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pop culture

MAKE
BELIEVERS

THE DEATH OF
CULTURAL
CHRISTIANITY

THE UNSPOKEN
GENOCIDE

THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN
LIFE

TRUE

GOVERNMENT

THE ABSOLUTE
AUTHORITY OF THE
SCRIPTURES

ANTI-CHRIST
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THE BIBLICAL TRUTH ON HUMAN SEXUALITY

GLOBAL
PANIC

THE RETURN OF
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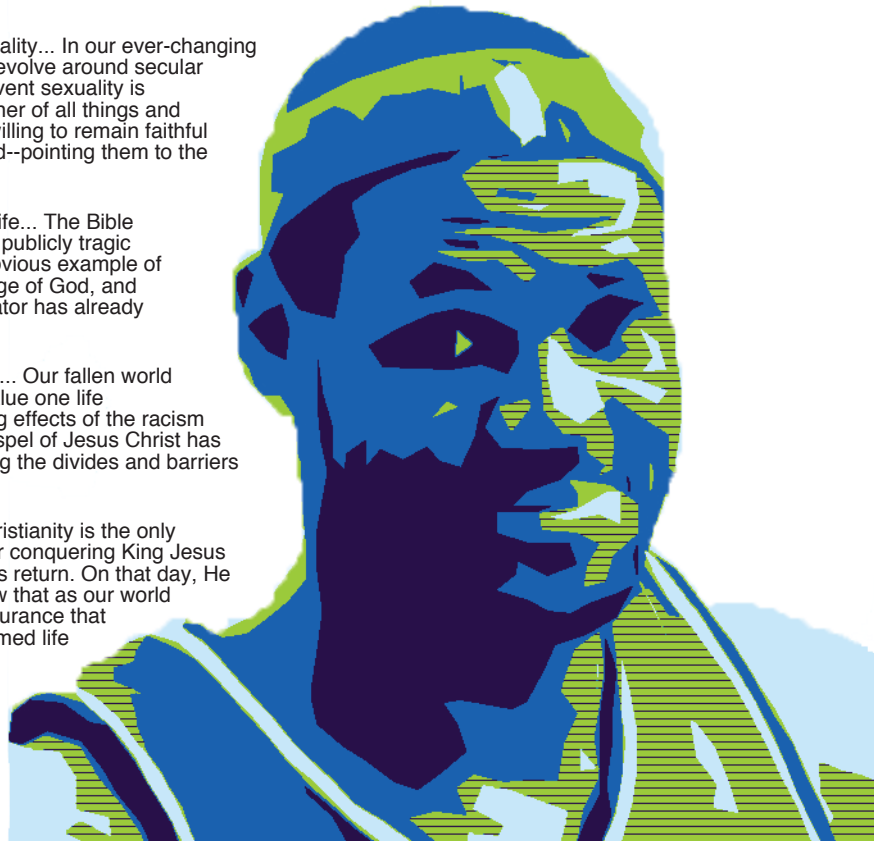
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- 6 **TRUE GOVERNMENT** The absolute authority of the scriptures... As Christians we believe in the foundational truth of the Bible as the absolute authority for all lives. With the many competing voices of influence in our culture today, Christians must compassionately and honestly engage the culture from the truth found in the word of God. This demands a reordering of our lives and the courage to live in light of its truths -- regardless of the cost.
- 8 **JESUS > EVERYTHING** The exclusivity of the Gospel... Jesus is the most polarizing figure that has ever lived. He did not leave room to be merely "liked!" His claims demand that we love Him or hate Him. The Bible exalts Jesus as the sole means for sinful humanity to find salvation for sin. Considering all of the religious and irreligious offerings found in our world today, the independent exclusivity of Jesus must be known, embraced, and shared.
- 10 **ANTI-CHRIST AMONG US** The global hatred of Christianity... Within our insulated and inoculated American church, the reality that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is an offense is often lost on us. But we must see that globally, the church is under immense suffering. The global hatred of Christianity is growing rapidly and the cost of following Jesus is higher than ever. We must see for ourselves what the Bible describes as the reality for our cultural future, and the continued intolerance against our faith itself.
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- 22 **GLOBAL PANIC** The return of Christ in a chaotic world... Christianity is the only religious world-view that gives hope in the midst of chaos. Because our conquering King Jesus has defeated sin, death, hell, and the grave, we trust the promise of His return. On that day, He will right every wrong and reconcile all things back to Himself. We know that as our world spirals downward from the lasting effects of sin, we have confident assurance that King Jesus will return, and those who belong to Him will enjoy a redeemed life with Him forever!



pop culture

Our culture is rapidly changing every single day and as Christians we are caught right in the middle. Faith, religion, politics, morality, and truth are at the center of controversy and debate. As Christ-followers, we live in an unusual time in American history. Christianity is now viewed as the most controversial and offensive of all faith systems. How do we navigate through the ever increasing issues of our culture? How do we stand on truth and shine the light of the Gospel in the times in which we live?

In Pop Culture, we will deal with some of the most controversial topics and issues facing our society today. Our prayer is that this series will not only equip you to courageously live out authentic Christianity but also give you the boldness needed to engage our culture with the hope that's found in the Gospel of Jesus.



How to use magazine Resources/QR codes

Throughout this magazine we have offered a number of additional resources to continue the conversations that have been started. In order to access these resources, you can scan QR codes, which link to sites where you can listen to music, read further articles, or purchase additional resources. We recommend a QR reader app such as “QR Code Reader” by Scan Inc., which is available wherever apps are sold.

a word from our pastors...

“My hope is that Pop Culture will enable our church to engage a culture that is in desperate need of Jesus—with His Gospel! As followers of Jesus, it is often difficult to navigate our lives in a culture that is so opposed to biblical Christianity. However, we have been sent by Jesus to engage the world with the love of Jesus and the truth of His word. I believe this series will equip us to gently and respectfully give ‘an explanation to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that you have’.”

Todd Kaunitz, Lead Pastor

 @toddkaunitz



“My prayer for our Pop Culture series is that the Holy Spirit of God might open our eyes to the concerned and confused culture around us. Our calling as Christ-followers is to engage our world—in love—with the truth of God’s word. While we cannot compromise on our biblical convictions, we must tenderly and compassionately serve others, as well as share the truth of God’s Kingdom with others who hold to differing views.”

Connor Bales, Lead Pastor

 @connorbales



make believers

THE DEATH OF CULTURAL CHRISTIANITY

IS CHRISTIANITY DYING?

By Russell Moore

Christianity is dying. At least, that's what major newspapers are telling us today, culling research from a new Pew Center study on what almost all sociologists are observing these days—the number of Americans who identify as Christians has reached an all-time low, and is falling. I think this is perhaps bad news for America, but it is good news for the church.

The lead editor of the report tells *The New York Times* that secularization—mainly in terms of those who identify as “nones” or with no specific religious affiliation—isn't isolated to the progressive Northeast and Pacific Northwest. He notes, “The change is taking place all over, including the Bible Belt.”

This is precisely what several of us have been saying for years. Bible Belt near-Christianity is teetering. I say let it fall. For much of the twentieth century, especially in the South and parts of the Midwest, one had to at least claim to be a Christian to be “normal.” During the Cold War, that meant distinguishing oneself from atheistic Communism. At other times, it has meant seeing churchgoing as a way to be seen as a good parent, a good neighbor, and a regular person. It took courage to be an atheist, because explicit unbelief meant social marginalization. Rising rates of secularization, along with individualism, means that those days are over—and good riddance to them.

Again, this means some bad things for the American social compact. In the Bible Belt of, say, the 1940s, there were people who didn't, for example, divorce, even though they wanted out of their marriages. In many of these cases, the motive wasn't obedience to Jesus' command on marriage but instead because they knew that a divorce would marginalize them from their communities. In that sense, their “traditional family values” were motivated by the same thing that motivated the religious leaders who rejected Jesus—fear of being “put out of the synagogue.” Now, to be sure, that kept some children in intact families. But that's hardly revival.

Secularization in America means that we have fewer incognito atheists. Those who don't believe can say so—and still find spouses, get jobs, volunteer with the PTA, and even run for office. This is good news because the kind of “Christianity” that is a means to an end—even if that end is “traditional family values”—is what J. Gresham Machen rightly called “liberalism,” and it is an entirely different religion from the apostolic faith handed down by Jesus Christ.

Now, what some will say is that the decline in self-identified Christians is a sign that the church should jettison its more

unpopular teachings. And in our day, these teachings are almost always those dealing with pelvic autonomy. First of all, even if this were the key to success, we couldn't—and wouldn't—do it. Christianity isn't a political party, dependent on crafting ideologies to suit the masses. We received this gospel (Gal. 1:11-12); we didn't invent it. But, that said, such is not the means to “success”—even the way the sociologists define it.

The Pew report holds that mainline denominations—those who have made their peace with the Sexual Revolution—continue to report heavy losses, while evangelical churches remain remarkably steady—even against some heavy headwinds coming from the other direction. Why?

We learned this answer 100 years ago, and it reminds us of what we learned 2,000 years ago. Two or three generations ago, Christians who held to the Virgin birth of Christ were warned that their children would flee the faith unless the parents redefined Christianity. “If you want to win the next generation,” they were told, “you have to make Christianity relevant, and that means dispensing with miracles in favor of modern science.” The churches that followed that path aren't just dying; they are dead, sustained by endowments and dwindling gatherings of nostalgic senior adults with a smattering of community organizers here and there.

