



BUBBLEGUM GOSPEL

How Attractional
Churches Sugarcoat
the Bible

Adam Butler

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Preface to the Revised Edition

The original draft of this book was published in 2019. I was 19 years old when I began writing what would later become titled “Bubblegum Gospel.” I was still in college, studying Christian Studies at Charleston Southern University. I have gone back through the book and updated it completely.

Though the overall message of the book has not changed, the revised edition is expanded, and further clarity has been added to portions, as to reflect some of the big ideas more relevantly. I have decided to make this book accessible to all people at no charge. I hope that you enjoy this updated edition of Bubblegum Gospel, and that you find it helpful.

Adam Butler

Introduction

What Is Bubblegum Gospel?

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions

—2 Timothy 4:3

The Tables Have Turned!

It was Saturday morning in North Carolina. My father and I were in attendance at the National Conference of Christian Apologetics, sponsored by Southern Evangelical Seminary. Many fantastic apologists were guest speakers at the event: Frank Turek, Gary Habermas, J. Warner Wallace, and others. Dad and I were listening to Josh McDowell discussing the question “Who is God?” That was the theme of the conference. Dr. McDowell was talking about a worship event he had attended. “Students were raising their hands and singing the worship songs,” he said. “It was absolutely beautiful! I was walking around the auditorium and I decided to ask some of the students the question ‘who is God?’” What Dr. McDowell said next was devastating to me. “Not a single one of them was able to answer the question.” The reality hit me like a freight train.

How could so many students not have a coherent answer to a seemingly simple question? Because perhaps the question is not as simple as we think. Perhaps we have never really bothered to answer it ourselves. We know how to worship, but we do not know *who* we are worshipping. I fear this is one of the fundamental problems in our culture, as followers of Jesus. But where is the root of the problem? Certainly, we as the church are missing something.

In case you have not yet noticed, there is a serious problem in American churches. The church is malnourished. This lack of proper nutrients is seeping into secular culture. My question, then, is “How did this come about?” What happened to a nation that valued the church as a morally central place of security? What happened to a secular culture that respected a Christian’s faith even if secularists disagreed with it? Notice the turn of the tables; Christians are now being painted as the enemies. Christianity is under attack, and it is taking the modern church by surprise. It shouldn’t, however, because we were strictly warned of this (John 15:18–19).

According to research conducted by the Barna group, while 35 percent of Americans would identify as “born-again” Christians, only 23 percent consider themselves Bible-minded, and a mere 7 percent are evangelical with their faith. That means, about 7 percent of the 325.7 million citizens in America are actively pursuing Jesus’s command to be faithful in making disciples.

Many millennials within the church are basing their beliefs off sources other than God’s Word.

- Over 40 percent (of millennials in the church) state they are not born again.

- 35 percent state the Bible has errors, or they don't know if it has errors.
- 44 percent say either homosexual behavior is not a sin, or they don't know if it's a sin.
- 65 percent believe if you're a good person you'll go to heaven.
- 33 percent believe there are other holy books that are inspired by God or they don't know if there are.¹

The culture is shifting.

Bubblegum Gospel

Have you ever been really hungry? I mean so hungry that you cannot wait to get something to eat, to the point that you don't really mind so much what kind of food it is. When I was a child, for my birthday one year, my family decided to cook one of my favorite foods for me: tacos. Knowing I would be indulging in tacos that evening, I decided not to eat anything else all day; no breakfast or lunch. I wanted to enjoy as many tacos as I could. By the time dinner came around, I was so hungry, all I could think about were those tacos. When I finally got to eat them, it no longer mattered what I was eating, I was just overjoyed to finally satisfy my hunger pangs. The type of food was not my main priority at the moment; all I was concerned with was getting *food* in general. In other words, I was certainly not craving something that would not fill me up, such as candy. I knew licking a lollipop or chewing a piece of bubble gum was not going to satisfy me. I needed sustenance.

I can guarantee that everyone you have ever met has experienced the same need. Human beings share a universal physical requirement for food; we cannot live without it, at least, not for very long. That is why I thank God he decided to make it enjoyable. Nothing beats a juicy ribeye when you are starving. I can also guarantee that everyone you have ever met agrees (or at least should agree) with the fact that candy does not constitute as the same type of food necessary for life, and therefore is not a requirement for people. If I were hungry and had the choice between that ribeye and a chocolate bar, there is really no question of which I would choose over the other.

I believe that truth is a lot like the need for daily sustenance. Whatever your view of truth may be, the one thing we all agree on is its vitality. Truth is needed for the security of the foundations of life, society, law, etc. Nothing can exist in reality without truth. This includes God's truth: the truth of scripture. The truth of God's Word is a lot like food; it nourishes us, it makes us grow, and we cannot go very long without it. But, like I said, when we are hungry, we do not crave candy because it does not do a good job of nourishing us. It is primarily composed of sugar and lacks nutritional value such as vitamins, protein, carbohydrates, potassium, fiber, etc. In other words, trying to live by candy alone is probably not going to work very well for anyone.

The problem with American culture is that the world is *starving for truth*. The good news is that the Bible is just that: truth. The bad news is that a lot of modern ministry here in America, and

even in other parts of the world, has been preaching what I refer to as *bubblegum gospel*. In a world that is hungry for the gospel, we must be aware of the dangers of feeding it bubble gum. This includes “feel-good” ideals that often lack sound Scriptural doctrine; watered-down messages that fail to encompass the nature of God, mankind, the gospel, the importance of repentance, and even false teachings designed to attract crowds rather than speak solid truth.

Bubble gum is not a bad thing in and of itself. However, if you were to replace your children’s meals consisting of nutrients like vegetables, fruits, and grains, with nothing but Big-League Chew and Reese’s Pieces, they would not grow up to be very healthy or nourished. Bubble gum does not fill an empty stomach. It tastes good, it is easy to chew on for a while, and it satisfies in the moment, but it provides no nutritional value to one’s diet, it loses its flavor eventually, and one will not benefit much from consuming nothing but bubble gum. In fact, chewing the same piece of bubble gum for too long gets to be a bit disgusting.

It is hard to believe that many churches today are feeding both believers and nonbelievers only bubble gum. Christians have been called to go out and preach the message of Christ (Matthew 28:18–20) and the church is the body of believers who have been changed by this message. Unfortunately, though, this view of Christians and churches portrayed by Jesus in Scripture is diminishing. I know you may be thinking, *but it is the believers’ job to feed themselves!* I couldn’t agree more; self-feeding is the only means of consistent growth. The gospel is not only lived out on Sundays; it is a way of life. In other words, once we are changed by grace, our lives should be reflective of that change. Once children get old enough to feed themselves, they are expected to do so.

However, in this book, I will be addressing the importance of the church as a whole body, including new believers and those who may have been professing faith for years. The vitality of truth is the same for each.

Nothing But the Good Stuff

Many churches will admittedly preach only sermons that are designed to inspire. In other words, a sermon about the reality of hell, the nature of mankind’s sin and how God detests it, or the nature of God as a righteous judge pouring out His wrath over sin, will not be heard in said churches. They have been labeled “feel-good churches” with good reason. The argument behind these types of sermons is that lost people (people who have not come to know Jesus or accept salvation through faith) do not want to come to church for the first time only to hear a sermon telling them they are sinners who are going to hell unless they repent and turn toward Jesus. The only problem with this idea of church is that *that is what they need to hear*. More importantly, though, church was never intended just to attract lost people. The church, by definition, is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27; Romans 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 12:12; Colossians 1:24).

Churches whose primary focus is attracting lost people have been labeled “seeker churches,” “emerging churches,” or “attractional churches.” The intention is to bring people who don’t know Christ into an environment where they can connect with Him and come to know Him as their Lord and Savior. They are open to people who are “seeking” God. In doing so, they often sacrifice messages that may be hard to swallow, in order to avoid offending or turning lost people away. Bubblegum gospel comes into play, therefore, in the content of these messages, as well as the way discipleship is pursued in the church. They may be true messages based in Scripture, but many times, they are bubble gum: only the “good stuff.” They only contain truths people can relate to and feel good about. They are often entertaining to listen to or experience, fun to chew on (think about for the rest of the day), and typically very “tweetable” (consisting of catchy or memorable phrases that one can post on social media or use as an Instagram caption). Understand that these traits are not inherently bad at all. But be aware that if this is all the church is feeding the congregation, leaving out the vital sustenance of God’s Word, the believers will not be equipped at the end of the day.

Sugarcoating

I remember taking liquid medicine as a child when I was sick. It was not enjoyable by any means; it was hard to swallow because of how bad the taste was. I think what made it even worse were the flavors with which they would disguise it to try to make it more tolerable for children. There were flavors like cherry, grape, cotton candy, and yes, bubble gum. Some were worse than others, but the intention was to make the medicine taste at least somewhat enjoyable. I tried the old trick of holding my nose while taking a gulp of the disgusting medicine. It does not make it any better by the way; that is a myth.

Many times, truth is a lot like liquid medicine. We need it in order to be healthy, but it is not always easy to swallow. In fact, it can often have an undesirable taste. Sugarcoating it does not disguise the true flavor of what is there.

Many Christians and churches today will try to sugarcoat the message of the gospel to make it “easier to swallow.” They try to make truth more attractive than it often is. Paul says in Galatians 4:16, “have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?” The church in Galatia responded to the truth of the gospel in a similar way we are seeing in modern America. They were quick to reject the truth (Galatians 1:6) for a supposed other, distorted teaching (1:7). No amount of convincing or covering up can distract the nature of truth. Not everyone will be willing to accept the truth of Jesus (John 6:60–66).

A prime example is the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel from the Bible, who were called to speak to people whom God warned them would never listen to a word they said (Ezekiel 3:7; Isaiah 6:9; Jeremiah 7:27). We should not be discouraged by this fact, but encouraged to speak truth all the more, as not to conform to certain standards of acceptance. Christians were never meant to conform, but to stand out; just look at Jesus, and then look at his following.

What the world is starving for is not bubble gum, it is *truth*. Jesus has called his followers to preach the Gospel and make disciples of all nations. That is not to say we should not try our best to love them at all times in every way. We should be loving in our methods of reaching people. Jesus tells us it is by love that people will know we are disciples of Him (John 13:35). However, truth is required for faith, and truth is often hard to hear; that does not make it any less true.

In fact, to speak truth *is* to be loving. It would be unloving *not* to proclaim truth. To suggest that grace and truth are somehow mutually exclusive is a misunderstanding of the character and nature of God Himself. God is truth, and God is love. These two characteristics are inseparable, and therefore should be the same in our Christian witness.

Eat Your Veggies

Parents are always telling their children to eat their vegetables. Why? Because the vegetables are where the most nutrition lies. Vegetarians, for instance, live off of *nothing but* vegetables. Scripture is like a full meal. Some courses are more enjoyable than others, but typically included in every well-balanced meal is at least one vegetable. This is the stuff in the Bible that is hard to hear and often left out of sermons, because not everybody is willing to consume it. As the writer of Hebrews says, “solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:14). How can new followers of Christ be expected to mature in the faith if we as the church are not feeding them, and more importantly, teaching them to feed themselves solid food; not just bubble gum? If we are going to be faithful followers of Jesus, as He has commanded, we must be willing to consume and teach all of God’s Word for what it really says.

In this book, I will discuss the effects of cultural influence on the Christian walk, as well as the church, how culture affects our view of God and the church therein, and the importance of discipleship through proper understanding of the Bible, and of the church as a body, in a world desperately starving for truth.

A Starving Culture

“For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”
—John 18:37b–38a

One of the first things we learn about when we move to or visit a new country is their culture. Merriam Webster defines culture as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.” Culture is what defines us as a community, as a people, and if we’re not careful, as individuals. Culture plays an important role in life. The question then becomes, “what role does the church play in culture?” Is the church ahead of culture, or are we always trying to catch up? Do we lead, or do we follow? Because culture defines a people group, does that mean culture defines the church as well? And if so, how should the church respond? And how does this question play into what is happening in modern America?

An even more compelling question is the question of truth. What role does culture play in finding and defining truth? Can truth be known? Which truth claim is right? What I have found in response to those questions is nothing less than shocking.

We live in a culture that has abandoned the idea of truth. By “abandoned,” I mean we have replaced the concept of *absolute truth* with *relative truth*. While this may not seem like such a dire problem at first, it is proving to be greatly detrimental to foundational ideals that the Christian faith is built on. In short, Christianity is under attack.

Research on Christian students in America has found that, of the students who grew up in Christian homes and attending public schools, approximately 70% of them walk away from the church and their faith after high school. What a drastic thought; that means that about 3 out of every 4 students will abandon church, and even their faith, after high school.

It is important to note; recent studies have clarified that some of these students do end up returning to active attendance in church, but many never pursue an active faith again. So, the question remains: what is causing so many young people to deconvert?

Deconversion may not be as explicit as the name implies. In other words, it is not as simple of a matter as a child coming to his or her parents and saying “Mom, Dad, I am not a Christian anymore”, though this does happen quite often. Rather, deconversion has taken the more culturally relevant and appealing term of **deconstruction**. For someone to “deconstruct” Their faith usually entails questioning the fundamentals of the Biblical worldview—namely, the aspects of the Bible which are no longer acceptable in the eyes of society. So, rather than outright claiming a departure from the Christian faith, many will begin having doubts about the authority of the Bible, and “deconstruct” their faith, one doctrine at a time. The result is often anything but Christian. This new phenomenon seems to be sweeping churches by storm, to the point where

many Christians are praising those who begin the deconstruction process. In order to understand the centrality of a worldview, and how dangerous this can be, we need to return to a proper understanding of the bedrock of all reason: truth.

What is TRUTH?

The simple definition of truth is *that which affirms reality for what it really is*. In terms of what is true, truth can be broken up into two categories: *absolutism* and *relativism*. Absolute truth describes the truths which cannot be debated or disputed. When something is absolutely true, that means there is no denying the fact of the matter. Absolutism is necessary for any belief one seeks to defend, because there must be solid, unshakeable facts to hold up said beliefs. Without these, skeptics can shoot down just about any claim anyone tries to make, by questioning the validity therein. This is why absolute truth is so important, but also evident. It is especially important for the Christian.

1 Peter 3:15 says “but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.” We are called to defend faith with reason, because faith without reason is blind. Why would anyone decide to believe the Bible without sound evidence to support said belief? If all beliefs were founded on faith, then all truth *would* be relative, and we could believe whatever we felt like. But luckily, truth does not work that way.

There are three philosophical laws that exist which prove the nature of truth to be absolute. The first, called the **law of noncontradiction**, says that two opposing claims cannot both be true in the same sense, at the same time. So, beliefs of absolutism, such as the idea of the existence of God are either right or wrong. It is either absolutely true or absolutely false that God exists. God cannot exist for some and not exist for others. So, whether I believe in God or not does not change the nature of his existence. Either theists (those who believe in God) are correct in their belief, or atheists (those who believe there is no God) are correct in theirs. Since these two claims contradict one another, only one of them can be true.

The second law that proves truth’s absolutism is the **law of excluded middle**. Simply put, the law of excluded middle states that a belief is either true or false; there is no in-between. In the case of the existence of God, either God exists, or he does not. He cannot half-exist or exist in some senses and not others; He either does or He doesn’t. Once again, either those who believe in God are correct in this sense, or people who do not believe in God are correct, with no middle ground.

Lastly, the **law of identity** says that if a claim is true, then it is true. No question. If God exists, then He exists for everybody, regardless of their opinion of Him. So, choosing not to believe in God does not make him go away. Truth, after all, is absolute; that means it is universal, which means it applies to all people of every culture.

The problem with culture is the adoption of relative ideas, and the negation of absolute ideas. Modern society is striving for relativism in every sense. Relative truth is something that is true depending on a certain perspective. It is important to understand that the nature of absolute truth does not make relative truth impossible; there are some instances in which relative truth exists. Opinion, for example, is a relative truth. However, it is a belief, or a subjective viewpoint (as I will discuss later) about an objective reality. Anyone can disagree with an opinionated claim, because it is an opinion-based belief determined by one's personal perspective. On the contrary, the truth that "George Washington was the first president of the United States" is an absolute truth. No one disputes (or at least shouldn't dispute) this fact, because it is not debatable, nor is it any one person's opinion. Relying solely on relative truth is a self-defeating claim. The idea that *all* truth is relative, or that there is no truth at all, is logically unsound and does not have support in and of itself. If it were the case that all truth was relative, why would anyone believe this claim; why would anyone have reason to believe anything at all?

The question then arises as to the nature of truths such as moral behavior: ethical decisions such as abortion, euthanasia, etc. One may ask *are those not opinion-based beliefs, therefore classifying them as relative truth?* To answer this question, we must dig for the root of said beliefs. No one believes abortion is right or wrong without any supporting claims to back up their beliefs. Likewise, no one believes in God without a solid, foundational reason. Christians believe the Bible, the infallible Word of God, is the foundation upon which all beliefs are grounded. Upon this foundation lies the answer to the questions of *what defines morally good behavior; does a loving God really exist; etc.*

This is where the problem with culture becomes increasingly evident. People in modern society are being taught to disregard the foundation upon which beliefs are grounded, or at least replace it with whatever seems right to them. In doing so, we have also disregarded absolute truth, replacing it with relative truth. Without absolute truth, young people are being taught that anything they believe is correct, which leads to the push for *tolerance*. According to society, all beliefs should be tolerated. Knowing the nature of truth, complete tolerance of any stance is not only illogical, it is impossible. What we are left with, in turn, is young people with wavering belief systems. Students are torn between ideals, thinking things like *I don't know whether to believe my parents or my friends; I don't know if I am pro-life or pro-choice; I don't know what is morally/ethically right...*

The moral relativist's response to this is that it does not matter, *being that there is no absolute truth to begin with*. On top of that, culture will agree with the idea of moral relativism, while screaming that there is a right approach; *Yes, there is no truth, but you should be pro-choice. Yes, there is no truth, but you should believe whatever the media wants you to believe. Yes, there is no truth, but let culture define what is morally/ethically right*. What do we expect? Without a foundation, we cannot be surprised that so many young people abandon the faith.

That being said, there is a right approach to every truth. Perspectives on any truth claim or any facet of life are known as *subjective* viewpoints. What the viewpoints are defining is what is known as the *objective* truth. Something that is objective is unchangeable by subjectivism. In other words, no matter what one's subjective view is regarding a topic, the objective truth of that topic does not change, because it exists outside of the realm of personal perspective. According to the nature of truth, the fact that subjective viewpoints do not exist without objective truths, only one religion can be correct. Remember those philosophical laws I mentioned earlier? Regardless of what one believes, truth does not change.

Reformers, not Conformers

Unfortunately, the facts of truth are seldom held fast in American Society. Society supports, and even encourages people to question their God-given biological bodies. Society promotes a perverted view of what is beautiful, and a perverted view of what happiness looks like. Society now promotes, and even praises the murder of unborn babies. Not only has the foundation started to be stripped away from the secular world, this idea of relative truth is seeping into modern churches all over the world as well. Many churches are preaching that the Bible can be interpreted through the lens of relativism, thus shunning the idea of literal translations and foundation of God's Word. The Bible is incompatible with relativism.

America used to be a nation built on Christian ideals; that is, the founding fathers of the nation understood a universal law, even suggesting what American-German philosopher Paul Tillich would call a Theonomous culture: "We hold these truths to be *self-evident*, that all men are created equal, that they are *endowed by their Creator*, with certain unalienable rights..." That is, God was present in the laws of the land. However, we are becoming a nation drifting further and further from what is true, without realizing it. We are warned of this in 2 Timothy, when Paul says to Timothy, "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths" (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

What will the church do? We are called to reform the culture, not conform to it. When the church backs away from culture, the culture will become Godless. When the culture becomes Godless, the truth is more and more jaded with lies. Paul tells us in Romans not to conform to the patterns of this world (Romans 12:2). We must not give up on reforming culture and people to the truth of God's Word.

The Famine

Imagine a country being faced with drastic famine. The people are starving, and the leaders of the country are anxious to figure out where the next supply of food will come from. The citizens of that country will die unless someone steps in to provide them with sustenance. Now, imagine

you have the remedy; you have a voluptuous supply of food, enough to feed the whole country for years. Would you remedy the famine?

Hopefully all of us, given the opportunity, would give of what we had in order to save a starving country. Withholding their only potential life source would be dreadful to imagine. The prophet Amos describes a similar situation in Amos 8. However, it is a different type of famine; this is a *famine of truth*.

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD, “when I will send a famine on the land— not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it. (Amos 8:11–12)

The picture described by Amos is a startling one: people searching to and fro for the Word of God, and not being able to find it. People will be searching for the truth of scripture and starving for it. This famine is already taking its toll on the world. Only the truth of God’s Word can remedy the lack of food; so, what are we doing to provide a remedy?

The world is starving for truth; the truth of the Bible, the truth of the Gospel, the truth of Jesus. However, if the world is hungry enough, we will eat anything we are fed.

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” —John 14:6

A Little Taste of Context

*All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction,
and for training in righteousness*

—2 Timothy 3:16

The Bible is the infallible (will not lead us astray), inerrant (without error) word of God, and there is no question that the writings we see in scripture are both reliable and applicable some 3,400 years later, in our modern lives. As a matter of fact, there is a passage in the Bible that applies to practically every aspect of life. However, the danger of application lies in how we use it. 2 Timothy 3:16 says that all scripture is breathed out by God, meaning God divinely inspired the authors with what to write, which gives credence to the authority and infallibility of Scripture. Being that the Word of God is directly from the mouth of God, the verse goes on to say that every aspect of it therein is profitable for reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. Essentially, this is telling us the power that the Word holds, being living and active (Hebrews 4:12). Having said that, God intends for us to relate to His words in a personal manner, but to preach His words to the lost as well. This is why it is vital that we as Christians relay the truth of scripture, rather than our own interpretations, which can be flawed.

Hermeneutics looks like a scary word, but don't worry; it simply means looking at the text of scripture to get a better understanding of the what's, why's, and how's of what is written. When reading any book of the Bible, it is important to be aware of several things: who the author is, who the audience was they were writing to at the time, what their intention was for said audience, and what the message was in its own context. You may be thinking, *But I thought the Bible was written for everybody, regardless of the original audience?* That is correct. Every book in the Bible points toward God, whether it is the original law of God, which accounts of the faithfulness of God to His people, prophetic writings of God, praise toward God, and even His direct teaching as the God-man, Jesus, and all the apostles' teaching afterward. But if we do not take time to understand the original context of the passage, we may not understand its significance today.

So, whether we are learning about God's faithfulness in the past, or His promises for the future, the Bible speaks through it all. It is important to realize what exactly is going on in the various books, though, so none of the message is lost. We should be aware of what we are reading before we jump into the Word of God and start making assumptions based on single verses. That is where most of the issue lies. If we see a verse that "speaks to us", we "tweet" it, post it on Facebook, use it as an Instagram caption, or even get it tattooed on our bodies. The problem is that many people who focus on these single verses are not getting the whole story. This is a problem for two reasons: 1) a closer look at the context of scripture can give a whole new meaning to a single verse. 2) there is so much more God wants to say to us than just the

memorable verses! Remember 2 Timothy 3:16? *All* scripture is breathed out by God; not just your favorite Bible verse.

Context, therefore, is important for the message of anything we read, especially the infallible Word of God. You would not start reading a novel somewhere in the middle; you would start at chapter one, so that you can be sure you have the whole back story, setting, and time-period, and so you can get an introduction of the characters, or what you may need to know that could be going on that is vital to the story. The same is true when reading the Bible.

