

# Critical Issues Commentary

A BIBLICALLY BASED COMMENTARY ON ISSUES THAT IMPACT YOU

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## THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD

BY BOB DEWAAY

*"Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God."*  
(Acts 20:26,27 KJV)

*"Therefore I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God."*  
(Acts 20:26,27 NASB)

The apostle Paul, after years of ministry in Ephesus and the surrounding areas, called the elders of the Ephesian church together for a final word before his departure. In this touching scene, Paul bared his heart and revealed his practice. What was important to him was not his own life (Acts 20:24), but the welfare of the church. Paul reminded them of his practice: "how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:20,21). Sadly, he also predicted that after his departure, wolves would arise from their own midst (Acts 20:29-31). They had been prepared to deal with this, since Paul patiently taught them "the whole counsel of God."

Today, with more wolves, more deception, and more questionable religious information bombarding Christians through every conceivable media, are we to suppose that we no longer need the whole counsel of God? That is just what many have been telling us. The seeker sensitive church movement, one of the largest and most influential in America, is built on the premise that churches should provide what religious consumers want, not necessarily what

the Bible says they need. Thousands of pastors are being trained through church growth seminars which mete out advice that is contradictory to Paul's practice and what he advised Timothy in the pastoral epistles. We are told that many traditional Christian doctrines are not relevant to contemporary people. Furthermore, the common advice is that we should find out from the community around us what people think they need, and then set out to meet "felt needs." If people are not interested in the whole counsel of God, then supposedly we are foolish to declare it.

Consider this — if we tell people what they want to hear, not what God has spoken once and for all (see Hebrews 1:1,2), can we like Paul say "I am innocent of the blood of all men"? Surely some things (like God's eternal purposes) are more important than temporal success in building a ministerial career. In this article, I will argue that "felt needs" from a human perspective are not the same as real needs from God's perspective, illustrating this from the ministries of Paul and Jesus. I will further claim that teaching extra-Biblical material at the expense of what God has revealed is a failure to fulfill the Great Commission as found in Matthew 28:20 and that God's eternal purpose is always relevant to all humans, whether they concern them-

selves with it or not.

### WHAT IS TRULY PROFITABLE?

Paul told the Ephesian elders that he did not withhold anything that was profitable. The context tells us this had to do with the gospel and the blood atonement (Acts 20:21,28). Humans, because of their fallen nature, do not naturally desire what they really need. Paul makes this clear: "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1Corinthians 2:14). Given this fact, how many unregenerate people would consider their greatest needs to be on this list: to die to self and be crucified with Christ, to have the wrath of God against their sin be appeased by a blood atonement that God Himself provided, to have their minds renewed by the Word of God, and to put their faith completely and whole-heartedly in the finished work of Christ? The truth is, the natural man would never think of these things on his own, they are revealed through the preaching of the gospel. Also, without the gift of God's grace, the natural man always rejects the things of God. Though the gospel is offensive to both Jew and Greek in different ways (1Corinthians 1:22), God has chosen the preaching of the gospel to save those who believe (1Corinthians 1:21).

Some pastors in the course of establishing a congregation in a community go door to door and ask the neighbors: if they were to go to a church, what would they look for. I wonder how many respond, "the preaching of the whole counsel of God." Do you suppose if the apostle Paul had gone about Ephesus before he began preaching there, and asked the pagans what sort of religious program they would

be interested in, they would have suggested the things Paul preached? Clearly not! What makes us think that modern pagans are more fit to tell us how to preach the gospel and worship God? Yet much of what comes to us through seminars and seminars on church growth is based on demographics and market survey approaches.

People don't want to be confronted by God's Holy Word, we are told, they want to be understood. People want to feel comfortable, meet other people like themselves, be made to feel happy and positive about themselves, and be given practical tools to help them solve life's problems. That's what they feel they need, so churches that meet those felt needs will grow and prosper, especially if they have comfortable seating, convenient parking, an innocuous name, a service that entertains, and all the other amenities that would set them apart from normal churches. The message, if it contains any Scripture reference at all, must be relevant to the mind set of the audience.

