

RELATIVELY UNSAFE

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by

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RELATIVELY UNSAFE: WHY THE CHURCH MUST BE FREED  
FROM THE TRAP OF RELATIVISM

Just one generation ago, the most quotable Scripture in American churches would have easily been John 3:16. Today, it is arguably Matt. 7:1 "Do not judge so that you will not be judged." There are several reasons why this verse is so popular among believers today, but the most obvious is the mistaken concept that it provides a safe haven for the tolerance and acceptance of personal sin, regardless of its egregious nature.

It has become apparent in recent years that the church is faring little better than the world in regard to moral relativism. Even within the walls of the church, Scripture is rarely accepted unequivocally as absolute truth. The church is now better characterized as simply a baptized by-product of western individualism. Borrowing the words of the Lord in John 14:6, this paper will examine how the church in America has lost her way (*o`do.j*), because of the absence of truth (*avlh,qeia*). Without a miracle, it may cost her life (*zwh,*).

However, a few recent examples from the culture and one that bridges church and culture may be helpful at this point. In a book designed to help marriages, R. C. Sproul sees how Christians can succumb to attitudes which develop from social acceptability, even if they are out of line with Scripture. Sproul says,

Running through the popular sex manuals is the principle of what I call statistical morality. Ethical judgments are made on the basis of what is 'normal.' The normal is determined by statistical analysis. This is the basic approach to humanism as a philosophy. What is most human is considered good. The human is often determined by the normal. Whatever deviates from normal human behavior is then judged to be detrimental to human fulfillment. Thus statistical surveys like those presented by Kinsey, Chapman, or Masters and Johnson become standards for ethical decisions. It's the old argument of everybody is

doing it. If it can be shown that the majority of people practice premarital sex, then it is considered normal and therefore all right.<sup>1</sup>

J. Budziszewski of the University of Texas argues that moral “neutrality” is an illusion and illustrates its dangers by saying, “Using a bicycle wheel as our model, the moral virtues are to spokes as practical wisdom is to the hub. We all know what happens when we use a bicycle wheel with a damaged spoke. Before long, the others give in too, and the wheel gets more and more out of true. This is the classical thesis for the unity of the virtues. If one virtue bends, then every virtue bends.”<sup>2</sup>

Countering that notion is Princeton’s Gilbert Harman, who has been championing moral relativism since *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) was published. In a more recent “debate” with Judith Jarvis Thomson, Harman summarizes, “Moral relativism claims that there no such thing as objectively absolute good, absolute right, or just in relation to this or that moral framework. What someone takes to be absolute rightness is only rightness in relation to... that person’s values.”<sup>3</sup>

Gregory Koukl takes the argument about relativism from theory to the practical realm as he observes,

...in order for certain concepts...things like praise and blame, the existence of evil in the world, the value of justice and fairness, the reasonableness of personal accountability, the idea of moral discourse and moral improvement and reform, and the idea of tolerance-all of these things are tied up with a

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<sup>1</sup> R. C. Sproul, *The Intimate Marriage: A Practical Guide to Building a Great Marriage* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1975), 134.

<sup>2</sup> J. Budziszewski, *The Revenge of Conscience: Politics and the Fall of Man* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1999), 48.

<sup>3</sup> Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 17.

particular idea...That's why if you hold moral relativism-let everybody make up their own rules and decide for themselves what's right and wrong and let's not push our morality on any one else-then if you're going to be consistent you have to abandon the idea that there is anything like an absolute right or wrong. Therefore, your language of wrong-doing has to be excused from your vocabulary. The language of things being evil in themselves or wrong in themselves must be removed because there is no such thing.<sup>4</sup>

However, examining the broad scope of moral relativism, especially as the church must engage the cultural war, is too vast a topic for this forum. This paper will look particularly at how the wounds evident in the modern church are primarily self-inflicted. Specifically, it will examine the emerging church, the seeker-friendly church, and problems within the prosperity movement as well. It will illustrate the connection between moral relativism and doctrinal relativism. Its conclusion will include a prophetic glimpse toward the future of the American church if this battle against relativism is not won.

