

1-1-2002

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### Recommended Citation

Talley, Scott (2002) "The Dangers of Spirituality without Theology," *Leaven*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol10/iss1/4>

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# The Dangers of Spirituality Without Theology

SCOTT TALLEY

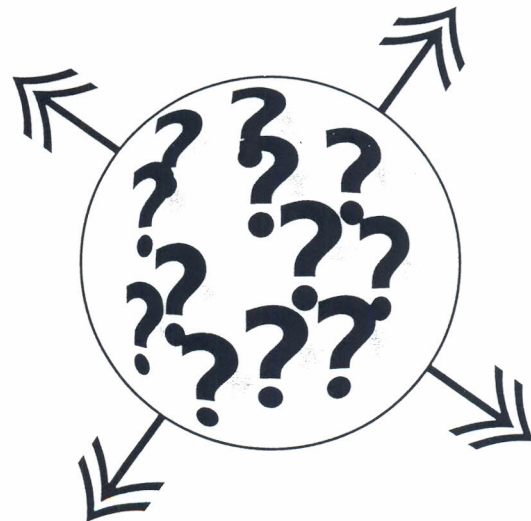
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In what might be the greatest single verse in the New Testament, John describes the glory of Jesus (the word that became flesh and lived among us) as “the glory as of a father’s only son, full of *grace* and *truth*” (John 1:14). In his very theological gospel, John uses two significant words to explain the personal nature and reality of God as revealed in his son, Jesus Christ: “grace” and “truth.” These words echo the Hebrew words *hesed* (steadfast love) and *emet* (truth) and refer to God’s covenant love and faithfulness. John uses these two very significant words at the beginning of his gospel not only to reveal the nature of God but also to help believers understand the theological harmony and unity of *grace* and *truth* in the person of Jesus. John describes the glory of Jesus as full of grace and truth.

When John speaks of the incarnate word as full of grace and truth, he is pointing us to the fact that truth and the complete reliability of God are bound up with one another. God is not only the God of grace, he is also the God who desires “truth in the inward being” (Ps 51:6). Unfortunately, many believers often view these two inseparable characteristics as incompatible. As a result, many of our churches define themselves as either “grace churches” or “truth churches,” but rarely both at the same time. For example, some churches come together to celebrate the grace of God that saves. They rarely confront sin, and their study of scripture is often shallow. A celebration of grace that is not founded on truth is not grace but rather hype in the name of grace. On the other hand, there are churches that practice truth without grace. The assemblies of these churches are very cerebral and focus on information and knowledge, and their study of the Bible is often void of application. In these churches sin is discussed only in terms of condemnation and judgement; discussions related to forgiveness of sin and to grace seldom occur. Members of these churches often do not understand that truth without grace is not the whole truth.<sup>1</sup>

## GRACE, TRUTH, AND SPIRITUALITY

Many people raised in the 1950s and 60s were part of churches that leaned heavily toward truth over grace, often resulting in legalism. “Truth churches” that were characterized by legalism profoundly influenced the pioneers in youth ministry in our fellowship. In an attempt to move away from the legalism they inherited, youth ministry projects and activities were often structured around grace. Bible studies focused on grace, love, and forgiveness. Youth ministries often emphasized hands-on service to the poor and the underprivileged, and youth worship was praise-oriented. We had the best of intentions.





We taught our teens how to serve, and they became graceful, forgiving Christians. We taught biblical truth, but much of our teaching centered on service, grace, and praise. We assumed our students had already learned foundational theological and doctrinal truths in their homes or in Bible classes during their earlier years. We were rearing good, spiritual teens who genuinely loved God and cared about serving others; but we were inadvertently neglecting major systematic theological and doctrinal instruction. As a result, they did not understand, nor could they explain, their beliefs about God.

Spirituality without theology can be dangerous. When teens are given little theological and biblical knowledge—even though they devote much of their time to praise and service to others—they are ill prepared to face an increasingly changing culture. Recently, both Randy Harris of Abilene

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Christian University and Monte Cox of Harding University—professors who routinely teach incoming freshman at their respective universities—indicated that while their students are very spiritual and service-oriented, they “do not understand the faith very well.”<sup>2</sup>

If it is true that our teens do not understand the faith very well, but that they are spiritual,

serving, and God loving, why is there a problem? The problem exists because they are not theologically and doctrinally prepared to meet the challenges of a pluralistic, diverse, and changing world. Let me illustrate with an incident that happened several months ago. A freshman girl was tragically killed in a car accident on the way to her small private high school. The entire student body was participating in a school-wide service project that day, and they were not attending regular classes; therefore, they did not learn about the tragedy until later. A group of experienced crisis counselors were called to assist in telling the students of the accident and resulting death. As someone who had years of experience counseling teens in crisis, I was asked to help and was assigned a group of fifteen freshmen that were close friends of the deceased student. I began by asking them to tell me about the girl. They immediately started talking about her good qualities and what a good person she had been. After some discussion, I wanted to shift the conversation in such a way that they could deal with this tragedy, grieve, and begin their healing. If these young people had all been Christians, I would have known exactly how to proceed. I would have focused on scripture, faith, and prayer, and upon the need to lean on God during difficult and tragic times. However, since this was an exclusive private school, my knowledge concerning the religious beliefs of this group of students was limited. When I asked about their faith and beliefs, I was startled to learn that among a total of fifteen students, there were two Orthodox Jews, one Hindu, one Muslim, one Buddhist, and two Bahai. This diverse group of students was not in some major metropolitan center, but in a small city in central Texas!

