


Who Is My Enemy?

My son is an excellent baseball player. Throughout his childhood and teenage years he played on all-star teams formed from several communities around our city. As you may know, sports activities for children have become far more than a casual recreational pursuit. For good athletes and their parents, participation in youth sports requires a level of devotion reminiscent of the Nuremberg rallies of 1936. One particular year, my son played eighty baseball games in three different states over a four-month period of time. As good parents, we dutifully went to most of his games.

Despite this busy schedule, I relished the opportunity as a pastor to spend that much time with fifteen other families, most of whom were unchurched. Watching my son play baseball got my wife and me outside of our church walls and deeply involved in the lives of other couples.

One day, as I was getting out of my car to watch yet another game, one of the fathers called to me in a loud whisper, “Rich, come over here. I want to show you something.” He and several other dads were standing at the back of a car, snickering like junior high boys.

“What’s up?” I asked.

He opened the trunk of his car to reveal a cooler full of beer. Excitedly, he said to me, “Hey, Rich, you want some?”

I responded with a real note of appreciation in my voice, “Hey, thanks for the offer, but no, I think I’ll just go over and watch the

game." I walked toward the field, laughing and thinking to myself, *Guys never outgrow adolescence, do they?* But that wasn't the end of the story.

A Christian couple whose son was on the team, and who regularly sat about fifteen feet away from all of the other parents, got wind of the fact that beer had been brought to the parking lot at one of the games. (Apparently there was a Little League rule that no alcohol could be served within several hundred feet of a game in progress.) This couple petitioned the league to make a ruling on the "beer incident." The league came down against it. They also demanded that the coach speak to all of the parents and ask them to sign a pledge that they would no longer bring beer anywhere near a game in the future.

To this day I believe that this Christian couple was sincere in their religious convictions. They believed that what they were doing was ultimately serving the cause of Christ. The effect of their stand for righteousness, however, was devastating to our witness with the other parents. The unchurched parents were completely turned off to Christianity. For the remaining few weeks of the baseball season, my wife and I had to listen to them angrily denounce Christians. All of our work evaporated, because, in my opinion, a couple of Christians drew their boundary lines in the wrong place.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN REVISITED

On one occasion Jesus told this story:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the

man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

—Luke 10:30–37

In the story that has become known as the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus helped his audience see that the category of *neighbor*, those whom they were called to love, was much wider than most of them would allow. Neighbors included those outside the covenant community and beyond the borders of the chosen people. To love God, according to Jesus, meant to love people with the wideness of the heart of God. In other words, loving God, at least in part, means redefining whom we include in our category of neighbor.

The challenge facing the church in the twenty-first century is more basic than the question, "Who is my neighbor?" I believe the first question the church must answer correctly is, "Who is my *enemy*?" Many people believe that the world is our enemy.

PRACTICING THE WELCOME OF THE KINGDOM

Have you ever been in a situation where you knew you were not welcome? I was raised in a conservative Jewish family in New York City. My sister once invited her new Italian Catholic boyfriend, Dominic, over to our house early in their dating relationship. Throughout dinner my sister kept calling her boyfriend "Dom." "Dom, could you pass the butter?" "Dom, what movie do you want to see tonight?" "Dom, could you get me a drink from the refrigerator?"

My very traditional Jewish grandmother kept hearing my sister refer to her boyfriend as Dom. She innocently asked, "Don? Is that short for Donald?"

My sister responded, "It's not *Don*, his name is *Dom*. Dom is short for Dominic."

The blood drained from my grandmother's face as she repeatedly asked in a high-pitched voice, "*Dominic? Dominic? Dominic?*" as she came to the stunning realization that her granddaughter was dating outside of the faith. "Dominic" is obviously not a Jewish name. For the rest of the evening, my grandmother refused to speak. It was obvious that, at least according to my grandmother, Dominic was an unwelcome guest.

How would a feminist or politically liberal person feel in many conservative churches? I don't know, but I fear they would be made to feel like Dominic at my family's dinner table.

Michael Cromartie wrote about a conversation he once had with a very conservative Christian journalist. The journalist insisted that Jimmy Carter could not be a Christian because "no one could be a Christian and have his kind of foreign policy."¹

I have been told by several people that they keep their political views hidden around their conservative Christian coworkers because they do not want their coworkers to know that they occasionally vote Democrat. They fear a reaction akin to my grandmother's "Dominic? Dominic?" "How could you possibly vote for a Democrat and call yourself a Christian?"

KINDNESS WITH DISCERNMENT

Church members and pastors deeply desire to practice the welcome of the kingdom and to be kind. The English pastor G. A. Studdert-Kennedy reminds us that even kindness has a limit: "Christians in trying to be kinder than Christ cease to be kind at all."² Christ was very clear that "the world," in at least one of its biblical senses, is hostile to God and everything God stands for.

What does the Bible mean by "the world?" The term *world* is used in three different senses in the New Testament. First of all, it refers to the earth, or the created order. God, we are told, "made *the world* and everything in it."³ It is this sense that the apostle John wrote, saying, "*The world* was made through him."⁴

Second, when the Bible speaks of the *world*, it sometimes means simply the world of people—people of various races and ethnicities—

the world of men and women. It is likely in this second sense that the apostle John writes, “For God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son. . . .”⁵ It is an unfortunate fact that the majority of men and women have not loved God or served him. Rather, in the case of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, they were antagonistic to him, rejected him, and ultimately nailed him to a wooden cross.

So it is not surprising, then, that the Bible uses the term *world* in a third sense to refer to the human race in its opposition to God and in its refusal to receive the truth, to worship God, to believe in Christ, or to follow God’s commandments. *The world* in this last sense is the mind-set of unredeemed humanity. Or as David Wells puts it, “The ‘world’ is the way in which our collective life in society and the culture that goes with it is organized around the self and substitution for God. It is life characterized by self-righteousness, self-centeredness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement and self-promotion, with a corresponding distaste for the self-denial proper to union with Christ.”⁶ It is the world in this third sense—a way of life hostile to God—that the apostle John was referring to in 1 John 2:15–17 when he wrote these words:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away.