Herein lies a huge conflict of interest. The whole counsel of God is clearly **not** in the category of things that contemporary people consider needful. Yet, given the fact that we are charged to fully preach God's Word (**2Timothy 4:2**), we most certainly will appear irrelevant or offensive to most of the people in our communities. Even many professed Christians have little interest in the whole counsel of God. How many times I have heard them say, "my church isn't meeting my needs." Once I even heard that from a person who was a member of a huge mega-church that was described by another person who went there as "having every program but the space program." The real issue is that this "my needs first" approach is carnal minded and likely never to be satisfied. If we cater to that mentality we are failing the people God has sent us to. Paul told Timothy to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort with great patience and instruction" (**2Timothy 4:2**). We must offer deliverance from this carnal minded approach and motivation to start loving the things of Christ.

In the next verse of **2Timothy 4** Paul tells us why we must "reprove, rebuke, exhort":

*For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires (**2Tim. 4:3**).*

It seems clear to me that this passage is absolutely fatal to the whole premise of the seeker sensitive church movement. There is no difference between "felt needs" and "their own desires." Since Paul predicts that people will not endure sound doctrine, but find teachers to tickle ears with whatever their whims may be, those who take that approach are the false teachers about whom Paul warns. In this passage we are explicitly told to preach God's word, fully and patiently, since people are looking for something else. If we truly love the Lord, the people we are sent to, and the truth, then we will honor God by preaching God's word and not watering down its message.

#### JESUS AND "SEEKERS"

It's clear that Paul gave people what they needed, not what they wanted or thought they needed, but what about Jesus? There are several instances in the gospels that make it clear that Jesus was only interested in meeting real needs, not felt needs.

Consider the story about Mary and Martha:

*Now as they were traveling along, He entered a certain village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. And she had a sister called Mary, who moreover was listening to the Lord's word, seated at His feet. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him, and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for*

*Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her." (**Luke 10:38-42**)*

Here, plainly Martha's "felt need" was for help with the preparations. Jesus' response was that the few things really necessary (KJV "needful") could be boiled down to only one, to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to His word. Our need for God's word is so profound, that all the things that distract us and press upon us should be set aside so that His word can penetrate our hearts and souls. Surely this ought to be true for the Lord's day.

It is a sad situation when people spend six days a week dealing with the troubles and distractions of daily life and when they get to church on Sunday they hear practical advice on the troubles and distractions of daily life and **not** God's word! Much of the contemporary church has turned into a society of evangelical Marthas, wanting only help with this life and having little concern with everything God has spoken. Not unlike the liberals of past generations, many neglect key Biblical teachings such as: heaven and hell, atonement and redemption, sanctification and glorification or other important scriptural themes. In their place we get help in making our ride through this life to an unknown destination smooth and carefree.

This is not the only incident where Jesus was confronted by people who wanted Him to meet their "felt needs." Consider **John 6**. This chapter begins with Jesus' miraculous feeding of the five thousand. After the miracle, the people wanted to take Him by force and make Him king (**John 6:15**). Jesus withdrew from them. After the incident of walking on water (**John 6:19**) the multitude managed to find Jesus on the other side of the sea. Jesus said this to them: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled" (**John 6:26**). He then told them of their **true** need: "Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you, for on Him the Father, even God, has set His seal" (**John**

6:27). They truly needed to believe on Jesus as the promised Messiah (**John 6:29**) and receive eternal life.

The discussion about their “need” for bread led them to remind Jesus about manna (**John 6:31**) and imply that if Moses gave them manna, and Jesus was the promised “Prophet” (**John 6:14** which is an allusion to **Deuteronomy 18:15**), then surely Jesus would provide the bread they were requesting. In stark contrast to their claimed need, Jesus made this offer: “*I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh*” (**John 6:51**). This discussion led to a mass rejection of Christ’s teaching and only the twelve remained (**John 6:66-68**). This is another incident where Jesus refused to meet “felt needs” but addressed true needs, from God’s perspective. We need the blood atonement (**John 6:53,54**), not bread and a political king.

