

UNCOMPROMISED FAITH
OVERCOMING OUR CULTURALIZED CHRISTIANITY

S. MICHAEL CRAVEN

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FOREWORD

For years there has been an increasing concern with the state of the church in America and its growing irrelevance both here and throughout the Western world.

Research reveals that Christianity in America has become more diluted, more distorted, and less Christlike with each subsequent generation. Heterodoxy is replacing orthodoxy, and the notion of absolute truth has been all but eliminated from popular thinking. And our young people, raised in Christian homes, are walking away from the church in alarming numbers. So severe is the crisis that I dared to proclaim that if something serious does not occur in the life of the church, we may be witnessing the last Christian generation in America.

Increasingly, Americans no longer hold to what evangelicals consider to be the true foundations of the Christian faith. The theological ignorance and biblical illiteracy of this generation are possibly the worst in history—an astonishing fact when you consider that we are the most educationally resource-rich generation in the history of the church. The net effect is a generation that professes Christ but doesn't

follow Him. Christianity, for many, has become a private matter, based more on simple assent to a few facts about Jesus: Pray “the Sinner’s Prayer,” and you’re done! But this is a far cry from the historic Christian faith that has been transforming people and the world for nearly two thousand years.

For centuries, Christians have been formulating and presenting a serious interpretation of reality that was applied to every aspect of life and culture. This interpretation, or Christian worldview, once shaped the cultural institutions of the Western world as well as the social and moral consensus. However, a serious shift began in the latter part of the eighteenth century, the effects of which continue to this day. Following the Enlightenment, Christianity began to be supplanted by new ideas about life and reality—ideas that sought to elevate man and eliminate God. Initially, this challenge was met by serious and intellectually formidable Christians. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, an anti-intellectual spirit began to dominate the American church, and Christians had less and less to offer in the way of serious ideas about life and the world. The result: The church and Christianity ceased to influence the culture and instead became increasingly conformed to the culture.

In the pages that follow, Michael meticulously peels back the layers of today’s culture to expose the manner and means of Christianity’s unwitting cultural captivity in America, offering a thoughtful route to reform rooted in historic orthodoxy. This book will challenge you to think deeply about the times and culture in which you live and how these conditions have combined to shape our thinking in ways that inhibit an authentic and robust Christian life.

Every Christian needs to read this book if he or she wants to understand the times in which we live and how to live faithfully within them.

—JOSH McDOWELL, speaker and author

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INTRODUCTION

I recall seeing the sci-fi action film *The Matrix*, starring Keanu Reeves, when it was first released in 1999. For those of you unfamiliar with the film, it portrays a future in which reality, as perceived by humans, is actually the product of an artificially constructed computer program called the Matrix. This false reality, in which people think they are living ordinary lives, is created by sentient machines to pacify and subdue the human population while their bodies' heat and electrical activity are used as an energy source. As the story unfolds, Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves), a computer hacker who operates under the name Neo, begins receiving cryptic messages on his computer, encouraging him to ask, "What is the Matrix?" Soon Neo encounters several sinister "agents" concerned about his interest in the Matrix. He is rescued by a small band of rebel humans led by the mysterious Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne).

Neo is brought to Morpheus, who asks him, "Do you want to know the truth?" Morpheus's hanging question is followed by a choice: take the blue pill and all will return to normal with no recollection of the experience, and life will simply go on as it has always been; or take the

red pill and the truth will be revealed. Before Neo chooses, Morpheus warns that if the red pill is chosen, there can be no going back, its effect irreversible. If the red pill is chosen, Neo will discover the truth and bear the full weight of its consequences. Of course, Neo chooses the red pill and discovers the horrible reality of humanity's condition—that they are in bondage to this malevolent society of machines.

What follows is nothing short of a radical adjustment in Neo's worldview. Everything he has previously understood and believed to be the truth about reality is, in fact, a lie; his life from this point forward will never be the same. Something extraordinary that can never be undone has taken place in Neo's life, so much so that the whole of his existence from that point forward will be dedicated to liberating others in light of this truth.

I could not help but draw parallels between this story and that of conversion to faith in Jesus Christ. All that we have previously understood about life and reality is shattered by the inbreaking reality of Christ. Upon receiving Christ as Lord and Savior, one cannot simply go on as if something extraordinary has not happened. This divine penetration into one's present reality—through which our eyes are opened, our own rebellion quelled, and we see or at least acknowledge for the first time that Jesus Christ has saved us from a horrible condition and dreadful fate—is the most amazing experience in any human life.