The world in its hostility murdered Jesus, and the world in its hostility continues to murder Jesus’ followers to this very day. It was the world in the form of the Chinese Boxers who slaughtered hundreds of foreign missionaries and tens of thousands of indigenous Christians at the beginning of the twentieth century. E. J. Cooper, a Protestant missionary, wrote to his mother about that world:

The Lord has honored us by giving us fellowship in his sufferings. Three times stoned, robbed of everything, even

clothes, we know what hunger, thirst, nakedness, weariness are as never before, but also the sustaining grace and strength of God and his peace in a new and deeper sense than before. . . . Billow after billow has gone over me. Home gone, not one memento of dear Maggie [his wife] even, penniless, wife and child gone to glory, Edith [his other child] lying very sick with diarrhea, and your son weak and exhausted to a degree, though otherwise well.⁷

The world attacked two families and six young children in the Chinese town of Luchen, chasing them from one village to another, hurling sticks and stones and shouting, "Death to the foreign devils." One seven-year-old named Jessie Saunders understood the character of the world when, after being stoned, she said to her mother: "If they loved Jesus, they would not do this."⁸

The world still practices crucifixion at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the Sudan, the largest country in Africa. After enduring more than forty years of civil war, the predominantly Christian population in the southern Sudan is subject to torture, rape, and starvation for their refusal to convert to Islam. Christian children are routinely sold into slavery. Muslims in the north who dare to convert to Christianity are faced with the death penalty. In the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, Sudan's estimated death toll of more than 1.9 million is far greater than the much better publicized slaughter in Rwanda (800,000), Bosnia (300,000), and Kosovo (several thousand as of the beginning of 1999) *combined*.⁹

The world in the form of the modern Chinese government acknowledged "the church played an important role in the change in Eastern Europe" and then it ominously added, "If China does not want such a scene to be repeated in its land, it must strangle the baby while it is still in the cradle."¹⁰

The world is also found in the "Christian" West. For Western Christians to have the proper perspective on this, they must listen to people who come to the West from other cultures. Eugene Peterson makes this astute observation:

If you listen to a Solzhenitsyn or Bishop Tutu, or university students from Africa or South America, they don't see a Christian land. They see almost the reverse of a Christian land. They see a lot of greed and arrogance. And they see a Christian community that has almost none of the virtues of the biblical community, which has to do with a sacrificial life. . . . The attractive thing about America to outsiders is the materialism, not the spirituality. . . . What they want are cars and televisions. They're not [attracted to] our gospel.¹¹

IRRELEVANT OR IRRATIONAL?

One way the world's hostility toward Christ is apparent, at least in its Western expression, is in its view that Christianity is either *irrelevant* or *irrational*. At the end of 1997, A. M. Rosenthal, former executive editor of *The New York Times*, candidly confessed that he had helped promote Christianity's irrelevance: "I realized that in decades of reporting, writing, or assigning stories on human rights, I rarely touched on one of the most important [rights]. Political human rights, legal, civil, and press rights, emphatically; but the right to worship where and how God or our conscience leads, almost never."¹²

Religious freedom and the role of the church worldwide simply never show up on the radar screen of the cultural elite in America. Economics are endlessly discussed, as are political considerations, social differentiations, and racial and gender divides. But the cultural elite in America are generally unable to see, much less understand, the role of faith (Christian or otherwise) on the decisions of ordinary people.

Patrick Glynn reflects on his undergraduate days at Harvard in the late 1960s:

When I left my Jesuit High School to attend Harvard in 1969, I plunged into an environment where the death or the disappearance of God was simply taken for granted. . . .

It was not so much that the professors who taught me were anti-religious—the English Department (apart from a couple of practicing Catholics and a few other churchgoers) was marked by a kind of sad yearning for lost Christianity. It was simply assumed that religious belief had become impossible for rational human beings in the modern era, a fact that one accepted with a certain melancholy and nostalgia for previous ages when it was still possible for “men” to believe.¹³

When religion does appear on the radar screen, it almost always does so in its most irrational form, such as the latest battle between science and religion, or the latest witchcraft scare in a local public school, or the most recent completely harmless book being selected for censorship by “fundamentalist” parents. Of course, the term *fundamentalist* is never used in its appropriate historic context (one who subscribes to the fundamentals of the faith) or, even more narrowly (one who takes a position of opposition to modernist tendencies). In the media, *fundamentalist* is almost always used as a shorthand for “religious fanatic.” It is often preceded by adjectives (whether appropriate or not) such as right-wing or ultraconservative, or it is followed by “follower of” as in the expression, “right-wing fundamentalist follower of Jerry Falwell” or “ultraconservative fundamentalist follower of Pat Robertson.” The portrait is one of blind, unthinking, often intolerant and bigoted commitment to some religion or religious sect. This stereotypical description allows the elites to dismiss Christians without ever taking seriously what a particular Christian may be saying or without ever asking the question whether a Christian’s viewpoint may, in fact, be a true one.

Thus, despite all the talk about multiculturalism, contemporary culture regularly balks at including Christianity in its “gorgeous mosaic.” This resistance to Christ and Christianity has sometimes been dubbed the “ABC Rule,” meaning “anything but Christianity.”

DISCERNING WHAT FORM OUR REAL ENEMY IS TAKING

Throughout this book, I will attempt to clearly identify the world in this third sense. My goal is to discern the form our real enemy is taking in the twenty-first century. We must not shrink from this task—as though Christian love means the absence of moral discernment or any critique whatsoever. We must never find ourselves trying to be kinder than Christ! According to the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, “We are unfeeling, not when we probe deeply into the wound they carry when they come to us for healing, but rather when we pass over it as if we did not know why they had come.”¹⁴ Barth was echoing sentiments expressed by the prophet Jeremiah more than six hundred years before the time of Christ: “They [the prophets and priests] dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace.”¹⁵

It is relatively easy to practice the welcome of the kingdom yet fail to practice moral discernment at the same time. For example, many churches have adopted the gay-rights perspective, which blurs the distinction between compassion for individual homosexuals and the political and social agenda of gay activists. These churches claim that compassion for individual homosexuals must translate into complete tolerance of homosexuality in all spheres of life. Anything less than viewing homosexuality as a completely equal and valid alternative to heterosexuality (including the blessing of same-sex marriages) is seen as evidence of homophobia.

It is also relatively easy to identify sin in others and fail to practice the welcome of the kingdom. Using my prior example of homosexuality, many churches announce a moral position against homosexuality but fail to emphasize the hope of redemption for homosexual sinners to the same degree as they do for every other kind of sinner.

Again, it is easy to announce a moral position. It is far more challenging to create ministries that offer healing and hope to broken people. To me, the most exciting (and biblical) kind of

church to be involved in is a church that maintains clear moral standards but also communicates maximum compassion and mercy through ministries of welcome. Such ministries of welcome may include ministries to drug and alcohol abusers. Or perhaps a ministry to AIDS sufferers or those who are trapped in New Age mysticism. Ministries of welcome might include a “Coffee and Conversation” evening, where folks are invited to listen to someone speak about a controversial subject. They then have the opportunity to discuss (and agree or disagree with) the speaker’s viewpoint as they have coffee afterwards with a church member.

People need and deserve straight talk from Christians. If sex outside of God’s prescribed boundaries kills us spiritually (and sometimes physically), let’s say so without mincing words. But first let’s make sure that in our communication we’re targeting our greatest firepower toward those who are presently *inside the church*, while showing maximum patience and grace toward those *outside the church*. And let’s not merely announce a moral position. (We don’t need Jesus to do that; the Pharisees were great at merely announcing moral positions.) Let’s couple a “ministry of welcome” with every moral stance taken.

MISIDENTIFYING THE WORLD

Before I became a pastor, I taught business law at a major state university for seven years. Like many universities, the oval on our campus was frequented by preachers who claimed to speak in the name of Jesus Christ. One particularly offensive preacher wore a shirt emblazoned with the words, “Got AIDS Yet?” The “G” in “Got,” the “A” in “AIDS,” and the “Y” in “Yet” were bright red and lined up vertically in a column to trumpet the word “GAY.” The preacher employed the most vulgar and pejorative terms for gay people, for those who were engaging in premarital sex, even for women who wore jeans or shorts. He thought he was serving Jesus by attacking those he judged to be *the world*.

