

The Truth War by John MacArthur, Nelson Books, Nashville, TN 2007 (35 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. Speaking Up for the Truth

It seems there is no shortage of people nowadays willing to kill for a lie. Yet few seem to be willing to speak up for the truth—much less die for it. (p. xii)

2. Polycarp--Persecution

Brought to a stadium before a bloodthirsty mob, he was ordered to curse Christ. Polycarp refused, saying, “Eighty-six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me. How then shall I blaspheme my King who saved me?” He was burned alive on the spot. (p. xiii)

3. God is the Source

God is the source of all that exists (Romans 11:36). He alone defines and delimits what is true. He is also the ultimate revealer of all truth. Every truth revealed in nature was authored by him (Psalm 19:1-6); and some of it is His own self-revelation (Romans 1:20). He gave us minds and consciences to perceive the truth and comprehend right from wrong, and He even wired us with a fundamental understanding of His law written on our hearts (Romans 2:14-15). On top of all that, He gave us the perfect, infallible truth of Scripture (Psalm 19:7-11), which is a sufficient revelation of everything that pertains to life and godliness (2 Timothy 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:3), in order to lead us to Him as Savior and Lord. Finally, He sent Christ, the very embodiment of truth itself, as the culmination of divine revelation (Hebrews 1:1-3). The ultimate reason for all of this was for God to reveal Himself to His creatures. (Ezekiel 38:23) (p. xix)

4. Authentic Christians

Scripture describes all authentic Christians as those who know the truth and have been liberated by it (John 8:32). They believe it with a whole heart (2 Thessalonians 2:13). They obey the truth through the Spirit of God (1 Peter 1:22). And they have received a fervent love for the truth through the gracious work of God in their hearts (2 Thessalonians 2:10). According to the Bible, then, you haven't really grasped the truth at all if there is no sense in which you know it, believe it, submit to it, and love it. (p. xix-xx)

5. Proper Interpretation

Truth is never determined by looking at God's Word and asking, "What does this mean to me?" Whenever I hear someone talk like that, I'm inclined to ask, "What did the Bible mean before you existed? What does God mean by what He says?" Those are the proper questions to be asking. Truth and meaning are not determined by our intuition, experience, or desire. The true meaning of Scripture—or anything else, for that matter—has already been determined and fixed by the mind of God. The task of an interpreter is to discern that meaning. And proper interpretation must precede application. (p. xx-xxi)

6. Why We Are Fighting

Christ rebuked the churches in Revelation 2-3 who had tolerated false teachers in their midst (2:14-16; 20-23). He expressly commended the Ephesian church for examining the claims of certain false apostles and exposing them as liars (2:2). Churches as a clear duty to guard the faith against false teachers who infiltrate. Christ Himself demands it.

At the same time, we need to notice carefully that a polemical defense of the Faith by no means guarantees a healthy church, much less a healthy individual Christian. Christ also rebuked the doctrinally sound Ephesians for departing from their first love (Revelation 2:4). As vital as it is for us to enlist in the Truth War and do battle for our faith, it is even more important to remember why we are fighting—not merely for the thrill of vanquishing some foe or winning some argument, but out of a genuine love for Christ, who is the living, breathing embodiment of all that we hold true and worth fighting for. (p. xxvi – xxvii)

7. Truth

So what is truth?

Here is a simple definition drawn from what the Bible teaches: truth is that which is consistent with the mind, will, character, glory, and being of God. Even more to the point: truth is the self-expression of God. That is the biblical meaning of truth." (p. 2)

After thousands of years, the very best of human philosophers have all utterly failed to account for truth and the origin of human knowledge apart from God.

In fact, the one most valuable lesson humanity ought to have learned from philosophy is that it is impossible to make sense of truth without acknowledging God as the necessary starting point. (p. 7)

8. Postmodernism

Postmodernism in general is marked by a tendency to dismiss the possibility of any sure and settled knowledge of the truth. Postmodernism suggests that if objective truth exists, it cannot be known objectively or with any degree of certainty. That is because (according to postmodernists), the subjectivity of the human mind makes knowledge of objective truth impossible. So it is useless to think of truth in objective terms. Objectivity is an illusion. Nothing is certain, and the thoughtful person will never speak with too much conviction about anything. Strong convictions about any point of truth are judged supremely arrogant and hopelessly naïve. Everyone is entitled to his own truth. (p. 11)

9. Rationalism

Rationalism needs to be rejected without abandoning rationality.

Rationality (the right use of sanctified reason through sound logic) is never condemned in Scripture. Faith is not irrational. Authentic biblical truth demands that we employ logic and clear, sensible thinking. Truth can always be analyzed and examined and compared under the bright light of other truth, and it does not melt into absurdity. Truth by definition is never self-contradictory or nonsensical. And contrary to popular thinking, it is not rationalism to insist that coherence is a necessary quality of all truth. Christ is truth incarnate, and He cannot deny himself (2 Timothy 2:13). Self-denying truth is an absolute contradiction in terms. “No lie is of the truth” (1 John 2:21). (p. 13)

10. Contending for Faith Against Falsehood

Postmodernism is simply the latest expression of worldly unbelief. Its core value—a dubious ambivalence toward truth—is merely skepticism distilled to its pure essence. There is nothing virtuous or genuinely humble about it. It is proud rebellion against divine revelation.

In fact, postmodernism's hesitancy about truth is exactly antithetical to the bold confidence Scripture says is the birthright of every believer (Ephesians 3: 12). Such assurance is wrought by the Spirit of God Himself in those who believe (1 Thessalonians 1 :5). We need to make the most of that assurance and not fear to confront the world with it.

