

Commendations

As it turns out, our age is not quite so *secular* as we thought. The purely pluralistic, live-and-let-live, totally tolerant society that promised to transcend religious conflict was always an illusion. The fool may be able to say in his heart that there is no Jehovah God, but he cannot, try as he might, quite extinguish the *sensus divinitatis*. Man's religious affections must be directed somewhere.

In this brisk, invigorating, highly readable book, Ascol and Longshore call on Christians to get *woke*, so to speak, to the present situation. That is, they diagnose what really ails our culture—the ascendancy of a new religion that is, indeed, God-less but not deity-less; secular but not religion-less. This new religion comes in many forms, but it is always and everywhere tyrannical. Its yoke is not easy, its burden heavy. Its god is the autonomous, ever-malleable self. Its sacrament is destructive, its liturgy gobbledygook, and its eschatology an unforgiving immanentization of the eschaton.

But the authors don't stop with a Sun Tzu diagnosis. A much-needed call to arms, a call to recovery of doctrine and practice, is issued. Evangelicals have been resting on their laurels—the vestiges of a bygone era—for so long that they have not yet realized that they have real competition on the block. They haven't noticed the insurgency that is captivating the hearts and minds of their sons and daughters. More dire still, they have forgotten how to put on the full armor of God and meet the enemy in the field head on. Ascol and Longshore are clear-eyed but confident in their assessment, hopeful in their plea, and determined in their charge. Do get this timely book.

Timon Cline

Writer at *Modern Reformation* and *Conciliar Post*, and contributor to *By What Standard? God's World...God's Rules*.

I am thankful that for years Tom Ascol and Jared Longshore have been sounding the alarm of the dangers of social justice. It is as if the strong winds of social justice that have been blowing out of Europe have gathered into a massive hurricane over the Atlantic Ocean. The outer bands of this horrific storm have long ago made landfall here in North America—having already inflicted much damage to the American church.

Sadly, for many evangelical leaders, their alarm has fallen on deaf ears. Not willing to be perceived as offensive or divisive, many Christians have

chosen to remain silent or, even worse, embrace social justice. The evangelical church is starting to be torn asunder. But the real damage of social justice is still pending. When the eye of the hurricane arrives (if it hasn't already arrived in the year 2020), social justice will wreak utter havoc on those who remain unprepared. If the church does nothing, if the church doesn't prepare and board up its windows and doors by equipping the saints to hold fast, I am not sure what will remain standing.

With such a devastating tempest approaching, I want to stand alongside Tom and Jared and encourage everyone to read this book. My plea is for pastors and Christians to heed this clear alarm and secure multiple copies of this book to share with everyone they know. Tom and Jared rightly describe social justice as "the new religion of secularism." They explain that it has a false gospel, a false law, a false priesthood, a false spirit, and a false god ("worshiping creation rather than the Creator"). But, unlike Christianity, this new religion prohibits the liberty of conscience and the freedom of speech. It has no room for disagreement. And even more dangerous, this new religion seeks, through political activism, to wield the power of the sword so it can censor those who do not bow the knee to their unjust view of justice.

How is the church to endure the furious winds of social justice? The remedy, according to Tom and Jared, is found in affirming the biblical distinction between law and gospel, educating our children, affirming our commitment to the local church, and reminding our civil authorities that Christ will justly judge them by His law. There is much work to be done in the days ahead of us. Thus, I hope you will join me in trying to get this book into as many hands as possible. This is an excellent book that is much needed.

Jeffrey D. Johnson

Pastor of Grace Bible Church and
President of Grace Bible Theological Seminary, Conway, AR

In 2020, a very real virus was used as the rationale for restricting civil and religious liberties and justifying government intrusion into the *when*, *where*, and *how* of corporate worship services, revealing that Christians in the United States of America face the same problem as many pastors. Desiring to be liked, we grow lax in speaking words that would bring conviction concerning the sins in the room. A misguided attempt to maintain public witness has become a means whereby we affirm popular pagan ideologies. Unquestioned subservience to secular society is seen as a way to sustain our social capital. Whereas Christians

of yesteryear did not fear death, preached the hard truths of Scripture regardless of the results, and either fled from or fought against tyranny, today our attitudes and actions toward the aforementioned ideals are virtually indistinguishable from those of the world. The colonists of America look petty in light of what we have endured in 2020. The convictions for which Christians were once willing to die are seen as unnecessarily divisive today. What was once valued as virtuous is now considered selfish and evil.

But the recognition of God-given rights by government authorities is not only good for you and me; it is good for the spread of the gospel, human flourishing, and the glory of God. If our government was made for a religious and moral people then we shirk our duties when we keep our Christian faith from the public square. Our countrymen are some of our nearest neighbors. We cannot in good conscience sit idly by and kowtow to a culture that is anti-Christ at its core simply because we lack the strength or courage to do otherwise.

In this book, Tom Ascol and Jared Longshore address arguments and attitudes about the topics of science, health, economics, racism, and church and state relations through the lens of Scripture, pushing Christians to reclaim these principles of strength and courage which are so sorely lacking in our context today. God help us.

