

CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

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My task in this address is to think about Christian discipleship in our contemporary world. Given the enormity of the task and the limitations of my time, I am going to have to limit my topic and the subjects that I can cover. One of these limitations is that I am here going to have to assume the basic, biblical teaching on the nature of discipleship. I will not be returning to these themes and rehearsing them. I assume them and my task is to *apply* them which, given the complexity of our times, is not easy. So, where do we start?

In the 1980s, it was far more plausible than it is today to think of the postmodern cognitive crisis only in narrow, philosophical terms. The issues of what we know, how we know, whether we can know with any certitude are now being made far more complex by the fact that our cognitive horizons have been unavoidably expanded. Now, our inward crisis is being framed by our globalized consciousness and that puts a slightly different edge on what it means to be postmodern. It is this mutation in our postmodern context that I wish to explore in this paper. First, I need to think about our context, this globalized postmodernity, and then in the light of this, second, I am going to select for consideration three facets which are important to our Christian discipleship. These I cannot explore in any depth but will simply offer as agenda items for what I believe should be the church's further consideration in the days which lie ahead.

I. GLOBALIZATION

The interconnectedness of the globe was becoming more and more apparent throughout the twentieth century but what all of this means has become an increasingly difficult debate. Today, some see in this development the potential for a more civilized world but others see in it nothing but danger. And certainly, there is the potential for the conquest of other societies by one means or another because of globalization. Outside the West, there is a fear that the conquest will come by Western immorality or by the American *worldview* because American technology and enterprise have

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become inextricably linked to the phenomenon of globalization. This worldview is carried by products like McDonalds, Visa, American movies, television, and rock music, all of which have become ubiquitous.¹ For still others, though, the very notion of globalization is a figment of an overheated academic imagination.

It is true that global forces of trade and information have not replaced governments, diminished nation states, subverted ethnic identity, or replaced domestic economies. In that sense, the argument for globalization is weakened.² However, if we are thinking more about the ways in which global trade and information affect our *consciousness*, then the case for globalization is much stronger.³ It is in this sense that the concept is being used here though I intend to use it modestly and cautiously.

Globalization has to do with the movement of products and information around the world. The consequence of this is that facets of life, across otherwise different cultures, become homogenized.⁴ At the same time, and as a part of this process, our consciousness is expanded far beyond our own immediate circumstances. From one angle, globalization means that the world *contracts* because more and more places look alike while, from a different angle, the world *expands* because now we are more and more conscious of places that are spatially and culturally remote from where we are.

As is so often the case, though, globalization in these ways has also provoked its own reactions. These come most often in the form of renewed nationalisms precisely because there are people, perhaps many of them, who desire to escape the homogenizing process of world economic life or, at least, desire to tame these forces within their own cultural frameworks of understanding. And certainly there are many outside the West who see these globalizing influences as deeply injurious to what is important to them such as the place of tradition, family, tribe, and religion.⁵ Here, however, I intend to focus on only two of the undeniable and most obvious consequences of globalization in the United States.

¹ Peter L. Berger, "The Cultural Dynamics of Globalization," in *Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World* (ed. Peter L. Berger and Samuel P. Huntington; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 1–3.

² On this discussion, see also Daniel Cohen, *Globalization and Its Enemies* (trans. Jessica B. Baker; Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2006) 79–96; Donald Held and Anthony McGrew, *Globalization/Anti-Globalization* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Richard Falk, *Predatory Globalization: A Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999). See also the succinct summary of the debate in Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 24–37. Clearly, globalization has come to mean different things in different economic and cultural contexts, which is what is demonstrated in Berger and Huntington's *Many Globalizations*.

³ In order to avoid diluting the concept of globalization, it is better not to include in this notion ideas of exploration from earlier centuries, imperialism, or colonialism. Cf. Vinoth Ramachandra, "Globalization, Nationalism, and Religious Resurgence," *Globalizing Theology* 214–16.

⁴ This is the argument which is developed in George Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2004).

⁵ Meic Pearse, *Why the Rest Hates the West: Understanding the Roots of Global Rage* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004) 34.

First, as a result of trade barriers and tariffs falling, national boundaries becoming invisible, and the undiminished virility of American business continuing, our markets in the United States are now saturated with consumer goods. This accessibility to so many consumer goods has brought the issues of lifestyle and affluence front and center as far as serious Christian discipleship is concerned.

Second, while our markets are saturated with products, our minds are saturated with the knowledge of other kinds of people, other religions, and other lifestyles. This is raising profound questions of self-identity, not least of theological self-identity. Both of these factors are feeding into our post-modern experience and both, I believe, have to be taken up with renewed seriousness by those intent on being Christian disciples. Let me now consider these factors a little further.

