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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

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Modernity as a Barrier to Belief



S. Michael Craven

*F*rom the point of view of contemporary culture, the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead is irrational. It cannot be incorporated into the existing plausibility structure.

LESLIE NEWBIGIN

*T*o reach a new and better understanding of the gospel] I had to be "depropositionalized." Rather than seeing the gospel as propositions, mechanisms, abstractions, or universal concepts, I came to see the gospel as narrative, a story, a "once there was a man named Joseph engaged to a woman named Mary" type of account. The term gospel itself should have told me this: the term means not just "good information" or "good concepts" or "good mechanism" but "good news," and news (whether in the newspaper or on a news broadcast or in sharing news across the back fence) comes to us as stories that answer this question: What happened?

BRIAN MCLAREN

*O*n a spring afternoon in 1929, theologian and defender of the Christian faith, J. Gresham Machen, shared the following words with the graduating class of Hampden-Sydney College:

It is a serious step, in these days, even from the worldly point of view, to become a Christian. There was a time, not so very long ago, when the faithful Christian was supported by public opinion or at least by the united opinion of the visible church. But that time has gone by. The man who today enters upon the Christian life is enlisting in warfare against the whole current of the age.¹

If Machen were alive today, he would likely agree that the "whole current of the age" has very nearly succeeded in wiping away all that remains of true Christianity in America.

Now you may think this an overly pessimistic appraisal of the matter, but consider the state of our culture today. All remnants of our nation's Christian heritage have been systematically removed from the public square; furthermore, Christians—or the biblical view of the world—no longer lead in virtually any institution of our culture. American universities

and colleges are dominated by fundamental secularists who see higher education as a platform for liberal political indoctrination. The public education system has been reduced to a mechanism for the production of standardized thinking, if it could even be called that, and the mere mention of anything Christian, including overtly religious holidays such as Christmas, will trigger a reaction on the scale of an international incident. With the loss of thoughtful Christian influence, art and music have been reduced to their most base forms—devoid of any objective standards by which we may judge the true, the good, and the beautiful. Secular-driven art deconstructs these categories as historically understood, and pop music has degenerated into a primitive, sexualized, and bombastic praise and worship medium for hedonism.

The most recent political season exalted the position that one's private beliefs should not influence one's public policy, meaning that religious beliefs in particular should be excluded from the public policy arena. Of course, this perspective is telling in that it confirms that most people today categorize religion as a secondary source of knowledge, and therefore non-religious belief systems are regarded as both rational and thus the primary source of so-called real knowledge.

Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich articulated this perspective quite clearly in an article that appeared in *The American Prospect*, in which he said,

The great conflict of the twenty-first century may be between the West and terrorism, but terrorism is a tactic and not a belief. The underlying battle will be between modern civilization and anti-modernist fanatics; between those who believe in the primacy of the individual and those who believe that beings owe blind allegiance to a higher authority; between those who give priority to life in this world and those who believe that human life is no more than preparation for an existence beyond life; between those who believe that truth is revealed solely through scripture and religious dogma, and those who rely primarily on science, reason, and logic.²

You can see the distinction; any attempt to derive truth from a religious worldview is openly deemed irrational.

Culturally speaking, the last century has seen the legitimization of abortion, sex outside of marriage, and homosexual behavior. The whole shift in sexual ethics has completely undermined God's design for the natural family to the extent that we stand on the brink of legalizing the unthinkable: marriage between persons of the same sex—a standard never before codified in the most pagan of cultures. And yet here in America, a historically Christian nation, this notion is today advancing in our public policy. While the last presidential election and the defeat of same-sex marriage legislation in eleven states offered some cause for celebration, I fear, based upon closer examination of the values and beliefs of the forthcoming generation, this celebration is temporary unless something dramatic occurs in the spiritual life of America.

The lack of influence and subsequent exclusion of Christianity from public life has resulted from, and further encourages, a privatized faith among many professing Christians today. Unfortunately, the private version of the Christian faith is no better than its public effects or lack thereof.

According to a recent national survey by George Barna, only 4% of American adults have a biblical worldview as the basis of their decision-making.³ While this in and of itself should be adequate to raise alarm over the state of Christianity in America, this is only the surface evidence of a much deeper crisis unfolding in the church today. The criteria Barna and his team used in defining a biblical worldview were as follows:

1. Believing that absolute moral truths exist and that the Bible defines such truth.
2. Jesus Christ lived a sinless life.
3. God is the all-powerful and all-knowing Creator of the universe and he still rules it today.
4. Salvation is a gift from God and cannot be earned.
5. Satan is real.

6. A Christian has a responsibility to share their faith in Christ with other people.
7. The Bible is accurate in all of its teachings.