Everything we know changes! (Or it should.) All of our conceptions of reality, self, human nature, knowledge, morality, and ethics are thrown into a new understanding. We are, for the first time, truly alive in Christ, now able to obtain a new understanding of everything, the knowledge of which transforms us and how we live. The result of this radical transformation then bears witness to the life-changing truth, power, and presence of Jesus Christ. This transformation affects not only us personally but also our ideas about everything else—in other words, a new and true interpretation of reality. Sadly, it seems that in America this transformation has become something less in its

PART I

Cultural Ideas That Hinder Belief and Adversely Influence the Christian Life and Witness

The Crisis Confronting the American Church:
Rethinking Cultural Engagement

Looking back over the last two millennia of Western history, one cannot help but be impressed with the role Christianity has played in shaping and forming, for better or worse, this great civilization. Throughout the centuries, Christianity has faced enormous struggles. From virtual obscurity, Christianity rose to challenge and conquer one of the greatest empires the world has ever seen: the Roman Empire. Christianity served to civilize and educate an entire continent; it gave birth to the modern ideals of freedom, human dignity, equality, free market economics, and social justice. Christianity forever established as universal human virtues the concepts of compassion, love, sacrifice, and forgiveness. The monuments of Christianity can still be seen everywhere: from the cathedrals of Europe to the music of Bach; from the intellectual heritage of Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin to the literature of Dante, Milton, and Shakespeare. From the colonization of America to the abolition of slavery, Christianity has been the most powerful and, one might add, most positive, formative influence on culture in the history of the world.

It has been the unique influence of Christianity that has produced the greatness of so-called Western civilization. However, I must stress that we are not to confuse Christianity and Western civilization, or being Christian with being American, as these are by no means synonymous. Christianity stands on its own, and where Christianity flourishes it naturally brings with it personal, social, and cultural transformation. Conversely, where Christianity fails to flourish or, more specifically, where the followers of Christ fail to think and act faithfully, cultures will likewise decline or fall short of their potential. This point was recently reinforced when a leading scholar from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, speaking to a group of Westerners in 2002, said,

One of the things we were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact, the pre-eminence of the West all over the world. We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we have realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubt about this.¹

This Chinese scholar acknowledges the obvious historical facts only when he recognizes that Christianity has been the central forming influence of the world's most successful civilization. Frankly, this success is an inevitable result for any civilization that, first, builds and maintains its social and cultural foundations upon truth that is consistent with reality and, second, rightfully acknowledges the source of this truth.

CHRISTIANITY IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY AMERICA

So here at the dawn of the twenty-first century, what has become of Christianity in the West? What new struggles does it face? What can be said for Christianity in Western civilization and specifically in America as we look to the future?

In comparison with its past achievements, it is safe to say that evangelical Christianity today is in a pathetic state of decadence and decline in the West. It is, to a large degree, fragmented, watered-down, and retreating from relevancy. For the past two centuries, too many evangelical Christians have lived on the periphery of responsible intellectual and cultural existence. We have traded in Milton's *Paradise Lost* for *Left Behind*, the arias of Bach for contemporary Christian music, and Rembrandt for Thomas Kinkade. It is not my intention to denigrate Tim LaHaye or Jerry Jenkins, the contemporary Christian music industry, or Mr. Kinkade. However, the fact of the matter is that much of what passes for Christian art and literature today fails to rise to the same level of quality and achievement as that of historical Christian artists and writers. It is this substandard quality that necessitates the subcultural category now necessary to identify Christian art and literature as its own category.

So-called Christian art and literature no longer serves as the creative benchmark for mainstream art and culture. The fields of creative and intellectual expression once dominated by Christians have been largely abandoned, taking with them any objective standards by which we can judge the true, the good, and the beautiful. Modern evangelical Christianity has to a large extent become pietistic and legalistic; it has forgotten beauty, relativized truth, and, in many respects, reduced Jesus into nothing more than a marketing tool to sell music, T-shirts, and jewelry to an increasingly irrelevant subculture. Even the most casual observer of society and culture surely must recognize that consciously Christian ideas and values no longer direct any of our

cultural institutions. The trend of every institution of American culture over the last fifty years has been a decidedly liberal drift, including some mainline Christian denominations. Welcome to post-Christian America!

Instead of engaging the intellectual and cultural challenges that we must in order to be salt and light in a world desperate for hope and meaning, the vast majority of evangelical Christians have abandoned the hard work of apprehending and pressing the truth into every sphere of life and culture. As a result, we have surrendered, by default, our influence in society to secular humanists and others who reject the truth and centrality of Christ to all of life.