Rev. Christopher Lee Bolt, Ph.D.
Pastor at Elkton Baptist Church, Elkton, TN

In this book, Tom Ascol and Jared Longshore have faithfully sounded the trumpet of warning like faithful watchmen on the wall (Ezekiel 33). But they have done more than identify a crafty, encroaching enemy; they have also blown the silver trumpet blast that summons God's people to war (Numbers 10:9). This book is full of practical wisdom that is firmly grounded in God's Word, and the authors write with passion and with muscular clarity. They write like men—men who gladly embrace their God-given masculinity and the responsibility that goes along with it. We have had quite enough of “Be Nice and Inoffensive.” We are overflowing with “Be Tolerant and Sensitive.” It is high time that we were admonished to “Be Strong and Courageous.”

Dr. Jim Scott Orrick
Pastor of the Bullitt Lick Baptist Church, author of *Mere Calvinism* and *Seven Thoughts that Every Christian Ought to Think Every Day: Laying a Foundation for a Life of Prayer*

In this powerful and timely book, Tom Ascol and Jared Longshore offer Christian leaders a bracing, sober, and clear-eyed examination of many cultural challenges facing the church in America—a culture that is increasingly driven by forces of lawlessness, anarchy, and deconstruction. Their clarion call is for the church of Jesus Christ to rise up, overcome her complacency, and boldly fulfill her God-given mission to advance God’s kingdom of light into the darkest corners of society.

What marks this book throughout is the deep passion for God and His Word. Ascol and Longshore uphold Jesus Christ is King over all, and His Word in Scripture is our highest authority—not just in the church but over all creation. They provide several practical, biblical recommendations for Christ-followers to live faithfully in the midst of “a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15).

Highly recommended!

Scott D. Allen

President of the Disciple Nations Alliance, and author
of *Why Social Justice is Not Biblical Justice: An Urgent
Appeal to Fellow Christians in a Time of Social Crisis*

I found *By What Standard* so useful in defining the jargon of the “woke” movement that I purchased copies for all our students. *Strong and Courageous* takes the next step by equipping believers to react biblically to the “social gospel” heresy.

Dr. Charley Holmes

President, BMA Theological Seminary,
Jacksonville, TX

Christian faithfulness in America requires more of us in the twentieth century than in any previous generation. The advance of liberalism in every public and private sphere now claims many once reliably conservative denominations. These sweeping waves of leftist progressivism were considered revolutionary before, but are seldom detected by the poor standards of contemporary orthodoxy. Both strong and courageous, Tom Ascol and Jared Longshore call Christians to deeper commitment to God’s all-sufficient Word and greater confessional clarity for advancement and preservation of the Gospel.

Ryan Helfenbein

Vice President of Communications and Public
Engagement at Liberty University and Executive Director
of the Falkirk Center for Faith & Liberty

Clearing garbage from our hearts so we can see accurately—or should I say, smell truthfully—to clear the garbage from our society is no mean undertaking. This book shows clearly that the living word of revelation containing the soul-saving power of gospel truth has an expansive energy and changes not only believing hearts and church bodies but is intended to be a leaven in society. The authors contend that neither pastors nor the sheep of their flocks can become privatistic or escapist in their pursuit of true piety. They also must be courageous and well informed about the idols within society that challenge the sole authority of the one true God who rules through the victory of Christ over sin, death, the devil, and hell. The dominating idol of self, the unchallenged sense of personal will and prerogative as the chief and only good, expresses itself in many destructive forms: abortion (or the modern expression of Molechism), critical race theory, intersectionality, atheistic and secularistic commitments as the foundation of education, lawlessness of aggressive destruction claimed as a right, movements toward political tyranny, and actions that intrude without warrant on the religious liberties of the people.

This book gives careful attention in each chapter to the gospel and the way its central truths challenge each of these paths to self-destruction. There is no diminishing the importance of reaching heaven at last, but how the gospel informs our steps along the way in this world receives creative and forceful attention. The authors explore the tension between obeying God rather than men while being subject to the governing authorities. They induce thinking about how the Christian should honor the governing officials that God has given us while we take seriously the task of pressing and educating them to see that they are finally responsible to God and his law. This book might not warm the heart, but it will press the mind to engage in some real heart work, attaining a life characterized by truth-informed courage.

Tom J. Nettles

Author, Church Historian,
Retired Professor of Church History and Historical Theology
at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY

Through the centuries, the greatest challenges to the church have always come from within, and so it is with today's American church. Threatened from without by an increasingly hostile culture and a government some have weaponized to advance a progressive agenda, the greatest threat to the church nonetheless comes from those within her ranks who would repurpose the gospel, not as means of radical personal transformation and salvation through the person of Jesus Christ but as a tool to serve

earthly gods who cannot save and whose broken promises are a matter of historical record. In *Strong and Courageous*, Tom Ascol and Jared Longshore expose this fraud for what it is: a subtle, pernicious heresy whose seductive nature threatens to rent the church asunder. This is a handbook, a manual for the modern American evangelical. Read it and understand the difference between being “woke” and being awakened.

Larry Alex Taunton

Executive Director of the Fixed Point Foundation, freelance columnist, and author of *The Faith of Christopher Hitchens: The Restless Soul of the World's Most Notorious Atheist*.

The church today faces a clash with culture that demands a robust theology rooted in a submission to the whole counsel of God's Word. As aliens and exiles, whose true citizenship is in the kingdom of God, Christians must understand how to live under God-ordained human authority without compromising our ultimate allegiance to our true King, the Lord Jesus Christ. Tom Ascol and Jared Longshore perform a great service to the church by carefully expounding the theology that is needed for such a time as this. This book needs to be in the hands of every pastor to help navigate his church during the difficult days that most certainly lie ahead.

