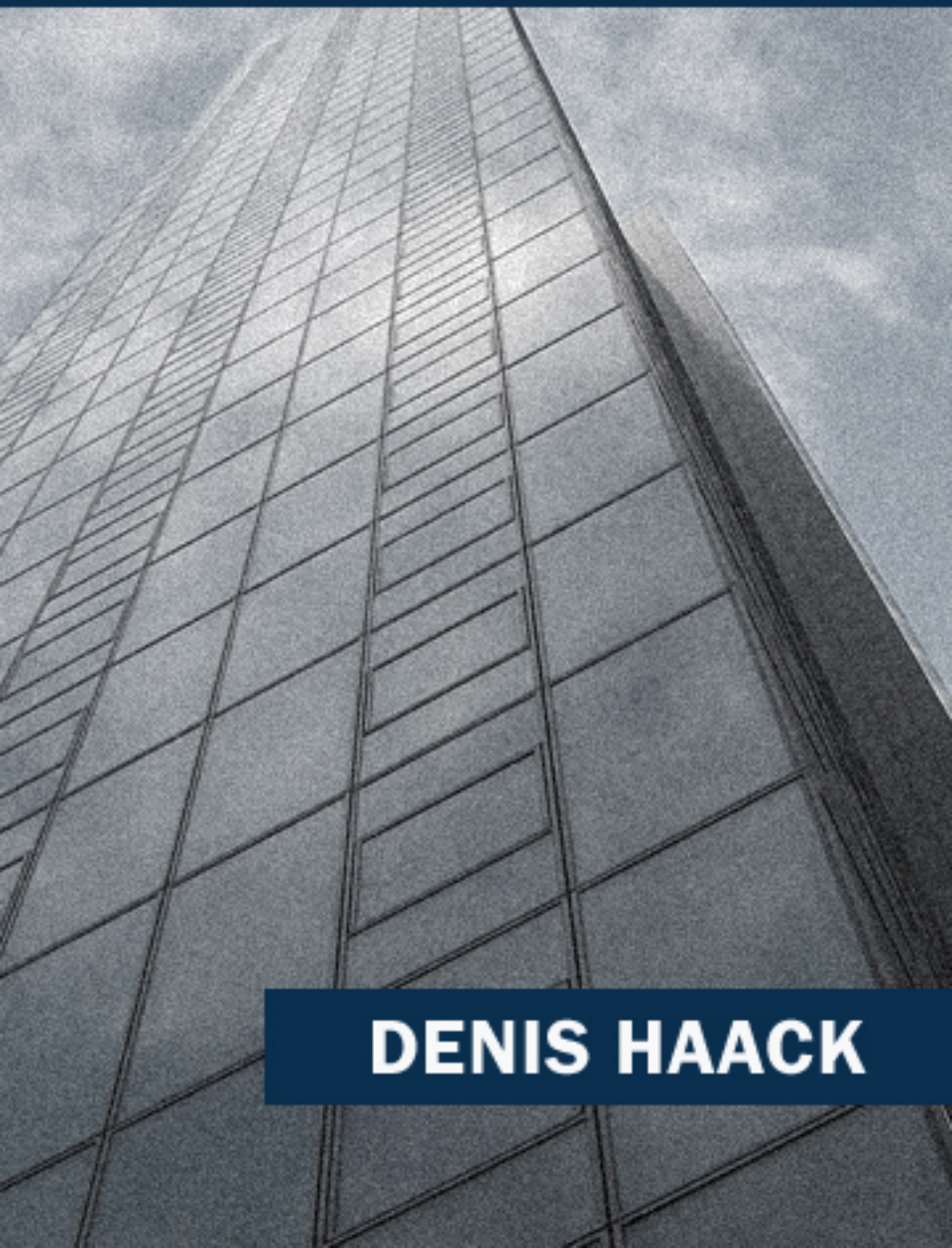
THE BABYLON SERIES
BEING IN THE WORLD, BUT NOT OF IT



DENIS HAACK

Babylon Series

Being In The World, But Not Of It

by Denis Haack

Ransom Fellowship
Publications

Babylon Series:
Being In The World, But Not Of It
by Denis Haack

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Part 1

On Being Offended In A Pagan World

There is much to offend Christians in postmodern culture, and, needless to say, much offense is taken. I recently gave a workshop on being discerning at the movies. During the question and answer time someone asked whether I had seen *Good Will Hunting*, a film that had only recently appeared in theaters. I had not, I said. The questioner said she had gone to see it with her husband and another couple, but they had almost walked out of the theater because of the language. She explained how offended they were, and was uncomfortable describing the offensive dialogue they had been subjected to. The film had been highly recommended, but they felt personally assaulted as they watched it.

The offense experienced in such situations can be profound, a sense of violation so visceral as to be akin to pain. It is far from pleasant to feel you have been made "dirty" by the incivility and immorality of philistines who should know better than to celebrate things that in an earlier age would be ignored, or censured. It is bad enough to live in a society in which both manners and morals have slipped; it is an indignity to have one's face rubbed in it. We simply want to enjoy a good movie with dear friends, only to end up offended by the film, angry at Hollywood, and disgusted with ourselves. And to make matters worse, we shelled out good money for the experience.

Indeed, there is much to offend Christians in postmodern culture, and much offense is taken. So much so, in fact, that the issue is worth examining a bit more closely. Some questions come to mind: Does Christian faithfulness in a pluralistic society necessarily include taking offense at unchristian behavior? Does a growing revulsion for sin accompany a growing love for God and his Word? If I am not offended by the dialogue in *Good Will Hunting*, am I being less faithful or am I less attuned to the holiness of God? Or to turn the question around: Is being offended by the actions or language of unbelievers a sign of spiritual maturity? And can taking offense ever become a barrier to the gospel?

If raising these questions seems strange, it might be because taking offense seems so "natural" a phenomenon as to be simply "obvious." We rarely plan for it; offense simply happens. Besides, sin is offensive to God, and should be to us. Enough said.

But is it? After all, the Christian belief in the Fall means that our natures are fallen—we are sinners—which means that our "natural" reactions can not and must not be necessarily trusted. As we are known to repeat at Ransom, being reactionary is not identical to being discerning. The believer's standard for being in the world but not of it must not be what

seems natural to us, but what God has revealed in his Word.

A Text to Examine: Paul in Athens

The story that Luke records for us in Acts 17 is a good place to begin our study be-cause in Athens Paul found himself surrounded by people who did not share his deepest convictions. And there was much in Athens to assault a Christian's sensibilities. Thus, we can examine the text to see whether Paul was "offended" by what confronted him in that pagan city.

Ancient Athens was a profoundly idolatrous place, and visiting the city affected the apostle Paul deeply. "While Paul was... in Athens," Luke writes in Acts 17:16, "he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols." The New King James Version translates it as "his spirit was provoked within him." Other versions render it "exasperated" (NEB), "strongly moved" (RSV), or "deeply troubled" (NLT). The Greek word in the text is paroxyno, which might ring a bell since the English word "paroxysm" is derived from it. It "originally had medical associations," John Stott says, "and was used of a seizure or epileptic fit." It is not surprising, then, that J. B. Phillips described Paul as "exasperated beyond endurance" in his translation of the passage.

Notice too that Luke is quite specific about what had so distressed the apostle. It was the idolatry of the pagan Athenians that Paul found so troubling. When Luke says Athens was "full of idols," he uses a Greek adjective found nowhere else in the New Testament, and which could be translated, John Stott says, as literally "smothered" or "swamped" with them. Many of the idols and shrines were elegantly made by skilled artists, and filled Athens to the point that Xenophon spoke of the city as "one great altar, one great sacrifice." Historian E. M. Blaiklock notes that the city's great gold and ivory statue of Athena had a gleaming spear-point which could be seen 40 miles away. "Elsewhere" in the city,

Dr. Stott says, "there were images of Apollo, the city's patron, of Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune, Diana, and Aesculapius. The whole Greek pantheon was there, all the gods of Olympus. And they were beautiful." But many were also what most Christians—and social conservatives—would define as pornographic today. The herms which adorned the city wall, Dr. Blaiklock says, for example, were "roughly fashioned with phallic attributes," and "stood as protecting talismans at every entrance in the city."

Certainly it is not unreasonable, then, to take Paul's experience in Athens as recorded in Acts 17 as an appropriate passage to examine the question of taking offense in a pagan world. The myriad shrines and blatant idolatry—some of the most public examples being overtly sensual in nature—are clearly antithetical to a Christian mind and sensibility. Little wonder that Paul was "greatly distressed" by the experience.

The question to ask, then, as we seek to learn from and apply the text to ourselves is this: Was Paul's "distress" comparable to the modern Christian's "offense" at the behavior of unbelievers? Or to put it another way: Was the apostle's experience in Athens parallel to my friend's reaction to the foul language in Good Will Hunting? Paul's faithful witness in Athens is a model of spiritual maturity in a pagan and pluralistic culture, and is worth a closer look.

Paul's Distress Versus our Offense

There are three reasons why I conclude that Paul's "distress" over the idolatry in Athens is profoundly dissimilar to a modern Christian's "offense" at the behavior of unbelievers.

The first difference between Paul's "distress" and our "offense" is that his distress led him to engage the culture of Athens, while our offense tends to lead to withdrawal. "While Paul was... in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols," Luke reports. But notice what Paul did

as a result of that distress. “So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there “ (Acts 17:16-17). Furthermore, not only did he not withdraw from the idolaters of Athens, he did not withdraw from the distressing idolatry. When Paul was invited to speak to them at the Areopagus he said he had “walked around and looked carefully” at their idols and shrines (17:23), and then went on to quote one of their pagan thinkers (17:28). In effect, he thoughtfully immersed himself in the surrounding, “distressing” culture. The Greek poet which Paul read and quoted in Athens was actually writing an extended paean of praise to Zeus. Yet this rank idolatry—to a Christian sensibility, blasphemy—did not deter the apostle.

In contrast, the deep sense of personal “offense” felt by modern believers usually leads them to pull back, to walk out of the movie, to throw away the book, to withdraw into the Christian subculture. Dis-cernment means, by definition, intentionally engaging the surrounding culture, actively engaging the literature and art of an un-believing world in which we are called to live as salt and light. Much of that literature and art may, of course, offend Christian sensibilities, but that is hardly surprising in a fallen world. The lifestyle, choices, art, and conversation of unbelievers who are sexually immoral, greedy swindlers, or actively idolatrous will likely offend Christian sensibilities, but Paul explicitly commands us not to separate ourselves from them (1 Corinthians 5:9-13). Trying to do that, he says, would require us “to leave this world” he says (vs. 10). “I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people,” he tells them, “not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters” (vs. 9-10, emphasis added). To claim we will obey the apostle’s instruction to “associate” with the person while refusing to countenance their literature merely reveals how unbiblical is our view of both friendship

and art. It also reveals our disobedience to the biblical injunction to imitate Paul's example. "I urge you," he writes in 1 Corinthians 4:16, "to imitate me."

When an offended Christian withdraws from the surrounding culture he is not only distancing himself from the apostolic model and teaching, he is also distancing himself from Christ. The Incarnation represents the greatest and most startling immersion into a fallen world that can possibly be imagined. In fact, it is so radical that it is beyond our ability to imagine. When the Second Person of the Trinity took on flesh, he also took on human culture. He immersed himself in the surrounding culture, a fallen culture in a fallen world. John R. W. Stott's explanation of the meaning of the Incarnation is worth reflecting on with care:

There was no aloofness about Jesus. He never kept his distance, even from sinners. He did not share the Pharisees' false fear of contamination. He fraternized with dropouts and was criticized for it. "This man receives sinners and eats with them," people scoffed. "Friend of swindlers and sinners, that's what he is," they sneered. They hoped to ruin his reputation by this whispering campaign, but they succeeded only in enhancing it. The nickname they thought dishonorable was one of supreme honor. If Jesus were not the friend of sinners, he could be no friend of mine—or yours. So he touched untouchable lepers and allowed prostitutes to touch him. He shrank from nobody. He offered friendship, understanding, acceptance, love.

Life in a fallen world, particularly in a pluralistic culture in which we are surrounded by those who do not share our deepest convictions, will not necessarily be pleasant. Much will "distress" our Christian sensibilities. Our calling in such a setting, however, is not to withdraw but to engage. We do not need to pull back in fear, because Christ is risen from the dead, and he has promised to never leave nor forsake his covenant people. Listen again to Rev. Stott:

We do not follow in the footsteps of Jesus if we develop a ghetto mentality, if we withdraw from the world into our evangelical monasteries (though we do not call them that, and they have no walls)... What we are called to is not "arm's length evangelism," but "incarnational evangelism." This means that we have to listen before we speak, for, "if one gives answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame" (Proverbs 18:13). We have to struggle to enter the other person's thought world, however alien it may be to our own... We have to respect his integrity as a person, and his convictions, however contrary they may seem to us to be. In a word, we must feel the pain of his alienation and weep the tears of his lostness, just as Jesus wept over the blind folly of Jerusalem's impenitence. By God's grace may we seek a godly maturity that will allow us to shed our tendency to withdraw from the surrounding culture when "offended" by the behavior of sinners. Instead, may we imitate Paul's "distress" which produced the opposite reaction, causing him to engage the culture of a fallen world. In this way we will honor the Lord Christ who took on flesh and culture in a sinful world, so that offensive sinners—like us—could be redeemed.

Second, being "offended" by the behavior and/or culture of unbelievers makes it difficult for us to creatively find points of contact and agreement, as Paul's "distress" moved him to find in the idolatrous culture of Athens. The apostle not only thoughtfully engaged the culture and unbelievers of Athens, he unabashedly identified areas of agreement which he could exploit for the sake of the gospel. More specifically, he found two points of contact in Athenian culture.

First, his examination of the shrines and idols of Athens uncovered an altar which he identified as an altar to the true God. "Men of Athens," he said as he began his message. "I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To an Unknown God. Now

what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you." Now, would Christians offended by the behavior of sinners see this pagan altar as Paul saw it? Or would we find the idols, shrines, and herms such an assault on our sensibilities that it would not occur to us that a pagan altar could be identified as an altar to the God of Scripture? (Would we even "walk around and look carefully" enough to notice the altar in the first place?)

The sense of "offense" is like a personal assault, and precisely because it is so personal, it tends to deflect our attention away from faithfulness to our own sense of hurt. The hurt and offense may be in the form of disappointment and betrayal at what is happening to our culture. It may come because, like the Pharisees, we imagine that holiness is separation from sinners, and that being with them dirties us with guilt by association. It may be a sense of revulsion when we see sinners not only enjoying their wickedness but actively encouraging others to enjoy it as well. Regardless of the dynamic involved, can we really justify allowing the behavior of sinners to so offend us that we shrink back from understanding, loving, and befriending them for the sake of the gospel? Where would we be if Christ shrank back from us?

The language in Good Will Hunting is indeed rough, but it is also realistic. The sort of people depicted in the film talk that way, whether we like it or not. When Mrs. Schaeffer heard of the discomfort and offense expressed by my questioner she asked, "Do these people not know any non-Christians? Do they not befriend any unbelievers? Do they really not know that this is how people talk?"

To be personally offended by the behavior of sinners is to forget or discount the horror of our own sin. It is also to allow a personal reaction—a deeply felt one—to arise at a time when faithfulness and discernment is crucial. The altars of Athens must not be ignored because we find idolatry offensive, they must be used as points of contact for the gospel. To use

another modern example, What Dreams May Come portrays an unbiblical understanding of heaven, hell, and reincarnation, yet the film can be used to engage unbelievers in a thoughtful discussion of just those topics. To allow the mistaken message of such a film to so offend us that we miss identifying it as a point of contact is to allow our personal feelings to undercut our service. The same is true of Good Will Hunting. A remarkable film about relationships and meaning in life, it is very worth discussing.

The second point of contact or agreement the apostle Paul found in Athens was in the writings of the Greek poet he quoted. "God... is not far from each one of us," he told the Athenians. "'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'" (Acts 17:27-28). Paul includes two quotations here, the first from Epimenides (6th century B.C.), and the second from Arastus, a 3rd century Stoic author (who may have been quoting an earlier philosopher named Cleanthes).

What is striking here, however, is that though Paul quoted Arastus approvingly, agreeing with him, Arastus was clearly referring to Zeus. Think about it: Paul's approach was creative, and for that reason, amazingly powerful. The artifacts and ideas of his audience's pagan culture and religion was creatively (mis)applied by Paul to the truth concerning Jesus Christ. It is the subversive nature of this tactic that lends its power: an assumption of their world and life view (we are Zeus's offspring) was suddenly revealed as untrue, not via challenge, argument, or debate, but through agreement, so that what was simply obvious to them was assigned a radical new meaning (not Zeus but God who raised Jesus from the dead). Paul was willing to agree with the Stoic poet, even though Arastus was writing about Zeus. Are we willing to go on record agreeing with, say, Woody Allen or Carl Sagan or Shirley MacLaine or even with a foul-mouthed character in Good Will Hunting?

Sin is offensive, but if any barrier occurs in our interaction with unbelievers, it should be the offense of the cross, not our being offended by sinners who act naturally, which is to say, sinfully. By God's grace may we grow so that our "distress" over a lost world causes us, like Paul in Athens, to identify points of contact and agreement in the surrounding culture for the sake of the gospel. Allowing the offensiveness of sin to deter us from finding a creative opening for the gospel is a luxury we simply can not afford. If we invest emotional energy in being offended at sin, may it be over our own.

Third, Paul's "distress" was God-centered, while the "offense" felt by Christians is self-centered. We have already noted that Paul had a strong emotional reaction to his time in Athens. Since he was alone (Acts 17:16 says he was waiting for his Christian friends to arrive), we can assume he told Luke about it later, underscoring perhaps, both the depth of the paroxyno he experienced and the importance he assigned to it. John Stott helps us understand the passage correctly:

The clue to interpreting the nature of Paul's emotion is that paroxyno is the verb which is regularly used in the LXX of the Holy One of Israel, and in particular (such is the consistency of Scripture) of his reaction to idolatry. Thus, when the Israelites made the golden calf at Mount Sinai, when later they were guilty of gross idolatry and immorality in relation to the Baal of Peor, and when the Northern Kingdom made another calf to worship in Samaria, they "provoked" the Lord God to anger. Indeed, he described Israel as "an obstinate people... who continually provoke me to my very face." So Paul was "provoked" (RSV) by idolatry, and provoked to anger, grief, and indignation, just as God is himself, and for the same reason, namely for the honor and glory of his name. Little wonder then, that as a result Paul engaged them thoughtfully, refusing to withdraw, finding points of contact in their culture and world view to provide a creative opening to help them understand the good news of Christ. "Luke does not

say that Paul was indignant or offended," John Calvin writes, "but describes his unusual heat of righteous anger, which whetted his zeal, so that he set about the work more fervently." Paul's distress was not self-centered, nor did he see the Athenian's paganism as an assault on his sensibilities. Rather, he was filled with a righteous jealousy for God's Name, for their idolatry was an assault on God's divine glory. And compared to that, one's own sensibilities are not really of much significance. As a result, Paul not only did not withdraw, he was more deeply motivated to understand and engage the Athenians and their idolatrous culture.

This deep distress, "this inward pain and horror, which moved Paul to share the good news with the idolaters of Athens," John Stott writes, "should similarly move us." Why should we be faithful in evangelism and mission? One answer is obedience, since we have been commanded to go and make disciples. John Stott argues, however, that obedience, though good, is an insufficient motivation.

Compassion is higher than obedience... namely love for people who do not know Jesus Christ, and who on that account are alienated, disoriented, and indeed lost. But the highest incentive of all is zeal or jealousy for the glory of Jesus Christ. God has promoted him to the supreme place of honor, in order that every knee and tongue should acknowledge his lordship. Whenever he is denied his rightful place in people's lives, therefore, we should feel inwardly wounded, and jealous for his name. As Henry Martyn expressed it in Moslem Persia at the beginning of the last century, "I could not endure existence if Jesus was not glorified; it would be hell to me if he were to be always... dishonored."

For these three reasons, then, the apostle Paul's "distress" in Athens over their idolatry is not parallel to the "offense" many modern Christians experience when confronted by sin in a fallen world. First, while the sense of "offense" tends to make us withdraw from the surrounding culture and

unbelievers, Paul's "distress" caused him to engage the culture and unbelievers of Athens. Second, because we are so "of-fended" by the behavior and/or culture of unbelievers, it is difficult to find points of contact and agreement, as Paul's "distress" moved him to find in the idolatrous culture of Athens. And finally, while the "offense" is self-centered, Paul's "distress" was God-centered.

Godly self-discipline is required to thoughtfully engage a pagan culture. It doesn't take effort to be put-off by the behavior of those who do not share our deepest convictions; it is very hard work to find winsome points of contact and agreement in order to express the gospel in ways that can be understood in a pluralistic culture. It is relatively easy to be offended by sin; it takes true spiritual maturity to be filled with a holy jealously for the glory of Christ's name. May God grant his people the grace to know and live the difference.

But What About...?

Good questions can be raised about what I have written here—some good challenges can be raised, as well. What about Philippians 4:8, for example? There Paul tells us that "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." Does watching Good Will Hunting fulfill that command? And will not exposure to such things coarsen us, so that we become less sensitive to sin and holiness? What about the need for good people to "take a stand" for righteousness and civility in a society in which both seem to be in danger of extinction?

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Part 2

Living In Exile: A Model For Faithfulness

A story is told of a man from Colorado who came to northern Minnesota one autumn for deer hunting. The Mid-westerners who hosted him planned to “drive the woods” the afternoon of the opening day of the season. They instructed their friend to walk down the road until he reached the ridge, and then stand on it in order to get a shot at any deer running out of the woods. After giving him a head start, they fanned out in a straight line and began walking slowly through the woods in his direction. When they finally emerged from the woods, however, they were surprised to find no one standing on the ridge. In fact, the Colorado hunter was nowhere to be seen. They drove down the road looking for him, and eventually found him several miles away, still walking, still looking for the ridge.

For a man who lived in the Rockies, the hump of earth pushed up on the far edge of the open field just beyond the woods simply didn't qualify in his mind as a "ridge." But in northern Minnesota, which is utterly flat as far as the eye can see, it is called a "ridge" to this day. And it is the only ridge around; if he had walked a mile or so further, he would have crossed the border into Canada.

The misunderstanding over the "ridge" was not an issue of intelligence, nor were the plans for the hunt unclear. Rather, the problem arose because the hunter from Colorado had a different mental image or model of "ridge" than the hunters from Minnesota. The image we have of something—the way we picture it in our mind —can make a real difference.

A similar problem can arise when we talk about how to live in the world but not be of it. The model we have adopted (consciously or unconsciously) for how to live faithfully in a fallen world can make a big difference in how we view and respond to culture and life. In this second article of the Babylon series, I want to propose a model that will help make sense of our situation, namely living in exile. I will argue that we have much to learn, living in a postmodern culture, from the texts that tell the story of the covenant people of God who were living in exile in Babylon. In exile they lived among people who did not share their deepest convictions, in a pagan society in which a variety of religions, world views, and values competed for acceptance. Although there are important differences between their situation and ours, the parallels are significant enough that we should be able to learn much from God's people as they sought to be faithful while living in exile.

A Brief Review

In the first article we noted that there is much to offend Christians in postmodern culture, and that much offense is taken. The question we sought to answer was

how we should respond to living in a society surrounded by beliefs and values which are clearly antithetical to righteousness. For guidance we turned to Paul's experience in pagan Athens, where the Scriptures record that he "was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). An examination of that text, however, led us to conclude that Paul's profound response to the paganism of Athens was very different from what most people mean today when they complain that their Christian sensibilities have been offended by something in the world.

More specifically, we identified three significant differences. First, Paul's "distress" led him to engage the culture and people of Athens, while our "offense" tends to lead to withdrawal. Paul was motivated to understand their beliefs and practices, and as a result he examined their idolatrous shrines and read their pagan poets. When we are offended, on the other hand, we often pull back from what has assaulted our sensibilities.

Second, being "offended" by the behavior and/or culture of unbelievers makes it difficult for us to creatively find points of contact and agreement with them, as Paul's "distress" moved him to find in the idolatrous culture of Athens. Paul sought to find windows of insight into what the Athenians' believed, and in doing so, he was able to use their altar "to the Unknown God" as a point of contact to discuss the truth. And he hadn't read the pagan literature simply to disagree, but quoted approvingly what the Stoic poet said about God, even though the poet had been writing about Zeus.

And finally, Paul's "distress" was God-centered, while our "offense" tends to be self-centered. The apostle's deeply moving response to the idolatry in Athens was not that his Christian sensibilities had been assaulted, but that God's glory was not recognized and honored.

May we grow in faith and spiritual maturity so that we increasingly follow Paul's godly example. Christian faithfulness is marked not by taking "offense" and withdrawing at the beliefs and

behavior of unbelievers, but by a righteous "distress" which compels us to holy spirited, creative, compassionate engagement for God's glory.

The question of taking offense in a pagan world, however, is only one aspect of the wider question we are seeking to address, namely, how we should live in the world without being part of it. And since this is not a new question, but one which the people of God have had to ask ever since the Fall, it will prove helpful to consider some of the answers Christians have proposed down through the centuries.

Five Different Answers

In 1949, Yale Divinity School professor H. Richard Niebuhr gave a series of lectures that were later published under the title Christ and Culture. In this work, Dr. Niebuhr identified five main approaches that Christians have historically assumed in trying to answer the question of how to be in the world but not of it. Christ and Culture is worth reading with care, and my summary here of the five categories does not do justice to Dr. Niebuhr's detailed study. Though we might not agree with all the details of his argument, Niebuhr's five-fold classification remains a helpful analysis today. In the list that follows I briefly define each of the five views Niebuhr identifies in his book, and then I respond to each, mentioning a few strengths and weaknesses of each view.

1. Christ Against Culture

The key idea here is "opposition" or "separation." In this view, human culture is seen, by and large, as unimportant, irredeemable, and under the judgment of a righteous God. Christians are to obey the command to "come out from them and be separate" (2 Corinthians 6:17), or as the apostle John put it, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). Niebuhr identifies the second century church father Tertullian as an

advocate of this position, along with Leo Tolstoy, the early monastic movement, the Mennonites, and the Quakers. It is also the approach advocated by many Christian fundamentalists today.