This is hardly a comprehensive biblical framework for analyzing, evaluating, and guiding one's responses to the challenges and opportunities of life. These are merely the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith, the very basics of what it means to believe as a Christian! Again, according to this survey, only 4% of American adults even believe these basic tenets, and yet 85% of Americans claim to be Christian.⁴ What is worse is that according to a later study using these same criteria, only 51% of Protestant pastors agree with all seven of these statements.⁵

What about the next generation? According to Barna in 1999, 82% of American teens say they are Christian. Three out of five teens say they are "committed Christians." One-third (34%) of all teenagers describe themselves as born again, a figure unchanged in several years. And more than seven out of ten teens are engaged in some church-related activity in a typical week: attending worship services, Sunday school, a church youth group, or a small group.⁶

According to these figures, we should be mightily encouraged, but sadly that is not to be the case. If we take a closer look at the theological and doctrinal beliefs of young people today, I suggest that my case has been made: Christianity in America is in a pathetic state of decadence and decay.

According to the latest research, two out of three teens (65%) say that the devil, or Satan, is not a living being but is a "symbol of evil." Three out of five teens (61%) agree that "if a person is generally good, or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in Heaven." Slightly more than half (53%) say that Jesus committed sins while he was on earth. Three out of ten believe that all religions are really praying to the same God, they are just using different names for God. In total, 83% of teens maintain that moral truth depends on the circumstances, and only 6% believe that moral truth is absolute. When it comes to believing in

absolute truth, only 9% of born-again teens believe in moral absolutes, and just 4% of the non-born-again teens believe that there are moral absolutes.

I charge that in light of these conditions, either Christianity is not true, or Christians who today are living in America have lost the understanding of true Christianity. I, of course, am convinced that it is the latter.

We seem to have no real or meaningful understanding of who God is or of how we are to relate to him. Like the world around us, we have set him at a very great distance—an irrelevant being whose influence in our daily lives and personal decisions is, at best, marginalized, or at worst, ignored altogether. "We, like sheep have gone astray," embracing a "way that seems right to us" but is ultimately focused on ourselves and not the Holy, Living God—the Creator of all things and Redeemer of the world. We have descended to a "form of godliness [religious practice] but deny its power." Our post-enlightenment, modernistic minds have pushed from the realm of possibility any idea that the supernatural God still intervenes in the daily affairs of men—that God remains central to every event and every action. The result is that *we* have confirmed for the world that they are correct in saying, "God is not real," or at the very least, "He is irrelevant" (Jeremiah 2:13). This is the great tragedy in America today, and the call upon those who still know Christ as Savior and King is to stand, at any cost, against the "current of this age" with love, grace, and sound minds grounded in theological truth, doctrinal depth, and cultural relevance.

Furthermore, we must graciously endeavor to entreat, exhort, and persuade our brothers and sisters in Christ to understand and embrace the fullness of faith in Christ and his Lordship in every area of their lives. I appeal in particular to those of us who hold to the richness of Reformed theology: we must abandon our prideful and sometimes arrogant distance from those whom we believe are lacking in knowledge.

As I have wrestled in my own attempts to understand the causes of this condition and what we in our imperfect flesh can do to present ourselves as vessels equipped for his good

works, I have become increasingly drawn to the influence of modernism and modernity as principal barriers to both the integration and the acceptance of the full gospel.

I have been researching, in particular, the chasm that is apparent among young professing evangelicals—they claim to be Christian, they point to Christian beliefs as their basis for life and living, and yet their behavior is completely inconsistent with what they claim to believe, and their theology is even worse. What they lack is a comprehensive biblical framework through which they analyze, assess, and determine their response to life's challenges and opportunities. They do not possess a view of Christianity that connects with reality. Instead, many today follow the modernistic impulse that compels them to ultimately trust in technology, the ingenuity of man, reason, and the assumption that progress is perpetual and ever upward—they are practical modernists. Thus there is no confidence in the supernatural, and therefore they never expect nor seek the supernatural God to intervene in human affairs. Nor do they believe he will punish our unfaithfulness (Jeremiah 5:12). We have simply lost an understanding of who God is.

I have come to believe that the depth of modernity with all of its attendant forces of time pressures, careerism, family separation, technology dependence, and distractions is so pervasive that it is no longer distinguishable as a force often antithetical to Christianity. I here use the term modernity in the same sense as Os Guinness,

Modernity . . . refers to the character and system of the world produced by the forces of modernization and development, centered above all on the premise that the "top down" causation of God and the supernatural has been decisively replaced by the "bottom up" causation of human designs and products.⁷

We are immersed in modernity to the extent that we accept everything about it as true and correct and never test against Scripture the *times* in which we live. This condition, coupled with its modernistic assumptions, has placed God at a very

great distance in the lives of most professing Christians, which in turn validates this same perspective in the unbelieving culture at large. God may be ignored in the secular culture, but he is largely irrelevant among too many in the so-called Christian culture.

