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The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World

A Quick Focus

The Book's Purpose

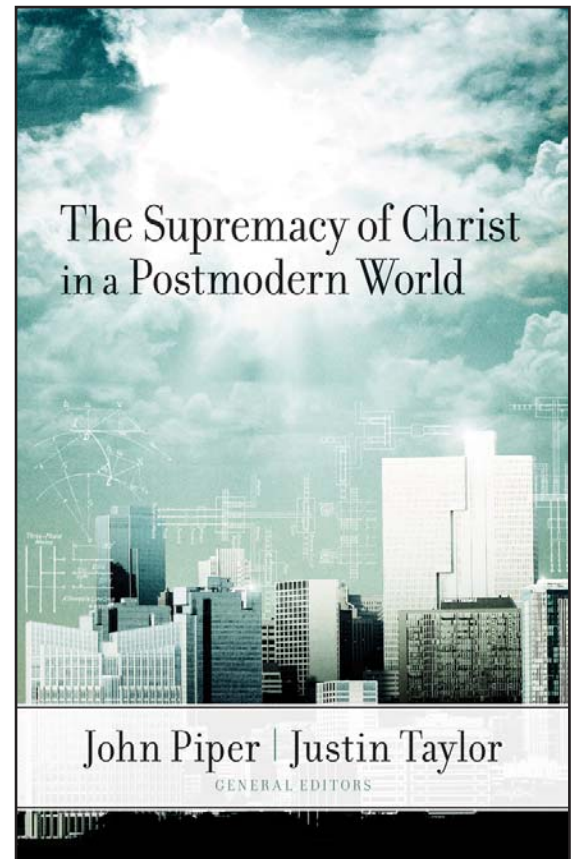
- Identify characteristics of today's postmodern culture and ways they relate to Christian faith
- Offer a practical, biblical understanding of the supremacy of Christ
- Equip Christians to present the truths of Scripture to an unbelieving world

The Book's Message

How do the postmodern mind and the biblical Christian mind grapple with life's ultimate questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is wrong with the world? How can what is wrong be made right?

How should evangelicals respond to the challenges of postmodernism? How can we place the emphasis on Christ rather than the culture as we do so?

This compilation of messages from the Desiring God national conference convened in the fall of 2006 seeks to sharpen our thinking and motivate our ministry by helping us address issues of culture, truth, joy, love, the gospel, and the church as they intersect with the truth of Christ in our contemporary world.



John Piper and Justin Taylor, Editors
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Three Main Points

- Culture and Truth 2
- Joy and Love 4
- Gospel Theologizing and Contextualizing 7

Part One:

Culture and Truth

The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World, David Wells

On September 11, 2001 America experienced the worst terrorist attack in its history. On that day thousands of Americans died, and our country was shaken. The tragedy brought into focus many issues surrounding our nation and culture, including our moral and spiritual deficiencies. But it is striking how little has actually changed morally and spiritually since that day. America has become a culture of vastly differing ideas and beliefs, and the Church has become weak in addressing the real issues of today, lacking the ability to be a voice in the midst of uncertainty.

In every generation of Christianity, there has been a culture to contend with, learn within, and reach out to. Today's Church must do the same for our society, or it will cease to have a mission mind-set. Currently in America, there are two realities transforming culture. The first is the emergence of the postmodern ethos and the second is the growth of religious and spiritual diversity. It is no longer necessary to travel to other countries to observe religious and spiritual diversity. This diversity is evident in everyday life—in our neighborhoods, schools, and cities. These various influences on society morph together, mixing truth with lies and causing each influencing factor to grow dull. ***“Such spirituality threatens to rumble through evangelical faith in a way more detrimental to it than any Christian engagement with non-Christian religions.”***

When the Enlightenment mind-set dominated American culture, only the secularists and the humanists looked within themselves for answers. But in today's postmodern culture, a wide array of people—including even those who believe in the sacred—seek it within themselves. A widespread belief is that truth is found in one's experience, not in a mandate or an order for a larger society. Many seek comfort and connectedness through experimentation. This postmodern spirituality has many similarities to Gnosticism.

Ancient Gnosticism is also hard to define, as it was composed of various kinds of beliefs. Those beliefs were easily accepted into society because they fit naturally into humanistic thinking. Self was the central theme. Ancient Gnosticism held that knowledge was the key to understanding. “Self-knowledge” allowed people to grasp the human plight, and as such was superior to faith. Gnostics generally denied the doctrines of Christianity and believed they possessed a higher level of spirituality than others who clung to a God outside of themselves.

