

## CHAPTER 1

# The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World

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Tuesday, September 11, 2001.<sup>1</sup> The weather in Boston was clear, the sky cloudless, the air crisp, the trees showing just the first hint of fall color. That was the day that two jets left Logan International Airport for California but were hijacked and, a short time later, flown into the towers of the World Trade Center in New York. Thousands of people who thought they were beginning another ordinary day were killed in an extraordinary way. Two other jets were also hijacked that day, one ending up in the side of the Pentagon and the other in a field in Pennsylvania, the latter thanks to brave, bare-handed, anti-terrorist action on board. On that day the United States suffered its worst act of terrorism, a ghastly moment of cold, callous, calculated mass murder. It left a gaping hole in the nation's heart and images of chaos and wreckage etched forever in its memory.

In the days that followed, as dazed Americans watched the pictures from the crash scenes, the distractions that make up the noisy surface where we live were stripped away. It is, of course, the rather mundane routines and events of life that give it a sense of daily normalcy. But these were not normal days, and much of the surface clutter simply stopped. It suddenly seemed indecent, inappropriate, in light of this stark, unrelieved tragedy.

Television cleansed itself of its incessant barrage of commercials

<sup>1</sup>This chapter is adapted from David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005). Used with permission.

and, for a few days, offered uninterrupted coverage of the unfolding events. And how could we ponder this appalling loss and, at the same time, sit back to watch the Miss America beauty pageant or the Emmy Awards? They were canceled. The late-night comedians fled the air. Hollywood studios were quick to finger this pulse and revisited their decisions regarding what movies would be released in the fall. Even the usual bickering and destructiveness of the political process, driven by the competition for power and ever feasting on the nation's social divisions, stopped overnight. National purpose now loomed over these squabbles. It suddenly—and unusually—seemed to be a bigger thing than narrow, partisan interest. Indeed, the politicians seemed almost to have been shamed into attending to matters of national concern.

At all the crash scenes, but especially in New York, onlookers gazed in sad awe at the smoking wreckage, buildings and planes twisted into grotesque shapes and hiding within them the crushed bodies of those taken down. The nation's attention was simultaneously riveted on the heroic actions of those who worked with such determination, and amidst such tiredness, to find any who might still be alive. Here, too, was another telling juxtaposition: the terrorists' dark hatred and the remarkable bravery and fortitude of those who continued to dig for the lost.

This event, which was so unexpected, so terrible, and so psychologically intrusive, brought into clearer focus a number of other issues. Three of them are particularly germane to this present discussion. First of all, there is the fact that for all of the talk about how America changed after this event, there remains an uneasy sense that American culture is actually little different from what it was before—that it still is morally and spiritually adrift, and in this it is no different from the other Western countries. Second, the global ambitions of radical Islam called attention to the many Muslims in the West and this, in turn, was a reminder of the West's growing ethnic and religious complexity. To this America is no exception for, in a short period of time, it has become the world's most religiously diverse nation. Third, this moment of tragedy and evil shone its own light on the church, and what we came to see was not a happy sight. For what has become conspicuous by its scarcity, and not least in the evangelical corner of it, is a spiritual *gravitas*, one that could match the depth of horrendous evil and address issues of

such seriousness. Evangelicalism, now much absorbed by the arts and tricks of marketing, is simply not very serious anymore.

### The Front Lines

These three issues do, of course, have their connections. The first two, I believe, are the major defining cultural realities with which the church must now intentionally engage: first, the disintegration of the Enlightenment world and its replacement by the postmodern ethos and, second, the fact that through the changed immigration law of 1965, America has become a truly multiethnic society and perhaps the most religiously diverse one in the world. The exotic religions from faraway places that once only filled the pages of *National Geographic* may now be next door. Mosques, landmarks that once seemed confined to the Middle East, can now be seen side-by-side with churches in America, though much of the practice of Islam is invisible to most people. America is now home to more Hispanics than African Americans; Arabs are coming close to drawing even with Jews in number; and there are more Muslims than Episcopalians, or Congregationalists, or Eastern Orthodox, or Mormons. The arrival of old, non-Christian religions in America and the emergence of more recent spiritualities that are not religious, and often not institutionalized, are a new circumstance. This means that the relation of Christ to non-Christian religions, as well as to these personally constructed spiritualities, is no longer a matter of theorizing from a safe distance but rather a matter of daily encounter in neighborhoods, in schools, at work, at the gas station, and at the supermarket. And what will prove to be even more momentous in the evangelical world than its engagement with the other religions, I believe, will be whether it is able to distinguish what it has to offer from the emergence of these forms of spirituality. Therapeutic spiritualities that are non-religious begin to look quite like evangelical spirituality that is therapeutic and non-doctrinal.

These two developments—*the emergence of the postmodern ethos* and *the growing religious and spiritual diversity*—are by no means parallel or even complementary, but they are unmistakably defining American culture in a significantly new way. And they are defining the context within which the church must live out its life. Already there are some signs that this engagement with culture is not exactly going

the church's way. It was certainly noticeable that, following September 11, the church was mostly unable to offer any public reading on the tragedy that did anything more than commiserate with those who had lost loved ones. There was virtually no Christian interpretation, no wrestling with the meaning of evil, little thought about the cross where Christians contend its back was broken.

### **Christ and Context**

In 1984, I wrote a traditional Christology entitled *The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical Analysis of the Incarnation*.<sup>2</sup> This volume was part of a series in which each of the authors was asked to follow the same format: about one-third was to be devoted to the biblical materials, one-third to historical developments, and the remaining third to a discussion of three or four contemporary thinkers. This is the sort of foundational work which needs to be done in developing a Christology. The questions that such an account seeks to address are almost always those that are *internal* to the church or academia. This is entirely appropriate. These issues, such as how the person of Christ is spoken of by the different authors of the New Testament, how these lines of thought were taken up in the early church, how they were debated in the Middle Ages and Reformation, and how they have been formulated by recent scholars, are central and necessary considerations in a Christology. However, it has become increasingly clear to me that while these internal issues are of vital importance, they are not the only issues that should be engaging the church. They are the indispensable, foundational questions, but they do not comprise everything that the church should be thinking about with respect to the person of Christ. There are also issues that are *external* in nature that should accompany this foundational work. These are concerned with how a Christology faces off against, how it engages, its own cultural context.

That being the case, the volume that I wrote earlier, in 1984, remains foundational to this present analysis. Nothing has changed in the conclusions I reached then, nor should they, for they echo the biblical testimony. What has changed is a growing concern on my part to be able to say more exactly how Christ, in whom divine majesty and

<sup>2</sup>David F. Wells, *The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical Analysis of the Incarnation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1984).

human frailty are joined in one person, is to be heard and preached in a postmodern, multiethnic, multireligious society. Indeed, not to proceed in this endeavor would be an unhappy outcome because theology, if it is true to its own nature, must be missiological<sup>3</sup> in its intent. Its task is not only to understand the nature of biblical truth but also to ask how that truth addresses the issues of the day. Churches today who send out missionaries to other parts of the world would be considered greatly mistaken if they instructed those missionaries to depend only on the Word of God and not to attempt to understand the people to whom they have been sent to minister.

