

CHRISTLESS CHRISTIANITY

The Alternative Gospel of the
American Church



MICHAEL HORTON

Foreword by William H. Willimon

Christless Christianity

*The Alternative Gospel of the
American Church*

Michael Horton



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Liberating a Captive Church

Here we are in the North American church—conservative or liberal, evangelical or mainline, Protestant or Catholic, emergent or otherwise—cranking along just fine, thank you. So we’re busy downsizing, becoming culturally relevant, reaching out, drawing in, making disciples, managing the machinery, utilizing biblical principles, celebrating recovery, user-friendly, techno savvy, finding the purposeful life, practicing peace with justice, utilizing spiritual disciplines, growing in self-esteem, reinventing ourselves as effective ecclesiastical entrepreneurs, and, in general, feeling ever so much better about our achievements.

Notice anything missing in this pretty picture? *Jesus Christ!*

Jesus Christ indeed. In Flannery O’Connor’s wild, wickedly funny novella, *Wise Blood*, her antipreacher preacher, Hazel Motes, preaches a “Church without Christ” where nobody sheds blood, and there’s no redemption “‘cause there ain’t no sin to

redeem,” and “what’s dead stays that way.”¹ I always thought O’Connor’s book an outrageous, wildly improbable satire. Then Mike Horton comes along and names the “Church without Christ” as our pervasive ecclesial reality. Horton accuses us of achieving what has never transpired in the entire history of Christendom. Somehow we’ve managed to preach Christ crucified in such a way that few are offended, a once unmanageable God suddenly seems nice, and the gospel makes good sense—as we are accustomed to making sense. We just can’t stand to submit to the machinations of a living God who is determined to have us on God’s terms rather than ours, so we devise a god on our own terms. Flaccid, contemporary Christianity is the result.

This is a tough book, but well written, fast paced, and wonderfully grounded in classical Reformation Christianity. Our poor old, compromised, accommodating church is here subjected to withering theological critique. Here the roots of our current theological malaise are exposed and we see the wrong turns we took when we began taking ourselves more seriously than God. The boredom and conventionality of the contemporary church are assaulted. Michael Horton diagnoses our trouble in stunning, unavoidable candor. Therapeutic, utilitarian deism is named, nailed, and defeated with the best weapon God has given us—the gospel of Jesus Christ. Presumptively evangelical Christianity is exposed as the latest recruit to the cause of insipid, culturally compromised liberalism. I am judged in the process. Robert Schuller’s vapid ecclesiology is us all over. My sermons are only slightly less silly and compromised than Joel Osteen’s. *Mea culpa. Mea culpa. Mea culpa.*

But this book is not all critique. Horton mounts a wonderfully hopeful argument. His sermon is not only tough but also invigorating and empowering. In the process of reading this Jesus-induced polemic, you will be recalled to the power of the gospel. God forgive us for selling out our great intellectual

treasure—the gospel of *God with us*—for a mess of psychobabble and pragmatic, utilitarian, self-help triviality.

Horton joyfully reminds us that theological thinking is so much more interesting than all of the distractions that keep us busy but malnourished. The peculiar Good News of Jesus Christ is better than anything William James or Charles G. Finney and their innumerable heirs have to offer. The determination of God in Jesus Christ to love sinners and to enlist them in the invasion that is his kingdom is so much more relevant to our true condition than our inclination to meet the felt needs of narcissistic North American consumers.

Have a wonderful adventure reading this book. Enjoy being enticed into the strange new world of vibrant Christianity in Horton's spirited gospel recovery operation. In the process, you will be liberated from our cultural captivity so that again you will be free to worship, in word and deed, the risen Christ.

Let's put Christ back in Christianity.

William Willimon
Bishop of the United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Alabama

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Christless Christianity

The American Captivity of the Church

What would things look like if Satan really took control of a city? Over a half century ago, Presbyterian minister Donald Grey Barnhouse offered his own scenario in his weekly sermon that was also broadcast nationwide on CBS radio. Barnhouse speculated that if Satan took over Philadelphia, all of the bars would be closed, pornography banished, and pristine streets would be filled with tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The children would say, “Yes, sir” and “No, ma’am,” and the churches would be full every Sunday . . . *where Christ is not preached.*

It is easy to become distracted from Christ as the only hope for sinners. Where everything is measured by our happiness rather than by God’s holiness, the sense of our being sinners becomes secondary, if not offensive. If we are good people who have lost our way but with the proper instructions and motivation can

become a better person, we need only a life coach, not a redeemer. We can still give our assent to a high view of Christ and the centrality of his person and work, but in actual practice we are being distracted from “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). A lot of the things that distract us from Christ these days are even good things. In order to push us off-point, all that Satan has to do is throw several spiritual fads, moral and political crusades, and other “relevance” operations into our field of vision. Focusing the conversation on us—our desires, needs, feelings, experience, activity, and aspirations—energizes us. At last, now we’re talking about something practical and relevant.