I have known people who will pull the Bible off the shelf, open to a random page of any book, close their eyes and put their finger on the page. Whatever verse the finger lands on is the verse they will read, perhaps more.

The only problem I see with this is that the reader may not be getting the whole story. There may be more God wants to tell him in that same book, that would enhance or even change his view of that particular verse, if he would only take a moment to look at the context of the writing.

The hermeneutical term for a lack of contextual understanding regarding a passage is known as the *fallacy of fragmentation*. David Bauer and Robert Traina discuss this issue, saying “Ministers are among the worst offenders in this connection. They frequently disregard the setting of the passage they take as a text.”¹ You would not want to drive to work in half of a car; first of all, because you cannot get the full purpose out of a car unless you have all the necessary parts. A car without a radiator, carburetor, gear shift, etc. is not a complete car, thus it will not prove to be sufficient for your needs—driving! I am not a car guy, so I don’t know too much about the workings of cars. However, I do know that if I blew out a tire on the highway, I could not just take that tire off and keep driving; I need all four fully working tires in order to get where I am going. Similarly, the books of the Bible were intended for *all* of us to read *all* of them; not just half, or the parts we like about them. That is what is meant by fragmentation—taking bits and pieces without getting the whole picture.

What I am trying to say through all this business of context is that it can be dangerous to view Scripture through a limited scope of knowledge. It can be dangerous to view it through the lens of our culture, as well. We tend to subconsciously impose ideals that are ordinary to us, but to the people of Hebrew culture, for example, would seem strange and in many cases even offensive. I think this is where many sermons become bubblegum gospel; they are taking a verse and using the wrong kind of application. We must be willing to accept God’s Word through the lens of truth and a full understanding of the gospel.

There are many very popular verses that are commonly taken out of context and applied to areas of life that the author was not even alluding to. This is where the danger of application comes in, which I was talking about earlier. When we apply verses from the Bible to areas of life in ways the author was not intending, they lose the original meaning the author was going for when he

wrote the book, and we end up with a false message that we accept as truth because it is in the Bible. Many popular verses you are probably greatly familiar with may not have the meanings we have been taught in modern sermons or by reading the verse alone.

Jeremiah 29:11

For example, one of the most popular verses of all time is Jeremiah 29:11. It reads, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare, and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” You can see why this is such a famous verse. It is inspiring, it gives hope, and it reassures the reader of the positive plans God has promised. When I was younger, I read this verse, and something did not sit right with me. I started thinking, *how can this be true for all Christians? How can God have plans to prosper me and not to harm me, and apparently everyone else? What if I get into a car accident and die tomorrow before I’ve ever really accomplished anything in life; is that God’s plan for me? Or does that mean I am an exception to God’s plan?* What a quick review of the context would soon reveal to me was that there was an intended audience the author was speaking to when the Bible was written. Here we see the importance of context.

Jeremiah was a prophet around 627–585 B.C. He was appointed by God to speak to the nation of Israel, more specifically the southern tribe, Judah. Israel, as we know, had a pattern of obedience to God; they would obey, decide to turn away, face the punishment for their disobedience, and decide to repent and turn back to God; then they would do the whole thing all over again. In this particular verse, verse 11, Jeremiah is reassuring the exiles in Babylon of God’s faithfulness, in this case to them as a people. God had plans for Israel to be a prosperous nation, which, as we see, is still true to this day. So, we must be careful when reading scripture out of context, and be aware of who the author’s audience was, and what the message was for those people.

That is not to say the verse cannot be applied to our lives as Christians as well; God is still the same God from the Old Testament, and still remains faithful to His people, because He does not change (Malachi 3:6). However, it is important to understand the full story of any Bible passage. The issue therein lies with pastors preaching entire sermons based on the idea that God has plans not to harm but to prosper and give welfare to believers.

Romans 8:28

Romans 8:28 is a common verse Christians use for people who are facing trials or have experienced hardships. However, a quick look at the context of this verse will tell us otherwise. The verse reads, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Paul, who was a preacher after the death of Jesus, and started many churches in various countries, is writing a letter to the church in Rome, which was already a widely known church at this point. Being that Paul’s desired audience is the church of believers, he is discussing the process of becoming sanctified in Christ, meaning

becoming holy, or more like God. This is a command from God we see in the Old Testament (Leviticus 11:44–45, 19:2, 20:7). Sanctification in Christ is the process all believers should strive for; we desire conformity to God.

This is what Paul is addressing in this section of chapter 8. While the verse is often misquoted to mean God will work everything out regarding our personal situations, the passage actually speaks of the steps in the sanctification process of believers. Look at verse 27: “And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” The “saints” is referring to believers. Instead of referring to trials in Romans 8, Paul is describing the power of sanctification. Likewise, the chapter continues on in verses 29–30 to talk about justification and ultimately glorification, which are the steps in sanctification. Context of God’s Word provides a proper understanding of His message for our lives.

Philippians 4:13

Philippians 4:13 is yet another popular Bible verse, especially for people who grew up going to Sunday school. The verse says, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” The “him” Paul is referring to is Christ, of course, though many Christians have blown this verse out of proportion. In their defense, reading the verse by itself does sound like it implies Christians are practically invincible, or able to perform anything they desire, so long as Christ is the center of their lives. This is essentially the message that tends to be extracted. The context of the chapter in Philippians, though, shows us that Paul is referring to contentment in the midst of trial. “I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing penalty and hunger, abundance and need” (Philippians 4:12).

Philippians is one of the “prison letters” of Paul; he had been captured by the Romans and wrote the book of Philippians to the church in Philippi while imprisoned. He is reflecting in this chapter about how to achieve peace with self, having suffered much for preaching the gospel. Paul is writing in verse 13, therefore, about being content in suffering, knowing that Christ grants believers the strength to carry on, providing them with the strength they may be lacking. When pastors and Christian leaders start preaching that Christians are able to do literally anything, it becomes a misinterpretation of the text.

Matthew 18:20

Matthew 18:20 is often used in the context of small groups. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them.” Many group leaders or even pastors will reference the verse in relation to the vitality of Christian community. While community among believers is certainly vital, the verse itself is talking about something other than believers simply gathering together in small groups or even praying together. The context of what Jesus is saying in this passage of Matthew is that of discipline, specifically within the church. The rest of the chapter

reveals that Jesus is teaching his disciples what discipline of believers looks like; he discusses how to address certain issues within the church, who to address them with, and what to do when said issues arise (See also Galatians 6:1). Regarding verse 20, Jesus is saying that when two or more believers gather concerning how to deal with a problem in the body of Christ, He is there in Spirit, meaning issues can be resolved within these teachings, so long as the believers are in fact one body. Corruption within the church, however, leads to a broken body of Christians.

1 Corinthians 10:13

“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” Right away, in reading this verse, you may notice that you have heard it said another way. Countless times, I have heard people say the phrase, “God will not allow you to be put through more than you can handle” or something along these lines. This false teaching is nowhere to be found in the Bible. When people say this, they are misquoting Paul, when he is speaking to the church at Corinth regarding temptation. The verse has nothing to do with trials and struggles. Rather, the Apostle Paul is talking about temptation as a common hindrance to anyone, Christian and non-Christian. The verse continues to say that there will always be a way of escape when we are faced with temptation, so we should not be discouraged when we stumble.

1 Corinthians 6:19

Many people use this verse to justify the reasoning that tattoos are not Biblical. While this is an issue of individual preference, and one with which we have liberty to discuss, it is important to take a look at the context of this passage to get a better understanding of the real message.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul is writing to the church at Corinth; the book deals with both spiritual and moral application. In this particular passage, Paul talks about the uniqueness of sexual sin. “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own.” Some people have taken Paul’s message and added something he never intended for it to mean— the idea of tattoos. Once again, if we look at the previous verse, we get a grasp on the real message the author was aiming for. Verse 18 says, “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.” Here, Paul is drawing a clear distinction between every other sin and sexual sin. That is not to say sexual sins are *worse* than any other sin, but they are *unlike* every other sin, in that we are sinning against ourselves in committing sexual sin.

The verse actually has nothing to do with tattoos, because nowhere in the book of 1 Corinthians does Paul say anything about the subject. The problem with false application comes about, therefore, when the verse is taken to mean something the author never intended, thus creating a faulty understanding of scripture. Many of us have been taught to interpret the scripture for

ourselves, in order that we might discover a meaning that is strictly for us individually. This is what an individualistic culture teaches to be the right way of interpreting scripture. It is with this method of interpretation that we encounter the danger of *eisegesis*.

Unwrapping the Text

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

—Joshua 1:9

I don't text often, except to my wife when I'm not with her. I would much rather hold a two-minute conversation over the phone than text back and forth the same conversation, which in turn takes ten minutes to type. However, if I text, I'm going to do it right—complete sentences with proper grammar, punctuation, and spelling. I am not an “*idk*” texter. In fact, I might even add a corresponding emoji to better convey the attitude with which I am texting. Unfortunately, most people who text are not like me. Most people are “*idk*” texters. I used to think people were mad at me when they would respond in short texts. If someone were to text me “*k*”, my mind would go to *did I say something to offend them? Are they mad? Do they not want to talk to me anymore?* I am bad about reading into texts. Interestingly, sometimes we tend to do the same thing with the Bible. We read into it a meaning that was never there to begin with.

As I mentioned, the branch of study that deals with text interpretation of literary text and the Bible is known as hermeneutics. It is the difference between simply reading the Bible and extracting the meaning the author intended. Naturally, this is where disagreements and debates have arisen over time; people get different meanings, which leads to controversy. There are countless issues that have arisen which Christians cannot come to terms on for the simple reason of a lack of agreement regarding hermeneutics. That is why it is so important to understand the context of scripture in order to retrieve the author's desired idea.

That is also why so many Christians make the mistake of interpreting scripture through the lens of eisegesis: reading into the text, thus getting a meaning that was not intentional of the original Biblical author. All scripture is breathed out by God, meaning the Biblical author was divinely inspired to write it. Would God have created His holy Word with the intention of leaving it so widely open for free-translation? No, God had an explanation for the Biblical author, just as it has endured through many generations, and continues to endure today. That is what makes the Holy Bible more unique than any other book in existence.

Scripture being interpreted without context is what leads to eisegesis. We end up getting a false meaning. Staying true to scripture is an area in which many churches tend to fail. Many pastors are guilty of preaching bubblegum gospel in that they preach sermons based on practical interpretation of the scripture that is eisegetically drawn from the text. Church leaders have been appointed by Christ to be the shepherds of the members of His body. It is therefore essential for them to have a solid and true understanding of what the Bible says. The apostle Peter talks about eisegesis in 1 Peter, in reference to the teachings of Paul. “... There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do

with the Scriptures" (1 Peter 3:16). Notice the consequences Peter points out as a result of "twisting" the scripture: it is to our own destruction.

A prevalent example of eisegesis in Bible study is in modern small groups. I have attended small groups when I was a student in youth groups at church that sometimes missed the point of studying God's Word for what it says; we tend to approach Bible study groups by going around a circle of people, asking the question *what does this verse mean to you?* This is a dangerous way of looking at scripture; it does not matter what the verse means *to me*, what matters is what the *author means* for it to say. An understanding of exegesis, reading out of or *from* the scripture, is what constitutes for healthy and true study of the Bible. This is what many pastors lack; they end up feeding the congregation bubble gum: feel-good, semi-satisfactory messages designed to invoke emotion but that possess little to no absolute truth related to the main message written by the author. This is the danger of eisegesis.

In hermeneutics, the desired meaning of a passage or book-as-a-whole is often referred to as the Author's Intended Message (AIM). Without proper understanding of the AIM, unintended interpretations arise. This is why isolated verse study is a potentially dangerous method of studying the Bible; if we only look at one verse and drop the rest of the passage, how will we understand what the author's intended message was? It is easy to read into passages of scripture without the context to support them. This is why so many verses by themselves are taken out of context and used falsely. The biblical authors knew what they meant when they wrote the Bible. We must, therefore, understand what they meant as well, which is not possible without context. Who is the author? To whom are they writing? Why are they writing this? Where are they writing from?

False Views of the Gospel

Eisegesis is also what leads to views of the gospel that are not true. Paul warns the believers in Galatia of this fact in Galatians 1:6–9. The simple act of taking a verse out of context can create a twisted view of the whole passage. When we interpret scripture for ourselves, we subconsciously start making interpretations based on what we know, or at least think we know. These false allegations regarding the Word of God are what give rise to gospels such as the *prosperity gospel*. A prime example of bubblegum gospel, the prosperity gospel takes verses that speak of blessing and reads into them in a way that draws a meaning which does not prove to be Biblically sound. It is a false view of what is meant by living with Christ. Essentially, its claims suggest the Bible speaks of the desire for Christians to be prosperous, wealthy, healthy, and financially stable should we continue to obey all God commands. The problem is that the believer is instructed to use God as a sort of vending machine, asking God to send blessings. From the start, one should recognize the covetousness at the heart of this teaching. We as Christians are instructed to give to God what is rightfully His to begin with (2 Corinthians 9:7;

Proverbs 3:9; Matthew 6:21; Leviticus 27:30). Paul also warns of people who suggest the prosperity gospel as the correct view.

“And constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.”

“But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.” (1 Timothy 6:5, 9:11)

Prosperity gospel is an example of bubblegum gospel, and believers should be aware of false teachings like this; it is a product of a misunderstanding of God’s Word.

On the contrary, many churches will preach the so-called *poverty gospel*. Another unbiblical interpretation of the Bible, poverty gospel preaches the opposite of prosperity gospel; God essentially wants people to be poor. While the Bible does speak of giving everything away to follow Jesus (Matthew 19:21), the argument is one from eisegesis. A Bible verse commonly read out of context is what much of the poverty gospel beliefs are founded upon. In 1 Timothy 6:10, Paul warns that “... the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.” Notice an important word in this verse that is often overlooked: “The *love* of money is the root of all kinds of evil.”

While the verse is often taken to mean money *itself* is the root of evil, Paul is not condemning people who are wealthy; he is warning his readers about idolatry. Anything that takes the place of God, which could include money, relationships, status, power, or any personal desires is an idol (Exodus 20:3; Matthew 6:24). A look at the context of 1 Timothy 6:10 reveals that Paul never says money is a bad thing; it is the priority in which we place money’s role in our lives that becomes the root of all kinds of evil.

Another example of a falsely interpreted gospel is what is often referred to as the *therapeutic gospel*. This teaching focuses more on the idea that God wants believers to “reach their potential” as sort of a sense of fullness in Christ. Essentially, the focus is not on God himself, but more so how a relationship with God can benefit humans individually. Right away, this is playing off of the individualistic ideals that modern America is shifting into. According to the Bible, apart from God we have no purpose (Acts 17:28), so we should be more than willing to humble ourselves and take up our cross to follow Jesus, fulfilling the calling he has for our lives. The Gospel does not exist so that we can find happiness; it exists so humans can know God and make Him known, all the while glorifying Him.

The most common false view of the gospel, however, is the view that focuses entirely on the omnibenevolence of God, and almost ignores the truth of God being a righteous judge (Psalm 7:11). While the unconditional love of God is completely Biblical, so is the wrath of God.

Church leaders must be careful not to preach solely the “feel-good” or *bubblegum* gospel, but to preach truth in its entirety; the fact that there are consequences, both temporal and eternal, for disobedience against the Creator God.

Another view of the gospel that is sweeping America, and is nothing new, as we have seen in history, is the concept of *universalism*. Simply put, universalism is the belief that “all roads lead to heaven.” It suggests that God is the father of all, not just those who have been saved, and all religions teach “essentially the same thing.” Everybody is saved. What a dangerous way to view truth! A quick look into different religions will reveal that they are not all essentially the same, but most significantly (and frighteningly) different. The fundamentals of God’s Word are absolute, because truth is absolute. If there is one true road to heaven, which is Jesus Christ, we as Christians would be wrong *not* to tell everyone we possibly can for two reasons: first, it is our mission as followers of Jesus (Matthew 28:16–20). Second, if the gospel is true, then people need to hear it, because there are only two possible outcomes after death: eternity with God or eternity separated from Him.

The Wrong Idea

In an interview with Christian author Ross Douthat, political commentator and television host Bill Maher asked Douthat how he would respond to the passage in the gospels that says, “do not repay evil with evil” (1 Peter 3:9; Romans 12:17). Maher was attempting to stump him by asking him how he would justify killing another individual (in the context of capital punishment, for example). Douthat responded saying “there isn’t a quote that says civil authorities have no right to kill a mass murderer if he is guilty of mass murder.” His answer to Maher was that governing authorities have the right to preserve peace, and punishment is a necessary means of that. After all, morality trumps government. This is why issues such as abortion are so heated; they involve both political and moral implications to high degrees. Maher responded to Douthat by suggesting that his answer was “a very specific reading” of the passage. In other words, Maher accused Douthat of reading into the Biblical text.

However, a closer look at the Biblical context reveals that in fact it was Maher who was reading into the text. In the passages regarding repayment of evil, both in 1 Peter and in Romans, the authors are not speaking about the government or civil discipline; they are speaking to individual Christians. 1 Peter is written to the Christians known as the “exiles of the dispersion” (1 Peter 1:1), and Romans is a letter written to the church in Rome. So, the command of not repaying evil with evil has nothing to do with governing laws and everything to do with the individual believer becoming more like Christ. 1 Peter 3:9 is actually a reflection of Jesus’s teaching to his followers regarding how a Christian should live (Luke 6:27–28). In Romans, the very next chapter, chapter 13, speaks of the importance of being subject to governing authorities (Romans 13:1). Paul is saying in this passage that authority has been appointed by God and is to be respected therein (13:1–2). Again, the exception to this idea is the possibility of corrupt government, or

government that goes against God's moral law. The whole debate between Maher and the Christian author can be answered with a proper *exegetical* understanding of scripture.

The Wrong Foundation

Eisegesis can lead to even greater misunderstandings of scripture. Unfortunately, it is these ideas which are the most commonly brushed off by Christians, as not to "stir up debate." I agree that we should strive to always be loving in our approach to the gospel (John 13:35) and live peaceably with everyone (Romans 12:18). However, we are also called to be ready to defend our beliefs with solid reason when we are faced with these tough questions (1 Peter 3:15). After all, the difference between the Christian faith and all other religious beliefs and secular ideas is that the Christian faith is based on reason. Some Christians will say it is based entirely on blind faith; that is not true, and it is also an inadequate answer to a skeptic who is questioning why he should choose Jesus over every other belief. The Christian faith is founded on the reliable, sufficient Word of God that has proven throughout history to be true, reliable, and without error or contradiction. So, the evidence for Christ is anything but blind faith.

I had a conversation with someone recently about the cultural shift that the church is being faced with. I was discussing the rapid change of the approach to the fundamentals of faith, down to the very idea of truth itself. In doing so, I happened to mention my interest in apologetics, defending and answering questions from skeptics about Christianity. I remember him telling me, "well, just don't get too bogged down in apologetics."

I would disagree; we need apologetics now more than ever. People are starving for truth and attacking the ultimate source of it, God's Word. The minds of new believers are being flooded with opposing ideas such as relativism and postmodernism; how will they know what is true if the church is not ready to defend what is true? The church needs Christians who are able to combat these assaults on the Christian faith. *Faith without reason is blind*. Without a reason for belief, why would anyone choose to believe the Bible? This is part of the rationale behind the roughly 75 percent of church-attending students' decision to abandon church after high school.

Eisegetical interpretations of the Bible, however, have not contributed to the defense argument for God's Word; some attack it. For example, a popular interpretation of the book of Genesis, the foundation for the rest of the Bible, is the acceptance of evolutionary processes, rather than God's intentional design. While this may not seem like a problem on the surface, children are being taught to believe that evolution is the artist behind the mind-blowingly complex world we live in, rather than a God who carefully designed it that way.

Another example of a common eisegetical argument is the argument of *predestination* as limited atonement. This is a belief of modern 5-point Calvinism. However, the Bible teaches that salvation applies to all who believe (John 3:16; Romans 5:19; 10:9; 10:13; Acts 2:21; Acts

16:31). The idea of limited atonement eisegetically drawn from scripture contradicts many other ideas from scripture, as well as the point of following Christ.

The reason I use these controversial arguments as examples is that they are the ones many Christians try to avoid because either we do not have an answer, or we do not want to stir up heated debate. We must be cautious how we are reading and teaching the Bible, especially the leaders who have been called to ministry; we must also not brush off these arguments, as they could be the deciding factor between someone's faith or rejection of the Bible and salvation through Christ.

Culture Vs. the Church

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

—Matthew 16:18

Churches have experienced a tremendous increase in attendance over the last decade, especially following the rise of the so-called “mega-churches.” At first, Christians will think this is great news for the Christian faith and the faith of lost people alike. However, a closer look at the focus of much of the modern ministries we see today should raise a flag. Many emergent or attractional churches have shifted the focus of their content and method of ministry. While these churches are not the problem in and of themselves, it is the lack of discipleship, apologetics, and unity that may be detrimental. These lacking areas within the church are what is known as *syncretism*.

Craig Ott and Gene Wilson describe the idea of syncretism in their book *Global Church Planting*. According to the authors, “syncretism occurs when the purity of the gospel message or the essential functions of the church are sacrificed at the altar of relevance... This can be a compromise with elements of... materialism, consumerism, and *me-ism*. And as a result we have people who walk into church expecting everything to be about them, and they want church to be just like the world; so, churches have begun bending the knee to that mindset for the sake of drawing crowds. The gospel needs to be *expressed* in contemporary forms but not at the expense of its transforming power, prophetic voice, or convincing penetration.”¹ The church cannot afford to neglect the vitalities of growing disciples in a culture that is flooded with conflicting worldviews.

Back to the Sources

The boom of divisions within Christianity had its start coming out of the Protestant Reformation in 16th Century Europe. It was not until this historic event in the history of the church that denominations started appearing one after the other. The issue with denominations of Christianity is that they cause a divide within the body; if the Bible is the self-validating authority of God, then what it says is absolute. It is how Christians approach *interpretation* of the Bible that makes room for disagreement. If all Christians were to read the Bible the exact same way, the way God and the divinely inspired Biblical authors intended, there would be no denominations at all; hence, there were no denominations within the early church. That being said, churches should be unified in beliefs; what we have in America is quite the opposite, however. To make matters worse, some of the largest sects of Christianity have put priority in the wrong areas.

One of the driving ideas of the Protestant Reformation was the push for “*ad fontes*.” The phrase is Latin, meaning “back to the sources.” It was used to suggest that Christians and church leaders alike should be looking to the source of our authority, the original text of the Bible, as the

governing document of our faith walk, the way we approach church, worship, and everything regarding Christianity. Many of the reformers took this stance in response to the shift in fundamental vitalities within the church. Essentially, if we want to know what the Bible really says, we should be looking at what the authors really wrote; hence, there was a push to study the original manuscripts of the Bible. After all, one of the most neglected principles of Bible study is looking for the author's intended message.

The authors of the Bible knew what they meant and meant what they said when they wrote the Bible; it is a concealed text. Needless to say, the only thing that should be governing the way church is run is the Bible; we must drop the heavy burden of cultural expectations, looking back to the sources in order to be a church that worships the God who is worthy of all our praise. What sources will we allow to drive the next generation?

