



## When the World Determines the Message of the Church

By Bob DeWaay

One hundred years ago the modernist/fundamentalist controversy was raging. What started it was one simple idea—that Christianity needed to be reinvented if it wanted to be relevant to the modern world. Darwinian evolution made the Biblical account of creation suspect in the minds of many, and modern rationalism cast serious doubts on miracles of any kind. Biblical accounts with angels, demons, miracles, the virgin birth, the literal bodily resurrection of Christ, etc. were seen to be incompatible with the rationalist worldview of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The religious modernists did not see themselves as rebels, but as saviors. They intended to save Christianity by making it relevant to the minds of modern, rationalistic man. So, Biblical doctrines, such as the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth, God's supernatural creation of the world out of nothing, and even the literal resurrection of Christ were scuttled. They kept the forms and structures of the church and even the official statements of faith, even though many liberal theologians did not believe these statements.

The “relevant” replacement for Biblical doctrine was the social gospel. Liberal leaders like Harry Emerson Fosdick determined that the church could adopt the newly developing social sciences like sociology and psychology, train the clergy in their practice, and turn the clergy into helping professionals. Pastors no longer had the truth of the gospel to proclaim because escaping God's wrath against sin through the blood atonement was a doctrine unacceptable to modern sensibilities. But living a better life now through a wedding of social science and religion appeared to be an ingenious idea. Many old line Protestant denominations adopted this new social gospel and still embrace it today. What was lost was “the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). If there is no doctrine of sin, God's wrath, hell, and the need for atonement, what is there to be saved from? The answer, for liberals, was salvation from living an unfulfilled life in the here and now. Christ's words were kept for their ethical teachings, but His work of atonement was rejected.

Harry Emerson Fosdick's follower was Norman Vincent Peale and his "positive thinking." Then, in 1957, acting on an insight that he got from Peale that "Jesus never called a person a 'sinner,'" Robert Schuller became a leading successor of the social gospel movement when he created the Crystal Cathedral. Schuller has inspired followers as well, notably Bill Hybels and Rick Warren (though now Warren is distancing himself from Schuller). These men also have produced versions of Christianity that appear relevant to the felt needs of the unregenerate.

Now the Emergent Church is on the scene and is reinventing Christianity even further. There is one key idea that fuels these movements: the principle of relevance to the world. This principle guided the modernist version of church and now guides the postmodern one (Warren's religious consumer version bridges the gap between them).

The principle of "relevance" is the watershed. Either the sinner determines what he or she thinks is relevant, or the Bible declares what is truly relevant. When the sinner's priorities determine relevance, and the church seeks to be relevant, the gospel itself is soon compromised. Let me explain.

Early modernists were rationalists. They believed in the uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system. The "closed system" is the key, because it ruled out the possibility of miracles. So the modernist church removed the miraculous in order to be relevant to the culture. Today we have the opposite situation in society. We live in an era of mysticism where belief in the interaction of the spiritual world and the material world is widespread, even among non-Christians. People have given up on rationality (not just rationalism) and are open to spiritual experiences that give life meaning, with little concern for the source of such experiences. Consequently, for example, the Emergent Church offers a spiritual experience sans definitions, boundaries, or an authoritative Bible that speaks clearly.

Notice how two opposite beliefs lead to the same result. The modernists rejected the inerrancy of Scripture, and the postmodernists make the idea of an inerrant Bible absurd. They doubt that any human language can convey meaning validly across generations and cultures, so why would they care if the Bible is inerrant? As long as the Bible provides a spiritual or mystical experience of some sort, that is all that is sought. Meaning, they say, is not found through words.

Rick Warren captures the idea that connects the modernist church, the consumer church, and the postmodernist church as revealed by these statements from *The Purpose Driven Church*: “Catching fish on their terms means letting your target determine your approach.” (196); “While most unbelievers aren’t looking for truth, they are looking for relief.” (226); “The ground we have in common with unbelievers is not the Bible, but our common needs, hurts and interests as human beings.” (PDC 295) When we look for common ground with unbelievers, we never end up with the truth of the Bible, in any era of history.

Critical Issues Commentary

[www.cicministry.org](http://www.cicministry.org)

---

©2008

Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures taken from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995 The Lockman Foundation.