There are numerous other examples, such as the woman at the well (see **John 4**). The woman at the well did not think she needed a Messiah who would tell her about her own sins, but that is what she got, and she rejoiced. Yes, those who respond to the “words of life,” to quote Peter, are a smaller group than those who want immediate satisfaction of problems relating to this life. Yet God has us here to proclaim the only means of salvation, not simply to make the world a little more comfortable. This does not mean we are not a compassionate people, willing to help as the Lord enables us. It means that we never forget our focus and sacred calling to proclaim the whole counsel of God. The meeting of practical needs is merely a by-product of God’s great work of salvation.

#### GOD’S MESSIANIC PURPOSE AND HUMAN EXPECTATIONS

On a broader level, we should consider the fact that God’s plan of Messianic salvation through a rejected, crucified savior was not what anyone in Israel thought they needed. Jesus repeatedly had to tell His closest disciples that He

was going to be rejected and crucified, yet it did not sink in until after His resurrection. A study of the Jewish writings between Malachi and the coming of Messiah does not reveal an expectation of a rejected Messiah who died. This fact was the greatest apologetic issue for the early church as she defended her beliefs before the Jews. **Psalm 110:1,2** is quoted or alluded to twelve times in the New Testament. Why? Because it shows the Lordship of Christ (“*the Lord said to my Lord*”) and the fact that he would reign from the right hand of the Father, “*Sit at My right hand, Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet.*”

The Jews were looking for a mere human leader who would re-establish the throne of David and reign on earth. When Jesus was crucified, it appeared to

them that this proved He was not Messiah. This can be seen by various comments made while He was on the cross. **Psalm 110:1,2** supported the church’s claim that resurrected Christ was seated at the right hand of majesty on high, ruling as promised in the Old Testament. Consider how Peter used this passage in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost:

*This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet. Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ— this Jesus whom you*

*crucified.”* (**Acts 2:32-36**)

Peter was showing that even though Messiah had not met their expectations, He was truly the promised One.

These truths were foundational to the “whole counsel of God” that Paul patiently taught for three years in Ephesus. Had the early church taken up a program of trying to meet the “felt needs” of the demographic groups they encountered, this message would never have been preached. It is safe to say that no one thought they needed a rejected and crucified, Jewish Messiah. This should underscore the huge danger in looking to the wants and felt needs of the unregenerate to determine the message of the church.

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Some respond to this by claiming we must meet the “felt needs” of people first before they will listen to our teaching. Again, this sounds like a

brilliant idea, but was not how Jesus approached things. For example, consider **Mark 8:2** “*I feel compassion for the multitude because they have remained with Me now three days, and have nothing to eat.*” He preached to them first. The Bible nowhere teaches that we have to buy the right to preach the gospel by giving people what they think they want from us. We show compassion to people, help people and give to people because the Holy Spirit enables us to love God and neighbor as our Lord commanded. I have given money to many needy people over the twenty years I have been a pastor in a poor, urban neighborhood. I have never yet seen a person become a Christian because I gave him money. In several cases I helped the same person many times over several years. After determining that the person was not sincerely trying to get his life straightened out, I would quit giving the money. In every case such individuals never came to the church again. It seems everyone thinks they need money, but money never



saves souls. If people do not respond in faith to the preaching of the gospel, nothing we can do is going to make them Christian.

Changed lives are the **result** of the Holy Spirit's sovereign work in people's lives, not the **cause** of it. We can embark on all manner of helpful, life enhancing programs. There may be good reasons to do so. But only the message preached is God's ordained means of bringing redemption and sanctification. For example, in the Book of Acts, it was **after** God had established churches through the preaching of the gospel that they took action to care for the widows whom God had added to the church (**Acts 6:1**). Paul's series of rhetorical questions underscores this issue: "*How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?*" (**Romans 10:14**). In our day we could also ask, "how can they believe the gospel if the preacher does not preach it?"

#### THE GREAT COMMISSION AND THE ISSUE OF TRUTH

The most common response I have encountered to the assertions I am making here is: "all truth is God's truth." More technically this is called, "the unity of truth." Many critics of the whole counsel of God approach say, "life is an integrated whole, truth is an integrated whole, and we cannot divide it up like that." The application of this thinking is that anything we teach that is true is from God and therefore valid and useful. This objection has influenced a great many Christians and deserves a thoughtful response.

