

# Theology Matters

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## Overcoming the Juvenilization of American Christianity

by Thomas E. Bergler

In our last issue, we introduced Thomas Bergler's book, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*. Here we introduce *From Here to Maturity: Overcoming the Juvenilization of American Christianity*. We do not do justice to either, but we thank Tom for allowing us to offer these essays as *hors d'oeuvres*. For the main course, please read these books. *Richard Burnett, Managing Editor*

### We're All Adolescents Now

Americans of all ages are not sure they want to grow up. If you listen carefully, you can sometimes hear thirty- or forty-year-olds say things like "I guess I have to start thinking of myself as an adult now." Greeting cards bear messages like "Growing old is inevitable. Growing up is optional." A recent national study of the sexual lives of eighteen-to twenty-three-year-olds found that most want to get married and have children—eventually. But they think of settling down as the end of the good part of their lives. One young woman spoke for many in the study when she said that having children will be "what makes your life, like, full, after like, you are done with your life, I guess."<sup>1</sup>

... Beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, three factors combined to create the juvenilization of American Christianity. First, new and more powerful youth cultures created distance between adults and adolescents. Second, in an attempt to convert, mobilize, or just hang on to their teenage children, Christian adults adapted the faith to adolescent tastes. As a result of these first two factors, the stereotypical youth group that

combines fun and games with a brief, entertaining religious message was born. In the years since, this model of youth ministry has become a taken-for-granted part of church life. Finally, the journey to adulthood became longer and more confusing, with maturity now just one among many options. The result was juvenilization: the process by which the religious beliefs, practices, and developmental characteristics of adolescents become accepted—or even celebrated—as appropriate for Christians of all ages.

It is important to realize that many benefits have come from injecting more youthfulness into American Christianity. Church growth, mission trips, and racial reconciliation all received a big boost from the youth ministries of the past seventy-five years. Churches that made compromises with youth culture sometimes managed to inspire long-term loyalty in their young people and even make church more attractive to adults. ... But this attempt to make Christianity as pleasurable as youth culture had some dangers. In the 1950s, one teenage girl who was a member of Youth for Christ had this to say about Elvis Presley: "The fact of the matter is, I've found something else that has given me more of

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a thrill than a hundred Presley's ever could! It's a new friendship with the most wonderful Person I've ever met, a Man who has given me happiness and thrills and something worth living for."<sup>2</sup> In other words, Jesus is just like a teen idol, only better. Juvenilization kept Christianity popular, but did little to promote spiritual maturity. ...

It is important to realize that because of juvenilization, the problem of immaturity is no longer just a youth problem to be solved by adolescents, parents, or youth ministers. One pastor told me that the concept of juvenilization helped him understand some of the struggles he is having with congregants in their sixties. These Baby Boomers raised in the founding era of juvenilization want church to revolve around their preferences. But the problem is not just the old oppressing the young. The young leaders of a church that targets twenty-somethings asked a middle-aged woman to leave the music team because she did not "project the right image." That is, she looked too old. Not only is it easy to find people of all ages who are immature, it is now the whole life course—the normal pattern of moving from childhood to adulthood—that has been compromised as a path to spiritual maturity.

#### **A Dubious Destination: The New Adulthood**

By now, the assumption that youth is better than adulthood is widely accepted. This cultural belief is visible whenever adults tell teenagers that "this is the best time of your life" or when college students say "this is my time to have fun." Christian youth leaders have often contributed to the worship of youth by praising young people as model Christians and looking to them to save the world. ...<sup>3</sup>

It would be understandable if people simply wanted to retain the strength and physical beauty of youth. But what makes other adolescent attributes attractive? For one thing, immaturity boosts sales. In the early twentieth century, advertisements still explained the features of products and invited the customer to make a rational choice based on how well the product would meet a need. Of course many of those "needs" were created by the advertisers, but at least it was assumed that the customer would be making a rational choice about whether to buy the product. Today, advertisers use images, music, and a minimal amount of the spoken or written word. These techniques aim to bypass conscious reasoning and inflame desires for identity, belonging, sensual gratification or even spiritual transcendence. The most innovative advertisers sometimes dispense with describing the product at all, or even showing an image of it. The product is much less important than the intangible benefits it will supposedly impart.<sup>4</sup>

People who know who they are, who think carefully about purchases, and who exercise self-control are harder to persuade to buy products they don't really need. In contrast, impulsive people who are searching for a sense of identity, who are looking to salve their emotional pain, who desperately crave the approval of others, and who have lots of discretionary income (or are willing to spend as if they do) make ideal consumers. In other words, encouraging people to settle into some of the worst traits of adolescence is good for business. Not all businesses and advertisers operate on this basis, but enough do to encourage the cult of youth and discourage people from growing up. Considerable evidence suggests that consumers can see through these techniques and resist them to some extent.<sup>5</sup> But immersed as we all are in the culture of adolescence, it becomes increasingly hard to embrace the self-denial and character formation necessary to achieve what used to be called mature adulthood. ...

Most significantly for our discussion of juvenilization and its impact on the church, the connection between adulthood and maturity has been severed. As a middle-aged Christian woman I met on a plane recently told me, "I'm never going to grow up." Adults are free to define themselves in almost any way they choose, whether or not their personalized vision of adulthood is beneficial to themselves, to their communities, or to their children. ...

Adults caught in the many transitions of life who are trying to figure out who to become sometimes have little left to give to others, even their own children. An ethnographic study of a large high school in southern California revealed that most teenagers there felt abandoned by adults. These teenagers believed that there was not a single adult in their lives who truly knew them and truly cared about them. Although some of this was probably adolescent misperception and even self-absorption, there were plenty of adults who were sending the wrong messages. Coaches cared only about winning, teachers paid attention only to the top students and labeled the others as hopeless, and parents were "out of control," so their children felt unsafe telling them what was really happening in their lives. ... The author of the study theorized that many adolescent problems, including cynicism, mistrust of adults, casual sex, cheating, and alcohol abuse, could be traced to this systemic abandonment.<sup>6</sup> To the extent that adults are too busy with their own self-construction (or reconstruction) projects to care for the young, our juvenilized society has ironically become harmful to adolescents. Of course, many people still aspire to maturity and achieve it. But in this adolescent society, there are fewer supports for those wanting to grow up and many tempting detours or just plain dead ends along the way.

**“It’s All about You”:** **Spirituality on the Path to the New Adulthood.** The popular Evangelical Christian worship song “The Heart of Worship” is about returning to a focus on God, yet ironically there is still an awful lot of talk about “me” in it. Lines like “I’m coming back to the heart of worship” and “I’m sorry, Lord, for the thing I’ve made it” seem to compete with the intended core message of the song: “It’s all about you, Jesus.” The song serves as a metaphor for just how hard it is to escape the relentless self-focus of American culture. Even our efforts to dethrone our therapeutic god of self are often done in therapeutic ways. I am not singling out this song for blame; it merely illustrates the powerful gravitational pull exerted by the new patterns of human development and notions of the “self” in contemporary America. That pull distorts Christian discipleship in different ways in each stage of life, although as we shall see, some common themes emerge.