1. *Affluence and lifestyle.* Today, we live in a world where markets, from an economic point of view, are close to replacing the importance of nations. America's borders mean very little. Actually, they mean nothing in respect to communications which cross almost all national boundaries as if those boundaries were not there. Although the internet "burst on the global scene only in 1995," Catherine Mann has noted, it "now encircles the world."⁶ It embraces a billion people, half of whom are in the developing world. The fact that knowledge is instantaneous and potentially universal means that America has lost its privacy but so, too, has almost everyone else. Markets, as a result, are now being penetrated from all sides.

Sara Bongioni, for example, has described her family's attempt, here in the U.S., to live day by day without using products or ingredients made in China.⁷ This is now virtually impossible. From knockoff designer jackets at a fraction of the cost of the real thing, to frozen strawberries and apple juice, birthday candles, sneakers, television sets, toys, and even the ingredients in some of our medications, the Chinese economy is booming in America.

At the same time, of course, American products, images, and icons, are likewise being spread across the whole world as well. Coca-Cola serves a billion people each day worldwide and Hollywood produces almost nine out ten of the most watched movies in the world.⁸ McDonald's, which is both a

⁶ Catherine L. Mann, *Accelerating the Globalization of America: The Role for Information Technology* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 2006) 2. Outside the West, the high end of internet use is in Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea and the low end in the Arab world where, in 2006, only about 2% were users. Indeed, in some Arab countries, like Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates, use of the internet is restricted. But restrictions of this kind will be increasingly hard to maintain. Rasha A. Abdulla, *The Internet in the Arab World: Egypt and Beyond* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007) 77.

⁷ Sara Bongioni, *A Year without 'Made in China': One Family's True Adventure in the Global Economy* (New York: Wiley, 2007).

⁸ James Davison Hunter and Joshua Yates, "In the Vanguard of Globalization: The World of American Globalizers," *Many Globalizations* 324.

symbol of big American business and a cultural icon, has spread itself around the world, including Asia. The golden arches are now firmly planted in Malaysia, Indonesia, China, Taiwan, Singapore and the Philippines, to name only a few.

When McDonald's opened in Beijing in 1992, it was a sensation. Yuppies traveled long distances simply to be there. They were there, not just for the food which many said they did not like, but in order to make a connection with the outside world. "In the eyes of Beijing residents," Yunxiang Yan says, "McDonald's represents Americana and the promise of modernization" and modernization, of course, promises equality and democracy.⁹ The reverse side of this, though, is that McDonald's also "represents the egocentric, the noncommunitarian, the nontraditional, the foreign, the unrestrained, the self-indulgent. It represents the West," says Meic Pearse.¹⁰ In other words, McDonald's was working like a sacrament, the outward and visible sign of the golden arches promising an inward and invisible Western grace. But the grace was also a bit ambiguous.

The openness of our markets has become a bonanza for American consumers, whatever the costs we are paying by way of lost jobs. Our markets are flooded with consumer goods, many manufactured overseas where wages are lower, thereby giving American retailers some room to discount prices while also profiting.¹¹ There is enormous downward pressure on prices making ours increasingly the age of discounts and bargain-hunters: in food, clothing, home electronics, computers, and cars.¹²

This surfeit of products and services, at costs within the grasp of increasing numbers, means that almost anyone can now do what the truly wealthy alone once did and that is to create their own lifestyle and image. A lifestyle

⁹ Yunxiang Yan, "McDonald's in Beijing: The Localization of Americana," *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia* (ed. James L. Watson; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997) 41.

¹⁰ Pearse, *Why the Rest Hates the West* 43.

¹¹ David Bosshart, *Cheap: The Real Cost of the Global Trend for Bargains, Discounts & Consumer Choice* (London: Kogan Page, 2004) 1–3. Increasingly, children who help influence how \$600 billion is spent annually are the targets. The consequence of this cradle to grave blitz, Susan Linn argues, is a "hostile takeover" of our children. See *Her Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood* (New York: The New Press, 2004). Nor should it be forgotten that the globalization which brings cheap products also brings drugs, weapons, body parts, and people, among them nannies who bring maternal care, maids who do domestic work, and sex workers who provide "transient sexual pleasure" for others. "It is as if the wealthy parts of the world," write Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell, "are running short on precious emotional and sexual resources and have to turn to poorer regions for fresh supplies." (Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell, eds., *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (New York: Metropolitan/Owl Book, 2002) 4–5). Globalization, in these ways, is flourishing on the fragility of marriage, mostly in the West, and on its frenetic, unrelenting pace of life

