

## SIN OF THE CENTURY, PART 1: HELPING OURSELVES

Revelation 1:12-18, Selected Texts (NASB)

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Reality as human beings perceive it is disastrously warped by our fallenness. We think we are seeing things as they really are, but Scripture says this belief is false: **“The heart is more deceitful than all else /And is desperately sick; /Who can understand it?”** (Jeremiah 17:9). Our view of truth is distorted from both the inside and the outside. Scripture makes clear that the internal distortions of reality become group efforts. The *kosmos*, or evil world system, builds huge structures of logic to make wrongdoing and false doctrine seem plausible by connecting the deceptions of individual hearts together. How quickly and powerfully this is done is seen in Adam and Eve who agreed together to act on the deception that by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they would become like God.

Sin does this in every age but with different faces. For example, many of us read Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*, while in high school. It tells the story of the infamous Salem witch trials. We all thought that we were reading a reasonably accurate historical fiction because that is how the author presented it. A few of us later found out that it was a wildly inaccurate representation designed to smear the character of Christians. When asked why he did not conform his characters to what the real people actually said and did, Miller replied: "My characters are more real than the real people themselves."

Dr. Elaine Storkey, an internationally recognized speaker on worldview issues, reports that a young woman stood up at a college symposium at which she was speaking to interject: "I want to tell what Jesus means to me." Dr. Storkey thought that she was about to hear a refreshing testimony, but the woman went on to explain that "Jesus" was the name she gave to the feeling she has when walking on the beach at sunset. Dr. Storkey asked: "Not Buddha? Not Moses?" The woman was adamant: no, that feeling was named "Jesus." Never mind that Jesus is a real historical figure.

While sin is the same monster in every time, these are evidences of the face of sin in this postmodern time. You may be inclined to think: *This postmodern distortion of reality doesn't effect me! I'm a Christian and I believe in truth!* Unless you have become sinless, the spirit of the age is still attacking you, and that includes your mind. The goal of this study is to help us understand why postmodern culture produces certain powerful spiritual dynamics in our lives and what to do about them. Then we'll be in a position to help others who are swimming in the same sea.

## THE SIN OF THE LAST CENTURY

Before we can understand the nature of the sin of the century in which we live we must understand the sin of the last century. We are painting with a very broad brush because human relations are complex, but it is fair to say that modern thinking peaked in the twentieth century. It has deep roots going back centuries, but the sin of the last century was basically the impulse to make man the center of all things and push God out to the edges of life. You might say it was the dethroning of God and the enthroning of mankind, as described in Romans: **“For they [all mankind] exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever.**

**Amen”** (Romans 1:25). In premodern Western culture God determined what was right and wrong, to a greater or lesser degree as filtered through the laws of the land and personal codes of ethics. But prior centuries also laid the groundwork for the departures of the last century. For example, philosopher John Stuart Mill proposed that the definition of good was found in what would work the best for the most people, not admitting that it would take an omniscient being to determine it. Another influential philosopher named David Hume argued that reality, or truth, cannot be known at all, only our perceptions.

These sorts of breaches in the wall of truth opened a crack through which the sinful human heart could drive a truck. What began as an intellectual experiment in the Enlightenment became the basic principle of society in the last century as David Wells described in his book entitled *No Place for Truth*. As a culture we embraced the idea of “freedom from God, freedom from authority, freedom from the past, freedom from evil” (p. 58). In that environment the same Constitution which had eventually freed the slaves was interpreted to mean that unborn babies are non-persons and therefore not protected by law. The death toll from elective abortions is now over fifty million. In that cultural environment Hitler convinced the German people that Jews were non-persons and together they killed six million of them. This was repeated by other non-Western but secular tyrants, namely, Pol Pot in Cambodia, Stalin in Russia, MaoTse-Tung in China, Idi Amin in Uganda, and we now believe that Saddam Hussein finished out the last century in Iraq with a death toll in the millions. Such is the result of making man the measure of all things.