The history of the church shows that in every generation there are cultural challenges. The two motifs that are now transforming culture—the emergence of the postmodern ethos and the new, growing tidal wave of religious pluralism—are deep and powerful currents that are flowing through the nation. But they are not peculiar to America. In fact, Europe appears to be well ahead of the United States in its experience of postmodernity, and it also appears to be caught in more painful perplexity about immigration and its consequences. Yet there is nothing in the modern world that is a match for the power of God and nothing in modern culture which diminishes our understanding of the supremacy of Christ. From this vantage point, I have attempted in the following pages to think about the message of Christ from within the postmodern world I have spent time describing. In the first section I take up the theme of spirituality, which really speaks with the soul of postmodernity, and in the second I address how postmodern unbelief is expressing itself in the language of the meaninglessness of life.

### Christ in a Spiritual World

We begin our exploration with the emergence of a new kind of spiritual person: one who is on a spiritual quest but often pursuing this in oppo-

<sup>3</sup>I have developed the missiological nature of theology in several essays which deal with its methodology: “The Nature and Function of Theology,” in *The Use of the Bible in Theology*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 175–99; “An American Evangelical Theology: The Painful Transition from *Theoria* to *Praxis*,” in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George Marsden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 83–93; “Word and World: Biblical Authority and the Quandary of Modernity,” in *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F. Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 153–76; “The Theologian’s Craft,” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John Woodbridge and Thomas McComiskey (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 171–94; and “The Theology of Preaching,” in *God’s Living Word: Essays in Preaching*, ed. Theodore Stylianopoulos (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Press, 1983), 57–70.

sition to what is religious. That, however, may be stating the matter a little too starkly, for it suggests that religions are being understood in terms of what they actually assert. In reality, religions tend to blur in the postmodern mind and become undifferentiated from each other. That is the almost inevitable outcome of our pluralism. When religions become aware of each other in the postmodern world, they typically either lose their sharp edges or are at least seen as having done so. It is as predictable as it is desultory that 44 percent of Americans think that “the Bible, the Koran and the Book of Mormon are different expressions of the same spiritual truths.”<sup>4</sup> Yet it remains the case that this spirituality sees itself as other than what is religious, be this religion that is insistently doctrinal or religion that has become blurred by its passage through the postmodern spirit. Such spirituality threatens to rumble through evangelical faith in a way more detrimental to it than any Christian engagement with non-Christian religions. In this section, then, I need to accomplish three things: first, I need to provide some description of this new spiritual search; second, I will explore the parallels that exist between this new quest and what the church has faced before, especially in the patristic period; and, third, I need to outline what a biblical response to this search looks like.

### **The New Spiritual Yearning**

These new spiritualities are now taking their place alongside some older ones, spiritualities that are often defined over against religion but nevertheless are not averse to incorporating religious ideas. Individuals and groups who have thus turned to things spiritual have, since the 1960s, had assorted goals, some of which also overlap. For some, the aim has been that of finding peace of mind or inner transformation; in its Eastern configuration, the goal has been achieving a different kind of consciousness; in its shallowest and most banal form, it is about self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-actualization, achievements which may come in a purely secular form or as a part of spiritual self-discovery; and for contemporary gnostics, the hope is empowerment—not in the ways we encounter in gender politics, which are frequently fueled by resentment, but in the sense of connecting with a power deep within the self.

<sup>4</sup>George Barna, “Americans Draw Theological Beliefs from Diverse Points of View,” October 8, 2002. Available online at <http://www.barna.org>.

When the Enlightenment mindset dominated American culture, those who said that they looked within themselves for answers were, in all likelihood, secularists and humanists of one kind or another. In the postmodern moment in which we are living, however, those who look within themselves are not necessarily divorcing themselves from the sacred. On the contrary, many are actually believers in the sacred, which they are pursuing within themselves. They are not seeking the God of the Christian religion, who is transcendent, who speaks to life from outside of it and entered it through the Incarnation, whose Word is absolute and enduring, and whose moral character defines the difference between Good and Evil forever. Rather, it is the god within, the god who is found within the self and in whom the self is rooted. This is, for the most part, a simple perception, and as found spread throughout American society it comes with few pretensions to having great intellectual depth. Yet that is not always the case. Mircea Eliade, for example, has spoken of the “irruption of the sacred”<sup>5</sup> within life and of the complex ways in which myths and dreams are rooted in the manifestations of the divine within. It is the same belief, then, that comes sometimes in homely ways and sometimes wrapped in complexity—and yet this inward presence invariably proves to be elusive, and so the search is always unfinished. In this searching, it is hoped, there will be found the balm of therapeutic comfort, the suggestion of meaning and of connectedness to something larger.

Such searchers would include many of the 56 percent among Americans who say that in life’s crises they look within themselves for answers rather than to an outside power like the Christian God.<sup>6</sup> They are in search of a new *consciousness*. If they speak of *transformation*, as so many do, it is in terms of their own human potential, the innate sources of personal renewal that lie deep within. If they speak of their own *intuitions*, as they often do, it is with the sense of having onboard a navigational system that enables them to find their place in reality. Or, perhaps more correctly, it allows them to find a better place in reality. And if they speak of a *connectedness* for which they yearn, it is in the blurry sense that somehow the human and divine are no longer disengaged from each other but, rather, are implicated in each other.

<sup>5</sup>Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper, 1960), 15.

<sup>6</sup>Barna, “Americans Draw Theological Beliefs from Diverse Points of View.”

An outside God, such as we find in biblical faith, is comprehensible because he is self-defined in his revelation; the inside god is not. The inside god is merged into the psychological texture of the seeker and found spread within the vagaries of the self. The outside God stands over against those who would know him; the inside one emerges within their consciousness and is a part of them. Religions have their schools of thought and their interpreters, and always the debate is over who most truly understands the religion. Spirituality, in the contemporary sense, spawns no such debate because it makes no truth claims and seeks no universal significance. It lives out its life within the confines of private experience. “Truth” is private, not public; it is for the individual, not for the universe. Here is American individualism coupled with some new assumptions about God that are being glossed off with infatuations about pop therapy, uniting to produce varieties of spirituality as numerous as those who think of themselves as spiritual.

The spiritual journey in this contemporary sense does not begin with what has been given by God or with what does not change. Rather, it begins with the self. It begins in the soil of human autonomy and it gives to the self the authority to decide what to believe, from what sources to draw knowledge and inspiration, and how to test the viability of what is believed. The result is that this kind of spirituality is inevitably experimental and even libertarian. Its validation comes through the psychological or therapeutic benefits that are derived. Mixing and matching, discarding or reappropriating ideas in an endless process of searching and experimenting, is what this spirituality is about.