On the positive side, there are at least three things which commend the Christ against culture view. First, it seems to be motivated by a deep desire for holiness and purity in the midst of a sinful world. Second, it argues for a radical commitment to Christ and his kingdom, even at personal cost. And finally, unlike some of the other approaches, this one takes seriously the profound nature of sin and its effects in a fallen world.

On the negative side, however, the Christ against culture approach shows itself to be inadequate and unbiblical for several reasons. First, it tends to identify sin with culture. This divides life into sacred and secular spheres, an idea that is actually rooted in Greek pagan thought, not in the Scriptures. Second, its appeal to Scripture is too selective. As a result, the attempt to live out this view often ends up being little more than a practical, though inadvertent, rejection of Christ's Lordship over all of life and reality. Third, the isolation it tends to foster fails to demonstrate and communicate either love or truth to a watching world. And finally, in the end it does not actually separate believers from culture so much as produce an alternative "Christian" ghetto-culture which is usually sadly unimaginative, uncreative, and unattractive.

2. The Christ of Culture

Niebuhr identifies the early Gnostics, and modern liberal theologians such as Albrecht Ritschl as proponents of this view. The key idea is "accommodation." It is nature, not culture, that is the problem, according to this view, and since reason, science, and technology are not antithetical to faith, following the example of Jesus within the progress of history will allow an unfolding of culture under the universal fatherhood of God.

Evangelicals have tended to be dismissive—even derisive—of the Christ of culture approach, but at least two positive things should be said of it. First, it has historically demonstrated a keen concern for issues of social justice which evangelicals have often shamefully ignored, including a concern for the care of creation, and for justice for the marginalized and powerless in society. As well, it has taken learning and the life of the mind seriously, while an unbiblical and unfortunate anti-intellectualism has plagued the evangelical movement.

On the negative side, however, the Christ of culture approach must be rejected as unbiblical because of its inadequate view of the Fall, and thus the corresponding need for redemption. Christ is not so much Savior as model, and in the end human reason stands in judgment over the Scriptures. As a result, such liberal religion tends to lose any real distinctiveness, and over time appears to be little more than simply an expression of the prevailing culture colored with a faint religious hue.

3. Christ above Culture

Here the key notion is "synthesis," and early proponents of this view, according to Niebuhr, include Justin Martyr (died AD 165), and Clement of Alexandria (died AD 214). The most influential proponent, however, was Thomas Aquinas who sought to synthesize (bring together) the philosophy of Aristotle with the theology of the medieval church. Life is in two parts, grace (the higher) and nature (the lower). Rev-elation is seen as being in a place of superiority in the realm of grace, just as reason holds supremacy in the realm of nature. Thus, using reason man can come to the truth, and though reason can be misdirected, the solution is better reasoning under the guidance of the church.

On the positive side, there are at least two things which commend the Christ above culture approach. First, it seeks a unified view of life and reality, convinced that there is one truth, and one God who is both Creator and Law-giver. It also takes

divine revelation and the life of the mind seriously.

On the negative side, however, there are several serious flaws. The primary one is that Aquinas failed to take the biblical teaching of the Fall seriously enough. More specifically, our problem with reason in a fallen world is not merely that our reason can be misdirected, but that it is fallen. The solution, then, is not merely better reason, but redeemed reason, or to use Paul's term, a "renewed mind" (Romans 12:2), which is impossible apart from the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. As well, though some historians may dispute it, a good argument can be made that Aquinas' synthesis paved the way for the Enlightenment, with its elevation of reason over revelation.

4. Christ and Culture in Paradox

The key idea is "dualism," as Dr. Niebuhr says, a perpetual sense of living in conflict. Better understood as a motif rather than a school of thought, the Christ and culture in paradox approach is associated by Niebuhr with the apostle Paul (I would disagree), with Marcion in the second century, and primarily with Martin Luther. In this view, culture is seen as deeply fallen, but is also understood as the place in which we must live. Thus, day by day, life feels very much like being torn in two, for believers sense they must live in two worlds simultaneously while feeling completely at home in neither—a sinner in the kingdom, and a saint in the world.

There are at least three things that commend the Christ and culture in paradox approach to understanding how to live in the world while not being of it. First, and most significant, this is what most Christians tend to feel as they seek to live faithfully day by day. This view is plausible because it mirrors our personal experience so admirably. Second, it faces up honestly to the real difficulty of the struggle we face. Rather than give simplistic answers, it is content to acknowledge our limitations, and to insist only Christ's return as King will fully resolve the tension that comes from living in a fallen world. And third, it reminds us that

we are, in Peter's words "aliens and strangers" living after the cross but before the consummation of our faith in glory (1 Peter 2:11).

On the other hand, there are problems with this view. One is that this position, in practice at least, tends to lead to an unhealthy conservatism. Since we must become involved in culture in order to proclaim the gospel, but since there is little hope for culture on this side of glory, the concern tends to be primarily that of seeking to keep the culture from degenerating into anarchy, which would interfere with the ability to preach the gospel. Thus there is a tendency to conserve order rather than seek deeper reform. As well, this approach can easily degenerate into a sacred/secular dichotomy. Being caught in a paradox is never comfortable, and soon it becomes easier to concentrate on one side of the dualism. In the end, it can allow people to take the easy way out, keeping a foot in both camps without having to do the hard and risky work of really integrating culture and faith.

5. Christ the Transformer of Culture

The key notion is "conversion," according to Niebuhr, though "reformation" or "renewal" would work equally well. Creation, creativity, and human culture are seen as good gifts of God, but now sadly distorted by the Fall. Christ died to redeem all of creation, and his Lordship means that all of life and reality is to be brought under his Kingship and into conformity with his law and word. All of life and culture is to be permeated with and conformed to the good news of Christ. Niebuhr identifies the apostle John, St. Augustine, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards as proponents, and I would add Francis Schaeffer and Jerram Barrs to the list.

I would argue that Christ the transformer of culture, out of the five historical approaches listed by Niebuhr, is the one that best captures the biblical teaching on living in the world while not being of it. It is rooted in the biblical understanding of Creation,

Fall, Redemption, and Consummation as the unfolding drama of what God is doing in human history through Christ. It holds an equally high view of sin and of the Cross, while insisting that there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. It provides for a correct understanding of Christian spirituality as being the nature of true human experience, and it honors Christ as King across all of life, culture, and reality.

Honesty insists there are some negatives worth mentioning. First, this approach can be misconstrued as an excuse to not be concerned for evangelism. Some have also used this position as an excuse to marry their career, claiming that they are attempting to pursue it to God's glory, when it appears more likely that they have turned their job and personal success into an idolatry. And finally, without the careful nurturing of a rigorous Christian world and life view, this transformationist approach is very difficult to maintain. It is exciting to speak of transforming culture, but it is a costly enterprise that requires cultural insight wedded to biblical and theological literacy. If a keen Christian mind is not developed within the context of the community of God's covenant people, discernment will not mature, and hope will languish. And, during those periods when the surrounding culture seems to go from bad to worse, discouragement can set in, causing the believer to migrate to one of the other five approaches—but more on that in a moment.

Where Evangelicals Are Today

At the risk of greatly oversimplifying the matter, let me suggest that the trajectory of the modern evangelical movement in terms of Niebuhr's five categories runs something like this. At the time of the First Great Awakening (1735-1743), evangelical Christianity was, by and large, transformationist. Following in the footsteps of Augustine and Calvin, Jonathan Edwards proclaimed a gospel in which Christ is Savior, Lord, and Transformer of culture. Then, under the influence of the Second Great Awakening (1795-

1830), and the onslaught of the Enlightenment, evangelicals withdrew in the early years of the twentieth century into a strongly Christ against culture stance. Fundamentalism was born as a response to modernism, and increasingly the effort was to save souls while leaving culture to the world—all of which would be burned up when Christ returned anyway. Then, when the decade of the sixties burst on the scene, even old-time fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell discovered that they increasingly felt not-at-home in American society, and felt something had to be done about it. And they heard the voice of Christian thinkers like Francis Schaeffer and Carl Henry reminding them that Christ is Savior and Lord, as well as the Transformer of culture.

Now, this was heady stuff, and conservative Christians were optimistic. Since what we believed was true—after all, we believed the Bible—simply insisting on our own values and ideas in the public square would automatically be for the common good. Besides, there were good reasons for what we believed, and those reasons were obviously compelling. Pictures of fetuses proved they were babies—nobody would doubt that once it was explained to them. And anybody with an IQ over 70 could understand that relativism was self-defeating. To top it off, there were lots of us—we were the moral majority, remember—and so our entry into the political arena meant we could make an impact, politically, economically, and spiritually.

Needless to say, things did not turn out as expected, and optimism, it is safe to say, has waned. I am neither a prophet nor a sociologist, but what has happened, it seems to me, is that the strong biblical foundation required to sustain and nurture this reformational view through discouraging times has been weak or nonexistent. Biblical, theological, and creedal illiteracy has increased, and the hard work of cultural discernment has been replaced by a reactionary spirit. As a result, it seems that we are presently in the midst of what appears to be a fracturing of the evangelical movement into some of Niebuhr's other four

categories.

Some evangelicals, for example, are fleeing towards a Christ against culture stance, withdrawing into the imagined safety of their own subculture, which is, in reality, a Christian ghetto. Particularly popular among home- and Christian-school families, this movement is increasingly cynical, reactionary, and survivalist.

Other evangelicals are becoming increasingly accommodationist (the Christ of culture approach). Os Guinness has identified four steps liberals tended to move through in the 30s and 40s, and it doesn't take much imagination to spot the same process at work in sectors of the evangelical movement. The four steps are these: 1. Assumption: there is something in the modern world superior to what's gone before (such as the power of modern marketing and the application of various techniques for numerical growth); 2. Reduction: those aspects of the faith that seem incompatible with modern sensibilities are dropped or downplayed (such as doctrinal substance, God's wrath, or covenant community); 3. Translation: what is left of the faith is translated so as to jive with modern sensibilities (as in church shopping, or worship as entertainment); and 4. Accommodation: the faith increasingly becomes acceptable to and indistinct from the surrounding culture. Unlike the liberals, who accommodated to classical culture and biblical criticism, Christ of culture evangelicals are drawn to pop culture, consumerism, and marketing—but the accommodation is similar, even if the final product looks different. In any case, it is far removed from a transformationist approach.

Many evangelicals who claim they are transformation-ists, in actuality are not. They tend to be so offended by the direction society is taking that they do not really engage the culture in order to reform it; rather, they seek to force change through power politics, economic boycotts, and cultural protest. But these are reactionary tactics, and not only is there growing evidence that the attempt will fail, there are signs that disillusionment is increasing.

Rather than promote reformation, this activism provokes a backlash from the unbelievers we are called to win, and makes evangelicals look like merely one more special interest group seeking to force its agenda on the public square.

A Model for Faithfulness: Living in Exile

What is needed, it seems to me, is for evangelicals to develop a theology of being in the world but not of it—what Ken Myers of Mars Hill Audio refers to as a "theology of the exile." Why the emphasis on exile? When we read the Bible, it is proper to ask which portions of Scripture seem to be addressed to believers in circumstances most similar to our own. This is not to say that all the Scriptures are not normative for us, for they are. Nor does this suggest that some parts of the Bible can be highlighted while the rest ignored. Rather, the question we are asking simply takes the historical and textual context seriously, recognizing that in history God's people have been called to live faithfully in a wide variety of cultural circumstances. And, when we ask which portions of Scripture seem to be addressed to believers in cultural circumstances most similar to our own, two come to mind. The first is Acts 17, where Paul visits Athens. And the other involves the Old Testament people of God who were living in exile in Babylon.

Acts 17 is vitally important to teach us how to engage the surrounding culture and how to speak the truth winsomely into it. Paul did not live there over an extended period, however, so we must turn to the Old Testament record of the exile to gain insight into how to live faithfully over the course of a lifetime. And the biblical record of the exile is really quite rich. It includes, in Jeremiah 29, a letter that God had the prophet Jeremiah write to the exiles in Babylon instructing them on how they were to live. And in the book of Daniel we have a record of four Jewish believers who lived faithfully in Babylon, even at the risk of their lives. These passages are worth serious study.

When we reflect on what living in exile means for the people of God we discover a dynamic model for Christian faithfulness. Consider three Old Testament cities (thinking of them as metaphors for life in a fallen world), and put them on a continuum—Jerusalem, Samaria, and Babylon.

Jerusalem is where God's word is honored, and though not everyone living there is a believer, the culture is ultimately rooted in the reality of God and the truth of his law. The Temple dominates the landscape, worship is central to life, and the passing of time is marked by the succession of feasts and sacrifices commemorating God's grace and care for his people. Disputes are settled by appeals to the law of God; poetry and music flourish, giving praise to the living God and celebrating the glory of his creation. Jerusalem is not heaven, of course, but all of culture—politics, justice, art, and the work of one's hands and mind—all of culture resonates with the God who has spoken and who is Redeemer, Judge, and King.

Now consider Samaria. It is certainly very different from Jerusalem, but it is not so very far away either. Populated by people who have over the years married unbelievers, their commitment to God and his word has been compromised. During the period of the prophets, for example, Samaria was a center for idolatry, and it was there that Ahab and Jezebel encouraged the worship of Baal. Though this rank idolatry has ended, Samaritans don't worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, but on Mt Gerizim. Rather than accept the entire Old Testament, only the first five books of Moses are accepted as canonical—a limitation that is reflected in Samaritan belief and practice. Still, the Pentateuch is better than nothing, and at least part of God's word and law is honored.

Finally, think about Babylon. Very far from Jerusalem, and far even from Samaria, the literature and culture is what one would expect when belief in many gods gives rise to a world view in which sorcery, charms, magic, and astrology are an essential part

of life. The capital city of a great military empire, Babylon has become home to people from every part of the known world. God's word and law, if acknowledged at all, are seen as simply one option among many, representing the provincial beliefs of a people whose god has been soundly defeated by the army of Anu, Enlil, and Ea, the three great Babylonian deities. The culture, personified in the king, is idolatrous and unjust, with morals repugnant to true righteousness. Here the people of God are a small minority, living among people who do not share their deepest convictions, in a society in which a variety of beliefs and values compete for acceptance.

Jerusalem, Samaria, Babylon. Which of the three is a metaphor for where you and I live today? Which city is the best analogy for life in our pluralistic, postmodern culture? I suppose it is possible that some might disagree with me, but I do not find the question all that difficult. We are certainly not in Jerusalem, and even Samaria sounds foreign to me. We are living in exile in Babylon.

Many evangelicals, however, act like they are still living in Jerusalem or Samaria. Consider, for example, the issue that was discussed in the first article: taking personal offense at the behavior or language of unbelievers. If I go to see a movie in Babylon, should I not expect the film to reflect Babylonian beliefs and values? As a Christian I may disagree strongly with those beliefs and find the values utterly contrary to God's law, but surely that should not be surprising. Nor, if I am living in exile in Babylon, does it make sense to be offended that Babylonians act like Babylonians, or that they fail to make many films that reflect the beliefs and values of Jerusalem. In fact, I should not be surprised if they make films that deride the beliefs and values of Jerusalem—after all, this is Babylon.

The model of living in exile thus helps clarify why we might want to watch Babylonian films, even though they do not reflect the beliefs and values of Jerusalem. The fact that

Babylonians make art that reflects their world and life view should be seen as an opportunity. We need windows of insight into the Babylonian culture, and points of contact in order to launch discussion of the big questions of life, and Babylonian art is one place where both can be found. Besides, one need not be a believer to make good films, just as an author need not be a Christian to write fine fiction, full of insight into life in a fallen world.

The model of living in exile also clarifies why reacting negatively to Babylonian films can be so counterproductive. To be reactionary when Babylonians do what Babylonians do erects walls between them and us, when our concern should be to enter their lives with love and friendship, until we have earned the right to share the gospel. It is hard to live in exile, hard to be surrounded by people who do not share our deepest convictions. It is much easier to be reactionary in Babylon, and more satisfying too, because being offended by them makes us feel so very righteous. Besides, it is disappointing to be stuck in Babylon when what we really want is to live in Jerusalem. It is hard work to find creative and winsome ways to translate the gospel into terms they will understand. It requires discipline to develop skill in discernment, and single-mindedness to nurture biblical literacy in the midst of the busyness that presses in on us. It takes time and energy—and perhaps a great deal of study and thinking—to give honest answers to honest questions. It takes patience to refrain from giving answers to questions they have not yet asked, and which they cannot yet appreciate or receive. It takes perseverence to love sinners whose sin we find repugnant, and humility to remember that our sin seems less wicked only because it is ours.

If we are living in exile, we are not here by chance. God has called us to serve him here, in this place, and not in another. In the same way the Jewish exiles were convinced that it was God's hand that took them to Babylon (see Daniel 1:2), so we have been called to be faithful in a pluralistic and postmodern world.

Seeing ourselves as living in exile will help us better

understand what that faithfulness consists of.

But What About...?

If the model of living in exile is appropriate, it would be wise to look more closely at the experience of the Old Testament people of God in Babylon to see what we can learn from them. What instructions did Jeremiah give in his letter to the exiles in Babylon? How did Daniel and his three friends model faithfulness as they lived out their lives in exile from Jerusalem?

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Part 3

A Letter To Exiles Living In Babylon

In 597 B.C., the Babylonian army marched into Jerusalem and carried off thousands of Israelites, forcing them to walk hundreds of miles across the desert to live in Babylon. The long-prophesied fall of Jerusalem had begun, though the final sacking of the city would not occur for another decade. The Babylonians had defeated the Egyptian army at a place called Carchemish, and as a result, Judah, a vassal state of Egypt, came under Babylonian control. So it was that some of the people of God found themselves in an alien place, living in exile in Babylon, among people who did not share their deepest convictions.

Three years later, in 594 B.C., the prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to those Jewish exiles, a copy of which is found in Jeremiah 29. It was a message the exiles desperately needed to hear, because they found themselves living in a situation that was totally new to them. It was a message of hope and instruction designed to teach them how to live faithfully in exile.

A Model to Make Sense of Life

In this series of articles I have suggested that the model we should adopt that best makes sense of living in our pluralistic culture is that of living in exile. That is, if we think of three great cities of the Old Testament—Jerusalem, Samaria, Babylon—and ask which place seems to best serve as a metaphor for our own situation, the answer is Babylon. Certainly we do not live in Jerusalem, where believer and unbeliever alike acknowledge that the God of Abraham exists and that his word and law is the supreme authority. Nor do we live in Samaria where the true God is still acknowledged, even though orthodox belief and practice has been tainted by years of compromise with pagans. Rather, we live in Babylon where a variety of gods, beliefs, and values compete for acceptance, and where our world view is merely one option out of many. Thus we find ourselves, like the Old Testament people of God in Babylon, living in exile. It would be wise, then, to reflect on what Jeremiah's letter might teach us.

Jeremiah 29 is a rich text, even though at first it can appear rather unexceptional. Buried, as it is, in a book few Christians study with care, its message to us can be easily overlooked. Yet it is a text of real significance for us, for the simple reason that it is God's word to his people living in a pagan culture. It is a letter to real people who found themselves a minority in a cultural setting over which they seemed to have little if any influence. In Jerusalem they held positions of influence as priests, prophets, court officials, artisans and skilled workers (29:1-2), but now they found themselves in what had to

be, to say the least, a disappointing situation.

With that as background, consider five lessons Jeremiah's letter taught the Jewish exiles, and then reflect on what it could mean for us.

Lesson #1: Be Faithful in the Ordinary Things of Life

"This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon," Jeremiah records (29: 4-6). "'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.'"

Notice how very ordinary these things are. Notice too that they were not added as a postscript after all the spectacular things were listed, but were the opening instructions of the letter. These were the people of God, a people whose God had done extraordinary things in history, and yet faithfulness in Babylon was defined as being faithful in the very ordinary things of life. When they built houses, planted gardens, ate regular meals, had families, and celebrated the marriages of their children they were not pursuing insignificant things, but fulfilling God's call for their lives. Nor would they be allowed to see the exile as temporary, keeping their bags packed in the assumption that their time in Babylon would be so brief that they could afford to ignore such long-range things as homes, livelihood, and family. On the contrary, living in exile began with being faithful in the ordinary and routine things of life and human culture.

For us today: It seems to me that the constant agitation for a spectacular and decisive win in the modern culture war should give way to a holy spirited commitment to be faithful in the very ordinary things of life and culture. We need far fewer activists and many more thoughtful reformers. And the sacred/secular dichotomy that continues to plague the Christian

community might actually keep us from concentrating on what faithfulness really means.

Lesson #2: Engage Babylon, Do Not Withdraw

"'Also,'" God has Jeremiah add in verse 7, "'seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.'" Not only were they to be faithful in the ordinary things of life, they were not allowed to withdraw into their own subculture, a little ghetto safe from the dangers of the paganism of Babylon. Rather, they were to pray and work that Babylon might flourish. They were not only to establish a presence in the city, but expect that God was at work in and through them in that pagan culture. They arrived as captives, but now were to act as missionaries, seeking the peace and prosperity of a city that by every measure was in rebellion against the living God.

For us today: Is prayer a significant part of our lives, or are we so convinced in the efficacy of our programs, abilities, plans, and techniques that we tend, in actual fact, to live as if God does not exist? Perhaps we have forgotten that the unbelievers among whom we live—the abortionists, the neo-pagans, the movie directors, the media—are not the enemy, but are precious people for whom Christ died. Our increasing tendency to withdraw from the culture—for the sake of "holiness" and the "protection of our children"—may actually be a misguided effort that has far more to do with the American frontier spirit and modern individualistic survivalism than it does biblical faithfulness.

Lesson #3: Be Discerning

"'Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you,'" God tells them (29: 8-9). "'Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them.'" Notice the warning is not that the Babylonians believe false things—would not that

have been obvious?—but that some of the Israelites' own leaders were telling them falsehoods in the name of God. Skill in discernment was required for faithfulness while living in exile.

For us today: We will be ill-equipped to identify nontruth unless we recover biblical, theological, and creedal literacy. Since the false messages Jeremiah was warning against were pleasant messages the exiles enjoyed hearing, is it possible that the tendency to "shop" for a church that "meets our needs" might be contrary to Christian discernment? It seems that we are more reactionary than discerning—both in the church and in the wider culture.

Lesson #4: Be People of Hope

It is hard to live in exile, but harder still to be hopeful when there is little to be optimistic about. And so God graciously gave the exiles in Babylon a promise to remember, for he is a good God, and contrary to what they might have felt, he had not forgotten them. They remained his people, and because of that, though life might be disappointing and discouraging in Babylon, it was not hopeless. "'When seventy years are completed for Babylon,'" God promised them, "'I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to [Jerusalem]. For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (29:10-11). Central to their hope was the covenant promise that he had repeated throughout Scripture: he was their God, would be with them, and would bring them to himself. "'You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the Lord" (29:13-14). It was God's presence and redemption that was to be their hope, and his covenant was certain, regardless of what happened in Babylon.

But it is very hard to be people of hope in a fallen and disappointing world. Consider all that might have discouraged

the Jews in exile so long ago in Babylon. For one thing, it's disappointing to live in Babylon when you yearn for Jerusalem. It is not simply that you like Jerusalem better, but that you feel more comfortable there, more at home. It is hard work to be faithful and discerning in a pagan culture.

Second, it is disappointing to discover your spiritual leaders have clay feet. It is one thing to realize we have to be discerning about Babylonian beliefs and values; it can be discouraging to realize our spiritual leaders are less than fully dependable.

Third, it can be disappointing when your calling is so very ordinary when there are so many extraordinary needs. Building houses, planting gardens, raising families—none of it sounds very remarkable. But this is the message we read throughout the Scriptures. Our primary calling, the essence of our service to God is to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of our daily lives. Everything in our cynical culture pushes us toward the spectacular and the extraordinary, but the meaning of faithfulness before God will be found in the midst of that ordinary cycle of work and rest that is our life. Our focus must not be on the ordinariness, but on the faithfulness—for it is faithfulness that will earn us a "Well done!" from our God.

Fourth, God's timing can be so disappointing. God promised to rescue them, but then said it would not occur for another 70 years. That means that all or most of the adults reading the letter would never see it for themselves—they would be dead by then.

And finally, it can be disappointing to have to seek the good of Babylon. It is far easier and far more satisfying to simply withdraw, except of course for occasional brief evangelistic forays or political protests.

And for us today: Perhaps our cynicism over the electoral process, and our discouragement over our failure to stop abortion reveals that we have placed our hope in events and in our techniques and efforts. Unless our faith is deepened we

will never be able to replace our misguided optimism with biblical hope.

Lesson #5: Things Are Not Out of Control

If we are to be people of hope in a disappointing world, we must maintain a biblical perspective on history and the story of our lives. We must not see things primarily in terms of the ebb and flow of current events, but as part of God's redemptive purposes in Christ to bring all things to their appointed end.

"I know the plans I have for you," the Lord told the Jewish exiles (29:11), "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." That is a wonderful promise, but remember: it did not rescue them from Babylon, nor did it transform Babylonian culture into something in which they felt more at home. In the meantime they would have to believe something that was very hard to believe: events had not swirled out of God's control. While they waited they were to trust that God remained good, even if there appeared no evidence at the moment to support the idea. "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon" (29:4; emphasis added), God begins the letter to them. (And note God repeats this fact more than once.) Even the exile, painful as it was, had not taken God by surprise. On the contrary, though the exiles might not have been able to guess how or why, even this cruel injustice by a pagan king would be made, someday, to resound to God's glory.

Christ has promised to return as King to consummate his kingdom, but that does not mean the world ceases to be a disappointing place in the meantime. What it does mean is that God's plans are so much greater than we can possibly fathom that what he is doing to bring all things to their appointed consummation in Christ is utterly beyond our comprehension. We are part of the story, but the story is so much greater than we are, because it is God's story, the working out of his eternal purposes in human history.

This means that regardless of what it looks like in the media, things are not out of control. Despite what we may think best, God's plans and timing are, in fact, perfect. And no matter how much we are certain that it makes absolutely no sense to be stuck in Babylon, the truth of the matter is that when we get to the final chapter, we will stand and cheer for then it will make all the sense in the world. He knows the plans he has for us. We don't. But he assures us they are plans for good. We may not see it yet, but that does not change a single thing. The timing may seem impossible, but that is our problem. Babylon may look unassailable, but that is only an illusion. God remains God.