### EMERGING GOSPEL

The traditional church has much it can learn from the emerging church. In fact, I have "accidentally" purchased three books written by emerging authors. This may be the obvious drawback from internet purchasing rather than traditional bookstores, but Amazon.com has taught Barnes and Noble a few things, much as the emerging church can teach the traditional church. These three books all were "sold" through blurbs revealing weaknesses within the traditional church. The buzzwords were exactly what I wanted to hear as I contemplated the problems of the infection of moral relativism within the church.

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<sup>4</sup> Gregory Koukl, "Relativists and Sociopaths," *Stand To Reason*, <http://str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5540>.

At the risk of oversimplification due to lack of space and time, we must be aware of the distinction between the terms “Emerging Church” and “Emerging Village.” “Emerging Church” is the broader term used to describe the entire movement of (primarily) younger Christians who have chosen to withdraw from traditional churches in order to begin a more communal and missional lifestyle and worship system that, in their opinion, better reflects the early church than traditional churches. Many of these ministers have begun a cooperative and organized effort that involves officers, board members, and raised financial support.<sup>5</sup> This joint venture is what is being referred to as the Emergent Village. In fact, “emersion” is a partnership between Baker Books and the EV, and their debutante publication was one of the three books I have mentioned.<sup>6</sup>

Rodney Clapp, like most EV writers, sees obvious problems in the church. He calls contemporary Christians “useless,” refers to the church as “private clubs,” and bemoans Christians not being “peculiar” from the world.<sup>7</sup> However, as keen as that insight is, his theological responses are equally fleshly. He accepts homosexuality and feminism despite the blatant scriptural conflict. Clapp falls into the popular trap of minimizing sin in order to make the message more popular. His call for the church to be more like a community resounds in EV literature. So does the silence about the issues of sin and the effect of the cross.

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<sup>5</sup> For more details, please see "Essential Concerns Regarding the Emerging Church" presented by Brett Kunkle of Stand to Reason at the Evangelical Theological Society's Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. 11/15/06; also available at [www.str.org](http://www.str.org)

<sup>6</sup> Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, eds., *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

The second book I ordered from reading the title is by Mike Erre. Since I am a member of a church in suburban Dallas, Erre's title caught my attention. Reading the introduction ensured me his perspective was not what I was expecting. Erre says, "We cower behind our fortress of absolute truth, arrogantly pronouncing judgment on the world around us, condemning sin and sinner alike."<sup>8</sup>

From my perspective, the church has allowed the culture to rob us of absolute truth. He's right in that the church is doing many things wrong. Like Clapp and others to be discussed below, Erre has keenly identified problems in the traditional church. However, if you'll allow a cliché as illustration, these young writers seem to be throwing the baby out with the bath water. Instead of calling for a revolution against the relativism of the culture, Erre calls for "revolution," which he then illustrates as simply waving and speaking to neighbors who were not friendly to him<sup>9</sup>. This sounds more like basic spiritual maturity than revolution, but he's right that not enough of us are practicing it. However, Erre is more balanced than most of the EV writers I've read-intentionally or not. He's right again when he says, "It is one thing to proclaim that God loves everybody. It is another thing to minister to rapists in prison."<sup>10</sup>

Brian McLaren is arguably the most recognized name in the EV, yet his preference for the postmodern mindset creates confusion, primarily because of his disdain for particular labels. He says,

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<sup>8</sup> Mike Erre, *The Jesus of Suburbia: Have We Tamed the Son of God to Fit Our Lifestyle?* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006), xiii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

“...orthodoxy in this book may mean something like ‘what God knows, some of which we believe a little, some of which they believe a little, and about which we all have a whole lot to learn.’ Or it may mean ‘how we search for a kind of truth you can never fully get into your head, so instead you seek to get your head (and heart into it.’ Most people are too serious, knowledgeable, and busy for such an unorthodox definition of orthodoxy.”<sup>11</sup>

The president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, Albert Mohler, examines McLaren’s book and finds it lacking. He concludes,

“Orthodoxy must be generous, but it cannot be so generous that it ceases to be orthodox. Inevitably, Christianity asserts truths that, to the postmodern mind, will appear decidedly ungenerous. Nevertheless, this is the truth that leads to everlasting life. The gospel simply is not up for renegotiation in the twenty-first century. A true Christian generosity recognizes the infinitely generous nature of the truth that genuinely saves. Accept no substitutes.”<sup>12</sup>

One of the glaring frailties of the EV is its disdain for everything traditional, even theology. Dan Kimball says, “It is not a weakness to explore theology outside what we’ve been taught in our specific church or seminary. It’s not a weakness to admit there is a lot we just don’t know. I see that as a strength, not a weakness. Weakness is when we simply close our minds and become afraid to explore different ideas, which may mean we are afraid to be challenged or discover something new.”<sup>13</sup> Personally, I challenge myself frequently to address issues about divorce and remarriage, eschatological issues, spiritual gifts, and other controversial subjects, but I always want my opinions to square with the

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<sup>11</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 28.