Strangely associated with this human-centered view of reality was a powerful set of fond hopes that all the good things which come from a God-centered society could be maintained while pushing God to the periphery. These hopes were falsely based on an indestructible view of the goodness of mankind and the goodness of perpetual progress. Science would deliver us from disease, education would deliver us from social problems, economics would deliver us from poverty, entertainment would deliver us from boredom, and government would deliver us from want. At the height of modern thought, the lead singer of the rock band, The Who, cried out repeatedly in song: “I don’t need to be forgiven, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!” And all the people said, “Amen.” In other words, we’ve got the goodies of life and we don’t need God.

Western culture was able to keep the good things going without God for a while. Francis Schaeffer said that we were living on the fumes of God’s discarded blessing, like a car which is out of gas but which runs for a bit on the residual vapors. But without God as the foundation of Western culture, all the good things began to evaporate before our eyes. The same century which saw the peak of modern thought also saw the abortions and genocides I mentioned earlier. We have seen the rise of pollution, inhumane treatment of animals, the development and use of weapons of mass destruction, the extinction of species, widespread substance abuse, public acceptance of pornography, and the breakdown of the family.

## LOSS OF THE BIG STORY

As a result, Western culture has gone through a sea change from modern to postmodern. The belief that we could run our own world, keep the goodies, and relegate God to the edges has been dashed. Though many people try to describe the postmodern era as a distinctly new era, it really is the caterwauling child of modernity. Modern culture pursued science in the quest for truth even as it cut the

cord of absolute truth from God. The intense search for truth using only empirical means could not be sustained in the face of the incessant refrain: “There is no absolute truth.”

So the sin of the last century was to put man at the center of all things and push God out to the edges of life. What is the sin of our century? It is the same sin, only that God and absolute truth have been shoved completely off the playing field. They were sent to the showers by the referees of the last century, they donned their street clothes, and have gone home. People are attempting to play the entire game of life without them.

The specific face of the sin of our century is the loss of the Big Story, capital “B” and capital “S.” The Big Story is that there is an all-powerful, all-holy God who made the world and the people in it. He has provided the world with a set of absolute moral standards. The people whom God made rebelled against him and brought sin into the world, causing the catastrophic fall of all mankind and the entire created order. The same God mercifully sent his only Son to die for our sins, redeem us from our fallen condition, and restore us to fellowship with himself. This is the core definition of reality: **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”** (Genesis 1:1). Everything else springs from that.

As someone has said, “Reality is God’s home address.” He defines truth. In the modern period, God said: “I am truth,” and mankind said: “No, we define truth.” God said: “I provide absolute moral authority,” and mankind said, “No, we will provide our own authority.” God said: “I will explain to you the meaning of life,” and mankind said: “No, we will provide our own meaning for life.” Is the result hard to guess? The mark of this century is that the project of Western culture to provide truth, moral authority, and meaning for life independently of God has failed miserably and left people with absolutely nothing. Not only did we lose the Big Story of God, we lost every other story as well. We lost the very capacity and the willingness to function in any meaningful order of truth and morality.

Once the Big Story is gone, life must be lived without truth, without authority, and without meaning. That is a prescription for spiritual and cultural suicide. There is a book with the title, *Suicide of the West* by James Burnham. Jacques Barzun, the famous historian, released a telling history of Western society entitled *From Dawn to Decadence* tracing the foundational principles of our culture and showing that we are not merely losing them, we are actively throwing them all out.

So when we talk about God to postmodern people they do not disagree with our concept of God, they believe that the word cannot have any meaning. When we speak to them about salvation they do not disagree, they simply have no concept of self which might indicate that they are spiritually lost. If you do not know who you are, why should you think that you need to be saved? Postmoderns, while rejecting Christianity, are not turning in large numbers to traditional Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or anything else--they are turning either to nothing or a *potpourri* of many religions. All that is left is the self, and the claim that the individual has the right to determine all truth, authority, and meaning for himself or herself.

## CHRISTIANS IN THE POSTMODERN AGE

Somewhere in the last section many of you began to think: “This doesn’t have anything to do with me. I’m a Christian and I believe in God, truth, and morality.” I invite you to open your heart and mind to the blistering reality that all of us are affected by swimming in the sea of postmodern culture.

There is no other sea right now! There is no turning back the clock.