To say, as Harold Bloom does, that this spirituality is “gnosticism,” and that gnosticism is the “American religion,”<sup>7</sup> is, from a historical and conceptual point of view, too heavy-handed to be helpful. Nevertheless, Bloom’s case could be better made along slightly different, and more nuanced, lines.

The point of connection with the past is not so much gnosticism

<sup>7</sup>This “religion,” Bloom argues, resolves itself into a spiritual quest in which the self is both subject and object of the search. His argument is that this quest underlies much overt religion that on the surface expresses itself doctrinally and in very different ways—Roman Catholic, Mormon, Seventh-Day Adventist, and Southern Baptist. See his *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992). As a part of his argument he claims that America is gnostic without knowing it: *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 183.

but, rather, a primal spirituality which, in the early period of the church's life, came into expression as gnosticism. The theories of gnosticism were defeated and soon forgotten. However, the spirituality that they were seeking to explain is the point of connection with the past. It is this spirituality rooted in the self that assumes the liberty either to oppose or appropriate external religious forms but is resolute in its opposition to having to submit to external religious authority. It is in these ways that we are also seeing the convergence between this primal spirituality and a resurgent paganism.

When Christian faith encountered this spirituality in the early centuries, Anders Nygren declares, it had arrived at "its hour of destiny."<sup>8</sup> This was so because this spirituality was, in its outworkings, its beliefs, and its view of life, the polar opposite of what we find in Christian faith. It was an opponent. And the besetting temptation that the Church would encounter, sometimes in fierce ways and at other times in more subtle ways, was to wonder if it could lessen the fierceness of the competition by incorporating in itself elements of this pagan way of looking at the spiritual life. These two spiritualities, Christian and pagan, Nygren contrasts in the language of two very different kinds of love, *Agape* and *Eros*. From this time forth, and coming right down into the contemporary moment, the struggle is going to be how *Agape* is going to preserve itself from the persistent intrusions of *Eros*.

The opening salvos were, of course, fired in the conflict in the early church over gnosticism; today, they are being fired by the new spirituality. Although the gnosticism of the patristic period was only one particular expression of *Eros*, it is, nevertheless, worth revisiting because of its parallels with postmodern spirituality.

### **An Ancient Spirituality**

Ancient gnosticism, like the contemporary spiritual search, was a very diverse movement, and it is hard to provide a succinct definition of it. Irenaeus's survey shows how variegated the gnostic world was,<sup>9</sup> though as a set of movements, as distinct from intellectual influences, none predated the Christian faith despite Bultmann's claim.<sup>10</sup> The diversity of these movements arose from the fact that the influences behind them

<sup>8</sup>Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip Watson (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), 30.

<sup>9</sup>Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, i, 1–I, vii, 5; I, xi, 1–I, xx, 3; I, xxiii, 1–I, xxxi, 4.

<sup>10</sup>See Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Some Alleged Evidences for Pre-Christian Gnosticism," in *New*

were different: some had their roots in Eastern theosophy, others Greek philosophical speculation, and still others mystical Judaism. These sources produced some very different outcomes among the competing schools of gnostic thought which took root in Egypt and Syria, and along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. Over time, after gnosticism had become a set of movements that paralleled the church, it changed shape and in mid-career began to appropriate Christian ideas and attempted to incorporate Christian faith into its larger framework. In its final development it came right into the church, and, in thinkers like Valentinus, Marcion, and Basilides, it passed itself off as being an authentic expression of Christianity, thereby confounding definition even further.

Gnosticism proved to be an especially nettlesome matter in the early church, not because the novelty of its ideas swept people off their feet, but because its ideas, in some important respects, already pervaded that ancient world. They seemed normal, natural, and familiar. There had already been a long history of thought on some of its key elements in the East. It is not clear how Eastern thought reached Greece, but classical Greek philosophy sometimes followed some of the important paths blazed in the East, and these ideas had already permeated the world in which the church had been planted.

Here, too, is an echo of our own times. The combination of a modernized social fabric and the Enlightenment ideology that took root in it until relatively recently produced the *autonomous self*. This is the self that is not subject to outside authority and into which all reality has been contracted. The result is a radicalized individualism with a deeply privatized outlook and a mood that is insistently therapeutic. All of this has produced soil throughout society that positively invites the new spirituality. It seems normal and natural. That is why it is as difficult for the church to contest today as was gnosticism in the early centuries.

Classical Greek philosophy, like Eastern thought, depreciated the natural world and pondered the soul's alienation from it. And like the philosophies of the East, Greek thought typically came to think of the soul as being not a divine creation but a shard that had fallen away

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*Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 46–70.

from the All or Absolute and was now found in a human body. Its sense of alienation from the world came from the individuality by which it was now afflicted, individuality which expressed itself in thought and consciousness.

Greek philosophy struggled with how to relate the divine, which is remote and removed from life, with the soul and its struggles within the body. And that was where the Gnostics pushed the argument forward one or two steps. At the heart of their spiritual quest was a search for the answer to evil. Wherever they looked, whether to the firmament above or to the bodies in which their consciousness resided, what they saw was a monumentally failed work, a creation that was awry, corrupt, nefarious, and dark. All gnostic systems of thought, as a result, were philosophically dualistic or semi-dualistic, positing that what had been made had been made by an enemy of human beings. There were differences of opinion as to how to work this all out, but typically it led to the notion that either there were two ultimate principles in the universe, one good and one bad, the latter being responsible for the creation, or there was only one ultimate principle from which a series of emanations and spirits had proceeded, one of whom was eventually so far from the source of good as to be able to bring about this wretched creation. What the various gnostic teachers sought to do was to bring understanding about the human plight, to inculcate insight about the very nature of things, and, most importantly, to get people in touch with their spiritual natures. Only then could there be liberation from the clutches of what was evil.

So what is the nature of this insight that held the key to self-liberation for these ancient gnostics? It is, of course, “knowledge.” This was not really intellectual knowledge, though it was often accompanied by complex philosophical speculation. It was more of a private insight, an internal revelation, a spiritual perception, one given from within. It was not so much knowledge of God that was sought, for he was perceived to be ineffable, distant, removed, and unattainable. He is, as Valentinus said, “that Incomprehensible, Inconceivable (One), who is superior to all thought” and who, in fact, is beyond the range of all human thought.<sup>11</sup> They were far more interested in pursuing what was inside in the self.

<sup>11</sup>Valentinus, *Evangelium Veritatis*, IX, 5.