<sup>12</sup> Albert Mohler, ““a Generous Orthodoxy”--is It Orthodox?,” *Commentary By R. Albert Mohler Jr*, June 20, 2005, [http://albertmohler.com/commentary\\_print.php?cdate+2005-06-20](http://albertmohler.com/commentary_print.php?cdate+2005-06-20).

<sup>13</sup> Dan Kimball, “Humble Theology: Re-exploring Doctrine While Holding on to Truth,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 216.

Bible. I don't want new for the sake of newness and rebelling against my parents' generation. I want to have God's view.

Dwight Friessen establishes orthodoxy as “right beliefs,” but juxtaposes it with what he calls (and may have coined) “orthoparadoxy,” which he defines as “holding difference rightly. Orthoparadox seeks to hold difference, tensions, otherness, and paradoxes with grace, humility, respect, and curiosity, while simultaneously bringing the fullness of self to the ‘other’ in conversation, not to convert or to convince but with the hope of mutual transformation through interpersonal relationship.”<sup>14</sup> His definition, while extremely creative, borders on being tautological, and flings evangelism via the Holy Spirit aside in favor of a fleshly, hopeful conversation without conversion. His next paragraph pulls some of the confusion out of his point by saying, “Genuine difference and genuine oneness, the life of God as the life of God's creation: this is orthoparadoxy.”

Nanette Sawyer, an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) sounds like Friessen (or vice-versa) by offering “paradoxology” as the antidote to arrogance. After citing a “paradox” from 1 John 3:9 (the NRSV says “they cannot sin because they have been born of God.”) she defends her rebuked position that all people are therefore children of God. She chooses to ignore the basic differences between present active indicative Greek verbs and the present tense in English just to find what she considers to be an error of logic in Scripture. From there she concludes that the errors of Scripture should serve to keep Christians humble. She concludes, “...paradoxology-the glory of

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<sup>14</sup> Dwight J. Friesen, "Orthoparadoxy: Emerging Hope for Embracing Difference," in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 204-205.

paradox, paradox-doxology-which takes us somewhere we wouldn't be capable of going if we thought we had everything all wrapped up, if we thought we had attained full comprehension."<sup>15</sup>

### SEEKER-FRIENDLY CHURCH

From the outset, it should be noted that the seeker-church movement per se does not necessarily create uncommon ground with a traditional, evangelical church. Dozens of churches in America fall into the mega-church category because their pastor preaches primarily expository and believers come to be fed and to serve others. However, some of the main leaders of the church growth movement from a decade ago have taken a left turn toward a more culturally-correct pathway to attract more followers. It appears that the bigger the monster grows, the more maintenance it requires.

John MacArthur has noticed the drift away from expository preaching of truth toward a more popular homiletic as he says, "There are plenty of gifted communicators in the modern evangelical movement, but today's sermons tend to be short, shallow, topical homilies that massage people's egos and focus on fairly insipid subjects like human relationships, 'successful' living, emotional issues, and other practical but worldly-and definitely not *biblical*-themes."<sup>16</sup>

Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) and *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) have each sold millions

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<sup>15</sup> Nanette Sawyer, "What Would Huckleberry Do? A Relational Ethic as the Jesus Way," in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 48.