Now admittedly, the behaviors of the Christian parents at my son’s baseball game and this preacher are not representative of the Christian community in tone and style. Few Christians I know

would go to war about beer brought to a baseball game or would use harsh, vulgar language aimed at homosexuals or women.

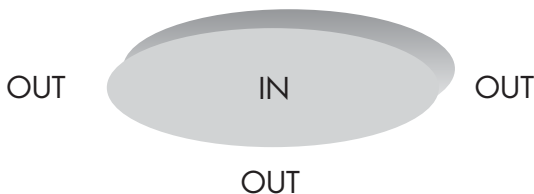
But I believe the larger Christian community, particularly in the United States, does share the flawed assumptions that undergirded these believers' behaviors. Many Christians err when we try to identify *the world* as "those people out there"—nonchurchgoers such as New Agers, postmodernists, feminists, advocates of diversity, liberals, and homosexuals. What if we discover that *the world* we Christians are to avoid is not "out there," but is *in the church*?

THE WELCOME OF THE KINGDOM AND SET THEORY

What Are Bounded Sets?

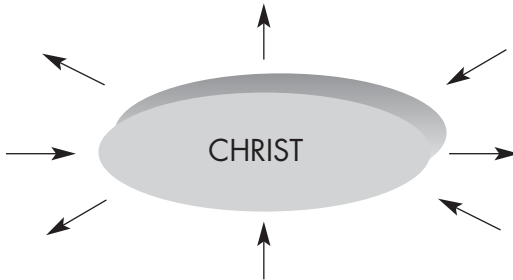
Paul Hiebert, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Missions, points out that people around the world categorize things in very different ways.¹⁶ In the West, we tend to look at life in terms of *bounded sets*. An apple is always an apple. Apples may be MacIntosh, Jonathan, Winesap, or Delicious. They may be green, yellow, red, or some combination of these. But everyone knows that an apple is an apple. An apple is never a potato.

In the West, whenever we look at life, we Westerners tend to see clear boundaries. An object is either *in* or *out* of a particular category. Of course, the Bible uses bounded-set language on many occasions. Paul speaks about people being *in Christ* and *outside of Christ*.¹⁷ The apostle John makes it clear that there are boundaries to the Christian life: "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death."¹⁸



What Are Centered Sets?

Hiebert points out another way of defining things. Rather than drawing a boundary between one category and another, one could define things in terms of *centered-set* theory. In a centered set, the issue is not being in or out of a category (as though everything were static and unchanging). Rather, in a centered set we define things by movement—a person or object is either moving *toward* or moving *away from* the center. In a centered set one recognizes not only movement, but the possibility of a change in direction.



So rather than asking “Are you healthy today?” as though health were an unchanging static category, centered sets help us to understand that a person is either moving toward or away from health. We further recognize that a person who is moving away from health by smoking or eating fatty foods can turn around. In Christianity, the critical question in terms of a centered set is not whether you have *crossed the line* and are *in* or *out*, but rather where are you right now in relationship to the center, namely, Christ? Are you facing Christ, or is your back turned to Christ? Are you moving away from Christ or toward Christ? Rather than merely asking ourselves, “Did I pray the sinner’s prayer twenty years ago?” most Christians would be far better off asking, “Who is my Lord today? Today am I moving away from Christ or toward Christ?”

In the past, Christians understood centered-set thinking through their familiarity with John Bunyan’s classic *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. In Bunyan’s story the Christian life is seen as a journey toward (or away from) the Celestial City (heaven). Many Christian leaders have

commented that it would be an enormous boon to Christian discipleship if the church could regain “journey” language in addition to “step over the line” language. Classes and book clubs that rediscover *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, as well as leadership training on centered sets, move us in the right direction.

Jesus often used centered-set language. He saw that the Pharisees, although they were near to God, had the wrong direction in their lives and were moving away from God. On the other hand, tax collectors and prostitutes, who were far away from God, were moving toward him.

Over the years, I have watched many longtime Christians who have attended church for twenty or thirty years smugly judge and condemn those who have not stepped over the boundary line by praying the sinner’s prayer. The question needs to be asked, How do you know that the person *outside* is not moving toward Christ? How do you know that *you* haven’t spent the last decade moving away from him?

Centered-set thinking has been an enormous encouragement to evangelism and ministry for the church I pastor. Recently, a young woman came to our church from a background of deep involvement in Wicca and the New Age. She was dressed entirely in black and had no ability to make eye contact with anyone in the church. One of our staff interns talked with her and later confessed, “My first reaction was that this woman was so far-out, she could never be reached. But then I remembered that the issue is not how far or near someone is, but what direction they are headed. At least she was here at church making contact with another Christian. It is obvious that God is at work in her life, drawing her toward Christ. My interaction with her became a lot more fun as I discovered new ways that the Holy Spirit was drawing this former practitioner of Wicca toward Christ.”

Centered-set thinking also recently helped a widow in the church. She told me about an encounter she had had with two Mormons who knocked at her door. She welcomed them in and offered them something to eat. As they sat around her kitchen table, she talked with them about a relationship with Christ.

“What church do you go to?” they asked her.

“I attend the Vineyard on the northeast side of town,” she replied.

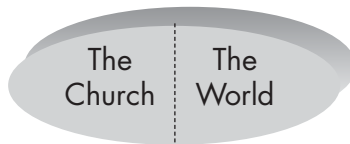
The two young Mormon men looked at each other and laughed. “We thought so. The Christians in your church are the only Christians in town who don’t slam the door in our faces and who show us any kindness at all.”

As you can imagine, I couldn’t have felt more proud of the people in my church than I did when I heard her story!

Throughout this book, centered-set language will show up again and again as a key toward creating ministries of welcome that continue to hold moral standards.

What Are Fuzzy Sets?

Paul Hiebert mentions a third way of forming categories. Some people, especially in Oriental societies, have talked about *fuzzy sets*. Rather than seeing something as being either A *or* B, people in the East will often ask why not both A *and* B? For example, using fuzzy boundaries, they might ask the question, “Where does a mountain begin?” Sometimes things blend into each other.



In a culture of increasing diversity, many people have great difficulty filling out the census form with regard to their race. When is someone Hispanic? Must all of their ancestors be Hispanic? What if one of their four grandparents was black? What if two were black? What if one was Northern European? When is a Hispanic Hispanic?

Applying fuzzy-set theory to the Bible, we might ask, When did Peter become a disciple? When Jesus first called him? When he first confessed that Jesus was the Christ? When he got out of the boat and began to walk on the water? When he repented of his sin of disowning Christ? And when was Peter a non-disciple? When he was born? When he told Jesus to depart from him because Peter was

a sinful man? When he rebuked Jesus for suggesting that Messiah must suffer and die? When he took his eyes off the Lord as he walked on the water? When he denied three times that he knew Jesus?

In the West, with our bounded sets, someone is either in or out. But with fuzzy sets, one thing may run into the other. Contrary to most Christians' assumptions, fuzzy sets help us understand that the church and the world often blend together.