#### **DEFINING THE PROBLEM: A POSTMODERN WORLDVIEW**

Our culture is increasingly dominated by a postmodernist worldview. It is a worldview that rejects any notion of a universal truth and reduces truth to social constructions shaped by class, gender, ethnicity, and opinion. In other words, everyone has a different story, a different truth, and it is impossible to determine or describe reality accurately. Our culture has become dominated by pluralism. Modern pluralistic culture provides a smorgasbord of belief systems, choices, and worldviews. A decade or so ago, when most of us grew up, the choices were very limited. One might be Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, or possibly Catholic. Today, however, there is cafeteria-style or menu of numerous options from which to choose. And the menu is often à la Carte, allowing one to mix and match a set of beliefs. For example, the coach of the Los Angeles Lakers, Phil Jackson,



refers to himself as a “Zen-Christian.” George Lucas, the creator of the “Star Wars” movies, claims that he simply mixes many different philosophical notions together (good versus evil, re-incarnation) to give his movies a religious flavor.

Our society encourages and validates such pluralism, resulting in relativism—the idea that there is no overarching, objective, absolute truth but only a variety of subjective beliefs. In other words, truth is relative and, while it is fine for one to believe something to be true, an individual cannot define truth for anyone else but can only define his or her individual truth. Therefore, it is not uncommon to see “truth,” “objectivity,” “knowledge,” even “reality,” within quotation marks in scholarly books or journals, suggesting ironic connotations to such quaint words.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, one is expected to be tolerant toward all truths and beliefs, because there are no absolutes. Thus our culture is dominated by pluralism, relativism, and tolerance that, in the words of Robert L. Simon, borders on “absolutophobia.”<sup>4</sup>

The point is that our young people live in a postmodern, post-Christian culture, and they are not prepared biblically, theologically, or doctrinally to understand, defend, or share their faith with their world. Thus their visible spirituality and their eagerness for service can be insufficient. Without a theological foundation, it is possible for them to think that faith and a relationship with God are based on personal preferences rather than on foundational truths. Therefore, it is important that we teach them theology and doctrine to reaffirm their commitment to the truth. They need to be taught that God and his word represent ultimate reality. In so doing, they will be assured that, although worldly foundations are shaken and it is difficult to be sure of anything in today’s culture, God is truth and we discover God in his word.

Also, teaching our teens biblical doctrine and theology contributes to their spiritual health and keeps them from being susceptible to new forms of eclectic spirituality (New Age and mystical Eastern religions). They need our help in understanding that new types of “spirituality” and Eastern mystical religions simply do not answer their deepest questions. They also need to understand scripture well enough to know that doctrine is deeply connected to life and that our theology must make a difference in how we live, act, and think.

Teens must have adequate theological and biblical knowledge to share their faith with a lost world. Teens must be taught that Christians are not only saved from something (sin) but they are saved to something (Christ’s lordship over all life). Moral discourse in America is changing, and people are coming to the realization that something is wrong. Events such as the school shootings in Littleton, Colorado are causing people to realize that what the “modern age” has believed for much of the past century has failed, and that evil exists in the world. Christians have a great opportunity to take advantage of these feelings of discontent by living and proclaiming the gospel and articulating a Christian worldview. Our mission as Christians is clear: “...you will be my witness in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

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### REMEDIES AND SOLUTIONS

Thus far we have defined a problem. Now let us turn to possible remedies and solutions. How do we prepare young people to live in our postmodern, post-Christian culture? How do we equip them biblically and theologically so they can understand, defend, and articulate the Christian faith? I have three suggestions.



*Understand the Post-Modern, Secular World in Which We Live*

We have already made the point that today's culture requires us to teach our teens theological and biblical truths in the context of that culture. In many ways, our culture is experiencing the collapse of both modernity and the power of Christendom—a culture dominated by Christian values. One prominent Christian writer refers to this new culture as a “pre-Christian” world. “It is a world similar to the first century after Jesus. It is a world of technological change and population migration; a world of systemic injustice and apocalyptic longing; it is a world of excessive materialism and spiritual yearning; it is a world of deep anxiety and utter cynicism toward religious institutions of the past.”<sup>5</sup> In the first century, Christians had to learn how to communicate about the one true God and his son Jesus Christ to pagans—people who believed in many gods. Similarly, many people in today's world have grown up as if in a “pre-Christian” setting, outside any influence of

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Christianity. As a result, they are tolerant of a variety of viewpoints and “gods.” Today's gods have different names from their first century counterparts, but they are no less “gods.” Their names are astrology, Wicca, money, sex, power, mystical spirituality, and many more. It is within this context that we must teach our teens

biblical truth and theology so they can interpret their faith in a world that dismisses absolutes, worships inclusiveness, and pursues mystical spirituality. The dangers are real, and we can no longer afford for our young people to be biblically illiterate. Therefore, we must provide them with solid, life-claiming theology and biblical truth that is grounded in the one true God, revealed through Jesus Christ as the only source of meaning, healing, and salvation.