This pursuit of the knowledge of the self rested upon a double assumption. The first was, in modern terms, that *theology is nothing other than anthropology*. “For gnostics,” Elaine Pagels explains, “exploring the *psyche* became explicitly what it is for many people today implicitly—a religious quest,” not least because gnostics believed a fragment of divinity was lodged somewhere in their interior world.<sup>12</sup> What they also assumed is that *people stumble, suffer, and make mistakes not because of sin but because of ignorance*. It was, of course, to remedy this ignorance that, in the Christian phase of gnosticism, the Son was seen as bringing “knowledge” of the Father—yet this was a far cry from knowledge as it is construed biblically. Thus it is that both ancient gnostics and those postmoderns who place such value on psychotherapeutic techniques do so because above all other things they value “the self-knowledge,” Pagels notes, “which is insight.”<sup>13</sup> And this self-knowledge functions in a revelatory way which is only possible, we need to note, because of the lost understanding of sin. It is ignorance, ignorance of ourselves and especially of our spiritual nature, gnostics believed, that is the key to our ignorance of the nature of things, and of the grip that evil exercises invisibly on all things created and on ourselves not least. And it is the self that, in this situation, reveals its own connections into what is divine.

One of the chief contentions of the gnostics in their polemics against the church was that “knowledge,” in their understanding of it, is superior to “faith.” They might as well have said that they were pursuing spirituality, rather than religion, for that is what they meant. They were opposed to a doctrinally shaped and governed Christianity. They were instead pursuing enlightenment through the self, for this kind of understanding, they believed, was itself revelatory. This did not mean that they always eschewed organized religion, for some gnostics entered the churches and suggested that they were the most authentic realization of Christian faith. However, for them the church was never more than a means toward the end of their pursuit of psychic knowledge, a circumstance being played out again in church after church in the postmodern world where consumer habits have hooked up with a therapeutic orientation that now is subjugating religion to spirituality and spirituality to private choice.

<sup>12</sup>Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), 123.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 124.

In one very important respect, however, gnosticism was the antithesis of another of the church's rivals, paganism. Paganism was about nature; gnosticism was in flight from nature. Gnostics saw themselves as caught in a creation that is flawed, dark, and ominous, whose rhythms bring no connections with anything divine, and whose God is far away, alienated, aloof, and incommunicative. In this respect, they were far removed from the pantheism that was at the heart of paganism. Speaking for gnostics of all times, Bloom argues that the creator God is a "bungler" who "botched" the creation and precipitated the fall.<sup>14</sup> This creation offers no home for the human being because, he argues, originally "the deepest self was not part of creation" but was part of the "fullness of God" to which it yearns to return. This yearning, this homesickness, is what often passes as depression, he suggests. And yet, despite this significant difference, there is also an important point of convergence. "God," Bloom tells us, "is at once deep within the self and also estranged, infinitely far off, beyond our cosmos."<sup>15</sup> Here lies the point of connection with paganism: not in the worship of nature (cf. Rom. 1:18–24), but in the access to the sacred that is sought through the self, this "deepest self," which experiences itself as being adrift from life, as not being able to fit in with life, and as offering an exit from the oppressive complexities and manifold pains of this "botched" creation into what is eternal.

### **A Christian Response**

#### *Clash of Worldviews*

It seems rather clear, then, that our contemporary spirituality is in continuity with some of the different aspects of what has preceded it. In some of its expressions it has more in common with paganism; in others it is more like gnosticism. New Age, for example, what Bloom mocks as "an endlessly entertaining saturnalia of ill-defined yearnings . . . suspended about halfway between feeling good and good feeling" and "a vacuity not to be believed," has affinities that are more obviously pagan, but this wider spirituality, as we have seen, finds significant parallels in gnosticism.

Seeing how this spiritual search is both contemporary and ancient

<sup>14</sup>Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 27.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 30.

is really the key to understanding how to think about it from a Christian point of view. To put the matter succinctly: those who see only the contemporaneity of this spirituality—and who, typically, yearn to be seen as being contemporary—usually make tactical maneuvers to win a hearing for their Christian views; those who see its underlying worldview will not. Inevitably, those enamored by its contemporaneity will find that with each new tactical repositioning they are drawn irresistibly into the vortex of what they think is merely contemporary but what, in actual fact, also has the power to contaminate their faith. What they should be doing is thinking strategically, not tactically. To do so is to begin to see how ancient this spirituality actually is and to understand that beneath many contemporary styles, tastes, and habits there are also encountered rival *worldviews*. When rival worldviews are in play, it is not adaptation that is called for but confrontation: confrontation not of a behavioral kind which is lacking in love but of a cognitive kind which holds forth “the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). This is one of the great lessons learned from the early church. Despite the few who wobbled, most of its leaders maintained with an admirable tenacity the alternative view of life which was rooted in the apostolic teaching. They did not allow love to blur truth or to substitute for it but sought to live by both truth and love.

A worldview is a framework for understanding the world. It is the perspective through which we see what is ultimate, what is real, what our experience means, and what our place is in the cosmos. It is in these ways that we might speak of postmodernity as having a worldview despite the denials of its advocates and practitioners. What they are denying is having an *Enlightenment* worldview, one which is rationally structured and, from their perspective, one that is pretentious because it is claiming to know much too much. Everyone, however, has a worldview, even if it is one which posits no meaning and even if it is one that is entirely private and true only for the person who holds it.

We must go further, however. It is not just any worldview that we encounter in the postmodern world, but one that increasingly resembles the old paganisms. It is one that is antithetical to that which biblical faith requires. It is this transformation of our world, this emerging worldview, that has passed largely unnoticed. That, at least, is the most charitable conclusion that one can draw. For while the evangelical

church is aware of such things as the fight for gay and lesbian rights, hears about the eco-feminists, knows about pornography, has a sense that moral absolutes are evaporating like the morning mist, knows that truth of an ultimate kind has been dislodged from life, it apparently does not perceive that in these and many other ways a new worldview is becoming ensconced in the culture. If it did, it surely would not be embracing with enthusiasm as many aspects of this postmodern mindset as it is or be so willing to make concessions to postmodern habits of mind.<sup>16</sup>

This casual embrace of what is postmodern has increasingly led to an embrace of its spiritual yearning without noticing that this embrace carries within it the seeds of destruction for evangelical faith. The contrast between biblical faith and this contemporary spirituality is that between two entirely different ways of looking at life and at God. Nygren, as noted earlier, used the Greek words for two different kinds of love, *Eros* and *Agape*, to characterize these worldviews, and his elucidation is still helpful. In the one worldview, which he calls *Eros*, it is the self which is in the center. *Eros*, Nygren says, has at its heart a kind of want, longing, or yearning.<sup>17</sup> It is this fact, of course, which has always put the church in something of a conundrum. Is this yearning a natural preparation for the gospel, human nature crying out in its emptiness, calling out to be filled with something else? It was this thought that led Clement of Alexandria in the early church to speak of the “true Christian gnostic” as if gnosticism’s yearning for what was spiritual reached its fulfillment in Christian faith. Yet if this yearning