FOUR IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

I am indebted to one of the world's foremost Jesus scholars, N. T. Wright, and his book *Jesus and the Victory of God*, for offering a practical and biblical way for us to sort through the issues raised by set theory. Specifically, Wright asks us to consider four important questions:

- Who are we?
- Who is our enemy?
- What is our calling?
- What are our methods?¹⁹

Who Are We?

Jews in Jesus' day defined themselves by certain boundary markers: the temple, the Torah, the keeping of the Sabbath, and the observance of certain dietary restrictions. Boundary markers are those things that tell us who is in and who is out, who is one of us and who isn't. A Pharisee in Jesus' day believed that he could easily discern who was one of God's covenant people by simply examining how that person observed the Sabbath day.²⁰

Christians today also have a set of boundary markers, defining who is in and who is out of the community of believers. Read the newsletters from Christian parachurch organizations. Listen to Christian radio. Liberals are out; conservatives are in. Homosexuals are out; heterosexuals are in. Those who are pro-choice on the issue of abortion are definitely out; those who are pro-life are definitely in. Much of conservative Christian thinking is limited by its exclusive use of bounded-set categories.

While I am *strongly* pro-life and have actively worked for twenty years in various pro-life activities, in this book I would like to challenge the use of outward “badges” to identify and define God’s people. One way to challenge our thinking is to ask ourselves who drew lines and used identifying badges in the New Testament—the Pharisees, or Jesus? Who said that prostitutes and tax collectors would get into the kingdom before many of those who were supposedly in? Jesus had boundary markers too, but they were quite different from those of the Pharisees and contemporary Christians. Jesus’ identifying badges included such things as love (“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”) and faith (“For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life”).²¹ He also used the badges of mercy and compassion for the broken and the outcast,²² self-denial, cross bearing, and not being ashamed of him or his words.²³ Are these the badges you and I use to determine who is in and who is out?

Who Is Our Enemy?

The Pharisees were quite clear about who were the enemies of God. According to them, God’s enemies were obviously the Romans, as well as anyone who deliberately flouted the Torah—people such as prostitutes, tax collectors, and “sinners.” Jesus redefined the concept of enemy in a way that caused deep offense to the Pharisees. According to Jesus, the so-called “people of God” were to be God’s enemies. He called that generation of Jewish people “wicked and adulterous.”²⁴ He said they were idolatrous and in bondage to the love of money.²⁵ He told them they might actually be weeds and not wheat, or bad fish and not good fish.²⁶ In other words, *the world is often found in the church.* (Fuzzy sets!)

Our inquiry concerning what is wrong with the world should always begin with the answer—we are! This echoes G. K. Chesterton’s famous two-word answer to an essay contest. In response to “What is wrong with the world?” Chesterton telegraphed, “‘I am!’ G. K. Chesterton.” What is wrong with the world, therefore, is not that there are too many liberals or New Agers or feminists or postmod-

ernists in our schools or in our government. What is most wrong with the world is that *the people of God fail to act and live like the people of God*. Or to put it another way, what is wrong with the world is that there is too much of “the world” in the church. Jesus’ strictest scrutiny is always reserved for those who supposedly are in a covenant relationship with God, not for those outside of a covenant relationship with God.

The apostle Paul said much the same thing when he wrote to the Corinthian believers about church discipline: “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church. Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside.”²⁷

What Is Our Calling?

Many Pharisees in Jesus’ day believed they were called to be victorious over the Gentile world by engaging in revolutionary activity against the Roman government. Jesus challenged Israel to fulfill its calling by choosing an entirely different path—the path of being the salt of the earth and the light of the world.²⁸ As Wright so aptly puts it, “He . . . [criticized] his contemporaries for being more concerned for victory over the Gentile world than for bringing YHWH’s healing and salvation to it.”²⁹

Could not the same thing be said of the contemporary Christian understanding of calling? Our rhetoric often betrays us. We use holy-war rhetoric and the language of crusades, suggesting that our primary calling is to crush those who oppose us, not to bring healing and salvation to them.

What Are Our Methods?

The method of many of the Jewish people in Jesus’ day was to support nationalistic, sometimes violent revolutionary activity against Rome. Jesus rejected the entire way that the people thought the battle would be won. In fact, in the words of Wright, “Jesus was to fight the battle against those who wish to fight the battle.”³⁰ Jesus wept over Jerusalem, saying, “If you, even you, had only known on this day *what would bring you peace*—but now it is hidden from your eyes.”³¹

What are the things that “would bring you peace” to which Jesus was referring? What were Jesus’ methods for dealing with people who were far from God? First, he challenged Israel to act like Israel. Jesus called God’s people to radical repentance and to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world! Salt that has lost its saltiness won’t save anyone. Second, he welcomed sinners, ate with them, and offered them the gift of forgiveness and salvation. Third, he brought those outside of the covenant community into God’s family. Jesus preached the good news, healed the sick, and delivered those who were oppressed by the devil. Finally, he went the way of the cross. The way of the cross, in part, involves overcoming opposition to God through voluntary suffering rather than retaliation in kind. (“Well, the gays are marching; we Christians need to organize a counter-demonstration!”)

Here are some of the things that “would bring you peace” we’ll reflect on in this book:

- the continual need on the part of Christians to revisit our categories—specifically, who we are, who our enemy is, what our calling is, and what our methods are
- the need to learn the language of our culture
- the need to listen rather than to speak
- the need to follow the way of the cross and be willing to suffer for Jesus’ sake

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF THE CULTURE

On the day of Pentecost, Jews from all over the known world gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate one of the three annual Jewish pilgrimage feasts. For some, their trip to Jerusalem was a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage. The book of Acts records a miracle that took place on one particular Pentecost:

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly

amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”³²

What was the miracle that took place on that Pentecost day? It wasn't only that a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven, or even that the disciples saw what seemed to be tongues of fire separating and coming to rest on each of them. The miracle of Pentecost was that people from all over the known world heard God speaking in their own language. “A crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.” And again, “How is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?” And again, “We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

Luke, the author of Acts, wants us to understand the shattering impact of God speaking to a person in his or her own language. There is a world of difference between believing that God sent his Son to die for the sins of the world and experiencing the reality that *my* God sent his Son to die for *my* sins. Very often the change from the impersonal, “Christ died for the sins of the world” to the first person, “Christ died for *my* sins,” occurs when persons hear God speaking in their own native language.

That is precisely what happened to me. I first heard about Christ through a woman named Marlene, who later became my wife. Through Marlene I first began to understand the basic outline of the gospel. She spoke to me about Christ fulfilling the Old Testament promises. She told me the story of God coming to earth and taking on human flesh. She shared with me Christ's teachings and miracles, his death on a cross for sin, and his resurrection from the dead. But as a person raised in a conservative Jewish family in New York City, there still was a huge cultural distance between the story of Christ

and my own life—that is, until I heard God speaking to me in my language. At Marlene’s church, a Jewish believer in Christ explained the gospel narrative in terms of the Passover Seder dinner, which we were celebrating together one evening. I finally heard God speaking to me in a language I could understand (the Jewish Passover Seder), and I was able to embrace Christ’s death as a death for *my* sins.