It is technically correct that truth is from God. God created all of reality, including the human capability to enjoy, understand, and truthfully describe the world around. Also, the devil is by nature a liar: "*He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he [the devil] speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies*" (**John 8:44b**).

Since the Fall, human discourse is a mixture of truth and error. Partly because of malicious intent and partly because of cognitive limitations, humans do not always speak the truth. However, God cannot lie (**Titus 1:2**). We believe that God's inspired Word is true in all that it asserts.

There are several ramifications to all of this. First, there is the issue of knowing what is true. This matter is complex and I am aware of many issues that have been raised by philosophers, linguists, and theologians. Most people, however, are willing to accept as fact that we can validly know things to be true, that the concept "truth" is meaningful, and that there is an objective difference between truth and lies. All human communication and commerce depends on this. We know that all the Bible asserts is true and we know that some things humans assert are true. Furthermore we will assume that there are some means of distinguishing truth from error. Let's accept these things as a reasonable basis for this discussion.

A second issue is the matter of relevance. This may be the real watershed issue. Many true things may not be relevant in certain contexts. If a person is seeking to find out why his car will not start in cold weather, he is not helped by being told that all squares have four sides. The statement is true, but not relevant. When it comes to the teaching of the church, the issue of relevance can be confusing. There are many things that we can do and teach that will appear to be quite relevant to the needs of people. People are interested in their financial needs, relationship needs, psychological needs, family needs, and some may even be interested in their spiritual needs. The typical reasoning goes something like this: all truth is God's truth, human science (such as psychology) has discovered truth that is relevant to the needs of contemporary people, so therefore Christians should apply the relevant truths to people's felt needs. Likewise, many reason, much of the Bible is irrelevant to contemporary people and their needs. So it only seems to make sense to take the truths of psychology

(or whatever human "science" that is helpful) and add them to certain Biblical facts that do seem relevant, and have a church that meets the needs of the people around us.

This argument has convinced many if not most of contemporary evangelicals. I heard it in Bible College in the 1970's and seminary in the 1990's. I suggest that this is the key reason why so many have laid aside the whole counsel of God. There are several Biblical reasons why this approach is wrong. The first is that nothing God has revealed is irrelevant. The assertion that parts of the Bible are irrelevant dishonors the Holy Spirit who inspired it. Since God chose to inspire the Biblical authors, preserve the content of the Scriptures for all future generations, and commanded His word be taught to people of all nations, then we can hardly make ourselves the final judges of its relevance.

For example, consider this one passage: "*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*" (**Romans 3:23**). The category "sin" is not relevant as far as most popular psychology sees it. As mentioned in our last issue, Robert Schuller makes it clear that people are not to be called "sinners." For the most part, people do not want to be made aware of their lost and sinful condition. As I have had people explain it to me: "people don't go to church to feel worse about themselves." So, it is deemed irrelevant to discuss the sin nature, and relevant to help people feel better about themselves. What about the glory of God? Are we to hear a powerful, Biblical presentation of God's glory, His holy nature, our fallen condition, and the necessity of a blood atonement to appease the wrath of God (**Romans 3:25**)? Again, these matters are not likely to be deemed relevant to many.

However, the truth is that all people are sinful, all need redemption, and there will be no one who is exempt from the final judgment. Therefore, if we believe the Bible is God's inspired truth, then we cannot believe that these matters are irrelevant to any human being! My thesis is that the whole counsel of God is always relevant, in

all times, cultures, and situations. The purposes of God are both true and relevant, always. This cannot be said about any form of uninspired, human reasoning.

Another reason why the “all truth is God’s truth” approach is not Biblical is the great commission.

*And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20).*

The disciples were commissioned to make disciples, baptize, and teach. The content of the teaching is all that Jesus commanded to be taught. There are many truths in the world that do not fall into that category.