As provocative as Barnhouse’s illustration remains, it is simply an elaboration of a point made throughout the history of redemption. Wherever Christ is truly and clearly being proclaimed, Satan is most actively present in opposition. The wars between the nations and enmity within families and neighborhoods is but the wake of the serpent’s tail as he seeks to devour the church. Yet even in this pursuit, he is more subtle than we imagine. He lulls us to sleep as we trim our message to the banality of popular culture and invoke Christ’s name for anything and everything but salvation from the coming judgment. While undoubtedly stirring his earthly disciples to persecute and kill followers of Christ (with more martyrdoms worldwide in an average year now than in any previous era), Satan knows from experience that sowing heresy and schism is far more effective. *While the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, the assimilation of the church to the world silences the witness.*

I think that the church in America today is so obsessed with being practical, relevant, helpful, successful, and perhaps even well-liked that it nearly mirrors the world itself. Aside from the packaging, there is nothing that cannot be found in most

churches today that could not be satisfied by any number of secular programs and self-help groups.

Christless Christianity. Sounds a bit harsh, doesn't it? A little shallow, sometimes distracted, even a little human-centered rather than Christ-centered from time to time, but *Christless*? Let me be a little more precise about what I am assuming to be the regular diet in many churches across America today: “do more, try harder.” I think that this is the pervasive message across the spectrum today. It can be exhibited in an older, more conservative form, with a recurring emphasis on moral absolutes and warnings about falling into the pit of worldliness that can often make one wonder whether we are saved through fear rather than faith. Heaven and hell still figure prominently in this version. Especially on the “high holy days” of the American church calendar (that is, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Father's Day, and Mother's Day), often complete with giant American flags, a color guard, and patriotic songs, this sterner version of “do more, try harder” helped get the culture wars off the ground. At the same time, more liberal bodies could be just as shrill with their “do more, try harder” list on the left and their weekly calls to action rather than clear proclamation of Christ.

Reacting against this extreme version of fundamentalist and liberal judgmentalism, another generation arose that wanted to soft-pedal the rigor, but the “do more, try harder” message has still dominated—this time in the softer pastels of Al Franken's “Stuart Smalley” than in the censorious tone of Dana Carvey's “Church Lady,” both of *Saturday Night Live* fame. In this version, God isn't upset if you fail to pull it off. The stakes aren't as high: success or failure in this life, not heaven or hell. No longer commands, the content of these sermons, songs, and best-selling books are helpful suggestions. If you can't get people to be better with sticks, use carrots.

Increasingly, a younger generation is taking leadership that was raised on hype and hypocrisy and is weary of the narcissistic (i.e., “me-centered”) orientation of their parents’ generation. They are attracted to visions of salvation larger than the legalistic individualism of salvation-as-fire-insurance. Yet they are also fed up with the consumeristic individualism of salvation-as-personal-improvement. Instead, they are desperately craving authenticity and genuine transformation that produces true community, exhibiting loving acts that address the wider social and global crises of our day rather than the narrow jeremiads of yesteryear.

Despite significant differences across these generations and types of church ministry, crucial similarities remain. The focus still seems to be on us and our activity rather than on God and his work in Jesus Christ. In all of these approaches, there is the tendency to make God a supporting character in our own life movie rather than to be rewritten as new characters in God’s drama of redemption. Assimilating the disruptive, surprising, and disorienting power of the gospel to the felt needs, moral crises, and socio-political headlines of our passing age, we end up saying very little that the world could not hear from Dr. Phil, Dr. Laura, or Oprah.