Proponents of Gnosticism believed they were trapped in a creation, or a nature, that was deeply flawed, without hope of reaching the divine. Such beliefs distinguished them from Paganism. However, the Gnostics shared common ground with Pagans in their belief that the sacred was accessible through the self. This very belief summarizes the challenge of the spiritual environment today—partially rooted in Gnosticism and Paganism, current spirituality has the potential of poisoning the unsuspecting Christian's faith. To see this from a Christian point of view, we must look at society's spiritual search and understand it from both a current *and* an ancient view.

“Those who see only the contemporaneity of this spirituality ... usually make tactical maneuvers to win a hearing for their Christian views; those who see its underlying worldview will not.”

We do not need more programs or church fads. What is needed is strategic planning and an understanding of foundational worldviews that lead to the contemporary thinking. Christians and the evangelical church must understand that embracing the postmodern mind-set is antithetical to living out a Biblical worldview.

The various spiritual beliefs engaging our culture have a common foundation. Each of these beliefs sees human nature as capable of accessing God by looking within, without acknowledging the fallen state of man or the need for repentance of sin. We each carry the divine within, but not the evil.

continued on page 3

“We have lost the moral world in which sin is alone understood.”

The world around us is meaningless. The postmodern culture is enamored with superficiality. There is no plan or vision beyond enjoying the external. And the more we focus on the external, the more our internal selves are destroyed. Those who minimize or ignore sin, seek purpose within, and underestimate the holiness of God will continue striving in vain. Beginning with God in our search for meaning will lead us to true life and satisfaction.

Truth and the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World, Voddie Baucham Jr.

There are two main competing worldviews within our society today. One is the Christian worldview (or Christian theism) and the other is secular humanism. Overall, there are five major questions that help define the principles of each worldview. While these questions are certainly simplifications, they serve to compare and contrast these two worldviews.

The first question each worldview must answer is, Is there a God, and if so, what do we know about Him? Christian theism holds that God is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. Secular humanism is fundamentally atheistic.

The second question is the question of man. Christian theism sees man as a special creation made by God and in the image of God. Secular humanism sees man as *“a single-celled organism run amuck.”* Man is central to the secular humanist view.

The questions of truth and knowledge are viewed as absolute by Christian theism. What was true 2,000 years ago still remains true today, it purports. However, postmodern secular humanism sees truth through pluralism and experientialism, rejecting absolute and objective truth.

The last question, the question of ethics, is also viewed as absolute by Christian theism. Morals do not change with passing generations. Secular humanism sees morals and ethics as changing with culture, even negotiable for differing countries.

Of course, there are always ultimate life questions, such as Why am I here? Understanding how Christian theism and secular humanism answer these questions is crucial to understanding the culture around us.

Who am I?

The first question is perhaps the most important: Who am I? Christian theism says that you can't know yourself until you know Jesus Christ. All things (therefore, us) were made by Christ, and humans are the *“crowning glory of the creation of God.”* We were made for a purpose, with a plan and a future. Secular humanism sees us as accidents, no more purposeful than nature and animals, and it sees everything in nature as equal to every other thing in nature with respect to its worth.

Why am I here?

The second question may be the question we ask ourselves the most: Why am I here? Christian theism answers this question in one statement.

We are here to glorify God. Whatever we may do in life, we are to worship and glorify God with our lives. Postmodern secular humanism answers the question in a very different way. We are here to get more, have more, and enjoy more. Life gives us nothing, so we must take what we want and not let anyone or anything take away our joy.

What is wrong with the world?

The third question is, What is wrong with the world? Christian theism sees man as what's wrong with the world. Sin is what is wrong with the world, and man is inherently sinful. We are man-centered, not doing what we were created to do (glorify God), and our flesh is weak in doing what we ought not to do. Secular humanism sees the degradation of our world as a misuse or a lack of education and of government.

How can wrong be made right?

The last of life's ultimate questions is, How can wrong be made right? Christian theism points to the cross. Christ's life was sacrificed for our own, Christ's own blood took the place of ours for the sins we've committed.

“The spotless, sinless Lamb of God was crushed, rejected, and killed to pay a debt that he did not owe on behalf of sinners who could never pay him back.”