The gospel message in all its component facts is a clear, definitive, confident, authoritative proclamation that Jesus is Lord, and that He gives eternal and abundant life to all who *believe*. We who truly know Christ and have received that gift of eternal life have also received from Him a clear, definitive commission to deliver the gospel message boldly as His ambassadors. If we are likewise not clear and distinct in our proclamation of the message, we are not being good ambassadors.

But we are not merely ambassadors. We are simultaneously soldiers, commissioned to wage war for the defense and dissemination of the truth in the face of countless onslaughts against it. We are *ambassadors*—with a message of good news for people who walk in a land of darkness and dwell in the land of the shadow of death (Isaiah 9:2). And we are soldiers—charged with pulling down ideological strongholds and casting down the lies and deception spawned by the forces of evil (2 Corinthians 10:3-5; 2 Timothy 2:3-4).

Notice carefully: our task as ambassadors is to bring good news to people. Our mission as soldiers is to overthrow false ideas. We must keep those objectives straight; we are not entitled to wage warfare against people or to enter into diplomatic relations with anti-Christ ideas. Our warfare is not against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12); and our duty as ambassadors does not permit us to compromise or align ourselves with any kind of human philosophies, religious deceit, or any other kind of falsehood (Colossians 2:8)

If those sound like difficult assignments to keep in balance and maintain is proper perspective, it is because they are indeed.

Jude certainly understood this. The Holy Spirit inspired him to write his short epistle to people who were struggling with some of these very same issues. He nevertheless urged them to contend earnestly for the faith against all falsehood, while doing everything possible to deliver souls from destruction: “pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh” (Jude 23). (p. 24-26)

11. Fighting for the Mind

What I am stressing here is that permission to use physical force is never granted to the church. That is because the people of God corporately have a different—and far more important—kind of warfare to wage. The Truth War is not a carnal war. It is not about territory or nations. It is not a battle for lands and cities. It is not a clan war or a personality conflict between individuals. It is not a fight for clout between religious denominations. It is not a skirmish over material possessions. It is a battle for the truth. It is about ideas. It is a fight for the mind. It is a battle against false doctrines, evil ideologies, and wrong beliefs. It is a war for truth.

Paul makes this clear in 2 Corinthians 10:5, where he spells out the ultimate objective of the Truth War: “casting arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.” The battlefield is the mind; the goal is the absolute triumph of truth; the priceless spoils of conquest are souls won out of the bondage of sin; the outcome is our willing submission to the Christ; the highest prize is the honor given to Him as Lord; and the ultimate victory is completely His. (p. 32)

12. Righteousness

Real righteousness simply cannot exist in isolation from belief in the truth. To make the case for any concept of “practical good” that subsists apart from sound doctrine, one quickly has to remove just about everything that is truly righteous from the definition of good. Naturally, it doesn’t take very long for that kind of thinking to undermine the foundations of Christianity itself.

Brian McLaren, for example, goes so far as to suggest that followers of other religions can also be followers of Christ in practical terms without leaving other religions or identifying with Christianity. “I don’t believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion,” he says. “It may be advisable in many (not all!) circumstances to help people become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish contexts.

McLaren is leading the parade for those who do not seem to think wrong beliefs, superstition, false religion, and false gods are evils that people need to be delivered from. Instead, he suggests that even the false religions themselves may ultimately be redeemable:

Although I don’t hope all Buddhists will become (cultural) Christians, I do hope all who feel so called will become Buddhist followers of Jesus; I believe they should be given that opportunity and invitation. I don’t hope all Jews or Hindus will become members of the Christian religion. But I do hope all who feel so called will become Jewish or Hindu followers of Jesus.

Ultimately, I hope that Jesus will save Buddhism, Islam and every other religion, including the Christian religion, which often seems to need saving about as much as any other religion does. (In this context, I do wish all Christians would become followers of Jesus, but perhaps this is too much to ask. After all, I’m not doing such a hot job myself.) (p. 34-35)

13. The Right Practice

But the thing to notice here is that in McLaren’s system, orthodoxy is really all about practice, not about true beliefs. While acknowledging that this idea is “scandalous,” he nonetheless affirms it as the central message of his book. It is frankly hard to see such a perspective as anything other than plain, old-fashioned unbelief, rooted in a rejection of the clear teaching of Scripture. McLaren has elevated the sinner’s own good works above the importance of faith grounded in the truth of the gospel. No wonder he feels such an affinity with Buddhists and Hindus—at the end of the day, many of his ideas about the role of righteousness and good works in religion are not fundamentally different from theirs.

And bear in mind that in McLaren's own moral hierarchy, one of the highest values (if not the supreme virtue by which all others are measured) is a particular notion of "humility"—namely, the standard postmodern species of humility, which starts with the assumption that certainty, assurance, and bold convictions are arrogant and therefore wrong. So the ramifications of McLaren's continual stress on right practice apart from an equal stress on right belief turn out to be profound. "Right practice" by his definition virtually begins with the relinquishment of all certainty about "right belief." One gets the distinct impression that objective, propositional truth means so little to McLaren that he would consider a broad-minded Hindu who always tries to speak positively and tolerantly about others' beliefs a better "Christian" than the preacher who openly curses someone else for teaching a wrong view of the law and gospel.