For example, it is true that circles have no corners and that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. The “all truth is God’s truth” approach apparently makes no distinction based on the relative significance of the truths in question. A given local church could conceivably teach truths consistently, avoiding all falsehoods. People could be taught mathematics, auto mechanics, cooking, world history, and any number of things, all true. Yet none of this could be construed as fulfilling the great commission. Christ did not command us to teach these matters.

There is yet another problem with the theory that we shall integrate human discoveries of what might be true with parts of God’s word — what is left out is usually that which is distinctive to God’s word. Let me illustrate. I recently was able to find out from someone who attends a large local congregation that follows the “seeker sensitive” approach what the recent sermons had been about. The answer was, “a series of sermons urging husbands to be more responsible, better husbands and fathers.” Who could argue with that? However, I won-

der how many realize that one could get the same from a Mormon church or Louis Farrakan? The idea that husbands ought to be good husbands is certainly a Biblical idea, but it is not unique to Christianity. If taught in the larger context of the whole counsel of God it will honor God; but if such matters are taught exclusively, with no mention of Christ’s exclusive claims, we can easily mislead people.

To further illustrate, a few years ago I met a man at a driving range who was giving a golf lesson to another man. We struck up a conversation. When he found out I was a pastor, he showed a lot of interest and said that he was a counselor also and had worked with many churches. We exchanged business cards. A few weeks later I got a letter from him outlining his philosophy. His letter quoted dozens of great religious teachers (including Jesus) over the centuries who taught “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” His conclusion was that all religions teach the same thing.

I wrote back a response. In my response I agreed that certain ethical matters are quite universal. Most societies have laws against stealing, as does the Bible. The uniqueness of Christianity is not found by comparing certain of its ethical teachings with those of certain other religions. The uniqueness of Jesus’ teaching is found in its solution to the problem of sin. Fallen humans do not live up to the very standards they affirm to be true. The doctrine of salvation as a gift of grace, received by faith, is what is unique to Christianity. I explained the cross, the atonement, and the grace of God. To this, I knew, he would not find a counterpart in the Koran, Book of Mormon, Hindu writings, or anywhere else. He wrote back and said, “Well at least you didn’t say anything about divine retribution.”

My point is, when the whole counsel of God is laid aside for certain teachings we glean from the Bible for their supposed relevance to “seekers,” the things we leave out are often the things unique to Christianity. This is to be expected when the goal is to blend in

rather than stand out. Do we think the Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Islam, and liberal versions of Christianity are teaching men to be bad husbands and fathers? They are not. What they are not teaching is the grace of God revealed through the cross. The result of teaching the ethics of the Bible without the need for a blood atonement is described by Paul: “*Holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; and avoid such men as these*” (2Timothy 3:5a).

#### CONCLUSION

So, when we teach the whole counsel of God, we, like Paul, shall emphasize the things unique to Christianity and in the process give godly instruction about living by faith in this sinful world. The “all truth is God’s truth” credo is not helpful in this and often serves as a stumbling block. The question “is it true” is a good one, but inadequate in itself. More important is: did Christ command us to teach this?

Paul told the Ephesian elders: “*I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable.*” He wrote this to Timothy: “*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness*” (2Timothy 3:16). Timothy was also ministering in Ephesus. It is clear that “all Scripture” is profitable and the Christian teacher and preacher should not avoid any of it. Though we may not be able to expound every single verse of the Bible in a lifetime (though surely a worthy goal), we should never avoid a verse or a topic for fear the audience might not like it. The whole counsel of God is relevant, applicable, and needful to every generation in every culture throughout the church age. There will be no situation in which it will be any less “profitable” than it was for those under Paul’s and Timothy’s ministries. May God give us grace, courage, tact, and insight as we set forth to proclaim the whole counsel of God.



