

LEMONADE WITH TOO MUCH WATER

For an outsider surprise about the presence of the church in American public life starts at a curious place. The European is familiar with cathedrals and churches against the skylines of towns and villages. He is pleased to find buildings like the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. or St. Patrick's in New York. Even the unfinished cathedral of St. John the Divine on New York's West Side is admired and seen as an enormous undertaking that may take generations to accomplish. They see some continuity with European expectations and experiences.

In a similar way the beautifully columned white churches in the South are a colorful visual delight. They fit in well with the landscape, antebellum history, the deep verandas, the drooping trees, and the Spanish moss. And the heavier stone churches of New England Episcopalians continue Anglicanism from England across the ocean.

Visitors from regions of the world, where other religions are practiced, expect to notice churches in the same way we expect to find temples, shrines, and mosques in their countries. It seems normal to find so many churches in a country that has so publicly stated its Christian roots in the past. *God* as a word and *faith* as personal conviction are part of the American image on the screen of life.

Surprising to the visitor is the vast number of small churches all

over the countryside and on many streets in the cities. Whether the size of a hot dog stand or a large family home, whether in a form recognizable as a church or just a storefront, whether in a residential neighborhood or out of town and in appearance like a hangar or a shopping mall, churches abound everywhere in America. Some of the smaller ones have a one-reverend focus. He or she made history once as a sectarian offspring from something larger and became a kind of personal sheik for a splinter group. That church now offers little more than healing, blessings, and spirit in a separate but faithful community.

Perhaps the greatest surprise comes when travelers see what looks like a giant plant from the outside and then, having parked their car on the lot, are introduced to a church with programs for every age and interest with regard to current needs or marital state of the parishioners. The whole thing is a masterful organization. The billboard or monument along the side of the road announces the sermon title and activities much the same way a company logo in an industrial park indicates what goes on there. In an open society church signs serve to inform, to attract, and to compete. The church takes part in the competition on the market and advertises its expanding services. Where she once focused on right thinking and a moral life in all spheres of society from inside the church, she now competes for the time and dedication of the public with such offerings as schools and gyms, bingo halls and adult education programs. In the past she reached into the community. She has today become an alternative community among many others. Through literature and TV she reaches the shut-ins and the shy, giving experience without obligation, a show without requiring a ticket. Somewhat like a shopping channel, the church offers religion, community, and a better self-image.

The church has made herself available beyond the local parishioner with the ever-changing attractions and appeals to a people that is both historically and religiously on the move. An open, mobile society enjoys the freedom of the market. People need to be attracted to the various religious stalls on the fairground of life. The service indus-

try has cast its shadows also on the church and has become the model. One of the effects is a change in the content of the churches' offering and her participation in life.

When church was part of the normal things in the community, she maintained the immigrants' traditions from the past or embraced the Puritan welcome on the other side of the ocean upon arrival. The church and her teaching influenced for a long time the way people thought and lived. Her word brought together the transcendent knowledge of the Creator's mind and will with the immanent pressures, possibilities, and problems of daily life. The sermon sought to tame the wilderness of the human heart and mind, so that nature's wilderness would be challenged through personal morals and an awareness of the obligation to help others. With the study, exposition, and application of the Creator's word in the text of the Bible, a direction was given for life to take shape against the wiles of evil and the unpredictable ravages of an imperfect nature.

The biblical outlook freed each person from any fatalistic resignation to the status quo of his situation or nature. Living by every word from God, not by bread alone (cf. Deut 8:3-9), explained the need to grow grain, to make ovens, and to bake bread in the first place. Life as a conquest, an expression of moral and intellectual dominion, was the purpose of human beings. For then we follow the commands and purposes given by God to glorify him and enjoy him. The image of God in man liberated him from any temptation to merge with an impersonal nature and to lose himself in resignation. Particularly after the fall of Adam and Eve, the need to put hands to the plow, to seek justice and to help the weak, to further life and to resist death became urgent and finds creative responses to life's cruelty and fundamental absurdity.

This distinctly Jewish and Christian worldview encourages a mind-set of continuously recognizing problems and seeking solutions. There has always been a remarkable generosity among normal Americans toward the stranger, at home and abroad. Curious about other people, desiring to express a created abundance and a Christian

witness, Americans gave and gave again. They hosted strangers to hear from them the recent news and to share with them blessings of the land and their work on it. Such material readiness was the fruit of a biblical, moral instruction about all of life. The conquest of the land in its spacious wilderness gave practice to the skillful hand and generous heart to help the next generation get started, the neighbor to stay above water, and the immigrant to get out of it.

Christians worked according to their insights and convictions in all areas of life. They talked about their Christian view of things and shaped their lives more or less accordingly. The sermon was the central form of instruction and encouragement about all of life. A biblical view of things helped give shape to government, law, and civil society. Christians and Jews understand the Bible to explain the “Whence? What? Whither?” of life. This is a distinct view among religions for two central reasons. First, that view expresses the belief that we are meant to be human beings with minds and hands to be used to nourish body and soul as well as to have dominion over nature and to create the flow of history in a deliberate use of culture over nature. Second, it expresses the belief that the bigger picture of life can only be explained from a revelation in a text and language that addresses the mind and deals with real issues. Questions are not to be squashed, and answers need to be examined for their truthfulness. At the same time this heightens the place of man and calls for careful study in all areas of God’s creation in order to make good use of life and to protect it against error.

Church schools and universities were part of an obligation, and for some a delight, to teach the next generation about all of life—from meaning to morals, from skills to sanctification, from personal to public obligations. Christians worked in the professions, for which the teachings of the Bible had prepared an intellectual and moral landscape. They saw history as real, their own lives as significant, and the tasks before them as effective contributions in a flow that started with creation, suffered the Fall, and hoped in the work of Christ onward to the kingdom of God.

As recently as 150 years ago, however, a gradual shift in thinking was accepted. First, revelation was gradually denied on any but a very personal level. The Bible, it was said, no longer now told us about all of life but contained only moral prescriptions and general indications about human dependencies. Left with only indirect revelation, the God of the Bible could no longer be known as Creator. Instead, on a second wave, creation itself became seen as divine. God was assigned a place in the midst of nature's working. Knowledge of God was not gleaned anymore from careful study of Word (the Bible) and work (nature), but became related more to the degree of goodwill, self-confidence, and personal accomplishment in each person. Many Christians joined the Romantic Movement in the nineteenth century to be closer to God in nature—under the mountains and in rich autumn foliage. They left the knowledge of God's text and rational thinking and instead turned to feeling, spontaneity, and an inner light.

David Wells has shown succinctly and in considerable detail how there was a shift from studied understanding to the power of an inner conviction, a kind of Christian transcendentalism married to the advancing democratization of Christianity (see his books *No Place for Truth* and *God in the Wasteland*). Our own generation has turned the Christian faith into something consisting of incredible lightness. Man's position above and over against nature, sometimes counter to the flow of things and very much focused on being human, was abandoned for seeing God in nature, a trust in human nature, and a tolerant view of everything as part of a natural flow.

Over the years too much water has been mixed with the lemonade. What had been a relief and delight to any thirsty person on a hot summer day has now become a weak imitation. When good intentions replace good thinking and good work, a society may continue for a while, but the reasons for its existence and the realities created by its efforts and convictions will become weak. When people decide on what they believe on the basis of what they like, what they are comfortable with, and where they find support for what they always

wanted, they are no longer concerned very much about what is true, just, and good in the longer perspective.

The body of belief that strongly influenced a whole culture to think and act more biblically about man and nature has been weakened by the gradual neglect of important components. They have atrophied from a diminished conviction of what is true and what matters morally and in general from the widening separation of genuine faith from mere comprehension of life. Feelings are more readily embraced than reasoned and certain content. Convictions are more private, less tested in the real world for their truthfulness to that real world in the circle of all of life. Instead, faith and convictions come across in personal views, denominational particulars, and rules for a separated community.

The Christian profession of belief about God, man, and history came out of a study of reality, revelation, and relevance to the human experience. Today the Christian profession of faith takes on the form of the personal testimony. There is little encouragement in the churches to live thoughtfully as Christians in all aspects of life. Bowing morally and intellectually before the Creator is now a matter of personal preference and personal perspective. Instead of engaging the world of human activity, greater importance is placed on establishing parallel channels to replace secular institutions. Christian schools, sports teams, companies, and publishing houses create their own market for their community. They function almost like a separate country with citizenship in the church. They are like a package of yeast that has no contact with the flour and will never make the whole loaf rise. Questions of truth, quality, and integrity are no longer raised with any thought about a larger world. More weight is given to belonging and speaking to limited contexts. Christians, who work in the midst of a wider world, are left to stand alone, unless they can be there as missionaries.

Church has become increasingly a private affair and a personal choice and less a place of real community at a time of growing fragmentation. People flee into private spaces and new homes and leave

the city. Long driving distances diminish geographical, emotional, and intellectual proximities. Previously community existed among people who lived in the same place as family and neighbors. Community did not have to be created or even discussed. Now our life and thought have largely broken up that proximity. We form ideological communities based more on membership than on life together. Membership is an exclusive agreement. Part of the aspect of the human family is lost. Rather than starting from a community of people who live out a concern about what is true, good, just, and beautiful, we cut ourselves off from the wider human family. Christianity with its universal truth is not the same as a church with its tribal truth.

Fragmentation characterizes much of our lives. With fewer children and two incomes per family, each person already leads a more independent life in the smallest community—the family. Personal convenience and the need to be in control, understood as personal rights, make it hard to accept others into my personal sphere. They might be an unpredictable burden. Moving the older generation out of homes into convenient retirement settings contributes much to generational fragmentation and isolation. The distances we cover in order to experience our “right to privacy” make real and daily community much harder.

The automobile allows us to move from the neighborhoods around the church into the country. There new churches are always changing congregants. Church is becoming more a matter of the heart and imagination. You can carry that with you wherever you go. It requires no stable commitment to place or people regardless of inconvenience.

A new and more internal church of private choice, convenience, and personal conviction is less exposed to the details, to the various aspects of normal life. That church offers a sanitized view of our lives, for it removes all the inconveniences, struggles, and frustrations that are part of a more stable and local human context. There you had to test what you believed against the outside world and in the midst of realities that were often far from pleasant. We now expect the church

of our choice to support us in our flight from the world around us with a safe environment, a ready acceptance among equals, an entertaining program to hold our attention through joy and tears, laughter and light instruction. Here we are among new brothers and sisters. We hardly notice the artificiality of this church family. We can now *pretend* to be family without the burdens of quibbles, shared bathrooms, and competition for time and attention.

Churches nurture this fragmentation by providing a group and study for each age. This breaks up real families. Where church used to bring us together from different situations under the teaching and blessing of one God, church now meets the perceived needs of fragmented people. While attention to personal variations is an act of respect and kindness, the church's mandate is to bring us all to the Creator and his work for us in redemption. We may be focused on our own painful story; yet the Bible places it in the context of history (*his* story), so that we understand what is the problem of mankind, not just my personal and immediate sensation. Healing comes from God's work for us, not from feeling better about ourselves.

Too many ideas about community are expressed in various programs without a reality check. Actually being together in place and ideas, across the ages and in all aspects of life, serves community much more. Everything else is merely an illusion of community.

Fragmentation inevitably shrinks our field of vision. We alone are important to ourselves. Personal happiness, immediate fulfillment, personal concerns can and do trouble us. In adolescence we require everything to revolve around our needs. But church is not only composed of adolescents. Yet we hardly admit anyone to show us, from a wider angle, that our expectations about church and faith, life and love, may be very unrealistic, idealistic, and selfish. Exposure to the larger picture of life in a fallen world is avoided. From a narrower base of concerns and questions the wider, glorious answers of God's answers and work in history remain undiscovered and unappreciated. There is little awareness of any of the more universal problems and the historic burdens from life in a fallen world.

Consequently Christians show little confidence in the marvelous weight and wholeness of the biblical answers. We end up feeling either selfishly satisfied or constantly frustrated. Both are emotional states. The weight and wonder of God's work in history, of the truth of the Bible applicable to all areas of physical and intellectual life, is overlooked.

Such a change of focus from the real world to one's personal vision expresses itself in both left- and right-wing orientations in politics and society within the church. Both offer quick fixes, simplistic, one- or two-step solutions to all the problems we recognize. Some Christians think that the poor, the marginalized, and the variously inclined are God's favored people. They rarely see that life is more complex than that. Poverty, being on the sidelines of society, or pursuing your own favorite orientation in any area may also be the result of an unfounded opinion, personal vision, or ideological idolatry in the first place.

Much of the Christian Left pays little attention to the devastating consequences of erroneous worldviews, pagan religions, and political visions of the kingdom of God. They tend to quote Scripture to sanctify their dream of kingdom values without Christ. They call for justice but have in mind only a mathematical, numerical equilibrium. Their vision is a healed society through what turns out to be a paleo-Marxist view of equally distributed goods. Their slogan refers to "preferential treatment by God for the poor" and parallels an affirmative action program without any respect to culpability or merits in outlook. They tend to assume that pain is always the result of injustice from those who do not have the same pain. They forget that ideas and faith have consequences.

Ideas that are true to the real world have different consequences than ideas that exist only in relationship to an imagined world. The Left largely operates from a materialist and mathematical model applied to human beings and their life situation. They recognize victims but never self-inflicted wounds.

The Right within the church also has a simple vision of how to solve all problems. For those holding this view there is little recogni-

tion of genuine problems for life in a fallen world. They are like Job's friends and always see a personal cause for all life's situations. "You suffer; ergo you must be a bad person. Change your ways, and you will have no further problems!" They overlook the tragic side of life. There is no justice under the sun. Parents may have wicked children, and children may have stupid parents. The rain falls on the righteous and the wicked.

The proposals of the Right for a better world do not recognize a world that groans while waiting for the redemption. In the world of their imagination, justice is already here. We all get what we deserve. With Jesus in our heart, or simply left to ourselves without government intervention, all things would work well. They have identified the enemy. The state is as evil as the sinner next door. The elimination of either or both would solve all the remaining problems—poverty and naughty children and cancer. They propose a new and separate community of the righteous, where the wheat is separate from the tares without waiting for the angels' work at a later time.

The solution for both the Right and the Left is, in their view of things, always within reach. There is no real need to wait for the Messiah to come and clean up the mess. We only need the right political decisions. The enemies are those outside our community, foreign or unpatriotic. There is no admission of an internal and lasting problem, the reality of sin in thought and life in each person and its effect on the long road of history.

The personalization of Christianity weakens the emphasis on the need to bow before the reality of God, our sin, and Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Correcting one problem often results in another, much like the man who fell off the horse and tried to get back on with such zest that he fell off the other side. First, the revivals in the nineteenth century rightly taught the necessity of individual conversions. We become Christians individually. This was an urgently needed corrective after the teaching of more general ethics or the marriage of the church to nationalism. Christianity had widely become a matter of habit, custom, and repetition, not of personal choice to believe God. Choices are

personal because only persons make them. Neither nature nor history nor a machine has the consciousness to make them for us.

The emphasis on the personal also had some regrettable results. With it we fell off the horse on the other side. The personal focus in conversion elevated the individual, so that the person could and did become the center of his theology. Revivals coincided with the move from an acknowledged larger world to the world that the individual could oversee. The Bible, the gospel, and life experiences invite us to seek wisdom in our effort to understand the world, creation, and the existence of God. Revivals often had a single focus—the individual's soul.

Personal faith has insidiously become married to the idea of a personal worldview, a private perspective from personal knowledge and personal interests. The nineteenth century talked about the person in contrast to animal instincts, scientific law, and an absolutist monarchy. It was a century of rising personal awareness. Individuals discovered their rights and possibilities. We are persons, not things or pawns or puppets in the nobility's wars.

America as a new continent placed enormous responsibilities on all persons for themselves. The vastness of the land required personal moral choices. Settlers had to have the law on their own hearts before the law of government reached them. Before they were accountable to Washington, they had to be accountable to God individually. They were pioneers, self-made men and women. They crossed a continent in which only the handyman survived. They had to take dominion over all kinds of unexpected situations.

Their religion was also carried with them from the East. Most of them were not pagans to whom missionaries later came with something new. They knew the teaching of God and Christ, but in the absence of established communities they relied more often on their intuition and experiences than on considered biblical teaching. They often saw God's hand and mind in a wild, magnificent, largely unknown and threatening nature around them. The God of heaven no longer revealed himself in history and through language in the Bible.

He was heard more and more as the voice within, the harmony felt with nature and, necessarily, with one's neighbors.

Such a shift is also noticeable in the meaning of the word *personal*. It gradually took on a different meaning. Commonly it marks a distinction in human beings, who make choices and act in history. Persons act, and in that they differ from animals and nature, which react. But without the constant reminder of Scripture the "personal" became the "private." It is no small step from man made in the image of God to each man being divine in his own imagination. The studied sermon for instruction was replaced by the Spirit within. Exposition was replaced by personal impression. The antiauthoritarian mood of the new democratic America removed the authority of God from heaven and made God an inner inspiration. There he could be more easily controlled, defined, and amused.

The Lord of heaven now spoke through the light in a man's heart. Yet while *heart* in the Bible is the central core of a human being, the place of all intellect and personality, *heart* for the nineteenth century was an emotional concept in contrast to reason. This has the advantage that a private view of things need not stand in the market of ideas but can be carried as "personal" views, "personal" faith, and "personal" opinions. Theology, the study of words and sentences and the acts of God in history to gain wisdom in complex human situations, could then be replaced by what "works for me in my life" and other "personal" experiences.

This would inevitably lead to a more tolerant but less precise Christianity. The dogmas of theology taught in seminaries became denominational distinctives. Presbyterians believe this, Baptists the other, with a somewhat silent agreement not to merely pursue what is biblical. American pluralism gave rise to a multitude of denominations, often for good historical reasons and personal preferences. But plurality also undermined the very notion that there is a basic body of belief that distinguishes all Christianity from its detractors and opponents. Too much pluralism makes it virtually impossible to still believe there is truth anywhere.

At what point does pluralism still describe real variety, wisdom, and different emphases, and when does it point to agnosticism and an inability to know anything for sure?

When does pluralism contribute to a dynamic challenge to see more clearly, and when does it make excuses for my right to hold my own crazy views? When is lemon without water too sour to drink, and when does too much water mixed in cheat the client out of his money?

Our age has largely replaced real discussions of theological, philosophical, and cultural content with “personal” testimony, anecdotal experience, and private views. Parallels with other expressions of the same fluidity in our culture are striking. Is beauty only in the eyes of the observer? Should marriage be defined differently for each couple according to their sexual or religious preference?

In his prayer for the disciples before his departure, Jesus asked that God would sanctify them through the truth, for God’s word is true (John 17:17). But today the very concept of truth has been diluted. Jesus certainly had something more substantive in mind than what we have adopted in our pursuit of personal knowledge, personal approval, and private opinions.

External factors have also contributed to the decline in the holding of truth. Even agreement that we have the Word of God in the Bible does not prevent modern notions of what is true from doing great harm. One of these is the modern concept of democracy, which has affected our understanding of what is true. Once it was held that submitting all matters to the consent of the governed required an acceptance of a corresponding responsibility by the voters. They must be critical, informed, moral, and accountable. Where this is not the case, democracy will no longer bring an educated and moral consent. Law will follow a mathematical win/lose situation. Numbers can win a count, but not always an argument. Majorities do not by necessity have moral integrity. They only tell us the size, not the character, of the followers.

The majority/minority relation tells us something numerical only.

Without an outside definition of what is good, right, and beautiful, democracy will only indicate what is more or less accepted. In the end, what separates the minority from the acceptable is a matter of numbers, not greater wisdom, moral rectitude, etc.

Pragmatism and utilitarianism also have affected our understanding of what is true. What works in this situation, what I like, what causes least trouble or gives greatest joy to the individual and thereby gives immediate practical benefit decides over good and bad. But these are emotions and sensations without any larger grid to weigh them against. In a fallen world, all kinds of things work in the short run, give temporary pleasure, or satisfy personal greed. Bad consequences follow only after some time. There may be not only unintended but also unanticipated consequences that remain unknown until later. Pragmatism without wisdom is risky and often foolish.

Sin is the pursuit of an illusion. It follows a belief that something is real, possible, and good when in fact it is impossible, imaginary, and harmful. It may seem to bring a benefit or personal pleasure. Eve saw that “the tree was good for food, and . . . it was a delight to the eyes” (Gen. 3:6) when she believed the promise that Adam and she would be like God. In reality that was only an illusion. Adam and Eve could never be like God, since they had been made by the eternal God to begin with. Hitler, from a desire to correct what he and others considered the injustice of the Versailles Treaty, sought to create a less flawed human race. Adultery is often justified with faulty reasoning that attraction and love in multiple relationships are better than one. Don Juan argued it and became a convenient example for many. Yet in reality he destroyed both intimacy and then himself.

Finiteness, confusion in the face of too many options, and cynicism about any final knowledge demolish the notion that there is real truth. Who am I to know? How can I ever be sure? Everybody has his own view on these things and sees things from their perspective. Truth? What an impossible concept! A student asked me recently, “Do we always have to think?” Implied was the desire to be

free to act on impulse, to follow impressions of the moment, and to respond to mere feelings. That desire is made easy by, for example, insurance for no-fault situations. Such a view can cover many acts of sinful stupidity.

Francis Schaeffer made the helpful distinction between *true* truth and *exhaustive* truth. He suggested that we can't ever know things to the end, or exhaustively. Only God can know what is there in all details—what is and will be; what could be but is not; what should be but won't; also what could never be. Humans are limited. We do not know anything completely. We do not know how, when, or even where the seed fell on the ground for the tree from which the middle rung of my ladder was made by someone anonymous in whatever kind of a mood on whichever day of the week.

However, that does not mean that I do not really know much that is really true about many things. I do not know anything exhaustively, but I do know much in such a way that the opposite could not be true. For it was a real person, moody or not, who worked that day and built a ladder from wood he purchased from a mill instead of resting on a beach and thinking of Roman aqueducts. He did a good job, and I can climb on the ladder to pick my cherries.

The proposition that we can't really know anything every time we cannot know something exhaustively is convenient when we don't want to admit to things that need to be corrected, compared, and established with reasonable certainty. It is far easier to say that I see it such and such a way with deep "personal" conviction and claim God's direction for it. The fact is that God has spoken, explained himself, and now expects us to struggle for wisdom and understanding of what is true in the real world. We can't just claim to know already or not to know at all.

Anything less gives persons only greater intensity of conviction, not a degree of certainty to be pursued further. Personal opinion may be claimed to have divine sanction. But many atrocious views have been held in this way. Hitler saw God, then fate and destiny behind his ideas and accomplishments as well. Many speak about the will of

Allah. In church circles you find as many visionaries as outside the church. They claim to have the Spirit on their side; others claim to hear the voice of history or to feel the pain of the people.

Whichever way you cut it, the discussion almost always deteriorates to a mere personal view of things. We must of course admit to being persons who see, describe, and then state their conclusions in the open so they can be corrected, questioned, and believed. But “personal” has come to mean the private and untouchable. Personal views demand blind trust, not agreement. Such personal knowledge requires a faith up front rather than as the conclusion of finding sufficient evidence. That kind of faith is the opposite of biblical faith. When the Bible offers to quench our thirst, it has not watered down the lemonade to cheat us out of our money.

Personal knowledge *seems* to be more tolerant, less divisive. But in the long run you will always find it to be little more than a statement into the night without an audience to convince, inform, or encourage. Each person has his own belief, viewpoint, and podium to speak from. But the neighbor, the child, or the next generation that wishes to understand the insight and wisdom of the parents is left in the dark, lacking certainty and without any lasting definition.

Left alone with our “personal faith” to hear the voice of God inside us in personal experiences and interesting stories isolates us from others. We become incomprehensible and finally just as easily wise as foolish, just as likely vocal as ignorant, offering advice not based on truth but on a feeling of truth. This is often only an imitation of the real thing.

One further aspect must be pointed out. By reducing Christianity and one’s faith to what a person believes rather than to what he ought to believe in light of the real world, it is easier to turn God into an image-bearer of various people. The personal characteristics, moods, and preferences become decisive. Rather than being brought into relation with God, God is filtered into my life. The “sinner in the hands of an angry God” of Jonathan Edwards is easily turned into what might be called “God responding to an angry public.” Or, stated in

another context, the hymn line “What a friend we have in Jesus” because he intercedes for us before a just and holy God might become “Jesus is my support group leader, my therapist divine.”

The focus has shifted from God to man, from the Creator to the creature, from the eternal to the temporal, from judgment and instruction to approval. Many Christians have turned the God of creation into their personal god, the Lord into their friend, and the truth into their self-validation. The understanding of the church at war has been widely replaced by the notion of the church as fellowship. It joins so many other associations of mostly personal interests at a time of diminished family life and greater distances between family members in the midst of our hurried and harried lives.

Despite the surprising response among professional colleagues when I insisted that Christianity is the truth of the universe, the Bible is not merely a particular set of glasses to see another world reserved for Christians but is rather a corrective that allows us to understand the real world more fittingly. For not only do we need glasses to see—we also need to be sure that we understand which glasses bring the real world into focus. In other words, Christians have a worldview that is true to the real world in which all men and women have to live, whether they like it or not.

All people, independent of their religious or cultural views, live in the same world of cause and effect, of before and after time, of man being different from non-man, of language and rationality in the daily things of life. There are not many creations. There is only one. All people put their pants on one leg at a time all around the world. Poisonous mushrooms make you sick regardless of your ethnicity, color of skin, or religious persuasion. This is the one and same world we all live in. Here lemonade has a definition. Here we are concerned with truth in labeling. Here a yes should always be a yes.

When Christians teach facts about the real world, they do not present a Christian view of things as different from another working model. There are no “Christian” facts and other facts about the same

phenomenon. The acceptance and interpretation is often different, but not the facts under study.

We do not have one specific view of basic things in the world, with other views also possible. Postmodernism is not modern, but a justification for an assumed freedom for our minds to see things only because and when we see them. As an idea it justifies our confusion, when we have failed to see reality as “there” and coherent. Any incoherence is of our making. We choose to see it that way from the position of our own fragmentation. Reality is then a construction of our minds, of our perspectives. We can never be sure of the thing as it really is in and of itself. Until, of course, reality crushes us and the poison begins to work.

The conviction that we are in touch with a real world out there has been lost when the thrust of the discussion, the center of one’s concern, has become what we believe rather than what we are forced to acknowledge as people living in an objective world. When we reduce our convictions to personal views, we suggest that we do not *know* anything. For then we only know in the sense that we have a mental model in our mind in the same way we wear a mask over our eyes. With that the Christian has moved into the chair of the post-Kantian nihilist and dances to the melodies of a postmodern dirge.

There is no merely Christian angle to the world of reality. Everything that accurately relates to the real created world with its deliberate definitions and with a real purpose in the decisions of the Creator is Christian. That is the world of reality, good but now fallen, affecting relationships and even microscopic details. For there is no Christian molecule and then some others! What we look for, what we value and prize, what we choose to do or not to do depends on our worldview. But the world itself, out there and created, does not depend on such a religious view of the world. Our interpretations may and should vary, but that does not change the shape of things. There is no Christian biology. There is only biology done by different kinds of people with their own degrees of integrity, curiosity, honesty, etc., as

Christians or not. The truth of biology does not depend on the faith of the practitioner.

There is an incredible lightness to the church's teaching about the Christian faith today. There is too much water and too little lemon. Our arguments no longer carry any weight. There is an increasing alienation of Christians from the certainty of a real world. Privately, they still hold to the certainties of their convictions. They know what they believe. They state it, live it more or less, share it with others, and confess it alone and in community. But from that alone one does not know whether what they believe is true to the real world. They live and speak what they see, but that has little weight in modern pluralist societies, where each person has the right to his own vision of things and obligations to none.

To use another picture, we have not thought through enough on the teaching and church level how little we actually say. Whatever we say is not plausible to an audience that has embraced the notion that "this is a free country," all of life is like a shopping mall, and freedom has been practically reduced to questions of consumption. Every day new suckers are born, we are told, and you should try to sell them something any way you can.

NOTES

1. *Religious Congregations and Membership in the U.S.*, The Glenmary Research Center, 2000, gives one church, synagogue, or temple for every 1,049 Americans. Our figure is a rough estimate, since many ethnic and evangelical churches have been left out of the Center's calculations.
2. Marquis de Custine, *The Empire of the Czar, a Journey Through Eternal Russia*, foreword Daniel J. Boorstin, introduction George F. Kennan (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1989).
3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1 (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), p. 522.
4. Adam Gopnik, *Paris to the Moon* (New York: Random House, 2000), pp. 124-125.
5. See, among other places, the long discussion of how the "great obstacle [to discovery is] not ignorance, but the illusion of knowledge," in Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), p. 86ff. Further on he points out how the lack of knowledge (in geography, for instance, an orphan in the world of learning for a thousand years) was made up by a rich resource of ancient fantasies (p. 109). Often Christians would embroider a sacred world through doctrines and ignore the real one. This is no recent phenomenon, for in past generations Christians would often relish theological speculations and practice scientific and scholarly amnesia. They would approve pagan myths and Greek speculations but be contemptuous of pagan science (pp. 109-110).
6. David Gress, *From Plato to NATO* (New York: The Free Press, 1998).
7. Arthur G. Powell, Eleanor Farrar (contributor), David K. Cohen (contributor), *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999).
8. Kaye Ashe, *The Feminization of the Church* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 1998). See also Leon J. Podles, *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 1999).
9. "The Emasculation of Sports," *New York Times Magazine*, April 2, 1995.
10. Paul Johnson, *The Birth of the Modern, 1815-1830* (New York: Harper, 1999), p. 704ff.
11. David Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 52.
12. "Faith in the Flesh: An Essay on Secular Society's Preoccupation with Life [Somewhat] Eternal," *Lynn Magazine*, October 1985, p. 18.