People who don't want Christianity, don't want almost-Christianity. Almost-Christianity looks in the mainline like something from Nelson Rockefeller to Che Guevara at prayer. Almost Christianity, in the Bible Belt, looks like a God-and-Country civil religion that prizes cultural conservatism more than theological fidelity. Either way, a Christianity that reflects its culture, whether that culture is Smith College or NASCAR, only lasts as long as it is useful to its host. That's because it's, at root, idolatry, and people turn from their idols when they stop sending rain.

Christianity isn't normal anymore, and that's good news. The Book of Acts, like the Gospels before it, shows us that the Christianity thrives when it is, as Kierkegaard put it, a sign of contradiction. Only a strange gospel can differentiate itself from the worlds we construct. But the strange, freakish, foolish old gospel is what God uses to save people and to resurrect churches (1 Cor. 1:20-22).

We do not have more atheists in America. We have more honest atheists in America. Again, that's good news. The gospel comes to sinners, not to the righteous. It is easier to speak a gospel to the lost than it is to speak a gospel to the kind-of-saved. And what those honest atheists grapple with, is what every sinner grapples with, burdened consciences that point to judgment. Our calling is to bear witness.

make believers

THE DEATH OF CULTURAL CHRISTIANITY

We don't have Mayberry anymore, if we ever did. Good. Mayberry leads to hell just as surely as Gomorrah does. But Christianity didn't come from Mayberry in the first place, but from a Roman Empire hostile to the core to the idea of a crucified and resurrected Messiah. We've been on the wrong side of history since Rome, and it was enough to turn the world upside down.

The future of Christianity is bright. I don't know that from surveys and polls, but from a word Someone spoke one day back at Caesarea Philippi. The gates of hell haven't gotten any stronger, and the Light that drives out the darkness is enough to counter every rival gospel, even those gospels that describe themselves as "none."

Russell Moore serves as the eighth president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, the moral and public policy agency of the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

A widely-sought cultural commentator, Dr. Moore has been recognized by a number of influential organizations. The Wall Street Journal has called him "vigorous, cheerful, and fiercely articulate" while The Gospel Coalition has referred to him "one of the most astute ethicists in contemporary evangelicalism."

*An ethicist and theologian by background, Dr. Moore is also an ordained Southern Baptist minister and the author of several books, including the forthcoming *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel*. He blogs frequently at his Moore to the Point website, and hosts a program called *Questions & Ethics*—a wide-ranging podcast addressing listener-generated questions on the difficult moral and ethical issues of the day.*

Source: russellmoore.com

RESOURCE:



For more on this, see Dr. Moore's new book *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel*.

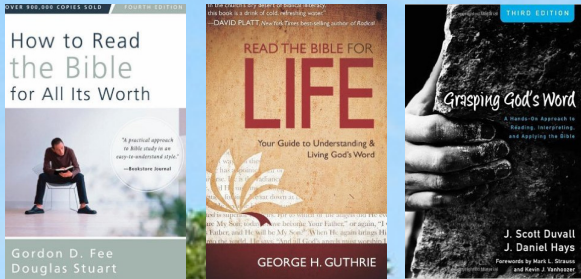
<http://www.onward-book.com/>



true government

THE ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

RESOURCES:



www.jointhebibleproject.com

BIBLE-WISE

By Josh Edds

Many of us would agree that the Bible is the most important possession a Christian has at their disposal. The Bible is God's Word, God's revelation to man. The Bible is how God has communicated His salvation plan and the Gospel to all the world. The Scriptures reveal to us how to experience more of the abundant life Jesus promised us. The Holy Spirit uses God's Word to lead, guide and direct us. The Bible unlocks our created purpose which is to glorify God, and the Bible shows us just how we can fulfill that purpose. The Word of God is our weapon and

defense in a broken and sinful world.

While all these truths about scripture exist, one unfortunate truth persists as well.

Many Christians do not understand how to study the Bible.

There is a difference between simply *reading* the Bible, and proper *understanding* of the Bible. If you are like me, all your Christian life you've been encouraged to read the Bible more, memorize scripture, and when the time was right, asked to even teach from it. And (for the most part) I've always been faithful to do those things. It wasn't until Seminary that I was taught *how* to read, study, and understand the Bible. I immediately thought what a tragedy it was that I was never taught these skills earlier in life!

The plain and simple truth is; you don't need a seminary degree to understand how to study the Bible properly.! There are a few simple practices you can add to your personal Bible study time that will help you to study, interpret, and understand what you are reading in the Word of God.

OBSERVATION

The first thing that every Bible-reader needs to practice is observation. Don't just *read* the text, *observe* what is going on *with* the text. Observe as many details as you possibly can. In this early stage of observation, don't try and interpret or apply what you're reading, simply observe the notable things about the passage. Here's a list of things to observe and look for when studying scripture:

1. Repetition of Words

If any particular words are repeated in a sentence, verse, or passage alarms should sound in your head to pay attention to this word because it is important to understanding the principal from that particular passage. (e.g. 1 John 2:15-17)

2. Contrasts and Comparisons

Look for concepts, people, and items that are compared or contrasted with each other. Contrast focuses on differences while comparison focuses on similarities. Both are tools used by the biblical writers to point us to the main principal of the passage. Remember, the things themselves being compared or contrasted are not the point of the passage, the *reason* they are the same or different is. (e.g. Proverbs 15:1, 25:26)

3. Lists

Anytime you come across more than two itemized things, you can identify them as a list. When you see a list in a passage of scripture, you should ask some questions. "Is there order?" "Are the items in the list grouped in any way?" Identifying lists and asking questions like these will help you to better understand the principal being made in the passage you're reading. (e.g. 1 John 2:16)

4. Cause and Effect

Often the Bible will state a cause, and the state the effect of

true government

THE ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

that cause. Cause-and-effect relationships play an extremely important role all throughout scripture. So always be on the lookout for cause-and-effect relationships in the text you're reading, and take note of them. (e.g. Romans 6:23)

5. Figures of Speech

Figures of speech are images in which words are used in a sense other than the normal, literal sense. (*"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path"*) Figures of speech are powerful literary forms because they paint images to which we can relate emotionally. (e.g. Psalm 18:2)

6. Conjunctions

If you could imagine the biblical text to be a brick house, then conjunctions are the mortar that hold the bricks together. Always observe and pay attention when you see words such as, "and," "for," "but," "therefore," "since," "because," etc. Always take note of conjunctions and identify their function and what ideas they are connecting. (e.g. 2 Timothy 1:7-8)

7. Verbs

Verbs are extremely important because they communicate the action of the sentence. As you observe the text, note what action the verb is making. Ask questions like, "Is the verb past, present, or future tense?" "Does the verb have continued action?" (I was going, I am going, I will be going etc.) "Is the verb a command?" (Go!) Always take special care to identify verbs that are commands! When the Word of God gives us a command, we should obey! (e.g. Ephesians 4:2-3)

CROSSING THE BRIDGE

Once you have thoroughly observed the text, it is time to draw out the key principal or main idea of the passage so that you can apply it to your own life. How do you draw out the main theological principal? You take all of the information that you have observed using the 7 tools above, and walk that information through four steps of interpretation.

Step 1. Grasp the Text in Their Town

You need to start by asking the question, "What did this text mean to original, biblical audience?" You can begin to answer that question by taking all the information you've observed about the passage you're studying, and write out what the passage meant for the biblical audience. (e.g. "God commanded the Israelites in Joshua 1 to..." "Jesus encouraged his disciples by..." etc..)

Step 2. Measuring the Width of the River to Cross

There is a "river" of differences that separate us from the original biblical audience. This river of differences is made up of time, language, culture, situation, and sometimes covenant. The differences that we have from the biblical audience hinder us from moving straight from meaning in their context to meaning in ours. In this step you'll look for significant differences between our situation today and the situation of the biblical audience. If you are studying an Old Testament passage, also be sure to remember that a key difference is covenant. The writers and audience of the Old Testament we're not under the

New Covenant that was brought by the work of Jesus on the Cross. (e.g. Joshua 1:1-9 – What are the differences? – We are not entering or conquering the Promised Land, we are not the new leaders of the nations of Israel. We are not under the old covenant.)

Step 3. Crossing the Bridge

Now that we've grasped the meaning of the text in their town, and recognized differences that separate us from the biblical audience, we're ready to cross over the river of differences and pinpoint the the theological principal of the text. The theological principal will be one that has meaning and significance to both the biblical audience and to us. To determine the theological principal, recall the differences you identified in Step 2. Then try to identify similarities between the situation of the biblical audience and your situation. (e.g. Joshua 1:1-9 – we are also the people of God, we are also in a covenant relationship with God, while we may not be invading the Promised Land, we are seeking to obey the will of God and to accomplish what He has commanded us to do.)

After evaluating the differences and identifying the similarities, go back to the meaning for the biblical audience that you described in Step 1 and try to identify a broader theological principal reflected in the text. This broader theological principal should relate to the similarities you have with the biblical audience. This overarching principal should always agree with the rest of scripture as a whole. Additionally, the theological principal of the text should be timeless and not bound to a specific situation, as well as it should not contradict any other part of the Bible.

Step 4. Grasping the Text in Our Town

"How do I apply this theological truth to my own life today?" That's the question you need to ask yourself once you've reached this step. If we're going to take the time to read, examine, and study the Word of God, and draw out solid biblical truth, we can't just sit on those truths! We need to apply what we have learned from the Bible to our own life!

