



**Study guide for  
MORAL THERAPEUTIC DEISM**

## Introduction

While I was doing a post-doctoral research fellowship on the East Coast, a mainline theologian [told me about going] to his daughter's and son-in-law's house for Easter one year. And he said they go to one of these sprawling evangelical church growth churches, based on church growth models and techniques, and he says, "I thought it would be interesting to go with them on Easter Sunday." He said, "I thought I'll get them at their best." Everybody's at their best on Easter Sunday, talking about Jesus and the resurrection.

He's telling me the story. He said he went there and he knew that his children were going to try to evangelize him because he's a mainline theologian. And he said, "I walked in, and there was nothing visibly that would suggest that I was in anything other than a mall. But I said, okay, I'm just going to sit down, and it's not about that [the mall look], I'm going to sit down and wait for God to open His mouth and start talking to us with God's greeting at the begin.[Referring to the liturgical blessing greeting invocation of the Holy Spirit] Well, there was no greeting from God at all. There was a greeting from the minister as if it were his living room, welcoming people into his presence, but not God addressing His people."

He said, "I went through the whole service. I kept waiting. He thought, well, they're evangelicals. They put everything into the sermon. There's no liturgy, but they'll put everything into the sermon. The Word of God all gets poured into this one half-hour presentation. I'll wait for that." And he said, "This was Easter. We had not yet sung anything about the cross and the resurrection. We had not heard any Scripture read. And we had not prayed. There had been a couple of quick, 'hey there's' but not real prayer, corporate congregational prayer." He said, "So we got to the sermon, and it was about how you can turn your scars into stars, and your crosses into stepping stones. Jesus conquered His opposition and so can you." There was no gospel in it. It wasn't about what He had done for us. It was about how what He did can be done by us too.

After the service, They got in the car and drove home, and it was pretty quiet. And the son said, "Well, Pop, did you hear the gospel today?" And he said, "No." He said, "Did it touch your heart?" "Did what touch my heart?" "Well, did... did the Spirit touch your heart?" He said, "How could the Spirit possibly have touched my heart? His Word wasn't present." He said, "I have been in liberal churches where there was more of the Word of God at least in the liturgy, than was in the whole service in what I thought was an evangelical church on Easter... I don't know how you could imagine that I could have been evangelized today when God didn't even show up."

Horton summarized the story

This situation can be found across the board. I'm hearing it more and more. When I was growing up, we knew the churches in town, where it was, Christless Christianity. But today you can't point to anything. It's across the board today. It's across the spectrum from fundamentalists to liberal, from Arminian to professing Reformed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Horton: Moralistic & Therapeutic Deism retrieved on 5/19/19 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBFqgEOCbEM&t=394s> via. YouTube Transcript, Time Code 01:58-06:11, The message from 2010 West Coast Conference on the theme of "Christless Christianity"

# I. Defined and described

**Moralistic Therapeutic Deism** comes from sociologist Christian Smith. It is a combination of beliefs producing a General religious outlook in American teens. Five core beliefs make up what is believed.

1. A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Further Definition of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

### **Moralistic**

moralistic because it "is about inculcating a moralistic approach to life. It teaches that central to living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person."<sup>3</sup>

### **Therapeutic**

Therapeutic means it is "about providing therapeutic benefits to its adherent" Thus it is not about things like "repentance from sin, of keeping the Sabbath, of living as a servant of a sovereign divine, of steadfastly saying one's prayers, of faithfully observing high holy days, of building character through suffering ..."<sup>4</sup>

### **Deism**

Deism is the "belief in a particular kind of God: one who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in one's affairs—especially affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved."<sup>5</sup>

"the Deism here is revised from its classical eighteenth-century version by the therapeutic qualifier, making the distant God selectively available for taking care of needs.....something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he's always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Smith, Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 162-163

<sup>3</sup> Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*: 163

<sup>4</sup> Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*: 164-163

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* 164

to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process.”<sup>6</sup>

So Who is this God?

He is the God of “Oprah Winfrey, and Self magazine.”<sup>7</sup> If the Church is not careful, it can produce a generation with a Christian veneer that is actually devoted to the church of Oprah.

## 2. Describing the problem

The below excerpt is From “Rod Dreher’s book ‘The Benedict Option,’”

Even more troubling, many of the churches that do stay open will have been hollowed out by a sneaky kind of secularism to the point where the “Christianity” taught there is devoid of power and life. It has already happened in most of them. In 2005, sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton examined the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers from a wide variety of back grounds. What they found was that in most cases, teenagers adhered to a mushy pseudoreligion the researchers deemed Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD).....they found, [MTD] is especially prominent among Catholic and Mainline Protestant teenagers. Evangelical teenagers fared measurably better but were still far from historic biblical orthodoxy. Smith and Denton claimed that MTD is colonizing existing Christian churches, destroying biblical Christianity from within, and replacing it with a pseudo-Christianity that is “only tenuously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition.”