Besides the preaching, our practices reveal that we are focused on ourselves and our activity more than on God and his saving work among us. Across the board, from conservative to liberal, Roman Catholic to Anabaptist, New Age to Southern Baptist, the “search for the sacred” in America is largely oriented to what happens inside of us, in our own personal experience, rather than in what God has done for us in history. Even baptism and the Supper are described as “means of commitment” rather than “means of grace” in a host of contemporary systematic theologies by conservative as well as progressive evangelicals. Rather than letting “the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching

and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16), the purpose of singing (the “worship time”) seems today more focused on our opportunity to express our own individual piety, experience, and commitment. We come to church, it seems, less to be transformed by the Good News than to celebrate our own transformation and to receive fresh marching orders for transforming ourselves and our world. Rather than being swept into God’s new world, we come to church to find out how we can make God relevant to the “real world” that the New Testament identifies as the one that is actually fading away.

Most Americans believe in God, affirm that Jesus Christ is in some sense divine, and believe that the Bible is the Word of God. Evangelical pollster George Barna found that 86 percent of American adults describe their religious orientation as Christian, while only 6 percent describe themselves as atheist or agnostic.¹ Judging by its commercial, political, and media success, the evangelical movement seems to be booming. But is it still *Christian*?

I am not asking that question glibly or simply to provoke a reaction. My concern is that we are getting dangerously close to the place in everyday American church life where the Bible is mined for “relevant” quotes but is largely irrelevant on its own terms; God is used as a personal resource rather than known, worshiped, and trusted; Jesus Christ is a coach with a good game plan for our victory rather than a Savior who has already achieved it for us; salvation is more a matter of having our best life now than being saved from God’s judgment by God himself; and the Holy Spirit is an electrical outlet we can plug into for the power we need to be all that we can be.

As this new gospel becomes more obviously American than Christian, we all have to take a step back and ask ourselves whether evangelicalism is increasingly a cultural and political

movement with a sentimental attachment to the image of Jesus more than a witness to “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). We have not shown in recent decades that we have much stomach for this message that the apostle Paul called “a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense,” “folly to Gentiles” (Rom. 9:33; 1 Cor. 1:23). Far from clashing with the culture of consumerism, American religion appears to be not only at peace with our narcissism but gives it a spiritual legitimacy.

Before I launch this protest, I should carefully state up front what I am *not* saying. First, I acknowledge that there are many churches, pastors, missionaries, evangelists, and distinguished Christian laypeople around the world proclaiming Christ and fulfilling their vocations with integrity. I apologize in advance for not telling this other side of the story, with its truly remarkable exceptions. However, I doubt that they will mind, since many of them register similar worries about the state of Christianity in America.

Second, I am not arguing in this book that we have *arrived* at Christless Christianity but that we are well on our way. There need not be explicit abandonment of any key Christian teaching, just a series of subtle distortions and not-so-subtle distractions. Even good things can cause us to look away from Christ and to take the gospel for granted as something we needed for conversion but which now can be safely assumed and put in the background. Center stage, however, is someone or something else.

I will refer to recent studies demonstrating that it does not really matter any longer whether one has been raised in an evangelical family and church—understanding the basic plot of the biblical drama and its lead character is as unlikely for churched as for unchurched young people. God and Jesus are still important, but more as part of the supporting cast in our own show. More interested in our own thin plots, we are losing our confidence in what English playwright Dorothy Sayers called

“the greatest story ever told.” So much of what I am calling “Christless Christianity” is not profound enough to constitute heresy. Like the easy-listening Muzak that plays ubiquitously in the background in other shopping venues, the message of American Christianity has simply become trivial, sentimental, affirming, and irrelevant.

Third, I am not questioning American Christianity at the level of *zeal*. The call of Christian leaders to “deeds, not creeds” is doubtless motivated by a serious concern to be witnesses to Christ in a broken world. I do not question the sincerity of those who say that we have the correct doctrine but are not living it out. Rather, I simply do not agree with their assessment. I think our doctrine has been forgotten, assumed, ignored, and even misshaped and distorted by the habits and rituals of daily life in a narcissistic culture. We are assimilating the disrupting and disorienting news from heaven to the banality of our own immediate *felt needs*, which interpret God as a personal shopper for the props of our life movie: happiness as entertainment, salvation as therapeutic well-being, and mission as pragmatic success measured solely in terms of numbers.

So, in my view, we *are* living out our creed, but that creed is closer to the American Dream than it is to the Christian faith. The claim I am laying out in this book is that the most dominant form of Christianity today reflects “a zeal for God” that is nevertheless without knowledge—particularly, as Paul himself specifies, the knowledge of God’s justification of the wicked by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, apart from works (Rom. 10:2, see vv. 1–15).