**Adolescent Faith: “If I’m Having a Hard Time, It Makes Me Feel Better.”** In their landmark National Study of Youth and Religion, Christian Smith and his team of researchers found that the majority of American teenagers are not alienated from religion or the church. On the contrary, even teenagers not personally involved in religious activities think that religion is basically a good thing. Many of them have learned this favorable view of religion through contact with church youth groups. An astonishing 69 percent of all teenagers in America have attended a religious youth group at one time or another. ...<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, Christianity seems to be helping teenagers without passing through their brains or across their lips. Smith’s research team found that American teenagers are surprisingly inarticulate about their faith. When asked what they believed, even some young people who attend church and youth group regularly said things like “Um, Jesus and God and all them guys ... that they are up there watching out for us.” The biblical language of faith is a foreign language to American teenagers. They seldom used words like “faith,” “salvation,” “sin,” or even “Jesus” to describe their beliefs. Instead, they returned again and again to the language of personal fulfillment. The phrase “feel happy” appeared over 2,000 times in the 267 interviews in which teenagers tried to describe their religious beliefs. As one teenage boy put it, the thing that is so good about faith is that “If I’m having a hard time, it makes me feel better.”<sup>8</sup>

Smith and his research team came up with the label “Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism” to summarize the religious beliefs that emerged in their in-depth interviews with teenagers. Teenagers are “moralistic” in that they believe that God wants us to be good, and the main purpose of religion is to help people be good. But

many think that it is possible to be good without being religious, which means religion is an optional tool for being good that may be chosen by those who find it helpful. Further, they believe most people are good and will go to heaven. American Christianity is “therapeutic” in that, like the teenagers in the study, we believe that God and religion are valuable because they help us feel better about our problems. Finally, American teenagers show their “deism” in that they believe in a God who remains in the background of their lives. He is always there watching over them, ready to help them with their problems. But he is not at the center of their lives.<sup>9</sup>

There may be any number of reasons that so many teenagers hold such a superficial set of religious beliefs. One reason is certainly that they have not learned the vocabulary of faith. Perhaps adults have *talked to* teenagers a lot about faith but seldom helped teens to *talk about* their own beliefs. In many cases, the interviewer got the feeling that she was the first person to ever ask this teenager what she believed about God and religion. American teenagers have little practice with, and seem to place little importance on, talking about faith matters. But if something is truly important to a person, it doesn’t tend to stay in the background the way the god of moralistic, therapeutic deism does. These same teenagers who floundered awkwardly as they tried to say *anything* meaningful about their religious beliefs could talk easily about other subjects that were either more exciting to them (like their extracurricular activities) or in which they had been better instructed (such as the dangers of drug abuse). And it is important to note that it was not just nominal Christian teenagers who seemed to espouse moralistic, therapeutic deism. Quite a few who attended church regularly and claimed that faith was very or extremely important to them could not articulate anything deeper when asked.<sup>10</sup>

Most importantly, teenagers absorb these religious beliefs from the adults in their lives. It is the American culture religion. One of the clearest findings in the study was the strong correlation between the religious beliefs and practices of parents and those of their teenage children. As Smith and his team put it, when it comes to forming their children’s faith, parents will “get what they are.”<sup>11</sup> This way of being religious is not something that can be easily overcome. It is the default position in American society, the magnetic north with which young people tend to align unless they are actively and persistently formed in a more countercultural way of following Jesus Christ.

Sociologists of religion often measure what some call the “3 Bs” of religion: Believing, Belonging, and Behaving. The National Study of Youth and Religion revealed that churches at their best seem to help

adolescents achieve a warm sense of belonging that helps them to avoid harmful behaviors. But even a good many churchgoing adolescents fail to internalize a strong set of religious beliefs or form internally motivated, godly patterns of behavior. As a result, our children do not do so well when they leave the nest after high school graduation.

**Emerging Adult Faith: “My Faith Is What’s Best for Me.”** To keep things in perspective, it is important to note that it is quite amazing that *any* emerging adults are seriously religious. Their life stage is almost perfectly suited to reducing religious interest and involvement. The lives of emerging adults are full of transitions, distractions, and disruptions. They switch residences, cities, jobs, schools, relationships, and everything else, and these changes wreak havoc with church attendance and personal religious practices. Emerging adults strive to keep their options open and are careful to affirm that everyone is entitled to his or her opinion on all important matters. Their driving goal is to become self-sufficient, so they see churches as “elementary schools of morals” that they are ready to leave behind. They put off marriage and childbearing, two life events that have traditionally driven young adults back to church. They feel the need to differentiate themselves from their parents, and religious beliefs seem like an especially safe—that is, unimportant—arena in which to depart from how they were raised. Although they tend to choose friends who are similar to them religiously, they typically don’t talk much with those friends about matters of faith. Many of their peers tell them by word and example that “they are supposed to devote themselves to hanging out, partying, and perhaps drinking, doing drugs, and hooking up.” None of these typical elements of emerging adult lives tends to promote stronger religious belief and involvement. The only exception would be that their many life transitions sometimes include personal tragedies or hardships that push them to revisit their childhood faith or explore a new branch of Christianity.<sup>12</sup> The good news is that despite all these built-in obstacles, some emerging adults are serious about their faith. The bad news is that even many of the serious ones may not be well grounded or prepared to mature in it.

In Waves II and III of the National Study of Youth and Religion, researchers followed the same teenagers into their young adult years. Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism seems alive and well among these eighteen- to twenty-three-year-olds, but diversity of religious belief and practice did increase. A few emerging adults became stronger in their faith and more articulate about their beliefs. Some questioned the beliefs with which they were raised. Many stopped going to church or putting much effort of any kind into their faith.<sup>13</sup>

Emerging adults still think of religion as a good thing, especially for children, even if they are personally indifferent to it right now. They think most religions share the same key principles and that religious particularities are unimportant. A few believe that their religion is uniquely true, but they are unable to explain why. Most think that it is impossible to choose between truth claims in any definitive way; each person just decides for himself or herself. As a typical emerging adult put it, “I think that what you believe depends on you.”<sup>14</sup>

Emerging adults can be sorted into six religious types: Committed Traditionalists (15 percent), Selective Adherents (30 percent), Spiritually Open (15 percent), Religiously Indifferent (25 percent), Religiously Disconnected (5 percent), and Irreligious (10 percent). Of these types, only the first three are likely to put any effort whatsoever into their spiritual life. Committed Traditionalists can articulate some Christian beliefs, attend church reasonably regularly, and see faith as an important part of their lives and identities. But even they “focus more on inner piety and personal moral integrity than, say, social justice or political witness, and can keep their faith quite privatized.” And like all emerging adults, they tend to think that religious beliefs and practices are matters of personal choice and should be based on what works or feels right to the individual. As one young Catholic put it, “my faith is what’s best for me.” A subgroup of the Committed Traditionalists (about 5 percent of all emerging adults) are the most devoted to their faith and attend religious services at least weekly, say faith is very or extremely important to them, feel very or extremely close to God, pray at least a few times a week, and read Scripture at least once or twice a month. This group does better than their peers at avoiding harmful behaviors like alcohol and drug abuse and engaging in positive ones like charitable giving and volunteering. But these differences are not as dramatic as they were among adolescents.<sup>15</sup>

Selective Adherents typically come from reasonably strong religious upbringings but are now in the process of picking and choosing what to keep. They are especially likely to disregard what their church and parents taught them about the need for regular church attendance, belief in hell, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, and use of birth control (for Catholics). Some feel conflicted or guilty about discarding elements of their religious upbringing; many do not. They compartmentalize their faith more than Committed Traditionalists and are likely to say things like “I still have the same *ideas* now; I just don’t go to church.” Selective adherents show little difference from the general population of emerging adults in terms of religious beliefs and positive life outcomes. Finally, the Spiritually Open are not personally committed to any one faith, but show varying degrees of interest in exploring Christianity or other

types of spirituality. They most often come from non-religious backgrounds or from a Christian background that they have abandoned.<sup>16</sup> Clearly the life stage of emerging adulthood does not encourage people to grow toward spiritual maturity. A few do so anyway, but they have to swim upstream.