<sup>16</sup> John MacArthur, "Plexiglas Preaching: The Devastating Consequences of a Watered-Down Message," in *Fool's Gold: Discerning Truth in an Age of Error*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 36.

of copies, and many people today point to the latter as having a strong influence in pointing them to Christ. Nathan Busenitz points to several strengths of the more recent work, only to note that its approach to Scripture is too casual. He adds, “Our biggest concern with the Purpose-Driven Life is that although it frequently references the Bible, it often does so inaccurately...Warren offers proof-texts for much of his discussion, usually without any exegetical or contextual support.”<sup>17</sup>

Warren has arguably become the most recognizable figure in evangelicalism circles today, but has come under fire recently for ecumenism, an on-going abuse of Scripture, and an all-encompassing nature of “Purpose-Driven” programs.<sup>18</sup> His efforts to take a socialized gospel internationally have also drawn criticism for joining with Ted Haggard to implore President Bush to initiate government action to fight global poverty, and for naively allowing himself to be used by terrorist-supporting dictatorships like Syria. Warren has denied making quotes credited to him, but journalist Joseph Farah comments that either, “He made the outrageous statements...for which he should be ostracized-maybe even tried for treason,” or “He ...was misquoted-in which case he has placed himself in the predictable position of being a ‘useful idiot’ for the Islamofascist regime in Damascus.” Farah goes on to cite the Syrian Arab News Agency having reported, “Pastor Warren hailed the religious coexistence, tolerance, and stability that the Syrian society is enjoying due to the wise leadership of President al-Assad, asserting that

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<sup>17</sup> Nathan Busenitz, "A Sense of Purpose: Evaluating the Claims of the Purpose-Driven Life," in *Fool's Gold: Discerning Truth in an Age of Error*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 48-49.

<sup>18</sup> Tim Challies, "Rick Warren: Three Primary Concerns," *Challies.com*, Nov. 22, 2005, <http://challies.com/archives/001468.php>.

he will convey the true image about Syria to the American people.”<sup>19</sup>

Bill Hybels founded Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago in 1975. He had been mentored by Robert Schuller, and his church’s materials on small groups gives clear instructions to “remove religious words” from their small group literature in an attempt to lure unchurched Harry and Mary to WCCC. But how can anyone teach truth without employing terminology that involves doctrine? WCCC skillfully uses 12-step programs to lure people to the place of confronting them with the gospel, but how can those people mature without truth?

Whether it’s these two churches which were built on a seeker-friendly system, or any of the many others like them, when church growth is dependent upon entertainment of their congregations, it’s the church leadership who will always be seeking the next most effective method with which to entertain an increasingly bored audience.

Occasionally, the worlds of the emergent church and the mega-church collide, as Hybels and Mark Driscoll, “the cussing preacher”<sup>20</sup> formerly of the EV persuasion are currently embroiled about the elder pastor’s public criticism of the younger (Driscoll) over another video pulled from YouTube.com that failed to mention women as church planters. However, a quick glimpse at the video<sup>21</sup> finds that Driscoll flies as close to the flame as possible. What he says would not get “bleeped” on prime-time television, but his

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Farah, "The Purpose-driven Lie," *Between The Lines*, Nov. 16, 2006, [http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE\\_ID=52969](http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=52969).

<sup>20</sup> This tag was first placed on Driscoll in *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson), 2003.

<sup>21</sup> The video may be viewed on Driscoll's blog- [http://www.theresurgence.com/md\\_blog\\_2007\\_04\\_28\\_banned\\_church\\_planting\\_video](http://www.theresurgence.com/md_blog_2007_04_28_banned_church_planting_video).

crass remarks have no place in a pulpit. Driscoll, however, has left the EV to start his own organization. McLaren, Leonard Sweet, and a few others are mentioned in Driscoll's blog as "...pushing a theological agenda that greatly troubled me. Examples include referring to God as a chick, questioning God's sovereignty over and knowledge of the future, denial of the substitutionary atonement at the cross, a low view of Scripture, and denial of hell which is one hell of a mistake."

However, Alistair Begg of Parkside Church in suburban Cleveland was asked a question last September from a lady serving on a pastor search committee regarding which names she should want to hear in response from a candidate about his influences. Begg said to pursue a candidate whose shapers are "Thomas Watson, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and John MacArthur." He also said to dismiss candidates who profess to follow "Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, and Joel Osteen."<sup>22</sup>

### PROSPERITY GOSPEL

While an avaricious and self-sustaining attitude has swept over the modern American seeker-church, it has become the very backbone of the extremely popular Word-Faith movement. If doctrinal relativity has emerged in seeker-churches that were at least founded on solid doctrinal teaching, it has characterized the neo-Pentecostal movement, as evident through the movement's recent literature and broadcasts. If seeker-church pastors have shied away from expository preaching and found refuge in the

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<sup>22</sup> Will Shin, "Oooooooh! Alistair Begg Lays It Straight Who's In And Who's Out!," *Thoughts And Actions*, Sept. 9, 2006, <http://thoughtsactions.wordpress.com/2006/09/09/ooooooooh-alistair-begg>.

practical application of a harmless, powerless topical sermon, then the leaders of the prosperity gospel ignore verses on sin and suffering in order to anesthetize their congregations with messages of comfort and toys.