As evidence that this cultural megashift has affected believers in Christ today let me list their salient characteristics. We have a generation of Christians who rarely read their Bibles, have trouble believing Biblical truth, have trouble submitting to God's authority, who have little respect for pastors, elders, and deacons, and who are comfortable with immorality and heterodoxy. Because of our cultural loss of the big story, most Christians are afraid to invest our whole lives in Christ, preferring to pick and chose the parts of the Christian walk with which we are comfortable. Because we are unsure of any big story which explains everything--including the true Big Story--we hedge our bets. We choose to have a self-centered life with Jesus in it rather than a Christ-centered life.

When was the last time you read your Bible for any length of time? When you did so, didn't you find some passages where a little voice in your head was saying: *You don't really have to follow that! How can you be sure it is true? What if God isn't really there?* How many of you are willing to admit to God that you are actively on your guard against the pastor, elders, deacons, trustees, and teachers? Does the little voice say, *You can't just follow these people! You need to stay completely in control!* And when you are confronted with the challenge of God's word to live a Christ-centered life, the little voice says: *Well, it would be better not to give your all for Jesus because it might turn out to be false in the end. It would be better to get the comforts and satisfactions of this life along with Jesus so that you have it both ways.*

Ask yourself this question: What kind of church is comprised of professing Christians who don't read much Bible, follow it half-heartedly when they do, resist the pastor and other leaders, and make sure to keep one foot in the world at all times? That is a prescription for the death of the church.

This is the false wisdom of postmodern culture at work in you and me, and it's killing us. Instead of correcting the sin of the century, many churches are now organizing themselves around it. They don't teach the Bible much, they don't assume faith for participation, they don't expect the members to do anything, they refuse to confront sin, and they appeal to self-centered thinking. Worship services are designed to be human-centered so that church will seem accessible to postmodern people, and therefore God himself becomes inaccessible in his own church. Is that the church described in the Bible?

Listen to Jesus' critique of our postmodern tendencies: **“And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him”** (Hebrews 11:6). **“Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time”** (1 Peter 5:6). **“But Jesus said to him, ‘No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God’”** (Luke 9:62). The real church made up of those who believe, are submitted to God, and who are actively following him.

## THE CURE FOR THE SIN OF THE CENTURY

The cure for the sin of the century is no secret. A living experience of the glorious God as revealed in Jesus Christ has the power to drive out all the deadly foolishness of our time. The Apostle John was privileged to know Christ during his earthly ministry, but he was also given the rarest opportunity to see the true glory of Christ in a vision recorded in the first chapter of Revelation: **“Then I**

turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, ‘Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades’” (Revelation 1:12-18).

John was so riveted by what he saw--his beloved Christ shining forth in divine glory--that he instinctively fell at his feet in worship. Until the reality of who Christ is grips our minds and hearts, we will always be compromising with the sin of the century. It becomes a vicious circle: the glory of Christ is obscured by our postmodern tendencies, and that very veiling keeps us locked in compromise.

You might be saying: “Well, if I had a vision of Christ like that I would worship, too! If only I could see a miracle my faith would be strong!” Christ answered that objection: **“If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead”** (Luke 16:31). The Word of God is enough! We don’t have to repeat John’s vision because we have John’s vision of Christ in the Bible. It is not just a bunch of dead words, ink on a page: **“For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart”** (Hebrews 4:12). If you are looking for a vision of Christ to change your life, you have it already in your Bible.

Ask God to forgive your unbelief, your unwillingness to be led by him, and other compromises with the sin of the century. Ask God to help you experience his living word. Choose to stay in the word even though your gut wants to watch television or play on the computer, and you will discover that your experience of the glorious Christ will grow. Fight to stay submitted to him, and you will discover your fears of being led will evaporate. Struggle to invest your whole life in him because no half-way walk with Christ can overcome the power of the sin of the century in your life.

If you do these things in faith, not even knowing how they will help, you will discover that God has been waiting to unleash power from heaven in your life like you never imagined. If you have not yet confessed your sin to God and asked for the atonement of Christ to be applied to you in a personal way, that is where you must begin. Don't put it off. You do not have the power to overcome the tidal wave of modern and postmodern culture on your own. You need God for that.