We can nurture hope by walking with him, by carving out time to be in his word and before him in prayer so that his promises can fill our hearts and minds and inflame our imaginations. The covenant blessing of God is not personal peace and affluence, nor is it comfort and a lack of suffering. The covenant blessing is God's presence with his people. Even in Babylon we can seek him, love him, serve him, and by maintaining godly perspective, cultivate gratitude and a sense of humor. We can refuse to become either cynical or discouraged, for the simple fact that against all appearances, and against all the arrogant claims of the Babylonians, there is one thing about which we can be fully certain: God exists, he is good, and the story of history is his story of redemption.

And that is why we can be—we must be—people of hope while living in exile in a disappointing and increasingly pagan world.


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Part 4

Legalism In A Decaying Culture

A few years ago a friend sent me a paper he had written, with a note expressing the hope we would distribute it as part of Ransom's ministry. He is a committed believer, a pastor deeply concerned with nurturing godliness in Christian families. The paper opened with a study of the biblical texts that address the importance of educating children in the things of God; it concluded with a detailed description of the specific type of Christian school every parent had a biblical obligation to send their children to—and if such a school did not exist in their community, they had a biblical obligation to help establish one. He issued warnings of what would transpire if parents failed to rise to the challenge, and the sort of righteousness that could be expected in the next generation if their education was fully Christian.

The paper contained a host of good ideas (usually with Bible references attached), and was written with a passion that swept the reader from basic principles (that were impossible to disagree with) to practice (that was hard to disagree with).

Yet, by the time I reached the final page, I was not only uninterested in distributing it, I thought it sadly dishonoring to Christ. Like so many resources and teachings making the rounds in evangelical circles, my friend's paper was a case study in legalism.

Calling something "legalistic," however, does not necessarily make it so. Sometimes the term is thrown around rather loosely among Christians (particularly among evangelicals), used simply as a label to dismiss some teaching we happen to dislike. What exactly is legalism? Why is it so appealing? What danger does it pose? And what are its defining characteristics so we can learn to identify it? Those are questions a discerning Christian should reflect on, and thankfully, the Scriptures address the error of legalism in such a way as to provide some answers.

Legalism Defined

"In the New Testament we meet both Pharisaic and Judaizing legalism," J. I. Packer writes. "Jesus attacked the Pharisees; Paul the Judaizers."

The first century Pharisees were a minority party in Jewish religion, culture, and politics, but they apparently wielded considerable influence—enough influence, at any rate, to warrant some of the most severe criticism voiced by Christ. Known as "the separate ones," they believed the Babylonian exile had been caused by Israel's failure to obey the Torah, and so stressed careful fulfillment of every aspect of God's word. Not only was Israel as a whole to obey the law, each individual was responsible to fulfill the law's commands. The Pharisees studied the law carefully in order to apply it to changing cultural circumstances, and were convinced their careful study had unveiled practices that were authoritative for all.

The “Judaizers,” on the other hand, were teachers in early Christian circles who sought to make obedience to the Mosaic law a requirement for salvation. They taught that Gentile converts to Christianity must be circumcised, and must follow Jewish ceremonial law to find favor with God. The first New Testament mention of Judaizers dates to around A.D. 49, when Luke records that “men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved’” (Acts 15:1).

The legalism of the Pharisees was obviously different from that of the Judaizers in significant ways, but at the most basic level their error was identical. Both groups confused works and grace, teaching that we must do certain things in order to merit the grace of God. And that brings us to a definition of the term: Legalism is anything that suggests we can earn salvation, achieve or add to our own righteousness, or by accomplishing something gain increased favor with God.

According to the Scriptures there is nothing we can do that will merit God’s favor; we are all unworthy sinners, and undeserving of grace. Whatever we do should be done to God’s glory, as service to him alone, and whatever we receive should be accepted gratefully, as from grace alone. “In Galatians,” J. I. Packer writes, "the apostle Paul condemns the Judaizers’ ‘Christ-plus’ message as obscuring and indeed denying the all-sufficiency of grace revealed in Jesus (Galatians 3:1-3; 4:21; 5:2-6). In Colossians, he conducts a similar polemic against a similar ‘Christ-plus’ formula for ‘fullness’ (i.e., spiritual completion: Colossians 2:8-23). Any ‘plus’ that requires us to take action in order to add to what Christ has given us is a reversion to legalism and, in truth, an insult to Christ."

The paper by my friend described a wonderful school, but that does not mean that parents who choose another option for the education of their children are necessarily being unfaithful. Nor does the mere possibility of such a school mean that every parent’s

calling necessarily includes helping to begin one. And most basic of all, though enrolling one's children in such a school may be a prudent choice, it does not guarantee they will grow in righteousness.

"Often," Louis Tarsitano writes in an article on Christian "self-help" books, we are told by famous evangelical pastors to embrace a works righteousness that would make a Roman Catholic parochial school teacher of the 1950s blush. What goes unexplained is why God should owe us anything at all for doing the "good works" we were created to do, let alone the "good works" we have defined and chosen for ourselves. It is not, after all, what we do that saves us, but what Jesus Christ has done for us, to the glory of his Father.

Discernment is required, of course, because teachings do not arrive with large banners heralding the fact that THIS IS LEGALISM. Disclaimers might even be issued. That is what Edward Gross does in his book *Will My Children Go To Heaven?*, for example, as he teaches that parents, through their obedience (particularly in child rearing), can guarantee their children's conversion. "I will show from Scripture," he writes, "that parents can be sure that their children will be saved and go to heaven." Throughout the book Gross repeats that salvation is a matter of grace, not works, but his entire argument is precisely the opposite, namely, that if parents fulfill the responsibilities he lists in his book, their children's righteousness is certain. He even includes a chapter addressed to parents whose grown children are unbelievers, in order to help them see where they failed, and how their obedience now may be used of God to bring their children to faith. His repeated disclaimers about salvation by grace may appear to be reassuring at first glance, but if his message was truly one of grace, they would be unnecessary. The faithfulness of Christian parents is important, but it cannot earn or guarantee the salvation of either parents or children. We are called to obedience as the children of God, but our works do not merit favor with

God—all we receive is given us by grace. (For a book that maintains a proper biblical balance on this topic, I would recommend Susan Hunt's *Heir's of the Covenant: Leaving a Legacy of Faith for the Next Generation*.)

The Appeal of Legalism

On the most basic level, legalism is appealing today for the same reason it has always been appealing: as fallen human beings we feel we deserve whatever grace comes our way. We may be sinners, but surely our good works as Christians produce a net increase in righteousness. If you think about it, legalism is appealing because it appeals to our pride. That being the case, we should expect that the need to be discerning about it will remain as long as pride remains a problem—which will be until Christ consummates his kingdom.

Though legalism has always been appealing to fallen people, we live in an age particularly prone to it, especially where modernity is strongest. At the heart of the modern mindset is the conviction that problems can be solved rationally, and the advance of technology has been so impressive that it is tempting to believe techniques can be found for every sphere of life. "Americans are attracted by the idea of 'self-help,'" Tarsitano notes, "even when we are dealing with God. We like to think we can do well by doing good, which is a concept that would come as a surprise to" those who were martyred for their faith. And so, though as Christians we claim to believe that all is by grace, we develop formulas, "steps of action," and techniques on how to do it "God's way." From how to parent, how to grow a church, or how to survive Y2K, we have it covered. We may prefer to call them "teachings" rather than "techniques," of course, but that is just a facade. As Tarsitano points out, the "how-to" books and seminars of the Christian community are simply "the religious equivalent of the 'self-help' books sold in competing secular establishments."

It is not that these teachings never contain good ideas, for

they do. And often the techniques seem to work. After all, if they contained only non-truth and if the techniques consistently backfired, they would fade away pretty quickly. The problem is not that legalistic systems never contain truth, but rather that legalism undercuts grace—and is therefore opposed to the gospel. Legalism gives the appearance of unpacking the hidden things of God, but in the end it reduces the richness of the walk of faith to technique, and distorts grace with human effort. It produces what the late theologian Klaus Bockmuehl called "practical atheism." We still believe in God, of course, but with so many things figured out, he is not really needed very much, except in the background. If we follow the techniques, the outcome is guaranteed—after all, God's promises are certain. The walk of faith turns out to require far less faith than we had imagined. And when fellow believers face failure, we are in a position to diagnose where they went wrong, and can bless them with steps of action to reverse at least some of difficulties their failure has wrought.

One further point: living in a decaying culture makes legalism even more attractive to those who would take the Scriptures seriously. In a relativistic and secular society, people increasingly discount God's law as judgmental and implausible, by and large irrelevant for everyday life. Such societal decay occurs slowly and incrementally, but eventually a reaction is provoked in those who cherish holiness. Believers who find themselves living in an increasingly alien culture—like exiles in Babylon—awaken to discover themselves, in Walter Brueggemann's words, "in a context where their most treasured and trusted symbols of faith [are] mocked, trivialized, or dismissed." It is hard not to react under such circumstances, especially when our fellow Christians start acting like they believe in Law Lite. In contrast to this flaccid antinomianism (anti-law), both in the church and outside it, legalism feels like a bracing corrective, rigorous yet simple.

For all its appeal, however, legalism remains a deadly error.

“Legalism is a distortion of obedience that can never produce truly good works,” J. I. Packer writes. "Its first fault is that it skews motive and purpose, seeing good works as essentially ways to earn more of God’s favor than one has at the moment. Its second fault is arrogance. Belief that one’s labor earns God’s favor begets contempt for those who do not labor in the same way. Its third fault is lovelessness in that its self-advancing purpose squeezes humble kindness and creative compassion out of the heart."

Identifying Marks of Legalism

Discerning Christians need to be able to recognize legalism. For that we can turn to the Gospels, because in his interactions with the Pharisees, Jesus distinguished at least four defining marks or characteristics of legalism by which it can be identified.

1. *Legalism tends to cause people to major on minors.*

In Matthew 23:23 Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for missing the weightier matters of God’s law because they had become consumed with details that, though legitimate, were in fact far less significant. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!” Jesus said, “You give a 10th of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.” They had majored on things they could accomplish and could measure, while ignoring virtues essential to covenant community and love. It is not that the Pharisees necessarily thought justice, mercy, and faithfulness of little importance, rather, they were so content with their own version of obedience that they were blind to their own shortcomings. “We have a tendency to exalt to the supreme level of godliness whatever virtues we possess and downplay our vices as insignificant points,” R. C. Sproul says. “I may view my refraining from dancing as a great spiritual strength while

considering my covetousness a minor matter."

Jesus did not tell the Pharisees that the less weighty details they were emphasizing were unimportant or untrue; instead, he confronted them because their imbalance was so deadly. Francis Schaeffer, in his booklet *The New Super-Spirituality*, explains how the imbalanced teaching of the truth can produce heresy—his explanation is worth quoting at length:

"It is interesting to see how heresies function and how the Devil wins out. Let us say the complete body of Christian teaching consists of points 1-100. Now, then, we must realize that this Christian teaching is not just dogmatic, but meets the needs of man as God has made him and as man now is since the Fall. So, in order for the whole man to find fulfillment, he must have teaching from points 1-100. If you study church history, I think you will find that heresies arise like this: the church begins to fail to preach, or preaches very weakly, say, points 40-50. Let us say, therefore, that points 40-50 are unstressed. Two things follow. First, the situation is unbiblical. True Christianity is a balanced whole. Second, Satan takes points 40-50 out of the total Christian framework and encourages someone to overemphasize them. And this becomes heresy. In other words, points 40-50, instead of being kept in line and in relationship to the rest of Christian doctrine, are moved out and away from the whole system. Being out of place, they somehow become inverted or reversed. But why does Satan win? He wins because there is a longing, a need in the human heart and mind; points 40-50 are needed because the whole of Christian teaching is needed, not only to give one the right Christian system, but to meet the needs of total man as he is in the fallen world. Satan wins because when people recognize the lack of points 40-50 in their church and suddenly see someone stressing them, they go to that group not realizing that the points are being overstressed, and they are caught in a net. One group is stressing points 40-50, but in an overemphasized way, out of relationship to the whole of Christian doctrine. Another group, on the other hand, sees this

overemphasis on points 40-50 as a heresy, and so they retreat in the opposite direction. They preach points 40-50 even less than they did before in order to be safe, in order to be seen clearly as not being a part of a heresy or wrong teaching. Satan fishes equally on both sides, and he wins on both sides."

In other words, legalism develops out of an honest desire on the part of Christians to be faithful to every detail of God's word. Their mistake is not that they have impure motives nor are they necessarily teaching blatant falsehoods (especially at first). Their mistake is that in their zeal to provide correction to a weakness they perceive in the church, they major in the minors that address the weakness, thus meeting an imbalance with a further imbalance. And this imbalance easily leads to even greater error. Imbalance in teaching must be countered with the full counsel of God, not with a counter-imbalanced teaching—which is what legalism does. One characteristic or defining mark of legalism, then, is a tendency to emphasize details, and to major in minors.

When the Scriptures are taught in a balanced way, on the other hand, our vision is broadened, not narrowed. We are confronted with God's undeserved grace, and invited, as the beloved of God, to wonder at and enjoy the presence and glory of the infinite personal God, to be faithful to Christ as Lord across all of life and culture.

2. *Legalism causes people to promote themselves as righteous.*

This is what Jesus confronted the Pharisees about in Luke 20:45-47; Matthew 6:1-8; and 23:2-7. And if you think about it for a moment, it is relatively easy to see why this sort of thing occurs with legalism. Legalism, because it tends to reduce righteousness to systems, techniques, steps of action, or formulas that can be followed, immediately divides the people of God into those who are following the program, and those who are not. Once such a system is promulgated, the division is irrevokable, no matter how much the teacher professes otherwise. Even those wanting simply

to "share" what they have learned will tend to speak and act in a we/they manner. They have adopted a technique that brings them favor with God—favor you will not have unless you too, buy into the program. Though they may not recognize it, they will tend, in the words of Jesus to "parade their righteousness before men," simply because the system demands it. They are following the system, you are not, and try as they might, there is no way around that fact. This is why Dr. Packer warns that legalism produces "arrogance," a "contempt for those who do not labor in the same way," and a lack of love which "squeezes humble kindness and creative compassion out of the heart."

It should be noted that those caught in the spell of legalism rarely see their lovelessness, and may, in fact, imagine their eagerness to share the "steps of action" that identify "God's way" to be proof of their compassion. Still, ideas have consequences, and anything that suggests we can achieve righteousness by our efforts will bear bitter fruit. By contrast, the good news of Christianity is a story of grace. It is the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to us, and there is nothing we can possibly add to it. Through Christ, we are brought into a covenantal relationship with our heavenly Father, who makes us part of the community of his people. Teaching the gospel of grace nurtures mercy and humility, an ever-deepening realization not of your lack of obedience, but of my own, and an ever-increasing conviction that it is all of grace and not of myself.

Think, for example, about one of the formulas for success our culture assumes to be true:

education + hard word = prosperity

Now, as a general principle, of course, there is truth in that. Even in a fallen world, the skilled person who is disciplined and energetic will tend, on average, to gain at least sufficient income, if not a fair degree of wealth. From a Christian perspective, however,

this formula leaves much to be desired. For one thing, it simply is not always true. There are, no doubt, numerous hard working and skilled farmers in the world today who are watching their children starve because of famine, war, or, in the case of Christians in the Sudan, the horrors of persecution. What is more, the formula is devoid of grace; it leaves God out of the picture. I must be faithful to work hard, seeking to gain and use all the knowledge and skill I can, not because these things bring prosperity, but in order to bring glory to God. As I do so, I acknowledge I am an unworthy servant, whose best efforts are still shot through with sinfulness. The wonder of it is that God is gracious, and because he has adopted me into his family, I can pursue my work as unto him, seeking his pleasure alone. And when any income or measure of prosperity comes my way, I can bow before him in thanks, being grateful that I have not been treated as I deserve, but with grace. From a Christian perspective, then, the left side of the formula is what I give to God, for his glory, expecting nothing in return. The right side of the formula, to the extent it is granted, is received as a gift. Thus, from a Christian perspective, we need to rewrite the formula, dividing it into two:

education + hard work = to God's glory

prosperity = received as a gift by grace

Now, think of all the techniques and formulas being promulgated within the Christian community, and apply the same reasoning. The same principles apply, whether the formula involves child-rearing, growing a church, strengthening a marriage, earning an income, or anything else. The perspective of the Scriptures is a covenant of grace.

3. *Legalism tends to cause believers to adhere to the letter of the law while missing its spirit.*

Christ made this point when he addressed the Pharisees in Matthew 15:3-9 and 23:16-24. In their desire to be righteous before God, the Pharisees had increasingly produced a system they were able, with hard work, to follow. In an effort to unpack and apply the law, they had reduced God's word to a set of requirements, missing the fact that God had given the law primarily to reveal his glorious holiness and our desperate need of his righteousness. They had also reduced life and reality to a manageable set of duties and responsibilities, missing the wonderful richness of life in the world God had created.

Whenever I think of adhering to the letter while missing the spirit of a thing, I remember the family vacation we took when our oldest daughter was a senior in high school. A friend had suggested a wonderful route through southern Minnesota so we could camp at a series of State Parks while learning something of the history of the area. We visited Pipestone, a site long held as sacred by Native Americans, and Bishop Whipple's wonderful stone church where he ministered so faithfully at the time of the Sioux Indian Uprising. However, when we broke the good news of our plans to our three children, they responded with their usual grace. Our son said the camping was OK, but it was summer and he wouldn't learn anything. Our youngest daughter said the learning was OK, but camping was too much work. And our oldest daughter reminded me that I had been encouraging her to earn money for college, but was now asking her to take an entire week off to sit in the backseat of a car between two brats. I thanked them for sharing, and said we were going. It was actually a great time, and in our family photo album there are a couple of pages of pictures marking our progress in a big loop through southern Minnesota. We have looked at them as a family, now that so much time has passed, and laughed together. For in each picture our oldest daughter is dutifully in her place, posing as required, but in not a single photo did she smile. Obedient to the letter, she missed the spirit entirely.

The danger of legalism comes primarily because the

teaching is a distortion of the meaning of obedience. Concentrating on minutiae, it misses Christ; outlining "God's way" to do something that will result in increased righteousness, it knows little of grace. "So far, then, from enriching our relationship with God," Dr. Packer says, "legalism in all its forms does the opposite. It puts that relationship in jeopardy and, by stopping us focusing on Christ, it starves our souls while feeding our pride. Legalistic religion in all its forms should be avoided like the plague."

4. *Legalism tends to cause people to treat their traditions or system as part of God's authoritative law, thus binding consciences where God had left them free.*

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees sharply about this in Mark 2 16-3:6 and 7:1-8, but it would be wise to realize that we can easily make the same error. It is sobering to remember that the Pharisees believed the Scriptures to be God's word, they had a passion for purity, they desired to be separate from the world's pollution, and they sought to be faithful to God's law. By using a bit of imagination we can see how we can be tempted to make the same mistake they did.

In all the essentials of the faith—what is covered, for example, in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds—there is great clarity in Scripture, and these central doctrines of the faith are revealed in rich detail. There are many other areas, however (such as raising children), that are mentioned in Scripture, but with remarkable simplicity and brevity. In these areas God has granted us great freedom as his people, providing basic principles while leaving much room within those broad limits for creativity and diversity. In these areas of life we must grant one another increasing freedom in how we choose to put the principles mentioned in Scripture into practice. As we move in our thinking and instruction from the text of Scripture, to its meaning, to a teaching we would give, to formulating policy based on it, and finally to actual practice, we must grant freedom to one another for the simple reason that God's

word grants this freedom to us.

Now, imagine being a first-century Pharisee who took God's law as divinely inspired, and who desired to teach others to be faithful to it in every detail. And let's say the law under discussion is quite clear: work is forbidden on the Sabbath. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work," the text says, "but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work" (Exodus 20:9-10). Thus, you point out, harvesting crops is forbidden on the Sabbath. Not too difficult, it would seem—except that questions come up when you try to teach it to people who, truth be told, are rather slip-shod in their approach to faithfulness. First someone asks whether pulling up one carrot in the garden for a salad is really "harvesting." Then someone wonders if God would object to an emergency harvest to store up some food in the face of an impending siege by the Assyrian army. And so it goes. As questions arise, and as teachers unpack the meaning of the basic biblical principles, spelling out practices based on those principle, surely we can understand the temptation to identify our "practice" as "God's way." After all, our practice is based on God's word, isn't it?

What must be remembered, however, is this: there is an important distinction between seeking to be faithful in applying the truth to life, and of going beyond the Scriptures to produce a system that binds the conscience where God's word has left it free. My practice may be prudent and wise, but there might be other ways to faithfully apply the same text to life. The text says parents are to be faithful in raising their children in the Lord; different parents may obey that text by using very different options in the education of their children. It is important to think through the choice we are making and know why we think it wise. It is another thing altogether, however, to suggest ours is "God's way," and that those who choose other options are less faithful than we, and will face consequences as a result. The relationship of husband and wife, child rearing, dating and courtship, both spouses working

outside the home, engaging the culture—in all these areas (and more) teachings are circulating that may be well intentioned, but are, in fact, case studies in legalism.

Those who promulgate such systems probably do not intend to add their "tradition" to the word of God, nor did they start out with the desire to improperly bind the consciences of their fellow believers. Nevertheless, in their zeal to unpack the meaning of faithfulness, they often do several things that end up doing precisely that.

The first thing worth mentioning in this regard is the improper use of proof-texts. Now, it can be helpful when teachers note passages of Scripture that either clarify what they are saying or from which they have derived the idea they are explaining. If I mention, for example, that the Lord ordained that the Israelites be made exiles in Babylon because they failed to rest, it might be helpful if I include a reference so you can check out that assertion (2 Chronicles 36:15-21). However, when meaning, teaching, policy, and practice are all marked with texts, the impression can be given that they are all equally the word of God, when that is not the case. The text is God's word; the practice is simply one possible idea derived from one possible policy implied by one interpretation of the text. Thus to use proof-texts like this is to imply that the practice being suggested bears the same authority as the text itself, which is, of course, not the case. Used properly, proof-texts are helpful; used improperly, they can imply an authority that is unwarranted and bind the conscience of believers over something about which God's word actually grants freedom. One thing is certain: the only thing proof-texts prove absolutely is that the teacher has access to a concordance.

Another technique that is used—intentionally or not—to bind the conscience of believers where God's word grants freedom is the use of forceful logic and dogmatic rhetoric that fails to distinguish between biblical principle and mere opinion. When

teachers forcefully move step-by-step from text to meaning to teaching to policy to practice, they can give the impression of a seamless whole, when in fact they have moved from God's word to their own opinion. Sometimes the problem lies in the tone of the teaching or resource: so dogmatic, so final, so forceful that the Christian reader trembles to do anything but instantly buy into it. It seems heretical to wonder whether other options are possible, especially if the testimonials included in the teaching are so poignant that it seems only a heartless pagan would hesitate to adopt whatever is being taught. Add to that a few warnings of dismal failure, and before long even the very idea of withholding judgment until further study can occur seems like dereliction of duty.

Another variation of this technique is to outline a proposal that may, in fact, be a good idea, but then imply it is the only possible option available to faithful Christians. Sometimes this is done by adding terms such as "biblical" or "God's way" in a manner that suggests that believers who seek to apply the text in other ways are less than fully faithful. In a booklet entitled *A Critique of Modern Youth Ministry*, for example, author Christopher Schlect argues that much contemporary youth ministry is destructive of the family and segregates young people from older Christians who could mentor them in the things of God. "These divisions breed immaturity," Schlect writes, "because they hinder younger people from associating with and learning from their elders." He urges that youth ministry be cross-generational, and designed primarily to instruct "parents to raise their children biblically." He is imbalanced here. "Educating covenant children is a family affair and a community affair," Susan Hunt says correctly (emphasis added). "It does take a village to raise a child. It takes a village of faith, the church of the Lord Jesus." Still, Schlect has some good ideas. Convinced, however, that he has discovered practices that when followed brings God's favor, he implies that if we implement his proposals, each succeeding generation will be

increasingly godly. All he wants, he says is “that youth ministry grow and flourish—the way God designed it to.” The problem, of course, is that his dogmatic presentation seems to suggest that “God’s way” is the way Schlect just outlined—case closed, discussion over. Now, although I have no reason to doubt his sincerity in any of this, like so much, unfortunately, of what is coming from Canon Press, Schlect’s booklet contains good ideas but in a dogmatic format that is deeply problematic.

This is not to suggest that teachers should give weak instruction, but rather that their ministry be marked with humility and an openness that invites questions, further study, reflection, and time for unhurried prayer. Dogmatism is often nothing more than the bluster of arrogance.

Throwing Baby Out With The Bath Water?