## JESUS, THE CROSS AND NEWSWEEK

A LESSON FOR THE CHURCH  
FROM AN UNEXPECTED SOURCE

BY RYAN HABBENA

I was making my weekly browse through the current periodicals at a local bookstore when a particular headline caught my eye. *Newsweek's* cover story was entitled: *Visions of Jesus: How Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists View Him*. Many of the current secular news periodicals feature cover stories on the person of Jesus. The vast majority of these features carry a particularly liberal bent. I considered passing it over and moving on, but my curiosity got the best of me. I took the magazine off the shelf and paged to the conclusion of the article, to see if reading the rest was worth my while. After I read the conclusion of the article, I felt I had struck "theological gold." Whenever one finds a secular source unknowingly testifying to the truth of Scripture, this tends to be quite exciting.

The article in *Newsweek* explores that various views of Jesus of Nazareth from Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist perspectives. After exploring these, the author sets forth the following conclusion:

Clearly, the cross of Christ is what separates the Christ of Christianity from every other Jesus. In Judaism there is no precedent for a Messiah who dies, much less as a criminal as Jesus did. In Islam, the story of Jesus' death is rejected as an affront to Allah himself. Hindus can accept only a Jesus who passes into a peaceful shamadhi, a yogi who escapes the degradation of death. The figure of the crucified Christ, says Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, "is a painful image to me. It does not contain joy or peace, and this does not do justice to Jesus." There is, in short, no room in other religions for a Christ who experiences the full burden of mortal existence – and hence there is no reason to believe in him as the divine Son whom the Father resurrects from the dead.<sup>1</sup>

Can the current views of Jesus in other religions be stated any clearer? Remove the message of the cross and they have little-to-no problems with Him. In the last issue of CIC, I addressed the peril of neglecting to preach the cross of Christ (CIC #56 "God's Vessels of Salvation"). This *Newsweek* article all the more confirms that truth. Cultures shift

and change, nations rise and fall, yet the word of God remains true through all the ages. The message of the cross is still a "stumbling block" to the Jews and "foolishness" to the Gentiles. Yet, to those who are being saved it is "the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18).

What can be learned from this article? First, it is abundantly clear that the cross is at the center of Biblical Christianity; even a cursory study of comparative religious views of Jesus will reveal this. Second, and most importantly, this confirms the importance of centering our faith upon Jesus Christ *and* His cross. If the cross is dispensed of, and Jesus is simply presented as a wise teacher, as He is throughout the religions of the world, we perilously depart from the necessary watershed of a crucified Messiah. If Christ is divorced from the cross we preach a different Jesus and a different gospel. In light of this, in the words of the classic hymn, we *must*, "Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim – Till all the world adore His sacred Name."

1 Kenneth L. Woodward, "The Other Jesus," *Newsweek*, 27 March 2000, 60.

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## Critical Issues Commentary: Next Issue

### Examining the New "Openness of God" Theology

Some Contemporary Evangelicals are Denying God's Exhaustive Foreknowledge

We shall answer this challenge: "Most of the published criticisms raised against the open view have largely ignored the Biblical grounds on which open theists base their position." (Greg Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 12)

We shall examine their "proof" texts, showing they do not disprove God's foreknowledge.

We shall expound the Biblical passages that affirm God's exhaustive foreknowledge and sovereignty.

## A USER'S GUIDE TO SEEKER SENSITIVE RELIGIOUS TERMINOLOGY

BY BOB DEWAAY

Since modern evangelicals have taken to using professional pollsters, focus groups, demographic analysis, and other marketing "tools of the trade" to foster church growth, it has been discovered that many common religious words are a "turn off" to would be seekers. Therefore, a new set of religious terms has been developed for the use of the market savvy, evangelical pastor. *The following is a "tongue in cheek," though sadly quite realistic, user's guide to seeker sensitive religious terminology.* Terms defined elsewhere in the guide are in **bold**.

**ATONEMENT:** This is too technical and too threatening. Claiming that people need atonement implies that God is angry at sin and that He has wrath that needs to be appeased. These ideas are irrelevant or offensive to seekers. Try this: "at-one-ment"; seekers don't mind being "at one" with a higher power.

**BIBLE:** This is a book that **fundamentalists** carry to church with them. Seekers do not like to be preached "at" from these. If you feel the need to refer to the Bible, use stories from the Bible to inspire people, but avoid **doctrine** and anything that might be controversial.

