

THEOLOGIZING

A Ministry of Biblical Antithesis in a World of Synthesis (Part one)

By Jay Wegter

Whether a pastor or a layman, there is a biblical calling upon every Christian man, husband, and father to be a theologizer. Believing men are to be biblical teachers in the body of Christ and in the home—to ‘steward’ of the truth in such a way as to set forth from Scripture the knowledge of God in Christ, the meaning of human existence, and the path of life.

Paul issues the following command to young pastor Timothy: “Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you” (2 Tim 1:13-14). The verbs, ‘guard’ and ‘retain’ infer that the communication of God’s transformational truth will be resisted, both by individuals, and by the culture at large. Therefore, it is highly useful to identify the major points at which the Word of God stands in antithesis to the assumptions of culture, especially those which have been assimilated by Evangelicalism.

Theologizers need to know how postmodernity has affected the church

Author David Wells provides penetrating insights into the shift occurring within Christian culture. In his book, *God in the Wasteland*, he makes the following observations:

Postmodernism eats away every transcendent reference point, for in postmodernism there is no longer any meaning outside of self. Human potential becomes the disordered self in need of order. The empty, dismantled self (with its inner void), runs to psychology to fill it. Religion becomes completely based upon self.ⁱ The boundary between God and self becomes fuzzy. An encounter with God does not depend upon an infallible truth-based belief and idea, but upon an inward experience. In the culture of modernity, the Creator-creature distinction is in trouble. The traditional biblical theism of God external, instead of internal is falling apart.ⁱⁱ

As a consequence, there is a new epistemology in religion (a new method of knowing). Our culture, schooled in the “Kantian” mind superimposes its own opinions upon the data.

Our culture suffuses experience with the divine. In so doing it confers divinity on the self. Feeling replaces reason. Dependence upon the awe of God in His transcendence is lost.ⁱⁱⁱ Wells makes some disturbing observations about the cost of disregarding theology within evangelicalism: there is trauma in retaining the Scriptural, theocentric God of grandeur. The radical reconstruction of self by God’s revealed doctrine is needed, or the knowledge of the Holy One will not sink in. The cost of retaining the knowledge of God is the real trauma of ongoing repentance.^{iv} That is the very opposite of the feel good, therapeutic approach.

Objective in-scripturated redemptive history is the revealer of who God is. God’s redemptive presence in truth and holiness are found only on His terms, not ours. We must have God transcendent in holiness, or we do not know Him. But, in much of evangelicalism today

God's moral "otherness" is converted into relatedness. Thus, in the transition from transcendence to immanence, God becomes a convenient means to satisfy self.^v We are witnessing the loss of God's "otherness" within compromised Evangelicalism. Man without the transcendent has lost his roots in the world, pseudo-freedom comes at an infinite cost—a palpable lost-ness pervades. There is no sense of God's providence, it's but a chance universe moving toward an uncertain end. Or, as one of my unsaved friends recently wrote to me, "I have benefitted many times by this 'force' known as providence." By contrast, Christ is the Architect of providence. His cross is at the center of providence.^{vi} But, post-modernity champions a 'salvation' of esoteric self-help, for it views fulfillment as achieved through the process of looking within. The disconformity in the world is internalized into privatized meaning. This is why we are seeing an increasing civility toward other religions. The exclusivity of the gospel is minimized as social causes eclipse the word of the cross. In postmodern humanist thought, society's economic power structures are corrupt, but self is not. Self is innocent—thus, self provides an accurate vantage point from which to interpret the world.^{vii}

The Church exists in a world of personal preferences and no absolute truth. It is catastrophic when the Church disguises itself to meet post-moderns on their own philosophical turf. When the Church assumes this posture, the point of contact with the unsaved world is marketing. The consumer's interest is the new *wicket gate* in postmodernism. Consumer interest becomes the "entrance" to the narrow way of salvation. Evangelical spirituality will someday be indistinguishable from New Age spirituality (David Wells). Once that takes place, salvation will be equated with, and reduced to the 'commodity' of personal wellbeing. When the Church attempts to appeal to the modern world by erasing its antithesis to the world, she instantly loses her divine message. The secret of engaging the world has for the last 2000 years been, "Christ's cross, or the world." Without this antithesis, the Church cannot be salt or light.^{viii}

How has postmodernism cleared the way for the new spirituality?