*Understanding and Defend the Christian Faith*

Our young people also need to be capable of defending the faith and giving rational and reasonable explanations for the one true God. In a relativistic world void of absolutes, it is necessary to raise a new group of apologists who will produce a “pre-Christian” apologetic for our time.<sup>6</sup> Although apologetics and reason will not lead someone to Christianity, they can set the stage whereby a person can understand that the Christian faith is reasonable. Apologetics also sets the framework for one to understand the Christian experience.<sup>7</sup> If our culture is to be transformed, it will happen from the bottom up—when ordinary believers begin practicing apologetics in their day-to-day encounters with others. Therefore, we should teach our teens that Christian truth is best advanced by defending it and by being instruments of God's grace. They will then be able, as the apostle Peter says, to “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (NIV 1 Pet 3:15). If we teach our teens the importance of apologetics, they will be prepared to formulate a defense of Christian truth in every area of life and to speak to our culture in the name of Jesus Christ.

*Share the Christian Faith in the Midst of a Cosmic Struggle*

Finally, and most importantly, our young people must understand that there is a war in progress—a cosmic struggle between worldviews. This war is not simply a cultural battle over abortion, homosexuality, or the decline of public education, but rather a struggle between competing ways of understanding reality. It is a war between the Christian worldview and the many secular and “spiritual” worldviews arrayed against it. We should teach our teens that there is an absolute physical and moral order, and there is absolute truth and it is knowable. For the Christian, this reality is



rationally sustainable and livable as with no other worldview.<sup>8</sup> If our teens believe this, they will be better prepared to engage a pluralistic, secular society.

### AN ESSENTIAL MESSAGE

Our teens need to understand the essential nature and significance of the biblical worldview. It can be demonstrated that Christianity is more than a private belief system that offers personal salvation. It is a philosophical alternative that richly explains the physical and moral order of the universe. In other words, our teens need to know that Christianity is a comprehensive life system that addresses humanity's ultimate questions.

At the heart of this understanding are spiritually truthful answers to three basic human questions: (1) Creation: Where did I come from? Who am I? (2) Fall: Why am I here? What has gone wrong with the world? (3) Redemption/Salvation: Where am I going? Is there a way out?

Christianity accurately diagnoses the human dilemma—a moral dilemma of guilt before a holy God. Christianity also confronts and provides answers to the problem of sin—redemption through Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Christianity does these things on the basis of historical truth: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory,

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the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Finally, in the grace and truth of Jesus Christ, all of us are liberated from sin and empowered to help bring Christ's restoration to all of God's creation. It is therefore imperative that our teens understand the Christian message and its worldview so they can actively communicate the message of salvation to a lost world with confidence and grace.

### CONCLUSION

Our world has now experienced 500 years of the age of reason, 200 years of tremendous technological advances, and 100 years of a therapeutic culture. How much better are we? Is it not time for parents, church leaders, and youth ministers to return to the richness of scripture and the spiritual discipline that the word of God can provide?<sup>9</sup>

We have wonderful young people in our churches with hearts for loving God and serving others. They live in a dangerous world, and we must not leave them vulnerable. Therefore, their faith must be grounded in the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ, and they must be taught theologically to understand, defend, and communicate the Christian faith in a secular age.

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### ENDNOTES

- 1 Monte Cox, “Finding Balance In a Shaky World,” lecture, 4 February 2000, Crestview Church of Christ, Waco, Texas.
- 2 Randy Harris, “Building A Spiritually Healthy Church,” lecture, 5 November 2000, Crestview Church of Christ, Waco, Texas.
- 3 Gertrude Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures* (New York: Vintage Press, 1999), 122.
- 4 Robert L. Simon, “The Paralysis of ‘Absolutopia’,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 June 1997, 5 (B).
- 5 William M. Easum and Thomas G. Bandy, *Growing Spiritual Redwoods* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 22.
- 6 Easum, *Leadership On The Otherside* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 78.
- 7 Chuck Colson, *Chuck Colson Speaks: Key Messages From Today's Leading Defender of the Christian Faith* (Uhrichsville: Barbour Publishing, 2000), 105–6.
- 8 Colson, 76.
- 9 Harris, “Building A Spiritually Healthy Church.”