Fourth, there are a lot of issues I would like to address about our American captivity that will not be taken up here. Most of these issues I have treated elsewhere, especially in *Made in America*, *Power Religion*, and *Beyond Culture Wars*.² The idols that identify the Christian cause with left-wing or right-wing political

ideology are merely symptoms that Christ is not being regarded as sufficient for the church's faith and practice today. As the media follows the growing shift among many younger evangelicals from more conservative to more progressive politics, the real headline should be that the movement is going back to church to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ rather than becoming a demographic block in the culture wars. So my focus in this book is on whether Christ is even being widely proclaimed in the nation where half the population claims to be evangelical.

Where the gospel is not taken for granted, it is often a means to an end, like personal or social transformation, love and service to our neighbors, and other things that in themselves are marvelous effects of the gospel. However, the Good News concerning Christ is not a stepping-stone to something greater and more relevant. Whether we realize it or not, there is nothing in the universe more relevant to us as guilty image-bearers of God than the news that he has found a way to be “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). It is “the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16), not only for the beginning, but for the middle and end as well—the only thing that creates the kind of new world to which our new obedience corresponds as a reasonable response.

In the following chapters I offer statistics supporting the remarkable conclusion that those who are raised in “Bible-believing” churches know as little of the Bible's actual content as their unchurched neighbors. Christ is ubiquitous in this subculture, but more as an adjective (*Christian*) than as a proper name. While we swim in a sea of “Christian” things, Christ is increasingly reduced to a mascot or symbol of a subculture and the industries that feed it. Just as you don't really need Jesus Christ in order to have T-shirts and coffee mugs, it is unclear to me why he is necessary for most of the things I hear a lot of pastors and Christians talking about in church these days.

I do not think we realize the extent of our schizophrenia: annually decrying the commercialization of Christmas by the culture while we assume a consumer-product-sales approach in our own churches every week. We lament the growing secularization of American society while we ensure that the generations currently under our care will know even less than their parents and be less shaped by the covenantal nurture that sustains life in Christ over generations. While calling our capitulation to a narcissistic culture *mission* and *relevance*, we charge secularists with emptying public discourse of beliefs and values that transcend our instant gratification.

While we take Christ's name in vain for our own causes and positions, trivializing his Word in all sorts of ways, we express outrage when a movie trivializes Christ or depicts Christians in a negative light. Although professing Christians are in the majority, we often like to pretend we are a persecuted flock being prepared for an imminent slaughter through the combined energies of Hollywood and the Democratic Party. But if we ever were really persecuted, would it be because of our offensive posturing and self-righteousness or because we would not weaken the offense of the cross? In my experience, substantiated by countless stories of others, believers who challenge the human-centered process of trivializing the faith are more likely to be persecuted—or at least viewed as troublesome—by their church. My concern is not that God is treated so lightly in American culture but that he is not taken seriously in our own faith and practice.

Killing Us Softly

My argument in this book is not that evangelicalism is becoming theologically liberal but that it is becoming theologically vacuous. Far from engendering a smug complacency, core evangelical

convictions—centering on “Christ and him crucified”—drove three centuries of evangelical missions. The ministry of John Stott, a key leader of this postwar consensus, has embodied this integration of Christ-centered proclamation with missional passion. Yet when asked in a recent issue of *Christianity Today* how he evaluates this worldwide movement, Stott could only reply, “The answer is ‘growth without depth.’”³

There certainly are signs that the movement’s theological boundaries are widening—and I will touch on a few examples in this book. Furthermore, vacuity and liberalism have typically gone hand-in-hand when it comes to the church’s faith and practice. Liberalism started off by downplaying doctrine in favor of moralism and inner experience, losing Christ by degrees. Nevertheless, it is not heresy as much as silliness that is killing us softly. God is not denied but trivialized—used for our life programs rather than received, worshiped, and enjoyed.

Christ is a source of empowerment, but is he widely regarded among us today as the source of redemption for the powerless? He helps the morally sensitive to become better, but does he save the ungodly—including Christians? He heals broken lives, but does he raise those who are “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1 NKJV)? Does Christ come merely to *improve* our existence in Adam or to *end* it, sweeping us into his new creation? Is Christianity all about spiritual and moral makeovers or about death and resurrection—radical judgment and radical grace? Is the Word of God a resource for what we have already decided we want and need, or is it God’s living and active criticism of our religion, morality, and pious experience? In other words, is the Bible God’s story, centering on Christ’s redeeming work, that rewrites our stories, or is it something we use to make our stories a little more exciting and interesting?