While each passage of scripture will often only have one theological principal to learn, there will be numerous application possibilities. This is because you will always find yourself in many different specific situations in this life. Each of us will grasp and apply the biblical principals in scripture differently based on our current situation. So once you've examined the scripture, examine yourself and ask The Holy Spirit to guide you in how to apply the truth you just learned to your life.

There is a difference between studying the Bible and simply reading it. It takes more of a time commitment, and more mental effort, but the payoff is much greater! As you begin to practice using these tools and taking these steps, the scriptures will begin to open up to you in a way you've never experienced before!

(Adapted from "Grasping God's Word" by Duvall and Hays)

PHOTO BY ASH_CROW

Jesus > everything

THE EXCLUSIVITY OF THE GOSPEL

IT'S OK TO SAY JESUS IS THE ONLY WAY

EXPLORING THE RISING TREND TOWARD PLURALISM

By Jonathan Dodson

Many Christians find it difficult to believe there is only one way to God because they know kind, respectable people who do not believe Jesus is the only way to God. Who are we to judge? In fact, many of our friends believe the opposite—namely, there are many ways to God, a view called religious pluralism. Over the past four years in Austin, Texas, (a case study city for Harvard's Pluralism Project) I have had the opportunity to meet, know and talk with both Christian and non-Christian pluralists. As I have reflected on these conversations, it seems there are at least three reasons people drift to religious pluralism. They believe there are many ways to God, not just one way, because it seems more enlightened, humble and tolerant.

What Do the Religions Teach About God?

Is the belief that all religious paths lead to the same God more enlightened or educated? Well, all religions teach very different things about whom God is and how to reach Him. In fact, there is a lot of disagreement between the religions regarding the nature of God. Buddhism, for example, doesn't believe in God. Islam teaches an impersonal monotheism, Allah. The Koran states that God reveals His will but not His person. Christianity teaches a personal trinitarianism, where God is three persons in relationship, Father-Son-Spirit that can be known and enjoyed. Hinduism is all over the map on this question, ranging from polytheism to atheism. The reason for this is because there is an absence of definitive revelation to clarify their "theology." Instead Hinduism has multiple sources of revelation (Upanishads, Vedas, etc.). Contrary to Islam, Hinduism has no presuppositions about the nature of God.

In short, religious views of God differ. If so, it would seem far from "enlightened" or educated to claim that all religions lead to the same God, when their views of God are, in fact, radically different. Moreover, the various "ways" to God in each religion also differ. The claim of religious pluralism actually contradicts the tenets of the religions themselves.

Is Religious Pluralism More Humble?

Why, then, would educated people continue to insist on an inaccurate view of other religions? One major reason is because they believe it to be an act of humility and love. Very often I hear people say: "Who am I to judge someone else's religion, to tell them they are wrong?" This implies, of course, that maintaining Jesus is the only way to God is arrogant. I'll be the first to admit there are angry, arrogant Christians who rudely insist that Jesus is the only way to God. I'd like to apologize for those kinds of Christians. Arrogant insistence on your beliefs actually runs counter to the life and teachings of Jesus.

But the claim of the religious pluralist is arrogant because

it enforces its own belief on others. This can be incredibly arrogant, particularly if the person saying this hasn't studied all the world religions in depth and makes this blind assertion. Upon what basis can the religious pluralist make this exclusive claim? Where is the proof that this is true? To what ancient Scriptures, traditions and careful reasoning can they point?

Is Religious Pluralism Truly Tolerant?

To be tolerant is to accommodate differences, which can be very noble. I believe Christians should be some of the most accommodating kinds of people, giving everyone the dignity to believe whatever they want and not enforcing their beliefs on others through politics or coercive preaching. We should winsomely tolerate different beliefs. Interestingly, religious pluralism doesn't really allow for this kind of tolerance. Instead of accommodating spiritual differences, religious pluralism blunts them.

The claim that all paths lead to the same God actually minimizes other religions by asserting a new religious claim. When someone says all paths lead to the same God, they blunt the distinctives between religions, throwing them all in one pot, saying: "See, they all get us to God so the differences don't really matter." This isn't tolerance; it's a power play. When asserting all religions lead to God, the distinctive and very different views of God and how to reach Him in Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam are brushed aside in one powerful swoop. The Eightfold Noble Path of Buddhism, the 5 Pillars of Islam and the Gospel of Christ are not tolerated but told they must submit to a new religious claim—all ways lead to God—despite the fact that this isn't what those religions teach.

People spend years studying and practicing their religious distinctives. To say they don't really matter is highly intolerant. The very notion of religious tolerance assumes there are differences to tolerate, but pluralism is intolerant of those very differences. In this sense, religious pluralism is a religion of its own. It has its own religious absolute—all paths lead to the same God—and requires people of other faiths to embrace this absolute, without any religious backing at all.

The Way, the Truth and the Life

I'd like to suggest three ways that Christianity can be humble, enlightened and tolerant from the claim of Jesus Himself: "I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6 ESV).

First, Jesus is the Way. What does this mean? As the way, Jesus doesn't create a path for us to hike. We can never make it, do enough spiritual, moral or social good to impress God. Much less love Him with all our soul, mind and strength. We can't make it up the path. We all fail to love and serve the infinitely admirable and lovable God. In fact, we love other things more, which is a crime of infinite proportions. It's against a holy, righteous God. The sentence for our crime must be carried out. He hikes down into our sin, our rebellion and our failures, and He heaps them all on His back and climbs on a cross, where He is punished for our crime, a bloody gruesome death. The

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innocent punished for the guilty. This is what it means for Jesus to be the way. He is the redemptive way. He takes our place. This understanding of Jesus as the way should make us incredibly humble not arrogant. We realize how undeserving we are and how much mercy we have been shown.

Jesus is also the Truth. What does that mean? In John 1, we are told that God became flesh and was full of grace and truth in Jesus. The truth is that God is Jesus. This is enlightening. Christianity is the only religion where God comes down to man and becomes man. In all other religions man has to work his way to God. The truth is Jesus, the Truth, is a person, and the Truth dies in our place, for our crimes, and in turn gives us His life.

Finally, Jesus is the Life. Later on in John, Jesus says He is the resurrection and the life, and that whoever believes in Him, "though he die yet he will live" (11:25). He goes down into the valley to take our death and rises up from the dead on the other side of valley where He prepares a new place for us to enjoy life with Him forever. The hope of that life should break into the lives of Christians today, making us persuasively tolerant.

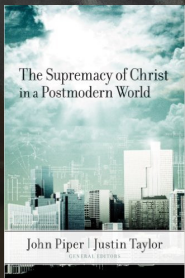
We tolerantly extend people the dignity of their own beliefs. We don't minimize the differences between religions. We honor

them. The life of Christ produces in us true humility. But it also produces in us true enlightenment. We've come to grasp grace that God works His way down to us, dies for our moral and religious failures and offers us life. If this is true, we must lovingly, humbly try to persuade others to believe in Jesus, who alone offers the wonderful promise of the way to God, the truth of God and life of God.

Jonathan Dodson (M.Div, Th.M) is happy husband to Robie, and proud father to Owen, Ellie and Rosamund. He is also the lead pastor of Austin City Life church and a leader in The GCM Collective and Gospel Centered Discipleship.com. Jonathan is also the author of *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* and writes regularly for *Boundlessa* and *The High Calling*. He blogs at jonathandodson.org, enjoys listening to M. Ward, watching sci-fi and following Jesus.

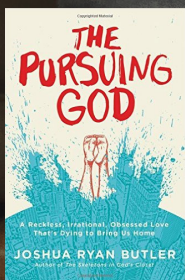
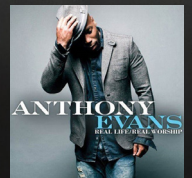
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RESOURCES:



Seeing and Savoring the Supremacy of Jesus Christ Above All Things

John Piper, Passion Conference – 2012



anti-christ among us

THE GLOBAL HATRED OF CHRISTIANITY

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND PERSECUTION: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

By David Platt

Eerie.

That's the only word that comes to mind when I think about standing a hundred yards away from North Korean soldiers who were staring right back at me with weapons in their hands.

I was in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), a small strip of land that cuts the Korean peninsula in half. Approximately 150 miles long and 2.5 miles wide, it serves as a buffer between North and South Korea and the allies they represent. Ironically, it is the most heavily militarized border in the world.

I stood in what is called the Joint Security Area, the only part of the DMZ that allows North and South Korean forces to stand face-to-face with one another. Years ago, this small village was designated as the location where negotiations between the two countries would take place. In the center of that area is a small blue building where international meetings occur. I walked into the building, where I saw a conference table with a white line running down the middle of it. During official discussions, South Korean officials sit on one side of that line while North Korean officials sit opposite them.

What was most eerie for me, though, was not coming out of that building and looking across the border at these North Korean soldiers whose eyes were fixed on my every movement (along with the few others who were with me). Instead, what was most eerie was contemplating the condition of people, and particularly Christians, living behind those soldiers.

Pressure on all sides

For many Christians in North Korea and in other countries where Christians are persecuted, societal pressure follows closely on the heels of government regulation as family, friends, religious fanatics, community leaders, and criminal mobs intimidate, threaten, harm, or kill men, women, and children who profess a certain faith. Such pressure accounts for much Christian persecution today. Syrian rebels disproportionately target Syrian Christians, abusing, raping, murdering, and beheading them. During one month alone in Egypt in 2013, 38 churches were destroyed, 23 others were vandalized, 58 were burned, 85 shops were looted, seven Christians were kidnapped, and six Christians were killed. The following month witnessed the worst attack on Christians in Pakistan's history as suicide bombers exploded shrapnel-laden vests outside All Saints' Church in Peshawar, murdering 81 church members and wounding more than 100. All of these stories, reported by The Gospel Coalition, represent persecution of Christians by people outside the official governments of these countries.