Tom Buck

Senior Pastor at First Baptist Church of Lindale, TX

Tom Ascol, PhD, has been the Senior Pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Florida since 1986. He is the President of Founders Ministries and of the Institute of Public Theology and can be heard weekly on the Sword and the Trowel podcast. He and his wife, Donna, have six children, three sons-in-law, a daughter-in-law, and fourteen grandchildren.

Jared Longshore, PhD, is the Associate Pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Florida and Vice President of Founders Ministries. He is the author of *Wisdom for Kings and Queens* and can be heard weekly on the Sword and the Trowel podcast. He serves as Vice President and Dean of the Institute of Public Theology. Jared and his wife, Heather, have seven children.

STRONG AND COURAGEOUS

FOLLOWING JESUS AMID THE RISE OF
AMERICA'S NEW RELIGION

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Tom Ascol and Jared Longshore



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With gratitude to God for the privilege of serving
Him together, we dedicate this book to our
fellow elders, Jorge Alvarez, Chris Faro, Graham
Gunden, and Don Kiah, and to the members of
Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Florida.

Soli Deo Gloria.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was more born than written. For the last few years the ideas and convictions set forth here have been forged, debated, tested, and proven in the press of everyday pastoral ministry. We have spent hundreds of hours together discharging our responsibilities to shepherd the wonderful members of Grace Baptist Church. The weight of that stewardship is what ultimately gave rise to this book. In the pages that follow we have simply tried to put into words and organize into chapters the burdens that we have borne in teaching the flock over which the Lord has made us overseers. It is to them, and to our fellow elders with whom we joyfully share that responsibility, that we dedicate this effort.

Far more people have helped get this book out in a timely fashion than we can possibly name, but there are a few who we simply must thank publicly. Mark Coppenger sacrificed time from his busy schedule to provide invaluable feedback with record speed. His observations, suggestions, encouragements, and critiques are a model of brotherly love and have proven so helpful (and often entertaining) that we would

gladly write another book just to have the benefit of his edifying input. Jim Orrick made many helpful suggestions that enabled us to say what we meant to say with greater precision and accuracy. Jeff Johnson, Chris Bolt, Tom Buck, and Rebecca Sissons also provided keen insight and help in reading an early draft of the manuscript. All of these exemplify in their respective spheres the kind of strength and courage that we commend in this book, and we are grateful for them.

Finally, we must give special thanks to our wives, Donna and Heather. They have steadily helped us refine our thinking and communication through extensive conversations about the Scriptures and the times. They have also endured some of the heartache and challenges that go with following Jesus in the face of opposition. Courageous and fruitful women they are, laughing at the time to come and dining at the table that the Lord has prepared in the presence of enemies. Without their help and joyful sacrifice, this book would have never been written.

Obviously, the mistakes and deficiencies that remain are ours and no one else's. Our hope and prayer is that what we have written will help God's people to stand firm in the evil day (Ephesians 6:13).

Tom Ascol & Jared Longshore

December 2, 2020

Cape Coral, Florida

PREFACE

A dozen or so years ago, John MacArthur came to Southern Seminary to speak, and I had occasion to thank him for the great help he'd been to me in 1984, when, as a new pastor, I found myself in a squall of dismay and opposition to my policy on divorce and remarriage. I'd stumbled into it as I was teaching through that year's January Bible Study on 1 Corinthians. Chapter 7 touched on the issue, and, with the observation that I wouldn't feel free to officiate at some weddings, the honeymoon was over.

I was swamped with literature (e.g., William Barclay and Loftin Hudson); agonizing first-person testimony ("Divorce is like dying"; "I just want my little girl to be happy"); rhetorical questions ("Are you saying it's the unforgivable sin?"; "How do you think you'll minister to them in the future?"); the counsel of prudence ("You don't want to get out too far in front of your people, or they'll mistake you for the enemy"; "With people leaving, it's not clear how we're going to be able to pay your salary"); counter-texting ("Genesis says that it's not good for man to be alone"); experiential demonstrations

(“But he’s blessed our marriage with great kids”); accusatory comparisons (“Our former pastor didn’t draw those lines, and neither do many other prominent pastors”); the classic stylistic scorecard (“It wasn’t what you said but the way you said it”); and some good old *ad hominem* (“Well, you’re just not loving”).

About two months into this, I headed out for Army Reserve duty in the Mojave Desert, and, just before I left, a friendly deacon handed me a cassette with a message on the topic by John MacArthur, of whom I was only vaguely aware. Still reeling from the conflict and some measure of self-doubt, I was suddenly taken by MacArthur’s calm, confident, and biblically reasonable case for limits on remarriage. Talk about a Balm in Gilead. Maybe I wasn’t callous after all. Maybe I was in the biblical ballpark. Maybe I hadn’t disqualified myself from the “Christlike” pastorate.

Little did I know when I thanked John on campus, decades after his desert ministry to my soul, that I would be thanking him for brand new heroics in 2020. I didn’t suspect that he would be standing tall (or even need to be) in the midst of various madnesses besetting evangelicals in this era—a concatenation of social justice, critical race theory, intersectionality, COVID tyranny, and PR idolatry.

Neither did I suspect that Founders Ministries would be taking the lead among Southern Baptists in holding the fort and advancing against the woke conceits that had beguiled many of our leaders. From my seminary days, I knew Tom Ascol as one who urged respect for and faithfulness to the theology of such forebears as John Broadus and Basil Manly, from whose names we got Broadman Press (the B in B&H). But there he was, speaking truth to the power, the powerful forces assuring us that all was well in the fold, grantees

disposed to bark, “How dare you, Sir! Move on. Nothing to see here.”