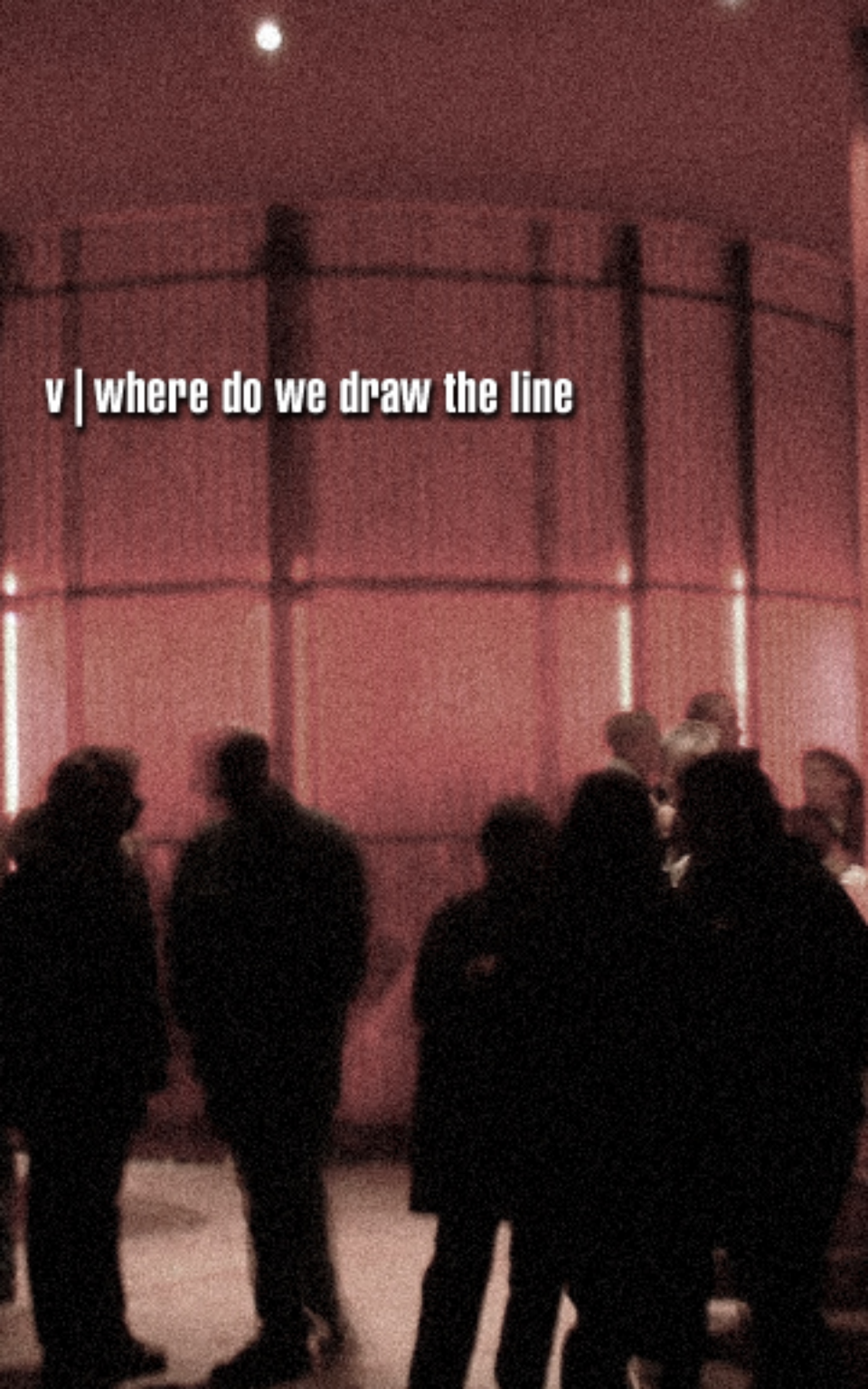
Legalism is, sadly, relatively easy to find in the evangelical community. Given that these teachings, resources, and systems often contain very good ideas, the question arises as to what to do with them. Should they still be used? After all, if we do not use them, will we not be guilty of keeping the good ideas they contain from folk who need them? To mention a specific example, for all the problems associated with the Ezzo’s “Growing Families International,” many people insist the instruction is so helpful in “Growing Kids God’s Way” that the good outweighs all the problems. But is this is an acceptable response? For one thing, it may take the danger of legalism far too lightly. Dr. Packer’s warning is worth repeating:

"So far, then, from enriching our relationship with God, legalism in all its forms does the opposite. It puts that relationship in jeopardy and, by stopping us focusing on Christ, it starves our souls while feeding our pride. Legalistic religion in all its forms should be avoided like the plague."

Consider: “These resources or teachings are so profound, so vital, and so unique,” we are told, “that they must be used even

if they do partake of legalism." But why cannot all these good and helpful ideas be reformulated and taught within the context of the covenant of grace? Especially in an age when we are virtually overwhelmed with resources, why do we need to use ones that are problematic? The problem of legalism is not simply that some people take some teachings the wrong way. The problem of legalism resides in the teaching itself. The mistake is not merely on the part of the listeners, rather the system or teaching itself is flawed—and if it contains truth, that truth can be taught in such a way as to lead the students into a celebration of the freedom and grace that is theirs in Christ. Why should the truth be taught in any other way?

Our role as believers is not to issue forth as moral police, sniffing out legalism wherever it is to be found. Our calling is to be discerning, distinguishing truth from error in a decaying culture. None of us will be able to stop all the legalism that is circulating, but we can seek to live in such a way that, by God's grace, we celebrate the freedom that is ours in Christ.


v | where do we draw the line

Part 5

Where Do We Draw The Line

A Christian friend is in middle management in a large corporation that extends medical insurance benefits to same-sex partners of employees. He mentioned recently that though he is willing to explain the policy to new employees, he always adds a bit of commentary. Each incoming member of his department is not only introduced to the company's policy, but to my friend's conviction that homosexual behavior is against both nature and God's word. "If I just explain the policy without saying what I think of it, they might think I support it," he said. "That wouldn't be honoring to God. I have to draw the line somewhere."

Another Christian friend runs his own business. The workers he hires need not be believers, but he "draws the line" on the language they use. They are notallowed to swear or use language he deems offensive to his Lord. "After all," he adds, "it is my business, and therefore it will reflect my values." Even for employees who have no contact with the public.

Another Christian is always careful to correct his neighbors when they say something unbiblical about God. "I have to draw the line at New-Age ideas about God. How can a Christian not respond to non-truth, especially about God? It's part of my witness, part of standing for the truth."

The notion of having to "draw the line somewhere" is fairly common in many Christian circles. It refers to the need to maintain limits in our interactions with unbelievers in a society that increasingly tolerates—if not celebrates—sin and incivility. Certain behaviors, values, and ideas, this line of reasoning goes, are so contrary to righteousness and the common good that they simply cannot be tolerated, and so must be challenged. Failing to draw the line, it is asserted, will compromise our witness and make us appear soft on sin. And though unbelievers may not particularly appreciate or even understand the lines we draw, they will respect our courage, and be reminded of the demands of God's law. Most agree that the act of drawing the line should not be done insensitively, or with rank belligerency, but there is no doubt that some friendships will suffer as a result of taking a stand. That is sad, of course, but hardly surprising, since our Lord warned us that the world would hate us just as it hated him. Besides, the real insensitivity is not loving someone enough to confront them with the truth.

Drawing the Line: A Few Questions

Where did this whole idea of "drawing the line" come from in the first place? Is it a biblical notion? Which texts would we

point to as teaching it? Where, in the Gospels, do we see Christ doing it? Are there texts that call the practice into question?

If drawing the line is a biblical notion, exactly which lines do we need to draw? Why these, and not others? Can there be different lines for different Christians? For different cultural settings? And when believers disagree over what lines should be drawn, how do we determine which are correct?

Drawing the line seems, at least on the surface, to be a rather combative approach to things. Exactly what "combat" is in view? Who are the combatants? If you do not agree that it is "combative," how would you characterize the practice? Why?

And how should we go about doing it? Is it possible to draw the correct line, but to do it in a way that dishonors the truth we are seeking to assert? Which is worse: drawing the correct line badly or failing to draw the line in the first place? Why?

Drawing the Line in Babylon

To reflect on such questions Christianly means we have to go to Scripture so our thinking is molded, by God's grace, by the truth of his word. One place to begin our study is in the first six chapters of the book of Daniel. There we watch four young believers live faithfully as exiles in Babylon, among people who did not share their deepest convictions. And as you study this text—which I strongly recommend—reflect on the lines they drew, the lines they did not draw, and how they went about it.

Daniel chapter 1. The Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, carried Daniel and his three friends into exile, ordering that they be taught "the language and literature of the Babylonians" (v. 4). His goal was that after three years they would "enter the king's service" (v. 5), to be included in the ranks of his "magicians and enchanters" (v. 20). He also gave them new names, (v. 7) the meanings of which were apparently related to Babylonian gods (see, for example, 4:8). There is nothing in the text that suggests Daniel and his friends raised any objection to any of this. They did,

however, “draw the line” over eating food provided by the king (v. 8-16).

Daniel chapter 2. Nebuchadnezzar had a troubling dream, and as a test for his advisors, insisted they both tell what the dream was and give the interpretation. When they couldn’t do it, he ordered their execution. Daniel and his three friends are included among the “magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers” to be executed (v. 2, 13). Daniel is able to give both the dream and the interpretation (v. 19), after which the king bows before him in honor, and orders incense be offered (!) to Daniel (v. 46). Daniel apparently accepts all this, plus a promotion, and asks that his friends be promoted as well (v. 48-49). Daniel even refers to the Babylonian king as “the king of kings,” to whom God has given “dominion and power and might and glory” (v. 37). He does insist, however, that his ability to tell the dream and interpret it is due to God’s grace and power (v. 27-28).

Daniel chapter 3. Daniel’s three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, refuse to bow to an image erected by the king, and are thrown into a furnace as a result. Nebuchadnezzar issues a profoundly cruel decree about God as a result of their divine rescue from the fire (v. 29). There is no record of either objection—or even discomfort—on their part. They simply accepted another promotion from the despot.

Daniel chapter 4. Nebuchadnezzar has another dream, and only Daniel, among all the wise men of Babylon, is able to interpret it. The text emphasizes the pagan meaning of Daniel’s new name (v. 8), and that he was considered “chief of the magicians” by the king (v. 9). Again, no record of any objection from Daniel on either point. Since the dream is a divine warning to Nebuchadnezzar, however, Daniel does use the opportunity to give the king a very brief and, by most measures, a carefully worded bit of advice concerning sin and repentance (v. 27).

Daniel chapter 5. Daniel provides the meaning of the writing that appears on the wall as Belshazzar is giving a feast for

his nobles. Daniel tells this new king that he does not want a reward for interpreting this troubling sign (v. 17), though in the end he accepts the King's gifts (v. 29). Interestingly, the king attributes Daniel's abilities to "the spirit of the gods" (v. 14), and though Daniel refers to "God" throughout their interaction, the text records no explicit objection by Daniel to the Belshazzar's pagan terminology.

Daniel chapter 6. Daniel's fellow governmental workers are jealous, and so hatch a plot to get Daniel executed by having him thrown to the lions. Darius, the new king in Babylon, is tricked into issuing a decree that for the next month no one can make a request (or pray) to any god or person, excepting the king himself. Daniel not only disobeys the decree, he insists on praying three times daily before an upstairs window opened towards the east (v. 10)—which is interesting, since the Old Testament law never required such "public" praying.

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Part 6

Singing In Babylon: Can There Be Joy In Exile?

Joy was in short supply among the Old Testament people of God when they were swept into exile in Babylon. It was a time of hardship and grief, a time when lamentation was more natural than laughter. We know this not merely by imagining what exile must have been like for them, but from the poetry they composed in that far away land.

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars,
we hung our harps,
for our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

(Psalm 137:1-3)

The setting may have been pastoral, but their hearts were heavy almost beyond endurance. Their instruments set aside, they grieved, their grief doubtlessly made worse by the taunting of the Babylonians. "How can we sing the songs of the Lord, while in a foreign land?" they asked (vs. 4). Centuries earlier Miriam and Moses led the Israelites in a great celebration of song when the Egyptians who threatened them were defeated (Exodus 15:1-21), but now it was the Babylonians who were in control, marching to victory under the banner of their pagan gods. Someday, the exiles knew, "all the trees of the forest will sing for joy" (Psalm 96:12), but for now the poplars growing along the bank of the river could serve to hold the exile's silent instruments. Far from Jerusalem, not able to feel fully at home in Babylon, the Old Testament people of God found themselves living among people who did not share their deepest convictions and values. There was much in Babylonian culture that was offensive to righteousness, and the Jewish exiles had good reason for sadness. They had lost much, were under assault, and found themselves living and raising their families in a culture which was both promiscuous and pagan.

"How can we sing the songs of the Lord," they asked, "while in a foreign land?" How is it possible to be joyous in exile? A good question.

A good question for us, as well. After all, modern American culture is, by and large, much more like Babylon than Jerusalem: increasingly more pagan than Christian. And, like the ancient Jewish exiles, we find ourselves living among people who not only do not share our deepest convictions, they often find them implausible. Let's face it: joy can be hard in such a setting.

Joy as a Christian Characteristic

Before we reflect on our struggle with joy, however, there is another, more basic question worth asking. It is this: To what extent are we as the people of God supposed to be characterized by joy? The only way to answer that is to turn to the Scriptures. Please

read with care these passages from the Scriptures, which are chosen, almost at random, from the more than 400 texts which address the topic of joy explicitly.

Deuteronomy 16:13-15. God gives his people instructions for a week-long festival to be held each autumn. “Celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress. Be joyful at your Feast—you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns. For seven days celebrate the Feast to the LORD your God at the place the LORD will choose. For the LORD your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.”

Psalm 16:11. The people of God have always understood that joy is associated with the gift of redemption. “You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”

Psalm 19:8. Since God is the source of all that is good, hearing his word is a joyous affair. “The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.”

Psalm 33:1-3. In a fallen world, joy is also a matter of obedience. “Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.”

Psalm 51:12. It is also a matter for intercession. “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”

Psalm 66:1-2. Not merely for believers, all of creation is to rejoice before the glory and greatness of God. “Shout with joy to God, all the earth! Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious!”

Luke 2:10. From the narrative of Christ’s birth: “...the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of

great joy that will be for all the people.'"

John 15:11. Jesus speaks to his disciples about loving him by obeying him. "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

Romans 15:13. The apostle Paul writes a thoughtful letter to the Christians in Rome, and near the end, he includes this blessing: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

James 1:2. Another apostle reflects on going through hard times: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds..."

1 Peter 1:8. A third apostle speaks to believers who are being persecuted: "Though you have not seen him [meaning Jesus], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy."

Simply stated, joy is central to Christian faithfulness. It is a grace, a gift of God, a fruit of the indwelling Spirit. "Obedience is doing what we are told," John Piper notes. "And we are told to delight ourselves in the Lord... In fact, when the psalm says, 'Serve the Lord with gladness,' it implies that the pursuit of joy must be part of all our obedience" (Piper's emphasis). The reverse side of the issue is worth remembering as well. "I desire the dejected Christian to consider," the Puritan Richard Baxter wrote, "that by his heavy and uncomfortable [i.e., unattractive] life he seemeth to the world to accuse God and his service, as if he openly called Him a rigorous, hard, unacceptable Master, and His [service] a sad, unpleasant thing."

None of this means, of course, that we can never grieve when grieving is appropriate in this sad world—Jesus did not laugh at Lazarus' tomb. Nor does it mean that we all have to respond identically to every situation. Nor does it mean that the irritating, yellow "happy face" must be our personal symbol. In fact, there

are few things more antithetical to Christian faith than the syrupy shallowness which suggests everything is simply fine, where grief is suppressed, or where struggles and doubts which tear at the soul are answered with cheap clichés. That is not joy; it is a lie. If Christ was anything, he was ruthlessly realistic, and he expects his followers to be like him. Being characterized by joy does not mean we don't know sadness; it means that we will be quick to comfort, slow to speak, and always on the lookout—even in the most unlikely of places—for those hidden, glimmering, hopeful evidences of the grace of God which delight the soul like a drink of cold water on a very hot and humid day. Christian joy is not: "Don't worry. Be hap-py." Quite the opposite. True Christian joy involves seeing the world as it truly is, in all its darkness and despair and alienation and death—and still knowing something of joy for the simple reason that our hope is not in this sad world, but in the One who has overcome the world.

So, Are We?

That being the case, then, to what extent are we characterized by joy? Are we, the people of God, known as people who are filled to overflowing with a deep and infectious delight in people, events, life, creation, creativity, and God? Or are we known to our non-Christian colleagues and neighbors, by and large, as those who can be counted on to be more often negative, even judgmental, and rather quick to disagree?

I confess that I have absolutely no data on this issue, and I suppose we might disagree about it, but I don't notice long lines of unbelievers standing around wanting to know why in the world we are so joyous.

I wonder why that is. After all, we of all people have reason for joy. Our Lord's tomb remains empty, meaning that death—our final enemy—has been soundly defeated. The deep alienation which separated us from God has been met by grace, meaning that the Judge of all the earth is now our Father. The work of our hands

is truly significant, for we are called by God into his service, and all that we do across all of life and culture can be done to his glory. And even when things seem to go from bad to worse—in our lives or in the wider culture—we need not despair, since our sovereign God has promised that someday, by his grace and in his good timing, righteousness will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Wouldn't it seem that people who really believed that would exhibit a deep and infectious delight in life, people, culture, and the grace of God? Shouldn't such a community echo with the wonderful healing power of laughter, when delight redeems sadness, and joyfully spills out into glad and spontaneous praise and gratitude?

I ask again: Why are we not known for this as the community of God's people?

Six Barriers to Joy

Joy may be something that should characterize us as the Christian community, but that doesn't mean we can simply turn it on like water from a spigot. And there is no formula, no steps of action, no techniques to make it happen. The very fact that joy is a fruit of the Spirit means that without the grace of God, true joy is impossible. Joy is a gift, not a commodity.

The Old Testament Jewish exiles wondered how they could sing songs of joy in Babylon, and we might wonder the same for ourselves. Yet, even in Babylon they remained the people of God, and even in that pagan place they could trust him, serve him, and even learn to rejoice in him. There were barriers to being faithful in Babylon, no doubt, and there are barriers to joy that we must face honestly as the people of God if we are to be faithful in our postmodern culture. Identifying some of these barriers allows us to care for and minister to one another so that joy can become a reality—not perfectly of course, but increasingly—in this sad world. I will identify six barriers that are worth some prayer and

thought.

Barrier #1. Sentimentality

Sentimentality is a cheap counterfeit of the real thing; the easy shallow happiness which comes from refusing to squarely face the darkness and pain of this sad world. It's the idea that we have to be happy regardless of what happens. That every question has a compelling answer, and that every doubt can be fully and easily resolved. That every story worth telling has a happy ending. That art should be pretty. Sentimentality says that to grieve at the funeral of a loved one is unbecoming for a believer, especially if the person who died was a professing Christian. And, if taken to its logical conclusion, it says that if a bus runs over your foot as you stand by the curb, you won't yell in pain, you'll smile sweetly and say, "hallelujah."

Sentimentality is dangerous because, on the surface at least, it can look like joy. It does, after all, look rather happy. It is, however, merely a cheap imitation, and as such, a source of both unfaithfulness and, at times, great pain. Sent-imentality keeps us from mourning with those who grieve, and makes those who have suffered loss feel guilty for their pain. It keeps people from opening their lives to one another in community and accountability, because no one wants to be seen as needy if everyone else seems to have it all together. Sentimental happiness is a superficial thing, lacking both depth and grace. Joy refreshes; sentimentality burdens.

There is a lot of sentimentality in the Christian community today. It often shows up in our music, our art, and in the clever way we share without ever becoming truly vulnerable. Or in the way we pray by stringing together clichés and religious phrases that sound pious, but actually say very little, and which reveal nothing of the reality of our lives.

It is difficult to speak of this without causing offense or misunderstanding. If I suggest, for example, that the work of

Thomas Kinkade—sold as prints, books, and calendars in Christian book stores—is suffused with a smarmy sentimentality unworthy of Christian affections, some will no doubt take exception. Being weaned from a diet of sentimentality can be a disheartening affair. Like Neo in the movie, The Matrix, choosing to live in reality with all its warts and disappointments and problems, can seem harsh and uncomfortable compared to living in a warm and apparently secure illusion. Still, reality is preferable to illusion, as is joy to sentimentality.

Speaking more personally, like many of you I have come through what could be called dark nights of the soul. And like you, I have had to suffer the sentimental clichés of well-meaning Christians who spoke when they should, quite frankly, have remained silent. But I have also been graced with friends who were simply content to be my friend, who knew what a precious gift silence can be, and who walked with me through that dark valley until at the end, by God's grace, we could rejoice together in the light. And that joy, shared in love, is enough to take your breath away.

The problem is not that sentimentality seeks to be happy, but that it seeks happiness without first fully embracing the deep sadness of this fallen world. It wants the delight of heaven without first enduring the cross. That is why sentimentality is more popular than joy: it skips the cross. That is also why it is a barrier to joy.

Barrier #2. Cynicism

Another barrier to joy is cynicism. We live in a cynical age, and if we aren't careful, we can absorb that perverse tendency into our very soul. Actually it is worse than that. It is not simply that we absorb it, we tend to embrace it, for the simple reason that a finely honed cynical tongue is a fun weapon to wield. Cynicism is amusement gone to seed, a sarcastic sense of humor with a note of bitterness that comes from the death of hope. The cynic laughs easily and often, but it is the laughter of bravado, not of joy. From

a cynical perspective, things are so bad and so out of control that little can be done, so even little glimmers of hope are viewed with a jaundiced eye.

There is simply no place for cynicism in the Christian life, for the simple reason that we are to be people of hope. Things are not out of control, Babylon has not won, and God is at work in history bringing all things to their appointed end in Christ. J. I. Packer sums it up well:

Living between the two comings of Christ, Christians are to look backward and forward: back to the manger, the cross, and the empty tomb, whereby salvation was won for them; forward to their meeting with Christ beyond this world, their personal resurrection, and the joy of being with their Savior in glory forever. New Testament devotion is consistently oriented to this hope; Christ is "our hope" (1 Timothy 1:1) and we serve "the God of hope" (Romans 15:13)... Though the Christian life is regularly marked more by suffering than by triumph (1 Corinthians 4:8-13; 2 Corinthians 4:7-18; Acts 14:22), our hope is sure and our mood should be one of unquenchable confidence; we are on the victory side.

We can nurture hope by carving out time to be in his word and before his face in prayer, nurturing true spirituality in a living walk with God. We can learn to be the people of God, until we can risk being vulnerable with one another, and so discover the hope-filled grace of true community. Together we can maintain a biblical perspective, cultivating gratitude and a sense of humor. We can refuse to be cynical, because God exists, he is good, and the story of history is his story of redemption. We can learn to be people of hope, and if hope does anything, it fills the heart with joy.

If sentimentality takes the cross too lightly, cynicism takes God too lightly.

Barrier #3. Amusement

This is another barrier to joy which arises from the surrounding culture (as cynicism does), rather than primarily from within the Christian community (as sentimentality does). In Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality, cultural critic Neal Gabler argues that we live in a culture in which entertainment is the standard by which all of life is increasingly defined and valued. "While an entertainment-driven, celebrity-oriented society is not necessarily one that destroys all moral value, as some would have it," Gabler says, "it is one in which the standard of value is whether or not something can grab and then hold the public's attention. It is a society in which those things that do not conform—for example, serious literature, serious political debate, serious ideas, serious anything—are more likely to be compromised or marginalized than ever before."

Though it takes many forms and is rarely identified as such, this primacy of entertainment has infected the church, sadly, almost as much as the surrounding culture. Believers rate church services by "what I got out of it," or by "how much it spoke to me," rather than by whether God was truly worshiped, and his word truly preached. It has become so common for Christians to choose a church based on what captures their children's interest that to question such a choice is to seem anti-family, if not downright churlish.

Both within the church and without, we are invited to choose among an ever growing array of options, each of which promises to be amusing. Movies, sports, seminars, leisure, TV, music, books, foods, travel, the Internet—the list is endless, and the possibilities can fill up any amount of available time. I am not saying that these things are evil, for they are not—received with gratitude and used with care, they are gifts of God's common grace which can resound to his glory. I am pointing out, instead, that there is a difference between being joyful and being merely amused or entertained. And that is the danger: being amused is

easy because entertainment is so accessible that our lack of joy is never noticed amidst all the laughter. Like amusement, joy is light-hearted; unlike mere entertainment, true joy is rooted in something substantial, something which transcends the moment.

Barrier #4. Boredom

On the one hand, boredom is hardly a new problem, and most of us can remember times when we've been so bored we've feared the monotony of life might just do us in. On the other hand, boredom takes on added meaning in a culture in which so much of life is defined by entertainment. In that setting, boredom sets in whenever entertainment fails, or when things simply aren't entertaining enough. The trap in this, of course, is that contrary to popular belief, precious little in life is actually very entertaining when you get right down to it. Thus the choice can seem rather stark: either escape into more entertainment, or be bored out of your mind. Actually there is one more option available: keep so busy you don't have time to notice either way.

Now, most adults I talk to claim they are rarely bored, but if the conversation continues they usually get around to mentioning how tedious their lives have be-come. Work and its stress, constant commuting, ferrying kids to untold numbers of events and activities, never enough time to read, to rest, to pray and wait on God, or to talk leisurely about the things that matter most, the constant sense of being be-hind, of things being beyond our control. Funny: perhaps we truly aren't bored, but the way we live sure can look boring. Missing what is important because we're overwhelmed by the urgent may not be boring, given the adrenalin our busyness and stress generates, but it sure is not faithfulness, either.

When older folks hear young people complaining about being bored they often greet the news with incredulity. "How in the world can you possibly be bored when you have more places to go, more things to do, more electronic toys to play with, more

friends to meet via phone and chat room and mall, more activities, more music and movies, more disposable income, and more everything else than anyone in all of human history? Why, when I was a kid... yada, yada, yada." But perhaps that's part of the problem. Having too much too easily can in the end spawn boredom rather than contentment. Anticipating something that we desire—and having to wait for it—increases its deliciousness when we finally achieve it, so when everything we desire is instantaneously available, the fulfillment we receive from anything is decreased. So more is needed. All the time. Besides, the younger generation has been reared when virtual reality—popular culture: movies, music, the Internet—tends to be far more exciting, far more intense, than everyday reality, which seems boring in comparison. After all, being in a darkened theater, transported to a world I cannot visit on my own, surrounded by music that moves me, and captured by a story which inflames my imagination is a far more intense way to spend two hours than cleaning the garage. One of the reasons why *The Matrix* was such a hit is that it addresses this very issue. Living with the greyness of reality when virtual reality is so much more attractive is a dilemma that is worthy of careful reflection. Boredom can be deadly to joy—and to much else, for that matter.

One more thing is worth mentioning here. The younger generation has heard us talk about our meaningful lives, our meaningful jobs, and our meaningful educations, but perhaps they have reason to be less than impressed by it all. They also see us constantly stressed, far too busy, defensive about our faith, and, by and large, more negative than joyful about culture. Perhaps it is time to stop criticizing those who claim to be bored, and to listen, instead. The conversation might just be...well, intense. The point is not that we must somehow try to make our lives as exciting as virtual reality, but surely Christian faithfulness should be so attractive, so real, so imaginative, so substantial, so freeing that the virtual in virtual reality becomes apparent.

