

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

Why the Church Lacks Discernment - Part 2 Pragmatism

Written by Bob DeWaay

“There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”
(Proverbs 14:12)

Pragmatism and America

Any observer of contemporary American ways of thinking and acting can readily see that so-called “common sense” has deteriorated into common non-sense. Commonly accepted standards of proper behavior, civility, decency, and morality that previously informed the “senses” of our citizens have given way to forces of diversity and pluralism. These are fueled by an American individualism that used to find outlets within the boundaries of “common sense.”

The right to do things our own way used to mean using innovative means to conquer the forces of nature, to eke out a living for one's family under difficult circumstances, to use one's wit and bravado to start new businesses, or to make scientific discoveries.

Now, individualism has come to mean the right to flaunt publicly one's perversity. For example, three U.S. Senators have sounded an alarm over the trash that is being broadcast on talk shows that are popping up like spring dandelions. One of them said, “There was a time when personal failure or marital failure, subliminal desires, perverse tastes, were accompanied by a sense of guilt or embarrassment. Today, these are a ticket to appear on the Sally Jessy Raphael show to be broadcast for children to watch.”¹

What “seems right to a man,” now can mean literally anything and need no longer fear public censor. If nothing else, the celebration of the weird and perverse on the national media shows that we have collectively lost the means of discerning good from evil. To modern America, human belief and behavior is not right or

wrong, it just is.

Pragmatism is an American philosophy that judges truth claims by their practical consequences. It was articulated at the beginning of the twentieth century by serious philosophers who did not foresee that it would lead to such crass and distorted applications as are evident in our day. It is my intent to show that pragmatism has essential flaws that make it incompatible with Biblical Christianity. Understanding pragmatism in its current, popular expression will go a long way toward understanding why the moral rot that the Senators derided is not likely to go away soon. In order to be the salt and light that God has called us to be, Christians must have a different approach to their understanding of truth and morals.

Pragmatism is attractive to Americans because it refuses to accept any universal system of truth or absolutes. William James, commonly known as the foremost proponent of American pragmatism, wrote: “He [the pragmatist] turns away from . . . fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. . . . It [pragmatism] means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth.”² James thought that pragmatism could resolve the conflict between idealistic, rationalistic philosophies and crass materialism. God, an Absolute, or other religions ideas were perfectly acceptable if they could prove themselves useful in real life.

Pragmatism and Truth

For the pragmatist, religious ideas must prove their worth in concrete ways to be considered true. James writes, “*If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much.*”³ Believing in an “Absolute” was common, said James, for the “ordinary lay-reader in philosophy” who wished to take “moral holidays.” What he meant by this was that he thought all absolute systems of truth could be proved by professional philosophers to be flawed,

including a belief in an eternal, Creator-God who had spoken finally and authoritatively to man. Yet, to have no God, or ideal assuring us that things will come to some final, good conclusion is too disturbing for most people. So, says William James, we take a “moral holiday” and forget the philosophical problems and enjoy the thought that life is meaningful and all will work out for the good.

Is this what Biblical Christianity is all about - blissful ignorance? Peter did not think so: “*For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.*” (2Peter 1:16) Christianity is neither an idealistic philosophy nor a religious superstition. It is based on the revelation of God who demonstrated His power and love in history, particularly through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Christians, we neither lay aside concrete reality for the bliss of a idealistic, romantic philosophy that grants a mental leave of absence from the fallen world around us nor live in a more “realistic,” hopeless despair. We know there are many problems; but we **know** the ultimate solution in the person of Jesus Christ.

Sadly, in spite of having a divinely inspired Bible to guide our paths, many Christians have needlessly adopted pragmatism as their approach to truth. If it “works” it must be true they reason. The old America ideal of rugged individualism has turned into the right to allow subjective religious experience to lead each person down whatever spiritual path that seems to “work” for them. There is no logical limit to what people deem pragmatically workable. Evangelicals have taken the pragmatic approach to everything from self-help to revival to church growth. Os Guinness comments on this:

The overall results of such different trends as prosperity piety, positive thinking, engineered revivalism, and the church-growth movement has been to stamp pragmatism indelibly on the evangelical soul. The concern “Will it work?” has long overshadowed “Is it true?” Theology has given way to technique. Know-whom has faded before know-how. Serving God has subtly been deformed into servicing the self.⁴

Americans are an impatient lot and will not tarry long over something that does not quickly meet their “perceived” needs.