**BLOOD:** The blood atonement is offensive to seekers. Mentioning blood is disturbing to many seekers and sounds too archaic. A God who demands blood as a payment for sin seems ominous and threatening. Many modern seekers are animal rights activists so don't mention that God required the blood of animals to be sacrificed in the Old Testament, this will drive them away. Try talking about **love** instead.

**CHRIST:** Do not be afraid to speak about Christ. This term is innocuous to seekers as long as you don't make any exclusive claims or explain who He is in terms of the virgin birth or the **blood atonement**. If you mention Christ often without any further explanation, seekers will not be

offended. Let them imagine Christ however they want to.

**CHURCH:** Many seekers have had negative experiences with churches. The term is rather old fashioned. Try "Christian Center" (like "shopping center") or even better, a name with no Christian connotations.

**COMMANDMENTS:** Seekers do not like to be commanded to do, believe, or abstain from anything. Seekers would rather be invited than commanded. For example, rather than commanding seekers to obey God, invite them to enjoy a more fulfilling life. Which would you rather hear, ten commandments or ten invitations to personal happiness?

**THE CROSS:** The cross is OK as long as it is a gold plated, Christian symbol. Many seekers enjoying wearing them as jewelry. Though perhaps a bit old fashioned, crosses do not usually offend seekers. However, if you preach on the cross in terms of the **blood atonement** and explain that seekers must embrace the cross, die to self, and trust fully in Christ's substitutionary death, this will offend them.

**DAMNATION:** You have got to be kidding! Don't even think about mentioning this.

**DOCTRINE:** Nothing drives seekers away quicker than doctrine. The very term sounds stodgy, dogmatic, and narrow minded. Doctrine is so passé that no seeker sensitive pastor should use the term or teach it. People are interested in practical matters and nothing is less relevant to them than Christian doctrine.

**ELECTION** See **damnation**.

**EVANGELICAL:** This term is usable. Even the greatest seeker sensitive pastor of all time, Robert Schuller, uses it. As long as you do not define it as excluding anyone, there is no harm in using it. Also, people calling themselves this deny many Biblical doctrines and remain popular. So why shouldn't a seeker church that teaches no **doctrine** at all use it?

**EVIDENCE:** This is not important to post-modern seekers. Evidence sounds

too much like a trial, or like a search for truth. Seekers do not want to make decisions about truth and error, or right and wrong, they just want to experience life. Seekers would rather hear inspiring stories than to hear rational proofs.

**FATHER GOD:** Do not use the term "Father" when referring to God. Seekers prefer gender neutral terminology. Many seekers had bad experiences with their earthly fathers and so they cannot relate to God if He is a Father. Try terms like God, deity, higher power, divine being or even **Christ**.

**FEAR OF GOD:** This phrase cannot be used around seekers. Seekers have a negative image of any religion that teaches that God is to be feared. Fear is a definite turn off to seekers and implies that God is Judge. Seekers do not like to think about authority figures who may be displeased with them.

**FUNDAMENTALIST:** This is a great term to use to describe anyone who disagrees with the seeker sensitive approach. It sounds something like "terrorist bomber" and will send your critics heading for cover. At all costs, make sure everyone knows you are not one of these and always use it to describe people who insist on preaching from the **Bible** or who resist your agenda.

**GOSPEL:** Since the term means "good news" it works with seekers, as long as you don't let on there is any bad news (see **damnation**). The tried and true gospel for seekers, proven by Robert Schuller himself, is the gospel of self-esteem. Seekers are always wanting to hear good news about how they can have more self-esteem.

**HELL:** Obviously this word should not be used. There is a difference of opinion about how to deal with this matter. Some have opted to deny its existence and teach annihilationism or universalism. Others substitute the phrase "Christless eternity" and leave it to seekers to imagine what that might mean.

**HOLINESS:** Seekers are very turned off by this term. It sounds ominous and likely to provoke feelings of guilt. Don't use it at all.



**JUDGEMENT:** On the eternal type, see **hell**. Judgement is also something seekers should never be subjected to. In another sense, judgements are something people should be urged not to make. Post-modern seekers hate judgements and judgmentalism more than anything.