MTD is not entirely wrong. After all, God does exist, and He does want us to be good. The problem with MTD, in both its progressive and its conservative versions, is that it's mostly about improving one's self-esteem and subjective happiness and getting along well with others. It has little to do with the Christianity of Scripture and tradition, 10 which teaches repentance, self-sacrificial love, and purity of heart, and commends suffering-the Way of the Cross- as the pathway to God. Though superficially Christian, MTD is the natural religion of a culture that worships the Self and material comfort.

As bleak as Christian Smith's 2005 findings were, his follow-up research, a third installment of which was published in 2011, was even grimmer. Surveying the moral beliefs of 18-to-23-year-olds, Smith and his colleagues found that only 40 percent of young Christians sampled said that their personal moral beliefs were grounded in the Bible or some other religious sensibility. It's unlikely that the beliefs of even these faithful are biblically coherent. Many of these “Christians”

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid 165

<sup>7</sup> Christian Smith, “Is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism the New Religion of American Youth? Implications for the Challenge of Religious Socialization and Reproduction,” in *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, ed. James L. Heft (New York: Fordham University, 2006), 65.

are actually committed moral individualists who neither know nor practice a coherent Bible-based morality.

An astonishing 61 percent of the emerging adults had no moral problem at all with materialism and consumerism. An added 30 per cent expressed some qualms but figured it was not worth worrying about. In this view, say Smith and his team, "all that society is, apparently, is a collection of autonomous individuals out to enjoy life." These are not bad people. Rather, they are young adults who have been terribly failed by family, church, and the other institutions that formed- or rather, failed to form-their consciences and their imaginations.

MTD is the de facto religion not simply of American teenagers but also of American adults. To a remarkable degree, teenagers have adopted the religious attitudes of their parents. We have been an MTD nation for some time now. "America has lived a long time off its thin Christian veneer, partly necessitated by the Cold War," Smith told me in an interview. "That is all finally being stripped away by the combination of mass consumer capitalism and liberal individualism."<sup>8</sup>

In Short:

God is the everlasting **Mister Rogers**.

Who is **not a helicopter parent** but will act like a **Kind Butler** if you need him.

The spirituality of America Christianity influenced by MTD can be described in this way,

- We desire experience more than knowledge.
- We prefer choices to absolutes.
- We embrace preferences rather than truths.
- We seek comfort rather than growth.
- Faith must come on our terms or we reject it.
- We have enthroned ourselves as the final arbiters of righteousness,
- We are the ultimate rulers of our own experience and destiny.
- We are the Pharisees of the new millennium.

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<sup>8</sup> Rod Dreher, "The Benedict Option," Pg. 10-11

## II. What kind of Christianity does MTD produce?

Maureen H. O'Connell calls it **bourgeois Christianity**. Bourgeois Christianity is a kind of Christian praxis that endorses "moral therapeutic deism." It portrays God as wanting people to be "good, nice, and fair to each other," and happiness and feeling good about oneself are at the central goal of life. <sup>9</sup>O'Connell maintains that

"American bourgeois Christianity promotes individualism, perpetuates materialism, and tolerates disengaged apathy. As a result of these factors, we are more willing to believe in peace than to live peacefully, to believe in equality more than to treat others equally, to believe in promises of abundance more than to work to create abundance for all, to believe in a friendly divine benefactor interested in our well-being more than to concern ourselves with justice for others."<sup>10</sup>

### 1. A church driven by the cult of celebrity

One American type of bourgeois Christianity is the cult of celebrity often found among evangelical preachers.<sup>11</sup> Behind the rise of this personality driven Christianity is a desire to be entertained. MTD promotes a church that is more show than time of worship. Smith saw this in its infancy among the youth culture of evangelical churches. He writes, "Youth ministers are ever obliged to be entertaining, religious youth activities always need to be great fun, Sunday-school teachers must be interesting and 'relevant' in ways that do not always comport well with the actual interests and priorities of religious traditions, etc. . . . It is difficult to have it both ways."<sup>12</sup> The results of such entertainment practices is telling. Often young people today will not listen to a message longer than seventeen minutes. Their attention spans have been amused into submission. This has produced a teen and 20 something church culture that is heavy on flair but light on substance.<sup>13</sup>

### 2. A church inward focuses and not mission focused

"Moralistic Therapeutic Deism has little to do with God or a sense of divine mission in the world. It offers comfort, bolsters self-esteem, helps solve problems, and

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<sup>9</sup> Maureen H. O'Connell, *Compassion: Loving Our Neighbour in an Age of Globalization* (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 2009), 27.

<sup>10</sup> Maureen H. O'Connell, *Compassion: Loving Our Neighbour in an Age of Globalization* (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 2009), 28.