¹² It may be that the long-term prospects are not quite so rosy since oil prices as well as those for many mineral supplies will rise as the global economy grows. This may be true even of food in the U.S., since it is now a net importer, whereas not long ago it was a major exporter. See Clyde Prestowitz, *Three Billion New Capitalists: The Great Shift of Wealth and Power to the East* (New York: Basic Books, 2005) 150–63.

used to be the subtle form of identification by which one was aligned with a particular group, say the upper class, or the wealthy. Today, we *choose* our lifestyle. It is about people projecting and “displaying their individuality and sense of style,” Mike Featherstone writes, “in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions” and thereby saying who they are or want to be.¹³ In a highly modernized society such as ours, where custom and tradition wither and choice expands almost exponentially, issues of self-identity inevitably become more and more aggravated. And matters of self-identity are often indistinguishable from matters of lifestyle because the presentation of the self to others has become a matter of choice made possible partly by what can be bought.¹⁴

What this means, of course, is that consumer goods are partly about their use but partly about their message. Even the most mundane products are associated by our advertisers with romance, desire, and the exotic and in so doing, they are linking products with self-perception. “The pursuit of the good life,” as Philip Cushman observes, has come to be associated with “the good *things* in life.”¹⁵ Consumption is not only about our material needs but also about self-understanding and self-projection.¹⁶

The danger in all of this, though, is that the meaning we adduce from the things accumulated can drift loose from reality. Image can dominate substance, appearance can substitute for reality, and the staging of a self may even end up trumping the real thing. This is why Featherstone argues that postmodern culture is without depth or boundaries, a culture in which art tends to triumph over reality. Perhaps this speaks too disparagingly. It is, nevertheless, true that postmodern culture is one in which the self is constantly under construction and one in which consumption with all of its possibilities for the creating of self-images plays a large role.

2. Knowledge is softened. If the daily world in which we live is flush with products so, too, is our consciousness now saturated with the awareness of other cultures, other religions, other spiritualities, and other lifestyles. Immigration has brought people from around the world into our cities,

¹³ Mike Featherstone, “Lifestyle and Consumer Culture,” *The Consumer Society Reader* (ed. Martyn J. Lee; Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 95.

¹⁴ “This explains,” Anthony Giddens writes, “why therapy and counseling of all kinds have become so popular in Western countries.” Freud, he goes on to say, thought that he was just introducing a scientific method for treating neuroses but this has turned out to be a method “for the renewal of self-identity, in the early stages of a detraditionalising culture.” Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 65.

¹⁵ Philip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (Reading: AddisonWesley, 1995) 68. See also Peter K. Luntand and Sonia M. Livingstone, *Consumption and Personal Identity: Everyday Economic Experience* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1992) 59–85.

¹⁶ On the way that advertising can focus attention on certain issues and use them to its own advantage, see Rodger Streitmatter, *Sex Sells! The Media's Journey from Repression to Obsession* (Cambridge: Westview Press, 2004).

peoples whose views of life may be very different from our own. Today, as a result, almost every religion is a religion in diaspora. There are “Pakistani Muslims in New Jersey, Tibetan Buddhists in Germany, European Catholics in Hong Kong”¹⁷ and many of the world’s Sikhs no longer live in the Punjab. In fact, almost every religion is represented somewhere in our large, Western cities as well as in many cities outside the West. American cities are becoming microcosms of the entire world and not least, of its religions.

It is important to remember that the inevitable comparisons which arise when religions become aware of one another is really part of a much larger picture. When consciousness is expanded, when people become aware of others, some even in far off places, everything becomes a matter of comparison from how the others live, what they think, and what their religion looks like. The sense of toleration which emerges along with our globalization is a necessity in our increasingly multi-national, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural societies in the West. But what is a virtue can also become problematic if it degenerates into relativism. Sometimes, it is true, this engagement with the “other” strengthens the particulars and distinctives of a religion but, in the West, the more common outcome is the reverse. It is a sense that religions are all tending toward the same end. And that is an outcome which is difficult to resist when religions, worldviews, and spiritualities all become aware of one another. Almost half of America, for example, thinks that the Bible, the Koran, and Book of Mormon all have the same spiritual truths.

II. BEING A DISCIPLE

In the 1980s, an astounding reversal took place. Throughout the long dominance of the Enlightenment in the West, religion of all kinds had been forced to the margins of public life. However, this cultural environment quite unexpectedly began to change with the passing of much of the Enlightenment’s hard-edged rationalism and naturalism. Pockets of these attitudes undoubtedly remain, not least in academia, Hollywood, and in some business sectors, but the postmodern ethos has also opened wide what had been a closed window. Now, religions and spiritualities are pouring into our public places. All of a sudden, there is a place under the sun for Christians to stand.¹⁸ Indeed, there is a place for all religions and all spiritualities to stand. What this has done has been to invite Christian faith out of the cultural shadows, and it has raised afresh what it now means to be a disciple in this changed situation.