I once heard a lady say that she had just left a large successful church in our city because, "they were not meeting my needs." About that same time an unrelated person said about the church that the disillusion member had just left, "they have every program but the space program." We are getting quite used to the high tech, quick satisfaction of every need. Even those churches that have harnessed the powers and advances of modernity most efficiently and successfully are not guaranteed to be found satisfactory by the evangelical consumers who have flocked to their pews. One of the characteristics of pragmatic shoppers is that they are mobile - they quickly move to where their latest pressing need is met to their satisfaction, for now. In this competitive, religious marketplace someone else is sure to come up with a better product soon.

David Wells discusses this trend as, "the personalized, designer religion of the 1990's."⁵ He sees the hunger for a religious experience minus doctrine and dogma with a pragmatic approach to truth as partial causes of this fad. He also comments:

They [baby-boomers] are the children of a massively commercialized world who have learned the needed skills of commerce - principal among which is an ability to identify the products that will satisfy their inner needs. . . . In the fevered quest for individual fulfillment, commonality of belief is brushed aside as an irrelevance, if not an impossibility. The common *need* for religious experience of some sort is acknowledged, but no restrictions are placed on the sort of experience that will fill the bill for any given individual.⁶

These modern church attenders may not know any theology, but they know what they want - quick answers to whatever needs may be pressing upon them at the moment. If something "works," the question of its truth is rarely raised.

One former reader of this commentary wrote asking to be removed from the mailing list because I questioned this pragmatic approach. One of his comments is telling of our differences: "If your theology does not work, throw it away and get a different one." Any theology, no matter how Biblical, is disposable if it does not "work" to our satisfaction. Is this not the very problem Israel had during her years of wilderness wandering? When

they became impatient as Moses communed with God on the mountain, receiving the ten commandments, they looked for something that would "work" sooner. Aaron explained to Moses, "*For they said to me, 'Make a god for us who will go before us; for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'*" (**Exodus 32:23**) God is the true God, and we need to stick with Him and His revealed truth, even if it momentarily does not seem to be "working" for us.

"It Works For Me"

Whatever question might arise about one's belief or conduct can be answered easily to the satisfaction of most modern Americans by the simple rejoinder, "it works for me." In the last issue of CIC I referenced a video tape from the John Ankerberg Show on the Silva Mind Control method.⁷ When pressed repeatedly by John Weldon and Dave Hunt about the dangers of contacting spirit guides and trusting their information, Silva's response was always, "if it solves problems" it is good. If you have a problem and your "counselors" (one male and one female spirit guide) are able to help you, then why question it? - was his logic. This sort of reasoning must be irresistible to many people since it is used repeatedly in many contexts.

For example, pagan America now has "psychic" phone lines that give millions of people instant access to people who claim to be able to tap secret information that will help them in all realms of life. These nine hundred number phone lines are sold over the TV using "infomercials" that supplement regular ads. Celebrities tell the viewers how psychic information has helped them with life's problems. "It works for me, I am successful, so it will work for you" is the reasoning. For so many dollars per minute one can find out what the demonic forces of darkness have to say about their future, if they are "lucky." Otherwise they may only talk to a person who really can only speak in generalities with no supernatural information.

Of course, Silva and other peddlers of psychic processes do not believe or at least admit that the spiritual sources they tap into are evil spirits who are out to destroy as many humans as possible. They assume that **evil** spirits would not give them useful information that "worked" to

solve problems. Or would they?

Satan and his evil cohorts are not so stupid as to offer people something that is overtly and immediately negative or worthless. Temptation works only because what is offered **seems** desirable. Why not offer people bits of truth or fact, taken out of context, if doing so gets them to believe a bigger lie? Satan quoted Scripture to Jesus (see **Luke 4**). People who use tarot cards, ouija boards, practice astrology, necromancy, or other forbidden (see **Deuteronomy 18:10-12**) forms of accessing secret, spiritual information all claim that they "work," at least some of the time.

The Bible does not accept the "success" of a prophet to be enough of a criterion to endorse him:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, "Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them," you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him.

(Deuteronomy 13:1-4)

Supernatural signs that come true do not validate the ministry of a prophet who does not teach people to follow God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture. This is precisely the problem with much of the spirituality in modern America. Those who deny the trinity, the deity and Lordship of Christ, and the Biblical means of salvation through faith nevertheless have a "practical" spirituality to promote that "works." We need to follow Moses' advice and not listen to them; but rather serve God and cling to Him!

"It works for me," is a commonly supplied justification by those whose per

verted behavior lands them on one of the trash talk shows mentioned earlier. Americans so relish their "right to choose," that many accept this cheap reasoning as if it had some profound logic behind it. If someone says that they cannot be happy unless they divorce their wife, have a sex change operation and live as a woman, then "who has the right to judge?" they reason. If the only valid purpose in life is to be happy, and happiness is determined an individual's urges at the moment, then it makes sense to accept this destructive reasoning.