From the public school system to the universities, the sciences to the humanities, films to the fine arts, politics to philosophy, Christians have, for the most part, abandoned mainstream culture and withdrawn to the confines of their churches, creating an elaborate Christian subculture with its own language, symbols, entertainment, and literature. To think, then, that we can venture out into the “real” world from this irrelevant subculture and reach people with the truth of Christ is naïve. The fact that the most important truth ever revealed to humanity has been successfully consigned to the margins of society has only strengthened the implausibility of the gospel story!

In the meantime, the truth claims of Christianity have come under vicious attack from all sides. The possibility of miracles, divine revelation, and the Incarnation is both questioned and categorized as a primitive, out-of-date interpretation of reality. The deity of Christ and the existence of God are either rejected altogether or reduced to a practical deism in which God set things in motion but has little to do with everyday life and social existence. The historical and scientific accuracy of the Bible is repeatedly attacked. One only has to recall the recent wave of critics and so-called theologians who weighed in on Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* or recent prime-time specials on Jesus and Paul—all dismissing the historical and supernatural truth of the

biblical revelation and Jesus as God. The success of *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown, with its outrageous and false claims of conspiracy and cover-up as the impetus for the early founding of Christianity, promises to further weaken the plausibility of the Christian faith and message.

The way of salvation — through Christ alone — is regarded as divisive, offensive, or simply unnecessary. Competing religious systems are set over and against Christianity as being more tolerant and more humane. Today, Christians are often labeled fundamentalist right-wing extremists. Unfortunately, due to the general intellectual weakness and pervasive theological ignorance of the church, this is a label that is all too often accurate. And more and more, all remnants of our nation's Christian heritage are being systematically removed from the public square.

AN ANTI-INTELLECTUAL SPIRIT

Rather than engage these kinds of arguments and actions intelligently as 1 Peter 3:15 commands, many evangelicals continue to hide away under the mask of anti-intellectualism. Too many Christians think, *Apologetics is too rationalistic, cerebral, intellectual, and abstract. I don't need to try to rationally prove the existence of God or argue with others about whether or not He exists. I just need to show love and compassion. After all, what really matters is faith, hope, and love — not reason.* Reason, they say, just gets in the way of faith, hope, and love. They follow God with their heart, not their head! Others will retreat into the abyss of fideism, saying, *Religion is a matter of faith and cannot be argued by reason — one must simply believe.* Faith, they think, is a blind leap in the dark, devoid of any rational reasons. They argue that faith and reason stand opposed to one another. This might account for the lack of biblical literacy evident among so many professing Christians today. Recently George Barna reported that “75 percent of Americans believe that the Bible teaches that ‘God helps those who help themselves’”!²

This same attitude is to blame for the overwhelming absence of a consciously Christian life and worldview within the church, without which the Christian lacks the necessary theological framework for analyzing, understanding, and addressing every aspect of life, society, and culture from a coherent biblical philosophy. I will address this in greater detail later.

Nonetheless, this anti-intellectual attitude simply flies in the face of what the Bible teaches. We are commanded to “always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15, NKJV) or to “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God . . . [taking] captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). This passage in 2 Corinthians is critical and is one we often either misunderstand or misapply. The apostle Paul is urging Christians to engage in intellectual discourse and persuasive debate whenever they find themselves confronted by false ideas that contradict the biblical understanding of life and reality. This passage is not to be understood in purely individualistic or private terms related to taking our *own* thoughts captive; we need to understand the ideas and thoughts of others that keep *them* from the knowledge of the truth. Practically speaking, this means we are to be actively engaged in pressing God’s truth into every aspect of life and the world. N. T. Wright was helpful in further explaining the Christian’s proper relationship to the world in which he or she lives:

The new life of the Spirit, to which Christians are called in the present age, is not a matter of sitting back and enjoying the spiritual comforts in a private, relaxed, easygoing spirituality, but consists rather of the unending struggle in the mystery of prayer, the struggle to bring God’s wise, healing order into the world now, in implementation of the victory of the cross and anticipation of the final redemption.³ (emphasis added)

Rather than living and thinking consistent with the way God intends the world to be, modern Christians seem to be more comfortable with the way the world presently is. Thus, they remain uninterested in engaging in the hard task of reasoning, thinking, and earnestly contending for the faith that has been delivered once and for all to the saints!

OVERCOMING EMPTY-HEADED EVANGELICALISM

So what is to be done? Is there a way out of this destructive malaise of “empty-headed” evangelicalism? I believe the proper remedy is the repudiation of all types of anti-intellectualism that dumb down Christian theology, impoverish the witness of Christianity, and give Christians excuses not to ask and answer the hard questions.