Conservatives and liberals moralize, minimize, and trivialize Christ in different ways, of course, with different political and

social agendas, showing their allegiance either to elite culture or popular culture, but it is still moralism. According to Methodist bishop William Willimon,

Lacking confidence in the power of our story to effect that of which it speaks, to evoke a new people out of nothing, our communication loses its nerve. Nothing is said that could not be heard elsewhere. . . . In conservative contexts, gospel speech is traded for dogmatic assertion and moralism, for self-help psychologies and narcotic mantras. In more liberal speech, talk tiptoes around the outrage of Christian discourse and ends up as an innocuous, though urbane, affirmation of the ruling order. Unable to preach Christ and him crucified, we preach humanity and it improved.⁴

Liberals may have pioneered the theory that there is salvation in other names than Jesus Christ, but no group in modern history has wanted the general public to pray nonsectarian prayers—that is, with or without Jesus Christ—as much as the conservative evangelicals. When it comes to *getting God back into our schools*, we can even leave Jesus behind.

Jesus has been dressed up as a corporate CEO, life coach, culture-warrior, political revolutionary, philosopher, copilot, cosufferer, moral example, and partner in fulfilling our personal and social dreams. But in all of these ways, are we reducing the central character in the drama of redemption to a prop for our own play?

Like the liberals of yesteryear, a growing number of evangelical leaders are fond of setting Jesus's teaching on the kingdom—especially the Sermon on the Mount—over against the more doctrinal emphasis found especially in Paul's epistles. Many celebrate this emphasis on Christ-as-example rather than Christ-as-Redeemer as the harbinger of *a new kind of Christian*, but is it really an old kind of moralist? Regardless of whether Christ's

death is regarded as a vicarious sacrifice, discipleship—*our* cross-bearing—becomes the more interesting topic. Never mind that disciples are people who learn something before they set out to make a splash by their zealous activity. Again, I’m not saying that these brothers and sisters are liberals but that there is no discernable difference for our witness whether we ignore or deny the message of Christ and his cross. When the focus becomes “What would Jesus do?” instead of “What has Jesus done?” the labels no longer matter. Conservatives have been just as prone to focus on the former rather than the latter in recent decades.

Religion, spirituality, and moral earnestness—what Paul called “the appearance of godliness but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:5)—can continue to thrive in our environment precisely because they avoid the scandal of Christ. Nobody will raise a fuss if you find Jesus helpful for your personal well-being and relationships, or even if you think he was the greatest person in history—a model worthy of devotion and emulation. But start talking about the real crisis—where our best efforts are filthy rags and Jesus came to bear the condemnation of helpless sinners who place their confidence in him rather than in themselves—and people begin shifting in their seats, even in churches.

Discipleship, spiritual disciplines, life transformation, culture-transformation, relationships, marriage and family, stress, the spiritual gifts, financial gifts, radical experiences of conversion, end-times curiosities that seem to have less to do with Christ’s bodily return than with matching verses to newspaper headlines, and accounts of overcoming significant obstacles through the power of faith. This is the steady diet we’re getting today, and it is bound to burn us out because it’s all about us and our work rather than about Christ and his work. Even important biblical exhortations and commands become dislocated from their indicative, gospel habitat. Instead of the gospel giving us new thoughts, experiences, and a motivation

for grateful obedience, we lodge the power of God in our own piety and programs.

I do not expect to get everything right. Some of my judgments may turn out to be too sweeping or ill-informed. I hope not, because these issues are too important to be treated casually. Readers will certainly find a lot of good news interspersed between the bad news in this book, but I admit from the outset that on balance it is not a cheerful missive. I'm counting on the indulgence of readers to wait for this book's more constructive sequel. If this book will have only raised questions that provoke us to deeper analysis of our witness in the world today, it will be sufficient.

My aim is not to target any particular wing, movement, person, or group. We are all victims as well as accomplices in our captivity. In fact, my sense of urgency is motivated by my impression that "Christless Christianity" is pervasive, crossing the conservative-liberal spectrum and all denominational lines. In fact, when I wrote up some of the thoughts in this book for an article in a magazine recently, a Catholic editor exclaimed, "He's writing about us!"