<sup>16</sup>The dichotomy that postmodern epistemology wants to force is one between knowing everything exhaustively and knowing nothing certainly at all. And since it would be arrogant in the extreme to claim to know what God alone knows, the only other option, it seems, is to accept the fact that our knowledge is so socially conditioned, so determined by our own inability to escape our own relativity, that we are left with no certain knowledge of reality at all. This is the epistemological position accepted by Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh. All attempts at “getting reality” right, they say, have proved to be failures, and Christians should concede as much. See their *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995). From a slightly different angle, Brian McLaren has adopted as a positive, even God-directed, development the disjunction between spirituality and religion. The religion in question for him is still evangelical, but the disjuncture he promotes leaves behind a faith that is suspicious of reason, resistant to formulated beliefs, and allergic to structures within which faith is practiced, and, of course, it is dismissive of worldviews. Unless these attitudes are allowed to reshape the way Christianity is lived out, he believes, it is doomed to die. Here, indeed, is the old liberal fear of becoming outdated coupled with the postmodern infatuation with spirituality in its divorce from religion. See his *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001). In the cases of Middleton, Walsh, and McLaren, then, the adoption of a postmodern worldview is not inadvertent at all but knowing and deliberate.

<sup>17</sup>Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 210.

is a preparation, it is one that stands in need of serious purging, for it carries within itself an understanding about God and salvation that is diametrically opposed to what we have in biblical faith. In this sense, it is less a preparation and more of a wrong turn. Why is this so?

The movement of Eros spirituality is upward. Its essence, its drive, is the sinner finding God. The movement of Agape, by contrast, is downward. It is all about God finding the sinner. Eros spirituality is the kind of spirituality that arises from human nature, and it builds on the presumption that it can forge its own salvation. Agape arises in God, was incarnate in Christ, and reaches us through the work of the Holy Spirit opening lives to receive the gospel of Christ's saving death. In this understanding, salvation is given and never forged or manufactured. Eros is the projection of the human spirit into eternity, the immortalizing of its own impulses. Agape is the intrusion of eternity into the fabric of life, coming not from below, but from above. Eros is human love. Agape is divine love. Human love of this kind, because it has need and want at its center, because it is always wanting to have its needs and wants satisfied, will always seek to control the object of its desires. That is why in these new spiritualities it is the spiritual person who makes up his or her beliefs and practices, mixing and matching and experimenting to see what works best and assuming the prerogative to discard at will. The sacred is therefore loved for what can be had from loving it. The sacred is pursued because it has value to the pursuer, and that value is measured in terms of the therapeutic payoff. There is, therefore, always a profit-and-loss mentality to these spiritualities.

#### *Sin's Disappearance*

The premise beneath all of these spiritualities is that sin has not intruded upon the relation between the sacred and human nature, that human nature itself offers access—indeed, we assume, unblemished access—to God, that human nature itself mediates the divine. Gone are the days when people understood that an avalanche has fallen between God and human beings, that human nature retains its shape as made in the image of God but has lost its relationship to God and stands in pained alienation from him.

It is no small anomaly that we have arrived at this point. How can we be so knowledgeable about evil in the world and so innocent about

sin in ourselves? Is it not strange that we who see so much tragedy through television, who are so knowledgeable of the darkness in our world, who pride ourselves on being able to stare with clear eyes and no denials at what is messy, untidy, ugly, and painful, are also those who know so little about sin in ourselves?

The reason, of course, is that we have lost the moral world in which sin is alone understood.<sup>18</sup> The religious authorities who once gave us rules for life and who gave us the metaphysical world in which those rules found their grounding have all faded in our moral imagination. Today, we are more alone in this world than any previous generation.<sup>19</sup>

The consequence is that we have come to believe that the self retains its access to the sacred, an access not ruptured by sin. In 2002, a national survey by Barna turned up the astounding discovery that despite all of the difficulties that modernized life has created, despite its rapaciousness, greed, and violence, 74 percent of those surveyed rejected the idea of original sin and 52 percent of evangelicals concurred. These were the percentages of respondents who agreed with the statement that “when people are born they are neither good nor evil—they make a choice between the two as they mature.”<sup>20</sup> Here is raw American individualism and the heresy of Pelagianism, which asserts that people are born innocent of sin, that sin is a set of bad practices that is caught later on in life rather like a disease. It is our lost moral compass that produces this fallacious understanding of human nature, and it is this fallacious understanding that fuels and drives Eros spirituality.

#### *Confrontation, Not Tactics*

As previously noted, church talk about “reaching” the culture turns, almost inevitably, into a discussion about tactics and methodology, not about worldviews. It is only about tactics and not about strategy. It is about seduction and not about truth, about success and not about confrontation. However, without *strategy*, the tactics inevitably fail; without *truth*, all of the arts of seduction that the churches are prac-

<sup>18</sup>See Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995).

<sup>19</sup>James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth: What People Really Believe about Everything That Matters* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991), 27.

<sup>20</sup>Barna, “Americans Draw Theological Beliefs from Diverse Points of View.”

ting sooner or later are seen for what they are—an empty charade; and because the emerging worldview is not being engaged, the church has little it can really say. Indeed, one has to ask how much it actually wants to say. Biblical truth contradicts this cultural spirituality, and that contradiction is hard to bear. Biblical truth displaces it, refuses to allow its operating assumptions, declares to it its bankruptcy. Is the evangelical church faithful enough to explode the worldview of this new spiritual search? Is it brave enough to contradict what has wide cultural approval? The final verdict may not be in, but it seems quite apparent that while the culture is burning, the evangelical church is fiddling precisely because it has decided it must be so like the culture to be successful.

### **Christ in a Meaningless World**

Postmoderns are remarkably nonchalant about the meaninglessness that they experience in life. Reading the works of an earlier generation of writers, existentialist authors like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, one almost develops a sense of vertigo, the kind of apprehension that one gets when standing too near the edge of a terrifying precipice, so bleak, empty, and life-threatening was their vision. That sense, however, has now completely gone. Postmoderns live on the surface, not in the depths, and theirs is a despair to be tossed off lightly and which might even be alleviated by nothing more serious than a sitcom. There are today few of the convulsions that once happened in the depths of the human spirit. These are different responses to the same sense of meaninglessness, which is one of the threads that weaves its way from the modern past into the postmodern present. What changes is simply how those afflicted with the drift and emptiness of postmodern life cope with it. In this section, then, I first need to explore this theme; second, I want to frame this meaninglessness theologically; and third, I need to think about how life's meaninglessness is addressed by Christ's gospel.

### **The Culture of Nothingness**

“The first half of the twentieth century,” writes Daniel Boorstin, was a time of “triumphal and accelerating science,” and yet it “produced a

literature of bewilderment without precedent in our history.”<sup>21</sup> At the time, this development in the modern world may have seemed strange. In the very moment of social conquest—when science and technology were promising to rewrite the script of life, to eliminate more and more diseases, to make life more bearable, to fill it with more goods—at that very moment the human spirit was sagging beneath the burden of emptiness, apparently ungrateful for all of this modern bounty.

