

Wresting the Wheel from God: Theological Roots of the Current Crisis in Christianity

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Introduction

In 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian, was executed by the Nazis because of his role in the resistance movement. It came to light later that, as part of the resistance, he had been part of a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer's participation in that plot came as quite a shock to those who knew him, because he was an outspoken pacifist. He admired Mahatma Ghandi's use of non-violence and received permission to visit him in India, although he was never able to do so.

So what would drive a pacifist to join an assassination plot? According to his sister-in-law, Emmi Bonhoeffer, he explained it this way:

If I see a madman driving a car into a group of innocent bystanders, then I cannot, as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe and then comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrest the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver.

That makes sense, even from a pacifist point of view. Killing the one madman Hitler would have saved countless other lives. Moreover, like the mad driver, Hitler was the instigator of the horrific violence of the war. His death would likely have brought peace or at least brought it sooner. Bonhoeffer's reasoning is reminiscent of the high priest Caiaphas' unwitting prophecy in John 11, "it is better...to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."

But what if the madman in the story was the passenger and not the driver? What if the driver was entirely safe and sane, and the notion that he was heading for the bystanders was the passenger's delusion? Can you imagine the disaster that would ensue as the passenger tried to wrest away the wheel, only to veer into the bystanders or oncoming traffic?

As we consider the theological crisis in Christianity today, both versions of that illustration help to explain what is happening. Imagine that the Christian Church is the car and God is the driver. At some point, a group of passengers in the Christian car determined that God was no longer driving in a safe or sane way. They became convinced that God's driving was threatening many innocent bystanders, so they felt conscience-bound to wrest the wheel away from Him.

The problem, of course, is that God is right and they are wrong. Those who are trying to wrest away the wheel are under a delusion and their actions are the dangerous ones. Nevertheless, they have convinced many other passengers in the car that their delusion is actually the truth. In fact, many seem to feel that it is heroic, enlightened, faithful and loving to challenge God for the bystanders' sake.

Of course, God and His will are not threatened by these deluded passengers, but the tussle is causing chaos inside the Christian car. People in and outside of it are being endangered by its erratic swerving as these misguided folks fight for the wheel. The perplexing question is where these theological "madmen" think God went awry and where He should be driving instead. The more I try to understand those questions, the more complicated they get. The crisis in Christianity has multiple roots, causes, influences, motivations and goals. Much of it, however, seems to coalesce around an entirely new way of understanding and proclaiming the faith. This new, false gospel is the focus of this presentation.

The Crisis

As most of you know, the life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has been marked by a perpetual series of controversies. At the very beginning was the disagreement over the office of ministry. The Commission for a New Lutheran Church, which formed the ELCA, could not agree on an understanding of ministry, so it decided to postpone the issue, thinking that it would be easier to reach agreement after the merger. It was not. After a long and expensive study by a task force, its report was rejected by the churchwide assembly in 1993.

Also in 1993, the first salvo in the sexuality struggles was fired. The statement released that year completely embraced revisionism. Marriage was out, co-habitation was in. Perhaps you remember the headlines, “Lutherans Approve Masturbation.” After an outcry from church members, that statement just disappeared. It was never approved or voted down. It was just suppressed. However, the sexuality question was reopened in 2001 and continues today. Indeed, some of us wonder if it will ever end.

Shortly after that first sexuality statement, the struggle over three ecumenical proposals began. Opposition to those proposals gave birth to the WordAlone Network. I trust that Bishop Allison’s presence here proves that we opposed the agreement with the Episcopal Church solely on theological grounds and not, as our critics so often charged, due to ignorance of or dislike for Episcopalians! That particular canard needs to be laid to rest for good. Despite our efforts, that agreement, *Called to Common Mission*, was approved nearly ten years ago, but has yet to create the promised flowering of mission. Maybe we were on to something when we insisted that mission was never its true goal! A new full communion agreement with the United Methodist Church is coming to the ELCA churchwide assembly next summer, but, in contrast to the earlier proposals, it has received remarkably little attention. I have not even seen the text of it yet.

Most recently, the Renewing Worship project and the resulting *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* hymnal have caused a great deal of dispute. We will return to that topic later.