The study of historic Christian apologetics is essential for any person who professes to be a follower of Christ. However, I want to make a distinction between historic Christian apologetics and cultural apologetics. Without venturing into the debate over classical, presuppositional, and evidential apologetics, let me just say that I believe that elements of each are helpful and not necessarily mutually exclusive. So when I use the term *historic Christian apologetics*, I am referring to those three schools of thought collectively. For the sake of understanding, classical apologetics “stresses rational arguments for the existence of God and historical evidences supporting the truth of Christianity.”⁴ Presuppositional apologetics differs in that it “defends Christianity from the departure point of certain basic presuppositions”⁵—namely, that all persons presuppose or assume certain explanations about reality that arise from their worldview. In presuppositionalism, the Christian apologist presents the truth of Christianity by exposing the fallacy of alternative worldviews, which the skeptic ultimately knows serve only to suppress the truth that in his heart he knows to be true. Finally, evidential apologetics stresses the need to first logically establish the

existence of God before arguing for the truth of Christianity. Suffice it to say, these, to one degree or another, are all vital for the Christian to apprehend and be able to communicate.

But I want to emphasize the need for what can be called a “cultural” or “missional” apologetic. These work on two intellectual fronts. The first front addresses the ideas or ideological influences common to a given culture. These ideas surreptitiously shape our thinking in an osmotic fashion, like the water in which a fish swims: The fish doesn’t give the water the slightest thought; it simply takes the water for granted. Such is the case with the ideas common to our culture. They are the air we breathe, and thus we scarcely give them a thought, but their influence on our thoughts, if unchecked, is formidable.

The second front pertains to social issues and their underlying ideas or worldview. These are most often expressed in the cultural debates over moral and ethical questions such as abortion, same-sex marriage, feminism, and homosexuality, to name just a few. The respective positions often represent opposing views of reality and the nature of man, yet whichever moral perspective—and its underlying worldview—gains social acceptance tends to form the consensus view of reality.

SENT INTO THE WORLD ON A MISSION

It is not enough to simply understand these two ideological fronts; a cultural apologetic ultimately relies on a missional approach to culture in order to effectively confront and subvert these ideas. Currently, we toss “Christian hand grenades,” occasionally entering the culture to present our one-sided arguments for the truth of Christianity and then retreating to our churches as soon as we are done. Being missional means we act more like a rescue force that is determined to stay until all are rescued than like a commando unit that occasionally enters hostile territory to harass the enemy! Being missional means we endeavor to develop real and meaningful relationships with those who God, in His

providence, has brought into our lives—to first demonstrate the love of Christ and then be ready with an answer to explain the hope that is within us. It means we listen more than we speak; we ask and answer questions and expand our conversations to include more than just religion; and when we speak—for goodness’ sake!—we speak in normal language and not “Christianese.”

The missional Christian presses into the world wherever he or she is and pushes back the darkness with the love of Christ. The missional Christian works at really getting to know and love his neighbor, not because he has to but because he loves people as Christ commanded. This includes those neighbors who are different, difficult, or just downright unlikeable. And, yes, this includes those neighbors who share very different political views and lifestyles. In other words, we really seek to interact and develop real relationships with the lost. It means we invite sinners into our life. It means we put up with their profanity and coarse talk. It means we love them as Christ loves them, without reservation. This is what it means to be missional. If you claim to be Christian, it is what you already are: a follower of Christ left on mission in hostile territory.

If you are armed with an understanding of the cultural and social barriers that inhibit the reception of the gospel and employ this missional approach, you will go a long way toward demonstrating the relevance of Christ and His message to the unbelieving world. It is the true mark of the Christian: love. It will also align your life with Christ’s commandments.

A MISSIONAL EXAMPLE

I want to share an experience I had several years ago when speaking at the University of California–Berkeley that illustrates this missional approach. I had been invited by the student chapter of the ACLU to participate in a debate on same-sex marriage. Lucky me!

Now, let me be honest: UC–Berkeley was the last place on earth I wanted to go to defend the biblical perspective on marriage. However, God is providential, and I believed this was precisely where He wanted me to go, so I agreed. I would be joined in the debate by another Christian from a large pro-family organization, and we would be facing two gay activists from two organizations working to advance same-sex marriage. As I was flying from Dallas to Berkeley, I was praying for courage and wisdom. I confess there was an element of fear and I was not particularly enthusiastic about what awaited me later that evening.