**Adult Faith: “Religious Doctrines Get in the Way of Truly Relating to God.”** Many Christian adults and even Protestant pastors do not have a very clear understanding of spiritual maturity. In a national survey conducted in 2009, the Barna Research group found that 81 percent of self-identified Christian adults agreed or strongly agreed that “trying hard to follow the rules in the Bible” was a key element of spiritual maturity. When asked an open-ended question about how their church defines “a healthy, spiritually mature” Christian, about half were unable to answer. Of those who ventured a guess, responses varied and tended to be generic: “having a relationship with Jesus” (16 percent), “practicing spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study” (9 percent), “living according to the Bible” (8 percent), “being obedient” (8 percent), “being involved in church” (7 percent), and “having concern for others” (6 percent). When asked to describe their personal beliefs about the content of spiritual maturity, respondents as a group produced a similar list of answers. Significantly, most respondents offered only one measure or trait of spiritual maturity, even though interviewers probed repeatedly for more ideas.<sup>17</sup> Evidently religiously inarticulate teenagers grow up to be religiously inarticulate adults, at least when it comes to describing spiritual maturity.

The same survey also found that a majority of self-identified Christian adults rated themselves as “completely” (14 percent) or “mostly” (40 percent) spiritually healthy. Not surprisingly, most were also “completely” (22 percent) or “mostly” (43 percent) satisfied with their spirituality. It is possible that at least some who were “mostly satisfied” still desired to grow. And even if that group was spiritually complacent, there was still a large group, as much as one-third of all respondents, who recognized that they were not spiritually healthy and did not like it.<sup>18</sup> But if an accurate working knowledge of spiritual maturity is necessary in order to grow toward it, then a good many American Christians may be in trouble. Even those who want to grow may not be able to do so. ...

But what did these people mean by “spiritual growth”? For those who responded to the survey and follow-up interviews, “spiritual” generally meant the inner, experiential dimension of religion especially in contrast with the rules, doctrines, and structures of organized religion. A majority believed that “personal experience is the best way to understand God” (61 percent) while

only 33 percent agreed that “church doctrines and teachings are the best way to understand God.” Even among those most highly interested in spiritual growth, about half agreed that “religious doctrines get in the way of truly relating to God.” Thus the participants in the study perceived themselves to be growing spiritually if they had feelings of closeness, assurance, forgiveness, or comfort from God, especially if they believed that the frequency of such feelings was increasing in their lives.<sup>19</sup>

The same study revealed that American adults generally believe that church attendance can be helpful to spiritual growth, but is not necessary. About 70 percent agreed that “My spirituality does not depend upon being involved in a religious organization.” Yet among those who say that spiritual growth is “extremely important” to them, 80 percent attend church “almost weekly” and 74 percent reported that attending church has been very important to their spiritual growth. On the other hand, among the next lower group, those who still claimed that spiritual growth is “very important” to them, only 53 percent attend church “almost weekly” and only 56 percent say attending church services has been very important to their spiritual growth.<sup>20</sup>

The evidence regarding adults’ engagement with particular faith traditions and doctrines is mixed. Those who say that spiritual growth is “very” or “extremely important” to them tend to agree with general Christian beliefs such as “God is fully revealed in Jesus” (79 percent) or “Christianity is the best way to understand God” (74 percent). On the other hand, these same believers do not differ from the general population in their general agreement (70 percent range) that “All religions contain some truth about God.” And even those extremely interested in spiritual growth have not typically put much effort into learning the theology or heritage of their church. ...<sup>21</sup>

### **The Challenge of Juvenilized Faith**

Of course not every Christian in America is spiritually immature. A significant minority cares deeply about spiritual growth and is actively pursuing it. Nevertheless, many American Christians display the symptoms of juvenilization. They value a “relationship with God” above all and like the idea of “falling in love with Jesus.” They don’t see much value in the rules, strict beliefs, or structures of “religion,” although they like going to church if it helps them feel closer to God. They are largely uninformed about the teachings of their churches and may even see doctrine or theology as enemies of authentic spirituality. They like the sense of belonging and acceptance that they find in their congregations but are not very open to being corrected by fellow believers. Their God is always there to help them feel better about their problems, and this is one of

the chief benefits they see in their faith. They like the idea of spiritual growth, but they may not know much about how to grow and may rate themselves more highly than they should. They are drawn to religious experiences that produce emotional highs and sometimes assume that experiencing strong feelings is the same thing as spiritual authenticity. They see themselves as in charge of their own search for a satisfying sense of religious identity. In short, American Christianity looks a lot like we would expect it to look if many Americans were stuck in a Christianized version of adolescent narcissism. It could be that most American churches have been fighting a heroic but failing battle against these trends toward a self-focused, immature faith. But the fact that so few American churchgoers know much about spiritual maturity and so few pastors have a plan to foster it suggests otherwise.

Yet churches did not create the new immature adults and their religious preferences, at least not by themselves. Americans display these patterns of believing and behaving because the path from adolescence to adulthood is beset with many gorges, switchbacks, washed-out bridges, and wrong turns. It is a wilderness trail that is poorly marked, poorly maintained, and in some cases actively sabotaged by those who stand to profit from keeping people away from the summit. Although some adults along the way try to help, the young people who are walking this trail must primarily rely on one another for guidance and support. The trail is so poorly marked that many never make it. Indeed, even some of the people who are Christian “success stories” because they take faith seriously and attend church regularly may not be growing toward spiritual maturity. Thus if we would like to see Christians reach a mature faith that involves more than good feelings, vague beliefs, and a sovereign self, we must overcome the challenge of juvenilization.

### **Growing Up in Christ**

Many American Christians are confused about spiritual maturity. What is it? How do we get there? Is it even possible? Many are also not making much progress toward it. While there are many reasons people may be slow to grow up into Christ, it seems doubtful that someone who is largely ignorant of the whole idea will get very far. So if we want to overcome juvenilization and the immature Christians it produces, we must learn what the Bible says about spiritual maturity. The concept of “maturity” and the related metaphor of growing from infancy to adulthood are not the only tools the New Testament writers used to describe how Christ transforms human beings. But contemporary American Christians especially need to learn and experience these biblical truths.

In particular, Christians who are tempted to stay stuck in immaturity need a better understanding of the beginning, end, and process of spiritual growth to maturity in Christ. First, they need to embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ as good news of spiritual transformation. Second, they need to be captured by a vision of spiritual maturity that is desirable, attainable, and has clear content. Third, they need to understand the process of growth to maturity so they can actively participate in it. Not all readers will agree with the biblical theology of spiritual maturity presented here. That is to be expected given our different theological traditions. But hopefully the approach taken here will challenge each reader to do his or her own theological reflection on what the Bible says about spiritual growth. At the very least, all those with a teaching role in their family or church need to ask themselves, “Is the theology of spiritual growth that I teach likely to overcome the challenge of juvenilization?” In some cases, Christian teachers are communicating the right things about spiritual growth, but people are refusing to listen. But it may also be that some parents and church leaders are not teaching the right truths, or not teaching them clearly or compellingly. Teaching includes more than telling, and *From Here to Maturity* addresses ways to help people experience the spiritual transformation described here. Still, good teaching does need to begin with good content.

### **Beginning Well: The Good News of Transformation**

Though it is a bit embarrassing to have to discuss it, we must begin by facing the fact that a significant number of Christians do not regard growing up in Christ to be an intrinsic part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. As we have seen, most American Christians like the idea of spiritual growth. But when asked “What is your faith all about?” or even “What is the gospel?” many will not think to mention spiritual transformation into Christlikeness. They may have a theoretical expectation of growth, but practically speaking, it is not central to their lived theology. They think a lot about God making them happy; they rarely think about God making them holy. We should not be surprised if people do not grow after accepting a gospel that is silent about spiritual transformation. They did not sign up for that. Many ordinary Christians in America describe the gospel as something like this: “Jesus died for your sins so you can go to heaven when you die.” This gospel is what most of the college students I teach have learned growing up in their churches. If we look closely, we notice that this way of describing the gospel leaves a big blank spot where most of our life in this world should be. It is all about past sins and future reward. Is the rest of life just waiting until heaven? Is there no spiritual growth or participation in Christ’s mission in the meantime?