Secular humanism strives to make wrong right by educating people more and governing more; hence the AIDS awareness programs, the conflict resolution classes, and the obsession with how government is serving us.

One worldview tells us we are full of purpose, life, and meaning. Another worldview tells us that we are simply accidents and that life has nothing for us. Many walk through life having no hope of a future and nothing to take away the emptiness. The supremacy of Christ in truth in this postmodern world is the answer many need. We need to run ahead, proclaiming the gospel of Christ because the world around us is dying and hurting.

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Part Two:

Joy and Love

Joy and the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World,
John Piper

“But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves” (John 17:13). This verse reveals much about joy and the desire of Christ for us to have this joy. There are ten steps in realizing “***the indispensable place of joy conveyed from Christ to us . . .***,” steps based on fundamental truths revealed by Scripture.

Step 1: *God is one God, but consists of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He has no beginning and He is the ultimate provider of life. Nothing is more valuable than God.*

The joy Christ leaves for us cannot be attained without first believing these fundamental truths of God, and none of these truths are found in postmodern thinking. Appreciation for the value of God in our lives cannot be conceived until we fully understand that God is not confined by this world as we are. He has no need for air, shelter, sun, rain, sleep or food. He is bigger than anything we know. He never had a beginning as He simply always has been. And, He’ll never have an end.

“‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty’ ” (Revelation 1:8). The beginning of our joy is the ability to say that we are completely and utterly dependent on God and that He has more value than is measurable. We were made to enjoy God’s superiority.

Step 2: *God did not create the world out of a discontent with who He was. He has all and is content with all.*

God does not need anything. Therefore, He didn’t create the world and man because there was a hole that needed filled in His Being. He created the world and man and everything that He deemed necessary

out of His fullness. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are full of joy in one another.

Step 3: *We are created in God’s image so that we can honor and glorify God by knowing Him, and by knowing Him, His beauty is displayed.*

When we glorify God, we show Him His own glory—not to make Him look better, but to reflect what is already perfect and holy. Paul says in Romans that God purposed to “make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy” (Romans 9:23). When we know God and commune with Him, we also know His fullness and find joy in His presence. We know God in our minds, and we treasure God in our hearts, thereby displaying His great glory.

Step 4: *Jesus Christ was born a man; He lived perfectly and died on the cross to pay for our sins. He rose from the dead, conquering death, Satan, and all evil, so that all who believed in Him would receive eternal life and forgiveness of sins and would enjoy God forever.*

God’s wrath for all sins fell on Christ when He hung on the cross. It was the only way for us to fully enjoy God forever—His Son, perfect and holy, had to die in our place. The ultimate goal of the cross was not to escape God’s punishment and judgments. The ultimate goal was to be changed, healed, and forgiven so we might find joy in His glory and in being with Him for eternity.

Step 5: *The deepest way for God’s glory to shine is by enjoying Him. Enjoying God ends with God alone; there is no other motive for doing so.*

Joy is our response to the things we hold dearest. It’s not feigned or false but immediate and spontaneous. You have joy, or you don’t—it can’t be faked. Our truest form of worship is finding joy in God because that kind of joy is real and is reflected back to Him from the depths of our hearts.

continued on page 5

Step 6: *Enjoying God is the foundation for all self-sacrifice, all service to others. While God sees the depths of our hearts and the joy we find in Him, He doesn't want us to stop there. He wants us to shine that joy for others to see. Our joy overflows into acts of love for those around us.*

"First, the grace of God is revealed. Then joy abounds in that grace. Then joy overflows in a wealth of generosity—in spite of the fact of ... 'affliction' and 'poverty.' This is the way God made us: Joy in God overflows in sacrificial, self-denying acts of love." Our joy is what carries us through life, day in and day out, trials and circumstances, struggles, failures, and victories. It is this joy that reveals God to others through us.

Step 7: *The true knowledge of God is the only joy that results in God-glorifying love. What we don't know about God we still enjoy because of what we do know about God. Because we are flawed, all our abilities to enjoy Him are based on poor images of who God is, so His true excellence is that much greater.*

Having a deep, personal knowledge of and relationship with God is the way we find true joy. We are secure in what we don't know about God because what we do know is so wonderful and holy. Joy is found in biblical truths of God, not in theories. He can be known just as any of those around us can be known, and His character is such that our joy abounds.