According to Open Windows, on the whole, an average of 100

Christians around the world are killed every month for their faith in Christ (and some estimates have this number much higher). Literally countless others are persecuted through abuse, beatings, imprisonment, torture, and deprivation of food, water, and shelter. Each occurrence of religious oppression represents an individual story of faith tested amid fire and trial. But these are not merely stories on a page for me. These are my friends. And I praise God for how they have endured the fire faithfully.

I think of Sahil in South Asia. He and his wife both grew up in Muslim homes. She came to Christ first, and then she introduced Sahil to Christ. As soon as their families discovered they had become Christians, Sahil and his wife were forced to flee their community. In the years that followed, they grew in Christ and in their desire to see their family know Christ. Slowly they renewed contact with their family members. Slowly their family members began to respond. They eventually welcomed Sahil and his wife back to their community, and from all appearances things were going well, until one day Sahil dropped off his wife for a meal with her family while he went to be with his family. His wife sat down at the table with her family and began to drink and eat. Within moments she was dead. Her own parents had poisoned her. When I met Sahil, I met a man who had lost his wife, but he had not lost his faith. He now works as a church planter in his country.

Becoming like Jesus

These stories are not surprising when you consider the words of Christ in the Gospels. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," Jesus told his disciples. "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (Matthew 5:10-12). On a later occasion, when he sent these disciples out like "sheep in the midst of wolves," he promised them that persecution would come. "Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them." He concludes, "You will be hated ... for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 10:16-18, 22). Even a cursory reading of Gospel passages like these reveals that the more we become like Jesus in this world, the more we will experience what he experienced. Just as it was costly for him to counter culture, it will be costly for us.

Surrounded by the global reality of religious persecution, and driven by our love for God, we must act. We must pray and work for our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world. When one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers (see 1 Corinthians 12). In a land of religious liberty, we have a biblical responsibility to stand up and speak out on their behalf.

Moreover, in a country where even our own religious liberty is increasingly limited, our suffering brothers and sisters beckon us not to let the cost of following Christ in our culture silence

anti-christ among us

THE GLOBAL HATRED OF CHRISTIANITY

our faith. May we not sit back and accommodate our culture in relative comfort while they stand up and counter their culture at great cost. May we realize with them that privatized Christianity is no Christianity at all, for it is practically impossible to know Christ and not proclaim Christ — to believe his Word when we read it in our homes or churches, and not obey it in our communities and cities. And may we remember with the great cloud of witnesses that has gone before us that while our citizenship officially belongs to a government, our souls ultimately belong to God.

David Platt is president of the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. This essay is adapted from his forthcoming book, Counter Culture, (Tyndale, February 2015). This article was originally published in the winter 2015 issue of Southern Seminary Magazine.

Source: sbts.edu/blogs

PHOTO BY ALEX-PHOTOS

RESOURCES:



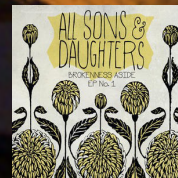
www.counterculturebook.com



Persecution & the Global Church

David Platt and Dan Darling (ERLC)

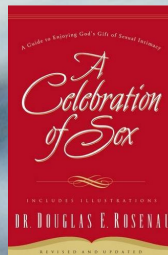
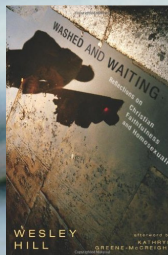
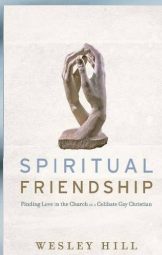
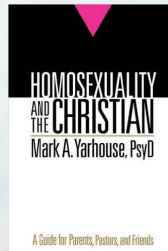
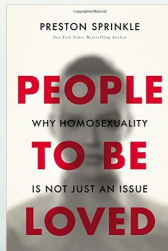
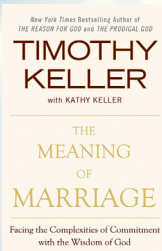
In this short video, Dan Darling interviews David Platt, pastor of The Church at Brook Hills, about how Christ's followers will be persecuted for emulating Him. Whether in the United States or around the globe, Christians need to be prepared for when evil attacks.



sexual revolution

THE BIBLICAL TRUTH ON HUMAN SEXUALITY

RESOURCES:



HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT GOD INTENDED FOR SEXUALITY?

By Matthew J. Tuininga

In one of his famous dialogues with the Pharisees Jesus skillfully appealed to creation norms to trump the part of the Mosaic Code that permitted men to divorce their wives for frivolous reasons.

Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they

shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate. . . . Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery. (Matthew 19:4-6, 8-9)

Here Jesus intertwined the teachings of Genesis 1 and 2 to tie marriage indelibly to the ordering of human beings as male and female, an ordering that was itself indelibly tied to God's purposes for sexuality and procreation. By linking the sexual relationship between male and female introduced in Genesis 1 to the one flesh union introduced in Genesis 2, Jesus pronounced judgment on all legal engineering that would reduce marriage to something else (in the case of Matthew 19, an opportunity for men to treat women like slaves).

It was a powerful argument and one that played no small part in elevating natural law as a fundamental concept in Christian ethics. Calvin used the "hardness of heart" argument to explain numerous parts of the Mosaic Law that he found lacking. The ultimate standard for Christians, he pointed out, is the natural moral law that stems from creation, not the various stipulations of the Torah.

Others have appealed to creation norms to critique slavery, various forms of oppression, sexual immorality and environmental degradation.

Can we appeal to creation to defend same-sex marriage?

And yet here is the rub. Christians have also appealed to nature as justification for racial segregation. Others have used it to defend social patriarchy. Now some are beginning to appeal to creation to defend same-sex marriage.

The question is, how do we determine the moral meaning of creation? How do we determine the content of natural law? Surely we can rule out a few forms of argument.

1. We should not be gathering ethical norms from the ways in which animals interact. It makes little moral sense to say, "if chimpanzees do it, why can't we?" There are fundamental differences between humans made in the image of God and animals.

2. We should not be slavishly imitating the ways of life of the first human beings. It makes little sense to argue that if Adam and Eve walked everywhere they went, so should we. We can accept the accomplishments of culture and technology.

Sexual revolution

THE BIBLICAL TRUTH ON HUMAN SEXUALITY

3. We do not have precisely the same obligations that were given to the first human beings in Genesis 1-2. For example, Genesis says that God rested on the seventh day and declared it to be holy. Deuteronomy 5 presents this as the basis for the sabbath law that was so central to the covenant with Israel. But Paul declares that Christians are no longer bound by a sabbath day (Colossians 2), and even most Christians who believe in a new covenant sabbath emphasize that it no longer falls, as it did at creation, on the seventh day of the week.

4. This last point is very important. Christ has fulfilled the purposes of creation, and it is in him that we now seek our own participation in that fulfillment. Christian ethics does not look backward — as if the goal were to try to get back to creation — but forward, toward the fulfillment of creation in Christ.

Is the natural law relevant?

But does that mean that creation, or the natural law, is no longer relevant?

Jesus' teaching regarding the nature of marriage, like Paul's various appeals to creation, remind us that the order of creation remains, even though it must now be interpreted in light of the work of Christ. So the task at hand, when wrestling with matters like human dignity as grounded in the image of God, the call to be fruitful and multiply, the call to work, the command to exercise dominion, the institution of marriage, and the meaning of gender, is to determine how we fulfill the purposes of creation in light of what Christ has done and is doing.

Yet this can be tricky. For, how do we tell the difference between the sort of fulfillment that entails the transcendence of a certain dimension of the creation order (i.e., the sabbath day) even as it continues to be fulfilled in more meaningful ways (i.e., resting in Christ, worshiping God, etc.), and claims about fulfillment that amount rather to a contradiction or nullification of the creation order?

These latter claims can take various forms, but they invariably embrace dimensions of the fall into sin and integrate those dimensions into a new, corrupted understanding of creation. Is this not what we see in forms of patriarchy that exploit women, defenses of social systems that idolize racial segregation, and visions of cultural progress that run roughshod over the environment?

Christians wrestling with whether or not God is calling us to affirm homosexual relationships within the church need to work through these basic questions.

Does it transcend or distort the created purpose?

It is one thing to say that the work of Christ points us to the fulfillment and transcendence of marriage, procreation, and gender, a logic that leads to a new appreciation for the significance of celibacy within the Christian tradition (1 Corinthians 7). After all, Jesus himself said that in the kingdom there will be no marriage (Luke 20). Those who choose to be celibate therefore anticipate the fulfillment of creation's own purposes. Those who devote themselves to bonds of love that transcend sexuality anticipate the future communion of all in God.

It is another thing entirely to say, as some are saying, that we may therefore do with marriage, sexuality, and gender whatever we desire. To engage in sexual intercourse without a willingness to accept the children God may provide (if our birth control fails, for instance) is to turn a basic purpose of sexuality on its head. Do we not do the same when we seek sexual gratification through practices fundamentally different from what sex actually is and was intended to accomplish according to the design of creation? This is not transcendence or anticipation of future fulfillment, but distortion of created purpose. It does not direct people to the renewal of creation in the coming kingdom of God. It drives them back to the hopelessness of corrupted and fallen creation.