It would be bad enough if Christians just forgot about spiritual growth, but the problem is worse than that. A

good many Christians seem committed to the idea that we can expect little spiritual progress in this life. Consider some of the things students in my Understanding the Christian Faith class said when asked to describe spiritual maturity: “We never arrive in our spiritual growth.” “No one is perfect in this life.” “We can’t be holy in this life.” ... Others like to remind us, “The only difference between Christians and unbelievers is that Christians are forgiven.”<sup>22</sup>

These popular theological slogans emphasize that salvation is a gift from God, and not something we earn. That part of the gospel is crucially important. Much of the New Testament was written to remind people who were already following Jesus that being a good, observant religious person does not earn one’s salvation. But this truth needs to be connected with other equally important truths about the gospel. Otherwise, the default understanding can become “miserable sinner” Christianity—the idea that we’re all just miserable sinners saved by grace and that very little progress is possible in this life.<sup>23</sup> But do we truly believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died on the cross, rose from the dead and sent the Holy Spirit to live in us so we can be the same “miserable sinners” on the day we die as on the day we received the free gift of salvation? Is that what the New Testament presents as the Good News about Jesus Christ? If not, then we need to think more carefully about how we present the gospel.

The Good News that Jesus himself preached clearly included spiritual transformation. Here is Mark’s brief summary of Jesus’ message: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news’” (Mark 1:14–15). In saying “the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near” Jesus was alluding to the many Old Testament prophecies about a coming golden age when God would perfectly rule the world and restore the fortunes of Israel. Many of these prophecies included promises that God would transform his people by doing things like writing his law “on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:31–34) and exchanging their “heart of stone” for a “heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26–27). The result would be a renewed people who could finally renounce their idols and obey the life-giving commands of God. Even if Jesus’ first hearers did not think about these prophecies when they heard him preaching, they certainly would have understood that a call to “repent” was a call to spiritual transformation.

The proper response to the good news of the Kingdom of God was to become a follower of Jesus. When Jesus called disciples (followers, students, apprentices), he called them to spiritual transformation. “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people” (Mark 1:17). To change

from being a fisherman to being a rabbi was not just a change of occupation. Each of those who dropped everything to follow Jesus knew that he was entering into a process of being trained to be just like his rabbi. “A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher,” Jesus would later tell them (Luke 6:40, NIV). This saying would not have been a surprise to those who first heard it. Everyone knew that is how the rabbi-disciple relationship worked. A disciple might not achieve the full greatness of his rabbi, but if he did not eventually become a rabbi himself, the process of discipleship had failed. No one signs up for a course of study or intensive training with the expectation of failure. Imagine the medical school or electrician’s apprenticeship that advertised itself by saying, “Come work hard to learn about an occupation for which you will never be qualified.”<sup>24</sup>

If anything, Jesus promised his followers a more radical experience of transformation than the typical rabbi’s apprentice might expect. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:23–24). Those who hoped to add Jesus to their lives while leaving everything else undisturbed did not really understand the good news. This “my life plus Jesus” approach was what sunk the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17–22, Matt. 19:16–22, Luke 18:18–23). The Good News of the Kingdom of God is not a self-help message that provides three easy steps to a better life. Self-help techniques keep the self firmly in charge. Rather, to accept the gospel is to submit to a death and resurrection process accomplished by God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus offered a stark choice: hang onto your life and lose it or lose your life and find true life in him.

Toward the end of his time on earth, Jesus instructed his followers to continue his work of spiritual transformation: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20). People who are baptized into the name of the Triune God and are living according to the teachings of Jesus are people who have been spiritually transformed.

If the Good News that Jesus preached included the promise that his followers would become like him, where do Christians get a truncated, “miserable sinner” gospel? Most likely the problem is a misunderstanding of Paul’s teachings. Paul fought hard against an influential faction among the first Christians who insisted that Gentiles who decided to become followers of Jesus needed to also become fully observant Jews. It was not enough to obey the Great Commandments and

the Ten Commandments; these Gentile converts also had to get circumcised and obey all the dietary and ceremonial laws found in the books of Moses. Paul rightly saw the dangerous direction of this teaching: It would become a false gospel of “works” in which people would see themselves as accepted by God because of their correct behavior or their observation of the stipulations of the Old Covenant, rather than by the grace of God given through the work of Jesus Christ. In response, Paul fervently preached that no one could be saved by observing the law, but only by putting faith in Christ: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). This fight against a false gospel of works permeates Paul’s writings, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians. And it must be noted that there is a persistent temptation to credit ourselves with somehow earning God’s favor or even salvation itself. This spiritual danger is real, and we must fight against it ...

But unfortunately, this gospel of salvation by grace received through faith can be misused to justify low expectations for spiritual transformation. That is not what Paul had in mind. We see this especially well in a passage in which Paul starts by attacking the false gospel of works and ends by talking about maturity. In Philippians 3, Paul warns his readers to beware those Christian teachers who insist on circumcision and other requirements of the Law (v. 2). He then describes his own impeccable Jewish credentials: “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (vv. 3–6). Even though he had the best possible resume for earning a good standing with God, “whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ... I have suffered the loss of all things and I regard them as rubbish” (vv. 7–8). Paul counted these supposed spiritual “strengths” as no more valuable than the inedible food scraps one would throw out into the street for the dogs to eat.<sup>25</sup>

Paul eagerly and joyfully renounced his greatest religious attainments because of the “surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” and to “gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ” (Phil. 3:8–9). Clearly Paul had no interest in anything that could be interpreted as his own, humanly manufactured righteousness. But neither did Paul’s spirituality bear much resemblance to “miserable sinner” Christianity. He writes, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the

dead” (vv. 10–11). His devoted pursuit of Christ pushed him to invoke athletic imagery: “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (vv. 13–14). Paul was running hard to be ever more closely united to Christ and conformed to the pattern of his death and resurrection. He confessed that he had “not already obtained this” or “already reached the goal.” Some distort this idea of not reaching the goal of perfect union with Christ in this life into a kind of “treadmill theology”: we try and try to become more like Jesus but never get anywhere.<sup>26</sup> Certainly many American Christians are especially eager to agree with Paul that we “never arrive” or are “never perfect” in this life. But it is at just this point in his argument that Paul invokes the word “mature”: “Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind” (v.15).

Several important conclusions can be drawn from the somewhat surprising appearance of the word “mature” in this context. First, Paul assumed that at least some of his readers were already “mature” and so would agree with what he had been saying. Second, whatever “mature” means, it can’t mean “perfect” or “already having reached the goal” of fully knowing Christ and becoming fully like him. Third, a mature follower of Christ understands the gospel well enough to avoid *both* “works righteousness” *and* low expectations for spiritual transformation in Christ. “Miserable sinner” Christianity is a misinterpretation of the gospel that Paul preached.

All Christians, especially those with a responsibility to teach others, must carefully examine the gospel we preach. Does the story we tell of Jesus and the salvation he brings include spiritual transformation? Or are we telling a story in which becoming like Christ becomes an optional afterthought? Here’s a simple way to state the gospel that doesn’t leave out transformation: *The Good News is that Jesus died and rose from the dead in order to transform everything in the world to become more and more the way God wants it to be—and that includes all parts of you. ...*

The point of offering this example is not for everyone to adopt my particular way of describing the gospel. But it is important for all Christians, especially those charged with teaching others, to articulate a clear, memorable, and effective way to explain the connection between the Christian gospel and each believer’s transformation into Christlikeness. Christians from different theological traditions will favor different ways of explaining this crucial connection. Even Paul and James had different ways of explaining it. But every Christian teacher has a sacred responsibility to explain the connection between the gospel and spiritual transformation publicly and often.

Content taken from *From Here To Maturity: Overcoming the Juvenilization of American Christianity* by Thomas E. Bergler, ©2014. Used by permission of Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. *Although this analysis was originally published when Millennials were in their teen and young adult years, many trends described have continued.* Dr.