This question mark hovers over the public issues which trouble our society today: issues of war and peace, of racial justice, and of the environment. In the face of these issues, what does it mean to be a disciple? And it

¹⁷ Mark Juergensmeyer, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 5.

¹⁸ See the account of this transformation in José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) 11–66.

is a question mark which hovers over the internal issues of truth, authenticity, and a global vision. I have chosen to think briefly about the latter, not because the former, the public issues, are unimportant, but simply because I believe the internal issues are more foundational.

1. *Truth.* Early on in Don DeLillo's brilliant, postmodern novel, *White Noise*, is an amusing father-and-son conversation. The father is Jack Gladney, head of the department of Hitler studies in a well-to-do liberal arts college called College-on-the-Hill. The son is Heinrich. He is fourteen years old and already has a receding hairline, maybe because his mother took a "gene-piercing substance" somewhere along the way. As father and son drive to school, rain splatters on the windshield and a conversation ensues. This had not been predicted on the radio, Heinrich comments, leaving some doubt about whether it was actually raining. Because it was not predicted, the father responds, should they suspend their senses and doubt that what they are seeing and hearing is rain? Senses are wrong all the time, counters Heinrich. But, replies the father, in some consternation, is it still not *true* that it is raining? Which truth is operative in this case, the son asks? From the perspective of someone on a distant planet, it might not be raining on this particular road at this particular time. Or, what we on earth call rain, such a person might call soap. Anyway, who knows whether it is, in fact, rain? Maybe what is splattering on the windshield is sulfuric acid produced by factories in China. And what does it mean, anyway, to claim that it is raining "now." "Now" is simply the moving line between the past and the future and the moment the word is said, what was present has already disappeared. The "now" is always in a state of dissolution.

They arrive at the school. "I watched him walk through the downpour to the school entrance," Gladney, the narrator in the novel, observes.¹⁹

The issue of truth has become a vexed matter today. In fact, we are being forced to choose between two positions, neither of which is very happy. Either there are insights into truth which are apparently untainted by the thinker's internal biases, social location, and cultural lenses, or we live in a cultural context so overwhelming that thinkers are merely ciphers waiting to be filled and determined by their cultural experience. Either "there is truth which is independent of society," Randall Collins writes, "or truth is social and not objectively true."²⁰ The first is the way of the Enlightenment and the second of the postmodern world.

The tipping point between these two options happened some time in the 1980s. By then, the earlier exhaustion of Enlightenment thinking had clearly turned into irreversible disintegration in much of our culture. The Enlightenment's attempt to build a rationalistic world with a universal narrative was in disarray. With the Enlightenment's demise, reason lost its infallibility,

¹⁹ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985) 25.

²⁰ Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 7.

science its authority, and progress its credibility.²¹ As the Enlightenment's false canopy of meaning came tumbling down, and we began to doubt ourselves as knowers, our perceptions of reality dissolved into little more than private intuitions. All of this has ignited a mighty conflagration in the academic world.

This has brought us to a critical moment because while it is the case that we are ever a part of the culture from within which we know God, it is also the case, as David Tracy has noted of historical Protestant belief, that this modernized context with its postmodern mood should not have any kind of "inner-theological significance."²² What he means by this is that in an historical Protestant methodology, the biblical Word is authoritative over all cultures, including our own, and must be normative in the construction of our theologies.

If this is true, then this speaking by God in and through the words of Scripture, and under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, must have the power to shed light on our embeddedness in our culture.²³ This speaking, after all, is a speaking into our world, the one that we inhabit by sound, sight, appetite, and inclination. It is speaking to those sounds, sights, appetites, inclinations, horizons, and ways of thinking. The meaning of biblical revelation is substantive, not adjectival, as Nicholas Wolterstorff has said.²⁴ It is true that we must struggle with reading texts aright, but it is a postmodern misstep to say that meaning flits from reader to reader indeterminately, that it is never anything more than a case of isolated, individual signification. It is precisely this captivity to our own selves, to our own autonomous subjectivity, that God must break if we are to hear his Word aright otherwise we hear it not at all. And if this hearing in fact is held at bay by our epistemological captivity, then Christian faith has to mean something different in every age and context.