As I was praying, the safety information card in the seat-back pocket in front of me caught my eye. Specifically, it was what I saw at the top of the card: REV. 11/3, referring to the date of its last revision. However, my first thought was that the Lord was directing me to Revelation 11:3. Of course, my rational side pushed this thought aside, but the Lord persisted, and I felt I must read this passage. I opened my Bible to find these words: “I will give power to my two witnesses.” Wow! Needless to say, I was now a little more enthusiastic. As I continued to pray, the Lord brought to mind the differences in our respective goals for this event, His and mine. I wanted to win! I wanted to systematically, methodically, and intellectually destroy the opposition, demonstrating the superiority of the biblical perspective and, frankly, my own, as well. However, the Lord helped me see that this was not *His* purpose. I was reminded of God incarnate, Christ who humbled Himself unto death. This, I felt, was what the Lord was asking me to do—to surrender *my* ambitions and *my* goals of winning and instead present myself as a living sacrifice for His glory. In essence, the Lord was asking me if I was willing to be obedient to the point of public humiliation in order to demonstrate His love for His name’s sake. This changed my whole approach from that of polemic argumentation to seeking humbly to persuade in an attitude of love, not opposition.

There were more than eight hundred students and faculty on hand. There was not an empty seat in the auditorium; every inch of floor space

was occupied, as well as the perimeter walls. The place was packed! I can safely say that of the hundreds in the audience, only four were there in support of our position. How do I know this? I invited two and my partner invited the other two. This was the most hostile audience I had ever encountered in my life, and the debate hadn't even officially begun!

The debate began and I led off. I tried to limit my statements to the positive affirmations of traditional marriage and the natural family as supported by historical, sociological, and anthropological evidence. (These same arguments have been incorporated here into the subsequent chapter on marriage.) I most definitely did not employ any religious language. Once the crowd saw that I wasn't going to beat them over the head with Scripture and biblical moral arguments, they began to settle down, although I am speaking relatively. Then it was the opposition's turn, and their approach was not surprising. By slinging *ad hominem* insults and sarcasm, they incited the audience into a frenzy. Suffice it to say, this was not what I wanted to be a part of.

Then it was my partner's turn. To my dismay, he led off by quoting Romans chapter 1, and the reaction was unlike anything I had ever seen. The audience was screaming, laughing, booing, hissing—it was almost demonic. The debate continued for another hour, but honestly I was ready to leave after the first outburst. This had turned into a spectacle intended for the amusement of the audience, who in this case wanted to be entertained by the public humiliation of these Christians. I was thinking, *Lord, where are they seeing Your love in this?* I was grieved by the whole experience and wanted it to end.

Of course, it did end. As I was gathering up my things and preparing to leave the stage, I noticed a large crowd of students pressing toward me. Somewhat unsure of their motives at this point, I was greeted by the first student, a female. This young woman had virtually everything on her face pierced, and her T-shirt clearly proclaimed her sexual orientation, which was *not* heterosexual. However, much to my surprise, she thrust out her hand and said, “Mr. Craven, I want to thank you for

coming. I didn't agree with everything you said, but you made some good points, and I really appreciated *the way* you spoke, unlike this @#*&! here," referring rather uncharitably to my partner. Not surprisingly, he quickly left the auditorium. This same pattern was repeated as student after student came forward to express thanks. Then a young woman came forward saying she was a Christian who had been living in a same-sex relationship for more than three years. She said, "I don't understand how something that feels so right to me could be wrong in the sight of God," and she began to weep. My heart broke for this young woman who was so obviously conflicted. Without going into great detail, I began to gently explain the biblical admonitions against her lifestyle while sympathizing with the reality of her attractions; I likened these to the sexual attraction felt by heterosexuals outside the context of a biblically prescribed relationship. I explained that acting upon these attractions outside the biblical prescription is an act of disobedience against God. At this point, I realized that I had reached across the podium and taken this young woman's hand as she wept. This moment was, for me, frozen as I looked up to observe the entire group of fifty to sixty students captivated by this exchange. It was as if the Lord said to me, *This is what I want them to see—that I love them and I died for them.*

I spent the next hour and a half with this entire group of young people, none of whom was Christian as far as I could tell, in the most productive and respectful dialogue I have ever experienced. These students had serious questions that I sensed they had been holding in reserve for years. It was as if they wanted to ask questions about Christianity but had never met a Christian, or a least one they were inclined to speak with. As the evening grew late, these students walked me across campus to my car, and as I drove away I couldn't help but think how rarely I had engaged the lost in such a manner. This was where I first recognized what it truly means to be missional, and by God's grace I determined then never to act in any other way again.

There was a profound benefit to both having understanding (cultural apologetics) and speaking to my audience as human beings made in the image of God and not as opponents (namely, the missional approach). If all we do is gain knowledge without understanding that this knowledge is to be used as an instrument of liberation, not condemnation, we are, as Scripture says, only resounding gongs and clanging cymbals (see 1 Corinthians 13:1)! If our motivation is anything other than love, we are nothing.