It is true that in Christ there is no male or female, just as there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free (Galatians 3). But this points us to the transcendence of sexuality in the communion of Christ, not to its distortion. Because we still live in that time between the two ages, inhabiting the tension between the already and the not-yet, we can anticipate that communion only by forming bonds of love while abstaining from sexual activity or by entering marriages oriented toward the purposes of the created order that nevertheless reflect the love between Christ and his church.

Resource: erlc.com

PHOTO BY RBH

the unspoken genocide

THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE

ACTUALLY, WOMEN DO REGRET THEIR ABORTIONS

By Brianna Sharbaugh

The headline of an article at Time in the summer of 2015 screamed: **HARDLY ANY WOMEN REGRET HAVING AN ABORTION, A NEW STUDY FINDS.** Time described a study recently published in the “multidisciplinary academic journal PLOS ONE” that concluded: “Ninety-five percent of women who have had abortions do not regret the decision to terminate their pregnancies.” The study, which surveyed 670 women three years after their abortions, downplayed the emotional impact on women. “Certainly, experiencing feelings of guilt or regret in the short-term after an abortion is not a mental health problem,” the study assures women. “In fact, such emotions are a normal part of making a life decision that many women in this study found to be difficult.” (Time glanced over the part of the study that said women who struggled with the decision to have an abortion had poorer emotional outcomes.)

You can examine the criteria used for this particular study, but I would caution you not to draw conclusions on the impact of abortion based on just one study. A finding about 95% of the women in this one study, at this point in their lives is very different from what Time is asserting in its headline.

My knowledge of the post-abortive woman has been shaped by a decade of experience counseling them. In the past ten years I have heard the stories of hundreds of these women as I’ve worked at three different crisis pregnancy centers (in both a staff and volunteer capacity) throughout the Midwest.

One post-abortive woman whose story impacted me the most is my friend Maggie,* who became pregnant when she was just fourteen years old. Her mother was eager to spare the family embarrassment and told Maggie to either have an abortion or take her fourteen-year-old self and find another place to live. Without any easy options and a mother who continually coerced her, Maggie had an abortion. In the following months, her grades in school plummeted and she began pursuing destructive relationships. At age sixteen Maggie became pregnant again. Fearing her mother would force yet another abortion, Maggie ran away from home. At sixteen Maggie did everything she could think of to provide for herself and her son.

Several years later, she met a man who loved her and her son and wanted a future with them both. They married and had another child, a daughter, who completed their family. A few years later Maggie recognized a pattern of anger in herself that she couldn’t explain. As she worked through counseling (over a decade after her abortion) she recognized that the anger was

always directed toward her children. She realized that every time she looked at her two living children, she was always thinking about the one child she never got to meet. She could not stop thinking about her third child, and the regret of her abortion was impacting her parenting decisions every day.

Another young woman, Anna, a sophomore in college, discovered that an unplanned pregnancy would forever impact her life. She had been taking a medication with known adverse effects for pregnancy. Anna sought the counsel of every doctor she could find in the phone book and every single one told her the only option she had was to terminate her pregnancy. Her boyfriend drove her to the abortion clinic and they both decided abortion was the best decision. Several years later this boyfriend became her husband and they were eager to start a family. They soon welcomed a little boy that blessed their lives in ways they never thought possible. Anna confessed that every time she snuggled her little boy she could not help but think about the child she and her husband had aborted. They would never know if their baby was a boy or a girl. They would never get to watch their first child go on his or her first date, or graduate from high school, or enjoy the college years as Anna and her husband had. Every milestone their son reached was overshadowed by a mom and dad who were heartsick because of the “what if’s” they would never have answered.

Laura found herself suffering a similar heartache long after her abortion decision. Each Christmas Laura would enter into a deep depression and struggle to make it through each day of the month of December. While she later married a man with two children and delivered a son to complete their family, it was never enough. Laura could only think of the fourth child she wouldn’t be buying Christmas presents for. Every holiday was as difficult as Christmas as she struggled with grief. Special anniversaries were a struggle as well, remembering what the spring air smelled like the day she had her abortion, knowing the day her child would have celebrated each birthday, kindergarten graduation—they all reminded her of the hole in her life...the hole put in her life because of her decision to have an abortion.

When I first met my friend Doris, she was well into her sixties and still facing the daily impact of an abortion she had in her twenties. As a young bride, Doris was horrified to discover, while still on her honeymoon, that her husband was an alcoholic. The alcohol brought out an abusive husband, and as a young newlywed, Doris was unsure how to keep herself safe. A few weeks later she discovered that she was pregnant. She was convinced that the only way to cut ties with her abusive husband was to have an abortion without telling him and to file for divorce. Life crept along for the next forty years while she struggled to bond with her three living children and walked through two more divorces because of a fear of attaching herself to a person she may lose.

the unspoken genocide

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My friend April had an abortion because she was embarrassed to be pregnant again. This mother of five was too ashamed to tell anyone she was going to have a sixth child, so she immediately called the abortion clinic. Eight weeks into her sixth pregnancy, she had an abortion. The next several months were a depressing case of Murphy's Law attacking April. Her oldest child had problems at school, her car broke down, her job was stressful, the list went on. Every day she was struck with fear that her whole life would come crashing down as she wished with all of her being that she could go back and undo her abortion.

All of the women in these true stories are very precious to me (and they're even more precious to God). Their stories are not unusual.

Many other studies show that abortion has a negative impact on women. This study from Finland examined medical records of women who committed suicide and found an undeniable link. Women who had committed suicide and were post-abortive were six times more prevalent than women who had committed suicide and carried a pregnancy to term, especially among lower income, single mothers.

Another study found that 65% of post-abortive women "experienced multiple symptoms of increased arousal, re-experiencing and avoidance associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)." My friend Karen experienced similar symptoms and found herself suffering from vivid flashbacks and trauma at the sound of a common household vacuum, similar to the sound of the suction device used during her abortion procedure over fifteen years ago.

This study "compared psychiatric admission rates of women in time periods from 90 days to 4 years after either abortion or childbirth." It found that, among low income women, those who had abortions were more likely to have multiple psychiatric admissions than their peers who carried a pregnancy to term. Anyone who has taken a research methods class understands that cherry-picking from one study does not provide conclusive evidence. The study digested in the Time article provides just one look at the lives of post abortive women in a three-year period of their lives--merely a glimpse into the lifelong impact abortion can have on women. This study must be considered in light of the cumulative body of work surrounding abortion. In addition, more research should be done on this topic before we make conclusive statements that women do not regret their abortions.

For more stories about real women who have experienced post-abortion trauma and stress and to find hope, healing, and forgiveness if you are struggling with a past abortion decision, please check out the following resources:

**Because of confidentiality policies, the names have been changed in the stories to protect the identities of these women. Their symptoms and the impact abortion has had and continues to have are very real and have not been changed.*

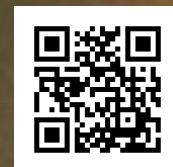
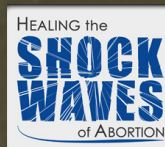
Brianna resides in northeast Ohio with her encouraging, enthusiastic husband and chatty, charming toddler. She enjoys serving middle and high school students with her youth pastor husband and serves as a biblical counselor. When not with students she enjoys being outdoors, running, and playing board games.

Source: pjmedia.com

PHOTO BY SHIFTWORSHIP

THE UNSPOKEN GENOCIDE CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE

RESOURCES:



the unspoken genocide

THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE

ABORTION TESTIMONY

By Kacy Withrow

For the longest time, I came to church with a smile on my face, hoping I looked like I had it all together. But deep down I had a secret...a secret that I had been carrying around for eleven years. And because of that secret, heavy chains of tremendous guilt and shame began to weigh me down.

You see, my husband and I were in an unhealthy relationship before we got married. As a result, we found out I was pregnant. So I panicked and made the decision to have an abortion out of fear of rejection and embarrassment of what others would think. Unfortunately, I followed through with that decision thinking that everything would be back to normal and no one would ever have to know. But as time went on, I continued to experience a deep sense of loss. I became so desperate to tell someone else about it, but feared I would face rejection and judgement. I also felt as though I didn't deserve help. I was completely ashamed and my despair, grief, and guilt grew with every year. Of course, I knew about God's forgiveness and I believed in it, but I began to think that maybe I had committed the unforgivable sin. I believed my sin was in a class of its own, beyond the reach of God's forgiveness. I had asked God for forgiveness probably more than a hundred times, but deep down, I hated myself for what I did and I figured God was still angry with me too.

I came across a Bible study on abortion and grief recovery and through this study and His Word, the Lord showed me His true character. I was so relieved to find that God's purpose for sending His Son into the world and die was for people like me, who saw no hope or chance for forgiveness. After reading scripture after scripture, and verse after verse of His amazing grace and unconditional love, I finally realized that God was not mad at me anymore. As a matter of fact, I found that the Bible says in Micah 7:18, "You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins under foot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea." And in Isaiah 1:18-19 it says, "Come now, let us argue this out," says the Lord. "No matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can remove it. I can make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you as white as wool." Isaiah 43:25 also says, "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions, for My own sake, and remembers your sins no more"

Needless to say, that relentless burden of guilt had begun to lift when I realized that God truly cared for me and loved me despite what I had done. The chains of condemnation began to fall as I started to see and experience the love that He actually had for me. God is as grieved as we are about the losses that are brought on by our choices. And He will not leave His repentant children alone as we walk through the circumstances of our sin. He actually delights to show us mercy!