As we faced all these controversies, each one seemed to be an isolated issue. In fact, early on, many of us believed that each one was an anomaly. The thought each time was that if this particular issue could just be defeated, then everything would be fine. Addressing those issues motivated many people to join the effort to bring reform to the ELCA.

As the parade of controversies continued, however, it created a sense of crisis in the ELCA—that something deeper was wrong. People rightly wondered why all these issues kept arising. Many also became tired of the battle and quit fighting. Some acquiesced to the ELCA agenda. Others withdrew from active participation in the ELCA. Yet others left the ELCA for other denominations.

Over time, I have come to believe that the crisis in the ELCA is not due to all the controversies that have arisen. Instead, all the controversies arise from a deep, underlying theological crisis in the ELCA and most of Western Christianity. This theological crisis has been diagnosed in several ways. Carl Braaten recently attributed it to Gnosticism, which arose in the early church and has never gone away.¹ In *The Courage to Be Protestant*, David Wells, a professor at Gordon-Conwell seminary, describes it as a loss of confidence in the basic worldview of Christianity.² Others link it to pluralism, relativism, post-modernism or other social/philosophical influences. I believe those all contribute to this crisis.

For me, however, the most compelling diagnosis comes from Dr. Philip Turner. He is a fellow Episcopalian with Bishop Allison and formerly served as the Dean of the Berkeley Divinity School at

Yale University. In 2005, Dr. Turner wrote an article entitled “An Unworkable Theology” that was published in the journal *First Things*.³ Some of you have read an article I wrote about Turner’s thesis for WordAlone’s *Network News* last year.⁴ If so, please bear with me while I try to recap his insights.

Turner’s premise is that the “working theology,” the day-to-day beliefs and convictions that actually drive a church’s ministry, is not necessarily the same as and may be dramatically different from the “official theology” contained in its creeds and confessions. After serving for ten years as a missionary in Uganda, Turner returned to the U.S. and was shocked at the “working theology” he found. It differed dramatically from what he was taught. It differed drastically from the preaching and teaching he had heard in Uganda. He labeled this new approach “the theology of divine acceptance,” in contrast to “the theology of divine redemption.”

The “theology of divine redemption” is Turner’s term for the Christian faith as it has long been preached and taught in the Christian Church. It identifies the basic problem in creation as human sin and declares that God’s solution to sin was Jesus’ death and resurrection. Its central message is that God forgives sinners for Jesus’ sake, putting them to death and raising them to new life in him.

Yet, this theology also knows that forgiven Christians are *simul iustus et peccator*—simultaneously saints and sinners. Our motives and desires are always suspect, so it calls believers to strive for holy living according to God’s word, not our own desires or inner direction. Because believers remain prone to sinful error, it insists that our beliefs must be grounded in the Bible as their source and norm.

The “theology of divine acceptance” is profoundly different. It identifies the basic problem in creation as the exclusion of people who are not fully accepted by God or others. It does not believe people are “by nature sinful and unclean.” Rather, it affirms the created goodness of all people and thus also their natural inclinations. It locates sin in external social, theological and cultural norms that restrict full expression of one’s self-understanding. To conform to such norms is to deny oneself and the goodness in which God created all people. This new theology turns Christianity completely on its head.

Turner names five key tenets of the “theology of divine acceptance.” First, it asserts that God is love. Of course, I John 4:8 clearly states exactly that, but this theology twists basic truths like that to mean something entirely different, which makes it very tricky to understand and expose its falsehood. In this case, the twist is that it insists that God is *only* love. It omits all wrath, all judgment, all condemnation for sinners. God is pure, accepting love, and nothing else. It’s as if the Bible stops at the end of Genesis 2! In Turner’s words, this results in “a quasi-deist theology that posits a benevolent God who...acts neither to save us from our sins nor to raise us to new life (in) Christ.”

Portraying God as pure love, this new theology then insists that Jesus’ incarnation, life and death imply no judgment on human sin. Rather, God becoming flesh only affirmed its essential goodness and even revealed a divine character to it. So, Jesus does not mean salvation for sinners who stand under God’s wrath, but rather God’s unconditional affirmation and acceptance of all people, just as they are.