Pastoring a mega-church with Word-Faith leanings evidently compounds the error. Joel Osteen is pastor of Lakeside Church in Houston. In his ill-fated interview on “Larry King Live,” Osteen responded to King’s question about fire and brimstone by saying, “...I just don’t believe in that...maybe it was for a time.” King’s next question dealt with the condemnation of those who reject Christianity. Osteen replied, “You can live a good life no matter what’s happened to you...I know there is condemnation but I don’t feel that’s my place.” When King asked him about his critics, Osteen said, “I’m going to be who I feel like I’m supposed to be.” When King pressed further about the afterlife of non-Christians, Osteen said, “Well, I don’t know if I believe they’re wrong. I believe here’s what the Bible teaches and from the Christian faith this is what I believe. But I just think that only God will judge a person’s heart...I’ve seen the sincerity (of the people of India). So, I don’t know. I know for me, and what the Bible teaches, I want to have a relationship with Jesus.”<sup>23</sup> So, the prosperity gospel may not be as guilty of moral relativism as they are doctrinal relativism.

I admit that I have never read Osteen’s book.<sup>24</sup> However, I offered an unemployed member of my singles division \$50 if he could locate the word “sin” five times in it. As I was teaching about false teaching from 1 Timothy and using the Word-

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<sup>23</sup> *CNN.com*, June 20, 2005, "CNN Larry King Live: Interview with Joel Osteen," <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0506/20/lkl.01.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: Time Warner International, 2005).

Faith movement as an example, this particular gentleman became outraged over my criticisms of Kenneth Copeland and was quite disruptive. The only thing I stood to gain from this venture was having my speculation proved wrong. However, I did receive an apologetic e-mail a few months later.

Rivers of ink have been spilled and blogs have been digitized detailing the false doctrines being taught by Joyce Meyer, Creflo Dollar, Kenneth Copeland, T.D. Jakes, Mike Murdock, and the burgeoning Word-Faith ministers. For brevity's sake, a summary point should suffice. The mainstream evangelical church must be made aware of the errors propagated by these immensely popular speakers. However, even corrective criticism must be done in love and should not be seen as personal attack, but rather a defense of truth in a truthless world.

Do pastors and evangelists of the Word-Faith movement even care about their people being able to defend the truths of Scripture in a timeless world, or are they simply concerned with expanding their investment portfolios? As the people of our churches confront this faulty thinking, we cannot expect them to discern error if they do not know the truth.

## CONCLUSION

This paper offers the tips of three icebergs that face the mission of defending the truth by the mainstream church today. The scope of this forum hardly allows an exhaustive treatment of any of the three major topics presented. However, my practical experience tells me that the church at large is woefully ignorant on these topics, much as she has become biblically illiterate.

Before our scholars begin strategizing on defending timeless truths in a “truthless” world, a more fundamental step must be considered. Before we address our curb appeal, we must repair the huge cracks in our own foundations. Our congregations must be better disciplined and discipled by a regular feeding of the word of God rather than sermons where an obligatory Scripture is employed for the sole purpose of camouflaging 30 minutes of entertainment. It is no wonder that thousands are leaving Southern Baptist Churches for the Church of Latter-Day Saints. It is no wonder that thousands are leaving mainstream churches for the prosperity gospel. We’re trying to play their game and we’re not as good at it as they are. It’s no wonder thousands of our children are leaving for the Emergent Village. They’re right about our methodology no longer being effective, and their ministers are far too bright to fall for the logical and theological inconsistencies of Mormonism.

Regardless of the size of the church, she can learn from one plank in the platform of the Emergent Village. The mainstream protestant/evangelical church, its positions on eschatological, charismatic, or reformation issues notwithstanding, is suffering from an absence of agape. The Emergent Village has shown us that our efforts to preserve dogmatism and orthodoxy and our zeal to have a purpose-driven church have cost us the ability to regularly show love.