THE INFLUENTIAL “ISMS” OF OUR DAY

I will address some of the more influential ideas common to contemporary American culture in much greater detail in the subsequent chapters, but a brief summary will help the current discussion. There are the influences of modernity, those pressures and influences unique to living in a technologically advanced, industrialized modern society. In addition, there are the persistent influences of modernism—the post-Enlightenment emphasis on human reason and ingenuity as savior. In both cases, these serve to undermine our sense of the supernatural and our willingness to truly live dependent on the supernatural God. There is postmodernism, which, in one sense, exposes the futility of reliance upon human reason but goes too far by destroying the historical categories of true and false, right and wrong. Postmodernism can also go too far in undermining the traditional means of both discovering and understanding truth. In doing so, the context into which we now present the gospel story has changed radically. These changes inhibit the gospel’s reception and thus we must understand this new context. Lastly, there is the all-pervading influence of consumerism, which shifts the object and aim of human life to an artificial and idealized lifestyle that can be achieved “without effort, on purchase of the appropriate commodity.”⁶ Consumerism is, in effect, an alternative gospel competing (rather effectively, I might add) with the true gospel.

CONFRONTING OUR MORAL ISSUES

Concerning those social influences and their underlying ideas expressed in the debates over moral and ethical questions, Christians must be equipped to recognize the logical fallacies behind false moral perspectives. Furthermore, they must subsequently affirm—in the marketplace of ideas—biblical, moral, and ethical truths in a manner that is rational, relevant, and responsible without first employing religious rhetoric and moralistic arguments. The debate over moral issues and the church’s inability to preserve the biblical basis as the standard by which we make moral distinctions has contributed, more so than anything else, to the redefinition of truth in our culture. The devastating result has been the elimination of the Creator God as the absolute and exclusive source of truth in the West.

Whether it be the ideas common to a given culture or those ideas that arise out of the social debate over moral and ethical questions, both create barriers to either the reception of the gospel by nonbelievers or the *integration* of the gospel into the life of a believer. In other words, the gospel story may remain implausible in the minds of many nonbelievers, and thus they are encouraged in their unbelief. And many believers may not realize that their thinking remains largely captive to the world, and thus they fail to sanctify their theology and cultivate a comprehensive Christian life and worldview that actually changes the way they live and respond to life’s challenges and opportunities. They may speak “Christianly,” but they think and often act “worldly” and thus remain in captivity *to* the culture rather than being an influence *on* the culture.

To demonstrate the inextricable connection between the preservation of true ethics and morality and belief in the authority of God, consider what atheist and Yale Law School professor Arthur Leff wrote in 1979:

If [God] does not exist, there is no metaphoric equivalent. No person, no combination of people, no document however hallowed by time,

no process, no premise, nothing as equivalent to an actual God in this central function as the unexaminable examiner of good and evil. The so-called death of God . . . seems to have effected the total elimination of any coherent, or convincing, ethical or legal system.⁷

The social acceptance of false moral perspectives has created an unprecedented culture of unbelief in America. In other words, because we (Christians) have been unable to articulate meaningful, rational, and compelling reasons for preserving biblical authority as the basis for morality, Christianity has become irrelevant in shaping the moral consensus. It naturally follows that when Christianity, Scripture, and Jesus Christ Himself are perceived as irrelevant in defining moral values, Christianity, Scripture, and Jesus would ultimately be perceived as irrelevant in the way of offering any valid explanation of anything, including reality, meaning, and purpose. If God's revelation no longer plays a central role in defining right from wrong—something that affects us on a daily basis—then why would anyone seek answers to life's larger questions from Jesus or the Bible?

THE LOSS OF THE CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

Our apparent inability to discern, articulate, and effectively defend biblical moral perspectives is the direct result of our lacking a comprehensive philosophy of life that is grounded in Scripture and reflected in a Christian life and worldview. According to a recent national survey by the Barna Research Group, only 4 percent of American adults have a biblical worldview as the basis of their decision making.⁸ The research firm said this in describing the survey results:

If Jesus Christ came to this planet as a model of how we ought to live, then our goal should be to act like Jesus. Sadly, few people consistently demonstrate the love, obedience and priorities of Jesus. The

primary reason that people do not act like Jesus is because they do not think like Jesus. Behavior stems from what we think — our attitudes, beliefs, values and opinions. Although most people own a Bible and know some of its content, our research found that most Americans have little idea how to integrate core biblical principles to form a unified and meaningful response to the challenges and opportunities of life. We're often more concerned with survival amidst chaos than with experiencing truth and significance.⁹

Barna also reported that only 51 percent of the country's Protestant pastors have a biblical worldview.¹⁰ However, the criteria Barna's survey used to define a Christian worldview were as follows:

- Believing that absolute moral truths exist and that such truth is defined by the Bible.
- Jesus Christ lived a sinless life.
- God is the all-powerful and all-knowing Creator of the universe and He still rules it today.
- Salvation is a gift from God and cannot be earned.
- Satan is real.
- A Christian has a responsibility to share his faith in Christ with other people.
- The Bible is accurate in all of its teachings.¹¹

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 percent of American adults agree with these seven statements, and yet 85 percent of Americans claim to be Christian.¹² This is basic Christian orthodoxy or essential doctrine, not a worldview in the proper sense of the term. A worldview is better

understood as an all-embracing life system that emanates from our fundamental conceptions of ultimate reality. What is the essential nature of the external world? Is it ordered or chaotic? In other words, does the world owe its existence to a Creator, or is it merely the product of undirected material causes resulting from time and chance? What are our conceptions regarding the essential nature of mankind? Is man inherently prone to do good, evil, or some combination thereof? What are our ideas about knowledge and what we are able to know or how we know? Is only knowledge that is empirically provable legitimate, while experience and supernatural revelation are not? What is our understanding of good and evil (or ethics), and, finally, what is the meaning of humanity's story on the earth, or the meaning of history? A Christian worldview could be better defined as a Christian philosophy of life in which men understand all of reality and nature in connection to the revealed Word of God. A Christian worldview properly understood is when men interpret the universe and everything in it under the direction of and authority of God. Our ideas of truth, beauty, and goodness all originate in God.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW?

When man rebelled against God, he chose to do without God in every respect. Sinful man sought then—and continues to seek—his own ideas about truth, beauty, and goodness somewhere beyond God, either directly within himself or indirectly within the universe around him. This is the condition of every mind prior to its regeneration. Every one of us is brought to the cross by His grace, with every aspect of our being in desperate need of transformation and renewal, including our minds. This is why Romans 12:2 commands us to “not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of [our minds].”

Instead of continuing to interpret the universe and everything in

it from within yourself or with yourself as the ultimate point of reference (and by this I am speaking about every aspect of life: politics, economics, education, vocation, science, philosophy, as well as ethics and morality), you now seek to *reinterpret* everything you have previously understood under the direction and authority of God, from His perspective exclusively. In other words, you begin to develop a comprehensive biblical philosophy of life or Christian worldview. This is key to fulfilling the instruction given in Romans 12:1: “to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, [the entirety of your being] holy and pleasing to God” and accomplishing the goal described in the latter part of verse 2: “*Then* you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (emphasis added).

It can be argued that one of the principal reasons for the loss of influence of Christianity in Western civilization has been, and continues to be, a lack of commitment to a renewed intellect (or mind) operating under the direction of God. This would explain why, in large part, our salt has become tasteless and our light is hidden under a bushel. Christianity, as it is largely expressed in the American church, is no longer a transforming force in culture, and the result has been an ideological shift away from the Bible as the source of truth to one in which man has become the “measure of all things.”¹³

J. Gresham Machen, the early-twentieth-century theologian and defender of the Christian faith, wrote,

False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which . . . prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion. . . . So as Christians we should try to mold the thought of the world in such a way as to make the acceptance of Christianity something more than a logical absurdity. . . . What more

*pressing duty than for those who have received the mighty experience of regeneration, who, therefore, do not, like the world, neglect that whole series of vitally relevant facts which is embraced in Christian experience—what more pressing duty than for these men to make themselves masters of the thought of the world in order to make it an instrument of truth instead of error?*²¹⁴

Amen!

AMERICAN ESCHATOLOGY: PROPHETIC FULFILLMENT OR SPIRITUAL SLOTH?

Some Christians today dismiss this cultural duty under a popular and pessimistic view of the end times. They see attempts to reform society and culture as both futile and pointless or, worse, unrelated to the Christian life. While there are indeed various eschatological perspectives on which good Christians can disagree, none relieves Christians of their responsibility to be a preserving force in the world (salt) or active advocates of truth (light). This misguided understanding is just one more example of the anti-intellectualism so prevalent in the church. In my experience, it seems that many Christians have an eschatology formed more by popular fiction than serious biblical study. Additionally, in the United States we seem to suffer from a culturally myopic view of Christianity and history that is overly American-centric; thus, we tend to interpret Scripture and historical events through uniquely American eyes. The United States of America is not the central point in human history; Jesus Christ is!