Actually, I *am* writing about "us"—all of us who profess the name of Christ both as ministers and witnesses. It would be easier if we could identify one particular writer, circle of writers, or movement as an isolated nemesis. However, no tradition is free of this captivity, including my own, and no person, including myself. There is therefore no position of antiseptic purity that I can pretend to occupy, from which I can mop up the rest of the floor. The most that any of us can do is to say with Isaiah, as he beheld a vision of God in his holiness, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isa. 6:5).

Naming Our Captivity

Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism

Several years ago a mainline theologian told me of his experience at an evangelical megachurch. He was visiting his children and grandchildren during spring break. In the church they attended Easter Sunday, nothing visibly suggested that it was a Christian service, but this distinguished theologian tried to rein in his judgments. There was no greeting from God or sense that this was God's gathering. The songs were almost exclusively about us, our feelings, and our intentions to worship, obey, and love, but it was not clear whom they were talking about or why. He concluded, "Well, evangelicals don't really have a liturgy. They put all of the content into the sermon, so I'll wait."

However, his patience was not rewarded. Although it was Easter, the message (with no clear text) was on how Jesus gives us the strength to overcome our obstacles. Lacking even

a benediction, this theologian left discouraged. He had come to an evangelical church at Easter, and instead of meeting God and the announcement of a real victory over sin and death by Jesus Christ, he encountered other Christians who were being given fellowship and instructions for making their own Easter come true in their life.

Pressed with leading questions by his son-in-law as to his reaction to the service (such as, “Did it touch your heart?”), the theologian broke his silence: “I assume you’re trying to ‘evangelize’ me right now,” he said. “But there was no ‘gospel’ anywhere in that service that might convert me if I were unconverted. . . . Not even in the most liberal churches I’ve been in was the service so devoid of Christ and the gospel. It’s like ‘God *who?*’”

Since then, a mainline Methodist theologian told me of an almost identical experience—curiously, also at Easter—in a conservative Presbyterian church that was known around the university for its “Bible-believing” and “Christ-centered” ministry. He too left disappointed (the sermon was something about how Jesus overcame his setbacks and so can we), further substantiating his appraisal that evangelicals are as likely as mainliners today to talk pop psychology, politics, or moralism instead of the gospel.

But are these isolated anecdotes that could be culled from any period of church history?

Substantiating the Charge

Based on numerous studies conducted by his research group, George Barna concludes, “To increasing millions of Americans, God—if we even believe in a supernatural deity—exists for the pleasure of humankind. He resides in the heavenly realm solely for our utility and benefit. Although we are too clever to voice it,

we live by the notion that true power is accessed not by looking upward but by turning inward.”¹

Unless something changes, Barna thinks,

It will be every man for himself, with no second thoughts or regrets about the personal or societal implications of this incredibly selfish, nihilistic, narcissistic way of life. . . .

Most Americans have at least an intellectual assent when it comes to God, Jesus Christ, and angels. They believe that the Bible is a good book filled with important stories and lessons. And they believe that religion is very important in their lives. But this same group of people, including many professing Christians, also believe that people are inherently good; that our primary purpose is to enjoy life as much as possible.²

Eighty-two percent of Americans (and a majority of evangelicals) believe that Benjamin Franklin’s aphorism, “God helps those who help themselves,” is a biblical quotation. A majority believe that “all people pray to the same god or spirit, no matter what name they use for that spiritual being” and that “if a person is generally good or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in heaven.”³ It should not surprise us, then, when President Bush says, “I believe that all the world, whether they be Muslim, Christian, or any other religion, prays to the same God. That’s what I believe.”⁴

After citing a series of reports, Barna concludes,

In short, the spirituality of America is Christian in name only. . . . 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, the ultimate rulers of our own experience and destiny. We are the Pharisees of the new millennium.⁵

Among the false assumptions “killing the ministry” today are that “Americans have a firm understanding of the basic tenets of Christianity,” that “people who believe in God believe in the God of Israel” known in Scripture, or that non-Christians are interested in salvation, since most Americans “are relying instead on their own good deeds, their good character, or the generosity of God” apart from Christ.⁶

Barna’s studies suggest that most Americans value time and efficiency over everything else, minimizing long-term commitments, maintaining “independence and individuality at all costs,” even to the point of being skeptical of institutions, people, and authorities. After all, people are being told every day, “You are unique” and you shouldn’t submit to the expectations of others. Above all, “*Trust your feelings to guide you.* Relying upon absolute principles places unrealistic limitations on you. Only you know what’s right or best for you at any given moment, in those circumstances.” Finally, “*Set goals and achieve them. . . . Have fun. . . . Stay in good health. . . . Discover and revel in the purpose of your life.*”⁷ These are the principal values according to Barna’s surveys of American adults today. In spite of his diagnosis, however, Barna’s own prescriptions (which I take up in a later chapter) are more likely to aggravate the illness rather than cure it.