Barrier #5. An Unhealthy Solemnity

Another barrier to joy is what I would call an unhealthy solemnity: an unrelenting seriousness about life, culture, and truth that believes in joy, but simply doesn't have time for it. The cynical Christian recognizes how bad things are and mistakenly thinks there is no reason for hope. The solemn Christian makes the opposite error: like the cynic they recognize how bad things are, but rather than give up hope, they hope in the wrong thing. They actually imagine they can solve the problem. So they declare culture war, and wade in with sword drawn. And since error is found everywhere, every tiny detail of life is examined and corrected with a grim and persistent seriousness. On the one hand, it is hard to be critical of such an approach, since anyone who takes holiness and truth this seriously should be applauded. On the other hand, it's rather hard to wish them well, because no one in their right mind would want to live in the solemn, joyless culture—or the solemn, joyless church—they produce.

Now, most of us are not that extreme, of course, but I must confess that sometimes I'm tempted to an unhealthy solemnity. Especially when it comes to evangelism and dealing with a world in rebellion against God. The problem is, of course, that solemnity does not attract as joy does, is negative in tone, and looks so much like anger that the two can scarcely be distinguished. Novelist Anne Lamott wonders why some Christians seem hostile that they're saved and you're not. The prodigal son returned to a father who was characterized by love, acceptance, and a joy that flowed out into celebration (Luke 15:11-32). One wonders what the story would be like if the father had instead met him with solemnity, and a few comments on the wise use of financial resources.

Life in a fallen world is serious, to be sure, but not unrelentingly so. It is not joyless. Even the world knows something of the reality of this. Consider the amazing film, Life is Beautiful, a warm and very human comedy set in the midst of the horror and

pain of a Nazi concentration camp. A father protects his son by humor, and uses laughter to defuse evil, even at the risk of his own life.

If we are to be people of joy, filled with a deep and infectious delight in people, events, life, creation, and God, it would be helpful to recover a Christian understanding of foolishness. From a Christian perspective, there are three types of fool.

The first type of fool is the person whom God considers a fool. "This is the fool," Os Guinness notes, "who litters history with the vast carelessness of his moral stupidity." This fool is often mentioned in Scripture, particularly in the Old Testament. "A fool finds no pleasure in understanding," Proverbs 18:2 says, "but delights in airing his own opinions." "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue" (Proverbs 17: 28). "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1).

The second type of fool is, in Guinness' words, "the fool bearer, the person who is ridiculed but resilient, the comic butt who gets slapped but is none the worse for the slapping. In Christian terms, the second fool is the one who is called a fool by the world, but who neither deserves it nor is destroyed by it... The second fool is the 'fool for Christ.'" This might not be what we necessarily want in life, of course, and it would be wrong to somehow seek it, but being faithful might just require it. And note: being a fool for Christ, though a serious matter, is not a grim, joyless affair. "We do not choose suffering simply because we are told to," John Piper explains, but because the one who tells us to describes it as the path to everlasting joy. He beckons us into the obedience of suffering not to demonstrate the strength of our devotion to duty, nor to reveal the vigor of our moral resolve, nor to prove the heights of our tolerance for pain; but rather to manifest, in childlike faith, the infinite preciousness of his all-satisfying promises.

Finally there is the third type of fool, the holy fool—the "fool maker"—who understands that sin is not only rebellion against God, but folly. That insight allows the holy fool to take sin seriously without forgetting to laugh at the absurdity of it. As a result, the holy fool uses humor creatively to reveal the foolishness of folly. It is this third type of fool that we must recover if we are to maintain a proper balance be-tween the seriousness of our calling in a fallen world, and the mistake of taking things too seriously. "The third fool is the jester," Guinness writes, "building up expectations in one direction, he shatters them with his punch line, reversing the original meaning and revealing an entirely different one."

Christian authors like Walker Percy, Dorothy Sayers, Flannery O'Connor, and G. K. Chesterton were holy fools who made the truth plausible to unbelievers, not by preaching at them, but by using humor and story to raise unexpected questions, and to puncture the illusions erected on a foundation of falsehood. Steve Turner does the same with his poetry. Rather than preach about the significance of being human, for example, he wrote this poem entitled, "The Conclusion:"

My love
she said
that when
all's
considered
we're only
machines.
I chained
her to my
bedroom wall
for future use
and she cried.

It is true, of course, than none of us are Chesterton and Sayers, but surely we can all learn to tell stories. Not many of us are poets, but we all have a sense of humor which can be nurtured. Few of us have considered how humor can be used to gently poke holes in ideas that are untrue, and how effective it is when a winsome story, well told and to the point, is inserted into a discussion of serious issues. Few of us even read poetry. Instead, too many of us approach life—especially evangelism—with an unhealthy solemnity which is frankly unattractive in its intensity. Sin and unbelief are serious, yes, but they are also folly; and one of the best ways to reveal foolishness for what it is, is not with grim pronouncements, but with the scalpel of satire.

We can read Jesus's parables again—with our imagination—and observe how Jesus interacted with unbelievers. We can fire our imaginations by reading the work of holy fools like Percy, Chesterton, Sayers, O'Connor, and Turner. We can learn to laugh at ourselves. And repenting of an unhealthy solemnity which does little to commend our faith, we can, by God's grace, begin to recover something of the holy fool as the people of God. As Guinness says, "Only the side with the ultimate truth [can] be sure of having the last laugh."

6. The Stress of Busyness

The final barrier to joy I will mention is the stress of busyness which plagues us in our oh-so-frantic culture.

Some of our busyness comes from the technology in our lives. Cars give us mobility, and the expectation we'll go more places and be involved with more activities. Answering machines and email increase the pace, and, once again, come with the expectation that we will respond faster to more people who have chosen to interrupt us. A few months ago I logged on to email in the morning and downloaded a message about a meeting which was 9 months away. Two hours later the friend who had sent the email phoned me long-distance. "You haven't responded," he said,

"Didn't you get my email?" Keep multiplying that sort of thing, and it's no wonder we feel overwhelmed.

Some of our busyness occurs because we are surrounded with a myriad good things to do—tapes to listen to, books to read, needs to meet, programs to join, meetings to attend, people to minister to. The problem is that we simply don't know how to say No to good things.

None of this is to suggest that we should throw out these technologies, nor that we should isolate ourselves in order to remain pure. Rather, my goal is simply to point out that the stress of busyness that clogs our calendar can also sap our joy. God's call to us is faithfulness, which means that by his grace we can live out our calling in this period of history, discovering together what faithfulness means in our fragmented and frantic world.

One of the great hymns of the Church is "Joy to the world, the Lord is come." What is easy to forget, though, is that we are Christ's body in this sad world, and so it is in and through us that this joy is to be demonstrated and spread. By God's grace may we learn to be less negative, and quicker to agree than to disagree. May we be increasingly filled to overflowing with a deep and infectious delight in people, events, creativity, life, creation, and God. Not because we take things less seriously, but because we really do believe the Lord has, in fact, come. And if that doesn't fill us with joy, what would?


vii | finding the true, noble, and pure in babylon

Part 7

Finding The True, Noble And Pure In Babylon

It's a good thing the Bible identifies sin as folly, because sometimes it's almost impossible to keep from laughing. Relativism may be a deadly philosophy, but it can produce events of stunning absurdity. Consider this, for example, which appeared a few years ago in an article by John Leo in U. S. News & World Report. "In his new book, Leading with My Chin, Jay Leno tells a mildly embarrassing story about himself on the old Dinah Shore television show. The only problem with the incident is that it didn't happen to Leno. It happened to another comedian, Jeff Altman. Leno told Josef Adalian of the New York Post last week that he liked the story so much he paid Altman $1000 for the right to publish the tale as his own." If this wasn't a true story, it wouldn't be funny—it wouldn't even be believable.

We don't need stories of ethical absurdity to remind us that anyone committed to holiness will have serious concerns living in Babylon. After all, Babylon is a society in which the Bible is considered to be merely one religious book among many, and the law of God to be nothing more than the primitive moral code of a religious minority. It would be different if we were living in Jerusalem, of course, but we aren't—we're in exile, to adopt a biblical metaphor, living among people who increasingly do not share our deepest convictions and values.

Given this reality, how can we live in a post-Christian culture without being contaminated by the fallenness around us? One common answer is that we should make Philippians 4:8 the standard for our involvement with the non-Christian world. In that text Paul tells the believers in Philippi that "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." This verse, then, provides us with a straightforward list of qualities by which we can determine exactly what we should allow to fill our minds. If the book or joke or TV show or pop song fails this simple test, then the Christian should set it aside. Besides, who would want to give precious time to something not characterized by the qualities in Paul's list?

This understanding of Philippians 4:8, of course, would call into question some of what we publish in this newsletter. For example, since the music of Nine Inch Nails doubtlessly fails this test, is it wise for Dr. Seel to expose himself to it in order to write his review found in Critique #7-1999? How can we suggest that films be a window of insight to help us understand our culture when so many include material that even some non-Christians find objectionable? Would I say that watching The X-Files regularly is filling my mind with whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy (Critique #3 - 2000)? How then should we understand Philippians 4:8?

Our heart's deepest desire

First, we need to remind ourselves that not only must we have a concern for holiness, we must yearn for it. Jesus expects this of his people. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," he taught in the Sermon on the Mount, "for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6). Luther describes it as a "hunger and thirst for righteousness that can never be curbed or stopped or sated, one that looks for nothing and cares for nothing except the accomplishment and maintenance of the right, despising everything that hinders this end." The apostle Peter stresses the same thing when he teaches us to be holy, and then repeats himself to drive the point home. "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:14-16).

Those who teach that Philippians 4:8 is the standard for holiness by which to measure our involvement with the non-Christian world are to be commended for desiring holiness. If we love the Lord Christ as Savior we can never be complacent about evil. It is not enough that I believe that sin is bad in some vague theoretical sense; rather I must be mortified at the sin I see in myself. I must resist excusing myself, and by God's grace never grow comfortable with those sins which particularly plague me. "There is an old comedy," James Packer writes, "in which an escaped lion takes the place of the shaggy dog beside the armchair and the comic affectionately runs his fingers through its mane several times before realizing that, as we say, he has a problem. We act like that with regard to our sinful habits. We treat them as friends rather than killers, and never suspect how indwelling sin when indulged enervates and deadens. This, one fears, is because we are already its victims, never having known what it is to be really alive in our relationship with God, just as children born with crippled legs never know what it is to run around, as distinct from hobbling."

A heart's desire for holiness, a hunger and thirst for righteousness is not optional for the believer. This means that we must know ourselves, identify those areas in which we are weak, and resist temptation. Living in a fallen world means we are living among those whose lives and art express both something of glory, for they are made in God's image, and something of the Fall, for they too are rebels against God. Living in Babylon means that many of our neighbors and friends may mistake evil for good, and may disdain what is good, mistaking it for weakness or prudishness. "Nearly all the wisdom we possess," Calvin says in the first line of his Institutes, "consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." As we get to know God, we love him and desire to be like him, and he is holy. Knowing ourselves means, among other things, we will take our disposition to sin with deadly seriousness, making sure we are part of accountable relationships in the community of God's people, and seeking to grow in grace by the Spirit's sanctifying power.

Taking holiness seriously also means we will be discerning about our culture's lust for entertainment. If entertainment means allowing something which amuses us to wash over us as we relax and give ourselves mindlessly to it, then there is no place for entertainment in the Christian world and life view. We live in a fallen world. At no time can we cease to be discerning, whether watching a movie or the news, reading a book bought at amazon.com or at a Christian bookstore, undergoing training at work, or listening to a sermon. This does not mean that novels and films can not be enjoyed, but rather we must be discerning as we enjoy them. In fact, I would argue that the more we engage the book or painting or film or whatever thoughtfully and critically and biblically, the greater can be our enjoyment of it.

Misunderstanding Philippians 4:8

If holiness is so important, it seems reasonable to argue that we should withdraw from anything that fails to measure up to the

standard Paul gives in this text. Anything that is not true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy is, therefore, out-of-bounds for the believer, and must be set aside. And, since precious little in Babylonian culture comes even close to passing this test, it is inappropriate (at best) and dishonoring to Christ (at worst) to get involved with it, regardless of the reason.

I believe this understanding of Philippians 4:8 is mistaken. Let me explain why.

We live in a fallen world. A world which, though created by God and declared to be good by him, is now abnormal and under his judgment because of our sin and rebellion. It's not merely that human beings occasionally commit some sin, but that by nature we are sinners. It is not surprising, then, that the effects of the Fall permeate all that we are and do. Since we are created in God's image we bear true significance, but we are also fallen which means that everything about us is tainted by sin. It's not just non-Christians of whom this is true, but Christians as well. We are all sinners, and thus all fall short of God's glory. Even if we are redeemed by God's grace and deeply desire to honor our Lord above all, we realize that even our worship is incomplete, at best, and flawed, at worst. We seek as believers to live to God's glory, but we are well aware that this can occur only by grace. Until our redemption is consummated, even our service to him is imperfect, affected by the inevitable ripples of the Fall.

This means that nothing anyone does or makes in this fallen world (except for Christ, of course) measures up fully to the list Paul gives in Philippians 4:8. Everything falls short in one way or another. As a result, trying to use this text as a measure by which to draw lines for our involvement in a non-Christian world ends up being a rather subjective affair. We don't intend that, of course, but how could it be any different? If nothing in this bent world fully meets this standard, we end up drawing our lines arbitrarily. We rule out the things we tend to be uncomfortable with, and then conveniently, we tend to ignore the fact that what we have ruled

"in" doesn't meet the standard, either.

This is not, of course, an argument for not making distinctions. Some things do partake more of purity than do others, and that is significant. Christians need to be discerning in such things. On the other hand, the reality of living in a fallen world means that if Philippians 4:8 is to be used as a standard by which to measure involvement in a post-Christian culture, we should be honest enough to admit that our application will be, by definition, both subjective and arbitrary.

Let's take literature as an example. No doubt some evangelicals would be troubled by the language in Foreign Bodies, a novel that is not featured on the shelves of Christian bookstores. Yet, it is a deeply Christian story, by which I mean that it not only is written from the perspective of a Christian world view, but the main character is an outspoken believer who leads a friend to faith. It's a postmodern novel, written by a Gen-Xer, and yet the gospel of Christ is expressed clearly. Many would argue that the rough language, examined in light of Philippians 4:8, fails the "pure" test, and so the novel must be ruled out-of-bounds. Yet, I would argue the language is realistic for the sort of non-Christian character speaking in the story. Does not that make it "true?" Many of those who are uncomfortable with Foreign Bodies, on the other hand, have no trouble with the poorly written fiction hawked in religious book stores. Yet, do not these novels fail to be "lovely," a term which includes the notion of aesthetic excellence? In terms of quality of writing they are neither "excellent" nor "praiseworthy." The truth of the matter is that we are more comfortable with the one than with the other.

Because we live in a fallen world, using Philippians 4:8 as a standard by which to measure our involvement in a non-Christian culture will always, by definition, end up being both subjective and arbitrary. The text does not tell us where to draw lines in a fallen world; it is used by believers to justify the lines they draw.

If Philippians 4:8 means we can only think about what is

true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy, it is impossible to have a thoughtful relationship with a non-Christian. If we compare Philippi-ans 4:8 with Romans 3:9-18 where the apostle describes the characteristics of the person apart from God, we find they are polar opposites. True: "there is no one who understands." Right: "there is no one righteous." Pure: "their throats are open graves." Lovely: "their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." Admirable: "they have together become worthless." Praiseworthy: "there is no one who does good."

Yet, surely we do not believe that Paul is telling the Philippians never to think about their unbelieving neighbors and co-workers. Or that their relationships with non-Christians should somehow be mindless or thoughtless. Understanding Philippians 4:8 as a standard by which to measure the Christian's involvement in a non-Christian world falls apart when we compare Scripture with Scripture—an important key in rightly interpreting the Bible.

And finally, if this is how Paul intended us to understand this text, why did he not live that way himself? In Acts 17 we find him reading Greek philosophers, thinking about what they were saying in order to discern truth in the midst of a work about the pagan god Zeus. And Paul expects us to model ourselves after his example, for the text we are discussing is followed by this: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put into practice" (Philippians 4:9). If we interpret Philippians 4:8 to be the standard by which to measure our involvement with the non-Christian world, we must first explain Paul's failure to abide by his own teaching.

Even if motivated by a desire for holiness, this interpretation of Philippians 4:8 will cause us to live less than faithfully as God's people in a fallen world. It will tend to make us withdraw, when we are called, instead, to engage, and will erect unnecessary barriers between non-Christians and the gospel.

Obeying Philippians 4:8

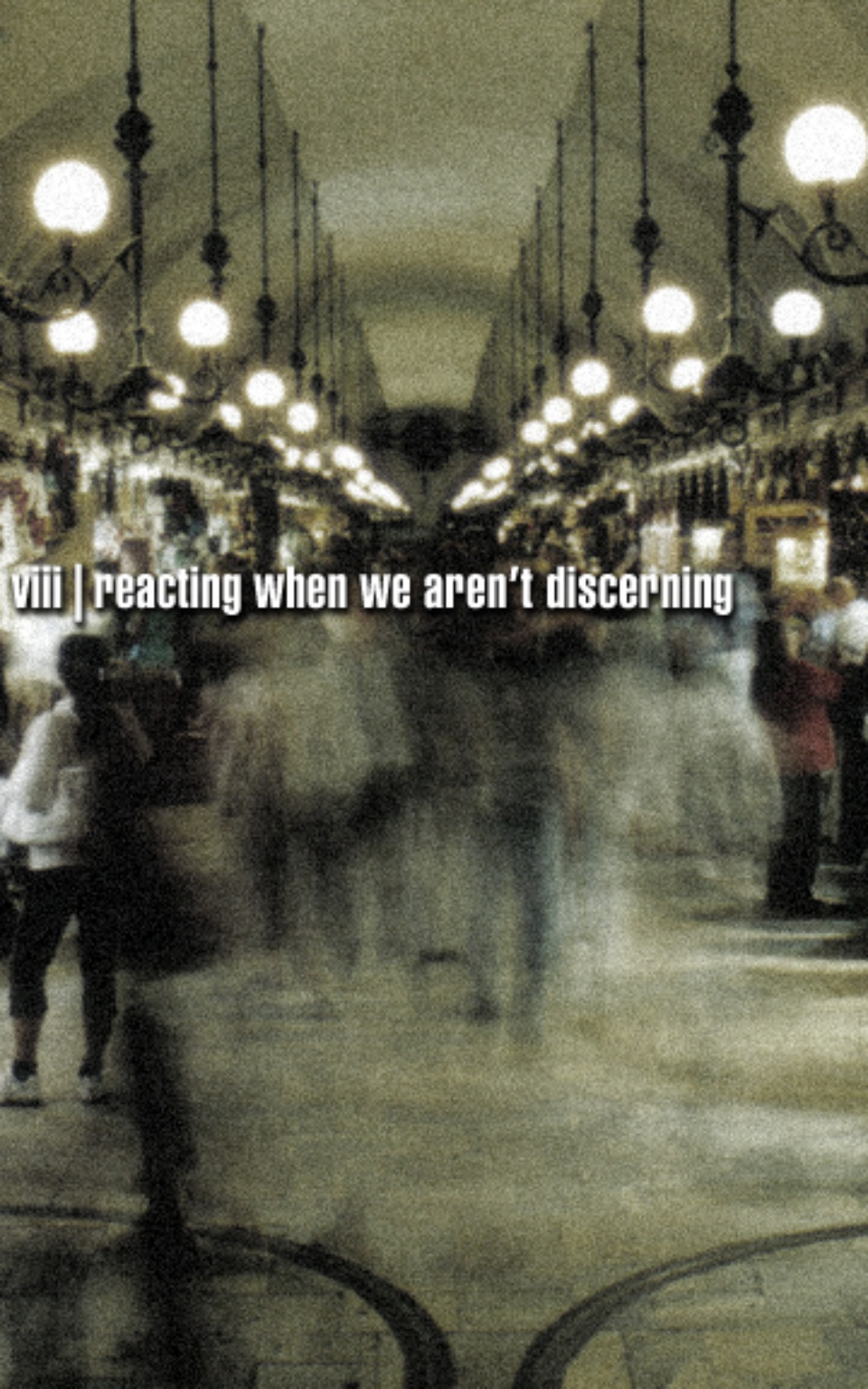
The apostle is not giving us a checklist by which to measure our involvement with the non-Christian world. Neither is he giving us a justification for withdrawing from the people and culture of Babylon. He is rather commending—and commanding—the development of a fully Christian mind and heart and imagination. When he tells us to "think about such things," he is using a word which means to meditate and reflect on, to contemplate, with the result that what is meditated upon becomes so much a part of us that it molds our thinking, our doing, and our feeling. In other words, he is teaching us what is necessary to prepare us to engage the culture and people of Babylon with the gospel, without compromising, and without being seduced by Babylonian ideas and values.

The apostle's instruction here is parallel to what he writes in Romans 12, when he insists that a renewed mind is required if we are to live transformed lives instead of being pressed into the mold of the world. The spiritual disciplines of solitude, prayer, and meditation on the word of God grounds us in what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy, preparing us to live faithfully in exile in Babylon. Just as Christ did not have to be withdrawn from a sinful world to be holy, neither do we. And the Gospels record numerous instances when Jesus spent time alone with his Father. We must follow his example.

This doesn't make Philippians 4:8 easier to obey; in fact, I would argue it makes it much harder. It's reassuring to be able to justify withdrawing from some activity or person or cultural artifact that I find offensive or uncomfortable. Far more difficult is the realization that not only am I called to engage the culture of Babylon with the gospel, but that I must nurture and grow in the spiritual disciplines. But who has unhurried time in the midst of our busyness to meditate, to pray, to wait quietly before the Lord? And yet the command of Scripture is clear: "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is

lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

Reading the Word and reading the world. Without the first, the second is not only impossible, it is dangerous.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Part 8

Reacting When We Are Not Discerning

Living in a pluralistic culture in a fallen world means that our neighbors, co-workers, and friends do not necessarily share our deepest convictions and values. Our situation is similar to the time that the Old Testament people of God found themselves in exile in Babylon. In Jerusalem God's word was the final authority, while in Babylon a wide variety of world views and religions competed for acceptance. This is why we find ourselves—at least occasionally and perhaps far more often than we'd like—in uncomfortable situations which require choices. Choices about which we feel uncertain, unsure, and unprepared. And because we are uncomfortable, we tend to simply react. We don't exactly plan on things unfolding this way, of course. Reactions, after all, tend to just happen. Like what might transpire when we're giving a coworker a drive home after work and they insist on being dropped off at a porn theater instead.

In his book *Chameleon Christianity*, Dick Keyes points out that Christians tend to react in two distinct ways. We tend to either accommodate or withdraw; to either compromise with our post-Christian culture or isolate ourselves from it; to either blend in or pull back. And though these are the ways we tend to react as individuals, they can also be identified corporately in the church at large. Among God's people are pockets of both groups, each certain their reaction to the world is correct. So certain, in fact, that they look at the other tendency with deep suspicion, if not open hostility.

This two-fold pattern is not unique to Christians, but can be observed in any minority group that senses itself at odds with the wider culture. "Sociologists tell us," Keyes writes, "that dissonant groups within a larger society react to reduce the potential for friction in two predictable ways. One is to compromise their distinctive beliefs and way of life and so reduce their conflict with society. The other is to keep their dissonance and tribalize, retreating within their own group and thus losing contact with society." Some ethnic groups, for example, have quickly sought to disappear into the melting pot which is America, while others have formed little enclaves in an effort to maintain their cultural distinctiveness. Regardless of how natural this two-fold pattern seems to be, however, we must ask whether either accommodation or tribalism demonstrates Christian faithfulness in a pluralistic world.

Accommodation: The Chameleon Reaction

The first reaction is to tend to accommodate as much as possible, to go with the flow, to blend in so as not to make unnecessary waves. Christians who accommodate, Keyes says, act like chameleons in our post-Christian culture. They seek safety by blending in so as not to attract notice, by never doing anything that would cause them to stand out from the crowd. They want to be left alone by a hostile world, to live and to raise their family (if

they have one) in relative peace and security.

So, for example, since intolerance is not tolerated in our pluralistic society, it's easy for us to react to the pressure by quietly downplaying the radical claims of Christ. So we say Jesus is "my Savior," and "my Lord," but seldom if ever "Lord of all." And it works; we find that not only do non-Christians not object to this limited claim, they may even be happy for us. "Glad Jesus works for you," one man said enthusiastically when he learned I was a Christian. "What does it for me is being a Druid."

Like all reactions, the process of accommodation is not very difficult once we begin down that path. Since divine judgment and hell are also not tolerated, they too can go unmentioned. Sin is on the taboo list also, of course, along with any mention of God's law or absolute truth, since both are closely related to judgment. So we talk of love, God's love, and what our faith brings us, of personal peace, or fulfillment, or the comforting sense that we aren't alone in this lonely and fragmented world, and we let it go at that. People aren't turned off, and since many churches are accommodating as well, no one need be offended.

What we're actually doing, of course, though we may not realize it, is reducing the gospel to what the culture finds comfortable and acceptable. We're accommodating to the world, even though our motivation may have seemed pure: a desire to gain a hearing, or to guard ourselves and our families from needless hostility. "Saltless salt pictures the Christian blending in with the surrounding society," Keyes says, "just as a chameleon changes its color to blend in protectively with its surroundings. This is the Christian individual or group that adapts, accommodates, compromises, and is diluted. Like salt that has lost its taste, the Christian is useless to carry out Jesus' purposes because dissonance with the world has been reduced to resonance or sameness. A distinctive Christian identity is lost, and there is nothing to offer the world that the world does not already have."

Tribalism: The Musk Ox Reaction

The second reaction Christians tend to make is to withdraw from the culture, to pull back into the safety of home and church, and thus protect ourselves and those we love from a hostile world. We act like musk oxen, Keyes says, which rally around in a tight defensive circle when the herd is threatened by wolves. Our pluralistic culture is not only post-Christian, it is offensive and dangerous, so we pull back our lives into the circle of family and church where God's word is still honored. Where we feel safe, confident, and at home, sheltered from both the temptations of the world and the onslaught of a decadent and immoral culture that has turned its back on God. Within the circle we maintain our distinctiveness with great vigor, but we maintain security by erecting a barrier between us and the society outside.