Significantly, the cross and even Jesus himself soon disappear from this theology, because it has no real need of them. Human sin is not the issue, so there is no need for a savior. Jesus came only to welcome and include in his kingdom all those who are marginalized and excluded by society. In a similar way, it radically re-defines Christian freedom. It is no longer freedom *in* Christ, as Paul says in Galatians 2:20, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” Instead, it is an unfettered freedom to “be ourselves” that rejects any demand to conform to any external standard.

Thirdly, this theology says that, since God is love and Jesus was devoted to love, his followers must love others in the same way. Again, that is a basic, important Biblical truth. In John 13:34, Jesus gave “a new commandment...that you love one another...just as I have loved you.” Here again, though, love is defined only as unconditional inclusion and acceptance of all people. It is not a transforming love that puts sinners to death and raises them to new life in Christ. It is not a tough love that calls us to repent and die to ourselves, but urges us only to accept and love ourselves, just as God does. Dr. Turner concludes, “In respect to human beings, it produces an ethic of tolerant affirmation that carries with it no call to conversion and radical holiness.”

Under such a “theology of divine acceptance,” a new purpose must then be found for the Christian Church to exist. It cannot be to proclaim God’s justification of the ungodly, because this theology does not believe people are ungodly—except to the extent they dare to say that people are. The one intolerable sin in this theology is any hint of intolerance. Otherwise, it only affirms, includes and accepts.

In that case, the only mission left for the church is to advocate for policies that promote “social justice” and justice is also defined in terms of including the rejected. It focuses especially on those who in any way do not fit social norms, whether in society or the Church.

This is why ELCA and other denominational assemblies are so dominated by social and political issues. At one ELCA synod assembly last spring, every one of the eight or so resolutions concerned “being green.” Now I have no problem with being environmentally responsible, but when that is the only item on the agenda it suggests some confusion about the core mission of the Christian Church.

Bishop Mark Hanson just released a message that he sent to President-elect Barack Obama. It stated, in part, that “Scripture is clear about what should matter to Christians: hospitality to strangers, concern for people in poverty, peacemaking and care for creation.”⁵ Of course. Those are all Biblical calls. The difference now is that, increasingly, that is the whole list! Even when ELCA leaders talk about mission or evangelism, it is often comprised of this same type of social agenda. What is not included here is more telling than what is. Under this new gospel, seeking “peace and justice” is the Christian Church’s sole reason for being.

The fifth characteristic Turner identifies in this new theology is that it results in a peculiar form of North American or Western liberation theology. By defining Christian mission as merely including the excluded, it blurs the line between God’s kingdom and this world. “Peace and justice” become much more than just promoting fairness, tolerance or good public policy. To accept and affirm all people as they are is seen as the means to create God’s kingdom on earth. Turner writes that “the result is a practical equivalence between the gospel of the Kingdom of God and a particular form of social justice.” This also helps to explain the dominance of social issues on church agendas.

That vision is a far cry from the Bible’s judgment that this world is so broken by sin that God must bring forth a new creation. It has no room for the *Small Catechism*’s prayer that “at our last hour (God) would graciously take us from this world of sorrow to himself in heaven.” It believes that social justice, defined as inclusiveness, comprises the fullness of God’s kingdom. Nothing more is needed.

This “theology of divine acceptance” is so contrary to the faith handed down to us that it can only be called an entirely new and false gospel. It is delusional in believing that the Biblical theology of divine redemption harms people by lowering their self-regard and well-being. It is unfaithful in attempting to wrest the wheel of the Christian car from God and steer it in an entirely different direction. It is

dangerous in that it is leading people astray, many without full awareness of what is happening, with a sweet-sounding, but utterly false message that denies the human condition and affirms lives lived contrary to God's will.

Evidence of the Crisis

Despite its completely foreign nature, this new theology has made deep inroads into the ELCA and other Christian denominations. The evidence is abundant and disturbing, but it is also mostly anecdotal. I do not see any organized conspiracy to destroy the faith. I am not aware of any one book or movement that lays it all out. I am convinced that many who promote it would utterly deny that they are undermining the faith. There has certainly been no effort to change the official theology contained in the Lutheran confessions and the ELCA constitution.

Instead, it is in the working theology, the day-to-day convictions that shape faith and ministry, where this new gospel appears. Cultural and philosophical forces from outside the faith inspire "new," "creative," "modern" and "relevant" teachings. They undermine the Gospel subtly, by erosion, rather than by openly opposing or overturning it. The tenets that Turner described pop up all over, more like a guerilla campaign than a frontal assault.

About the best I can do is give a list of examples, neither systematic nor exhaustive, that shows where the "theology of divine acceptance" appears. In these examples, it is not always clear which is the cause and which the effect, however. Some of these innovations may have been brought on by this new theology. Others may have opened the door to it. In either case, the danger and damage are the same.

The claim of direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit apart from the Word.

Because of the enduring power of sin, Martin Luther objected strongly to any notion of direct divine inspiration. He insisted that the Holy Spirit speaks through the Word. Conversely, any inspiration that anyone perceives must be tested and supported by the Word.

Since the Bible does not support this new theology, however, it is frequently attributed instead to the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The United Church of Christ codified it in a slogan and promotional campaign called "God Is Still Speaking." Less formally, one often hears that "the Spirit is doing a new thing." This was very apparent to me at the 2003 ELCA churchwide assembly in Milwaukee. There were constant appeals to the Holy Spirit's leading in order to justify moving away from the witness of the Bible. It was so recurrent that I finally told a friend, somewhat blasphemously, "If the Spirit blows through here anymore, they can turn off the air conditioning!"

The danger in this is obvious. Any idea, desire or hope, no matter how contrary to Scripture, can simply be credited to the Holy Spirit. It ignores the power of sin to delude and corrupt human minds.

The sharp erosion of the authority of Scripture.

Christians are ever more willing to yield the Bible's authority to a variety of other authorities—science, philosophy, culture and others. Perhaps the greatest of these other authorities is the individual. Personal experience, thoughts and convictions have become paramount. The awareness that one's experience, thoughts and convictions might be wrong, corrupt or sinful has all but disappeared.

A disturbing sign of this demotion of Scripture appeared in the third part of the ELCA studies on sexuality, "Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor." Much was made of the fact that it was based on the book of Galatians, but in each session, after reading a passage from Galatians, the group leader was

instructed to ask two questions. “What did you hear?” and “Is there a word of God for us?” “What did you hear?” How about what did *God* say?! “Is there a word of God for us?” You just read it! Here the Bible is but one possible source of divine inspiration and apparently not the most likely one.

The diminishing acknowledgment of sin and its ongoing power in our lives.

The relegation of sin has been most apparent in ELCA worship resources. Since the appearance of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* in 1978, each new hymnal has moved confession and absolution more and more to the periphery of worship. In the new *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, it is reduced to an option that can be replaced by “Thanksgiving for Baptism,” a rite that does not include confession and mentions forgiveness only in passing.

It is also apparent in seminary education, perhaps especially pastoral care. Even in my seminary education 25 years ago, I was taught mostly secular methods of diagnosis and counseling. I certainly was not taught how to bring God’s Word to bear on the struggles of human experience. Many Clinical Pastoral Education programs deliberately avoid—even stridently exclude—any faith talk, and woe to the student who dares to read the Bible or pray with a patient!

Beyond that, talk of sin in general is often decried today as unpopular, uninspiring, “telling people how bad they are” and other such negative judgments. This directly reflects this new theology’s conviction that people are born without sin and remain essentially good.

Emending Biblical and Christian texts in service to various ideologies.

For the sake of feminism, pacifism and other ideologies, many Christian texts are simply changed with little awareness or concern for the doctrinal implications. At a wedding I attended last summer, what was called the Lord’s Prayer began not with, “Our Father in heaven,” but “God you are life for us” and ended not with “yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory,” but “for the power, the splendor and the fulfillment are yours.” To avoid “offensive” terms like “Father” and “kingdom,” this version disguises and alters the theological claims of this greatest of all prayers.

The ELW hymnal is rife with this misplaced sense of textual priority. It has been widely praised for including all 150 Psalms, which is good. However, many of the psalms were freely emended—not retranslated—particularly in order to remove masculine language for God. Many hymns were also altered, some subtly, others beyond recognition, for the same reason.

More troubling, the second article of the Apostles’ Creed was changed from “Jesus Christ, *His* only Son, our Lord,” the antecedent of which must be God the Father in the first article, to “Jesus Christ, *God’s* only Son, our Lord.” That severs the grammatical connection between the first and second articles. It provides just the narrow opening a false teacher needs to deny Christian teaching about God.

The worst example is the “creative” substitutes for God’s revealed name. To avoid saying “Father” and “Son,” one option is to pray “in the name of the Trinity,” but the Trinity is a doctrine, not the name of God. Another option is “Rock, Water and Light,” earthly analogies of such doubtful value that a friend of mine derisively calls them “Rock, Paper, Scissors.” Avoiding any possibility of offending anyone’s sensibilities is deemed more important than preserving essential texts and doctrines.

Inviting un-baptized people to receive Holy Communion for the sake of welcome and inclusion.

The theology of divine acceptance insists that all people are, by definition, part of God’s family. Baptism ritualizes the Christian’s entry into it, but none are excluded. Thus, to limit the Lord’s Supper in any way is unwelcoming and exclusionary, and in this theology, that is the true and only sin.

Alarming, this practice reduces the sacrament to the level of hospitality. It becomes the rough equivalent of the coffee hour, except it occurs during the service. For the sake of “hospitality,” it utterly despises the meaning, power and purpose of the sacrament. Incredibly, though, this practice is fast gaining currency in Christian churches. Some time ago, a column in *The Lutheran* magazine openly advocated for it⁶ and Philip Turner says it is the new, *avant-garde* wave in the Episcopal Church.⁷

The reduction of grace in Lutheran theology.

Grace, of course, is an essential Biblical and Lutheran term, indeed the very heart of the Gospel. Increasingly, though, the grace proclaimed in the ELCA and other Christian churches is merely a shallow acceptance of all by God. It is not the astounding, transforming, utterly undeserved favor that God unexpectedly lavishes on sinners who deserve to be condemned. It has been distorted into what a friend of mine calls “sloppy agape,” which depicts God as hardly more than a harmless, grandfatherly figure whose wrath does not burn at sin, but who gently laughs at all the cute antics of us little rascals.

The *Metro Lutheran* newspaper recently published an article by Michael Sherer, formerly the editor, which said rightly that “Lutherans believe in radical grace,” but he described that belief this way. “Lutheran theology centers on one central affirmation: The universe is governed by a benevolent power who embraces us broken human beings where and as we are, with unconditional acceptance which can change our present and our future decisively for the better.”⁸ Reducing God to “a benevolent power” and grace to “unconditional acceptance,” apart from forgiveness, dying to self and new life, is a clear expression of the “theology of divine acceptance.”

Christian preaching today has been deeply corroded by this weak understanding of grace. At a conference a few years ago, Dr. Cynthia Jürisson, formerly a professor at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, told how she noticed that very few of her neighbors in Chicago attended church. She was curious why that was and, being an American church historian, turned it into a small research project. She interviewed several of her neighbors and one man explained that he had attended several churches in the area, but the message in all of them seemed to be the same, “I’m O.K. and you’re O.K. and that’s O.K., O.K.?” and he did not need to go to church to hear that.

I sensed this same weakness in my own preaching when I was on internship. I spoke endlessly of grace, but it did not grow out of a Law-Gospel dialectic. Instead, it was “all grace, all the time.” By the middle of that year, I felt as if there was no substance or power to my preaching. It seemed like so much oatmeal. I was not able to articulate the problem until later, but I know now that it was a symptom of preaching a “theology of divine acceptance.”

A close parallel to this distortion of grace is the ELCA’s obsession with baptism. Again, baptism is an essential part of Lutheran theology. It pains me even to mention it as part of a critique. But under the “theology of divine acceptance,” baptism has been reduced to merely an initiation rite, the ultimate act of including the excluded. It is no longer understood as dying and rising with Christ, much less as daily dying and rising with Christ. Instead, baptism is constantly proclaimed as our assurance that we have been accepted into the Church and once we are in, “we’re in like Flynn”—apart from repentance, amendment of life or any transformation other than loving ourselves unconditionally.

Strange teachings about Jesus.

I noted earlier that the “theology of divine acceptance” has no real need of a savior, so a crucified Jesus becomes something of an embarrassment. Many theologians and New Testament scholars today reject the cross as the center of God’s salvation, some radically dismissing it as “divine child abuse.”

Others are more subtle. At a convocation of ELCA teaching theologians held last year, Professor Marit Trelstad of Pacific Lutheran University presented a paper arguing that salvation is found in God's actions before and after the crucifixion, rather than in the cross itself. "The cross signifies human rejection of God's covenant, yet God persists in offering grace... Either intentionally or accidentally, theology [centered in] the cross can become oppressive," Trelstad said. "It has helped to perpetuate the oppression of women, for example. When we allow women in abusive relationships to think, 'This is my cross to bear,' we risk having a God who insists on passivity." In contrast, she said, both parties are active in salvation by covenant.⁹

Last spring, a series of articles in *The Lutheran* promoted some very odd views of Jesus. One by George Johnson portrayed him as a social/political subversive.¹⁰ In the next issue, Richard Swanson suggested he was a brittle perfectionist whose understanding of God's will was distorted during his ministry and transformed by his resurrection.¹¹

In a *Lutheran Partners* review of Linda MacCammon's book *Liberating the Bible: A Guide for the Curious and Perplexed*, David von Schlichten rightly wrote, "MacCammon's book is problematic for Lutherans in that it de-emphasizes the atoning significance of the resurrection, concentrating instead on Christ as moral exemplar." But then he went on immediately, "Nevertheless, many church leaders will find *Liberating the Bible* a helpful voice as they study the Bible and labor to find new and bold ways to proclaim the old, old story of salvation by God's grace through Christ's death and resurrection."¹²

The debates over sexuality.

Perhaps the most obvious evidence of the "theology of divine acceptance" appears in the endless debates over human sexuality. This new gospel demands approval not just of same-sex relations, but almost every other natural desire that people identify in themselves.

Under this new theology, the logic is simple and clear: 1) I have certain desires that I believe I have always had. 2) Therefore, they must be from God, since God made me. 3) Since God made me good, then the desires must also be good. 4) To say that they are not good is to oppress and exclude me. 5) Instead, love demands that you accept me just as I am. This reasoning holds even if it requires ignoring or arguing away the Bible and long-standing Christian teaching.

What is missing from that logic, of course, is the basic truth of the human condition. Since we are by nature sinful and unclean, all of our "natural desires" are corrupt, suspect and fall under the scrutiny of God's Law. We cannot determine what is right and wrong on the basis of internal desires. We must take our cue from Scripture, which may and often will declare judgment against our natural desires.

These two approaches to sexual behavior have been on full display at recent ELCA assemblies. Sexual revisionists tell poignant stories (and they truly are poignant!) of loved ones who feel excluded from the church because it will not accept them as they are. Those who support traditional sexual ethics appeal to the Bible and Christian teaching, urging all people to conform to Christ. The two arguments pass each other like ships in the night, because they grow out of two entirely different gospels.

Implications of the Crisis

The crisis in Christianity today is not a minor dispute over side issues. Christians have always been fighting about something and often, with time, those disputes seem to be much ado about very little. The temptation is to dismiss this also as one more dust-up over *adiaphora* that will fade with time. We in the reform movements are often charged with "majoring in the minors."

But in this crisis, I believe the faith that was handed down to us is hanging in the balance. The “theology of divine acceptance” distorts the very essence of Christianity and turns it into a gospel without a cross, without Christ and without conversion. Diana Butler Bass recently wrote a book called *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, which she describes as “not about personal salvation, not about getting everybody else saved or about the politics of exclusion and moral purity. Christianity for the rest of us is the promise of transformation—that by God’s mercy, we can be different, our congregations can be different and our world can be different.”¹³

That version of “Christianity” differs so drastically from Biblical, classical and confessional theology that it can only be called an entirely different gospel and St. Paul made it clear in Galatians 1:5 how a different gospel should be received. “Even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed.” And then, just on the off chance they missed it, he said it again!

Beyond that, this new gospel threatens not just Christian truth, but religion itself. In a new book called *America’s Secular Challenge: The Rise of a New National Religion*, Herb London describes the radically secularist ideas of “new atheists” like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins.¹⁴

Taken together, they form the basis for a seductive new religion. Since this religion is based upon individual, self-directed action as the source of salvation—and upon manifest disapproval of the transcendent—one might just as accurately describe it as a new form of paganism.

London then delineates six central principles of secularism, what he calls the “articles of a possible secularist catechism.” 1) Truth is subjective, relative, or contextual. 2) Rationality can solve moral and ontological questions about man’s nature. 3) A rational government is freed from limits traditionally imposed on its purview through the attainment of technical knowledge. 4) Since we are all children of the globe, subject to the same rationality, national loyalty and patriotism are dangerous anachronisms. 5) The most important goal one can seek is self-transformation or self-actualization. 6) Discrimination is the great bugbear of social intercourse.

I am struck by how closely those six points echo Philip Turner’s description of the theology of divine acceptance. It is hard not to conclude that secularism, the antithesis of faith, is being promoted within the Christian Church under the guise of a new theology. Our day is a return to the 2nd and 3rd centuries when Gnosticism and other heresies threatened the integrity and the very survival of the Gospel.

Response to the Crisis

How are we to respond to this new gospel and the crisis it has engendered in our denomination and through much of Christianity? Its diffuse, subtle nature makes it difficult to combat, but it clearly calls for several responses from faithful Christians.

First, learn and re-learn the faith so that you are able to articulate it, to detect false teaching and to defend the truth. It is so common to hear laypeople confess their ignorance of the faith or their inability to understand Scripture and theology, leaving those topics to pastors and theologians. I sympathize with that, because these issues are complicated. They can be difficult to understand. But you who are laypeople have to understand that you are the last line of defense here. You can “smell a rat” before anyone else and you must take up the challenge of preserving the faith. Seek out trustworthy materials, like those produced by Sola Publishing and the Institute for Lutheran Theology, to deepen your theological understanding.

Secondly, hold pastors and teachers accountable for upholding Christian truth. Cultivate a healthy, constructive suspicion of pastors, professors and any book or theology that promises a bold, new or fresh understanding of the faith. (Please note that I said a *healthy* and *constructive* suspicion. That is critically important. Conspiracy theorists, alligators and bulls in china shops are not helpful!) Too many Christians have assumed a position of blind trust of church leaders for far too long. Tragically, that will no longer suffice in the midst of this crisis.

Thirdly, cling as never before to the great Solas of the Reformation.

Word Alone—The Bible, and the confessions based on it, alone are and must remain the source and norm for Christian faith and life.

Faith Alone—Trusting Christ Jesus, not self-actualization or other worldly authorities, is the only source of life, salvation and freedom.

Grace Alone—Not the sloppy agape of this new gospel, but the radical grace that puts sinners to death and raises them to new life in Christ each day.

Christ Alone—As Paul did in Corinth, we must “decide to know nothing...except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Christ crucified is the unique message, the heart and soul of Christianity. To diminish Christ or the cross is, quite simply, to destroy the faith.

Lastly, we must overcome our legendary Lutheran shyness and learn to witness and testify, preach and teach, in the most gracious, winsome ways we possibly can, to family members, friends, pew-mates and church leaders. For if the truth and purity of the Gospel that was handed down to us is to be preserved and handed down to the next generation, it will depend on the faithful witness of Christians like you and me to God’s divine redemption of sinners through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus our Lord.

This whole crisis finally boils down to who must drive the Christian car. To think that anyone other than God knows how and where it is to go is sheer delusion. To try to wrest the wheel from his hands is sheer madness. Thus, to take Bonhoeffer’s illustration one step further, we must, as those called to defend the faith, devote ourselves—heart, soul, mind and strength—to wresting the wheel away from those who would so foolishly seek to wrest it away from God.

Endnotes

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