However, Jesus asked a piercing question: "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36) Satan had offered Jesus all that was in the world (Luke 4:1-13), but Jesus rejected these temptations and chose rather to die on a cross for the sins of others. The result of Jesus' humility and sacrifice during the short years of His earthly sojourn? - "Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven,

and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:9-11)

Those who take the pragmatic approach and judge all possible

beliefs and courses of action by their practical results for the individual have a huge problem with passages such as these. They would have to admit that if Jesus' life were judged by pragmatism based on commonly accepted goals for life on this earth, it would be deemed a "failure." Jesus said, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." (Luke 9:58) He died between two common criminals, and His few remaining faithful followers scattered. His claims of deity and eternal purpose were vindicated by His resurrection on the third day, but pragmatism is for this life, not some hoped for resurrection.

If people believed the teaching of Jesus that there will be a general resurrection and judgment (John 5:28,29), they would not bank their hopes on self-centered success schemes with shady moral underpinnings. "It works for me," does not cut

it unless personal happiness with no regard for eternal judgment is accepted as a reasonable philosophy for life.

It "Works" for How Long?

This underscores a key problem with pragmatism and why evangelical Christians should not allow it to guide their lives. The problem is described by the question: "How long should one wait to decide what really works?" William James understood the need for a time frame for judging results, and sought to include it in his philosophy. Yet it comes with inherent difficulties. James writes, "Pragmatism has to postpone dogmatic answer, for we do not yet know certainly which type of religion is going to work best in the long run."⁸ The problem is - how long do we have?

Suppose an individual set out to try the world religions, to see which ones "worked." How many could be reasonably learned, applied, and given ample time to prove themselves "true" in the pragmatic sense? This could be a serious problem,

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say, if Hinduism was the first to be tried. Since Hinduism believes in karma and reincarnation, one's present condition is the result of problems in previous lives. To find out if the religious experimenter had sufficiently paid for previous mistakes in this life and done better, he or she would have to come back yet again. If reincarnation is not true, the experiment fails with a wasted life and eternal darkness.

One lifetime is too short a period to test out Hinduism! When does one then get around to trying Islam, Bahai, Mormonism, Jehovah Witnesses, etc.? If the claims of Christ are true, could an individual use as a defense on the day of judgment that he had not got around to trying Christ because he lived only long enough to see if two or three other religions "worked" for him? I suggest that a better approach is to see if any of the leaders or founders of these religions have

validated their truth claims. If Jesus is raised from the dead as the Bible asserts, then He alone has been proven worthy of trusting with one's eternal future.

Even within this short life, how many previously cherished ways of belief and practice have most of us had to throw on the scrap heap? The saying, "too soon old, too late smart" nicely describes the problem. If there were some way of knowing ahead of time what timeless principles, eternal truths, and essential wisdom would not leave one disappointed, how great it would be! Happily, we have such a means; it is the Word of God.

Twelve years ago, after witnessing many sorrows and failures of popular movements that claimed to be the latest voice of God, only to fade as others took their place, it was evident that God's people needed a solid foundation. For ten years I saw various luminaries come and go with new words from God that promised a "new day" for the people of God, with answers to every conceivable problem. From the inner healing movement, to the shepherding movement, the deliverance movement, the prosperity movement, the kingdom now movement; one after another swept through, leaving little time to reflect on the failed promises of the previous one. We were told these were "waves" of the Spirit that would usher in the kingdom.

I could see that people could not integrate into their lives the many conflicting teachings and promises that they received during this process. Many were becoming cynical about Christianity. Many leaders fell by the wayside, leaving a spirit of mistrust. Those with whom I was working and I decided that we had to start building something in the lives of those to whom we were ministering that they would not regret later. The only thing that would do this was sound, exegetical teaching from God's Word. In Sunday School, home Bible studies, etc., including the Sunday morning sermons, we began teaching verse by verse through the Bible. Rather than pushing the latest, hot spiritual technology, we began exploring the roots of historical Christianity.

The difference has been gratifying. By carefully teaching Scripture, we have spared ourselves many regrets. Our greatest longing should be that we could live out the truths of Scripture more perfectly, not that some new revelation would come that would "work" to make us happy for the moment. People still have sorrows and difficulties, but knowing and applying

eternal truths that are pertinent to all of life causes maturity and stability that we did not see during the days of quick fixes. Living as we do in a culture that is addicted to the “new and improved” product, we need to offer something that is permanent, changeless, and will leave no regrets: the truths of God’s Word.