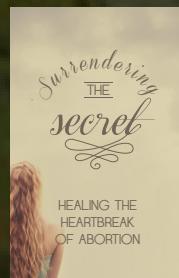
One morning I woke up feeling devastated over what I had done. My heart was so heavy and right as I was about to reach out to

God for comfort, I remember thinking, "you don't deserve God's comfort." And the truth is I don't...I don't deserve it, but I was quickly reminded that God chooses to comfort me anyway! And He did! That morning as I was checking my emails, I noticed a devotional sitting in my inbox. Expecting that God was going to do something in my heart that day, I decided to read the article. The title of it gave me goose bumps! It was called, "My Secret" and it was a testimony of an up and coming Christian woman who was becoming quite popular among Christian women around the world. The passage she used came from Psalm 34:4-5 which says, "I sought the Lord and He answered me; (which I was seeking the Lord that morning) He delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to Him are radiant. Their faces are never covered with shame." And to my astonishment, she began to share about her own abortion experience!

God knew I needed that and it couldn't have come at a better time!! So from that point on I thought...how can I keep this in any longer? I've got to reach out to others and show them the same comfort the Lord has shown me. And let me tell you, the Lord has given me many opportunities to do just that. I think it is so amazing to know that He is still willing to use me regardless of my past!

Through the years I have found that there are multiple women out there just like me. Are you one of those women? Have you convinced yourself that what you did was beyond the reach of God's forgiveness? Are you bound by those same chains of guilt and shame? Do you walk around pretending that everything is fine, but on the inside you are really hurting? My challenge to you would be to reach out to someone you can trust...a Christian friend, a pastor, or a Life Group Leader. A part of my healing actually began when I started confiding in those I trusted. Not only were they not judgmental, but they were so encouraging and were thankful that I actually confided in them. Don't wait as long as I did. Accept God's free gift of total forgiveness or you'll miss out on the full life God intended for you to experience!

RESOURCES:



the unspoken genocide

THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE

9 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ADOPTION

By Joe Carter

Each year in November, the President of the United States issues a proclamation to announce National Adoption Month, a time dedicated to raising awareness of the need for adoptive families and to encourage citizens to become involved in the lives of children and youth in foster care. Here are nine things you should know about adoption in America:

1. Adoption has been and remains rare. Between 1973 and 2002, the percentage of ever-married women 18–44 years of age who had adopted a child fluctuated between 1.3 and 2.2 percent. Men were twice as likely as women 18–44 years of age to have adopted a child. Among ever-married persons, men (3.8 percent) were more than 2.5 times as likely as women (1.4%) to have adopted.

2. Relinquishment of infants at birth is extremely rare. Only 1 percent of children born in the United States in 1996–2002 to women 18–44 years of age as of 2002 were relinquished for adoption within their first month of life.

3. Surveys reveal that women currently seeking to adopt would prefer to adopt a child younger than two years old, without a disability, and a single child rather than two or more siblings. (Two-thirds of women would not accept a child 13 years of age or older or a child with a severe disability.) The data also suggest that women would prefer to adopt a girl rather than a boy.

4. In 2012 there were 397,122 children in foster care and 101,666 waiting to be adopted. The average age of a child in foster care waiting to be adopted was 7.8 years old. The average age of children in foster care being adopted was 6.3 years old.

5. On average, a child will wait three years in foster care awaiting adoption. About 55 percent of these children have had three or more placements with foster care families, and 33 percent had changed elementary schools five or more times, losing relationships and falling behind educationally.

6. In 1851 Massachusetts passed the Adoption of Children Act, the first modern adoption law in America. The law is considered an important turning point because it required judges to determine that adoptive parents had “sufficient ability to bring up the child” and that “it is fit and proper that such adoption should take effect.”

7. The beginning of the foster care concept in America was the Orphan Train Movement. Between 1854 and 1929, as many as 250,000 children from New York and other Eastern cities were sent by train to towns in midwestern and western states, as well as Canada and Mexico. According to the Adoption history project, families interested in the orphans showed up to look them over when they were placed on display in local train stations, and placements were frequently made with little or no investigation or oversight.

8. Each year thousands of U.S. citizens adopt children from abroad. In 2013, Americans adopted 7,092 children from abroad. The total number of intercountry adoptions from 1999 to 2013 was 249,694. According to UNICEF, approximately 13 million have lost both parents.

9. The Child Welfare Information Gateway, a government-funded adoption information service, estimates the average U.S. adoption costs of various types of adoptions:

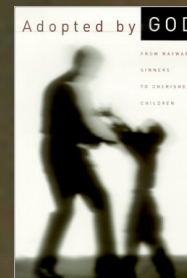
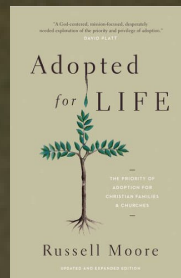
Intercountry Adoptions — \$15,000 - \$30,000
Independent Adoptions — \$8,000 - \$40,000+
Licensed Private Agency Adoptions — \$5,000 - \$40,000+
Facilitated/Unlicensed Adoptions — \$5,000 - \$40,000+
Public Agency (Foster Care) Adoptions — \$0 - \$2,500

Joe Carter is an editor for *The Gospel Coalition*, the editor of the *NIV Lifehacks Bible*, and the co-author of *How to Argue Like Jesus: Learning Persuasion from History's Greatest Communicator*. You can follow him on Twitter.

Source: thegospelcoalition.org

PHOTO BY SHIFTWORSHIP

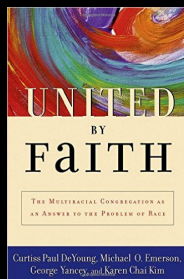
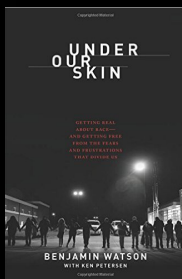
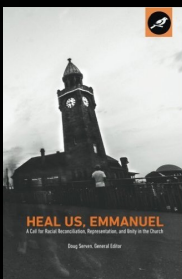
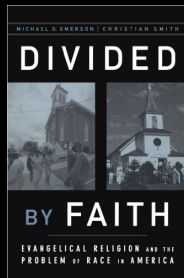
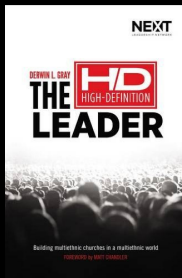
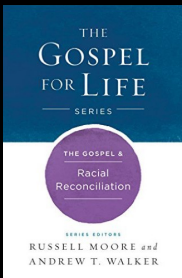
RESOURCES:



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THE GOSPEL AND RACIAL RECONCILIATION

RESOURCES:



RACIAL RECONCILIATION, THE GOSPEL, AND THE CHURCH

By Jarvis J. Williams

The relationship between the gospel and racial reconciliation has been a contested topic among evangelicals of late.

Some Christians propose that the gospel and gospel action can solve the current racial divide in the church. I (an African-American) make this point in a book called *One New Man*, and biblical scholars Kenneth Mathews (European-American) and Sydney Park (Asian-American) make a similar point in *The Post Racial Church*.

However, there is hardly a Christian consensus regarding the church's role in the work of racial reconciliation.

A SOCIAL ISSUE OR A GOSPEL ISSUE?

Michael Emerson and Christian Smith observe in *Divided by Faith* (Oxford, 2000) that evangelical Christians have traditionally viewed racial reconciliation and matters of race as a “social issue” instead of a “gospel issue.”

One white Southern Baptist pastor illustrates the point in his 2014 article “I Don’t Understand the Evangelical Response to Ferguson,” where he argues that racial reconciliation is a social issue instead of a gospel issue. Assuming the modern social construct of race, he strongly criticizes fellow evangelicals for suggesting, in light of the sad events in Ferguson, Missouri, that the Christian gospel speaks to issues of race and racial reconciliation.

To be sure, we should be extremely careful about referring to various issues as “gospel issues,” as D. A. Carson has observed. But Carson continues,

Certainly the majority of Christians in America today would happily aver that good race relations are a gospel issue. They might point out that God’s saving purpose is to draw to himself, through the cross, men and women from every tongue and tribe and people and nation; that the church is one new humanity, made up of Jew and Gentile; that Paul tells Philemon to treat his slave Onesimus as his brother, as the apostle himself; that this trajectory starts at creation, with all men and women being made in the image of God, and finds its anticipation in the promise to Abraham that in his seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Moreover, the salvation secured by Christ in the gospel is more comprehensive than justification alone: it brings repentance, wholeness, love for brothers and sisters in

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the Christian community. But the sad fact remains that not all Christians have always viewed race relations within the church as a gospel issue.

RACIAL RECONCILIATION, NOT JUST DIVERSITY

Part of the problem is that evangelicals can confuse racial reconciliation with multi-ethnicity or diversity, and so they begin conversations about racial reconciliation with a push for multi-ethnic churches.

I agree that gospel-grounded racial reconciliation produces multi-ethnic and diverse churches. But diversity is not the same as gospel-centered racial reconciliation and the goal of gospel-centered racial reconciliation is not simply diversity. An assembly of the United Nations is multi-ethnic and diverse, as is the army, or the local public high school, or so many other groups. Yet such settings hardly enjoy the racial reconciliation of the gospel.