**LOVE:** There you go! This is the one topic you should always dwell on. But, be careful — remember that seekers do not like being **commanded** to do anything. So don't **command** them to love God and neighbor (see **Bible**) but invite them to experience love. Everyone wants to be loved. Most important of all, always remind seekers that they need to love themselves more, self-love resonates with seekers.

**REASON:** See **evidence**. Seekers do not like to think, they like stories and uplifting anecdotes.

**REPENTANCE:** Seekers often come from dysfunctional, shame-based homes. The idea of repentance brings back feelings of shame that will turn them away; so

never mention it.

**REVERENCE:** This term is a turn off for seekers. Try “relevance.”

**SIN:** This is a very negative term that is seen by seekers to be **judgmental**, shaming, and holier than thou. However, since something obviously is wrong in the world and people's lives are not what they would like, another term is needed to explain the problem. Use “low self-esteem” whenever you normally would use “sin.”

**SINNERS:** Never, ever refer to seekers as “sinners.” Why do you think we call them “seekers”?

**TRUTH:** The most important thing to remember is “all truth is God's truth.” Once that is established, everything can be lumped into the category of truth and no one will question you. Seekers do not care whether an idea is true anyhow, they are more concerned about how it makes them feel or if it seems to work.

**WORSHIP:** Though some seeker church-

es still use this term, many do not. It sounds old-fashioned and religious. It implies bowing before a **holy** God, which is definitely something seekers are not prone to do. A better term is “celebration.” Seekers love to celebrate. You can invite them to “celebrate life” and thus create a positive feeling without any Christian connotations.

This users guide is not exhaustive. However, the astute seeker-sensitive pastor should be able to use these basic principles and make wise decisions on any other matter that may come up. The basic idea is tell people what they want to hear. If you do it well, they will come in droves.




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#### END NOTES

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#### “ROBERT SCHULLER AND THE SEEKER SENSITIVE CHURCH”

1. The Reformed Church of America
2. Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, (Waco, Word Books, 1982). See Bob DeWaay, *Self-esteem, the New Christian “Virtue” Part 2*, in *Critical Issues Commentary*, Issue 18, November, 1993; for a critique of this book and Schuller's self-esteem philosophy.
3. Robert Schuller, *Your Church as a Fantastic Future*, (Ventura: Regal Books, 1986).
4. Ibid. 29.
5. Ibid. 30.
6. Ibid. 115.
7. Ibid. 117.
8. Ibid. 122.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid. 123.
11. Ibid. 124.
12. Ibid. 120.
13. Ibid. 15-17.
14. Ibid. 227,228.
15. Leonard I. Sweet, “The Modernization of Protestant Religion in America” in *Altered Landscapes*, David W. Lotz ed.,

(Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1989) 28.

16. Robert Moats Miller, “*Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet*” (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) see chapters 8 and 9, 112-173.
17. Ibid. 115.
18. Ibid.
19. Quoted by Miller, Ibid. 115.
20. Ibid. 211-222.
21. Ibid. 403.
22. Quoted by Miller, Ibid.129.
23. Quoted by Miller, Ibid. 411.
24. Ibid. 409.
25. Glenn T. Miller, “Professionals and Pedagogues: A Survey of Theological Education,” in *Op. Cit.* Lotz, 196.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid. 196, 197.
28. Quoted from *Fosdick*, Robert Moats Miller, 173.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid. 560.
31. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 178.

#### TRUSTING THE ‘FOOLISHNESS’ OF GOD”

- 1 This is often how many churches rationalize their methods. As long as they strictly preach the non-offensive, “practical” portions of Scripture, they still may call themselves “Biblical.”
- 2 Tim Celek, “A Look at a Seeker-Centered Church” in, *Make Room For the Boom . . . or Bust*, Gary L. McIntosh, ed., (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1997), 76.
- 3 John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993) This book critiques the current “user-friendly” movement and addresses many of the biblical and practical problems that arise from this trend. It is highly recommended.
- 4 Ibid., 129.

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#### “GOD’S VESSELS OF SALVATION: