

God in the Wasteland

The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams¹

David F. Wells

Synopsis and [comments](#) by William H. Gross, Colorado Springs 2005

The book's page numbers are in [brackets]

In *No Place for Truth*, David Wells describes how America became pagan over time. Here he describes our current spiritual environment, our conception of ourselves, and our conception of God.

Transformation of the Self

Wells tells us we live in a *World Cliché Culture*. He distinguishes between the two forces of modernization and modernity that are driving the transformation of our world (as he did in *No Place for Truth*). *Modernization* produces changes in the outer fabric of our life, while *modernity* alters the values and meanings that emerge from the context of the modernized world. Capitalism, technology, urbanization, and telecommunications, which are stimulants and products of modernization, drive further modernization at a rapid pace.

Capitalism began to make evident changes beginning in the Age of Industrialization, and it culminated its impact in facilitating the ubiquitous and indispensable technology of the 20th century. Capitalism requires a democratic society that fosters risk-taking, freedom of association, unrestricted travel, and a philosophy of personal gain. When these things are present, capitalism reorganizes the social structure toward centralized banking, manufacturing, production, and consumption. In other words, it pushes urbanization along with all the necessary support systems such as uniform codes of law, communications (advertising), and transportation. As such, it controls our personal, social, and workplace environments, our values and our expectations of success and advancement.

Technology is not merely the advancement of science to better our way of life and improve production (through higher efficiencies of labor). It is also a philosophical view of life that is both mechanistic and material. It tends to impose its standards of cost-benefit analysis that may be fine in our work culture, but may be destructive in our social culture. It says, "whatever is most efficient is most ethical."

Urbanization is the consequence of centralized manufacturing plants and economies of scale. Manufacturing plants pay a wage that farmers cannot earn without heavy labor and a market advantage. And so capitalism pulls workers from the rural fields to the urban factories. In Western countries, 94% of the population lives in cities of 50,000 or more. Rural life is rare.

Telecommunications, including all forms of broadcast media, has given fast and ready access to all world events. Television makes everyone an eye-witness, but not an undirected witness. It enables us to transcend physical and cultural space, linking us to others around the world. But such bonds are synthetic and the communion is that of common voyeurs. It treats war and fashion alike, stringing them together on a ribbon of disconnected sound bites in such quantities that it devalues everything seen and experienced.

The overall effect is to destroy localized culture, the morals, beliefs, and habits that arose in specific contexts of history, religion, society, and community. To span the globe with products for consumption, modernization is producing "comparable ways of thinking, wanting, and being in countries that are very different in terms of their histories, religion, and organization." [pp.7-9] Its appeal is culturally thin by necessity. It must be present everywhere while denying ownership to anyone in particular – its thinness reduces life to clichés, served up in universal sameness.

The outcome is that our public and private lives are disengaged in this new pluralism. We know people in public only by their functions in relation to us: the doctor, plumber, and salesman. As such, we don't care about them as people regarding their family, religion, politics, or sexual preference. We don't care about

¹ Wells, David F., *God in the Wasteland* (Eerdman's Pub. Co., Grand Rapids, Mich., 1994)

their morality beyond whether they have adequately served our functional needs. We objectify them. Like television images, they have no personality or reality that requires interaction or social connection beyond the perfunctory one. Such anonymity leads to diminished accountability. In this manufactured world, it is virtually impossible to think that God has any meaningful place, and certainly not in the public square. “The truth is that the public dimension of our chrome and plastic world, our cities with their high rises and high rents, admits no interest in the divine presence, seeks no grace, and asks no forgiveness,” [p. 10]

With materialism (or narcissism) as its primary philosophy, the modern world deals with competing beliefs by establishing pluralism as its guideline. You can believe whatever you want about God, the supernatural, and moral absolutes, as long as you keep your beliefs private. Societal beliefs are non-sectarian and non-partisan. Our sense of identity within the community is destroyed, because any community requires a shared belief system to establish itself. The only shared belief is narcissism: it’s all about me, getting what I want, going my own way, and doing my own thing. Character becomes internal (how we think of ourselves), rather than external (how we treat others). All those proud, self-centered individualists then lament their sense of isolation, even though it has been self-imposed. They have sold their souls for the lie that they can have it their way, that they are the center of the universe, even as they are marginalized and corrupted. Adam made the same choice, and paid the same price.

Our shedding of personal value (which is ironic in a self-centered world) is illustrated in the change in our obituaries. At the beginning of the 19th century, most obituaries contained some mention of the character of the deceased rather than their occupation, written in religious language to express the pain, suffering, and loss, and referring to that individual’s involvement in community life. By the beginning of the 20th century, the obituaries had changed. They mentioned the person’s function instead of character; they left out the sense of loss and grief in the context of the religious sphere; and they seldom referred to the person’s community involvement. They had become workers on the assembly line in more ways than one.

As we transition from a world in which God and his truth are central and public, we succumb to the world and its “noisy human enterprise” as a substitute. Image and appearance assume the functions that character and morality once had. It’s better to look good than be good. The façade is more important than the substance. In the center of our being is emptiness. We have become “hollow men” without weight. The self is disappearing, despite (and indeed because of) our self-centeredness. We now define all of life in terms of the recovery and actualization of the self. We have much more, materially speaking, but we have become much less ourselves. “We have become spiritual vagrants in the modern wasteland, wandering with no home to return to. The inner terrain of our lives – including the soil in which our Christian faith grows – is constantly shifting.” [pp. 14-15]

Our faith must span the yawning chasm between our public and private worlds, between the home in which we struggle to maintain control and have significance, and the corporate environment in which we are controlled and have no significance. *Trying to be both modern and Christian is perhaps impossible.*

Transformation of Evangelicalism

In the 1970’s, Evangelicalism dropped its spiritual agenda for a political agenda. It abandoned its deep theology for shallow sound-bites, and thus transformed itself into a civil religion. It mistakenly believed it could win a war in the civic arena on issues such as family values, abortion, and prayer in the schools. By doing so it hoped to hold the line on ethics. “The problem with civil religion... is that it is inoffensive.” It isn’t driven by a passion for God’s truth but by the politics of the day. “Without [God’s] Word as its center, a civil religion forfeits his grace and his judgment – and without these, it has no means to survive in the modern world.” Evangelicalism has become modern, and secular. It derives its power not from theology, but from its culture. The power it thinks it wields is an illusion because it is culturally derived, and hence it is borrowed. Borrowed power can be withdrawn as easily as it is conferred. [p. 26]

There is little interest in confessions, and evangelicalism has fallen into therapeutic theology: badness is simply a disease that can be treated. Consumerism, with all its appetites for purchase, ownership, and

power, has become indistinguishable from the practice of the evangelical faith. Religious life is orchestrated and regimented by managers pursuing private careers that could as easily be carried on in the most secular corporations in America. Entertainment and worship are often indistinguishable. And in the end, Evangelicalism has made itself culturally acceptable “by emptying itself of serious thought, serious theology, serious worship, and serious practice in the larger culture.” Faith has become largely private and internal, a part of our personal identity and psychological makeup. We are oh so *civil* about it. [p. 27]

The Central Issue

Is modernity *one* issue among many, or is it *the* issue with which the Christian faith must be engaged? Modernity is in the center of our culture, just as Catholicism was in the center of the Reformers culture. The challenge it poses is even more serious. “We have to contend with the modern mind, with its complete lack of interest in truth – especially the truth of God.” Modernity is unprecedented in its power to remake human appetites, thinking processes, and values. Where do we begin to reconstitute the evangelical faith? There are no fast fixes or simple answers. That’s what got us into consumer theology in the first place, where we tend to treat symptoms rather than disease. *The modern mind is quick to conclude that the evangelical faith is faltering because it is not efficient enough, or appealing enough, because it has not adapted itself adequately to the inner needs of those in the modern world.*

And so we tinker with the church’s structures, its services, its public face. Modernity has convinced us that God himself is secondary to organization and image, that the church’s health rests in flow-charts, its convenience, and its offerings rather than its inner life, its spiritual authenticity, the toughness of its moral intentions, and its understanding of what it means to have God’s Word in this world. The New Testament is clear that love of God and love of the world compete with each other. Modernity has infused itself in the church, especially in our anthropology. We need to reverse the church’s entanglements with culture, recover authentic Christian practice, and resurrect bold Christian witness. [pp. 28-31]

Aliens and Strangers in the World

Those who are separated from worldly culture are the ones driven to change it; those who are comfortable and at home there are so beholden to it that they resist being dislocated from it. Those “not of this world” have the reason, and acquire the fortitude, to resist the charms and allurements of the world.² [p. 36]

It has been argued that people whose lives are on the whole pleasant tend to find ultimate meaning in a god who is immanently present within life, whereas those whose lives are on the whole more painful and dark tend to find ultimate meaning in a wholly transcendent god. Those who follow this logic typically identify Christianity as a faith fixed on the transcendent, and therefore mistakenly conclude that it has no interest in the world.

The “world” is the way in which our collective life in society and culture is organized around the self in substitution for God. “It is life characterized by self-righteousness, self-centeredness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-promotion, with a corresponding distaste for the self-denial proper to union with Christ.” The “world” is a godless assembly demanding that its teaching be obeyed, rewarding those who acquiesce, sanctioning those who do not, and generally making belief and trust in Christ difficult. Christ himself was alienated from the world. He was not of it (Jn 17:14; 18:36), refused to pray for it (Jn 17:9), opposed its ruler (Jn 12:31; 14:30), and is now its Judge (Jn 9:39; 16:7-11).

The “church” is defined by a knowledge that creates an unbridgeable chasm between its moral and spiritual values and those of the society in which it is placed. Christians are called to be exiles from the world (1Pet 1:1; Heb 11:13), however painful that exile may be. They are aliens in the world’s darkness (1Pet 2:11) as they seek another city, “whose builder and maker is God” (Heb 11:10). “This is no easy antagonism to maintain.” [pp. 40-41]

² Jn 8:23; 18:36; Do not love money: Lk 4:5; 16:13; 1Tim 6:5,10; Heb 13:5; 1Pet 5:2; Never satisfied: Ecc 5:10; Do not love the world: 1Jn 2:15; Jn 15:19; 17:14; Jms 4:4.

God's truth has a moral dimension to it. When we don't believe that, we are not merely mistaken. It is not merely an intellectual error. We have *done* something wrong.

What is morally right is inextricably bound to what is intellectually true, and we are duty bound to reflect that truth in our actions... Truth is not simply knowledge untainted by life's biases and conventions: it is the reality of God himself (Jn 7:17; 8:47). It has the power to dislodge people from the safe and comfortable conventions of the world where these are mistaken or unethical, to wrench people free from their sin (Jn 8:32-34). To be in the truth is to be in God, to be free, to have life. To be separated from the truth is to be mired in darkness, falsehood, and corruption with the stink of death hanging over everything.

This is not the moral dualism of Buddhism, Hinduism, Greek philosophy, or Zoroastrianism. It is an eschatological dualism, "and it must work itself out in ways that are trenchantly moral and intellectual." It doesn't view the world or the body as inherently evil, nor does it view all spirituality as innocent and uncorrupted. "Rather, it holds that good and evil are... locked in a battle the outcome of which is already known but the outworkings of which are still painfully slow in their development." *This Age* with all its corruption and rebellion against God, exists coextensively with those in whom *the age to come* has already begun through their union with Christ. [pp. 42-43]

Biblical authors see everything from God's point of view, and secular writers see everything from Man's point of view. Secular writers force us to read the world from within a framework absent of Gods' moral will and saving intentions. His truth and his Christ are never the criteria of meaning or importance for them, [or for their intended audience](#). [p. 44]

Postmodernism

Modernity, at its heart, is an Enlightenment mentality. Proponents of Enlightenment assumed that meaning and morality could be discovered within the bounds of natural reason, without reference to God. They naively believed that progress is inevitable, that day by day we're becoming better and better. This is the underpinning of evolutionary thought as well. They believed that knowledge is always good and saving. By the end of the 1960's, modernity had lost its Enlightenment views. Looking at the brutality of the World Wars and world famine, the side-effects of our scientific and technological "advances" such as Thalidomide babies, over-crowding, noise, and contamination, the nuclear threat, and terrorism, it was hard to maintain that human nature, or even the human environment, was improving. Post-modernity began to emerge. [p. 46]

Without salvation in humanistic terms, living in a world that worships humanism, despair set in. Post-modernists are attacking all "metanarratives," all beliefs in overarching meaning, all beliefs rooted in a transcendent order, and all values. [Values are subjective. Truth is subjective. Meaning is subjective. The idol of self-importance remains on its pedestal, but without a framework to understand the role of the self in the wider scheme of things.](#) Distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad, decent and indecent, have not merely collapsed. They have become irrelevant. [p. 48] [Those are community values, and there is no community beyond the universal broadcast signal of consumerism. We don't share moral values in common, or community involvement. Instead, we share our experiences of TV shows, radio programs, weather forecasts, music CD's, movies, and magazine articles.](#) They come at us in disarray and chaos. Commercials interrupt our train of thought and our emotional involvement, fracturing our view of life. They destroy any possibility of drawing meaning from it all. [It just is. Instead of glorifying God and enjoying him forever, our mantra of meaning is now, "Whoever dies with the most toys wins."](#)

Idolatry consists in trusting some substitute for God to serve a uniquely divine function. It doesn't have to be a supernatural idol. It can be money, power, expertise, astrology, sexual potency, or even the belief in human progress. [p. 52] Why do we make the substitution? It makes the need to be accountable to God unnecessary. [We set up an artificial standard of performance and "goodness" and made ourselves into our own law-givers.](#) But we have only made ourselves "scarecrows in a cucumber field" (Jer 10:5); we are as dead as the idols we worship. [p. 53]

M. Scott Peck in his book, *People of the Lie*, tells us that criminals and those who are consistently unethical feel no guilt. They think of themselves as perfect, and absolutely refuse “to tolerate the sense of their own sinfulness.” When they are in conflict with the world, they will invariably perceive the conflict to be the world’s fault. Since they deny their own badness, they must perceive others as bad.³ When the lines of accountability before God are severed by modernity, God’s wrath moves inward, producing psychological furies that are unleashed on the world. The individual is at war with God (Jms 4:4), **but he has no god on which to vent his anger and frustration, nor from whom to receive grace and forgiveness; and so he vents on the world around him.** [p. 54]

There is nothing inherently wrong with the products of modernism, the organization, technology, and wealth. The problem is that Evangelicalism is unable to see how these things carry within them values that are hostile to Christian faith, and evangelicals are unwilling to forsake the immediate and overwhelming benefits of modernism, even when these corrupted values are attached to them. What is missing is *discernment*, the insight that comes with Christian wisdom. It is the ability to see “through” life and discern right from wrong in the actual circumstances of life. This ability flows from “the interactions of the truth of his Word, reflection on it, and the moral character that grows out of it.” [p. 55]

The American Mindset

Why is it so hard for evangelicals to discern how to be in the world but not of it? Because the evangelical world has abandoned theology. Those characteristics which contribute to American life also contribute to undermining our discernment. The American character manages to mix individualism and conformity in a way that is uniquely American. The two are naturally contradictory, but American culture has made them compatible by diverting individualism into private life, and conformity into public life. This is how worldliness has infiltrated the church. Individualism has become a technique for adjusting a personal image to what seems valued, admired, and desired in society.

Individualists used to be driven by an internal gyroscope of character. They thought for themselves, and did what they believed was right in the face of opposition from others, judging that it was “better to be right than to be president.” [pp. 56-57]

Today, individualists have replaced character with a desire to be like others, to have what they see as pleasing, and to be what they admire. American democracy is not a political system. It is an entire worldview dictating that culture and truth belong to the people, as determined by the people. “Our custodians of culture and truth are constrained to operate within the bounds of popular consensus.” They lead only if people are willing to follow, as revealed in the polling data of their advisors.

The church, having become worldly, follows this same path of leadership. Our pollsters have become our teachers and ethicists, our philosophers and theologians; they are the arbiters of what the church must model if it is to be accepted and successful. We market the gospel like any other commodity. We have capitulated to a system of values and assumptions that kill the love for God which is required by the First Commandment. The church must discern how sin is made to look normal, and how righteousness is made to look strange. Worldliness has the capacity to destroy the very center of Christian faith: its understanding of the being and character of God, both his acts and his truth. [pp. 58-59]

Clerical Marketing

“Jesus Christ was a marketing specialist.” George Barna

“The Church is looking for better methods. God is looking for better men.” E.M. Bounds

The hallmarks of consumption are a hunger for *satisfaction* on the part of consumers, and a hunger for *control* on the part of the producers. In the church, we’ve turned these hungers into a desire for therapeutic ministry to fix our sicknesses but not our sins, and we manage these ministries through the

³ Peck, M. Scott, *People of the Lie* (NYC, Simon and Schuster, 1983) pp. 71-74.

efficient control and distribution of church resources. Such therapeutic and managerial solutions offer a kind of “secular providence,” transferring control from God to managers and therapists. [We lay out a buffet table of remedies for every kind of malady, and we provide an army of dispensers to apply them. The congregation selects what they perceive are their needs from the selection of available remedies, and the clerics then provide the forum and the medicines that are sure to cure their ailments.](#) [pp. 60-62]

Church economy is best understood by the market model which has four necessary factors:

1) organization (or church polity); 2) sales representatives (clergy); 3) a product (religious doctrine and life); and 4) marketing techniques (evangelism and church growth). Supply and demand explain the workings of both market and church economies. Baptists and Methodists in America have always been democratic in their organization at the local level. Their ministers had the “common touch.” Their message was down-to-earth and practical. Their method was carefully worked out and effective. By using a market approach that appealed to the common man, they began to attract the members of the three competing and dominant denominations, which were the Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians. They increased their market share from 19.4% to 54.7% during the 100 years following the Revolution by being popular – and pushing a populist platform with popular sovereignty. They offered an environment in which ordinary, often untrained people, were given the freedom to act on their own impulses, unhampered by the doctrines of the past. Out of this movement arose the Mormons, the Disciples of Christ, and the Universalists.

While the others were building impressive institutions of higher learning like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, the Baptists and Methodists were out on the road winning the soul of America. They stimulated savage anti-clericalism and anti-intellectualism because the insurgent leaders were “intent on destroying the monopoly of classically educated and university trained clergymen.”⁴ [pp. 63-65]

Their sermons were colloquial, “employing daring pulpit storytelling, no-holds-barred appeals, overt humor, strident attacks, graphic application, and intimate personal experience”⁵ The point of it all was to engage the audience. Charles Finney despised sermons that were formally delivered on the grounds that they put content ahead of communication.⁶ Both Finney and Moody vigorously opposed “the formal study of divinity.”⁷ In practice, this Jacksonian advocacy of the common man was used to take religious matters into his or her own hands, and to act on instinct and private opinion. Beneficially, the distinction between clergy and laity, the privileged and the commoner, began to disappear. Detrimentally, the deference toward learned men began to disappear along with them. Those who held onto the old forms of denominationalism were perceived as elitist and aristocratic, specifically the Calvinists. Arminianism became the new theology of the people under the banner of the Methodists. [pp. 65-66]

The Politics of Theology and Growth

At its psychological center, Evangelicalism shares two ideas with democracy and capitalism: 1) The audience is sovereign. 2) Ideas find legitimacy and value only in the marketplace. Therefore, evangelicals operate on the assumption that ideas have no intrinsic value. They receive their value only when people determine that they are legitimate. The work of doing theology, therefore, ought not to be left to an intellectual elite that considers itself gifted for it, and feels called to do such work, and views the discovery of truth as an end in itself. Rather, it should be taken on by those who can persuade the masses of the usefulness of the ideas: [the salesmen](#). Ideas quickly lose their appeal unless they can be translated into a [sellable](#) technique. Evangelicals bestow legitimacy only on ideas that *work and that sell*.

⁴ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989) p.162.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57

⁶ Hatch, *Evangelicalism as a Democratic Movement*, in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George Marsden (Grand Rapids MI, Eerdmans, 1984), p. 74.

⁷ *Loc. cit.*

All of this suggests that the evangelical “market” involves issues of psychology, under-currents of political ideology, nationalism, class warfare, the public sense of what is religiously appropriate, the moral climate, and definitions of public virtue, which brings us to the Church Growth movement. Os Guinness tells us that the movement is focused on “the centrality of the church, the priority of mission, the possibility of growth, the necessity of speaking to outsiders, the acknowledgment of culture and cultures, the insistence on real results, and the wisdom of using the best insights and technologies proffered by the key disciplines of the human sciences.” That means psychology, marketing techniques, and the behavioral sciences. [pp. 67-69] So far as this stimulates church evangelism, the growth movement is a good thing. [So far as it redefines the gospel based on its audience-appeal, it’s a bad thing.](#)

George Barna says that, like it or not, the church is not only in a market but is itself a business. It has a “product” to sell, which is relationships to Jesus and others. Its core product is the message of salvation. Each local church is a franchise in the chain. Its pastors are not judged by their teaching and counseling, but by their ability to run the church smoothly and efficiently, and show a profit. It must achieve success in penetrating and servicing its market. Hence we see the redirection of our seminaries from tooling up for teaching, to tooling up for managing. [p. 73]

[But the marketplace, the consumer base, is also tooling up. It has an advantage over the seller in that it can take or leave the seller’s products. It doesn’t “need” them, and so the evangelical consumer can pick and choose among the available vendors of truth, settling on the one that best meets his or her desires. There is no consumer loyalty, either to the product or to the producer, because there is neither “brand” loyalty, nor “manufacturer” loyalty. Denominational loyalty is gone, and without a theological footing, loyalty to a particular brand of gospel is gone as well. Itching ears go in search of a pleasing message, or an entertaining environment in which to amuse themselves. “The churches that have adopted the strategy of marketing themselves have effectively installed revolving doors. The pews may be full, but never with the same people from week to week.” \[p. 75\] Accommodation has led to compromise. Neither one is the “business” of the church.](#) Wells asserts that Barna is mistaken when he advocates that the church be run like a business enterprise. The summary chart on the next page shows why Barna is mistaken.

Contrasting Business and Church [p. 78]

Business	Church
It markets its products to develop a consumer base	It declares Christ’s gospel to call the elect
Its business is for personal profit	Its business is for the salvation of the elect
Its goal is to sell its products to the consumer	Its goal is the elect’s total surrender to Christ
It demands an immediate purchase	It demands a life-long commitment
It intends to arouse lust and greed	It intends to arouse love and self-denial
It triggers guilt and suspicion	It evokes forgiveness and trust
It promotes independence and pride	It teaches dependence and humility
It offers ease and comfort	It offers trial and tribulation
It is accountable only to its shareholders	It is accountable only to God

Barna claims that if a church isn’t growing, then it’s dying. But the facts are that churches in 1776 had an average congregation size of 76. In 1890 it was 92. They’re about the same size today. Mega-churches are the aberration, not the standard or trend. The percentage of the population attending church has also not changed. It was 41 percent in 1937 and 42 percent in 1988. The number of churches has increased with the population, but the size has remained the same. Yet Barna wants to transform traditional churches into “user friendly” churches that adapt themselves to meet the felt needs of their target audience. [p. 79]

First, this means the transition from the world to the church should be as invisible as possible. The church is to behave like a recovery group, driven by pragmatic optimism. It's a self-help environment in which "anything is possible: anyone can be rich, thin, healthy, and spiritually centered with faith, discipline, and the willingness to take direction." We just have to lay claim to our own power to overcome our addiction or our privation. All we need is self-esteem and a positive mental attitude: mind over matter, mind over the past, mind over relationships, mind over anything that is painful or negative.

We employ this technique corporately by developing a "vision," and focusing on it repeatedly until it is rooted in the congregation's mind as a "clear mental image of a preferable future." Barna says God conveys this vision to a leader, customized for his congregation, outlining the direction in which it should be headed. "The future is a reality that is created by those strong enough to exert control over their environment," which asserts a firm confidence in managerial control.

Barna's strategy is clearly man-centered, co-opting God's rule for a bureaucratic and therapeutic process. A profound worldliness has intruded here.

Second, these kinds of therapeutic models tend to ignore the concept of sin, or they euphemize it by calling it a sickness. This is nothing more than the old Pelagianism, the view that sin is not inherited by nature but caught from the environment. [pp. 80-81]

While we may be able to market the church, we cannot market Christ, the gospel, Christian character, or meaning in life. That's because the premise of all marketing is that the consumer's need is sovereign, the customer is always right, and this is precisely what the gospel insists *cannot* be the case. It calls sinners to surrender their self-centeredness, to reject the sovereignty of their fleshly needs, and to acknowledge the claim of Christ over their lives. Barna inverts this process. To market the church, Barna must obscure its essential reality and market it as an organization rather than an organism. It becomes a place to meet people rather than a place to meet God. It creates an environment on terms dictated by those who attend, instead of terms established by God. It turns it into a commodity for consumption rather than a place of authority which calls for penitence and surrender. What is lost is biblical truth. [p. 82]

What we are looking at is Pragmatism. It subjects philosophical beliefs to the test of daily experience, observing how well they hold up under the scrutiny of empirical reality. This has the effect of reducing truth to an ongoing experiment, a radical empiricism. It sets up experience as the test of truth. What is not sense (personal experience) is nonsense. Church marketers are impatient with eternal principles and they lack interest in the value of truth in itself. They assume that the external features of the church are more important than the substance, because those are the features that draw people in.

The Church should be known as a place where God is worshipped, where the Word of God is heard and practiced, and where life is thought about and given its most searching and serious analysis. But none of this can be marketed, and so it is ignored. [p. 84]

The Weightlessness of God

One of the marks of our time is that God is now weightless. He has become unimportant to us. He is less interesting than TV, less authoritative than our appetite for affluence and influence. His judgment is less inspiring than the evening news, and his truth is less compelling than the latest ads. The untrue appears true, the bad poses as good, and the trivial masquerades as important. Modernity has so confused the landscape that it is not always easy to distinguish vices from virtues. The traditional doctrine of God remains intact while its saliency vanishes. It is believed, defended, and affirmed as inviolable, and yet it no longer has the power to shape and to summon as it has in the past. Few contest the validity of doctrinal beliefs, but neither do many allow these beliefs to affect their behavior. [pp. 88-89]

Modernity rearranges all belief in God. His weightlessness in our lives says more about us than God. It reveals much about our psychological disposition when we exclude God from our reality. What was once transcendent in the doctrine of God has either faded, or it has become immanent and private. When the

pollsters ask their questions, they don't ask about truth, or about our understanding of God's nature and character. They simply want to know how we feel about religion, what *internal value* it has for us, rather than asking about God's *objective* significance.

If God is objectively true, then he summons all people in all places, times, and cultures to know him in the same way, and for the same end, with the same results, so that his kingdom is extended and his name is made known throughout the earth. When the objective reality of God crumbles, so does everything that rests on it. Nonetheless, it is entirely possible for private, internal religion to flourish while belief in God as externally and objectively true fades. He has become a figment of our imagination, a psychological aid. He is a god with whom we are on easy terms, whose reality mirrors our own, who exists merely to satisfy our needs, has no real authority to compel, and will soon begin to bore us. This is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. [pp. 90-93]

The Weightlessness of Self

Modernization has increasingly robbed modern people of their external forms of connectedness. The postmodern environment of despair and withdrawal has eaten away every transcendent reference point and fatally weakened every attempt to find over-arching meaning (a metanarrative).⁸

Moderns have sought to relocate all reality internally, in the self, where it is detached from any fixed moral norms of the larger society. At the same time, adapting to the chaos of modern life produces self-identities that are constantly shifting [according to the marketplace of relationships, brand-loyalties, and shared experiences](#). Moderns no longer have integrity and consistency in their self-portrait; it is a mere collage of images [purchased off a rack of available identities provided by the marketers of image](#).⁹ It results in a pervasive weariness and emptiness, and an obsession with the autonomy of the self. This leads to a rejection of all other authorities, [except the authority of popularity – the need to be accepted without constraints, judgment, or expectations \(i.e. to be the center of attention, whether deserved or not\)](#). [p. 94]

[In short, what we see is isolation, a loss of identity, a loss of value, and a loss of loyalty. Gone is our sense of duty, commitment, obligation, and willing submission. This results in an overall sense of abandonment, powerlessness, and general anxiety. \[p. 97\] It stimulates a response of cynicism, rebellion, and withdrawal. Why?](#)

The self draws its substance from three basic sources: family, community, and craft. Our connection to each of these sources is either strained or lost in the modern world, [through divorce, relocation, and repeated job changes](#). [Any attempt to make sense of it all is discouraged by the media, government schools, and popular movies which oppose metanarratives; they deny there is any sense or meaning to it. Life, in their portrayal, is merely a random series of events – evolutionary and indifferent.](#) Belief in progress, rationality, and justice has been replaced with freedom (or license), which results in that randomness. Hunger for meaning cannot be satisfied in the chaos and contradictions of modern life, and so the young are turning inward. Community is no longer geographical, and so we are seeing ad hoc communities emerge based on shared interests or activities rather than proximity. [p. 95]

[Like Cain](#), we have become anonymous wanderers in the earth, vagrants without a home, belonging no where, and everywhere. [Machines and computers](#) have severed the link between the worker and his work, between personal ideas and impersonal products – [they are owned by the corporation, not by those who work for and define that corporation](#). Taking pride in one's work is harder and harder to realize. A universal culture of commercialized life has churned up and overturned the local cultures that once were

⁸ In his book, *The Homiletic of All Believers*, O. Wesley Allen Jr. asserts that we are no longer to "find" meaning, we are to "make" it. In *The Emerging Church*, Dan Kimball chides us for thinking that postmodernism is wrong, and needs to be corrected. He equates modernism with the Enlightenment, where universal truth exists; postmodernism rejects that idea. Here, Wells isn't willing to patronize postmodernism, but neither is he an advocate for modernity. Please note that Kimball's definition of *postmodernism* and Wells' definition of *modernity* overlap.

⁹ In *No Place For Truth*, Wells tells us that Americans are all about image, not substance. That's how we reconcile our need for individualism and conformity. There is a uniform image of individualism to which everyone is compelled to conform. It would be funny if it wasn't so pathetic. That competing drive for individualism and conformity is rampant in the American church; its symptom is participation without commitment.

tied to family and community. [Every town, shopping mall, and airport looks the same. They are manufactured environments, designed and managed by faceless entities.](#) They overturn our settled values, stable hopes, and established beliefs. [p. 96] We get the uneasy feeling that we are mere pawns in a game played by irresistible and unpredictable forces in society, undermining our ability to cope in life. [p. 97]

Designer Religion

After the 1950's, personal identity became increasingly disengaged from beliefs about character and basic human nature. Instead, it was associated with consciousness, [our view of ourselves](#). In the 1970's, personal identity changed again, becoming associated not with the narrative of one's inner life, but with the projection of one's public *image*. Modern people have become performers who stage their own characters and accomplishments, an art that "transcends the need to tell the truth in order to practice 'the techniques of management impression.'" We market ourselves by creating appealing images for others. The self is not our essence, but something we construct.¹⁰ [pp. 98-99]

In the church, the Boomers who grew up from the 1950's to the 1970's have a hunger for religious experience, but an aversion to any theological definition of that experience. Their abandonment of boundaries between God and self, or one religion and another, results in a smorgasbord of spirituality. Their second trait is that they are cultivated shoppers. They have an "ability" to identify products that will satisfy their inner needs. They are in the market for religious goods according to their personal tastes. In this quest for individual fulfillment, finding a common belief between them is irrelevant if not impossible. There's a common need, but not a common satisfaction. This is designer religion in the 90's. [pp. 99-100]

Reality From Kant to Rorty

Our concept of God in the modern and postmodern worlds has become increasingly subjective. God is no longer an external and transcendent reality. He is now perceived as an extension of the self, knowable only internally and immanently; and it isn't just God. Our entire concept of reality is now limited to our perception of it, rather than the factualness of it. The science or philosophy of how we come to know what we know is called *epistemology*. This science has been undergoing massive changes in the past few centuries.

Prior to Immanuel Kant, the mind was considered a mirror in which the external world was reflected. The objective world imprinted its reality on the mind which was passively receiving these images. Kant rejected this model. He argued that the mind is active in this process, and it is a constituent of the images, [altering them according to its predilections](#). The senses are mere receptors of the information, but the mind is a synthesizer of what is received; [it may be biased by past experiences or emotional distortions](#). Space and time, for example, are constructs of the mind rather than realities of the world. Once the mind is seen as the source of knowledge, it is cut off from an objective knowledge of God and his truth. [God and truth become subjective constructs, just like time and space](#). [pp. 102-105]

As a consequence, the meaning of the written or spoken word is supposedly assigned by the reader or hearer, and not by the author or speaker. The "correctness" of interpretation is irrelevant. What is heard is innately authoritative as to the meaning of the words, regardless of the author's intent. Moreover, the reader's interpretation is governed by the local community in which he acquired his perspective or bent. Thus effective communication is restricted to that local community. Other communities lack the requisite vantage point from which to truly understand what has been said. That's why men cannot speak to women's issues, and elders cannot address the youth. [p. 106]

Naturally, this non-sense extends to the church. It affects our understanding and interpretation of the bible, and of authority. Religious authority moves from an external source such as the bible or the church, to an internal source such as feeling or conscience. [Even if we keep the bible as authoritative, its meaning](#)

¹⁰ In the movie, *Batman Begins*, the protagonist declares his identity is not who he is, but what he does – a reversal of truth.

and commandments become subjective – it means whatever we think it means according to our own impression of what the Spirit is telling us there. “After all, I think I too have the Spirit of God...”

Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that modernity is by its very nature hostile to any expression of a traditional understanding of the transcendence of God. In consequence, theism either retains its traditional character and becomes increasingly incomprehensible to moderns, or it adapts itself to the modern cultural context and becomes increasingly strained in its relation to historic orthodoxy... At the root of the remaking of the modern mind... is the refusal to allow external reality to impose constraints on the knower.¹¹

Schleiermacher taught that our understanding of God’s transcendence and our knowledge of God are experienced immanently with the experiencing subject. **God is whoever we think he is and however we spiritually experience him.** “A God so understood can no longer stand outside sinners summoning them to the sort of knowledge of himself that might well violate everything they have experienced and presumed to be deep, profound, and therapeutic. The will and the reality of God are coextensive with our personal religious experience; such a view denies that God has the power to contradict that experience. Ironically, this postmodern view of reality reinforces the Enlightenment view of the autonomous self. [p. 111]

The Sin of Pride

Pride is usually associated with vanity, a relentless striving for success, lording it over others, an appetite for power and attention, and being puffed up and stiff-necked. It also means self-centeredness. It is a preoccupation with the self as the goal of life. It is self-absorption and self-love. And it is sin. Dante portrayed pride as being bent over beneath the weight of an enormous stone: the gaze of the proud never leaves the earth.

Modernity has turned the sin of pride into a virtue, an alternative god. As the self comes to dominate the shape that truth can take, the universal reach of Christian faith collapses. It can no longer offer the same word of grace to people in all times and places.

“The sovereignty of the self, **when it finds its way into the church**, destroys the character of the church as the one people of God who are united by a common redemption in Christ, a common identity as children by adoption of the Father, and a common understanding of his written word. It destroys as well **their** worship of the God who stands outside all sinners and whose greatness and glory are the objects of their **mutual** adoration.” [pp. 112-113]

Recovering the Importance of Truth about God

Correcting our anthropology – we need to convert our understanding of ourselves as consumers of inner experiences and things religious, to an understanding of ourselves as moral knowers and actors.

We have turned to a God that we can use rather than to a God we must obey; we have turned to a God who will fulfill our needs rather than to a God before whom we must surrender our rights to ourselves. He is a God for *us*, for *our* satisfaction – not because we have learned to think of him in this way through Christ, but because we have learned to think of him in this way through the marketplace. In the marketplace, everything is for us, for our pleasure, for our satisfaction, and we have come to assume that it must be so in the church as well. And so we transform the God of mercy into a god who is at our mercy. We imagine that he is benign, that he will acquiesce as we toy with his reality and co-opt him in the promotion of our ventures and careers.

Psychologically, we have a deep affinity for what is relational, but an uneasiness with what is moral. This carries over into the church as an infatuation with the love of God and an embarrassment at his holiness. We find it easier to believe in God as a therapist who empathetically solicits our knowledge of ourselves and passes judgment on none of it, than to think he could have had any serious business to conduct with Moses. We imagine the great purposes of life are psychological rather than moral, that they are realized in the improvement of our inner disposition, and that all things work together for our satisfaction. This is the triumph of the therapeutic over the moral.

¹¹ That is, don’t bother me with the facts; facts are what I believe them to be.

Scripture doesn't promise psychological wholeness and ease. It offers the prospect of indignities, loss, damage, disease, and pain. It promises only that, through Christ, God will walk with us in all the dark places of life, that he has the power and the will to invest his promises with reality, and that even the shadows are made to serve his glory and our best interests. Those who understand that reality is moral at heart, because God is holy at heart, and they will be satisfied that this is all they need to know. As beings made in God's image, we are fundamentally *moral* beings, not consumers. Satisfying our psychological needs pales in significance when compared to the enduring value of doing what is right. Our modernity must be undone through deep, sustained repentance from our self-absorption. [pp. 114-115]

God's Transcendence

God is not immanent, nor is he dependent on our personal experience of him to exist and be validated.

- *He is transcendent because he is self-sufficient.* He owes nothing to the creation. He is not dependent on anything or anyone for his own life, or to exercise his will. Rather, everything and everyone is dependent on him for their life and their very existence. Thus he is over it all, and sustains it all.
- *He is transcendent because he is holy.* His moral purity separates him from all of human life, and it defines him in his essential character. "[Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty.](#)"
- *He is transcendent because he is eternal and supernatural.* He acts on and within his creation. He enters into history and the natural world, but he is not bound by it. He called out a people to himself, redeeming and leading them, sustaining them spiritually and morally through his law and through various institutions.

Because God acts on and in history, and is involved in the affairs of men, the meaning of events and circumstances is not subjective, as if assigned their meaning by a reader of words. Instead their meaning is eternal, according to the will of God, assigned by the author of it all. Events either happened or they did not. This framework of objective historical fact secures the public relevance of God's revealed truth, and it disallows all the pagan habits of privatizing truth, which we still see in the modern world.

Unless God is understood to be transcendent in his holiness, the world can have no objective moral meaning, no accountability beyond itself, no assurance of salvation from guilt through Christ's death, and in the end, no assurance that God will be the final line of resistance to all that is evil. Without this assurance, the hope dies that one day truth will be put forever on the throne and evil forever on the scaffold. [pp. 116-117]

The Outside God

Modernity is seductive. It is addictive. However, it can be resisted by a strong and passionate mind that has been shaped by God's Word of truth, and infused with a due sense of what is right. God is our one sure defense against it. Modern sociologists maintain that as society becomes more modern, it necessarily becomes less religious. That's because modernity inexorably relocates God to its periphery, rendering him first impotent, then irrelevant, and finally invisible. Its formal discipline excludes the reality and character of God. But it is this reality that enables Christians to stand *outside* their culture. More than that, the holy God, the Giver of truth, enables them to stand *against* worldly culture. *It is this distancing and dissociation from modernity that preserves Christian identity.*

Throughout the church today, belief in God, in his eternity, in his power to act in life, and in the sovereignty of his purposes, has been mixed with modernity's teachings about the centrality of the self. It has been mixed with modernity's promises that it can secure a fix for all our problems, whether moral or spiritual, if we will only employ the proper concepts and techniques. Modernity is dictating in the church how, why, and when things will be done. God is moved to the periphery, just as he is in the culture.

The church is nothing if it does not belong to God; and it ceases to belong to him when it loses a full-blooded understanding of him, when it ceases to be fully obedient to him, when it no longer worships in awe before him, and when it gives up faithful service in his name. [God owns his church. He is its center and its identity.](#) To be Christ-centered is to be God-centered. The Church's identity vanishes where

transcendence melts into immanence, where theocentric faith becomes anthropocentric faith, faith which is centered on a therapeutic interest in the self. God becomes merely a convenient means by which to satisfy the self. [pp. 119-122]

The Trinity

What are the consequences of saying that God is on high, that he is elevated over all of creation, and that Christ, who had been “above,” came “below”? The issue at stake is subordinationism, or the relationship between the Father and the Son in the godhead. Historically, theologians have gotten into trouble when they try to differentiate the persons of the godhead. There are a number of verbal formulas that councils have tried to employ in the creeds and confessions, but nothing adequately describes the nature of the Trinity. However, when we separate out the functionality of the persons, we sometimes establish an artificial polarity between the Father and the Son. The Father “represents” a distant, powerful, harsh side of God, while the Son represents an approachable, understanding, and compassionate side of God.

This kind of duality existed in the Puritan teachings in New England, and it produced competing kinds of belief. On the one side was Deism, with a remote God, cool rationalism, and an absence of Christological interest. On the other side there emerged modern evangelicalism, which saw God as invested with all the transformative passion of the gospel, but a greatly diminished transcendence – this was the God “below.” He was warmer, closer, more engaging, and more susceptible to being translated into a private deity. This fit the increasing popularity of the democratic paradigm mentioned earlier. God’s otherness was lost, and his immanence was cut from his transcendence. It is the otherness of God that provides the only sure defense against the seductions of culture. [pp. 127-129]

Boundaries

First, holiness ought not to be associated exclusively or predominantly with the Father; nor should love be associated only with the Son. Secondly, Father and Son are not opposed or competing with one another in the process of accomplishing our salvation. Father and Son were united in the common cause of saving those who were lost, and they had been united in this endeavor from eternity (Ac 2:23). Third, the NT does not allow for a pluralistic and ecumenical theology in which we can have God-centered faith in place of Christ-centered faith. It is unacceptable to claim that Christ is anonymously manifested in other religions that specifically deny the revelation of Christ in Jesus of Nazareth. Christ is not merely an example, or a teacher, or a prophet. [He is God incarnate, sacrificed on the altar to pay the infinite penalty owed by his people, and to redeem them for the Father, to make for him a holy and righteous people.](#)

Some argue that to be Christ-centered is not to be God-centered, because such a position excludes all other religious options than Christianity. It declares one road to salvation and not many. [This is not in the vein of modernity with its pluralistic and privatized religiosity.](#) And yet the NT declares the uniqueness of Christ; it vitiates every other religious claim. God has revealed himself sufficiently in Christ, but some things remain hidden. Those hidden things are not different than what has been revealed. The attraction in Christian mysticism is that what is hidden in God is other than what has been revealed, or deeper, or more interesting or spiritually nourishing. This assumption and way of spirituality is as much in error as pluralism. [pp. 130-132]

The Irrelevance of Holiness in Modernity

There are three main reasons why God’s holiness weighs lightly on us.

First, God himself weighs lightly on everyone. He is so marginalized in the modern world that his character and his revealed will make little impact on everyday life.

Second, learning virtue is so painful and haphazard, and is attended by such a profusion of failures, dashed hopes, regrets, shame, and embarrassment, that we are double-minded about it (Rom 7:13-25). Our fallen nature is hostile to God, and cannot submit to his law. But as a substitute, we are willing to pursue psychological wholeness. We attribute the problems of lying, theft, abuse, rape, and depravity to a

bad upbringing, or a bad self-image, rather than a bad character. Moral responsibility, even in the church, has vanished. We are treated with psychological wisdom in place of biblical truth. [We want deliverance from woe, not hell; we want deliverance from weakness, not worldliness.](#)

We hear the language of victimhood in both society and the church. When everyone is a victim, as it seems they are, it trivializes actual victims. This victimhood comes from being overly sensitive to individual rights, and a refusal by individuals to take responsibility for their actions [and for their emotional responses to the world around them.](#)

Third, Christians tend to overly emphasize God’s love at the expense of his holiness. Hence, talk of divine holiness [and righteous behavior](#) is distracting or abusive. [And so in response to calls to obedience, we hear defensive charges of “legalism” and “harshness.”](#)

Holiness fundamentally defines the character of God. If love is virtuous and right, then love is not an alternative to holiness, but an expression of it. A vision of God’s holiness should inspire his people. It should evoke their worship, sustain their character, fuel their passion for truth, and encourage persistence in their efforts to do his will. But the religious talk of modernity significantly departs from the language of the bible. Modernity’s God has no sharp edges in an effort to make him less threatening, more comfortable, and more tame. He is rarely perceived as the God of the Outside who, in his awesome greatness, summons his people to worship, to hear that Word of truth that they cannot find within themselves or their world. He summons them to become *agents of righteousness* in a world that scorns this righteousness as alien and contrary. Without such a God, worship loses its awe, the truth of his Word loses its ability to compel, and the church loses its moral authority.

Why has this happened? Because it’s the easiest route to take. The habits and appetites of modernity are more attractive than the sacrifice and discipline of orthodox faith. God’s love seems less burdensome than his holiness. The church has succumbed to the seductions of our therapeutic culture. In that context, it seems quite natural to favor the relational dimension over the moral dimension, mysticism over cognitive conviction, self-fulfillment over personal surrender, self-image over character, and pluralistic religious equality over the uniqueness of the Christian faith. [pp. 133-136]

Those who know God are inclined to walk humbly before him (Mic 6:8), to be morally circumspect and reverent. They are inclined to demonstrate an appropriate “fear of the Lord” (Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7; Job 28:28). God’s holiness carries with it the demand of exclusive loyalty to him, as the First Commandment requires (Ex 20:1-3). The love of the world and the love of God are mutually exclusive. *We cannot* have both (1Jn 2:15-17).

In the ancient Near East, holiness was usually ascribed to people, articles, and places than to gods and goddesses. The OT, however, reverses this arrangement. God alone is holy. This loftiness and burning purity goes hand and hand with tenderness, which is another marked difference between the Hebrew God and the pagan gods and goddesses. In Isaiah, God says he is the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy, who dwells in the high and holy place, but who also dwells with those of a contrite and humble spirit. He is both exalted and near to those who trust in him. [pp. 138-139]

He is a righteous God, and *therefore* he is a Savior. God’s holiness necessitates the work of Christ, calls for it, and provides it. John Piper writes that Christ’s suffering “was the measure of his love for the Father’s glory. It was the Father’s righteous allegiance to his own name that made recompense for sin necessary.”¹² The glory of God is preserved and proclaimed against all that sin seeks to do in undermining it. [p. 140]

God’s holiness and majesty belong together and interpret one another. There is a profound moral aspect to God’s majesty. The reason that God is separate, high, and lifted up, is his consuming, burning purity. This

¹² It is because we are God’s people, called by his name before the foundation of the world, that God makes us his *holy* possession in Christ. It is not that we are made holy by Christ, and therefore we may bear God’s name. Rather, because we bear God’s name, Christ has made us holy.

is what makes him dangerous, and this is what the Israelites had to learn by hard experience. God's holiness was foundational to his working with them. It is in this unity of righteousness and love that all the deeper religious ideas of Israel find their source.

In his holiness, God is not to be trifled with; familiarity with God borders on contempt and it is subject to judgment. Because his fearful punishment falls on Philistines and Israelites alike, God ensures that all men will bow before his majesty.¹³ Yet such awe is conspicuously absent in our churches. Our confidence to approach God through the veil of Christ does not allow us to be careless of the purity of God or the requirements he has set for his people. [pp. 140-141]

Because holiness is God's essential character, it is his essence in confronting sin and evil. When people, things, and places are referred to as holy, it is only in the sense that God has set them apart to serve his special moral or religious purposes. They are rendered holy by God's action in separating them out from common usage and dedicating them for his *exclusive* use. [We are the saints, his holy ones](#). God demands true holiness of all the elect right now, not in some remote apocalyptic sense. Specifically, he demands that the external expressions of our inner life accord with the fact that we belong to him through Christ, consistent with his truth and obedient to his moral law.

When we cloak the holiness of God by focusing on his love to the exclusion of his wrath, we create a god who may be patient, kindly, and compassionate, but who lacks the will to resist what is wrong, the will to judge it, and the power to destroy it. When holiness slips from sight, so does the centrality of Christ. [We have salvation without transformation. The Holy Spirit is stripped of his power to effect real change in us](#). Sin has no meaning and grace has no point. God's holiness is what gives the one its definition and the other its greatness. Without the holiness of God, sin is merely human failure, but not failure before God. It is failure without the presumption of guilt, without retribution, and without any serious moral meaning. [It negates the reason Christ went to the cross](#). Without holiness, faith is simply confidence in the benevolence of life, or perhaps confidence in ourselves. [It is another gospel](#). [pp. 142-144]

The Crisis of Authority

Western society has historically been held together by tradition, authority, and power. Only power remains. Power alone directs our corporate life, power severed from any moral order. In the absence of any consensus about what is right, we have turned to law to settle our disputes. [The litigiousness of our society is a symptom of its moral decay](#). Truth in any absolute sense has been abandoned. The truth that remains has no authority or rightness because it is no longer anchored in anything absolute. If it persuades, it does so only because our experience has given it its persuasive power; but tomorrow our experience might be different. [And so our Constitution is twisted and distorted to fit our current experience and political desires instead of being fixed in its meaning according to eternal values](#).

God's Word, which does not change according to the relative truths of our culture, no longer carries authority or weight. It has become silent in the church. It plays a small part in the church's worship, in its understanding and spiritual nurture. That largely explains why God, in his holiness, is also a stranger to the church. The content of less than a quarter of all sermons contained in Pulpit Digest from 1981-1991 were based on a biblical passage under consideration. Without the Word, the church has no meaning. It may find substitutes in committee work, relief, and various other activities, but they cannot provide meaning in themselves. Cut off from God's meaning [and purposes for it](#), the church is cut off from God; it loses its identity as the people of God in belief, practice, and hope.

Cognitive vigor, a conviction about God's truth, the courage to make it known in public and lived in private, and the fortitude to do this day in and day out, are born in the understanding of God's otherness. His transcendent holiness and knowledge enable us to stand outside the charms of modernity in order to act morally within it. [pp. 146-151]

¹³ The Philistines suffer under the wrongful possession of the ark. When David retrieves it on a wooden cart in violation of God's statutes, and one of his men touches it as it slides, that man dies before the same dictates that brought affliction to the Philistines. 2Sam 6:1-9.

God on the Inside

There are two historically important doctrines that have ceased to influence the evangelical worldview. The doctrine of *Providence* asserts God's control over all of life's events. The doctrine of the *Cross* asserts that through the crucifixion, God has resolved what has disordered the world and robbed it of its meaning. We are seeking substitutes for these doctrines in political action, dramatic spiritual experience, strong charismatic leaders, and beguiling entertainments. The churches are feeding their flocks sugary fluff and pleasant stories to divert them from thinking about the painful realities of an empty existence. Because the church has failed to provide godly meaning, the flock has appropriated its meaning from the culture. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so the void in the soul must be filled with something, anything.¹⁴

Modernity produces the sense that there is no sure and steady purpose pervading life. Meaning has broken apart into small unrelated fragments. We have an intuitive sense that the fabric which holds our society together is unraveling. Law, commerce, government, and education have greatly expanded their reach, but their credibility has plummeted. There are fewer and fewer shared meanings and desires; the collective sense of what it means to be an American is shattering under the impact of a relentless emphasis on distinctions of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. We have good reason to fear those who toy with the secrets of life and death in genetic research and transplantation. Our world celebrates brilliance without wisdom, and power without conscience. Lawyers and bureaucrats have assumed the roles that moral leaders once held. The world has become fragile, and precarious. Turbulent, dangerous, and unruly forces look increasingly like malevolent genies escaped from the bottle of Divine Providence.¹⁵

Our society no longer has a center of values to exert a centripetal force on our collective life. Our religion no longer has a center of theology to exert a centripetal force on our thought and practice, both private and public. The disappearance of these centers produces an emptiness that has been filled with various forms of pluralism. The once-whole worlds of society and religion have broken apart into smaller independent worlds, each on its own trajectory. They consist of small units of meaning within which we exist and through which we pass, **neither owning them nor being possessed by them**. Each has its own values, boundaries, methods, and class interests. Like amphibians, we enter into them and retreat again. Church is just another pond.

This is true of our sciences and of human knowledge in general. Secularization is the cause, and pluralization is the effect of the removal of our center. There is a breakdown in the unity of our knowledge **and experience**, and in its place emerges specialized fields and disciplines. Increasingly weary people long not for freedom of choice, but freedom from choice. They want the freedom simply to drop out **of the chaos, discord, and competition for their attention**. And yet they lament the relativity and impermanence of it all, the sense of homelessness, lostness, and rootlessness. Freedom from God and from his holiness comes at a cost. The sheer volume of information and news engenders a mood of frustration, helplessness, and fatalism which drive us to escape into hedonism and self-indulgence. It extinguishes our hope that some meaning can be retrieved from the ashes. [pp. 157-160]

The Death of Progress

There was a promise in the Age of Science and Industrialization that scientific and technological advance would lead to a better world. This has been proven false over time. The Enlightenment promised that men would control their own destiny, that we were ever-improving, ever-progressing. **But we have discovered that man, though wearing colorful and impressive garb, is still the lawless barbarian at heart, depraved and porting about his sinful nature wherever he steps. It was all an illusion**. While the death of an illusion is hardly cause for regret, the death of the idea of progress has led many to abandon *all* rationality, all purpose, and all meaning in life. Talk of *Divine Providence* has a hollow ring to it.

¹⁴ p. 153.

¹⁵ pp. 154-156.

Our view of God's Providence and the world should not arise from our psychological response to it, or our experience of it, but from the God who is outside of it, from what he has disclosed of his will for the world in his Word. It is here that we find *his* meaning for it all. While we may believe in God's existence and goodness, we find ourselves psychologically disabled. We cannot reconcile that belief, that truth, with our daily experience. The result is that we bargain internally; we negotiate between what we *ought* to believe about God's Providence and what we *can* believe. [The object of our belief shifts from Christ, to the world.](#) [pp. 161-162]

Christ Our Interpreter of Providence

God's revelation of himself and of his will is more than the event of Christ's death and resurrection to provide purification for sins; providence is more than salvation. Some theologians debate the mechanics of Providence. They want to understand how God's work in the preservation of life, and his nourishment of his covenant people, relates to the laws of nature, to human volition, to natural causes, and to evil. Does he use them, work around them, work despite them, or work through them?

Evil, though at the fringes of God's action, is never the cause of God's action. He does not react to it in the sense of being controlled by it. It is subject to God's judgment, but nevertheless it exists or is acted out only within the boundaries of God's providence, will, and control. In the end, it can only serve his purposes and not its own. [Satan required God's permission to afflict Job. He could not act independently of God's intent or outside of God's intent. That would have negated God's sovereignty and providence.](#)

We do not have the cool, detached god of the deists, nor an absentee landlord, nor a creation without a Creator as the modernists would have it. [God's providence is both general and specific.](#) It is general towards both the evil and the good to reinforce the ethic of love, which we should emulate (Mat 5:44-48). God's general providence has determined for all nations their allotted periods of rule, and the boundaries of their habitation (Ac 17:26). Yet God's providence effects no saving grace in the larger world because God has not established a saving covenant with the nations. [His providence of saving grace is specific toward the elect \(2Cor 5:5; 1Jn 3:22; 4:13\).](#) His providence towards his people rests on this grace, is explained by this grace, and is an exercise of this grace in the shape of a covenant. What God does in guiding the nations is rarely explained. It is hidden from human scrutiny. [pp. 163-168]

The elect's experience of pain, suffering, and affliction does not create a contradiction. In the same way that rain falls on the good and the evil alike, affliction falls on the good and the evil alike. Contradictions arise only when we have false expectations. God's people have no assurance that dark times will be held at bay for them, much less that he will give a running commentary on his reasoning and purposes. Quite the contrary. The church is warned that despite God's providence, suffering and evil will fall on all those who follow Christ. Those who preach wealth and health are preaching a false gospel, and a false doctrine of providence. It is more the expectation of American middle-class affluence than biblical truth. [p. 169]

The cross is the place where God's providence is most importantly interpreted, because that providence is centrally moral in its nature. The world's offenses against God are decisively confronted in the cross. The cross is the revelation of God's love and his holiness. There is no other place where the scales of injustice are balanced. Those who promote the love of God to the exclusion of his holiness cannot accept that his governance of the world might include judgment. *How can a loving God judge anyone?* [p. 170-171] Asking such a question shows a basic misunderstanding of the gospel message.

The NT message is not that we are innocents who have been taken captive by the powers of evil, but that we have willingly participated in our own captivity. The deliverance the gospel declares, then, is from our complicity in this rebellion against God, our love of darkness, and our devotion to worldliness. We would rather be delivered from sickness, loneliness, boredom, and meaninglessness than from the ideologies that authenticate our rebellion. The NT vision isn't about winning a victory, but about entering into the victory that Christ has already won; it isn't about gaining the world, but of saving the soul. Its message isn't about making this worldly age more secure, but entering the "age to come" through Christ. It's not about

manufacturing happiness, but about finding holiness. It's not about purchase, but faith. It's not about amusement, but repentance; not distraction, but knowing God; not preserving what will fade, but claiming what is enduring. *The message isn't grounded in ourselves but in Christ.* [p. 172]

It is essential that the church grasp the implications of living in an interim time, between the first and final comings of Christ, between the rumblings of God's justice at the cross and the final storm of Judgment. Life outside of Christ is life under God's wrath. This is the key to what God is doing, and the focus of his providence. [p. 173]

Accommodating the World

Rather than standing apart from it, the church has negotiated with this world. It has made extraordinary efforts to accommodate it. To a significant extent, it has absorbed the values of the world oblivious to the fact that this world has no ultimate reality. This capitulation to worldliness has taken two forms: one more liberal, and the other more evangelical. The more liberal form involves an outright surrender of the Christian faith to the modern mindset. In the more evangelical form, the church has sought meaning in the private sphere in small circles of friends and family, or in a neighborhood where personal relations are important. Evangelicals have substantially accepted this distinction between public and private spheres. They have relegated their faith to the private sphere, and have reinterpreted it in therapeutic terms.

Our literature and theology belies the conquest *by* Christ over Satan. Instead we find tale after tale of an engagement with demons which arises from our desire to win a conquest *for* Christ. [That's part of the self-centered, dependent-God view of modernity.](#) In reality, the warfare with demonic powers is not still awaiting some ultimate resolution; it has already been won and Christians have entered into the victory through their union with Christ (Eph 1:21; 6:10-20). Paul therefore counsels believers simply to stand, and to withstand, drawing on the weapons of Christian character: the Word, and prayer.

The Church in the World

The Puritans intended to establish a theocracy, not in the belief that the world could be conquered by politics, but in the belief that the kingdom should effect a change in the world. Christians existence as a religious people can only be explained in terms of God's sovereign actions in establishing his kingdom. This kingdom is at odds with the world, not in cooperation with it, and its principles need to be made supreme in society.¹⁶ Puritans believed that under God life should be something other than what it is apart from him. The ideals of Christ's kingdom are realized too little in the world, his name acknowledged too infrequently, and his truth believed and obeyed too inadequately. [pp. 174-181]

So, between the already of the cross and kingdom, and the not-yet of Judgment and the Wedding Feast, does God's providence involve his active participation in the affairs of men? What is meaningful in what God is doing? Both conservative and liberal Christians are far too willing to assign a meaning to the current events of the day, as if God's infinite will were known by finite men, or as if they could be privy to his intent. Everybody sees God doing something different, because we see it from our own place in it.

The NT never denies the activities of the Holy Spirit in the world. He is doing the work of Christ. What we are missing is that the focus of that work is to apply to men and women what Christ accomplished on the cross. His work is to produce in them faith, love, and hope, of which Christ is the source and object.

Christ's work on the cross, and the glory of his person, are the sole criteria that we have for reading what God is doing in the world today. Anything that does not arise from Christ's saving death as interpreted by Scripture, and that does not promote Christ's glory as understood by the apostles' teaching, and that does not bear the stamp of his grace as seen in obedience to his Word, love of his gospel, commitment to his church, and service of others, cannot rightly be characterized as the work of God.

¹⁶ This sounds like a post-millennial view, now widely held in the church. However, it was a minority view at the time of America's founding. To clarify, the Puritan view of "society" was not the political order of a community, but the community of those living under a political order. Their religious views were not to be separated from their participation in government, their selection of leaders, or their choices on issues. A righteous people, they believed, will produce a righteous government – but it will not work the other way around.

Anything else smacks of modernity's desire for empirical evidence. The presumption is that we must identify God's presence in the world with boldness and certainty as to what he is doing, and do so in a way that meets with modernity's approval. If we can't, then we fear modernity will make the accusation that God is doing nothing, and that he is absent. [And so we cater to their rules of evidence, and fall into their trap.](#) That's how modernity has emptied the world of God's presence in our minds. [We refuse to believe that God is active in the world without visible proof.](#) Like Thomas we want to put our fingers in the holes. [We refuse to stand on Scripture alone, and so we try to verify it with external evidence. That isn't faith, hope, and love. It is unbelief.](#) [pp. 182-184]

The cross is not the only place where salvation is found. It is found in every place where evil has been judged and God's holiness has been revealed. [The gospel call of the church isn't just to bring home the elect. It is also to pronounce judgment on the reprobate, and to declare the holiness of God.](#) It is because of God's judgment and holiness that the church is called to be bold in its declaration, confident in its witness, and joyful in its service. It is to acknowledge [and demonstrate](#) the fact that it has been pardoned from sin and freed from the powers of darkness. The church is called to declare the message of the cross, not to uncover God's hidden purposes in the world. It is to tell the world what God has actually said about sin, not to guess at what he might be saying through events and circumstances. It is to make known the coming Judgment [so that those who hear might be saved through faith in Jesus Christ.](#) [pp. 184-185]

Speaking with a Different Voice

When the church abandons the biblical worldview, when it fails to confront its culture with this worldview in a cogent fashion, it has lost its nerve, its soul, and its *raison d'être*. It becomes like an English teacher who goes to China, but makes only a feeble attempt to teach the language. Then, out of a desperate sense of loneliness, learns Cantonese so that no one will have to speak English. The days when the church could bumble along in the context of an essentially civil culture are gone. The choice for the evangelical heart is clear: love for God, or love for the world?

The church must first recover its sense of antithesis between Christ and culture, and then find ways to sustain the antithesis. It must give up the freedom to do anything it happens to desire. It must give up self-cultivation for self-surrender, entertainment for worship, intuition for truth, slick marketing for authentic witness, success for faithfulness, power for humility, and a god of cheap grace for the God of costly obedience. *Do God's business on God's terms.* [p. 223]

Some recent proposals for church reform suggest that the problems are all administrative or organizational, matters of style or comfort. [Other proposals suggest that the problems are doctrinal, and that we should reconstruct it from scratch.](#) Still others suggest we take advantage of the current interest in private spirituality and create a system of secluded monastic orders with charismatic leadership – exactly what modernity would recommend.

Real reform will have to look beneath the surface to see the poverty of spirit in the evangelical world. It lacks seriousness; it tends to engage in superficial rather than penetrating analysis; it has a childish inability to withstand the diversions of flash, fun, and glamour. God now rests inconsequentially upon the church:

- His Word, if it is preached at all, does not summon enough.
- His Christ is impoverished, thin, pale, and scarcely capable of inspiring awe.
- His Riches are entirely searchable, [without mystery or depth.](#)

What the church needs most is God in his grace and truth, God in his awesome and holy presence. It needs to rediscover what it means to be the church. Only God can change human nature and incite a rebellion against the world, overturning worldly assumptions and exposing them as contradictory to his Word. Only God can invigorate a hardened heart to a robust and righteous passion. It isn't a program, or a technique that is needed, but a passion for God's truth. Only God can resuscitate a lost appetite for that truth. Only God can enable families to recover their order and connectedness. Only God can make known

in new measure the sweetness of his grace in the life of the church. [We need to reintroduce the flock to their God as he is revealed in his Word, interpreted through Christ who reigns today.](#) [pp. 224-225]

Christian spirituality is a forlorn pursuit unless the individual is embodied in a structure that gives corporate expression to private spirituality. [Church is not a drive-in for private vehicles to visit once a week for the show. We don't sojourn in the kingdom and live in the world.](#) The lone thread must be woven into a fabric. In this sense, the local church creates its own Christian culture. It establishes its own set of values and ways of looking at the world. It paints its own hopes and dreams which will become normative, because they are corporately held and practiced. Unless the dissident can return to a center and receive fresh confirmation of his or her biblical worldview, a fresh understanding of the world and human life, fresh nourishment in believing, and a renewed connectedness with the people of God, failure is as predictable as the rising of the sun. Those who ask little find that the little they ask is resented or resisted; those who ask much find that they are given much and strengthened by the giving. It is only as lives begin to intersect in sacrificial ways that the church starts to develop its own internal culture. Only in this context will the reality of God weigh heavily on the church and be preserved in life.

Evangelicals profess a deep yearning for greater spiritual authenticity in ancient Catholic practices. [They seek a place of quietude and orderliness, an escape from the noise and chaos of modernity.](#) But a flight from modernity [into monastic seclusion with our immanent god](#) will not in itself guarantee spiritual renewal. To scrape away what is ugly is not necessarily to uncover what is beautiful. We need to make room for the presence of God in all his truth and grace. Evangelicals must formulate anew their answer to the question of what constitutes the chief end of man. Can the wisdom of Westminster in this regard once again become ours? [pp. 226-227] *"The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."*