The “Sent-out” Ones

A common analogy in modern ministry is when churches start describing themselves as “hospitals.” The idea behind this analogy is that the church is a place for broken people seeking acceptance and authentic community. It is absolutely true that church is a place which should be acceptant of anyone, regardless of their past. The church was established as the ever-growing body of Christ. This means the focus of the church described in the New Testament was and still should be a gathering of believers. To find the Biblical language for a church, we must look to the Bible; 1 Corinthians 12:12 says that there should be membership. The church is the gathering of the saints (1 Corinthians 12:7, 25; 14:4–5, 12, 17, 26, 31). Is this to say that the local church should close its doors to anyone who is not a member or does not agree with the church's statement of faith? By no means! That would be unloving and egregious; Jesus did not spend his entire ministry with his disciples. His most influential moments were the ones spent with sinners and tax-collectors— the very people that people hated. However, in the context of the church, it is the Christians, having been saved and transformed by grace who are added to the church body (Acts 2:41). According to Jesus in Matthew 28, it is the Christians' job, having been equipped, to seek out the lost and make disciples.

We do so by being “sent-out,” not just into our community, which is also vital, but to the ends of the earth, according to the Great Commission of Jesus. Why have many churches stopped sending out people? Why are we not doing an adequate job of equipping them for evangelism?

If we are not training them up, they will not be ready to defend themselves when the attacks of the world hit. You may still be wondering, *I thought it was the job of the individual to feed himself?* That is absolutely correct; however, what I have found is that *many Christians do not know how to feed themselves spiritually because they have not been disciplined.* Disciples make disciples, and we are called to be disciples who are sent-out. So, let us start sending out disciples. Let us raise up leaders who can start new churches and minister to unreached communities.

But Why Even Have Membership?

That word seems a little exclusive, does it not? I mean, isn't the church supposed to be acceptant of everyone? Not exactly. That is one of the problems with the battle between truth and culture—we are expected to be accepting of everyone, though we do not have to agree with everyone. That is certainly not to say we should ever force our beliefs on anyone. Jesus offers us the choice to believe in him, as should we as his disciples. Part of the definition of love is that free will is involved. So then why have church membership? Why shouldn't we let just anyone become a member? Here are **four reasons** for church membership:

- *Unity.*

Just as the body of Christ is one, the church is to be as well. Jesus prays for unity in John 17:20–23, when he says, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one.” (See also Acts 4:32; Philippians 2:1–2).

- *Discipleship.*

Being a member of a church means you are planted and growing there. Discipleship simply means ensuring the catechism (growth) of the Christ follower. Disciples make disciples. With discipleship comes discipline as well. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:12, “is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?”

- *Covenant.*

The covenant of the church usually outlines the expectations of that church. This is why the church should not allow *just anybody* to become a member; we must ensure they agree with the beliefs. If you have not read your church's statement of faith before, I would encourage you to do so. It is usually located on their website; if not, ask the pastor!

- *Commitment.*

I heard a church leader say one time, when looking for a church, make sure it is somewhere you can be planted. Commitment to a church is more than just agreeing to attend every Sunday, because church is more than a building. We *are* the church. So, we should be committed to it, to our leaders, to each other, and most importantly, to God's Word.

Worship: Who Gets the Glory?

Here is where churches need to be cautious while approaching a “refined” or even “liberal” approach to church:

Mankind exists to glorify God. This is our primary intention as Christians (Isaiah 43:7). However, churches strive to be culturally relevant, with good purpose. However, in doing so, many churches focus so much on the experience that it draws away from the primary focus and purpose of the gathering of believers. I was once invited to tour a church that had recently started and got to take a look at their tech booth. One thing that surprised me was when I found out they had spent upwards of \$100,000 on sound equipment alone. In addition, the church had invested a large sum of money into other theatrics including lights, stage equipment, projectors, fog machines, etc.

I would like to clarify before I go any further; my intention is not to attack churches whose focus is on the experience, so I mean not to offend anyone. I was simply blown away that they had decided to invest so much on the environment itself. When the church’s focus becomes solely about this, it makes me question what their motive is. I was talking with a pastor of a large church one day about worship environments and how we should approach them. I wanted to know what he thought about why many modern churches invest so much in these areas. The response is understandable but left me wondering. Essentially, modern churches strive for a relevant ministry environment, with good reason. The church should be culturally relevant but should not bend to fit society’s standards. Most churches, traditional or attractional, will agree with this idea, and let’s be honest; what is now considered “traditional” in many senses was once considered “modern” or “contemporary.” Every song you sing in church was a new song at some point.

Culture is a moving target, and the body of Christ exists throughout our changing world. However, what happens when cultural relevance becomes the method of ministry? Like I said earlier, the emergent church’s primary motive is to “seek” lost people. Relevant church environments are the tactic in which this is achieved, and it has certainly worked. Some of the mega churches in America have weekly attendance averages of over 10,000 people! But what are people really attending church for?

The pastor I asked about the environment of the church told me that all the lights, sound, fog machines, etc. were additives to the environment to help people connect with the worship and feel comfortable while attending the church. Granted, he did say in addition that God would still move, and they would still be the same church without all those things, but I found it interesting that he said that about the “worship experience.” Calling it a worship experience implies that there is something to get out of attending the church, whereas Christian worship should be entirely God-centered. In fact, the word “worship” comes from the word *worth-ship* which means words carrying weight. Specifically, worship to God is acknowledgement of God; that is His nature, goodness, and divinity. Worship in individualistic society and modern churches has

been consumed with an acknowledgement of the worship itself. What I mean is that it is becoming more about *how* churches approach worship and less about *who* we are worshipping.

The question I have been struggling with is *what really is the point of a worship experience if not to place the focus on the one who deserves the worship in the first place?* If worship on Sunday mornings is nothing more than a concert, who is getting the glory; God or the worship team? Why are there so many lights and fog machines? Does the Holy Spirit need a supplement just to move among His people? I believe if God wants to move the hearts of believers, he will do so with or without lights, music, or even a church building. So many churches are focused too much on the emotional experience people have during the service. Many Christians are quick to assume that if they have an emotional moment during worship, that the Spirit of God was moving among their hearts. I am not going to deny that; it is between them and God.

However, it is not always the case. I am not typically one to cry during worship; some of the most intense moments of conviction or closeness to God I have experienced have been *internal*. Music can have an emotional effect on many people; that does not inherently mean it is the Holy Spirit every time. Sometimes we may not leave church feeling uplifted, and that's okay. Revival cannot be scheduled because the work of the Holy Spirit cannot be manipulated based on stimuli ("revivalism"). Just because something creates a positive emotional experience or attracts large crowds does not mean it has an undeniable theological security.

Of course these are all arguments regarding what are often referred to as the **regulative** vs **normative** principles of worship. According to the regulative principle, unless an act of worship is strictly forbidden in the Bible, it is okay to perform in church. The normative principle, on the other hand, suggests that churches should not do anything that is not directly spoken of in the Bible. I do agree that the Bible should be the ultimate source of authority, (*Sola Scriptura*)², though there can be some agreement and disagreement on how worship is approached, being that culture, technology, and instruments have changed and progressed over time. However, the point of the argument as to the focus of worship is not on *how* the church performs worship, but *who* the worship is directed toward.

Worship should be authentic; we are not trying to put on a show. Jesus describes true worship as being both in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

Sermon: Bubblegum Gospel

The church I had visited provided Bibles underneath each chair. I was thoroughly impressed to find that almost no one in the congregation used them, because practically everyone I saw had brought their own Bibles and notebooks and were following along with the reading themselves. So many churches have stopped encouraging the congregation to be intentional about personal Bible reading.

This lack of intentionality is not only on the shoulders of the congregation, but is in the content of the sermons they are being fed. Many modern churches, unfortunately, have been feeding people bubble gum. Sermons in many churches today have become more and more practical and less God-centered. By practical, I mean in the sense that everything has become about us. So many sermons today contain some message regarding how to “find fulfillment in life”, “waiting for blessings”, finding “purpose” or living “your best life now.” As disciples of Jesus, we are called to take up our cross daily (Luke 9:23). This means that walking with Jesus will not be easy; Jesus promises us the opposite (John 16:33; Matthew 10:22; Matthew 5:11). The church is not only a hospital, but it is also a training ground for the people of the Lord. Bubble gum sermons will do nothing but provide believers with something to chew on, leaving them empty-handed when it comes to making disciples in their communities and fighting the battle of truth vs lies.

If the church is not discipling believers, how will the believers know how to disciple the world, or even preach the gospel? They are not being fed enough “solid food” (Hebrews 5:13– 14). There are not enough sermons about the reality of mankind’s sinful nature, genuine repentance, sanctification, propitiation, the reality of hell, spiritual warfare, or even the nature of God.

Many Christians are accepting teaching from pastors as their only means of spiritual nourishment. This is evident in the fact that so many people neglect to bring Bibles to God’s house. My generation and generations before me have been assuming that everything taught from the pulpit is what the Bible says, no question. Sometimes it is not that we had been told it was so; we just never took the time to investigate God’s Word for ourselves. What a dangerous mistake. Again, I am not attacking your pastor or saying you should question everything any pastor or teacher has ever said, but it is important that we base our beliefs on the Bible, before putting our trust entirely in people alone. That is not to diminish the authority of the Lord’s appointed (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Timothy 5:17). We should be eager to feed ourselves, though; not just on Sunday mornings. Leaving it to the pastor for our spiritual nourishment will leave us hungry the rest of the week, and that is a heavy burden that a church leader was never meant to carry.

I believe the reason many churches in America have seen such a tremendous increase in attendance is because of the content. Crowds are being drawn in by the experience of the worship, and the inspiring, relatable, sweet-tasting messages preached from the stage. We must be careful that we are not pursuing bubblegum gospel. It will leave the Christians with little, if any spiritual nourishment, making them decide to walk away from church completely (which is evident in young people across America), or to relax in the comfort of bubblegum gospel until something they don’t agree with makes them walk away from that particular church.

What this type of experience-focused environment has created is a reliance on the experience as a means for making the Holy Spirit work. However, the Holy Spirit does not need a supplement.

It goes along with the idea of scheduling revivals. Revivals cannot be scheduled, because we cannot schedule the work of the Holy Spirit. He moves whether we want him to or not. We have this idea in modern Christian communities that if it doesn't look right, sound right, or feel right, and if there is no emotional experience every Sunday morning, that the Holy Spirit has not moved. I am not denying the fact that aesthetics are important to the environment and cultural relevance on Sunday mornings with a church, but if that becomes the focus of ministry, then we are missing the point of church entirely.

Small Groups: Support Groups or Bible Study?

The response to the earlier statement about a lack of deeper sermons is typically, *If you want to go deeper, get involved or get in a small group*. While getting involved in the church is certainly a must for believers, being that we are the hands and feet of Jesus (1 Corinthians 12:27), it is not enough to satisfy the hunger many believers are faced with unknowingly. Churches strongly encourage Christians to get into a small group, being that in closer community, they will go deeper into a relationship with God as well as with each other. I agree completely; the church is a family and should be treated and pursued as one (1 Corinthians 12:13; Mark 3:35). The question then becomes what exactly is being pursued within the small group.

What is the focus of the small group? In other words, what is to be gained? The answer should be to grow in knowledge of the Word and stronger in one's longing for God. That is part of the essence of discipleship, is it not? However, many small groups today are less concerned with studying the Bible and more concerned with being authentic relationally. While authenticity and honesty are not bad in terms of community, and I would argue they are necessary, they may become the focus of community groups within the church. If believers want to go deeper in their faith, the only way is through studying the Bible. No amount of heart-to-heart moments can suffice for the desire for Biblical truth and wisdom. That must be sought out (Ezra 7:10; 2 Timothy 3:14–17).

I was in a small group for a few months at one point that was going through the books of Matthew and John. It was a single men's group that met one night a week. One thing I noticed about the group was how little studying of the Bible occurred. The group meetings consisted primarily of discussing how we related to the particular scriptures in our own lives. We were encouraged by our small group leader to "be real with one another." The only problem at the end of the semester of the small group is that I ended up learning more about the people in my small group than I did about the Bible. Don't get me wrong, I loved those guys and I enjoyed learning about them. If Christians are going to stop chewing bubble gum and start feeding ourselves and others solid food, churches have to make the step of discipleship to ensure that its congregation is being fed just that.

The two most common responses to the problem of feeling like we are not going deep enough in our faith within churches is that either we are not serving, or that we are not in a small group.

Serving within the local church is extremely important; in fact, it helps grow our love for Christ's body, specifically for the context of the local church. In addition, it is very important in order to get connected. The Bible talks about service within the church. However, you cannot grow deeper in faith without discipleship and spiritual discipline. The only way discipleship is achieved is through the word of God.

The problem with small groups in many modern churches is that they have become less focused on studying the Bible, and more focused on emotional support. While support groups are very helpful to the life of the individual, if that is where the focus of small groups lies, we are missing the point of small groups almost entirely. Many churches have done away with the concept of Sunday school altogether, because it sounds too traditional. However, we must be teaching believers how to study the Bible. If they do not know how to study the Bible for themselves, they will never grow deeper in their faith. This contributes to the reason that over 70 percent of church-attending students are walking away from church after high school; they are not being fed spiritually, nor do they know how to feed themselves. So, when they are faced with the realities of the world, skeptics, and people/worldviews which are ultimately anti-Christian, they have no foundation upon which their lives in their faith are structured. Thus, it is our responsibility to ensure that foundation is secure, which can only be found in the truth of God's Word.

But what about all the good that so many churches are doing? What about the ministries they have set up for lost people? Churches have gone above and beyond to minister to single, struggling parents, pursue foster-care and adoption, establish ministries for recovering addicts, financially unstable individuals, abused people, etc. This is what it means to *be* the church. We need more ministries such as these—the world needs the love of Christ. We also need *truth*. We need the authority of God's Word and the gospel to be behind everything we do—all for the glory of God.

Seeds of Truth

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

—Matthew 11:15

I love a good story. There is something about hearing someone tell a good story that makes me happy. Especially when that person is a good story-teller. Some of the best stories are the ones that have meaning. You remember learning about allegories in English class, right? An allegory is a story that represents something in real-life, thus portraying a real-life moral or meaning. That is essentially what a parable is, and Jesus was probably the best story-teller of all time.

One of the most important parables or allegories of Jesus is, unfortunately, often one of the most neglected. The value of Jesus's parabolic teaching is often diminished for the fact that not many people interpret them to their full potential. On the contrary, many tend to overanalyze parables as well. In order to fully understand how to interpret a parable, which is a necessary ability, being that Jesus taught in parables frequently, we must first understand how to read one.

How to Read a Parable

First and foremost, like any other text in the Bible, proper understanding of parabolic teaching requires a proper grasp of the **context** of the parable. In other words, before reading a parable of Jesus, we should ask ourselves the questions, *why is Jesus telling this parable? Who is he telling it to? What is Jesus trying to accomplish in telling this parable? What is the gospel writer trying to accomplish?* Essentially, knowing the context gives readers a firm grasp on the immediate circumstance therein. Secondly, readers need to be aware of the **structure** of Jesus's teaching in terms of how his story is laid out. *Are there any repetitions? Why did Jesus compose the events the way he did?*

Next, we should pay attention to the **details**. For example, the setting and characters in parables are often significant to the lesson they portray. For instance, in the parable of the "Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:25–37), Jesus describes various people of different status, culture, and race. A proper understanding of how these characters relate to each other is greatly beneficial, if not vital, to the teaching of the story. The audience Jesus was speaking to in the context of this passage is primarily Jews. Specifically, he is speaking to a lawyer. Jews and Samaritans despised each other racially. So, the idea that a Samaritan stopped to help the man who had been beaten, while neither the priest nor the Levite did anything to assist him. The overall message is showing love to one's neighbor, of course, but contextual evidence is a necessary supplement. Lastly, as expected, readers should pay attention to the **main points** Jesus covers in the telling of the Parable. *Keeping the structure and context of the story in mind, what are the points Jesus is trying to convey to the reader? What is therefore the overall message of the parable?*

In terms of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, the main points have to do with the Godly display of love, as shown by the Samaritan, a figure the Jews would have considered unlikely to do so. The Samaritan was the only character in the parable that went out of his way to show what it looks like to love one's neighbor. At the end of the story, Jesus asks the lawyer "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" The lawyer responded, "the one who showed him mercy." Jesus's command, therefore, is to "go and do likewise." So, the main message of the parable is one of mercy.

Readers must be careful not to fall into the danger of over-analyzing parables. I have heard sermons preached about this particular parable, in which every figure and item in the story had some symbolic, significant, deeper meaning. While I am not denying any profound symbolism within the parables of Jesus, it is important to keep the context in mind when reading them. The audience Jesus spoke to through the use of parables would not have necessarily analyzed every word of the parable. The whole point of parables, after all, is to illustrate a message through images the audience would have been familiar with.

While intentional study of parables is necessary, over-analyzation can lead to eisegesis if we are not careful. If we look too far into the details of the parable, we end up losing perspective of the big picture, and ultimately the main message, thus either taking the parable out of context or reading into it, deducting a message which the author never intended.

The Parable of the Sower

As stated earlier, one of the most familiar parables from Jesus is often overlooked or interpreted wrongly; however, it bears a vital message. It is the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:1-9 and 18-26. Let's take a look at the story.

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matthew 13:1-9)

This is the first telling of the narrative of the sower by Jesus. As we will see soon, even his disciples have a hard time understanding some of Jesus's teachings. So, before we try to interpret the parable for ourselves, let us take a look at the context. *Who is Jesus telling the parable to?*

Jesus has just left a house where his mother and the disciples were, having asked to speak to him from outside (12:46). He sits down by the sea, and a great crowd gathers around him, as crowds usually did when Jesus was near. So, the crowd could have consisted of many different peoples of various status; we do know, however, that the Pharisees were almost always somewhere near when Jesus was speaking, as they tried throughout the gospels to refute his teaching. Jesus's disciples were also present wherever Jesus went.

Why is Jesus telling this parable? Jesus's primary mission while living out his days of ministry on earth was to speak truth to the people (John 18:37). He is, therefore, carrying out his mission by preaching to whoever would listen (Matthew 13:9), as well as equipping the disciples to do the same. Through the telling of parables, Jesus is revealing the truths about the kingdom of heaven, which could then be understood by those who choose to listen, as well as readers in modern times. Parables are great ways of illustrating moral and spiritual truths because people can relate to them and understand them better. For example, children learn better through the telling of stories; I remember watching the cartoon Veggie Tales videos as a child, and I still remember some specifics about Bible stories because of them. Likewise, Jesus knew truth would be easier to comprehend through understandable imagery.

Secondly, we must pay attention to the structure of the parable. *Why did Jesus tell the story this way?* Look back at the parable: the sower goes out and sows seed; his seed lands among **four areas**. This tells us that Jesus is describing four different "fields" or areas in which the truth is spoken, as he will explain in verses 18–23. The seed then has **four reactions** in regard to the subsequent areas it is sowed. In the first area, which is the *path*, the seed is quickly devoured by *birds*. In the second area, the *rocky ground*, there is not much soil, so the seeds spring up quickly. However, because of the lack of soil, the seeds therefore have *no roots*; the sun scorches the plants and they wither. The third area is the *thorns*, which grow up and *choke* the plants before they ever grow. Lastly, some seed fell among what is referred to as *good soil*. There, of course, it produces much grain.

This takes us to the next point of study: the details of the parable. *What details are there that are significant to the lesson?* Jesus is not creating a complex puzzle to be debated by scholars for years to come; remember that parables are meant to be understood. That being said, the four areas and four reactions are just that; four different responses to the preaching of the gospel in different situations. Be careful not to over-analyze the symbols within parables. Finally, *what are the main points of the parable? What is the lesson Jesus wants readers to grasp?* Jesus actually explains the meaning of the entire parable when the disciples have questions.

Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a

while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. (Matthew 13:18-26)

The Parable of the Sower Explained

Through Jesus's explanation of his parable, we understand the message he wanted both the listeners and readers to take away. First, who is the sower? The one planting the seeds is the believer; the seed represents the gospel: the truth necessary for salvation (Romans 10:17). It is the believer's responsibility to preach the gospel. What are the different areas? Each place that the gospel was sowed represents a person or group of people. In turn, there will be different responses to the gospel.

Some will hear the gospel but will not understand it (The seed sowed on the path). The evil one, Satan, will "snatch it away" because of the lack of understanding. The apostle Philip encountered the Ethiopian eunuch who did not understand what he was reading and was led by the Holy Spirit to explain it to him. The Eunuch ended up being baptized directly afterward (Acts 8:26–40). Sometimes the gospel will require explanation; it is for this reason believers are to be learned in the teachings of the Bible, studying and meditating on it day and night (Psalm 1:2).

The next place the seed falls is on the rocky ground. The rocky ground represents people who hear the teaching, but it does not take root in them. Pay attention to how the message is received: they responded with joy at first. *Just because the word creates an emotional response does not mean there has been a work of the Holy Spirit.* One of the most influential theologians and pastors to have ever lived, Jonathan Edwards, describes the false signs of salvation in his book, *Religious Affections*. Many people think they are saved based on the feeling they get from worship or even the message, but true salvation and sanctification are the product of the holy spirit working in our lives. On the opposite hand, we also must be careful as not to discredit the working of the Holy Spirit.

What Happens When the Emotion is Not There?

Do you remember getting Halloween candy as a child? I do. I remember there were two kinds of candy-givers: those who cared about the happiness of children, and those who obviously hated Halloween. Of course, there were also the ones who pretended not to be home to avoid trick-or-treaters entirely. But as for the people who did give out candy, the ones who cared handed out the good candy; I'm talking about Snickers, Hershey's, Three Musketeers, Reese's, Skittles, etc. Then, we also got the not so good stuff, like Dots and those no-name brand Tootsie-Roll rip-offs. I remember loading up on candy and eating all the good stuff over the

course of about two days following Halloween. After that, the bucket was left with the candy nobody wanted to eat.

When we consume all the good stuff, we are often left with the less appetizing, less appealing portions afterward. Once the sugar rush wears off, what do we do? We no longer crave candy anymore. We start to long for something with sustenance. Junk food only satisfies temporarily, but a full-course meal fills an empty stomach and provides necessary nutrients. A lot of times we treat church like the candy. We see something we like, we have an emotional experience with it, and it makes us feel good. So, we attach that experience-mentality to the truth of the gospel; unfortunately, the “spiritual high” eventually wears off and we are not as emotionally responsive as we once were. Do not get me wrong, we do go through seasons of emotional response, so that is not to say we will never have a spiritual high again. However, if we believe that emotion constitutes the work of the Holy Spirit or even our relationship with God, we will feel like we are drifting away or becoming stagnant when the emotion is not there.

I felt this way about emotion for several years in my faith. I would see people crying and raising their hands during worship, and I could not help but think, *are we not worshipping the same God? Why don't I get that emotional? Is my faith just not strong enough? Am I just not close enough to God? Does the Holy Spirit just not want to move in me?* The truth is that we were and always have been worshipping the same God, I had just led myself to believe that in order to be present with Him, I had to have an emotional experience. The truth is that if I want to be present with Him, all I have to do is continue to read His word and pray. That will produce true worship in us. If we are not leading believers in discipleship, many of them will feel the same way about emotion. Once the experience is not present anymore, they will think God is not present either. That is what often leads to plateaus in our faith. What is the remedy? *We must start eating food with sustenance.*

The gospel without roots is bubble gum. It tastes good, it is sweet, it makes us feel warm and fuzzy, but it has little to no nutrients. This is why it does not take root in the lives of those who hear it. Truth without foundation is pointless; it creates a structure that will not stand on its own. It is imperative, therefore, that the gospel is preached to its full extent; not sugar coated, not just the “good stuff”, but also the vegetables: the parts of the message which are generally hard to swallow. There can be no *good news* without *bad news*.