Step 8: *We cannot find true joy without the right knowledge of God. If we are ignorant of God and believe lies about God, we will be unable to conceive of this God-glorifying joy. Without it, we will be void of friendships and fellowships in God.*

When we misunderstand or believe wrongly about who God is, we lack the joy of knowing God intimately. This misunderstanding or wrong belief affects our relationships with other believers because differing beliefs and knowledge lead to a tension and a lack of honest depth. If one person overlooks another person's wrong thinking toward God for the sake of the relationship, then a shared future is nonexistent, and the ability to share in the eternal joy with God is void.

Step 9: *We cannot minimize the great importance of coming to understand healthy biblical doctrine about the character of God and the coming of Christ to earth. We need to embrace and treasure true doctrine and then use it to build up our faith and reach out to the world.*

Step 10: *"And thus may the church become the pillar and buttress of the truth, and therefore of joy, and therefore of love, and therefore the display of the glory of God and the supremacy of Christ in all things—the very reason for which we were created."*

Love and the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World, D.A. Carson

Looking at John 17, we see the focus of love as Christ prays to His Father the night He is betrayed. There are five petitions offered to God through this prayer that all relate to the love of God in one way or another. These petitions are interwoven as though adding layer upon layer. If one layer were removed, the whole of the prayer's message would unravel.

Petition 1: *Prayer for Christ's disciples to be safe. (John 17:11, 15-16)*

Christ is returning to heaven, leaving those behind who have followed Him during His time on earth. Because His followers now belong to God, they are foreigners on earth, a hostile environment. In order to continue their work, they must unite and help one another while proclaiming the gospel. God the Father loves them, just as He loves His own Son, so a prayer asking for protection is appropriate.

Petition 2: *Prayer for the disciples to become one. (John 17:20-23)*

This prayer is not only for the disciples of Christ while He was on earth, but for all people who would come to Him through their message, in all times and places. Becoming one would allow Christ followers to experience the same intimacy and oneness that Christ has with God. And the unity of Christians would produce an evangelistic outreach that would be great across the earth. Those denying Christ would eventually see the truth of God and Christ through that unity and the cross would be vindicated. Again, this prayer shows God's love for Christ's followers by allowing the love of the triune God to be in them.

Petition 3: *Prayer for God to make Christ's followers holy. (John 17:17-19)*

Christ followed through with the will of His Father (the cross) so that His followers could become holy. We can never know truth or joy in the Lord without being sanctified. And we could never have become sanctified without Christ's dying on the cross in place of us. As we are made holy through Him we are no longer of the world, therefore we need the protection as described in Petition 1. By becoming sanctified, we have a message to spread to the world about the gospel, a message that yields yet more true Christians.

Petition 4: *Prayer for Christ's followers to know the full extent of His joy. (John 17:13)*

The disciples would still be confused and distraught trying to understand the proclamation of Christ concerning His own death. How could the Messiah die? And what did that mean for them? Only in Christ's obedience and joy in following God's will would the disciples themselves eventually experience the joy Christ had in obeying. Their love for God is shown through their desire to obey, and God's love for them is shown in the intimacy with Him they are given.

Petition 5: *Prayer for Christ's followers to enjoy eternal life with Him.*
(John 17:24)

God promised to reveal Christ's glory. In order for Christ's disciples to see the full glory of Christ, they must be reunited with Him. Christ glorified God through His work on earth and desired to be given back the glory He shared with God "before the world began" (John 17:4-5). That they shared the glory together expressed the love of God for Christ.

"Transparently, then, even this slimmest of sketches of Jesus' petitions recorded in John 17 discloses their tight interconnections, and how each petition is in some way or other tied to Jesus' understanding of love, no least the love between the Father and the Son."

The word *glory* is used several times in the themes of John 17, and rightly so. Glory is tied to God's love and to the cross. Only God can be glory, reveal glory, and give glory. And Christ brings all the more glory to God through the cross~His death, resurrection, and exaltation. God returns that glory to Christ by reuniting with Him through the ascension.