Gospel-grounded racial reconciliation begins with what Christ accomplished at the cross. He united one-time enemies to God and therefore to one another. He made the two one. Racial reconciliation begins, in other words, with the “indicative” of who we are in Christ. And then racial reconciliation shows itself in our love for the “other.” It flows from the Spirit-empowered obedience and demonstration of who we are in Christ. To define racial reconciliation as simply diversity, or to think that our churches are racially reconciled simply because they might be diverse, is misleading.

To clarify, I strongly desire, promote, and live for ethnic diversity in both church and society. I am multi-ethnic. I have African-American, Native American, and Caucasian blood flowing through my veins. I long to be part of a multi-ethnic church. I am in a multi-ethnic marriage with a Hispanic woman from Costa Rica. I have a multi-ethnic son. My wife and I hope to adopt a little girl from another country. And I live in a multi-ethnic community. But none of these things depends upon a gospel-centered racial reconciliation. Gospel-grounded racial reconciliation, after all, is supernatural, not natural.

NEEDED: RELATING THE GOSPEL AND RACIAL RECONCILIATION

In order to understand what biblical racial reconciliation is and what it means for the church, Christians, first of all, need a better understanding of the relationship between the gospel and racial reconciliation. Let’s just consider Ephesians 2 and 3 for a moment.

The mystery of the gospel is an important theme in Ephesians (1:9-10). Paul defines this mystery as the unification of all

things in Christ (1:10) and “the gospel of your salvation” (1:13). Chapter 2 then begins by recalling the fact that we are all dead in our sins and separated from God (vv. 1-3). “But God,” verse 4 famously begins, makes us alive in Christ and saves us by grace, say the following verses. Based on Ephesians 2:1-10, evangelicals often define the gospel with reference to our reconciliation to God (see esp. Eph. 2:1-10).

Yet that’s not all God does in the gospel. Paul goes on to say that the gospel includes the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles into one new humanity. Verse 13 begins with a second sharp adversative: “But now,” Paul says, and then points to something else Christ has already accomplished: those Gentiles “who were far away have been brought near.” They were brought near God’s promises of salvation to Jews “by the blood of Christ Jesus” (2:13).¹

The good news of the gospel includes the fact that the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, died so that he would put an end to the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles, to reconcile Jews and Gentiles to God, and to each other into one body through the cross, which made both groups into one dwelling place of God by the Spirit (2:14-22). And Jesus himself preached this gospel of peace (=reconciliation) to Jews near the promises and to Gentiles far away from those promises (Matt 15:21-28).

In chapter 3, Paul refers to the stewardship of the grace of God given to Paul (v. 2). He describes that stewardship as a mystery that was made known to Paul by a revelation, and that mystery is the mystery of Christ as revealed to Paul by the Spirit (vv. 3-5). He explicitly states the content of the mystery is Jew and Gentile inclusion as “fellow heirs” and “of the same body” because together they are “partakers of God’s promise in Christ by the gospel” (v. 6). And he connects reconciliation between Jew and Gentile to the gospel by stating that God graciously called Paul to proclaim as good news the inexpressible riches of Christ to the Gentiles (v. 8).

It would not be exegetically accurate to say that Ephesians 2:11-3:8 are “about racial reconciliation,” at least in the way we think of those terms today. The ancient division between Jew and Gentile was not the same as the divisions we know exist between Black and White or Serbian and Croatian or Hutu and Tutsi or Japanese and Chinese. The division between Jew and Gentile was God’s own doing according to his covenantal plan, and Ephesians 2 and 3 dwell on the fulfillment of that covenantal plan. But certainly we must say that a lesson or an implication of Ephesians 2:11-3:8 is that Christ united Christians of every ethnicity together. He removed ethnicity as a barrier. The good news of the gospel, in that sense, includes racial reconciliation. Christ did it! He reconciled us both to the Father and to one another!

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Christians who contend that racial reconciliation is a gospel issue also cite verses like Romans 1:16-17 and Galatians 2:11-14. Passages like these demonstrate that the Bible's categories of identity and racial reconciliation intersect with salvation and gospel.

NEEDED: A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF RACE

In order to understand what gospel-grounded racial reconciliation is and what it means for the church, Christians, second of all, need a better understanding of race.

Race was one kind of social construct in the biblical world, and it is another kind of social construct today. Race in the ancient biblical world was a social construct based on special characteristics that had nothing to do with pseudo-scientific racism. Race in the modern world is a product of eighteenth and nineteenth century racist theories in Europe about the "science" of whiteness and non-whiteness.

Understanding the nature of past and present social constructs will help us to understand what really does and does not divide us. We must accurately diagnose the problem. The Christian gospel tells us that racism fundamentally exists because of sin. Racism is an evil ideology of hate, which shows itself most clearly through violent or prejudicial actions. But racism exists even without violent or prejudicial actions because of sin. Could the very construct of race be one more manifestation of the sin of racism? Racism begetting the very idea of race?

FURTHER TO GO STILL

Christians have come a long way on race relations since the inception of America. I am a proud black, multi-racial Southern Baptist. I became the first person of color to join Hindman First Church in Hindman, Kentucky in 1996. I came to faith in Jesus Christ through the ministry of this all white SBC church and began to see racial reconciliation personified as the brothers and sisters there ministered to me and my family, nourishing us in the faith and into my calling into the ministry. Furthermore, I am privileged to be the only African-American New Testament scholar teaching at any Southern Baptist seminary or institution of higher education (to my knowledge). Therefore, Southern Baptists who rightly understand and promote gospel-centered racial reconciliation as a gospel issue should be very dear to my heart, and the ethnic diversity that exists in the SBC should be commended.

However, in my view, at the moment, Christians in general must do a better job at defining the gospel, race, and racial reconciliation, and we must be intentional about pursuing racial reconciliation in our churches and communities. We must do a better job living out the gospel of racial reconciliation in community with real people in both church and society.

Five further steps occur to me. First, Christians must believe and preach the whole gospel, including what the gospel says about racial reconciliation.

Second, Christians must be honest about our racist past to answer some of the complicated questions in our racist present. Moreover, progress will be difficult, if not impossible, if we deny that racism still exists—individually and systematically, in both church and society.

Third, Christians should work to listen to ethnic minority voices within the Christian movement who have thought long and hard about the race of issue, how it intersects with the gospel, and how this intersection applies today. Whites must welcome minority voices at the leadership table whenever and wherever discussions about the gospel and race happen. And the white majority must share their privilege and power with those sensible voices among the underrepresented minorities and suffer with them. Minorities must be willing to sacrifice some preferences to live in a reconciled way in the church.

Fourth, Christians and Christian churches must boldly press the claims of the Christian gospel onto a racist society, and we must be willing to stand against any and all forms of racism with legal and peaceful means whenever we see racism raise its ugly head.

Fifth, as citizens and residents of the United States, we must hold our leaders accountable. If they commit injustice instead of uphold justice, we should take the necessary legal steps to ensure that justice under the law will be upheld for all citizens and residents.

[1] He here offers a Christological reading of Isa 9:6, 52:7, and 57:19 in Eph. 2:13-18. "Peace" in 2:14 and the proclamation of peace to "those far off" and "to those near" in 2:17 link 2:13-18 with Isaiah. The proclamation of peace in 2:17 is a reference to the proclamation of the gospel. In Isa 9:6, "peace" refers to the Jewish Messiah. In Isa 52:7 and 57:19, "peace" refers to the salvation (=the gospel) that YHWH promised to bring to Israel through the Jewish Messiah.

Jarvis J. Williams is associate professor of New Testament Interpretation at Southern Seminary. He is also a member of Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. You can follow him on Twitter at @drjjwilliams.

Source: 9marks.org

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heart check-up

Take some time to prayerfully reflect on the four assessment statements below. On the scale from 1-10 under each question, circle the number that you think most honestly reflects where you are regarding the issue of racial reconciliation as a Believer currently. Then, in the space provided under each question, write out a short statement of how you plan to take the next steps in that particular area.

1. I Have Repented of My Prejudices & Sinful Biases

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. I Have Pursued Relationships with People of Different Ethnic Groups & Social Classes

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. I Have Listened & Learned when others with Differing Backgrounds Speak

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. I Have Done My Part to Help NBBC Become a Church that Reflects the Diversity in our Community

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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THE RETURN OF CHRIST IN A CHAOTIC WORLD

HEAVEN IS NOT OUR HOME

By N. T. Wright

There is no agreement in the church today about what happens to people when they die. Yet the New Testament is crystal clear on the matter: In a classic passage, Paul speaks of “the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23). There is no room for doubt as to what he means: God’s people are promised a new type of bodily existence, the fulfillment and redemption of our present bodily life. The rest of the early Christian writings, where they address the subject, are completely in tune with this.

The traditional picture of people going to either heaven or hell as a one-stage, postmortem journey represents a serious distortion and diminution of the Christian hope. Bodily resurrection is not just one odd bit of that hope. It is the element that gives shape and meaning to the rest of the story of God’s ultimate purposes. If we squeeze it to the margins, as many have done by implication, or indeed, if we leave it out altogether, as some have done quite explicitly, we don’t just lose an extra feature, like buying a car that happens not to have electrically operated mirrors. We lose the central engine, which drives it and gives every other component its reason for working.

When we talk with biblical precision about the resurrection, we discover an excellent foundation for lively and creative Christian work in the present world—not, as some suppose, for an escapist or quietist piety.