Pragmatism and

The Greek word for heresy is “*hairesis*” which means “choice,” to choose for oneself what to believe outside of established, authoritative truth. Thayer says of this Greek word, “*that which is chosen, a chosen course of thought and action; hence one’s chosen opinion, tenet; . . . an opinion varying from the true exposition of the Christian faith (heresy).*”⁹ Biblical faithfulness conflicts with the popular American notion of the right of every individual to choose their own “truth.”

Sociologist Peter Berger discusses this situation in his book, The Heretical Imperative.¹⁰ He outlines how changes in the culture over the years have thrust people into a situation where there are few if any “givens.” People are forced to make more choices than can reasonably be processed, and that without a culturally accepted set of authoritative beliefs to guide them.

Berger and others see damaging effects in this process. The lack of “givens” has created a pluralistic, secular environment that leaves us with innumerable choices. Moderns must make choices constantly and must do so with no community wide standards of belief and practice. Too often an individual must choose with only the pragmatic standard, “what works for me” to guide the choices made. The culture provides one universal guiding principle: that we do not apply our chosen beliefs to anyone else.

Thus heresy, to choose that which is outside of the norms of the faith, has become culturally imperative. There are no accepted norms of the faith and everything must be chosen. Mental and spiritual breakdowns are epidemic. If ultimate beliefs can exist only in the private world of the self, family and community relationships rest on the flimsy scaffold of choice. We must choose what works for us and cannot expect to be united with others who live by common standards. David Wells comments, “. . . the dissolution of religious belief has meant that the source of ‘authority’ could be found only in private, critical, self-

consciousness . . . the only authority that now remains is that of private experience.”¹¹

The reason I press so hard for a Christian fellowship that learns and applies the teachings of Scripture is that I see it as the only way to find hope and mind-renewing power in this sick world. We no longer have a culture that supports a Christian world view. We are forced to choose constantly, and if we are to avoid heresy we must submit our choices to Biblical authority. We must recognize that if truth is to have more than a personal and private meaning, we must be able to study it corporately and it must apply to the whole Christian community.

Pro-abortion people cannot understand why we are opposed to “choice.” Don’t have abortions, they reason, if you don’t believe in them; but let the rest of us choose. They reason pragmatically, “if abortion does not work for you, don’t have one.” What they do not realize is that there are certain choices that we are better off not having. Our choices affect other people (like innocent, unborn children) and there are too many self-destructive temptations now. Maximizing choices does not maximize the well being of the citizenry.

That is why the trash TV referenced earlier is so harmful. Young people grow up with the idea that every perversion imagined and lived out by unrestrained man is a viable “choice.” They may or may not make the wrong choice; but they would be better off not having it. Heresy is condemned in Scripture because God has not left everything up to choice. He did not parade a smorgasbord of gods and religions before us and say, the choice is up to you as long as it makes you happy! He said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me.” (**Exodus 20:2,3**)

Pragmatism is not able to provide the direction and help we need in this fallen world. It was developed by philosophers who did not believe in reliable, divinely revealed truth. The price of giving up eternal hope based on the changeless revelation of God Himself is exceedingly high. No dogma, no doctrine, only the acceptance of what works for me promises everything, but delivers only a disconnected, autonomous “self” with no assurance about the future or meaning for the present.

For the church to have discernment we must lay aside pragmatism as a way of

determining our beliefs and actions. In its place we need to, “because of practice have [our] senses trained to discern good and evil.” (**Hebrews 5:14b**) The context of this passage shows that the training needed is Biblical training. God has given us everything needed for life and godliness (**2Peter 1:3**) and if we avail ourselves of our precious resources in Christ, we need not be blown about by worldly winds of doctrine.

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End Notes

1. Quoted from Donald Wildmon, “Look whose voices remain silent about TV trash.” The American Family Association Journal, Vol. 19, No. 11 page 2.

2. William James, Pragmatism, (New York: Logmans, Green and Co., 1943 combined edition) 51. Pragmatism originally was published in 1907.

3. *ibid.* 73.

4. Os Guinness, Fit Bodies - Fat Minds, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 59.

5. David F. Wells, God In The Wasteland, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans: 1994) 116.

6. *ibid.*

7. The John Ankerberg Show, video tape “Silva Mind Control,” (P.O. Box 8977; Chattanooga, TN 37414) 1987.

8. *op. cit.* James, 300,301.

9. Joseph H. Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 16.

10. Peter L. Berger, The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation, (Garden City, N.Y.; Doubleday, 1980).

11. David F. Wells, No Place for Truth, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 86.

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