The role of Christ is expressed very interestingly in John, specifically John 5:1-18. When acting on the Sabbath and rebutting the attitude expressed against Him by the Pharisees, Christ claims His right to act on the Lord's Day because His Father in heaven never stops working. Aside from offending the Pharisees greatly, He claims God as His Father, and does the work of His Father (and not only that, but *duplicates* the work of God!), thereby showing His nature with God. **"He is truly God; he has all the prerogatives of his Father; he is to be honored as God; yet he is distinguishable from his Father; and there is but one God."**

The exclusiveness of Christ in our experiencing God's love is found in these truths:

- We can understand God's love by seeing the perfection with which Christ loved God and the perfection with which God loved Christ.
- We can understand God's love by observing the perfect unity between Christ and God, and by desiring and duplicating that unity with one another.
- We can understand God's love by understanding that the central point of the cross is not about us, though God does love us. The central point of the cross is Christ's desire to do God's will, Christ's love for God.
- As a result of all of the above, we can understand a small portion of God's love for us.

"For God to love this world with the love that he has for his Son is simply past finding out. The love of the Son for the Father, though we understand so little of the Trinity, is comprehensible enough. But for Jesus to say to us, 'Love one another, as I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' (John 13:34-35)~this is simultaneously incomprehensible and incalculably wonderful."

The opinions that require us to throw out doctrine in order to fall into unity with one another do not show the love of Christ and the Father. They don't help us further understand John 17. They merely negate and overlook the essential doctrines that must work together to provide us with God's love in the first place: the relationship of God and Christ, the cross, the resurrection and vindication of the Son, the Godhead, and the assurance of eternal life.

Part Three:

Gospel Theologizing and Contextualizing

The Gospel and the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World, Tim Keller

One hundred years ago, our culture was facing an apathetic view of God. Today, we are facing a complete denial of Him. Our ways of evangelizing must change! Society has been inoculated to ideas of the gospel that haven't painted the full picture or the true picture of it. The evangelism of the past was shaking awake those who had fallen asleep in their faith, for everyone generally held the same beliefs. Making those beliefs personal was the key to that evangelism. We've seen revivals of all kinds illuminate faith and bring about change. But those same methods don't work today.

There are three main problems with the postmodern mind-set:

1. Truth is relative.
2. There is no sense of guilt.
3. There is a disbelief that texts and words can convey trustworthy meaning. In order to combat these problems in our postmodern world, there are many ways the Church must change its mode of evangelism.

Gospel Theologizing

Up until now, we've grown accustomed to sticking to the minimum, or basic, doctrines of faith. Now, we must theologize the entire gospel in order to have an impact. **"Words and language, then, are ingredients in the self-giving of the divine persons to each other and therefore to us."** Language must be used, for God's Word is the only way to life in the true Word—Jesus Christ. Unless we ground everything we say in the gospel, and tell the whole story, we will be ignored. Postmodern minds require narratives; therefore, we need to blend the message of God's wrath with the understanding of becoming new creations through Christ. Thus far, we've only sent one message or the other.

Gospel Realizing

We must be the first to realize and understand that salvation is from and of the Lord only. We are just as sinful as those without God, so our attitudes must be that of humility toward our enemies. Only after we **"shake ourselves"** until we understand fully this principle can we move on to more advanced aspects of the gospel. We cannot theologize the gospel while leaving gaps and holes in our own lives. We need to be diligent to practice what we preach. The wonder of our own faith must return.

Gospel Urbanizing

Statistically, there are more people living in cities than in towns and rural areas. Therefore, we will have our greatest impact in cities—where

the people are. Cities are what creates and changes culture, and until Christians live and breath in cities, our culture will not be changed to reflect those beliefs. We cannot continue to complain about our society at large, while leaving the urban life void of Christian contact.

Gospel Communication

There are four stages of moving from a complete ignorance of Christ to a full embrace of Him.

1. **Intelligibility:** This stage refers to correctly understanding or **"perceiving clearly."** We need to educate and express the supremacy and the character of God. If we jump too quickly to preaching the gospel, people hear and see through their own biased interpretations of what we are saying. We need to start at the beginning: God.
2. **Credibility:** We can't allow people's doubts about Christianity, or their **"faith assertions"** to go without debate or discussion. We must show faith assertions to be wrong, giving credit to Scripture and to God. One example of a faith assertion is this: all religions are equal, and one is not superior to another. This faith assertion needs to be broken down in order for a postmodern mind to begin to see Christianity in a better light; otherwise, everything we say will be seen through the postmodernist's biased lens.
3. **Plausibility:** In this stage, we enter into the hopes, dreams, and emotions of others—their intimate selves—and we try to connect with them (otherwise known as **"contextualization"**). We must show how their own lives can find answers in Christ. This is when we preach the gospel.
4. **Intimacy:** This is the stage in which someone accepts Christ as his or her Savior and Lord.

continued on page 8

We can't jump to stage three, while skipping over stages one and two, and then expect a person to convert. All these stages take time and consideration. We must be humbled ourselves in order to persist through these, because the reality is that God is sovereign, and He must control the process as well as the outcome.