Furthermore, this condition discourages us from pursuing knowledge of "ultimate things." We just don't think about such things anymore, as Chesterton said, "The modern idea is that cosmic truth is so unimportant that it cannot matter what any one says."⁸ Thus if Christianity advances in such a culture, it often does so at a superficial level. We seem to want to put God in a category that meets these modernistic criteria that conform to how *we* think the world is, and not how God has made the world and everything in it and how he wants us to live, regardless of the times.

I am convinced that modernity and its attendant philosophy of modernism have had a devastating impact upon the contemporary church. While postmodernism may have raised legitimate challenges to modernism, it nonetheless can do so only within the context of modernity. The result, I believe, is that the criticisms raised by postmodernism remain academic while the world rolls on in the grip of modernistic thinking. We still trust in the ingenuity of man as evidenced by the fact that we have only *increased* expectations from our government, or the enigmatic "they," to solve everything from affordable healthcare to obesity. The solution to every problem is "education," and any temporary deviation from the expectation of perpetual prosperity is an aberration and must be "fixed." Of course, this expectation is absolute because any impediment to personal affluence is considered "unnatural" in America.

How many of us actually live by faith even in the slightest sense? When was the last time any of us, living in America, were compelled to utterly trust in the Lord for our daily bread? Do any of us stand on the brink of starvation? Do we risk our lives in the exercise of faith in Jesus Christ? Don't we claim "social persecution" as if that is to be compared with real persecution? Honestly, don't we really trust *first* in our

jobs, the power company, modern medicine, the order insured by government, technology (the tools of modernity), and so forth, and this is what produces such great fear in us when these fail? When was the last time we responded to a call upon our hearts to do something so irrational and contrary to “normalcy” in obedience to God? I am not suggesting that God no longer calls us to the same level of obedience described in Hebrews chapter 11; I am saying that we no longer expect—or perhaps, more accurately, want—this “kind” of call, and thus we do not listen.

Modernity appears to have met all our physical needs for security and thus produced a standard by which we then measure everything, including God’s expectations of us. We think he works exclusively through what we perceive to be the normal state of things: jobs, medicine, housing, modern conveniences, and the like. We simply no longer expect the supernatural, and therefore we find ourselves mostly independent of God until something goes awry.

Where this impact may be most damaging is in the church itself. This may be best exemplified in some, though not all, churches that are caught up in church-growth movements and strategies with an unhealthy reliance upon methodologies and not the Holy Spirit. Here again, Os Guinness is helpful.

In today’s convenient, climate-controlled, spiritual world created by the managerial and therapeutic revolutions, nothing is easier than living apart from God. . . . Modernity creates the illusion that, when God commanded us not to live by bread alone but by every word that comes from His mouth, He was not aware of the twentieth century. The very success of modernity may undercut the authority and driving power of faith until religion becomes merely religious rhetoric or organizational growth without spiritual reality.⁹

Our reliance on the tools and resources of modernity can and often does maintain our dependence upon the things of this world: those things we have trusted in all along. We

rarely come to experience or seek after radical dependence upon Christ. I think this condition is central to maintaining the all too common “sacred/secular” distinction among many professing Christians. I think this may also contribute to the contemporary perspective of justification apart from any obligation that John Armstrong and others are thankfully challenging.

Thankfully, there are others who recognize that the contemporary church in America is in desperate need of renewal. These rightly recognize that what passes for Christianity in America today is a mere shadow of historic faith in Jesus Christ. In addition, there are a multitude of causes for this condition: I have addressed only one, but one that I believe is significant and, due to its inherent subtlety, is difficult to discern and root out.

However, I am concerned that some Christians’ efforts at “renewing the church” rely solely upon the very paradigm that I am addressing. These “modernistic” reformers seek renewal through the development of measurable metrics and strategies such as those common to business. Their arguments are based upon the premise that we can through certain processes produce “spiritual growth” that is both quantifiable and duplicative. The “problem” in their minds is not theological or spiritual in origin but rather a problem of leadership and techniques. The language is often managerial in nature, appealing to paradigms, trends, and best practices. The dependence upon processes is defended in the name of doing all things in excellence to the glory of God, but in the process of doing this we often eliminate God himself from the very process.

In conclusion, I am not denouncing progress or the benefits of modern technologies. Nor am I advocating that we dress our kids like Pilgrims and start churning our own butter! The last three-hundred years have produced extraordinary advances in science, technology, and the general quality of life. The irony is that the resultant “spirit” of these advances that now threaten the gospel were largely fostered by and developed as a result of the Reformed Christian life

and worldview. These advances have proven beneficial in many respects and serve to fulfill God's longstanding commandment to "subdue the earth." I applaud such creativity committed to improving the human condition to the glory of God. I am simply warning that these very things can replace our dependence upon God. Therefore, the condition of modernity and its inherent benefits and tools demand careful and critical scrutiny so that they maintain their proper place in our lives.

May it be our sincere prayer that the Lord would deliver us from dependence upon the things of this world and render us utterly dependent upon him! May he be the King to whom I give my heart, my mind, and my life.

Author

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Notes

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