That, of course, would make the apostle Paul a bad Christian (Galatians 1:8-9)—not to mention Jesus (Matthew 23). (p. 36)

14. Righteous Living

Scripture does clearly and consistently teach the primacy of right belief as the foundation of right behavior. In other words, righteous living is properly seen as a fruit of authentic faith, and never the other way around. Pious actions devoid of any real love for the truth do not even constitute genuine orthopraxy by any measure. On the contrary, that is the worst kind of self-righteous hypocrisy. (p. 38)

15. Why the Evangelical Movement Is in Trouble Today

Apostasy poses real and present dangers today as always. Actually, the threat may be more imminent and more dangerous than ever, because most Christians nowadays simply don't care about the prevalence of false doctrine, nor do they take seriously their duty to fight against apostasy. Instead, they want a friendly atmosphere of open acceptance for everyone, tolerance of opposing ideas, and charitable dialogue with the apostates.

Evangelicalism as a movement has historically stood against handling important Bible doctrine in such an indifferent way—as if truth itself were pliable. Evangelicals' primary distinctive used to be their commitment to the purity of the gospel. That commitment is reflected in the word *evangelical* itself (which is derived from the Greek word for "gospel"). William Tyndale was one of the first to use the expression, speaking of "evangelical truth" as a synonym for the gospel. And the evangelical movement has always treated the gospel as the core and foundation of all truth.

Since the Protestant Reformation, the term has historically been used to signify a particular strain of conservative Protestantism in which a handful of key gospel doctrines are regarded as absolutely essential to authentic Christianity. These nonnego-

tiable evangelical distinctives include the doctrine of justification by faith, the principle of substitutionary atonement, and the absolute authority and perfect sufficiency of Scripture. (Of course, necessarily implied and included in that short list are a number of other vital doctrines, including Christ's deity, His virgin birth, and His bodily resurrection.)

Evangelicalism has furthermore always expressly denied that any good works or sacraments have any merit before God or any instrumental efficacy for justification. So the stress in historic evangelicalism is properly placed on the primacy of faith over works.

Evangelicals have always resisted the pressure to elevate good works over sound doctrine, insisting that truly good works are the fruit of faith, never a valid substitute for it.

But the evangelical movement isn't really very evangelical anymore. The typical evangelical leader today is far more likely to express indignation at someone who calls for doctrinal clarity and accuracy than to firmly oppose another self-styled evangelical who is actively attacking some vital biblical truth.

Meanwhile, much of the evangelical movement has been acting for a long time as if our *main* duty is just to keep in step with the fads of worldly culture in order to gain the approval of each succeeding generation. That strategy will never fail to find enthusiastic support among those who are immature, weak, ignorant, or cowardly, but it can never be truly effective. Without the truth, no spiritual transformation is possible (1 Peter 1 :22-25; John 17: 17).

Evangelicals who are so desperate to follow the culture invariably lag several years behind anyway, somehow managing to look awkward and clumsy by always failing to keep in step, no matter how hard they try. But, then, the church is not supposed to ape the world's fads or court the world's favor anyway. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:18-19).

The campaign to make Christianity seem "contemporary" and sophisticated in the world's eyes is proving especially disastrous right now. As postmodern culture becomes more and more hostile to authority, clarity, and authoritative proclamations of truth, evangelicalism is blithely drifting more and more into postmodern ways of thinking about truth, imagining that this is the way to "reach" the culture. Consequently, Christians are less and less willing to fight for the truth. (p. 46-48)

16. Attacking the Truth

Does it amaze you to think this was necessary even in the days of the apostles? We sometimes tend to think of the early church as pristine, pure, and untroubled by serious error. The truth is, it wasn't that way at all. From the very beginning, the enemies of truth launched an effort to infiltrate and confuse the people of God by mangling the truth and by blending lies with Christian doctrine. Attacks against the truth regularly came not only from persecutors on the outside but also from false teachers and professing believers within the visible community of the church. Satan's strategy of placing his ministers within the church to sow bad doctrine was proving dangerously effective even while the New Testament was still being written (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). (p. 61)

17. The Long War Over Truth

Many Christians today are weary of the long war over truth. They are uneasy about whether doctrinal disagreements and divisions are a blight on the spiritual unity of the church and therefore a poor testimony to the world. These and similar questions are constantly heard nowadays: "Isn't it time to set aside our differences and just love one another?" "Rather than battling people with whom we disagree over various points of doctrine, why not stage a cordial dialogue with them and listen to their ideas?" "Can't we have a friendly conversation rather than a bitter clash?" "Shouldn't we be congenial rather than contentious?" "Does the current generation really need to perpetuate the fight over beliefs and ideologies? Or can we at last declare peace and set aside all the debates over doctrine?"

Of course, there is a legitimate concern in the tone of such questions. Scripture commands us: "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Romans 12:18). "Pursue peace with all people" (Hebrews 12:14). "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). Taken together, these passages make it clear that what the Scripture demands of us is the polar opposite of a cantankerous attitude. No one who exhibits the fruit of the Spirit can possibly take delight in conflict. So it should be plain that the call to contend for the faith is not a license for pugnacious spirits to promote strife deliberately over insignificant matters. Even when conflict proves unavoidable, we are not to adopt a mean spirit. But conflict is not always avoidable. That is Jude's whole point in writing his epistle. To remain faithful to the truth, sometimes it is even necessary to wage "civil war" within the church—especially when enemies of truth posing as brethren and believers are smuggling dangerous heresy in by stealth. (p. 73-74)

18. Psuedo-Christian Documents

You may have noticed quite a lot of publicity lately about early pseudo-Christian documents such as *The Gospel of Thomas* and *The Gospel of Judas*. In 2006 even *National Geographic* released a television special heralding *The Gospel of Judas* as if it were a monumental new discovery hitherto unknown to Bible scholars. Actually, the "gospels" of Thomas and Judas are both well documented gnostic works. They are pure fiction masquerading as history--full of demonstrably false claims and fanciful mythology. Scholars of every kind (Christian and secular scholars alike) all agree that although these works are authentic relics of early gnostic teaching, they cannot possibly be what the *gnostics* claimed they were. Like virtually all other gnostic writings, they are anonymous frauds, full of gnostic lies.