So, if an elephant is eaten one bite at a time, how can the church regain her “saltiness” and be restored to her position as the vessel of truth for a truthless world? In my view, it begins in our pulpits. We need to be less concerned with tickling the ears of people who are seeking righteous entertainment instead of total surrender, and be more concerned with simultaneously feeding new believers as well as mature ones. We need to

be less concerned about marketing and more concerned about maturity.

If a common thread exists through these three examples, it is the blatant ignorance of sin. It is not hard to understand why preachers today avoid the issue. Who wants to sacrifice a Sunday morning to listen to someone offering a harangue about sin? What sounds better-“God wants you to be rich,” or “Join with me in suffering”?<sup>25</sup> What sounds better-“Homosexuality is natural,” or “Love homosexuals but hate homosexuality”? What sounds better-“Become part of this church/entertainment center,” or “Repent and surrender”?

We cannot simply sit by and wave the white flag, allowing the upcoming generation to understand moral relativity so well that they disregard the truth of Scripture. In order to defend the truths of Scripture in a timeless world, we must be bolder than ever about educating our congregations and our young ministers about the word of God in the first place. We cannot expect them to discern error if they do not know truth.

Today’s church, biblically illiterate and culturally naïve, has lost her way. We have a generation of young ministers from the West Coast telling us that we need to get “fired up.” In many ways they’re right, but they have chosen to ignore the absolute truth of Scripture in favor of the ability to blend in and evangelize the culture. If the church’s new way continues down this slippery slope of relativism, the logical questions are: 1) If there is no sin-from what do people need to be saved? 2) If we have nothing from which to be saved, why should people need a Savior? 3) If people don’t need a Savior, isn’t all this talk about Jesus a big waste of time? If she’s lost her way, and embraces the notion of impossibility of absolute truth, then her life is in peril.

Josh McDowell acknowledges the crises of reaching young people with the truth of the gospel in a truthless world. He believes "...the solution lies in revealing to this generation of young people who Christ really is and then leading them to properly respond to him. Our young people's distorted views and unchanged lives will continue until they experience a true revelation of Christ for who he really is."<sup>26</sup>

Mark Dever, the senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, collected and published a series of his sermons on marks of a healthy church.<sup>27</sup> Dever cites expository preaching as "far and away the most important mark. The remaining marks include a biblical theology that understands God and His ways, the message of salvation based on Jesus, the necessity of conversion, evangelism, membership in a local church, church discipline, spiritual growth, and church leadership.

Polemic papers are not enjoyable to write, but they are necessary for the times in which we live and minister. MacArthur surmises,

I am convinced that the greatest danger facing Christians today has infiltrated the church already. Countless false teachers already have prominent platforms in the evangelical movement; evangelicals themselves are loath to practice discernment or question or challenge anything taught within their movement; and many leading evangelicals have concluded no doctrine or point of theology is worth earnestly contending for.<sup>28</sup>

Just exactly what kind of reform is necessary to keep the church alive? First,

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<sup>25</sup> 2 Tim. 1:8 (NASB)

<sup>26</sup> Josh McDowell and David H. Bellis, *The Last Christian Generation* (Holiday, FL: Green Key Books, 2006), 69.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> John MacArthur, *The Truth War: Fighting for Certainty in an Age of Deception* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2007), 170.

(Dever is right) we must return to an expository preaching mode, even if we're convinced that church members want to duck the difficult passages about moral absolutes that fill Scripture. Since the Greek word for "disciple" (*maqth.j*) means "pupil," why are we more concerned with entertainment than education? Second, we must return to a more recognizable system of historical-grammatical hermeneutics. Since we have become so dependent upon application in our sermons, we have drifted from instruction. It doesn't matter what Scripture means to a believer until that believer knows what Scripture means. Third, we must have dogma without the ugly dogmatism that has characterized my generation of ministers. The EV is right in this regard. Where the EV is wrong is in eliminating doctrine. Our congregations must be better informed about biblical doctrines, or they won't know how to apply Scripture to their lives. Fourth, everything we do must be showered with love without a hopeless romanticism that prohibits kingdom expansion. Finally, we must eliminate the decades-old emphasis on evangelism until we have the necessary infrastructure for discipleship. This is a call to return to expository preaching to better defend truth in a truthless world.

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