The notion that God saves people by allowing them to hear the gospel message in their own language has fueled the modern Bible translation movement. In past centuries, great missionaries such as William Carey, Hudson Taylor, Henry Martyn, and Adoniram Judson were all Bible translators. One of the greatest missionaries in history, a man named Cameron Townsend, felt a calling to missionary service and went to Guatemala as a young adult in 1917. While there, he tried to sell Spanish Bibles to the native Cakchiquel Indians who lived in a remote rural area of Guatemala. Only a few Cakchiquel Indians could read or speak Spanish. One day Cameron Townsend was confronted by an Indian man. “If your God is so smart,” he asked, “then why hasn’t he learned the Cakchiquel language yet?” Cameron Townsend was so convicted by that question that he spent the next thirteen years of his life translating the Bible into the Cakchiquel language. Based on this experience, Townsend started an organization in 1942 called Wycliffe Bible Translators. Their mission is to provide the Scriptures in every known language on earth so that people can hear God speaking in their own language.³³

I believe we would do wrong to confine our thinking about God, who speaks many languages, to just Bible translation. I believe we should include, for instance, the experience of an unchurched person who walks into a church and, for the first time in her life, can relate and connect with God. One of the greatest compliments I hear about our church from guests is, “Today when I came to your church, I felt like I had come home!” What they mean is, they didn’t have to jump through seventy-two cultural hoops to hear God speaking. It wasn’t as though they had been transported back in time

seventy-five years and felt completely out of place. The message, the music, the dress, and the issues addressed all served to connect them to Christ.

This is the ongoing task of a church—to recreate in twenty-first-century people the miracle of Pentecost—hearing God’s voice in their native language. This includes communicating the gospel in the increasingly diverse dress of America and other Western nations’ newest immigrants. This means planting thousands of ethnic churches and creating many multicultural churches. It also includes recognizing that the language of seniors and baby boomers is not the language of young adults. Nor is the language of moderns the language of postmoderns. It includes the recognition that the language of married couples is not necessarily the language of singles, or that the language of men is not the language of women. We must ask ourselves as Christians, “Do we love people enough to try to speak to them about God in their own language?” Not everyone is a churched person. Not everyone speaks “Christian-ese.” Do you love people enough to enter their world and really comprehend the way they think and the way they speak? Do you love teenagers enough to speak to them in such a way that God is not simply the “God of their fathers.” Do you have enough love for people who have AIDS or who are HIV-positive to communicate the gospel in their language? Do you love feminists and postmodernists enough to even learn their language?

I believe the question posed to Cameron Townsend nearly a century ago is the question being asked of Christians today: “If your God is so smart, then how come he doesn’t speak my language?”

LEARNING TO LISTEN

We live in an increasingly diverse culture, and Western Christians can no longer claim the privileged position of guardians of the culture’s morals, values, or truth claims. In fact, the Christian’s position today more closely resembles the position of Christians in the New Testament world than the position of Christians in the church-dominated world following the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313.³⁴ Today

Christians are a minority, and so we find ourselves increasingly marginalized by our culture's elite institutions.

Christians must be willing to listen as much as they speak if they ever hope to be heard and taken seriously. Listening communicates more respect than speaking (a very hard task when you are confident you possess the truth). Listening suggests we may actually have something to learn. Since we claim omniscience belongs to God alone and not ourselves, this shouldn't be a novel concept for Christians. Yet it is the rare book on evangelism that advises Christians to actually listen to their non-Christian friends as much as speak. By listening we not only show respect, we also affirm truth in a friend's position, at which point we can point him or her to a greater, more comprehensive, more satisfying truth.

Most of all, the style we adopt should be that of our great example, Jesus, who, when he saw the crowds, "had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."³⁵ Compare Jesus' tone and style to that of the Pharisees, who, when they saw the crowds, disdainfully said, "This mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them."³⁶ Which tone and style do you think most Christians use, especially those engaged in today's culture wars? More important, which tone and style do we use as we relate to those outside the church with whom we may strongly disagree? Are we more likely to sound like our overall goal is to crush opposition to God, or to bring healing and salvation to those who oppose the truth?

THE WILLINGNESS TO SUFFER

When I was a business law professor at a midwestern state university, I once hosted a luncheon with other professors, with a time set aside for questions and answers. One young professor, without any sense of incongruity, asked me, "How can I live as a Christian in my university department without having it affect my prospects for tenure and promotion?"

I responded, "Whatever made you think you could live as a Christian and not have it affect your tenure? Didn't the apostle Paul say

somewhere that it is appointed to you to not only believe in him, but also *to suffer* for his sake?” When I saw that I wasn’t scratching his itch, I talked to him about my own experience, the constitutional protection given to state university professors, and the long-standing tradition of academic freedom that includes the opportunity for Christian professors to be public about their faith.

But that professor’s question left me unsettled and shaken, because it sums up why, despite so much religious activity in America, there is so little impact on the public square. Millions of American Christians are asking that professor’s question. “How can I serve Christ without paying a price?” The simple biblical answer is, *You can’t!* Whatever made you think you could?

The price we pay as Christians is not only the suffering we experience at the hands of the world (as defined by those outside the church). We may also find ourselves in direct opposition to the worldliness found today in the church. Like Jesus, you may find yourself subjected to the cross not only at the hands of the Romans, but also at the hands of God’s people. There is a price to pay when one begins to redefine the answer to the question, “Who is my enemy?”

Questions for Reflection and Discussion



1. Recall the story of the “beer incident” at the beginning of this chapter. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt torn between taking a moral stand and showing the grace and love of Jesus? What did you do, and what was the outcome?
2. Consider the term *world* in its third sense—hostile opposition to God. What experience can you point to in which you experienced the world this way?

3. Explain the difference between a bounded set, a centered set, and a fuzzy set. How do you most often categorize people spiritually—by using bounded-set language, centered-set language, or fuzzy-set language?
4. How might expanding the categories you normally employ assist you in being a follower of Christ? In your witness?
5. What would you say is the “language” most people speak today at your job, in your neighborhood, in your family, and so forth. Is it the language of young adults? Traditional Christian? Postmoderns? Some other? How well do you as a Christian communicate God in the language that is most prevalent around you?