But there was something big to see, and Tom didn’t shrink from pointing it out. And it wasn’t a one-off proposition, but a faithful crusade against what I call a legion of “sensitivity thugs.” (“If you don’t accommodate, yea venerate, our feelings, we will crush you.”) Steady, steady, he and Jared Longshore have courageously and thoughtfully helped us sort things out, often through *The Sword and The Trowel* podcast.

One doesn’t have to agree with everything they conclude to see that they have set us an excellent table. (For instance, I’m not all in with the “regulative principle.”) And from that table of discourse, they have brought generous helpings of wisdom to this book—well-seasoned, nutritious fare.

It’s said that we academically/culturally insecure Southern Baptists used to strike a bargain with our liberal theological “betters”—“We’ll call you Christians if you’ll call us scholars.” Now, it seems that a host of ecclesiastical adepts, young and old, have retooled the arrangement to read, “We’ll call you deeply insightful if you call us likeable.” A fool’s game, one that Tom and Jared refuse to play.

Mark Coppenger

Introduction

SECULAR AMERICA AND THE NEED FOR A DEEPER REFORMATION

“What in the world is going on? What has happened to our nation?” Many American Christians are asking questions like these at the moment. Granted, 2020 has been an election year. But this is not just another crazy political moment. We are watching the civil expression of an inner and erroneous faith commitment. That secular faith, expressed in the Social Justice movement, is committed to a law, a gospel, and a particular vision of our world’s future structure. But it is not committed to God’s law, Christ’s gospel, or the future that will most surely come about by the work of the Holy Spirit. Regrettably, America is in trouble, in part because the secularists have been much more committed to their faith than Christians have been to the true faith.

What we see forming in America is both a theological and political movement. All of life is theological. You do not get away from God. You do not get away from being religious. Man has been created in the image of God and is going to worship something or someone. The new religion maintains deeply held convictions about the nature of the world,

humanity, ethics, justice, love, and mercy. Those convictions have been put on display in the rioting, protesting, and calls for the deconstruction of our society. While both the root and fruit are erroneous, the movement is nevertheless doctrinally informed and politically focused.

The message of this secular faith includes that America must be overthrown. Western Civilization is an evil that must be disassembled. Christianity, they say, is draped in whiteness, complete with a white Jesus and white theology. Good Christians hear that and say, “Oh, I don’t want to be a racist.” So, there is a concerted effort to get rid of all of the whiteness. The hope is that once all of that abominable whiteness is purged from among us, then the holy seed will remain. Sadly, many churches, even good evangelical churches, are being manipulated and drawn into bad paths by such logic.

Many Christians have become complicit in the agenda of this secular faith. They say, “How wrong we have been about everything! This horrible nation was birthed in irredeemable sin. Seeing how wrong we have been, we need to sit down, be quiet, and listen.” Others have sought to avoid these matters. They say, “I don’t understand these things. I’m just going to be quiet.”

To our fellow Christians, and especially pastors, our message is that the time for silence is gone. We must be willing to speak what God has said in His Word, and we must do so boldly, clearly, unapologetically, and lovingly. Our call is not to save America. We are grateful for our nation and lament to see the trajectory of our civil life. We do not want to see our nation unnecessarily destroyed. But our concerns are much deeper than the fate of a single nation. We are speaking out

because there are false teachers among us who are advancing ideas that will lead people to hell.

HARDENED SECULARISM

Secularism, in a sense, is inept. It cannot sustain a civilization. Christianity, on the other hand, can. History illustrates how societies flourish when they adopt Christian principles. Islam also has some sustaining power. While it does not have the same strength as Christianity, Islam can undergird some kind of civic life. Secularism, however, tends to fall flat.

Even so, while secularism may not have what it takes to build civilization, it sure seems to have what it takes to tear it down. Vain philosophies can do a great deal of civil damage when they harden. As long as your secularism is soft, merely an idea floating in your mind, then you won't torch too many businesses. But ideas have consequences. Eventually, the rubber of your ideas meets the road of life. That gripping point is Critical Theory¹ and all of its various offshoots. That unpleasant aroma of burnt rubber and burning local businesses, is the Social Justice movement in all of its forms.

Christians must come to see the religious nature of secularism with its sacrament of Critical Social Justice. Until they do, they will misunderstand the times and be ill-equipped to

¹ Timon Cline has wisely said, "Though myriad intellectual strands have come together to form contemporary critical theory—indeed, one of the chief characteristics of critical theory generally is that it is allergic to rigid definition—most agree that the Frankfurt School and the development of western or cultural (or some prefer "humanist") Marxism—Marxist framework applied critique of western culture— played a foundational role in this origin story." For a deeper analysis of Critical Theory see: Timon Cline, "Identity Politics and the Bondage of the Will," *Founders Journal* 118, (Fall 2019): <https://founders.org/2020/02/10/identity-politics-and-the-bondage-of-the-will>.

live wisely in them. For example, if you have a neighbor who is a Jehovah's Witness, most Christians will have no problem with you saying to him, "What you do is wrong. What you believe is wrong. Your worship is wrong. Jesus is God." Many will commend you for speaking the truth. But if you have an LGBTQ couple next door flying the rainbow flag, you will not be commended for telling them, "What you are doing is wrong. What you are committed to is wrong. What you believe is wrong. Jesus is God."