In retrospect, however, it is not so strange. This was the moment when the Enlightenment world, which had promised so much, was showing the first symptoms of the postmodern ethos of the West, of that curdling of the soul that would leave the human being replete with goods, smothered in plenty, but totally alone in the cosmos, isolated, alienated, enclosed within itself, and bewildered. The conquest of the world, the triumph of technology, and the omnipresence of shopping malls—our temples to consumption—are not the tools by which the human spirit can be repaired. Of that there should be no doubt now, for if affluence, and the bright, shiny world in which it arises, could be the solvent of all human maladies that lie submerged beneath the surface of life, then this *anomie*, this bewilderment of soul, would long since have been banished. The truth, in fact, is that the conquest of our external world seems to be in inverse relation to the conquest of our inner world. The more we triumph in the one, the less we seem able to hold together in the other.<sup>22</sup>

The appearance of this despairing mood earlier on is, of course, associated with a wide swath of writers, but at mid-century it came to the fore not only in Sartre and Camus, but also in writers such as Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Martin Heidegger, and others, not all of whom were existentialists. In their different ways they were all reflecting the empty world they inhabited. It was empty because, on the intellectual side in the West, finding any ultimate grounding for things has become an increasingly precarious undertaking. This nihil-

<sup>21</sup>Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Seekers: The Story of Man's Continuing Quest to Understand His World* (New York: Random House, 1998), 228.

<sup>22</sup>This is the “American Paradox.” The paradox, says David Myers, is that we “are better paid, better fed, better housed, better educated, and healthier than ever before, and with more human rights, faster communication, and more convenient transportation than we have ever known.” Alongside all of this largesse, however, are the signs of life in pain and travail. Since 1960, the divorce rate has doubled, teen suicide has tripled, violent crime quadrupled, the number in prison has quintupled, illegitimate children sextupled, and the number of those cohabitating has increased sevenfold. David G. Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 5.

ism, whether philosophically conceived or merely assumed amidst the trappings and doings of Western influence, has moved out along different avenues depending upon which of several aspects is emphasized. At root, however, it operates by denying that objective ground exists for believing that anything is true or right—or simply by assuming none does. It denies that anything can be ultimate because ultimately nothing is there. There is no hub to hold the spokes; or if there is, we are unable to get our cognitive sights on it. This sometimes takes the form that one can know nothing certainly, that what is true and what is not cannot be distinguished, and that all knowledge is merely an internal construct in which the outcomes are, as a result, always provisional; still others press the attack on reality itself, arguing that in the end nothing is, in fact, real. And in the absence of any reality in which truth can be grounded, all that remains in life is power, as Nietzsche saw so clearly. If there is no ultimate reality before which we are accountable for what we think, say, and do, then there are no restraints upon the exercise of power, upon the imposition of our will on others, either at a personal level or by corporations, ethnic groups, or the state.

In America, the disintegration of the self and the disintegration of its world are not commonly expressed in the dark language of this earlier literature, though there are exceptions to this in some of the rock music from the 1970s onward which is full not only of obscenities but of violence, hatred, and fear in a world turned empty. More typically, though, when this bewilderment spilled out into the wider culture in America, it lost its edge. In this earlier literature, there were a sharpness, a painful aching loss, an unbearable emptiness, a disorientation of being, but when this sense of dislocation from life became domesticated in the wider culture it also became much tamer. It lost its acuteness. By the 1990s, when we encounter the television series *Seinfeld*, for example, this sense of internal loss and disorientation had been turned into a brilliantly acted but completely banal sitcom. *Seinfeld*, Thomas Hibbs writes, was “a show about the comical consequences of life in a world void of ultimate significance or fundamental meaning.” This show, he adds, was “by its own account, a show about nothing.”<sup>23</sup> The darkness of soul had lifted, though not its emptiness. Now we were no

<sup>23</sup>Thomas S. Hibbs, *Shows about Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from The Exorcist to Seinfeld* (Dallas: Spence, 1999), 22.

longer serious enough to do anything but smirk. The journey into the postmodern world, from the writers of the literature of bewilderment into television shows like this, is one from darkness in the depths to mockery on the surface, from suicide to shallow snickers. The Void is constant; how we live with it is where the differences arise.

Such loss of any grounding for meaning also eats away at hope. Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who was taken off to the Nazi death camps during the Second World War, has written with poignant clarity about those who survived and those who did not and in so doing illustrates this point. In the camps, the prisoners were stripped of every semblance of dignity and identity and were under constant threat of death. He wrote about the deadening of emotion that happened as a result, the apathy that so often took hold, and the protective shell of insensitivity in which they took refuge because they had to see so many unspeakable horrors. He also noted that under threat of constant beatings, insults, and degradation, prisoners had only their inner lives left, and here they could “find a refuge from the emptiness, desolation and spiritual poverty” of their existence.<sup>24</sup> Every strategy was used to stay alive. One of these was to rob the present of its power of destruction by dwelling in the past, by letting the imagination return to past events, to revisit other people, and by doing so to enter a different world. However, although the past offered some fleeting respite, it was the future that held out the hope for survival. Those who could see no future for themselves simply gave up. They were doomed. “With this loss of belief in the future,” he wrote, such a person “also lost his spiritual hold.” The prisoner would typically refuse one day to get dressed. Blows, curses, threats, and whippings were to no avail. The prisoner had given up. For such a prisoner, meaning had died because there was nothing left for which to survive.<sup>25</sup>

What is so striking is the comparison that naturally arises between these prisoners who had been stripped of every remnant of dignity and reduced to disposable refuse, and those in the postmodern West who likewise have lost their hold on meaning but for precisely the opposite reason. They have not been deprived of everything, nor have they been treated brutally. On the contrary, they have everything; they live with

<sup>24</sup>Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, trans. Ilse Lasch (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 38.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

unprecedented convenience and freedom, but the future in a world without meaning is as impotent to summon up hope and direction as was that of the prisoners who gave up in the camps. The difference, however, is that these postmoderns, unlike the prisoners, have ways of offsetting this inner corrosion. Luxury and plenty, entertainment and recreation, sex and drugs, become the ways of creating surrogate meaning or momentary distraction, or at least some numbness. It is surrogate meaning and distraction to conceal the inner blankness, the depletion of self, so that its aches can be forgotten.

### **This Side of the Sun**

Seen within a theological framework, the question of contemporary meaninglessness is one, I would argue, that has two sides to it, sociological and soteriological. Biblically speaking, meaninglessness is primarily *soteriological* in nature and only secondarily sociological; as it is experienced by people, its soteriological nature is often not comprehended. If anything is comprehended at all, it is only what is sociological, and that might well be misconstrued.