Bodily Resurrection

While both Greco-Roman paganism and Second Temple Judaism held a wide variety of beliefs about life beyond death, the early Christians, beginning with Paul, were remarkably unanimous on the topic.

When Paul speaks in Philippians 3 of being “citizens of heaven,” he doesn’t mean that we shall retire there when we have finished our work here. He says in the next line that Jesus will come from heaven in order to transform the present humble body into a glorious body like his own. Jesus will do this by the power through which he makes all things subject to himself. This little statement contains in a nutshell more or less all Paul’s thought on the subject. The risen Jesus is both the model for the Christian’s future body and the means by which it comes.

Similarly, in Colossians 3:1–4, Paul says that when the Messiah (the one “who is your life”) appears, then you too will appear with him in glory. Paul does not say “one day you will go to be with him.” No, you already possess life in him. This new life, which the Christian possesses secretly, invisible to the world, will burst forth into full bodily reality and visibility.

The clearest and strongest passage is Romans 8:9–11. If the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus the Messiah, dwells in you, says Paul, then the one who raised the Messiah from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies as well, through his Spirit who dwells in you. God will give life, not to a disembodied spirit, not to what many people have thought of as a spiritual body in the sense of a nonphysical one, but “to your mortal bodies also.”

Other New Testament writers support this view. The first letter of John declares that when Jesus appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. The resurrection body of Jesus, which at the moment is almost unimaginable to us in its glory and power, will be the model for our own. And of course within John’s gospel, despite the puzzlement of those who want to read the book in a very different way, we have some of the clearest statements of future bodily resurrection. Jesus reaffirms the widespread Jewish expectation of resurrection in the last day, and announces that the hour for this has already arrived. It is quite explicit: “The hour is coming,” he says, “indeed, it is already here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of Man, and those who hear will live; when all in the graves will come out, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.”

Life After Life After Death

Here we must discuss what Jesus means when he declares that there are “many dwelling places” in his Father’s house. This has regularly been taken, not least when used in the context of bereavement, to mean that the dead (or at least dead Christians) will simply go to heaven permanently rather than being raised again subsequently to new bodily life. But the word for “dwelling places” here, *monai*, is regularly used in ancient Greek not for a final resting place, but for a temporary halt on a journey that will take you somewhere else in the long run.

This fits closely with Jesus’ words to the dying brigand in Luke: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Despite a long tradition of misreading, paradise here means not a final destination but the blissful garden, the parkland of rest and tranquility, where the dead are refreshed as they await the dawn of the new day. The main point of the sentence lies in the apparent contrast between the brigand’s request and Jesus’ reply: “Remember me,” he says, “when you come in your kingdom,” implying that this will be at some far distant future. Jesus’ answer brings this future hope into the present, implying of course that with his death the kingdom is indeed coming, even though it doesn’t look like what anyone had imagined: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” There will, of course, still be a future completion involving ultimate resurrection; Luke’s overall theological understanding leaves no doubt on that score. Jesus, after all, didn’t rise again “today,” that is, on Good Friday. Luke must have understood him to be referring to a state of being-in-paradise. With Jesus, the future hope has come forward into the present.

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For those who die in faith, before that final reawakening, the central promise is of being “with Jesus” at once. “My desire is to depart,” wrote Paul, “and be with Christ, which is far better.”

Resurrection itself then appears as what the word always meant in the ancient world. It wasn’t a way of talking about life after death. It was a way of talking about a new bodily life after whatever state of existence one might enter immediately upon death. It was, in other words, life after life after death.

What then about such passages as 1 Peter 1, which speaks of a salvation that is “kept in heaven for you” so that in your present believing you are receiving “the salvation of your souls”? Here, I suggest, the automatic assumption of Western Christianity leads us badly astray. Most Christians today, reading a passage like this, assume that it means that heaven is where you go to receive this salvation—or even that salvation consists in “going to heaven when you die.” The way we now understand that language in the Western world is totally different from what Jesus and his hearers meant and understood.

For a start, heaven is actually a reverent way of speaking about God, so that “riches in heaven” simply means “riches in God’s presence.” But then, by derivation from this primary meaning, heaven is the place where God’s purposes for the future are stored up. It isn’t where they are meant to stay so that one would need to go to heaven to enjoy them. It is where they are kept safe against the day when they will become a reality on earth. God’s future inheritance, the incorruptible new world and the new bodies that are to inhabit that world, are already kept safe, waiting for us, so that they can be brought to birth in the new heavens and new earth.

From Worship to Mission

The mission of the church is nothing more or less than the outworking, in the power of the Spirit, of Jesus’ bodily resurrection. It is the anticipation of the time when God will fill the earth with his glory, transform the old heavens and earth into the new, and raise his children from the dead to populate and rule over the redeemed world he has made.

If that is so, mission must urgently recover from its long-term schizophrenia. The split between saving souls and doing good in the world is not a product of the Bible or the gospel, but of the cultural captivity of both. The world of space, time, and matter is where real people live, where real communities happen, where difficult decisions are made, where schools and hospitals bear witness to the “now, already” of the gospel while police and prisons bear witness to the “not yet.” The world of space, time, and matter is where parliaments, city councils, neighborhood watch groups, and everything in between are set up and run for the benefit of the wider community, the community where anarchy means that bullies (economic and social as well as

physical) will always win, where the weak and vulnerable will always need protecting, and where the social and political structures of society are part of the Creator’s design.

And the church that is renewed by the message of Jesus’ resurrection must be the church that goes to work precisely in that space, time, and matter. The church claims this world in advance as the place of God’s kingdom, of Jesus’ lordship, and of the Spirit’s power. Councils and parliaments can and often do act wisely, though they will always need scrutiny and accountability, because they in turn may become agents of bullying and corruption.

Thus the church that takes sacred space seriously (not as a retreat from the world but as a bridgehead into it) will go straight from worshiping in the sanctuary to debating in the council chamber; to discussing matters of town planning, of harmonizing and humanizing beauty in architecture, green spaces, and road traffic schemes; and to environmental work, creative and healthy farming methods, and proper use of resources. If it is true, as I have argued, that the whole world is now God’s holy land, we must not rest as long as that land is spoiled and defaced. This is not an extra to the church’s mission. It is central.

The church that takes seriously the fact that Jesus is Lord of all will not just celebrate quietly every time we write the date on a letter or document, will not just set aside Sunday as far as humanly and socially possible as a celebration of God’s new creation, will not just seek to order its own life in an appropriate rhythm of worship and work. Such a church will also seek to bring wisdom to the rhythms of work in offices and shops, in local government, in civic holidays, and in the shaping of public life. These things cannot be taken for granted. The enormous shifts during my lifetime, from the whole town observing Good Friday and Easter, to those great days being simply more occasions for football matches and yet more televised reruns of old movies, are indices of what happens when a society loses its roots and drifts with prevailing social currents. The reclaiming of time as God’s good gift (as opposed to time as simply a commodity to be spent for one’s own benefit, which often means fresh forms of slavery for others) is not an extra to the church’s mission. It is central.

Whatever is Holy

One of the things I most enjoy about being a bishop is watching ordinary Christians (not that there are any “ordinary” Christians, but you know what I mean) going straight from worshipping Jesus in church to making a radical difference in the material lives of people down the street by running playgroups for children of single working moms; by organizing credit unions to

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help people at the bottom of the financial ladder find their way to responsible solvency; by campaigning for better housing, against dangerous roads, for drug rehab centers, for wise laws relating to alcohol, for decent library and sporting facilities, for a thousand other things in which God's sovereign rule extends to hard, concrete reality. Once again, all this is not an extra to the mission of the church. It is central.

This way of coming at the tasks of the church in terms of space, time, and matter leads directly to evangelism. When the church is seen to move straight from worship of God to affecting much-needed change in the world; when it becomes clear that the people who feast at Jesus' table are the ones at the forefront of work to eliminate hunger and famine; when people realize that those who pray for the Spirit to work in and through them are the people who seem to have extra resources of love and patience in caring for those whose lives are damaged, bruised, and shamed—then it is natural for people to recognize that something is going on that they want to be part of.

No single individual can attempt more than a fraction of this mission. That's why mission is the work of the whole church, the whole time. Paul's advice to the Philippians—even though he and they knew they were suffering for their faith and might be tempted to retreat from the world into a dualistic, sectarian mentality—was upbeat. "These are the things you should

think through," he wrote: "whatever is true, whatever is holy, whatever is upright, whatever is pure, whatever is attractive, whatever has a good reputation; anything virtuous, anything praiseworthy." And in thinking through these things, we will discover more and more about the same Creator God whom we know in and through Jesus Christ and will be better equipped to work effectively not over against the world, but with the grain of all goodwill, of all that seeks to bring and enhance life.

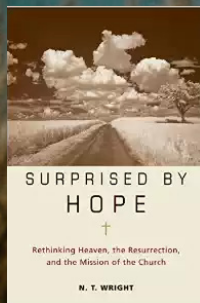
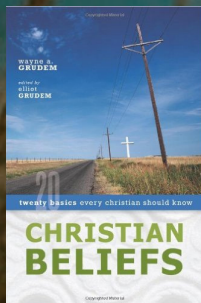
Dr. N.T. Wright is a world renowned New Testament Scholar and former Bishop of Durham in the church of England. He currently is research professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

This article is excerpted from his book, Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church (HarperOne).

Source: christianitytoday.com

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RESOURCES:



Home at Last: The Spectacular God at the Center (Revelation 21-22)

Don Carson addresses TGC's 2012 national women's conference.



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