Furthermore, these books do not really contain any newly uncovered or long-forgotten truths. The existence of these works and many others like them has always been well-known to scholars. *The Gospel of Judas*, for example, was first mentioned at the end of the second century by Irenaeus, who connected it with an especially evil cult of gnostics who had made heroes of Cain, Esau, the men of Sodom, Korah, and all the other villains of Scripture.⁴ They produced *The Gospel of Judas* in order to portray Judas as a hero. The work turns the biblical account of Jesus' life and ministry on its head, borrowing truth from Scripture here and there--but then poisoning it with out-and-out lies. That is the kind of satanic truth twisting that gnostics have always been best known for.

In a very similar way, the popular best-selling novel and motion picture *The Da Vinci Code* is based on a handful of revived gnostic myths blended with more recent conspiracy theories and held together with some rather inventive gnostic-style historical revisionism. The book is sold as fiction, but author Dan Brown often claims the story is based on historical facts. The premise that "facts" are involved has proved sufficient to create the illusion in some people's minds that the entire Da Vinci conspiracy is not fiction at all, but some deep, secret, long-guarded knowledge that is finally being revealed. That sort of attack on biblical Christianity is classically gnostic. (p. 93-94)

19. False Doctrine

The evil borne by false doctrine is no incidental or unintentional side effect. The actual goal—and the inevitable result—of all false doctrine is to “turn the grace of our God into lewdness” (Jude 4). That is also the true aim and ambition of every apostate. According to Jude, in the mix of the evil motives behind every heresy, you will always discover an appetite for evil things. The driving passion of all false teachers is their lust (vv. 18-19). It may be a craving for carnal pleasure (v. 7), greed for money and material things (v. 11), or a rebellious hankering after power (v. 11). Many times it is all of the above. Look

closely at any false teacher and you will see corruption caused by lust—manifest not only in the love of money and power but also in an inability to control the flesh. (p. 120-121)

20. God Has a Plan for False Teachers

But don't imagine for a moment that God is fooled or His plans are really thwarted by the subtleties of lying, false teachers. In fact, consider the implications of all the various biblical warnings and prophecies declaring that false teachers will arise from the church. In Jesus' words, "Take heed; see, I have told you all things beforehand" (Mark 13:23). These are not merely warnings designed to make us fearful; they are also prophecies that prove God knows what He is doing. He has a plan for the false teachers too. He will accomplish all His good pleasure despite their best efforts. And because Christ Himself is building His church, the gates of hell will not prevail against it. The powers of darkness cannot win the Truth War. (p. 122)

21. Understanding God's Sovereignty and the Fact of Evil

Whenever we consider God's sovereignty and the reality of evil alongside each other, it poses some difficult doctrinal and philosophical dilemmas. We might get sidetracked discussing those questions for a long time. But it is not necessary to trace and untangle every thread in the tapestry to see the big picture. Jude makes the main idea stand out as boldly as possible when he says the false teachers are marked out for condemnation. Here, in simple terms, is the whole point of the matter as Scripture lays it out for us: God will ultimately overthrow every wicked deed and every malicious intention of every evildoer. In the meantime, He is free to use every evil deed done by fallen creatures to bring about ultimate good. In fact, He does so without fail. But in no case does God ever do evil so that good may come.

22. Two Common Errors

Before leaving the subject, let me stress that two common errors must be avoided in our thinking about God's sovereignty as it relates to evil. One, of course, is this notion (sometimes advocated by certain hyper-Calvinists) that God actively and directly causes evildoers to be evil. As we have already seen, that idea violates several emphatic statements of Scripture that God is never the source or the direct agent of evil. "[He is] not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, nor shall evil dwell with [Him]" (Psalm 5:4).

23. God Works in All Things

But an opposite error lies at the other end of the spectrum. We are not to think God's command over evil and evildoers is limited to a kind of passive, prescient fore-

knowledge in which He reluctantly and grudgingly gives His consent to something He knows evildoers are going to do anyway.

Rather, the picture of divine sovereignty in Scripture is that God positively ordains whatsoever comes to pass. He always acts with a purpose. Even the wicked unwittingly do His bidding, and they fulfill His sovereign purpose in the end. Here are God's own words:

For I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like Me,
Declaring the end from the beginning,
And from ancient times things that are not yet done,
Saying, "My counsel shall stand,
And I will do all My pleasure,"
Calling a bird of prey from the east,
The man who executes My counsel, from a far country.
Indeed I have spoken it;
I will also bring it to pass.
I have purposed it;
I will do it. (Isaiah 46:9-11)

Or to borrow Paul's words, God "works all things according to counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1: 11).

This is admittedly a difficult subject, but it is also profoundly important. And the main ideas we need to keep in mind turn out to be fairly simple: The biblical picture of God's sovereignty is that He works in and through all that happens. Rather than merely trying to circumvent evil or rearrange His plan to accomplish good in spite of evil, He harnesses the deeds of the wicked to accomplish His good and perfect ends. He also guarantees the ultimate destruction of evil itself. Meanwhile, nothing thwarts any aspect of His plan. Even the most stubborn actions of the worst sinners turn out to be no actual impediment to the divine purpose. He simply employs them as tools to accomplish His will.