Today, postmodern culture inclines people to see the world as if it had been stripped of its structures of meaning, of its morality, of any viable worldview that is universal, and it collapses all of reality into the self. It eats away at every vestige of meaning for which people grasp. In these ways, it is one of the forms in which the biblical understanding of “the world” takes shape in the West. It therefore adds weight, or gives further reality, to what is soteriological, to that emptiness of human experience which is the outcome to alienation from God and which is the present consequence of his wrath. It is the consequence of being relationally severed from him. And that is registered in the twilight knowledge of God that still persists in human consciousness, leaving people “without excuse,” but the relational disjuncture is so substantial and complete as to leave them always disoriented, always caught in the coils of painful futility.

Nowhere is this better illuminated than in the book of Ecclesiastes. Its opening salvo is the author’s refrain, “vanity of vanities” (1:2), which recurs some thirty-one times in the book. How utterly transitory, empty, and meaningless is life! It is nothing but the pursuit of the wind. That is the word of the Preacher, considered by many to have

been Israel's King Solomon. And what he recounts is his tortured search for some contentment, some respite from, even some escape from, the relentlessly empty world he came to inhabit "under the sun."

It is useless, Solomon said, to seek for wisdom that unlocks the meaning of life, for in his search he had found only futility (Eccl. 1:17). The human being is afflicted by the longing for knowledge but thwarted in its pursuit. What we see is but the passing, fading surface, and what lies behind it is lost in obscurity. This initial search for wisdom, then, brought Solomon no peace, no inner quietude, but rather restlessness and sorrow. Nor did he find any relief in party-making, revelry, and pleasure-seeking. All of this turned out to be hollow and empty as well (2:1–2). The emptiness within could not be assuaged by ceaseless activity, or by work, or wealth (2:4–11; 4:7–12). Work brings no unmitigated pleasure but only care and carping (4:4–6). "So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun"—the rewards of which would, in any case, be inherited by another (2:20). Thus did the Preacher demolish every attempt at finding meaning "under the sun" in a fallen world. For him, it was not possible for Eros to reach into the infinite and find meaning.

Nor was Solomon alone in expressing this outlook. A number of the sentiments heard in Ecclesiastes are echoed in the book of Job. Further, in one telling sentence Paul directly links the meaninglessness of the world and the resurrection of Christ. This is important because what it tells us is that this sense of life's emptiness, the Void that is at its center, is not simply a postmodern experience; its deepest connection is not sociological but, in fact, *soteriological*. This gives us an entirely different way of thinking about this postmodern disposition.

Without the resurrection of Christ, Paul argued, his own work as an apostle would be futile, his struggles pointless, and not only would meaninglessness engulf him but it would blanket everyone, for if "the dead are not raised," he concludes, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32). His argument is rooted in the general order of resurrection, of which Christ's is the first fruit. It is the fact of this resurrection that makes the good life worth pursuing and that judges the alternative, which is a life of license, revelry, and emptiness. For Paul, it is this other order, entered finally through resurrection but that now penetrates this life, which gives it its purpose. It is this that explained

why he was willing to have his life put “in danger every hour” (1 Cor. 15:30). It explains what energized him (1 Cor. 15:10).

### **God Whispers in the Night**

That there is a twilight knowledge of God that pervades human consciousness is indisputable from a biblical angle, and it is developed in two directions that actually also intersect. And the point of intersection lies in the conscience. From one angle, the dependability, orderliness, and beauty of creation all bespeak a Creator who is in covenantal relation with the creation (Gen. 8:21–22; 9:16). In his evangelistic address in Lystra, Paul spoke of this creation, as a result, as being a “witness” to God in that “he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17; cf. Ps. 19:1–6).

The other angle from which this is seen is the fact that the human being remains a *moral* being even in the midst of great moral disorder and confusion and, not least, even as a perpetrator of moral disorder. Indeed, that is what is at the heart of the sense of human futility and confusion. By creation, we are made for a moral world that we cannot honor but from which we cannot disengage. Paul argues that this fact is illumined both externally from the creation and internally from our own moral fabric. From the creation, “in the things that have been made,” are revealed God’s “eternal power and divine nature” (Rom. 1:20). As a result, we know God (Rom. 1:21), Paul declares. Yet this knowledge, which clearly is not saving, is no match for the willful disobedience of fallen human nature. The result is that God’s existence and character are not allowed to order human life. The consequence of this is that his “wrath” (Rom. 1:18) is disclosed against every failure in the religious (“ungodliness”) and moral (“wickedness”) spheres, every failure to acknowledge God for who he is and to live life in a way that reflects his moral character.

The additional consequence of this willful disregard of God is the fact that life becomes empty and meaningless. Paul’s actual language is that “they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:21). Fallen human reason is much given to fallacious ideas and fraudulent judgments because God has given it up to a “debased mind” (Rom. 1:28). Indeed, it is not only fallen minds

that are subject to the curse of emptiness, but the whole universe suffers under this affliction (Rom. 8:20–21).

In a fallen world, Fate, Chance, Material, and Emptiness then assume God's place in life.<sup>26</sup> They become the organizing forces in the creation. The outworking of this inner hollowness nevertheless appears to be the essence of wisdom (1 Cor. 3:20)! However, the "more the unbroken man marches along this road secure of himself," wrote Barth, "the more surely does he make a fool of himself, the more certainly do that morality and that manner of life which are built up upon forgetting the abyss, upon a forgetting of men's true home, turn out to be a lie."<sup>27</sup> The vanity, emptiness, and futility of fallen reason are the affliction visited upon sinners by God's judgment. In every age, this has followed different directions. In the postmodern world today, whose center lies in the autonomous self, all of which is yielding a bountiful harvest of intellectual emptiness and moral disorder, this is not good news. What the postmodern world celebrates in its rejection of all absolutes and in its assumed right to define all reality privately is a sign of God's wrath (cf. Rom. 1:22).

People may plead ignorance in this situation, but Paul says they are "without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). Later, he develops this in terms of internal consciousness. Even the Gentiles who are without the written moral law still show that what it requires "is written on their hearts" because their conscience is actively at work within them (Rom. 2:14–15; cf. 1 Cor. 9:21).<sup>28</sup> It is no small scandal what Paul has to say here. What is revealed to all people everywhere? It is not that God is loving, though he is. It is not that he is accepting, though sinners may find acceptance with him. It is not that we can find him on our own terms, though he should be sought (Acts 17:27). No, what is revealed is the fact that he is *wrathful*. It is true that this disclosure comes alongside the fact that the creation also bespeaks his glory and the greatness of his power. Yet the greatness of his power and his glory do not obscure the fact that God is alienated from human beings. Indeed, his glory is precisely the reason that he is alienated! There is, as a result, already a faint foretaste of final judgment as the consequences of sin visit their retribution upon

<sup>26</sup>Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 43.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>28</sup>James Q. Wilson has gathered considerable empirical evidence that points to the reality of this natural revelation. See his *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press, 1993).

the sinner. This is scandalous to a postmodern ear, but locked in that scandal is the key to meaning in the world, and in that meaning there is hope.