We are to neither withdraw nor assimilate into the culture around us. Instead, we remain distinct while continually serving in love and humility. Our problem with the postmodern culture is that we simply don't like postmoderns. They irritate us and we see them as the enemy. We shelter ourselves, not wanting to engage our lives in their filth. But, God called us to be about and among them so that they might see our good deeds and our love and perhaps be changed.

The Church and the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World, Mark Driscoll

Christ is as popular as ever, though His name is often misused, and He is often misunderstood. Our culture embraces Christian symbols, writes songs using His name, and even has calendars based on His life. T-shirts, jewelry, bumper stickers ... you name the items, and there are sure to be some with Christ's name on them. Although our culture's approach is not always loving (and at times even hateful), Christ's presence is frequently evident in some way. As a result, Christians must contend for the true faith as fiercely as ever.

One reason the Emergent church is growing in popularity is that it stresses the humanity of Christ—the fact that He is at work here with us. Jesus was incarnate. He lived as an infant through to adulthood, He lived life by working and sharing with family and friends, and He experienced emotion. He chose to give up divinity to live here on earth, but He was empowered by the Holy Spirit. Christ also suffered temptation and endured trials; otherwise He would not be able to sympathize with us as He does.

“All of this matters because Jesus' life was the perfect human life of a missionary in culture.”

Christ was not only our Savior, but also our missionary. To align ourselves with Him in our culture is to understand that we are to be missionaries ourselves, in our daily lives to those around us.

However, Jesus was also fully God, as Reformed churches stress. He did what only God was able to do, forgiving sins, healing sickness, and never sinning Himself. He is exalted, glorified; He is God! He is enthroned in glory and is the authority over all. He is powerful, passionate, and ultimate. We must remember that Christ is the authority, that He is sovereign, and that we are not.

Once we understand both of these truths and align them together, we are ready to contend for the faith. The Church must contend for the faith much like the first disciples and apostles, as there are many attacks against our doctrine that lead us astray. Ten theological issues must be fought for specifically:

1. Scripture is inerrant, timeless, and truthful.
2. God is sovereign and all-knowing.
3. Christ was born from a virgin.
4. We are fully sinful and depraved.
5. Jesus died in our place.
6. Jesus is the only way to salvation.
7. Males and females are distinct from each other, as created so by God.
8. Hell is a real place.
9. God's kingdom is preeminent over human culture.
10. Satan and his demons are real, and they are at work.

God has put all of us here on earth for a specific reason and time. We are to be missionaries, bringing the gospel and Christ to the world around us. Jesus was engaged in the culture without falling into sin. He was neither a liberal nor a fundamentalist, and we are supposed to imitate Him, using Scripture as our guide. This is true contextualization—bringing the gospel in the language native to our surroundings. There is not just one method of doing so, but there is certainly only one foundation on which to stand.

There is a two-handed approach to Christianity. In one *closed* fist, we must hold tightly to the truths of Christianity. These truths must not be re-evaluated or up for discussion. They are our foundations. In the other *open* hand, we hold various means and methods of communicating those truths. We are able to change these methods as time progresses, not being

**PART THREE: GOSPEL THEOLOGIZING
AND CONTEXTUALIZING**
continued from page 8

relativistic but “relevantistic.” Most churches have either a doctrinal stance or a tendency to give grace with respect to culture changes. But the Bible, through the Gospels, shows us how to contend for the faith while both holding to correct doctrine *and* extending grace. We should never stress human preferences over God’s commands. But we should be using language that the lost can understand.

How do we know what to reject, receive, and redeem in each culture, then? The New Testament epistles often give us guidance to these questions as they provide answers that transcend culture and time.

It is time to step forward in faith, understanding Christ’s supremacy over our world, having a new mind-set toward this postmodern culture, and proclaiming God’s truth everywhere we go.




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