We see the faulty religion of Jehovah's Witnesses, but we do not see the LGBTQ community, the Black Lives Matter movement, or the proponents of Cultural Marxism as practicing a false religion.² Many fail to see these as actual faith commitments that will lead people to hell. The book *By What Standard* explores this idea in more detail. The introduction states,

Many have failed to see that a false religion is afoot... This false religion is the same one God gave people up to in Romans 1. We have turned from worshiping the Creator to worshiping the creature. This religious system teaches that man is God and that the human will is the holy standard. Salvation masquerades as that future state of universal equality attained by strict adherence to the Hegelian dialectic. But, in reality, it consists of satiating the unrestricted human appetite by any means necessary.

So we do not leap upon altars crying out to Baal to send fire while cutting ourselves. But we do leap up on cars as we riot in fiery streets, cutting down people's

2 For an introduction to Cultural Marxism see: Voddie Bauchum, "Cultural Marxism," Founders Ministries, January 3, 2019, <https://founders.org/sermons/cultural-marxism>.

livelihoods while crying out to finite, governmental gods. We do not sacrifice our children to Molech, but we do sacrifice them to Planned Parenthood.³

A KING LIKE THE SECULAR NATIONS

Godless kings do not limit their government. Some people maintain that the secular king will not burden them with a heavy yoke of legislation. Those same people believe that a God-fearing king would weigh them down with undesirable religious standards. But that set up is altogether backward. It is the king who fears the Lord that dawns upon men like a new day—“When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth” (2 Samuel 23:3-4).

Much of the COVID pandemic response in 2020 gave us a vivid reminder of this principle. California governor Gavin Newsom, for example, prohibited restaurants from opening in the summer. He also issued an order mandating churches not to sing or chant when they gathered. Perhaps the governor is genuinely concerned about the virus. For the sake of argument, let us give him the benefit of the doubt and say he was doing what he believed to be best for his state. Even so, what is happening here?

A governmental authority is telling Christians what they can and cannot do in worship. They can still gather; they just cannot sing. Tragically, the typical response has been pastors saying, “Romans 13, Romans 13, the governor says that we must not sing so we will not sing.” Have we forgotten that

³ Jared Longshore, *By What Standard? God's World, God's Rules* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2020), v.

we, and Governor Newsom, are people under the authority of Christ? When governors begin to dictate what the church can and cannot do, those of us who believe the Bible must come back and say, “Wait a minute, we already have dictates on what we can and cannot do in worship. Those orders are found in the Scripture.”

Those who come out of the Protestant, Reformed, Confessional background argue for the regulative principle in worship. We are not free to do whatever we want to do in worship. We have a book, and God has spoken. The Second Commandment demonstrates that God takes very seriously how He is approached in worship. We see that in the practice of the Lord’s Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11, we hear that God killed people for inappropriate attendance of the Lord’s Supper. He killed Nadab and Abihu in the Old Testament because they offered up strange fire, contrary to what He had prescribed.

So we have a divine prescription. If the governor thinks he can prohibit what God has commanded, then he has gotten out of his lane. He has been called upon by God as a civil magistrate to operate in a way that promotes what is good and punishes what is evil. Given the ill-conceived mandate of Governor Newsom, Christians were forced to obey God or Governor Newsom. The problem belongs not to the Christians in California, but to the governor of California. As Samuel Rutherford once said, “Truth to Christ cannot be treason to Caesar.”⁴

Here again, we are reminded that it is not whether, but which. It is not whether you will have faith, but which kind

⁴ Samuel Rutherford, *Lex, Rex: The Law And The King* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2020), 1.

of faith are you going to have? Are you going to have the Christian faith? Or are you going to have the secular faith?

In 1 Samuel 23, Saul is chasing David, trying to kill him. Throughout that chapter, David continues to inquire of the Lord. David discovers that the Philistines are attacking Keilah, a city in Israel. David prays, “God, should I go and fight them?” God replies, “Yes, go fight them.” Saul, meanwhile, pursues David. While Saul acquires data, he does not inquire of the Lord. However, hearing that Saul pursues him, David prays, “God, should I flee?” God says, “Yes, flee.” David flees to the wilderness of Ziph. The Ziphites go to Saul and say, “David is with us.” Saul’s reply is quite humorous. He tells the Ziphites to make more sure. “David is sneaky,” Saul says, “so bring me solid intelligence.” But, Saul does not inquire of the Lord. He pursues David, but David escapes.

Saul fails to deal with the God who exists. He was remarkably diligent with getting precise information. But, he cared nothing for God’s Word on the matter. There is nothing wrong with getting sure data. All truth is God’s truth. We should pursue it anywhere we can find it. The problem with Saul is that he wanted to get the information apart from faith in God. He trusted himself rather than his Creator.

In California, there is the “king like the nations” with all of his COVID predictions. He is not dealing with God or thinking about what God has revealed in His Word. He is not concerned with how God says to operate in the world. But he can clearly see that, because of the data, the church cannot sing in California.

We have had contact with pastors in California who are full of courage and joy. They have taken an altogether different approach. They are resolved to follow Christ. One fellow

pastor said, “I’m going to sing. And if I die from singing and catching COVID, you just tell everybody that I’d rather sing and die than live and not sing.”