### **God Reaches Down**

#### *The Presence of Eternity*

Given the collapse of Enlightenment rationality after the 1960s, what alternatives do we have for engaging what is ultimate, and how can we find the grounding for beliefs about truth and error, right and wrong? Or are we, like the postmodern nihilists and the earlier existentialists, obliged to live with the fact that there is no such grounding, that there is no objective truth “out there”? If natural reason cannot gain entrance to this world of what is ultimate—and postmodernists now see this to be a doomed and arrogant undertaking—then there remain only two other alternatives: the self and revelation.

Today, throughout America, as we have seen, the option that is being exercised is for the self, for Eros spirituality, for an assumed access that is unmediated into the sacred. In this new spiritual quest, it is the self that is the conduit into the spiritual world. It is through the self that seekers imagine themselves to be peering into, and experiencing, the eternal and by doing so hoping to find some meaning. And though its language was a little different, this was really the way the earlier liberal Protestantism traveled until it sank beneath the human debris of war in Europe and the Depression of the 1930s in America, incapable of addressing evil and suffering. It had no place to stand outside the culture. It could offer no judgment on human depravity. It had to assume the innocence of its own means of access into the divine, and that assumption simply blew apart.

The alternative connection to what is ultimate is, of course, revelation. In this view, it is not the human being reaching up to seize the meaning of life, or gazing into itself for that meaning, but God reaching down to explain life’s meaning. In this understanding, there can be no speaking of God, no speaking of meaning, before his speaking to us is heard. This way was treated rudely by the Enlightenment luminaries because it both limited human freedom in shaping the meaning of reality and resorted to what was miraculous in the way revelation has been given. And it has not been treated any more kindly by the post-

moderns for whom its grand, overarching Story is anathema and who do not believe that they can escape their own subjectivity. But this is the Christian confession.

The upward reach of Eros is always and forever blocked by the God who makes himself inaccessible to it. Biblical faith is about Agape, about God reaching down to disclose himself to those who could not otherwise know him, and about grace reaching those who otherwise could not be restored to him. This downward movement of Agape, this majestic condescension of God as he graciously makes himself known to us and in that knowledge gives to us an understanding of life's meaning, and therefore hope, is developed in the New Testament in terms of an *eschatological* redemption.

Thus, Christian hope has to do, biblically speaking, with the knowledge that "the age to come" is already penetrating "this age," that the sin, death, and meaninglessness of the one is being transformed by the righteousness, life, and meaning of the other. More than that, hope is hope because it knows it has become part of a realm, a kingdom, that endures, where evil is doomed and will be banished. And if this realm did not exist, Christians would be "of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:19), because their hope would be groundless and they would have lived out an illusion (cf. Ps. 73:4–14).

For a long time in traditional systematic theologies, eschatology occupied the final section of the work and was concerned with "the last things" or "the end times," with matters like the return of Christ, the millennium, judgment, and the destruction of evil.<sup>29</sup> However, one of the great gains in biblical study in the last century was the realization that eschatology is not some final adjunct to the body of theological knowledge but more like a thread that is woven throughout its many themes. And it was the coming of Christ that radically transformed it. The conquest of sin, death, and the devil and the establishment of the rule of God do not await some future, cataclysmic realization. It has, in fact, already been inaugurated, although its presence is quite unobtrusive. As Oscar Cullmann notes, "that event on the cross, together with

<sup>29</sup>Pannenberg has correctly observed that because "God and his lordship form the central content of eschatological salvation, eschatology is not just the subject of a single chapter in dogmatics; it determines the perspective of Christian doctrine as a whole. With the eschatological future God's eternity comes into time and it is thus creatively present to all the temporal things that precede this future." Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 3:531.

the resurrection which followed, was the already concluded decisive battle.”<sup>30</sup> Thus it is that, in the period between Christ’s two comings, “this age” and “the age to come” coexist. As a result, eschatology, or the penetration of God’s future into the current time of sin and death, is light that floods across a number of New Testament doctrines. Certainly in soteriology, everywhere there is the “already/not yet” tension that the presence of eternity in time creates<sup>31</sup>—or, more accurately, that the presence of Christ’s victory that is already present amidst fallen human life creates.

In Paul, the present age is the age characterized by sinful rebellion against God, and the age to come is that in which Christ reigns. However, this reign has already begun redemptively in the regenerate church of which Christ is the head. The linguistic contrast between these ages is most explicit in Paul’s prayer that Christ might be seen in his exaltation “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come” (Eph. 1:21). But, as Geerhardus Vos suggests, it is implied in a number of other passages: Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 1:20, 2:6, 8, 3:18; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Galatians 1:4; Ephesians 2:2; 1 Timothy 6:17; Titus 2:12.<sup>32</sup> This present age belongs to Satan, “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4), but for the believer, this age or world has passed, its so-called wisdom has been exposed by Christ (1 Cor. 1:20). Paul is not always precise as to where the line lies between these ages. He can speak of the age to come as being in the future (Eph. 1:21; cf. 2:7) but he can also speak of it as being present (1 Cor. 10:11; 1 Tim. 4:1). It seems clear that for him it is not so much the language that matters but the *fact* that an inbreaking of divine power and grace has happened through Christ that is sending its clarifying, revealing light into life (Rom. 16:25; Gal. 1:12; Eph. 3:3), as it brings eternity into time.

Paul’s Christology, therefore, also encompasses the language of the kingdom of God in the Gospels. To believe on Christ is to enter the kingdom and is to become a part of the age to come. Paul, however, expands this thought far beyond the personal and ecclesiastical. If

<sup>30</sup>Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), 84.

<sup>31</sup>This language is borrowed from Rudolph Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity: History and Eschatology* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957).

<sup>32</sup>Geerhardus Vos, *Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 12.

Christ is the Lord whom every believer serves, the Head to whom the whole churchly body is responsive, he is also the Creator from whom everything derives its existence, the center without which there is no reality. Whether above in the starlit firmament or below within human consciousness, Jesus has “supremacy” (Col. 1:15–20).

In this fallen world, and in their fallen lives, those who are alienated from God are a part of this age, which is now passing. It has no future and there are intimations of that in the depths of human consciousness where a tangle of contradictions lie, for we are made for meaning but find only emptiness, made as moral beings but are estranged from what is holy, made to understand but are thwarted in so many of our quests to know. These are the sure signs of a reality out of joint with itself. This is what, in fact, points to something else. These contradictions are unresolved in the absence of that age to come which is rooted in the triune God of whom Scripture speaks. He it is who not only sustains all of life, directing it all to its appointed end, but who also is the measure of what is enduringly true and right, and the fountain of all meaning, purpose, and hope.