Heathen spirituality is flourishing in our present postmodern climate. The underlying motifs of the postmodern mind are: 1) No comprehensive worldview. 2) No driving divine purpose to fill the world with what it lost spiritually. 3) No fidelity to God's truth—therefore the absolute truths of orthodox Christianity have no place in the world. The above motifs of postmodernism form the perfect soil mix in which neo-pagan spirituality has germinated.

In the new spirituality, the correspondence view of truth is gone. What the Bible says is no longer seen as corresponding to reality. Various religions are not viewed as competitors, but only as possible sources for 'spiritual' insights and ideas.^{ix} The 'new spirituality' focuses on personal experience and healing for the individual, not upon God's infallible interpretation of life and the cosmos. The new spirituality is at home in the postmodern world because the private view of 'truth' has been disengaged from the public view of truth. The correspondence view of truth (God's infallible self-revelation) is passé—spirituality as therapy reigns supreme.

The new spirituality is replete with syncretism (synthesis between truth claims). Neopaganism is not shy about raiding ideas from other religions—all the while retaining the postmodern view that self is autonomous. The new spirituality is hostile to any kind of revelation which is both universal and true in an absolute sense. Today the assumption is that we have the freedom to express a multitude of ‘spiritualities’—and that it is highly implausible that there is a central single meaning of life, nor any viable authoritative interpretation of it.

Mega seeker churches have popped up like oversized mushrooms in our postmodern culture. Why? Because it is easy to gain a hearing for what is ‘spiritual’ in the self-help, human potential, therapeutic sense of the word. But, it is not easy to cultivate loyalty to religious propositions which are spiritually ‘tough’ in a counter-cultural way. In congregations filled with seekers, one will seldom find a sharp antithesis between God’s truth and culture. The reasons why are that the new spirituality is about the journey, not the destination. Unlike Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the postmodern spiritual journey does not have the destination as its purpose. Postmodernism has become a lifestyle with Jesus as ‘mascot of the spiritual journey.’ And, in sharp contrast to the new spirituality, the true Christian begins his life of faith with the burden of sin left at the cross. His ‘pilgrimage’ is not about the experience, or wandering, or being a seeker—the genuine Christian always knows where he was headed. He has a controlling destiny—conformity to Christ and the glory to come. In true Christianity, the entire journey to glory is framed in moral realities set by the Lord (Rom 6:20-23; 2 Tim 1:8-14).

Seeker-ism can be spiritual suicide when it shucks off all cognitive structures and minimizes the value of revealed truth in the life. The new spiritual quest today is aimed at the person who desires a pursuit that is the opposite of religious (by ‘religious’ is meant that one’s ‘spirituality’ is grounded in God’s absolute truth revealed in Scripture). The new spirituality is a greater threat to evangelicalism than false religion. For, pursuit within the new spirituality does not seek God who is transcendent, who speaks to life from outside of life—whose Son came from above. The new spirituality is not seeking to hear God as speaking outside of them—as the transcendent One—instead they seek the god who is found in self and self’s goal of wellbeing.

In the new spirituality, the distinction between the human and the divine is becoming blurred. We live with those who *look within*—and who do not necessarily divorce the self from the sacred. Contemporary spirituality spawns no debate because it makes no truth claims, and it seeks no universal significance. Truth is private, not public—“truth is for the individual,” not the universe. The new spirituality is a mere coping device without a common worldview. By contrast, Christianity demands that we live within doctrinal barriers established by God whose saving purposes are fixed from eternity. Our holy God, on account of His holy character imposes on humans His standards of belief and behavior. The new spirituality stands in opposition to the historic faith, for the journey does not begin with what has been given (the changeless Word of God), rather, it begins with self. The original autonomy lie told in Eden gives self the authority to decide what to believe, what sources of inspiration to select, and what modes of spirituality and experimentation will validate the self and provide therapeutic benefit.^x

What will happen if Evangelicalism keeps sipping the 'hemlock' of Eros spirituality?

'Eros spirituality' is that aspect of the new spirituality characterized by a buoyant optimism that self is capable of achieving divine contact and personal spiritual wellbeing. This is the polar opposite of God's electing love which comes down to the helpless sinner in redeeming, sovereign, *Agape* love. What we are seeing today is a convergence between primal heathen 'spirituality' and the neo-pagan spirituality. The soil of the new spirituality includes the old Enlightenment ideology in combination with radicalized individuality in which the self is subject to no outside authority. In this modernized social fabric, privatized therapeutic spirituality actually seems normal and natural!