A HERITAGE OF FAITHFULNESS

That kind of pastoral leadership is anything but secular. It is full of faith in God and love toward people. There is something light about such godly leadership. Christ said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

We have glorious examples of such leadership throughout church history. Caesar said, “You cannot worship anybody but Caesar.” The Conventicle Act in 17th century England prohibited assemblies. Our brothers and sisters in parts of Africa and China have often suffered from tyranny. Their response was not to go along with whatever unrighteous statute was handed down. They obeyed God rather than men (Acts 5:29). We look to these faithful Christians and stand on their shoulders. We praise God for their faith. Many went to their deaths. They were burned. They were hung. They were drowned because they determined to honor God.

Sometimes we look back on those stories and think everyone knew that the Christians had the moral high ground; their oppressors were real devilish people. But when the oppression happens in real-time, things are not so clean cut. Those who rule unjustly attempt to grab the moral high ground. When Rome persecuted the early church martyr Polycarp, he was told to repent and cry out, “Away with the

atheists!” The problem was, Rome wanted him to repent of his faith in Christ. The atheists, according to Rome, were the Christians who would not worship the emperor. Polycarp responded with courage—“But Polycarp, gazing with a stern countenance on all the multitude of the wicked heathen then in the stadium, and waving his hand towards them, while with groans he looked up to heaven, said, ‘Away with the Atheists.’”⁵

THE TOPPLING OF STATUES

Quite a few statues were pulled down in the civil unrest of the year 2020. Those toppled statues send a clear signal. From the vantage point of Social Justice, there is no honoring people who are sinners. The world must be flattened out. Such a maneuver accords with Critical Theory. The goal is a future state of universal equality. All things must be equally shared, and that includes honor. No gold medals, unless everyone gets one. No statues, unless everyone gets one. Some may claim that the statue toppling is only about racism, sexism, or homophobia. But something deeper is going on. They would try to tear down those statues regardless of the issue. They do not desire a level playing field. They desire, or at least pretend to desire, a level award ceremony podium.

But that is not the way Christianity works. Christianity has a place for commending fallen people. The faith, once for all delivered to the saints, commends certain actions and shames others. The secular-religious commitment makes no such distinction. Hardened secularism does shame things like maleness, whiteness, etc. But it does so only because

5 Roberts, A., Donaldson, J., & Coxe, A. C. (Eds.). (1885). The Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna. In *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (Vol. 1, p. 41). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company.

those identities are seen to have more power than the others. Theoretically, someday out there in the future, once everyone has the same payday, the vitriol for those oppressor identities would be gone.

If you want to adopt the modern *zeitgeist*, you will have to rewrite the Bible. Scripture says to give honor to whom honor is due (Romans 13:7). Is there some sinless person that is being spoken of in that text? Of course not. Look at Solomon, David, Moses, Paul, and Peter. All of these men are teachers from whom we are to learn. Their sins are evident. God does not paper over them. He puts them out there to be seen. Imperfect men receive honor, and the glory of the gospel is displayed.

The gospel provides real salvation for real sinners. All of us have blind spots. All of us have sin that remains in us. The virtue-signaling proponents of the new religion claim they are greater than those who have gone before. That sentiment is the spirit of the age. The church cannot go along with it. We cannot pretend that we are walking together whenever we are operating on two different bases of authority under the lordship of different gods.

A DEEPER REFORMATION

If the church is to move forward in faithfulness to Christ, then we are in need of a deeper reformation. We have seen God work in the past, but some of our past movements have been too shallow. For example, the inerrancy movement among Southern Baptists, beginning in 1979 with the election of Adrian Rogers as SBC president, was a great work that stopped short. The 20th century saw the advance of liberalism in nearly every denomination. But the Southern

Baptists resolved that God's Word was inerrant. You can hardly find anyone within the Southern Baptist Convention anymore who says the Bible has mistakes in it. Such a statement, however, was not uncommon in Southern Baptist seminaries before the inerrancy movement.

But the inerrancy movement did not go deep enough. We must not only affirm that the Bible is inerrant; we must actually read what is in it. We are not permitted to pay superficial service to the text of Scripture, pretending that it can be harmonized with every thought and imagination of man. The sword of the Spirit divides. In many cases, Southern Baptists have cared far too much about the praise of man to speak plainly the words of Scripture.

Another movement, which had many good aspects, was the Young Restless and Reformed movement. This movement was resolved to glorify Christ and held to Calvinistic soteriology. Large numbers of young people began to identify as Calvinists. T-shirts reading "Jonathan Edwards is my homeboy" were in vogue. We praise God for much that happened. But we have seen that the Young Restless and Reformed movement was not deep enough either. They had a godly ambition but failed to ground themselves in God's Word.

In *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan describes Mr. By-Ends who loves religion when it walks in silver slippers. That is what happened with many in both of these movements. It became practical to be an inerrantist, and it became cool to be a Calvinist. It is not that they were duplicitous in their thinking. Instead, there was simply a lack of resolve to take up the cross.

DOCTRINAL RECOVERY

Along with a resolve to go with Christ outside the camp, we need to recover certain doctrines and methods that have been lost. While we only have space for sketching the general direction, getting an idea of the doctrinal work required is critical to the work of reformation.