That, after all, is precisely what Scripture says happened at the cross—which was the worst atrocity ever carried out by the collective forces of evil. But in the hands of a sovereign God, it was also the greatest good ever accomplished on behalf of sinners (Acts 2:23-24; 4:27-28). (p. 127-129)

24. A Time to Be Tough; A Time to Be Tender

Remember, Jude is writing about apostates and gospel corrupters. He is not suggesting that every trivial flaw in someone's thinking about nonessential or difficult doctrines is

an occasion to bring out the heavy weapons. He is certainly not exhorting us to get militant every time there is a disagreement in the church. Sometimes, even close friends and true brothers in Christ disagree sharply. In such cases, if reconciliation proves impossible, parting company amicably is preferable to a fight (Acts 15:37-41). As the Old Testament reminds us, there is "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace" (Ecclesiastes 3:7-8).

I touched on this point briefly in chapter 2 and again at the end of chapter 3. But the caveat is worth stating again here with emphasis: honest disagreements between true brethren should never escalate into mortal combat (Psalm 133:1; John 13:35; 1 Corinthians 1: 10; Ephesians 4:3-6). Jude's call to battle applies when there is a serious threat to "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints"-the kind of false teaching that undermines the foundations of the gospel. The error Jude has in mind does not stem from some slight misunderstanding about a difficult text. He is talking about heresy that is ultimately rooted in willful unbelief-a denial of "the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 4). He has in mind an error that corrupts the essential character of the gospel. He is talking about damnable error. He stresses that fact when he says the purveyors of such heresies are destined for condemnation. Now, bear in mind that such errors are often subtle and hard to spot. The only way to develop the discernment necessary for detecting such subtle error and correctly assessing its danger is by applying oneself conscientiously to the task of rightly dividing the Word of God (2 Timothy 2: 15). That skill must be perfected over time through faithful diligence.

Furthermore, as I have stressed from the start, apostates are usually clandestine about their unbelief. The mere fact that someone professes to be a brother in Christ and insists that he is only making negligible and perfectly benign doctrinal distinctions does not make it so. In fact, that is exactly what Jude is describing: false teachers who deliberately try to remain unnoticed-who pretend loyalty to Christ, but whose doctrine contradicts that profession. It can be quite difficult to see past someone's phony profession of faith and assess the true gravity of his error. That is one of the main reasons harsh judgments are not to be made lightly. "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24, emphasis added).

But that verse (often erroneously cited as an argument for withholding all judgments completely) is actually the opposite: a command to judge righteously. We can't set aside all judgment just because discernment is difficult. Willful gullibility is disobedience to God's Word. "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

Still, overzealousness is clearly a danger we need to guard against carefully. There are indeed some full-time critics operating today, always looking for a fight, taking fleshly delight in controversy merely for controversy's sake, and making judgments that may be too harsh or too hasty. Don't fall into the trap of assuming that the most censorious and nitpicking opinions are automatically the most "discerning" ones. Watch out for the person who shows no caution or restraint about making severe judgments and yet claims to be a "discernment" expert. True discernment is gained by applying our hearts and minds to biblical wisdom, not by fostering a critical spirit.

As a matter of fact, Scripture says that those who are merely pugnacious or quarrelsome are unfit for spiritual leadership (1 Timothy 3:3). When Paul laid out the qualifications for church leaders, he was emphatic about this. "A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth" (2 Timothy 2:24-25). That is the spirit we must cultivate. Contending earnestly for the faith does not require us to become brawlers. Let's acknowledge that as plainly as possible and never lose sight of it.

But by far the greater danger facing the church today is utter apathy toward the truth and indifference about false teaching. Frankly, we are not very good these days at guarding the truth. We tend not to see truth the way Scripture presents it—as a sacred treasure committed to our trust (1 Timothy 6:20-21). I think that is why evangelicals on the whole don't take seriously the duty to expose and refute false teachers. Too many have decided it is easier and seems so much "nicer" to pretend that every doctrinal deviation is ultimately insignificant. That kind of thinking has given Christians a dangerous sense of false comfort and security. (p. 133-136)

25. Apostasy

The ungodliness of an apostate system will occasionally become gross, widespread, and scandalous. A network of pedophile priests, for example—carefully camouflaged under a methodical cover-up that has been orchestrated by the church hierarchy—is a pretty clear sign of a system shot through with apostasy. No amount of clerical garb can mask the evil in that.

But the fruits of apostasy and ungodliness are not necessarily that obvious. Apostates are not unique to any single denomination or theological system. They are by no means limited to cults and fringe groups. On the contrary, they often deliberately conceal themselves within the heart of the evangelical mainstream. Some teach in evangelical seminaries and Bible colleges. Some pastor churches. They publish Christian-themed web logs. They write books that are sold in evangelical bookstores.

How is their ungodly character manifest? In worldly lifestyles and unwholesome preoccupations. In private behavior that contradicts the carefully crafted public image. In sensual talk and carnal conduct. In the kind of hypocrisy that practices religion merely for the praise of men but cares not about pleasing God (Matthew 6:1-8).

Proof that godliness is rampant in evangelical circles is evident in megachurches that purposely cater to the preferences of the ungodly-furnishing entertainment and amusements in place of authentic worship and Bible teaching. More proof is found in a popular doctrinal system that deliberately removes the lordship of Christ from the gospel proclamation to give a theological justification for "carnal Christians"-people who profess to believe in Christ but live ungodly lives.