Over a decade ago, I had the opportunity to interview Robert Schuller on our radio program. During our two-hour conversation, the best-selling author and televangelist reiterated his arguments in *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*. A church, he says, can afford to think in a God-centered fashion, but a mission must put humans at the center. “It was appropriate for Calvin and Luther to think theocentrically,” writes Schuller, but now “the scales must tip the other way” toward a “human needs approach.” In fact, “classical theology has erred in its insistence that theology be ‘God-centered,’ not ‘man-centered.’” *Sin* is defined

as “any act or thought that robs myself or another human being of his or her self-esteem. . . . And what is ‘hell’? It is the loss of pride that naturally follows separation from God—the ultimate and unfailing source of our soul’s sense of self-respect. . . . A person is in hell when he has lost his self-esteem.” “The Cross sanctifies the ego trip.”⁸

I asked Dr. Schuller how he would interpret the following admonition from Paul to Timothy:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.

2 Timothy 3:1–5

Before I was even able to compose my own question, my distinguished guest immediately responded to these apostolic words by saying, “I hope you don’t preach that. It will hurt a lot of beautiful people.”

The challenge before us as Christian witnesses is whether we will offer Jesus Christ as the key to fulfilling our narcissistic preoccupation or as the Redeemer who liberates us from its guilt and power. Does Christ come to boost our ego or to crucify our ego and raise us up as new creatures with our identity in him? According to the apostle Paul, there is glory awaiting us, to be sure, but it is the glory that comes to us by virtue of our being in Christ: “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:3–4). Our righteousness before a holy God is not inherent; it is a gift to those who are in themselves unrighteous.

By the way, I do not think this means that we simply write off the desire for fulfillment and happiness. The gospel neither meets our narcissistic goals nor denies the truth of which they are a perversion. People were created for meaning, purpose, joy, and fulfillment. As C. S. Lewis reminds us, it's not that our desires are too strong but that they are too weak.⁹ While God wants to give us everlasting life, we settle for trivial satisfaction of superficial *needs* that are to a large extent created within us by the culture of marketing.

Only when God's law—his holiness, majesty, and moral will—creates in us a sense of our moral offensiveness to God does the gospel communicate deeper answers that our felt needs and cheap cravings only mask. Hardly unique, my children would be delighted if I told them that instead of their usual three meals today we would provide a variety pack of candies. When my wife and I decline their urges, it is because we know that they will make themselves sick if they just follow their immediate desires. Similarly, God wants to fill our lives with joy, but before we allow him to tell us the story, we have already decided within the narrow confines of our limited experience what joy is from.

Reacting against a legalistic and self-righteous tendency in their childhood, many Americans have abandoned church altogether. Those who return often do so on their own terms. The message must be light and affirming; the form in which it is presented must be entertaining and inspirational. They are ready for something useful and helpful but not something jarring and disturbing. As David Brooks has observed concerning the post-war generation generally, Boomers are part *Leave It to Beaver*, bourgeois moralists with a vague sense of values and nostalgia for community and part Bohemian revolutionaries of the sixties and seventies, who resist the traditions, commitments, convictions, and structures that genuine community requires.¹⁰

In this context, as *Newsweek* reported, churches “have developed a ‘pick and choose’ Christianity in which individuals take what they want . . . and pass over what does not fit their spiritual goals. What many have left behind is a pervasive view of sin.”¹¹ A decade later, *Newsweek* added in yet another cover story on the search for the sacred,

Disguised in the secular language of psychotherapy, the search for the sacred has turned sharply inward—a private quest. The goal, over the last forty years, has been variously described as “peace of mind,” “higher consciousness,” “personal transformation” or—in its most banal incarnation—“self-esteem.” . . . In this environment, many searching Americans flit from one tradition to the next, tasting now the nectar of this traditional wisdom, now of that. But, like butterflies, they remain mostly up in the air.¹²

It was secular psychologist Karl Menninger who pointed out (in a book titled *Whatever Became of Sin?*) that the growing suppression of the reality of guilt in churches was actually contributing to neuroses rather than avoiding them.¹³ Not long ago, I read a *Wall Street Journal* article with a similar report, bearing the headline, “To Hell with Sin: When ‘Being a Good Person’ Excuses Everything.”¹⁴ Isn’t it slightly odd when the world has to complain that the churches are no longer talking about sin?