"Hidden light," Keyes says, is the metaphor Jesus used for "Christian tribalism—the protective containment of Christian distinctiveness within a Christian ghetto or subculture. It entails Christian tribal dialects, tribal education, tribal music, tribal television, and even the Christian tribal yellow pages—all mystifying to those uninitiated into the tribe. Much time is spent reassuring the membership of the superiority of their beliefs and traditions over the terrible evils lying outside the fortress walls. The psychology of tribal life demands proscribed answers for most of life's questions. The New Testament, however, does not give us enough of these rules to hold a tribe together; it allows far too much freedom. So when a church or Christian group becomes tribal, part of the process includes adding many rules and prohibitions to the ethics of the New Testament." Rules about how children are to be educated, perhaps, or what movies are allowed, what music can be enjoyed, or any number of other issues in which faithfulness is reduced to legalism.

Since the tribe isolates itself, engaging non-Christians and the wider culture with the gospel becomes increasingly difficult. "Typically," Keyes notes, tribalized Christians "will not know

others socially who are not already Christians. Evangelism then becomes artificial and contrived, if not insensitive and belligerent." One time, for example, after speaking at a weekend church conference, a woman told me she had been shocked at some of what I had said in my messages. My goal had been to identify and clarify some of the challenges we face as Christians in our pluralistic culture. To show from Scripture how we can be discerning, developing skill in thinking, speaking, and living so that we communicate the truth of the gospel in a way that can be understood. "I was shocked at what you said about what non-Christians believe and do," she told me. "I couldn't figure out why I was shocked, until I was listening to your sermon this morning. Then it dawned on me. I don't know any non-Christians. We're so busy home-schooling our children, plus all the activities at church—I simply don't have time for non-Christians."

Reacting to Reacting

Being reactionary in a fallen world—whether we accommodate like chameleons or withdraw in a protective circle as musk oxen—may seem so natural, so unplanned, and so utterly commonsensical at the time as to be hardly worth much consideration. The truth is, however, being reactionary reflects poorly on us as Christians, on our faith, and ultimately on our Lord.

For one thing, being reactionary makes us appear defensive and fearful. Both musk oxen and chameleons are reacting to a threat. We may have tasted hostility towards our faith, or a sense of shame at not having sufficient reasons for our convictions, or we may feel so deeply uncertain about what to say or do as a Christian that we react either by trying to disappear from view or by lashing out as a sort of cultural warrior for Christ.

Consider, by way of example, the following email that swept through Christian communities, warning them about the *Harry Potter* novels by J. K. Rowling:

[quote]

>>This is the most evil thing I have laid my eyes on in 10 years, and no one seems to understand its threat. The Harry Potter books are THE NUMBER ONE selling children's books in the nation today. Just look in any bookstore window.

>>Harry Potter is the creation of a former UK English teacher who promotes witchcraft and Satanism. Harry is a 13 year old "wizard." Her creation openly blasphemes Jesus and God and promotes sorcery, seeking revenge upon anyone who upsets them by giving you examples (even the sources with authors and titles) of spells, rituals, and demonic powers.

>>I think the problem is that parents have not reviewed the material. Let me give you a few quotes from some of the influenced readers themselves:

>>"The Harry Potter books are cool, 'cause they teach you all about magic and how you can use it to control people and get revenge on your enemies," said Hartland, WI, 10 year old Craig Nowell, a recent convert to the New Satanic Order Of The Black Circle.

>>And here is dear Ashley, a 9 year old, the typical average age reader: "I used to believe in what they taught us at Sunday School," said Ashley, conjuring up an ancient spell to summon Cerebus, the three-headed hound of hell. "But the Harry Potter books showed me that magic is real, and that the Bible is nothing but boring lies."

>>DOES THIS GET YOUR ATTENTION!! If not, how about a quote from the author herself, J. K. Rowling: "I think it's absolute rubbish to protest children's books on the grounds that they are luring children to Satan," Rowling told a London Times reporter in a July 17 interview. "People should be praising them for that! These books guide children to an

understanding that the weak, idiotic Son of God is a living hoax who will be humiliated when the rain of fire comes."

>>Please FWD to every pastor, teacher, and parent you know. This author has now published FOUR BOOKS in less than 2 years of this "encyclopedia of Satanism" and is surely going to write more. Pray for this lost woman's soul. Pray also for the Holy Spirit to work in the young minds of those who are reading this garbage that they may be delivered from its harm. [end quote]

Set aside for a moment the errors of fact in this email. Set aside also the foolish claim that "sources" for sorcery are included in the stories, since the books of magic used by Potter consist of such titles as *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* by Phyllida Spore, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* by Newt Scamander, and *A Beginners Guide to Transfiguration* by Emeric Switch. Set aside the fact that the quote by Rowling is not from an interview in *The London Times*, but from *The Onion*, a national satirical newspaper that publishes fictional spoofs on topics appearing in the news. Set all that aside for the moment, and consider instead merely the tone or flavor of this emailed warning. Reflect on the impression such a reaction might leave on a thoughtful non-Christian. Or on a child who overhears the warnings being passed around in Christian circles. Would the impression be one of quiet confi-dence that Christ is risen from the dead, and is therefore trium-phant over death and Satan? An assurance that the gospel is the power of God who is bringing all things to their appointed end in Christ? An eagerness to discuss the world view of neo-paganism in light of the claims of the gospel? Or is there some-thing of fearfulness here, a bit of defensiveness?

We need to train our children to respond to the claims of neo-paganism, but surely we should begin that training by demonstrating a quiet confidence in the claims of Christ. We would be wiser to applaud the interest in spirituality which is sweeping the

culture, and invite a closer examination of the book which reveals Jesus in all his glory. Though the author of this email means well, the hysteria surrounding the *Harry Potter* books is simply another instance of Christian tribalism. As a reaction to a set of children's books it makes us appear both fearful and defensive, when we have no reason to be either. In this regard, we should be willing to learn from the mistakes of previous generations. The tendency of early Fundamentalists to withdraw from the culture and the life of the mind similarly cast Christian faith in negative terms. "Withdrawal encouraged fanaticism and paranoia in them," Jewish scholar Alan Wolfe says, "and confirmed to others a sense that if this was religion, they were better off without it."

The chameleon reaction also makes Christians appear afraid and defensive. Shying away from certain topics, or talking about only parts of the faith, or deflecting questions that make us uncomfortable all give the impression of fearfulness. The impression is given that perhaps what we believe won't stand up to close scrutiny after all, or that there aren't good and sufficient reasons to believe in Christ. That's not what we intend, of course, but that doesn't change how those around us view our evasiveness.

The second problem with reacting, at least in the accommodating or chameleon variety, is that it weakens the very faith it sets out to protect. Blending in so that the gospel has nothing new to say to a lost and dying world is not faithfulness but cowardice. Diluting the gospel until a post-Christian culture is comfortable with it is to dilute it until it becomes something less than the gospel. No thoughtful unbeliever will take our message seriously if we have nothing radical or worthwhile to offer. With nothing distinctive to say, we have no reason to be heard.

The third problem with reacting, particularly in the tribal variety, is that it makes us seem negative and judgmental as Christians. It's in the nature of reacting to zero in on areas of disagreement rather than agreement. After all, if we didn't disagree there would be no need to react in the first place. When my wife

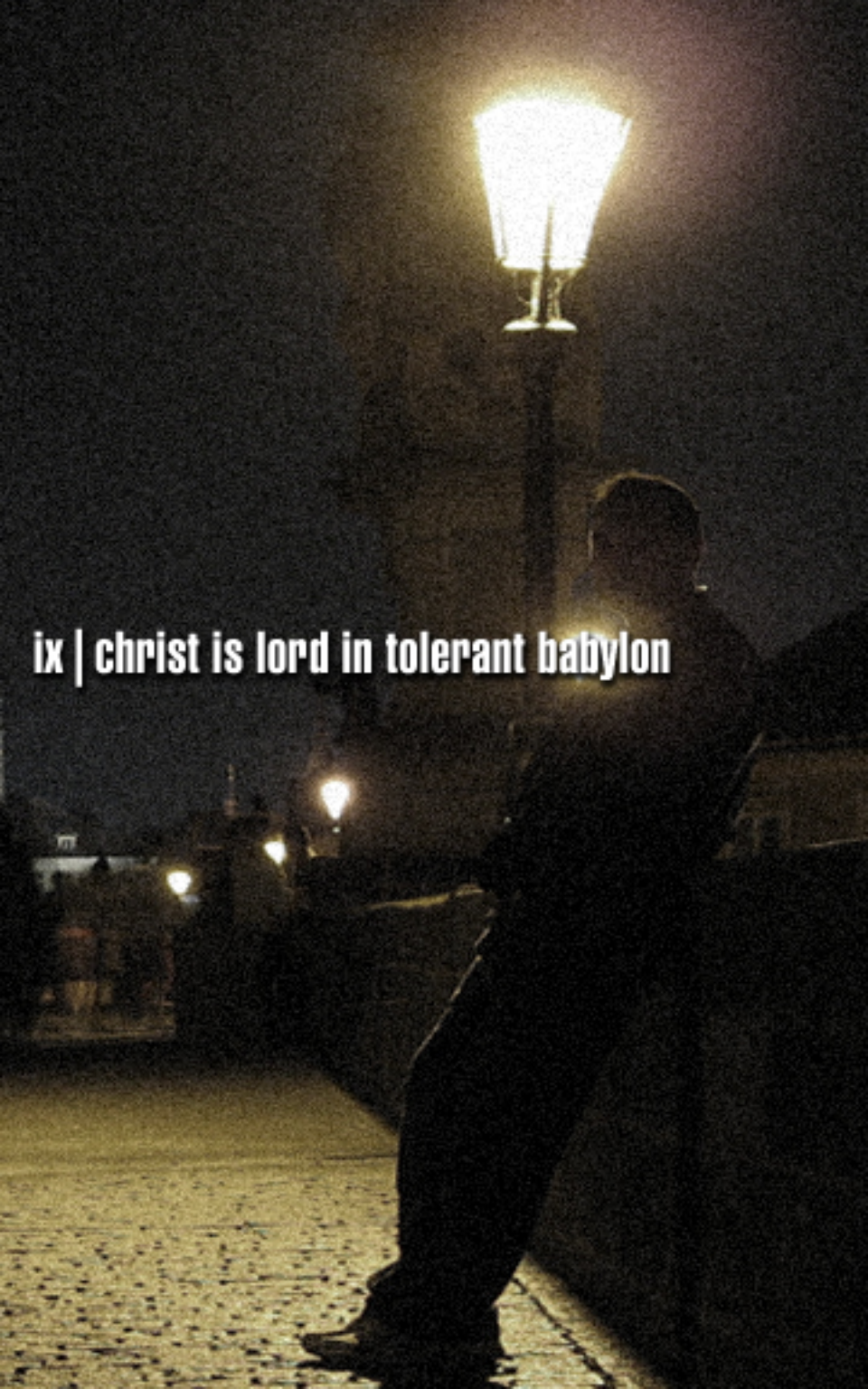
and I host discussion groups and seminars, for example, in order to help people develop skill in discernment, we always insist that before we identify where we disagree with the film or article (or whatever), we first identify where we agree as Christians. Not only does this lend balance to the discussion, it transforms the tone of the interaction and changes the atmosphere in the room. Many believers are so used to reacting negatively to things that agreeing before saying anything else comes as something of a shock. Repeatedly we've been told that this simple discernment exercise has revolutionized how they see and respond to things. It's not that we shouldn't disagree when necessary, but that there is a profound difference between disagreeing and merely being disagreeable.

Instead of Reacting, be Discerning

Faithfulness for the Christian involves more than simply reacting to things, which only makes us look defensive and fearful, weak and negative. Because God has revealed himself in the living Word who is Jesus, and in the written word, the Scriptures, our minds and hearts and imaginations can be renewed so that we are discerning, able to see things increasingly from God's point of view. An ability to think and talk about the issues and questions that arise about what we believe, and why. An ability to respond winsomely to those who see things differently than we do, instead of merely reacting to the ideas, values, and behavior of the non-Christians around us. An ability to think and live biblically even when we're confronted with situations that are not specifically mentioned in the Bible.

Unlike reacting, which merely happens, discernment is a skill that must be learned and practiced until it becomes a habit of the heart. It changes not only our posture in a fallen world, but the impression we leave as well. We are called to be neither chameleons nor musk oxen, but the people of God. We need not accommodate to the world nor withdraw from it for the simple

reason that someone far greater than the world has promised to never leave nor forsake us.


ix | christ is lord in tolerant babylon

Part 9

Christ Is Lord In Tolerant Babylon

In a fallen world, the truth of the gospel will in some way or another always be in tension with at least some of the ideas, values, and beliefs that happen to hold sway at the moment. The tension may shift from time to time or from generation to generation, but never ends, and will not until Christ returns to consummate his kingdom. Even if we lived in Jerusalem (speaking metaphorically), we wouldn't be free from sin, and sadly, those who take the Scriptures most seriously as God's word (as the Pharisees did) can run afoul of the truth. Since we find ourselves not in Jerusalem but living as exiles in pluralistic Babylon, among those who do not accept the Scriptures as God's word, we need to find a way to winsomely address those points at which the gospel comes most sharply into tension with Babylonian beliefs and values.

An obvious—and seriously troubling—point of tension arises from the postmodern notion that tolerance is a value that trumps all other considerations. In a pluralistic world, it is asserted, a multiplicity of religions jostle for acceptance, so to guard against an outbreak of religious warfare, no religion must claim superiority over the others. Besides, no one has a monopoly on truth. It's fine to believe in Jesus, the reasoning goes, but don't claim my belief in Baal is wrong or that Jesus is the only way to God. In Babylon, in other words, Jesus is merely one god among many, and his religion no better than any other.

As Dick Keyes points out in Chameleon Christianity, at points like this Christians must beware of two equally unhelpful reactions. The first accommodates to the surrounding culture, so that Christ's claim to be Lord of all is either quietly downplayed or perhaps even disbelieved. The second unhelpful reaction is to throw down the gauntlet, insisting that Christ's claim must be the opening point in the conversation, even if this stance isolates the church and effectively ends the discussion. Both reactions are highly attractive (in their own perverse way), which is why the believer who leaps in either direction always finds plenty of company. In reality, however, as Keyes shows, both reactions are not only unhelpful but constitute a denial of the gospel.

The two reactions just described are perhaps best understood as a false dilemma: either an attractive gospel or an uncompromising one. But as Christ's own example demonstrates, we need not choose between the two—and must not—because we are called to both. Faithfulness requires that we proclaim the gospel of Christ without compromise and that we show it to be both glorious and attractive because to do otherwise is to proclaim a lie. We must love our postmodern friends enough to refuse to downplay the good news that Jesus is Lord, as we creatively find ways to live out and talk about that truth in a way that can be understood in a pluralistic setting.

What might this look like?

Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian in Manhattan, can help us see what this sort of faithfulness might look like. Since September 11, roughly 30% of those attending services at Redeemer have been non-Christians. Non-Christians, he says, who are so "steeped in religious pluralism," that they "have little patience for claims of Christianity's superiority." In "Preaching Amid Pluralism" (in Leadership) —an article I commend to you—Keller explains how he seeks to go about "elevating Christ in a culture that sees all religions as equal."

First, Keller says, he is careful never to malign other religions, nor does he "directly make the naked claim 'Christianity is a superior religion.'" Both tend to terminate the conversation, transform the relationship into a debate, and allow the unbeliever to assume the implausibility of Christianity. What he stresses instead, he says, is the distinctiveness of the Christian faith.

"After the World Trade Center tragedy," Keller writes, "between 600 and 800 new people began attending Redeemer. The sudden influx of people pressed the question, 'What does your God have to offer me at a time like this?' I preached, 'Christianity is the only faith that tells you that God lost a child in an act of violent injustice. Christianity is the only religion that tells you, therefore, God suffered as you have suffered.' That's worded carefully as a way of saying, 'Other religions tell you many good things, too. But Christianity is the only one that tells you this. If you deny this, then you lose a valuable spiritual resource.' Pluralists get stumped by that because they realize that they want the distinctives of Christianity —a God who has known human pain, salvation by grace, and the hope of heaven—in their times of need."

What I like about this is its creativity. It proclaims the gospel clearly and truthfully, yet in terms which speak directly to the needs, questions, and lives of the non-Christians who are being challenged to consider the claims of Christ. Such creativity is costly, but then our Lord warned us that following him would not

be comfortable.

Then, because the notion of tolerance is deeply ingrained in his listeners, Keller also talks about religious pluralism, uncovering its hidden yet very real flaws:

For example, pluralists contend that no one religion can know the fullness of spiritual truth, therefore all religions are valid. But while it is good to acknowledge our limitations, this statement is itself a strong assertion about the nature of spiritual truth. A common analogy is cited—the blind men trying to describe an elephant... This is supposed to represent how the various religions only understand part of God, while no one can truly see the whole picture. To claim full knowledge of God, pluralists contend, is arrogance. I occasionally tell this parable, and I can almost see the people nodding their heads in agreement. But then I remind them, The only way this parable makes any sense, however, is if you've seen a whole elephant. Therefore, the minute you say, "All religions only see part of the truth," you are claiming the very knowledge you say no one else has.

Another important way to emphasize the distinctiveness of Christianity, Keller says, is to talk about moral behavior not merely in terms of law, but by rooting morality in grace. The goal of the gospel is not the reformation of outward behavior but the transformation of the person. Our morality is to be the result of faith, as we are filled to overflowing with delight in the glory, joy, beauty, and grace of God. When morality is seen as merely an issue of law and justice, Christianity looks like every other religion. When morality flows out of a living and vibrant relationship with God, however, the transformation of the person by the indwelling Spirit can not be denied.

And finally, Keller says, Christians should demonstrate a practical distinctiveness that will be obvious to the watching world. And the horrific events of 9/11 gave Christians in New York an opportunity to demonstrate it. "There are perfectly good excuses for non-believers to flee this city," he notes. "But Christians have

every reason to stay. That's a distinction anyone can see." We are called to minister, not to escape to some imagined place of comfort and safety. Even at cost.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Part 10

Listening To Babylonian Stories

The story does what no theorem can quite do. It may not be 'like real life' in the superficial sense, but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region. ~ C. S. Lewis in "On Stories."

I love movies—I enjoy watching them, discussing them, reading about them. The cinema is an art form of great power, grace, and liveliness. Like all of human culture, it is a good gift of God, even in a fallen world. Perhaps that should be especially in a fallen world, since fallenness sharpens our desperate need for God's gracious gifts. Created in God's image means creativity is essential to who we are, which means that we can not live fully human lives without the grace of art. Art is not a luxury of questionable value in a lost world but an expression of who we are as God's creatures.

In his Institutes Calvin warns the people of God to not be disdainful of truth "wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God." That is a very sobering idea. Just as all truth is God's truth, so all expressions of grace, creativity, and beauty must be embraced as good gifts of God, even if they arrive in packages that are flawed. All art, like all of life is tainted by the fall. Unless we wish to dishonor the Creator, however, we dare not dismiss art, creativity, and culture, even if doing so makes us feel righteous. The movies of Babylon depict Babylonian ideas and values, but because Babylonians are made in God's image, their films and stories also express creativity and insight into life and reality which is molded, in part, by God's common grace. My love of film is increased as my eyes become more attuned to the glimpses of grace and glory that shine out in the art of our post-Christian world.

My love of movies, however, is not the primary reason Ransom emphasizes film. Rather, we emphasize movies because they represent the stories of our postmodern world. Every culture and generation has stories which are told, retold, and discussed. Created by the word of God means we were created for story, to be part of The Story that is revealed in Scripture and centered on Jesus, the living word. As Charlie Peacock is fond of saying, we are called to storytelling and storied living. We find well-told stories attractive because we were made for them. Which is why children so often ask for stories to be repeated and books to be reread, over and over again.

Sometimes the stories of a generation are told by parents, or read in books, or told by storytellers as people sit under the stars around a fire—but the stories are always present. Stories which entertain, certainly, but which also do far more. They also both reflect and mold the ideas, hopes, and values of those who listen to and identify with them. "Story, in whatever form it takes, is our pilot," novelist Larry Woiwode says. "We are headed somewhere and it's our story that carries us forward in its wake.

If I weren't heading toward eternity (as I see it at times), I wouldn't have a story to tell. And you are headed the way you are because your story is bearing you in its direction."

We may not be aware of it, but it is story which shapes our values, ideas, and perception of reality. Christians should find this obvious, given that Scripture is not merely an endless list of propositions. The Bible weaves a richly textured narrative of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consum-mation, proclaims the good news that this Story can be our story through Christ, and in the process reveals propositions to our minds, hearts, and imaginations that are both credible and plausible in the world God has made.

All of which implies an important question for Christians who desire to be faithful in our fast-changing world: Where can we find the stories that are shaping the imaginations, hearts, lives, and minds of the postmodern generation? Finding them matters because it is in and around the stories of a generation where an ongoing conversation about the things that matter most takes place. Now, we live in a pluralistic world, so there may not be one single, simple answer to my question—this generation has lots of stories. On the other hand, the essential answer is not that difficult to discern. For the postmodern generation, one of the primary places—I would argue the primary place—where their stories are told is in popular culture, especially in the movies. Which explains why just like children asking for the same story again and again, young adults flock to the movies that resonate within their souls, often watching the same film repeatedly.

If we want to understand our times, and our friends and our selves, we need to listen to the movies. This is our world, whether we like it or not, and as Chris-tians we are called to engage this world, this generation, and their stories, with the gospel. We do not have the luxury of being blind to the common grace expressed in film (and the rest of popular culture), unless we are content to be deaf to the postmodern generation.

This much seems obvious to me—so obvious, in fact, as to be uncontroversial, if not self-evident. However, whenever I say such things (and I say them often) objections are raised by good people for whom these ideas seem new, or radical, or even dangerous. Since the same objections keep coming up, I thought it might be good to address some of them. And as you will see, addressing these objections require us to reflect on far more than merely the cinema. In the process we will have to think about some of the foundational issues of what we believe as Christians.

Objection #1: Hollywood is depraved.

"Hollywood is the prime example of what is wrong with this sick world," this objection says. "Dedicated to mere entertainment, it churns out lewd movies that celebrate depravity. It's the sort of moral cesspool that Christians need to avoid."

A visitor to my church raised this objection as we talked over coffee after the service a few weeks ago. I thought of how G. K. Chesterton was once asked by a magazine to submit an article on "What's Wrong with the World." His piece consisted of two words: "I am." Which is part (alas, only part) of the reason I was tempted to respond with sarcasm. "Hollywood is a prime example of what's wrong with this world," I was tempted to say, "but then you are a good example, too." (As am I—I would have added, if they were still listening.)

We live in a fallen world, which means the effects of the fall are evident in film. That is no reason to disdain film, however, any more than the sordid existence of pornography requires us to disdain photography as a moral cesspool. There are lewd films that celebrate depravity, as there are businesses that do so, books that do so, and people that do so. This reality calls us to a life of discernment, not to an excess of rhetoric which perverts the truth.

Although this objection is raised as a declaration of moral concern, it fails as such for the simple reason that it fails to speak

truthfully. This sort of rhetoric may cause social conservatives to cheer, but Christians should be discerning enough to see past the rhetoric to the truth. We must speak truthfully if we expect our listeners to take our message of the Truth seriously. Some films are lewd, but many are not. Many are intelligent, creative, truthful, beautiful works of art. Some even portray Christian faith attractively and with clarity.

In Athens Paul quoted a pagan thinker his audience considered authoritative (Acts 17:28). More than that, Paul agreed with him, since he said something true about God, without launching into rhetorical excess over the fact that the pagan was referring to Zeus. Even many Greeks were distressed at the myths about the gods, since so many were scandalous, showing the gods to be petty and immoral—Zeus included. Yet Paul saw this pagan literature not as a moral cesspool to avoid but as a point of contact to begin a discussion about the things that matter most.

This objection tries to claim the moral high ground, but fails. Sadly, in choosing rhetoric over truth, it is remarkably similar to the shallow entertainment it set out to denounce.

Objection #2: "Why watch sin?"

This objection is similar to the first one. "Just as we don't need to visit a brothel to understand prostitution," it states, "so we don't need to be exposed to other sins to understand they are wrong. Why should we set out to intentionally watch sin being portrayed in the movies?"

What I find interesting about this objection is that I usually hear it raised as a "discussion stopper," a trump card for which no response is possible. In fact, it's imagined potency is so great that it is rarely raised as a question, but instead simply asserted. Since no Christian can be in favor of being entertained by depictions of wickedness, and since movies contain such things, the discussion is deemed over.

A contraire.

To repeat the obvious, but to begin at the beginning, we live in a fallen world. Everything in creation is exposed to sin and its effects. Even our worship falls short of God's holiness, apart from God's grace in Christ. Since art is a creative expression of life, it will reflect something of what it means to live in a fallen world. Artists who shy away from such honesty produce works that may be pretty, but feel artificial or sentimental.

Still, I don't go to the movies to see sin, any more than I read the Bible with that in mind, though sin is depicted there. Read again the story of David, a story which includes seduction, adultery, the cruel misuse of power, murder, and deception. Or the story of Lot, about incest in an alcoholic stupor. I go to these texts not to see sin, though they depict it, but because they "are able," as Paul says, to make me "wise for salvation" (2 Timothy 3:15).

Good films depict reality in a fallen world truthfully, but they also portray much of God's common grace. If we aren't careful we become like the father who always sees the flaws first. When his children show him a picture they have colored, he immediately places his finger on the spot where they failed to color within the lines. "For their own good," such fathers always say, but before long the child will stop showing him their work.

Some films depict both sin and its consequences in ways that parallel the biblical teaching precisely. Some do not. Some even seek to glorify it. If it is a question of our own weakness and areas in which we are tempted, then we must recognize our weakness, refrain from sin, and seek to grow in grace. What I am urging is not that everyone see the same films, but that we all enter the conversation which swirls around the films of Babylon, a conversation which will include a discussion of right and wrong. As we enter that conversation we must not be blind to sin, but we must not be blind to grace, either. Always seeing the sin first suggests a mind set in the wrong direction. It also fulfills an accusation often made against Christians, namely, that we tend to

be negative and judgmental.

This objection is troubling because it suggests eyes that are trained for sin instead of for grace. We must never forget the world is fallen, but shouldn't our love for our Father foster a thirst to see his glory? Are we sensitive to the glimpses of grace that appear in this dark world? Or are we so intent on and impressed by the darkness that it overwhelms our ability to see the light of God's glory in the ordinary things of life and culture?

Objection #3: "Are they noble?"