The need for this kind of emancipation is not something that we understand easily. The modern ideology of the self conceals everything except a subject's own self-consciousness because in this ideology it is the self which

²¹ David Lyon, *Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999) 10. George Orwell earlier on had set out to build a utopian future of a socialist kind. However, in his devastating novel, *1984*, he shows us how putting his hope in a purely human future had turned sour. Paul Johnson observes that the problem was that he "put his faith in man but, looking at the object of his devotion too closely, lost it" (Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988) 306–7). Many postmoderns have also been walking down this same road since the 1960s.

²² David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988) 24.

²³ "We are acting out of cultural paradigms even when we are not looking," writes Joel Green, "precisely because 'culture' entails, among other things, these values and practices that form the (often unexamined) presuppositions of embodied social existence." He goes on to say that historical criticism has the obligation of initiating a "conversation" between these assumed cultural norms and the declared norms of Scripture. Joel B. Green, "Modernity, History and the Theological Interpretation of the Bible," *SJT* 54 (2001) 314.

²⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 153–82.

is supreme and at the center of reality. This is so because the fallen self insists on emancipating itself from the past, from others, and from God in order to assert its own autonomy. And that assertion is, in fact, what conceals its own real bondage. Postmoderns have rendered a small service by calling attention to the sleight of hand which is happening here since this seized autonomy can only be professed as long as its own entanglement with internal passions, motivations, and desires is denied which is what Enlightenment ideologues were wont to do. And along with those denials went any sense that we are trapped within the cultural norms of our own time.²⁵ And yet this postmodern discovery of presuppositions is hardly a novel discovery. It is, in fact, a Christian affirmation that the self which engages the text engages it from the vantage point of sinful rebellion and cultural entrapment until the grace of God has worked to loose those bondages enough for understanding and acceptance of his truth to happen.

It is not, then, only a text which will rescue us from ourselves but the *God* of that text, the God who speaks through that text and whose redemptive power is known by that text. Holy Scripture, John Webster has suggested, “is a shorthand term for the nature and function of the biblical writings in a set of communicative acts which stretch from God’s merciful self-manifestation to the obedient hearing of the community of faith.”²⁶ There is a point here but perhaps we could make it more felicitously if we said that Holy Scripture should be obediently heard in the community of faith but that that hearing is a response to, not a part of, that revelation. We do not have to be Barthians to see that Scripture is not a harmless and undemanding Word but it is the voice by which we are summoned into the very presence of God. However, if there is one thing that seems to have been lost in the experience of the American Church today, it is that.

If George Barna’s most recent polling is yielding results anywhere close to the truth, the evangelical and born-again end of American religion is, in fact, not listening. While 45% of Americans say that they are born again, only 9% have even a most minimal biblical knowledge for making life’s decisions. And even those who do have some minimal doctrinal scaffolding—those within this 9%—often make decisions based on other principles. Only 51% of those with a doctrinal framework in 2006 said that their biblical beliefs trumped all other considerations when making decisions in life.

And what of our young people? Christian Smith, in a recent and careful study, has found that among the teenagers who see themselves as Christian, the great majority are following in the footsteps of their parents in what they believe. What is quite striking is that the picture we have come to accept of teenagers, that this is a time when their internal stresses, their search for identity, and their yearning for independence inevitably produce stormy

²⁵ See Kathryn Ann Kleinhans, “The Bondage of the Will as Good News for Postmodern Selves,” *Dialog*, 39/2 (2000) 93–98.

²⁶ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 5.

rebellion is not true, at least religiously. “What we learned,” writes Smith, “by interviewing hundreds of different kinds of teenagers all around the country is that the vast majority of American teenagers are *exceedingly conventional* in their religious identity and practices.”²⁷ They are content to follow their parents’ beliefs.

However, what is equally clear is that while their formal, doctrinal, understandings of God and Christian faith are quite biblical—especially among the conservative Protestants—the actual *weight* of these orthodox beliefs in the lives of these children is also quite minimal. At the core, regardless of whether teenagers are from conservative Protestant homes or not, is what Smith calls “moralistic therapeutic deism,” the creedal elements of which are “normally assimilated by degrees, in parts, admixed with elements of more traditional faiths.”²⁸ Here, the signs of the softening of Christian knowledge are everywhere.