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- <sup>1</sup> Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 174.
- <sup>2</sup> “The last time I saw Elvis,” *Youth for Christ Magazine* (March 1960): 4. For more information on the costs and benefits of juvenilization, see Bergler, *Juvenilization*, 208–25.
- <sup>3</sup> Liberal Mainline Protestants have been especially prone to idealize youth, but white Evangelicals, African American Protestants, and Roman Catholic adults all did it too. See Bergler, *Juvenilization*, for examples.
- <sup>4</sup> Barak Goodman and Rachel Dretzin, directors, *Frontline: The Persuaders* (Boston: PBS, 2004). See also the web site: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/persuaders/>.
- <sup>5</sup> See Goodman, *Merchants of Cool*, Goodman and Dretzin, *Persuaders*, and J. Bryant and S. Thompson, *Fundamentals of Media Effects* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002).
- <sup>6</sup> For the abandonment of teenagers by adults see Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).
- <sup>7</sup> Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 51, 61–61, 124–27.
- <sup>8</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 118–71.
- <sup>9</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 118–68.
- <sup>10</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 130–31.
- <sup>11</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 261.
- <sup>12</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 75–87, 280.
- <sup>13</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 103–65.
- <sup>14</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 156.
- <sup>15</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 151, 166–67, 259–75.

- <sup>16</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 12, 167–68.
- <sup>17</sup> Barna Group, “Many Churchgoers and Faith Leaders Struggle to Define Spiritual Maturity,” Barna Update, May 11, 2009. Retrieved 6/11/13 from <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/264-many-churchgoers-and-faith-leaders-struggle-to-define-spiritual-maturity>.
- <sup>18</sup> Barna Group, “Many Churchgoers.”
- <sup>19</sup> Robert Wuthnow, “Contemporary Spirituality,” in *All in Sync: How Music and Art Are Revitalizing American Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 42, 48.
- <sup>20</sup> Wuthnow, “Contemporary Spirituality,” 32–48.
- <sup>21</sup> Wuthnow, “Contemporary Spirituality,” 32, 39–43.
- <sup>22</sup> Stephen W. Rankin provides excellent critiques of ‘sound bit’ theology about the atonement, the heart, and grace. He convincingly shows how such overly-simplified theology hinders spiritual growth to maturity. Stephen W. Rankin, *Aiming at Maturity: The Goal of the Christian Life* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011, 66–67, 78–82, 116–17.
- <sup>23</sup> The phrase “miserable sinner Christianity” is borrowed from Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 79–80.
- <sup>24</sup> Willard notes that churches so often operate as if they expect no one to change to become more like Christ. He wonders what would happen if we created, announced, and publicized a course on how to forgive our enemies with the expectation that at the end of the course, people would actually be able to do so. See Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 82–84, 250–51.
- <sup>25</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 305–61.
- <sup>26</sup> Rankin, *Aiming at Maturity*, 32. Rankin also provides a helpful exegesis of many passages I discuss in this chapter. See chapter 1 of his book.

## Struggling to “Live Not by Lies”

by Stephen Crocco

Earlier this summer, I met with a couple of my seminary classmates and their wives to tell boring stories of glory days. When we turned to the present situation, the transgender phenomenon came up. Since one of the wives was a psychiatrist, I asked her how it was affecting her profession and her faith. She said the issue had been settled by the various national and state boards—those who experience gender dysphoria should be encouraged to transition using chemical and surgical options. Medical professionals are obligated to help in this process. Period. Twenty years ago, she said, there was one clinic in the country that specialized in treating

gender dysphoria in young people. Today there are close to four hundred. Along with many of her colleagues, she had deep concerns similar to those expressed in Abigail Shrier’s book, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, they cannot say anything about it for fear of being disciplined, fired, and disbarred from the profession.

While we were shaking our heads, I said something like, “Well, we now have a glimpse why Christians in Nazi Germany didn’t speak up when they suspected that trains of Jews were heading to a bad end in the east.” I

was not comparing the Holocaust with the trans movement—or the brutality of the Nazis with cancel culture. I was drawing a comparison between the moral reasoning used in both cases. Does my friend’s understandable silence differ in a morally significant way from the silence of the German pastors who felt they could not raise questions about what was happening to the Jews? Do the justifications we use not to speak about a moral issue also justify the German pastors and church members who avoided questioning the endless trains traveling through their towns? If we are pastors and teachers, how do we prepare people to live in this kind of culture? How would you minister to this psychiatrist if she were a member of your congregation? In these times, I have found Rod Dreher’s work to be helpful. *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post Christian Nation* tells us that orthodox Christians have lost the culture wars and should look to St. Benedict to form communities of resistance to face the days ahead.<sup>2</sup> In *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*, Dreher calls the church to prepare to live under an increasingly (soft-)totalitarian society by learning from Christians who survived persecution in Eastern Europe during the Soviet regime.<sup>3</sup> I know there are many great Christian people out there who have not given up on the culture. They are thinking great thoughts, writing important books, and working in useful organizations—like the Center for Public Justice, which is a faith-based organization that finds ways to work within our political system to promote the Christian faith and justice for all Americans. I also know that there are many fine Christians serving in the military and the government. I wish them all well, but I am glad Dreher is thinking about the things he is thinking about.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc in our lives and world. Vaccine mandates and passports are stirring things up. The contentious political situation makes everything worse. Racial strife, demonstrations, riots, insurrection, the removal of statues, climate change, talk about “menstruating persons,” gun violence, cancel culture, socialism, doubts about the security of elections, the big tech companies censoring speech and ideas, the open Southern border, reactions to the heartbeat law in Texas, critical race theory being taught in high places, and the transhumanism movement threaten to overwhelm us. Then there are political developments around the world most recently in Hong Kong, Haiti, Cuba, and Afghanistan. And now my friends in Taiwan are getting nervous.

Pastors have always struggled to discern how to do ministry in the communities and times to which they have been called. Every time can probably be construed as being a difficult and contentious time, but today is the difficult and contentious time given to us. I just heard of

a mother who tore into the pastor of her evangelical church last summer because her eleven-year-old identified as a boy and wanted to stay in the boy’s cabin at church camp. How do we minister to this woman who is obviously and deeply concerned about the welfare of her child? Even to try to get up to speed so we can say something intelligent about these cultural issues seems like a luxury when there are so many more immediate things to do—like making sure we are up on the latest COVID regulations. It is a lot easier to ignore political and cultural issues in sermons and deal with them in pastoral prayers if at all.

Like many in my generation with my theological orientation, I am partial to Karl Barth’s famous quotation about preaching with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in another. Intuitively, that seems to be the right way to go. Without the Bible, there is nothing to preach; without the newspaper, there is no context for preaching or hearing the Gospel. In an article about him in *Time Magazine* in the early 1960s, Barth recalled advising young theologians forty years earlier to “take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.”<sup>4</sup> That is even better. As for Barth’s printed words, the closest formulation I can find is from a letter to his friend, the pastor Eduard Thurneysen, dated November 11, 1918. That was Armistice Day, the day when the Great War in Europe was declared to be over. At the time Barth was a pastor in the small town of Safenwil, in neutral Switzerland, about forty miles from the southern end of the front line between Germany and France. Kilometer Zero. To Thurneysen, Barth wrote, “[I’m] Just up after an attack of the grippe,”—that is the flu that killed 50 million people world-wide and 650,000 people in the United States near the end of World War I—“we must now get quickly in touch in these extraordinary times. But what goes on round about us? *What* is there to say? One stands astonished, does he not, and can only state how the face of the world changes visibly; on *this* side of things. ... [w]ho is there now with a comprehensive view who is able to seek to the very roots of world events in order to speak and act from that standpoint?” “I was thankful that I did not yet have to preach yesterday. ... It seems to me that we come just too late with our bit of insight into the world of the New Testament. How needful it is now that one should be able with full hands to draw out, to interpret, to clarify, to point the way and lay open paths—and how thinly flows the little stream of knowledge. ... If only we had been converted to the Bible *earlier* so that we would now have solid ground under our feet!” Here is the basis for the famous quotation: “*One broods alternately over the newspaper and the New Testament and actually sees fearfully little of the organic connection between the two worlds concerning which one should now be able to give a clear and powerful witness.*”<sup>5</sup>

Barth regretted that he did not yet have an adequate foundation for preaching the Bible with the newspaper in mind. It was a year earlier he gave his famous talk: “The Strange New World Within the Bible.” That was a marker in his discovery that the Bible was, “Not the history of man but the history of God”—an approach that he argued was radically different from considering the Bible for its history, morals, and stories—ways that he and his colleagues had been trained to read the Bible. “It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men.”<sup>6</sup> Barth came to believe that the Bible had not been taken seriously but had been reduced to merely human thoughts about God—that is why the nations of Europe were tearing each other apart. I find it amazing that Barth was glad he did not have to preach on such a momentous occasion as Armistice Day.