The gospel will not always create an emotional response; a positive one, that is. In fact, it will turn some people away. John 6:60–71 shows us that Jesus’s teaching was not easy to accept. Jesus said to his disciples (many more than twelve at the time), “Do you take offense at this?... There are some of you who do not believe.” Afterwards, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him, so that he was left with only twelve.⁴ *Some people will have a hard time accepting the gospel.* Let’s be honest, some people simply don’t want it to be true. It is not the job of believers to ensure their salvation, but to ensure truth is spoken to them so that God can

move in their hearts (1 Corinthians 3:6). Once the seed is planted and watered, the Holy Spirit will allow for its growth.

One of the reasons so many young people are walking away from church after high school is this fact that the truth has not taken root in their lives. If the Bible is not the supreme foundation upon which their faith is founded, why carry it with them once they are on their own in the world? If the church continues to preach bubblegum gospel, all students will be equipped with will be nothing more than something to chew on until the flavor is lost. We must then implement discipleship into the values of every church. The most important aspect of discipling believers is *orthodoxy*, which is “right teaching.” Orthodoxy will primarily lead to *orthopraxy*, or “right practice.” That means right teaching leads to right practice. A proper understanding of the gospel creates the necessary foundation for lasting faith, which leads to sanctification (2 Peter 1:3–11).

False Teachers Among Us

The next group to hear the word that is sowed is choked out by the thorns. Jesus describes the thorns as being cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches. There may be growth at first, but thorns arise and prevent the crop from bearing fruit. The reality in this passage is evident in the fact that many modern churches in America are moving toward *cultural Christianity*: beliefs that are rooted not in the Bible, but in humanistic and individualistic worldviews. We have adapted a society of moral relativism, rather than holding to the absolutes of scripture. In turn, it has never been easier to be caught up in the deceitfulness and lies surrounding us through media, societal expectations, and the push for universal tolerance. Many of these worldviews will even claim to be rooted in Christianity but are no more than deceptions from the enemy. False teaching is mentioned frequently throughout scripture (Jeremiah 23:16; 2 Timothy 4:3–4; Acts 20:28–30; 1 John 4:1–6; Matthew 7:15–20).

The book of 2 Peter chapter 2 gives a detailed description of the false teachings the world will face and is facing. The Bible prophetically warns that many will be led astray by their teaching (v. 2). Their teachings are focused on corrupt, worldly desires (v. 10), which is what Jesus describes when talking about the seed choked out by the thorns. “For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For *whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.*” America is faced by these very false teachers; they are practically screaming at us from our TV screens, radios, social media, magazines and *even our churches* (Jude 3). In fact, Dr. John MacArthur, writing about the state of the church, says, “It is quite possibly more susceptible to false teachers, doctrinal saboteurs, and spiritual terrorism than any other generation in church history. Biblical ignorance within the church may well be deeper and more widespread than any other time since the Protestant Reformation.”⁵

Be aware: social media is permeated with slogans and catchy phrases that sound Biblical but are actually very deceptive. The problem is that, in the age of social media, we are more apt than ever to like and share the slogans and phrases without ever testing them with the scrutiny of truth. Just because something *sounds Biblical* does not mean it is *Biblically sound*. False teachers get away with this all the time by appearing to preach Biblical messages, but the Enemy comes as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14).

Bubblegum gospel is not doing the Word of God any justice; the world is starving for truth. Without a proper foundation of Biblical doctrine, they will be deceived by the lies of Satan for generations to come (Matthew 7:24–27). It is therefore more important than ever that our churches are discipling, preaching truth, pursuing apologetics, and not getting caught up in cultural Christianity and post-modern thinking.

The last group of people to hear the gospel, according to Jesus, are the ones who show growth. These are believers who hear the word, build their houses on the solid rock of the Bible's authority, accept spiritual discipline (Proverbs 12:1; Hebrews 12:10–11; Proverbs 3:11–12; Deuteronomy 8:5–6), and produce fruit as a result (Galatians 5:22–23; 2 Peter 1:3–11). An interesting piece of the parable to note, however, is the amount of fruit that is produced and yielded. When we are connected to the vine of Christ, we will bear fruit. As Jesus explains in John 15, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." This is not saying "unless you bear fruit, you are not saved;" rather it is saying, "*when* you are saved, *then* you will bear fruit." The fruit of the Spirit is the evidence of changed lives. Therefore, our faith is put on display when we are made alive in Christ.

So, how can we know we are connected to the vine? It is by the fruit we bear and a longingness for keeping God's commands that is the true sign of salvation. Verse 23 says, "He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." *Why does the number decrease?*

This is also a prophetic promise of scripture; the gospel will be received by many, and those who are saved will go and make more disciples, but the fact remains that we live in a world corrupted by sin. It is a world that is still becoming more corrupt. So, as Jesus warns, some will hear the truth and many more will be saved because of this person. There will be some, however, who will not see the same reaction. As time goes on, more and more people will reject the gospel and the truth of scripture; we are witnessing it today. A nation that used to be founded on Biblical ideals and principles is moving further and further away from the Bible. Christians are persecuted throughout the world and hated just for being Christians (Matthew 10:27; John 15:18–25). Many church leaders, on the contrary, believe the world will soon become "Christianized." With the rise of the emerging church movement, it is easy to believe this. However, it is easy for the world to become Christianized when all that is being fed is that

which sounds good and is easy to listen to, or when the only reason we go to church on Sundays is for the visual experience. If there are genuine roots, however, Jesus says we will not necessarily see this at all.

Should we then be discouraged? By no means! We should, however, be willing to stay true to the gospel. Compromising truth for the sake of winning people over is not the approach we should be taking; we should be approaching the lost with both *grace* and *truth*. If we wish to see a true vineyard of changed lives— people who have decided to follow Jesus and bear fruit by being planted and allowing their roots, *and fruits*, to flourish, the first step is ensuring that the seed is watered.

A Sugar Coated View of God?

And one called to the other and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

—Isaiah 6:3

We live in a fast-paced society. American culture has made it easier than ever to find satisfaction, happiness, and fulfillment. I fear that the rise of cultural relevance in society has also seeped into many modern churches. With the encouragement of moral relativism among people, the pursuit of individualism¹, and the boom of media over the last decade, where has God been shifted to except the back burner?

"Why does God seem so far away?" "Why is it so hard to hear from God?" "Why is America abandoning the Christian ideals that were once so prevalent and influential?" "Why are so many students walking away from church after high school?" These are commonly asked and pondered questions among people of all ages and denominations within the church today. Perhaps one of the biggest reasons we seem to be abandoning God, or vice versa, is the fact that many of us have slowly drifted away from a proper understanding of who God is. The preaching and teaching of bubblegum gospel has only further diminished His divine image. Today, you will hear phrases such as *"just talk to God like he's your best friend."* We use apps such as *Sprinkle of Jesus*. We hear song lyrics like *"I love the way you hold me."* (In reference to Jesus). While an app that provides daily encouragement (not necessarily scripture-based) is not a bad thing, and songs that put God in the same love category as a significant other are catchy in and of themselves, when they become the focus or definition of a Biblical definition of God the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, we have lost sight of the holiness and worth of our Lord and Savior.

God has become more of a convenience than our Lord. Just look at the way we pray. Prayer can generally be separated into two categories: prayers of Responding and prayers of Asking. Within the category of Responsive prayers, there are two types. The first, prayers of praise, involve worshiping God for who He is. Essentially, this is the acknowledgement of His nature. Secondly, prayers of thanksgiving are thanking God for what he has done. The second category of prayer, Asking, can also be divided into two types. First, there are petitions; these are asking God specific requests for ourselves. Lastly, supplications are asking God for things on behalf of others.

Of the four types of prayer, prayers of petition are probably the most often prayed in American culture. We even jokingly pray for God to bless our favored sports teams. In an individualistic society, the need for God and absolute truth has been replaced by the need to be accepted, or the need to be right. Culture is essentially teaching students and adults alike that it is okay to believe whatever they want to believe; this eliminates the need for a supreme, authoritative God completely. If the Bible is not true, then God is not who Christians say He is; so why should we look to God for authority? In turn, we are left with a God that serves no other purpose than to

answer occasional prayers when we do not know what else to do in situations, and to use as a cop-out answer to questions that people do not know the answer to.

In terms of the Christian community, modern culture has also taken away the value of God. Many modern churches will preach a colloquial view of God, neglecting some of the most important attributes of His nature, including His holiness, divine wrath, and righteous judgment. While it is easy to come across as pharisaic in saying these things, understand that my intention is not to paint a picture of God that is unbiblical. I am simply pointing out the fact that individualism and relativism have affected the way we view God and having a proper understanding of the glory and magnitude of who God really is will ultimately undermine our response to His calling on our lives, our faith, and our personal walk with Him.

The God of the Bible

My uncle and cousin went on a mission trip to Africa with his church several years ago. They ministered in a village in Tanzania. One of the days of the trip, they and the mission team were about to go to a church service in the small church building the community had set up. As they were entering the hut, there were several people standing outside. My uncle and the translator with him asked the group of people why they were not going into the house, seeing as how the church was about to begin worshipping God. They replied “We cannot go in yet. *God is in there.*”

Woah. These people of the Tanzanian community understood something about the nature of God that many Christians in American culture seem to overlook: his holiness. The Africans were not ready to enter the presence of God. They wanted to be sure they were fully prepared to go in. How does that compare to many of our modern churches in America? We show up on a Sunday after having argued in the car with our spouse, brother, sister, children, etc. The first thing we do when walking in the doors of the church is run over and grab a cup of coffee, or in some cases, buy it from the church cafe. We walk into the worship center and find a good seat. Maybe we connect with some friends; we start talking with them about our week, even if the worship has already started. We sit back, relax, and enjoy the message, maybe take some notes, and then check our watches around the last ten minutes of the sermon, hoping the last worship song isn't a repetitive one, since all we can think about is where we are going to eat after service. For many of us, church has become a social club. Our walk with Christ has become a hobby.

How would our culture change if we started approaching God from a Biblical perspective? Isaiah 6:1–8 paints a vivid picture of the holiness of God. “Holy” literally means “set apart;” so understanding God’s holiness will help us understand more of His divine nature. Be aware that God is relational and personal; however, we must also acknowledge the characteristics he possesses that make him unlike any created gods. Let us read Isaiah’s vision of the throne room of God:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

This is a loaded passage; there is a lot going on, so let us unpack it. First, we see God high and lifted up on a throne. The train of his robe fills the whole temple in which Isaiah is witnessing everything. Right away, we are getting a picture of the majesty of God; the height of his throne and length of his robe are symbols of status. In many cultures, the longer a robe or a dress is, the more status or worth the person wearing it holds. God’s robe train is so long, it fills the entire room. The throne is lifted up so that those looking upon it must literally *look up* to see God. It puts Isaiah in a position of humility; he is literally and figuratively *underneath* the majesty, worth, status, and glory of God. Hence, many would literally fall on their faces before the Lord, known as “prostration” (Genesis 17:3; Numbers 20:6; Revelation 7:11). It is symbolic of humbling oneself in the presence of God. So, in case you were wondering where the tradition of bowing our heads during prayer came from, it is a toned-down form of prostration.

Secondly, the seraphim (a type of angel) are flying around God’s throne, singing praises to him. Notice, though, that they are covering their faces. *Even God’s angels cannot look directly at him.* Remember when Moses witnessed God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19), he could not look upon the face of God either. In fact, looking at the very backside of God left Moses’ face literally radiant. If the very image of God is so visually overwhelming, what more does that say about God’s character of holiness?

The most significant part of this passage, though, is the way the angel praises God. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts...” In Biblical Hebrew literature, words are repeated to add emphasis to whatever they are describing. For example, when Jesus says “Truly, truly, I say to you...” he is not just saying “what I’m saying is true;” he is saying “listen up, because there is no denying what I’m about to tell you.” So, the repetition of the word *holy* adds emphasis to God’s holiness. However, *holy* is the only word in the entire Hebrew Bible that is repeated more than two times in a row. Each time it is repeated, in Isaiah 6 and again in Revelation 4:8, it is used in reference to God. This unique usage of the word *holy* creates a totally new meaning; God is the *holiest of holies*. Essentially, God is beyond holy!

What is Isaiah's response to having been in the throne room of God? Does he rejoice? If Isaiah lived today, would he pull out his phone and try to get a good picture for Instagram? Would he get a selfie for Snapchat and put a timestamp on it, complete with a nice filter? Would it not be the happiest day of Isaiah's life, having witnessed God in person?

No, his reaction is quite the opposite. He cries out "Woe is me! For I am lost!" (Some translations use the phrase "I am *finished!*") Isaiah is overwhelmed to the point of thinking he is about to die, simply by the sheer acknowledgement of his lowly self being in the presence of God. How does this compare to the modern view of God today? Why do we regard God with such a limited acknowledgement of his holiness? Of course, we are in a much different position than Isaiah was, for sure. It is still humbling to think about the amount of emotion, fear, and awe Isaiah felt from being at the feet of the creator of the universe.

There is a quote in the Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis concerning Aslan the lion, who acts as a metaphor of God in the story. It reads, "'Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion.' 'Ooh' said Susan. 'I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion'... 'Safe?' said Mr. Beaver... 'Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.'"

Let us not forget that the very name of Jesus makes every knee bow and every tongue confess his Lordship (Philippians 2:10–11). Yet, we throw it around as slang. If God is as holy and worthy as he is made out to be in Isaiah, he deserves more praise and honor than we give him credit for. If God really is the divine, all-powerful, all-loving God of the Bible, he deserves so much more than being used as the occasional Instagram caption. If he really crawled up on a cross to save the very people who hated him, he deserves so much more glory than we can give him in return.

We also must be intentional in our reverence of God through worship. Nadab and Abihu, two of the sons of Aaron were put to death for not worshiping God correctly. They offered up what the author describes as "unauthorized fire" in the tabernacle, which he had not commanded. As a result, they were consumed by the fire, and died before the Lord (Leviticus 10:1–2). Again, it is important to understand Biblical context; the Israelites were under a different covenant and Mosaic law at the time. While this no longer applies to us, it does not alter the fact that God in his nature does not change (Malachi 3:6). So, He is still worthy of proper worship.

There can be no good news without bad news. The gospel does not make sense unless we realize that we are, in fact, all guilty of the same crime: sin. God, as a righteous judge, will judge justly. I have heard the argument before, *how could a loving God banish those who reject him to eternal torment in hell? That sounds contradictory to the all-loving God you preach about.* God is all-loving; so much so that he loved us while we were still enemies to him (Romans 5:8). He sent his son to die the most brutal of deaths for this reason. And His love is so powerful, that we are given the choice whether to accept it. God will not force you into his presence against your will. He loves you too much to do that. Eternal separation from God is the punishment we are all

deserving of, regardless. God's love, therefore, is *displayed* by offering us the choice to be with him or be separated from him. Part of the definition of love is that there must be a choice involved. So, the "*how could a loving God*" argument does not take into account just how vast God's love is. Eternal sin deserves eternal punishment; sinning against the God of the universe constitutes that degree of punishment. Even still, God's love goes deeper.

The Nature of Sin

What is the difference between punching your brother in the face and punching your mother in the face? You will be disciplined for both, but one obviously carries more weight than the other. Some would argue punching one's brother could be justified, but under no circumstances would anyone even allow the thought of punching one's mother to cross their mind. In terms of sin, we are faced with the same situation, to an even higher extent. Sinning against God is a higher offense than any other.

You have probably heard the phrase "sin is sin." Perhaps you have heard it said, "all sin is equal in the eyes of the Lord." Believe it or not, that is not a verse in the Bible; all sin is not equal. It may be deserving of the same eternal punishment, though there are different consequences for different sin. In fact, Jesus seems to imply this as well, when addressing the Pharisees. He says in Matthew 23:23 that they have "neglected the weightier matters of the law..."

I have seen this misconception played out in my own life, confusing the difference between the sin itself and the God I have sinned against. In doing so, I end up creating tiers, or categories for sin. What happens when we categorize types of sin is that we begin to question what constitutes certain ones as actually being sin. It isn't about *what* the sin is, it's about *who* the sin is *against*.

When considering sin, we shouldn't focus on what the potential consequences are, because they can be vague to us, being imperfect in nature as we are. We should consider who we are disobeying. Questioning sin is actually, at a deeper level, questioning the nature of God. God is the supreme, divine, authority that made all things. His intentions are often beyond our comprehension, but He is good, and he is the absolute standard of morality. mankind is sinful and corrupt until redeemed by Christ, so who are we to question the nature of the supreme standard of morality?

Take a look at the first sin, for example. Adam and Eve were commanded not to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Why? God told them they would surely die. However, as soon as they took a bite, there was no immediate consequence to eating the forbidden fruit, besides shame. The ultimate consequence for the disobedience, however, was spiritual death; the gravity of which far surpasses even physical death. One might wonder, *So why even create a tree like that in the first place? Why even give Adam and Eve the option to sin?* Because God was loving enough to give us the choice whether or not to obey him. Love, by definition, is freely given. That is where the heart of sin lies; not in how much weight the

consequences carry. Jesus says if we love him, we will desire to live by his commands, rather than our sinful nature (John 14:15).

So many modern churches are failing to preach about the holy wrath of God. I understand that it sounds like a scary topic, but if it is real, which it is, shouldn't we then be more disposed to teach about it and how to appease it? The answer, of course, is that preaching about the wrath of God, or propitiation and atonement, or God as a good judge, or sanctification are not "attractive." We have adopted bubblegum gospel, which does not allow for such sermons. They are like the vegetables that stay on the edge of the child's plate because he does not want to eat them. I was that kid, too. It is the vegetables, however, that provide the most nutrition and growth. Though hard to swallow at first, they are vital to growing children. Likewise, the truth of scripture and of God is vital to the growing believer.

We must not ignore the qualities that make God God. Yes, he is loving in an unconditional manner that makes him like no other, but he is also just. He will ultimately give us what we choose, should we decide to believe and accept Christ or continue living in sin. C. S. Lewis put it this way: There are two kinds of people in this world. There are those who say to God, 'Your will be done;' or those to whom God says, 'Your will be done.'

It's Not All About Us

For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

—Philippians 2:21

We live in the age of individualism. A huge fraction of the ads we see on television and the internet are ways to “make your life better” or “find true happiness.” Unfortunately, these ideas have often made their way into the church as well. Too many sermons have shifted the application of scripture to ourselves in every sense, rather than grasping a proper understanding of the context and desired message from the author. Taking this approach to the Bible is a dangerous use of eisegesis; we read into the verses to try to see how they apply to us, even when they do not. As a result, there are false messages being preached in our churches designed to make people feel good.

We must remember that not everything in scripture is about us. In fact, it is important to remember the fact that Israel is still God’s chosen people. That being said, there are things in the Bible that are specific to Israel as a nation. The Old Testament, for example, *describes*, whereas the New Testament *prescribes*. Also, the redemption was for the Jews first, and then to the Gentiles (Romans 1:16), and so the Bible applies to us as well (Romans 4:23–24). In addition, there is plenty in scripture that serves the sole purpose to point toward the glory of God. In other words, not every verse in the Bible can be used to make us feel good, as many bubblegum gospel preachers seem to think. The Bible was not written to us, about us; rather, it was written for us about God, and therefore we apply His doctrinal truth to our lives.

That is not to say we should disregard whatever does not directly apply to our situations of life, because *all* scripture is profitable for teaching, correction, reproof, and for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). We should, however, be very careful not to take ideas and verses out of context and wrongly apply them. The result of false application and making the Bible all about us is two things: we fall into the illusion of bubblegum gospel and we neglect the explicit authority of the Word of God, thus creating entirely wrong assumptions about how to hold scripture as an anchor of our lives.

Famous pastors have said things on television that are in direct opposition to the preaching of God’s Word. I have watched interviews with pastors who have a huge following, or are the leaders of megachurches, in which they have said things that make me cringe. Cultural Christianity has led to some church leaders openly claiming ideas like, *abortion is not really a bad thing*, and *Jesus is not the only way to heaven*. The foundations are crumbling both outside and within the church. Individualism has made the Christian walk less about the self-validating authority of God’s Word, and more about validating the authority of ourselves.

God the Gumball Machine?

We have begun interpreting the Bible improperly through the lens of individualism. We twist the message of God's glory and apply it to ourselves. Most of the messages we hear in church have little to do with glorifying God, and a lot to do with glorifying ourselves, overcoming our past mistakes, pain, and habits and discovering our "true potential" or living our "best life." Everything in our culture is about us, for us, and making us look/feel good, but did not create us for our glory; he created us for his glory. One of the reasons so many people are rejecting the authority of the Bible is for that reason—we want it to be about us, not God. Bubblegum gospel tastes good because it points toward us. I hear sermons all the time full of phrases like "God wants to bless you; do not be a hindrance to the blessing." Has the Christian walk become about receiving blessings or discovering our potential? Have we forgotten the sacrifice and calling required to follow Christ? If we are really going to find our life, we must be willing to lose it first (Matthew 10:39).

The Christian walk is a sacrifice; reflective of the ultimate sacrifice Jesus paid for the forgiveness of sin. In an egocentric culture, it is easy to search for the self-benefitting aspects of everything we are part of. Let us not forget that the Christian walk is quite the opposite; we do not live for ourselves anymore. Having been changed by grace through faith, we now live for Christ. Glorifying God and proclaiming his truth should be the ultimate goal in the life of the Christ-follower. Why have we made it the goal to glorify ourselves? "Celebrity pastors" have contributed to this idea. Jesus was not a celebrity; he was born and lived in the humblest of conditions. Born in a stable (Luke 2:1–20), our Lord worked as a carpenter (Mark 6:3), washed the feet of his disciples, even though he was a Rabbi to them (John 13:1–17), and died the most brutal of deaths known to man. We are called to be imitators of Christ (Ephesians 5:1), which implies we are to be humble.

A very popular worship song today is "King of My Heart." It is a beautiful song; it really encompasses the goodness and glory of God, and the praise He is due therein. There is one part of the song that has always interested me, however. In the bridge, the following line is repeated: "*You're never gonna let, you're never gonna let me down.*" This is the "climax" of the song if you will; it is the part where I see most people's hands raised during worship. After the bridge the chorus is repeated even bigger.

Why do we sing about God being the king of our lives, and then remind Him that He won't let us down? After all, as God reminded Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy" (Romans 9:15). God *is* beyond merciful and gracious, but I think the bridge should say "*I never want to let, I never want to let you down.*" Let me stop and say I am not trying to attack what might be your favorite worship song. That is not my intention. I do want us to be aware, however, of *who* we are worshiping. We must be careful not to become self-consumed. When the Christian walk becomes about us, we lose sight of the glory of God. Many of the modern worship songs we sing have something to do with God's faithfulness to us. Why don't we sing as much about God's glory? According to the Westminster Shorter Confession, the chief end of man

is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. We should be willing to glorify God regardless of our situation. It is not God's job to make sure *we* are not being let down, though He proves time and time to be abundantly faithful even so; it is our job to make sure we are not letting *Him* down in our faithfulness to Him.

The Egocentric Gospel

So many preachers are applying scripture in ways the author never intended. Contextual understanding of the Bible, therefore, is vital to understanding what God has revealed through the author. However, I have heard many sermons which take the message of the author and eisegete a message from it that has nothing to do with the passage. While the message may be practically sound, there is little *Scriptural* support. The Bible should not merely *promote* a pastor's sermon, it should *govern* the sermon. In other words, the message should defend the scripture, the scripture should not defend the message, lest false application occurs. If a pastor is the Lord's appointed leader of the body of Christ, which he is, he should be using scripture as a basis for his teaching. This implies solid, exegetical understanding of the meaning of scripture.