RECOMMENDED READING



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Part 1



**Is the Postmodernist
My Enemy?**





2

The Hodgepodge on the Highway

"I'm an Episcopalian, and I think of myself as a practicing non-Jew," says Katherine Powell Cohen, a 36-year-old English teacher in San Francisco. "I'm a Mennonite hyphen Unitarian Universalist who practices Zen meditation," says Ralph Imhoff, 57, a retired educator from Chandler, Arizona. "I call myself a Christian-Buddhist, but sort of tongue-in-cheek," says Maitreya Badami, 30, who works in the Contra Costa, California, public defender's office.¹

The *Wall Street Journal* recently wrote about this hodgepodge of beliefs:

If America has always been a melting pot, these days its religious practices have become a spiritual hash. Blending or braiding the beliefs of different spiritual traditions has become so rampant in America that the Dalai Lama has called the country "the spiritual supermarket." Jews flirt with Hinduism, Catholics study Taoism, and Methodists discuss whether to make the Passover Seder an official part of worship. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a prominent Jewish scholar, is also a Sufi sheik, and James Ishmael Ford, a Unitarian minister in Arizona, is a Zen sensei, or master. The melding of Judaism with Buddhism has become so commonplace that marketers who sell spiritual books, videotapes, and lecture series have a name for it: "JewBu."²

The *Journal* goes on to report that even Christian clergy are caught up in this smorgasbord of beliefs. For example, at St. Gregory of Nyssa, an Episcopal church in San Francisco, two senior ministers have created a service that includes “the worship of Jesus Christ, dancing and the ringing of Buddhist cymbals.” The ministers, both of whom have impeccable Episcopalian credentials (with graduate degrees from Cambridge and Princeton universities respectively), had the church built four years ago to their specifications. St. Gregory’s has an interior decorated with Eastern Orthodox icons, a Shinto shrine, and a Chinese gong. The ministers wear tie-dyed African vestments. Unlike traditional Episcopal services, their service always includes the Shema (an ancient Jewish prayer), as well as quiet moments of reflection with the ringing of cymbals. People dance forward to join in the Eucharist, and everyone is invited to partake, not just Christians.

HODGEPODGE ON THE HIGHWAY

Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, wrote an amusing article about how Americans can hold in their minds entirely contradictory ideas without sweating it. He reported that one day on a Chicago expressway he was following a car that had a Playboy bunny decal affixed to its rear window. Curious to see what sort of person would drive a car with a Playboy bunny decal so prominently displayed, Mouw pulled up alongside the car, only to notice a plastic statue of the Virgin Mary on the car’s dashboard.

“Was there some intra-family compromise at work,” wondered Mouw, “between, say, a would-be Hugh Hefner and [the driver’s] pious wife?” Upon further reflection, Mouw recognized that this incident was symptomatic of the entire lack of coherence in people’s worldviews.

Mouw went on to tell another story about a time when he was a guest on a call-in radio show. His fellow guest was a liberal church leader who was skeptical about the reliability of the New Testament and the resurrection of Jesus. Mouw, however, defended the reliability of the New Testament text and the historicity of Christ’s resurrection. One of the callers was a young woman who identified herself as “Heather from Glendale.”

“I’m not what you would call, like, a Christian,” Heather began. “Actually, right now I am sort of into—you know, witchcraft and stuff like that. But I agree with the guy from Fuller Seminary. I’m just shocked that someone would, like, say that Jesus wasn’t really raised from the dead!”³

Is there a philosophy or worldview that can account for Heather from Glendale (the dabbler in witchcraft who believes in the resurrection), the fellow whose car bore a statue of the Virgin Mary and a Playboy bunny sticker, and St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church (which has Christian symbols alongside a Shinto shrine and Chinese gongs)? Yes, the worldview that can account for the melding of seemingly incompatible philosophies into one gigantic collage is called “postmodernism.” To make sense of the Western world in the twenty-first century, one must strive to understand the postmodernist worldview.

WHAT IS POSTMODERNISM?

One author said that trying to get a handle on postmodernism is “like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.” Some contend that postmodernism is simply a collection of different forms of antimodernism. Others see it as a rather benign or neutral movement that takes shape within different areas of the arts, physical sciences, and the metaphysical disciplines. Still others view it as a self-contradictory attack on the very concept of truth itself, which would jettison all attempts at a singular worldview.⁴

Some authors, such as theologian Thomas Oden, believe that postmodernism is a misnomer altogether and that we ought to substitute the word “ultramodern” for “postmodern.” Oden writes, “What is named ‘post’ is actually a desperate extension of despairing modernity, which imagines by calling itself another name (post-modern), it can extend the ideology of modernity into the period following modernity.”⁵

Because there are so many different perspectives on postmodernism, any attempted definition will be criticized by one camp or another. Instead of trying to define postmodernism, I will describe some of its main features. But first . . .

WHEN DID POSTMODERNISM BEGIN?

The word *post* means “after.” Postmodernism, therefore, simply means “after modernism.” But just as there is no agreement regarding the definition of postmodernism, there is also no consensus about the exact dating of modernism. Theologian Stanley Grenz would place the birth of the modern era at about 1648, associating it with the beginning of the Enlightenment and the Peace of Westphalia following the Thirty Years War.⁶ Thomas Oden marks the modern period by the fall of two great walls: the wall in front of the Bastille Prison in 1789 and the wall in Berlin in 1989.⁷ Thus, modernity would cover an exact two hundred-year period marked by the collapse of these two famous walls.

However one dates the birth of the modern period, whether as early as 1648 or as late as 1789, it is clear to most observers that the twenty-first-century Western world is witnessing the end of an era. The philosophical perspective known as modernism is either dying or is already dead.

WHAT ARE THE FEATURES OF MODERNISM?

Although many features of modernism could be cited, some of the more prominent ones include the following:

- a belief in the inevitable progress of humanity
- an extreme confidence in human reason
- an acceptance of autonomy and rejection of authority
- a belief that nature is all that exists
- a quest for unity, with a tendency toward uniformity

A Belief in the Inevitable Progress of Humanity

Modernists are the ultimate optimists. To them, everything is getting bigger and better every day and in every way. Modernists’ political slogans speak of New Frontiers, New Deals, and a New Day Dawning. The eighteenth-century French philosopher Condorcet spoke of the gradual perfection and improvement of

humanity over time with these enthusiastic words: “The human race, emancipated from its shackles, released from the empire of fate and from that of the enemies of its progress, is advancing with a firm and sure step along the path of truth, virtue, and happiness.”⁸ John Dewey, whose philosophy of education has permeated the public school system in North America, captured modernism’s optimistic belief in inevitable progress this way: “The future rather than the past dominates the imagination. The Golden Age lies ahead of us, not behind us.”⁹

But it is by no means self-evident or obvious that we moderns are happier, more moral, more compassionate, more tolerant, or less warlike than our premodern ancestors. The twentieth century provided an abundance of evidence that we are not. While it is certainly the case that we have progressed technologically and scientifically, this past century has witnessed trainloads of Jews delivered to German gas chambers; Soviet gulags; Chinese brainwashing; ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and Bosnia; genocide in Uganda and Cambodia; atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; massacre at Mylai—to name just a few witnesses against the idea of moral progress.