The central assumption in this Christianized, therapeutic deism is that God is the Creator and Sustainer of all but that he now keeps a safe distance from what he has made and this, in fact, yields what is a morally vacant universe for many of these religious teenagers. In each day “there are the specific people, pains, pleasures, and opportunities”²⁹ but in the heavens above there is only empty, unoccupied space. Nevertheless, “central to living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person,”³⁰ they believe. Religion, though, is not necessary to being good so it actually becomes “an optional individual lifestyle choice.”³¹ Finally, the chief benefit of religion is its instrumental function. It makes us feel better, helps us make better choices, and resolves troubles. Religion, the majority of our young people think, is there to help people make the choices they want to make. And in none of these points are they really different from what is being advocated in many of the churches they attend. They are simply giving us, in ways that lack the complications and subtleties that come with more maturity, what is the *de facto* American religion, one which is colonizing the different forms of Christian faith. It is essentially a religion which is non-theological because it is a religion in which God is distant, his truth is non-invasive, and Christian faith is non-particular.

It is tempting to think that the remedies for this situation can be found simply by reformulating the doctrine of Scripture or by defending older, orthodox formulations of it. This work of retrieval is not without merit but we need also to remember that the doctrine of Scripture is not unrelated to the nature of God and his redemptive purposes in this world. It is entirely possible to affirm the inspiration of Scripture and yet miss its whole point.

²⁷ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 119–20.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 166.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 157.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 163.

³¹ *Ibid.* 155.

Two-thirds of Americans, in fact, believe that Scripture is the Word of God, but only half can even name one of the gospel writers.

Scripture is not a manual for success, nor yet a textbook for therapeutic help, but the Word of *God*. It is by this Word that we are addressed by the triune God, summoned before him, and impelled to be his people in this world. It is not this Word by itself about which we must think, not about interpretive communities alone, not about the demands of deconstruction alone and not about speech/acts dynamics alone. All of these preoccupations have their place but at the end of the day we must end with what we only rarely have today, in our churches or among our young people, and that is this Word as it summons us to come outside of ourselves and to know the God who transcends all cultures and times.

The renewal of which we stand in need,³² I believe, is of *both* the understanding of truth and of our knowledge of the God of that truth. It is not the one or the other but it is the one *and* the other. This written Word, this Word of dignity, accosts us because it is true in and of itself and because, as true, it is the vehicle through which we are summoned to stand before the God of that truth.³³ It is by this Word that he, in fact, intrudes upon us, invades our private space, demands that our choices conform with his, and commands that we stand out as those who belong to another age and time, one which is eternal. It is this hearing, in fact, which will reintroduce the very unconventionality which is so conspicuous by its absence in our culturally conventional kind of believing today.

³² From his massive survey of the rise and fall of intellectual schools of thought from the past, both in the West and parts of Asia, Randall Collins has concluded that these schools are made up of thinkers who share a common set of ideas, have a common approach, influence one another, and exploit differences with other schools in order to identify and exhibit their own distinctiveness (Collins, *Sociology* 6). Indeed, creativity needs this kind of rivalry to flourish. However, the lifespan of these schools of thought has typically only been a generation, about thirty-five years, unless they become institutionalized. Schools, he says, “are best able to reproduce themselves when they are based in organizations with material property and a hierarchy of offices” (ibid. 90). These schools, though, are most effective when they are a part of a network. This is an intergenerational set of linkages, most immediately made up of teachers and their students and of like-minded associates, but also extending beyond these face-to-face contacts to include the great thinkers of the past who still inhabit minds today. “All of us,” Collins writes, “from stars to bystanders, are part of the same field of forces. The network which links us together shapes and distributes our ideas and energies” (ibid. 79). Such has been post-War evangelicalism. And now, generationally down the road, it clearly needs to have its capital renewed.

³³ As vexed as truth language has become today, it is important to remember that in the Johannine epistles, we are told that Christians *know* the truth (1 John 2:21; 2 John 1; cf. John 8:22). The gospel is “the word of truth” (Eph 1:13; see also Col 1:5; 2 Thess 2:13; Heb 10:26; 1 Pet 1:22). Paul speaks of coming to a “knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim 2:25; 3:7–8; 4:4) and of faith as “obeying the truth” (Gal 5:7). The writer to the Hebrews speaks of Christian faith as being “knowledge of the truth” (Heb 10:26), and Peter speaks it as “obedience to the truth” (1 Pet 1:22). Those who are condemned, Paul says, are condemned because they do not believe “the truth” (2 Thess 2:12). Those who are depraved in mind are depraved because they are “deprived of the truth” (1 Tim 6:5). Christianity is about him who is the Way, the *Truth*, and the Life and about how faith in the Son is made effective by the Spirit who is the Spirit of truth (1 John 5:6).