It is well known that Barth was forced to leave Germany in 1935 because he refused to swear an unconditional oath to Hitler. He spent the rest of his life in the city of Basel, Switzerland, just over the border from Germany and France. There, Barth tirelessly and courageously urged the defeat of the Nazis. When the war was finally over, he defended the German people from those who sought revenge. After the war, Barth was not as critical of the Soviet Union as he was of Nazi Germany, because communism was clearly atheistic—and not posing as Christian—whereas Nazism was the worst possible distortion of Christianity. Many, notably Reinhold Niebuhr, took issue with Barth on this point, arguing that atheistic or heretical, Communism deserved an equal measure of Barth’s condemnation. History may have vindicated Niebuhr here, though there are many who say Barth was plenty critical of the Soviet Union. Like I said, this is all well known, and I am not going to develop this account of Barth any further except to say he was relatively safe in neutral Switzerland—a country that conducted business with Germany during the War and denied admission to many Jewish refugees. If this was a paper on theological history, I would be spending more time on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Ernst Lohmeyer, two German theologians, who faced radical evil without the protection of a neutral state and ultimately lost their lives for their efforts. I read James R. Edwards’s book on Lohmeyer, *Between the Swastika and the Sickle*, when it was published in 2019, and I am convinced more now than then of its relevance for us.<sup>7</sup> His portrayal of the faith of a Christian scholar under the Nazis and then the Soviets is heart-rendering and inspiring, and it gives us a valuable narrative to add to the mix when considering the Christian’s response to totalitarianism.

To go back to brooding, fretting, over the Bible and the newspaper, no one ever seems to ask, “Which newspaper?” In Barth’s day, newspapers had openly political slants so it would have been helpful for him to

qualify his statement about brooding over a particular newspaper or newspapers and the Bible. One of my favorite preachers, Fleming Rutledge, published a book of sermons with the title, *The Bible and the New York Times*.<sup>8</sup> There was a day when that might have gone unnoticed. Those of us who read the *New York Times* twenty or thirty years ago believed it was basically reliable about the news it reported, and its opinions were left to the editorial pages. Today, it seems that all news media are mostly editorial with a little bit of news thrown in. Over the course of the past year or so, it is striking to me how much I had miss if I just relied on one newspaper or news source. The editorial policy makes a difference not only how the news is covered, but which news is covered. Limited to one news source, it is easy to slide uncritically into a deeply grooved political track that will take us far from our destination. More than ever, we need to be alert to the news sources people in our congregations are reading and which sources we are going to brood over alongside our Bibles. Who can afford the time to do this work? Who cannot afford it?

### **The Love You Had At First**

Given where my head has been, it has not surprised me that the book of Revelation has been on my mind for a while now. From generation to generation, Christians have read the book of Revelation to try to understand their own perilous situations. It is a book written for the church in a conflicted culture and dangerous political situation with false prophets inside the church and an oppressive superpower—the Romans—bearing down on believers and anyone else who got in the way. I want to focus on the first letter to the church in Ephesus, the largest and most important city in the area, because I think it has a pointed message for pastors and other serious Christians struggling to be faithful in a contentious time like ours. The letter contains a commendation from Jesus: “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. I also know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary.” There is a lot of good news there: patient endurance, no tolerance of evil doers and false apostles, bearing up because of the name of Jesus, and so forth. Then there was a condemnation. Jesus began it with a “but.” Is he allowed to do that? It has been drilled into our heads for decades now that we are not supposed to do that. Does not “but” negate everything that came before? “*But* I have this against you,” Jesus said, “that you have *abandoned* the love you had at first.”

Can there be a more devastating critique? *The Message* paraphrases it this way: “But you walked away from your first love—why? What’s going on with you

anyway? Do you have any idea how far you have fallen? A Lucifer fall!" Most biblical scholars I read suggest that the first love here has to do with the motive or the spirit behind the good works of the Ephesian Christians. The argument goes that their works had become routine and were exercised without love. They were going through the motions. Love was replaced by habit and duty. And without love, quoting the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, their works were like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. I think the problem is deeper. Routine actions formed by habit and duty are not all intrinsically bad! Maybe they lose a little passion, but can they not be an expression of love after all? Love matures and changes over time. I do not think that Jesus was criticizing a love that had matured like fine wine. Despite praising them for doing the work of the church under difficult circumstances, Jesus claimed that the Ephesian Christians had abandoned something so basic that it could be called their first love. Can you imagine anything worse—the shock and, given the source, the inevitable truth of Jesus's accusation? They were busted. Suddenly, the commendation took a back seat. When we talk about abandoning something, bad things usually come to mind. Why do you abandon your first love? You lose interest. Maybe you have a new interest. You do not use the language of abandonment to ditch something bad; you generally abandon something of value or that was once valuable like a gold mine. You abandon a family, a post, a cause, or a Lord. The message to the church in Ephesus was ultimately about them leaving their first love—the One who went to his death for the sake of others.

Many men I know, who are or were married, can tell, or relate to a story that may help to illustrate the depth of the fall of the church in Ephesus. Like any illustration it has its limits. It goes something like this: It is a Saturday. A husband gets up with his young children, gets them dressed, and takes them out to breakfast so his wife can sleep in. He returns with her favorite donut and coffee. Later that morning, after he cut the grass, he met a friend, and they took their kids to the zoo so their wives could go out to lunch and go clothes shopping. He ordered pizza for dinner, they watched a family movie together, then he put the kids to bed and read stories until he fell asleep. After stumbling downstairs, he looked forward to a few minutes of conversation with his wife and maybe even a little praise. When he saw the look on her face, he cringed, fearful for what she was about to say. "Look, I appreciate everything you did today, but you don't love me the way you used to love me." Something valuable or essential is missing. ("But I have this against you," Jesus said, "that you have abandoned the love you had at first.") It is easy to imagine a variety of reactions to this woman's response to her husband's good deeds. The first husband was defensive. "Love you? I married you, didn't I? I work like a dog at home

and the office for you, don't I? You're never satisfied." This guy is angered by the accusation. The second husband was in denial. "She's just having a bad day. How do I change the subject? Note to self—Buy her two donuts next time! Maybe if I offered to give her a backrub. This guy puts his head down, and plows forward, trying harder. The third husband was terrified by her emotion. "I'm sorry. I really am. I'll try harder." This guy offers an immediate apology to make the anxiety go away. The fourth husband is guilt-ridden. "Well, I have been busy lately." This guy knows he has been compensating for working twelve-hour days, playing golf every weekend, serving on too many boards, and so forth. Of course, all four husbands miss the point. This woman is asking her husband to pay attention, to be alert, to set aside agendas, to hear what she is really saying, to be responsive, and to make changes for the benefit of their marriage and family—things he did knowingly, willingly, and maybe even enthusiastically when they were first married.