False application of scripture is what leads to bubblegum gospel and false views of the gospel, such as the idea that "*God wants me to be happy,*" or "*God wants me to be wealthy.*"

But Doesn't God Want Me to be Happy?

When we start focusing on glorifying ourselves rather than the one who made us, our sermons shift focus as well. As a result, much of the truth of scripture is thrown out in fear of the harshness of it. Disciples were never called to a life of luxury and happiness; we are called to a life of sacrifice (Matthew 10:38, 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23, 14:27). A common misconception in churches today is the idea that "God wants me to be happy." Unfortunately, many of the sermons have warped to fit this mold. Bubblegum gospel will feed believers and non-believers ideas relating to having our best life, and abundant blessings, but when tragedy occurs, we blame God, question him, or are left in a state of confusion and loss. Has the focus shifted from a God-centered church to a *me*-centered church?

Take a moment to ask yourself the reason you are attending the church you are a member of. What made you want to join? I went through a period where I had to ask myself the same questions, and I was shocked and honestly ashamed of my answer. I realized that the primary reason I was attending the church I was a part of at the time was for the experience and the atmosphere. I was proud of the church I was at solely because of the relevance of it. *My desire for church was no longer a desire for God; it was a desire to feel good.* My motives for going to church were in the wrong place. I was serving, but my heart was not in ministry, it was in promoting the experience. I was attending a small group, but my heart was not in God's Word, it was in hanging out with friends. I had gotten to the point where I was serving every Sunday for each worship "experience." I served in the tech booth, running the monitors for the service, and I

was not hearing the word because my focus was on making sure the show was running correctly. By the time Sunday morning was over, I was exhausted. What was meant to be a day of rest had become a day of stress for me.

Many of us will attend a particular church simply for the environment, the pastor's preaching style, the aesthetics, or the music. I am not denying the importance of said factors, but I fear they are becoming the driving factors for church attendance. I even heard one person say she had recently left a church she described as "irrelevant." She said she was much happier at her new church, and much more impressed with the atmosphere; the first reason she listed for why the new church was a better choice than her last, however, was that the pastor could dress well.

We must be sure that our reasoning for attending the House of the Lord never becomes about us, or even the wardrobe of the pastor; it must be about God. The cultural influence of the modern church has given us a speed-dating view of churches. We want to find the one that is the most *attractive, convenient*, and makes us *feel good*. We are faced with a nearly endless buffet of ice cream flavors and choosing the best one is almost impossible, because the satisfaction of the things we are looking for in churches only lasts so long. The flavor of the bubble gum eventually dissolves, and we are left with a church that has lost the fire for Christ, ministry, discipleship, and missions. We have no other choice but to find another piece of candy to enjoy. Sometimes we must be reminded that we are still here for a purpose, and ultimately are vessels for the glory of God (2 Timothy 2:21; 1 Corinthians 6:19–20; 2 Corinthians 4:7). Sometimes God has to put us in our place to remind us that he is still in his place. That is, regardless of what church looks like, the glory still belongs to God now and forever. I believe we should strive for humility before the King of Kings.

Sad Puppies Make Me Cry

We have all seen the commercials on television promoting homeless animals. You know the ones I'm talking about—pictures of sad puppies flash across the screen as "In the Arms of an

Angel" by Sarah McLachlan is playing, and the narrator is urging you to give a certain amount of money a month to give them a home. How much less convincing would those commercials be without the music or the sad pictures? Perhaps few people would watch them.

This appeal to emotion through aesthetics is known as **emotionalism**. We are more likely to be convinced of something or persuaded to react to something when there is emotion involved. In a sense, it is manipulation. We do the same thing in church. Churches tailor our sermons to appeal to emotions in order to persuade the congregation, because bubblegum gospel has created a culture that believes the Holy Spirit is not present without an emotional experience. So many churches will tailor the atmosphere and sermons to be emotivism-driven; soft music is played during the prayer, the worship is emotional, with a good light show to go along with it, the pastor connects the topic verse to each person's individual life by listing struggles people may have

gone through such as divorce, loss of loved ones, abandonment, etc. Are these real issues that should be addressed? Absolutely. However, many of us have made the Bible about us. Church culture thrives in *me-ism* through bubblegum gospel using emotivism; if we are not careful, it becomes more about presentation than truth. Are the previously listed aspects of a Sunday morning bad? Not at all. However, are they vital?

We believe the false assumption that we need to cater only to the emotional faculty of believers. As a result, we manufacture feelings in our churches. The person knows less and less of why they believe what they believe but more and more of how they feel because of it. As Kyle Idleman says, *Whatever you win them with is what you'll win them to*. In other words, the means by which we attract people are the means by which we must keep them.

I have to remind myself that God gets the glory no matter what the circumstances of my life. Even when my heart is not in it. God gets my hopes and dreams no matter what they are. Pastor Francis Chan was asked in an interview “what is working well in your... model that others can reproduce in other areas...?” He responded by discussing the church he had started and how he began to feel convicted about the “waste of spiritual gifts” each Sunday, being that the Bible talks about each member of the body possessing a supernatural gift instilled by God for his glory. Chan stated, “Then I started thinking, how much money does it cost to run this thing? Millions of dollars. How come people in other countries get to go to church for free?”

What would our churches look like if everything we did was entirely God-centered? What if we weren't as concerned about how “cool” our churches are? Chan went on to talk about a vision for the house-church model of church, where people were discipled in small groups, who went on to lead other groups that continued to reproduce, all of which occurred within homes and did not cost a dime. What would it look like if we were not concerned about pleasing ourselves but only concerned about pleasing God?

Most people want to hear messages that apply to us, and that is not a wrong desire. And do not get me wrong; application is a vital part of Bible study and sermons. There needs to be practical application involved; that is what the apostle Paul talks about when discussing the usefulness of the Bible in 2 Timothy 3:16. With the mindset of “me-ism” in our approach to God's Word, though, it is easy to read scripture out of context and through the lens of individualism. We must be sure that the messages we are preaching, and the applicative value therein, are true to what the Word of God really says.

What Would Jesus Do?

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

—Matthew 16:24

There is a well-known quote that says "Preach the gospel always. Use words when necessary." It is falsely attributed to Francis of Assisi, while he never actually said this. The phrase was introduced during the rise of Modernism in both the Church and the secular world, and the point of the quote is that the gospel is better expressed through actions rather than words. Essentially, the writer of the quote is suggesting the Christians should focus more on loving our neighbors than preaching truth. What a dangerous phrase!

The idea that actions speak louder than words, as suggested by the falsely quoted phrase, also goes along with another popular modern phrase, especially among students. "*What Would Jesus Do?*" This question has become the topic of many sermons; it is a favorite motto of many, and I can't tell you how many students I see wearing wristbands with "WWJD" printed on them. As widely known as the saying is, why are we not seeing more evangelism as a result of the WWJD question? Perhaps the reason is that this question is lacking in several areas.

This question was originally asked by Charles Sheldon, who was suggesting that the Christian walk was a more influential means of evangelism than preaching the gospel. While the walk and lifestyle of a Christian is vital to his or her ministry, the truth he or she proclaims is even more so. Jesus did not come just to perform signs and wonders, he performed signs and wonders as a part of his real mission: to bear witness to the *truth* (John 18:37).

Has Jesus's name become the subject of simple good behavior? What do we mean when we ask that question? Has his name, like much of scripture, lost its significance?

The phrase in its modern sense is typically used to suggest that when people are faced with decisions, we should choose the "Jesus way" of reacting. Would Jesus hold a grudge? No. Would Jesus show love to someone when given the opportunity? Yes. Would Jesus give to the poor? Yes. Would Jesus complain in situations that did not go his way? No. However, the original intent of the question, when asked by Sheldon, was to suggest that Jesus would have been accepting of all. This was during the rise of "universalism," the belief that God is the Heavenly Father of all, regardless of his or her beliefs. Simply put, everybody is saved. Universalism arose during the 19th century as a way to attract more people to church. Many Church leaders had begun searching for ways to achieve higher numbers in attendance. After all, the push for Christian liberalism, a way of getting away from the fundamentals of scripture, left people questioning the authority of God's word. So, the phrase "What Would Jesus Do?" proposed the idea that Christians and Church leaders should be less "fundamental" in beliefs. *Jesus would not*

have been concerned about someone's beliefs. This phenomenon is occurring in modern America, and I fear that many churches are responding in the same way.

An issue with the phrase is that many Christians and non-believers use it as a philosophy. We have disconnected the gravity of Jesus's life and purpose from his name. The correct question we should be asking as the anchor of our walk is "What *Did* Jesus Do?"

The cross. Let us not forget the purpose of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. Without the cross and resurrection, the rest of his life was void. So, what would Jesus do? He would make a way for a fallen humanity to have life in his presence. He would not be afraid to preach the gospel always. He would not be afraid to speak truth. As Christians, we are called to be imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1), and Jesus was fully God in human form. How are we to live, then?

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus and do "what Jesus would do?" To answer this, we must understand what a follower of Jesus really is.

What is a Disciple?

Jesus called his twelve apprentices "disciples," and this is also how he referred to anyone else who decided to follow him. A disciple of Jesus is, as Kyle Idleman would describe, a "completely committed follower." This is best illustrated by the twelve disciples Jesus had during his ministry. They were with him everywhere he went, they witnessed his miracles, they learned what it meant to live life in a manner worthy of the gospel.

I cannot imagine how incredible it must have been for Jesus's disciples to have that opportunity with God himself, in the form of their Rabbi.

Needless to say, the twelve disciples of Jesus were beyond committed, to the point that many of them were martyred after Jesus's death. Some of them even wrote a portion of the New Testament. The question "What Would Jesus Do?" or more importantly, "What *Did* Jesus Do?" should leave us as disciples of Christ with the same mentality as Jesus's twelve disciples. That is, we are called to be completely committed followers of him. Being a disciple requires discipleship. Jesus poured into the disciples day after day; he praised them, rebuked them, encouraged them and disciplined them. That is what true leadership looks like. So, how are we leading the next generation of believers? Are we doing what Jesus would do? Are we making disciples, or are we just drawing crowds?

Being a disciple requires sacrifice. Look at how Jesus describes what true commitment looks like in Luke 14:26–27: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."

At first glance, this may seem a bit extreme. He is calling his followers to hate their families and their own lives, on top of carrying an instrument of torture in order to follow him. That is a serious lifestyle change, and I think it looks more serious than simply wearing a “WWJD” bracelet wherever we go. We are called to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God (Romans 12:1). After all, that is what our call to follow Jesus is a call to die to our old selves in order to be made alive in Christ. Has our modern culture masked the antecedence of true commitment? Has it mollified the importance of the cross?

Before I go any further, allow me to clarify; you may be wondering if I am suggesting that salvation is not genuine unless your life has experienced a complete 360. I am not saying that there are qualifications to following Jesus. You do not have to be “good enough” for salvation. That is banking on the idea of works-based salvation, which is not Biblical. Jesus’s blood covered *all* sinners. I believe the Bible is true when it describes what salvation is: repentance and belief in Jesus Christ (John 3:16; John 3:36; Romans 10:13; Acts 2:21; Acts 3:19; Acts 16:31). Salvation is a free gift, and there is nothing *we* have done or *can* do to earn it, it is the result of everything *Jesus has* done on the cross. However, deciding to commit our lives to Jesus’s calling does not end with the moment we make that choice—it is a life-long walk. For instance, marriage does not stop the moment you say “I do;” that is only the beginning. From there, it is a life-long commitment to each other, no matter how difficult things get. Likewise, accepting Jesus is only the beginning of a renewed life in Christ as a disciple.

Disciples make disciples. So, we must start discipling. We must not cower at the idea of speaking truth and grace. We must not be ashamed to call ourselves completely committed followers of Christ. We must be willing to lead through love. That’s what Jesus would do.

Church Culture in The Age of Branding

For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

—1 Corinthians 12:13

I job-shadowed the graphics director of a large church years ago when I was considering graphic design as my career. I had the privilege of hanging out with him for a few hours at the design studio he worked at to observe, learn, and pick his brain. One of the principles he taught me about is known as *brand-consistency*. In the marketing industry, brand-consistency is a helpful tool, and one that is often overlooked. Brand-consistency involves using the same graphic styles (fonts, colors, images, etc.) on or in every product or promotional material in order not to stray too much from a common appearance of the particular brand. For example, Apple is very good at preserving brand-consistency. Their products, stores, and commercials all have the same, simplistic appearance and fonts. It is the consistency of Apple which makes them easy to distinguish among other brands.

While brand-consistency is an important part of graphics, it has also made its way into the modern church world. Churches have begun branding themselves using the same principles of visual attractiveness as do major companies, and it is all thanks to the cultural influence sweeping churches today. While this may not sound like a bad thing right away (and I do not necessarily think it is), I do fear that churches are beginning to put *too* much focus on the visuals of the church “brand.”

Church logos are everything now; you will see them as decals on cars, worn on t-shirts, as designs on coffee mugs and travel cups, and pretty much anything else that will “advertise” the church. The problem with the logo culture churches have created is that it also promotes an individualism of sorts for the local church. If the Bible is true (and I believe it is), and the church is one spiritual body unified in Christ (as the Bible claims), then why are churches quick to distinguish themselves separately from other churches? The rise of denominations after the Protestant Reformation did nothing to assist in the unity of the church; rather, it created a divide of Christians that continues to be an issue within Christianity to this day. God’s Word has not changed, but the way people view it has, which in turn has created rifts in the body. This was not the vision of the early church. Ideally, Christians would all be unified in mind and in spirit, but as long as there are disagreements in theology and church polity, this will not occur.

Why is it that we feel we must create visually distinguishable and graphically pleasing churches? Why are local churches quick to put their logo on everything? Has professionalism overrun the need for community? Are we preaching the gospel or are we advertising? Are we praising the name of Jesus, or using Jesus to try to make a name for ourselves?

What This World Needs

The world is starving for truth. We need unity now more than ever, and the individualistic culture of people and churches creates a hindrance for this need. What is the church to do? We have created a church culture in which many modern churches with a mentality of relevance strive to follow the cultural train; thus, we often neglect vital doctrinal ideals and often sugarcoat others with feel-good messages. All these aspects are complete with a logo slapped on top of them; is this the model of church we read about in the New Testament?

It is important to note that unity does not also equal *uniformity*. That is where specific beliefs of established denominations come into play. This is why C. S. Lewis describes the Christian faith as being “Mere Christianity.” The idea behind Christianity is large enough for all denominations to agree on the fundamental ideals of scripture. All Christians agree on the absolutes of Christianity; where disagreement falls should be discerned by the light of God’s Word. In the fundamentals, there should be *unity*; in the non-essentials, there should be *liberty*.

Look at Acts 2:44. The church has just been established; the gospel is beginning to spread, and Jesus’s command is taking place. What characteristic does the author mention about the church, other than their new zeal? “And all who believed were together and had all things in common.”

Unity. Understand that this does not mean they all happened to possess the same exact characteristics. No, this is not talking about unity of interests; it is talking about unity of beliefs. Regardless of what local church you attend, we are all the body of Christ, meaning we all share in the same mission.

What this world needs is a church that is not bound by cultural expectations and limitations; we need a church that is universally one body, mind, and spirit in Christ. We need a church that is not separated by denominations or logos. We need a church that pursues the lost and feeds the believers. So, how do we achieve unity?

We need a less self-centered church and a more God-centered church. We need to stop putting so much stock in branding and cultural relevance and start investing in the Kingdom of Heaven. We need to look beyond the boundaries of denominations and turn our eyes toward the one goal that matters: Jesus. We need to resist the burden of people-pleasing and pursue solid truth. We need to stop feeding the world bubble gum and start giving them sustenance that matters. Truth, at the end of the day, is the driving force in whether lost, broken people will decide to be found and healed by Christ or not.

What this world needs is less branding and more multiplying. What we have neglected in the push for large, branded churches is the vitality of church multiplication. There comes a point at which the flock gets too large for the shepherd to care for. This is why we need more reproducing churches. Size is not a bad thing but can be detrimental to the intentionality of the church family. If my family reunions consisted of 5,000 people, I would not know half of them personally. Some churches grow to sizes in which it would be impossible to know who is a member and who

is not, much less who is attending each Sunday. The unity of the body is abandoned in the pursuit of growth. However, if churches would start raising up leaders through intentional discipleship, we could not only send out people to invite them to church, but to start planting other churches. In turn, we are reaching a wider demographic of people and continuing a pattern of multiplying. If the church is one body, the amount of facilities in which it is held should not matter; logos should not matter.

So, what are we waiting for? Let us start raising up leaders who are not bound by culture, but who are willing to grow the body of Christ throughout every tribe and nation, not just in the local church.

The Necessity of Conviction

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

—1 John 1:9

“*That’s nothing but a lie from the enemy!*” I cannot tell you how many times I have heard this phrase. While there is truth in it, within the proper context of usage, there are times it is used in a completely false manner. With the rise of bubblegum gospel, feel-good theology, and support-group style Bible study, the idea of *conviction* has been pushed to the back-burner, if not dismissed entirely. The Bible has a lot to say about conviction, so why should we leave it out of our sermons and small-groups? In fact, sanctification in general is a term seldomly heard in many modern churches. Why? Because it sounds too traditional and “deep.” However, according to the Word of God, it is a vital aspect of the Christian walk, so believers should be more than willing to pursue a sanctified faith in Christ. The only downside is that sanctification requires doing away with the old in order for God to bring out the new.

Part of the process of God stripping away our old, sinful selves is conviction of sin. Merriam Webster defines a conviction as *the act or process of finding a person guilty of a crime especially in a court of law*. That is exactly what conviction of sin is; we are all **guilty** of disobeying the holy, perfect, and righteous God. We must, therefore, acknowledge our crime through conviction, followed by repentance. The problem in a culturally-focused view of Christianity is that we are uncomfortable with conviction, to the point where we end up suppressing or ignoring it completely. We do not like to admit we are wrong, and we especially do not like knowing we are wrong and feeling guilty because of it. We live in a culture in which everyone has to be right. This is why universal tolerance is harped on so avidly. To ensure everyone else knows we are right, we must make our opinions known through any form of social media we can get our hands on. When we realize we are wrong, we will do anything we can to avert the attention from the fact that we made a mistake. Nobody enjoys conviction.

I love cookie dough. Yes, I said cookie dough, not cookies, I love a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie as well, don’t get me wrong, but something about eating the raw cookie dough is especially enticing. But I shouldn’t. Have you ever paid attention to the packages of frozen cookie dough that clearly say, “DO NOT CONSUME RAW COOKIE DOUGH?” (As if anyone who enjoys cookie dough as much as I do really adheres to that warning.) There is a reason cookie companies are required to print the instruction, however. Eating raw cookie dough can be dangerous; especially too much at a time. I remember a time I had the bright idea to indulge in the forbidden fruit that is cookie dough. I was at home by myself, had nothing to do, so what better idea than to drive to the store, pick up a package of frozen cookie dough, and enjoy? I ate several (at least 5) squares of raw, chocolate chip cookie dough, fresh out of the package. Needless to say, my stomach did not agree.

The rest of the day, I had a horrible stomach ache. What felt good in the moment ended up ruining my afternoon. It was seriously uncomfortable, but necessary. Imagine if our bodies had no way of alerting us when we were consuming things we should avoid. We would continue to eat more and more cookie dough, with no alert signals. You see, stomach aches are our bodies' way of telling us to slow down on the cookie dough or sweets. Conviction is a lot like that stomach ache. When we sin, it is like ignoring the clear warning on the package of cookie dough. We feel convicted as a way of reminding us we should not have done that in the first place.

Giving Satan Too Much Credit

As I said above, one of the most common phrases I hear is something along the lines of "what you're feeling is just a lie from Satan." The irony in this phrase is that half of the time, the phrase itself is a lie. Don't get me wrong, Satan is a liar; in fact, he is the father of lies (John 8:44). One of his most useful tactics, especially in today's society and culture, is the use of lies. He will lie to us about ourselves, about others, about the church, and about God. With the help of the media, his audience is increasing every day. Children, teenagers and adults alike are exposed to the enemy's lies every time they log onto social media, watch videos on the internet, or watch their favorite programs on television and the radio. This is not to say you should throw out your cell phone or computer but be aware that anything desirable can be used to create a foothold for Satan (Ephesians 4:27; 2 Corinthians 11:14).

One thing we must never confuse as one of Satan's lies, though, is the feeling of conviction. Imagine this fictional scenario: Jim has been struggling with looking at things on the internet he should not be looking at. It has become an unhealthy habit, and to make it worse, his wife does not know about this habit. He feels guilty about it and knows this is something he should not be doing, especially after he has made a vow of faithfulness to his wife. Jim has been attending a men's small group at his church once a week. They read a passage from the Bible, and then discuss what the passage means in their personal lives. One night at a Bible study group, Jim decides to talk about his personal life. He is open with his small group and says "listen guys, for some reason I am having some serious doubts about my role as a husband. There are things and habits that I struggle with and I feel like I am not measuring up. In fact, I get the strangest feeling my marriage might be in danger for some reason. Like something is wrong."

Naturally, the guys in Jim's group have his back and are more than supportive. One of them replies by saying "hey bro, don't listen to those lies from the enemy!" Someone else chimes in with "yeah, Satan is just trying to bring you down. He's making you feel bad about your marriage. He wants to destroy it." Another member of the group says "you gotta shake off those feelings, Jim; you're a great husband. The enemy is getting into your head!"

Unfortunately, this scenario is all-too common. What Jim was feeling was not a lie from the enemy, although Satan may use guilt to bring him down even further; what he was feeling was conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 7:9-10). We must be careful not to discredit

the work of the Holy Spirit in any way, be it salvation, miraculous intervention, and even conviction of sin. Understanding conviction is a necessary step to repentance. Simply brushing off the feeling as a “lie from the enemy” is unacceptable. Cultural Christianity pushes for a comfortable relationship with Jesus; we have essentially forgotten what the calling entails. If we love God, we are expected to obey Him (John 14:15). Part of obedience is the requirement for discipline, and proper discipline requires the acknowledgement of wrongdoing. This is where conviction comes into play. You cannot seek genuine forgiveness for something you have no remorse for.

We also often accuse the enemy of spiritual attack under circumstances that are not spiritual attack. Once again, let me say I am not undermining the reality or gravity of spiritual attack; it is all too real. However, when we begin to label certain difficult feelings as the work of the enemy, we step into dangerous territory. Sometimes the work of the Holy Spirit on our lives is not comfortable. We cannot expect our walk with Jesus to be a painless, smooth ride in which we are always right. We are imperfect humans in need of a savior and sometimes that constitutes discomfort and conviction of the sin we are cursed by.

So, what should our response to spiritual conviction be? Whenever we encounter conviction of sin, there is a next step necessary: *repentance*. It is all too unfortunate that the nature of repentance is something that is rarely pushed in churches or small groups due to the lack of intentional discipleship. Many will take God’s unconditional love and forgiveness for granted; it is viewed as a sort of “get-out-of-hell-free card.” This was never how God’s love was supposed to be embraced.

What Does Repentance Look Like?