In Eros spirituality, knowledge is not academic per se, but is private revelation, and spiritual insight—with spiritual insight being equated with spiritual liberation. By contrast, true religion is God-centered. Gnostic spirituality is self-centered, for in pagan spirituality ignorance of self is equivalent to an ignorance of the nature of things. The Gnosticism Paul opposed was deadly, for it eviscerated the meaning of Christ's atonement. Under Gnosticism, the events of the cross do not effect man's redemption, they are only spiritual symbols.^{xi}

A loss of the correspondence view of truth has become the soil in which the new spirituality is growing. The new spirituality regards the reality of the sacred self to be jeopardized by religion, which is why we frequently hear the refrain, "I am spiritual, but not religious." The need to discern between the true and the false is considered a 'bad habit' to be abandoned. The only litmus test in neo-paganism is pragmatism, what is useful therapeutically. By contrast, Scripture sets forth self-love as an adversary which is hostile to the love to God (2 Tim 3:2; 1 Jn 2:15-17). The new spirituality endorses *reinventing* and *remaking* the self, thus it carries the seeds of destruction of the Evangelical faith through its 'Eros' spirituality.

The discerning theologizer knows that there are innate instincts about God that are diametrically opposed to biblical Faith. There are two Greek words which encapsulate the two ways of looking at God: *Eros*, and *Agape*. The first is natural, the second divine. *Eros* is the upward reach (as in the architecture of Asia's temples). It is the journey to connect with the divine. *Eros* projects the human spirit into eternity. *Eros* is human love void of the Spirit, desiring to control the object of its desires. *Eros* spirituality is built on the assumption that human nature can forge its own salvation. This *Eros* is at the heart of the new spirituality. By contrast, *Agape* is downward. God's love sovereignly finds the sinner, redeeming and seeking that which was lost. Christ dies for the helpless (Rom 5:6-8).

God cannot be manipulated by the human spirit. Only grace alone from the outside can save. Human questing and seeking for its own sake is still unbelief. The locus of true faith is what God has spoken, and how God has decisively acted in Christ. The new spirituality seeks to justify self which is equivalent to being the enemy of faith. Many 'doing church' in a seeker-

sensitive experiment have only seen the surface habits of postmodernism. They have not really understood *Eros* spirituality! Seeker-ism poses the danger of emptying evangelicalism of theology. Theologians, here is an acute warning: without theology, Christianity in our postmodern setting moves ever closer to *Eros* spirituality. What we call, ‘reaching our culture’ with the tactics and methodology of seeker-ism and marketing may prove to be more about seduction than truth. When the church tries to be like our culture in order to be successful, she won’t be able to explode the deadly worldviews of the new *Eros* spirituality.^{xii}

In order for the church to respond to the new spirituality, she will have to address the three major heretical perspectives held by neo-paganism: 1) Sin has not produced death and separation from God. 2) Self is innocent and sacred, but fragmented and in need of self-realization. 3) Human nature itself offers access to God (human nature mediates the divine). The premise behind these erroneous ‘spiritualities’ is that sin has not intruded upon the relationship between the sacred and human nature. The new spirituality assumes unblemished access to God. There is a loss of sight of the disaster of human depravity on the image of God. The language of grace is gutted because there is no authentic perception of forgiveness without feeling the full impact of the enormity of what has been forgiven (Lu 7:36-50). It is a fallacious understanding of human nature that drives *Eros* spirituality. Our perceived innocence leads to the assumption that the sacred is easily and conveniently accessible to us (hence seeker-ism and consumerism are bedfellows). The truth is that God has ‘shut up all in disobedience’ (Gal 3:22; Rom 11:32).

What is the answer? Biblical antithesis—truth exposing error is the ‘antibiotic’ that destroys the pathogen of *Eros* spirituality

God’s truth corresponds to reality, whether revealing the counsels of the Creator or the contents of the human heart, God’s truth is a faithful representation of what’s out there.