Still more proof is seen in the erosion of evangelicals' commitment to clear biblical moral standards. As the Emerging movement gains strength, more and more voices within are suggesting that evangelicals should back away from confronting Western culture over moral evils like abortion and homosexuality. Tony Campolo, for example, explained to a reporter why he wrote his book *Speaking My Mind*: "My purpose in writing the book was to communicate loud and clear that I felt that evangelical Christianity had been hijacked. When did it become anti-feminist? When did evangelical Christianity become anti-gay? When did it become supportive of capital punishment? Pro-war? When did it become so negative towards other religious groups?"

Brian McLaren says he is not sure "what we should think about homosexuality." He called for a five-year moratorium on making any pronouncements about whether homosexuality is a sin or not. "In five years, if we have clarity, we'll speak" he said. "If not, we'll set another five years for ongoing reflection."

The recent wave of popular books written by leading figures in the Emerging Church movement has unleashed an unprecedented flood of vulgarity and worldliness onto Christian booksellers' shelves. Obscenity is one of the main trademarks of the Emerging style. Most authors in the movement make extravagant use of filthy language, sexual innuendo, and uncritical references to the most lowbrow elements of postmodern culture, often indicating inappropriate approval for ungodly aspects of secular culture. In the popular book *Blue Like Jazz*, for example, Donald Miller writes of his experience in one of the best-known Emerging churches in the Pacific Northwest, referring to the pastor as "Mark, the Cussing Pastor": Even though Mark said cusswords, he was telling a lot of people about Jesus, and he was being socially active, and he seemed to love a lot of people the church was neglecting, like liberals and fruit nuts. About the time I was praying that God would help me find a church, I got a call from Mark the Cussing Pastor, and he said he had a close friend who was moving to Portland to start a church and that I should join him.

Rick and I got together over coffee, and I thought he was hilarious. He was big, a football player out of Chico State. At the time we both chewed tobacco, so we had that in common. He could do a great Tony Soprano voice, sort of a mafia thing. He would do this routine where he pretended to be a Mafia boss who was planting a church. He said a few cusswords but not as bad as Mark.

A secular writer doing an article on the Emerging Church movement and postmodern Christianity summed up the character of the movement this way: "What makes a postmodern ministry so easy to embrace is that it doesn't demonize youth culture--Marilyn Manson, 'South Park,' or gangsta rap, for example--like traditional fundamentalists. Postmodern congregants aren't challenged to reject the outside world."

I've noticed the same thing. Whole churches have deliberately immersed themselves in "the culture"-by which they actually mean "whatever the world loves at the moment." Thus we now have a new breed of trendy churches whose preachers can rattle off references to every popular icon, every trifling meme, every tasteless fashion, and every vapid trend that captures the fickle fancy of the postmodern, secular mind. Worldly preachers seem to go out of their way to put their carnal expertise on display--even in their sermons. In the name of "connecting with the culture" they boast of having seen all the latest programs on MTV; memorized every episode of South Park; learned the lyrics to countless tracks of gangsta rap and heavy metal music; or watched who-knows-how-many R-rated movies. They seem to know every fad top to bottom, back to front, and inside out. They've adopted both the style and the language of the world--including lavish use of language that used to be deemed inappropriate in polite society, much less in the pulpit. They want to fit right in with the world, and they seem to be making themselves quite comfortable there. (p. 138-140)

26. Rebellion Against Christ's Lordship

At the heart of their apostasy is rebellion against Christ's lordship. Even if they confess with their lips, they deny with their lives. They may call Jesus, "Lord, Lord," but they do not do what He says (Luke 6:46). In the words of Paul to Titus, "They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work" (Titus 1:16). Their apostasy eventually poisons all their doctrine. They twist and pervert and reinvent teachings of Christ. They adjust the gospel to suit their own tastes. When you get to the core of where they are, they simply want to be kings of their own dominion.

That brings us full circle back to the issue of character. Apostate false teachers are not humble. They are not broken. They are not submissive. They are not meek. They are blatant, proud sovereigns of their own religious empires, and while they like to use

Christ's name for their advantage, they do not really know, obey, or love the truth—written or Incarnate.

Nevertheless, God alone is truly sovereign. His eternal purposes are not the least bit threatened by the efforts of false teachers. His truth will triumph in the end. And tragic consequence for the false teachers and all who follow them is sure and certain condemnation. As Jude says, they already have a long-standing appointment to that end.

Of course, that doesn't alter or diminish our duty to oppose them and contend earnestly for the faith here and now. (p. 142-143)

27. Evangelical Fad Surfing

Evangelical fad surfing. Contemporary evangelicals have therefore become very much like "children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14). They follow whatever is the latest popular trend. They buy whatever is the current best seller. They line up to see any celebrity who speaks spiritual-sounding language. They watch eagerly for the next Hollywood movie with any "spiritual" theme or religious imagery that they can latch on to. And they discuss these fads and fashions endlessly, as if every cultural icon that captures evangelicals' attention had profound and serious spiritual significance.

Evangelical churchgoers desperately want their churches to stay on the leading edge of whatever is currently in vogue in the evangelical community. For a while, any church that wanted to be in fashion had to sponsor seminars on how to pray the prayer of Jabez. But woe to the church that was still doing Jabez when *The Purpose-Driven Life* took center stage. By then, any church that wanted to retain its standing and credibility in the evangelical movement had better be doing "Forty Days of Purpose." And if your church didn't get through the "Forty Days" in time to host group studies or preach a series of sermons about *The Da Vinci Code* before the Hollywood movie version came out, then your church was considered badly out of touch with what really matters.