"Do movies fulfill the biblical standard of Philippians 4:8?" this objection asks. "Finally," Paul writes there, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

I've written about this at length, so won't go into detail here (see "Finding the True, Noble, & Pure in Babylon"). Suffice it to say here that this objection represents a misunderstanding of what Paul is saying. He is not arguing that we can engage only those things which fully fulfill this standard, since that would rule out coming into contact with everyone and everything in this fallen world. Rather, he is insisting that we must be rooted in that which is holy, so that we can live godly and faithful lives in the midst of the fallenness. This text is not an excuse to withdraw from a fallen world, but the necessary instruction we need if we are to faithfully engage that world with the gospel. Rooted in the grace of God, having minds, hearts and imaginations steeped in the truth of God's word, we are prepared, by the power of God's Spirit to be his ambassadors in a world that does not acknowledge its rightful King.

Objection #4: "Aren't reviews sufficient?"

"Life is short," this objection reminds us, "time is tight, and we are busy. Why should I sit through a two hour movie when I

can scan a few reviews in a couple of minutes and get all the information I need?"

Well, perhaps you are too busy. At least be willing to consider the possibility. I don't mean to suggest that you need to see every movie, since no one can manage that, nor should we try since not every movie is worth viewing. What seems necessary, however, is that we have a keen window of insight into our world, a point of contact for discussing the things that matter. If not film, then find another. If we are so busy that all such windows are squeezed out of our schedule, then I suggest we are too busy. Doing lots of good things is not the same thing as Christian faithfulness.

Remember that we are discussing engaging the stories of a postmodern generation with The Story of the gospel. Consider what you are saying in this objection from the perspective of your non-Christian neighbor. If we express interest in our neighbor, but say we haven't the time for the stories which express their deepest fears and hopes, why should they take us, or our Story, seriously? I have known a number of non-Christians who gained their knowledge of my faith primarily from articles on Christianity in newspapers or news magazines. From my perspective their understanding is well informed but highly inaccurate and incomplete. Our discussions have been, as a result, rather frustrating. More importantly, I have never felt they took me or my faith all that seriously.

What I am arguing for in all this is not gathering a few sound bites that we can drop into the conversation to spice things up. I am arguing that the postmodern generation is talking about the things that matter, and like every generation that conversation revolves around their stories. I am arguing we need to enter that conversation with integrity and compassion. Reviews can be helpful. They can help us determine which films are worth seeing. They can help us see how those who do not share our most basic convictions and values see and interpret those films. But stocking

up on sound bites is not the same thing as being part of a living, ongoing conversation. Using them the way this objection suggests is to treat our non-Christian neighbors with less than full integrity. The gospel permits no shortcuts. Thankfully, Jesus did not take any shortcuts when he entered our world.

Reflecting on sin

If you think about it, a lot of what we're addressing here involves our understanding of sin. To think rightly about these things, in other words, we need to think rightly about sin. And in a recent article on popular culture, Theodore Turnau warns that unfortunately, many Christians hold a view of sin that is less than biblical:

"Many evangelicals seem to be guided by a semi-Pelagian heritage that views sin as discrete acts that can be, in a sense, isolated from the person. When someone becomes a Chris-tian, he or she turns from his or her sinful acts. Sanctification, therefore, is seen as a process where these acts happen less and less (and one seeks environments where one is less liable to do these sinful acts). The dominant American popular culture, then, is seen as a willful and public act of sin and an enticement to others (especially to children) to follow in the sin of the sinful culture-makers. Such an approach to sin localizes the problem as something 'out there,' something we can control if only we are careful enough. So, for many, the approach to popular culture has been a strategy not of engagement but of withdrawal."

This view of sin is "thin," Turnau says. "First, it oversimplifies the way sin works in the world and in human beings. Sin can be identified and avoided too easily. Second, it is overly optimistic." In contrast, the biblical view is that sinfulness permeates the depth of our being, so that our hearts are "compulsively idolatrous and rebellious." Our need for grace is therefore total, a view which transforms our understanding of the relationship of sin and popular culture. Turnau is worth quoting at

length:

"Producers... of popular cultural texts work out of idolatrous hearts. Then those sinful patterns are, to some extent, replicated within the structure of the popular cultural texts (perhaps as enticements to idolatry). This is what many evangelicals react to (and rightly so). Further, these popular cultural texts are appropriated in sinful ways, feeding the idols of individual (or groups of) audience members, even in rejecting them (out of Pharisaical pride or self-protective fear). However we respond, our own hearts serve as collaborators, and the truth is, our hearts need no enticement to idolatry because our hearts are artesian wells of idolatry, to use Calvin's memorable image (see Mark 7:14-15,20-23). One could even say that popular cultural texts are a pretext rather than an enticement to sin. It is not as if these texts pulled neutral or good people toward sin they would otherwise avoid... Withdrawing from certain cultural texts and replacing them with others will not render the audience less sinful. Rather, the compulsive and organic nature of sin means that in eschewing certain cultural idolatries by disengaging ourselves from the surrounding culture, we are probably only setting up more socially acceptable idolatries that will be harder to detect and repent of (e.g., materialism, or the family, or pride in our own holiness).

This 'thick description' of sin as rebellion that permeates all that we do... ought to drive us to repentance, not withdrawal... Perceived sin in popular culture should, therefore, cause us to reflect on these idolatries in biblical perspective, that is, cause a positive and apologetical engagement with them rather than withdrawal from them. The radical and pervasive nature of sin ought to drive us to the radical nature of grace where sinners can be restored and renewed again and again and where real growth (though not sinless perfection) is possible. Parents who have taught their children how to abide in Christ and drink deeply of his grace need not be afraid to engage popular culture (as wisdom guides) with their children. The depth and pervasiveness of sin ought to

force evangelicals to recognize the depth and pervasiveness of grace as well.

There is great irony here. The view that sin is "out there" in the culture appears to assert the moral high ground, but in the end is found wanting. The more robust view of sin presented by Scripture may make the question of cultural engagement more richly complex, but it also opens the door to a robust understanding of grace. And that is precisely what discerning Christians need at every step if we are to have ears to hear and engage the stories of Babylon.


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Part 11

Beginning The Conversation

On my way to a walk along a creek near our home, I stopped to talk with some neighbors who were sitting on their porch. The cool autumn weather prompts front porch life in Minnesota, as V's of Canadian geese fill the sky and the sun sets. We talked casually of this and that, and then as I walked along the creek listening to the cries of red-winged blackbirds, I thought about how true conversation always tends to be so unpredictable.
I had stopped to say hello, but had left with an invitation. Pleasant, but not what I would have predicted.

Sales pitches, lectures, and sermons, on the other hand, follow a specific agenda, which is fine since no one imagines them to be actual conversations. That is true even if the presenter involves the listener in some way. This involvement inserts a small measure of unpredictability into the presentation, of course, but the agenda still reigns supreme, and the involvement can be terminated if it threatens to take things too far off course.

All of which raises an important question for Christians who would like to introduce the gospel into their conversations with friends and neighbors. Namely, how do we introduce the gospel and still keep it a conversation?

I have argued in the tenth installment of the Babylon series that a good way to launch the conversation is by listening to and discussing the stories of our culture. All people, whether they realize it or not, tend to explore their deepest fears, beliefs, hopes and values in the stories they tell, and want to hear repeatedly. For the postmodern generation, the primary place where their stories are told is in the movies. Thus, we can use the movies as both a window of insight into their world, and as a point of contact to begin talking about the things that matter most. It is true that we will likely not share many of the ideas and values depicted in the cinema, but then, we live not in Jerusalem, but in Babylon. Whether we like it or not, our culture is not Christian but post-Christian. We can hardly expect Babylonians to promote the world view of Jerusalem because, well, they are Babyloni-ans. Still, as the best film makers produce movies, they both reflect and mold the convictions and values of their culture. Those convictions and values are woven into the stories they depict on the screen, and they address the Big Questions of life and death. The very Questions we want to discuss in light of the answers provided in the gospel.

More than a few who have heard me say this, however, find it to be a very questionable proposition. “Why use the stories in movies as our point of contact when there is a better, more personal option? Why not just get to know our non-Christian neighbors well enough to hear their real-life stories and begin there instead? Then we won’t have to deal with all the questionable stuff in the films.”

Good question.

Our Tightly Hidden Hearts

None of us are completely honest and open to one another, to God, or even to ourselves. In a fallen world, none of us dare to be. What psychologists define as defense mechanisms make sense when full honesty can be used to destroy instead of to heal, to blackmail rather than to forgive. Even within the church some wounds would have salt thrown into them if they were uncovered for public display. Which is why observers have noted that far too often the community of God's people shoots its wounded. So, we hide our wounds, any sins deemed unacceptable, and say we are doing "Fine," when admitting the problem will be more painful than lying about it.

In fact, the problem goes deeper yet. Even when we determine to be fearlessly transparent our fallenness stands in the way. "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure," the prophet Jeremiah says, and then adds, "Who can understand it?" (17:9) It is a rhetorical question, and the answer is, "No one but God." We may say that we have nothing to hide, but the duplicity lodged deep in our fallenness always keeps full visibility at bay. Our wickedness makes our memories selective, our interpretation of events skewed in our favor, and our view of sin incomplete. John Calvin said that even if we honestly confessed all the sin we knew, the vast majority of our guilt would remain unconfessed.

Now imagine not a Christian who has an assurance of divine grace and acceptance, but a non-Christian who has neither. Who like us has found it discomforting to look deep into the hidden recesses of their soul. And who has, perhaps, been transparent before and been burned in the process. Is it any wonder that they might be shy about discussing, in the most intimate terms, the Biggest Questions of life and death? Blaise Pascal rightly noted that we usually find ways to be distracted from such things. Since we who love God and his holiness find repentance painful, can we not empathize with an unbeliever who is anxious not to probe too

deeply?

So, our problem as Christians is this. We wish to bear witness to the gospel of grace in Christ, because it is in him alone that redemption can be found. Yet, this word which we bring is fearsome. It is God's word, "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). What could possibly be more threatening than that? Let's not sentimentalize this text: swords hurt. The writer goes on to insist that "no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (4:13). That is a terrifying thought, and only the grace of God is sufficient to keep us from despairing at the prospect.

We must realize then, that when we witness to the gospel of Christ, we bring a word which is both loving and threatening, both gracious and dangerous. We are asking people to face the Big Questions of life and death, which is never to be taken lightly. We are inviting people to honestly face their greatest fears and all the sordid little secrets that they, like us, work hard to keep buried in the deepest recesses of their hearts.

So, how do we get the conversation to that level? Consider four possibilities.

Possibility #1:

Use an evangelistic technique. Some have proposed that there are things we can do to steer the conversation toward topics which open the door to a gospel presentation. The one that was popular when I was a young believer was to ask someone, "If you died tonight, where do you think you would go?" Now, I have no doubt that God has used this technique, and for that grace I am thankful. Never-theless, the technique still leaves me cold. My difficulty is that I simply can not imagine a casual conversation in which that question would be the next natural statement to make. Perhaps those conversations exist, but none have included me. And

the times that question has been raised in my presence the conversation ceased, at that moment, to be conversations, and became sermons. Or arguments. (Of course I realize it can be raised between two close, dear, long-time friends, but that is beside the point here.)

I believe that techniques are useful in technical matters, but they tend to kill conversations because by definition they are manipulative. And people must never be manipulated because they are made in the image and likeness of God.

There is another problem as well. When we suddenly insert Big Issues like death into an otherwise casual conversation we can inadvertently trivialize the very message we desire to commend. As finite creatures our context makes a difference. If we are chatting about ordinary things and suddenly someone starts asking about death, the atmosphere is changed. Either the comments about death itself are made to appear insignificant, or the person speaking is made to appear uncaring about those to whom they are speaking. No context of appropriate solemnity has been provided to make the question seem appropriate, or even truly serious.

Yet, I appreciate the desire that gave birth to this technique. Facing our mortality is a bracing experience, and tends to bring into sharp relief the things that matter most. Death is an enemy which Christ faced on our behalf, and so to be able to talk about it with my non-Christian friends is a good idea. But I'd like to do it naturally, by God's grace, not as a technique. In other words, I want to find a context in which I can openly discuss death with my non-Christian friends because they are open to the conversation.

Possibility #2:

Demonstrate compassion in relationships. The word "compassion" means to "suffer with" someone, and there are few things more precious than a friend who is willing to walk with you through the loss of a loved one. Do we have friendships with non-Christians that are marked by such faithfulness? We should.

Silence is important at moments like this, but those who cry with us earn the right to say things that we will accept from no one else. We may have to wait for the grief to pass, of course, before there is a time to speak, but such experiences open the door to talking about death, and life, and all they mean.

Perhaps it is we who will suffer the loss, and the non-Christian who will walk beside us. That is a precious gift, for presence is a grace in this lonely world. Letting them grieve with us, share our pain, and hear our doubts provides them a view into what life in Jesus consists of. It will not be perfect, of course, but that isn't a problem because our perfection was never the decisive factor. Where need abounds, his grace abounds, and that is the decisive factor.

The only problem with this is that we may have a long time to wait before it occurs. That doesn't mean we should not be there for them when the need arises, but it does mean that we will want to find other ways to prompt discussion of deep things—like death—in the meantime.

Possibility #3:

Sensitively listen to our friends. As we ask questions and get to know someone, there can be, by God's grace, little moments of vulnerability. As they tell their story over time, they may choose to include details which hint at loss, disappointment, and deep hurt. Demonstrating that we care, and gently asking questions can sometimes open the door to deeper discussion.

This requires holy-spirited sensitivity, which is nurtured only when we spend regular and unhurried time before the face of God in prayer and in his word. Our witness to the gospel is not simply a rational matter, but involves our full humanity as a child of God. Learning to truly listen instead of using the time to figure out what to say next can allow us to hear between the lines, and to notice the quiet, gentle prompting of God's Spirit within us.

Review the conversations recorded in the New Testament

in which Jesus interacted with unbelievers. He showed this sensitivity, and though he had added insight because he is God, we are not left entirely alone as we seek to witness to the gospel. Jesus told his disciples that it was to our advantage that he was returning to heaven, because the same Spirit which convicts the world of sin would dwell within us (John 16:5-11). Such sensitivity to people must be coupled with great humility, but we dare not allow the busyness of our age to keep us from maturing in this way, so that we grow increasingly sensitive to both our friends and to the Holy Spirit.

Occasionally this vulnerability occurs rather quickly in a relationship, but usually it reveals itself only after a great deal of time, when trust has been developed. So, we should be faithful, and patient.

But what about conversations with people we are only beginning to get to know?

Possibility #4:

Using Babylonian stories. I have tried over many years to be a faithful witness, and yet I can remember very few instances when death was the natural topic of conversation. Most of the time the subject was quickly changed when death was mentioned, or some other signal was given that my friend had no interest in pursuing the topic. Yet, every person with whom I have watched the film Wit could barely wait to begin talking about it. They have cried during the movie, been moved deeply, and needed no invitation from me to discuss it, and at great length.

I have asked what people consider to be the meaning of life, and occasionally the conversation which results has gone somewhere. Yet, every person with whom I have watched 13 Conversations About One Thing could barely contain their enthusiasm to talk about it. And not just in a broad theoretical way, either, but in deeply personal terms.

I have tried to ask people how they deal with the moral

failures they are guilty of, and a few of those conversations have included my sharing something of the meaning of Christ's cross. Yet, without exception everyone with whom I have watched Crimes and Misdemeanors has eagerly tackled the topic, often with an honesty that takes my breath away.

The list could go on. Blade Runner for what it means to be human in a technological world. Chocolat and The Wicker Man for neo-paganism and Christianity as competing world views. Contact for the meaning of truth, and the relationship of knowledge and faith. So many issues that probe so deeply, and in each case it is the art, the Babylonian stories of my non-Christian friend that sets the agenda. An agenda which involves the Big Questions—the very questions addressed specifically by the gospel.

The Question Answered

The role that stories play should not surprise us if we hold a biblical view of art. Good art not only reveals something of reality, it speaks to the heart in ways that can not be reduced to words. When the prophet Nathan wanted David to face the horror of his wickedness, he knew he would be confronting his King. So he came with a story, a piece of fiction about a lamb that was sure to hook the heart of David, who had been a shepherd as a boy. When Jesus, the Incarnate One from all eternity came to preach the good news of the Kingdom, he told stories about wayward boys, lost coins, and seeds that grew in rocky soil. Brief but poignant bits of fiction that lodge in our imagination like a splinter under a fingernail.

Such is the power of story. And since the stories of a generation is where that generation explores their deepest convictions and dreams, the stories quite naturally revolve around the Big Questions of life and death.

"Why use the stories in movies as our point of contact when we can hear their real-life stories and begin there instead?" Yes, hear their real-life stories, by all means. How else will we get

to know them in any meaningful way? But also use the stories in movies because the stories in the best films raise issues that would be hard to discuss if we had merely verbalized them. Besides, how can we get to know someone if we refuse to listen to the stories they hold most dear? It is true that those stories will contain "questionable stuff," but then so will the stories of their lives. They are, after all, fallen creatures, just as we are. The best movies spin a tale which draw us in, so that our heart is exposed in ways that we normally work hard to protect. Film draws us into a world in which people like us wrestle with what we wrestle with, and since we identify with them, it does not seem so vital to keep the recesses of our hearts so tightly hidden. The world of the movie is safe (because it's fiction), yet probing (because we were drawn in), so the discussion about what matters most can begin.

This isn't to say that every film discussion goes well, because like any conversation they are unpredictable. Nor is it to say that movies excuse us from showing compassion and listening to the personal stories of our friends. Nothing could be further from the truth. Compassion, our presence, and unhurried time to listen are all costly, but they are part of faithfulness.

I am not arguing that using movies as points of contact to begin conversations with non-Christians is somehow the only way to proceed. If you have found another point of contact that prompts people to eagerly talk about death, meaning, reality, guilt, and morality, then by all means use it. Just don't use techniques to try to short-cut the process. In the meantime, I'm going to continue to use film. I can appreciate the artistry, the insight, and the beauty of the best Babylonian art without having to agree with all it represents. And as we discuss the stories, I can relax in the conversation. Not because I know all the answers, but because I am convinced that the Story of Jesus fulfills all human stories, in ways that both stagger the imagination and bring grace and healing to all the secret, hidden, hurting recesses of every human heart.

xii | getting to the gospel

Part 12

Getting To The Gospel

Since movies contain the stories of our culture, thoughtfully engaging them can prompt discussion about things that are otherwise almost impossible to raise in ordinary conversation.

Movies such as *Wit*, *13 Conversations about One Thing*, and *Magnolia*, for example, seriously explore the Big Questions of life—in the case of these three films: death & eternal life, meaning & significance, and guilt & redemption. To invite our friends to discuss such movies invites them into a conversation already underway, begun by the artist making the film. Though everyone won't respond to every film in the same way, movies like these raise such topics so compellingly that we must either enter the conver-sation, or find some way be distracted by something else.

"In an increasingly privatized, secularized society, people will not listen to the gospel from strangers," Tim Keller says. "Not to people who come to their door, not to strangers who call them, mail them, or even advertise to them."

Our world is pluralistic, and our neighbors are not "unbelievers," but believers in things other than Christianity. So, we need an entrance into life, a way to join their ongoing conversation about things that matter, since most of them are hesitant (for good reason, sadly) to join ours.

"The question young people around me are asking," Andy Crouch writes, "is not 'Is Christianity true?' but 'Is Christianity worth believing?' It is a subtle difference. The first question can be answered by marshaling the evidence, which is a job for lawyers. The second requires the demonstration of an attractive vision, which is a job for artists." And for those who may not be artists but who nurture, through a love of Scripture, a sensitivity to creativity and a delight in engaging the art popular with their friends.

Unlike "evangelistic encounters" which require us to insert the Big Questions into the conversation, discussing a movie allows the film to raise the Big Questions. Since most people love to talk about movies, the setting provides a safe context for conversation. Perhaps we have watched *Wit*, and so are talking about death, and the possibility of eternal life. Or we watched *Whale Rider*, and people are wondering whether every belief—whether of the Ancestors who speak through the whales, or Jesus—is not equally valid. One thing is certain: talking about such things would have been almost impossible except for the catalyst of the movie.

Which raises a question that I often hear when I speak on using film as a point of contact with non-Christians. The question is this: "If the film prompts people to talk about the Big Questions, does the discussion ever get past that to actually presenting the gospel?"

Consider "the gospel"

What do we mean by "presenting the gospel?" For many Christians, it means presenting a specific summary of the gospel, perhaps one they learned in a training course on evangel-ism. It may even be the presentation that was helpful in bringing them to faith. Making this presentation lets them feel they've been faithful as a witness while failing to do so raises a specter of guilt and failure.

But where in the Scriptures do we see Jesus using a summary presentation of the gospel? We're told this approach is "guaranteed" to produce results, but is efficiency or being like Jesus our goal? We are free in Christ from the need to conform to the expectations of others, or to some program. It is true that practicing how to talk about our faith can be a helpful exercise. It can help us think about how to explain things clearly, to anticipate possible misunderstandings, and to talk in terms non-Christians can understand. Still, if Jesus wasn't constrained by having to insert some presentation in order to keep his encounters with people from being a failure, neither should we.

Besides, while these summary gospel presentations might have made sense when most non-Christians shared many of our values, they are counter-productive in a pluralistic culture. A couple of generations ago, when these evangelism programs were developed, the vast majority of non-Christians shared basic Christian beliefs. Most believed in right and wrong, that Jesus had died for sins, and that heaven and hell were real places. So, inviting them to trust Christ as their personal Savior made sense.

But today we live in a pluralistic world. What sense does it make to invite someone to receive Jesus if they are not sure Christianity is plausible, or worth believing? If someone can not imagine how one crucifixion out of so many, 2000 years ago in an entirely different culture can possibly have significance for them personally today, will not an invitation to believe Jesus died for them merely convince them that Christianity has no relevance?

Perhaps we should begin thinking of "being a witness to the kingdom" instead of "doing evangelism." Our responsibility is not fulfilled simply because we have made some presentation. Insisting on that without first being certain the person we are talking to is ready to hear it is to treat them with disdain instead of as people created in God's image.

From Big Questions to gospel

With that in mind, let me return to the question: "Do these film discussions ever get past the Big Questions to the gospel?" The short answer is Yes, but the longer answer is important.

A conversation.

I see film discussions as ongoing conversation, not a chance for me to achieve some evangelistic agenda. Which means that sometimes I never get to "the gospel" and still see the evening as an unqualified success. Many non-Christians have had such negative experiences with Christianity, for example, that I am eager for them to experience the hospitality of my home. I want them feel cherished, and to know that I take them and their beliefs seriously, even if those beliefs are antithetical to my faith. I want them to know that I listen, and am eager to give them the gift of unhurried time. I want to demonstrate that I believe they are of infinite value, created in the image of God—even if they happen to deny his existence.

And when I do these things, I am witnessing to the grace of God.

Questions beget questions.

I ask a lot of questions in these discussions, and that almost always prompts questions in return. As we talk about the film and as the Big Questions are raised, I ask what people think about them, and why they believe what they do. Why their convictions are attractive to them, and what difference they make in their life.

Whether they have considered any alternatives, and how their convictions and values compare to how they were raised. I ask because I am interested, because they are people worth knowing, and because their answers open a window, at least a crack, into their hearts. And I ask because I want to know how I can speak to them of the grace of God in terms that they might be able to understand.

Almost without fail, asking questions of people prompts them to ask questions in return. About what I believe, and why. About why I find those beliefs plausible, and whether I am not merely reflecting the indoctrination of being raised in a Christian home. I try to answer creatively and in ways that might resonate with their deepest yearnings and fears.

Meeting and moving.

These ongoing conversations are an opportunity to meet someone where they are, and by God's grace find a way to move them on towards faith in Christ. It is a process. Many people have never considered such things, or have suppressed the yearnings and questions of their heart.

We need to invite our non-Christian friends to tell us where they stand in relation to Christian faith. The answer to "Where are you with Christianity?" Timothy Keller says, can be discovered if we are willing to prove that we will not get defensive. By and large, Keller says, non-Christians tend to fall into one of four possibilities:

"Dissatisfied—Do you find aspects of Christianity unacceptable, distasteful? What is your trouble with Christianity? Where is your beef?

"Indifferent—Do you find Christianity simply unappetizing or irrelevant? Where does Christianity fail to challenge you? What would be relevant to you?

"Cautiously interested—Are you in a learning mode, interested, gathering information, and yet not completely understanding? What still does not make sense to you?

"Actively seeking, yet hesitant—Are you really searching for Christ, but find some fears hold you back? Does it seem to cost a lot and you are wondering about that? What costs give you pause?"

Obviously, where a person is on this continuum will make a difference. Mistaking where they are means providing answers to questions they aren't asking and that they find neither relevant nor interesting. And on the other side, learning where they are makes possible a walking alongside them as they make their way along their spiritual pilgrimage.

Spiritual pilgrimage.

Sometimes the movie discussion finally ebbs and fades, and if people are comfortable, the conversation can still continue. If people feel safe, they might be open to being invited to tell the story of their spiritual pilgrimage. (Obviously word choice matters here: Christians have "testimonies," but everyone has a "spiritual pilgrimage.") I have found that non-Christians, once I have earned their trust, are pleased to tell their story, and are amazed anyone would care. Listening provides the opportunity to ask more questions, and at times they have asked me to share my own story.

Often their story gives hints of pain or yearning (as ours should, too) that we need to have ears to hear. The story of loss, of fragmentation, of broken dreams and realized fears. We must touch such precious things with compassion, so that we share in their suffering. Simple responses about how Jesus "solves" such things can trivialize their pain and serve to only convince them that Christianity skates over the surface of life instead of addressing

their deepest needs.

Invitation to Bible study.

We have led many movie discussions with non-Christians, and prayed that God would be at work. Sometimes a film prompts intense discussion, while with the next group it falls flat. Whatever the case, we try to be faithful, intentionally offering hospitality, listening, and unhurried time to those who sit in our living room.

Over time, some begin to see our home as a safe place. We have not flinched when they challenged our faith, or debated our ideas, nor have we judged them for how they live. And when we sense we have earned their trust, we invite them to join our Bible study. “It’s an opportunity to study the ancient documents which tell the Christian story,” we tell them. “Even if you don’t believe it, at least you’ll know you gave the Bible an honest try.”

A surprising number have accepted our invitation, and have become active participants in our Bible study group. And by God’s grace, some have come to faith.