Law and Gospel

We desperately need a recovery of law and gospel. James Henley Thornwell was right when he said,

The Gospel, like its blessed Master, is always crucified between two thieves—legalists of all sorts on the one hand and Antinomians on the other; the former robbing the Savior of the glory of his work for us, and the other robbing him of the glory of his work within us.⁶

The new religion has a law, but not God's law. It has a gospel, but not God's gospel. They have an ethic, but it is no Christian ethic. They offer a process through which you can be washed partially clean, but it is not through the blood of the Lamb. That false gospel cannot stand against the true gospel of God. We need only proclaim it. Ernest Reisinger's book, *The Law and The Gospel*, is an excellent place to start to get theologically grounded on this topic.⁷

Confessionalism

We also need a recovery of robust and sound doctrine. We have glorious confessions handed down to us from our

6 J. H. Thornwell, "Antinomianism" in *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1871), 386.

7 Ernest Reisinger, *The Law and The Gospel* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2019).

fathers. Clear articulation of truth does not lead to unnecessary division. Some would avoid specificity in doctrine for the sake of unity. But that pathway never works. We do not need to avoid sound doctrine; we need to avoid pride. A fresh apprehension of the value and usefulness of confessions will strengthen the church against the rise of the new religion and help us maintain biblical orthodoxy. Tom Nettles has produced an excellent book called *Teaching Truth and Training Hearts*, in which he introduces modern Christians to their confessional heritage.⁸ The 1689 confession of faith has been translated into modern English.⁹ This resource serves as an aid to individuals, families, and church as we seek to recover our confessional commitments.

Pastoral Theology

Along with these recoveries, we need a renewed understanding and commitment to pastoral theology. Pastors are called to shepherd and defend God's flock. We receive regular communications from Christians telling us their churches are being torn apart by the social justice movement. We need to consider once again what is involved in faithful shepherding, preaching, praying, correcting, and encouraging. *Dear Timothy* is a book that details the calling and work of pastors that they might shepherd the flock of God that is among them.¹⁰ It is a timely resource for developing a healthy pastoral theology.

8 Tom Nettles, *Teaching Truth and Training Hearts* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2017).

9 Stan Reeves, *The 1689 Confession of Faith in Modern English* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2012).

10 Tom Ascol, *Dear Timothy: Letters on Pastoral Ministry* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2004).

Creation

We need a deeper understanding of creation. Perhaps the most crucial verse in all of the Bible is Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” We are creatures and there is only one Creator. This is God’s world. He brought it all into existence and has done so for His own glory. Everything operates under His authority, the way He has determined that it should operate. In order to live well in this world we have to take Him at His word and get in line with what He says.

The doctrine of creation carries many implications. If God created the world, then no place in the world is off-limits from Him. It does not matter if you are in Colorado or Florida. It does not matter if you are married or single. It does not matter if you are fighting a war or in a classroom. It does not matter if you are a president, a legislator, or a judge. Everything is His. Jesus Christ has made all, and He is Lord of all. It also follows that the creation is good. We know it is fallen. Genesis 3 tells the story. But that fall has not utterly obliterated the goodness of creation.

The Physical World

It is important to realize that mankind’s rebellion has not destroyed the goodness of the physical world. God gave us bodies. Therefore, our physical bodies are good. Life in this world, in both its spiritual and physical dimensions, is good. We indeed are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. He created the heavens. But we are also very much still living on earth before death and we must not disdain this life or the physical realities that it entails.

The secular mindset sees death as natural and universal. We all experience death. We see that it is inevitable. But death

is not natural. It is an invader, an intruder. Paul calls it the last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). At a Christian funeral, we praise God for the life that was lived, but it is right that we also grieve. Whenever we consider death we should stop and think, “An enemy has done this” (Matthew 13:28).

Christians have marching orders from Jesus. Those orders are to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit. We are to teach people to observe all that Jesus has commanded. At the funeral of a fellow-believer, we remember that one more soldier has finished the battle, and we carry on with the task assigned to us.

The Great Commission maintains a very earthly component. We see it in Jesus, announcing that He has all authority in heaven and on earth. The apostles were told to go and make disciples of all nations. We can see the earthly component to the Lord’s Prayer as well. Jesus said we are to pray, “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). There is a physical component to the Great Commission because God saves people body and soul. There are physical implications of God’s kingdom, for when His will is done on earth, it is done by people who are both physical and spiritual.

A misunderstanding of the spiritual and physical can result in all sorts of trouble. Such misunderstanding was revealed through the year 2020 with the panic that resulted from the COVID pandemic. It was also seen through the violent protests, rioting, and looting that took place in the name of “justice.” All of our work for Christ must be done by faith. But when we do it by faith, our work will regularly have tangible effects. We do not see the kingdom advance by human will or exertion, but God does use means.

As pastors who serve a local church in Cape Coral, Florida, that reality helped us and our fellow elders shepherd our congregation through that tumultuous year. Jesus has told us to make disciples. That commission could not be forsaken as we dealt with the COVID pandemic. That is why we kept regularly worshiping each Lord's Day (after taking two weeks to heed and assess the state of emergency called by our governmental officials). If the salvation of sinners were not central to the commission we have received from our King, then we would have done several things differently. But, if there really are embodied souls surrounding us who must repent of sin, trust Jesus and obey Him, then that truth determines how we will operate body and soul.

Metaphysics

We need a recovery of the true nature of reality. What is real? According to Karl Marx, the only thing that exists is the material world. Christians, however, believe in the physical and the spiritual. Spiritual things are not pretend things or imaginary things. Angels are just as real as plywood. The mainstream media, as well as certain governmental, medical, and religious leaders, served up steady doses of fear during the COVID pandemic of 2020. We were encouraged to put our hope in a vaccine, or a mask, or six feet of distance. Certainly, we are happy to commend staying home when sick, and we should all be thankful for such ready access to helpful medicines. But, we ought not forget that God once stopped a plague by telling an angel to stop killing people (2 Samuel 24:16). Too many Christians have been all about virus-avoiding tactics with little or no, "Lord have mercy."