It is too late now if you missed any of those trends. To use the language of the movement, they are all so five minutes ago. If your church is not already experimenting with Emerging-style worship, candles, postmodern liturgy, and the like (or-better yet-anticipating the next major trend), then you are clearly not in a very stylish church.

Of course, I'm not suggesting that all those trends are equally bad. Some of them are not necessarily bad at all. For example, there can be great benefit in teaching a congregation how to respond to something like *The Da Vinci Code*. But contemporary evangelicals have been conditioned to anticipate and follow *every* fad with an almost mindless herd mentality. They sometimes seem to move from fad to fad with an

uninhibited and undiscerning. eagerness that does leave them exposed to things that may well be spiritually lethal. In fact, the question of whether the latest trend is dangerous or not is not a welcome question in most evangelical circles anymore. Whatever happens to be popular at the moment is what drives the whole evangelical agenda.

That mentality is precisely what Paul warned against in Ephesians 4: 14. It has left evangelical Christians dangerously exposed to trickery, deceitfulness, and unsound doctrine. It has also left them completely unequipped to practice any degree of true biblical discernment.

The sad truth is that the larger part of the evangelical movement is already so badly compromised that sound doctrine has almost become a nonissue.

The mad pursuit of non doctrinal "relevancy." Even at the very heart of the evangelical mainstream, where you might expect to find some commitment to biblical doctrine and at least a measure of concern about defending the faith, what you find instead is a movement utterly dominated by people whose first concern is to try to keep in step with the times in order to be "relevant."

Sound doctrine? Too arcane for the average churchgoer. *Biblical exposition?* That alienates the "unchurched." *Clear preaching on sin and redemption?* Let's be careful not to subvert the self-esteem of hurting people. *The Great Commission?* Our most effective strategy has been making the church service into a massive Super Bowl party. *Serious discipleship?* Sure. There's a great series of group studies based on *I Love Lucy* episodes. Let's work our way through that. *Worship where God is recognized as high and lifted up?* Get real. We need to reach people on the level where they are.

Evangelicals and their leaders have doggedly pursued that same course for several decades now-in spite of *many* clear biblical instructions that warn us not to be so childish (in addition to Ephesians 4:14, see also 1 Corinthians 14:20; 2 Timothy 4:3-4; Hebrews 5:12-14).

What's the heart of the problem? It boils down to this: Much of the evangelical movement has forgotten who is Lord over the church. They have either abandoned or downright rejected their true Head and given His rightful place to evangelical pollsters and church-growth gurus. (p. 148-150)

28. The Emerging Church Movement

Christ's headship in the church is likewise being challenged by those in the Emerging Church movement who have suggested that Scripture is simply not clear enough to allow us to preach its truth with any certain degree of clarity, certainty, or conviction.

Most would never come right out and deny that the Bible is the Word of God, but they accomplish exactly the same thing when they insist that no one has any right to say for sure what the Bible means. (p. 155)

29. Knowing and Understanding the Scriptures

Jesus held not only the Pharisees but also the common people responsible for knowing and understanding the Scriptures. "Have you not read ... ?" was a common rebuke to those who challenged His teaching but did not know or understand the Scriptures as they should have (Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31; Mark 12:26). He addressed the disciples on the road to Emmaus as "foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe" because of their ignorance about the Old Testament's messianic promises (Luke 24:25). The problem lay not in any lack of clarity on Scripture's part but in their own sluggish faith.

The apostle Paul, whose writings are most under debate by scholars today, wrote virtually all his epistles for the common man, not for scholars and intellectuals. Those addressed to churches were written to predominantly *Gentile* churches, whose understanding of the Old Testament was limited. He nevertheless expected them to understand what he wrote (Ephesians 3:3-5), and he held them responsible for heeding his instruction (1 Timothy 3:14-15).

Paul and Christ both consistently made the case that it is every Christian's duty to study and interpret Scripture rightly (2 Timothy 2:15). "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Matthew 11:15; 13:9, 16; Mark 4:9).

Even the book of Revelation, arguably one of the most difficult sections of Scripture to interpret, isn't too hard for a typical lay reader to understand sufficiently and profit from. Hence it begins with this blessing: "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near" (Revelation 1 :3).

Protestant Christianity has always affirmed the *perspicuity* of Scripture. That means we believe God has spoken distinctly in His Word. Not everything in the Bible is equally clear, of course (2 Peter 3: 16). But God's Word is plain enough for the average reader to know and understand everything necessary for a saving knowledge of Christ. Scripture is also sufficiently clear to enable us to) obey the Great Commission, which expressly requires us to teach others "all things" that Christ has commanded (Matthew 28: 18-20). (p. 156-157)

30. Modernism

We are right back in the same situation the church was in a hundred years ago, when modernists were busily reinventing the Christian faith. Far from being a strong voice

and a powerful force for the cause of truth, the evangelical movement itself has become the main battleground.

Moreover, the postmodernists who are beginning to dominate the evangelical movement are employing exactly the same strategies, pleading for precisely the same kinds of doctrinal modifications, and even using some of the very same arguments modernists used when they took over the mainline denominations a century ago.