<sup>11</sup> Maureen H. O'Connell, *Compassion: Loving Our Neighbour in an Age of Globalization* (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 2009), 27

<sup>12</sup> Christian Smith, *Passing on the Faith*, 62

<sup>13</sup> Alvin L. Reid, *Raising the Bar: Ministry to Youth in the New Millennium* (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2004), 57.

lubricates interpersonal relationships by encouraging people to do good, feel good, and keep God at arm's length.”<sup>14</sup>

### **3. A church where Pragmatism is a problem in the pulpit.**

A. People see the gospel and it's preaching as

1. The gospel is a product to be sold - it must be packaged to the preferences and dispositions of the audience. If we want them to “buy it” we must cater to their self interest.

B. Pragmatism is the belief that if it works it's true.

One expert explains about youth ministry, “Young people are drawn to excitement. They enjoy being involved in activities that are fun.”<sup>15</sup> This was his axiom for ministering to youth. The name of the book “What Works and What Doesn't in Youth Ministry” clearly implies that his philosophy of ministry is pragmatism. Yet this effects more than just youth ministers, it has infected the whole church.

*My Definition:* preacher pragmatism is an approach to gospel ministry that confesses the word as final authority but values results more than faithful obedience to the Word, especially when the bible's teaching may not be attended by immediate, visible fruit.

I am not suggesting that everything we do which is pragmatic is ill-advised, for example taking an airplanes overseas instead of boats. The issue is about a willingness to overlook or even contradict what the Bible says for the sake of what appears to work visibly and immediately or in some cases look spiritual. I am talking about how we live and operate, not what we say, sign, or affirm.

I speak of the authority that governs our practical reason. When it comes to ministry methods, if “results” are most persuasive and the lack of scriptural consideration doesn't bother then you may have a problem. It could be that your real authority is just human reason, your own analysis of “what will work,” rather than the pattern and teaching of the Bible. It means your becoming man-centered and wrongly pragmatic in your approach to leadership and ministry.

Here are a few worrisome signs

#### **1. Arguing From Results, Not Exegesis**

What do you think his persuasive you often used to persuade others. Being self-aware of the arguments you use to convince others is a good way of seeing what is your true authority .

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<sup>14</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 29.

<sup>15</sup> Nido Qubein, *What Works and What Doesn't in Youth Ministry* (Colorado Springs, CO: Meriwether Publishing, 1996), 121.

## 2. Evaluating Numbers, Not Faithfulness.

Now we know the church counted heads. we would not know 3000 were saved at Pentecost otherwise. But they counted and did not care meaning numbers never became the means of evaluating a ministry. If they did then Saul at the end of his life would have been a failure. Most of his churches were having problems and battling heresy. Scripture is clear the man called to minister to the church is calling to be faithful. In ministry, fruitfulness may wanes like the tide. faithfulness is forever.

## 3. Assuming the Bible Is Silent About “How”

We’re not the first people to affirm the authority and sufficiency of the Bible yet deny them in our methods. In 1954, J. H. Bavinck wrote An Introduction to the Science of Missions, the Dutch theologian and missionary to Indonesia, wrote,

“The conclusion might easily be reached that the content of preaching is given in Scripture but that the manner of preaching, and the question of missionary approach, is a matter of personal tact and of applying oneself to the given circumstances.” He continues, “According to such a solution, the Bible provides the content, the ‘what’ of preaching, but the manner, the ‘how’ of preaching must be discovered otherwise.” Bavinck spends the first chapter showing how such a solution is “too simple”. He suggests that “theoretical problems concerning principles, which can be answered by Scripture alone, lurk behind the countless practical problems which beset the church.”<sup>16</sup>

## 4. A church where consumerism is a problem in the pew

A. People see themselves as

1. takers and not givers
2. consumers of spiritual teachings not ministers of the gospel

B. People focus on ourselves and believe in self

Jen Oshman a writer and missionary points out how this developed and why such self focus and self-trust is a dead end:

“So in the early 2000s we saw this movement come on the scene where some Christian social philosophers identified as moralistic therapeutic deism and basically they surveyed about 3,000 teenagers and said, 'What do you believe about God?' What we found is that teenagers were believing basically that there is a God and He wants us to be happy and he wants us to be nice. So you don't need God unless anything infringes on one of those two goals so as long as you're pursuing happiness and as long as you're pursuing niceness everyone's going to go to heaven other than that you don't really need the Lord. That philosophy, M.T.D., evolved into this sort of 'believe in yourself-ism' like you're all you need, you don't

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<sup>16</sup> J.H. Bavinck, An Introduction to the Science of Missions (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), xv and 80.



need the Lord for anything else as long as he's helping you to be happy and nice you're good to go. And of course everyone can sort of conjure up some happiness and some niceness so we sort of shelve God and we don't really need him. We just need to believe in ourselves, to invent who we are, what we want to do, and we need to just go for it. It's not unlike the health and wealth gospel, now when you say health and wealth gospel you tend to think of these crazy preachers on TV that are slaying people in the spirit and it's very wealthy and opulent and the faith looks fake, it doesn't look like probably what you and I think of when we think of going to church.