2. *Authenticity*. As DeLillo's novel, *White Noise*, opens, students are arriving at the College-on-the Hill at the beginning of a new academic year. The station wagons are laden down with the accoutrements of life. Clearly, the advertisers have won the battle for these young minds! There are "bicycles, skis, rucksacks, English and Western saddles, inflated rafts." There are "stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges." There are "the hairdryers and styling irons; the tennis racquets, soccer balls, hockey and lacrosse sticks, bows and arrows; the controlled substances, the birth control pills and devices."³⁴ Not to mention the junk food fresh from the supermarket shelves: "onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut crème patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints,"³⁵ none of which has anything to do with the basic preservation of life but all of which has to do with the life of plenty.

Here, however, is a paradox. The paradox is that while we have so much, we also have so little. Never before have our opportunities been so many, our products so abundant, or our accoutrements so numerous. At the same time, "we have less happiness," David Myers writes in his summation of many contemporary studies, "more depression, more fragile relationships, less communal commitment, less vocational security . . . and more demoralized children."³⁶ Sociologically, we are *postmodern* in terms of the sense of emptiness or uncertainty which sometimes haunts our inner life, but we are *ultra-modern* in terms of the world of affluence we inhabit. If the issue of truth finds its particular nexus in the former, the issue of authenticity comes into sharp focus in relation to the latter. This is because our abundance, our affluence, gives us choices about who we want to present ourselves as being and what we want to do with all that we have. We live, after all, in a world of images and of superficiality, on the one hand, but also in a world of hunger, deprivation, injustice, and untreated disease, on the other hand. Who are we going to be and what are we going to do? Our authenticity is tested in both of these points.

In the West today, many people think of authenticity as simply not putting on a front, telling it like it is, not hiding motives, and not acting hypocritically. The standard by which the pretense or fakery is judged is simply the self. Are we being true to ourselves? Did our actions, or the account we gave of ourselves, reflect who the person within really is? This does, indeed, give us one way of thinking about authenticity but the problem, of course, is that the self is simply incapable of authenticating its own belief or behavior. The postmodern self is self-referential and so the only bar the self has to meet, in matters of belief or behavior, is that of itself and that quickly devolves into a question only of psychological satisfaction. Did that make me feel good or not?

³⁴ DeLillo, *White Noise* 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ David G. Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) ii.

There is a different way to think about authenticity. Authenticity, theologically speaking, is not simply about being true to ourselves or about being satisfied with ourselves. It is about being true to who we are in Christ, being consistent to what we have been redeemed for, and being transparent before him by whom we have been redeemed. This kind of authenticity is quite different and, by comparison, quite difficult. Because its standard intrudes from outside the self, its immediate consequence is to demand that the self extract itself from purely psychologized ways of processing reality and re-enter the moral world which reflects who God is. This moral world has little interest in self-expression, self-esteem, or self-actualization, as we understand these terms today, and a lot of interest in self-discipline, self-denial and self-renunciation. It is still true, after all, that those who follow Christ must take up their cross and follow him and that has nothing to do with self-esteem and self-image.

This Christian self-denial and self-renunciation is not a thing in itself or simply for its own purposes. It is the necessary consequences of once again taking up our residence in the world strange to our fallen selves, the world of absolute Good which is the moral presence of God. This world is one that is bracing and, at times, hard with its sharp edges and disconcerting demands but only those who live here have any hope of living authentically in our fallen world. This moral world is one that enters ours from above, from outside of ourselves, and that is why it has the power to wrench around what we think and do. It has the power to seize hold of the self, this self that is always demanding its autonomy. In the absence of this intrusive world from above, faith always contracts into just a form of domesticated and harmless believing, more a matter of our lifestyle than a matter of our life, and in our context today, it will be a lifestyle, all too often, that is affluent and morally indifferent to others. Perhaps this is why Barna has discovered that at the level of daily living there are no ethical distinctions, no differences, between those who claim to be born again and those who say they are secularists.

Many postmoderns are acutely sensitive to fraud and know inauthenticity when they see it. Many, in fact, are almost nostalgic for what is real and are invariably impatient with what is not. And this impatience is being extended to Christians. Among Gen. Xers and Millenials, 85% in 2007 said that they believed Christians are hypocrites.³⁷ This perception may rest on little certain knowledge and may make no distinctions among different kinds of people who are self-described as Christian. However, today every instance of Christian inauthenticity, every example of a self-serving ministry, every instance of a self-promoting evangelist, every fallen leader, every empty Christian claim, simply feeds into this perception, however unjust that may be.

Being authentic is the indispensable key to Christian credibility. It requires that the angles of eternity be allowed to intrude upon and into

³⁷ David Kinnaman, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 42.

our lives. And these sharp edges will certainly cut into our affluent ways, our yearning for comfort, our self-preoccupation and, sometimes, our self-indulgence, for it is very difficult to live amidst great abundance as we do and not to be adversely affected by it. It is very difficult to have so much and yet still to care for those on the margins of life.