When Jesus told the Christians in Ephesus, "that you have abandoned the love you had at first," I wonder if any reacted like the hapless husbands in my illustration—defensive, in denial, scared, or guilt ridden. "There's more to do?" "He's asking too much." "Hey, we're persecuted after all. And we hate evil." "Where are you going with this, Jesus?" Jesus did commend the church for bearing up because of his name. For some, persecution causes love to grow more alive, awake, and fervent. But for others, not so much. Part of persecution is the threat of it. Persecution can cause love to grow cold—out of a sense of being overwhelmed or afraid, especially when duty becomes hard and survival mode kicks in. Had the Christians in Ephesus become cool or cold to the call of Jesus—to Jesus himself—even as they suffered for him? Had they abandoned their post? Had their works become routine or habitual, like in a marriage growing cold? When love grows cold, many people try to keep their heads down. The longer you keep your head down, the harder it is to raise it up. They may go through the motions, but when love grows cold it protects itself, and looks inward. Let us go back to the illustration of the couple on Saturday evening. Image a fifth husband, a wise husband. After hearing "you don't love me like you used to love me," he resists everything inside urging him to deny, minimize, fight, avoid, or apologize to get it over with. What does he do? A wise man is brave enough to step closer to his wife and endure the discomfort that is about to come from having to listen, really listen, to her, knowing that serious change is on the way.

Despite Jesus's punch-to-the-gut remark about the Ephesian Christians giving up their first love, he did not give up on them. Instead, he said, "remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did

at first.” Love me with the attentive love you loved me at first—the love that pulled you away from your sinful ways—and do works befitting that love. “If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.” I think it is fair to say that Jesus called the church in Ephesus, fortified by repentant hearts, to take a step closer to him. To be alert, outward looking, and courageous, walking toward chaos—not away from it. There was no promise of a better earthly future in Jesus’s words. Only testing, suffering, and death, but in death there is final victory.

Next Jesus put out a challenge that is repeated in the other letters to the churches: “Let everyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying in the churches.” (It’s not that far from what the wife in my illustration might say to her reeling husband. “Can you hear what I’m saying?”) If the church has ears—if God’s people hear—then what do they hear the Spirit saying? The last sentence in the passage gives us a clue. “To everyone who conquers I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.” Conquer what? You can conquer a fear—of spiders, snakes, heights, or flying. You can conquer a mountain. You can conquer an addiction. All good and true. But in this verse, conquering is likened to conquering in a battle. Everyone who conquers in the face of false teaching, persecution, and evil—to everyone who perseveres, who struggles in the battle, who endures—will gain the tree of life. The call to conquer is found in the other letters too. The letter to Smyrna: “Whoever *conquers* will not be harmed by the second death.” “Be faithful unto death and I will grant you the crown of life.” This crown is more like a victor’s wreath as a military or athletic reward than a king’s crown. The letter to Pergamum: “To everyone who *conquers* I will give some of the hidden manna ...” To Thyatira: “To everyone who *conquers* I will give authority over the nations to rule them with an iron rod as when clay pots are shattered. To Sardis: If you *conquer*, you will be clothed like them in white robes. To Philadelphia: If you *conquer*, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God. And to Laodicea: “To the one who *conquers* I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself *conquered* and sat down with my Father on his throne.”

The Christian’s basic posture in the world has always been to resist the earthly and spiritual forces opposed to God. Every age has had its challenges, and, in some ages, the challenges are more difficult than others. The church is assured of ultimate victory if it perseveres by conquering in the face of evil. That does not mean the church’s task is to conquer the enemy—that role was left to Jesus. Rather, the church conquers by showing up for the battle and not giving ground. Jesus’s message to the church in Ephesus is that they were not fit for the battle

that was raging outside. It was time to get focused and rejoin the struggle.

## Resisting Totalitarianism

The point of the text for us—two thousand years later in the face of rather extraordinary circumstances in our day—is to face the starkness of Jesus’s words and to ask whether or how we have abandoned the love we had at first. Have we lost a love that can only be regained by listening, returning, resisting, and conquering in his name? Most pastors I know are devoted shepherds of the sheep. But the COVID crisis has left many exhausted and wondering what ministry will look like in the future. Partisan politics has turned uglier than usual. The punishments for being thoughtful and outspoken, are real. There is no telling what our present world situation will lead us to. I have become increasingly pessimistic. That may just come with aging, being nostalgic about the past, and crotchety about the present. It does not matter. What matters is that the historians—and ultimately the Lord of history—will have their say about what we did and how we responded to the challenges put before us.

I feel sorry for people who readily point out the failures of previous generations. It is not because there are not failures in the past. It is because the people who point out past failures are oblivious to the fact that future generations will judge them, and they too will be found wanting. Pride, ignorance, and arrogance keep them from that realization. Where are we failing and where will we be called to account for our failures? Have our theologies equipped us with insight and courage to do the right things? These are serious questions that we all do well to ask ourselves. Perhaps there is no more shameful yet ultimately understandable example of failure in the face of spiritual and physical struggle in recent history than the attitude of a great number of pastors and Christians in Germany during the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust. We all admire the Confessing Church and the Barmen Declaration—but the focus of that movement was on the independence of the church, not on the Holocaust. The question remains, why did not the ordinary pastors speak out against the Holocaust? Many claimed they did not know. They were busy pastors and people with extra burdens due to the hardships of war. In that sense, they are not unlike pastors today who are burdened with pastoral care related to COVID. It is easy to attribute the failure to speak up to deep-rooted antisemitism, whipped up by a demagogic political leader. But fear of knowing too much or of speaking out, at the risk of risking one’s job, one’s family, and ultimately one’s life, must have been too much for many to bear even if they were inclined to speak out.

There are people today who think that if they had been in Nazi Germany, they would have resisted the Nazis and spoken up for the Jews. Jordan Peterson is famous for wryly responding to that claim with, “It’s not likely.” Will the struggles facing the people in our congregations be pleasing to the Lord of history—or even to our children and grandchildren? What will future generations say to us about how we lived the days given to us to live? Are things happening in our world now that will earn us condemnation in the future, not because we did not solve the problem but because we did not try? Here are some obvious ones: “Why didn’t you speak out against cancel culture? Now everyone is terrified to say a word.” “Why did you carry a smart phone and let big brother track your movements, purchases, contacts, and medical information? Now they track everything including our thoughts!” We live in a contentious time and there is no telling what we will get pulled into. Earlier I referred to the trans phenomenon. I do not want to minimize genuine gender dysphoria, but can we imagine our grandchildren asking us why we did not put up a fight about the breakdown of concepts of maleness, femaleness, and the family that have wreaked havoc in the lives of people who were once young and full of hope and are now living lives of regret and desperation?

What are we to do? There is an expression in the military that describes a good soldier as one who runs to the sound of gunfire. This soldier, whether a private or a general, has been prepared for this. As difficult as their task might be, when well-trained soldiers hear gunfire, they steel themselves to run to it. Their instinct for self-preservation is mitigated by *dedication, training, and mental preparation*. Last September, we marked the twentieth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Those who watched these events unfold in horror in person, live on our TVs, or in clips decades later, saw members of the NYFD run to and up the towers while everyone else was running in the opposite direction. They ignored an order to abort the mission—at least until after they rescued everyone they could. They ran to the spot of greatest need. Once again, an instinct for self-preservation was mitigated by *dedication, training, and mental preparation*.

In 1939, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, returned briefly to the United States. He had an invitation to join the faculty at Union Theological Seminary in New York and would have been able to resist Nazism from the safety of the United States. But two weeks after he arrived, despite Reinhold Niebuhr and others urging him not to go, he returned to the sound of gunfire in Germany to share the coming trials with the German people. It was a decision that ultimately cost him his life. Ernst Lohmeyer did not have to run to the sound of gunfire. It was literally in his ears much of his adult life—first with the Nazis and then the Soviets, who eventually took his life. There is no

more profound example of running to the sound of gunfire than Jesus who ran to where he needed to be and returned to Jerusalem again and again until he was finally arrested and killed.