More recently, Robert Jay Lifton, a pioneer in neuropsychology, has argued that today’s self is restlessly bent on reinvention mainly in order to get rid of a nagging sense of guilt that creates tremendous anxiety despite its unknown origins. The implication of his essay is that when people know why they feel guilty and are able to find an answer to it, they actually become more stable in their identity.¹⁵ As C. FitzSimons Allison has alleged, exchanging the biblical categories of sin and grace for such therapeutic categories as dysfunction and recovery represents “pastoral cruelty.”¹⁶ If we

feel guilty, maybe it is because we really *are* guilty. To change the subject or downplay the seriousness of this condition actually keeps people from the liberating news the gospel brings. If our real problem is bad feelings, then the solution is good feelings. The cure can only be as radical as the disease. Like any recreational drug, *Christianity Lite* can make people feel better for the moment, but it does not reconcile sinners to God.

Ironically, secular psychologists like Menninger are writing books about sin, while many Christian leaders are converting sin—a condition from which we cannot liberate ourselves—into dysfunction and salvation into recovery. In his best-seller, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Philip Rieff describes how pop psychology has transformed our entire worldview, including religion. “Christian man was born to be saved,” he writes. “Psychological man is born to be pleased.”¹⁷

Neil McCormick, a columnist for London’s *Daily Telegraph*, recounts the religious education classes he and his childhood friend, U2’s Bono, received at a nondenominational but mainly Protestant school in Dublin. The classes were “characterized by a kind of wooly Christian liberalism, presided over by a well-meaning, but—as far as I was concerned—druppily ineffective young teacher named Sophie Shirley.” McCormick recalls,

There would be Bible readings and class discussions in which Jesus took on the character of a beatific hippie while God seemed to be personified as an avuncular old geezer who only wanted the best for His extended family—if that was the case, I wondered, why was I being kept awake at night wondering if the torments of Hell awaited me when I died? I would fire this and related questions at my long-suffering teacher but I never received satisfactory answers, just platitudes about Jesus loving me.¹⁸

Just yesterday I saw a scene from NBC’s *ER* that powerfully underscores McCormick’s experience. Lying in his hospital bed

while he is dying from cancer, a retired police officer confesses to a chaplain his long-held guilt over allowing an innocent man to be framed and executed. He asks, “How can I even hope for forgiveness?” and the chaplain replies, “I think sometimes it’s easier to feel guilty than forgiven.” “Which means *what*?” “That maybe your guilt over his death has become your reason for living. Maybe you need a new reason to go on.” “I don’t want to ‘go on,’” says the dying man. “Can’t you see that I’m dying? The only thing that is holding me back is that I’m afraid—I’m afraid of what comes next.” “What do you think that is?” the chaplain gently inquires. Growing impatient, the man answers, “*You tell me*. Is atonement possible? What does God *want* from me?” After the chaplain replies, “I think it’s up to each one of us to interpret for ourselves what God wants,” the man stares at her in bewilderment. “So people can do anything? They can rape, they can murder, they can steal—all in the name of God and it’s OK?” Growing intense, the dialogue draws to its climax. “No, that’s not what I’m saying,” the chaplain responds. “Then what *are* you saying? Because all I’m hearing is some New Age, God-is-Love, have-it-your-way crap! . . . No, I don’t have time for this now.” “You don’t understand,” the chaplain counters. “No, *you* don’t understand! . . . I want a *real* chaplain who believes in a *real* God and a *real* hell!” Missing the point of this man’s struggle, the chaplain collects herself and says in the familiar tone of condescension disguised as understanding, “I hear that you’re frustrated, but you need to ask yourself—” “No,” the man interrupts, “I don’t need to ask myself anything. I need *answers* and all of your questions and all your uncertainty are only making things worse.” With no more to evaluate than his tone, she encourages calm. “I know you’re upset,” she begins, provoking his final outburst of frustration: “God, I need someone who will look me in the eye and tell me how to find *forgiveness*, because *I am running out of time!*”