To illustrate that our current cultural calamity is a uniquely Western problem and in no way indicative of global prophetic fulfillment, Mark Hutchinson, chairman of the church history department at Southern Cross College in Australia, said, “What many pundits thought was the death of the church in the 1960s through secularization of the West

was really its relocation and rebirth into the rest of the world.”¹⁵ In *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Philip Jenkins, professor of history and religious studies at Penn State, wrote, “For over a century, the coming decline or disappearance of religion has been a commonplace assumption of Western thought, and church leaders have sometimes shared this pessimistic view.”¹⁶ However, Jenkins pointed out, “We are currently living through one of the transforming moments in the history of religion worldwide. . . . The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes, and the day of Southern [referring to the southern hemisphere] Christianity is dawning.”¹⁷ Professor Jenkins added that “Christians should enjoy a worldwide boom in the new century, but the vast majority of believers will be neither white nor European, nor Euro-American.”¹⁸

A WORLDWIDE REBIRTH

The fact is, the so-called passage of Christianity in the West is overshadowed by the extraordinary expansion of the church currently under way throughout the rest of the world. Indeed, the numbers are astonishing. Ed Vitagliano, writing for the *American Family Association Journal*, pointed out that

*in Africa in the year 1900, for example, there were approximately 10 million Christians on the entire continent. By 2000, that number had grown to 360 million. The Anglican Communion is a perfect example of this worldwide trend. Whereas in its U.S. branch—the Episcopal Church—membership has declined over the last 40 years to 2.3 million, in Uganda alone there are more than 8 million Anglican Christians.*¹⁹

Researcher David Barrett, author of the well-respected *World Christian Encyclopedia*, told us that “Africa is gaining 8.4 million new Christians a year.”²⁰ Vitagliano added,

*South Korea is another example of a nation in which the growth of Christianity has been stunning. In 1920 there were only about 300,000 believers in all of Korea. But today, in South Korea alone, there are 10 to 12 million Christians—about 25% of the population. Worldwide, evangelical Christians are a thriving part of the Christian community. Yet today, 70% of evangelical Christians live outside the West.*²¹

According to David Aikman, *Time* magazine’s former chief in Beijing, “China is in the process of becoming Christianized. . . . It is possible that Christians will constitute 20 to 30 percent of China’s population within three decades!”²²

Gene Edward Veith, culture critic for *World Magazine*, pointed out that “it is not modernist, liberal Christianity that is sweeping through the Southern Hemisphere but a Christianity in which the gospel is proclaimed, that believes God’s Word, that refuses to conform to the world.”²³ The fact is, according to the “American Religious Identity Survey” conducted by the City University of New York, “The number of adherents to Christianity [in the United States] is in significant decline while every other false religious system is experiencing unprecedented growth.”²⁴ These facts should challenge those who abandon their responsibilities to the culture on the assumption that the apparent decline of Christian influence in America is attributable to prophetic fulfillment. In fact, it could be argued that this very same attitude has only contributed to the church’s decline and lack of relevance.

The church in America is in crisis, and this crisis cannot be dismissed or simply explained away under some end-times rationale. This crisis is quite clearly the natural consequence of biblical illiteracy,

theological ignorance, doctrinal apathy, and our subsequent conformity to the spirit of this age. As a result of our intellectual neglect, our minds do not experience genuine renewal, and therefore our ability to discern or prove God's good, acceptable, and perfect will in all things is greatly limited. American Christianity has simply descended into a shallow version of its former self—a mere shadow of historic orthodox Christianity. The words of Romans 1:28 offer a much more plausible explanation of our current condition: "Since [the people] did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, [God] gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done."

Not only are we doing "what ought not to be done," as evidenced by the dramatic moral degeneration of American culture in the past fifty years, we (the church) are obviously not doing what we *ought to do*, as evidenced by the widespread secularization of American culture during this same period.

OVERCOMING OUR CULTURALIZED CHRISTIANITY

My intention here is to help Christians identify, examine, and understand the varied and often unseen ideological and social forces prevalent in today's culture, forces that inhibit their ability to think biblically about life and the world in which they live. It is my sincere belief that many Christians do, in fact, desire a relationship with Jesus Christ that utterly transforms their lives and empowers them in His service. Unfortunately, more often than not they find themselves simply propelled along by life, never experiencing the joy of the Lord, any real sense of meaning or purpose, or even knowing what the transformed life is supposed to look like. These brothers and sisters are captive to the culture by various degrees and don't know it. In the following chapters, I will explore those largely unexamined philosophical forces in contemporary life and culture, demonstrating how these forces adversely affect our perceptions of almost everything, including Christ and what it

means to live as a Christian. By better understanding the culture in which we live, and thus becoming missional in the sense that we are immersed and engaged, I believe that the Christian church can recover its relevance and bring honor and glory to the King of kings!