The Bible has a lot to say about repentance, and bubblegum gospel tends to ignore its importance. Many sermons will preach the idea of having a great life and finding your true potential, and we may hear mentioned the idea of repentance, but seldomly will we hear sermons which go into depth about the subject. Why is that? Because modern church leaders do not want people to feel bad; that is not my assumption, well-known pastors have openly admitted this fact. The acknowledgement of sin and the need for conviction and repentance makes people uncomfortable, and bubblegum gospel attracts crowds, so they have sadly left it out of their messages almost entirely. If we forget about conviction and repentance, people will approach life believing they are “generally good” and thus the need for a savior is no longer a need, but more of a suggestion. Repentance is vital, and it requires three things of the believer.

The first step of repentance from sin is the requirement of **genuine sorrow**. There must be a godly grief, to put it another way. It is important to understand the difference between *guilt* and *conviction*. Guilt will tell you “you did this, so you are a horrible person.” Conviction will tell you “you did this, so you need to make it right and turn from it.” Without a true feeling of sorrow for the sin, there will be no true, intentional repentance.

I am the middle child of two other siblings, an older brother and younger sister. They say the middle child is either the wild one or the most reserved; I definitely am and always have been the latter. I got in trouble the least out of us three children, but when I did get caught disobeying my parents, I felt sorrow for it. As a child, however, the type of sorrow felt was different; I was not as sorry that I disobeyed my parents' instruction as I was simply sorry that *I got caught*.

When kids are young and get caught doing something disobedient to their parents, they will often express sorrow for the act. We must ask ourselves: are they sorry that they disobeyed, or are they sorry that they got caught disobeying? The difference between disobeying our parents and disobeying God is that God never has to "catch us in the act." He knows we are going to disobey before we ever do it, and he knows we are disobeying while we are doing it. True conviction is felt because of the sin and a longing to turn from it.

If this is to be the case of the believer's life, our hearts must be breaking for everything that displeases God. Our hearts should be breaking when we see violence on the news, children rebelling against their parents, people using God's name in vain, people denying Jesus, people hating one another because of skin color, people putting others to death because of their beliefs, corruption within the church, rape, abandonment; the list could go on and on. What this also implies is that we should be heartbroken whenever we disobey our Heavenly Father. We should desire to turn from our ways.

The next step of repentance is **confession**. We must be willing to confess our sins to the one we sinned against. 1 John 1:9 says "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." No matter whether a criminal pleads not guilty or not, he is still guilty of his crime. God knows this about sin. One may object, "what if I don't believe in sin? How can I still be guilty of something I did not know I had committed?" The answer is that ignorance of the law is not an excuse. A rapist is still guilty of rape, even if they believe they did nothing wrong or feel no remorse. Besides, Romans 1 tells us that we all know within our hearts that there are absolutes, including morality; some of us simply choose to suppress them. Likewise, in Romans 2:15, Paul says about the Gentiles, "They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them." All of us have some idea of absolute morality. Many simply choose to reject it.

The good news about God, especially in comparison to other world religions, is that God is a forgiving God. There is no being "good enough" for God; he already took care of that debt. It is humanly impossible, anyways. However, let us not take that fact for granted and forget how much he despises our sin (Proverbs 6:16–19; Psalm 11:5). We must be cleansed from all the unrighteousness that is within us; in order to receive that cleansing, we must first confess. I heard it said once that the first step in feeling better is admitting you're sick. We who are guilty of a crime must be willing to admit to our crimes.

Lastly, the final step toward repentance is **turning**. We must turn *from sinful* behavior and turn *to* God. Sanctification requires so much more than simply asking God for forgiveness. He already forgave us when he bore the sins of the world on him while dying on the cross. The ultimate sacrifice has already been made; God has not called us to keep living the same lives as we did before, just with the added bonus of his divine forgiveness for every time we mess up; he has called us to a new life of repentance, taking up our cross and following him.

If the first two steps are met, we will be much more willing to follow through with the last step. Paul says in Colossians to “put to death” the deeds of the flesh (Colossians 3:5). This language shows us the sacrifice necessary to turn from sin. Literally, kill off the old patterns of sin, says Paul. It’s not enough to just try to stop a bad habit. It is impossible to “stop sinning” by ourselves. Repentance is a response to salvation. It is also important to understand that repentance, like following Jesus, is not a one-time decision. It is a life-long process and posture, a necessary posture for carrying our cross.

Be careful not to brush off feelings of conviction. What we often mistake as the words of the enemy might very well be the work of the Holy Spirit. Conviction is a vital part of the life of every believer; we must be willing to accept it and take the next step of faith, which is turning from our sin, if we are to achieve true sanctification. Otherwise, we are feeding ourselves nothing but bubble gum, which will not satisfy eternally.

Seven Churches

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. —Revelation 1:7

I used to be terrified of the book of Revelation. I would hear the stories of scorpion demons, torment, beasts with seven heads, tribulation, the Antichrist, people seeking death and not finding it, etc. Not to mention the fact that I had heard how confusing the book is. It freaked me out, so my first instinct was to avoid reading it completely. Unfortunately, this is the exact same approach to Revelation that so many Christians are taking today, and it is the reason we will rarely hear a sermon preached from Revelation in church. In the pastor's defense, Revelation can be a bit intimidating; when people are faced with the bizarre images, they immediately try to decipher the symbols, and sometimes end up with interpretations that were never intended by the author. We cannot ignore the fact, however, that Revelation is in the Bible which means that it is divinely inspired. Because it is inspired, it is therefore inerrant, infallible, authoritative and sufficient, as is the rest of scripture. So, we must treat it like the rest of scripture: as *truth*.

The events described in Revelation have been translated a number of different ways; some believe the book is entirely symbolic, others believe every account in Revelation has already happened,¹ while many believe the events described are yet to come.² Regardless, there is a lot to learn from the book of Revelation. I eventually overcame my fear of cracking open the book, and I realized how full of truth it is, both for the future and the present.

There are two chapters in the book, chapters 2 and 3, in which John is given a vision of seven churches. The churches he sees were literal churches during the time Revelation was written, but a closer look at how John addresses them reveal that he is also speaking to modern churches, and churches of all generations. John sees the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, which were all churches in Asia Minor. We can learn a lot about modern churches from the things he says about each one of the ancient churches. Many churches are shifting the focus; we live in the age of relativism and it is eating away at the foundations of churches. Bubblegum gospel has seeped into many of the sermons we hear. Not so surprisingly, these very dangers were discussed by John in Revelation 2–3. For each of the churches mentioned, John describes aspects of them that they are doing right and condemns them for areas in which they are failing.

The Church in Ephesus

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up

for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.' (Revelation 2:1–7)

Here is a little bit of context as to what is going on: John is having a vision from Jesus of seven different churches, each represented by an angel before him. John is told by Jesus what he is to say to each church, beginning with the church in Ephesus. Jesus says that the Ephesian church is characterized by patience and endurance, their repulsion of evil and discernment of false teachings (v. 2). However, the Ephesian church has failed in one area: *they have abandoned their first love* (v. 5). They are called, therefore, to repent and return to the love they have forsaken. The first love Jesus is referring to, of course, is himself. The Ephesian church, over 30 years earlier, was praised by Paul for their love for Christ (Ephesians 1:15–16). In the book of Revelation, however, we see that the focus has shifted; the word *abandoned* suggests that it was intentional. How could a church with so much patience and zeal abandon their first love?

Have We Abandoned Our First Love?

The greatest commandment Jesus ever gave was to *love* (Matthew 22:36–40). Unfortunately, this is the one commandment we have the hardest time carrying out. The church in Ephesus abandoned their first love; that is, they still worked fervently, but were lacking the same passion for Christ as they had in their beginnings. If love for Christ is abandoned, on what grounds does the church love the world?

So many churches in modern America are abandoning their first love, just as the Ephesians did. The analogy of a bride and groom is often used by Jesus to describe the relationship the church has with Christ. Should the bride abandon her first love, the groom, it is like a divorce of enormous magnitude. By abandoning Christ as the center of the church, we are no longer focused on the Kingdom of God, but on the church as a social club for our glory. It will leave us empty and passionate for the wrong reasons. Where is the focus of the church? Where is the heart? If it is not on Christ, it is on worldly things, which is idolatry. Let us not forget our first love, the one who first loved us (1 John 4:19).

The Church in Smyrna

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the

devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.” (Revelation 2:8–11)

The church in Smyrna is given a warning about things to come. Though they were spiritually rich, they were already facing poverty and tribulation, and would be faced with more in the future. Like Jesus, the church is given a prophecy of “second death.” They were called to be faithful unto death, being promised that they would receive the crown of life when they conquered it.

Faithful unto Death

Like the church in Smyrna, we as the church are given the same calling and promise. We are promised suffering and tribulation (James 1:2; John 16:33) and called to be faithful amidst the trials. Staying faithful during suffering is not easy. In fact, many Christians struggle with the idea that God, being a God of love, would allow such persistent suffering during life. How can we as disciples stay faithful unto death during the testing of our faith such as loss of loved ones, cancer, disease, and miscarriage?

We are often quick to blame God for suffering. Unfortunately, we are quick to assume we deserve constant comfort. Many Christians will take verses like 1 Corinthians 10:13 out of context and use phrases like “God will not give you more than you can handle.” Many church leaders will preach bubble gum sermons, and many disciples are then left without answers to the tough questions of pain and suffering.

First and foremost, it is important to understand that God is not the one to blame for the problem of pain and suffering; sin is to blame, and sin is a result of man’s disobedience. Pain and suffering exist because mankind rebelled against the God of love; as a result, the world is cursed, and death is guaranteed. However, so is life. God made a way so that we do not have to live in a fallen world, only to die and be eternally separated from His presence. Enter Jesus Christ.

Jesus then calls us to be faithful unto death because we can live with the assurance that this life is not the end. We are never promised an easy life, but we can rest in the assurance of the eternal love of a savior who was willing to go to the greatest lengths for a humanity that rejected him. We are also promised a new world that is free of sin, suffering, and tragedy. Should we decide to follow Christ, we will one day live in a world without sadness and pain.

It is through this assurance of life that we are given the strength and peace to withstand the trials of this temporary, worldly life. It is difficult, but the apostle Paul says that we are to pray earnestly, after which the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will sustain us (Philippians 4:6–7). We as the church have a responsibility to the world; we have been called to

go out unto the world preaching the gospel. That requires commitment and faithfulness unto death. In fact, the very call to follow Jesus is a call to die in order to live. Will we be faithful to death during suffering? Will we be willing to raise up the next generations of disciples to do the same?

The Church in Pergamum

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.’” (Revelation 2:12–17).

Being a nation of acceptance, America is also a nation of many cultures and beliefs. Consequently, with many beliefs arise many worldviews; with many worldviews arises much debate. This is why discipleship is so important in our culture; people need a foundation upon which solid beliefs are held up. The church in Pergamum was in a similar situation; they were a church surrounded by pressing pagan worldviews which contradicted that of God’s Word. Jesus even described it as a place “where Satan’s throne is” and “where Satan dwells.” There must have been some serious issues at Pergamum in addition to the conflicting worldviews.

The Need for a Foundation

Yet, they held fast to Jesus’s name even so. We are human, and we are easily swayed by conflicting ideals. When faced with opposing viewpoints, if we are unable to defend our own, how will we stand? As we know, Christianity is under attack by said opposing viewpoints and worldviews, and it is our calling to hold fast to the truth. As David writes in Psalm 11:3, “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” The church in Pergamum understood this danger and withstood it. We as the modern church have an obligation to the same calling; is Jesus still the head of his church? Let us hold fast to the one name that matters; Jesus’s name.

Jesus did have to rebuke the church, though, as he did with each of the other six churches. They were called to repent concerning some members of the church who were following teachings other than what was true. Specifically, they were holding to the teaching of Balaam, who

essentially led the people of Israel into sexual immorality, eating food that had been offered to false idols, and listening to false-doctrine. The significance of this point is this: Jesus spoke up concerning one group *within* the church. They were called out for their wrong-doing and told to repent because of it.

A Lack of Discipline?

Jesus's rebuke of the church members is an example of church discipline. The church is a unified body, and in order for the body to function properly, we must be disciplined. After all, the church is to be of one mind (Philippians 1:27), and that brings with it much responsibility.

The Bible warns about false teachers, and in a world that is starving for truth, we must be cautious not to eat just anything we are fed, but to search for solid truth instead. If the church does not stay disciplined, we will only drift away from the truth.

The Church in Thyatira

“And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

‘I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works. But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold fast what you have until I come. The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’” (Revelation 2:18–29)

Dr. David Jeremiah remarks on this passage of Revelation, saying, “There are Christians and churches today who feel a need to be relevant and all-inclusive when it comes to spiritual and moral boundaries. The ancient church in Thyatira must have felt that way as well.” The prophetess Jezebel had begun seducing the men of the church in Thyatira into sexual immorality,

for which she was guilty. The church must not give into the dangers of inclusiveness concerning the spiritual and moral boundaries, as Dr. Jeremiah describes. The consequence for Jezebel's actions seems intense; according to the passage, God says he will "throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation." God is holy and righteous, and will not tolerate immoral behavior forever, as displayed in his words to John. As we can see, there is judgment both for the prophetess and for those who engage with her.

Hold Fast

However, there is also a message in this passage directed toward the Christians who did not follow the sexual immorality of Jezebel. They are instructed, "hold fast what you have until I come." This is the challenge for the church of today. Hold fast to what you have until Jesus comes. Are we going to be a church that gives into relevance and inclusiveness of spiritual and moral boundaries? Or, will we hold fast to the teachings of Jesus and be a church that leads?

The Church in Sardis

"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

'I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'" (Revelation 3:1-6)

Life and Death

Picture this: you look down at your thumb one day and notice that it is swollen, purple, and numb. There is obviously no blood flow getting to the thumb, and you conclude that something is seriously wrong with your thumb. What do you do? Hopefully, all of us would take the most logical option—go to the doctor! There is no question that a thumb with no life in it is a problem for your hand. Chances are, you would not think to yourself, "oh, no big deal! It's just a thumb; I've got a second perfectly functioning one on my other hand!" No, we care about our bodies and we care if there are parts of us that need to be fixed.

The church is a body as well, and the church in Sardis is given a convicting warning concerning lifelessness. Sardis was a *spiritually dead* church. It was like the thumb that was swollen and purple. The reason for their lifelessness was the fact that they were *nominal Christians*. The church was Christian in name only. According to Jesus, the church had a reputation of being a life-giving church, but there was no life to be found in them. Jesus did not say they were spiritually sluggish, stagnant, or even weak. He said they were dead. Imagine Jesus walking into your local church and telling the pastor “I have seen your works. You have a reputation for being alive, your members post on social media about you, you have record high attendance, *but you’re dead.*”

Being a nominal Christian is like claiming to be a car mechanic and knowing nothing about cars (like me). You can claim to know how to fix cars, but unless you are good at fixing cars, starting a car repair business will do you no good. Likewise, if the church claims to be the body of Christ, we must bear the fruit of such.

If you were to come across a tree with a sign on it that reads “Apple Tree,” what would be the first thing you would look for? Probably apples! If you didn’t see any, you would probably be a bit skeptical of whether the claim was true. Now it may very well be an apple tree after all, just one that has no apples on it at the moment. Perhaps they haven’t grown yet. That’s a possibility. Nevertheless, an apple tree, like all other fruit-bearing trees, is defined—and recognized—by the fruit it produces. Trees are identified by their fruit, and we as the church have a lot of work to do.

Wake Up!

What is the church told to do about spiritual death? “Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.” Sardis is called to “wake up,” and believe the church of today is called to do the same, lest we become spiritually dead, or unless we already have. We are called to life in Christ.

How can we be living churches instead of dead ones? Jesus has the answer: “Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.” Remember what you received and heard; the church must give life continuously. Waking up requires us to open our eyes. That means we need to acknowledge the staggering amount of people who are walking away from church having not been discipled and taught why and how to defend their faith. We need to open our eyes to the hate that is constant throughout the world. We need to open our eyes to the lies that so many children and students are being faced with. We need to open our eyes to the attacks on Christianity. But we cannot stop there, we must do something about it. How we do that is through discipleship of the church. We need to raise up church leaders, small group leaders, missionaries, and apologists. We need to raise up true *disciples*. Then, we are called to keep God’s truth and repent. Remember that repentance is not just a one-time event, it is a life-long posture.

Keith Green's song, *Asleep in the Light*, discusses the spiritual sleep of the church today. The song was written almost three decades ago, but oh how relevant its lyrics are even today! Here are a few lines from the song:

*"Bless me Lord, bless me Lord," You know, it's all I ever hear. No one aches; no one hurts; no one even sheds one tear.
But He cries, He weeps, He bleeds, and He cares for your needs, And you just lay back and keep soaking it in,
Oh, can't you see it's such sin?
The world is sleeping in the dark that the church just can't fight, 'Cause it's asleep in the light
How can you be so dead, when you've been so well fed? Jesus rose from the grave and you, you can't even get out of bed!*

The Church in Philadelphia

"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: 'The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.

'I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'" (Revelation 3:7–13)

Little Power, Big Faith

Though the church in Philadelphia was weak in some senses, Jesus points out something encouraging about them. They held fast to the truth. They kept the word of God and did not deny His name. The church is praised for their faith and promised safety from the trials that were promised.

What defines a church's strength? Is it the number of people who attend? Is it the pastor's preaching abilities or the worship band's talent? Is it cultural relevance? Is it the amount of

money they take in? No, it is the *faith*. Faith produces fruit, and the fruits of the church are determined by the willingness of its body to produce them. Jesus does measure success by the size of the church, he measures it by the size of our hearts. Are we keeping God's word and refusing to deny His name? If so, our fruits will confirm it. We will have more zeal for missions and discipleship. We will be more willing and unashamed to share the gospel. We will seek out the door of opportunity that no one will be able to shut.

We will also have a dependence on God's strength. Faith without works is dead (James 2:14). The church in Philadelphia had strong faith and was praised by Jesus for it. If we have faith, we cannot sit still and wait for God to move; we have to wake up and start moving. The world is starving for truth; it's time for the church to start feeding them.

The Church in Laodicea

“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

‘I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’” (Revelation 3:14–22)

The Lukewarm Church

What is worse than being spiritually dead? According to Jesus, being spiritually *lukewarm*. He says, “you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!” The church in Laodicea was on the fence. They were not alive, but neither were they dead, like the church in Sardis. Jesus says they should be one or the other! Francis Chan compared the church to drinking lukewarm coffee. He said picking up a cup of coffee that was once hot and has become lukewarm makes us want to spit it out, which is exactly what Jesus says will happen to Laodicea! Coffee is best when it is either piping hot or ice cold.

So, why was the church “lukewarm” and what does that mean spiritually? Well, Jesus goes on to describe them as being “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.” Those descriptors do not sound like the ones Jesus uses to describe his children. In verse 19, Jesus says “those whom I love I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.” The Lord disciplines those he loves (Hebrews 12:6). What does that mean for the church in Laodicea? It means that God still loves them. They are given the chance to repent, after all. God wants his church to be committed to him, not sitting on the fence somewhere between followers and fiends.

Laodicea had become apathetic in their commitment and love for God and the gospel. We must be careful that we do not become a lukewarm church. If we do not speak truth through love, there will be no zeal. Without zeal, we will fall into spiritual poverty, blindness, and nakedness. Remember that our walk with Christ is displayed by our fruits. We must ask ourselves: are we producing fruit? Or, are we falling asleep while the spiritual battle rages on? Jesus is still knocking at the door, waiting to be invited in (verse 20). Let him in and let him remain on the throne of his holy church!

During a time in my life when I was experiencing a season of doubt and lack of faith, I had many questions that I could not seem to find peace about. I felt that I was slipping away from the will of God, that my faith was waning, and that my zeal for God was dying out. One of the daily prayers I began to pray was this: “God, make my heart *burn* for you. Give me an overwhelming desire for you.” I wanted to realize my need for God so much that it would become a longing for Him. The more I prayed and sought Him out, the closer I felt to Him. I believe this is the prayer the church should be praying as well. Lord, make our hearts burn for you, and give us an overwhelming desire for you. It was during this season that Psalm 63 spoke to me like never before. “O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” Such descriptive language! That’s how badly I want to want God.

Who Is the Real Enemy Here?

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

—Ephesians 6:12

“I used to have to sneak around, now they just open their doors. It’s getting very simple now, because no one believes in me anymore.” This is a line from a song by Keith Green. The song, titled *No One Believes in Me Anymore*, is written from Satan’s perspective, and through a catchy tune, he talks about how easy it has become for the enemy to fool people for the sheer reason that nobody really regards Satan as a real threat anymore. We have begun to shift the blame onto other things, making the devil’s job even easier.

However, with the rise of bubblegum gospel, the enemy has become less of a *spiritual* force. Preachers will accuse our past mistakes and identities as being the enemies of our lives. Sermons about overcoming our pasts, personal struggles, the way we think others view us and our habits are some of the most common that I hear. Religion has become a primary enemy as well. Many modern preachers love to mention the fact that “the religious people killed Jesus.” One of the translations of the Bible even adds to Jesus’s words something he never said. In the particular passage, the translation reads “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me.”¹ The comment about religion is not in the original text of Matthew. Why would the translator feel the need to add to the infallible, authoritative, inerrant Word of God? While I agree that it is not about religion, but relationship, painting religion as the enemy as opposed to the true threat of the Christian faith is an idea all too prevalent in the church. Religion is simply the way many of us tried to bridge the gap between our fallen nature and God. In fact, as author and apologist Natasha Crain writes, “the problem is that Jesus doesn’t hate religion. He hates *false* religion.”²

Drive-thru Doctrine

We live in a fast-paced culture in America; no questions asked. Most of us are used to routine-living. We have a schedule every day that we follow to a t, and if something comes in the way of that, it throws our whole day off. Many of us literally have to find or make time to hang out with friends or just relax. Some of us are so caught up in this lifestyle that we have all but forgotten the importance of rest. That is why we experience burn-out and anxiety so often in American culture.

Needless to say, day-to-day life is fast-paced; the faster the pace, the harder it is to catch up with the pace. So, we find ourselves running through life, scared we are going to miss something. Ironically, in doing so, we end up missing the things which matter the most. What this society has left us with is a “microwave” culture in every aspect of life. We want to pop our food in the microwave oven, punch in the shortest time possible, and pull it out before it’s done so we can

enjoy our food as quickly as possible. We are used to instant satisfaction. We get angry when the drive-through at Chick-fil-A takes more than ten minutes (which is rare because Chick-fil-A probably has the fastest service on the planet). When we're hungry, all we can think about is food, and who can blame us? With the help of American culture, we do not have to worry about finding it and cooking it either; we can drive to the nearest McDonalds, spend a few bucks and have a warm bag of greasy food ready as we drive off and try to eat it at the same time.

I fear that much of modern church culture has adopted this drive-thru approach to ministry as well. When we conform to culture, we often end up negating vital ideals of Biblical doctrine in hopes to give people instant satisfaction. We have lost sight of what it means to teach them how to cook their own nutritious meals, and have started feeding them fast-food instead, or even bubble gum. How will new believers grow if they are not consuming solid, life-giving sustenance?

The drive-thru doctrine of church involves a three-step process that typically results in living life to its full potential or finding true joy in this life; 1) get saved, 2) get baptized, 3) live your life/invite people to church. It is like ordering from your favorite fast food restaurant: 1) order your food, 2) get your food, 3) enjoy your food, all as quickly as possible. As a result, we are fed with self-help, felt-need messages and studies that tailor to our interests and frankly, taste pretty good and leave us feeling good about ourselves. We neglect, therefore, the importance of sanctification and other important doctrinal ideals, which leaves little room for growth. Why? Because we fear they are ideas which are too "religious" for large congregations to handle. We are worried that discussing sanctification, propitiation, and even apologetics will "scare people away" or "bore people."