Movie discussions aren’t the only way to launch discussions about the things that matter most, but they are a good way. And the conversation they prompt is an opportunity for those of us who love Jesus to witness to the kingdom by both what we say and how we act. And that’s an opportunity that’s simply too good to miss.


xiii | caring enough to probe

Part 13

Caring Enough To Probe

Imagine you are sitting with some friends—perhaps at work or a coffee shop—and one says he'd like some advice.

"Ashley and I have been going out for almost a year," Justin says. "We really hit it off, love the same music, and enjoy hanging out. So, we're thinking of moving in together. One of us is always staying at the other's apartment anyway, so we could save time and a pile of money if we consolidated living arrangements. Here's where I need your help: I'd like to move in with Ashley, but don't know if I should. My mom says I shouldn't, but then you know how mothers are."

What do you think?

Imagine the conversation that results. Someone tells how some friends knew when to move in together, and how it turned out. Someone else tells how the last time she moved in with someone it was a disaster, and recommends that Justin hold onto his apartment for a few months after he and Ashley move in together. And someone who knows Ashley tells Justin he's crazy not to marry her. "You shouldn't let her get away, Justin," she tells him.

"Nope," Justin responds. "Ashley and I have talked about that. We don't intend to stay together forever. We need to concentrate on our careers, and marriage would complicate that. We both need to be free to move if an opportunity comes up, and neither of us wants to be tied down. Marriage isn't an option."

Now imagine that Justin turns to you, the only person who hasn't said anything, and, as far as you know, the only Christian in the group. "What do you think I should do?" he asks.

What do you say?

I suspect that many Christians will explain why they think it would be wrong for Justin to move in with Ashley. They will assure Justin that God loves him, that God's law defines what is best for people created in God's image, and that things work out better when we live according to his word. They may mention the sanctity of marriage, the problems with promiscuity, and the fulfillment possible when men and women live faithfully together as God intended. And they might mention that this might not be easy to hear, but that friends don't let friends hurt themselves without warning them of the danger.

I also suspect that the Christian who says these things does it with good intentions: a desire to speak the truth in love, to stand for righteousness, and to pray that God will use this to draw Justin to himself. As a dutiful Christian, they may even wonder if anything except this can be said. To not say it feels like a betrayal of the truth, and they certainly don't want to be so anxious for

Justin to like them that they sacrifice the truth. Certainly the rhetoric in many Christian magazines and on Christian radio stations suggest this is precisely the stand required if America is to be won back to Christ.

Still, I have a two problems with this approach.

My first problem is that, in my experience at least, such conversations always turn out badly. I realize that as Christians we dare not only say things that everyone likes. Sometimes the truth hurts, and though we must exercise care at such moments, being certain of what, when, and how we speak, Christian faithfulness includes speaking the truth, even when unpopular. My problem is not that non-Christians might dismiss the truth, but that they are told too little of the truth to actually understand what they are dismissing, so end up merely turned off by a caricature of the truth. Can Justin really understand the 7th commandment if he has no sense of the character of the God who commanded it? Does the prohibition of promiscuity make sense if he knows nothing of the deep human and spiritual meaning of sexuality? Is telling Justin he is wrong going to be convincing if it is based on an authority which Justin does not accept? It is one thing if Justin hears the gospel, understands it, and rejects it. It is another if he is turned off by an appeal to a command that when taken out of context sounds like little more than an up-tight puritanical view of sex, and the very antithesis of a life-affirming conception of human relationships. And that is precisely how, in my experience, such conversations usually turn out.

My second problem—closely related to the first—is that this usual "Christian" response is less than fully biblical. Consider, for example, when Jesus was talking to the woman by the well in Samaria (John 4). She had been married five times, and was living with a man to whom she wasn't married. Not only did Jesus never tell her this was wrong, he affirmed her, and used her admission to reveal her deep spiritual thirst, not her guilt. Consider how Paul talked about the truth when he was in Athens (Acts 17). He was

talking to people who did not share his deepest convictions, so he appealed not to his authority (the Scriptures) but to their's (pagan writings and shrines). And finally consider how often Jesus did not answer the immediate question that someone asked (for example, John 12:34-36), but instead said something that probed into the issues which lay behind their question. He said what they needed to hear, addressing deeper foundational issues which they needed to understand before the answer to their specific question would make sense.

When we weave these biblical threads together, another approach to responding to Justin becomes apparent.

First, we could ask some questions, questions designed to take him seriously as someone made in God's image, and to discover the authority he follows in his life. Why is it important for him to know what we think? What does he see as the pros and cons of moving in with Ashley? Why does he think his mother disapproves? How does he usually decide what is right and wrong? What authority does he base his decisions on? What does his mother base her opinions on? Is he satisfied with his approach to right and wrong? How does it work out in daily life? Would he commend it to us?

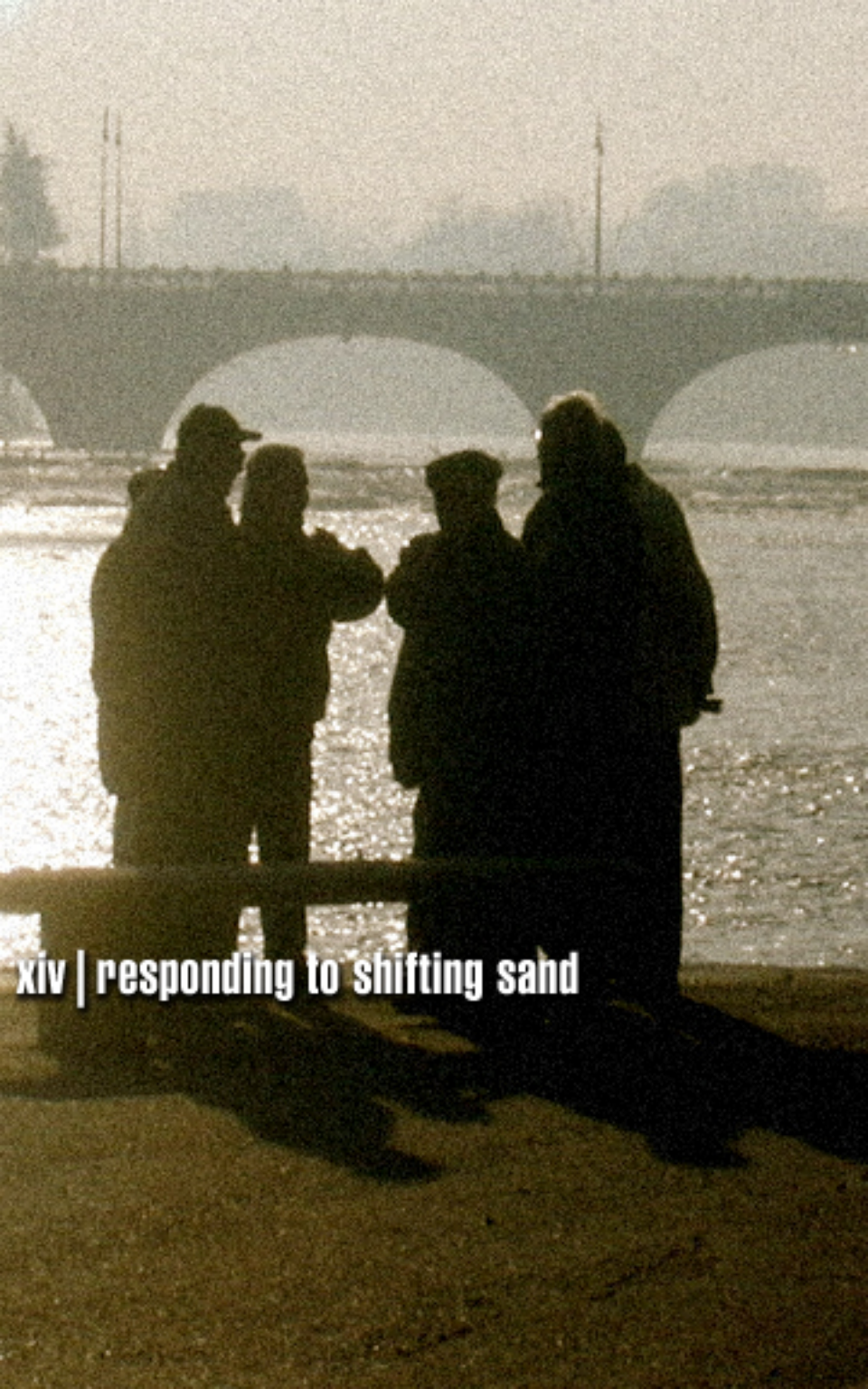
If Justin presses us for what we think as Christians, we could respond not with the 7th commandment, but by helping him see what is behind it: "Let me tell you what I believe about sex as a Christian," we could say. "I believe sex is the coming together of two people made in God's image in a way that is both physical and spiritual, both mystical and time-bound. When two people have sex they become one in the deepest core of their being so that ripples are set up in their lives that flow out beyond space and time. It is an act that takes us beyond the here and now to a deeper level of reality." Hopefully that will prompt discussion that touches on real issues of the heart.

And if Justin asks whether Christians believe sex outside of marriage is wrong, we could once again respond by addressing

the reality of grace which lies behind his question: “There is something unique in Christianity,” we could say, “something that is utterly different from any other religion or religious impulse. In every other religion, people obey the god in order to gain the god’s blessing, in order to merit the god’s attention or care. In Christianity, however, all that is turned upside down. In Christ we receive the blessing of God, so that he becomes our heavenly Father and Christ our elder brother. He puts his grace on us, unites us with him, so that we obey his word not because we have to, or to earn merit, but out of love and gratitude. Unless you understand that, talking about his law simply doesn’t make any sense.”

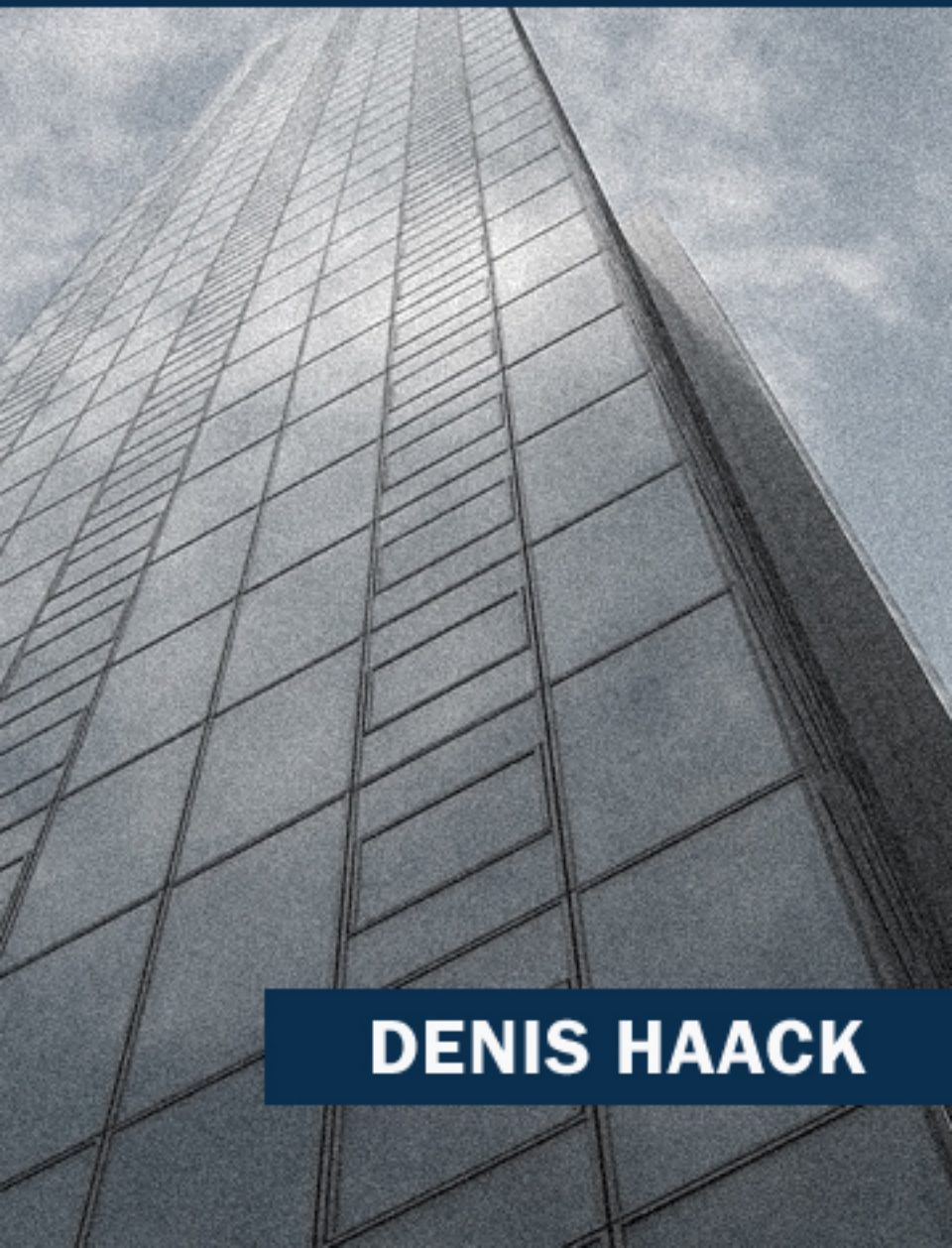
I do not write this because I think that if we approach things this way every conversation will turn out well, and all the Justins in our life will be drawn to Christianity. We live in a fallen world, and no “approach” should be made into a technique that “works.” On the contrary, I write this because I wonder if we have thought deeply enough, and biblically enough, about these all-too-common encounters in our pluralistic world. There is a difference between arguing over what is right and wrong, and truly engaging someone with the gospel.

We should think about this creatively, because if we’re engaged with the culture to any degree, the scenario about Justin isn’t all that farfetched.



xiv | responding to shifting sand

THE BABYLON SERIES
BEING IN THE WORLD, BUT NOT OF IT



DENIS HAACK

Part 14

Responding To Shifting Sand

“What has been is what will be and what has been done is what will be done,” the ancient Hebrew poet known as “the Preacher” wrote. “There is noting new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

I’d like to quote that while walking the Preacher through an electronics superstore, complete with ringing cell phones, large screen TVs blazing, the latest gadgets overflowing shelves, and a Bad Religion CD playing over loudspeakers.

I’d find that satisfying—even though I don’t like shopping—but there it is.

Of course, I’m doing the Preacher an injustice; he was wiser than my cynical sense of humor suggests (though I’d still love to do it). Read his exquisitely composed work in its entirety and his meaning is clear. He never meant that history was static,

nor that human creativity had reached an end. He was arguing that because all people share an essential humanity, created in God's image, the issues we face never change. Questions of reality, meaning, and morality are not simply optional topics for the few that like discussing that sort of thing. Who are we? What is the meaning of life? What happens at death? Is there a God? How do we determine right and wrong? Even those who don't like philosophy come to some sort of conclusion about such things, if only subconsciously. Living requires it. The Preacher is correct: the basic questions and issues all humans face do not change.

Some Christians make an assumption at this point, however, that is mistaken. It is this: since the basic questions of life don't change, and since the good news of Jesus doesn't change, we can keep using the same arguments to convince each generation of the truth of Christianity. But that isn't true.

Though the essential issues of human life never change, the specific questions raised about them can—and do—change over time. Which is why asking questions and listening with care are so important in a pluralistic world where our neighbors and friends hold beliefs and values different from our own. Each generation has unique formative experiences which mark them, and characterize their entire mind-set and perspective.

For many members of the postmodern generation who are not religious in the traditional sense, a shift has taken place in how they approach the issues of morality and meaning, and the resulting answers they find sufficient and satisfying. Thus, the answers and arguments that were compelling to my generation will be unconvincing to my grandchildren's generation. If we respond to new questions with old arguments, we make Christianity appear irrelevant.

But let me get more specific.

Morality: a new relativism

Not too long ago, most conversations about morality got

down to the question of whether there were absolutes, and how it was impossible to live according to relativism. Now, however, the discussion has shifted. Many who would argue that no religion has the final set of absolutes would also claim to hold strong notions of right and wrong. And to live according to them. Many are even convinced that their morality is superior to Christianity's.

For example, in *The Big Questions*, philosopher Lou Marinoff distinguishes between "ethical relativism" and "meta-ethical relativism." He not only distinguishes them, but speaks against the first:

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"A moral relativist believes that goodness, rightness, and justice are all relative to people's beliefs. In other words, a moral relativist believes not only that the Christians whom Nero fed to the lions were justified in their faith and martyrdom, but also that Nero was justified in martyring them. Moral relativists believe it was a great tragedy that so many innocent civilians died on the hijacked airplanes and in the World Trade Center's destruction, but they also believe that the hijackers were warriors who were justified in waging their jihad according to their rules. The spread of moral relativism, and its unfortunate political sponsorship by American and European centers of higher education, has brought much confusion to the Western world during the latter third of the twentieth century. Deprived of a moral compass, among other philosophical tools necessary for examining and understanding belief systems, millions of people find it difficult or impossible to establish a context for current events, no matter how horrific. This often adds travesty to tragedy" (p. 14).

Marinoff explains that over the centuries various theories (he identifies 10) have been developed to sort out the difference between good and evil. Once we have come to understand these different approaches to morality, we can appreciate meta-ethical

relativism:

“Now that you have learned ten different ways of being good, you face a real paradox: how do you decide which ones are better, and which (if any) is best? The problem is that we can't decide which theory of good is better or best until we know the meaning of good itself. If you were thoroughly indoctrinated early in your life, or if you have settled on a particular ethical theory for some other reason, then you don't have this problem. But if you are a thoughtful person, you may conclude that no single ethical theory can be stretched to cover every moral contingency. The only alternative, then, is to suppose that different ethical systems work better in different situations. This approach is called meta-ethical relativism.

“Meta-ethical relativism is not the same as ethical relativism, which supposes, subjectively, that anybody's ethics are as valid as anybody else's and, accordingly, that anything at all is permissible in a given situation. Ethical relativism says that Robin Hood is correct to believe that he is doing right, while the sheriff of Nottingham is also correct to believe that Robin Hood is doing wrong. If you have a problem viewing the very same action as both right and wrong, then you are not an ethical relativist.

“But is there an objective perspective that provides a wiser and more trustworthy moral compass? That's where meta-ethical relativism comes in to help us discover which ethical system among those mentioned above—and the unmentioned, and the variations on each—does three vital jobs. First, it must resonate with your moral intuitions. Second, it must mesh with your background experience of ethics. Third, it must help remedy the problem itself. There are no easy answers here, and there's an art (as well as an effort) required to answer the question ‘Which ethical system do you think is best in your case—and why?’” (p.

46).

The mistake many people make in all this, Marinoff argues, is to imagine that ethics is a "subject like mathematics." It isn't, he says.

"Simple algebraic equations (like x + 2 = 3) have unique solutions. There is one correct answer, which we can easily find, and infinitely many incorrect ones, which we can reject. Ethics more closely resembles two variable algebra, with equations like x + y = 3. Here we find infinitely many correct solutions, with interdependence between x and y. It makes no sense to ask, 'What's the correct value of x?' unless you first specify a value for y. Similarly, people who wonder 'What's the right thing to do?' need to specify something about their own moral intuitions, or their background ethical theories. Then we have a personalized context—your context—for exploring 'rightness.'

"In theory, there are any number of ways of thinking about goodness, rightness, and justice. In practice, one alternative may be more viable than others, but it has to make sense to you, resonate with your intuitions and experience, and function in your particular case. Sometimes you may have to choose between doing the right thing for the wrong reasons and doing the wrong thing for the right reasons. But in the end you have to take your own stand" (p. 26).

The technical terms—ethical relativism and meta-ethical relativism—aren't necessarily widely used or known. The distinction Marinoff draws here is important, however, because people are living it and believing it.

The standard argument against ethical relativism is two-fold. First, it is self-defeating because if everything is relative, so is this initial assertion. And if there is no final right and wrong, there is no way to stand against the obvious evil which occurs all around

us.

Not surprisingly, this two-fold argument is not compelling to those who have accepted some form of meta-ethical relativism. Nor do they necessarily feel their sense of morality is weak or inferior; indeed, they may be convinced it is sufficient, satisfying, and perhaps superior.

Meaning: a new significance

In a similar way, it used to be assumed that if there is no God, if we are nothing more than matter + energy in an impersonal universe, then there is no meaning to life. Which is neither sufficient nor satisfying, because human beings simply can't live without a sense of significance.

But now consider this. In *Is Belief in God Good, Bad, or Irrelevant*, Christian historian Preston Jones (PhD, University of Ottowa), and Bad Religion musician and evolutionary biologist Greg Graffin (PhD, Cornell University) discuss the difference between proximate and ultimate meaning. By proximate meaning they are referring to a "sense of meaning or purpose derived from action in the observable world." By ultimate meaning they are referring to a "sense of meaning or purpose derived from belief, and from acting on belief, in a reality beyond or greater than the observable world" (p. 40).

Graffin feels no need for a sense of ultimate meaning in life:

"I have never concerned myself with ultimate meaning, but I have a deeply meaningful life. I am privileged to have a deep effect on the way lots of people think—most importantly for me, my two children. I have a wonderful circle of friends and a loving interpersonal relationship with my girlfriend. I was never baptized, never aware of a single story from the Good Book, never programmed by religious teachers, and never concerned about life after death. Rather, naturalism teaches one of the most important

things in this world: there is only this life, so live wonderfully and meaningfully" (p. 40).

Graffin is convinced his position makes more sense than the Christian's insistence that God brings true, ultimate meaning to life.

"It seems that most people want to believe there is more meaning in the universe than actually exists. There is a strong emotional drive to find meaning, which might be 'hard-wired' in our brains or a cultural universal found in all human societies perhaps. This drive leads many people to accept religion readily because theologies reassure us that indeed there is an ultimate meaning and an ultimate purpose to human life.

"I never accepted such myths, probably because I was surrounded by skeptics in my upbringing. Yet still I believed that I led a meaningful life and that I mattered in some way. As I grew up I realized that I mattered a lot less than I thought. By this I mean only that as I grew more worldly and empathetic I learned that there is a world out there that exists and functions regardless of my presence and influence. To me, this is a part of growth and maturation, a humility that develops with age and experience.

"I think there are all sorts of realities that we learn as we mature, and we are forced to rewrite our world views. I was never taught any of the traditional religious world views. That is the reason the world began to make sense for me rather late in life, during my studies of natural history at university. The world became more meaningful to me as I learned about the fragility and complexity of our ecological communities and geological processes. I felt like I was a part of a great biological tradition and I felt lucky to be able to witness the 'grandeur of life' with a deep appreciation for its intricacy and knowledge about its functioning. The deep sense of satisfaction I got, and still get, from studying and participating in nature, leaves me perfectly content with the

proximate meaning of it all.

"Even though I can't formulate any ultimate meaning for it all—I know I am just a small part of it and I will soon be dead and so will my offspring—I know that the studying, teaching and sharing of natural history provides a lifetime of meaningful enterprise for me. I don't feel empty or at any kind of loss from my conclusion that life has no ultimate purpose. Passing on proximately meaningful traditions and rituals is enough for me. It always has felt like enough for me. Maybe that will change, but I doubt it. As I have learned more I have felt an even greater pull toward my conclusion that there are no ultimates.

"The so-called 'existence' of notions that there is more than this world alone I whole-heartedly reject. It might be that we are taught poorly as kids. It might be a symptom of our imperfect education that we are told there is an ultimate meaning to things. What if our society stopped passing along inaccuracies by removing such language from the learning curriculum? Would the notion of ultimate purpose cease to exist? I believe strongly that it would be virtually nonexistent in society. We can live with proximate purpose alone and still live fully satisfied lives without the mythology of ultimates. I believe humans would feel just as emotional and loving and caring in the absence of ultimates as they do going about carelessly thinking that a better world awaits them when they die. I think that we, like other social organisms, use proximate meaning and proximate purpose to get through life. Ultimates are an invention of theology, and one we cannot easily shake from our culture" (p. 139-142).

Engaging the shift

We may be tempted to argue as Christians, of course, that both these positions are not real solutions at all to the great human dilemmas of morality and meaning. That meta-ethical relativism is still relativism, so that nothing, no matter how heinous, can truly

be considered wrong or evil in a final, absolute sense of that term. That proximate meaning is not true meaning, in any ultimate way, but merely the passing sense of some meaning without any suitable foundation for it to rest on. And we may think of other challenges to raise.

And they might be worth raising. But I would suggest that we shouldn't be surprised if our challenges aren't very compelling to the people with whom we are talking. For whatever we happen to think of their position concerning morality and meaning, they find it both personally sufficient and satisfying. Perhaps our probing will cause them to reconsider their position, but then, perhaps not.

But if that is so, how do we proceed? How do we engage such friends with the gospel?

By remembering that the point is not winning arguments over morality and meaning. It might be that they sense no need there, and are unmoved by the biblical alternative, but that does not mean God can not still be at work drawing them to himself by his Spirit. It could be, for example, that their greatest need is to befriend a Christian who proves that not all Christians live narrow, judgmental, negative, withdrawn, uncreative lives.

Whatever the case, we must see this conversation as not at a standstill, but just beginning. We can eagerly learn philosophy from Marinoff and evolutionary theory and music from Graffin, and cherish them as friends. We can continue to ask probing questions about their views and we can welcome their challenges to what we believe. We can live authentic lives before them, think more deeply about all these issues, give the gift of unhurried time, and find winsome ways to share more of the biblical Story with them.

And we can remember that the final apologetic, as Francis Schaeffer wrote in *The Mark of the Christian*, is not developing a killer argument, but love. In fact, as John 17:21 teaches, if non-Christians can not see authentic love demonstrated by Christians,

Jesus says we can not expect the world to believe that Christian faith is true and worth embracing.

And so we circle back to the fact that there is nothing new under the sun. Engaging our culture with the gospel is exactly what it has always been. It is about a quality of life, a reality of Christian love and community which reflects grace with such authenticity that we demonstrate, not perfectly but substantially, that God exists and that he can be known through Christ.

Indeed, there is much to offend Christians in postmodern culture, and much offense is taken. So much so, in fact, that the issue is worth examining a bit more closely. Some questions come to mind: Does Christian faithfulness in a pluralistic society necessarily include taking offense at unchristian behavior? Does a growing revulsion for sin accompany a growing love for God and his Word?

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