To cite one rather serious and significant doctrinal example, the principle of substitutionary atonement (always a favorite target of modernists) has recently been under heavy assault again at the hands of those who insist that evangelicals need to adapt their message to accommodate *postmodern* sensibilities. Scripture is clear: Christ suffered on the cross as a substitute for sinners (Isaiah 53:4-10), taking the full brunt of the punishment we deserved (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 9:27-28; 1 Peter 3:18). His death was a *propitiation*, or a satisfaction of divine wrath against sin on believers' behalf (Romans 3:25; Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). But that view has been forcefully attacked in recent years by people who insist it makes God seem harsh and barbaric. They are in effect advocating the elimination of the offense of the cross because it is too uncouth for their tastes. One influential author referred to the principle of substitutionary atonement as "twisted," "morally dubious," and "a form of cosmic child abuse." Others in the Emerging Church movement have said similar things. Brian McLaren, for example, has repeatedly voiced misgivings about whether it is appropriate for Christians to describe the atonement as a penal substitution. At one point, the hero in one of McLaren's quasi-fictional books says the notion of Christ being punished for others' sins "just sounds like one more injustice in the cosmic equation. It sounds like divine child abuse. You know?"

Various Emerging Church books and web logs have repeatedly advocated the dismantling and wholesale reimagining of some of the very same doctrines earlier evangelicals have fiercely defended for generations against modernists and theological liberals—including the inerrancy and authority of Scripture, the doctrine of original sin, and the exclusivity of Christ. Almost any biblical doctrine and evangelical distinctive you can name has at one point or another been maligned by this or that celebrity in the Emerging Church movement. (p. 168-169)

31. Evangelicalism

Unfortunately, the evangelical movement is amorphous, and that is one of the key factors that has allowed it to become such a monstrosity. There is no "membership," no mechanism for excommunication, no clear process for dealing with false teachers. Anyone can declare himself "evangelical" and make himself a teacher—and who's to say otherwise? Churches today are often planted by individuals who are neither doctrinally nor personally qualified for church leadership. This is frequently done with no

oversight by any group of elders and no accountability to a senior body. Megachurches have been built by men with strong entrepreneurial skills and weak exegetical skills. As they have reproduced themselves, the evangelical movement has been flooded with ministers who are grossly unprepared for ministry and deliberately undiscerning when it comes to doctrine. Evangelicalism is now dominated by leaders who regard big numbers as proof of success and divine blessing and who are convinced that careful doctrinal teaching is actually the enemy of church growth. No wonder theological chaos now reigns in the evangelical movement. (p. 172)

32. Argument

Let us be clear what we mean. This is not argument for the sake of argument; this is not a manifestation of an argumentative spirit; this is not just indulging one's prejudices. The Scriptures do not approve of that, and furthermore the Scriptures are very concerned about the spirit in which one engages in discussion. No man should like argument for the sake of argument. We should always regret the necessity; but though we regret and bemoan it, when we feel that a vital matter is at stake we must engage in argument. We must "earnestly contend for the truth," and we are called upon to do that by the New Testament. (p. 194)

33. Not Questionable

Not every issue is cast in black and white. There are many questions to which Scripture does not explicitly speak. For example, there is no list of holidays and holy days for Christians to observe or avoid celebrating. The issue is explicitly left in the realm of indifferent matters by the apostle Paul: "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). Paul says something similar about foods and dietary restrictions (vv. 2-3).

But many of the issues being compromised within the evangelical movement today are not questionable. Scripture speaks very clearly against homosexuality, for example. The Christian position on adultery is not at all vague. The question of whether a believer ought to marry an unbeliever is spelled out with perfect clarity. Scripture quite plainly forbids any Christian to take another Christian to court. Selfishness and pride are explicitly identified as sins. These are not gray areas. There is no room for compromise here. (p. 194-195)

34. The Authority of Scripture

All truth sets itself against error. Where Scripture speaks, it speaks with authority. It speaks definitively. It speaks decisively. It calls for absolute conviction. It demands that we submit to God and resist the devil (James 4:7). It urges us to discern between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error (1 John 4:6). It commands us to turn away from

evil and do good (1 Peter 3:11). It bids us reject the broad way that seems right to the human mind (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25) and follow the narrow way prescribed by God (Matthew 7:13-14). It tells us that our ways are not God's ways nor our thoughts His thoughts (1 John 2:21). It guarantees that the righteous shall be blessed and the wicked perish (Psalm 1:1, 6). And it reminds us that "friendship with the world is enmity with God. Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). (p. 196)

35. Discernment and Maturity

Hebrews 5:12-6:1 underscores all this:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to [maturity].

The writer of Hebrews is telling his readers, "You're babies. You've been around long enough to be teachers, but instead I have to feed you milk. I have to keep giving you elementary things. You can't take solid food. You're not accustomed to the rich things of the Word-and that is tragic."

Notice that in verse 14 he says that discernment and maturity go hand in hand: "Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil." Knowing and understanding the Word of righteousness-taking in solid food-trains your senses to discern good and evil.

The word "senses" in that verse is not a reference to the feelings, emotions, or other subjective sensory mechanisms. The writer of this epistle is explicitly encouraging his readers to exercise their *minds*. Those who "because of practice have their senses trained to discern" are the wise, the understanding, people who thrive on the solid food of the Word of God. Discernment results from a carefully disciplined mind. It is not a matter of feelings, nor is discernment a mystical gift. Notice from the wisdom literature of the Old Testament how closely discernment is linked with a seasoned, developed, biblically informed mind.

- Psalm 119:66: "Teach me good discernment and knowledge, for I believe in Your commandments" (NASB).
- Proverbs 2:2-5: "Make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding; for if you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if

you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the LORD, and discover the knowledge of God" (NASB).

- Proverbs 10:13: "On the lips of the discerning, wisdom is found" (NASB).
- Proverbs 16:21: "The wise in heart will be called understanding" (NASB).

The path to discernment is the way of spiritual maturity. And the only means to spiritual maturity is mastery of the Word of God. (p. 213-214)