This is where the anti-religion argument comes into play. As I said earlier, I agree that the Christian walk should not be about religion, but relationship; however, because religion has become the new enemy of the soul, some negative repercussions may arise as a result. Using the approach against religion as a lead-in to evangelism is counter-productive. Let's be honest; most people who ask the question "are you religious?" are not asking from the perspective of someone who has been hurt by religion. While religious people and even Christ-preaching Christians have been guilty of this many times, leaving good reason for people to be offended by religion, most people ask the question from the stance of, "are you a Christian, Muslim, etc.?" So, if we start our conversations with a potentially lost person with the statement, "no, I hate religion; religion kills!" and then claim to be a Christian, people may be genuinely confused, or think we are genuinely confused.

In other words, most people are not asking in the accusatory manner; they are not asking "are you a Pharisee?" In the gospels, the Pharisees were the ones that Jesus had to put in their place time and time again. In some sense, they were the "bad guys", in that the Pharisees and Sadducees were always trying to find fault with Jesus, ultimately to get rid of him. However, the

Pharisees did not even have their theology right! They *thought* they knew the Old Testament like the back of their hand, and in some sense they did, they just didn't get it. Jesus calls them out on this issue many times. Remember that the Pharisees were reading the law through the lens of legalism. Jesus reminded them that the Old Testament actually points toward *him* (John 5:39).

They thought holding fast to the law “religiously” was the correct way a Christian should live. The reason the authors of the gospels mention them and their flaws so frequently is to point out the fact that Jesus came to fulfill the law and that Christians are not to live like the judgmental, hypocritical Pharisees and Sadducees. In fact, if we are not careful, we can easily resort to legalism as well, which is exactly what the religious leaders were advocating for in the gospels. Understand that legalism is the *opposite* of the gospel. We as the church must be careful not to enforce this onto Christians—after all, the church is a place of acceptance and love—just as Christ displayed for us.

So, who is the real enemy? Ephesians 6:12 has the answer. “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” According to Paul in this passage, there is a *spiritual* battle going on right now, which Christians must be aware of. The enemy uses worldly things as weapons to bring us down, but we must be careful not to disregard the reality of his existence, much less his increasing influence. 1 Peter 5:8 says “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” *The devil is our enemy*. Believers must understand that the devil is not just a state-of-mind. He is not just religious symbolism whose reality lies in people. He is all- too real and all-too ready to destroy any ounce of Biblical truth used to demote his power.

Bubble gum sermons will rarely mention spiritual forces. Why? Because preachers fear they would scare people off. Let's be honest, nobody likes hearing about demonic possession; it is frightening but real. Ironically, however, our favorite movies and TV shows are saturated with spiritual ideas. Is there anything wrong with that? Not necessarily, though we need to be cautious when exposing ourselves to things which the Bible explicitly condemns. However, we are quick to simply brush it off as “fiction” by eating it up on the screen, while not stopping to acknowledge that spiritual warfare is a stark reality. Jesus and his disciples came into contact with many demon-possessed people during Jesus's ministry years. He was not afraid to approach them; if anything, *they* were afraid to approach *him* (Mark 5:7). Are we going to take the same stance against Satan and his angels that Jesus did? Or are we going to cower at the thought of demonic forces and the devil's tactics?

If we fear losing the congregation, we are missing the point of preaching truth. Truth can be a hard pill to swallow. The spiritual realm is real, and we must be mindful of dallying in its forces. We must be cautious about what we are allowing ourselves and our children to be exposed to. Religion is not the enemy; your past is not the enemy; they are merely tools used by Satan to

distract you from the real threat so that you will not be equipped for the real battle. The real battle is at hand; it is a battle of spirit and a battle for truth. Christianity is being attacked by modern relativism: one of Satan's many tactics against our faith. We must be willing to take up arms and fight against these schemes. We must choose to defend the truth. We can either remedy the disease with God's Word or continue to sit back and treat the symptoms with instant satisfactory messages.

What Is the Gospel, Really?

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

—Romans 5:8

Probably the most famous Bible verse of all time is John 3:16. Whether you're a Christian or not, chances are, you have heard the verse. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." We are so familiar with the verse, it shows up in our kitchens, on our t-shirts, as tattoos, as quotes on Instagram, on bumper stickers, etc. But has the familiarity of the verse destroyed its meaning?

C. S. Lewis talks about the danger of the "same old' thing" in his book, *The Screwtape Letters*. In the fascinating story about a demon, Screwtape, teaching his nephew, Wormwood, how to lead Christians astray, Screwtape says "Work on their horror of the Same Old Thing. The horror of the Same Old Thing is one of the most valuable passions we have produced in the human heart—an endless source of heresies in religion, folly in counsel, infidelity in marriage, an inconstancy in friendship." Once people get comfortably accustomed to the same old thing, there tends to be a resistance to it.

John 3:16 is so commonly blown off as "just another verse from an ancient book that's no longer relevant." However, John 3:16 is essentially the gospel message in so many words. It sums up the entire purpose for Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. For a couple of years, I led a small group once a week for 9th and 10th grade guys. Needless to say, it was an adventure each week. If you've ever been around high schoolers, you probably know exactly what I am talking about; not to mention we have all been that age at some point, so we have no room to talk. I quickly realized how "uncool" I am in the eyes of a high schooler. Whatever. The guys did get a little distracted, I cannot lie, but I could tell that they got it. They consistently wanted to dive deeper into God's word, and I prayed that before they got out of high school, they would decide to start taking those next steps.

One week we were talking about the gospel; I asked for a show of hands as to who in the room had ever heard of the word "gospel" before. Almost everyone's hand shot up. I then asked them if they could give me a summary of the gospel; "if you were explaining the gospel to someone who has never heard of Jesus before," I asked, "what would you say?" Some said it is the good news of Jesus dying on a cross. Some said it is the Bible. Some said it is the fact that Jesus loves us, but I was surprised that they did not have a full understanding of what the message really is in its entirety. I quickly realized that perhaps they had never actually heard or read the gospel message in its entirety.

So, what *is* the gospel, *really*? Modern America has adopted different views of the gospel; with the rise of media as a driving force in society, culture plays a prominent role in the definition of the gospel, whereas the case should be the opposite. Culture and modern churches have created a

self-help view of the gospel; it is no longer the truth of Christ and the one way to spend eternity with him. Instead, it has become a convenience, or a social identity, or a “solution to your problems.” It is as if we have begun marketing the gospel through church, like we are trying to sell something. We try to use the most attractive measures to bring in the buyers, promising happiness and fulfillment; we use church branding to promote and spend thousands of dollars on equipment to ensure the satisfaction of our customers. We have begun preaching bubblegum gospel and neglecting the truth of scripture; the result is generations of people with no foundation. The question is not *if* young people are leaving church behind them, but *why*.

The gospel is so much more than feel-good doctrine. It is so much more than a ticket out of hell, a label, “warm fuzzies” on Sunday morning, a “spiritual high” after returning from a conference, a reason to go to church, or even a lifestyle. The gospel should be the anchor and driving force of our lives as followers of Christ.

The gospel is the good news of Jesus, the God-man, but there can be no good news without bad news. Let us not forget that life is empty in and of itself. It was created to be perfect, because a perfect God created it that way (Genesis 1–2). Men and women were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). However, they sinned and thus were alienated from the presence of God (Genesis 3). As a result, we all deserve the wrath of God: eternal punishment in hell, separated from God. By ourselves, we are ruined by sin (Romans 3:10, 23), destitute and isolated. Sin separated us from God, and by nature we are not worthy of relationship with him, because God’s glory and our sinfulness cannot exist together. This is where the good news comes into play. There is nothing we can do to fill the gap between God’s glory and our sinfulness.

However, God in his love for humanity, made a way so that all could be saved from the punishment we deserve, which is death (Romans 6:23). Life by itself cannot bring satisfaction, purpose, or fulfillment to humanity (Proverbs 14:12). We are born in need of a Savior. Jesus is that savior; fully man and fully God, he died in place of us, serving as the ultimate atonement for sin (Romans 5:11), meaning that the sins of the world were covered by the blood of his eternal sacrifice when he died and rose again. (1 Peter 2:24). It is therefore God’s grace and man’s faith that allows for salvation (Ephesians 2:8). Being saved by grace then we can be justified, sanctified, and someday glorified in Christ (Romans 8:30). All things will be restored to the way they once were.

The gravity of John 3:16 is in the wording of the verse. It is easy to read over the most important word. Let us read the whole thing: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” What is the most important word in that verse? *So*. It does not read “God loved the world, so he gave his only Son... the emphasis is in the word “so.” For God *so* loved the world... That is to say, God loved the world *this* much: that he gave his only Son. The word *love* in this sense is displaying the omnibenevolence, or all-good nature of God. The love of the Father for his children is relentless.

This is also shown through the word *gave*. Literally, it means a sacrifice. It is the most extreme sacrifice at that. The *world* is not referring to the physical earth. It is referring to everyone within the earth, sinful flesh.

That is the gospel; it answers the question of reality. Essentially, the gospel is the foundation upon which we find our origin, what the meaning of life is, on what basis we have morals, and what the destiny of mankind is. No other worldview offers the same salvation and answers as does the reality of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. Faith comes by hearing (Romans 10:17), and so the gospel must be preached in grace and truth in order that the lost may find life.

There are roughly 2 billion people on earth who have never been exposed to the gospel. That means there are roughly 2 billion people who have no idea there is a God who loves them and is offering them the solution to the problem of certain sin. We as Christ-followers are called to be the light in their darkness. So, we have to decide if we are going to be willing to feed them the truth of scripture, or are we going to continue feeding the world nothing but candy?

Family Matters

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.

—Hebrews 12:6

I can say without a doubt that one of the driving reasons I am a Christ Follower today is because of my parents. They have been some of the greatest influences on my life by far. I grew up as a child living what many would consider a “sheltered” life. I was homeschooled, my only friends were those I knew from church, I had no cell phone until about 15 years old, and I spent a lot of time with my family. Who else would I have spent it with? I still love spending time with my mom and dad. The thing about that scenario that makes me proud, however, is the foundation my parents raised me and my siblings with. They are some of the strongest believers I have ever known, and they instilled in me the truth of God’s Word at a young age. Though I never fully understood what it meant to be a Christian until about the 6th or 7th grade, Mom and Dad never stopped teaching me and pressing into me the importance of Bible study and the wisdom they had learned from reading the Bible in their own lives.

One of the things I remember so vividly about my childhood was nightly prayer. Back then, it was to me just another one of the routine events that took place in the Butler household along with putting on our pajamas and brushing our teeth. Every night, my brother, my parents and I would gather in their bedroom and say our prayers together. I still did not fully understand what prayer really was, so I just tried to replicate my mother and father as best as I could. Even so, it was such a natural part of our night that I had gotten used to it for years, until we stopped doing it.

With the hustle and bustle of life, my older brother Andrew and I starting high school, new responsibilities, part time jobs, and so on, we cut back on the frequency of family prayer. We had gotten too “busy” and “preoccupied” to spend time talking to our heavenly father as a family. We could not let that happen. Eventually we decided that family prayer is too precious of a value to simply push to the back burner because of life’s ever-increasing pace. We decided to *make* time for family prayer every night.

The reason I digress into this narrative is to bring up a point that is taking place in the lives of so many Americans: the family is under attack.

Family ministry is perhaps one of the most neglected areas of Christian discipleship in modern ministry, with the rise of individualism within and out of the church. We live in the era of “me-ism” and we are walking away from the value of the family. Children and teenagers are being flooded with information from social media, websites, peers, television, etc., so much of which is telling them lies that combat the truth of scripture. How will they know where to find the right answers unless parents are taking up the calling to show them the source? Proverbs 22:6 says “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.”

This is the responsibility of the family. Children are being exposed to the enemy's lies through media, which is accessible like never before. The average age a child is exposed to pornography is around 9 years old. Teenagers spend an average of 9 hours every day consuming some form of media.¹ Teenagers are being exposed to postmodern thinking in our schools, through the internet, television/media streaming, magazines, etc. Biblical ideals are questioned and even looked down upon; questions like, *Why aren't you having sex with your girlfriend/boyfriend? Why are you still living by that old book? Why aren't you living like everyone else in this group?* It is easier than ever for the enemy's influence to take hold of children and young adults. The importance of family discipleship is now more vital than ever.

Here are the facts about the importance of children growing up with a mother and father:

- Sara McLanahan, a sociologist at Princeton University says on the topic of child development, "If we were asked to design a system for making sure that children's basic needs were met, we would probably come up with something quite similar to the two-parent family ideal... The fact that both adults have a biological connection to the child would increase the likelihood that the parents would identify with the child and be willing to sacrifice for that child and it would reduce the likelihood that either parent would abuse the child."²
- Sociologist Paul Amato also concludes that, "Research clearly demonstrates that children growing up with two continuously married parents are less likely than other children to experience a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and social problems, not only during childhood, but also in adulthood."³
- Professor James Q. Wilson at Harvard University, discussing an academic census, says "Almost everyone—a few retrograde scholars excepted—agrees that children in mother-only homes suffer harmful consequences: the best studies show that these youngsters are more likely than those in two-parent families to be suspended from school, have emotional problems, become delinquent, suffer from abuse and take drugs."⁴

Needless to say, children without one or both parent figures in their lives are at a higher risk of various developmental or mental hardships. Parents play a vital role in the lives and discipleship of their children.

There is a phrase I heard once that says, "The family that prays together stays together," and I believe there is a great deal of truth to the saying. Families need to be praying together. I only recently started to understand the gravity of family prayer and family devotion. Discipleship happens in community, and the family is an example of a close community; when we pray and study God's word together as a family, discipleship occurs, and with discipleship comes growth. We will grow both spiritually and relationally, as is the case with all communities.

The Puritans took this idea a step further, referring to the family as the "little church." We as the body of Christ are all members of His holy church, and the family is where much of the

intentional discipleship outside of weekly church occurs. The Puritans would attend church regularly, as do we in American culture, but they would then discuss the sermon and application thereof after the service. Many of us attend church regularly but go back to our day-to-day lives once we leave the parking lot of the building on Sunday afternoon. What if we were to stop viewing church as simply a hobby that all Christians are expected to take part in and start bringing it home with us.

If you have children who live at home with you and attend church with you, I would encourage you to sit down during lunch after Sunday service and discuss the sermon or what each of you learned. If you are married and do not have kids, talk about the message with your spouse after church. In addition, if you do not pray together as a family every day that you can, I would highly encourage you to do so. If you are married, I would encourage you to read the Bible and pray together as a couple. Make it a habit to be intentional about personal discipleship and openness of your spiritual walk.

The family that prays together *grows* together.

The Church as a Family

The church is not just a building where people gather every Sunday to sing songs and listen to someone speak loudly from a pulpit. The church is a family. Family members care for each other, and one necessary aspect of care is *discipline*. Like the discipline of family discipleship, there must be discipline within the church as well.

Church discipline is a part of discipleship that is often overlooked in the modern church.

However, it is as important as the spiritual disciplines of the individual believer and individual families. Many hear the word “discipline” and instantly think of the negative connotations. We may immediately think of the repercussions of disobedience when thinking of discipline, for example. That is not the only purpose of discipline. It is important to understand that the intention of church discipline is anything but negative—it is vital for growth, restoration, reconciliation and protection. Positive discipline is one of the building blocks for discipleship.

The Dangers of a Lack of Discipline

Just as Jesus loves the church enough to die for her, we are called to love the church as well. That requires the body doing whatever is necessary to protect her. Though discipline is not always easy, which is one of the reasons so many leaders fail to carry it out, it is even more important. Because parents love their children enough not to let them get hurt, disciplinary measures must be put in place for the children. In fact, Proverbs 13:24 tells us “whoever who spares the rod *hates* his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently.”

There are a few things to unpack about this verse: first, the author is not suggesting child abuse by any means. “Spare the rod” simply refers to withholding discipline of any sort. Secondly, the author does not mean that if there is no discipline for the child that the parent literally *hates* him or her. However, he is saying that they must care so little about the child's safety that it is *as if* the parent hates the child. He goes on to say that love is shown by diligent discipline. For example, reminding a child to brush his or her teeth every night is a part of being disciplined. Likewise, staying disciplined as followers of Christ may include making time to study God’s Word, and even to remember to set aside time to pray. We must be disciplined to repent and be held accountable when we sin as well.

The Importance of Discipline

Like children, the church must also be disciplined diligently. Hebrews 12:6 says that the Lord disciplines the one He loves. Like a parent, the Lord, being our heavenly father, values discipline for his children. In fact, Jesus commands us to hold each other accountable (Matthew 18:15). If we correct a friend for his or her wrong and they refuse to listen, we are then told to bring it to the church. If they yet again refuse to correct their behavior, the church is told to treat that person as a Gentile or tax collector (Matthew 18:17)! That sounds like a pretty harsh consequence for sin within the church. Even so, the significance of church discipline is evident through the words of Jesus.

Paul also discusses an instance in which discipline was necessary within the church in 1 Corinthians 5. Essentially, there was someone guilty of sexual immorality that Paul got word of; someone was allegedly sleeping with his mother (which, according to Paul, was “not even tolerated among Pagans”). What did the church do to address the problem? They boasted about it. Apparently, the Corinthian church was proud of the fact that they were so forgiving of the incestual acts, to which Paul replied, “you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?”

Paul does just what Jesus instructs us to do. Verse 5 says “you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord.” The man was treated like a Gentile or tax collector—he was sent out of the church. Again, this seems like an egregious punishment, does it not? Before we assume that Paul was overreacting, we must look at his words at the end of the verse. He says, “so that his spirit may be saved in the

Day of the Lord.” The discipline of the man was for his benefit: so that he could repent of his sinful lifestyle and turn back toward Jesus (See also 1 Timothy 1:20). That is the point of spiritual and church discipline.

Church discipline serves to restore us back to proper behavior. James 5:20 says “let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” This is why accountability partnerships are so beneficial to the Christian walk. Church discipline also brings back relationships within the church (Proverbs 13).

One of the most important reasons for church discipline is destroying the “root of bitterness.” Hebrews 12:15 talks about the dangers of sinful roots within the church, and how it spreads like weeds. The verse reads, “see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.”

Weeds are notorious. You can try to get rid of them individually, but they always seem to respawn in multiples throughout the yard. What is the only way to get rid of them? Attack the roots. Likewise, you can treat the symptoms of a sickness for temporary relief, but until you kill the virus, the sickness will prevail and possibly spread throughout the body. Sin is like the weeds or the virus. If the church becomes infected by sinful behavior, it will only spread. Paul is saying we must attack the root of the problem, not just treat it with bubble gum messages.

We must, however, rebuke not with an attitude of “holier-than-thou,” but with an attitude of love and humility (2 Thessalonians 3:14–15). It should not be approached on the basis of our own traditional views, personal preferences, etc. rather, we should be looking to God’s Word as the ultimate governing authority for spiritual correction.

If church discipline is neglected, there will be little or no spiritual growth, and there will also arise the possibility for internal corruption. Without personal growth, there will be little or no church growth as well. Also, discipline helps to prevent stagnation and backsliding.⁶ So, let us begin uprooting the weeds within the church. If we are called to holiness and sanctification, that can only occur through the effort of all members of the body. Like the importance of family discipleship, let us also encourage church discipleship. Start studying the Word of God together. Start praying together. Start *growing* together.

Disciples Make Disciples

Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.

—1 Peter 2:2

Do you remember going to Sunday school as a child? I do. I remember learning the books of the Bible in song form, and I remember Bible drills to teach us how to find the verses in the books. I also remember my parents attending “adult Sunday School” while I was a kid. I remember thinking, “why do they have to go to Sunday school too? I thought it was just for kids.” Sunday School was part of what helped them learn the Bible. Why have we gotten rid of the idea of Sunday school in modern churches? What have we lost by neglecting the importance of teaching the Bible?

Chances are, if you attend a modern church, typically one with a high emphasis on a culturally relevant ministry environment, you will not find Sunday school; you may not even find Bible Study. One of the areas the church is failing today is possibly the most important aspect of the church itself: *discipleship*. We are not discipling Christians like we should. What we are left with is a congregation of hungry Christians who have not been trained in righteousness but have been fed bubble gum. By doing away with the importance of Sunday discipleship settings, we have also done away with teaching the importance of Bible Study. In doing so, we are raising up believers who are brand new to the faith and have no idea how to read the very book their faith is founded on. So, they begin depending on Sunday mornings for their only source of Biblical sustenance.

Student Ministry: The Church of Today

Student ministry has often been deemed the “church of tomorrow.” I disagree; students are just as much the church of today as are adults and children. Therefore, they need the truth of scripture just as much as do adults and children. While the gospel should be permeated in a manner that is understandable to their age, we should not neglect an aspect of sound, scriptural doctrine. How can we expect students to grow, however, if we are not preparing them and teaching them to read and study the word for themselves? This notion applies to all members of the church, young and old, but I cannot shake the staggering statistics of young people abandoning church entirely.

So, how do we approach student ministry with absolute truth and Biblical doctrine? We must assist them in establishing a *foundation*.

The Importance of Bible Study

While Bible study methods may differ for each believer, it is important to instill the desire and significance of reading the Word individually. In other words, students cannot depend solely on Wednesday night small groups for their source of scripture. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:2, “I

fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready.” The milk Paul is referring to is the basics of the faith. It is like a baby being fed formula from a bottle; at some point the child must stop being fed milk and move to solid food in order to promote healthy growth. Likewise, the believer, having been fed the essentials of the faith (the gospel), must at some point be moved to solid food (discipleship and Bible study).

Unfortunately, so many students go through seven years of youth ministry being fed encouraging messages, but virtually no discipleship is involved. Students are then faced with the realities of the world and the only church environment they have been exposed to is a fun, “cool,” relevant one, which may not apply in regular ministry environments. If the coolness of church is all students are taking away from Wednesday nights, we are missing the point of ministry entirely; we are only feeding them bubble gum through the use of syncretism.

We have stopped encouraging people to bring their Bibles to church, which suggests a lack of authority therein. If we are not promoting the supreme authority of scripture and the study of it, students will not have anything to hold onto as an absolute foundation for life. Everything we are doing in ministry should be structured on and reflective of the Bible. After all, if leaders are not demonstrating an authoritative approach to scripture, why should students treat it that way? When they are faced with so many other false authorities in the world, the Bible is neglected and forgotten. We need to start teaching people how to read the Bible.

One-on-One Discipleship

How then should leaders and mentors approach intentional discipleship of the student or individual to instill in them a desire to study and grow in the Word of God? It is important to understand that discipleship is, in fact, an intentional process. In other words, leaders cannot simply hand the student a book or a series of podcasts and expect them to grow from it. We must be relational.

First, start with *prayer*. As should be the first approach to any aspect of our spiritual walk, the first step is communication with God. When choosing the twelve disciples, the first thing Jesus did was pray (Luke 6:12–13). We should pray about who God will put on our hearts and listen for the guidance to follow through. Secondly, *choose* the disciple. When choosing who to disciple, some questions leaders should ask are: *is this person willing to be disciplined? Is he/she a good fit spiritually? How should I approach him/her in an assertive but loving manner?* Jesus always sought out his followers; he did not wait for them to find him. Likewise, the church should be the ones to seek out the lost and disciple them intentionally.