The myth of progress exists not only in the realm of humanity’s moral improvement, but also in the modern belief of our intellectual advancement over premoderns. C. S. Lewis coined the phrase “chronological snobbery” to describe the uncritical assumption that what has gone out of date is on that account discredited (in other words, if an idea is no longer fashionable, it must not be true). Lewis wrote the following:

You must find out why [an idea] went out of date. Was it ever refuted (and if so, by whom, where, and how conclusively), or did it merely die away as fashions do? If the latter, this tells us nothing about its truth or falsehood. From seeing this, one passes to the realization that our own age is also a “period,” and certainly has, like all periods, its own characteristic illusions.¹⁰

An Extreme Confidence in Human Reason

Before the modern age, human reason was employed to understand truth given through biblical revelation. Anselm, the medieval theologian, said, “The believer does not seek to understand, that he may believe, but he believes that he may understand.”¹¹ The theologians of the church in the premodern period used their reason to demonstrate the truth of revelation and to reconcile the human experience of life with the teaching found in the Bible. Beginning with the philosopher René Descartes, however, human reason was uncoupled from revelation and was allowed to wander autonomously toward whatever discoveries could be made through the human senses. According to Stanley Grenz, modernism’s confidence in human reason was based on three major assumptions:

- Knowledge is certain. As long as we come up with the right method of investigation, humanity can make absolutely correct statements about all aspects of reality.
- Knowledge is objective. The ideal intellectual is a dispassionate knower who stands apart from what he or she is observing. In other words, the scientist can somehow gain a God’s-eye-view of the universe and be an entirely neutral observer of the object of his or her study.
- Knowledge is inherently good. This is taken to be a given. No justification is needed for any scientific enterprise, since all knowledge is inherently good and ignorance is always unquestionably evil.¹²

But are these modernist assumptions valid?

Is knowledge certain? Complete certainty is an impossibility, since every one of our observations and experiences takes place in some context and is, to some degree, a function of interpretation. In other words, everything we know is limited by who we are.

Recently I was asked to speak at a Unitarian-Universalist church. I have made it a practice to accept invitations to speak almost anywhere, as long as there are no constraints put on what I am allowed to say. After my talk (and an hour of questions and

answers), a young man came up to me and said, "Rich, I don't think I can believe in Jesus as you've been encouraging us to do this evening. I still have some doubts, and there are still questions that for me remain unanswered."

I said, "Listen, if you're waiting to arrive at a place of total certainty before you trust in Christ, that will never happen. I live life with a constant sense of my three fundamental limits. First of all, I am a creature, not the Creator. I am by design very small and can't possibly comprehend all of the working of my Creator. Second, I am a sinner. Even those things that I could comprehend get twisted in my mind to serve my own self-interest. I recognize that there is a high degree of distortion based on the fallenness of my reason. Third, I am from New York City. That fact inclines me towards a whole set of cultural assumptions and approaches. Therefore, I know that I could never arrive at absolute certainty about anything."

On the other hand, the fact that we can't have absolute certainty does not immediately throw us into a state of total relativity in which one opinion is as good as another. Neither must we stop drawing any lines or making judgments because we know philosophically that what we are saying may only be a very good approximation of reality.¹³

I witnessed the results of extreme uncertainty at a recent conference in which I participated. One of the other speakers, also a pastor, kept asserting that "everything was just a matter of perspective." A friend of mine asked him afterward, "How far would you go with this idea that 'everything is just a matter of perspective'?"

The presenter responded, "In the last several years I've lost my certainty about everything!"

My friend, still wanting to know where the pastor would draw the line, said, "I understand that, but let's say a Jehovah's Witness came into your church and wanted to lead one of your small groups. Would you allow him to lead?"

The presenter said, "As a matter of fact, he would be able to lead in my church."

My friend said, “You mean someone who denies the deity of Christ and the reality of the Trinity would still be able to have a leadership role in your church? Don’t you have a Statement of Faith?”

He said, “No. Our only Statement of Faith is ‘Follow Jesus, whatever that means to you.’”

The pristine certainty of modernism, which could not be subjected to any corrections, has been appropriately critiqued by twentieth-century philosophers. We shouldn’t, however, toss the baby out with the bathwater. Our basic confidence is that God can and does speak in ways appropriate to our limitations, so that we have more than enough knowledge on which to be saved and to live life well.

Is knowledge objective? Knowledge can hardly be said to be objective, since no human being can separate himself or herself from the flow of history and gain a God’s-eye-view of the universe. It is not wrong to struggle for objectivity or neutrality, but what we know must be viewed with a high degree of modesty. As scientists have long held, the very presence of an observer alters the results of the experiment.

What’s so great about objectivity anyway? In the area of interpersonal relationships, subjectivity may yield more reliable knowledge than objectivity. The existentialists used to talk about the importance of moving from an “I/it” relationship with other personal beings (making other people or God into objects to be analyzed) toward an “I/thou” relationship (making other people or God into subjects to be loved).

Who knows a person better—someone who views them dispassionately and indifferently, like a scientist, or someone who loves them, like a wife or a husband? As Christians, we believe that truth is not merely an abstract proposition, but it is contained in a person, Jesus Christ, who said, “I am the way and the truth and the life.”¹⁴

The addition of the subjective to the objective is not meant to pit words (objective revelation) against experience (subjective revelation). Objective words do not exhaust God’s revelation, but then neither does a “mystical experience.” We need both to arrive at what is true.

Consider this helpful illustration:

If you have any doubt that cognitive, propositional communication is at the very heart of relationship, let me ask this to those of you who have dogs at home: Would you say you had a good relationship with them? Probably most of you dog-owning readers of this chapter would say that, yes, you do have a good relationship with your dog. Yet even so, I predict the quality, indeed the very nature of that relationship would change if you were to go home this evening and be greeted verbally by your dog. If your dog introduced speech into the relationship, it would change the nature of that relationship. That dog could both fully know you and be more fully known by you.

Our God is not a mute God. Not only is he active in history [and also in our experience], but he has spoken. And so we must care about cognitive truth. God has revealed himself as a personal God, and part of that personhood is his communication to us of truth [through words].¹⁵

Is all knowledge inherently good? The Bible would not agree with the modernists. Some knowledge, specifically the knowledge gained through disobedience (“the knowledge of good and evil”) is inherently bad. Other kinds of knowledge, such as uncovering the secret of human cloning, may well turn out to be bad. Not only should we as Christians challenge the inherent goodness of knowledge, but we should also reject the idea that human reason is the sole means of gaining and judging knowledge. The Bible speaks of truth coming to human beings through prophecy, revelation, and such nonrational (or suprarational) means as dreams, visions, and angelic visitations. Emotions and intuition, therefore, should be added to human reason as legitimate biblical ways to discover truths.

An Acceptance of Autonomy and Rejection of Authority

The famous mathematician and atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell spoke for many modernists and illustrated another feature of modernism:

In this world we can now begin a little to understand things, and a little to master them by the help of science, which has forced its way step by step against the Christian religion, against the churches, and against the opposition of all the old precepts. Science can help us to get over this craven fear in which mankind has lived for so many generations. Science can teach us, and I think our own hearts can teach us, no longer to look around for imaginary supports, no longer to invent allies in the sky, but rather to look to our own efforts here below to make this world a fit place to live in, instead of the sort of place that the churches in all these centuries have made it. . . . We can conquer the world by intelligence and not merely by being slavishly subdued by the terror that comes from it. The whole conception of God is a conception derived from the ancient Oriental despotisms. It is a conception quite unworthy of free men.¹⁶

Have you heard John Lennon's song, "Imagine"? It reflects the same mind-set of autonomy. In it, Lennon imagined the utopia that would result from a world where there was "no countries . . . and no religion too."¹⁷

Russell and Lennon voiced the modernist dream: freedom from the authority of the church, freedom from the authority of Scripture, freedom from the authority of governments, and freedom from the authority of God.