“If one has lived in luxury all one’s life,” remarks Nicholas Wolterstorff, “certain aspects of the biblical text will almost certainly escape one’s attention; if one has lived under oppression, certain aspects will jump out”³⁸ And the same can be said of almost every aspect of our experience in a highly modernized, beneficent, but often empty postmodern culture. Discipleship, very often, is about finding what has been lost to us, what is lost on us, because of our culture.

3. *Global vision.* Early Christianity, impelled by the Great Commission, did two remarkable things. First, it walked away from its place of birth and abandoned any thought of having a center. Bethlehem and Jerusalem, places of real historical significance in Christ’s life, nevertheless are not, as Lamin Sanneh has noted, places to which Christians have to return by way of pilgrimages.³⁹ And, second, Christian faith abandoned the language of its founder, adopted *koine* Greek, then Latin, and now it has spread itself throughout the world’s languages. This idea, that religious language belongs “to the ordinary, commonplace world of men and women, and even of children,”⁴⁰ was implicitly declared at Pentecost when multiple languages were validated by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2: 6, 8, 11) but it is quite unusual when judged by the other religions.⁴¹ However, more is at stake here than simply languages. Christianity, as Andrew Walls has often reminded us, has passed from one people group to another, from one continent to another, from one age to another. It belongs to no single language, group, culture, or time but it is within the whole Church, spread across time and rooted in multiple people-groups, that the whole wisdom of God is reflected (cf. Eph. 3:17–19).⁴² Globalization just might help us in thinking a little better about all of this.

III. IMPLICATIONS

The immediate implications for Christian discipleship, I believe, are obvious. This means, to begin with, that in no culture of the world are there privileged understandings of Scripture, for the Word of God belongs to all of the people of God. To be quite specific, the Word of God does not belong to Westerners. It is true that in the West, we have deep traditions of belief,

³⁸ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* 185.

³⁹ Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering the West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 117–18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 119.

⁴¹ See Lamin Sanneh’s discussion of this point relative to Islam in his *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992) 212–14.

⁴² Andrew Walls, “Globalization and the Study of Christian History,” *Globalizing Theology* 71–74.

refined through learning that stretches back centuries. And yet, side by side with this are the perverting influences which are part and parcel of Western thought. So, while the West has much to give to those outside it by way of its deep traditions and refined thought, it has much to learn, too, for modernity has taken an unmistakable toll on Western Christianity.

Furthermore, the Western academic tradition should not be our only conversation partner. Today, our new globalized context is reminding us that there are many other conversation partners which we need to bring into our circle of knowledge for these are raising questions which are not often pondered in the West. An increasing engagement between Western and non-Western Christian thinking could be so helpful in understanding the same Word of God which has been given to the whole Church.

It also means that missionary strategy will need to adjust to the fact that some of the peoples to whom Western missionaries once went are now to be found in our own cities. It would not be inaccurate to say that Christian faith in America has found it easier to live in the more traditional, rural areas than it has in our highly complex, dense, urban centers. Large cities bring into close proximity those of different faiths and lifestyles and, in this regard, they are at one and the same time both anonymous and intrusive. They are also morally ambiguous, complex, ethnically diverse, but culturally dynamic. Our rural areas and suburbs, by contrast, tend to be more monochromatic, less culturally dynamic, more private, and, it has often been assumed, more hospitable to Christian faith. Indeed, it is the more affluent suburbs that have been specifically targeted by the church marketers as growth areas to be exploited, not the cities.

The Great Commission, however, has not been revoked and that means that making “disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19), many of whom are now represented in our cities, is still on the agenda for all Christian discipleship. Globalization is now giving us a new venue for thinking about this.

Finally, globalization has heightened Western Christian awareness of those in other parts of the world who have little, who contend with privation, violence, corruption, and disease in ways that sometimes are scarcely even imaginable to those who live amidst the plenty and relative safety of the West. If the incarnation was about parting with riches and power in the cause of divine self-giving, we surely have a model for thinking about how Western Christians, who have the lion’s share of the resources—educational, financial, and organizational—need to be relating to the majority of Christians, who now live outside the West, and who may have few resources.

Undoubtedly, it will take great wisdom to know how to help without impoverishing by creating dependence, how to give without dominating, and how to discern where giving will make a difference and where it will not.

It is globalization which is prodding us to think more about all of these matters and, indeed, to rethink them. If we can do this in the context of truth, in the presence of the God of that truth, and with authenticity, Christian credibility will be renewed and we will have done much to show that our Christian faith is thoroughly alive and viable in the midst of this rapidly changing world.