Next, the process of discipleship begins with *quality time*. Discipleship requires a plan; have an end goal in mind. The end goal for disciples should be spiritual growth and the newfound ability to study scripture. Bible study techniques may differ depending on the individual, but we must be willing to take the time to model what healthy study looks like. This includes **prayer**,

discipline, note-taking, asking questions, accountability, and application, to name a few necessary pieces of Bible study.

Why Don't I Don't Hear God Speaking?

A common objection I often hear to Bible study is *I don't hear/feel God speaking to me*. We often feel distant from God because he does not seem to be speaking. The only problem with this claim is that *He already did!* God already spoke to us in his word. We must look to the Bible if we want to hear God speak. This is the heart of the need for Bible-study; in order to grow as disciples, we must start reading the Bible and meditating on it.

The reason many modern churches struggle with discipleship is because of their size; large churches sacrifice intentionality and relational discipleship for big numbers. While church size is not a bad thing, there must be discipleship occurring as well. As the writer of Hebrews states, solid food is for the mature (Hebrews 5:14). So, we must be intentional about personal discipleship. The best place to start is with Bible study groups. Set aside a time once a week to meet with several other members of your church, and study God's Word together. Students should be doing this, as should adults. Once we begin to grow together, we will start to understand our spiritual gifts as well, and thus can be better equipped to serve the church.

Spiritual Gifts

In addition, it is only through intentional discipleship that we can raise up leaders. If all we are doing is being fed from the stage on a Sunday morning, we will not have the nourishment within us to start planting new churches for others to be exposed to the gospel. However, if we pursue intentional, goal-oriented discipleship groups or even classes set apart for this purpose, we can begin equipping the saints for the work of ministry by discovering their place within the church.

Ephesians 4 talks about the roles of ministry within the church. Some are gifted to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some are shepherds (or pastors, as some translations say), and lastly, some are teachers. This passage is often referred to as the "five-fold ministries" of the church. The apostle in the Bible was appointed by God to lead church plants, spread the gospel, and even write the New Testament. The prophet's job was to relay messages to the people of God. Many argue that these two offices are not in effect within the modern church today, being that the foundation of the church was built on the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20) and that said foundation was completed by Christ, suggesting that we should move on from it (Hebrews 6:1-3).

The next role, evangelists, are gifted with preaching the gospel. They are good at communicating the message of Christ. Shepherds, like real-life shepherds of sheep, care for the flock: the church. They have a heart for people and unity. Thus, Jesus uses the analogy of being the "good shepherd" and leaving the ninety-nine sheep in search of the one that goes astray. Finally,

teachers are gifted to teach, obviously. Perhaps they would be best equipped to help disciples understand questions about apologetics or theology.

Each role is equally important within the church as a whole, as well as within the local church. Each role also has a heart for people; the use of these gifts just plays out in different ways. Have you ever stopped to think about which spiritual gift you have? Being in a discipleship group will help you figure that out. Likewise, there is a great importance for students to be discipled, so that they may also discover their spiritual gifts.

Feeding the Famine

The famine of truth is not only outside of the church, but within it as well. What are some steps we can take toward healthy change in the church? Young believers have questions; let's speak up and answer them! The topics that we often blow off as "too deep" for Christians new to the faith are often the very questions they are asking. *How do we know the Bible is true? What is truth? What is sanctification? How do we share the gospel with a post-truth culture? Who is God? How do we answer skeptical objections about the Bible? How do religion and science coincide?*

Focusing on expositional preaching and teaching is the next vital step for the health of the church. Both new believers and those who have been Christians for years need preaching that comes from the scripture; not preaching that merely references or points to it. Paul says to church leaders in 2 Timothy 2:15, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." The church needs a proper understanding of Biblical theology and the gospel; this will lead to a proper understanding of evangelism and conversion. As Charles Spurgeon once asked, *are we feeding the sheep or simply amusing the goats?*

The young people we disciple today will be the leaders of tomorrow.

Don't let the concept of spiritual education sound too intimidating; it is exactly what a starving culture needs. Let us stop feeding bubble gum to the next generation of believers; let us train them up in righteousness.

Conclusion

What Now?

We have discussed the dangers of the cultural influence on churches in America, and the realities that have ensued therein. Moral relativism has taken captive the minds and hearts of Christians and Non-Christians alike; we are in more need than ever for solid, unshakable truth.

Unfortunately, the church is feeding the world bubble gum: feel-good ideas designed to attract or inspire but have little to no nutrients founded in Biblical doctrine. As a result, we have seen a shift of foundation; believers are ignoring the authoritative foundation of God's Word, and many are walking away from church and their faith completely. We have neglected the importance of discipleship almost entirely, leaving believers with nothing more than an experience on Sunday mornings and no training for studying God's Word, defending their beliefs, discerning truth in a world full of lies, and especially carrying out Jesus' Great Commission.

So, what should the church's response be to all of this?

Take a Stand

Romans 12:2 has the answer. *"Do not conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."* The church must possess the discernment to break through the cultural lies that are flooding our society and the church. We should be willing to hold fast to Biblical truth because it is the authority of God. We must not neglect the foundations of doctrine. We must not forget Paul's warning to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:3-4; *"For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."* We must be cautious of the messages we are feeding the believers. Let us not neglect the value of truth as opposed to bubble gum. Let us raise up a generation of students and adults who know how to study the Word of God and to defend its validity.

We must not forget that we are at war. We are in a battle against truth vs lies (Romans 7:11) and physical vs spiritual (Ephesians 6:12). The enemy is gaining power through the use of false teaching (2 Peter 2). The church as the unified body of Christ must train the believers to study the Word of God in order to fight against the lies with absolute truth. Let us be watchful of the deceitfulness that surrounds us, so we may know what is true (1 Thessalonians 5:21, 1 Peter 4:7). Let us be willing to put on the armor of God to fight for him (Ephesians 6:10-18). He is calling me and you to take a stand in faith and bear witness to the truth. This battle against truth has been being fought since the garden of Eden. Let us shine a light in His name so that the glory of God can be seen until the end of time.

A Balanced Diet

For so long, the church has either responded negatively to the pressing social issues among us, or not responded at all. How do we respond to a culture starving for truth? How do we approach the increasing need for discipleship in our churches? How do we remain influential to a culture that has labeled the church as an enemy? We do it through truth *and love*. There must be “both, and;” there cannot be “either, or.” Truth without love is disobedience, and love without truth is irrelevant.

So, there is absolute truth. Truth can be known, and God wants us to know the truth, which is why he has revealed it to us in His word. However, we must not neglect the greatest command within that word of truth, which is love. We must never hate the individuals, but always love. We must never force our beliefs on them, but always offer the choice. That is what Jesus did, and that is what his body, the church, must do as well.

It is hard to believe that the greatest command Jesus ever gave is the one his followers have the hardest time keeping. Love. If we are going to spread truth, we must do it with love. The Bible commands us to love everyone. Yes, even the people we disagree with, the people who are against us, and the people who intentionally hurt us.

As Jesus says in John 4:23, “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.” Proper worship of our heavenly father requires a balance of spirit and truth. It is like a balanced diet. There is a proper amount of each nutrient required for healthy growth. Likewise, if we are nothing but knowledgeable in God’s Word, we will have little influence. It would be like eating steak at every meal, with nothing else; no vegetables, fruit, bread, etc. That is why we need spirit as well (1 Corinthians 2:13). Only the Holy Spirit can reach the heart of man. That is the remedy to the famine of truth.

In order for us to successfully influence the culture with truth, we must love. I believe the apostle Paul says it best in 1 Corinthians 13:1–3.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Dr. Al Mohler said on the topic of how Christians should stand amidst the culture, “Evangelical Christians are now called upon to think strategically about what it means to speak truthfully and lovingly to a society that increasingly sees us as the moral outlaws.” That is the truth of the matter. There is a divide in the culture that is increasingly evident. Dr. Mohler continued, saying, “We now face no shortage of arguments for capitulation, but abandoning the truth of God’s Word is not an option. We deny the gospel if we deny the sinfulness of sin. That sin. Every sin. Our

sin.”¹ Refusing to be the light of truth in the world is not an option, but we must do it through love.

Let us be a church that speaks truth and life and does so through **love**.

Appendix A

Further Questions

Is the Church Too Judgmental?

There are two sides of the same coin on this issue: on one side, there is a great deal of truth in the notion that the church, in many senses, is guilty of being “judgmental” for the wrong reasons. On the other side, however, it is important not to take Jesus’s command not to judge out of context.

When it comes to issues of hot debate, specifically politically-motivated topics, it is difficult *not* to come across as “judgy.” Why? In a culture that has abandoned absolute truth, any idea which opposes our own seems to be motivated by unwanted judgment. The problem is that this is especially evident in Christianity, because some consider it an “arrogant religion.” That is, Christianity, like all worldviews, claims to be the right worldview. What many often fail to realize is that *every* worldview claims to be the correct worldview. Even relativism claims to be correct, which is what makes it defeat itself.

That being said, it is logically fallacious to claim that Christianity is arrogant in claiming to be founded in absolute truth. As we discussed earlier, if a certain truth claim is absolute, then all opposing truth claims must be false. Remember the law of non-contradiction?

The reason we are quick to label absolute truth as judgmental or intolerant is for this reason—nobody wants his or her worldview to be false, and who can blame them? We all want to be right. So, when we feel our worldview is threatened by an opposing one, specifically one that claims to be the only true worldview, we are often quick to play the *bigot* card.

But what about when Christians really are too judgmental? First, we must look at what the Bible actually says about judging. Matthew 7:1–3 says, “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” Many of us take the first verse and run, thus neglecting the other two. Notice that this passage is not a command to judge, but not to judge *hypocritically*. Christians are called to hold each other accountable. Later, in John, we are told to judge not by appearances, but with “right judgment” (John 7:24).

The Pharisees were the masters of hypocritical judgment. Jesus refers to this as the “leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:5–12). They knew the law but did not understand it. They were the definition of “holier-than-thou.” Their motive was essentially to prove to everyone how much more religious they were. This involved looking down on everyone and judging hypocritically. Jesus has a few nice words to say about this, including calling

them “snakes,” a “brood of vipers,” (Matthew 23:33) and even saying their father is Satan (John 8:44). This is what the Bible authors mean by saying we should not judge.

As far as right judgment, however, we as the body are called to hold each other accountable (see chapter 14). We must be sure, however, that we do not judge the world as the Pharisees did. Many are quick to target a particular sin issue and call everyone out about it. This is not a successful approach to evangelism. In fact, it can hurt our witness tremendously. The world needs to know truth, but we must preach it in a loving and accepting way. The same is true for accountability within the church.

Is Apologetics Really Necessary?

Apologetics literally means giving an answer or a defense. It comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which means just that. What we may not realize is that apologetics is actually commanded in scripture. 1 Peter 3:15 tells us, “but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.” Why would we be commanded to be ready to give an answer if this were an unnecessary form of ministry?

Unfortunately, apologetics is one of the most underappreciated fields of ministry within the church. We know what we believe, but do not know why we believe it. I believe this is one of the contributing factors to the staggering statistics of young people abandoning the faith after high school. This is especially true of a post-Christian culture (see introduction). It is no longer a matter of people being open-minded about truth; we are in the era of teaching which is in *direct opposition* to God’s Word. We have books like *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, college professors who are openly against Christianity and religious thinking, and post-modern ideals seeping into classrooms, textbooks, and media.

How can we effectively spread the gospel to a culture that has already decided not to believe it?

This is where apologetics comes into play. It is not a spiritual gift; it is not just for church leaders and apologists like William Lane Craig or Frank Turek. Being able to defend our beliefs is vital to Christianity. Using apologetics in ministry and evangelism is like citing your sources when writing an article or giving a speech. Unless you know how to defend your argument with facts and reason, people may not be willing to listen or believe you.

Apologetics is not just for non-believers either; it is also used to strengthen the faith of other believers. Using apologetics in your ministry will better equip people for evangelism and the pervasive attacks we are sure to encounter. In addition, many Christians face doubt or struggle with pressing questions at some point in their walk with Christ. Having answers is more than necessary to walk with them through these crises of faith.

People will have questions. We need to have answers. People will raise objections. We need to provide a defense.

Evangelism and Discipleship: What's the Difference?

In a sense, there cannot be one without the other. Evangelism should always lead to discipleship. Think of evangelism and discipleship this way: evangelism is the *outreach*, whereas discipleship is the *growth*. That is, evangelism involves preaching the gospel and planting a seed in someone who does not yet believe (horizontal ministry). Discipleship, then, occurs once the lost person has made the decision to follow Jesus. Discipling the believer is what leads to spiritual growth (vertical ministry).

Another way of looking at it is picturing a house. You would not build a house without a foundation. Likewise, we cannot disciple those who have not decided to accept salvation. The gospel message through evangelism is what establishes the foundation. Discipleship is the process of building the house. Both are equally necessary. The role of the church is present in both aspects as well. The church as a whole is called to evangelism. We all share the responsibility of bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth. However, discipleship occurs within the corporate (local) church. This is why it is important to be connected with a church.

Where Should I Go to Church?

First, look for sound, Biblical theology. The theology of a church is what should shape every other aspect of its being. Get connected in a church that teaches out of the Bible; this includes clearly presenting the gospel, treating the Bible as the ultimate authority of the Christian faith (inspired, inerrant, and infallible), and includes the importance of both the Old and New Testaments. (See Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 3:15–17, 4:2–4.)

We should also look for a church that places a Biblical view on God. Does the church treat God as holy? Does it have God-centered worship?

In addition, it is important to attend a church that values discipleship. This includes finding a church that follows the Biblical model of membership (Hebrews 10:24–25; Ephesians 4:11–29), church discipline (Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Corinthians 5:1–13), and the spiritual growth of the believer (2 Peter 1:3–11; Romans 15:14).

Being connected in a church that takes leadership seriously is also necessary. What kind of leadership does the church have? Does the church have qualified pastors and elders governed by Scripture? Are they caring? How is decision-making handled? (See Hebrews 13:7; 1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–11.)

Lastly, find a church that is serious about the love of Christ. Is Jesus's love evident in the congregation? Is there love for the lost? Is there love for one another? Is the church generous with time, talent, and treasure? (See Matthew 22:39; John 13:34–35; Philippians 2:1–4.)

Are You Saying Churches Should Not Be Attractive?

I am saying churches should not focus on being *attractional*. Being culturally relevant is not a bad thing, unless it becomes the focus and/or goal of the church. As discussed earlier, when churches focus on attractionalism as the top priority, syncretism occurs—the compromising of fundamentals in order to draw crowds. With this also comes the neglecting of discipleship, which, as we have seen, can be seriously detrimental to the life of the church and the believer.

Again, attracting lost people is not the issue either. Don't hear what I'm not saying. However, we must understand the purpose of the church as the united body of Christ. Cultural relevance is necessary to some degree; culture is a moving target. But relevance without truth is *irrelevant*. According to R. C. Sproul, the “seeker-sensitive” movement “rests on a fundamental error. The assumption is that unbelievers outside the church are desperately seeking for God... The second fundamental error is that the purpose of corporate worship on a Sunday morning is to reach the lost.” We should be concerned about what pleases God through our worship, not what pleases the unbelievers or the culture.

Appendix B

Expounding on Prosperity Gospel

Prosperity Gospel, as mentioned earlier in the book, is not just a problematic approach to the Gospel; it is actually opposed to the true Gospel message. It is a dangerous and evil message.

First, prosperity preachers use this false Gospel as a marketing technique in order to make money. One of the most famous (or infamous) prosperity televangelists is Creflo Dollar, who regularly preached the health and wealth gospel. He eventually repented of this teaching, though he has also spread many other false teachings besides prosperity from the pulpit. He is also known for teaching “little god theology,” which suggests that human beings are gods, being that we are from God. Dollar even once asked his congregation to help pay for a \$65 million jet, and claimed that this was somehow part of God’s will.

Jesse Duplantis, another popular prosperity preacher, received backlash for owning a \$54 million private jet. Kenneth Copeland, among many others, are also infamous for living lavish lifestyles with the income provided by their ministries. Many of these ministries teach prosperity theology and prey off of the people who buy into the lie. The pastors then use the profits to buy luxury homes, clothes, private jets, yachts, etc.

Prosperity Gospel is an anti-Christian message. That is, it goes against everything the Bible teaches about the provision of God. The message makes money into an idol, and Jesus into a means to an end. Essentially, teaching that strong enough faith will make one healthy and wealthy is opposed to the very life of Jesus and his disciples. After all, Jesus and his disciples were not wealthy by any means. So, to suggest that a lack of faith results in the prevention of God’s blessing is to suggest that Jesus himself somehow lacked faith.

Even more subtle teachings on prosperity are just as dangerous. Pastor Joel Osteen pastors one of the largest churches in the United States, and famously teaches that we should be pursuing our “best life now.” However, Jesus says that in this world we will have trouble, and that we will be hated simply for following Christ. Paul also taught that we will have trouble. To suggest that we can manifest goodness in our own lives simply by believing or speaking it into existence is to discount God and the Gospel completely.

Beware of preachers who twist the teachings of Jesus to try to suggest that the Gospel is all about us and obtaining societal wealth. Scripture clearly teaches that the love of money is the root of evil, and only God is sovereign to provide as he wills it for us.

Appendix C

Expounding on Worship

Human beings are worshipers. We were designed that way. That is, we have a natural tendency to worship *something*, be it a person, an item, ourselves, etc. So what *is* worship? And who deserves it?

Worship, simply put, is worth-ship. When we worship, we are acknowledging something above ourselves, and giving praise and glory to whatever that may be. We are acknowledging its *worth* or value. When it comes to Biblical, Godly worship, this type of worship begins with the trinity-the perfect, triune God. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are worthy of our *worship*. The persons of the trinity exist in perfect unity, eternally displaying love, community, and submission to each other.

Though God does not *require* our worship, as to suggest that there is something lacking in God, he *deserves* our worship and devotion and is worthy of all we can bring. Humans, after all, are created in His image (imago Dei), and should therefore reflect the worth and glory of our Father in heaven by ultimately pointing it back to Him.

As the Westminster catechism says, the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. That is our purpose: to bring God the glory. We do so when we worship, being that we are image-bearers of the one true God. It is in our core to worship God. Our fallen nature, however, causes us to drift from this and worship other things. We seek the glory of ourselves and lift up the creation, rather than our Creator. This is sin.

What Does Worship Look Like?

While many of us may immediately picture a Sunday service and singing songs when we hear the word “worship,” it is so much deeper than this. Yes, melodies and rhythm are a means of expressing worship, but worship exists with or without the instrumentation and song. Rather, worship is an outpouring of ourselves back to God.

The writer of Hebrews says this: “Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Hebrews 13:15–17) Worship is sacrifice.

Worship Is Not:

About us.

I once saw a post on Instagram from a leader at a large church, in which she defined worship as “surrender to what God says about us.” I was shocked at the statement; how easy it is for us as sinful, fallen humans to take Godly worship and point the glory back on ourselves. If anything, when we do acknowledge ourselves in worship, it should be to remember our depravity and need for a Savior! The glory belongs to God alone.

This is not to say we should not marvel at God’s mercy and love for us by calling us sons and daughters though we are sinful. But worship should never be about us. It should be solely about God alone.

Worship is also not confined to Sunday mornings. For too many of us, it remains there, whereas we fail to recognize that all of life is continuous worship. The only question is: *who* will be the object of our praise?

God is a jealous God (Exodus 34:14), burning with passion, who longs for His children to desire to worship Him. Will we bow in surrender to the King of Kings, to enjoy Him forever, or will we continue looking to worldly pleasures to be the objects of our devotion?

Notes

Introduction: What Is Bubblegum Gospel?

¹ Foley, Avery, “A New Reformation for a Post-Truth Church,” Answers in Genesis, <https://answersingenesis.org/christianity/church/new-reformation-post-truth-church/>

Chapter 1: A Starving Culture

¹ Suggests that people in a culture are governed by God and the laws of that culture are derived from His deity and nature therein. Specifically, Tillich defined it this way: "consciousness of the presence of the unconditional permeates and guides all cultural forms." (Tillich, P. *The Protestant Era*. University of Chicago Press, 1948, 43-44.)

Chapter 2: A Little Taste of Context

¹ Bauer, David R., and Robert A. Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics*, (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 124-125.

Chapter 4: Culture Vs. The Church

¹ Ott, Craig, and Gene Wilson., *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication. Grand Rapids*, (MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 124.

² From the Latin phrase, meaning “by Scripture alone.” This concept was made famous as an argument by Protestant reformer Martin Luther, in response to the corrupt methods of the Catholic church during the 1500’s.

Chapter 5: Seeds of Truth

¹ The Levitical priests, or Levites, were descendants of the Israelite tribe of Levi. Some were priests, who were given responsibility over the sacrificial requirements of Mosaic Law (Deut. 33:10). Others served as judges (Deut. 17:8–13), and others focused on the care and furnishings of the Tabernacle (Num. 3:21–26).

³ The truths Jesus reveals about the kingdom of heaven through the telling of parables were considered “secrets” which had not been known in the Old Testament (Mat. 13:11). The Jewish leaders rejected Jesus’s teaching, however.

⁴ John 6:61,64.

⁵ MacArthur, John. and Pam Sheppard. “A Call Back to Truth.” Answers in Genesis. <https://answersingenesis.org/christianity/church/a-call-back-to-truth/>

Chapter 6: A Sugar Coated View of God?

¹ The idea that the focus of an individual, religious or not, is on his or herself; that is, entirely self-reliant. This idea is more prevalent than ever in North American society, with the rejection of absolutes and the shift toward ideas like moral relativism, postmodernism, and the push for tolerance. Within the church, individualism has replaced the importance of community of the body of believers, focusing more on personal well-being and blessing.

Chapter 11: Seven Churches

¹ This view is known as *preterism*. It suggests that some or all prophecy in the Bible is history; that is, the events described by the prophets and by John in Revelation have already happened in the past and are therefore not a description of what will occur in the End Times.

² Known as *futurist eschatology*, this view suggests that the prophecies in scripture, such as those in Daniel and Revelation, are literal prophecies of events that will occur in the End Times.

Chapter 12: Who Is the Real Enemy Here?

¹ Matthew 11:28 (MSG)

² Crain, Natasha, “10 Signs The Christian Authors You’re Following Are Subtly Teaching Unbiblical Ideas” *CrossExamined.org* (2018).

Chapter 14: Family Matters

¹ Fight the New Drug: *What is the Average Age of a Kid’s First Porn Exposure?* July 30, 2018.
<https://fightthenewdrug.org/real-average-age-of-first-exposure/>

² Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1994) 38.

³ Paul Amato, “The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation,” in *The Future of Children: Marriage and Child Wellbeing*, Volume 15, Number 2, Fall 2005, (Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton and The Brookings Institution).

⁴ James Q. Wilson, *The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002).

⁵ If we are not growing, we are either stagnant or moving backwards. There have been several points in my life during which I have experienced “plateaus” in my faith. It felt like I was not going anywhere. It is easy during these moments to give up or neglect spiritual disciplines. Our faith walk will not always feel like we are growing, but it is important that we always push forward instead of becoming spiritually sluggish and stagnant. Backsliding is a term used to describe when Christians begin to relapse into sinful ways. Of course, we are all guilty of returning to sin, being sinful by nature. However, our faith is demonstrated by our fruits.

Conclusion: What Now?

¹ “Tebow’s Big Fumble,” by Dr. Al Mohler, posted February 22, 2013 to ChristianityToday.com