Why has this been the case? Because we are often rank materialists when it comes to our conception of reality. The

truth, however, is that reality is more than the material world. Reality is defined by the God who made it. What is love? What is justice? What is truth? What is mercy? These realities, just as certainly as physical creatures, are what God says that they are. We are observing a present attempt to drain all of those words of their substance. This is nothing less than an effort to twist and pervert reality. But this attempt to hijack God's things will not work.

God told Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. ... Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14). When we live aware of this fundamental truth, then all of life falls into place. If we get a vaccine from the doctor, we pray, "God, make this vaccine work." If we have surgery, "Lord, help the surgeon to use all the skills you have given him and make the surgery work." If you cannot get to a doctor or do not have access to medicine, God has not changed. We ought not to be presumptuous, but He can work apart from means. If you drink a cup of coffee, you are likely going to feel a bit more energetic because it has caffeine. The wonder is that God gives you the energy every time you drink coffee. You get a good night of sleep, and you feel better. But where in the world did that come from? God did it again. We do not live in a materialistic and mechanistic universe. There is order, indeed. But the order is maintained by Jesus Christ, who "upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Hebrews 1:3).

With this mindset, you are positioned to enjoy creation without worshiping it. God's sunsets blow us away, but we do not worship the sun. We worship the God who made the sun, not the sun itself as a god. We do this because of the Creator-creature distinction. God is eternal. Creation is not God, but it is dependent on Him. So we can enjoy the gift and worship the Giver.

The Advance of the Kingdom of Christ

Too many churches seem to function with a malnourished sense of the kingdom of Christ. They have lost their eschatological vision. They might say, “Well, no, we still have it.” But, compare the action of such churches to the Black Lives Matter riots. Who is more passionate about getting their gospel out? The Black Lives Matter movement and the social justice warriors who support it, or those Evangelical Christians who automatically and passively acquiesced to governmental edicts in 2020? Far too many Christians said, “The emperor said not to gather. Therefore, we are not gathering.” The Black Lives Matter people said, “We have a mission. We have an eschatological vision for what we want to see happen.” They assembled. They proclaimed. May God awaken His people so that we will be more zealous for the cause of our God and His truth than our unbelieving neighbors are for their gods and the lies that fuel their cause. When such reviving power comes, then Christians will stand up and say, “We have a job to do too. So, with all due respect to our proper human authorities, we have marching orders from Christ and must not be deterred from our mission.”

A significant problem with American Christianity is that it is more American than Christian. We think the default is, if the emperor says it, then we have to do it. But we must remember that the emperor, like all other creatures, is under the authority of King Jesus. Christians are sojourners and strangers here. We have a King, we have a commission, and we belong to a kingdom. That kingdom is never going to fail. It does not operate like the kingdoms of this world. It must never be equated with the kingdoms of this world. The kingdom of God is spiritual, led by a body and soul resurrected King. God’s kingdom is a heavenly kingdom, full of

embodied souls, that is coming upon earth as it is in heaven. The work of reformation requires a recovery of the nature and function of this glorious kingdom.

Political Theology

Many people boast in their freedom to speak their minds and stand against injustice. But, freedom of speech arises not from a secular worldview, but a biblical one. In the Christian ethic, you have the freedom to harbor and communicate erroneous ideas without getting your head cut off. The physical sword belongs to the civil magistrate to execute judgment on criminals who do evil to their fellow image-bearers. The sword of the Spirit belongs to the church of Jesus Christ. So we persuade, proclaim, and profess, but we do not coerce a person's will. We, instead, proclaim Christ and trust Him to bring about new life.

We are experiencing the crumbling of our nation because the foundations washed away a long time ago. The Judeo-Christian principles that were there, in the beginning, have eroded. The civil magistrate holds the sword for punishing the wrongdoer. The church bears responsibility for reminding the civil magistrate that the sword he holds was given to him by the God of the Bible. Many have simplistically referred to Romans 13, claiming that it teaches de facto obedience to civil authorities. But you do not get to exegete Romans 13 without saying that your governor is a minister of Yahweh, "For the authorities are ministers of God" (Romans 13:6). That does not mean that civil authorities are to establish the exact same statutes found in Israel's Old Covenant legislation. But, it does mean that God's servants should obey their master and listen to His instruction to them when they fulfill their duties.

Because we believe the gospel, we believe in the lordship of Christ over every square inch of creation. Nothing is outside of His authority. The sword has been put in the hand of civil authorities by God. The church must be willing to say that. We need to admonish police officers not to brutalize people they are called to defend and serve. We need to commend them for their honorable service. We need to remind governors of their responsibility to promote what is good and punish what is evil.

The Spirit's Work of New Birth

The work of the Spirit remains front and center in our labor for a deeper reformation. If we are going to see things become what they ought to be, if we are to see things biblically reformed, then people must be born again. Only the regenerate trust and obey Jesus. There is this great temptation to pursue reformation in a top-down fashion. But it is not by might nor by power, but rather by the Spirit that these things come about (Zechariah 4:6). We are to trust God's promises. We are to preach. We are to work by faith and pray. All must be done by the power of the Spirit.

Our prayer is that the chapters that follow will aid the church in this work of a deeper reformation so that we might follow Christ amid the rise of America's new religion.