Conquering does not mean winning. It means resisting, fighting, and not giving up against the enemies of God and God’s people. It is a first love—a love of Jesus—that compels a person to run to the sound of gunfire and, to mix a metaphor, to take up a cross. Are we pastors and doctors of the church the generals leading from the rear? Are we chaplains behind the front lines preparing the troops for battle? Are we on the battlefields with the troops, praying and giving last rites? Or are we chaplains on the battlefield, like Zwingli, with sword in hand? Zwingli went to battle knowing he might die physically; and knowing that if he did not go to battle, he might die spiritually. After the battle of Kappel in Switzerland, where troops from Catholic cantons overwhelmed troops from Protestant Zurich, Zwingli’s body was found quartered, burned, and smeared with feces. That was the sixteenth century’s version of cancel culture.

Who wants to be sacrificed? Russian dissident Aleksander Solzhenitsyn asked that question from his own experience. As a captain in the Red Army during World War II, Solzhenitsyn was sentenced to eight years in an isolated prison and then internal exile for criticizing Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in a private letter. His account of the Soviet prison system was published in 1973 as *The Gulag Archipelago*. There he wrote, “Every man always has handy a dozen glib little reasons why he is right not to sacrifice himself.”<sup>9</sup> There you have it. A blunt fact that turns into a hard question—to what extent are we, as Christians, relying on our own glib little reasons why we are right not to sacrifice ourselves? Let me add that if anyone in the room has glib little reasons why it is right not to sacrifice him or herself, it is me! Even Solzhenitsyn realized the near impossibility of self-sacrifice.

Instead of being arrested for *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn was exiled to the west. Before he left, he released his now famous essay, “Live Not by Lies.” In this essay, Solzhenitsyn writes: “In the West they have strikes, protest marches, but we [Russians] are too cowed, too scared.” They were too scared to speak, he argued, even though everyone knew that the failed state was propped up only by violence and lies. “For violence has nothing to cover itself with but lies, and lies can only persist through violence. And it is not every day and not on every day that violence brings down its heavy hand: It demands of us only a submission to lies, a daily participation in deceit—and this suffices as our fealty. And therein we find, neglected by us, the simplest, the most accessible key to our liberation: a personal *nonparticipation in lies!*” “Even if all is covered by lies,

even if all is under their rule, let us resist in the smallest way; Let their rule hold not through me!” He continued, “We are not called upon to step out onto the square and shout out the truth, to say out loud what we think—this is scary, we are not ready. But let us at least refuse to say what we *do not* think!” He then listed nine things he would refuse to do from then on. Two of the nine things Solzhenitsyn said he would not do caught my attention because they applied so readily to me during the past six years I spent as the Library Director at Yale Divinity School and probably to many of you too. 1. “[I] Will not be impelled to [attend] a meeting where a forced and distorted discussion is expected to take place.” 2. “[I] Will at once walk out from a session, meeting, lecture, play, or film as soon as ... [I hear] the speaker utter a lie, ideological drivel, or shameless propaganda.”<sup>10</sup>

### Living Not By Lies

Following Solzhenitsyn here was supposed to be a relief from telling the truth! At Yale, I would have been able to follow his example for about a week, if that—and I was in a mostly collegial and bracing academic environment. He wrote his list living in a repressive regime. Still, by easing from me the burden of boldly telling the truth—which would have led to me being disciplined and probably fired—Solzhenitsyn gave me the permission to not lie instead. When it proved to be too hard to walk out of every meeting where I heard someone speak ideological drivel, I tried instead to support those who struggled to resist ideologies, prayed for those who succumbed to them, gathered resources to train students theologically and culturally, and, whenever I could, questioned and corrected the dominant narratives. I am not saying this was sufficient or adequate. But it was the best that my fear allowed me to do.

Let me say at the outset of this section that Yale is an impressive place, and I am grateful for the opportunity to have worked there. Yale is the epitome of “the academy.” Smart people writing important books and having vital conversations in a stately setting with abundant resources. The atmosphere was generally cheerful, with gorgeous music and crowded chapel services. The YDS faculty was strong and collegial with a storied history of substantial theological contributions. Several faculty members were widely known and appreciated for their evangelical faith or openness to it. There were many evangelical students, too. The students were generally thoughtful, smart, and delightful, though it seemed to me that many were struggling because they had to navigate ideologies about race, gender, and privilege without much helpful guidance. The Dean is a Christian minister who believes in the Christian character of the school. He supported freedom of speech, though he knew cancel culture and censorship were real. There were some on the faculty who would say that error had no rights and should not be

represented on campus—in faculty positions, invited speakers, and even in books in the library. I would be giving the wrong impression to suggest that the ideologies in play were in lock step or that the narrative was uniform. But undeniably, a haze of progressivism, wokeness, or political correctness hung over the place, and many kept their voices low and their heads down. While the Divinity School campus was publicly attuned to issues of racial justice, there was quiet complaining by some faculty members and students that race and, to a lesser extent, gender had stolen the show. The power behind “Black Lives Matter” was that until black lives mattered, nothing else mattered. That meant there was little room or energy to talk about feminism, Lesbian–Gay–Bi issues, climate change, animal rights, or anything else.

Surviving at Yale was easy—no, thriving was easy—if you kept your head down and your mouth closed. What was difficult was finding ways to talk about the bundle of ideologies that comprised “the narrative.” The oppressed/oppressor mentality was strong, and students would often try to out-victim each other along racial, class, and gender lines. Some were true believers; many were not sure; most went along. Many agonized about their privilege. Some kept it to themselves, and others sought to show how they too were oppressed. In this setting, informal networks developed, resources were shared, and people prayed for each other. The role of providing sanity checks became extremely important. Making connections, small groups meeting off campus, and telling stories all helped. It turns out that these are some of the same strategies described by Rod Dreher in *Live Not by Lies*. That is how you prepare to live in a soft-totalitarian culture.

From reading Shelby Steele’s two books, *White Guilt* (2006) and *Shame* (2015) I came to see that white guilt was the unspoken guest in every conversation about race. A lot of people needed to prove that they were not racists and putting a *Black Lives Matter* sign in their finely manicured front lawns is one way to do it. There was a lot of “privilege guilt” too, but somehow it was easier to talk about “white privilege.” Perhaps the worst material came out of the departments that offered “training” to various campus constituencies. I had no objection to learning about the subtleties of racism, bias, and sexual misconduct. It was that these sessions were invariably taught by true believers who made no arguments and only settled for one correct answer in discussions.

Upon reflection, I could have done so much more at Yale. However, despite the joys of working there, it was a dangerous place for someone like me who could not afford to get fired. (There, I have justified the failure of Christians to speak out against the Holocaust again.) I

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fear the day is coming when more and more people, who are not at the ends of their working lives like I am, will be put in difficult spots. It will be a time to pray for bravery and to be prepared to face the consequences. In the letter to the church in Ephesus, Jesus asks us to step closer and endure the discomfort that is about to come from having to listen, really listen, to him, knowing that serious change is on the way. It is a time to be faithful to the love we had at first. He is the victor—the brave one—after all. It does not matter where we live or what

we do, there are sounds of gunfire in the distance. Just like soldiers who run to that gunfire and fire fighters who ran into burning buildings, we are called to get ready for the struggles ahead and then follow Jesus where he leads. We have a lot of training and mental preparation to come. May God be with us.

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<sup>1</sup> Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (New York: Sentinel, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Barth was interviewed for a story in *Time Magazine* that was published in May 1963. The story, which quotes Barth on the Bible and the newspaper, is printed in Karth Barth, *Barth in Conversation, Volume 2, 1963*, ed. Eberhard Busch (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018), 6–7.

<sup>5</sup> *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925*, trans. James D. Smart (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (London: Hodder & Stoughton Limited, 1935), 43.

<sup>7</sup> James R. Edwards, *Between the Swastika & the Sickle: The Life, Disappearance, & Execution of Ernst Lohmeyer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Bible and the New York Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, "Live Not by Lies," <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/live-not-by-lies>.

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