But in any event it's closely related because we're looking to God sort of as like a pie in the sky, just make me healthy and wealthy, because I'm a Christian things are gonna go well for me. I shouldn't expect too much hardship or to endure too much suffering because God wants me to be happy, to believe in myself, to be nice, and to be good. Well this kind of gospel is not the Gospel at all, this is actually a false gospel and it has really infiltrated our churches.... It's this movement where we're really looking inward, just constantly self reflecting about our gifts, skills, and abilities.

What can I do, what can I make, and what impact can I make? Rather than saying, 'Who is God? Who is our good, true, and beautiful God? What is his character like?' You know we constantly are looking at our own behavior and it's sort of even a legalism like 'I'm going to act one way and do this so that I can produce that' rather than beholding the Lord our God. The Almighty God of the universe created you and me and he made us for a purpose, by him and for him, created on purpose for a purpose. And so when we neglect that just to be happy, nice Christians we ignore the greatest truth of all time, the most beautiful, the biggest, and most profound truth that's available to you and me<sup>17</sup>

- B. People see the church and the preaching of the gospel as a service industry.
1. The gospel preaching is a "service rendered" to congregants thus- allowing the pew to judge it and never have it judge them.
  2. The church is seen as a service industry which assumes if I don't like the service I just Change churches. As well as assuming, The purpose of the church is to help them live their best life now.

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<sup>17</sup>Jen Oshman, why moralistic therapeutic deism is a dead end? Crossway video. retrieved on 5/19/19 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EN2aF0cRbg> via. YouTube Transcript, Time Code 00:05-02:51, Jen Oshman is the author of Enough about Me: Find Lasting Joy in the Age of Self

### III. Further Implications and dangers of MTD.

#### A. 5 Implications and dangers

1. the Gospel is not preached. This view of God changes the method of ministry from gospel to gimmick. Because it is shallow it is easily taught and digested thus preaches think they are being affected because people walk away remembering the main points unfortunately the points may be (1) you want a better life, (2) God can help, (3) let God help.
2. Emphasis on personal happiness - Christianity's emphasis is not on personal happiness. It's on God and we need to watch out for those messages that claim a method to make you happy in a way that does not have God at the center. It is a temptation of the flesh to cater to personal interest of the hearer to the exclusion of the whole true of scripture.
3. A loss of historical Christianity - In Christian Smith's study they found that relatively few teens made references in their interviews to a variety of historically central religious and theological views.
4. Language - the language is important and when you look at the language used and promoted among this type of religious faith, it is severely lacking in the most important terms. Critical terms like repentance, Trinity, holiness, sanctification, sin, grace, justification, church, heaven and hell are being replaced by a language of personal fulfillment and happiness. Such language is used more like advertising slogans than clear articulations of the theological truths of the faith.
5. Watch out for revisions that create an appealing appearance of depth - in more liberal forms MTD appropriates, revises, and abstracts doctrinal elements from a lot of religions but mostly Christianity and Judaism. Often for the purpose of creating the appearance of unity. In more conservative context, through poor hermeneutics and/or by using reader-response theory of interpretation, they will often redefine biblical terms for its own purpose, reframing scripture to teach whatever they want.

#### B. English Puritan John Flavel on God's far better plan:

"The intent of the Redeemer's undertaking was not to purchase for his people riches, ease, and pleasures on earth; but to mortify their lusts, heal their natures, and spiritualize their affections; and thereby to fit them for the eternal fruition of God."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 6:84.

C. Packer on one way ideas like Moralistic Therapeutic Deism often misrepresents the gospel and avoid the Bad News implicate in the Gospel.

Well, in one particular respect we have got it all wrong. We are inclined to believe that God exists for us, God is waiting for us, God is there to make us happy. But in the gospel, God does not play the role of a butler. In the Gospel we are told that God, the Creator who made all things for his own praise and glory, has gone into action as mankind's redeemer. We human individuals are impotent of spiritual response, that is, response to God in any shape or form; but God first of all sends us a Savior to make atonement for our sins, and then he sends the Holy Spirit to change our hearts and make us willing to see and respond to Christ. Now, if we do not appreciate that our salvation is God's work in that absolutely radical sense, that is, God sends the Saviour, God gives us the gift of faith to respond to the Saviour, then we will not even be able to tell people what the gospel means. You see, we ought to be telling people that they are helpless, that they need Christ, and that they must ask God for new hearts and for the ability to trust Christ. In other words, you have got to tell them of their own spiritual inability right from the start. If on the other hand we forget this and go around saying that God is just there to help you, and that you call on him whenever you need to, that he is a sort of cosmic bell-hop, well, then we are misrepresenting the gospel in an absolutely fundamental manner. Until the gospel is understood as a message that obliges us to say that we are hopeless, helpless, lost, and ruined, requiring also that God does the work of salvation from start to finish, then we are not presenting the gospel as it is revealed in the New Testament.<sup>19</sup>

**On the next page** is a chart of six inferior gospels being preached today. Many of them flow from a moral therapeutic view of God. Consider each in turn. They are ways the church loses the plot and preach a gospel that is far below what the church is called to proclaim. Michael Horton reminds us, *“The gospel is not good instructions, not a good idea, and not good advice. The gospel is an announcement of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.”*<sup>20</sup> Jesus is the message we are to proclaim.

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<sup>19</sup> J. I. Packer, “An Interview with Dr. J. I. Packer,” *The Founders Journal*, 16 (Spring 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Michael Horton, Professor of Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary California [retrieved on 2/13/2020] <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2009/november/6112309.html>

# the counterfeit gospels

COUNTERFEIT	STORY	ANNOUNCEMENT	COMMUNITY
<b>THERAPEUTIC</b>	The Fall is seen as the failure of humans to reach our potential. Sin is primarily about us, as it robs us of our sense of fullness.	Christ's death proves our inherent worth as human beings and gives us the power to reach our full potential.	The church helps us along in our quest for personal happiness and vocational fulfillment.
<b>JUDGMENTLESS</b>	Restoration is more about God's goodness than his judgment of evil or his response to rebellious humanity.	Jesus' death is more about defeating humanity's enemies (death, sin, Satan) than the need for God's wrath to be averted by His sacrifice.	The boundaries between the church and the world are blurred in a way that makes personal evangelism less urgent and unnecessary.
<b>MORALISTIC</b>	Our sinful condition is seen as the individual sins we commit. Redemption comes through the exercise of willpower with God's help.	The good news is spiritual instruction about what we can do to win God's favor and blessing upon our earthly endeavors.	The church is a place where people who believe like us can affirm each other in keeping the standards of the community.
<b>QUIETIST</b>	The Grand Narrative of Scripture is personal and applicable primarily to those areas of life that we define as spiritual.	Christ's death and resurrection is a private and personal message that changes individual hearts. It is not concerned with society and politics.	The church focuses on self-preservation, maintaining its distinctiveness by resisting the urge to engage prophetically with culture.
<b>ACTIVIST</b>	The kingdom is advanced through the efforts of Christians to build a just society. We are the answer to our prayers for a better world.	The gospel's power is demonstrated through political, social, and cultural transformation brought about by involved Christians.	The church finds its greatest unity around political causes or social projects.
<b>CHURCHLESS</b>	The storyline of Scripture focuses on an individual's need for salvation and purpose. The community of faith is at the periphery of this narrative.	The good news is an announcement solely for the redemption of individuals.	The local church is viewed as either an optional aid to personal spirituality, or an obstacle to be discarded in one's pursuit of God.

from *Counterfeit Gospels: Rediscovering the Good News in a World of False Hope* by Trevin Wax (Foreword by Matt Chandler) Moody, 2011

## IV. Further notes and quotes

### Consuming Religion

“consumer culture is not merely a set of ideologies...it is primarily a way of relating to beliefs – a set of habits of interpretation of use – that renders the ‘content’ of beliefs and values less important.”

Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 1.

### Liberal Individualism

Social scientists have a label for the pervasive cultural orientation of modern American society that makes it so difficult for us to stay connected and grow together in community with one another. They call it radical individualism. What this amounts to is simple enough. We in America have been socialized to believe that our own dreams, goals, and personal fulfillment ought to take precedence over the well-being of any group—our church or our family, for example—to which we belong. The immediate needs of the individual are more important than the long-term health of the group.

Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2009), 4.

This individualism is seen in how people interact with any number of different groups.

Social anthropologists refer to modern America as a weak-group society where the needs, goals, and desires of the individual come first. Personal allegiance to the group—whether that group is my family, my church, my co-workers, or a civic organization of some sort—is a secondary consideration. We tend to view the groups in our lives in a rather utilitarian way. These broader social entities serve as resources that we as individuals draw on in order to realize our own goals and to navigate our personal pathways through life.<sup>4</sup>

Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2009), 4.

Hellerman illustrates this individualistic worldview in how Americans tend to answer the three most important questions of life:

We can summarize our most important life-decisions under three headings: Vocation - What I am going to do with my life? Spouse - Who I am going to spend my life with? Residence - Where I am going to live? As an American individualist, my personal identity is deeply rooted in the decisions I make along these lines, and I alone am ultimately responsible for my choices—choices that determine my very destiny in so many crucial areas of life. Social scientists use terms like ‘self-reliance’ and ‘autonomy’ to describe this uniquely Western approach to decision making and identity formation.<sup>5</sup>

Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2009), 22

D-note: Church involvement and discipleship mirrors what is seen in American culture today. “I” is the primary consideration, not “you” or “we” when it comes to church

involvement. As is often the case for most of the church today, the individual is the primary lens through which life is approached.

### **In churches, individualism is evidenced in a few ways,**

1. The struggle to connect: forming a set of relationships that a person can naturally engage in is incredibly challenging because individuals are able to “custom-build” their lives. Their vocation has no tie to their neighborhood other than the distance of a commute, and their recreational activities are limitless, pursued in other parts of the city. Attempting to cultivate community, which depends on shared rhythms and spaces, becomes virtually impossible when everyone creates their own.
2. The response to authority: whether in the form of the Word of God or the elders who shepherd the church. The study of the Word is predominantly filtered through the lens of “what I think is true” rather than what the author intended and the community of saints has understood to be orthodox interpretation. A submission to eldership for the care of the soul is almost unheard of, and certainly church discipline is an unfamiliar, if not written-off, practice.
3. The transitory nature of the congregation: Career opportunity for individual gain is the driving force behind a decision about where someone will live. Seldom would someone give any thought to the impact that their leaving would have on their church community, and rarely would an individual concern themselves with input from our community other than simply some guidance toward what would maximize their quality of life.

The hardest part of dealing with our materialism is that it has become so much a part of us. Like people who have lived in darkness for years, we have been removed from the light so long we do not know how dark it really is.

Alcron makes the point:

Many of us have never known what it is not to be materialistic. It is normal, the only way we know.

Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2003), 60

The pervasiveness of consumerism

America “has become a paradise of unlimited, endless consumption, where desire now substitutes for the moral norms which were once there. And desire is never satiated.”

David Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), Kindle ed., loc. 1110-15

Skye Jethani points out the pervasiveness of consumerism through commodification removing the intrinsic value of an object. Speaking incisively into American culture with respect to engagement in worship and spirituality, Jethani explains:

The reduction of even sacred things into commodities also explains why we exhibit so little reverence for God. In a consumer worldview he has no intrinsic value apart from his usefulness to us. He is a tool we employ, a force we control, and a resource we plunder. We ascribe value to him (the literal meaning of the word “worship”) based not on who he is, but on what he can do for us.

*Skye Jethani, The Divine Commodity: Discovering A Faith Beyond Consumer Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2009) 202

### **The problem of dependance hindering maturity**

Consumption is rampant in American culture and in the American church, and impacts nearly every facet of life today. The church is far from immune from the insidious power of consumerism.

Considering consumerism through the lens of juvenilization, Bergler highlights how consumerism and immaturity feed one another. Perpetuating immaturity contributes to greater consumption, and easy consumption assuages the pain of immaturity and insignificant identity. As he puts it, "Encouraging people to settle into some of the worst traits of adolescence is good for business."

This particular idea surfaces in the church that perpetuates immature disciples. Often without critical thought, a program is created within the local church to meet a theological, emotional, sociological, or physiological need, but ends up cultivating a dependent relationship for the disciple. Small groups often capitalize on a need for friendship or Bible study, but create a dependency for a social infrastructure and theological education.

The church growth movement and the way we do evangelism catered to the very thing we need to work against - consumerism.

"Consumerism is an alternative religion...people are looking for purpose, meaning, significance, belonging, community. In other words the very thing that religion offers to us, or ought to, is being sought in consumption. The whole church growth movement the methodology was coopted to consumerism. We just created a whole lot of consumers. The only thing we can do is disciple people over against that . . . it was faulty as a methodology at the start. You can't make disciples out of consumers, you can't consume your way into the kingdom."

Alan Hirsch, "How Modern Evangelism Creates Consumers" (Austin, TX: Verge Conference, 2013), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2sNSVqIKzIA&list=PLBDFD0826D8E43DB0> (accessed August 21, 2013).

### **Church's purpose issue**

The problem of approach

One of two approaches

1.) finding a "community" fits your needs rather than 2.) committing to a body you trust

Worship Service attendance without a workout regiment of intentional living in community and Selfless Service for the good of others is pointless. Little growth only bodies in seats.

First link is on pragmatism seconds is much older and was aimed at encouraging pastors not to follow the new trends because they're ultimately worldly. it's accuracy is evident.

<https://www.9marks.org/article/long-term-consequences-of-pragmatism-in-the-church/>

<https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2000/the-new-pragmatism/>

### **Notes on the Church growth movement**

We have turned to a God that we can use rather than 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 and 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.

David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, Eerdmans, 1994, p. 114.

Many of those whose task it is to broker the truth of God to the people of God in the churches have now redefined the pastoral task such that theology has become an embarrassing encumbrance or a matter of which they have little knowledge; and many in the Church have now turned in upon themselves and substituted for the knowledge of God a search for the knowledge of self.

David Wells *Ibid*

Truth is now simply a matter of etiquette: it has no authority, no sense of 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.

David Wells *ibid*

### **Church marketing**

Today, the pressure to fill auditoriums and services has driven many pastors to place the felt needs, or tastes, of the people above their duty to Christ. On every hand we hear of the Gospel being molded into a non-confrontative message intended to meet felt needs and impress the sinful heart. And, by most standards, this new philosophy of church life is working, as more and more auditoriums are filled with people hungry for a message that will affirm that they are actually on fairly good terms with the Almighty. But the biblical message is the message of the cross. It cuts right across the grain of the modern age's preoccupation with pride, tearing down the façade and exposing the wretchedness of the human heart... Unfortunately, while the modern "un-gospel" may fill seats, it is the true gospel of sin and grace that is "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16).

David Hegg : *Appointed to Preach*, Christian Focus Publications, 1999, p. 46.

What the church lacks today is not quantity but quality in her pulpits. A strong case can be made that we presently have too many men in pastoral ministry; too many who have taken the mantle of leadership upon themselves without having been selected and formed by God for that purpose. They preach, but not with power and often not with truth; they lead, but not from the platform of a life of godliness, holiness, and prayer; and slowly these men are changing the face of pastoral leadership. What once was a ministry of humble dependence upon God and his



Word is more and more becoming a position of power and influence dependent upon marketing strategies, programming innovations, and an increasing infatuation with technology and culture. The image of a pastor as a servant-teacher is fast being replaced with that of a Chief Executive Officer whose knowledge of modern organizational theory and communication technique is more highly prized than his commitment to praying and preaching.

David Hegg, *Appointed to Preach*, Christian Focus Publications, 1999, p. 22.

D-Note: the issue is what comes first not the dismissal of leadership skills and helpful metrics. What do those in the pews and the pulpit value as of first importance.

Many of those whose task it is to broker the truth of God to the people of God in the churches have now redefined the pastoral task such that theology has become an embarrassing encumbrance or a matter of which they have little knowledge; and many in the Church have now turned in upon themselves and substituted for the knowledge of God a search for the knowledge of self. - David F. Wells

### **The influence of the Church growth moment**

Numerical bigness has become an infectious epidemic - Carl H Henry

Quoted in: *God-Given Growth* by Mark Dever, *Tabletalk*, October 2007, p. 10. Ligonier Ministries.

D Note - Growth must be defined biblically. One way is by using the key NT biblical metaphors for the church those of body, and building(temple). Church Growth is this defined by a church's health and its integration of new members. A church can be said to be growing when both 1.) unbelievers are converted and 2.) believers are disciplined in a healthy way. The results of growth is a community exhibits life and vitality, stability strength and interdependence.

The Church and it's leaders need to remember a single-minded focus on numeric growth that is growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of a cancer cell.

Whatever means you use to get people into the church is precisely what you must use to keep them. If you get them with a 'religious circus', then you must keep the circus going – keep up the entertainment. If you get them with biblical preaching and teaching, then that will keep them and you will not need the entertainment.

Ernest Reisinger

- relationships and community are important as well.

Christians are to be in the world, but not of the world, positively living out their faith in their various vocations in the “secular” realm and influencing it for the good, while remembering that their ultimate citizenship is in heaven.

Reference: *Tabletalk*, v. 28, n. 8, p. 18, Ligonier Ministries, Used by Permission.  
Gene Edward Veith

One would think that [persecution] would be an obstacle to church growth when joining the church meant a death sentence. And yet, the age of persecution was the greatest period of church growth in history.

Gene Edward Veith, *Tabletalk*, vol. 28, n. 8, p. 18, Ligonier Ministries,

Thom Rainer did a study a number of years ago asking formerly unchurched people the open-ended question, "What factors led you to choose this church?" A lot of surveys had been done asking the unchurched what they would like in a church. But this study asked the formerly unchurched why they actually were now in a church. The results were surprising: 11 percent said worship style led them to their church, 25 percent said children's/youth ministry, and 37 percent said they sensed God's presence at their church. For 41 percent, someone from the church had witnessed to them, and 49 percent mentioned friendliness as the reason for choosing their church. Can you guess the top two responses? Doctrine and preaching – 88 percent said the doctrine led them to their church, and 90 percent said the preaching led them there, in particular, a pastor who preached with certitude and conviction... When it comes to reaching outsiders, bold, deep, biblical preaching is not the problem. It's part of the solution.

Kevin DeYoung, "The Secret to Reaching the Next Generation" *Don't Call it a Comeback*, Ed. Kevin DeYoung, Crossway, Wheaton, 2011 p. 27-28.

In order to see God's church grow, we should use the means God has given to us... Preaching the Gospel is the normal way God grows His church. Added to this there is also prayer. Again and again in the book of Acts we find the early Christians in prayer. And as we beseech God for conversion and for maturity, we find God granting our prayers. The more we pray the more we acknowledge that God is the reason for any growth that comes. We acknowledge, in humility, that any growth that comes does not ultimately come from us.

Mark Dever, *God-Given Growth*, *Tabletalk*, October 2007, p. 10. Ligonier Ministries.

It seems ironic at first, but trading in size for faithfulness as the yardstick for success is often the path to legitimate numerical growth.

Mark Dever, *The Deliberate Church*, Wheaton Illinois 2005, p. 40

If Jesus Christ is the head of the church and hence the source and goal of its entire life, true growth is only possible in obedience to Him. Conversely, if the church becomes detached from Jesus Christ and His Word, it cannot grow however active and successful it may seem to be.

Os Guinness *Dining with the Devil*, Baker, 1993, p. 39.

If there were such a thing as a seeker, what would he be seeking? The church growth movement seems to believe he would be seeking more of the same. In a world consumed with lighthearted entertainment, we offer up less professional, less entertaining lighthearted entertainment? Why, I keep wondering, would a "seeker" get up on a Sunday morning, and travel to some giant box to hear a third rate rock band preceding a third rate comic giving a third rate "message" that leaves him in the same state that he arrived in?

RC Sproul Jr. *Pragmatic Principle*, *Tabletalk*, October 2007, p. 59. Ligonier Ministries.

Change can be difficult! There is a natural resistance to change, but sometimes we (the church) struggle a little too much with change, making it harder than it needs to be. After all, things have changed a lot in the last 2,000 years and they will continue to do so until the return of Christ. Some of the most effective words that hinder a church from moving forward are "we've never done it that way before."

Stephen Anderson, *Preparing to Build*, AMI, 2006, p. 141.

"Recently a neighbor told me how excited she was about her church. When I tried to point out diplomatically that the group was a cult, believing in neither the resurrection nor the deity of Christ, she seemed unconcerned. 'Oh, but the services are so wonderful,' she said. 'I always feel so good after I've been there!' Such misguided euphoria has always been rampant among those seeking spiritual strokes rather than a source of truth. But what about the church itself, that body of people "called out" to embody God's truth? Most of the participants in Robert Bellah's study saw the church as a means to achieve personal goals. Bellah notes a similar tendency in many evangelical circles to thin the biblical language of sin and redemption to an idea of Jesus as the friend who helps us find happiness and self-fulfillment.' These 'feel gooders' of modern faith are reflecting the same radical individualism we discussed in earlier chapters....The new barbarians have invaded not only the parlor and politics but the pews of America as well."

Charles Colson, Against the Night

"The important contrast lies not so much between those who define themselves theologically and those who do not but between two different theologies by which people are defining themselves. Those who voice dissent with classical evangelicalism at this point do so not because they have no theology but because they have a different theology. Their theology is centered on a God who is on easy terms with modernity, who is quick to endorse all of the modern evangelical theories about how to grow one's church and how to become a psychologically whole person."

David Wells, No Place For Truth-Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology

### **Felt needs issue**

D-note: There are differences between wants and needs. The church in some sense has a responsibility to meet genuine needs, but not wants and whims. A culture that has an extreme view of individualism and a society "consumed" with buying and consumption characterized by countless options to meet every individual's wants line between wants and needs will be unclear to most.

- Such a context how does the Church make distinctions between valid needs as compared to whims and wants?

The essence of the problem is loss of focus - not keeping the main thing the main thing.

"I don't want to generalize unjustly or be overly harsh, but it's fair to say that much of the church is caught up in the success mania of American society. Often more concerned with budgets and building programs than with the body of Christ, the church places more emphasis on growth than on repentance. Suffering, sacrifice, and service has been preempted by success and self-fulfillment."

Charles Colson Against the Night

- Through marketing techniques and other methods the Church is being influenced by the consumer mentality of our society.
- If a minister treats culture and the things of culture as if they were neutral they become susceptible to marketing the Gospel as a product to be sold.

Mark Noll states:

"American evangelicals never doubted that Christianity was the truth....What they did do, however, was to make most questions of truth into questions of practicality. What message would be most effective? What do people most want to hear? What can we say that will both convert the people and draw them to our particular church?

- This is characteristic of an "American Christianity" shaped by modern culture and nostalgic revivalism.

#### Dawson's Assessment

In the concern for marketing effectively and meeting the needs of the hearers. Where is the line crossed over so that the "audience" has replaced the message as the determining factor?

Without careful evaluation of our culture and how it affects the church, How can we guard against an ever increasing secularization of the church as it becomes more and more defined and formed by secular images, concepts and techniques?

Good intentions are not enough. Many good intentioned activities can have negative consequences. for example : What is the purpose of the Sunday morning worship service?

To entertain?

To be therapeutic?

To give one a break from a busy, hectic week?

Maybe

To worship God in his terms for His own sake.

Such cultural realities as therapy, individualism, and pragmatism come into our churches by two channels.

1.) one source is less organized and informal: the people sitting in the pews who, consciously or unconsciously are affected by the culture in which they live.

2.) the other source is more organized and formal: experts and practitioners that are themselves captured by and captive to these ideas.