Therefore, to know truth is to know *what is there*. Biblical truth is publicly given within the framework of redemptive history. God’s revealed truth is given in the context of the history of redemption in which God discloses His character and saving purposes (Eph 3:8-11). The Spirit of Truth invades sacrosanct areas and spaces and deconstructs them. God respects no sacred spaces other than the ones He fills! The postmodern construct of the new spirituality says that there is a sacred reality. This is a contemporary version of ancient idolatry. The truth is: *God brooks no rivals*. He respects no self-constructed sacred spaces.^{xiii} I find myself thinking deeply about this invasive nature of God’s truth every time I travel to Asia. For, while in that continent I am surrounded by emblems of *Eros* spirituality—dirt-poor villagers pool their resources to erect polychrome temples covered with the images of their gods—all with the *Eros* confidence that they possess the ability to appease their gods (1 Cor 10:20).

‘*Eros* spirituality’ dies in the presence of God’s Word because biblical truth destroys the sinner’s sovereignty. The sinner’s imagined sovereignty is at the heart of the new spirituality. But grace is only grace when there is no synergism—no cooperation with *Eros* desires and human effort. The Christian faith is about listening to the Word of God—in utter

dependence upon God's revelation. By contrast, *Eros* tries to reach up in self-sufficiency. *Eros* is spiritual arrogance. The church is charged with the responsibility of proclaiming the Word of God. When the Word is faithfully proclaimed, it overturns one's instincts about self and God. Herein is the radical antipathy between the new spirituality and true Christianity, it is the difference between *listen to self*, and *listen to God's Word*. It is the *self*, versus divine revelation. The upward of *Eros* is forever blocked by God who makes Himself inaccessible to it.^{xiv}

Biblical faith is about agape love—God reaching down to disclose Himself to those who would not otherwise be restored to Him. The Word of God says that there is a boundary between God and humans—a boundary of human sin and inability that can only be understood through the Scriptures (Jn 6:44-45). God's revelation is needed in order to understand that by reason of man's sin, God is hidden and man is blind. Only by the biblical revelation is the boundary made visible. The barrier is only apprehended by the aid of the Word and the Spirit; the truth understood overturns our primal pagan instincts. The meaning of *Agape* is God reaching across the boundary to sinners. In His revelation, He destroys illusions, frauds, and misconceptions which sinners have perpetrated on God and the cosmos. God's *Agape* is downward, gracious, condescending. He makes Himself known to us by way of gospel knowledge that gives understanding of life's meaning which corresponds to objective reality.

God's sovereign love (Agape) revealed in His Word destroys all false worldviews. The cross of Christ killed all private worldviews. God's *in-breaking* into history through Christ is *Agape*, not *Eros*. To be confronted with Christ is first of all to be confronted with one's sin against God—the reason being is Christ is the manifestation of God's glorious holiness (Jn 14:9; Heb 1:1-3). We desperately need God's testimony concerning our lost condition. The believer discovers that in Christ—Creator and Redeemer are one (Col 1:15-20). Christ is the reference point for all reality. How radical this stands in opposition to postmodern spirituality which seeks meaning and salvation in self.

Dear theologizer, here is your calling: Christianity flourishes best when its distinctions from Eros spirituality described above are sharply preserved. Without this biblical antithesis Christianity becomes 'sickened' (and vulnerable) when these distinctions are not preserved. Spiritual 'seekers' want a constructed spirituality that works for them (for sustaining relationships, for finances, for management of stress, for conflicts at work; etc.). They do not come to church to find the kind of truth by which church is defined, history is interpreted, and life is lived unto God. Seekers are 'buyers' who have a product in mind. Marketing methods keep customers satisfied. Techniques are more important than truth because truth calls for repentance, for contrition, for radical humility, for self-denial.^{xv}

In part two of this two-part series, we will examine, and deconstruct the cultural forces that seek to marginalize and muffle the teaching role of godly men.

End Notes:

ⁱ David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, pp. 94, 97

ⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 99, 100, 103

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 105, 107

^{iv} David Wells, *No Place for Truth*, p. 115

^v Ibid, pp. 116-117

^{vi} Ibid, pp. 120-122, 159

^{vii} Ibid, p. 212

^{viii} Ibid, pp. 219-222

^{ix} David Wells, *Above all Earthly Powers; Christ in a Post-modern World*, pp. 88-114

^x Ibid, pp. 119-132

^{xi} Ibid, pp. 135-148

^{xii} Ibid, pp. 148-162

^{xiii} Ibid, pp. 164-175

^{xiv} Ibid, pp. 179-185

^{xv} Ibid, pp. 204-232