The antiauthoritarianism of modernist philosophy, however, didn't stop with the church, the Bible, or even God. Modernist parents find that their authority has been severely undermined at home. For many of our contemporaries, the family is no longer a refuge from the stresses of life, but rather a battlefield for a war of the wills between parents and children. The authority of teachers has been so undermined that all too many schools are no longer places for learning and the impartation of knowledge. Drug-sniffing dogs patrol the halls, accompanied by uniformed police officers who carry clubs and handcuffs. Students in some school districts have to

pass through metal detectors and are no longer allowed to carry backpacks, since these can be used to conceal weapons.

The breakdown of respect for government's authority has resulted in the need to allocate billions of dollars for the construction of new prisons. In some neighborhoods in America, more young men are incarcerated than attend college. The modernist dream of freedom from external authority has turned out to be a nightmare. It has resulted in millions of men and women being locked up in penitentiaries, and many million more being "imprisoned" behind triple-locked apartment doors and in gated communities with twenty-four-hour security checkpoints.

A Belief That Nature Is All That Exists

Modernism is thoroughly naturalistic in its belief that the world is a closed system without any intrusion from the supernatural, whether divine or angelic or demonic. Naturalists attempt to explain everything by means of natural causes. Therefore, the modernist would view as absurd the claim that someone has been healed as a result of praying to God. Perhaps prayer had a calming effect on the endocrine system of the sick person, which then released beneficial hormones in the person's body, causing the person to be healed. But the notion that something from outside the closed system (namely, God) intruded into our world in response to prayer and healed a sick person is viewed as absurd. The universe is closed, and all that exists is nature.

Carl Sagan, the well-known popularizer of astronomy, put it plainly when he said, "The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be."¹⁸ Therefore, the universe itself cannot be attributed to an eternal Creator God, since it is simply the result of the cosmos itself. To the consistent naturalist, the universe has no beginning point; it has always existed. There are no such things as "answers to prayer" or miracles. There is no ultimate purpose in life beyond doing the best you can while you are here. And there is nothing beyond the grave. The modernist is left with no reason for living and no hope when dying. All the modernist has is the supposedly unalterable "laws of nature."

C. S. Lewis once critiqued naturalism in a beautiful little essay titled “Religion and Science.” He lets us listen in to a dialogue between himself and a naturalist:

Naturalist: “I think the laws of nature are really like two and two making four. The idea of their being altered is as absurd as the idea of altering the laws of arithmetic.”

Lewis: “Half a moment,” said I. “Suppose you put six pence into a drawer today, and six pence into the same drawer tomorrow. Do the laws of arithmetic make it certain you will find a shilling’s worth there the day after?”

Naturalist: “Of course,” said he, “provided no one’s been tampering with your drawer.”

Lewis: “Ah, but that’s the whole point,” said I. “The laws of arithmetic can tell you what you will find, with absolute certainty, *provided that* there is no interference. If a thief has been at the drawer, of course, you will get a different result. But the thief won’t have broken the laws of arithmetic—only the laws of England. Now aren’t the laws of nature much in the same boat? Don’t they all tell you what will happen *provided* there is no interference?”¹⁹

Lewis argued that the laws of science can merely predict what will happen provided there is no interference from an outside source, such as God. But God does not break the laws of science any more than a thief who steals something out of your drawer breaks the laws of mathematics.

A Quest for Unity, with a Tendency Toward Uniformity

The modernist quest for unity can be seen in institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. It can be seen in the image of the United States as a “melting pot” in which historic ethnic differences are melted away and a person comes out of the pot as something entirely new, *an American*. It can be seen in the slogan on most American coins, *E Pluribus Unum*, which means “out of many, one.”

The modernist quest for unity also can be seen in its architecture, in particular, at the International School of Architecture, founded by Walter Gropius in the 1920s. The school promoted the rectangular, unadorned glass and steel buildings that occupy the center of our major cities. International School architects believed that this uniform design would be liberating. In practice, it proved to be profoundly oppressive. The relentless boxes of modernist design were favored by Stalinist city planners and by the planners of Nazi concentration camps. Unity, in the modernist sense, led to relentless uniformity and a depressing tedium, which exterminated not only beauty, but also human beings.

Thomas Oden summarized the results of modernity's triumph as "a moral spinout." Oden's words are a bracing correction to anyone who wishes for a return to modernism:

The bull's-eye definition of terminally fragmenting modernity . . . is as a disabling social malaise, a crash of the moral immune system, a collapse of virtue, *a moral spinout*. . . .

The party is over for the hedonic sexual revolution of the period from the sexy '60s to the gay '90s. The party crasher is sexually transmitted diseases, with AIDS leading the way. We now have to learn to live with the consequences of the sexual, interpersonal, and familial wreckage to which this narcissistic money-grubbing, lust-enslaved, porn-infested, abortive self-indulgence has led us. Its interpersonal fruits are friendlessness, disaffection, divorce, and the despairing substitution of sexual experimentation for intimacy. Not a pretty picture!²⁰

In the next chapter we'll find out how postmodernism has come to not only critique but also to largely replace modernism.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion



1. Have you talked with someone recently who had utterly self-contradictory beliefs? If so, describe the conversation.
2. In your experience, whom have you found to be more optimistic about the future, the elderly or young adults? Why do you think this is?
3. Consider the way advertisements have changed in the past forty years. In the 1960s, actors in white lab coats spoke with “scientific authority” about a product. In the twenty-first century, products are advertised by associating them with fun or sexuality. What do you think accounts for this change?
4. Is it correct to say that if you cannot be *absolutely certain* about something, you should not believe it?

RECOMMENDED READING



- Guinness, Os. *The Gravedigger File: Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983.
- Himmelfarb, Gertrude. *On Looking Into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society*. New York: Vintage, 1994.
- Sire, James W. *The Universe Next Door*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988.
- Wells, David F. *No Place for Truth: Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.



Understanding the Postmodernist

“We create ourselves as a work of art,” French philosopher Michael Foucault observed about the self. Many young adults seem to agree. “I really enjoy photography, so I worked for a newspaper for a couple of years. Then I designed Web sites for a company, but I couldn’t hack the rat race. Now I’m working in landscaping, which I really like. I’m thinking about going back to school and getting my teaching certificate and teaching for a few years. What would really excite me, though, would be to pastor for a while and then maybe . . .”

THE LOSS OF THE SELF IN POSTMODERNISM

As a pastor I’ve had literally dozens of conversations with young adults who sounded just like this. Roles no longer define who people are; rather they are to be tried on like clothing for a while and then taken off, based on opportunity, mood, or taste.

The same thing is true for many young adults in the area of sexuality. Studies indicate a great amount of fluidity in sexual behavior and significant changes in people’s self-labeled sexual identities. This fluidity is also, of course, found in the popular phenomenon of “church hopping and shopping.” “I was raised in a mainline church, but I got saved when a friend took me to his Baptist church. But I didn’t like that real well, so I attended a large independent charismatic church for a while, but I missed a sense of rootedness. So I’m going to an Episcopalian church. I don’t know how long I’ll stay there . . .”